

# Solid work examines 1916 Waco lynching

Gruesome killing of teen helped move NAACP's agenda.

**The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP**  
By Patricia Bernstein  
Texas A&M University Press,  
\$29.95

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It's hard to imagine today, but in 1916, Waco was a city so bustling with activity, business and, especially, educational institutions, that it was referred to as "the Athens of Texas."

But its reputation for enlightenment was severely damaged in May of that year with the lynching of a black teenager.

On May 8, 1916, a middle-age white woman named Lucy Fryer was murdered in her home. A 17-year-old retarded teenager named Jesse Washington, who worked for the Fryer family, was arrested and charged with murder and rape. On May 16, minutes after being assessed the death penalty, Washington was taken from the courtroom by a mob and lynched in a public square.

Between 1880 and 1930, nearly 4,700 lynchings were committed in the United States. Most of the victims were black; more than 10 percent of the lynchings happened in Texas.

As Patricia Bernstein writes in her solidly researched and well-written book "The First Waco Horror," the lynching of Jesse Washington became a national story. It helped to accelerate the development of the NAACP when the young civil rights organization, founded mostly by white reformers, hired a young, white, women's suffragist to investigate the lynching. Elizabeth Freeman's dangerous and well-documented investigation not only provided details but also named those most responsible.

While there's little doubt that Washington murdered Fryer,

Freeman was convinced that he didn't rape the woman. In fact, the doctor who examined Fryer's body didn't mention rape while he was on the witness stand.



Her reports and the accompanying horrible photos were used by the great intellectual and activist W.E.B. Du Bois, editor of the

NAACP's journal *The Crisis*, to help ignite the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign.

What is always fascinating about looking back at photos of lynchings is the carnival atmosphere surrounding them. This was no less the case in Waco, where 15,000 to 20,000 spectators gathered in the public square to watch or participate in the murder of Washington.

Bernstein writes in nauseating detail how Washington was beaten, stabbed, mutilated and his body parts taken for souvenirs. She is rightly indignant, not only with the lynch mob, but also with the judge and law enforcement officials who allowed the mob to kidnap Washington and with the photographer who had his camera set up in advance for the lynching.

There were lynchings before Washington in Waco, and there would be others afterward, including that of a white woman. Yet one of the great shames of the U.S. Congress is that it could never find it within its collective heart and wisdom to pass a single piece of anti-lynching legislation.

Bernstein's book is not only a valuable examination of a little-known but disgusting event in our state's history, but a reminder of the cruelties men are capable of inflicting on other men.

As if we needed more proof.

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