

Rosewood Massacre

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Rosewood was a small community of nearly 350 people, mostly black, in Levy County in central Florida, USA. Today, it is remembered for the **Rosewood Massacre** of January 1923, in which over several days, white mobs attacked and killed blacks, and burned most of the buildings in the settlement, which was abandoned by residents during the attacks and was not reoccupied. It had been a "whistle stop" on the Seaboard Air Line Railway, located on the north side of State Road 24 half a mile east of the intersection with Levy County Road 345. After reopening of history of the incident in the late 20th century, publicity was given to the terrible events through a book, film and commissioned report to the Florida legislature. A bill was passed to compensate survivors and descendants. The site of the former village has been designated a Florida Heritage Landmark.

Settlement

Nine miles east of Cedar Key, Florida, near the Gulf of Mexico, Rosewood was settled in 1845. The growth of the timber industry, plus farming of citrus and cotton, led to construction of a train depot and a post office in 1870. Local industry also included two pencil mills in Cedar Key. Initial residents in Rosewood were both black and white, who established both black and white churches. After closure of the pencil mills and outmigration by whites, by 1900 the population in Rosewood had become predominantly black. Some people farmed or worked in local businesses, including a sawmill in nearby Sumner. The village of Sumner, predominantly white, was part of a voting precinct in which its population counted together with that of Rosewood. In 1920, the combined population was 344 blacks and 294 whites.^[1]

In 1920, Rosewood blacks had three churches, a school, a large Masonic Hall, a turpentine mill, a sugarcane mill, a baseball team and two general stores (one of which was white-owned). The village had about two dozen plank two-story homes, some other small houses, as well as several small unoccupied plank structures.

Background



The burning of Rosewood

The 1923 events took place in an environment where white mobs continued to use lynching to enforce white supremacy, often on the alleged grounds of a black man attacking a white woman. In the summer of 1919, there was an outbreak of mob mass racial violence in several northern cities, in part due to competition for jobs and place by returning veterans of both races. Migration of tens of thousands of blacks to the North in the Great Migration had unsettled labor markets. By 1940, forty thousand blacks

left Florida, for jobs, but more importantly, to escape the oppression of segregation, violence, and disfranchisement.^[2]

In the mid-1920s, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was reaching its peak of membership in the South and Midwest after a revival starting shortly before World War I. Its growth was in part due to tensions from rapid industrialization, growth and social change in many cities, where rural whites and blacks migrated, as well as the pressure of waves of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. The KKK was strong in Florida cities of Jacksonville and Tampa, and Miami's chapter held initiations at the Miami Country Club. It also flourished in smaller towns of the South where violence had a long tradition.^[3]

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Florida and other southern states had passed laws and constitutions effectively disfranchising African Americans, creating barriers to voter registration and voting. This meant also they could not participate as jurors in local or state trials, had no representation in the legislature, and had no positions in local government or law enforcement. As did other southern states, Florida had also passed Jim Crow laws imposing racial segregation in public facilities and transportation.^[4]

White mob action continued to erupt in north and central Florida towns. In 1920 whites removed four black men from a local jail and lynched them after their being accused of raping a white woman in Macclenny. Two whites and at least five blacks were killed in Ocoee in a dispute over voting rights. A white mob then destroyed the black community, including 25 homes, two churches and a Masonic Lodge. In the central part of the state, a black man was lynched in Wauchula for allegedly attacking a white woman.^[5]

In December 1922, a white mob burned a black man to death for the alleged murder of a white school teacher in Perry, and then burned down the black Masonic Lodge and other black institutions, including a school and a church. Such incidents both demonstrated and raised fears on both sides of the color line.^[6]

Events in Rosewood

On New Year's Eve 1922, the Ku Klux Klan held a parade and rally of over 100 hooded Klansmen in nearby Gainesville, Florida under a burning cross and a banner reading, "First and Always Protect Womanhood."

On January 1, 1923, in Sumner, a 22-year-old married white woman named Fannie Taylor claimed a black man had knocked on her door in the morning and then attacked her. Her official report stated he beat her about the face, but did not rape her. Other sources (and rumor) claimed that she was both raped and robbed.

Nine-year-old Lee Ruth Davis, a black resident of Rosewood, later reported that Mrs. Taylor had been visited by a white man employed by the Seaboard Air Line Railway. Davis' grandmother was Sarah Carrier, who did Mrs. Taylor's washing and ironing once a week. Carrier and Davis' young cousin, who was helping her deliver laundry, witnessed the white man enter the Taylor house and leave some time before noon. Other African Americans also contended Mrs. Taylor had a white lover.

Quickly, Levy County Sheriff Elias "Bob" Walker raised a posse and started an investigation. They found out that Jesse Hunter, a black prisoner, had escaped from a chain gang and started to look for him. Men used bloodhounds to find Hunter, but the dogs led a group of about 100-150 men to the home of Aaron Carrier. Rescuing Carrier from the mob, Levy County Sheriff Elias "Bob" Walker put him in custody at the county seat in Bronson, Florida. Sheriff Walker also attempted to keep all the black employees of the turpentine mills at work for their own safety.

The mob instead found Sam Carter, a black area resident. The mob, described as a "posse", tortured Carter into admitting having hidden the escaped prisoner Hunter, then they fatally shot him.

Black survivors recalled that Mrs. Taylor's white visitor John Bradley knew he was in trouble and had asked Sam Carter for assistance as a fellow veteran and Mason. They said Carter also had help from Aaron Carrier, another Mason, and covered Bradley in the back of a wagon. Carter took Bradley to a nearby river, let him out of the wagon, then returned home.

On January 2 in mostly white Sumner, armed men began to gather. On the evening of January 4, a mob of armed white men went to Rosewood and surrounded the house of Aaron Carrier (who was being held in jail). The house was filled with approximately 15-25 people seeking asylum, including many children. They were protected by Aaron Carrier's cousin Sylvester Carrier, who had a reputation of being independent and proud. The group of white men had reportedly heard that Sylvester Carrier stated that the attack on Mrs. Taylor was an "example of what (Negroes) could do without interference," although by the time the mob "heard" this, rumor was rampant. Reports conflict about who shot first, but after two members of the mob approached the house, someone opened fire. A number of shots were exchanged, but the whites did not overtake the house. A standoff lasted long into the next morning.

Afterward participants discovered that Sarah and Sylvester Carrier were killed inside the house, where several people were also wounded. Two white men in the mob were killed, and others were wounded. (A number of Rosewood survivors and their descendants claimed Sylvester Carrier was not killed, but escaped to Texas).

The white mob then burned a black church in Rosewood. Many black residents fled into the nearby swamps, some clothed only in their pajamas. Many of the survivors recall that it was uncharacteristically cold for Florida, and people suffered from spending several nights in the hammocks to evade the mob. Some took refuge with white families.

When the mob set her house on fire, Lexie Gordon fled from hiding underneath it, only to be fatally shot by the mob. Sheriff Walker pleaded with news reporters covering the violence to send a message to the Alachua County Sheriff P. G. Ramsey to send assistance. The story circulated in the *St. Petersburg Independent*^[7], the *Florida Times-Union*^[8], the *Miami Herald*^[9], and the *Miami Daily Metropolis*.

On January 5, more whites converged on the area, creating a mob of 200-300. Some came from out of state. They fatally shot Rosewood resident Mingo Williams, although he was not connected to any of the previous events. Sheriff Walker notified Governor Cary Hardee by telegram that he did not fear "further disorder". Although the governor's office was monitoring the situation, in part because of intense Northern interest, he would not activate the National Guard without Walker's request. For some reason, Walker said he could handle the situation. Records showed that Governor Hardee took Sheriff Walker's word and went on a hunting trip.

James Carrier, Sylvester's brother and Sarah's son, left the swamps and returned to Rosewood. He asked the white turpentine mill owner for protection, who locked him in a house. The mob found Carrier, however, and tortured him to find out if he had aided Hunter. Then they fatally shot him.

Black residents of nearby Sumner were forced to go to work in the mills. Those who did not work were required to stay at home.



The burning of Rosewood

On January 6, white train conductors John and William Bryce managed the evacuation of some black residents to nearby Gainesville. They slowed the train and blew the train horn, picking up women and children along the route. Fearing reprisals from mobs, they refused to pick up any black men.^[10] Many survivors boarded the train after having been hidden by white general store owner John Wright. Over the next several days, other Rosewood residents fled to Wright's house, facilitated by Sheriff Walker, who asked Wright to transport as many residents out of town as possible.

Ruth Lee Davis described the experience:

"I was laying that deep in water, that is where we sat all day long...We got on our bellies and crawled. We tried to keep people from seeing us through the bushes...We were trying to get back to Mr. Wright house. After we got all the way to his house, Mr. and Mrs. Wright were all the way out in the bushes hollering and calling us, and when we answered, they were so glad."^[11]

Several other white residents of Sumner hid black residents of Rosewood and smuggled them out of town. The *Miami Daily Metropolis* ran a headline reading, "Many Die In Race War, Hundreds of Whites Battle Negroes Ambushed in Cabin."^[12] National papers also carried stories about the violent outbreak.

On Sunday, January 7, a mob of 100-150 whites returned to burn the remaining dozen or so structures of Rosewood.

Many people were alarmed by the violence, and state leaders feared negative effects on the state's tourist industry. Governor Cary Hardee appointed a special grand jury and special prosecuting attorney to investigate the outbreak in Rosewood and other incidents in Levy County. In February 1923, the grand jury convened in the county seat of Bronson, Florida. Over a few days, they heard numerous witnesses, but found insufficient evidence to prosecute any individual. Jurors deplored the violence. Because of continued disfranchisement of African Americans in Florida since the turn of the century, all the jurors were likely white.

Newspaper editorials across the South and the United States condemned the violence, but with differing views. Some editorials in Southern papers suggested that deaths for an assault of a white woman, which they assumed to have been caused by a black vagrant as she claimed, were a kind of justice. Most northern papers condemned the violence, as did all African-American papers. Black papers held up for approval the example of African Americans who had resisted mob violence.

Officially, six blacks and two whites were the recorded death toll of the first week of January 1923. Historians, however, disagree about this number. Some survivors claimed to have seen or heard about more victims, up to 16 or 18, but these have not been verified. Many survivors fled in different directions to other cities, a few changed their names from fear that whites would track them down, and none ever lived again in Rosewood.^[13]

Compensation and remembrance

Despite nationwide news coverage in both white and black newspapers, the incident, as well as the small abandoned village, slipped into oblivion. In the 1980s, the terrible events were rediscovered. In 1982 Gary Moore, an investigative reporter from the *St. Petersburg Times*, ran a story on Rosewood. A year later, Ed Bradley from CBS *60 Minutes* also ran a story about it.

In 1993 survivors of Rosewood filed suit against the state government for its failure to protect them and their families.^[14] Sponsors in the Florida house and senate introduced compensation bills for the survivors and descendants of Rosewood. The Speaker commissioned a group to research and provide a report by which the equitable claim bill could be evaluated. On December 22, 1993, historians from Florida State University, Florida A&M University, and the University of Florida delivered a 100-page report (with 400 pages of attached documentation) of the Rosewood massacre. They had interviewed both black and white survivors of the incident, as well as using documented sources. It was entitled, "Documented History of the Incident which Occurred at Rosewood, Florida in January 1923," and delivered to the Florida Board of Regents. This became part of the legislative record.

The report provided an account of the failings of government to protect its citizens. It gave support for a compensation bill for survivors, a bill which proponents were fighting to get passed. Some lobbyists began to receive hate mail, including some from Ku Klux Klan members. One legislator remarked that the mail from public opposition was an unprecedented 10 to 1.^[13] People resisted learning about the terrible events in Florida's history.

The legislature passed it and in 1994, Florida Governor Lawton Chiles signed the Rosewood Compensation Bill, a \$2.1 million package to compensate the survivors and their descendants for what Chiles termed a "blind act of bigotry". It provided for \$150,000 for each of the nine survivors, and a \$500,000 pool for the descendants. Descendants could apply based on demonstrating that each had an ancestor who owned property in Rosewood in January 1923. Later a college scholarship fund was set up for Rosewood descendants.^[15]

The murders and arson in Rosewood were the subject of the 1996 book *Like Judgment Day: The Ruin and Redemption of a Town Called Rosewood* by Michael D'Orso, which won the Lillian Smith Book Award. In 1997, the events were the basis of the film *Rosewood* directed by John Singleton. Survivors were critical of the liberties Singleton took with their story, objecting to substantive changes and inventions.

Author Michael D'Orso later said, "[E]veryone [survivors] told me in their own way, in their own words, that if they allowed themselves to be bitter, to hate, it would have eaten them up."^[16]

Rosewood legacy

In 2004, the State of Florida declared Rosewood a Florida Heritage Landmark and erected a historical marker that names the victims and fully describes the community's destruction. The billboard is located beside State Highway 24. A sign marker indicates the name of the town for those traveling between Cedar Key and Gainesville. Scattered structures remain within the community, including a church, a business, and a few homes. Google Earth shows a series of streets laid out grid-style, with many overgrown with trees, and with few (if any) structures on them.

Remembering Rosewood is an on-line exhibit and website based on the historians' report prepared for the Florida Board of Regents. Survivors affiliated with the Rosewood Foundation have frequently spoken about their story and racial issues to schools, community and historic conferences.

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SOURCE: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosewood_massacre