**Ed Johnson’s Journey - A Timeline of Events**

**Prepared by Jenna Mackay for the Ed Johnson project**

***“It’s one of those stories that when you get involved with it, it doesn’t let you go.” - LaFrederick Thirkill (“Dinner and a Documentary: Gatherings Meant to Teach More Chattanoogans the Story of Ed Johnson” Chattanooga Times Free Press, April 23, 2017)***

**1877-1950** - Over 4,400 black people are lynched in the United States between the era of Reconstruction and WWII (Equal Justice Initiative statistic: https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america/)

**Feb. 18, 1891** - Newly completed "County Bridge" is dedicated, connecting the main downtown industrial and commercial center of Chattanooga with what was known as Black Hill City at the time. It will later be renamed The Walnut Street Bridge.

**Feb. 9, 1893** - Alfred Blount is brutally lynched by a mob from the first span of the County Bridge before he is even given a trial. His wife sued Sheriff Skillern citing inadequate protection. Styles Hutchins served as her attorney and her community helped raise funds for court fees.

**Jan. 23, 1906** - Nevada Taylor is brutally attacked and raped on her way home from work around 6:30 p.m. Taylor is unable to provide any concrete identifying information on her attacker other than he was average height and had a “soft kind voice.” The night was noted by many as being extremely dark and her attacker came from behind, choking her with a leather strap until she passed out. Investigators assumed her attacker was black despite Taylor’s initial uncertainty. A search begins immediately for the perpetrator led by Sheriff Joseph Shipp.

**Jan. 24, 1906** - News of the attack covers local papers. Public grows anxious. Newspaper headlines state, “feeling at high pitch,” “awful crime at St. Elmo” and demand that the “Negro brute” be caught.

*“...a reward of $50 was offered by Sheriff Shipp for any information leading to the arrest of the guilty party. This reward was increased to [$375] by the governor.”* (Noah Parden, Voice of the Negro - VON)

**Jan. 25, 1906** - A man named Will Hixon tells Sheriff Shipp that he saw Ed Johnson twirling a leather strap near the trolley station the night of the attack. Hixon eventually collects the reward money (worth over $10,000 today). Johnson is tracked down and arrested. News of the arrest spreads quickly, and Sheriff Shipp moves Johnson to Nashville. A mob attacks the Hamilton County jail that night. The National Guard is called in, and the mob is eventually dispersed.

**Jan. 27-28, 1906** - Nevada Taylor travels to Nashville to identify her attacker. She is presented with two black men, one of them being Ed Johnson. Taylor concludes that Johnson is “like the man as I remember him” and “has the same soft, kind voice.” In Chattanooga, the Grand Jury votes to indict Johnson on charges of rape.

*“[Johnson] was a poor young man and not able to hire counsel. The Court appointed Mr. Robert Cameron, W.G.M Thomas and Judge Lewis Shepherd, white, to represent Johnson. And it was one of the remarkable trials known in criminal history. The above named lawyers are men of ability, and they claim that the reason they could not conduct the trial as it should have been is that they were told that if they should undertake to file a plea to the array of jurors that Johnson would be lynched; then they thought, that, under the circumstances, they should motion for a change of venue, and they were again informed that Johnson would be lynched. They also thought that at the time prejudice in Hamilton county was at such a pitch that the case should be continued until the next term of court, and again they were informed that any dilatory plea would again cause the mob to make another attack on the jail.”* (Noah Parden VON)

***Feb. 6-8, 1906*** *-* An armed convoy brings Johnson to the Hamilton County Courthouse. The trial will last three days.

*“The young lady was asked to tell her story. Then she was asked if the defendant Johnson was the man. She looked at him for some time, and then she said; “I believe he is the man.” Others testified to immaterial facts. Johnson declared that he was not the man and ten or twelve others swore as to where he was at the time the young lady said she was raped. The young lady was called back to the witness stand by one of the jurors named Wrenn. Then Johnson was ordered to come around where she could look at him. He was then ordered to put on his hat. Then the juror Wrenn said: “Miss Taylor, look at this man and say if he is the man that assaulted you.” She turned her face towards the prisoner and said, “I believe he is the man.” Then it was that Breeding, a juror, arose from his seat, and in a frantic manner, cried aloud: “My God, Miss Taylor, will you swear that he is the man?” At that time everyone arose and crowded around the prisoner. Juror Breeding jumped from his seat and started towards the prisoner with both hands up. He was caught by two of his fellow jurors and remonstrated with. Then he cried aloud: “O! If I could only get to him. I would tear his heart out.” (Noah Parden VON)*

The defense presents over 20 witnesses vouching for Johnson’s character, attacking Will Hixon’s claim, and testifying in favor of Johnson’s alibi. The jury is unable to reach a verdict after deliberating for over six hours that night and is allowed to go home, rest, and return the next morning for further deliberation.

**Feb. 9, 1906** - *“On February 9th the jury returned a verdict of guilty and fixed his punishment by hanging until dead.” (Noah Parden VON)*

The next morning the jury reconvenes. They return a guilty verdict in less than an hour. Johnson’s attorneys, fearing mob violence, counsel him against an appeal. Johnson reaffirms his innocence, but agrees to not appeal. He states before the court, “I am not guilty, but I see somebody will have to die for this crime, and it might as well be me as anyone.” (Noah Parden VON) He is sentenced to hang on Tuesday, March 13th. Johnson is moved to a jail in Knoxville.

**Feb. 10, 1906** - Ed Johnson’s father, Skinbone Johnson, visits Noah Parden and Styles Hutchins. Parden and Hutchins are two well respected black attorneys working in Chattanooga. They agree to take on Johnson’s appeal.

**Feb. 12-13, 1906** - Johnson’s new attorneys bring their motion to appeal to Judge McReynolds. They are told to come back the next day to file. Parden and Hutchins return to Judge McReynolds on the 13th. Their motion is denied since their appeal is one day late. They set their sights on the Tennessee District Court. McReynolds refuses to offer up the court transcripts despite Johnson’s indigent circumstances. Parden and Hutchins collect the required fee money for the transcript from members of the black community. McReynolds abruptly leaves town before Parden and Hutchins can get his signature on the bill of exceptions, further delaying their efforts.

**Mar. 7, 1906** - Sheriff Shipp travels to Knoxville to bring Johnson back to Chattanooga for execution. Meanwhile, Parden files a petition for writ of habeas corpus with the federal courts. District Judge Charles Clark issues an order stopping Sheriff Shipp from taking Johnson back to Chattanooga until the petition is heard.

**Mar. 10-11, 1906** - The federal district court in Knoxville hears Parden’s petition. Judge Clark issues a temporary stay of execution, moving Johnson’s hanging to March 20th. While Clark does not feel the state has jurisdiction to determine if Johnson’s trial was fair, he uses the stay to give Parden and Hutchins time to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. This trial is attended to by a large portion of Chattanooga’s black community making up “fully two-thirds of [the spectators].” (Chattanooga Times, 3/12/1906)

**Mar. 12, 1906** - A meeting is held by the black community in Chattanooga. Six hundred people attend led by several prominent black preachers. Funds are raised for Johnson’s Supreme Court appeal. (“Case of Ed Johnson Nearing Its Last Stage,” Chattanooga Times, March 16, 1906.)

**Mar. 15, 1906** – Early in the morning, as Parden and Hutchins are working on the paperwork for Johnson’s appeal, their building is set on fire by arsonists. No one is injured. Parden gets on the train that afternoon.

**Mar. 17, 1906** - Parden meets with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harlan in Washington D.C. arguing for an emergency writ of habeas corpus on Johnson’s behalf. He presents evidence of the unfair trial and pleads for an intercession from the Supreme Court.

**Mar. 18, 1906** – Parden boards a train home. He has not been informed of the Judge’s decision either way. Meanwhile, back in Chattanooga, Johnson is granted one final wish before his scheduled hanging. He would like to attend church. St. James Baptist Church congregation and Rev. W. B. Fleming come to Johnson at the jailhouse. A sermon is preached and hymns are sung. Three hundred parishioners crowd the room. Johnson speaks, affirming his innocence. He states he has forgiven all and is ready to die. He is baptized into the St. James congregation using an old bathtub found in the county jail.

*"I have had a change of heart and I am ready to die. The change came over me all at once and I can't tell how it was. Before the change I hated the people that were against me. I couldn't eat and could only think of the arrest and the trouble I was in. I didn't want to talk or eat and I didn't want to see anyone. All at once I said that I was willing to give up my friends and folks and life itself if I had to, and then I felt different. I didn't hate the white people any more, my appetite returned and I am proud now to have anybody come to see me. Someone asked me that day what made me eat and I said that I felt different and was ready to face anybody. This change of feeling has stayed with me and I feel that way yet."[1] - Ed Johnson (“U. S. Supreme Court Will Review Negro’s Case,” Chattanooga Times, March 19, 1906.)*

Following deliberations by the Supreme Court Justices, a telegram is sent to Hamilton County that afternoon. The Court has issued a stay of execution affirming that they plan to reexamine Johnson's trial.

**Mar. 19, 1906** - Despite open threats of mob violence and widespread rumors of a lynching, Sheriff Shipp tells most of his guards to spend the night at home, leaving only one elderly jailer - Jeremiah Gibson - to guard Johnson and the other prisoners. Even though the mob takes several hours to break through to Johnson, Shipp does not call in any more deputies, jailers, or the National Guard for help.

*“When this news was heralded to the world, the mob formed in Chattanooga, Tenn., and in violation of the law and in defiance of the Supreme Court of the United States, took Johnson from the jail and hung him to the county bridge and fired over two hundred shots into his body. Then it was that they called aloud for Judge Harlan and N.W. Parden, the Negro lawyer that went to Washington. Before Johnson died, he said: “God bless you all, I am innocent.”” (Noah Parden VON).*

Of Johnson’s mental state during the horrific events that night, a Chattanooga Times reporter wrote, *“The prisoner was the calmest person in the jail. Not a quiver of the lip or utterance of a sound betrayed the slightest fear or terror.”* (“GOD BLESS YOU ALL --- I AM INNOCENT” March 20, 1906 Chattanooga Times) After the crowd disperses, G.W. Franklin, the first African American funeral director and embalmer in Chattanooga and a good friend of Booker T. Washington, arrives to retrieve the body. Both he and his wife work together to prepare the body for burial.

**Mar. 20, 1906 -** Thousands of black Chattanoogans protest Johnson's hanging by refusing to cross the County Bridge or go to work. They gather in large groups to discuss a plan of action. Sheriff Shipp calls in the National Guard. A race riot is feared. Noah Parden writes, *“Never before in the history of this country has lynching been brought so plainly within the power of the Federal government to punish the perpetrators. Johnson at the time of his death was a Federal prisoner. It is now up to the government to deal out justice.”*

*“The lynching stirred the colored people who quit work for a season. It was a barbarity without a parallel, for it was a direct slap at the Federal Court. If the United States ever expects to try to stop lynching, now is the opportunity…. Will the Nation ever awake? One man snatched from beneath the strong arm of the United States Supreme Court and lynched… Even human life is unsafe in these regions. The mob holds the nation terrified and submissive as it clenches its fist and gnashes its teeth. How long will the Nation crouch in abject fear before the depraved and the lawless. The terror of the mob hangs like a cloud over this whole...country.” (“The Supremacy of the Mob” from VON)*

Newspapers around the country report on the state of the city.

*“Chattanooga in a state of siege. Armed officers are patrolling that city’s streets. To prevent a race riot. Two white men shot by Negroes and one incendiary fire has occurred. Negroes quitting work and the governor asked to keep troops under arms… Nearly 1,000 negroes have stopped work in several of the larger industrial plants and are standing around in groups talking. The women servants have in many cases left their employment and are more angry and sullen than the men.”* (“Chattanooga in a state of siege” Columbia Herald, March 23, 1906)

**Mar. 21, 1906** - Ed Johnson's funeral, planned to be held at his sister's home, has to be moved to the nearby Primitive Baptist Church due to the size of the crowd. His body is laid to rest at Pleasant Gardens Cemetery where a large headstone is placed, paid for by his community.

The papers report on the funeral, *“No reference was made to the manner in which Johnson came to his death, and the funeral was devoid of all sensationalism and was conducted in a remarkably conservative manner. Over 2,000 persons were present. The internment of Johnson took place at 4 o’clock at the Pleasant Grove [Garden] cemetery, where a large crowd congregated.” (Ed Johnson’s Funeral, Chattanooga Times, March 22, 1906)*

President Roosevelt orders an investigation by the secret service into Johnson's lynching. The next week Sheriff Shipp is reelected without a single black vote.

**Mar. 25, 1906** - *“The following Sunday after the lunching, Rev. Jones, pastor at the First Baptist Church (white), preached a very strong sermon against lynching. He was notified through several letters that if he did not retract the statements made in that sermon that the mob would call on him. This he refused to do. The following Saturday night his house was set on fire. The lawyers have been threatened and the city is in an uproar, as bedlam reigns.” (Noah Parden VON)*

**1906-1907 -** The Supreme Court debates how to respond to the actions of Sheriff Shipp and the members of mob. Following hearings in Oct. and Dec. of 1906, the Court determines that it will try 25 Chattanoogans including Shipp, Gibson, and several identified members of the mob, for contempt of court. Evidence is collected and further hearings are held in 1907.

**May 12, 1907 -** Nevada Taylor tragically passes away after having returned to her hometown in Findlay, Ohio. Her cause of death was listed as “nervous prostration incidental of the crime committed under the very shadow of historic Lookout Mountain.” It is likely that she died from syphilis contracted during the attack over a year earlier. (https://www.chattanoogan.com/2019/5/13/390125/Nevada-Taylor-s-Story.aspx)

**Nov. 1908-Jan. 1910 -** In Nov. of 1908 the Court drops charges against 19 of the defendants. It takes two years for the Supreme Court to analyze over 1000 pages of written testimony. Finally, in May of 1909 Shipp, Gibson, and four members of the mob are found guilty of contempt of court. They are ordered to be arrested and brought to Washington D.C. for sentencing. In Nov. 1909 Shipp is sentenced to 90 days in jail. Others are sentenced to 60 days. On Jan. 30, 1910 Shipp is released early for good behavior, having only served 76 days. He arrives home in Chattanooga to a cheering crowd of 10,000 at the train station and a brass band welcoming him back a hero. Meanwhile, Noah Parden and Styles Hutchins had been forced to flee Chattanooga, abandoning their law practice. Parden continued to practice in East St. Louis and Hutchins worked as a barber the rest of his life.

**February 2000 -** Hamilton County Judge Doug Meyer overturns Johnson conviction and clears him of all crimes.

**Mar. 19, 2016 -** TN Resolution 701 is passed, 98 to 0 by state representatives, clearing Johnson and acknowledging the state’s role in perpetrating his unjust death.

**Feb. 26, 2020 -** Congress passes a law designating lynching as a federal hate crime.

**1893-now:** While the County Bridge appeared in countless postcards and tourism campaigns heralding Chattanooga as a progressive city ever since its original dedication in 1891, it remains a painful symbol of racial terrorism for many Chattanoogans. In 1978 the Bridge was closed, deemed unsafe for car traffic and abandoned for over ten years. In the 1990s several groups worked hard to save the bridge from demolition. In 1993, 100 years after Alfred Blount was lynched from the first span, the bridge reopened as one of the world’s longest pedestrian-only bridges. Painted bright blue (the original color was a rust red) and bookmarked by impressive parks and walking paths on the north and south end, the bridge reemerged as an icon of the city. For many, the bridge’s reemergence was simply a painful reminder of the past, leaving many Chattanoogans feeling unsafe and uncomfortable walking across its 2,375 foot span.

*“A lot of those people don’t know what happened on that bridge. In the White community, it wasn’t spoke out in the open so much...In the Black community, you never forget one of these atrocities. You never forget a lynching.”- Eric Atkins*

*“I really don’t feel comfortable walking the bridge, I felt as if by walking across the bridge that it was some sort of affirmation of silence or the fact that it’s a playground now.” - Donivan Brown*

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-lynching-that-black-chattanooga-never-forgot-takes-center-stage-downtown/2021/03/11/67405b4e-7c27-11eb-85cd-9b7fa90c8873_story.html>)

**September 19th, 2021** - A memorial created by artist Jerome Meadows is dedicated on the south end of the Walnut Street Bridge honoring Ed Johnson, Noah Parden, and Styles Hutchins, as well as other victims of lynchings in Hamilton County. Black and white Chattanoogans gather together to remember, mourn, and learn from the past, courageously hoping for a new America.

***“My hope is in the young people… They have stood up against many injustices… I think this generation finally is going to put Dr. King’s dream into practice.” - Eric Atkins (The Ed Johnson Conversations, Part VI: The Memorial on the Walnut St. Bridge)***

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