

## The Lynching of Mrs. Mary Turner

### INTRODUCTION:

The analyzed document is the letter written by W. B. Chambers in Jersey City (New Jersey) on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1934. It was addressed to the President of the United States, who was at the time Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and it reported complaints and requests about the cruelty of some lynching cases in order to encourage the commander in chief to officially ban them. As far as we know, the letter surely arrived at the Attorney General's office and probably was then read by the President too; nevertheless, we are given to know only that Mr. Keenan, Assistant Attorney General, replied thanking Mr. Chambers for his interest in the matter and no other details are released.

### HISTORIC DETAILS:

In just a quick overview of the lynching laws matter, history tells us that from 1919 there have been several attempts to pass an anti-lynching bill. Among the most important we need to mention the Dyer Act (1919), which was supported by President Harding but did not pass the Senate because of the Southern Democratic bloc; and the Costigan-Wagner Bill (1935), which was not even supported by President Roosevelt, who was afraid he would lose the Whites' votes from the South, as some historians claim, and by the Southern Senators. As of today, though the rate of lynchings dropped nationwide, an active and effective anti-lynching law is still missing. However, the "Justice for Victims of Lynchings Act", supported by black senators Booker, Harris, and Scott (respectively from New Jersey, California and South Carolina), passed the Senate in December 2018 and it is now waiting for presidential approval and for the House to vote.

### CONTEXT AND CONTENT OF THE DOCUMENT:

In context, the letter from Mr. Chambers was sent right in the middle of the Costigan-Wagner Bill discussion which means that this issue was present not only on the political field but also among the people; plus we can perceive that it was commonly acknowledged that the President was not in favor of the Bill, as the letter clearly tries to appeal to some remarkable historical facts to shake the President's conscience in order to encourage him to support the law. We are not given to know much about the writer, but we can imagine he is a middle-class individual because he does not spell all the words correctly, which makes it not very likely for him to be highly educated, but he is also up to date with political news, which means it is unlikely he is from a notably poor and undereducated class. As far as race is concerned, we cannot know by any means whether the author is for sure a Black or a White person, although we can hypothesize that he is an African-American as he mentions going to the Carnegie Hall, which is a bourgeois theatre, to listen to James Weldon Johnson, who was an African-American poet involved in the NAACP. e.g. "I can remember the blood running cold in my veins as James Weldon Johnson vividly portrayed the cruel fate of Mary Turner".

Taking a closer look to the evidence Mr. Chambers brings, he particularly appeals to some gruesome and incisive episodes, which are the lynching of a black family in Valdosta, Georgia, (1918) and the lynching of 11 Italian immigrants in New Orleans in 1891. The first one is mentioned, in my opinion, to convey the idea of the cruelty and gruesomeness of lynchings to first strike the conscience of the reader with very impressive pictures. On the other hand, it is also how Mr. Chambers found out as a boy about the fact since he remembers he was told the story, which really moved the black community (as it is testified by other letters sent by individuals and associations recalling the tragedy), in a public hall so that the lynching would not go blind on the public eye by portraying in details the violent hanging and disembowelment of Mrs.

Turner. The second event aims at picturing the impact that the savagery of lynchings has on the international stage, as the author reports the lynching of some Italians (recalling that the nature of lynching is only cruelty since it is not focused on black people only but on whoever the mob demonizes) and the subsequent failure of diplomacy, since King Humbert I was dispatching the Italian navy against the US.

At the same time, Mr. Chambers goes in the opposite direction, trying to stimulate FDR's ambition and comparing his political stature to the Lincoln's one, in order to be remembered as the President who successfully banned and sanctioned such a wretched and miserable "pastime" in America, as lynchings. He also recalls the bravery and the laudable leadership of King Humbert I as a model of honesty to his people and patriotism that in front of God Roosevelt ought to follow, thus deforming partially the actual feeling of the Italian King, who was surely patriotic but probably not as much as alluded by the writer.

What is more striking than anything else to me is the fact that Mr. Chambers comes to the point of preferring another citizenship to the American one "if means would allow it", given that he hates "golden silence and indifference" to the matter so much that he cannot live with himself in a coward country that seems to not care enough about justice and civil rights for everybody, regardless of the color of the skin. e.g. "I would renounce my citizenship and take up residence in a country whose national pastime is not burning people at stake.

Another point we need to highlight is the fact that W.B.Chambers appeals more than once to the Christian religion and to the supposed religious basis of the country, saying that the President (here conceived as what is closest to God) should not allow any kind of racial violence and discrimination, especially lynchings, in the name of the Christian civilization and of the values of patriotism. e.g. "You as the Christian head of a Christian nation would set a precedent second to only that of the immortal Lincoln".

#### CONCLUSIONS:

Personally, I believe this document pictures a fundamental part of African-American history, as it shows, on behalf of many others, the participation in social issues that involve the whole nation's profile. Especially if compared to current times, I believe it shows another kind of public interest, it shows that respect and equality should not be taken for granted and that there must be the urgency to peacefully protest and raise your voice if necessary.

In conclusion, I need to express my interest and appreciation for reading this document, which does not care about maintaining the author's dignity or self-righteousness, but it just aims straight to the objective, so that we perceive it as a cry for liberty and justice for all, without discriminations of any kind. Someway, in my opinion, we can rightfully claim this letter is an anticipation of the Civil Rights Movement and it surely is inspired by the same historical facts and by the same purposes of it since it has the same communitarian, patriotic, moral and religious basis as many speeches and documents, for example, from doctor Martin Luther King.

#### SITOGRAPHY:

<https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/2018/05/16/lynching-of-women-in-united-states-blog-series-the-lynching-of-mrs-mary-turner-and-her-family/>

[https://www.senate.gov/general/search/search\\_results\\_sb.cfm?query=anti-lynching&x=0&y=0&xsl=xml](https://www.senate.gov/general/search/search_results_sb.cfm?query=anti-lynching&x=0&y=0&xsl=xml)

<https://www.congress.gov/search?searchResultViewType=expanded&q=%7B%22congress%22%3A%22all%22%2C%22source%22%3A%22legislation%22%2C%22search%22%3A%22dyer+act%22%7D>



*Justice*

115 Orient Avenue.

Jersey City, N.J.

November 17, 1934.

DEPT. OF JUSTICE  
CRIMINAL DIVISION  
REPECTFULLY REFERRED  
FOR ACKNOWLEDGMENT  
AND CONSIDERATION  
*Rosa Mackay Howe*  
ATTORNEY

The President Of The United States  
Washington, District of Columbia  
Your Excellency;-

All through the years Mr. President, my finer feelings have been shocked with attendant horror at stated intervals upon reading of lynching in America. During the adolescent years I can remember the blood running cold in my veins as James Weldon Johnson vividly portrayed the cruel fate of Mary Turner, a generation ago at Carnegie Hall. How this poor defenseless Negro mother was hung to a tree, and then disembowled by the brutal blood thirsty mob. Mr. President, I can still remember that unholy spectacle that nauseated me, as if it happened yesterday. I was but a child then, and I believed that in later years that this my government would in later years wipe out the crimson blot on America's history. I had prayed that I too could sing The Star Spangled Banner with as much gusto as any other American citizen. The fact remains, I cannot, my government has done nothing to eradicate lynching, and the star Spangled chokes me in the singing now as it did then.

That lynching should have been abolished or at least placed in the category of federal crime, is all too evident to warrant any comment of mine. That such legislation as the Costigan Wagner Bill should have been passed as far back as 1891 is obvious. You, probably have read how eleven Italians were lynched in the Spring of that year at New Orleans. And further how Secretary of State Blaine evaded the issue by saying that "the Federal Government had no jurisdiction in the matter". You may also recall

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that King Humbert Of Italy not being satisfied with such an evasive explanation dispatched a squadron of warships to New Orleans to adjust matters. President Harrison then expressed his regrets and King Humbert of Italy then latter accepted a gift of \$25,000 on behalf of the bereaved families. In short Mr. President lynching involved this country in international complications, and the President then become somewhat disturbed over the matter fourty-three years ago. Since then what Mr. President? With the exception of a few presidential utterances in inaugural addresses, which were promptly forgotten, and your denouncing the "shame of lynching", as a relic of the middle ages, which obviously to has been forgotten, nothing has been done by them. On the other hand the National Advancement Association For Colored People have waged for twenty-five years a relentless fight for the abolition of this "quaint Southern pastime". I refer to the Dyer Anti- Lynching Bill that was killed in Congress, and the ~~Magnum~~ Constigan- Wagner Bill that was kept of the floor by the Democratic senators in the last session of that body.

However Mr. President as one America to another, this matter of lynching must be a foul stench in your nostrils as it is mine. To tell you the truth Mr. President if means would allow it, I would renounce my citizenship and take up residence in a country whose national pastime is not burning people at stake. Visualize a drunken mob of gloating men, women, and children, members of a supposedly superior race torturing one lone helpless <sup>black</sup> ~~black~~ victim. If this unholy spectacle is is not enough to ~~stamp~~ cause Federal action and legislation, what in God's name is? What is to matter with my government, that one one hand boasts of its modern civilization and culture, and on the ~~shar~~ other sets suplenly by while mobs not ~~at~~ only lynch the victims but the law as well? Is it any wonder then, that the world should term us as a race of savages, as long as such condit-

ions endure.

Again Mr. President as one American to another, "golden silence is not going to help eradicate this "shame of America! In fact "silence" would be the sister to indifference, and I know your christian qualities and inherit love for God and country would not permit you to be indifferant. On the other hand your support of the Comtergan-Wagner Bill is a goldan oppertunity to be of service to your God, man and country. You as the christian head of a christian nation would set a precedant second to only that of the immortal Lincoln. With one stroke of the pen Lincoln emancip-ated the slaves. Well chosen words on your part and the Costigan Wagner Bill would become a law. In the interest of humanity and for future history I can hardly see how you can do likewise.

Concluding Mr. President, let me hope that you will have the same sollicitation for the American citizens that King Humbert had for his countrymen who were lynched in 1891 at New Orleans. And that you will aid materially in the passing of legislation that will check these inhumane murders violating all moral and civil law. And that you will remember the better people of the North and South, the great body of churches, in fact all human society want this blight on America's noble traditions removed for all times "Lynching, The Shame of America.

Very truly yours,

W.B. Chambers

