

“Murder in the Heartland and Justice for Mr. William Keemer”

By: Joe Skvarenina and Linda Dunn

It was summer 1875 and a mob was gathering at the Hancock County Fairground Floral Hall to witness the lynching of Mr. William Keemer. There had been no trial or due process for Keemer, just mob violence. It is time for the life of Mr. Keemer and this tragedy to be acknowledged.

The first known lynching in Indiana took place in Southern Indiana, where three black men were accused of the robbery and axe murder of a pioneer family.

The Keemer Lynching was the first lynching of a Black man by a white mob in Central Indiana during the reconstruction period. News of the lynching was spread everywhere by participants and spectators as well as the newspapers of that era. Some say it fueled later lynchings and it , intentionally terrorized black communities and enforced white supremacy.

William Keemer (born ca. 1852) of Carthage Indiana was a Black carpenter with ties to the nearby free Black community of the Beech Settlement (begun ca. 1828). In 1875, white Hancock County farmer William Vaughn accused Mr. Keemer of raping his wife. Keemer maintained his innocence, a claim supported by Beech and Greenfield residents. There was no evidence of a rape except the allegations of the crime reported by the alleged victim’s husband. Some believe that nothing more occurred than a young Black man stopping at the Vaughn house near Charlottesville for a drink of water. Knocking on the door, Keemer scared Mrs. Vaughn so she screamed, which led to her husband and farm hands to chasing William Keemer who initially escaped into Rush County. He was apprehended, arrested, and held in the Rush County jail. Fearing a lynching, he was later transferred to Hancock County jail, where despite precautions, an angry mob gathered.

On August 25, 1875, a mob of white men broke into the Hancock County Jail, beat William Keemer, and lynched him at the county fairgrounds. While many spectators saw the murder, no perpetrators were found or prosecuted. The Keemer lynching was never justified with any evidence of a crime beyond a husband’s claim and even newspapers and historical recounting offer differing stories.

Some state the alleged rape victim never spoke of the incident while others insist, she recanted. James Bass Keemer, the great grandnephew authored a book that includes the version his family passed down through the years, which included the “fact” that she recanted. A hearing was held after the lynching in which the sheriff and others gave written testimony with the proceedings recorded in the newspaper. The doctor, who was a spectator, also testified he did not want to be involved. Despite the substantial number of people gathered at the lynching and

allegations later that people knew the names of perpetrators, no names were ever revealed, let alone any actions taken against them.

This lynching paved the way for other lynchings that followed. The 160 men involved in the hanging represented vigilantes from three adjoining counties. Men boasted at the time of having artifacts, such as an unnamed man in Knightstown claiming to have the noose. A letter to the editor of the *Hancock Democrat* complained of Black residents, said they had one and did not want anymore, and used the term "Keemer them." The accuser's husband was a candidate for sheriff before this allegation. He did not win the election but did become a prominent businessperson with state contracts and widespread influence.

The lynching occurred during the early adult years of James Whitcomb Riley, who had a lifelong friendship with Greenfield's first black resident, Irvin Hunt. Although there are no records of his involvement in this incident or in any writing about it, it would be unusual if this did not affect him in some way. Riley left Greenfield sometime after the lynching to be a jokester for the Wizard Oil Company, a traveling snake oil show. His poems of the period dwelled on death, racism, and alienation.

James Keemer, William's brother, has living descendants who passed on the legacy of William Keemer to their multiple great-uncles. One of them, Edgar Bass Keemer, became a doctor in Detroit who took part in the Civil Rights Movement, and marched at least once with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Edgar was also shot once.

Linda Dunn from the League of Women Voters and I collaborated, prepared and funded a historical marker application to the Indiana Historical Bureau to place a marker commemorating Mr. William Keemer. It was difficult to come to an agreement on the wording and the ultimate placing of the marker. Linda did the marker application writing, and I did the fund raising and initially chaired a steering committee to bring in multiple community voices and representation.

Funds were easily raised from fourteen people to cover the marker cost of \$2,950. Donors included judges, attorneys, democrat activists, one minister, corporate & hospital executives and one historical organization. Historical group support was sparse. By this time, descendants from the Beech and the Roberts Settlement Communities and the Keemer relatives became involved in the discussion of the wording of the marker. Major concerns centered around should the marker read "Innocent" or "never found guilty." A committee of Hancock County donors, Beech and Roberts Community members, family descendants, and Historical Bureau staff met to work on wording and placement of the marker. The committee finally agreed upon the following wording on August 8, 2022.

"Side One: William Keemer (born ca. 1852) of Carthage was a Black carpenter with ties to the nearby free Black community of Beech Settlement (begun ca. 1828). In 1875, white Hancock

County farmer William Vaughn accused Keemer of raping his wife. Keemer was arrested and jailed at Greenfield. He maintained his innocence, a claim supported by Beech and Greenfield residents.

Side Two: A mob of 160 white men broke into the jail, beat Keemer, and lynched him at the Hancock County fairgrounds. While many spectators witnessed the murder, no perpetrators were found or prosecuted. This lynching and denial of due process, along with others in Indiana from the mid-1800s to 1930, intentionally terrorized Black communities and enforced white supremacy.”

After text approval, placement became the issue. The marker placement caused a great deal of concern for some politicians. Some said it was not wanted in the city limits while others felt it would be wrong to commemorate such an event. These people could not understand it was a way to make amends for something so tragic to happen to Mr. Keemer and his descendants and apologize for a great wrong.

The first attempts included placing the marker at the site of Mr. Keemer’s burial on the new jail property, and the second site was at the fourth Hancock Jail in which he was held, now the prosecutor’s office. The County Sheriff suggested that it be placed on the highway near the site of Keemer’s burial. The Keemer Committee wanted it in a prominent location and rejected the highway site. The Keemer Marker was finally dedicated on August 24, 2024 at the Greenfield BMV on the National Road.

So, it goes...

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The Hancock Democrat, July 1, 1875, p. 2-3.

The Daily Reporter (Greenfield, IN), Sept. 15, 1965, p.7.

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Confessions of a Pro-Life Abortionist, Ed Keemer, M.D., Vinco Press, Detroit, Michigan, p. 3.

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The Indianapolis News, Feb. 17, 1908, p.7.

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The Indianapolis News, Jan. 1, 1898, p. 10.

Linda Dunn is with the Hancock County League of Women Voters, and Joseph Skvarenina is the Hancock County Historian since 1992 and teaches adjunct history at Ivy Tech.