

## Enraged Whites Drive Negroes From Town

### Crowd Breaks Up Church Services: Drive Negroes From Shacks. Many Leave Town; Others Hide In Houses--Church Burns Late At Night--Some Blame Mob

There were a few scattered demonstrations against negroes during Sunday but it was not until about 9 o'clock in the evening that the organized movement to drive the blacks from the borough started. Shortly before noon a negro arrested in town and was walking toward the negro section when he was seized by a white man in Roosevelt street. "Nigger," said the white man, "if you want to be alive and free tonight when the moon comes down here," "How, I've got to," replied the negro as he turned back toward the trolley line. The police arrested the white man and took him to the station.

disorder ceased entirely. By 11 o'clock conditions were about normal. About 1.30 the following morning some one saw a blaze in the colored church and an alarm was turned in. The wrong alarm was sounded and the engines went to Hudson and Union streets, the scene of the murder. Some one there directed them to the negro church. The structure was of pine and located on a lonely flat where the wind had full play. There was a strong north east wind at the time and the small building went up rapidly. Two streams were trained upon it for some time but it was not until about 11 o'clock that the fire was extinguished. The structure was a total loss.

## Carroll Fund Swells: Donations Pour In

### Many Generous Gifts Contributed To Fund For Aid of Widow of Young Bozoz

The Johnny Carroll fund started Sunday night by a donation of Five Company No. 2 with a check for \$500 at which time a committee was appointed as follows: William H. Nash, chairman; Edward J. Connelley, J. J. Mullan, Edward J. Dolan and John S. Olbricht. They have started to collect and are receiving donations from any member of the community. The fund is being held at 10 o'clock Sunday night at the Fire Company No. 2. The fund is being held at 10 o'clock Sunday night at the Fire Company No. 2. The fund is being held at 10 o'clock Sunday night at the Fire Company No. 2.

## Seniors Return From Washington Trip

### Had Good Weather And All Were In Good Health Throughout Trip

The Senior Citizens Club returned from their Washington trip Sunday afternoon. The trip was very successful and all were in good health throughout the trip. The club members enjoyed the trip very much and were glad to return home.

## Hundreds Attend Carroll Funeral

### Line of Hundred Cars Accompanies Body of Murder Victim To Last Resting Place

The funeral of John Carroll was held Sunday afternoon and was attended by more than 100 people. A line of hundred cars accompanied the body of the murder victim to the St. James Cemetery. The funeral was a very impressive one and the body was laid to rest in a quiet and dignified manner.

## Johnny Carroll Murdered; Negro Knifer Arrested

### Popular Carteret Bozoz Stabbed In Heart a Few Yards From Home. Companion Slashed By Same Negro In Serious Condition in Hospital

John Carroll, aged 26, of 76 Union street, was stabbed to death Sunday morning at ten minutes to one, a few yards from his Union street home. Robert Ducest, a negro also known as "Bad Eye", who killed Carroll and dangerously wounded Ralph Johnson, was arrested as he was fleeing from the borough through the Boulevard section. The murder of Carroll touched off the most unfeeling feelings against the negroes that have been accumulating for some time. A long predicted race riot broke out in the neighborhood of Carroll, Johnson and Ducest. The riot was very serious and many people were injured. The riot was very serious and many people were injured.

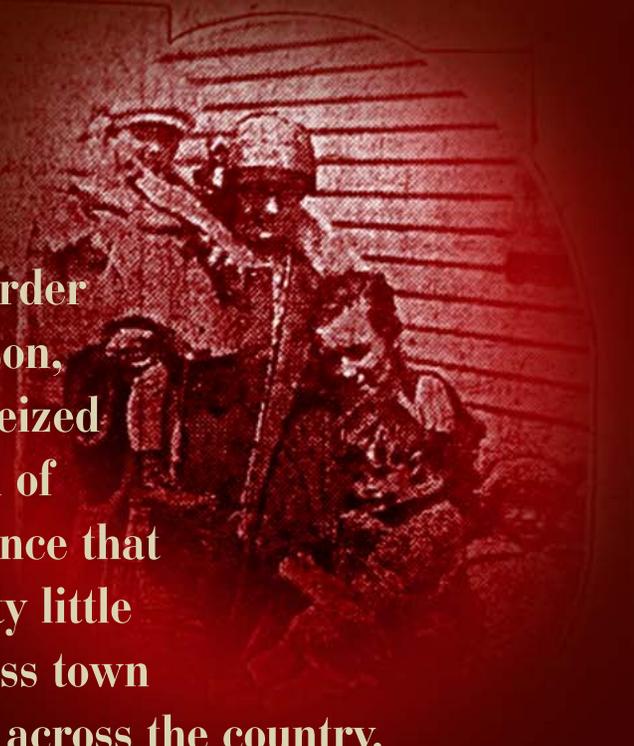


"JOHNNY" CARROLL, Carteret bozoz, whose slaying was followed by race riot and destruction of negro church.

# The Carteret Race Riot

Following the murder of their favorite son, Carteret was seized by a spasm of racial violence that put the gritty little working class town in the news across the country.

by Gordon Bond



**“...his generosity  
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**T**he news shook Carteret to its gritty working class core: Johnny Carroll was dead—murdered—stabbed in the heart and left to bleed to death in the gutter.

These days, the name means little, but on the sad morning of April 25, 1926, most residents would have at least heard of him. Others, evidently, adored him.

“He was the most able boxer ever produced in a borough noted for prize fighters above the average,” wrote the *Carteret Press* of him when they reported on his murder in the April 30<sup>th</sup> edition where it took up most of the front-page. “His clean sportsmanlike manner of boxing and his skill; his generosity and his personality all combined to win for him a legion of friends in this borough and in neighboring towns.”

Carroll, just 25-years-old, left a widow and three small children, and his death would have been tragic enough on its own. Yet the details of how he met his untimely end were about to be subsumed into an ugly spasm of racial violence that would put little Carteret in newspapers across the country.

What can be said with reasonable certainty is that Johnny Carroll and two, possibly three, companions were walking home in the early hours of a misty Sunday morning when an altercation took place between Carroll and Robert Ducrest. The latter took out a knife and stabbed Carroll before seriously slashing at one of his friends who gave chase.

Beyond these barebones, the way in which the details changed in the contemporary accounts say more about the times in general than the specific event in particular. We can begin with the murderer. His name mostly appears as “Ducrest,” though sometimes “Ducrease,” and even “Ducaest.” *The Carteret Press* inserted the colorful nickname of “Bad Eye” between the first and last names, an apparent reference to a scar over one possibly blind eye. But more often than not, he simply referred to as “the negro.”

Prior to the First World War, when Carteret was known as Roosevelt, you would have been hard-pressed to find a black face. The growth of the black community can be traced by looking at the U.S. Federal Census records for 1910, 1920, and 1930. In

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1910, out of the 5,836 residents counted, only a dozen qualified as “Black.” There was William and Minnie Moody, who lived with their three children on Rahway Avenue. He came from Maryland and she from Georgia. William worked as a cook in an office building. Over on Church Street lived Edward and Mattie Pelligrew who had come to New Jersey from North Carolina with their four children. Edward worked at a steel mill. Then there was 86-year-old John Cromwell, who lived with his son, Saul, Sr., Saul’s German-born wife, Margaret, and the couple’s ten children. John Cromwell was identified as “Black,” Margaret as “White,” and their children “Mulatto.” It isn’t clear if Saul, Sr. was indeed mixed race or if the census-taker made a mistake. But what is possibly telling is the last name. It wasn’t unusual for slaves to have been named after Oliver Cromwell from England’s Civil War. (Cromwell had enslaved Irish who would not vacate their land, sending them to Barbados, where they were sold off along with African slaves.) So it might be speculated that ancestors of Cromwell family had such experiences. There were also two Chinese brothers, Dok and Lok Lee, who owned a laundry. The black population in 1910 amounted to just a little over 0.2% of the total.

That’s not to say that the majority “White” population was especially homogeneous. The term encompassed a wide range of native-born and immigrant nationalities—mostly Hungarian, Polish, Irish, Italian, Russian, and even some Norwegians. What attracted them all were the opportunities for employment in the factories that lined the Arthur Kill. Among the leading places to find a job were steel mills, smelting plants, and fertilizer plants.

With the First World War, many young men left such jobs to join the military or would be drafted, creating a labor shortage. While African-American men also served in segregated units, there was still a large enough civilian population at home to step into the gaps the war created. Indeed, many were already on the move. The war came during what historians call the “First Great Migration” of black families from southern farms to northern factories. The low-wage agricultural jobs and pressures of Jim Crow were pushing them out of the south at the same time better-paid industrial jobs and emerging urban centers of (albeit

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segregated) black culture were pulling them in. Between 1910 and 1918, it has been conservatively estimated that some 400,000 families headed north.

Carteret saw only a little of this. By the 1920 census, the total population had grown to 10,497, out of which 38 were counted as “Black”—only a little over 0.3%. (Four were identified as Chinese.) Between 1920 and 1930, however, there was a more pronounced spike in African-American residents. The total population, tallied as 10,497, had grown but more modestly than in the previous decade. The “Negro” population had gone from those 38 individuals in 1920 to 370 in 1930—nearly 3.0% of the total. (Also counted were 8 Mexicans, 5 Chinese, 4 Filipinos, and 1 “Indian,” meaning what today would be called Native-American.) While still a minority, there were enough to support a distinct “colored side of town,” primarily in the 7th and 8th districts—certainly enough to begin to more seriously be seen as competition by other races and ethnicities jostling for jobs and homes.

Like any group of people, there would be both decent, hardworking folks and a sometimes not-so-decent, even criminally-inclined element. But there was an undercurrent of “otherness” when it came to the language used by *The Woodbridge Leader* newspaper to describe such distinctions among the borough’s black residents. They admitted most “were law-abiding citizens, who worked consistently, saved their money, had bank accounts, and caused no embarrassment to the white population.”

Among those who “caused no embarrassment to the white population” were included those black families who settled down there and had a vested interest in the community at large. The 1930 census records, however, do appear to bear out the assertion back in 1926 that there was what they characterized as “floating Negroes”—itinerate laborers the paper claimed came from “the tough waterfront sections of Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas.” According to the paper, they “did not work steadily. They tried to make an easy living at the gambling table, depending on the turn of a card or the fall of the ‘leaping dominoes’ to bring them enough money for ham and eggs and a cup of coffee.”

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Presumably, the sixteen black men who were listed as “roomers” at 23 Hudson Street would have been an example of what they meant. Ranging in age from 20s to 40s, they hailed from Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Each was listed as a laborer at “odd jobs.” All but four were single—and wives were not listed as living with the four married men. A bunch of mostly single working class guys far from home were all but guaranteed to be tempted by the common vices of drinking, gambling, and maybe some loose women. There were a couple other boarding houses listed and these likely added a rough-and-tumble grit to the neighborhoods.

Other boarding houses were run by black families where patrons seemed to have more specific employment in smelting or chemical plants. They also tended to be from New Jersey, though some had apparently come from Maryland, Florida, and Mississippi.

Obviously, we can't imply with any certainty the character of any of the men staying at such establishments one way or the other. Nevertheless, black itinerate workers seem to have been being held to closer scrutiny. Around the back from 23 Hudson Street where the sixteen black “odd jobs” men stayed were rooms rented by men of Polish, Austrian, Czech, Russian, and Norwegian origins, also largely single or without spouses present and also apparently “floating” at odd jobs. No doubt they too would have been subject to the same temptations of vice as those around the corner.

Yet, when Robert “Bad Eye” Ducrest was accused of the murder of Johnny Carroll, he became for many emblematic of the corruptive influence of the “bad Negroes” coming out of a part of Carteret known to locals as “The Jungle”—likely as much as an adjective for the depravities they believed happened there as the obvious racial slur.

And then, so it seemed, The Jungle had claimed the life of a favorite son.

In the 1920 Federal Census, a 20-year-old Johnny Carroll was living with his widowed 46-year-old mother, Hannah, his 15-year-old sister, Ella, and two boarders at 41 B Street in Carteret.

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Hannah and her late husband (also John) had come to America from Ireland in 1895. Scrolling across to the “Occupation” columns, her son was listed as a “Heater” working at a “Steel Furnace.” The other families on B Street had come from Ireland, Poland, Austria, and Russia. A majority of the men worked at similar occupations—steel mills, iron foundry, brass tube mill, copper smelter, copper refiner, crane operator, machinist—as well as the ubiquitous fertilizer plant.

When he had registered for the draft during World War I on September 12, 1918, he indicated his full name was John Joseph Carroll. He was described as tall, slender, with hazel eyes and black hair. His draft card also identified his employer as the Chrome Steel Works where he was working as a crane operator. A good idea of the importance of the steel industry can be had by the fact his hometown is listed as “Chrome, N.J.” Carteret didn’t exist yet. The borough was originally known as Roosevelt in 1906 and wouldn’t become Carteret until 1922. The names used to identify neighborhoods, however, were somewhat fluid. The Chrome Steel Works had been established around 1900 by Charles J. and Fred E. Canda, of New York. Charles J. bought land around the plant and built housing that would become homes for many of their workers, including the Carroll family. So, that development was known as Chrome—and the area still is by many residents.

What none of this documentation reflects, however, was that when he wasn’t working in the steel mill, he was making a name for himself as a boxer. He started competing seriously in 1921 and by the time of his death had a record of four wins, four losses, and one draw in the lightweight and welterweight divisions. It seems that Carteret was known for producing boxers and Carroll was beginning to be seen as the best of the lot.

Johnny Carroll’s murder by a black man had, in the eyes of some of Carteret’s white residents, become a focal point for evidently long-simmering racial tensions. Exactly how Robert Ducrest came to kill Carroll depended on the agenda of who was telling the story to an almost absurd degree. A survey of how newspapers were reporting the story shows how flexible the

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“facts” could indeed be.

*The Daily Home News* of April 26th placed the blame less on Ducrest and more on Carroll himself: “The murder occurred shortly after 1 o’clock yesterday morning when Carroll, a prize fighter, with Ralph Johnson of Rome, N. Y., went into a negro resort, according to information received. There a fight started. Carroll and Johnson were ordered out of the place. There was a scuffle. Then the party from the resort came out on the street with Carroll and Johnson. Carroll is thought to have started a fight when one of the negroes stabbed him twice in the heart.”

In this version, Carroll and Johnson entered a “negro resort”—meaning a bar or club—and it was Carroll who picked the fight that started things. In the account offered by the *Elizabeth Daily Journal*, however, Carroll and Johnson had not gone into any such establishments, but were simply walking home from the night shift at work: “Carroll and Johnson, both popular in sporting circles here, left the plant of the United States Metal Refining Company early yesterday morning and got into the altercation on their way home. As they passed a group of negroes, one of the colored men is said to have made a remark about Carroll and jostled him. An argument developed and ended when one of them stabbed Carroll in the heart, killing him almost instantly. The colored men fled and Johnson pursued them, according to the story he told. He was gaining on them, he said, when the same negro who killed Carroll, stopped, turned about, and stabbed him in the abdomen. Johnson was taken to a hospital in Perth Amboy in serious condition.”

It is worth pointing out that at the beginning of the *Elizabeth Daily Journal* article, the attack on Carroll was described as a “shooting,” though there is no evidence of any firearms being used. The *New York Herald Tribune* of April 27th echoed the report he had been on his way home from work: “Carroll, who was twenty-six years old and the father of three children, was attacked by one of seven Negroes while on his way home from work at 1:30 Sunday morning after an argument on the sidewalk. The Negro drew a knife and plunged it into Carroll’s heart. When Carroll’s companion, Ralph Johnson, chased his assailant the Negro also

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stabbed him. Johnson is in serious condition in Perth Amboy Hospital.”

In both accounts, the altercation took place on the street and escalated with tragic results. To some degree, discrepancies or lack of detail could be put down to local reporters rushing to meet deadlines and biased sources. But if the *Daily Home News* suggested Carroll as the instigator, and the *Elizabeth Daily Journal* and *New York Herald* described a street fight in more neutral terms, the *New York World* of April 27th was at the opposite end of the spectrum: “Carroll, twenty-six years old, who lived with his wife, three children and mother just outside ‘The Jungle,’ went out to buy candy for his children at a nearby store and met Johnson and Pete (‘Chick’) Donnelly, friends. They went into a lunchroom and chatted a few minutes. As they came out, six Negroes stood on the corner, 200 feet from Carroll’s home. Johnson and Donnelly afterward said the Negroes jostled them. Carroll resented it. One of the Negroes was said to have taken a pen knife from his pocket and to have driven it through Carroll’s heart. Carroll fell dead. The Negroes ran and Johnson and Donnelly started after them. Half a block away, Johnson said, the same Negro who killed Carroll struck at him with the knife. It slashed his abdomen. Donnelly dodged and escaped.”

It seems unlikely that a shop would be open at 1:30 on a Sunday morning, but even if one were—perhaps taking advantage of a brisk shift-worker trade—claiming he was just buying candy for his children and chatting with some friends is an obvious effort to cast Carroll in a positive light and as a victim of “The Jungle.”

The accounts also differ when it comes to who was with Carroll at the time of the attack. Ralph Johnson always appears, as he was also seriously wounded and was the one who managed to raise the alarm that alerted the police. A third man, “Chick” Donnelly is mentioned in some but not all newspaper reports. “Donnelly is said to have received a slight cut or scratch across the face,” the *Carteret Press* related. Yet in a piece they ran on March 7th where Johnson—whose nickname was given as “Scotty”—described what happened, Donnelly is not at all mentioned. Nor was he mentioned in the accounts published by

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the *Daily Home News*, *Elizabeth Daily Journal*, or *New York Herald Tribune*. *The World*, a New York paper, identified him as Pete “Chick” Donnelly and as being with Johnson when they bumped into Carroll at the shop where Carroll was supposedly buying candy for his children. It isn't readily apparent why Donnelly is often left out, but Johnson's account may give a hint.

On Friday, May 7, 1926, the *Carteret Press* reported that Johnson had been released from Perth Amboy hospital with “an open ugly wound several inches wide”—doctors thought it best not to sew it closed for fear of blood poisoning. According to Johnson, he and Carroll were walking down the street when they encountered a third unnamed man they knew who was the worse for drink. If this was Donnelly, it may have been embarrassment over his being that intoxicated that kept him out of other accounts. Johnson and Carroll decided to help the man get home, taking him by the arm, and guiding him down the sidewalk. At some point, according to Johnson, two black men crossed the street to them and one, Robert Ducrest, intentionally bumped into Carroll. “Carroll,” Johnson said, “asked the negro what was the matter with him and instantly the negro struck and Carroll fell. The negro wheeled about and slashed Johnson.”

The *Carteret Press* report from April 30th had said that the altercation took place at the corner of Hudson and Union streets and that Carroll had died at the end of a drive leading to Cheap John's shop. Johnson managed to stumble to the end of Hudson Street, where he reportedly found an open lunch cart (again, probably taking advantage of the trade provided by shift workers) and managed to give the alarm before passing out from loss of blood.

Three cops responded, but the stabber had disappeared into the misty, foggy dark, ducking and dodging between buildings. The paper also claimed one officer had fired a shot at the fleeing suspect, but he had gotten away. Sergeant Andres happened on “a youth named Symborski” who had just gotten off a trolley and got a break when he said he has seen a black man matching the description running towards the Boulevard. This was still a time when cops walked their beats, and Andres had to borrow a car to

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give chase, but he managed to apprehend an out-of-breath Robert Ducrest. Johnson was taken to the hospital and later identified him as the man who stabbed both himself and Carroll.

As the sun rose that Sunday morning and word of the murder spread, white neighbors began gathering in the streets, expressing their frustration with the bad elements of “The Jungle.” But rather than remaining focused on the individual responsible, their anger seems to have begun tapping into a long-simmering resentment against all blacks in Carteret. The *Carteret Press* gave an account—complete with racist language—of a black man who was stopped by a white man on Roosevelt Avenue. Where the quotes came from is not apparent, but the white man supposedly told him, “Nigger, if you want to be alive and kicking tonight when the moon comes out, leave town,” to which the black man allegedly replied “Boss, I’s e goin’ now” and headed for the trolley line.

The police saw the restless crowds, but rather than warn them not to get out of line, they instead warned the black population to stay off the streets. The paper, evidently seeing this as a proper response to the situation, reported how a majority obeyed, but some “of the more daring type” came out and “were defiant” and were promptly set upon by the roving mobs and beaten up.

By around 9:00 P.M. groups of whites began a systematic effort to drive all blacks—men, women, children, the elderly alike—out of the borough. They encountered one black man who would not be dissuaded—they chased him down one street and he would be seen trying to sneak down another. His motivation for trying to get around the mobs was that he was going “to services” at the all-black church on the edge of town. He may have hoped that his pious errand might win him some sympathy, but he would come to regret the admission. It seems to have served only to remind the mob that the First Baptist Church was there. Before long, the modest wood structure was surrounded by an estimated fifty angry white people. The 28-year-old Reverend George H. Reed had begun services when windows began shattering and an escalation of rocks, brick, and revolver bullets began thudding against the walls.

**“Run for your life!  
Run for dear life!”**

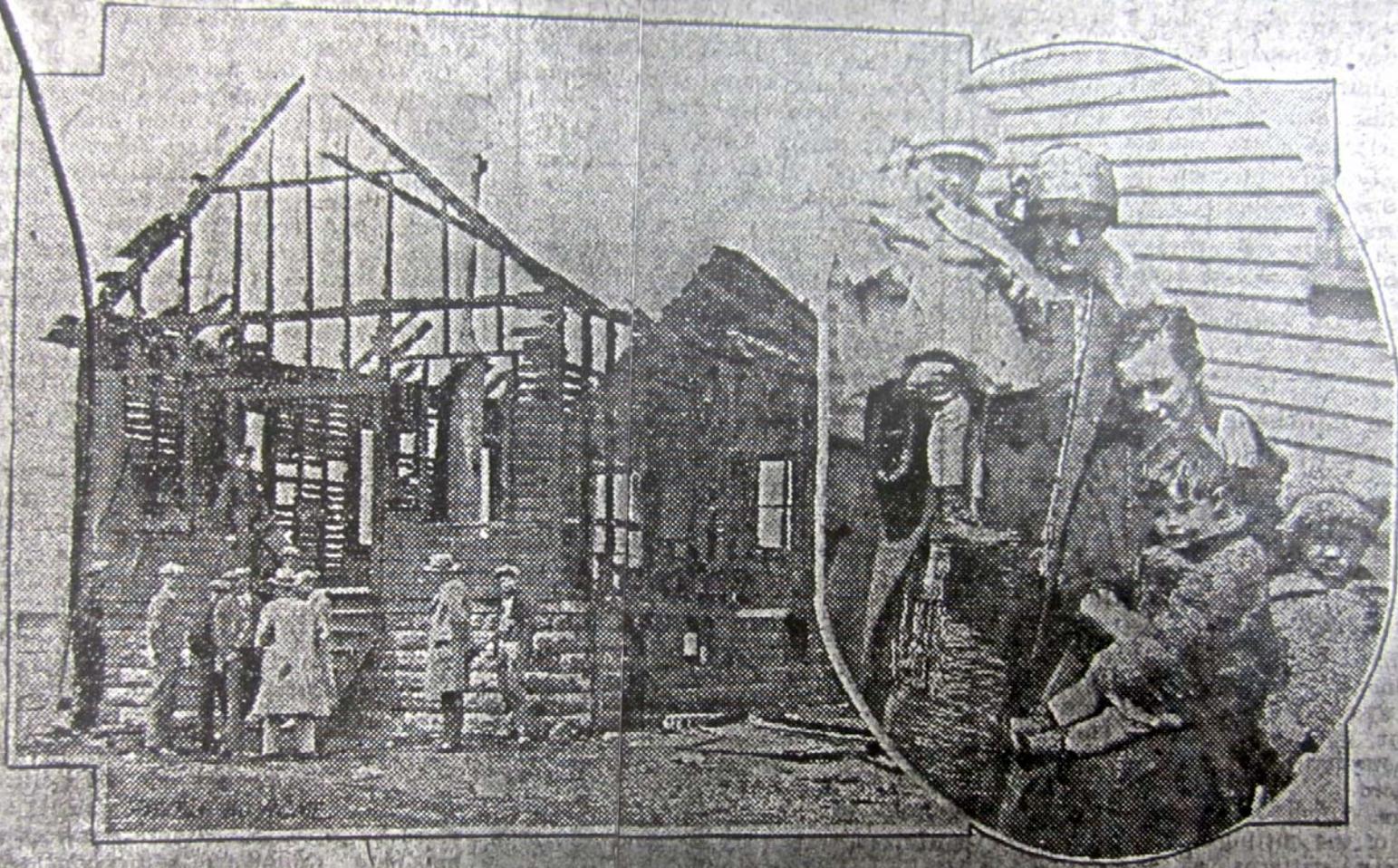
The police were summoned and, after breaking up the rioters, began escorting the black congregation members to their homes. Despite the police presence, crowds still hurled missiles from a distance at the fleeing groups. Among those beaten in the melee was Manuel Messias, a black man from France. What brought him to Carteret was not mentioned, but he received a blow to the head serious enough to be taken to Perth Amboy hospital.

An article in the April 28 New York paper *The World* related the account of Rev. Reed and his wife. There were only seven people in the church that evening. Rev. Reed was witting behind Rev. G.W. Burton, a guest preacher from the North Baptist University of Rahway, NJ, who was at the pulpit. “Run for your life,” Reed was said to have shouted by his wife. “Run for dear life.” Mrs. Reed described jumping through a window some eleven feet off the ground “under a hail of stones” and bullets. “I ran across the field in the back of the church, and first thing I knew I had fallen into a hole, where I stayed until things quieted down a bit. Then I peeped over the rim of the hole and saw I had been forgotten by the mob. I crept to the roadway and hailed a passing automobile.”

The degree of violence was apparently enough to make people think twice about helping her. The driver of the first car she flagged down, a white man, refused her. A second, however, evidently piloted by a chauffeur, did pick her up. Driving past the church, she crouched down in the back seat, but managed to get a glimpse as the building was beginning to be set on fire. Even a female friend of hers was at first reluctant to give her refuge lest it bring the wrath of the mob down on her as well. In the meantime, Rev. Reed was frantically trying to find his wife. A white male neighbor of the friend who took her in was persuaded to find a telephone and call the police to let him know she was safe. They would reunite at the home of his mother-in-law in Elizabeth who took the couple in.

“We had nothing to do with the Negro who is said to have killed a white man,” Rev. Reed told *The World*, “and I don’t know why they burned my church. I asked the mob if they would desecrate a house of God, and they said ‘To hell with your church,’ and began throwing bricks and firing revolvers.”

# BURNED CARTERET CHURCH AND BOXER'S FAMILY



At the left are shown the ruins of the Coored Baptist Church at Carteret, burned early yesterday morning after being stoned Sunday night as a result of the murder of Johnnie Carroll, boxer, by a colored man. The church was a small frame structure. In the other picture are Carroll's survivors, Mrs. Hannah Carroll, mother; Mrs. Julia Carroll, his wife, seated, and his three children, Loretta, five; Florence, four, and John, fourteen months.

Left: The remains of the Baptist Church after being burned.

Right: The widow Julia Carroll with children Loretta, Florence, and John.

*Newark Evening News*, April 27, 1926, p.2. From the Bernard Bush Collection on the Ku Klux Klan in New Jersey (1915-1946), 1913-2010, Rutgers University Special Collections and University Archives.

The number of the mob that roamed Carteret's streets harassing black residents was estimated at around 150. Aside from the church and attacks on individuals in the street, their lust for revenge was often left unsated. They surrounded the home of James McDougall, a politician who had courted the black vote, but were turned back by police with guns drawn. Rebuffed, the mob headed for the Armour Fertilizer Company plant. They knew that the company employed some 150 black workers, who lived in a company-run camp. At midnight, the shifts would change and the black men could be caught between work and the camp. They hid under freight railcars, but midnight came and went before a watchman informed the would-be rioters that the workers would be staying put under the circumstances and warned them against trying anything on company property. Only a reported seventeen



With no small irony, the Ku Klux Klan of Linden and Rahway donated \$170 towards the rebuilding of the Carteret First Baptist Church.

From the Bernard Bush Collection on the Ku Klux Klan in New Jersey (1915-1946), 1913-2010, Rutgers University Special Collections and University Archives.

black workers showed up the next day for fear of being attacked.

Indeed, many black families decided the safest course would be to leave town, at least until the anti-Negro sentiments had burned themselves out. They often took up the local police on their offer to escort them safely to the border. It is hard to gage the responses of the police. While they did intervene in an effort to restore order, no rioters seem to have been arrested, and “protection” of the black community largely took the form of ordering them off the streets or helping them to leave the borough.

Some would speculate that the violence was primarily the actions of outsiders and police did chase unfamiliar automobiles out of the black neighborhoods. Rumors also spread that this was the work of the Ku Klux Klan, though that seems to have been more of a knee-jerk assumption. In truth, while the Klan was present in New Jersey, they had a hard time gaining a foothold in

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Carteret. Many of the white residents were the kind of immigrants they had also objected to. Nevertheless, KKK-inspired or not, there may have been outside troublemakers looking to take advantage of the unrest to stir up racial and ethnic discord.

In an ironic twist, in July of the following year, the Klan had collected and donated \$170 to Carteret’s First Baptist Church toward their rebuilding. Such counterintuitive largess was not unknown. I may have been inspired by a desire for positive publicity or a way of “rewarding” good Negroes who kept to their place in society as the Klan saw it.

The inherent gross injustice of vengeance against an entire community for the acts of an individual was obvious even to members of the Klan. And this soon became an embarrassment to the more level-headed residents as their little town became known throughout the country for such a race riot. Southern newspapers seemed to regard the whole thing with ironic glee—here was a northern town acting with the sort of racism many northerners believed was only to be found below the Mason-Dixon Line. They readily seized on the injustice of holding the group responsible for the individual. Under the title “The Carteret Affair,” North Carolina’s *Greensboro Daily Record*, in a small editorial on May 16th asserted that “the incident afforded an example of the contrast between the North and the South’s attitude toward the negro. Had this altercation occurred in a Southern community, the negroes not involved in the affray with the white men would not have been disturbed.” Interestingly, though this appears to be the first report on the story in that paper, the killing of Johnny Carroll itself is not mentioned. The whole affair was put down to “altercation between two white men and some negroes.” Such details, however, were probably secondary to turning the story into a cautionary tale for any North Carolinian blacks contemplating joining the migrations north. The column concluded with “the affair at Carteret should be a revelation to negroes in the South who have been led to believe that the North is a utopia for them.”

A later May 24th editorial piece, also in the *Greensboro Daily Record*, especially noted the consternation expressed by none



Dixon Lanier Merritt

other than that mouthpiece of the northeast, the *New York Times* over racial unrest at the time in both Chicago and Carteret. "The race problem," the *Times* was quoted in the *Record's* piece, "has been transferred from an environment in which it has been long familiar to an environment of strangers too often exasperated by economic competition." By an "environment of strangers," they meant the European immigrants competing with African-Americans for jobs in places like Carteret. The Southern paper seemed to take a pride in declaring that the danger of such unrest would always be greater "in sections which do not know the Negro as he is known in the South." In effect, that the South knew how to manage "the Negro."

The editors of another North Carolina newspaper, the *Charlotte Observer*, took this sentiment even further. They noted in a May 15th editorial that there was also a town in their state by the name of Carteret. Had such riotous behavior occurred in their Carteret, they asserted, the town would have been made "known over the world" by the press. They claimed that nothing like what happened in New Jersey happens in the South, but that whenever there had been any fuss over race, "it is the custom of reporters for Northern papers to bolt for the scene, that salable matter may be dished up for the Northern papers."

That racial violence was not unknown in the South and that northern newspapers did indeed cover the story at length was ignored. Nevertheless, they make mention of a southern correspondent who had journeyed from his home in Lebanon, Tennessee, to Carteret to provide a southerner's perspective. His name was Dixon Merritt and his report appeared in a weekly New York magazine called *The Outlook*. In print from 1870 to 1935, it was an eclectic publication that would include among its contributors Theodore Roosevelt (who was an associate editor for a time) and Booker T. Washington, whose biographical series would be collected into the book "Up from Slavery."

Under the title "White and Black in Carteret: A Southerner Surveys a Northern Race Riot," Merritt paints a somewhat jaundiced picture of the town as a disjointed collection of neighborhoods that "sprawls over the mud flats of Raritan Bay."

**“There was a group of perhaps a hundred parasitical Negroes who lived on the backs of those who did work—expert crapshooters, card sharps, confidence men.”**

The whole account rests on a foundation of paternalism towards blacks common to the era, both North and South. In modern jargon, “the Negro” was regarded as “other”—as one might feel towards dogs, where some are faithful hardworking pets and other viscous threats. The killer of Johnny Carroll, of course, was of the “bad Negro” variety, of which there were many to be found, though he also acknowledged the many “good Negroes” and lamented that they were made to suffer for the transgressions of their “bad” neighbor. He also divided the white population into similar camps of good and bad. The bad Negro, he explained, was often the product of influence by bad whites who didn’t know how to handle their Negroes. He also saw a flaw in the “alien whites”—the European immigrants, as opposed to “native whites.”

“But, while alien white Carteret resented the presence of the Negro as a laborer,” Merritt elaborated, “a part of alien white Carteret extended to the Negro a certain sort of social recognition. There was no Negro section. Most of the thousand or so Negroes in the town were quartered in a section inhabited by Hungarians and others. Many of them lived in single rooms—three, five, and sometimes seven in a room. Many of the whites in the same section lived under conditions somewhat similar. And the color line was not at all clearly drawn. They say—nearly everybody to whom I talked except the police—that a very common sight in that section before the outbreak was white women lolling on the shoulders of Negro men.”

“Some of these philandering Negroes were workers, others were not,” he continued. “There was a group of perhaps a hundred parasitical Negroes who lived on the backs of those who did work—expert crapshooters, card sharps, confidence men. Here again was economic competition between white and black. For there was a gang of white parasites, too, upon the backs of the Negro workers. Bootleggers, skin-game artists, petty hold-up men. Whatever the black parasites took reduced by just so much what the white parasites could suck in.”

Merritt’s observations were likely correct in as much as Carteret then as now was a mix of people of various character irrespective of race. The real question, however, becomes one of

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agency. By Merritt's estimation, the "alien whites" didn't know how to handle the racial divisions. Further, their own members of low-class character had further corrupted the black community, as if they were too simpleminded to develop a bad character all on their own. He asserted that "the morals of the Negro will not stand up under the conditions which many of them face in Carteret. Sooner or later this high-grade Negro that I have spoken of will very likely fall to the level of the lowest-class whites."

Even Johnny Carroll himself was not immune from blame. He characterized the boxer as a bully to the black community who finally picked on the wrong Negro. "Many of them had been beaten up previously," he said of Carteret's African-Americans, "mainly by a particular pugilist for whom the whole of Carteret was a squared circle and Negroes indiscriminately his victims. One Negro finally declined to be beaten up, and the pugilist died the death." So, depending on the source, Johnny Carroll was anything from a nice guy out buying candy for his kids to a wanton bully who made sport out of beating up blacks.

When it came to the injustice of attacking the community for the acts of an individual, Merritt saw some differences in how North and South handled such problems. "Yes, a Negro might have been lynched in any one of many Southern communities for killing a pugilist," he admitted. "But I doubt if a Negro church would have been burned and Negroes, regardless of character, maltreated and chased out of town. I am not saying that one way of violating the law is better than the other. Both are unspeakably bad. I am merely pointing out the difference. Southern violence is likely to fall upon a Negro; very rarely does it fall upon the Negro in the mass."

There was a complex paternalism to Merritt's perspective that likely echoed the feelings of many Southerners at the time. It was up to the whites to manage the blacks in his worldview. The troubles that shook little Carteret were caused by letting the balance of racial power become upset. "There may be a way of working out satisfactory industrial conditions with Negro labor in towns like this," he concluded. "I hope there is. The plants need Negro labor. The Negro laborer needs the better wages that the



William M. Ashby

Northern plant offers. But I am very sure that the problem will never be worked out by giving the Negro a white woman to fondle instead of white men to pattern after.”

Dixon Merritt, however, was not the only correspondent to journey to Carteret to speak with residents and investigate what had happened. Approaching it from an opposite perspective was William M. Ashby. Born on October 15, 1889 in the no-longer-extant Carter’s Grove, Virginia, he was the eighth of thirteen children from an African-American family who had been landowning freemen for generations. Not that this rare status shielded him from the racial inequalities around him. When he was just 11-years-old, he gazed up into the face of a lynched man swaying from sycamore tree in Newport News, Virginia. He would go on to become the first black social worker in New Jersey in 1917 and found the state’s first Urban League office on Newark. After the First World War, he helped found Newark’s Welfare Federation and Community Chest, forerunner to the United Way and some fifty years later co-founded Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee. Ashby lived to age 101, dying in East Orange, NJ in 1991.

Ashby’s account, “What Happened at Carteret,” appeared in the June 1926 issue of *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, published by the National Urban League. While in some respects as anecdotal as Merritt’s, Ashby took a deeper look at some of the alleged underlying causes. The assumption repeated in the newspapers had been that there had been a simmering resentment by whites against blacks in their competition for jobs. “But this seems a rather insufficient cause,” he asserted. Black workers had been employed at Armour Company and the U.S. Smelting Company for a decade by then, and industries such as Warner Chemical had been employing black workers since World War I. To his mind, there was no sudden increase in black labor to account for so violent a response. “They therefore were not new to the community,” he suggests. He also cast doubt on the notion that employers were preferential to black workers because they were able to pay them less. He described how back in 1922 and 1923, when there was a boom in business following a depressed

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1920 and 1921, the Liebig Company found itself shorthanded. Lacking enough white workers, the superintendent, identified as F. L. Woods, appealed to the Carteret Labor Association, suggesting he was thinking of bringing in black labor. They advised against it, but under the pressure of production, he did it anyway. “The Negroes, therefore, were brought in, not at an underselling wage,” he concluded, “but rather at the same price all other unskilled laborers were being paid at that time and have been receiving it ever since.”

While he makes a case, of course, his sampling is somewhat limited. And, even if his observations were indeed applicable to all the factories employing black workers, the fact wouldn't necessarily alter the perceptions people had of rumors as truth.

Regardless, he found proof that the Ku Klux Klan had never really been much of a force in Carteret. “The population is preponderantly foreign, being mostly Italian and Slavish,” he described. “The city government too, is not good Klan timber.” He pointed out how the mayor, Thomas J. Mulvhill, was Irish, and the police chief “has as genuine an Irish face as could be seen on any street in Dublin this minute.” The significance of all this was that “the religious belief of all these groups is Catholic, and the Catholic Church and the Klan have not yet become bedfellows.”

Evidently Ashby also encountered grumblings that the local government was especially favorable to black residents, but in this rumor too he finds critical flaws. By his estimation, there were around 300 to 400 Negro residents who called Carteret their permanent home—as opposed to the transient labor force—and only “a bare 150 are registered for elections.” Hardly enough of a demographic, he concluded, to influence the aspirations of any would-be candidates.

While Ashby and Merritt would naturally approach the issues involved from different perspectives, they were actually in agreement on a few points. Perhaps in where they converged might be glimpsed some semblance of the truth. Dixon Merritt dismissed Johnny Carroll almost out-of-hand as a bully with an intimation that he got what he deserved. William Ashby wasn't prepared to go that far, but neither was he able to conclude Carroll

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was any sort of saint. “The following seems to be the most reasonable cause of the beginning of the outbreak,” he explained. “At a certain place there had been gambling that night, in which three Negroes—Ducrest, known as ‘Smooth Kid’; Leon Lusch, known as ‘Eats’; and George Calloway, known as ‘High Pockets’—were engaged. Calloway had become intoxicated after his winnings. Ducrest and Lusch decided to leave the game before becoming ‘cleaned’ by Calloway. They left the game and went in hiding from Calloway who pursued them. They stood by a fence near a restaurant known as ‘Cheap John’s’; and stepped out of their hiding as Carroll, Johnson, and Donnelly approached. The hold-up report is also false [evidently there were also rumors that Ducrest had tried to rob Carroll]; no such idea had entered their heads. They had no knowledge of who Carroll and his colleagues were. It was known that Carroll was drunk, and had been drinking steadily since Wednesday. Nor was Lusch who was Ducrest’s companion quite clearheaded. The inebriated Lusch brushed against the inebriated Carroll; Carroll burst forth: ‘You—nigger’ and struck Lusch in the mouth—his mouth was still bleeding when he was brought to Police Headquarters—a fight ensued, and out of it came the sad unpardonable fatality.”

Johnny Carroll didn’t deserve to die. However, both Merritt and Ashby seem to have found the same theme that Carroll was more of an aggressor than the hapless victim some sought to portray. The role of Robert Ducrest, however, is left as uncertain as before—aside from the salient fact he fatally stabbed Carroll and seriously wounded Donnelly. On the one hand, by pulling a knife, he had certainly escalated the situation. On the other, faced with an apparently belligerent drunk who knew how to use his fists, it is to be wondered if Ducrest’s actions could also be interpreted as self-defense. The truth is that we just don’t know—likely can never know—what happened in those alcohol-, adrenaline-, and testosterone-fueled moments. At the end of the day, the whole tragic mess may have begun with a street scuffle between two drunken men.

As for the broader violence that followed, while much of it was focused on blacks unlucky enough to be found by the mobs,

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Ashby saw the burning of the church as a more planned and deliberate act. “At 9 o’clock that night, the street on which the church fronted was lined with automobiles,” he claimed. “This was unusual, yet no one seemed to think seriously about it.” The attack came in two waves, the first fusillade of rocks, bottles, and bullets lasted around three minutes. After a moment of quiet, a shorter burst was launched before the police intervened. The estimate of 500 rioters was repeated. Ashby found it difficult to believe that so massive a crowd could have dwindled to the three or four individuals the police claimed were responsible for setting fire to the building.

Indeed, the whole of the police response seemed wanting to Ashby. It certainly seems to have been unevenly applied. When a police sergeant entered the church after the attack of missiles, Ashby was told his first action after throwing on the lights was to ask if any of the cowering Negroes had weapons. Earlier, around three in the afternoon, seeing the unrest brewing in the streets, the police swept through the black neighborhoods, telling them to stay indoors and confiscating any guns they found. At first blush, this might appear to have been a prudent step to prevent further bloodshed. Yet no similar disarmament of the white residents appears to have also taken place—an assertion backed up by how the mob reportedly fired pistols at the church later that evening. While the police did intervene and ultimately restore order, their actions have the appearance of attempting to quell a Negro uprising than the white violence already occurring. It is tempting, albeit perhaps dangerously so, to feel in all this some vague echoes of that very old American fear of a Negro revolt.

“It is possible to grant that the Department of Police acted efficiently after the storming and the burning [of the church],” Ashby conceded. “Still what remains yet to be explained is why not one of the 500 stoning the church, or the two or three burning it [as claimed by the police] has not been apprehended.” None ever would be.

Both Merritt and Ashby would ultimately find as a wellspring for racial discord the personal failings of groups of individuals. While not using so crass a term as “bad Negroes,” Ashby knew

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that there were indeed black men who dissipated their lives away with booze, gambling, fighting, loose women, and petty crimes. “The real cause of the trouble is not unlike that which might be born among any group under a similar circumstance,” Ashby explained. “It is purely personal, and at the bottom of it lie rum and gambling, which the town winks at.”

The point, of course, is that such subjugation to vice was not specifically a black problem. As Merritt himself pointed out, there were “low class” whites in Carteret too. The difference was that despite how so many of those lumped together as “white” were foreigners to America, society still generally felt like they had less to prove than blacks. African-Americans—any person of color, actually—was tacitly presumed to be inherently less intelligent, less civilized, and more prone to vice than whites. Such an attitude was embodied in Dixon Merritt’s conclusion that the Negro needed the example of a virtuous white man to emulate in order to avoid such degradations.

To some extent, William Ashby had absorbed that belief—that the black man or woman had to work harder to earn the respect of society than other groups. And in Carteret, he saw examples of how those who behaved badly could bring disrepute on the race as a whole, setting them back as they struggled to find some parity in American society. “The Negroes themselves,” he wrote of his brothers and sisters in Carteret, “must be more vigorous than ever in demonstrating to the community that they want to be peaceful.”

Yet at the same time, the earning of respect works both ways. “The town in order to prove to its own citizens and to the country,” Ashby wrote in conclusion, “that is has a sense of responsibility and fairness, must seek out and punish all who were at the bottom of the storming of the church, and the flogging of innocent Negroes on the street, forty-eight hours after Carroll had been killed.”

In the days that followed, Carteret slipped into an uneasy quiet punctuated only by the funeral of Johnny Carroll. It was among the largest funerals the borough had seen with over a hundred cars in the procession from the Carroll home to St. Joseph’s

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Roman Catholic Church and then to St. James Roman Catholic Cemetery in Woodbridge. Throngs lined the streets and perched on rooftops as police escorts cleared the way. Mounds of floral tributes surrounded the grave. The widowed Julia Carroll fainted while coming out of the church, and again at the graveside, overcome by her grief.

A quickly-created “Carroll Fund” for the benefit of Julia and her three now-fatherless children began to swell with donations from the fire department, athletic clubs, boxing fans, politicians, local business leaders, and civic groups. Benefit balls, exhibition fights, and other fundraisers were organized.

There were fears of fresh flare-ups of trouble surrounding the funeral. Much of Carteret’s black population kept a decidedly low profile as emotions again ran high. Rumors circulated of plans for new mobs to finish off the remaining blacks. Many of Carteret’s whites were becoming embarrassed to be associated with riots and saw the injustice of it all. Some of the threats may have been from outside troublemakers. Police managed to keep ahead of things, chasing strange cars out of the black neighborhoods. Not that the troublemakers were always white, either. Julia Carroll received anti-Irish threats in a letter and boxer John “Gimp” Dolan was sent a cartoon showing a butcher and threatening his life. Both evidently came from Harlem in New York City.

By May 3, 1926, the *Trenton Evening Times* was reporting that black families that had fled the unrest were returning home to “the jungle” section. The police were promising protection and Middlesex County Prosecutor John E. Toolan began an investigation of conditions in Carteret. Rev. Reed announced plans to return and begin a subscription for donations to rebuild his church.

Among those who were also paying attention to the events in Carteret was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Two days after Carroll’s murder, on April 27th, the organization’s national office was on the phone to their two main men in New Jersey—Dr. W. G. Alexander in Orange and the president of the Newark branch, Rev. Louis Berry. They also sent a telegram to New Jersey’s then-Governor, A. Harry Moore:

**“The [NAACP] respectfully urges that you use all of the means and powers at your command to see that the innocent colored people concerned have the full protection of the laws of the State of New Jersey and that those who are guilty of the outrages that have been perpetrated shall be apprehended and punished in accordance with the law.”**

*Newspaper dispatches from Carteret, N.J., state that as a result of some trouble a mob burned down a colored church in or near that town and drove out one hundred colored families. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People respectfully urges that you use all of the means and powers at your command to see that the innocent colored people concerned have the full protection of the laws of the State of New Jersey and that those who are guilty of the outrages that have been perpetrated shall be apprehended and punished in accordance with the law.*

The Governor’s vague reply seemed enough of a generic canned response that the NAACP leadership had to question if he had even read their message. All Moore’s telegram said was:

*You may be sure that would be glad to do all in my power to assist you in the matter referred to in your telegram.*

Almost immediately, they shot off a reply telegram to this unsatisfying answer:

*Your letter received acknowledged receipt of my telegram. I judged from it my message did not reach you personally or you did not understand it. I telegraphed urging in the name of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People that you use all means and powers at your command to protect innocent Negroes of Carteret against further mob violence. Communications within the hour from Carteret indicate probability of riotous demonstrations tonight. We call upon you to take steps to avert such an outcome by military guard if necessary.*

At the time, of course, the situation was still fluid and, fortunately, the anticipated additional violence never materialized. That the police were more on top of things may have been due, at least in part, to pressure brought by the NAACP’s Director of Publicity, a Mr. Selighamm, on Carteret’s Mayor Mulvihill. Selighamm reported to the national office that “upwards of one hundred colored people” had been driven out of town.

Given the weakness of Governor Moore's reaction, Rev. Berry began to organize a delegation with the goal of meeting with him personally. This was delayed, however, because Moore was in Atlantic City on April 28th, the planned date for the conference. As things quieted down and the police appeared to be providing adequate protection, the urgency for a meeting faded and by May 4th there were reports that many of the black families who had fled were returning to their homes.

On June 15th, Robert Ducrest—identified as George Ducrest in the *Trenton Evening Times*—was found guilty of second degree murder and sentenced to State Prison for thirty years.

Perhaps the strangest coda to this story was added by William Ashby. "Robert Ducrest, who killed John Carroll," he wrote, "is not even a Negro at all. He is a Mexican." 

**This article is taken from a section of a chapter on riots and civil unrest in Gordon Bond's new book, "Wicked Woodbridge: Exploring Vice in New Jersey's Oldest Township" published by American History Press and due for release in June of 2015!**