

2007

A Murder in Virginia: Southern Justice on Trial

Alan Pinson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pinson, Alan (2007) "A Murder in Virginia: Southern Justice on Trial," *Vulcan Historical Review*: Vol. 11, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol11/iss2007/14>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

Lebsock, Suzanne. *A Murder in Virginia: Southern Justice on Trial*. W.W. Norton: New York. 2003. ISBN 0-393-32606-3 \$16.95

Reviewed by *Adam Pinson*

Murder is perhaps the most destructive and tragic force that can ever befall a society. In modern times bringing those who commit this horrendous offense to justice is designed to be a process of fair consideration of evidence and quick resolution of the case, as well as a fair and just sentencing of the perpetrator. Despite these designs, in the late 19th Century the question of race often skewed the system heavily and denied justice to many who so desperately needed it. Suzanne Lebsock's *A Murder in Virginia: Southern Justice on Trial* highlights just such a case in the Virginia backcountry that involved more than just simple racism.

Lebsock begins her tale with the investigation of the brutal murder of Lucy Pollard, a supposedly upstanding citizen of remote Lunenburg County, Virginia. She was found hacked to death in the backyard of her modest farmhouse and \$800.00 of her husband's money stolen from inside the house. In true murder mystery style, Lebsock describes the abbreviated search for evidence and the eventual arrest of Solomon Marable, Mary and Pokey Barnes, and Mary Abernathy, all African-Americans for the murder of Mrs. Pollard. What follows is a story filled with all of the bias and heroism of the struggle for justice at the high tide of the Jim Crow South. The accused face no less than four trials, Marable, who first brought suspicion upon the Abernathy's and Barnes's, changes his story each time he testifies and is eventually hung for the murder. All of these trials, as one might expect, focused more upon the race of those accused rather than on the scant physical evidence linking them with the crime. Through court transcripts and reports of jury deliberations, Lebsock confirms the oft held theory that late 19th century southern justice that any African-American suspected of a crime was guilty until proven innocent.

Despite the depravity of many characters surrounding the Pollard case, Lebsock also highlights some very interesting "heroes" not the least of which are William O'Ferrall, governor of Virginia, who protected the accused from the copious lynch mobs longing for blood, and John Mitchell, Jr., who fought tirelessly to defend the accused women. All of these characters combine to create an extremely important and compelling story, that is made all the more so because of its truthfulness.

In addition, to the compelling nature of the characters and story in general, Lebsock's wonderfully literary writing style cannot go unheralded when reading the book. Lebsock writes this work in the greatest traditions of crime drama; it contains crime scene investigation, and high courtroom drama which keeps readers highly interested in the topic. In addition, Lebsock's writing amazingly avoids the plot and character confusion that often accompanies the large scope of murder mysteries. Nevertheless, an extremely helpful list of major characters in the story is providing in the Introduction that can be helpful while in the midst of Lebsock's tale.

Despite the strength of Lebsock's writing style and the sympathetic manner in which she tells her story, her thesis seems oddly weak. Indeed, her basic thesis seems to be that Southern justice during the late 19th Century was not blind to the travesty of racial prejudice and bias. Thus, instead of providing new information or insight into 19th century race relations in Virginia, Lebsock merely substantiates current scholarship in the field. Indeed, Lebsock's writing is intended for a popular audience, and it seems that Lebsock is attempting to provide deeper insight into this particular case, rather than challenge the boundaries of current knowledge.

In conclusion, Lebsock's work represents her mastery of tone and her ability to give long passed characters new life. She succeeds in providing a very detailed and clear story while also highlighting the complexity surrounding this extremely interesting case. However, the work fails to break much new ground in the field of late 19th Century southern legal history. Nevertheless, *A Murder in Virginia* is a wonderfully told story and one that can serve a great introduction to the complexity of this period in history.