CAPTURING AND RETELLING HISTORY

GRADE LEVEL: 9 – 12

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OVERVIEW
This activity guide focuses on the importance of documenting and preserving history, including "hidden histories" like forced labor in the American South, while also considering methods of historical interpretation. Students will have the opportunity to analyze historical photos and use them as guides to create their own photo essays. They will also conduct oral histories and review other methods to capture and retell history in academic settings.

BACKGROUND
As author Douglas A. Blackmon revealed, exploring the history of forced labor is significantly complicated by the paucity of information about its victims. Information about any individual from the nineteenth century or early twentieth century can be difficult to find (unless he or she was considered famous or influential at the time). Gathering information about poor, disenfranchised blacks in the American South after the Civil War is even harder, and researching black convicts is nearly impossible. Most were illiterate, and few left personal documents for future historians to discover. Blackmon had to scour documents found in the South's libraries, prison records, historical archives, and court proceedings to paint a picture of what life was really like for blacks who were trapped in forced labor.

Since the *Slavery by Another Name* book was published, Blackmon has received letters and e-mails from people relaying experiences of forced labor from their own family histories.

For this reason, *Slavery by Another Name* highlights the oral histories of descendants of forced labor — as well as those whose ancestors benefited from it — many of whom had no previous knowledge of the scope or breadth of forced labor.

For additional background, visit the following from the *Slavery by Another Name* Theme Gallery:

Descendant Stories:
http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/descendant-stories/

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. Why are some histories more difficult to uncover and document?

2. What are various ways to document history?

3. What role can oral history play in preserving history?

4. How can knowing history empower people today?

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

Documenting and revisiting the full face of history is important to help us understand who we are, where we stand, and where we're going.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Materials

- Photo History
  http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/classrooms/english-media-literacy/
  This is a collection of photographs of people and places during the period of forced labor - from Emancipation Proclamation to World War II.

ACTIVITY: HISTORY THROUGH IMAGES

1. Prepare to view "Reflections on Storytelling," by facilitating a discussion using the pre-viewing questions. Provide background on the clip for students. Continue the discussion using the post-viewing questions.

2. Project "Photo History." As you show each picture, solicit one-word responses to the photographs. Then delve into a deeper analysis of each photo. Ask students to describe what they see. Ask them to identify the who/where/what/why of each photo. Ask them what may be present just outside the frame of the image. Inquire about any confusing or misleading aspects of the image. Lastly, ask students if they can trust this image. Does it tell a complete story?

3. Instruct students to select a picture to respond to in a one paragraph response. Have students analyze the picture to provide more context about the history it aims to capture.

4. As a class, compile a list of themes that the pictures, as a collection, represent.

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5. Have students pick one central theme from the list that they believe the photos best evoke. If technology is available, using cameras or cell phones with cameras, have students take photos around school and their community that capture their theme. As an alternative, had students find pictures around the internet that represent the theme. Sites like Pics4Learning (www.pics4learning.com) and Flicker Creative Commons (www.flickr.com/creativecommons/) offer copyright-friendly pictures that can be used for educational purposes. Students can also use and download pictures from the *Slavery by Another Name* website (www.pbs.org/sban) and its Historic Image Slideshow (http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/slideshow/).

6. Then, instruct students to write a one-page explanation that accompanies their photos, explores their theme more deeply, including why they chose it, and makes connections between their photos and those from the Photo History.

7. Have students share their photo essays with the class. If technology is available, consider posting student work in an online classroom space such as a blog platform like Tumblr (www.tumblr.com) or WordPress (www.wordpress.com), or the *Slavery by Another Name* website (www.pbs.org/sban).

ACTIVITY: COLLECTING ORAL HISTORY

1. Prepare to view "Remembrance" by facilitating a discussion using the pre-viewing questions. Provide background on the clip for students. After viewing, continue the discussion using the post-viewing questions.

2. Continue the discussion by talking about how history can help us to better understand our present and future.

3. As a class, define oral history. Facilitate a discussion about the pros and cons of oral history. Does oral history work "better" than other forms of history? Which groups are more likely to use oral history? What are the benefits and limitations of oral history?

4. View some of the digital oral histories on the *Slavery by Another Name* website (www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/storycorps-stories/) as models. Continue the discussion about the benefits and limitations of oral history.

5. Tell students that they are going to capture oral histories that answer the question: How can knowing history empower people today?

6. Next, discuss interview subject possibilities, which include relatives, teachers, and neighbors.

7. As a class, brainstorm open-ended questions that relate to the overall question. Using these ideas, have students develop a list of six to eight interview questions

that they will ask.

8. Review tips for conducting effective interviews.

9. Have students conduct and record an audio or video version of their interview. See Additional Resources for tip sheets from StoryCorps about recording audio. If conducting the interview by phone, students can use a resource like FreeConferenceCall.com (www.freeconferencecall.com) to record the interview and download the audio file.

10. If technology is available, consider posting student work in an online classroom space such as a blog platform like Tumblr (www.tumblr.com), WordPress (www.wordpress.com) or the *Slavery by Another Name* website (www.pbs.org/sban).

11. As an extension activity, have students create digital stories, very similar to the digital oral histories that they watched in class. Using a platform like iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, or Stupeflix (www.stupeflix.com/) students can pair the audio of their interview with pictures and video. Students can use and download pictures from the *Slavery by Another Name* website (www.pbs.org/sban) and its Historic Image Slideshow (http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/slideshow/). Provide an opportunity for students to share their digital stories.

ACTIVITY: STUDENT ACTIVIST

Materials

- The 1921 Murder of Eleven African-Americans by Plantation Owner John S. Williams by Kate Willis
  This is an academic paper about peonage through the story of John S. Williams, a plantation owner who practiced forced labor. It was written by Kate Willis, a descendant of John S. Williams. She wrote the paper for one of her high school classes.

1. Prepare to view “Reflections on Family Legacies,” by facilitating a discussion using the pre-viewing questions. Provide a background on the clip for students. After viewing, continue the discussion using the post-viewing questions.

2. Tell students that they are going to read the paper that Kate Willis wrote about peonage. Distribute “The 1921 Murder of Eleven African-Americans by Plantation Owner John S. Williams.”

3. Inquire about student impressions of the paper. Discuss the paper's sources and the importance of sources in capturing and retelling history.

4. Steer the discussion to writing a history research paper —including requirements and purpose. Together, analyze and highlight the structure of the paper, including its thesis, supporting details and conclusion.

5. Have students write a one-page response to Willis' paper. Propose questions such as: Is this a secondary or primary piece of evidence? What is the bias of the author? What are her sources? What details does she use as support? What new insight into the topic does this document bring? What sorts of questions does this piece solicit? What other sources would shed light on this topic?

6. As an extension activity, have students develop a thesis and outline for an essay about a historical event of interest to them. Also have students include possible sources.

MULTIMEDIA CLIPS

Reflections on Storytelling

http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/storycorps-stories/video-reflections-storytelling/

This excerpt is from a StoryCorps oral history that features Sam Pollard and Daphne McWilliams. Pollard is the director of the documentary *Slavery by Another Name* and in this clip, he discusses the importance of documenting history and how he uses the medium of filmmaking to do so.

Pre-Viewing Questions

1. Why is it important to document history?

2. In what ways have you documented history?

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. How has history helped Pollard as a filmmaker?

2. Why do you think oral history is especially important? How does it compare with written history?

3. What current events do you believe should be documented and why?

Remembrance

http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/classrooms/english-media-literacy/

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This film clip from *Slavery by Another Name* discusses the importance of understanding and knowing history as a way to understand the present and move toward the future.

Pre-Viewing Questions

1. What is slavery? When did slavery end in the United States?

2. How does history help us understand present conditions?

3. What sorts of things can we learn from our predecessors' choices and experiences?

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. Blackmon asserts that real slavery didn't end until the 1940's. In what ways is that statement true?

2. Has your greater knowledge about forced labor changed how you think about the present?

Reflections on Family Legacies
http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/storycorps-stories/video-reflections-learning-legacies/

The following excerpt is from a StoryCorps oral history that features Kate Willis, a descendant of John Williams, a plantation owner who practiced peonage. After being questioned on his farm by two federal agents, Williams, possibly afraid that he might be charged with peonage, had eleven forced laborers murdered who worked on his farm. He was put on trial for murder and became the first white man, since Reconstruction, to be convicted of first-degree murder of a black person. In this clip, Willis discusses the high school paper that she wrote about peonage and Williams' role in it.

Pre-Viewing Questions

1. If you uncovered a family secret from several generations ago, would you share that secret? Why or why not?

2. Have you ever written anything that brought awareness to an issue that concerned you? What was the result and what did you learn?

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. What impact, if any, do you think Willis' paper may have had?

2. In what ways, if any, are we responsible for our ancestors' actions? Is it fair to hold

individuals accountable for things their ancestors did?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Do-It-Yourself Instruction Guide for Audio Recording | StoryCorps
http://nationaldayoflistening.org/participate

STANDARDS
Common Core State Standards
Reading Standards for Literacy in History and the Social Studies
Standards 1 to 3: Key Ideas and Details
Standards 4 to 6: Craft and Structure
Standards 7 to 9**:** Integration of Knowledge and Ideas
http://www.corestandards.org/

IRA/NCTE National Standards for English Language Arts
Standard 1; Standard 3; Standard 4; Standard 6; Standard 8
http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Books/Sample/StandardsDoc.pdf

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies
Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change
http://www.socialstudies.org/standards

National Standards for History
ERA 6:The Development of the Industrial United States (1870–1900)
Standard 2B; Standard 3A; Standard 3B
http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/

Historical Thinking Standards
Standard 2; Standard 3
http://nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/historical-thinking-standards-1/overview

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The 1921 Murder of Eleven African-Americans by Plantation Owner John S. Williams: What do his motives and the outcome of the trial reveal about the post-Civil War South?

By Kate Willis

In the spring of 1921, two Bureau of Investigation agents paid a routine visit to the Jasper County plantation of John S. Williams. They found nothing out of the ordinary there; the workers appeared to be treated well enough that the whispers of peonage were of no issue. However, in a fit of paranoia, Williams then had eleven of his peons brutally killed. To him, they were no more than evidence that could easily be thrown away.

Unfortunately for Williams, his evidence floated to the surface of a Newton County River. He was charged with first degree murder and put on trial. The murder trial was so sensational that it got nationwide coverage. The South's secret of post-Emancipation Proclamation slavery in the form of peonage was unearthed for all the nation to see. Williams was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison by a jury of his peers. These people were his neighbors and friends, but they overturned the Southern white hierarchy and proved that the South was ready to change.

Introduction

On February 18 of 1921, two Bureau of Investigation (it would not formally be called the Federal Bureau of Investigation until 1935)[1] agents paid a visit to the Jasper County, Georgia plantation of John S. Williams. Their routine visit was due to suspicions of peonage, which was a federal crime, but it was such a common practice at the time that it was rarely prosecuted. The two agents, George W. Brown and A.J. Wismer were following a tip they received from a former peon of the Williams plantation named Gus Chapman. After visiting the farm, the agents reported that the workers appeared to be well-treated, but in order to pursue a peonage investigation they would have to interview the workers away from the farm.[2] Between this ordinary day on February 18 and April 9 of 1921, at least eleven African-American workers were killed under the orders of John S. Williams, and he became the first white man since Reconstruction[3] to be convicted for the first degree murder of an African-American.

[1] "*FBI History,"* Federal Bureau of Investigation, http://www.fbi.gov/libref/historic/history/newdeal.htm (accessed November 15, 2009).
[2] *John S. Williams Case Summary*, U.S. Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice. October 27, 1932.
[3] Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name* (New York: Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, 2008), 364.

There is significant evidence backing the theory that Williams's motive for the murders was to destroy the evidence of peonage on his plantation. The investigators's questioning could have "spooked" Williams, and therefore he decided to obliterate all possible witnesses who could testify against him if he were put on trial.[4] Peonage was made illegal by the federal government in 1867 and carried a fine of a $1,000 to $5,000.[5] Ironically, Williams, well known for his three-car-garage and his plantation stretching over two counties likely could have afforded the fine.[6] Another irony is that Williams used murder to get away with slavery, which speaks volumes about the post-Reconstruction era South. Even though they were legally freedmen, African-Americans still had a price tag to many whites, and for John S. Williams, it appeared to be a few thousand dollars.

This story shows a history of the post-Civil War South which is contrary to popular conception. Although slavery was technically abolished by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1861, many African-Americans were re-enslaved through the systems of peonage and debt slavery. With no money or education, "emancipated" slaves had no means of becoming employed other than standing in public places and waiting to be hired to perform physical labor for the day. The Black Codes enacted during the Reconstruction period included laws against vagrancy, for which an African-American could be arrested by simply not having a job or standing around. Once arrested, they could then be charged with heavy fines they were unable to pay, and sent to jail.[7] Plantation owners, such as John S. Williams, routinely visited prisons and picked out workers for their farms, then paid their fines, and forced them to work off their debts. In most cases, however, the debts were never considered paid. Gus Chapman, for example, was obtained from prison by Williams's son Huland paying his five dollar fine. After working at the farm for a year, he escaped with his meager pay of thirty-five cents. [8]

Part I - Investigation

Unfortunately for John Williams, Gus Chapman got away, unlike many before him.[9] Williams was an extremely paranoid man[10], and was afraid that like Chapman, the approximately thirty other workers[11] enslaved by debts on his farm would talk to the authorities. With the help of his

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[4] Susan Burnore, great-granddaughter of John S. Williams, personal communication.
[5] "Thirty- Ninth Congress, Second Session, Senate and House of Representatives.," *New York Times,* January 27, 1867.
[6] Personal interview with LaRue Camp, niece of John Williams' son-in-law.
[7] Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name* (New York: Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, 2008), 54.
[8] Testimony of Gus Chapman, *State of Georgia v. Clyde Manning and John S. Williams,* May 31, 1921.
[9] Testimony of Gus Chapman.
[10] LaRue Camp, personal communication.
[11] Gregory Freeman, *Lay This Body Down* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1999), 14.

trusted foreman, Clyde Manning, John Williams destroyed all the human evidence of debt slavery on his plantation.

On March 30, 1921, a little over a month since the Bureau of Investigation's visit to the farm, John S. Williams and Clyde Manning were indicted on charges of first degree murder of peon Lindsey Peterson.[12] The prosecutors decided to try Williams and then Manning for the murders one by one. Williams would be tried first; Manning second. Manning's testimony in the trial against Williams was crucial to the prosecution, and it gave a clear picture of the way workers were treated on the farm. In a monumental historical moment, he gave a detailed description of how he assisted in the killing of eleven men; testimony that would lead to the first conviction of a white man for murder of a black man since 1877.[13]

In order to understand what happened on that Jasper County farm in the early spring of 1921, it is important to establish a timeline of events. Bureau of Investigation agents first visited the farm on February 18, after receiving complaints from the escaped workers Gus Chapman and James Strickland.[14] In his testimony, Agent A.J. Wismer described his interactions with the workers on this visit. The only information they received was from a young farmhand ironically named Johnny Williams. He told them about how Clyde Manning locked the workers in a shed-like structure at night and always carried a pistol by orders of John S. Williams. Two days later, at "about dinnertime" John Williams ordered Manning to kill Johnny, a boy who was probably no older than seventeen at the time.[15]

The next day, February 21, Williams told Manning to get rid of John Will Gaither, also known as "Big John". He ordered him to take Charlie Chisholm, another trusted worker with him. They were supposed to be digging a well, or so thought Gaither. But Gaither was in fact digging his own grave. Williams handed Chisholm a pickaxe, and instructed him to hit Gaither. Then Manning and Chisholm buried Gaither in the hole he had dug himself. His body was later unearthed by investigators, along with five others, all buried in various locations on the farm.[16]

Williams's next victims, John Brown and Johnny Benson (also known as "Red" and "Little Bit", respectively[17]) had been obtained from the Macon and Atlanta stockades. On February 25, John Williams offered them a ride to the train station to go home. However, as soon as Williams ordered Clyde Manning to get in the car with him, Manning knew that these two peons would never

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[12] *The New York Times,* March 31, 1921.
[13] Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name* (New York: Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, 2008), 364.
[14] Testimony of A.J. Wismer, *The State of Georgia v. Clyde Manning,* May 31, 1921.
[15] Testimony of Clyde Manning, *The State of Georgia v. John S. Williams,* April 6, 1921.
[16] Testimony of Sheriff B.L. Johnson of Newton County, *The State of Georgia v. Clyde Manning,* May 31, 1921.
[17] Testimony of Clyde Freeman, *The State of Georgia v. Clyde Manning,* May 30, 1921.

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make it home, and even worse, he would be forced to participate in their deaths. Williams did not drive them to the train station. Instead, they found themselves being pushed over Water's Bridge into the Alcovy River with an iron weight around their necks.[18] The next day, Williams disposed of Willie Preston, Lindsey Peterson, and Harry Price in the same way. Johnny Green and Willie Givens were killed on February 27. A five-day silence ensued, and Manning began to wonder whether Williams's killing spree was finished. Then, on March 5, Williams executed Charlie Chisholm, who had helped in some of the previous murders. A few days later, Williams shot Fletcher Smith in the fields, the only murder he actually committed himself. Manning knew that it was only a matter of time until Williams did the same to him.[19]

Part II - Motive

In the aftermath of the killings, the question arises of why Williams chose these eleven men out of the thirty blacks he had working on his farm. The connection between the men who were murdered gives evidence to the motives of John S. Williams. All eleven were debt slaves, obtained from either the Macon or Atlanta stockades. The elimination of these eleven men would mean the elimination of evidence that Williams was guilty of peonage. Although Williams had proved early on that he was capable of cold-blooded killing, (Clyde Freeman, one of Williams' workers, testified that he knew of at least three other men Williams had killed in previous years, including stockade obtainees Will Napier, Frank Dozier, and John Singleton.[20]), the systematic eradication of these eleven men in a few weeks was unprecedented. Whippings were routine on the farm, and occasionally punishment would go too far and a worker would be shot, proving that Williams was undoubtedly a violent man who regarded his workers as little more than animals.[21] Furthermore, Williams knew that he could get away with it. However, a killing spree of massive proportions was something that even the wealthiest Southern plantation owner could not get away with. The bodies began floating to the surface; three were found in the Yellow, South, and Alcovy Rivers near the Williams plantation[22] (they were later identified as Willie Preston, Lindsey Peterson, and Harry Price).

The newspaper reports of these then-unidentified murder victims caught the attention of Agents Brown and Wismer. Eberhardt Crawford, who worked on a plantation near Williams's, came

[18] Testimony of Clyde Freeman.
[19] Testimony of Clyde Freeman.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] *Covington News*, March 17, 1921.

to them after seeing the bodies pulled out of the river. He described them as having "rubber tire shoes".[23] Brown and Wismer remembered from their visit to the Williams's farm that all of the workers there wore shoes that had soles made from rubber tires. This small piece of evidence led them to petition the Georgia governor Hugh Dorsey to do something about the case. They brought along Crawford as a witness, who retold his story of seeing the bodies examined to the governor.[24] Once the meeting became front page news in Covington, the local authorities took heed and began an investigation.

Part III - Trial

It was not long before the bodies were identified, and John S. Williams was brought before a grand jury. The indictment was mainly based on Clyde Manning's confession to Sheriff Johnson of Newton County and the Bureau of Investigation agents, shortly after the bodies were identified. He was fearful at first, knowing that Williams would make him the next victim if he spoke to the authorities. But once his safety was assured by the law enforcement officials, he began to freely relay his story with a chilling emotional detachment. Manning appeared to be a special case as far as Williams's workers went. It appeared that he had lived on the plantation since he was very young, and had learned that blind obedience was the best policy for keeping himself and his family safe. Williams played a peculiar father-like role over Manning, whose father had died when Manning was a child. However it was not a loving relationship, it was more similar to a man's relationship with "a well-trained, obedient dog".[25] Manning's job on the farm was something like that of the overseers in the days of slavery. He carried a pistol and locked the other workers into their living quarters at night.[26] However, he was undoubtedly fearful of Williams. When Manning protested about Williams's orders to kill the "stockade boys", Williams told him frankly, "It's your neck or theirs."[27] After Williams was convicted and Manning went on trial, the defense continually used the argument that he was following orders when he committed the murders, and acting in self-defense. As he relayed his testimony in court, Manning "seemed little affected by his recital, and rarely changed the inflection of his voice."[28] It became apparent that he was essentially brainwashed.

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[23] Ibid.
[24] *Covington News,* March 24, 1921.
[25] Gregory Freeman, author of *Lay This Body Down,* personal interview, October 29, 2009.
[26] Testimony of Clyde Manning, *The State of Georgia v. John S. Williams,* April 6, 1921.
[27] Testimony of Clyde Manning, *The State of Georgia v. Clyde Manning,* May 31, 1921.
[28] "Chained Negroes Thrown off Bridge," *New York Times*, April 7, 1921.

On April 9, 1921, the world of John S. Williams came crashing down. The jury found him guilty of first-degree murder, and sentenced him to life in prison.[29] He and his three sons, Marvin, Leroy, and Huland, were then indicted by the Federal Grand Jury on charges of peonage.[30] However, the Williams boys were curiously nowhere to be found. Officials decided not to put Williams on trial for peonage, as he was already serving a life sentence in the Milledgeville State Prison.[31] In 1931, John S. Williams died under mysterious circumstances. According to local legend, he was released from the prison in the middle of the night, and was immediately run down by a truck. Some descendents even speculate that it was a setup, which is not completely far-fetched, as Williams had many enemies.[32] A year after his death, his three sons turned themselves in to the federal government. The Bureau of Investigation reopened the case, hoping to finally convict the Williams brothers for peonage, if not for murder. As the Bureau had not conducted the original investigation, it proceeded to piece together a thorough summary of the events of 1921. Although the Bureau was ultimately unsuccessful in convicting the Williams brothers of anything (very few witnesses from the Williams plantation remained; Clyde Manning had died in 1927, and the rest had dispersed across Georgia, as indicated by the Bureau of Investigation's case summary), the thorough summary gives an interesting perspective on the John S. Williams murders.

The file begins with a definition of peonage as "a condition of enforced servitude by which the servitor is restrained of his liberty and compelled to labor in liquidation of some debt or obligation, either real or pretended, against his will."[33] History often gains lucidity in hindsight, and this case is no exception. The mention of peonage in the summary is important because the Bureau of Investigation saw it as the cause of the murders. The connection between the two agents's visit to the Williams farm and the immediate murders was too coincidental to ignore. Brown and Wismer had determined this early on; Wismer even testified in court that he believed Williams was trying to avoid federal prosecution[34]. It is possible of course that Williams was simply a psychopath who killed people for no apparent reason (some local legends state that he was committed to the mental institution in Milledgeville, but this is not true, as he died while at the state prison[35]), but given the evidence, this seems unlikely.

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[29] "Convict Williams of Peonage Murder," *New York Times*, April 10, 1921.
[30] "Georgia Jury Returns Indictments for Peonage," *New York Times*, May 5, 1921.
[31] "Williams to Start Serving Sentence," *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 14, 1922.
[32] Susan Burnore, LaRue Camp, Personal communication.
[33] *John S. Williams Case Summary*, U.S. Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice. October 27, 1932.
[34] Testimony of A.J. Wismer.
[35] LaRue Camp, niece of John Williams' son-in-law, Personal communication.

Part IV - Historical Significance

The historical importance of the John S. Williams case lies in his motive for committing the murders. If he had simply been a psychopath who murdered for entertainment, the practice of peonage may have never come to light. The story of his killing spree would have still been atrocious, but the historical implications would not exist. This realization is apparent in the Bureau of Investigation file, and the Bureau desperately tried to gain enough evidence against the Williams brothers. However, the Williams family lost the plantation when their patriarch was imprisoned, and the former peons moved on. America moved on as well. The deaths of Clyde Manning in 1927, and of Williams, four years later, were not even noted in the New York Times, or the Atlanta Constitution, both of which had covered the trials in detail. Today, only one book can be found in print that solely covers the incident.

Peonage too, is somewhat of a black hole in Southern history. For example, A History of Georgia[36] contains no mention of the practice, even in the chapter devoted to post-Reconstruction race relations. How the South has kept this dirty little secret for so long is a mystery, but it is nevertheless an important chapter in history. A commonly conceived notion is that slavery was completely eradicated after the Civil War. However, economically, this would be nearly impossible for the agriculturally-based South. Peonage was undoubtedly cruel, but an economic transitional period nonetheless. The John S. Williams trial brought the practice to national attention, and it slowly began to die out.

The irony of the John S. Williams murders is that Williams feared the consequences of peonage more than he feared those of murder. This reveals much about the South in the post-Reconstruction era. Although legally, murder carried a more serious punishment than peonage, Williams knew that murder was a state crime, whereas peonage was a federal offense. More than likely, Williams was not afraid of the local authorities. A well-to-do member of the community such as himself had little to fear from the county sheriff's department. Mistreatment of blacks was unfortunately something that went unnoticed by law enforcement, especially for a wealthy gentleman like John S. Williams. However, Williams didn't trust the federal agents, who had no interest in adhering to Southern hierarchy. He had a post-Civil War attitude shared by many Southerners who feared that the Northerners in Washington, D.C. wanted to take everything they had. Williams had worked too hard in building up his wealth to have it all taken from him and his

[36] Kenneth Coleman, ed., *A History of Georgia, Second Edition* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1991).

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family. Even after his conviction in the Newton County Courthouse, he still believed that he would get away with his crimes. "I will come clear," he said, intending to appeal his sentence.[37]

Even the Atlanta Constitution declared Williams's conviction monumental. Williams truly had a jury of his peers, (they were all local white farmers and business owners) and many people did not believe that they would convict a white man on the testimony of a black man. However, in the words of Governor Hugh Dorsey, "They discarded all prejudices … in punishing him they [the jury] have vindicated the law and restated the fact that every man in Georgia must stand equal at her bar of justice."[38]

Conclusion

More than likely, an account of the John S. Williams murders and trial will not be found in a book of landmark court cases, nor will it be found in a book of Georgia history. However, venture to Jasper County, and one will find the grave of John S. Williams in the quiet Eastview Cemetery. Go north to Covington, and one can find a thick file tucked away in a cardboard box in the Newton County Judicial Complex. According to the secretary in the clerk's office, the file has only been requested twice. Once was by author Gregory Freeman, whose book Lay This Body Down describes the murders in detail, and once was for this essay. Generations of adhering to the typical Southern "we don't talk about that" have succeeded. The events of the spring and summer of 1921 in Jasper and Newton Counties have faded into obscurity. However, the legacy of these events has not.

The case brought out the best and the worst of the South. It exposed a dirty secret of forced labor to a nation that had fought for so long to eliminate slavery. But on the other hand, America saw that the South had the ability and the willingness to change. No one thought that a jury of white farmers would convict John S. Williams on the testimony of his black overseer. But convict him they did, and America applauded them for it. If anything, the trial forced Southerners to think about ethical labor practices on their own farms. More and more farm owners were investigated or prosecuted for peonage, including the sons of John S. Williams. Peonage eventually died out as the economy became less dependent on agriculture, but the national headlines describing the cruelty of the practice on the Williams's plantation helped to speed along the demise of forced labor for good.

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[37] "John Williams, As He Heard His Sentence," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1921, 2.
[38] Ibid.

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