

Beautiful home was site of ugly lynch mob scene

By Rebekah Davis

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The mayor and his men, crouched in hiding behind the fence at The Grove, could see them coming into view: “A stalwart crowd – their sun-browned faces, and their brawny, bared arms, and their double-barreled shot guns said “BUSINESS!”

And a serious business it was indeed. The story had unfolded in the pages of The Athens Post, beginning with the May 22, 1879, headline “A SHOCKING AFFAIR.” Mary Loveless Bailes, barely married a year to John Bailes and expecting his child, had been staying with her mother in Pettusville for some time when Bailes came to the home to ask her to come back to him.

“This she declined to do, when he became exasperated and drawing pistol, shot at her three times, one ball taking effect,” the Post reported. At press time, she was still alive, but dying, and Bailes was on the run with a crowd at his heels.

Within a week, Bailes was arrested for Mary’s death, and an Officer Vance brought him into jail, going 30 miles out of the way “by fox-like doublings” just to avoid the lynch mob that was after Bailes. By the next morning, all of Limestone knew that the mob was coming to town to rip Bailes out of jail and serve vigilante justice themselves.

“There was no power to oppose to force,” the Post reported. “Our new jail is strong, but men’s wills may be stronger than chilled steel bars, and harder to be moved than combination locks.”

That’s when Athens Mayor John T. Tanner took action. “Calling to his aid some of the oldest and most influential citizens, he with them, went to the grassy yard and big oaks of R.A.

McClellan’s hospitable residence, and there laid in ambush for the mob,” the Post said.

Built around 1875, Robert A. McClellan’s home stood in the middle of the block on Jefferson Street. Located just north of downtown Athens, it was the perfect place to intercept the mob heading south from the Pettusville and Elkmont area.

And that’s just what Col. L.R. Davis did, “springing upon his feet and his burly form towering o’er the palings, cried ‘Halt!’” Then, the Post reported, Davis “poured into them a volley of remonstrance and reasoning and good counsel, that told with great effect. When the Col. had ‘gotten his gun off,’ the reserved corps, Hon. Luke Pryor, came to the front and shotted and shelled them with principles and promises and in a minute one might see the wounded limp. The backbone of the mob was broken.”

Bailes was safe for the night, but no beautiful Grove filled with principles and promises could stop the mob from ultimately having their way. They tried and failed again and again to lynch Bailes, and their attempts even drew nearly 3,000 people to the jail, armed with crowbars, picks, hatchets saws and sledgehammers on Sept. 12, 1879. They took apart the roof of the jail to get to Bailes, dragged him out, and would have hanged him then and there if it hadn’t been for the eloquent prayer of Dr. W.R. McWilliams that calmed the crowd down long enough for Sheriff Dud Mingea to grab Bailes and haul him back into jail amidst cries of “Hang him!”

No one was there to pray for Bailes, however, on the night of Aug. 7, 1880, when a mysterious vigilante – or group of them – finally hanged him from a tree in the courthouse yard. The official report of the coroner’s jury, published in The Athens Post on Aug. 12, 1880, stated: “... said rope having been tied by parties unknown to this Jury, and whose names we have, after diligent enquiries, failed to learn.”

No one ever was arrested for Bailes' death, and while the story faded into history, The Grove still stands in the middle of the block on North Jefferson Street. It looks different today than it did on that 1879 night, but if you sit on the steps and think about it long enough, you can almost still see a mayor and his men, crouched in waiting for a mob that meant business.

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