

Elaine 1919

Phillips County, Arkansas

In Sixty Seconds

Before. Phillips County, Arkansas, in 1919 was a landscape of cotton plantations worked by Black sharecroppers locked into a system of debt peonage. Sharecroppers received a share of the crop, in theory, but plantation owners controlled the accounting, the prices, the store credit, and the armed enforcement.

What happened. On September 30, 1919, sharecroppers met at the Hoop Spur church to discuss joining the Progressive Farmers and Household Union. A white railroad agent and a deputy sheriff fired on the meeting. A white man was killed in the return fire. Over the next five days, white mobs and eventually federal troops killed between 100 and 240 Black residents.

Who did it. A coalition of Phillips County deputies, armed plantation owners, American Legion members, and roughly 500 U.S. Army troops sent from Camp Pike in Little Rock. The troops did not restore order. They joined the attack.

After. Twelve Black men were convicted of first-degree murder by all-white juries. No white person was charged for any of the killings of Black residents. The NAACP's appeal reached the Supreme Court in 1923 as *Moore v. Dempsey*, where the convictions were overturned, the first time a federal court ruled that mob-dominated state trials violated due process.

The Named

Robert L. Hill

Black veteran and founder of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America, the sharecroppers' labor organization that was targeted at Hoop Spur. Escaped Arkansas to Kansas; Arkansas filed extradition papers; the Kansas governor refused to return him.

Frank Moore

One of the twelve sharecroppers sentenced to death. The lead plaintiff in *Moore v. Dempsey*. Served six years before his conviction was overturned. Released in 1925.

Scipio Africanus Jones

Black attorney in Little Rock who took on the case of the twelve condemned men when no one else would. A former enslaved man. He argued and won *Moore v. Dempsey* at the U.S. Supreme Court in 1923.

Ed Hicks

A sharecropper killed during the massacre. His family documented his death in testimony to the NAACP investigation led by Walter White, who traveled to Arkansas in disguise.

For Discussion

1. The Progressive Farmers and Household Union was organizing sharecroppers to demand a fair accounting of their cotton. What makes the accounting ledger itself a site of power in a sharecropping economy, and where does the same pattern of opaque accounting shape contemporary worker-employer relationships?
2. Roughly five hundred United States Army troops joined the attack rather than stopping it. When institutions tasked with protection become participants in the violence, what conditions produced that shift at Elaine, and in what settings has a comparable shift recurred?
3. Scipio Africanus Jones was born enslaved and became one of the most consequential civil-rights lawyers in American history. He won *Moore v. Dempsey* against long odds. What career paths were open to formerly enslaved people in the decades after 1865, and how did legal practice become one of the clearer routes for a handful of individuals?
4. *Moore v. Dempsey* established that federal courts could intervene when state trials were dominated by mob influence. What is the line between mob influence and legitimate community sentiment in a jury trial, and who gets to draw it in practice?
5. The official death toll at Elaine cannot be established because bodies were buried in unmarked graves and dumped in the bayous. What responsibilities does a historian take on when the count itself is a direct product of the suppression being studied?

Primary Sources

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2. Cortner, Richard C. *A Mob Intent on Death: The NAACP and the Arkansas Riot Cases*. Wesleyan University Press, 1988.
3. *Moore v. Dempsey*, 261 U.S. 86 (1923).
4. White, Walter. "The Race Conflict in Arkansas." *The Survey*, December 13, 1919. (NAACP investigation.)
5. Stockley, Grif. *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919*. University of Arkansas Press, 2001.

