

The Early “Electrification” of Madison

(A Vintage Vignette by John P. Rankin, November 6, 2008)

Octavia Fletcher Frazier wrote a biography of her father, Dr. Richard Matthew Fletcher (1830-1906), Madison’s primary physician during the era of the Civil War. The biography was privately published in 1964 by the family as a small booklet of about 40 pages. The Madison Station Historical Society was granted permission by Fletcher descendant Richard Fletcher Pride to utilize the publication, and it has been added to a CD-ROM series produced by the Society to preserve the stories of early citizens of the town. One page of the booklet is quoted below to report events associated with the earliest known murder in Madison.

“Madison County, especially the village (*of Madison*), was electrified when Old Mr. Freeman was found murdered in his store. He was a respected and beloved citizen and the whole community was ready to hang the criminal who had stabbed him in the back while he was leaning over the sugar barrel and was left bleeding behind the counter. No one ever knew how much money he got. For days the officers were on his trail. Finally, word came that the guilty party had been found. It was a Negro in Tennessee, and he had confessed. They were bringing him to Madison to take him on the 5:00 o’clock train to Huntsville to jail. The community ran wild. Father and the boys (*Octavia’s brothers*) immediately advised all the Negroes we knew to pass the word to all the other Negroes to stay out of sight until things quieted. They sent trusty Negroes out on the pike and other roads to turn back any coming to Madison, knowing the turn events might take and wishing to protect the innocent.”

“As the time for the train drew near and the crowd increased, about twenty-five seemed to form themselves into a mob which was turbulent and determined to hang the culprit. They were armed with pistols, guns and knives. They were not all rabble. Some were well-known citizens. They grew bolder and more threatening as they gathered around the railroad track. Father said it was a tense and anxious moment. The minister, surrounded by a group of pleading men and boys, was trying to persuade the mob to obey the law, to disband and let the officers do their duty. The mumbling and threats continued. Syd (*Octavia’s uncle Sydney Fletcher, an attorney*) climbed up on a freight car which had been switched on the side track. He began by saying, ‘Boys, I got up here where you could see me and hear me. I know practically every one of you. We are friends. We all knew and loved Mr. Freeman. I helped to bury him. There is no man who deplored his death more than I do. I want the criminal hanged, but we are citizens of a law-abiding state and a peaceful community. We do not want blood upon our hands or to be known as lawbreakers. Mr. Freeman would want the law to be observed.’ This last statement seemed to find a responsive chord. Syd continued appealing to the better sense as he could see he had gotten their

attention. Finally, he concluded, ‘The train will be here in a few minutes. I am coming down to join you, and we will all stay on this side of the tracks and let the officers have room to put that man on the train and take him to jail. The law will hang him. Let’s all try to be as calm as possible.’”

“He came down and joined the crowd. When the train pulled in they all stayed on their side of the track. By due process of law the culprit was hung. Madison was a peaceful community again.”

While Octavia did not provide a date for the event, subsequent research of old newspaper accounts proved that the murder occurred just before Christmas in 1884 and that the victim was grocer Nathaniel Freeman at age 66. Even when two more murders crossing racial lines were committed in the town in 1903 and 1914, Madison remained a law-abiding, peaceful community, and “Judge Lynch” never ruled here.