

In Remembrance: Lynching in America  
The Soil Collection Project  
Equal Justice Initiative

**John Buckner**

**Valley Park, St. Louis County, Missouri, January 17, 1894**

Shortly after 3:00 am on January 17, 1894, a violent mob lynched a Black man named John Buckner just outside of Valley Park, Missouri in St. Louis County. The mob seized Mr. Buckner from jail and brought him to an iron bridge that spanned the Meramec River. There, Mr. Buckner was hanged from the bridge and abandoned leaving his lifeless body as a traumatizing public spectacle all too familiar to Black people in America during this era of racial terror. Despite the mob's violent lawlessness, no one was arrested or prosecuted for the lynching of John Buckner.

During this era, racial terrorism claimed the lives of thousands of Black people in the United States. Any criminal accusation against a Black man, woman, or child could trigger mob violence. Racial hierarchy and bigoted narratives against Black residents fueled much of the lawlessness and violence. Lynch mobs were notorious for 'taking the law into their own hands' and usurping the roles of judge, jury, and executioner before the legal system could or would intervene. In January 1894, John Buckner's parents, sister, and three brothers lived on a farm owned by a white family, the Harrisons, located about a mile south of Valley Park, Missouri. Mr. Buckner may have lived in his family's home, or in another dwelling, but reports indicate that he had also been living on the Harrison farm for at least a year.

On January 16, a white woman from the Harrison family reported to her neighbor that she had been physically assaulted by a Black man.<sup>1</sup> The white neighbors of Miss Harrison notified her father, who proceeded to take out a warrant of arrest for her assailant and alerted other white neighbors in the area. Soon, mobs of white men were scouring the forest.

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<sup>1</sup>White press accounts also reported the alleged assault of a Black woman named Mrs. Mungo on the same day. Though press accounts presumptively accused Mr. Buckner of both assaults, though he had no trial or due process, the racial caste system of this era often failed to prevent or prosecute sexual violence against Black women, whereas even the suggestion of a Black man having intimate contact with a white woman could easily arouse mob violence and end in lynching. In Mr. Buckner's case, the violent mob that pursued him was precipitated after Ms. Harrison's reported assault and led to the determined action of the mob to lynch Mr. Buckner.

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When a local constable was notified of the reports related to the Harrison assault and the active manhunt underway, he went to John Buckner's family home on the Harrison property, found Mr. Buckner, and took him into custody. As the constable carried Mr. Buckner towards the city of Manchester, he passed through Valley Park. Hearing of the arrest, the mobs in that area began to go in chase of the escort. The constable rushed Mr. Buckner before a local magistrate in Manchester, who ordered to have him placed in the local jail. Before the constable could transfer Mr. Buckner from the jail in Manchester to the county jail in Clayton, the mob arrived at the jail to seize Mr. Buckner. The constable was able to convince the mob participants to disperse, but the mob did not disband.

Early the next morning around 3:00 am, the mob returned to the jail on horseback wearing masks and surrounded the building. It was common during this era for lynch mobs to display complete disregard for the legal system and to seize their victims from jails, prisons, courtrooms, and directly out of police custody. Even when law enforcement officers were present, they rarely resisted lynch mobs with force and routinely failed to prevent Black people in their custody from being abducted and lynched. When the constable and other officers therein were alerted to the mob's presence by noises outside the building, they placed Mr. Buckner in a lower part of the jail. The mob converged on the jail and demanded that the officers turn Mr. Buckner over. When the constable declined, the mob broke through the jail doors, held the officers at gunpoint, and found Mr. Buckner. The mob forced Mr. Buckner into a wagon and drove him towards Valley Park "in high glee."

The mob reached Valley Park around 4:30 am, and they bound Mr. Buckner at the knees and ankles and placed a noose around his neck. From the city, the mob drove Mr. Buckner to an iron bridge spanning the Meramec River. The mob removed Mr. Buckner from the wagon, tied the other end of the noose to the bridge railing, and threw Mr. Buckner's body over the side of the bridge, hanging him to death. The mob then quickly dispersed, leaving Mr. Buckner's body as a public spectacle. Later that morning, residents who lived near the area found Mr. Buckner's body still hanging. It was not until 2:00 pm that a brief coroner's inquest was held. The coroner's jury rendered the verdict that Mr. Buckner "came to his death by hanging at the hands of parties unknown to the jury." His body was later removed and turned over to

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his family for burial.

Following Mr. Buckner's lynching, white press accounts largely sympathized with the mob and failed to condemn their terroristic violence. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that residents of Valley Park considered Mr. Buckner's lynching "a good work well done." It went on to state:

"Nineteen out of twenty of the people are satisfied with what happened," said a citizen of Valley Park this morning. "The county authorities will not make any investigation. The people want no inquiry. The matter ended with the verdict of the Coroner's jury."

During this era, both Southern and non-Southern states maintained a strict racial caste system in which the lives of white people were held in heightened value compared to the lives of Black people. Within the legal system, white people accused of crimes in this era were much more likely to be tried, convicted, and punished by the legal system rather than by mobs. However, Black people who were presumed guilty or suspected of the same crimes frequently became targets for mob violence and racial terror lynching, despite the presence of functioning legal systems and local law enforcement. Racial terror lynchings had widespread impacts on Black communities and residents, who had to navigate this arbitrary and, at times, lethal racial hierarchy.

White press accounts also sought to dehumanize Mr. Buckner, referring to him as "a wild beast" and "a monster in human form," though it was known that he neither had been legally convicted of any crime nor had an opportunity to defend himself in court. During this era, white press often appealed to accusations of criminal behavior and bad character to generate sympathy for the actions of the lynch mob at the expense of due concern for the rights and humanity of their victim. Such public justifications of lynching, common during this period, served to shield lynch mobs from legal and social consequences. By refusing to hold lynch mobs accountable, white officials, community members, and newspapers only served to embolden the perpetrators of racial violence and encourage the reign of terror that would continue to target Black Americans for nearly a century following the Civil

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War, resulting in more than 6000 documented lynchings of Black men, women, and children. In the end, no one was held accountable for John Buckner's lynching.

John Buckner is one of at least 68 documented African American victims of racial terror lynching killed in the State of Missouri between 1863 and 1950.

### Sources

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*The Montgomery Advertiser*, (Montgomery, Alabama), January 18, 1894, page 6.

*The Leavenworth Weekly Times*, (Leavenworth, Kansas), January 25, 1894, page 1.

*The News Boy*, (Benton, Missouri), January 27, 1894, page 2.

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### Location of Soil Collection

Early in the morning on January 17, 1894, an angry mob abducted a Black man named John Buckner from jail and lynched him just outside of Valley Park, Missouri in St. Louis County. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* reported that the mob placed a noose around Mr. Buckner's neck and carried him in a wagon "to the iron bridge which spans the Meramec River. When the middle of the second span of the bridge was reached the wagon was stopped and the end of the rope was made fast to one of the steel girders of the bridge[...]" There, the mob hanged Mr. Buckner from the bridge and abandoned his lifeless body as a public spectacle. No one was held accountable for participating in the lynching of John Buckner.

Author Joseph Wood, who wrote about Mr. Buckner's lynching in his book, *The Shadow of the Bridge*, indicates that the "Old Wagon Bridge" where the mob hanged Mr. Buckner was destroyed by a flood in 1915. The bridge was later replaced with what is today Highway 141, which crosses over the Meramec in the location where Mr. Buckner was lynched.

Please travel the **Meramec Greenway Trailhead (8 Meramec Station Road, Valley Park, Missouri, 63088)**, located on the Meramec River near the river crossing of Highway 141. Please collect soil from a safe and appropriate area at this location to acknowledge the lynching of John Buckner.