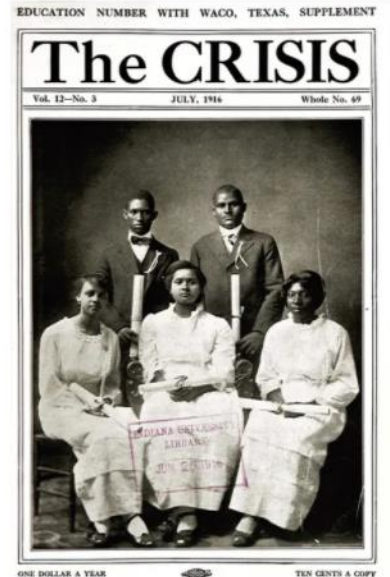


## How the NAACP fought lynching – by using the racists' own pictures against them

by [Andrew Belonsky](#) for Timeline, [theguardian.com](#)



In July of 1916, at the end of a long day, readers all across the US picked up the most recent issue of a new magazine, maybe from a coffee table or while browsing at the library. Its cover image was ordinary: recent college graduates, the women dressed in white lace and the men in fine suits. The articles seemed standard, too, with pieces about young doctors, a new production of Shakespeare, and baseball. But then, at the end, readers were taken aback by something entirely gruesome: an eight-page supplement featuring pictures of an African American man being lynched, step by step, from the convening of the mob to the hanging to the body in a heap of ashes. Nothing was censored – and that was the point. The magazine was the Crisis, the monthly publication of the then new NAACP, edited by WEB Du Bois. The images were part of a campaign that appropriated and subverted racist imagery for progressive purposes. They were a revelation, one that cemented the NAACP's status as a leading civil rights organization and opened Americans' eyes to horrific hate crimes across the country.

The victim in those nightmarish images was Jesse Washington, a black 17-year-old accused of murdering Lucy Fryer, the white woman for whom he worked, in Waco, Texas, on 8 May 1916. Fryer had been bludgeoned to death with a hammer, and Washington was found covered in blood. Arrested on the spot, Washington confessed under duress: authorities told him they would protect him from a gathering lynch mob. That confession was the centerpiece of his trial one week later, on 15 May. It took the jury all of three minutes to reach their verdict: a death sentence, and the 1,500 people packed into the courtroom wanted it to happen now. Within seconds, Washington was seized and pulled into the street, where he was beaten, stabbed, dragged, and chained. The crowd swelled into the thousands, and all were rapt as Washington was hanged from a tree and burned alive, a throng of white spectators guffawing and gawking, straining their necks to get a better look and giving up their spots for one man only, a photographer named Fred Gildersleeve. Waco's mayor had called Gildersleeve personally to capture the event, and the photographer readily complied, arriving on the scene with his camera bag and flash pan, using the same discerning eye with which he snapped local sporting events and youthful parades to capture Washington's agonizing final moments, his flesh turned to char.

None of this was unusual. Lynching had been a largely tolerated part of American culture since 1836. [...] Black men were the most frequent targets [...] but Mexicans, Jews, Native Americans,

black women, and white progressives were sometimes targeted as well, threatening as they were to Christian white supremacy. Within the lynching culture was a subculture of sorts, one that reveled in trading postcards of the crimes the way kids today might trade baseball cards. That's why Gildersleeve was taking pictures of Washington's murder – to cash in. He went on to sell prints for 10 cents apiece, about \$2.30 in today's dollars. But little did Gildersleeve know that his images would be used to flip the script, wielded in the fight for justice by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Formed in 1908, the NAACP spent its first few years focused largely on fighting Jim Crow and other forms of segregation, but leaders were keen to get involved in a burgeoning anti-lynching movement, and understood immediately upon hearing about Washington's death that they needed to redouble their efforts. To that end, the NAACP secretary, Roy Nash, wired Elisabeth Freeman, an English-born suffragette who he knew was rallying in Fort Worth, and asked her to travel to Waco to investigate. "You will probably be able very soon to locate liberals or Northerners there with whom you can talk freely," Nash wrote on 16 May, the day after the lynching.

Freeman was unsure. She didn't know much about the case, and she'd never worked on an anti-lynching campaign. [...] Nash, however, pleaded, and Freeman, a fierce believer in equality, agreed to take a look. [...] She spent eight days in and around Waco, interviewing participants and witnesses to Washington's murder. [...] Waco's residents spilled the beans, giving Freeman the material she needed for what became the Crisis supplement. And that included Gildersleeve's damning, and ultimately useful, images. It was a macabre jackpot.

Using Freeman's findings, Du Bois was purposefully sensational with his title: "The Waco Horror". While the text spared no detail, it paled in comparison with Gildersleeve's photos, presented in chronological order. [...] Sure, people had heard about lynching, but few Americans had seen it. More important, Washington's death didn't happen in some southern backwater; it happened in Waco, a town known for Baylor University and its upwardly mobile population. The NAACP had taken images originally intended for enthusiastic racists and turned them into evidence of racism's viciousness, of the banality of evil in star-spangled America, in stark black and white. But Freeman and the NAACP weren't done yet. [...]

No one was prosecuted for Washington's death, but his murder and the images that resulted marked a sea change. Through Freeman and the NAACP's efforts, the pain Washington faced, the pain Gildersleeve captured, awakened a new generation of activists. By using a reprehensible and unjustifiable piece of racist memorabilia against its creators, the NAACP woke the nation to an ugly reality, energizing the anti-lynching movement. [...] Though lynchings eventually declined in America, they didn't end completely.

