

Roger K. Hux, "Lillian Clayton Jewett and the Rescue of the Baker Family, 1899-1900"  
*Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 19, No. 1 (Winter 1991).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

[masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu](mailto:masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu)

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.westfield.ma.edu/mhj/>."



## **Lillian Clayton Jewett and the Rescue of the Baker Family, 1899-1900**

**Roger K. Hux**

On July 16, 1899, a large, predominately African-American audience gathered in Boston's St. Paul's Baptist Church to hear a young white woman speak on lynching in the South. Lillian Clayton Jewett, an aspiring novelist, excited the group with her offer to go South and bring back the surviving members of the Baker family of Lake City, South Carolina, whose head, Postmaster Frazier Baker, had been killed along with the family's baby daughter, in an attack of mob violence in February of 1898. Miss Jewett hoped, through a series of mass meetings, to make the family "an object lesson" against lynching.

Miss Jewett's Boston supporters called her "the new Harriet Beecher Stowe," and referred to her mission as another "underground railroad." The family's subsequent arrival in New England brought out large crowds and stirred memories of the abolitionist meetings before the Civil War. Even before her trip South, however, Miss Jewett's mission touched off discord among different factions of Boston's African-American community, a weakness that would eventually lead to her undoing.

Lynchings of Blacks in the South reached epidemic proportions during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, but none disturbed Northerners more than the murder of Frazier Baker. His opponents in Lake City, a small village in the northeastern section of South Carolina, maintained that he was inefficient and rude, but his major offense was that he had taken a position in a community where the postmaster had always been white. Harassed from his first day in office, he held out through one attack in which the post office had been destroyed by fire, only to face a second assault when another mob set fire to his home. As the family tried to escape the burning building, his

attackers shot and killed Baker and his baby daughter, and wounded his wife and three of his other five children.<sup>1</sup>

The attack on the Baker family launched a firestorm of protest from the national African-American community. Black groups across the country flooded the McKinley administration with petitions calling for apprehension of the mob and Federal support for the family. African-American congressmen introduced resolutions, and one Black newspaper, with the explosion of the U.S.S. *Maine* in Cuba still a recent memory, called on America to "remember Lake City." Ida Wells-Barnett, the Black newspaperwoman who had started compiling lynching statistics while working in Memphis, visited President McKinley and implored him to launch an immediate investigation of the attack.<sup>2</sup>

The Federal investigators faced two obstacles in their efforts to get the truth in the Lake City case. First, in a small, close-knit community, people who opposed the action of the mob were probably afraid to publicly voice their opinion. Second, many of the townspeople were relatives or friends of the suspects. Investigators had to rely on one or more of the mob members turning state's evidence.<sup>3</sup>

Two eventually did, but it took five months for a grand jury to meet, and the Federal prosecutors revealed their entire case at that hearing. By the time of the trial of thirteen white defendants in Charleston Federal District Court in April of 1899, the defense was able to present several witnesses, who testified that one of the defendants who had turned state's evidence had been in court in Kingstree on the day of the attack, even though it appeared that the date on the docket had been changed. Another defendant's testimony was thrown out when it was learned that he had been

-----  
1. Charleston News and Courier, February 12 and 23, 1898.

2. "Assassination of the Postmaster of Lake City, South Carolina," 55th Congress, Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, Record Group 233 (HR55A-H21.7), National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903 (Urbana, Illinois, 1975), p. 32; Ida B. Wells Barnett, Crusade for Justice: the Autobiography of Ida B. Wells, ed. by Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago, 1970), pp. 252-253.

3. Abial Lathrop to the Attorney General, March 5, 1898, Department of Justice Year Files 3463-98, Record Group 60, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

convicted of stealing a cross-cut saw. The defense offered alibis for the other defendants, but many were provided by relatives. The jury could not reach a verdict; the vote was seven to five, not guilty.<sup>4</sup>

The trial was continued until the fall term of the court, and two groups started campaigns to provide funds for the Bakers. One, started through the efforts of William Lloyd Garrison II, the son of the famous abolitionist, hoped to raise money to provide for the family in Charleston. The other, started by the Colored National League in Boston, also wanted to keep the Bakers in Charleston, at least until the conclusion of the trial. The League had sent a petition to President McKinley, and raised a small amount of money, which it sent to the Colored Ministers Union of Charleston, which was looking after the Baker family.<sup>5</sup> Reverend John Dart, the head of Charleston's (African-American) Normal and Industrial School, also was working for the Baker family. He supplied information on the trial to the Colored National League, and he visited Boston seeking support. Dart had some interest in sending the family north, but he did not think it possible until Miss Jewett's campaign changed his mind.<sup>6</sup>

Lillian Jewett was virtually unknown when she made her first Boston appearance. Conflicting reports arose concerning her background. Newspaper articles indicated that she was an attractive young woman, about twenty-four years of age, and that she had written a romantic novel entitled *Life's Passionate Guest*. One report indicated that she was the daughter of a wealthy Boston grain merchant, who lived on Beacon Street, but another stated that she was the sister of bootblacks from Brockton. Records indicate that she enrolled at Hollins College in Virginia in 1895, but that she withdrew after a short time because of illness. Whatever her background, Lillian Clayton Jewett was not wealthy;

-----  
4. Charleston News and Courier July 2 and 6, 1898, and April 14 to 24, 1899.

5. I. D. Barnett, "The Baker Family," Colored American Magazine I (May 1900): 10-13 (reprint ed., New York, 1969); Boston Evening Transcript, July 25, 1899.

6. John L. Dart, The Famous Trial of the Eight Men Indicted for the Lynching of Frazier B. Baker and His Baby (n.p., 1899); Boston Herald, July 19, 1900; Boston Daily Globe, July 23, 1899.

in 1898 she became one of the first to file for bankruptcy under the new Federal bankruptcy law.<sup>7</sup>

According to her account of what had inspired her, one day Miss Jewett had been talking about lynching with her Black maid, and after expressing her concern, she had been encouraged by the woman to contact Reverend Benjamin W. Farris of St. Paul's Baptist, an African-American church in Boston, and to make her feelings public. Farris later called this "an answer to his prayer," and he wasted no time in arranging for Miss Jewett to speak.<sup>8</sup>

The large audience on the night of July 16, with so little knowledge of Miss Jewett's background, showed how desperately Boston's African-American community wanted to stop lynching in the southern states. Seated on the platform along with Miss Jewett and Reverend Farris were Dr. Samuel Courtney of the Boston School Committee, Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin of the Woman's Era Club, Issac B. Allen, a prominent Black lawyer, and a number of other leaders.

In their remarks Reverend Farris and Miss Jewett both invoked the memory of the abolition movement, and Boston's prominent role in it. In his introduction, Farris compared Miss Jewett to an earlier heroine:

God has frequently touched the heart of a woman when He wanted a great work performed. When He aroused the people of America to the evil of slavery He put the pen in the hand of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Now He is once more touching the heart of a woman.

Miss Jewett, the object of everyone's attention, was attired in an elegant black silk dress, and she appeared to be a young woman of refinement who might have financial resources to give to the cause. She spoke slowly and quietly at first, warming to her subject as her speech progressed. "The actions of Southern

-----  
7. *Boston Sunday Post*, August 6, 1899; *Boston Daily Globe*, July 23, 1899; Anthony Thompson (Hollins College Archivist) to Author, March 15, 1987; Bankruptcy Case File #60, U. S. District Court, Massachusetts, Record Group 21, Federal Archives and Record Center, Waltham.

8. *Boston Herald*, July 21, 1899.

lynchers have filled my northern soul with grief and indignation," she declared. Making reference to the service of Blacks in the army during the Civil War, she reminded the audience that Black soldiers had always fought valiantly:

Look out upon Boston Common and see the brave black men who faced shot and shell with their leader Robert Gould Shaw. Bury him with his niggers they said, and they did. Is the old hate still there? Does the browbeater of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom still live?

Citing her college experiences in Virginia, Miss Jewett suggested that

true southerners can be aroused to join our cause [but] the campaign must start in Boston, where all great movements for right and justice have had their birth.

The movement to end lynching must begin right here. Something must be done to bring to our people a true picture of the conditions south of us.... Let them see the people who are being persecuted and shot down. Bring the Baker family here to Boston. Let them see the helpless children, the maimed and destitute mother, whose husband and little one were killed because the former was a servant of our government.

If this does not do it I am very much mistaken in the people of New England. You can do it, you should do it, and if necessary I will agree to go to Charleston myself and bring the Baker family here.

The speech had an electrifying effect on the audience. Several spoke in support of Miss Jewett, and many rushed up to meet her afterward.<sup>9</sup> After only a few days, negative reaction to

-----  
9. Ibid., July 17, 1899

Miss Jewett's offer began to develop. At a meeting of the Colored National League on July 25, Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin suggested that the League handle any plans for bringing the Bakers north. They had been working on the matter for some time, and should not turn it over to "some chit of a white girl who sprang up overnight."

Miss Jewett's supporters, Reverend Farris and lawyer Isaac B. F. Allen, defended her. Allen suggested that "the Colored 400" had no right to dictate plans, since they had done nothing for the Bakers.<sup>10</sup> These remarks reveal the class divisions that existed among Boston's African American community. Over the next few days a series of stormy meetings made it clear that Miss Jewett drew much of her support from Southern-born Blacks and Protestant ministers, such as Reverend Farris, while many of Boston's Black elite opposed her.<sup>11</sup>

Matters were further complicated by the publication in a Boston newspaper of a letter from a Virginia physician, revealing that he had treated Miss Jewett for "recurrent mania" during her student days, and that she had been institutionalized for her problems. Responding to the charges, Miss Jewett called the doctor a "racist" and denied having ever suffered from mental illness. She had previously revealed, however, that she had met the woman who became the main character in her novel during a stay in a Boston mental hospital.<sup>12</sup>

Discord continued to prevail. Miss Jewett's supporters formed the "Lillian Clayton Jewett Anti-Lynching League," but her opponents also continued to hold meetings. Mrs. Ruffin, in an effort "to keep Miss Jewett from posing as the Harriet Beecher Stowe of the race," stated that she had received several damaging

-----  
10. Boston Daily Globe, July 26, 1899.

11. Boston Herald, August 1, 1899. Miss Jewett's supporters included Reverend A. W. Adams, Isaac B. Allen, Reverend Benjamin W. Farris, Mrs. A. H. Jewell, and Reverend J. Allen Kirk. Her opponents included Isaiah D. Barnett, Dr. Samuel Courtney, Anthony Portlock, J. D. Powell, Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Hannah Smith, Reverend P. Thomas Stanford, Edwin G. Walker, and Curtis Wright. For a discussion of Boston's Black elite, see Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., "Aristocrats of Color: South and North, The Black Elite, 1880-1920," Journal of Southern History LIV (February 1988): 3-20.

12. Boston Daily Globe, July 28, 1899.

reports concerning the young woman, although she refused to reveal their content or source. She did say that Miss Jewett was using the Baker family to make money. Members of both factions attended meetings called by the opposition, so that the proceedings frequently degenerated into angry shouting matches.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, on August 4, Miss Jewett, carrying letters of introduction from her supporters, secretly left town and headed south to take matters into her own hands. Arriving at Sullivan's Island, she went to see Dr. Alonzo C. McClennan, chairman of the committee overseeing the Bakers. She arranged a private meeting with Mrs. Baker, who upon listening to her proposal, agreed to accompany her to Boston. Miss Jewett promised the committee to provide for the family, and to arrange for their return if they so desired. The next day, after she bought them new clothes, they left Charleston by train, heading back to Boston. Dr. Lucy Brown, a colleague of Dr. McClennan, travelled along to make sure that Miss Jewett's promises were kept.<sup>14</sup>

The Jewett-Baker story provided a bonanza for the Boston newspapers, which gave it extensive coverage. Robert Larsen, a *Boston Herald* reporter, traveled with Miss Jewett and the family. He even publicly defended her in Charleston, when Reverend John Dart, by then an opponent, tried to stop her mission. Once the family reached Boston, other papers ran human interest stories on Mrs. Baker and her children. The city soon became familiar with Lavinia, the mother, and her children — Cora, Rosa, Sarah, Lincoln, and Willie.<sup>15</sup>

After stopping briefly to rest in New York, Miss Jewett and the Bakers made their first Northern appearance, in the Providence, Rhode Island, Music Hall, before three thousand people. Standing on the stage where Garrison had held abolition meetings before the Civil War, Miss Jewett's supporters linked her name to those of Harriet Beecher Stowe, John Brown, William Lloyd Garrison, and Charles Sumner. Reverend Farris said that

-----  
13. Boston Herald, August 2, 1899; Boston Daily Globe, August 2, 1899; Boston Traveler, August 2, 1899.

14. Charleston News and Courier, August 6, 1899; Boston Daily Globe, August 6 and 7, 1899.

15. Charleston News and Courier, August 6, 1899; Boston Herald, August 7, 1899; Boston Post, August 13, 1899.



"she had to do underground railroad work to get them [the Baker family], but here they are." Miss Jewett called twelve year-old Lincoln Baker, who had been maimed in the attack, to the front of the stage, to show what the lynchers had done. In the highlight of the evening, George Downing, an elderly Black man who had participated in the underground railroad, shook hands with Miss Jewett, saying that he had been the last to hold the hand of Charles Sumner and now, in giving his hand to her, he was passing on the mantle of leadership. "Go on with your great work," he declared, "for you are the needed woman of the hour."<sup>16</sup>

Their first Boston appearance, before a crowd of four thousand in the People's Temple, played upon the long abolitionist tradition of the city. John Hutchinson, a member of a well-known family of abolitionist singers, performed, and the speakers once again made references to Boston's role in the abolition movement. The atmosphere in the hall was so emotional that Mrs. Baker fainted, under a strain after a long trip and a great deal of public attention, and she had to be revived by Dr. Lucy Brown.<sup>17</sup> Despite this subdued ending, Miss Jewett's supporters had every reason to hope for success. They expected the large turn-out to bring in one thousand dollars in donations for future meetings. When they counted the proceeds, however, and discovered that only two hundred dollars had been donated, they began to have doubts about the future of their plan.<sup>18</sup>

Dissension began to creep into their meetings, as attendance dropped. Mrs. A. H. Jewell, president of the Anti-Lynching League, resigned simply because she had not been given advance notice of Miss Jewett's trip to the south. Then Issac B. F. Allen resigned as treasurer. Late in August, Reverend Farris arranged an appearance of Miss Jewett and the Bakers at a Salvation Army convention being held at the campgrounds of Old Orchard, Maine. Despite an enthusiastic response from the audience, they took in only thirty-five dollars for their efforts.<sup>19</sup>

16. Providence Journal, August 8, 1899; Boston Traveler, August 8, 1899.

17. Boston Daily Globe, August 10, 1899; Boston Herald, August 10, 1899.

18. Boston Daily Globe, August 11, 1899.

19. *Ibid.*, August 9, 11, and 18, 1899.

In the South, politicians and newspapers followed Miss Jewett's activities with great interest. In a speech delivered in Greenwood, South Carolina, United States Senator Ben Tillman warned that an increase of "whitecapping" against Blacks would draw attacks from the North. "Why just look at that Jewett woman coming down here and taking away the nigger postmaster's family," he exclaimed. "She comes from Boston, the head and centre of all devilment. The Yankees are ready to take up any such deviltry."<sup>20</sup> The Columbia, South Carolina, *State* faithfully reported Miss Jewett's meetings, but cast them in terms of a carnival sideshow, with the Bakers being placed on exhibit to make money. It also reported opportunities for the Bakers in South Carolina, declaring that the family would have been better off at home.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile dissension in Boston continued. Miss Jewett and Dr. Lucy Brown clashed, with Miss Jewett maintaining that Dr. Brown's duties had been fulfilled, allowing her to return to Charleston. Dr. Brown stated that Miss Jewett's promises regarding the upkeep of the Bakers had still not been met.<sup>22</sup> By September, Mrs. Baker again sought to take the lead, and she issued a direct appeal to the public, asking for support. In a letter published in the *Boston Daily Globe*, Mrs. Baker stated that she was acting independently, so that those who did not approve of the method of her arrival in Boston could come to her support. She was glad to be there, and was thankful to Miss Jewett and the committee, but she felt that a change was necessary. Miss Jewett, when asked to respond, said that Mrs. Baker might just as well be free of the committee.<sup>23</sup>

William Lloyd Garrison II renewed his campaign to support the family, and he raised twelve hundred dollars for a home for them in nearby Chelsea. The family and Miss Jewett slipped from public view for a while, but in August of 1900, Miss Jewett and some of her Black supporters regained center stage when they got

-----  
20. *Boston Post*, August 17, 1899; *Boston Evening Transcript*, August 17, 1899.

21. *Ibid.*; *The State* (Columbia, S.C.), August 12, 1899.

22. *Boston Daily Globe*, August 29, 1899.

23. *Ibid.*, September 1899.

into an angry exchange with some white citizens of New Orleans over the Robert Charles massacre. Charles, a young Black man, had gone on a rampage, killing several whites and touching off race riots, which resulted in several deaths. Asked to comment on the affair, Mrs. Baker stated that she no longer kept up with Miss Jewett or the racial situation in the South.<sup>24</sup>

Miss Jewett continued to speak throughout the country. In August of 1900, she had a brief meeting with Mark Hanna at the Republican National Convention, but she failed to gain his endorsement. In Richmond, she appeared at a national Black Baptist convention, where she had been welcomed enthusiastically the previous year. Now they refused to let her speak; not to be outdone, she went into the street and took up where she left off. While in Richmond, a young white man challenged her to a debate, but she refused.<sup>25</sup> In September of 1900, Miss Jewett spoke at the Central Presbyterian Church in Rochester. She was enthusiastically received, but there is no record of any further action. At this point, she slipped from public view.<sup>26</sup>

The Baker family remained in Boston and faced the epidemic of tuberculosis that plagued the poor Blacks in that city. Willie, the youngest, died in 1908, and by 1920 all but one of the children were gone. Cora, the oldest, lived until 1942, when she died of a heart attack. At that point, Lavinia Baker, the mother, returned to South Carolina and lived out her days in western Florence County, passing away in Cartersville in 1947.<sup>27</sup>

-----  
 24. New York Times, September 23, 1899; William L. Garrison II to Ellen W. Garrison, September 20, 1899, and William L. Garrison II diaries, February-March, 1900, in Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton; Boston Post, August 5 and 8, 1900; Boston Daily Globe, August 5, 7, 11, and 16, 1900; Boston Traveler, August 7 and 10, 1900; William Ivy Hair, Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900 (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1976), pp. 192-195.

25. Richmond Dispatch, September 13 to 15, 1900.

26. Rochester Union and Advertiser, September 27 and 28, 1900.

27. John Daniels, In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes (New York, 1968; Chicago, 1971), p. 134; Standard Certificates of Death, Massachusetts Registry of Vital Statistics, Boston, and South Carolina Division of Vital Statistics, Columbia; Interview with Josephine Friday (Cartersville, South Carolina), June 1988.

Miss Jewett's campaign to use the Bakers to arouse opposition to lynching depended on the memories it inspired of the abolition movement and the underground railroad. Although she publicly rejected comparison with Harriet Beecher Stowe and other antislavery leaders, she relied on their memory to attract people to her cause. The mood of the North had changed, however, and many years would pass before there would be an end to lynching.<sup>28</sup>

-----  
28. Fred Davis, Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia (New York, 1975), pp. 102-104; David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (Cambridge, England, 1985), pp. 40-41.