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The Long Legacy of White Citizen Police: A Recap of the 12th Annual Gondwe Lecture

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Abstract

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Keywords

Black Lives Matter, Fugitive Slave Act, Gondwe Lecture, Policing, Race, Slavery

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Long Legacy of White Citizen Police: A Recap of the 12th Annual Gondwe Lecture

By [*Jeffrey Lauck '18*](#)

Last week, the Gettysburg College Africana Studies and Economics Departments sponsored [the 12th annual Derrick K. Gondwe Memorial Lecture](#) on Social and Economic Justice. This year's lecture featured Dr. Edward E. Baptist, a Durham, North Carolina native currently teaching in the History Department at Cornell University. His lecture, "White Predators: Hunting African Americans For Profit, From the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act to Lee's 1863 Invasion of Pennsylvania," painted the picture of a centuries-long instinct among white Americans to police black Americans.

Dr. Baptist began his historical lecture by reflecting on the present. He cited examples of young black kids like Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice being killed by armed white citizens and those same "police citizens" being acquitted of their murders. For Baptist, these cases are only the latest examples of white "police citizens" engaging in the legalized suppression of black lives. This legacy goes back over four centuries to the time when Africans were first brought to the shores of America in chains.



Photo credit: Jeffrey Lauck

The first slavery laws passed in colonial America had to do with the control of slaves. Before passing laws that established slavery as a trait inherited through a slave mother (never the father, who was often the slave owner himself), creating laws that regulated the transfer of ownership of slaves, and certainly well before debating any laws that sought to outlaw or limit the international trade in humans, colonial legislatures passed laws that dealt with hunting fugitive slaves. In doing so, they deputized all white citizens as officers tasked with returning runaway slaves. Newspapers soon filled with advertisements offering rewards for the capture and return of fugitives, making the whole black population a source of economic opportunity for white citizens. Fugitive slave ads urged their white readers to “not let anyone who fits the description of the fugitive” go free. According to Baptist, some bounty hunters carried several dozen such ads, stopping any black person they saw and cross-examining them against various descriptions of runaways.

Inevitably, many free-born African Americans were stopped, kidnapped, and brought south to a land they had never been, forced to perform free hard labor for masters they never knew, masters who did not care that these African Americans were in fact not escaped property. Solomon Northup, of *12 Years a Slave* fame, is the most commonly-cited victim, but there were countless others. Black orphan children were popular targets, as they were easy to capture and often had no one to defend them in court or even know to search for them once they were taken.

Free black Northerners often found themselves with no legal course of action once kidnapped—well before the 1856 *Dred Scott* decision stripped them of all legal rights—as most states prohibited black men from testifying against white men. Even if victims could somehow get in touch with white friends in the North to help them, social norms within the white community as well as laws passed to expressly prohibit the aiding of anyone deemed a “fugitive slave” usually meant they were on their own. In 1820s Philadelphia—a popular target for slave hunters—40 to 60 Black Americans were stolen annually from a city where 10% of the total population of roughly 75,000 was African American. When Joseph Watson, a white Quaker mayor of Philadelphia, tried to put an end to a notorious kidnapping ring in his city, he was met with resistance from many in the white community and was only able to prosecute two black accomplices. No white slave hunters ever saw trial. The message was clear to ambitious whites: African Americans could be hunted in the North with little or no fear of legal repercussions.

Throughout the North, African Americans were feared by whites. For years, white Americans had been conditioned to see blacks as criminals. For many, the only time they saw news stories related to their black neighbors were in fugitive slave advertisements or confessionals from fugitive slaves who had killed their white masters. Rarely would white Americans encounter any black voices that challenged this view that they were criminals. Some Northern communities tried to create registers and databases for blacks in their community—a seemingly unprecedented effort that sought to surveil a population in an era when government surveillance was almost completely unheard of. Of course, as Baptist pointed out, these efforts were not really that unprecedented, as

they bore a striking resemblance to the slave ledgers found on plantations throughout the slave-holding South.

Even in antebellum Northern states where black men were not explicitly prohibited from voting, white vigilantes' intimidation usually kept black votes to a minimum. In Bucks County, Pennsylvania, dozens of black men, armed with guns, stood up to intimidation and voted, swinging the election against the white Jacksonians who had been in power. Bucks County whites successfully challenged the vote in court. The court ruled that black men could not vote because if they could, they would surely vote for the violent overthrow of white society. According to Baptist, this ruling reflected the "easy activation of the white police citizen reflex."

Baptist painted a picture of continuity: one of four consecutive centuries of white citizens policing black populations. This conditioning helped define whiteness as much as it helped oppress blackness. Yet Baptist stresses that at each stage, from the Underground Railroad to the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been an active effort from African Americans to resist. After all, as Baptist notes, African Americans have been the core of coalitions that elected Barack Obama, passed the Voting Rights Act, and expanded legal immigration in the mid-20th century. Baptist ended his lecture by noting that history can often seem cyclical, with periods of successful resistance to and deconstruction of the white policing reflex as well as reactionary backlashes. Yet at each rebirth of the cycle, new causes emerge to expose different roots of the long legacy of white citizen policing.