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English Composition I

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The Unjust Execution of Lena Baker

Lena Baker was a 44 year old black woman who was wrongfully executed by the state of Georgia on March 5, 1945. Baker stated herself during trial that, “What I done, I did in self-defense, or I would have been killed myself. Where I was I could not overcome it”. Despite Baker’s plea of self-defense, she was found guilty, and was unjustly sentenced to death by electrocution for it.

Lena Baker was born in 1900 in a small community of black sharecroppers near Cuthbert, Georgia. Eventually, Baker and her family made the decision to move into Cuthbert, where she struggled to get by working as a maid to support her three children. However, Baker’s circumstances began to change when she was hired as a nurse for Ernest Knight, a white gristmill owner who hired Baker as a caretaker after he broke his leg. This job most likely came as a great relief to Baker, who had been struggling financially for some time. Unfortunately, the situation took a dark turn when Knight and Baker’s relationship became sexual, which was particularly dangerous since intimate inter-racial relationships were not tolerated at the time. When Baker attempted to free from this dynamic, Knight retaliated by locking her in his gristmill for several days at a time.

Lena Baker testified at her trial that on the night of April 30, 1944, Ernest Knight had forced her to leave her home where she was then locked up in the sweltering gristmill for hours, and once Knight returned to check on her, he demanded to have sex with her. When Baker refused, Knight attempted to intimidate her by brandishing a nearby iron rod, which the two then began to struggle over. Ernest Knight's pistol somehow was produced in the altercation which went off and killed Knight; Baker herself expressed confusion as to how exactly it was triggered. Baker testified she immediately walked to the home of a nearby neighbor she had once been employed to and told them she had killed Ernest Knight.

Lena Baker's trial was held a few months later, and only lasted four hours. No witnesses were called during the trial, and the jury consisted of twelve white men. In addition, the presiding



judge was locally known as Charles William "Two Gun"

Worrill, due to his tendency to open carry and always set two pistols on the bench. Baker made a plea of self-defense, but

despite this, she was found guilty of capital murder and

sentenced to death. Lena Baker was executed by electrocution

on March 5, 1945, where she continued to maintain her

innocence in the name of self-defense. Baker was buried in an

unmarked grave behind Mt. Vernon Baptist Church.

In August 2005, Lena Baker was officially pardoned by the state Board of Pardons and Paroles nearly 50 years after her death. The state acknowledged that given Baker's situation, she could

have been sentenced to a lesser charge of involuntary manslaughter which would have prevented her execution, and that this was “a grievous error” on their part.

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