

PITTSBURGH COURIER

How the Arkansas Peons Were Freed

July 28, 1923

The NAACP defended the black sharecroppers who had been convicted in connection with the Arkansas "uprising," pursuing the case to the U. S. Supreme Court. In its landmark 1923 decision, Moore v. Dempsey, the Court overturned the lower court's convictions on the historic grounds that the "due process clause" of the U. S. Constitution had been violated and that those convicted had not received a fair trial. Although the brutal suppression of the Arkansas sharecroppers' association was somewhat unique in its scope and ferocity, sporadic white violence against southern blacks continued into the postwar years. Like numerous other weekly African American newspapers, the Pittsburgh Courier covered the case closely.

N.A.A.C.P. Issues History of Famous Elaine Riot Case, Which Just Recently Entered Its Closing Chapters with the Release of Six of the Men, Thrice Convicted and Sentenced to Death

NEW YORK, July 26—In response to nation-wide interest in the freeing of the colored farmers of Arkansas, sentenced to death in connection with the Arkansas riots in 1919, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 69 Fifth Avenue, New York City, issued the following history of the case.

In October, 1919, the country woke to the existence of slavery in the form of peonage on the farms of Arkansas. Several white men and 250 colored men, women and children were killed in the canebreaks of that state. While the disorders were still going on, a representative of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Walter F. White, assistant secretary, hastened to the scene from New York. Armed with a letter appointing him special correspondent of the Chicago Daily News, Mr. White interviewed the Governor of Arkansas and was permitted to travel into the center of the disturbance. He escaped just in time from the Arkansas mob of white men who had discovered that a "yaller nigger" was investigating their reign of terror.

Mr. White returned to New York and reported that colored people had been held in peonage or perpetual debt slavery on the farms. Contrary to [the] report sent out by white news services the Negroes had no [sic] organized to "massacre whites," but in order to employ a lawyer to obtain settlements from their landlords. Following the riots, colored people were arrested by hundreds, penned in stockades in Little Rock, and after being tortured to make them give false evidence in court, 67 of them were railroaded to long prison terms and 12 colored men were sentenced to death.

Acting upon information obtained by Mr. White, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People stepped in to defend the 12 men sentenced to death. U. S. Bratton, the white lawyer to whom the peons had originally appealed, was enlisted in the cause. Mr. Bratton, owing to threats against his life, had to leave Arkansas. So the brunt of the work fell upon Scipio A. Jones, a colored lawyer of Little Rock, who carried six of the cases to the United States Supreme Court, where their sentences were reversed on February 19 of this year, and took the other six cases to the Supreme Court of Arkansas, which freed the men on June 25th of this year.

The entire power of the N.A.A.C.P. was invoked to win these cases, [said] Moorfield Storey, former president of the American Bar Association and now president of the N.A.A.C.P., travelling from his home in Boston to argue the cases before the U. S. Supreme Court in Washington. About \$14,000 has been spent on these cases and the victories have brought commendation from the most distinguished lawyers, including Louis Marshall, of New York, counsel for Leo Frank, and Charles Nagel, of St. Louis, former secretary of the interior in President Taft's cabinet.

The victories in the Arkansas cases constitute one of the most damaging blows ever struck against peonage in America. Scipio Jones, for the N.A.A.C.P., will file as soon as possible in the federal court, a petition for a writ of dismissal in behalf of those of the 67 colored people still serving prison terms in connection with the riots.