

THE LYNCHING OF ED JOHNSON



Associate Justice John Marshall Harlan
Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States

Justice Harlan was born on June 1, 1833, to a family that owned slaves. He began his career as a lawyer at the same time as tensions were increasing between Northern and Southern states. In 1861, Harlan petitioned against Kentucky joining the Confederacy and argued for the state to remain in the Union. He involved himself in both state and federal politics, and in 1876 President Hayes appointed him for a vacancy at the Supreme Court. After the Senate confirmed his nomination, Harlan spent 34 years as a Justice. In that time, he defended the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments and earned a reputation as “The Great Dissenter.” In several cases involving racial issues, Harlan was the sole dissenter, including *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Berea College v. Kentucky* (1908).

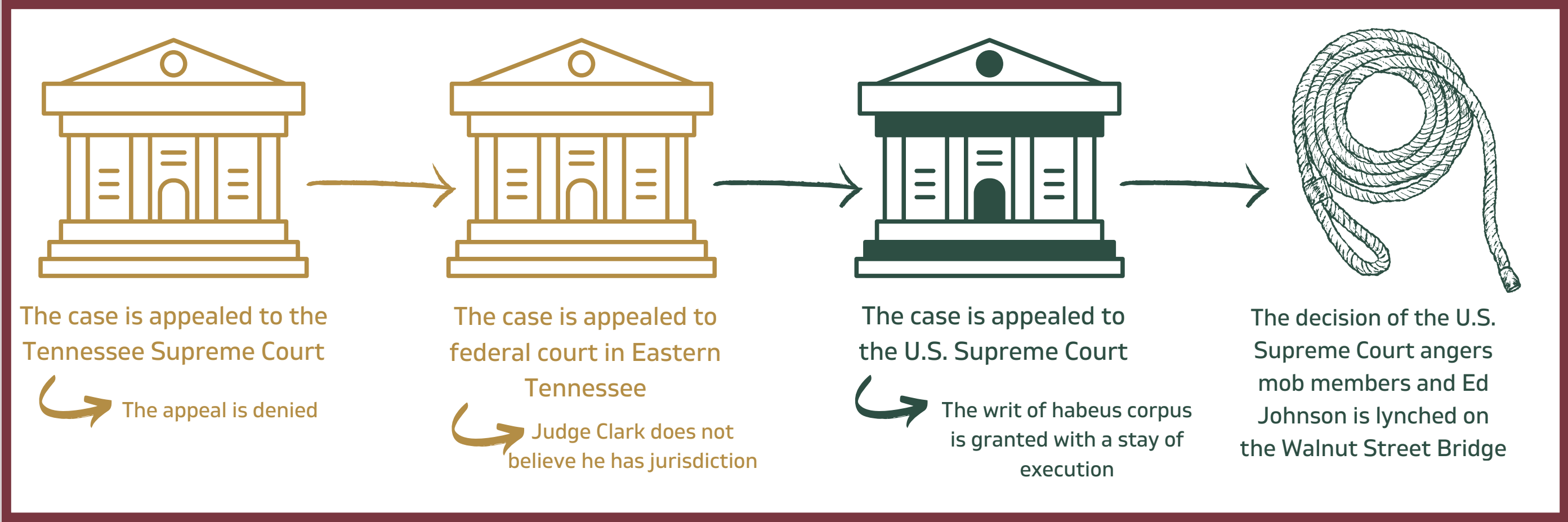
“The law regards man as man, and takes no account of his surroundings or of his color when his civil rights, as guaranteed by the supreme law of the land, are involved.”
-Justice Harlan

THE STAY OF EXECUTION

As Noah Parden rode the train home to Chattanooga, Justice Harlan decided that the Supreme Court would stay Ed Johnson’s execution so the Justices could review the original case. Ed Johnson’s life was safe for now. The Order was sent by telegram to Parden, Hutchins, Judge McReynolds, Sheriff Shipp, and Judge Clark. Shipp later denied receiving the telegram. Despite the Supreme Court’s ruling, that night Ed Johnson would be dragged from his cell and lynched.



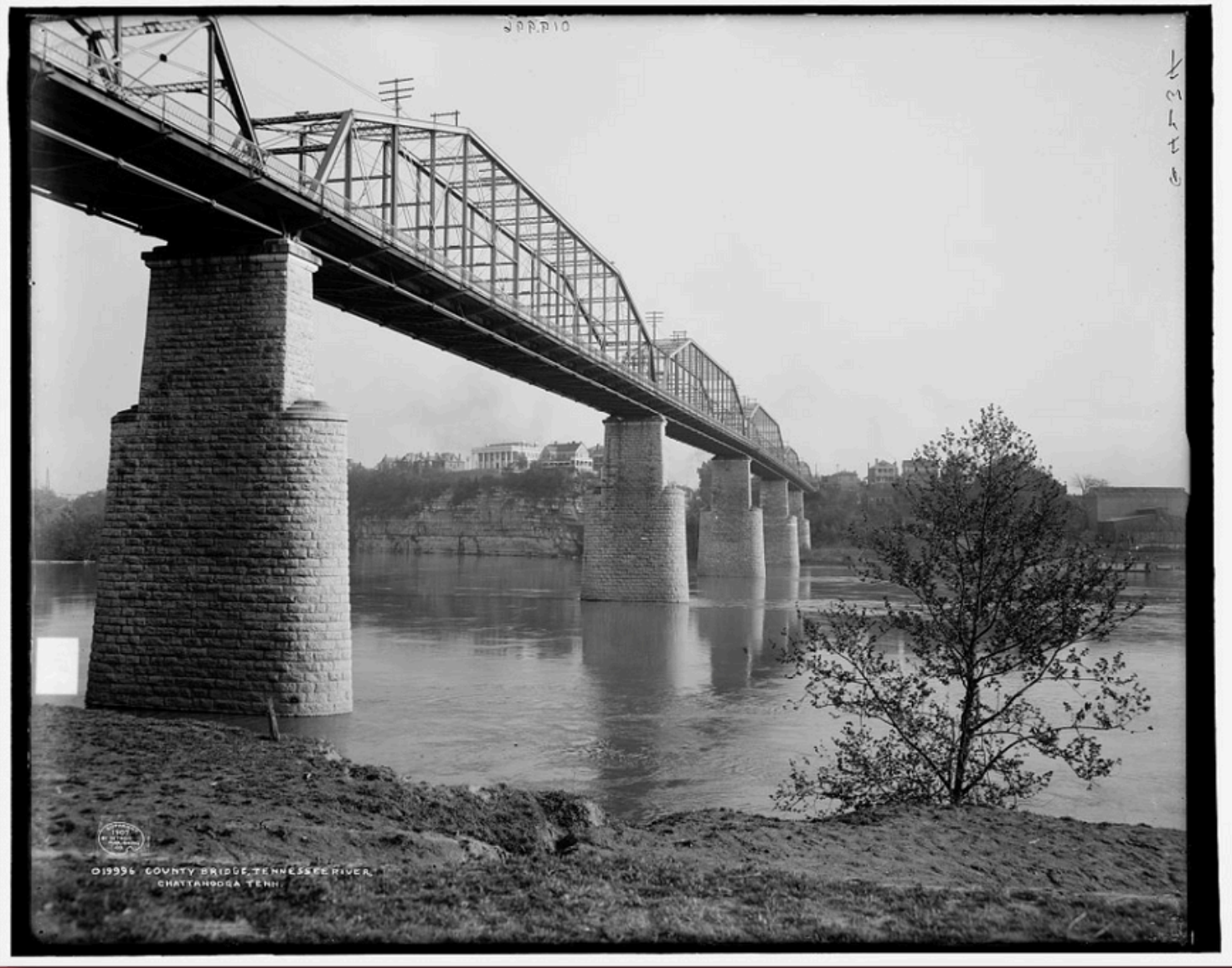
Newspaper clipping of the only known picture of Ed Johnson from the *Topeka Daily Herald*, reprinted in *Chattanooga Times Free Press*



THE LYNCHING

On March 19, 1906, a mob arrived at the jail to exact revenge on Ed Johnson. After many hours, the mob finally broke into the jail. The floor of the jail where Ed Johnson’s cell was located held only him and one other prisoner. All other prisoners had been moved. Sheriff Shipp had also given all but one of the jail officers the night off, leaving just one elderly officer on duty. The mob took Ed Johnson out of his cell and toward the Walnut Street bridge. When the mob arrived at the bridge, they tried to hang Ed Johnson but made the noose wrong. This caused him to choke instead of breaking his neck. The mob, more furious than before, started shooting. One of the members of the mob shot Ed Johnson in the head, ending his life. They left his brutalized body on the bridge with a taunting note to Justice Harlan pinned to his body.

“GOD BLESS YOU ALL, I AM AN INNOCENT MAN.”
-ED JOHNSON’S FINAL WORDS



Walnut Street Bridge, Chattanooga, Tennessee
Library of Congress

THE INVESTIGATION

After the lynching of Ed Johnson, the federal government sent two Secret Service agents to Chattanooga to investigate the events that had occurred leading up to the lynching and to gather evidence for a potential trial. While the two agents, Henry G. Dickey and E.P. McAdams, were not undercover they tried to proceed with their investigation discreetly. However, a Chattanooga newspaper quickly published an article about their arrival and the purpose of their visit. This angered many Chattanoogaans who were resistant to answering the agents’ questions. One group of men even jumped one of the agents and warned him to leave town. But with the help of Noah Parden, the agents were able to gather enough evidence, witnesses, and names of lynchers to write a report explaining the role of the lynch mob and jail officers in lynching Ed Johnson.



Created by the 2024 “Supreme Court and My Hometown” Students:
Eli Earl, Emma Ford, Peighton Skeate, Maddie Woods, and Nadine Habonimana