

TENNESSEE V. ED JOHNSON



Only known photograph of Ed Johnson
Topeka Daily Herald

“If there’s a God in heaven, I’m innocent.” -Ed Johnson

To the White community, Ed Johnson was rather unknown. To the Black community, Ed Johnson was known as a quiet man and hard worker who worked at the Last Chance Saloon. On January 25th, Ed Johnson was arrested for the rape of Nevada Taylor before being questioned, and he immediately denied being the attacker. That night, he was taken to Nashville for his safety and only returned the day before the trial.



Judge Samuel D. McReynolds
Library of Congress

As Judge McReynolds’ re-election was approaching, it was very important to him for Ed Johnson to be convicted and executed quickly, as it would please the White public. McReynolds refused to delay or move the trial despite the defense’s pleadings.

THE FIRST LYNCH MOB

On January 25, 1906, Ed Johnson was arrested after Will Hixson turned him in for a \$375 reward. Ed Johnson was interrogated by Sheriff Shipp for three hours. News of the arrest spread quickly, and by 7:30pm, there was a lynch mob outside the Hamilton County Jail. The mob used objects such as battering rams to break the doors and fired guns, injuring some in the crowd. They broke windows and severed the jail’s phone line. The National Guard was brought in, but the mob quickly disarmed them. At 9:15pm, a police officer sounded an alarm. However, this agitated the mob even more as they wanted to enact their own justice. At 9:45pm, Judge McReynolds approached the mob and gave a speech to dispel the mob.

“I hope that before week’s end, the rapist will be convicted, under sentence of death and executed according to law before the setting of Saturday’s sun.”

-Judge Samuel McReynolds

The crowd was not satisfied. Judge McReynolds decided to take five members of the lynch mob inside the jail to show them Ed Johnson was not there. Ed Johnson had already been taken to a jail in Nashville for his safety. Finally, the mob dispersed. None of the members of the mob were arrested for the crimes they committed that evening.

PROSECUTION

VS.

DEFENSE

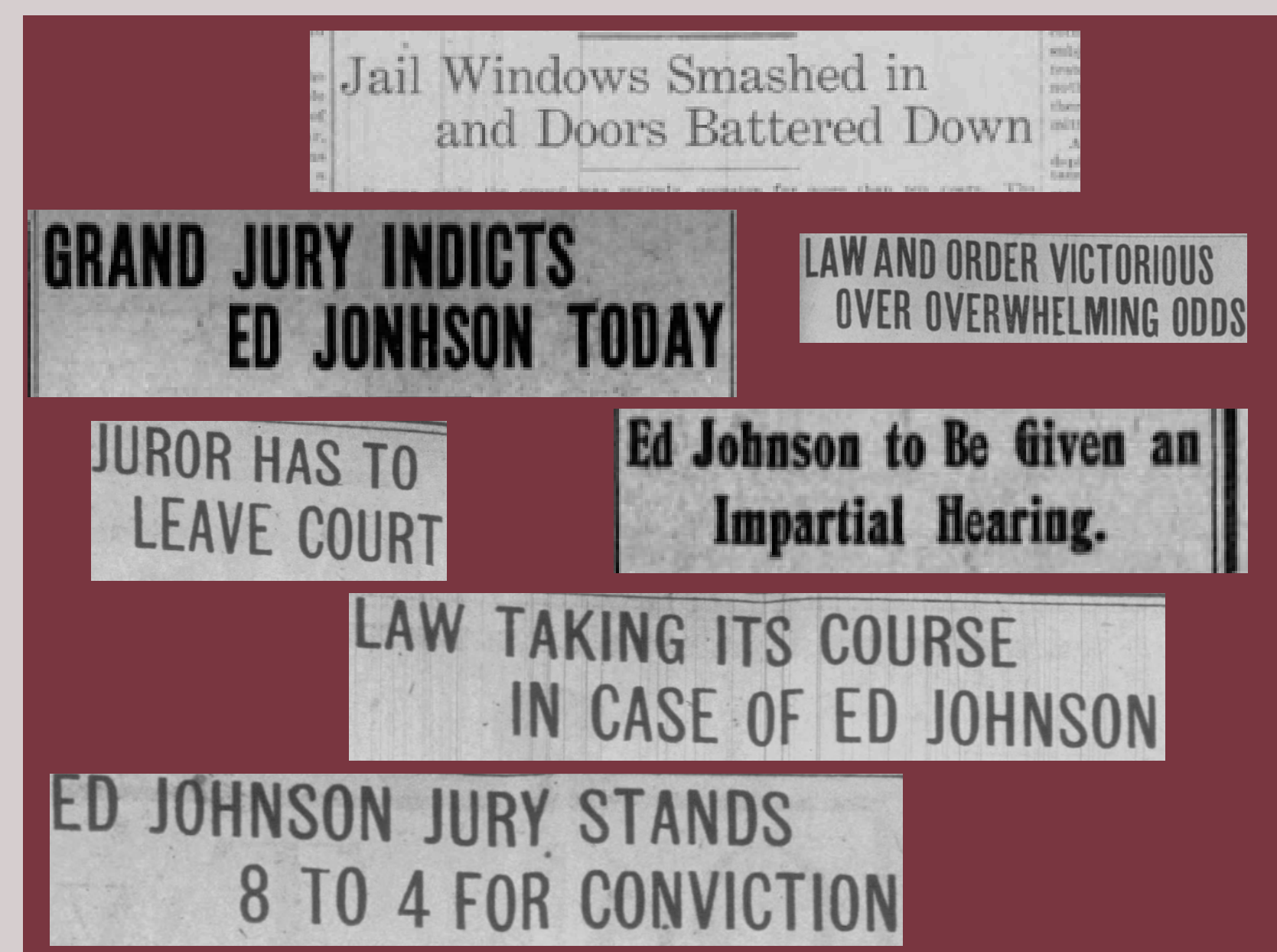
- **Attorneys:** *Matt Whitaker, E.S. Daniels*
- Nevada Taylor identified Ed Johnson as the culprit
- Will Hixson claimed to have witnessed Ed Johnson standing nearby “twirling a leather strap around his finger”
- Prosecutors relied on racial prejudices and faulty evidence

- **Attorneys:** *Robert Cameron, William Thomas, Judge Lewis Shepherd*
- Nevada Taylor could not swear Ed Johnson attacked her
- Ed Johnson denied ever meeting Will Hixson or Nevada Taylor
- Over a dozen witnesses provided an alibi for Ed Johnson
- Ed Johnson maintained his innocence even during questioning by Sheriff Shipp

Ed Johnson’s trial began on February 6, 1906, which gave the defense only one week to prepare. When Judge McReynolds asked if both sides were ready to proceed, the defense asked for more time and for the location of the trial to be moved for Ed Johnson’s safety. Judge McReynolds denied both requests. The trial lasted only three days. Throughout the trial, it was clear that the all-White audience and jury sided with the prosecution. Additionally, no defense supporters or Black people were allowed in the courtroom. During the trial, one of the jurors attempted to attack Ed Johnson. Despite this, he remained on the jury.

IMPACT OF MEDIA

The White media during this time inflamed the attitudes of White citizens in Chattanooga. The newspapers perpetuated racial bigotry and misrepresented what happened during the trial. They also pressured the jury to find Ed Johnson guilty and to punish him harshly. After the first day of deliberations, the jury was split 8 to 4. Overnight, their names were published in the newspaper. When they met in the morning, all 12 members of the jury found Ed Johnson guilty.



Various Newspaper Headlines from *The Chattanooga News* and *Chattanooga Daily Times*, January and February 1906

**THE JURY FINDS ED JOHNSON GUILTY;
HE WILL HANG FOR HIS FIENDISH CRIME**

The Chattanooga News, February 9, 1906

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