

Law Enforcement Involvement in the Death of Samuel Mason Bacon



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I. Samuel Mason Bacon

On March 12, 1948, Samuel Mason Bacon left his home in Akron, Ohio, returning to his roots to visit relatives in his hometown of Natchez in Adams County, Mississippi.¹ In Fayette, just a half hour away from his final destination, the 59-year-old Bacon was arrested and charged with “disturbing the peace” onboard the Tri-State Bus.² Official documents, newspaper reports, and family accounts diverge with regard to the events that lead up to Bacon’s arrest. What is not in dispute, however, is that Fayette Town Marshal Stanton D. Coleman shot and killed Bacon in the Fayette County Jail on March 15, 1948.³ Marshal Coleman claimed that Bacon attacked him with an ax that was left in the jail and he shot him in self-defense.⁴

The circumstances surrounding Samuel Bacon’s death sparked outrage in the African-American community.⁵ In response, the U.S. Department of Justice sought help from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and FBI agents were sent to investigate.⁶ Their report portrayed Bacon as a wild troublemaker, a very different characterization than the good natured and hard working man his family remembers. Such extremely different descriptions of Samuel Bacon’s basic character cast doubt on the official version of events.

¹ Greyhound bus ticket indicates that Bacon left Akron on March 12, 1948. Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 15.

² Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 5.

³ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8-9.

⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8-9.

⁵ “Youth Congress Demands Action In Mississippi Killing,” Arkansas State Press, March 26, 1948; “2 Slain in Dixie Jails” Nazi-like Slayings Exposed,” The Pittsburgh Courier, March 27, 1948, at 1; “SNYC Asks Probe of Jail Slaying,” The Baltimore Afro-American, March 27, 1948, at 12.

⁶ Memorandum from T. Vincent Quinn, Assistant Attorney General, Criminal Division, Department of Justice, to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation (April 19, 1948) (on file with the National Archives).

Samuel Bacon had moved to Akron six years earlier to be with his eldest daughter Elizabeth Sampson, and her husband, Charlie and to look for work.⁷ While in Akron, Bacon found a job at the Firestone Rubber Company and appeared to be making a good living and earning a decent wage.⁸ He was also planning to visit his estranged wife Fannie and his daughters, Frances and Ann, and their children, who were all living together in Fairfield, Alabama.⁹ It is believed that he was going to ask his family in Fairfield to move to Akron.¹⁰ The trip to Natchez was his first visit to see his family since he had moved north.¹¹

On March 14, 1948, Samuel Bacon was taken off the bus and arrested in Fayette, which is in Jefferson County, a half hour north of Natchez.¹² *The Natchez Democrat* reports that he was “raising a disturbance and using abusive language.”¹³ *The Pittsburgh Courier* reports that Bacon “refused to stand in the bus when vacant seats were available.”¹⁴

⁷ Interview with James Darrell Broach, Bacon’s grandson, in Long Island, New York (June 21, 2013).

⁸ Bacon’s personal items held at the Fayette County Sheriff’s Office revealed that he had bank accounts in the Fairfield, Alabama Branch of the Birmingham First National Bank and the Firestone National Bank of Akron, Ohio, with a balance of approximately \$1,850. Bacon was also carrying 24 War Savings Bonds valued at \$25, made out to his wife, Fannie M. Bacon. Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, 5, May 20, 1948; Ethel Morris, Bacon’s sister, states that Bacon was working for Firestone Rubber Company in Akron, Ohio and was “making a good salary.” Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 2.

⁹ Interview with James Darrell Broach, Bacon’s grandson, in Long Island, New York (June 21, 2013).

¹⁰ Interview with James Darrell Broach, Bacon’s grandson, in Long Island, New York (June 21, 2013).

¹¹ Ethel Morris, Bacon’s sister, told the FBI she was unaware that Bacon was planning to visit Natchez and had not returned since he moved to Akron. Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 5. Bacon’s relatives who were alive at time stated that they never met Bacon and believed this was his first visit to Natchez since moving to Akron. Interview with Willie Woods, great nephew, Henry Bacon, nephew, John Bacon, nephew, in Natchez, Miss. (August 3, 2013).

¹² Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 1.

¹³ “Fayette Officer Kills Attacking Prisoner,” *The Natchez Democrat*, March 16, 1948.

¹⁴ “Janitor’s Story Frees White Cop,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 2, 1948, at 4.

II. The Bus Incident

The FBI report prepared by Special Agent George A. Gunter,¹⁵ dated May 20, 1948, includes accounts from witnesses onboard the bus.¹⁶ Bacon was transferring from Greyhound to the Tri-State line and boarded the bus in Vicksburg, Mississippi.¹⁷ According to the FBI report, bus driver James H. Minninger claimed that as Bacon prepared to board, he was pushing people around who were waiting in line.¹⁸ When Bacon got on the bus, he stood in the white section and was talking loudly, saying he was “the voice of Firestone”.¹⁹ The report also states that Minninger “asked [Bacon] in a nice way to please keep quiet.”²⁰ When Bacon refused, Minninger drove to Fayette, where he planned to drop Bacon off and give him a transfer to take another bus to Natchez.²¹

Other witnesses in Gunter’s FBI report portray Bacon as an unruly passenger. One witness said that Bacon pushed his young daughter when he disembarked from the bus. This allegedly prompted the girl’s father to say that “he would have shot [Bacon], himself, if he had a gun.”²² Another stated that Bacon was complaining about the bus drivers, leading her to believe that Bacon had ties to the union and was trying to “start

¹⁵ Special Agent George A. Gunter was a “personal friend” of W. Webb Burke, Director of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. Memorandum from W. Webb Burke, Director, Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, to Perrin Purvis, State Senator (February 10, 1970) (on file with the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Online Archives); Memorandum from W. Webb Burke, Director, Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, to W.L. “Bill” Hollowell, Acting Superintendent, Mississippi State Penitentiary (March 15, 1973) (on file with the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Online Archives).

¹⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 3-4, 11-13.

¹⁷ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 3.

¹⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 3.

¹⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 3.

²⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 4.

²¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 4.

²² Tommy Ray, employee of the State Highway Department, states that he and his daughter were attempting to board the bus in Fayette when Bacon shoved his daughter and blocked the doorway, preventing all passengers from boarding. Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 11.

trouble for non-union bus drivers.”²³ Several witnesses in the report state that Bacon appeared to be either drunk or under the influence of some drug.²⁴ Another witness said he was “possibly insane,”²⁵ and that he’d either said he was “Mr. Firestone” or “the voice of Firestone.”²⁶

Samuel Bacon’s family recall a very different version of events, passed down to them from relatives who were waiting for Bacon to arrive in Natchez.²⁷ When the bus stopped in Port Gibson, less than an hour east of Natchez, a white man got on the bus and told Bacon to get up from his seat.²⁸ Allegedly Bacon’s refusal drew the ire of the bus driver and other white passengers.²⁹ Paul Bacon, Bacon’s great nephew, believes that Bacon’s manner of dress and appearance also made him a target, saying that “when he got down this way wearing a shirt and tie, that gave him a title of what some would consider to be an ‘uppity nigger.’”³⁰ Some newspapers reports told a similar story—that Bacon “refused to stand in the bus when vacant seats were available.”³¹ *The Chicago Defender* reported that when the rear seats for blacks were full, Bacon refused to stand because there were still vacant seats on the bus. According to the *Defender*, this enraged the arresting officer who apparently said he had to “kill the n----g because he didn’t know his place.”³²

²³ Evelyn Reynolds, passenger riding the Tri-State Bus from Vicksburg to Natchez, Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 12.

²⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, 4, 6, 12-13.

²⁵ James H. Minninger, bus driver, Tri-State Bus Company. Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 4.

²⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 3-6, 11-12.

²⁷ Telephone Interview with Willie Woods, Bacon’s great nephew, (June 24, 2013); Interview with Lucille Bacon, Bacon’s great niece, in Natchez, Miss. (August 3, 2013).

²⁸ Interview with Lucille Bacon, Bacon’s great niece, in Natchez, Miss. (August 3, 2013).

²⁹ Interview with Paul Bacon, Bacon’s great nephew, in Natchez, Miss. (August 3, 2013).

³⁰ Interview with Paul Bacon, Bacon’s great nephew, in Natchez, Miss. (August 3, 2013).

³¹ “Janitor’s Story Frees White Cop,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 2, 1948, at 4.

³² “Evidence of Negro Frees Trigger Happy White Man,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 2, 1948, at 20.

Samuel Bacon's family was waiting at the bus stop to greet him upon his arrival, but he never appeared.³³ Passengers on the bus told the family that he was taken off the bus in Fayette. Presumably they also related the story about Bacon refusing to give up his seat.³⁴ Samuel Bacon's brother Warrington went to the Fayette County Jail to pick him up, but by the time he arrived Samuel Bacon had been killed.³⁵

Bacon's family also insists that the behavior described in the FBI report is contrary to Bacon's true character. Bacon's relatives describe him as a "hard working man," a characterization supported by those who knew him.³⁶ His daughter Elizabeth, remembers him as a man who would not "sass nobody" and taught his daughters to treat others with respect.³⁷ Further, all of Bacon's daughters, Elizabeth, Frances, and Ann, wrote letters to the Department of Justice (DOJ) describing Bacon as a man who would not have behaved in the rowdy, aggressive manner that was described in newspaper reports.³⁸ "He did not drink, nor use profanity and he had never been arrested in his life," Frances Perry insisted.³⁹ Ann Broach wrote, "I am sure he didn't deserve to die the way he did. I felt like that only happened to people that were cruel and bad. But my father

³³ Telephone Interview with Willie Woods, Bacon's great nephew, (June 24, 2013).

³⁴ Telephone Interview with Willie Woods, Bacon's great nephew, (June 24, 2013); Ethel Morris, Bacon's sister, states that she found out about Bacon's arrest from another passenger who was on the bus. Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 2.

³⁵ Telephone Interview with Willie Woods, Bacon's great nephew, (June 24, 2013).

³⁶ Interview with Lucille Bacon, Bacon's great niece, and Paul Bacon, Bacon's great nephew, in Natchez, Miss. (August 3, 2013).

³⁷ Telephone Interview with Elizabeth Sampson, Bacon's daughter, (June 13, 2013).

³⁸ Letters from Elizabeth Sampson, Ann Broach, Frances Perry, Bacon's daughters, to Tom Clark, Attorney General, Department of Justice (March 20, 1948) (on file with the National Archives).

³⁹ Letter from Frances Perry, Bacon's daughter, to Tom Clark, Attorney General, Department of Justice (March 20, 1948) (on file with the National Archives); The FBI also uncovered that Bacon had no criminal record either in Akron, Ohio, Fairfield, Ala., or Natchez, Miss. Letter from Director, FBI, to T. Vincent Quinn, Assistant Attorney General, Criminal Division, Department of Justice (July 19, 1948); Letter from Director, FBI, to T. Vincent Quinn, Assistant Attorney General, Criminal Division, Department of Justice (June 18, 1948) (letters on file with the National Archives); Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 4.

was different, he was always willing to help anyone regardless to the cruel or color [sic].”⁴⁰

These letters from Samuel Bacon’s family to the Attorney General of the United States were written in response to the coroner’s findings that concluded that Town Marshal Stanton D. Coleman killed Bacon in self-defense.⁴¹ At the time, Frances Perry worked as a secretary for the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) in Birmingham, Alabama. SNYC began organizing efforts to look into Bacon’s murder,⁴² The Executive Secretary of SNYC, Louis Burnham, wrote several letters to Washington lawmakers and officials, urging the DOJ to investigate.⁴³ The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also pushed the DOJ to launch an inquiry.⁴⁴ The African-American press unleashed their outrage, calling Bacon’s death one of recent “Nazi-like” slayings⁴⁵ and an act of “barbaric cruelty[.]”⁴⁶

III. The Investigation

In response to the letters from Bacon’s daughters, press coverage, and pressure from various organizations, the DOJ directed the FBI to launch a preliminary

⁴⁰ Letter from Ann Broach, Bacon’s daughter, to Tom Clark, Attorney General, Department of Justice (March 20, 1948) (on file with the National Archives).

⁴¹ Millsaps Johnson, Sheriff, Jefferson County, states that he convened a coroner’s jury, which on the same day returned a verdict of “Self-Defense.” Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 10.

⁴² “Youth Congress Demands Action In Mississippi Killing,” Arkansas State Press, March 26, 1948, at 20.

⁴³ Letter from Louis Burnham, Executive Secretary, Southern Negro Youth Congress, to Tom Clark, Attorney General, Department of Justice (March 16, 1948); Letter from Louis Burnham, Executive Secretary, Southern Negro Youth Congress, to Robert Taft, Senator, Ohio (March 16, 1948); Letter from Louis Burnham, Executive Secretary, Southern Negro Youth Congress, to Fielding Wright, Governor, Mississippi (March 17, 1948) (letters on file with the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University); “Youth Congress Demands Action In Mississippi Killing,” Arkansas State Press, March 26, 1948, at 20.

⁴⁴ Letter from Franklin H. Williams, Special Council, NAACP, to Turner L. Smith, Chief, Civil Rights Section, Department of Justice (March 23, 1948) (on file with the Lamont Library at Harvard University);

⁴⁵ “2 Slain in Dixie Jails: Nazi-like Slayings Exposed,” The Pittsburgh Courier, March 27, 1948, at 1.

⁴⁶ “Youth Congress Demands Action In Mississippi Killing,” Arkansas State Press, March 26, 1948.

investigation.⁴⁷ They sent Special Agent George A. Gunter, who prepared the report from the New Orleans branch.⁴⁸ In addition to reporting the events that took place on the bus, the report also included a signed affidavit from Marshal Stanton D. Coleman.⁴⁹ The affidavit stated that Coleman had been Town Marshal of Fayette for six years,⁵⁰ and was 61-years-old.⁵¹

According to the FBI Report, Coleman said that on March 15, 1948, he was going “to the jail to get some tools [he] had stored there and check on Bacon.”⁵² The FBI report explained that the city jail cell did not frequently house prisoners, and was used for storage.⁵³ Items that were left in the cell included a rake, broom, and an ax, which Bacon allegedly used to attack Coleman.⁵⁴ Night Marshal Herbert Willison and Deputy Sheriff Duncan McArn, who arrested Bacon and put him in the jail cell, were apparently unaware that those items were in the cell.⁵⁵ Willison informed Marshal Coleman the next morning that Bacon had been placed in the jail cell.⁵⁶

Coleman stated that when he entered the cell, Bacon swung at him with an ax, missing him and striking the jail cell door.⁵⁷ The ax fell out of Bacon’s hands, and Bacon

⁴⁷ Memorandum from T. Vincent Quinn, Assistant Attorney General, Criminal Division, Department of Justice, to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation (April 19, 1948) (on file with the National Archives).

⁴⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 1.

⁴⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 7-9.

⁵⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁵¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁵² Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁵³ Stanton D. Coleman, Town Marshal, Fayette, Miss., stated that the city jail was used about once every three of four weeks and that the tools were stored in the city jail cell were used to maintain the streets of Fayette. When he did place prisoners in the jail, he would remove the tools outside before locking prisoners inside. Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁵⁴ Millsaps Johnson, Sheriff, Fayette County, Miss., stated that he observed these items when he inspected the cell after the incident. Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 10.

⁵⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 7.

⁵⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁵⁷ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

“came rushing out the door after [Coleman].”⁵⁸ Coleman struck Bacon with a blackjack and knocked him down.⁵⁹ Holding Bacon by the foot, Coleman sought help from Bill Gray, a 70-year-old African-American janitor who worked at the jail.⁶⁰ Coleman claimed that when Gray arrived, Bacon was able to kick Gray with his other foot, driving him “about six or seven feet away.”⁶¹ Coleman also claimed that Bacon kicked his way out of Coleman’s grasp.⁶²

Coleman said that when he drew his gun, Bacon grabbed it, and a struggle ensued.⁶³ During the struggle, a shot went off and struck Bacon in the chest. Bacon then allegedly “picked [Coleman] up clear of the ground some two or three times attempting to get the gun.”⁶⁴ As the men continued the struggle, Coleman stated that a second shot went off into Bacon’s stomach, and he fell back. Coleman said, “I could not tell if this man was drinking, under the influence of dope, or what was wrong with him, if anything. He was very powerful, and active, more so than the average drunk man.”⁶⁵

After receiving Gunter’s report, the DOJ concluded that the FBI investigation “did not disclose any evidence of violation of any Federal law on part of the arresting officers and Town Marshal.”⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁵⁹ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁶⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁶¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁶² Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁶³ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁶⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 8.

⁶⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation Report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 9.

⁶⁶ Letter to Frances Perry, Bacon’s daughter, from T. Vincent Quinn, Assistant Attorney General, Criminal Division, Department of Justice (July 28, 1948).

IV. Testimony before the State Grand Jury

While federal authorities concluded they did not have the jurisdiction to intervene in the case, the state convened a grand jury in September 1948.⁶⁷ Testimony from Bill Gray, the black janitor who worked at the jail, corroborated Coleman's claim of self-defense.⁶⁸ The grand jury issued a no bill, refusing to indict Marshal Coleman. In addition, the grand jury "further commended Coleman for the measures he took in 'maintenance of law and order.'"⁶⁹ The grand jury report also mentioned that the case was investigated because of "unfavorable publicity in Northern Negro Newspapers."⁷⁰

In his affidavit to the FBI, Bill Gray stated that he did not see Marshal Coleman shoot Bacon, because he had left the cell to look for rope to tie Bacon down.⁷¹ When he returned, Samuel Bacon was dead.⁷² Gray said that he only saw Bacon when Coleman held Bacon by the foot and that Bacon "acted like a crazy person might act. . . . [N]ever [seeing] one act as wild as this man acted."⁷³

V. The Aftermath

No criminal charges were ever filed against Stanton D. Coleman. He died six years after killing Bacon and is buried in the Fayette Cemetery.

⁶⁷ "Evidence of Negro Frees Trigger Happy White Man," *The Chicago Defender*, October 2, 1948, at 20; "Janitor's Story Frees White Cop," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 2, 1948, at 4.

⁶⁸ "Marshal Absolved in Slaying of Negro," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, Sept. 24, 1943.

⁶⁹ "Marshal Absolved in Slaying of Negro," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, Sept. 24, 1943.

⁷⁰ "Evidence of Negro Frees Trigger Happy White Man," *The Chicago Defender*, October 2, 1948, at 20; "Marshal Absolved in Slaying of Negro," *Biloxi Daily Herald*, Sept. 24, 1943.

⁷¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 9-10.

⁷² Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 9-10.

⁷³ Federal Bureau of Investigation report to Department of Justice, May 20, 1948, at 10.

Two months after Samuel Bacon's murder, his widow Fannie, their daughters, Frances and Annie, and their children, left Fairfield, Alabama and moved to Akron, Ohio to be with Elizabeth Sampson.⁷⁴

Samuel Mason Bacon was laid to rest in the Bacon family plot at Saint Mark's Baptist Church 2, in Natchez, Mississippi on March 21, 1948. His grave is next to his four brothers and their children. Several of Bacon's relatives still reside in Natchez. Bacon's eldest daughter, Elizabeth Sampson, who is 100-years-old, still lives in Akron.

⁷⁴ Interview with James Darrell Broach, Bacon's grandson, in Long Island, New York (June 21, 2013).