

# JustSouth Monthly

JSRI Perspectives on FAITH DOING JUSTICE

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Number 33

March 2014

## When Italians Were "Others"

### The 1891 Lynching in New Orleans

by Dr. Sue Weishar

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#### Student Summer Grants

Application Deadline: March 31

JSRI is currently accepting applications for summer research grant proposals centered around social justice issues in Louisiana and/or New Orleans. All Loyola graduate, undergraduate and law students are eligible to apply.

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#### JSRI HIRING Economic Policy Specialist

Details [HERE>>](#)

#### JSRI Upcoming Events

##### March 15

JSRI will co-sponsor the Fast4Families Prayer Service for Immigration Reform. The event will take place at St. Anthony of Padua Church (4600 Canal Street, New Orleans) at 3:30.

##### March 18

Fr. Kammer will meet with the Ignatian Staff Fellows on the evolution of "Jesuit Justice."

##### March 26

JSRI will discuss Post- Katrina New Orleans with students from Santa Clara University.

##### March 28

JSRI will sponsor a follow-up meeting with participants from the Loyola anti-racism workshop.

##### April 4-5

The JSRI Advisory Board will meet on the Loyola campus.

##### April 6-7

Fr. Kammer will attend the board meeting of the Ignatian Solidarity Network in Washington, D.C.

#### JSRI Recent Activities

##### February 19

Fr. Kammer addressed Catholic Day at the Capitol participants in Jackson, MS on criminal justice.

##### February 24

Dr. Sue Weishar attended an immigration integration conference sponsored by the Center for Migration Studies in Washington, D.C.

##### March 7

LA for Responsible Lending. of

This weekend local residents will celebrate their Italian, as well as Irish, ancestry at parades and block parties with the joy and abandonment for which New Orleans is famous. On the Feast Day of St. Joseph, March 19th, St. Joseph Day altars will be featured at churches with Italian roots throughout the metro area.

Tomorrow, March 14th, is also a unique day in the history of Italian immigration to New Orleans, but not for reasons we celebrate. It was on March 14, 1891, that eleven Italians were lynched at the hands of a mob at Orleans Parish Prison. The brutal murders were precipitated by the assassination of a popular Chief of Police, David Hennessy, who was shot in front of his home on Girod Street on the foggy evening of October 15, 1890. When a friend rushed to his aid, Hennessy allegedly whispered to him, "The Dagoes did it." The chief was taken to Charity Hospital but died the following morning without ever having identified his assassins.[1]

After learning of Hennessy's murder Mayor Joseph Shakespeare immediately ordered the police to "scour the whole neighborhood. Arrest every Italian you come across ..."[2] Three hours after Hennessy's death police had arrested and charged five dozen Italians with the murder of the police chief. Most were later released for lack of evidence but eventually 21 Italian immigrants or descendants were indicted for the murder of David Hennessy.[3]



Depiction of mob gathering at Henry Clay statue, March 14, 1891 from *Harper's Weekly*.

Despite the lack of evidence, the local press freely blamed the "Dagoes" for the murder.[4] A closely watched trial of eleven of the indicted Italians finally began on February 15, 1891.[5] After closing arguments the jury quickly came to a verdict. Eight defendants were found not guilty and a mistrial was declared for three.[6] The judge then remanded all eleven men to the parish jail.

That evening about 150 citizens, including prominent leaders of the legal and business communities, drafted a notice that appeared in all the morning papers on March 14.[7] It read: "All good citizens are invited to attend a mass meeting on Saturday, March 14, at 10 o'clock A.M. at Clay Statue[8] to take steps to remedy the failure of the Hennessy case. Come prepared for action." [9]

Six to ten thousand people of varied backgrounds awaited the organizers that morning. Men, women, and children cheered from windows as the mob marched past them on their way to Orleans Parish Prison in the Treme chanting, "We want the Dagoes." [10]

About 40 vigilantes forced their way into the prison and shot nine of the accused and hung two on trees outside the prison. One man was shot 42 times. Of the victims, five had not stood trial, three had been found not guilty, and no verdict had been found for three.[11]

Throughout the history of our country newcomers have been vilified as dangerous others—less than human. As the New Orleans community honors its Italian heritage this weekend it is an opportune time to reflect—have we learned from the mistakes of our collective past?

1. John V. Baiamonte, Jr., "Who Killa de Chief" Revisited: The Hennessy Assassination and Its

which JSRI is a founding member, was featured in a [Times-Picayune op-ed](#).

#### March 11

Dr. Alex Mikulich met with State Senator Jean-Paul Morrell to discuss death penalty legislation.

#### March 12

Fr. Kammer and Ms. Baudouin met with staff of Senator Mary Landrieu about increasing the minimum wage.

#### March 13

Fr. Kammer discussed the first year of Pope Francis on MSNBC's NewsNation with Tamron Hall.

Attermath, 1890-1991," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 33, No. 2, (Spring, 1992), p. 122 and Clive Webb, "The lynching of Sicilian immigrants in the American South, 1886-1910," *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 2002, p. 45.

2. Barbara Bolten, "The Hennessy Case: An Episode in Anti-Italian Nativism," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer, 1979), p. 265.

3. Baiamonte, Jr., p. 123-126.

4. Bolten, p. 267.

5. Seven hundred and eighty prospective jurors were interviewed before 12 were found to be free of prejudice against capital punishment and Italians. Bolten, p. 268.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

8. The Henry Clay statue was installed in 1860 in the median of Canal Street, at the corner of St. Charles. In 1900 it was moved to Lafayette Park on Camp Street.

9. *New York Times*, March 15, 1891.

10. Bolten, p. 272 and Baiamonte, p. 135.

11. Richard Gambino, *Vendetta, A True Story of the Worst Lynching in America. The Mass Murder of Italian Americans in New Orleans in 1891. The Vicious Motivations Behind It, and the Tragic Repercussions That Linger to This Day*, (Garden City, 1977).

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