



## THE NEW JERSEY ITALIAN HERITAGE COMMISSION



# Lynching Italian Americans and Mob Violence

**Grade Level: 9-12**

Can be adjusted to accommodate grades 6-8

**Subjects:** United States History / World Languages

**Categories:** Immigration and Prejudice / History and Society / Arts and Sciences

**Standards:**

Please see page 8 of the lesson plan for complete New Jersey Student Learning alignment.

**Objectives:**

Students will be able to:

1. explain why lynching was used as an extraordinary means of extracting justice throughout portions of American history.
2. determine why groups sometimes resort to irrational mob violence.
3. devise plans for people to avoid groupthink or mob mentality.

**Abstract:**

History records copious violations of the rule of law and of people's natural, civil, political, and social rights. Annals contain numerous stories of citizens taking the law into their own hands and lynching men and women whom have been accused of crimes.

During the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mobs took the law into their own hands against Italian immigrants on six separate occasions, three times in Louisiana alone. [The three other cases occurred in Colorado (1893 and 1895) and West Virginia (1891).] The most outrageous of these lynchings took place in New Orleans on March 14, 1891. New Orleans Police Superintendent, David Hennessy was gunned down in October 1890. As he gasped his last breath, he supposedly uttered, "The dagos did it." Students will examine these outrageous crimes, the United States' and the Republic of Italy's reactions.

## **Background:**

History records copious violations of the rule of law and of people's natural, civil, political, and social rights. Annals contain numerous stories of citizens taking the law into their own hands and lynching men and women whom have been accused of crimes. Sadly, many times, people more quickly resorted to lynching when the accused were members of ethnic, religious, or racial minorities. There have been lynchings of African-Americans, Catholics, Jews, Latinos, and Chinese, along with lynchings of Italians throughout periods of American history.

During the last decade of the nineteenth-century, mobs took the law into their own hands against Italian immigrants on six separate occasions, three times in Louisiana alone. [The three other cases occurred in Colorado (1893 and 1895) and West Virginia (1891).] The most outrageous of these lynchings took place in New Orleans on March 14, 1891. New Orleans Police Superintendent, David Hennessy was gunned down in October 1890. As he gasped his last breath, he supposedly uttered, "The dagos did it." Officials quickly arrested numerous area Italians and attributed the slaying to Mafia activity. After a public meeting where people called the Italians "not quite white," a mob gathered shouting "Hang the dagos!!" To avenge the murder of a popular police superintendent unrestrained mobs went into the city jail and beat, clubbed, and shot eleven Italian prisoners to death. Afterward, an investigation into the mob violence excused the actions of the mob.

The government of Italy responded by cutting off diplomatic relations with the United States and threatening to declare war.

## **Procedures:**

- I. On the day prior to the lesson, review the history of American lynching with the class.
  - a. Explain to students that mob violence had a very long history.
  - b. The word *lynch* comes from the American Revolution.
    - i. Virginia Militia Colonel Charles Lynch of Virginia, along with others, confronted Tories and criminal elements with "swift" extraordinary justice, in the absence of a stable judiciary.
  - c. "Lynching" gained acceptance in the American mindset because it was practiced on the expanding frontier, where formal avenues of justice were lacking or nonexistent.
- II. Previous Nights Homework
  - a. Have students begin their research at "The History of Lynching" <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/ah-lynching/>
  - b. Have students identify the article's thesis or main point.
    - i. Have them then list seven supporting details.
- III. Day of Lesson Procedures
  - a. Talk with the class about prejudice and group behavior.
  - b. Brain storm on the board - *Would a mob take the law into their own hands?*
    - i. Possible answers:
    - ii. They don't believe that the courts will serve out adequate justice.

- iii. They have great sympathy for the victim of a crime.
- iv. They have a particular dislike or hatred for the accused.
- v. The accused is a member of a racial, ethnic, or religious minority, and the mob wants to assert and demonstrate dominance.
- vi. The mob has an irrational fear of the minority group.

IV. Ask the class if they have ever experienced group emotions.

V. Assign class teams to review the following web sites, or print these articles for them to review.

- i. Boko Haram's Slaughter of Christians in Nigeria.  
<https://www.charismanews.com/world/71833-about-200-christians-murdered-in-heinous-killing-spree>
- ii. ISIS Beheads 21 Coptic Egyptians in Libya.  
<https://time.com/3710610/libya-coptic-christians-isis-egypt/>
- iii. Tallulah Lynching Guns, Goats, & Italians" The Tallulah Lynching of 1899  
[http://www.rootsweb.com/~lamadiso/articles/lynchings.htm#\\_ftn2](http://www.rootsweb.com/~lamadiso/articles/lynchings.htm#_ftn2)
- iv. Nativists Riots Philadelphia  
<https://unlearnedhistory.blogspot.com/2015/09/philadelphia-bible-riots-of-1844.html>
- v. Fallujah  
<https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Horror-at-Fallujah-SAVAGE-ATTACK-Bodies-2772639.php>
- vi. Lynching Israelis MIDDLE EAST Lynch mob's brutal attack  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/969778.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/969778.stm)

VI. Instruct the students to determine:

- a. whether the mob violence was spontaneous or was it directed?
- b. whether a crime or injustice (or the perception that a crime or injustice) had been committed had led the mob to violence?
- c. whether the mob attacked others because of racial, ethnic, or religious reasons.
- d. how the mob justified their violence.
- e. what were the real reasons the mob resorted to violence.
- f. what could be done by a member of perpetrating group to stop the mob from resorting to violence?
- g. what could be done by a member of the victim group, if anything, to stop the assaults by the perpetrating group?

VII. Class activity, or as a written assignment for homework.

VIII. Once the groups have done their research and have answered

- i. the questions, bring them back together.
- ii. Ask the students to determine whether the lynchings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were of the same nature as the mob violence found in riots and in reactions to war.
- iii. Does bigotry play a major role in all these types of group violence?

**Assessment:**

Have students play the role of a Federal agent sent to the any state in the Union in 1890. The agent has been given the task of convincing the population why they should never participate in lynching. The agent must explain to the population why lynching was wrong in itself and why lynching will hurt society as a whole. Have the students create a ten-step plan to effectuate their goal.

Use a teacher-made checklist. Make sure all steps can realistically be implemented for 1890 America.

**Extension:**

Have students go to: [https://www.nola.com/opinions/james\\_gill/article\\_50917537-f435-5542-b02d-06e16817916e.html](https://www.nola.com/opinions/james_gill/article_50917537-f435-5542-b02d-06e16817916e.html) Ask students to play the role of an Italian American Federal agent, an Italian American community leader or a Catholic priest or bishop. They have been asked by President Harrison to explain to the Italian American community what the Federal Government has done to remedy the situation that allowed the lynching of Italians in Louisiana. Students must have an understanding of the Federal nature of the American government to explain why their power was limited in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Have the same students explain what President Cleveland did to rectify the situation that allowed the lynching of Italians in Colorado.

<https://www.infoplease.com/homework-help/us-documents/state-union-address-grover-cleveland-december-2-1895>

Ask the students whether the Italian Government should accept these explanations and proposals.

**Resources:**

Alexander DeConde. *Half Bitter, Half Sweet: An Excursion into Italian-American History*. New York, 1971.

Richard Gambino. *Blood of my Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans*. Garden City, 1974.

James Allen, editor. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. Twin Palms Publishing, 2000.

# Supplemental Information

## Lynching Italian Americans and Mob Violence

The word *lynch* comes from the American Revolution. Virginia Militia Colonel Charles Lynch of Virginia, along with others, confronted Tories and criminal elements with "swift" extraordinary justice, in the absence of a stable judiciary. "Lynching" gained acceptance in the American mindset because it was practiced on the expanding frontier where formal avenues of justice were lacking or nonexistent.

Hundreds of lynchings took place during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, especially in cases where the population did not believe that a perpetrator or alleged perpetrator of a crime would receive the full penalty of the law. Many times mobs would attack minority prisoners, especially African Americans, in attempts to show racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural dominance.

The lynching of eleven Sicilians in New Orleans in 1891 was the largest and most outrageous mass lynching in United States history. The lynchings had taken place on March 14, 1891. New Orleans Police Superintendent, David Hennessy was gunned down in October 1890. As he gasped his last breath, he supposedly uttered, "The dagos did it." Officials quickly arrested numerous area Italians and attributed the slaying to Mafia activity. After a public meeting where people called the Italians "not quite white," a mob gathered shouting "Hang the dagos!!" To avenge the murder of a popular police superintendent, unrestrained mobs went into the city jail and beat, clubbed, and shot eleven Italian prisoners to death.

Ironically, many of Hennessy defenders had rioted against his father when he was superintendent seventeen years prior. As police superintendent, the elder Hennessy had defended the Republican Reconstruction government against city residents known as "White Leaguers" who were formerly loyal to the Confederacy and then loyal to the Democratic Party. During the Battle of Liberty Place, September 14, 1874, Hennessy held out against "White Leaguers," until former Confederate General, James Longstreet, entered the fray, now leading with Union soldiers. Longstreet and Hennessy defeated the "White Leaguers" and defended the government. The former Confederates, known as "White Leaguers" now rioted against Italian immigrants, in defense of the elder Hennessey's son, David.

Afterward, an investigation into the mob violence excused the actions of the lynchers. The lynching provoked a serious international crisis between the United States and the Kingdom of Italy that almost led to war. The Italian government threatened to cut off diplomatic relations with the United States and demanded that the United States provide restitution to the families of the victims. Unfortunately, the person who actually murdered Hennessey was never found.

Not caring about the precarious situation their actions would put their nation in, five years later a mob of fifty men invaded the jail in St. Charles Parish, Louisiana. The mob assaulted six Italians and hanged three of the unfortunate prisoners. Even though news

reports record that Parish officials and leaders may have participated in the outrage, a jury of locals rendered that the Italians "came to their death by being lynched by parties unknown."

The third incident took place in Tallulah, Louisiana, a small village in Madison Parish. There were only five Italian men in the whole town. On July 20, 1899, a fierce mob brutally lynched three men and forced the other two Italians who lived in nearby in Milliken's Bend to run for their lives. All of the victims were natives of Cefalu, Sicily. They were fruit vendors and kept small groceries in the town. The case is complicated in that one of the victims, Frank Defatta, had been accused of a number of violent acts in the past. A dispute between Dr. Hodge and Defatta erupted into violence that eventually led to the hanging of three Italian men. The source of friction between Hodge and Defratta was a number of goats that Defatta had allowed to roam freely near his shop. The goats would disturb Hodge at night when they wandered onto his porch. After warning Defatta to keep the goats off of his property, Hodge shot one of the animals when it wandered onto his porch. The incident erupted into a violent confrontation between the Italian men of the village and the native born American men. Details of what exactly transpired are cloudy, but after giving the Italian men some time to leave the town, the Americans captured three of the men and hanged them.

The case became more complicated when the Italian government issued protests to the United States government. Governor Foster of Louisiana reported to the U. S. State Department that under the Louisiana Constitution of 1879, the Italian men were considered naturalized citizens of Louisiana and outside the protection of the Italian government.

Baron Fava launched an investigation of the incident for the Italian government, however. He met stiff resistance, even after he discovered some African-American witnesses, one of whom was murdered as a warning for everyone else to remain silent. The American Secretary of State, John Hay gave the Louisiana government all of Fava's findings, but Louisiana did nothing to prosecute the lynch mob. Hay had to explain the dual or federal nature of the American government to the Italian government. On January 29, 1901 Hay then had President William McKinley ask the United States Congress for indemnities for the victim's families. Fortunately, the Congress honored the President's request, but the lynchers themselves, were never brought to justice.

There were other incidents of violence committed against Italians because of their ethnic identity in the United States. Later in 1901 a mob in Irwin, Mississippi, killed two Italians. Then, in December 1907, a riot broke out in Jackson Parish, Louisiana between African Americans and Italians immigrants. The African Americans looked upon Italian laborers as interlopers who had stolen their jobs from them. A number of Italians were killed. Again, the Italian Consul in New Orleans had to demand that the guilty parties be punished. The new Governor, Newton C. Blanchard maintained that Parish officials could handle the investigation and refused to interfere. For Italian immigrants in Louisiana, the danger continued and real justice was in very short supply.

**Sources:**

The National Italian American Foundation. *Milestones of the Italian American Experience*. [http://www.niaf.org/year\\_1891.asp](http://www.niaf.org/year_1891.asp)

Edward F. Haas. "Guns, Goats, and Italians: the Tallulah Lynching of 1899." *North Louisiana Historical Association*, vol. XIII, Nos. 2 & 3, 1982.  
[http://www.rootsweb.com/~lamadiso/articles/lynchings.htm#\\_ftn2](http://www.rootsweb.com/~lamadiso/articles/lynchings.htm#_ftn2).

## **New Jersey Student Learning Standards Social Studies**

6.1.12.D.5.d Relate varying immigrants' experiences to gender, race, ethnicity, or occupation.

### **English Language Arts**

RL.9-10.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence and make relevant connections to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferentially, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RL.9-10.2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details, and provide an objective summary of the text.

RI.9-10.3 Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

RI.9-10.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

RI.9-10.7 Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each work (e.g., Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Breughel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus)

RI.9-10.8 Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

RL.11-12.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence and make relevant connections to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RL.11-12.2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account, and provide an objective summary of the text.

RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

RI.11-12.6 Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

RI.11-12.7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (e.g., Shakespeare and other authors.)

RI.11-12.8 Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., *The Federalist*, presidential addresses).

SL.9-10.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with peers on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.1a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

SL.9-10.1b. Collaborate with peers to set rules for discussions (e.g. informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views); develop clear goals and assessment criteria (e.g. student developed rubric) and assign individual roles as needed.

SL.9-10.1c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

SL.9-10.1d. Respond thoughtfully to various perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement and justify own views. Make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

SL.9-10.2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, qualitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source

SL.9-10.4. Present information, findings and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically. The content, organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

SL.9-10.6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English. (See grades 9–10 Language standards 1 and 3 for specific expectations.)

SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with peers on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.11-12.1a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well reasoned exchange of ideas.

SL.11-12.1b. Collaborate with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and assessments (e.g., student developed rubrics), and establish individual roles as needed.

SL.11-12.1c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

SL.11-12.1d. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

SL.11-12.2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, qualitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

SL.11-12.4. Present information, findings and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically. The content, organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

SL.11-12.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (See grades 11–12 Language standards 1 and 3 here for specific expectations.)

RH.9-10.1. Accurately cite strong and thorough textual evidence, to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

RH.9-10.3. Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; draw connections between the events, to determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

RH.9-10.6. Compare the point of view of two or more authors in

regards to how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts

RH.9-10.8 Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claim.

RH.9-10.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

RH.11-12.1. Accurately cite strong and thorough textual evidence, (e.g., via discussion, written response, etc.), to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to develop an understanding of the text as a whole.

RH.11-12.3. Evaluate various perspectives for actions or events; determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RH.11-12.6. Evaluate authors' differing perspectives on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

RH.11-12.8. Evaluate an author's claims, reasoning, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other sources.

RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.