Vengeance And Justice: Crime And Punishment In The 19th Century American South

Edward L. Ayers

Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South

Exploring the major elements of southern crime and punishment at a time that saw the formation of the fundamental patterns of class and race, Ayers studies the inner workings of the police, prison, and judicial systems, and the nature of crime. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, pillories and stocks and whipping posts became museum pieces, the hangman and the firing squad were supplanted by more technical methods, and punishment became something that happened elsewhere — in distant prisons and execution chambers, under professional supervision, far from the baying crowd. All of this made a certain moral sense. The idea that a combination of financial sanctions and corporal punishment could replace imprisonment seems insane, even to a columnist floating slightly crazy ideas. There will always be a group of offenders sufficiently dangerous to require long-term separation from society. Ross Douthat’s column of April 23 incorrectly described an aspect of the American prison population.