

# John Lazia

Crime Figure  
1896-1934

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by Daniel Coleman

Author William Reddig, in *Tom's Town*, describes John Lazia as "one of the most successful and probably the most discussed citizen of Kansas City." Along with Tom Pendergast and City Manager H. L. McElroy, Lazia completed the era's triumvirate of power. Of the three, Lazia's character was probably described most accurately by anti-Pendergast activist Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg when he admonished Kansas Citians for having placed their government in "the hands of crooks and racketeers."

He was born John Lazzio in 1896 to Italian immigrant parents living in the crowded section of Kansas City known as Little Italy—the north side neighborhood just east of the City Market. With no formal education past the eighth grade, Johnny Lazia, as he became known, might have pursued the career of peddler or laborer common to many of his peers. Instead, he applied his considerable intelligence to a more sinister calling, but one that promised quicker and greater returns. He was arrested as a juvenile for a variety of crimes, including petty theft and gambling, and at age 18, was sentenced to serve 12 years at the Missouri State Penitentiary for robbery. His release less than nine months later was made possible only by legal manipulations at high levels, indicating that Lazia had already made important connections with people who operated in the shadowy world between the criminal and civil.

Lazia cultivated a persona of respectability throughout his 20s, marrying wife Marie in 1924, and solidifying a base of support in the north side. "Brother John" was a gum-chewing joker who granted favors and sometimes handed out money, generated by his extensive gambling and bootlegging interests. In 1928 he added a brutal show of force to his natural grasp of politics, overthrowing machine boss Tom Pendergast's long-time north side ward captain, Mike Ross. That spring, Lazia strong-armed community leaders into alliances, turned public opinion against the Irish Ross, and used violence at the polls to commandeer the north side Democratic Club, which had been controlled by Ross



for years. Pendergast yielded to Lazia in return for the north side votes he could be counted on to deliver, and henceforth Lazia played a large role in Pendergast's apparatus.

In the years of his greatest success, Lazia maneuvered in committee room and nightclub with equal ease. In public, the 140-pound Lazia, who wore thick rimless glasses to combat the effects of glaucoma, impressed people as a mild, well-spoken businessman. For a time his occupation of record was that of soft drink distributor, and he later established a venue known as Cuban Gardens near Pendergast's Riverside, Missouri, racetrack. Lazia and his wife dressed fashionably and maintained an equally fashionable Lake Lotawana home in addition to their luxurious Kansas City apartment.

The Home Rule movement granted local authorities increased control of the Kansas City Police Department in 1932, and John Lazia became one of several responsible for staffing the police force. He hired a number of officers with criminal records longer than their law enforcement resumes. Ties between Kansas City's gangland underworld and the police department had never been closer; it was said in jest that anyone who wished to reach Lazia need only call the police. In two widely reported kidnappings—that of businesswoman Nell Donnelly Reed and City Manager H. L. McElroy's daughter, Mary—Lazia was seen to have facilitated quick release of the captives. And in the years after the Union Station Massacre of 1933, investigators came to believe that Lazia arranged the perpetrators' meeting on the eve of the ambush and helped them escape Kansas City after the bloodbath.

By age 37, Lazia had gained great wealth and power, but his line of work was one whose achievers commonly met an early demise. His came in July 1934 when he and his wife pulled up to their Armour Boulevard apartment after an evening on the town. The killers who emptied their machine guns into his car were never captured but could have been any number of Lazia's enemies . . . or friends. Of the latter, nearly 7,000 appeared at his wake to pay their respects; Lazia was a popular figure and had helped many people throughout the course of his life. Historians, however, remember Lazia for the violence and lawlessness he created, the public mistrust of the city government and police force engendered by his involvement, and the misuse of a great political talent.

## Sources

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