

The Family Tree Newsletter
April 15, 2019

Dear Friends and Family:

I have a Google alert for “lynching” and each day brings news of yet another city, town, or county organizing to investigate and expose local lynchings, memorialize and apologize for them, and enact some form of restorative justice. As one who 25 years ago, found it almost impossible to say the word in public and, when I did, experienced the shock on librarians’ faces, this widespread, open, and honest acknowledgement of long suppressed chapter in American history is miraculous.

Here are a few examples:

A 1920 massacre wiped Ocoee, Florida’s, African American community off the map, but the Truth and Justice Project of Orange County aims to retell its history as a way to help heal that history. Project members recently traveled to Tennessee to learn from the exceedingly successful Memphis Lynching Sites Project, which has memorialized numerous lynchings and conducts educational services regularly.

In March, the Virginia state legislature passed a resolution apologizing for the lynchings of over 80 African American men – the first for any state in America. It calls for each lynching to be researched and described on a state website with memorial markers for each lynching. The resolution was initiated by Zann Nelson, a researcher and columnist for the Culpeper Times. She wrote an open letter to Charles Allie Thompson, the black man whose lynching inspired her to pursue this path many years ago.

Virginia’s first historical marker for a lynching was just erected in Charles City, which is near Richmond. In Leesburg, Alexandria, Jackson and Madison Counties, and Charlottesville, VA, activities aimed at bringing each county’s column from the National Lynching Memorial in Montgomery are underway. EJI’s hanging steel columns, one for every county in which there was a lynching, have duplicates lined up in the grass waiting to be claimed by the counties. But EJI requests a process which includes a diverse group including public officials educating themselves about local history of racial violence and inequity and a plan forward to address injustice. These tenets are being followed in different ways and to different degrees not only in Virginia, but in Maryland where a statewide commission was created at the grassroots, then worked to have the state legislature create a more official entity.

The announcement for the Leesburg dialogue stated, “In a release, organizers said: “Driven by principles of respectful listening and acknowledgment of personal experiences, community dialogues are meant to provide all and any members of the

community a space in which to share perspectives on topics that may be sensitive or difficult to discuss.”

Today in Md., at least six counties are involved in the memorial process. Different groups are working with existing racial justice organizations such as NAACP, Coming to the Table, and Connecting the Dots. A state-wide organization, Maryland Lynching Memorial, galvanizes the process and has helped state legislators to pass a bill to establish a commission to investigate and memorialize lynchings state-wide. This is a first for the nation. HB 307, a bill to create a Maryland Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was passed earlier in the session by the Maryland House of Delegates by a vote of 136-0 and was approved by the Maryland Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee. It will now be brought to the floor for consideration by the full Maryland State Senate.) If passed, it will establish a Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission; authorize staff provided by the Office of the Attorney General to issue certain subpoenas; require the Commission to hold certain public meetings in each county where a lynching of an African American by a white mob has been documented; authorizing the Commission to research cases of racially motivated lynching; requiring the Commission to submit an interim and final report to the Governor and the General Assembly on or before certain dates; etc.

In a few communities, the wording of markers and resolutions have rubbed some the wrong way. An Equal Justice Initiative-provided marker includes this "lynching of African-Americans during this era was a form of racial terrorism used to intimidate black people and enforce racial hierarchy and segregation" and in Madison County, Va., a public official argued that only a handful of people made up the mob and the rest were against it. EJI's Bryan Stevenson and various Remembrance Committee chair people have emphasized that these memorials are not intended to make anyone feel ashamed or attacked, but to simply remember those who were lynched. People in several other communities have taken offense over language in resolutions in which the word "terrorism" is used referring to the lynching as a community act of terrorism.

Many of these projects include large group field trips to the powerful National Lynching Memorial in Montgomery. Often they carry soil collected from their local lynching sites to join the hundreds of other jars being exhibited at EJI. In cities and towns with colleges, students and professors are often involved in the research and presentations. Journalists have been the initiators in some cases. The founder of the Maryland Lynching Project is Will Shwarz, whose documentary about the lynching of George Armwood just down the road from where we sat is being shown around the state. I recently spoke on a panel in Annapolis with Shwarz, Armwood's cousin Tina Johnson, Alex Haley's (Roots) nephew, and moderator Thornell Jones of Coming to the Table. 400 folks showed up and questions from both Jones and audience members drilled right down to the bone.

Elsewhere, the county commission in Chattanooga, TN, authorized \$100,000 for a lynching memorial; Orlando, and St. Petersburg, FL, have memorial plans as do Montgomery and Birmingham, AL. Markers have been placed or are being planned in Orlando, St. Petersburg, St. Augustine, and Jacksonville, FL, as well as Omaha, NE, Milwaukee, WI, and Helen, AR have placed markers. The Lynching Sites Projects of

Memphis has placed many markers and conducts ongoing education, memorialization, and reparation. In Georgia, lynchings have been acknowledged and memorialized long ago in Valdosta (Mary Turner) and Walton County and more recently in Harris County, Troup County, Athens, and Macon. Decatur, GA, has one in the works, spearheaded by the NAACP with local officials. The Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta through their Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing (Dr. Catherine Meeks, Director) has a mandate to mark all lynchings in the state. They recently held an event in which all 600 names of known victims were called out.

While EJI's National Lynching Memorial has lifted this movement to new heights, it's important to recognize that it started many, many years ago. I don't have facts but I do know that James Cameron, the first (and one of the few) black man on record to have escaped a lynching devoted his life to telling the story of what he called "America's Black Holocaust" and in 1984 built a Black History Museum in Milwaukee. When he died, my friend Fran Kaplan took over, along with Brad Pruitt and Reggie Jackson; their long struggles to keep ABHM alive (through a virtual museum on the internet when they could not afford a building) bears fruit as a stunning new edifice has just opened. You can visit the virtual museum at abhmuseum.org.

I sat on a stage in Milwaukee several years ago with two of the first people I met who labored alone in the fields of lynching memorialization. One was Doria Johnson, whose grandfather Anthony Crawford was lynched because of his success as a businessman in Abbeville, S.C. Doria, an outstanding scholar, was instrumental in 1904 in persuading the U.S. Senate to apologize for that body's failure to enact anti-lynching legislation. Tragically, she died of breast cancer shortly before the National Lynching Museum opened. Also on that Milwaukee stage was Henry Banks, another African American and a journalist, who almost single-handedly raised \$400,000 and erected a magnificent memorial in Duluth, MN, in 2003; it was probably the first such actual memorial in the nation. Another person on that stage was filmmaker Jackie Olive, whose long-awaited documentary *Always in Season* recently won awards at Sundance and elsewhere and is being shown in select cities around the country to great acclaim.

As I attended the Opening Day in Montgomery I kept encountering these pioneers (even Doria, memorialized in an interview shown on EJI's screens) and others, elderly African Americans I'd never met, who told me their own family stories, kept alive for many decades with traumatic after-effects, just as I discovered in my talks with survivors in Harris County, Ga. Among the memorial pioneers I encountered on that day was Warren Reed, whose grandfather participated in the Duluth lynching. Warren wrote about this in *The Lyncher in Me* in 2008. He was in Montgomery with Virginia Huston, a descendant of one of the men his grandfather lynched. I was there with women descended from one of the men my grandfathers helped to lynch, a man who was their cousin.

While EJI has provided many metal markers at lynching sites across the South, no county has yet claimed their column. Each of the 800-plus columns hanging at the Memorial, representing the counties in which lynchings took place and containing the names of men, women and children lynched, has a duplicate laid in the grass waiting to be claimed and erected in the county of the lynching. EJI requires a process of

investigation, education, acknowledgement and reparation by a diverse group of local citizens in order to claim the column. Many such processes are underway. I'll report to you as columns are claimed. I am hoping that Harris, Troup, and Muscogee counties in Georgia will be among the first.

NEW DISCOVERIES

One of the my most important discoveries, recounted in *The Family Tree*, was the role played by inter-racial family tensions and disavowals in lynchings as well as the role of white men's predations against black women. Just recently, the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that grand jury proceedings from the Walton County, Ga., lynching of 1946 must be made available to Anthony Pitch, the historian who requested them. Hundreds of white citizens were interviewed producing a multitude of files and, because this lynching was fomented in part by a white man's assumption of ownership over a black woman's body and her husband's objections, these documents promise to provide more data on this issue. In addition, a descendant of another Georgia lynching victim has recently revealed that his ancestor was lynched by members of the slaveholder family who enslaved his family, so here's more detail to come on this long-ignored subject.

A recent Washington Post article (*Keeper of the Secrets*) introduced me to John Johnson, an African American man who's been researching a lynching in Wytheville, VA, for over 20 years. I called Mr. Johnson several days later and we talked for an hour. I feel as though I've known you all my life, he said, and I said, "I feel the same." He is definitely a soul brother and we have plans for the future! The lynching he's researching bears similarities to the one my family carried out. In his case, a white woman became pregnant by a black man who was then lynched despite the woman's refusal to charge him with rape.

COMING TO THE TABLE

This fine organization provided invaluable support as I researched and wrote *The Family Tree*. In May an anthology entitled *Slavery's Descendants: Shared Legacies of Race and Reconciliation* in which CTTT members, including me, contributed stories of their experiences researching slavery and race in their families and often discovering and connecting with descendants related by blood and/or through enslavement. Rutgers University Press is the publisher.

CTTT has 29 local affiliate groups in 12 states, open to all, not limited to descendants of slaveholders and enslaved people. Go to comingtothetable.org for complete list as well as recent national articles about its work.

RECENT SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

Held conversations with Rachel Swarns's social justice journalism classes at New York University – one graduate, one undergraduate class. Some were involved researching a New York City lynching and we talked about methods and the process of interviewing people about such a difficult subject. I was joined by Deborah Daniels Dawson, who is descended from a family once enslaved by mine and who has joined me on many of my trips, as friend, cousin, photographer, and sister speaker. She gives me strength and is an energizing presence.

Participated in a 3-day conference in New Orleans sponsored by National Network for Safe Communities and Civil Rights & Restorative Justice Project. It brought together descendants of lynching victims, police chiefs, civil rights lawyers, academics, community organizers, librarians and historians to plan ways to educate police officers about African American historical trauma.

Addressed students at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. While there, I visited the former mansion of ancestors who fomented the bloody coup of 1898, discussed in my book. It's now the Graystone Inn on the market for \$2.2 million. In the heart of downtown Wilmington, across the street from a large Confederate Monument, it would make a wonderful Museum of True Southern History. A book about the Wilmington Massacre is in the works, as is a musical by Rihanna. Addressed seniors at Methodist Asbury Village in Gaithersburg, MD. Favorite compliment: first lecture we've had where no one has fallen asleep.

Spoke on panel at Montclair, NJ, Literary Festival with Rachel Swarns, former NYT reporter, and author of *American Tapestry*, about Michelle Obama's bi-racial ancestry in Georgia, and Dionne Ford, author of upcoming memoir about her racially mixed ancestry. We had the largest workshop of the festival, standing room only, with a lot of folks wanting to talk about reparations.

Gave 40-minute TED talk to packed auditorium as part of Police-Community Reconciliation symposium held by National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in NYC. On YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJSIqWNq0lc>. I am 1:08 into the 3-hour tape.

On Tuesday, April 16, I fly to Boston to speak to students at Northeastern U., to be interviewed for a documentary about the lynching of Henry "Peg" Gilbert in the Hamilton, GA, jail in 1947 (see book) and to consult with Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project staff about their upcoming trainings of five police departments and other future matters.

On June 15, I will co-lead an all-day workshop on Healing the Ancestral Spirit at the Apple Farm Community in Three Rivers, MI. I will also address residents at an elder-care facility in Kalamazoo while in the area.

I continue to work one-on-one with people investigating their own ancestor's racial crimes and struggling to find ways to heal those wrongs as well as people whose ancestors were lynched and are doing their own brave work of seeking the truth of those tragedies. Eventually we hope to form an organized community through which to make more impact. If you know of people who'd be interested, please send them my way.

So, the work goes on. The book is under serious consideration for a film. I am beginning to write at a deeper level about the journey – both inner and outer – I have found myself on. I have learned so much in the past three years that I do not want it to slip away. Perhaps it can be of use to others.

Be well. Be active. Be brave. Be wise. Spread knowledge and love.