

*The Family Tree Newsletter*12

5/18/23

Dear Friends,

I am happy to announce that, since my last newsletter in January, the Harris County Community Remembrance Project has flourished and is on track as a partner with the Equal Justice Initiative to become a constructive agent for racial change in this long-divided part of Georgia. We are much like the several hundred other CRPs around the country but distinguished from most in that we have a long list of descendants of both lynching victims and lynching perpetrators on our team.

We now have a website. Please check it out at <https://remembranceharriscountyga.org/> and let me know what you think with any suggestions you might have.

We have a distinguished lineup of Black and White authors, professors, and journalists -- including four descendants -- on our Student Essay Contest Advisory Committee.

We have attracted the participation of a brilliant high school student, soon to graduate, and his father. Dex Williams, Jr., and his creative student team from Harris County High will be featured in a Black History production at the county's first Juneteenth celebration. In addition, the two Dex Williamses in concert with our project are organizing a busload of students to visit EJI's Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice in early June.

By the end of the year or early into 2024 we plan to have a small memorial park in place in downtown Hamilton. I hope that many of you will be able to join us for its joyful opening.

Step back a moment. Take a deep breath. And recall. Recall if you can that seven years ago a memorial service I had planned with the then-mayor and a Methodist minister was shut down at the last minute due to threats of angry residents. Recall one brave librarian, Ada Demlow, who defied that anger and hosted us at the library, but she soon left and a negative whisper campaign prevented much progress of the painful, but honest conversation that began that night at the library. Yet quietly a few who were there began to create space for those conversations, forming ONE Harris, sponsoring Racial Trustbuilding workshops. They were supported by a strong Racial Reckoning next door in Troup County.

In 2020, a Black Lives Matter protest over the George Floyd police murder on the Hamilton Square brought out racist white nationalists along with racist impulses in the police chief and his deputy. The two were later caught in a hair-raising racist conversation on tape and lost their jobs. Google it; it was all over the news. After that, the then-Mayor, a white woman, and a councilman, Ransom Farley, an incredibly principled and courageous Black man (whom I have discovered to be a Linked Descendant, as we say in *Coming to the Table*) introduced a resolution to join EJI and build the park. It was passed unanimously. And now we're on our way, with Mayor Ransom Farley leading the effort.

A tax-deductible contribution to our work of any amount can be made on the website. Along the way I will ask some of you to consider a separate contribution to the Memorial Park.

*On another (but related) note, I want to highly recommend Sherrilyn Iffel's talk, *How America Ends and Begins Again* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMmvOHvAEFQ>. Iffel is president of the NAACP's*

Legal Defense Fund and author of the excellent *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-first Century*.

I listen to a lot of talks. This one stands above most. She speaks the absolute and terrifying truth about what is happening to Democracy at the present moment and names some of the openings this offers us for building a better future. It is both troubling and energizing and I highly recommend it. She beautifully articulates one of my favorite themes: anti-racist work is *not a choice* for white people who prefer democracy to autocracy.

In my last newsletter I mentioned two separate, but related, Harris County projects: the Oral History Project of Yamaona Pierce's Hamilton Hood Foundation. Go Tell It On The Mountain collects the stories of African Americans in and from Harris County (<https://hamiltonhood.org/oral-history/>) Their work on the Pierce Chapel African American Cemetery was just named one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 Most Endangered Places for 2023. Congratulations on such powerful work!

Katie McMurray's new website (theancestorcollection.com) delves deeply into the history and genealogy of her Walker ancestors – one of Harris County's largest enslaver families. You can find her work at theancestorcollection.org.

In the seven years since *The Family Tree* came out, I have met and worked with dozens of former and current Harris County residents who are exploring their family histories. There is a very large Harris County ex-pat community out there and, as they relate back to their home county and connect with family members and old friends, a fascinating alchemy occurs. I hope you will find ways to support this hard, but heartening work and know how much I appreciate those of you who've been with us all along.

In appreciation,

Karen