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Statement on H.R. 7912, the Evaluating Lynching Locations (ELL) for National Park Sites Act

by Congressman Steve Cohen

for the House Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

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I want to first thank Chairman Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher for including the Evaluating Lynching Locations for National Park Sites Act in today's legislative hearing.

I am proud to be an American. But, as a student of history, I know that our country is not infallible.

Since coming to Congress in 2007, I have worked with my colleagues to bring attention to many of the wrongs that have occurred in our country, and to right the ones we can.

Our government should be supportive of learning from the past, rather than burying or ignoring it, as we strive to become a more perfect union.

It is important that we, as Members of Congress, and the general population of American citizens, have an understanding and reckon with our country's past.

I was proud of my colleagues in 2008 when we passed the first-ever apology for the institution of slavery and racial segregation of African-Americans in the United States, which I led.

It is in this vein that I introduced the Evaluating Lynching Locations for National Park Sites Act, or ELL for National Park Sites Act, which would direct the National Park Service to study lynching sites in Memphis and around the region for potential inclusion in the system.

The bill is named after Mr. Ell Persons, who lived near the site of where the decapitated body of a 16-year-old white girl was found in the outskirts of Memphis in 1917. He was arrested twice, interrogated twice, and released twice before being arrested a third time and beaten into confessing to the crime.

For his protection, Persons was transferred to Nashville.

However, the Sheriff was “accosted by an organized mob” who threatened him to not return to the county without Persons. Ultimately, Persons was brought back to Memphis.

A crowd of approximately 3,000 people watched as he was burned alive. His clothing and the rope used to tie him were cut to shreds as souvenirs. Sandwiches and chewing gum were sold to spectators.

Once his body cooled, Mr. Persons was decapitated. His head was photographed and printed on postcards. It was carried across town and found nearly 10 miles from the lynching site.

The lynching of Mr. Persons carries historical significance due to the documentation of the event – from the threat of a public official and thorough accountings of the lynching by multiple newspaper articles and an editorial by the NAACP.

Unfortunately, while the documentation of this case is notable, this lynching is far from unique in our American history.

The Lynching Sites Project of Memphis has record of at least 30 similar events, just in the Shelby County alone.

In fact, between 1877 and 1950, there were more than 4,000 lynchings across the country, with others taking place in the years outside of that period.

This unfortunate history of our country should not be forgotten. By including lynching sites in our national park system, we will create an opportunity to provide appropriate context for these crimes, reflect upon the heinous actions, and memorialize the victims.

The ELL for National Park Sites Act is an important first step, which would direct the National Park Service to study sites within approximately 100 miles of Memphis and the Ell Persons lynching site. I did this because to study the more than 4,000 lynching sites across the country would be prohibitive of time and money. But, this project of memorializing the victims and reckoning with our history needs to start somewhere.

I appreciate the National Park Service’s interest in this project and look forward to working with them on effectively incorporating sites like the Ell Person’s lynching site into the national system.

I welcome Mr. Rich Watkins from the Lynching Site Project of Memphis as one of our panelists and look forward to his testimony. It was his organization that inspired the ELL for National Parks Act and his organization is helping to bring much-needed attention to this sad but important history.

I hope my colleagues will sign on as cosponsors of this bill and support its passage.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the remainder of my time.