

**Ell Persons Lynching Site
Pre-Reconnaissance Survey
Memphis, Tennessee • Fall 2021**



“...’What can I do to help the cause? The answer always is, ‘Tell the world the facts.’”

Ida B. Wells-Barnett¹

¹ Wells, Ida B, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* (Chicago: 1895), 101. Retrieved from <http://storage.lib.uchicago.edu/pres/2014/pres2014-0743.pdf>

Executive Summary

This pre-reconnaissance survey, completed by the Lynching Sites Project of Memphis (LSP) with help from the Memphis Area Association of Governments, is a preliminary resource assessment of a site near Summer Avenue and the old Wolf River Bridge in Memphis, Tennessee, associated with the 1917 lynching of Ell Persons. This survey examines the likelihood that the study area would meet the four established criteria for inclusion in the national park system: national significance, suitability, feasibility, and need for direct National Park Service (NPS) management.

The study area examined in this pre-reconnaissance survey contains the site of Ell Persons's lynching in 1917. The location of the site was determined after consulting eyewitness accounts, historical newspapers, and historical maps describing the site. Much of the account of Ell Persons's arrest and lynching was documented by criminologist and LSP member Margaret Vandiver in her 2006 book *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South* which is cited often throughout the historical discussion. The Lynching Sites Project of Memphis believes that this site is eligible under criterion A due to its association with racial terror lynchings, which the Equal Justice Initiative has documented peaked nationally between 1880 and 1940 and is likely to be found nationally significant if further evaluated against national historic landmark criteria.

A preliminary evaluation of suitability by LSP and Memphis Area Association of Governments finds that the study area offers a unique opportunity to interpret the phenomenon of racial terror lynchings that plagued the country at the turn of the twentieth century. This pre-reconnaissance survey also concludes that the study area is likely to be found feasible for inclusion in the national park system.

Since reconnaissance surveys cannot provide a full analysis of resource protection and management possibilities at the site, the Lynching Sites Project of Memphis and Memphis Area Association of Governments notes further study may be necessary to evaluate the possibility of including the site in the national park system. Such a study could be authorized to evaluate the criteria more thoroughly for inclusion, as well as illustrate other sites associated with racial terror lynchings at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Lynching Sites Project of Memphis was founded in late 2015 following the visit of Bryan Stevenson, of the Equal Justice Initiative, during which he urged local residents to identify and place markers at the sites of Shelby County lynchings. LSP is committed to researching and documenting the history of lynching in Memphis and Shelby County to achieve a more just, antiracist society. In 2017, the centennial of the Ell Persons lynching was marked by two commemorative markers to Ell Persons, one placed by Students Uniting Memphis, a nonprofit of Overton High School students, and the other placed by LSP, the Memphis NAACP, and the National Park Service. A well-attended interfaith prayer ceremony was organized by LSP and the Memphis NAACP. Since then, LSP has continued hosting interfaith events to "turn the light of truth" on racial terror lynchings in Shelby County.

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Introduction

In Spring 2020, the Lynching Sites Project of Memphis enlisted the historic preservationist of Memphis Area Association of Governments to assist with a pre-reconnaissance survey nominating the Ell Persons Lynching Site for inclusion in the national park system. Considering Memphis's place in African American history and Civil Rights history, it is the position of LSP and Memphis Area Association of Governments that there is no more appropriate location for the country's first national park honoring lynching victims.

A study team was loosely organized in Spring 2020, consisting of members of LSP and the Memphis Area Association of Governments historic preservationist. The Covid-19 pandemic took place soon after and stalled the work for several months. The study team reconvened in Fall 2020 and commenced the pre-reconnaissance survey of the Ell Persons Lynching Site.

Objective and Scope of Study

This report is a pre-reconnaissance survey of the site intended to provide a preliminary assessment of the site's potential for inclusion in the national park system.

The objective of this pre-reconnaissance survey is to provide a brief overview and analysis of the study area near Summer Avenue and the old Wolf River Bridge in Memphis, Tennessee, associated with the 1917 lynching of Ell Persons. The survey aims to determine whether the study area might qualify for inclusion in the national park system.

Criteria for Inclusion in the National Park System

There are four criteria, outlined in *NPS Management Policies 2006* section 1.3, that are used to determine whether a site may be eligible for inclusion in the national park system. This report provides a cursory examination and analysis of the study area in Memphis based on those four criteria:

National Significance. National Park Service has four criteria that must be met to be considered nationally significant:

1. It is an outstanding example of a particular type of resource.
2. It possesses exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the natural or cultural themes of American heritage.
3. It offers superlative opportunities for public enjoyment or for scientific study.
4. It retains a high level of integrity as a true, accurate, and unspoiled example of a resource.

National significance for cultural resources is evaluated by applying the national historic landmark (NHL) criteria contained in *36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 65.4*.

Suitability. A site may be determined eligible for inclusion if it contains a resource type that is not currently or sufficiently represented in the national park system or adequately represented and protected by other public or private entities. Adequacy of representation is determined on a case-by-case basis by comparing the resource type, quality, and quantity, along with the combination of resources present.

In addition to resource conservation, the fundamental purpose of all parks in the national park system is to provide for public enjoyment. Potential for public enjoyment is therefore factored into the suitability of each study considered for inclusion in the national park system. The preferred forms of public enjoyment are found at sites that foster an understanding of and appreciation for park resources and values, or sites that promote enjoyment through a direct relation, association, or interaction with park resources.

Feasibility. To be considered feasible, a study area must be of sufficient size and appropriate configuration to ensure sustainable protection of its resources and to accommodate public enjoyment. A study area should be capable of efficient administration at a reasonable cost. Other important factors in determining feasibility include land ownership, acquisition costs, current and potential use, access, level of local and general public support, and staff or development requirements.

Need for Direct NPS Management. Evaluation of management options for a potential new unit of the national park system must demonstrate that direct NPS management is the superior alternative. Even if a study area meets the criteria for national significance, suitability, and feasibility, it may not be recommended as an addition to the national park system. As this is not an NPS-authorized reconnaissance survey, the discussion of need for direct NPS management will be cursory.

Historic Context and Description of the Study Area

Historic Context

Reconstruction

“The Tennessee State Convention have unanimously passed a resolution declaring slavery forever abolished, and prohibiting it throughout the state.”²

These words were dispatched from Nashville on January 15, 1865, the start of a new year and what African Americans and abolitionists hoped was a new age of racial reckoning. The Civil War ended less than three months later on April 9, 1865, and the Southern cause was soundly defeated. The dispatch went on to report that the convention repealed the alignment with the Confederacy and repealed all laws and ordinances passed under Confederate alignment. The Union-controlled legislature ratified the Thirteenth Amendment outlawing slavery, and eventually the Fourteenth Amendment was affirmed as well. Tennessee became the first formerly Confederate state to reenter the United States.³

The Reconstruction era was swiftly ushered into Tennessee. Almost immediately after rejoining the United States, Republican lawmakers took steps to disenfranchise ex-Confederates and grant suffrage to formerly enslaved people.⁴ By 1868 white and Black lawmakers were part of constitutional conventions and had been elevated to high positions throughout the South.⁵ Sampson W. Keeble, formerly a Black barber in Nashville, became Tennessee’s first African American elected to the state legislature in 1873-1874. Samuel McElwee, previously an enslaved laborer in Haywood County, served three terms in the Tennessee General Assembly in the 1880s.⁶

² Tennessee State Convention; Slavery Declared Forever Abolished Parson Brownlow Nominated for Governor, Emancipation Rejoicings in St. Louis. Sinking of the Schooner Sarah B. James. From Cairo. Relief for Savannah. Obituary. Guerilla Expedition. Railroad Disaster,” *The New York Times* (January 15, 1865). Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1865/01/15/archives/tennessee-state-convention-slavery-declared-forever-abolished.html>

³ “Tennessee State Convention: Slavery Declared Forever Abolished Abolished Parson Brownlow Nominated for Governor, Emancipation Rejoicings in St. Louis. Sinking of the Schooner Sarah B. James. From Cairo. Relief for Savannah. Obituary. Guerilla Expedition. Railroad Disaster,” *The New York Times*; “Radical Republicans,” *Tennessee4Me*, National Endowment for the Humanities. Retrieved from http://www.tn4me.org/article.cfm/a_id/42/minor_id/10/major_id/6/era_id/5

⁴ Robert Tracy McKenzie, “Reconstruction,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia* (March 1, 2018). Retrieved from <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/reconstruction/>

⁵ “This Honorable Body”: African American Legislators in 19th Century Tennessee, Jim Crow and Disfranchisement of Southern Blacks, Tennessee State Library and Archives. Retrieved from <https://sharetn.gov.tnsosfiles.com/tsla/exhibits/aale/jimcrow.htm>

⁶ McKenzie, “Reconstruction,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia*.

While Black Americans were exercising their newly gained civil rights, white vigilante groups were forming to stop them. The most infamous such group was the Ku Klux Klan, first organized by ex-Confederates in 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee. Initially a social club to promote the political ascension of former Confederates, the group soon transitioned to terrorism to keep African Americans from exercising their 1867 suffrage rights. The Klan targeted Black political leaders, as well as any Black individuals the terrorists felt too boldly asserted their rights.⁷ The state legislature passed laws combating the rise of the Ku Klux Klan with the Act to Preserve Peace in Tennessee, and martial law was declared in several counties with significant Klan violence. The organization dissolved in the late 1860s under direction from the first Grand Wizard Nathan Bedford Forrest, having determined their mission complete.⁸ Local branches of the group continued despite this direction, and Congress passed a series of Enforcement Acts in 1870 and 1871 and the Ku Klux Klan Act in 1871 to address its continued activities. The KKK continued to be sporadically active in West Tennessee, especially around the 1874 election. It would reconvene again in 1915 and has remained active into the present.⁹

In addition to violence preventing Black Americans from exercising their rights, federal Reconstruction laws were weakened and challenged as Black citizens elevated to powerful positions. Senator Charles Sumner's Civil Rights Act was passed in 1875 but left without teeth to enforce due to the Cruikshank decision the next year stating that the Bill of Rights did not apply to private citizens.¹⁰ Lawmakers began passing laws mandating segregation in public spaces. Often cited as the first state to pass Jim Crow laws, Tennessee passed Chapter 130 of the Acts of Tennessee in 1875, permitting discrimination in the public sphere. This legislation passed a year after Sampson Keeble's term in the House ended.¹¹ The poll tax was a significant push to keep Black voters from exercising their rights, and it was reactivated in the state constitution in 1890 after earlier being repealed three years after its introduction in 1870. Later Jim Crow laws continued to enforce mandated segregation in spaces from waiting rooms to bathrooms, from buses to drinking fountains. Jim Crow laws refer broadly to any laws mandating racial segregation in the South at the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and continuing until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Senator Sumner's Civil Rights Act was declared unconstitutional in 1883, and the U.S.

⁷ "Reconstruction, 1865-1875," *Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area*, Retrieved from <https://www.tncivilwar.org/reconstruction>; "Radical Republicans," *Tennessee4Me*.

⁸ McKenzie, "Reconstruction," *Tennessee Encyclopedia*; "Ku Klux Klan," *Britannica*; "The Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871," United States Senate.

⁹ McKenzie, "Reconstruction," *Tennessee Encyclopedia*; "Radical Republicans," *Tennessee4Me*; "Ku Klux Klan," *Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ku-Klux-Klan>; Hebert, Keith S. "Ku Klux Klan in Alabama during the Reconstruction Era," *Encyclopedia of Alabama* (April 1, 2019). Retrieved from <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-2934>; "The Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871," United States Senate. Retrieved from <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/EnforcementActs.htm>

¹⁰ "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror." (Third edition), Equal Justice Initiative, 20. Retrieved from <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>; "This Honorable Body": African American Legislators in 19th Century Tennessee, Jim Crow and Disfranchisement of Southern Blacks, Tennessee State Library and Archives; "Reconstruction, 1865-1875," *Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area*; "U.S. v. Cruikshank," March 27, 1876, Federal Judicial Center. Retrieved from <https://www.fjc.gov/history/timeline/us-v-cruikshank>

¹¹ "Reconstruction, 1865-1875," *Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area*; "This Honorable Body": African American Legislators in 19th Century Tennessee, Jim Crow and Disfranchisement of Southern Blacks, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) determined that racial segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. “Separate but equal” was the law of the South.¹²

Lynching and Jim Crow

Jim Crow laws did not just constrain Black Americans’ political activities; every aspect of Black Americans’ lives were governed by law and white expectation of Black conduct.¹³ In addition to crimes against person or property, of which any white person could also be accused, Black Americans could also be accused of “speaking disrespectfully, refusing to step off the sidewalk, using profane language, using an improper title for a white person, arguing with a white man, bumping into a white woman, insulting a white person, and other social grievances.”¹⁴ Indeed, vigilante violence was routinely characterized as the only way to protect white families and their “Southern way of life” from the purported inherently criminal Black population. Civilized criminal courts were for white society, and African Americans were considered unworthy of such civilized treatment. The threat of lynching for such “crimes” maintained white supremacy and dominance in the South for decades after slavery was abolished, solidifying a racial caste system not much different from slavery.¹⁵

The abolition of slavery loosened white Southerners’ control over political and economic resources, and lynching became a political tool to regain that control. More than 4400 African Americans were lynched in a campaign of racial terror between 1877 and 1950. These documented lynchings took place in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The Black victims were most often accused of murder or sexual assault, but smaller infractions such as robbery, arson, and vagrancy were noted, and some were accused of no crimes at all. It is important to note that accusations of sexual assault of white women could hinge on being in the same room as a white person or accidentally brushing against her.¹⁶ The lynchings ranged in behavior from kidnappings and murder at the hands of a small group to torture and murder in front of thousands of onlookers. Preplanned and public lynchings often featured “prolonged torture, mutilation, dismemberment, and burning at the stake of Black victims,” and this same brutality was almost never suffered by whites accused of comparable crimes.¹⁷

¹² “This Honorable Body”: African American Legislators in 19th Century Tennessee, Jim Crow and Disfranchisement of Southern Blacks, Tennessee State Library and Archives; Melvin I. Urofsky, “Jim Crow Law,” *Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/event/Jim-Crow-law>; “Reconstruction, 1865-1875,” *Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area*; “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.” (Third edition), Equal Justice Initiative, 20. Retrieved from <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>.

¹³ “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” Equal Justice Initiative, 25.

¹⁴ “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” Equal Justice Initiative, 29.

¹⁵ “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” Equal Justice Initiative, 48; Jennifer Rae Taylor, “A History of Tolerance for Violence Has Laid the Groundwork for Injustice Today,” American Bar Association (May 16, 2019). Retrieved from https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/black-to-the-future/tolerance-for-violence/

¹⁶ “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” Equal Justice Initiative, 29; *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918*, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (New York: 1919), 9-10. Retrieved from <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=msu.31293101392482&view=1up&seq=14>

¹⁷ “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” Equal Justice Initiative, 33; Margaret Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South* (Rutgers University Press, 2006), 8.

The public spectacle of lynchings was intended to intimidate entire African American communities rather than serve solely as an extralegal punishment of a purported wrong doer. The threat of lynching was constant as there were a myriad of ways to commit offense as a Black American. The threat also extended to an entire Black community, rather than only the accused. Friends or family members of the alleged criminal might be lynched when the target could not be apprehended, and entire communities were sometimes stormed by armed white parties as a warning for others who might step out of line. As a result of such a wide range of what white citizens believed to be criminal Black behavior, African American communities lived in constant fear of violence by white mobs. Of course, this was the point of such terrorism.¹⁸

The Murder of Antoinette Rappel

On May 2, 1917, the body of sixteen-year-old white student Antoinette Rappel was found at the old Wolf River Bridge, near what is now Summer Avenue. Missing since April 30, Rappel was last seen crossing the Wolf River bridge. She had left home that morning to bicycle to her uncle William Wilfong's dairy to wait for the school wagon to Treadwell School.¹⁹ When she did not return home the next day and no relatives reported seeing her, her uncle Will Wilfong organized a search for the missing child.²⁰ Rappel's bicycle was found on the west side of the Macon Road bridge, approximately one hundred feet from the road. The girl's body was found at the end of about fifty feet of drag marks, decapitated and bruised. A doctor stated that she was killed by being struck on the head. It was asserted that she had been sexually assaulted, although whether this happened before or after the death could not be determined.²¹

¹⁸ "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror," Equal Justice Initiative, 32; Taylor, "A History of Tolerance for Violence Has Laid the Groundwork for Injustice Today," American Bar Association.

¹⁹ State of Tennessee, State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Certificate of Death, Antonette Rappel, April 20, 1917 [microfilm, vol. 51, page 426].

²⁰ Sources vary in describing the relationship between William Wilfong and Antoinette Rappel. Based on census records, it is determined that Wilfong was Antoinette Rappel's uncle, and Minnie Woods' brother-in-law. *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 3, 1917, 1; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 3, 1917, 1.

²¹ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 3, 1917, 1.



Figure 1. Antoinette Rappel. Photos from the *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 3, 1917, 1.

From the discovery of Rappel's body, Sheriff Mike G. Tate seemed fixated on a Black murderer, despite evidence to the contrary and the city police's own theories. The crime scene revealed an ax mark in the ground, a white handkerchief missing the corners, a white vest or coat, and tracks made recently from a car.²² The city police suspected a white assailant, as the recovered items would be uncommon among local African Americans and evidence suggested that Rappel was not forcibly taken from the road.²³ According to the *News Scimitar*, a white man was spotted at the Woodstock train depot or a nearby

²² National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, "The Lynching at Memphis," *The Crisis*, vol. 14, 4 (August 1917), 185.

²³ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 5, 1917, 7; *News Scimitar*, May 7, 1917, 1.

depot acting peculiarly on the day of the murder, but newspapers make no further mention of him.²⁴ A week later, another white man claimed that the recovered handkerchief belonged to him and reported that he and several friends were searching for ferns in the area on Monday morning, explaining the car tracks. The man also stated that they witnessed another white man acting “excited,” but it does not appear that police followed up on this.²⁵

Sheriff Mike G. Tate appeared unmoved by the city police’s line of reasoning and focused his attention on the Black woodcutters in the area.²⁶ DeWitt Ford, a nineteen-year-old who was deaf and mute, had reportedly mimed someone’s decapitation on April 30, but he was ignored until Rappel’s body was found. After being taken to the crime scene, Ford indicated that another Black woodcutter, Dan Armstrong, was the culprit. Armstrong was arrested, but his white employer P.O. Stockley assured police that Armstrong had been at his residence at the time of the murder. After another white man confirmed Armstrong’s whereabouts, suspicion moved away from him.²⁷

The Lynching of Ell Persons

“The majority approved. The minority kept silent, and silence gives consent.”²⁸

Ell Persons came under scrutiny after a white man, E.J. Brooks, reported a previous event in which Persons acted strangely with his wife. Brooks stated that in February, Persons “star[ed] wildly” at his wife and told her he had dreamt of her the night before. Brooks recalled wanting to “put a hole in the fiend,” but fired him instead. Sheriff Tate considered the incident indicative of Persons’s “brutish proclivities” and promptly took him into custody.²⁹ Persons’s home was searched for an ax, as were other homes of Black residents, but he could not provide one or explain the absence of it.³⁰ After releasing Persons twice, detectives hoped to follow him as he visited the crime scene. Persons did no such thing, and he was arrested a third time. Beaten by the sheriff and deputies, he maintained his innocence until the detective claimed to see blood on his shoes. The detective removed his shoes and brought them back an hour later claiming they were covered in human blood, at which point Persons allegedly confessed to Rappel’s murder.³¹

²⁴ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 5, 1917, 1.

²⁵ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 7, 1917, 1.; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 121-122.

²⁶ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 15, 1959 (clippings in MSCR).

²⁷ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 4, 1917, 1, 12; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 120-121.

²⁸ “After Thought: An Editorial on the Lynching of Ell Persons,” *The Memphis Press*, May 23, 1917, as reprinted in *Supplement to The Crisis*, July 1917. Retrieved from <https://blackbird.vcu.edu/v16n2/gallery/1917/sp-after-thought.shtml>

²⁹ *Herald*, May 27, 1917, page unknown, as quoted in NAACP, “Memphis, May 22,” 186; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1917, 9.

³⁰ Stephen Haley, “The Last Lynching,” *Memphis Magazine*, 5 (April 1980), 64.

³¹ The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* says Persons’s final arrest occurred on Sunday, May 6; the *Memphis News Scimitar* reported that Persons was arrested Saturday, May 5.

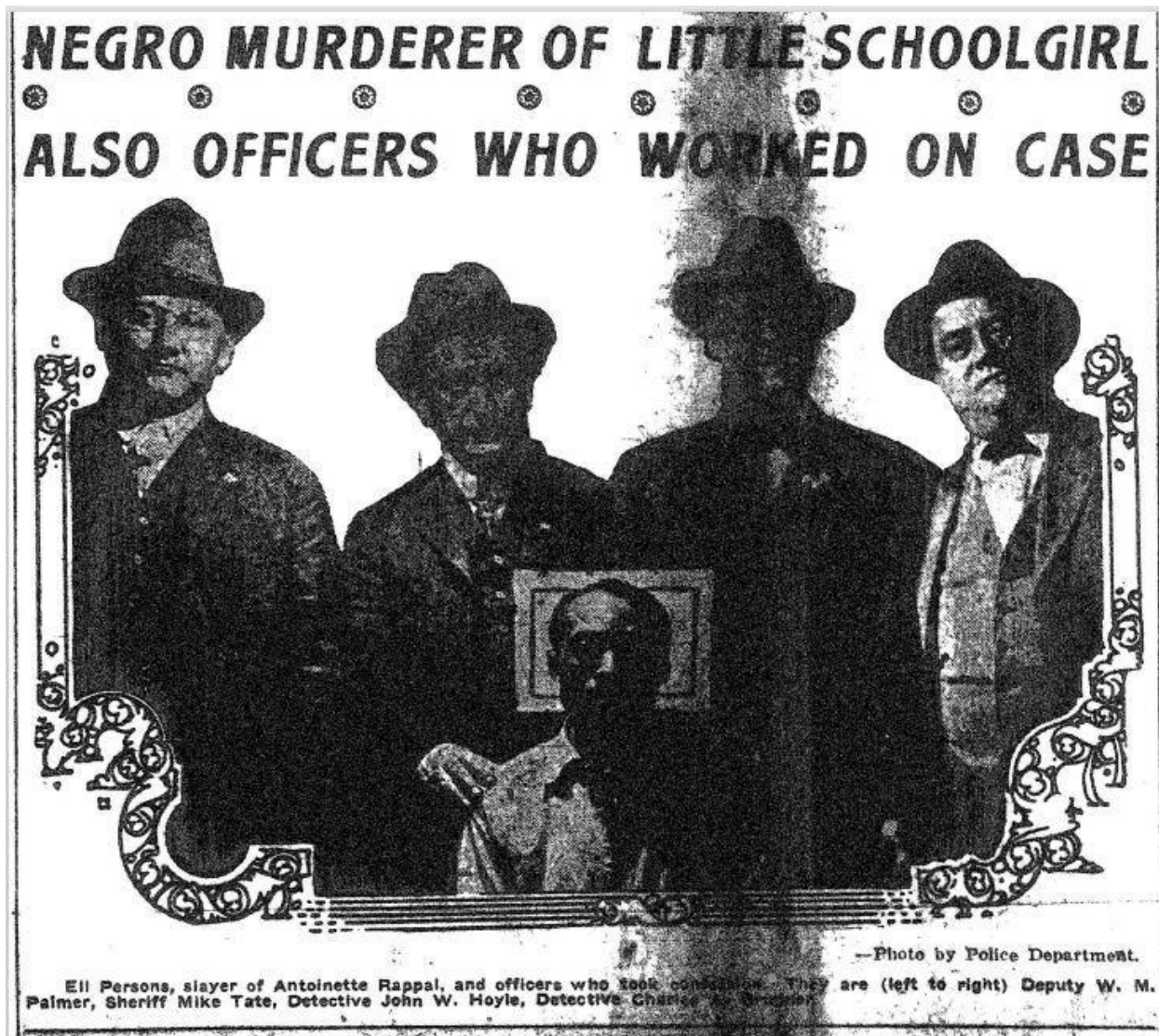


Figure 2. Ell Persons with the officers who investigated the case of Antoinette Rappal. Photo from the *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 8, 1917, 1.

Despite Persons's confession, there is no proof that he was responsible for Rappal's murder. The *Memphis Press* ran an article the same day as his confession stating that no blood was found on Persons's shoes or clothes, and he was never observed visiting the crime scene.³² Aside from his forced confession, the only other "evidence" appears to be a ludicrous theory that murder victims' eyes would have their last moment imprinted in their retinas. Judge Puryear ordered Rappal's body be unearthed so that her eyes could be photographed, despite a resolution from the Memphis Society of Ophthalmology and Oto-Laryngology stating that this was not possible. The *Commercial Appeal* reported that the

³² Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 123; *Memphis Press*, date unknown, quoted in NAACP, "Lynching at Memphis," 187.

photograph revealed “the outlines of a full-faced, large featured man,” while the *News Scimitar* stated “a likeness of Persons” was shown.³³

The police department noted the likelihood of a lynching before a suspect was even identified.³⁴ Once news of Persons’s confession reached the public, Sheriff Tate immediately relocated him outside the county until his trial. Persons, along with two detectives and a deputy, boarded a train for Nashville in the early hours of May 8.³⁵ A crowd was waiting at every station, but the sheriff convinced them that their prisoner was not Persons.³⁶ A crowd of about five hundred assembled in downtown Memphis that same morning demanded access to the county jail, which the sheriff granted. Not finding Persons, the mob was granted the same permission to search the city jail. The fruitless search angered the Memphians, and a group confronted the attorney general at the courthouse and demanded to know Persons’s whereabouts. Although telegrams convinced the mob that their target was not in Memphis, by nightfall they had resumed their search.³⁷ Anger and frustration grew, and Sheriff Tate was the target of open threats. The mob moved to the Court Square in downtown Memphis and began assembling a list of all who knew Persons. Another search of the city jail took place, and they finally disbanded after not finding him.³⁸ Sheriff Tate ordered Persons returned to Memphis by train with an escort of only two deputies. In Potts Camp, Mississippi, with no resistance from the deputies, a white vigilante group abducted Persons from the train.³⁹

³³ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1917, 9; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 8, 1917, 1.

³⁴ Memphis Police Department, "Report of Homicide, Antoinette Rappel," May 4, 1917, Shelby County Archives.

³⁵ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 8, 1917, 1.

³⁶ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1917, 9.

³⁷ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1917, 1.

³⁸ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1917, 1, 9; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 9, 1917, 1, 8.

³⁹ *Nashville Tennessean and Nashville American*, May 22, 1917, 9; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 1.

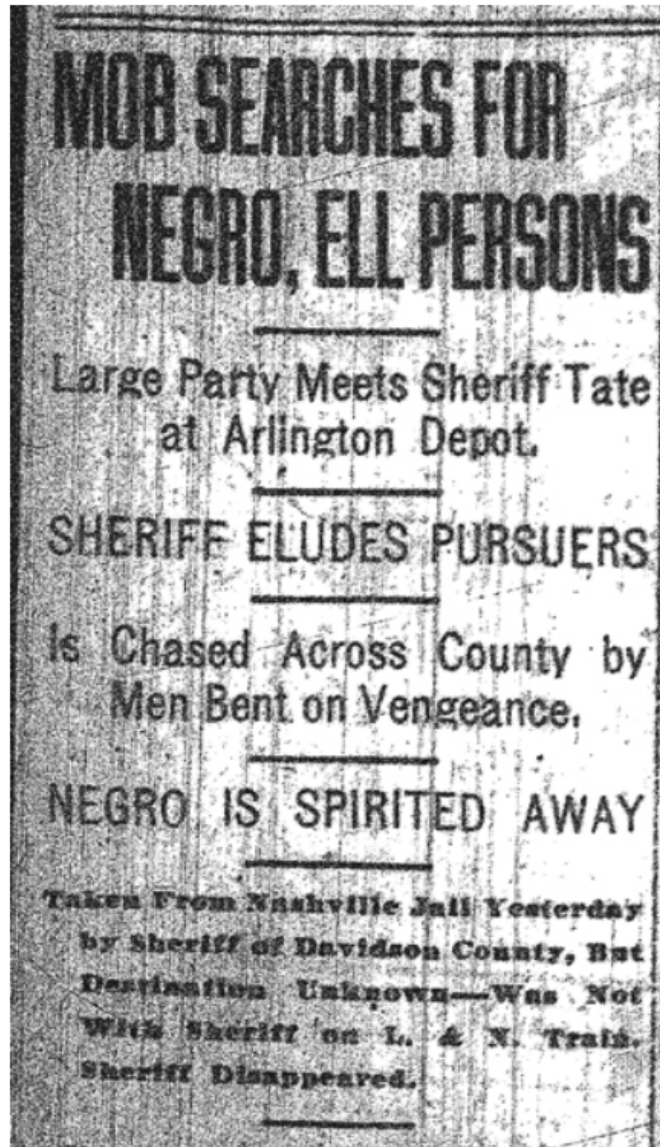


Figure 3. Headline, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 17, 1917, 1.



Figure 4. Headline, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 22, 1917, 1.

Newspapers announced Persons's lynching the next day and even predicted his burning.⁴⁰ On the day of his lynching, sandwiches and drinks were sold to the spectators, creating a carnival-like atmosphere on the Macon Road bridge.⁴¹ Several officers, in addition to farmers, workers, and professional men, were reportedly in attendance to watch the planned execution, "no doubt in sympathy with the business at hand."⁴² Rappel's mother reached the scene at the same time as Persons, and a police officer announced that she wished to make a statement. She wished for Persons to suffer as her daughter did, and the

⁴⁰ *Nashville Tennessean and Nashville American*, May 22, 1917, 1.

⁴¹ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, p. 1.

⁴² Boyce House, *Cub Reporter* (Dallas: Hightower Press, 1947), 105-6.

crowd responded with calls to burn him.⁴³ Persons was given a chance to address the crowd, and he implicated Dewitt Ford and Dan Armstrong in Rappel's murder. He was initially suspended over a pit by a rope, but the mob changed course and chained him to a log. Persons was doused with gasoline, despite protests that he would burn too quickly this way. According to the *Commercial Appeal*, a minister known as Brother Royal dismissed suggestions of prayers for Persons, stating that he did not allow Rappel a chance for prayer before her murder. Persons's body was then set afire, although newspapers differed in how quickly he died.⁴⁴

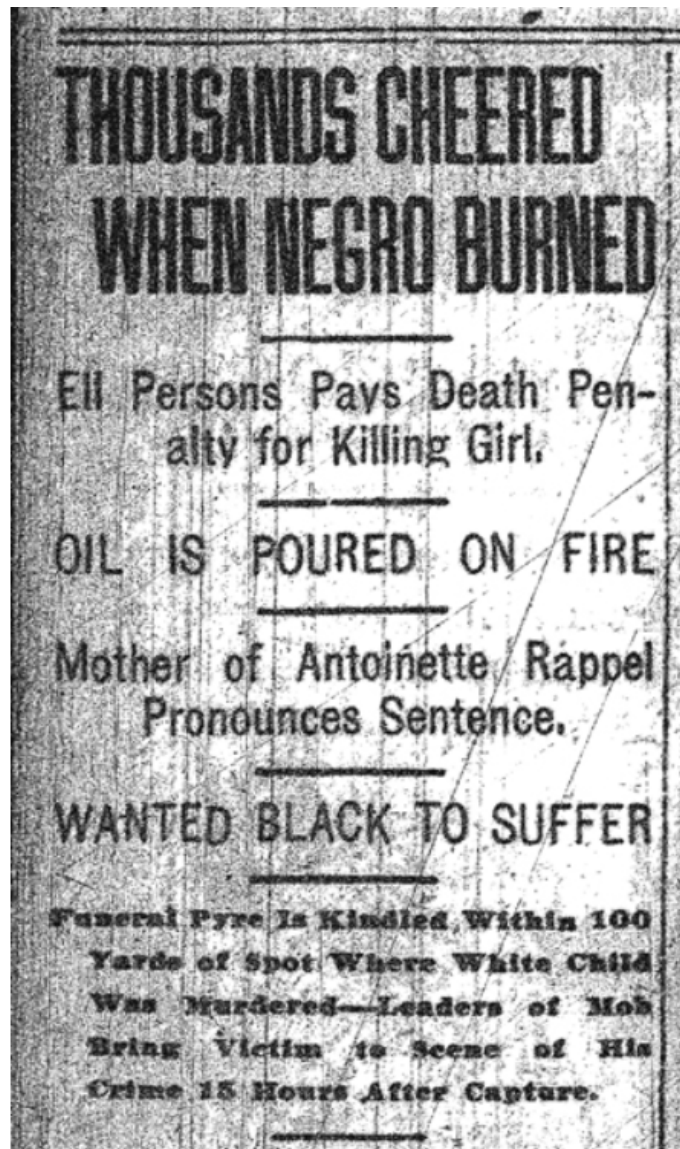


Figure 5. Headline, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 1.

⁴³ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 8.

⁴⁴ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 1, 8; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1, 8; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 128-129.

Persons is the only lynching victim known to be burned alive in Shelby County, and he suffered more violence after his death. His head was decapitated, his heart was cut out, and his body was dismembered by the crowd.⁴⁵ In his report to *The Crisis*, James Weldon Johnson speaks about being dispatched to Memphis by the NAACP to investigate Ell Persons's lynching. After noting the complete lack of evidence implicating Persons in Rappel's murder, he goes on to describe the scene largely untouched since the lynching. The log and iron rail to which Persons was chained remained on top of the "black and charred" earth where he was burned. He noted an American flag had been posted to mark the site.⁴⁶

The violence did not end that day with Ell Persons. A car of three white men drove over twelve miles to Memphis's Black commercial district and threw Persons's head and foot at a group of African Americans on Beale Street, which was the center of African American commercial life and entertainment during this time.⁴⁷ Immediately after Persons's death, a vigilante group began hunting for Dewitt Ford and Dan Armstrong, who were reportedly implicated by Persons as accomplices. The men were quickly apprehended and after a "trial" along a country lane, were released the same night by the armed groups after providing sufficient alibis.⁴⁸

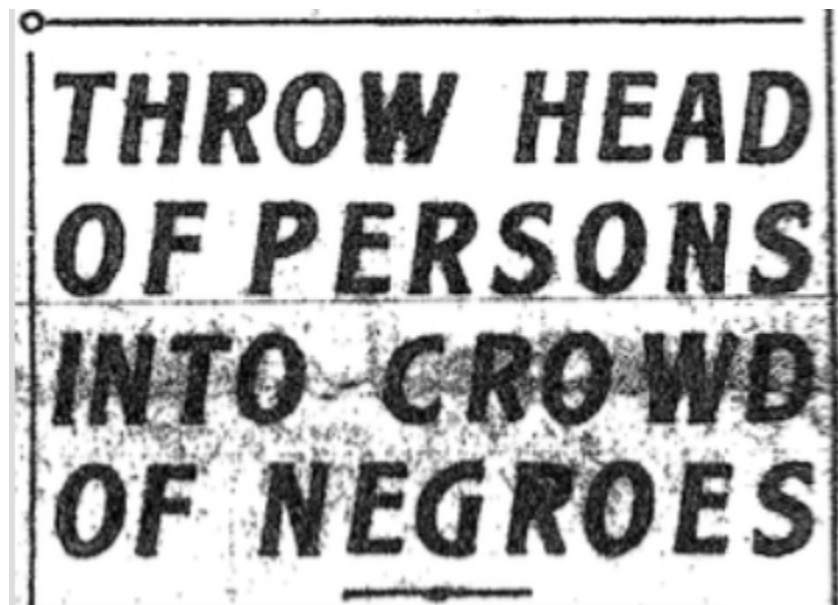


Figure 6. Headline, *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1.

The Aftermath

⁴⁵ Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 119, 129; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 1; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1.

⁴⁶ James Weldon Johnson, "The Lynching at Memphis," *The Crisis*, vol. 14, August 1917, 188.

⁴⁷ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1; *Chicago Defender*, September 8, 1917, p. 1; Bobby L. Lovett, "Beale Street," *Tennessee Encyclopedia* (October 8, 2017), <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/beale-street/>

⁴⁸ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 8; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 23, 1917, 1.

The lynching of Ell Persons took place with full participation from the white community and local government. The sheriff granted each demand from the mob to search the city and county jails in their quest for extrajudicial punishment between May 8 and May 18. Although a coroner's jury met at the lynching site the same day Persons was murdered, they concluded his death was from "unknown causes at the hands of unknown persons."⁴⁹ The morgue entry notes that they buried what was left of his body and noted him as responsible for Rappel's death.⁵⁰ A grand jury, charged by Judge D.B. Puryear on May 25, did not charge anyone with Persons's extrajudicial execution. Significantly, the judge had noted the support of the white community for Persons's lynching and did not grant the jury inquisitorial powers.⁵¹ No one has ever been convicted for either Rappel's or Persons's murder.

It is important to note that the mob participants responsible for Persons's kidnapping and murder appeared to have had no fear of consequences for their actions, legal or otherwise. A *Memphis News Scimitar* article discussed plans for a monument for Rappel and noted that many present at the lynching donated money. The article further listed the contact information for R.H. Brown, who had apparently gathered donations at the scene of the lynching.⁵²

⁴⁹ The coroner was N. T. Ingram, a prominent member of the Ku Klux Klan. *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 23, 1917, 1; Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 55.

⁵⁰ State of Tennessee, State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Certificate of Death, Ell Persons, May 22, 1917 (microfilm, vol. 51, p. 494); Shelby County Morgue Daily Record, May 1917, p. 152, SCA; Shelby County Criminal Court, Division One, *State of Tennessee v. L.T. Person* (case jacket), SCA.

⁵¹ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 26, 1917, 5.

⁵² *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 23, 1917, 1; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 131.



Figure 7. Article from the Memphis News Scimitar, May 23, 1917, 1.

Some members of the public were outraged over Persons's lynching and the failure of local government to prevent it. Several citizens, white and Black, wrote to Tennessee's governor immediately after protesting the injustice committed and asking for action.⁵³ The Jewish Brotherhood passed a resolution condemning the lynching and organized a protest that took place two days after the event.⁵⁴ A group of twenty clergymen and several African Americans issued a joint statement to the press recognizing their failure to alert the community of impending violence and noting the culpability of community leaders in not resisting vigilante violence.⁵⁵ The Memphis City Club called for Sheriff Tate's resignation in a resolution, and the Negro Medical Association moved its 1917 convention to Philadelphia to protest the city's failure to provide justice.⁵⁶

⁵³ *Herald*, May 27, 1917, page unknown, as quoted in NAACP, "Memphis, May 22," 4.

⁵⁴ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 8.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Berkley Kalin, "A Plea for Tolerance: Fineshriber in Memphis," in *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*, edited by Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 50-64, 57.

⁵⁶ *New York Age*, June 14, 1917, and June 21, 1917, Tuskegee Lynching Files, reel 221, frames 556 and 561; *Palatka (FL) Advocate*, June 16, 1917, clipping in Tuskegee Lynching Files, reel 221, frame 566.

One of the most significant outcomes of the outrage was the formation of a Memphis chapter of the NAACP.⁵⁷ NAACP Field Secretary James Weldon Johnson, who described the horror of seeing the charred site of Persons's lynching, developed the local branch with Memphian Robert R. Church, Jr. This branch was the South's fourth chapter. Membership ballooned in the first two years, and it became the South's largest branch. The NAACP's history states that the lynching of Ell Persons and subsequent formation of the chapter "changed the political and social structure of the South."⁵⁸ There are currently two historical markers commemorating Persons's lynching, one placed by Students Uniting Memphis and the Shelby County Historical Commission, the other by the Lynching Sites Project of Memphis, the Memphis NAACP chapter, and the National Park Service.⁵⁹

As Jennifer Rae Taylor, attorney for the Equal Justice Initiative, explains in "A History of Tolerance for Violence Has Laid the Groundwork for Injustice Today," lynchings and subsequent violence, as in Ell Persons's case, were far from isolated examples of vigilante justice by rogue actors. They were coordinated efforts to uphold a racial hierarchy through violence and intimidation that could not have succeeded without the tolerance or active participation of law enforcement and local and state government. African Americans were intentionally prohibited from exercising their political, financial, and social potential, and subsequent generations have been left to grapple with this trauma. Taylor goes on to say that "[w]hite people who witnessed, participated in, and socialized their children in a culture that tolerated gruesome lynchings also were psychologically damaged."⁶⁰

Very little information is known about Ell Persons, the central victim in this story. His death certificate lists his age as 38 and notes that he was married. His occupation was listed as farmer, although contemporary sources state he was a woodcutter. Michelle Whitney, a descendant of Persons' brother, has compiled an *Ancestry* family tree and notes several relatives, including a wife, Sallie Taylor.⁶¹ The Shelby County morgue record notes that "part of the body such as could be found" was buried in the county cemetery.⁶² The grave was unmarked, and its exact location remains unknown.

The omission of other details about Persons' life speaks to the heart of this report. The victims of racial terrorism, when named, are too often reduced to their suffering, and the lives and families left behind are all but erased from the public record. This in itself is another form of trauma. It is the position of the

⁵⁷ James R. Sweeney, "The 'Trials' of Shelby County, Tennessee: 'Judge Lynch' Presiding," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, vol. 63 (Summer 2004), 102-127; Darius Young, "'The Saving of Black America's Body and White America's Soul': The Lynching of Ell Persons and the Rise of Black Activism in Memphis," pp. 39-60 in Aram Goudsouzian and Charles W. McKinney Jr., eds., *Unseen Light: Black Struggles for Freedom in Memphis, Tennessee* (University Press of Kentucky, 2018).

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Viking Press, 1933), 317; Lester C. Lamon, *Black Tennesseans, 1900-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 265-67; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 134; "History," National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Retrieved from <http://www.naacpmemphis.org/history/>

⁵⁹ Jim and Kim Coleman, "The Lynching of Ell Persons Finds a Lasting Imprint on the Memphis NAACP Chapter," *High Ground News* (May 24, 2017). Retrieved from <https://www.highgroundnews.com/features/EllPersonsLynchingMemphisNAACP.aspx>

⁶⁰ Taylor, "A History of Tolerance for Violence Has Laid the Groundwork for Injustice Today," American Bar Association.

⁶¹ Whitney-Woods Family Tree, *Ancestry*. Retrieved from https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/family-tree/person/tree/6406871/person/230086747388/facts?_phsrc=DWM2&_phstart=successSource

⁶² Shelby County Morgue Daily Record, May 1917, p. 152, Shelby County Archives.

Lynching Sites Project of Memphis that until the United States deals with this trauma, there can be no healing. Without healing, there can be no reconciliation. Without reconciliation, there can be no justice.

Description of the Study Area

The study area examined in this pre-reconnaissance survey is near Summer Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee. The study area is approximately a quarter-acre and is in a wooded area near planned Wolf River Greenway Trail updates, scheduled to take place in 2022-2023. The boundaries are roughly Summer Avenue to the south, Wolf River to the west, Fletcher Creek to the north, and commercial property owned by Gary M. and Glenn A. Rutherford to the east.⁶³

The lynching of Ell Persons took place on May 22, 1917, at the Macon Road bridge that crossed the Wolf River. In the century since, the Wolf River has been moved and both the bridge and road are gone. Two concrete substructures mark the location of the bridge. We have been unable to determine their exact age, but the evidence indicates they probably were constructed in the early 1920s. The roadbed is not clearly visible on the ground but is marked by powerlines that run along its course. The site remains remote and isolated from the extensive development that has occurred around it. The study team has concluded that the lynching site was the north side of the west end of the Macon Road bridge. This was determined by scrutinizing all available sources that gave details of the location, with particular reliance on the police report of Antoinette Rappel's murder, contemporary local newspaper articles, and James Weldon Johnson's description in *The Crisis*.⁶⁴

All sources agree that both the murder of Rappel and the lynching of Persons took place on the west side of the bridge, that is on the side nearest to Memphis. A close reading of the sources indicates that Rappel's body was found on the south side of the road, while Persons was lynched on the north side. The *News Scimitar* wrote, "[I]t had been decided to burn Persons on the south side of the bridge, near the place where Miss Rappel [sic] was assaulted and killed In order that more spectators might secure a view of the execution, the plans were changed ... and the scene of execution was laid north of the bridge."⁶⁵ This account matches that of the *Commercial Appeal*.⁶⁶ Johnson's account in *The Crisis* provided the most specific description of the lynching site, noting that the evidence of the crime was "down in a hollow twenty feet, perhaps, below the levee of the road, and on the left side and at the near end of the bridge as approached from the city," which would be the north side of the west end.⁶⁷ Taken all together, the study team is confident that the north side of the west end of the Macon Road bridge is the site of Ell Persons' lynching.

Older maps noting the location of the study area are sparse as the area was not incorporated into the city of Memphis until 1956. There are no Sanborn Fire Insurance maps showing the details of the study area at the time of Ell Persons's lynching. The maps that do exist, however, indicate that the layout of the

⁶³ Shelby County Property Assessor website.

⁶⁴ Report of Homicide, Antoinette Rappel, Memphis Police Department, May 4, 1917, Shelby County Archives; *Commercial Appeal*, May 3, 1917, p. 1; *News Scimitar*, May 4, 1917, 1; *News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1; *Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 8; "The Lynching at Memphis," *The Crisis*, vol. 14, August 1917, 185-188.

⁶⁵ *News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1.

⁶⁶ *Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 8.

⁶⁷ Johnson, 188.

road and bridge remained consistent over approximately 100 years; although the river has been relocated and the bridge and road no longer exist, the remaining bridge substructures make it possible to precisely locate the site.

Nineteenth century information on the site: Construction of a plank road from the small settlement of Macon to Memphis was authorized by the Tennessee General Assembly in 1852.⁶⁸ This road crossed the Wolf River some miles east of Memphis and entered Memphis near its northeastern edge. Macon Road joined with the Old Raleigh Road at the location of the Poor House and Work House (not far from the Treadwell School Antionette Rappel attended) and continued east into downtown Memphis.⁶⁹

The earliest reference we have located to a bridge over the Wolf River on the Macon Road appears in the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 15, 1860.⁷⁰ The ambush and murder of a well-known doctor on the Macon Road near the Wolf River bridge in 1867 led to a detailed description of the area in the local press: “Four miles from the junction of the Macon with the Raleigh road is a bridge. A short distance this side [west side] of the bridge the road commences narrowing, and is fringed on each side with a thicket so thickly studded with dogwood, cane, etc., as to seem almost impervious even to pedestrians. Three hundred yards before reaching the bridge the road is so narrow that a horseman riding in the center is within eight or ten feet of either edge of the thicket. The vicinity is wild looking and suggestive of a bloody deed.”⁷¹

Maps dating from 1869 and 1888 show a bridge on the Macon Road crossing the Wolf River. It is likely that the bridge was replaced several times over the ninety-some years that it was in use. An 1882 notice in the *Daily Memphis Avalanche* reports a request for bids for commissioners “to let out and superintend the building of a Trestle across Wolf River Bottom, on the Macon Road.”⁷² A November article of the same year reports that “Messrs. Hamner and Houston, contractors, are nearing the completion of the immense trestle across Wolf river bottom at the Macon road bridge.”⁷³ In 1885, the *Weekly Public Ledger* revealed that the Macon Road was “in a very bad condition” between the workhouse and the bridge and “cannot be repaired by the road hands.”⁷⁴ It remains uncertain whether the bridge built in the 1880s was still standing in 1917.

⁶⁸ *Tennessee House Journal*, February 25, 1852, 886.

⁶⁹ 1888 Map of Shelby County, Tenn. Library of Congress, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3963s.la000879>.

⁷⁰ This was an advertisement for a stray mare found “about 1 mile from the bridge on the Memphis and Macon road crossing Wolf river.”

⁷¹ *Public Ledger*, August 29, 1867.

⁷² *Daily Memphis Avalanche*, August 1, 1882, 2.

⁷³ *Daily Memphis Avalanche*, November 5, 1882, 2.

⁷⁴ *Weekly Public Ledger*, October 13, 1885, 1.

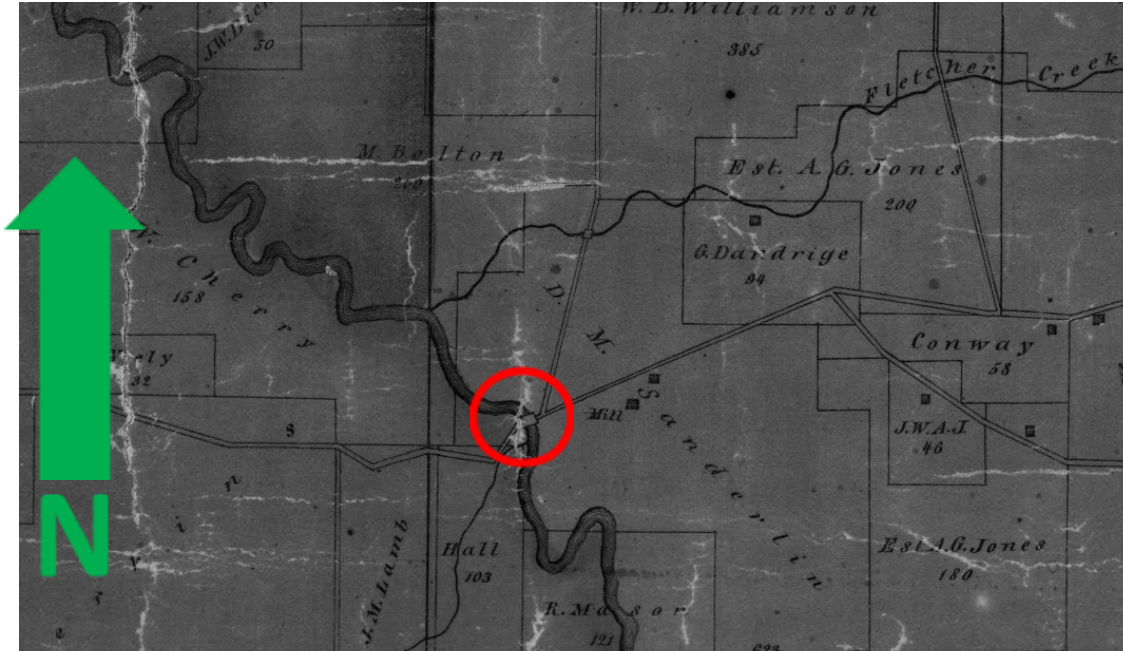


Figure 8: Detail from 1869 Williamson Map. Courtesy of Shelby County Archives.

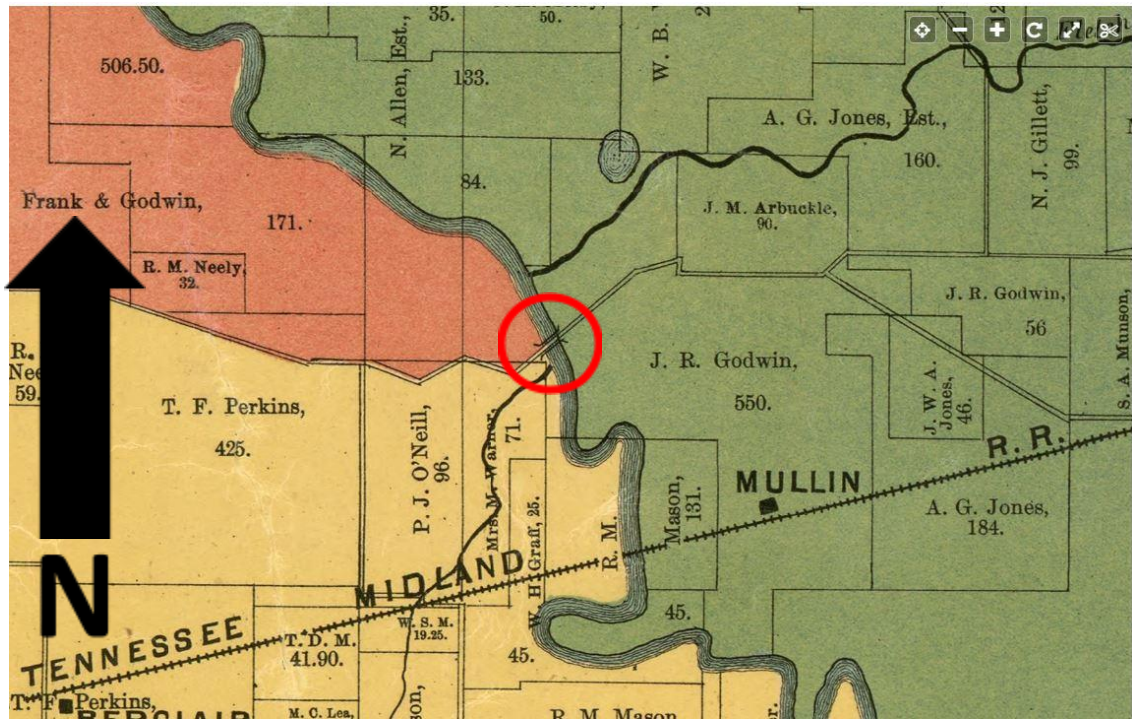


Figure 9: Detail from 1888 Map of Shelby County, Tennessee. Courtesy of Library of Congress, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3963s.la000879>

The site in the early twentieth century: A 1916 soil survey of Shelby County shows the study area and notes the presence of a bridge along Macon Road over the Wolf River.⁷⁵ No photograph of the bridge from that period has been located and no remnants of it exist. James Weldon Johnson's report in *The Crisis* described it as long and wooden with iron railings.⁷⁶ Extensive repair or replacement of this bridge probably took place after a damaging flood in 1919; the *Memphis News Scimitar* reported that "forty feet of the Macon road bridge over Wolf river was washed away and the levee on both sides has sloughed off."⁷⁷ On April 1, 1919, the same paper noted that repairs of damage done to area roads and bridges would begin at once.⁷⁸ It is likely that the existing concrete substructures date from the period after this flood.

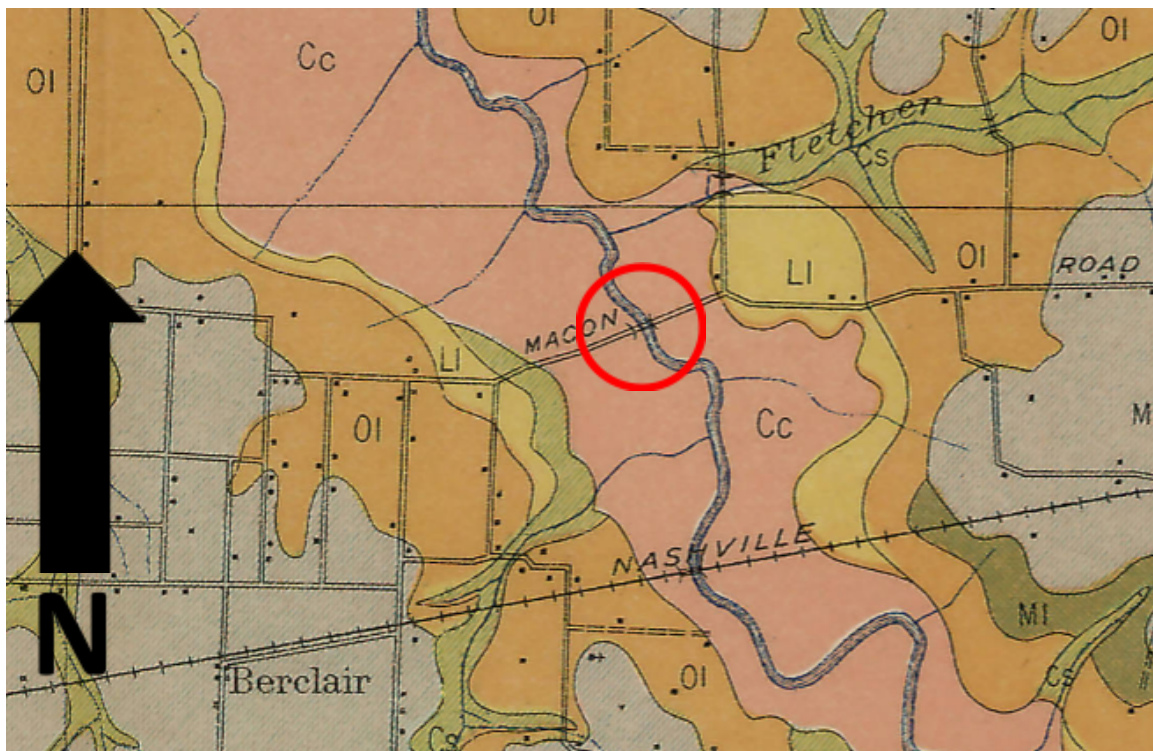


Figure 10. Detail of a Shelby County soil map, 1916. The approximate location of the ELL Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

⁷⁵ Shelby County, Tennessee soil map (1916), TSLA Map Collection. Retrieved from <https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll23/id/14/rec/1>

⁷⁶ Johnson, "The Lynching at Memphis," *The Crisis*, vol. 14, August 1917, 188.

⁷⁷ *Memphis News Scimitar*, March 19, 1919, 2.

⁷⁸ *Memphis News Scimitar*, April 1, 1919, 6.



Figure 11: Detail from Shelby County, Tenn., Rural Delivery Routes. Undated, probably 1920s-1930s. Courtesy of Tennessee State Library and Archives.

The site in the mid twentieth century: The Macon Road and bridge continued in use until the second half of the twentieth century. A 1949 aerial view of the study area shows the bridge intact, and a 1954 map of Shelby County indicates the bridge was still extant and useable. A 1956 topographical map shows the new Summer Avenue bridge over Wolf River, and the Macon Road bridge is not depicted. This strongly suggests the bridge was destroyed or fell into disrepair in 1955. The 1961 topographical map indicates the proposed rerouting of the Wolf River and notes “BRIDGE OUT” near the Macon Road bridge.⁷⁹ By 1964, the Army Corps of Engineers had channelized this section of the Wolf River, moving it approximately two hundred yards to the west.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Bartlett, Tennessee Quadrangle map, 1961, USGS store. Retrieved from <https://store.usgs.gov/map-locator>.

⁸⁰ Wolf River Conservancy, “Introduction to the Wolf River,” <https://wolfriver.org/introduction-to-the-wolf-river>.



Figure 12. Aerial view of the approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site outlined in red, 1949. Courtesy of Shelby County Register of Deeds.

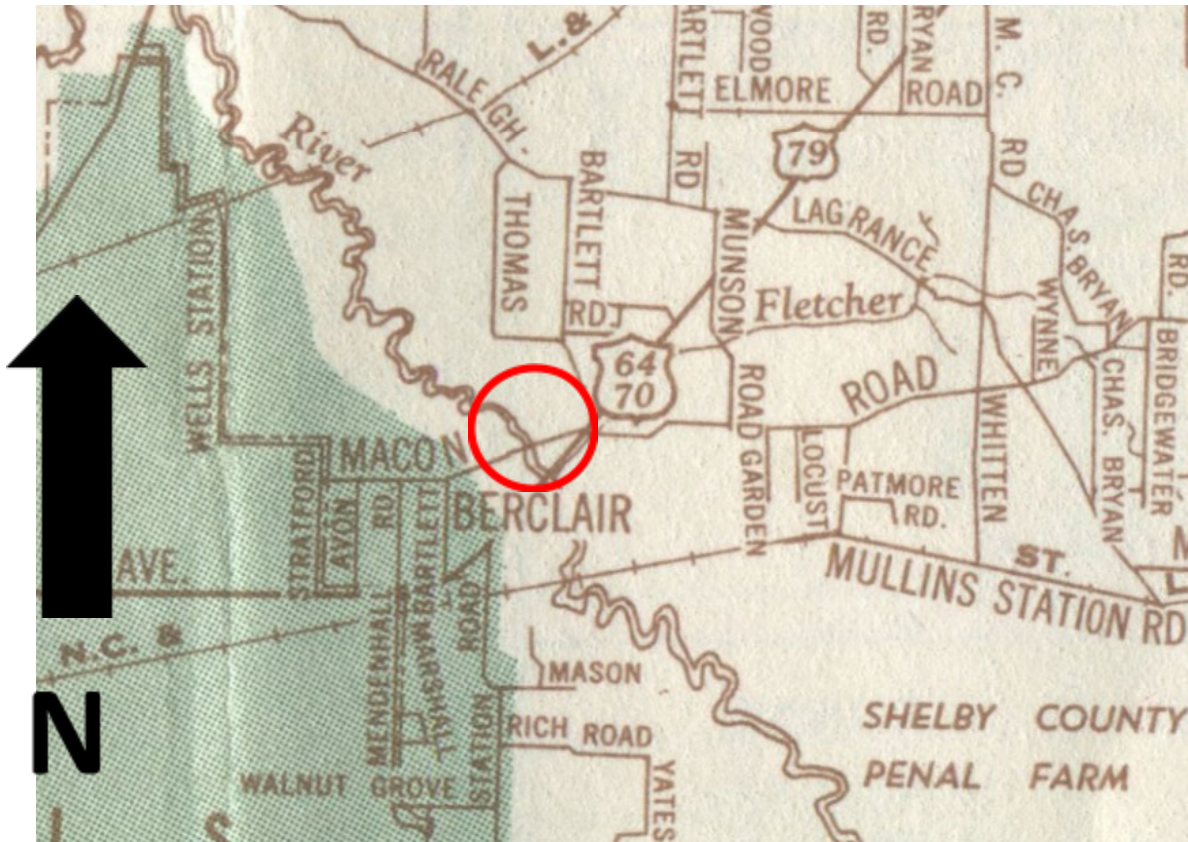


Figure 13. Map of Shelby County, 1954. Courtesy of The Digital Archive of Memphis Public Library. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.



Figure 14: Blytheville, Ak Quadrangle map, 1956, revised in 1970. The Summer Avenue bridge is depicted, but the Macon Road bridge is not. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.

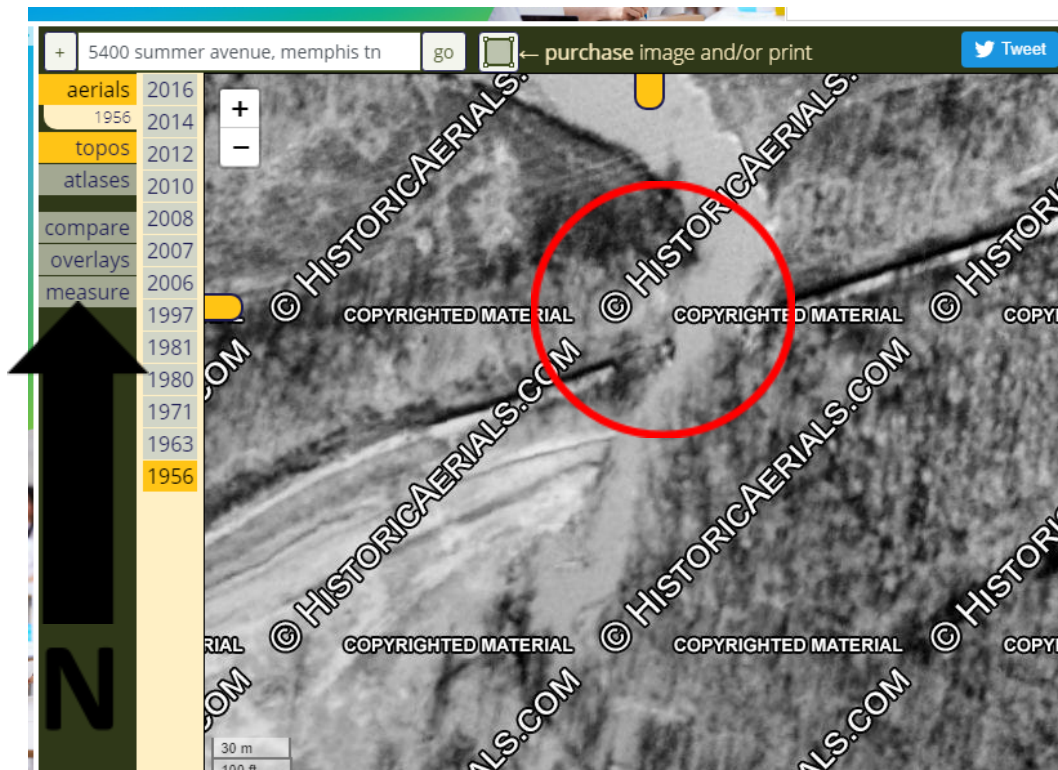


Figure 15. Aerial view of the approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red, 1956. Note the bridge is out over the Wolf River. Courtesy of historicaerials.com/viewer.

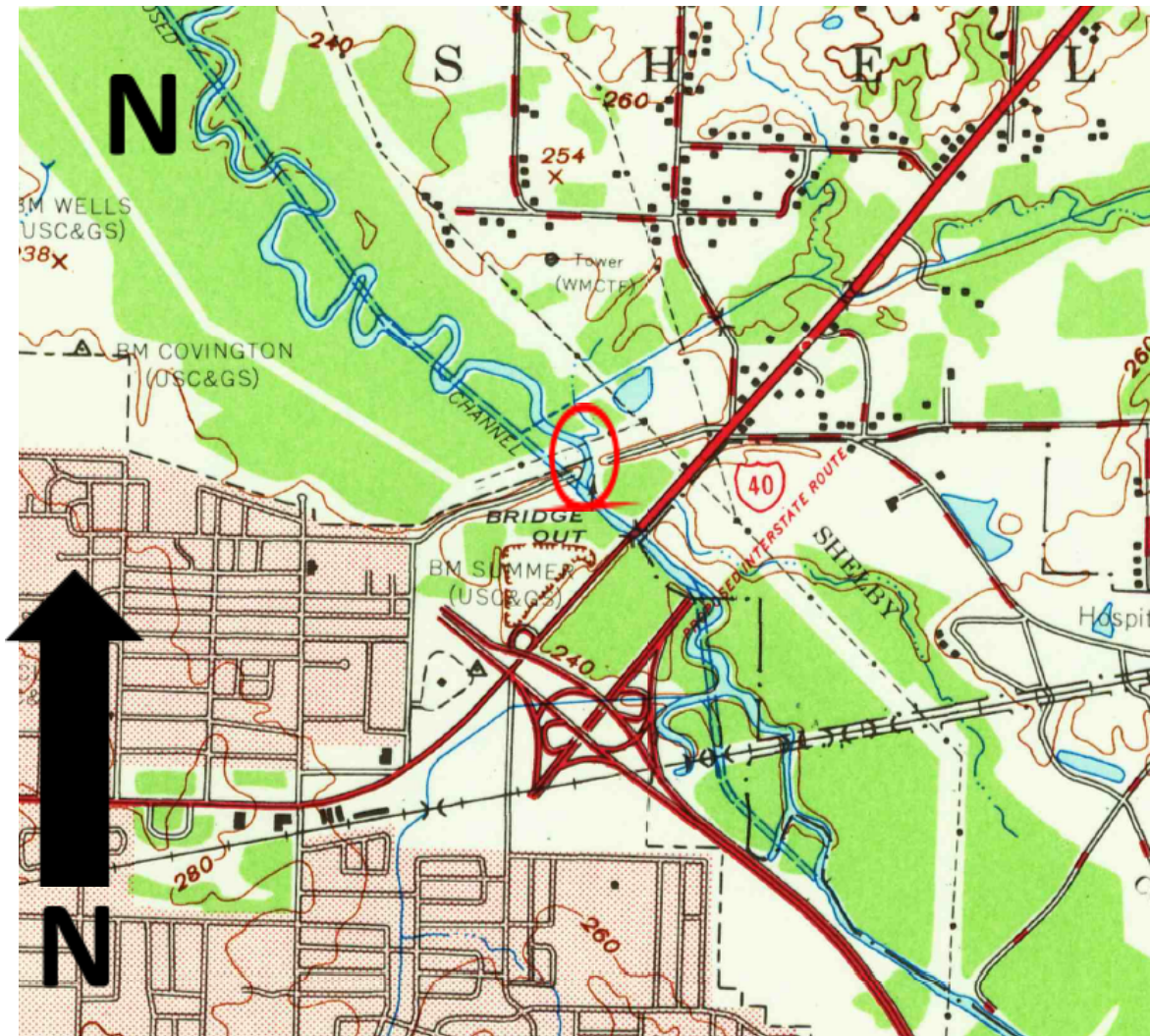


Figure 16. Northeast Memphis Quadrangle map, 1961. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.

The site at present: The roadbed of the Macon Road is not visible, but its course is marked by power lines. The only structures extant at the site are two bridge substructures of concrete construction standing in shallow water. Despite outreach to engineers, GIS analysts, TDOT Environmental Division, Wolf River Conservancy, local historians and archivists, historic organizations, and community members,

the study team was unable to conclusively determine the date of the substructures and whether they were at the location when Persons was killed. Given that they are consistent with the position of the bridge as indicated in all the maps above, it is highly likely that they do mark the location of the bridge, and thus of the lynching, in 1917. The site remains remote and heavily wooded, relatively untouched since the 1917 event. Despite the extensive development of the city around the site, the location remains isolated from the roads, businesses, and houses in the area.



Figure 17: 1949 aerial view of intersection of Summer Avenue and N. White Station Rd, where Haley stated Persons likely lived. Courtesy of Shelby County Property Assessor.

Contemporary sources provide hints at the historic locations of Persons' home, Antoinette Rappel's home, and her uncle's dairy farm, but no definitive answers. The 1916 Shelby County soil map indicates many buildings near the Ell Persons Lynching Site, but there is no way to identify them as the area was not within city limits at the time it was created. For the same reason, city directories have been equally unsuccessful. According to Haley's article, Persons lived within a half-mile of the murder site, near the intersection of what is today Summer Avenue and N. White Station Road, likely because Macon Road and the surrounding area "was a prime area for cutting wood."⁸¹ This reiterated the statement by James

⁸¹ Haley, "The Last Lynching," *Memphis Magazine*, vol. 5, April 1980, 63-64.

Weldon Johnson noting that “a number of [Negro wood choppers] worked in the vicinity.”⁸² Persons probably lived in a wooden shack that has long since been demolished.” Haley further noted that Antoinette lived with her widowed mother and grandmother at the time of her death, “some two miles east of the Macon Road bridge over the Wolf River,” and her uncle’s dairy was located at Macon Road and Avon Road. Efforts to track the locations through property records have been unsuccessful as well.



Figure 18: 1916 photograph of the Treadwell School, courtesy of Joe Walk Collection, Benjamin L. Hooks Public Library.

The Treadwell School is the only historic building related to Antoinette Rappel’s life that still exists and is approximately 3.4 miles west/southwest of the Ell Persons Lynching Site. Rappel was on her way to her uncle’s farm to wait for the school wagon to take her to Treadwell School on the day she was murdered. Located at 3538 Given Ave in Memphis, Treadwell School was constructed in 1915 by Memphis architects Max Furbringer and Merrill Ehrman.⁸³ The school has been significantly altered since its construction, and for this reason was determined not eligible for the National Register of Historic Places when it was surveyed by Judith Johnson of Memphis Heritage Inc. in 1993.⁸⁴

The Tennessee Historical Commission viewer shows no extant historic buildings from 1917 or earlier have been surveyed within a two-mile radius of the Ell Persons Lynching Site, only buildings constructed

⁸² James Weldon Johnson, “The Lynching at Memphis,” *The Crisis*, vol. 14, August 1917, 185.

⁸³ These famed architects also built the Raoul Wellenberg Memorial Shell (better known as Overton Park Shell), the Temple Israel, and the West Tennessee Tuberculosis Hospital, among others. Jennifer M. Tucker, National Register of Historic Places, Graceland, listed November 7, 1991, Section 7, 2.

⁸⁴ SY-11649, Tennessee Historical Commission Viewer.

between 1920 and 1980. Worth noting, however, is that Wilfong Road is approximately 1.9 miles north/northwest of the site. Antoinette's body was found by her uncle, Will Wilfong. It is possible that this road was named for the Wilfong family who, according to the girl's death certificate that he signed as the informant, lived on Macon Road.

Although historic buildings from 1917 are scarce, items belonging to Antoinette Rappel still exist. The family of Laura Wilfong, a descendant of Antoinette Rappel's family, still has possession of the girl's bicycle basket, books, photos, and gloves. These items were borrowed to display briefly at the Pink Palace (now the Museum of Science and History) in Memphis in 2017.

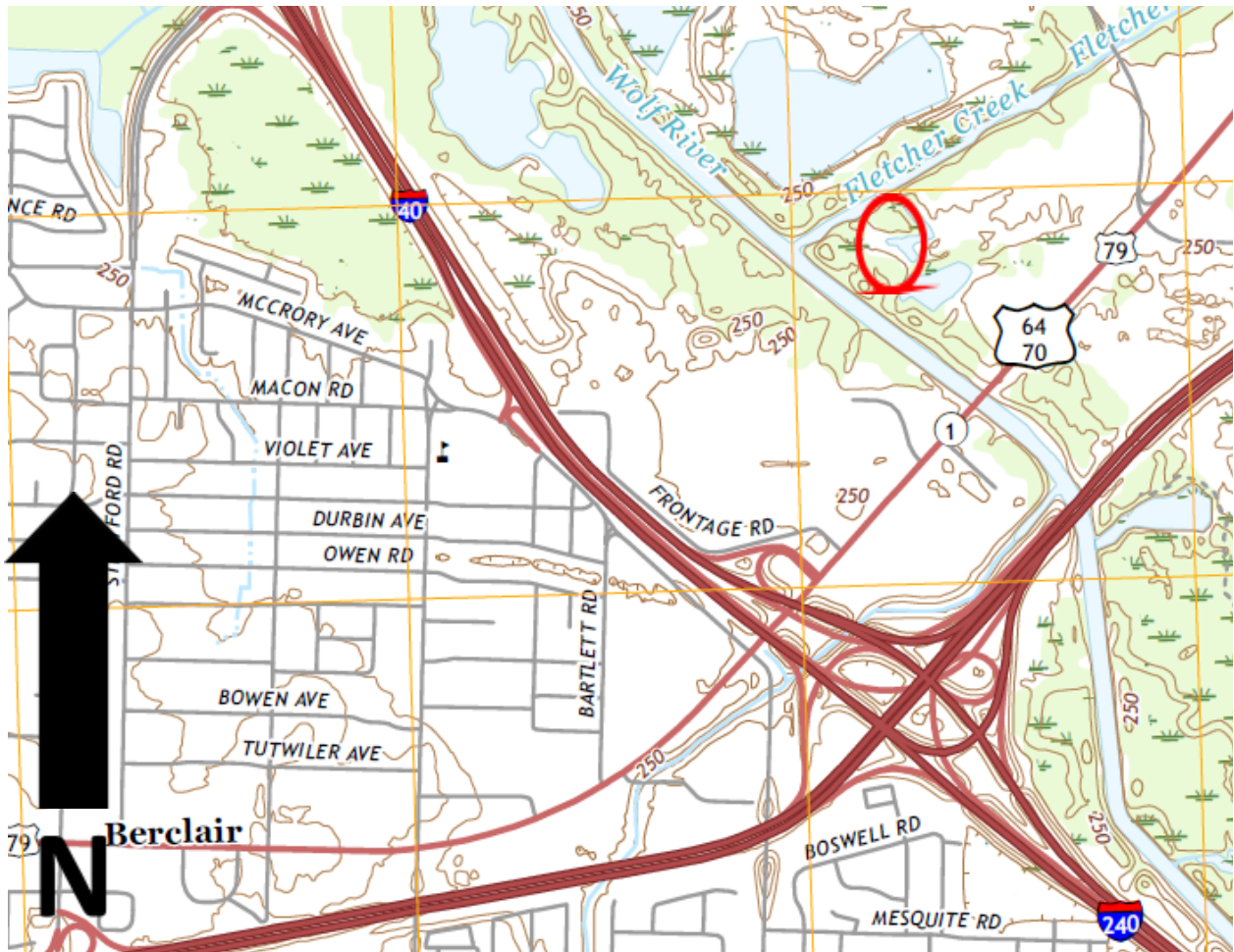
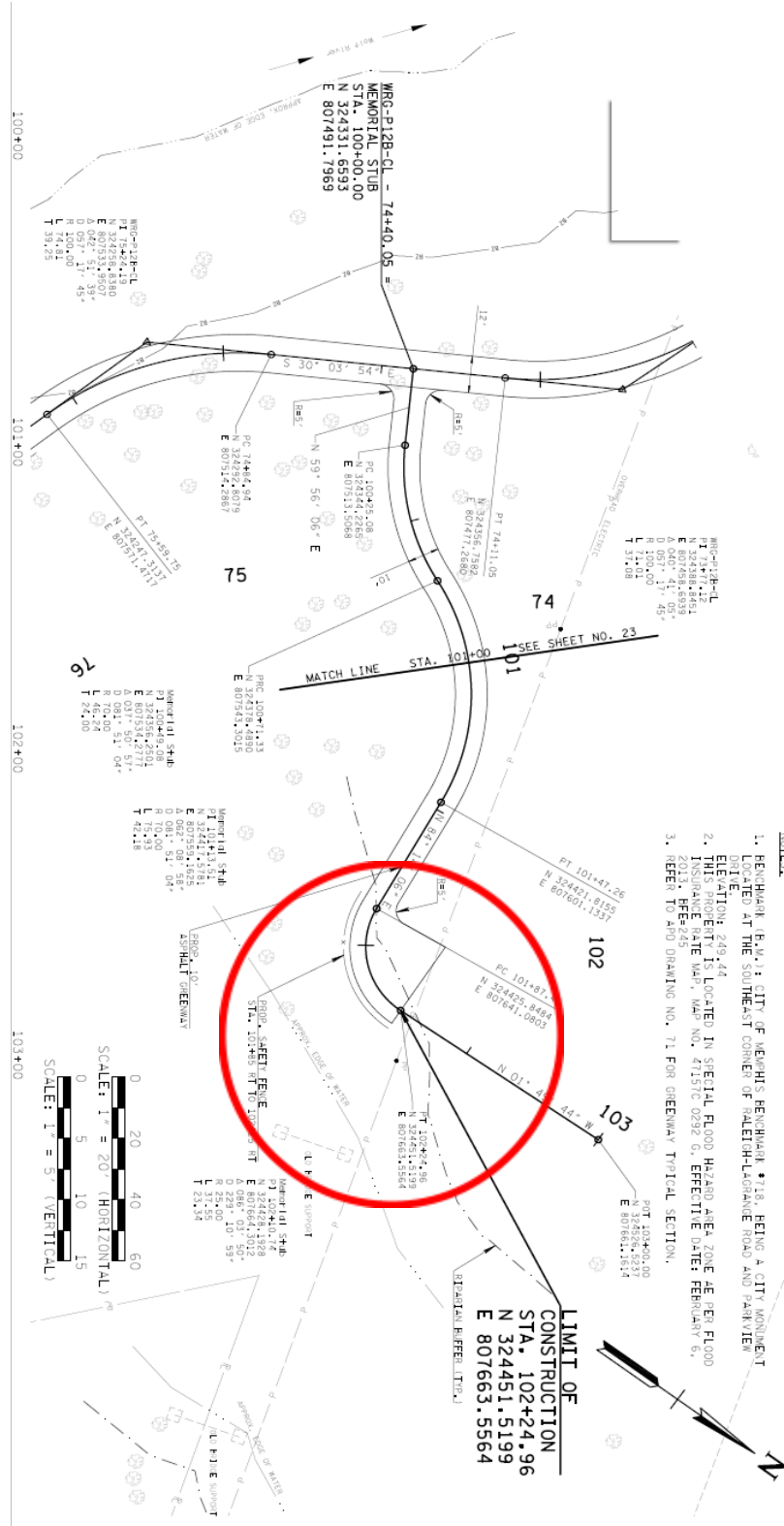


Figure 19. Northeast Memphis Quadrangle map, 2019. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.



- NOTES:
1. BOUNDARY B.M.A.: CITY OF MEMPHIS BOUNDARY #718, BEING A CITY MONUMENT LOCATED AT THE SOUTHEAST CORNER OF HALETH-LORRAINE ROAD AND PARKVIEW DRIVE.
 2. THIS PROJECT IS LOCATED IN SPECIAL FLOOD HAZARD AREA ZONE 2E PER FLOOD INSURANCE RATE MAP, MAP NO. 41197C 0292 G, EFFECTIVE DATE: FEBRUARY 03, 2010.
 3. REFER TO AND DRAWING NO. 71 FOR GREENWAY TYPICAL SECTION.

Figure 20. Wolf River Greenway construction drawings, courtesy of Wolf River Conservancy. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.

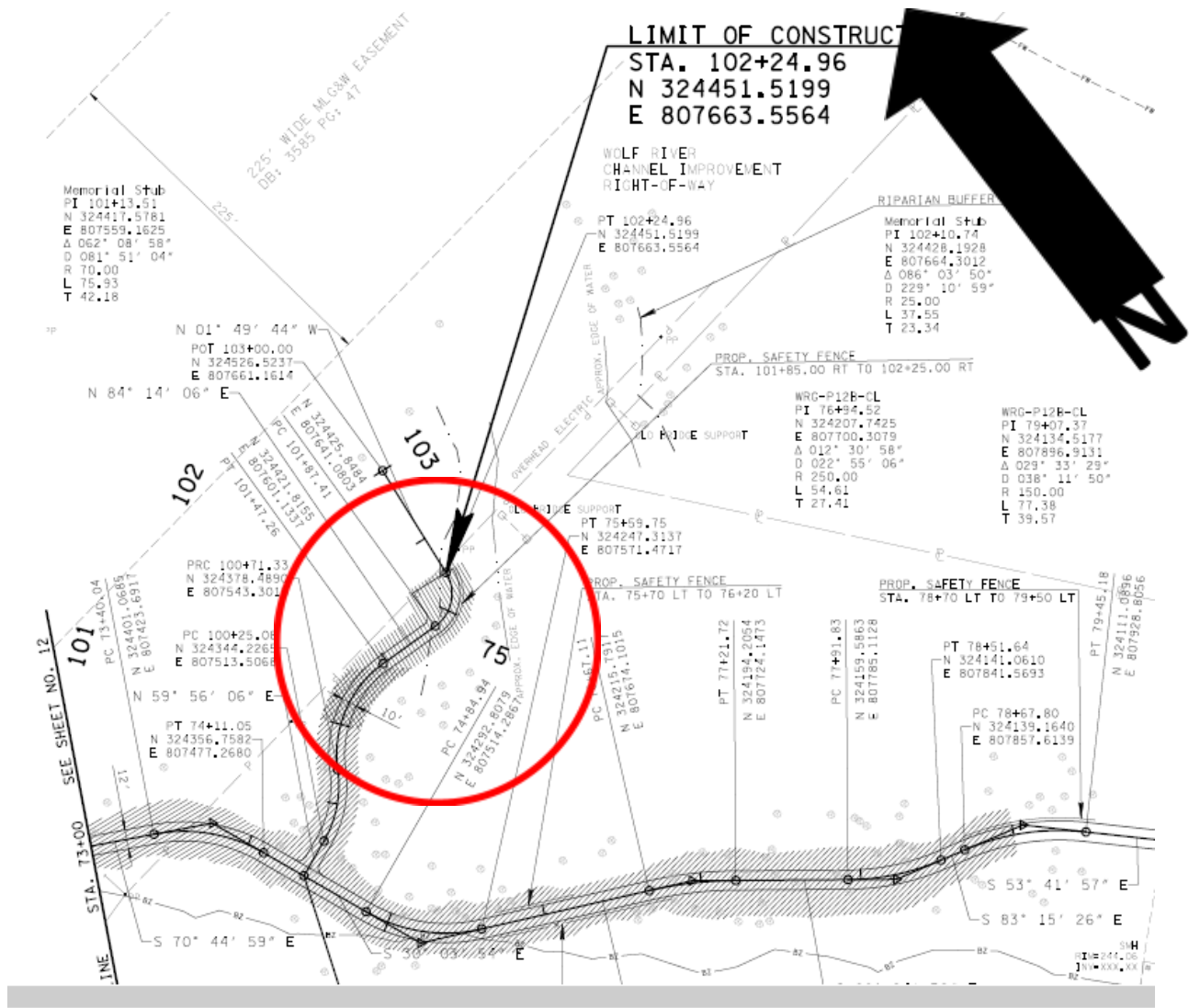


Figure 21. Greenway spur to Ell Persons site construction drawings, courtesy of Wolf River Conservancy. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.

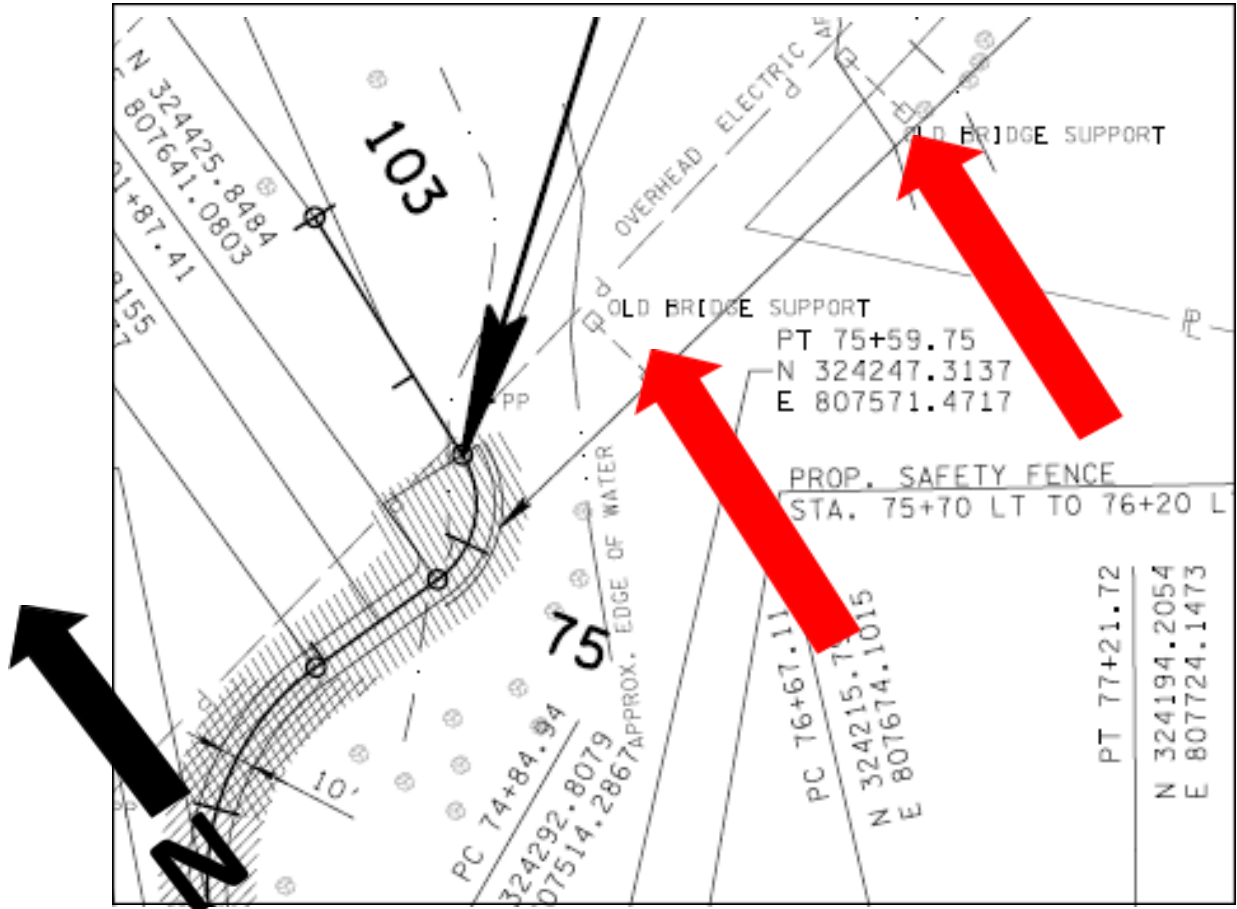


Figure 22: Closeup of construction drawings showing locations of bridge abutments, courtesy of Wolf River Conservancy.



Figure 23: Closeup of Greenway spur to Ell Persons site showing ownership of parcel, courtesy of Wolf River Conservancy.



Figure 24: Approximate boundaries of the study area, courtesy of Shelby County Property Assessor.

Preliminary Evaluation of Resource Significance

Introduction

National significance for cultural resources is evaluated by applying NHL criteria contained in 36 CFR Part 65. National historic landmarks are buildings, sites, districts, structures, and objects designated by the Secretary of the Interior as possessing national significance under at least one of six criteria:

1. an association with events that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified with, or that understandingly represent, the broad patterns of US history and from which an understanding and appreciation of those patterns may be gained; or
2. an association importantly with the lives of persons nationally significant in the history of the US; or
3. a representation of some great idea or ideal of the American people; or
4. an embodiment of the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen exceptionally valuable for a study of a period, style or method of construction, or that represent a significant, distinctive and exceptional entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
5. are composed of integral parts of the environment not sufficiently significant by reason of historical association or artistic merit to warrant individual recognition but collectively compose of an entity of exceptional historical or artistic significance, or outstandingly commemorate or illustrate a way of life or culture; or
6. have yielded or may be likely to yield information of major scientific importance by revealing new cultures, or by shedding light upon periods of occupation over large areas of the US. Such sites are those which have yielded, or which may reasonably be expected to yield, data affecting theories, concepts, and ideas to a major degree.

National historic landmarks must also retain a high degree of integrity in location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

National Significance Analysis

Properties considered for national significance under NHL criterion 1 can be associated with either a specific event marking an important moment in US history or with a pattern of events or a historic movement that made a significant contribution to the development of the United States. The 1917 lynching of Ell Persons was a turning point in Memphis's history as it spurred the creation of the city's NAACP chapter and elicited a strong reaction from the city's Black and Jewish communities. The event struck a nerve nationally as newspapers across the country covered Persons's lynching. In July of 1917 thousands of African American men, women, and children marched silently down Fifth Avenue in New York City to protest the lynchings of Ell Persons, Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas, and the riot in East St Louis. Many held signs reading: "We march because we want to make impossible a repetition of Waco,

Memphis, and East St. Louis by arousing the conscience of the country, and to bring the murderers of our brothers, sisters and innocent children to justice.”⁸⁵

Persons’s lynching was an extreme example of a national pattern of racial terror events that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; one scholar characterized it as “one of the most vicious lynchings in American history” (Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (Oxford University Press, 1967, 45). As the Equal Justice Initiative’s “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror” states, racial terror lynchings were distinct from other forms of racial violence as they took place openly without significant interference from law enforcement, the victims were denied a trial in an established criminal justice system, and the perpetrators were seldom punished for their crimes. Ell Persons’ lynching meets all these criteria, as well as attendance by thousands of white spectators, making his murder a public spectacle lynching.⁸⁶

The inclusion of the Ell Persons Lynching Site would fill a dearth of recognized sites of African American significance. Of 95,000 entries on the National Register of Historic Places, only two percent of those represent African American history.⁸⁷ Memphis is nationally known for its Civil Rights history, yet none of the city’s four historic landmarks are nominated for that significance.⁸⁸ As the site of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, his assassination, and the 1968 Sanitation Workers Strikes, Memphis is undoubtedly an appropriate location for the country’s first National Historic Landmark dedicated to lynching history.

Regarding the integrity of the site in relation to NHL criterion 1, Ell Persons’s case possesses a high degree of integrity in location, feeling, and association with racial terror lynchings at the turn of the twentieth century. Persons’s is also one of the relatively few instances where the precise site of a lynching is known. In 1917, the site was outside the Memphis city limits. In the decades since, the city has expanded around the site in all directions, with extensive development including the interstate highway, businesses, and residential areas. This development bypassed the actual site, however, leaving it buffered and remote from the surrounding roads and buildings. This isolation increases the impact of the location, as it allows for quiet reflection in a landscape that has changed little since the deaths of Rappel and Persons.

The resources found at the site also have the potential to answer several research questions, in a national context, if systematically examined. For example, a flawed yet pervasive narrative of lynchings argues that these were unfortunate actions by a few bad actors rather than a coordinated campaign of terror against African Americans. As racial terror lynchings took place across the country and no National Park Service-administered memorial exists, the Ell Persons Lynching Site can serve as an example to other communities that wish to preserve and commemorate their victims of racial terror.

Need for Further Context and Analysis

⁸⁵ “Negroes in Protest March in Fifth Av.,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1917.

⁸⁶ “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” Equal Justice Initiative, 4.

⁸⁷ Casey Cep, “The Fight to Preserve African-American History,” *The New Yorker* (January 27, 2020).

Retrieved from

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/02/03/the-fight-to-preserve-african-american-history>.

⁸⁸ Sun Record Company, Graceland, and Beale Street Historic District are listed as significant in Performing Arts, Entertainment/Recreation, and/or Social History, and Chucalissa Indian Village is significant in Prehistoric and Exploration/Settlement areas of significance.

Theme studies are significant resources in designation of national historic landmarks. The 2008 NPS document *Civil Rights in America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites* recognizes broad themes in the civil rights story; the individuals, places, and events that represent those themes; and evaluates how related sites are represented and recognized. Lynching is recognized in the framework under the broad theme of criminal injustice. Of national historic landmarks listed at the time of publication related to the theme of criminal injustice, which includes racially motivated killing and lynching, none were related to racial terror.

The 1917 lynching of Ell Persons made national headlines and is one of relatively few lynching sites that have been identified. If the site is considered potentially nationally significant under criterion 1 for its association with a national campaign of racial terror, then further study should assess other sites associated with racial terror and their aftermath in a comparative analysis. Scholarship on the history and context of documented racial terror lynchings has certainly flourished in the last few years, but most sites have not been documented. An NHL theme study investigating the sites and landscapes of racial terror lynchings in their wider national context would be critical in identifying nationally significant sites that represent this part of US history, and in verifying that the Ell Persons Lynching Site contains resources of exceptional value.

Documentation of the site in a NRHP nomination or NHL documentation is recommended to fully evaluate the resources and the aspects of potential national significance. It is likely that further study could reveal and examine other sites across the country associated with racial terror lynchings. As noted above, an NHL theme study of comparative sites should be undertaken.

Conclusion

As already stated, not a single national historic landmark related to the theme of criminal injustice is associated with racial terror. It is unfathomable that Memphis, with its connection to the Civil Rights Movement, does not have a national historic landmark related to civil rights. The Ell Persons Lynching Site is likely to be considered nationally significant under criterion 1 as an exceptional example of a pattern of historical events that has largely been erased from the physical landscape—racial terror in the United States from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To investigate the landscapes associated with race riots in America from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a comparative analysis is needed.

Preliminary Evaluation of Resource Suitability

Introduction

A site that is found to be nationally significant must also meet the criterion for suitability to be included in the national park system. According to *NPS Management Policies 2006*, a site is considered suitable if it “represents a natural or cultural resource type that is not already adequately represented in the national park system or is not comparably represented and protected for public enjoyment by other federal agencies; tribal, state, or local governments; or the private sector.” Adequacy of representation is determined by comparing the potential addition to comparably managed areas that contain the same resource type while considering differences in character, quality, quantity, or combination of resource values, as well as opportunities for public enjoyment. Evaluating comparable sites provides insight into whether the proposed addition would expand, enhance, or duplicate resource protection or visitor use opportunities found in areas that are already managed by the National Park Service.

As the study area in Memphis, Tennessee, is likely to be found nationally significant for its association with an event that is representative of racial terror across the United States, sites associated with racial terror commemoration and the formation of civil rights organizations will be identified in this survey.

Comparable Sites

Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice

Montgomery, Alabama

In April 2018, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) opened the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The Legacy Museum creates an immersive experience for visitors that examines America's racial justice legacy, from the horrors of the domestic slave trade to the current prison system. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice commemorates the more than 4400 African American lives ended or tormented by white mobs between 1877 and 1950. It is the country's first national memorial dedicated to telling the story of racial terror violence against African Americans.

The museum and memorial are managed by the Equal Justice Initiative and do not have an affiliation with the National Park Service. The memorial has a monolith for each southern county plagued by racial terror lynchings. Each monolith has a duplicate for the county to collect and erect to recognize their history of racial terror. Many counties are already working with the Equal Justice Initiative to secure their monolith, although none has yet been collected.

Elaine Massacre Memorial

Helena-West Helena, Arkansas

The Elaine Massacre Memorial was opened to the public and dedicated on September 29, 2019, one hundred years after the Elaine Massacre claimed the lives of over 100 African Americans. The memorial is located across the street from the Phillips County Courthouse, where twelve Black men were charged with murder after the massacre. The Elaine Massacre is a contentious topic in the community as many details are debated or unknown. The memorial was established by a nonprofit and is intended to be a space for remembrance and reverence.

John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park and Greenwood Cultural Center

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Dedicated in 2009, the park commemorates the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot and is named for the son of a race massacre survivor. The riot, stemming from an alleged assault of a white woman by a Black man, saw the destruction of one of the country's most prosperous Black neighborhoods, Greenwood District. About 200 people were killed and thousands were left homeless because of the damage by white mobs. The Greenwood Cultural Center has worked to preserve and educate the public on the Greenwood District's history and the legacy of the African Americans who helped build Oklahoma.

National Japanese American Memorial

Washington, D.C.

Completed in 2001, the memorial commemorates the service of Japanese American World War II veterans and the Japanese American civilians unlawfully held in internment camps during the war. Names of soldiers lost in war and the names and populations of ten internment camps are carved in a granite wall surrounded by Japanese symbolism. The memorial provides guests with an immersive experience to represent the confinement and release of Japanese Americans under suspicion of loyalty to Japan.

Chinese Reconciliation Park

Tacoma, Washington

Groundbreaking for the park took place in 2005, with park development continuing. The park commemorates the forced expulsion of the entire Chinese population of Tacoma in 1885 and the destruction of their homes and businesses. Located on the waterfront in the area where Chinese worked and lived, the park includes a garden, interpretive pathways and signs, and a Chinese pavilion donated by Fuzhou, China, a sister city of Tacoma. The park offers visitors a place to “reflect upon the past, ponder the present, dream of the future.”

Suitability Analysis

In their report *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, the Equal Justice Initiative summarizes their research into existing memorials and monuments:

Very few public commemorations of African Americans' suffering during the post-slavery era exist today. Formal remembrances of national racial history tend to celebrate the civil rights movement's victories, focusing on individual achievements and success stories rather than reflecting on the deeply rooted, violent resistance that upheld the racial caste system for so long. Honoring civil rights activists and embracing their success is appropriate and due, but when they are not accompanied by meaningful engagement with the difficult history of systematic violence perpetrated against Black Americans for decades after slavery, such celebrations risk painting an incomplete and distorted picture.

The study area in Memphis is poised to expand resource protection and visitor use opportunities for sites associated with late 19th and early 20th century racial violence. Equal Justice Initiative and others have emphasized the need to commemorate sites and events that shine a light on the history of systemic violence directed toward African Americans—a part of history that the study area in Memphis has the potential to address.

In the 2017 document *The National Park Service System Plan*, the National Park Service identified cultural resources and values that are underrepresented, in need of greater emphasis or redundancy, or missing within the national park system. Of the underrepresented themes in the document, two were identified that are applicable to the study area in Memphis—criminal injustice and African American history.

Conclusion

While there are sites managed by the National Park Service that protect stories and resources associated with the founding of other civil rights organizations, there are none that commemorate victims of racial terror. In regard to sites that contain resources associated with the late 19th and early 20th century racial terror, there are very few known to exist.

Based on this cursory inventory of sites that preserve similar resources inside and outside the national park system and a preliminary analysis of suitability, the resources and themes associated with the study area in Memphis are likely to be found suitable in a comparative analysis of similar sites managed by the National Park Service and others in a special resource study.

Preliminary Evaluation of Resource Feasibility

Introduction

To be considered a feasible addition to the national park system, a site must be of sufficient size and appropriate configuration to accommodate public use and ensure long-term protection of its resources. A potential new unit must also be capable of efficient administration by the National Park Service at a reasonable cost. These requirements are evaluated by: size; boundary configurations; current and potential uses of the study area and surrounding lands; landownership patterns; public enjoyment potential; costs associated with acquisition, development, restoration, and operation; access; current and potential threats to the resources; existing degradation of resources; staffing requirements; local planning and zoning; the level of local and general public support; and the economic/socioeconomic impacts of designation as a unit of the national park system.

Feasibility Analysis

Size and Boundary Configuration

The study area is approximately a quarter-acre site within a wooded lot, bounded by the following points: 35.1613389, -89.8843869; 35.1614907, -89.8842454; 35.1614381, -89.8849137; 35.1612566, -89.8849135.

The study area is sufficient size and appropriate configuration to accommodate public access to and interpretive experiences with the resources. The Wolf River Conservancy will provide public accessibility to the site Wolf River Greenway Trail Update I, which will be completed 2022-2023. To provide visitor services and further protect archaeological resources at the site, adjacent land may need to be acquired.

Current and Potential Uses of the Study Area

The site is at the location of the former Macon Road bridge. The Lynching Sites Project has proposed a designed memorial for the site that facilitates meditation and reflection in the outdoor space. The Wolf River Conservancy is developing adjacent land for the Wolf River Greenway Trail update, projected to be finished in 2022-2023, and will build a spur trail to the Persons site, increasing public access. When complete, the Wolf River Greenway Trail will “extend a total of 36 miles to connect neighborhoods all the way from ... downtown Memphis, through the neighborhoods of north central Memphis, connecting to Shelby Farms and then to the cities of Germantown and Collierville, Tennessee.”⁸⁹

Land Ownership Patterns

The Ell Persons Lynching Site is a historically undeveloped area and is currently owned by the Shelby County Conservation Board. The Wolf River Conservancy is attempting to gain an easement for the site from the Shelby County Conservation Board. The Shelby County Conservation Board voted unanimously on October 21, 2021, to donate the land if the National Park Service approves the request.

⁸⁹ Wolf River Greenway Overview, Wolf River Conservancy. <https://wolfriver.org/the-wolf-river-greenway>

Public Enjoyment Potential

Memphis has tremendous visitation and tourism opportunities. Most tourism in Memphis is focused on music, particularly Beale Street and Graceland. The city also has several sites significant to Civil Rights History, including the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel, Clayborn Temple, and the Mason Temple Church of God in Christ. As the nation has shown more interest in acknowledging systemic racism and contextualizing or removing symbols of white supremacy, it is likely that a National Park Site dedicated to lynching and racial terror history will draw a large audience. The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 has illustrated the importance of safe, outdoor enjoyment to allow for social distancing, and the Ell Persons Lynching Site can provide that.

Access

Access to the site is being developed as part of the Wolf River Greenway Trail update. According to the Wolf River Conservancy, the Ell persons Lynching Site will be accessed by a spur that is planned to be ten feet by 100 feet.

Current and Potential Threats to the Resources

As the Wolf River Conservancy is in the midst of the Greenway Trail update, there are no current or potential threats to the resources.

Existing Degradation of Resources

The site has not undergone development, and the site is determined to maintain integrity.

Level of Local and General Public Support

There is strong local and public support for the memorialization of lynching sites in Memphis. The landowner, the City of Memphis, believes that the creation of a memorial would help the city own its past and work toward creating a better future.

Numerous events have taken place at the site to honor Ell Persons and other lynching victims, and each has experienced tremendous support and participation. The events have been featured in *WMFE*, *Commercial Appeal*, *The Daily Memphian*, *The Memphis Flyer*, and other publications.

Economic/Socioeconomic Impacts of Designation

There would likely be minimal economic and socioeconomic impacts of designating the site as a unit of the national park system. Given the nature of the site, arrangements will need to be made for the likely event of vandalism. Considering Memphis's history of civil rights activities, the site is likely to have significant interest and visitation from locals and tourists wanting to know more about the fight for civil rights for African Americans.

Conclusion

Given the small size of the site, strong local and general public support for civil rights memorials, and the variety of attractions representing African American history in Memphis, the site would likely be feasible to manage as a unit of the national park system.

Preliminary Evaluation of Need for Direct NPS Management

Introduction

An area must require direct NPS management, and NPS management must be clearly superior to other possible management alternatives to be recommended as a new unit of the park system.

Direct NPS management may not be needed if there is potential for other entities to sufficiently manage the site. If that is the case, there are other alternatives. If the site requires some special recognition or technical assistance beyond what is feasible through NPS programs, the National Park Service could partner with other entities outside the federal government and establish the site as an affiliated area of the chosen entity. The National Civil Rights Museum is a possible entity that could act as the supporting unit for the site.

Need for Direct NPS Management Analysis

The site contains resources that offer the public a rare, direct connection to a critical part of US history that has been seldom represented in locally and nationally designated historic sites.

The possibility of the City of Memphis or the State of Tennessee managing the site as a city or state park has not been addressed in this pre-reconnaissance survey and could offer alternatives to direct NPS management. Further involvement of regional, state, or national nonprofit organizations could be solicited in the promotion of the site, particularly those with an interest in African American history or historic tourism.

The National Park Service could potentially undertake a consulting or cooperative role with these agencies. “Affiliated area” is a status given to nationally significant sites that involves an agreement between the National Park Service and management entities at the site and allows the National Park Service to provide technical or financial assistance. A “National Commemorative Site” designation is another possibility that would afford an NPS assistance role to a private or public owner of the site, if limited federal ownership was desired. Affiliated area designation is bestowed by an act of Congress or by the Secretary of the Interior. National commemorative site is an honorific bestowed by an act of Congress, and currently there are three sites so designated nationally. Further development and analysis of these options or any others, including impacts and costs, is beyond the scope of this reconnaissance survey.

Conclusion

Designating the Ell Persons Lynching Site as a national park system unit would ensure the long-term protection of the site and its significance to African American and US history. As already stated, African American history is severely underrepresented in the National Register of Historic Places and there is not a single designated historic site that commemorates racial terror. The designation of the site would serve as an example for other communities seeking to preserve and interpret their sites of racial terror violence.

Conclusions

This pre-reconnaissance survey is not a final or definitive assessment of the site's suitability for inclusion in the national park system. Further study would definitively assess whether it meets the criteria for inclusion, especially in terms of costs associated with acquisition, development, and maintenance of the site; opportunities for partnerships; and public support for NPS involvement, and what NPS involvement would look like. Further study could also examine other sites across the country associated with racial terror violence between 1880 and 1940 to determine if they could be considered nationally significant and whether they could enhance interpretation and preservation of this historical pattern.

The Lynching Sites Project of Memphis recommends continued collaboration between the City of Memphis and other partners to fund opportunities that tell the story of racial terror lynchings and appropriately preserve the site. A memorial or monument could be planned, constructed, and opened to the public regardless of any potential NPS involvement at the site in the future.

While this preliminary resource assessment finds that the site is likely to meet the criteria for inclusion, it recommends that further study be undertaken to definitively determine whether the study area meets the criteria and to assist in the development of resource protection and management scenarios in relation to NPS involvement at the site.

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