

<https://www.knoxnews.com/story/news/local/tennessee/2019/04/03/christchurch-shooter-used-racist-symbol-found-at-highland-center-fire-iron-guard/3347678002/>

White power symbol found at Highlander Center fire used by Christchurch shooter

[Travis Dorman](#), Knoxville News Sentinel Published 9:45 a.m. ET April 3, 2019 | Updated 6:17 p.m. ET April 3, 2019

A fire of unknown origin has destroyed the Highlander Education and Research Center in New Market, officials confirmed. New Market Volunteer Fire Dept, USA TODAY Handout

[CONNECT](#) [TWEET](#) [LINKEDIN](#) [COMMENT](#) [EMAIL](#) [MORE](#)

NEW MARKET, Tenn. — A racist symbol found spray-painted near a building destroyed by fire at the [Highlander Education and Research Center](#) has been displayed by notorious white supremacists here and abroad, including the man who livestreamed his massacre of worshippers at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.

A fire of undetermined origin destroyed the main office Friday of the Highlander Center, an internationally known social justice organization that hosted prominent leaders, including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s.

The building, about 25 miles northeast of Knoxville in New Market, housed archives documenting the Highlander Center's history. It's unclear what documents were destroyed; the Wisconsin Historical Society preserves the center's documents and said the majority of the archives [are safe](#).

In a [news release](#) Tuesday, the Highlander Center announced that a "symbol connected to the white power movement" was found spray-painted in the parking lot by the main office. Jefferson County Sheriff Jeff Coffey [confirmed](#) the symbol was found Friday and described it as "the hashtag symbol."



Buy Photo

A symbol connected to the white power movement was discovered Friday, March 29, 2019, at the Highlander Education and Research Center in New Market, Tennessee. The symbol was spray-painted in a parking lot near the center's main office, which was destroyed in a fire that same day. Authorities have not determined the cause of the blaze. The Highlander Center is a social justice organization known for its connection to major civil rights figures, including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. (Photo: Saul Young/News Sentinel)

A photograph taken Tuesday by knoxnews.com shows the symbol, painted in black, not far from the rubble of the burned building on the center's 200-acre campus. It consists of three vertical lines intersecting three horizontal lines, and looks like a hashtag with an extra line in each direction.

The symbol was used by the Iron Guard, also known as the Legion of the Archangel Michael, a far-right, anti-Semitic movement active in Romania in the 1930s, said Mark Pitcavage, a senior research fellow with the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism. He specializes in right-wing extremism and maintains the organization's Hate Symbols Database.

"Right-wing extremists in Europe and some in the United States have occasionally used that symbol, including in Tennessee," Pitcavage said. "The symbol was also one of the symbols that the Christchurch shooter painted on [one of his firearms](#)."



Buy Photo

The main office at the Highlander Education and Research Center in New Market, Tennessee, was destroyed by fire Friday, March 29, 2019. The building housed documents detailing the history of the social justice organization known for its connection to major civil rights figures, including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. It's unclear which documents were destroyed, but many of the center's archives are preserved at the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, Wisconsin. (Photo: Saul Young/News Sentinel)

Coffey, the sheriff, said Tuesday his office is seeking assistance from another law enforcement agency to verify the context of the symbol found at the scene of the fire. He would not say which agency is assisting those efforts, and he could not be reached for comment Wednesday morning.

Before the center issued its news release, authorities had not mentioned the graffiti publicly, nor have they said whether they consider the fire to be arson. The sheriff's office continues to investigate with assistance from the State Fire Marshal's Office and the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

The Highlander Center did not return a request for comment Wednesday.

Members of the Traditionalist Worker Party also have used the Iron Guard symbol, Pitcavage said. The neo-Nazi outfit was active in Knoxville in late 2017 and early 2018 before the group [reportedly collapsed](#) when a bizarre love triangle saw its leader, Matthew Heimbach, arrested on battery charges in Kentucky.

Heimbach grew popular in far-right circles after he helped lead the August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The demonstration turned deadly when avowed neo-Nazi [James Alex Fields](#) rammed his car into a group of counterprotesters, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer.



White nationalist Matthew Heimbach, 26, of Paoli, Indiana, yells Aug. 14, 2017, to television crews and reporters in Charlottesville, Virginia, about where to place the blame for the protests and death that occurred at a Unite the Right rally two days before. (Photo: Henry Taylor, USA TODAY)

Days later, when Heimbach spoke to reporters outside a court appearance for Fields, he wore a shirt bearing the Iron Guard symbol and a picture of the Romanian movement's fascist founder, Corneliu Codreanu.

While it was active in Knoxville, the Traditionalist Worker Party [posted fliers](#) that were removed from a University of Tennessee building, [brought 20 people](#) to protest a Women's March that drew a crowd of 14,000, and repeatedly painted swastikas and [other imagery on the Rock](#), a massive boulder that serves as an ever-changing message board on UT's campus.

In January 2018, the Iron Guard symbol appeared on the Rock, spray-painted in black along with the letters "TWP," the words, "My borders my choice," and various other white supremacist symbols.



A picture of the Rock on the University of Tennessee campus was spray-painted with a racist symbol in January 2018. The letters TWP stand for the white nationalist group Traditionalist Worker Party. The hashtag-like symbol is a recognized mark that originated with a Romanian fascist group active in the 1930s. (Photo: Submitted/ Allies of Knoxville's Immigrant Neighbors.)

The following month, Heimbach held a gathering on campus after the university said his group [misrepresented itself](#) to reserve a space. The talk drew 45 attendees, 250 protesters, 200 law enforcement officers — and [condemnation](#) from then-Chancellor Beverly Davenport, who noted, "I have repeatedly said they weren't invited."

Although the Traditionalist Worker Party reportedly disbanded after Heimbach's arrest in March 2018, some of its members continued to show up at events in Knoxville, including at a [rally](#) over the Supreme Court confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh. Meanwhile, Heimbach signed on to be the "director of community outreach" for another neo-Nazi group, based in Detroit, according to the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#).

Swastikas have appeared on the Rock [as recently as November](#).

During [the livestream of last month's terror attack](#) that killed 50 people at two mosques in New Zealand, the shooter could be seen using weapons with various names and symbols scrawled on them. One gun had the hashtag-looking Iron Guard symbol prominently displayed. The shooter

also posted photos of the guns to Twitter before his account was taken down; one image showed the symbol on the side of a firearm.

The video of the massacre was shared around the world before social media companies could react.

Staff Writer Hayes Hickman contributed to this report.

Reach Travis Dorman at travis.dorman@knoxnews.com. Follow him on Twitter @travdorman.