

“Legacy of Lynching” Website and Project

Dr. Kathryn Tucker

In the spring and fall semesters of 2018, students in “History 2225: African American Experience” classes at Troy University performed original research to uncover and document lynchings and racial violence in the regions surrounding Troy, as well as to trace the ongoing societal impact of this violence. As of this spring, our research and findings are now available on a new website, LegacyofLynching.com, which we hope you will take a few minutes to explore.

The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) opened the nation’s first memorial to lynching victims in Montgomery in April 2018. This landmark museum and memorial, dedicated to furthering understanding the ongoing impact of racial violence, provided the initial inspiration for our project. Our research quickly expanded beyond the four lynchings the EJI had documented in Pike County, however, as students began uncovering additional lynchings, links between incidents of racial violence in Pike County and the larger region, and even personal ties to lynching victims. The spring class ultimately researched ten lynchings in Lower Alabama, while the fall students each researched an incident of lynching or racial violence in a location that was meaningful to them. In each case, research began with the classes scouring historic newspapers, court cases, and vital records to identify and research incidents of racial violence, and then writing essays analyzing each lynching and its causes and ongoing impact. Several students also participated in collecting soil from the sites of these lynchings to commemorate the victims, and one of our soil collections is on display in the EJI’s Legacy Museum. By the time we had completed our research, students felt strongly about sharing what they’d learned about the ongoing impact of racial violence with their larger community, so they collected their primary sources, essays, and soil collections into an exhibit, “Lynching in Lower Alabama,” that the Troy University Library displayed during the summer and fall of 2018.

The most striking finding we uncovered in the course of this project was the personal connections between students and the victims of racial violence that we researched, with several students unexpectedly uncovering parts of their own family history they hadn’t previously known. None of us ever anticipated uncovering personal ties during our research, but at least two students discovered that they were related to lynching victims we studied, and another student found that her family currently owns a different victim’s property. In each of these cases, family and community members still remembered and passed down stories about what happened over a century ago, and how it had affected them and the larger communities. Other students also suspect they have family ties to lynching victims based on names and locations but have been unable to prove definitive connections. To us, these connections, more than any other aspect of our work, demonstrate with shocking clarity the ongoing impact of racial violence and the ways in which it has shaped people’s lives today. To find so many personal connections from a relatively small sample size of just over thirty students sharply highlights the vast impact of each incident of violence - violence that not only impacted the direct target, but also affected family members and larger communities in ways that are still felt today. We hope these findings and our work will help

people understand the many ways in which racial violence had shaped the world we live in and bring a measure of justice to individuals long denied. For more on the project, please visit LegacyofLynching.com, which we will continue to update as future semesters expand on the initial project.