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LOCAL

The bloody earth: Soil ceremony honors forgotten 1926 Delray Beach lynching victim



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DELRAY BEACH — On Sept. 26, 1926, a violent mob of angry citizens converged on the jail in Delray Beach, battered down the steel door of a cell and dragged the man inside off into the night.

His bullet-torn body was found the next day on the banks of a canal near the intersection of Atlantic Avenue and Sims Road, just west of Delray.

The man's death was reported three weeks later, on page 6 of The Palm Beach Post, under the headline "Negro is Taken From Delray Jail and Lynched."

For more than 94 years, that remained the last public mention of what had happened to Samuel Nelson, who, the Associated Press article reported, "was said to have been charged with attempted criminal assault on a white woman in Miami."

On Saturday, in a ceremony at Pompey Park commemorating Nelson's death with soil collected from the grounds once stained with his blood, Palm Beach County residents, ranging in age from toddlers to old men and women heard his story for the first time.

Soil taken from the site in buckets and transferred Saturday by ceremony attendees to tall glass jars, will be preserved and displayed in sites that include the Spady Cultural Heritage Museum in Delray Beach and the Equal Justice Initiative Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Ala., to ensure the retelling of his story.

Remembering Samuel Nelson

Little is known today about Samuel Nelson, whose burial place and whose family remain unrecorded, noted attorney Bryan Boysaw, the chair of the Palm Beach County Remembrance Project Coalition, which, with local residents, Delray Beach and Palm Beach County governments and the Equal Justice Initiative, arranged Saturday's ceremony.

Instead, Boysaw told Nelson's story as one about the laws, policies, social mores and culture in which he had lived and died. It was a time of legal segregation and structured racism in the years following the passage of the 13th Amendment.

The amendment, which mandated freedom for enslaved people and ended involuntary servitude except as punishment for a crime, "destabilized" rather than abolished slavery, Boysaw said. Its allowance of forced unpaid labor for prisoners, which continues still, created an economic enticement for disparate criminal justice and incarceration and added impetus to the violent oppression of Black citizens, he said.

It was a time, Boysaw said, when the city acted swiftly to clear the police department and jail staff of culpability in Nelson's abduction and death. His killers were never identified.

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Nelson's murder was one of two documented lynchings in Palm Beach County, both in the 1920s. In the other, a mob seeking to avenge the death of a police officer roused a man named Henry Simmons from a West Palm Beach rooming house and hanged him from a tree in Palm Beach, just south of The Breakers.

Efforts among West Palm Beach community members are underway now to collect soil from the site, with the intention of sending that soil to the Alabama museum as well.

There may be more sites undocumented, said former Lake Worth Commissioner Retha Lowe, who attended Saturday's ceremony.

"I'm sure there's a lot more," she said. Lowe, who now is 76, graduated from Carver High School in Delray Beach and never heard about the death of Samuel Nelson.

"This is a great thing they did today," she said.

Delray Beach City Commissioner Shirley Johnson also had never known of the lynching just outside the town where she was born and raised. "I was born 20 years after they lynched him," she said.

She learned of it just a few years ago when she met Equal Justice Initiative Executive Director Bryan Stevenson at a book event. "I was shocked," she said.

Why had no one around her, people who must have harbored memories of a jail cell break-in and the death of a man at the hands of a mob, never discussed it?

"Terror," she guessed.

Johnson's contribution to the project aimed to ensure that each person present Saturday keeps a tangible reminder of what happened to Nelson, with small black bags holding a copy of his story, along with a miniature wooden spoon and plastic bag to hold a little scoop of the soil.

Of all the residents he met when working to organize the coalition, Marc Schneider of the American Civil Liberties Union said, not one had heard of Samuel Nelson. He conjectures that was in part because Nelson was not well-known locally in life.

That will change, said Nakia Robinson, whose son, Ethan Jenkins — almost 8 years old — listened quietly and intently to the ceremony.

"He'll be telling this story," she said. "He might not understand why now, but he will."

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