

IN REMEMBRANCE: LYNCHING IN AMERICA  
THE EJI SOIL COLLECTION PROJECT  
FLORIDA

LYNCHING IN AMERICA

Between the end of the Civil War and the end of World War II, thousands of African Americans were lynched in the United States in violent and public acts of torture that traumatized Black communities locally and throughout the country. These racial terror lynchings, largely tolerated by state and federal officials, peaked between 1880 and 1940 and represented some of the most brutal violence, terrorism, humiliation, and barbarity in American history. This era of racial terrorism profoundly impacted race relations in the United States and shaped the geographic, social, and economic conditions of African Americans in ways that are still evident today. Lynching and racial violence fueled the forced exodus of millions of Black people from the South into urban ghettos in the North and West during the first half of the twentieth century and created a social environment where racial subordination and segregation was maintained with limited resistance for decades. The Black refugees and exiles who fled the American South lived in marginalizing and disadvantaged circumstances in the urban North, West and Midwest. Black people who remained in the South faced continued threat, terror and humiliation rigidly maintained by legalized racial segregation. The violence and terror of lynching created a legacy of racial inequality that has never been adequately addressed in America, and continues to sustain racial injustice and bias.

In February 2015, the Equal Justice Initiative issued a new report on *Lynching in America* documenting over 4,000 lynchings that took place in the 12 states that had the highest rates of lynching in America. With the release of the third edition of EJI's report, 300 additional racial terror lynchings have been documented that took place in the remaining states during this era. For the first time, EJI researchers characterized and catalogued lynchings and studied the locations of lynching so community members could discover their local history. Most recently, EJI released its newest report on *Reconstruction in America*, documenting nearly 2,000 more confirmed racial terror lynchings of Black people by white mobs in America than previously detailed. The report examines the 12 years following the Civil War when lawlessness and violence perpetrated by white leaders created an American future of racial hierarchy, white supremacy, and Jim Crow laws—an era from which our nation has yet to recover.

Our report on *Lynching in America* has now been read by thousands of people who have expressed a desire to engage more thoughtfully on what the legacy of lynching represents in America. We believe that understanding the era of racial terror is critical if we are to confront the challenges that we currently face from mass incarceration, excessive punishment, unjustified police violence, and the presumption of guilt and dangerousness that burdens many people of color.

## THE EJI MARKER AND MEMORIAL PROJECT

To create greater awareness and understanding about racial terror lynchings, EJI intends to mark many of the spaces where lynchings took place with memorials and historical markers. Most communities have said or done nothing to acknowledge their local history of lynching. The victims of racial terror and the trauma these horrific acts of violence created has been largely ignored. The silence surrounding these atrocities had added to the sense of injury and anguish in many communities of color and contributed to less thoughtful and serious discussion around issues of race. EJI believes that by publicly marking the sites of lynchings, a necessary conversation can begin that advances truth and reconciliation.

EJI has also built a national memorial in Montgomery, Alabama - The National Memorial for Peace and Justice - that calls on the nation to reflect more seriously and thoughtfully about this error of racial terrorism and its legacy. Memorials have the power to remind us of who we once were and challenge us to confront issues of injustice and inequality we currently face with more care and with greater dedication to protecting basic human rights.

## THE SOIL COLLECTION PROJECT

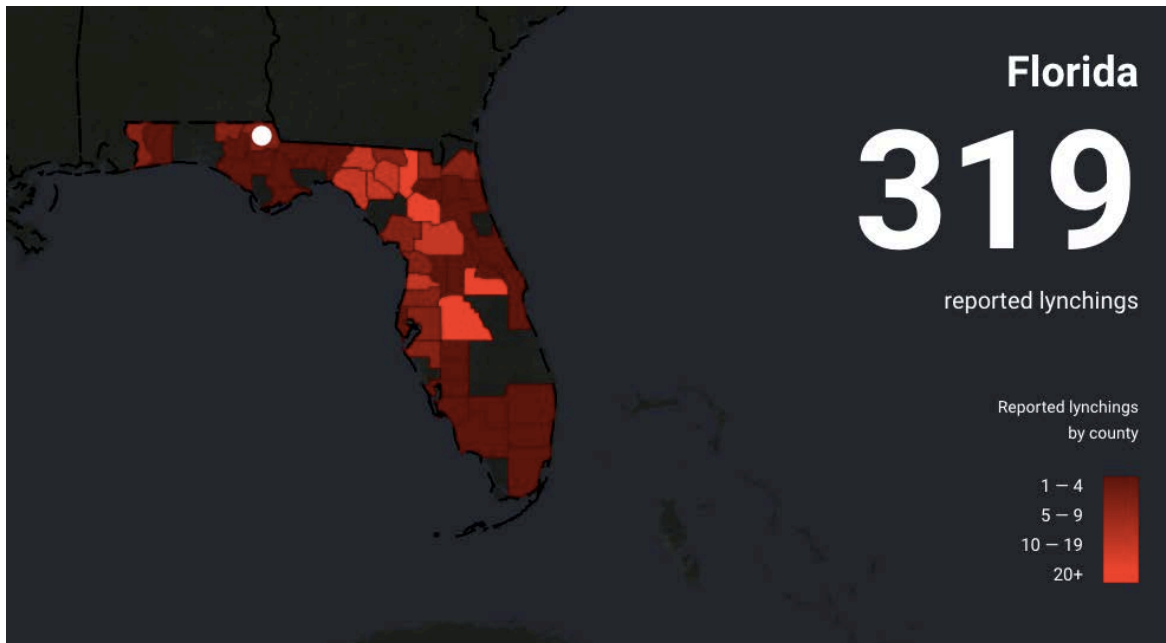
We have joined with community groups and individuals to travel to communities across the nation to collect soil from every lynching site as an act of remembrance and commitment to honoring the victims of this horrific era of terror. EJI's soil collection project is intended to provide opportunities for community members to get closer to the legacy of lynching and to contribute to the effort to build a lasting and more visible memory of our history of racial injustice. These jars of collected soil are on exhibit in the new Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, as well as in other exhibit spaces, to reflect the history of lynching and our generation's resolve to confront the continuing challenges that racial inequality creates.

While collecting soil from the site of a lynching is a simple gesture, we believe it is an important act of remembrance that can begin a process of recovery and reconciliation to our history of lynching and terror. The named containers with collected soil that we create become important pieces of our broken and terrifying past. We believe these jars represent the hope of community members who seek racial justice and a greater commitment to the rule of law and human rights.

## FLORIDA

EJI has documented 317 African American victims of racial terror lynching killed in Florida. The racial terror and acts of barbaric violence that took place in Florida are among the worst in America. Racial terror lynchings took place in over 20 states, in both rural and more urban settlements. State officials did very little to curb the white mob violence that menaced so many African Americans, and sometimes officials were even complicit and actively involved in committing acts of racial terror.

Your participation in this project helps us begin a process of recovery and we are very grateful for your involvement.



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**Sam Nelson**

**Delray Beach, Palm Beach County, Florida, September 27, 1926**

After midnight on September 27, 1926, a group of white people in Palm Beach County, Florida broke into the Delray Beach Jail and kidnapped a Black man named Sam Nelson. Mr. Nelson's body was found "riddled with bullets" on the bank of a canal four miles west of Delray Beach. A coroner's jury ruled that Mr. Nelson was lynched by "parties unknown," and the Delray Police Department was declared "free of any blame or neglect" despite their failure to protect Mr. Nelson while he was in their custody. In the end, no one was ever held accountable for the lynching of Sam Nelson.

The day before he was lynched, Mr. Nelson was arrested in Delray Beach for allegedly attempting to assault a white woman in Miami, Florida, which is 60 miles south of Delray Beach. "Accusations of "assault" extended to any action that could be interpreted as a Black man seeking contact with a white woman. These accusations were often based on merely looking at or accidentally bumping into a white woman, smiling, winking, getting too close, even being disagreeable."

Mr. Nelson was placed in the Delray Beach Jail around 3 p.m. on Sunday, September 26. The Delray Police Chief claimed that after the arrest, "he had refused to turn [Mr. Nelson] over to a man who purported to be from Miami." Despite this threat, the jail was left unprotected during the night. The Delray Police Chief claimed that to his knowledge Mr. Nelson had been in the jail at midnight."

However, the next morning, the "steel door of the jail was found battered open," and Mr. Nelson was missing from the jail. Mr. Nelson's body was found later that morning "riddled with bullets" on a canal bank west of Delray Beach. A coroner's inquest was held, but the jury's verdict merely claimed only that Mr. Nelson had "suffered 'death at the hands of parties unknown'." The Delray Beach City Council unanimously voted that the Delray Beach Police Department "should be exonerated and be declared free of any blame or neglect" for the abduction and lynching of Mr. Nelson.

After the lynching, reports emerged that the assault that Mr. Nelson had been accused of committing in Miami had never even been reported. The Miami

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Police Department stated that “they did not recall an assault case of this kind nor had they been informed of a lynching.”

During this era, the deep racial hostility that was prevalent in many white communities, led to a presumption of dangerousness and guilt against Black people whether or not any evidence supported such conclusions. Black men, like Mr. Nelson, were especially likely to be considered a prime suspect if the report was of an assault of a white woman.

Despite being legally obliged to protect everyone in their custody equally, law enforcement, as they did with Mr. Nelson, often abdicated their duty to prevent the seizure, assault, and lynching of Black men, women, and children by white community members.

White people involved in lynchings were rarely held accountable for their actions and instead were granted impunity by local officials. In a system where lynchings regularly went unpunished and law enforcement did little to protect Black communities, white mobs acted as judge, jury, and executioner, killing Black men, women, and children with no expectation of punishment. In turn, thousands of Black lives, including Mr. Nelson’s, were lost based on unproven – and often false – claims of wrongdoing.

Sam Nelson is one of at least 319 African American victims of racial terror lynching killed by white mobs in Florida between 1877 and 1950, and one of at least two African American victims of racial terror lynching killed in Palm Beach county during this period.

**Sources**

*The Palm Beach Post*, (West Palm Beach, Florida), October 17, 1926.

Delray Beach City Council, *Regular Meeting Minutes*, September 27, 1926.

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### Location of Soil Collection

In the early morning hours of September 27, 1926, a group of white people abducted Sam Nelson from the Delray Beach Jail, riddled his body with bullets, and left him on a bank of a canal four miles west of Delray Beach near the Military Trail.

The Delray Beach Jail was established in 1913. Based on a 1922 Sanborn map, the jail was located at the corner of Aitken and Lowry, which is now the corner of Northeast 4th Avenue and Northeast 1st Street. Although there is a lack of certainty about how the canal or roads have changed in Delray Beach since 1926, today's E-3 Canal is located four miles from the location of the old Delray Beach Jail at the intersection of West Atlantic Avenue and Sims Road. The E-3 Canal, which is part of the Lake Worth Drainage District, is also west of Military Trail.

Please navigate to the corner of **Northeast 4th Avenue and Northeast 1st Street in Delray Beach, Florida, 33483**, and travel approximately four miles west to the **E-3 Canal** located at the intersection of **West Atlantic Avenue and Sims Road, Florida 33484** to symbolically retrace the path of the mob. Then, please collect soil from a safe and appropriate area at the location to acknowledge the lynching of Sam Nelson.

