

STILL LEARNING

by George F. Thompson

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA. September 12, 2021: A day I shall always remember, as I was able to visit the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, informally known as the National Lynching Museum. Every citizen in the nation and the world should see these places, for one will understand more fully the history of America and why the Black Lives Matter movement, Equal Justice Initiative, and Poor People's Campaign are so important.

The Legacy Museum has expanded and is now located in a new pavilion across the street from Montgomery Stadium and Riverfront Park along the Alabama River, near the old dock, train station, warehouses, and slave market where tens of thousands of African Americans were sold, imprisoned, and trafficked to provide labor for the burgeoning cotton plantations in the nearby Black Belt region, so-called because of its rich dark soil (Figs. 1 and 2). The way one experiences the museum is carefully choreographed so that one follows history itself: from the first trans-Atlantic journey of enslaved Africans to Virginia in 1619 to the evolution of the international slave trade and explosion of slavery following the Revolutionary War when America's economic development depended on cotton, from the Emancipation Proclamation and the promise but quick demise of Reconstruction to widespread lynchings and Jim Crow laws, from the Civil Rights movement to ongoing challenges to the Voting Rights Act and the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. As one wanders through the powerful exhibits, the horror of slavery, segregation, unequal opportunity, and white supremacy are revealed in innovative and unforgettable ways as are the heroic efforts of so many who sought freedom, equal opportunity, and justice for all.

The National Memorial, located a little more than a mile away from the museum on a hill overlooking downtown and the state capital, offers an entirely different encounter with America's racial terrorism. One begins the tour outside by walking past an incredible installation by an artist from Ghana that represents the Middle Passage from freedom in Africa to enslavement in America (Fig. 3). Then one enters the centerpiece of the site, in which 808 six-foot-tall, rust-colored steel memorials hang like coffins from the ceiling, commemorating every one of the more than 4,400 African Americans who are known to have been lynched between 1877 and 1957 in 808 counties throughout the nation (Figs. 4 and 5).

And the number of documented lynchings will continue to grow. For example, ten lynchings are commemorated for Tuscaloosa County on its memorial, but John Giggie, a professor of history at the University of Alabama and an expert on lynchings, has uncovered 48 more and projects as many as 100

lynchings will eventually be documented for Tuscaloosa County, not ten. How does one include 100 names on a memorial for the county on which ten names barely fit (Figs. 6 and 7)?

The journey through the 808 memorials ends at a long wall (Fig. 8), in which one feels and hears the healing power of flowing water and reads the following: “Thousands of African Americans are unknown victims of racial terror lynchings whose deaths cannot be documented, many whose names will never be known. They are all honored here.” Of course, this memorial for peace and justice in Montgomery, a former capital of the Confederacy, is unable to commemorate the untold lynchings of Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans, whose stories also need to be told (Fig. 9).

September is a hot month in Alabama, and it was a hot Sunday when I visited Montgomery where, almost inconceivably, Rosa L. Parks Avenue intersects with West Jeff Davis Avenue in a neighborhood adjacent to the memorial. To protect me from the ever-present sun, I wore a black baseball cap with “STILL LEARNING” in white letters on the front (Fig. 10). One of the security guards at the memorial, whose ancestors, I later learned, were enslaved, took notice of it straight away and, seemingly impressed, smiled warmly and asked: “Still learning, huh? Ya know what that means?” He continued: “Still learning means you still want to live.”

Thus ended a visit I shall never forget.

Photos and captions:



Fig. 1. The new 11,000-square-foot pavilion of the Legacy Museum, located at 400 North Court Street in downtown Montgomery, opened simultaneously on April 26, 2018, with the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Both were conceived as projects of the Equal Justice Initiative.



Fig. 2. Maya Angelou's sentiment from "On the Pulse of Morning" (1993) adorns the old building of the Legacy Museum at 115 Coosa Street in downtown Montgomery.



Fig. 3. *Nkyinkyim (Twisted)*, an installation (2018) by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo (b. 1983), from Accra, Ghana. He was inspired by the Ghanaian proverb: "Life is a twisted journey."



Fig. 4. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice (Equal Justice Initiative in collaboration with MASS Design Group) is “the nation’s first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved Black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence.”



Fig. 5. As I walked among the memorials to those who were lynched, I spontaneously started to cry, overwhelmed by the feeling of loss, grief, and injustice.



Fig. 6. The memorial to ten men who were lynched in Tuscaloosa County is already out of date. Another 48 have been uncovered, and that number may well increase to 100.



Fig. 7. The memorials continue outside where visitors remember the dead as a community on grounds that feel like sacred space.



Fig. 8. A time for reflection.

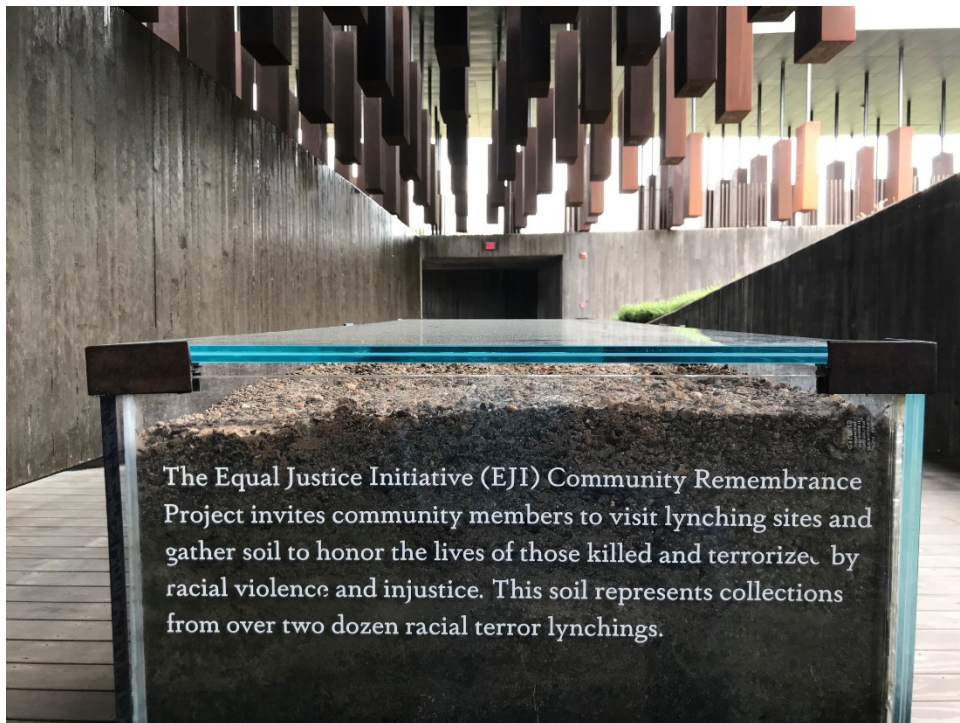


Fig. 9. A powerful reminder of America's past and the need to learn more.



Fig. 10. "STILL LEARNING means you still want to live."