

Evaluating Lynching Locations for National Park Sites Act Oral Statement Before
National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee Committee on Natural Resources
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Testimony of Richard D. Watkins
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Good Day Chairman Negus, Ranking Member Fulcher, and other esteemed members of the subcommittee. I am Richard D. Watkins, the Board President of The Lynching Sites Project of Memphis (LSP).

I am pleased to have the opportunity to submit an oral statement regarding H.R. 7912, a Bill that aims to evaluate lynching sites within approximately 100 miles of Memphis, Tennessee, for potential inclusion in the National Park System.

Lynchings constrained Black Americans' political and social activities in everyday life. Simple acts such as requesting a store receipt or minor transgressions such as speaking disrespectfully were sometimes met with lethal violence. The threat of lynchings helped maintain white supremacy in the South for decades after slavery and helped solidify a racial caste system.

According to the Equal Justice Initiative, 4,075 Black people were lynched between 1877 and 1950. We know of 236 reported lynchings in Tennessee during that time period with Shelby County leading the way with 20. LSP has documented 23 lynchings with 35 victims between the years of 1851 and 1939 and continues researching other probable cases. According to Beck and Tolnay's "Confirmed Inventory of Southern Lynch Victims", there have been 183 lynching victims in Tennessee within a 100 mile radius of Memphis. In some instances LSP have determined the precise location of the lynchings in Shelby County and has found the general location in others. **The exact locations of most lynchings are unknown, which makes knowledge and recognition of their location so meaningful.**

Our organization has documented many of the sites in Shelby County through the diligent work of our members as shown in our written report submitted with this testimony. In 2021, we did a survey to gauge suitability of the Ell Person's lynching site for entry into the National Parks Service. We found that this site offered a unique opportunity to recognize and interpret the phenomenon of racial terror lynchings that plagued our country at the turn of the twentieth century.

Unlike most lynchings which were performed in secret at the hands of small groups, the Ell Persons lynching was a spectacle lynching that was known throughout the nation at the time. Ell Persons was a laborer accused of killing a white girl. His former employer accused him after he saw Persons "star[ing] wildly" at his wife. Despite little evidence and being released twice, Persons was arrested and beaten until he falsely confessed. A mob abducted him from police custody and the local newspapers publicized that his lynching would be the next day and predicted that he would be set afire. Mr. Persons was lynched on May 22, 1917 to a carnival-like atmosphere where sandwiches and drinks were sold to the spectators. As predicted, he was burned alive. Additionally, his body was dismembered by the crowd and his head thrown in the street of a prominent black neighborhood. The local coroner concluded that his death was from "unknown causes at the hands of unknown persons."

This lynching had profound effects to our community and throughout the nation. The NAACP's James Weldon Johnson visited the site and wrote about it in the *Crisis* magazine. He spoke about it as he advocated for the passage of the Federal Dyer-Anti-Lynching Bill of 1918 and at

the 1919 National Conference on Lynching. This lynching played a significant part in the founding of the Memphis chapter of the NAACP, which eventually became the South's largest branch. The Jewish Brotherhood in Memphis condemned the atrocity. Some white Tennesseans formed the Law and Order League to oppose lynching in the state. It even hampered World War I recruiting because Black men in Memphis refused to enlist. More examples of how this lynching reverberated throughout the nation are in my written report.

This legislation will help shine the light of truth on what happened on sites like the EII Persons site. It has been over 100 years since the lynching but the site remains largely remote and untouched by development. There are two concrete substructures marking the location of the former bridge where the lynching happened. And the path of the road is marked by power-lines that run along its former course.

The NPS's *Civil Rights in America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites* recognizes broad themes in civil rights history. Although lynching is recognized in the framework under the criminal justice theme, there are no NPS national historic landmarks related to racial terror lynchings. **This is a missed opportunity.** Conscious decisions were made at the time to keep many of these sites hidden from history and to free the perpetrators from accountability. Most lynchings intentionally were performed by kidnapping under the cover of night. The arms of local governments contributed by ruling some deaths the result of unknown causes by unknown persons, such as with EII Persons. Many newspapers would provide blow by blow and shotgun blast by shotgun blast accounts of these killings in articles with no byline and without identification of perpetrators, such as with the killings of Thomas Moss, Will Stewart, and Calvin McDowell of the People's Grocery Store in 1892.

These lynching sites, the EII Person's site in particular, are places associated with events that have made a significant contribution to and are identified with broad national patterns of Civil Rights in our history. An understanding and appreciation of those patterns may be gained by further study.

Thank you for your time. And thank you to my representative Steve Cohen.