

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name Persons, Ell, Lynching Site
Other names/site number N/A
Name of related multiple property listing N/A
(Remove "N/A" if property is part of a multiple property listing and add name)

2. Location

Street & Number: Near 5400 Summer Avenue
City or town: Memphis State: TN County: Shelby
Not For Publication: N/A Vicinity: N/A Zip: 38103

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,
I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

national statewide local

Applicable National Register Criteria: A B C D

Signature of certifying official/Title: **Date**
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting Official: **Date**

Title: **State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government**

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
0	0	buildings
1	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

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6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

TRANSPORTATION-road-related (vehicular)

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

LANDSCAPE-forest

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

N/A

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: N/A

Narrative Description

The Ell Persons Lynching Site, significant for its association with a national pattern of racial terror events that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is located near 5400 Summer Avenue in Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee. Memphis had an estimated population of 651,073 in 2019. The site is approximately a quarter-acre and is in a wooded area near planned Wolf River Greenway Trail updates, scheduled to take place in 2022-2023. The boundaries include the historical location of the 1917 lynching of Ell Person on the north side of the west end of the Macon Road bridge. The bridge and roadbed are no longer extant, but later bridge substructures mark the bridge's location, and the path of the roadbed is marked by powerlines that run along its course. The site is roughly bounded by Summer Avenue to the south, Wolf River to the west, Fletcher Creek to the north, and commercial property owned by Gary M. and Glenn A. Rutherford to the east.

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The site maintains its rural character and isolation, leaving it much today as it was in 1917. In addition to being the site where a slain teenager's body, Antoinette Rappel, was discovered, the site was also ideal as it was the city limit boundaries. The site is undeveloped on raw land with hardwood trees and various bushes and undergrowth. Other natural features include the retention pond created when the Wolf River was rerouted by 1964. The vegetation is interrupted by the overhead electric power lines and the maintained grasses below. The old Macon Road followed the path of the powerlines until ca. 1950, and the roadbed grown over with grasses and vegetation. Other man-made features include two concrete bridge abutments marking the east and west sides of the old Macon Road bridge. The bridge abutments are almost certainly from after the 1917 lynching, likely in ca. 1920 after another Wolf River flooding. Despite them not being from the period of significance, the abutments and the electrical powerlines mark the path of the unpaved Macon Road and the bridge where Rappel was found and Persons was lynched, making them significant features of the site. The contributing structures and features include the natural(?) retention pond and two man-made bridge abutments. The noncontributing man-made objects include the overhead electrical lines and several wood utility poles. The boundaries are approximately 0.19 acres and represent the location of Persons's lynching and the crowd of spectators that stretched along the road towards the city.

The Ell Persons Lynching Site retains its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association over a century after the events of May 22, 1917. Due to the unusual level of documentation of the lynching, the exact location has been identified and found to be left largely intact and representative of the area in 1917. The bridge abutments mark the location of the bridge dating back to the nineteenth century and have remained despite the rerouting of the Wolf River by 1964. Ironically, the bridge abutments are unable to be dated conclusively because concrete was used for decades and has no identifying features that would easily distinguish it from one decade to the next. In addition to the design of the site, the setting is also intact, as the site of the road and bridge largely remain as rural and undeveloped as it was in 1917. In 1917, the road and bridge were outside the city limits of Memphis and marked the separation from the urban city and rural outside. The lack of development has ensured the site maintains its feeling and association with rural life on the outskirts of an urban city in the early 1900s.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions.)

ETHNIC HERITAGE-BLACK
SOCIAL HISTORY: CIVIL RIGHTS

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Period of Significance

1917

Significant Dates

N/A

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

N/A

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

The Ell Persons Lynching Site is the historical location of a racial terror lynching of a local Black man by a white mob on May 22, 1917, on the outskirts of Memphis. The site is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A at the National level of significance in the areas of Ethnic Heritage: Black and Social History: Civil Rights for association with a national pattern of racial terror events that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The period of significance is 1917, corresponding to the lynching event, which falls within the peak of racial terror lynchings from 1880 to 1940. A significant date is May 22, 1917, which was the day of Persons’s lynching. The lynching of Ell Persons came at a critical juncture in the history of American race relations. On May 22, 1917, on the outskirts of Memphis, a white mob attacked, burned, and dismembered Persons, a Black woodcutter, who had been accused of murdering a sixteen-year-old white girl, Antoinette Rappel. Despite the lack of evidence linking him to the crime, Persons was abducted from police custody by the mob, who had gathered after newspapers had announced the lynching. Approximately 5,000 men, women, and children witnessed the gruesome spectacle. After Persons’ death, the mob decapitated the body, and members of the lynching party later tossed Persons’ charred head and foot out of a car window into a group of African American men on Beale Street, at the time known as the “Main Street of Negro America.” The lynching of Persons immediately reverberated throughout the community and the country. In Memphis, African Americans organized a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which would become the largest in the South for a time. In Boston, the local branch of the Equal Rights League sent a telegram to President Woodrow Wilson, urging him to protect other potential lynching victims, while in New York marchers assembled to protest the lynchings of Persons and others. The black press expressed its outrage, with the *Chicago Defender* even running a photograph of Persons’ severed head within its pages. The national office of the NAACP, meanwhile, dispatched its Field Secretary, James Weldon Johnson to Memphis, and after a ten-day investigation he concluded that Persons had not committed the crime. In his memoir, *Along This Way*, Johnson later reflected that his visit to the place of Persons’ killing—having seen “the paraphernalia of the unspeakable orgy”—prompted him to arrive at the grim conclusion that “in large measure the race question involves the saving of black America’s body and white America’s soul.” A young Abe Fortas, born and raised in Memphis just a few blocks away from Beale Street, was surely affected by the events that swept his hometown. Years later, after a career on the U.S. Supreme Court during the 1960s, Fortas recalled the racial violence of his youth as part of the reason for his own commitment to the civil rights of Black people. The effects of Persons’ horrific murder, in other words, echoed through the decades. The burning and dismembering of Persons in Memphis in May 1917 marked the peak of post-Reconstruction racial terror in the United States, came at the height of the Lost Cause movement in the South, and prompted a renewed wave of black activism in Memphis and beyond that continued for much of the twentieth century. The unusual level of documentation has allowed researchers to pinpoint the exact location of this significant site, a rarity when researching the history of lynching. The rural site has not been developed and remains very much as it was in 1917, maintaining the overall sense of past time and place.

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Narrative Statement of Significance

Reconstruction

Even before Tennesseans formally abolished slavery in early 1865, black freedom was becoming a reality in Memphis.¹ Once federal forces had gained control of the city after victory in the Battle of Memphis, enslaved African Americans on surrounding plantations began to migrate into the city, seeking the freedom, security, and opportunity provided by the presence of federal troops. Between 1860 and 1865, the city's African American population increased at least four-fold, from fewer than 3,900 to approximately 20,000 by the war's end.²

Meanwhile, Union occupation and black in-migration created a spirit of resentment among white Memphians, resulting in the horror of the Memphis Massacre. In the months after Confederate surrender and the abolition of slavery, the ongoing presence of black Union troops in the city, stationed at Fort Pickering, offended local whites, who were astounded by the revolutionary changes occurring in their midst. With racial tensions running high, a confrontation between black troops and white police officers in the spring of 1866 turned violent. Beginning on May 1, 1866, white mobs lashed out in three days of indiscriminate violence against the black community. When the mayhem had subsided, at least forty-six African Americans had lost their lives, while more than a hundred buildings—homes, businesses, churches, and schools—burned to the ground.³

The violence in Memphis promoted a swift response at both the federal and state levels. Outraged Republican congressional leaders investigated, and Congressman Thaddeus Stevens of Massachusetts invoked “the screams and groans of the dying victims at Memphis” in a speech in support of the landmark Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The amendment, which provided for citizenship and civil rights protections, won swift congressional approval, and in July 1866 Tennessee became the first former Confederate state to ratify the amendment. Meanwhile, almost immediately after Tennessee's ratification of the Amendment and readmission to the Union, Republican lawmakers in the state took steps to disfranchise ex-Confederates and grant suffrage to formerly enslaved people.⁴

¹ “Tennessee State Convention; Slavery Declared Forever Abolished Parson Brownlow Nominated for Governor, Emancipation Rejoicings in St. Louis. Sinking of the Schooner Sarah B. James. From Cairo. Relief for Savannah. Obituary. Guerilla Expedition. Railroad Disaster,” *The New York Times*, January 15, 1865; Paul Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History* (University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1999), 150-151.

² Timothy S. Huebner, “The Civil War and Its Legacy in Memphis,” in Karen B. Golithly and Jonathan Judaken, *Memphis: 200 Years Together* (Susan Schadt Press: Memphis, 2019), 28-30.

³ Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot that Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

⁴ Thaddeus Stevens, “Speech on the Fourteenth Amendment,” May 10, 1866, in *Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens*, ed. Beverly Wilson Palmer and Holly Byers Ochoa (University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh, 1998), 2:138; Bergeron, et al, *Tennesseans and Their History*, 162-166.

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At the peak of Reconstruction, black freedom and civil rights seemed secure. By 1868 Black men were serving in state constitutional conventions and state legislatures throughout the South, and after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, the voting rights of black men gained federal protection. Black political participation and officeholding soon followed. Sampson W. Keeble, formerly a Black barber in Nashville, became Tennessee’s first African American to serve in the state legislature in 1873-1874. Other Black men, including Thomas Frank Cassels of Memphis, served as legislators throughout the 1880s.⁵

Freedom proved fragile. For the most part, white southerners fought these advances in the civil and political rights of Black people, prompting further federal intervention. White reactionary groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, founded about two hundred miles east of Memphis in 1866, terrorized and intimidated African Americans who exercised their right to vote. Under the leadership of President Ulysses S. Grant and a Republican Congress, the federal government vigorously responded. In 1870 Congress passed legislation to protect voting rights, establishing punishments for those who obstructed qualified voters by “force, bribery, threats, intimidation, or other unlawful means,” and the following year it enacted the “Ku Klux Klan Act,” aimed at enforcing the guarantees of the Fourteenth Amendment in all cases of “insurrection, domestic violence, unlawful combinations or conspiracies in any State.” To aid in enforcement, Congress created the U.S. Department of Justice, transforming the role of the attorney general from that of a mere legal advisor to the president to the head of an agency of attorneys permanently employed by the federal government. Taken as a whole, this enforcement legislation represented an unprecedented attempt to expand national power to meet the challenge of southern violence.⁶

Federal enforcement of Black civil rights was neither inexpensive nor easy. It required the continued presence of federal troops in the South, local juries that would convict defendants, and national political support for Republicans. After a financial depression hit the nation in 1873, popular support began to erode, and the following year Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives for the first time since the Civil War. In terms of the numbers of cases brought by the Justice Department, federal enforcement of civil and voting rights protections peaked in 1873, before beginning a dramatic descent. A decade later, in 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the last of the Reconstruction-era civil rights measures, thus marking the virtual end of the federal commitment to enforcement and paving the way for segregation.⁷ Across the South, state legislatures began passing laws mandating racial segregation, also known as Jim Crow laws. Tennessee’s law, often cited as the first of these state segregation acts, came in 1875, a year

⁵ “This Honorable Body”: African American Legislators in 19th Century Tennessee, Jim Crow and Disfranchisement of Southern Blacks, Tennessee State Library and Archives. Available at <https://sharetn.gov.tnsosfiles.com/tsla/exhibits/aale/jimcrow.htm>

⁶ Timothy S. Huebner, *Liberty and Union: The Civil War Era and American Constitutionalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 391-394.

⁷ Huebner, *Liberty and Union*, 393-403.

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after Sampson Keeble’s term in the state house ended.⁸ Disfranchisement—state-enacted legal restrictions on black voting rights—soon followed.

After Reconstruction: Jim Crow, Lynching, and the Lost Cause

In contrast to Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era offered dim prospects to Black Americans. Beginning especially during the 1890s, southern state laws not only constrained black political activities, they also controlled and circumscribed nearly every aspect of Black life and conduct. Laws mandated the segregation of Black and white on railways and streetcars, in schools and hospitals, and in hotels and restaurants. In addition to being charged with crimes against person or property, Black Americans could also be accused of “speaking disrespectfully, refusing to step off the sidewalk, using profane language, using an improper title for a white person, arguing with a white man, bumping into a white woman, insulting a white person, and other social grievances.”⁹ During this era, in other words, an entire legal framework grew up around upholding white supremacy, limiting the constitutional rights of African Americans, and controlling Blacks’ everyday behavior.

Lynching reinforced the white supremacy of the Jim Crow era. Although difficult to define, the classic definition of lynching, developed by the NAACP in 1940, referred to illegal killing “at the hands of a group acting under the pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition.”¹⁰ Most white southerners viewed extra-legal, community-sanctioned violence as a legitimate means of protecting white families and white womanhood from the supposed inherent criminality of the Black population. When whites grew frustrated that the criminal justice system moved too slowly or feared it might go too far in protecting black defendants, whites did not hesitate to turn to lynching as means of meting out justice. Between 1877 and 1950, mobs took the lives of more than 4,400 African Americans through lynchings in the southern states. These documented extra-legal killings occurred in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Most often, whites accused their Black victims of murder or rape, although lesser infractions such as robbery, arson, and vagrancy at times led to lynching. Accusations of rape of white women by Black men could hinge on the thinnest of evidence.¹¹

Lynching episodes ranged from kidnappings and murder at the hands of a small group to torture and murder before thousands of onlookers. Preplanned and public lynchings often featured “prolonged torture,

⁸ “Reconstruction, 1865-1875,” *Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area; This Honorable Body*: African American Legislators in 19th Century Tennessee, Jim Crow and Disfranchisement of Southern Blacks, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

⁹ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 143-146; “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” Equal Justice Initiative, 29.

¹⁰ Margaret Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South* (Rutgers University Press, 2006), 4.

¹¹ “Lynching in America,” 29; *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918*, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (New York: 1919), 9-10.

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mutilation, dismemberment, and burning at the stake.” Such brutality was almost never suffered by whites accused of comparable crimes.¹² Lynchers intended the public spectacle of lynching to intimidate entire African American communities rather than serve solely as punishment of a purported wrongdoer. In other words, lynching served as a form of racial control, as the threat at times extended beyond the accused. Friends or family members of the alleged criminal might be lynched when the target could not be apprehended, and an entire neighborhood or community at times suffered for the alleged actions of an individual.¹³

In response to such horrific violence, Black Americans resisted. In the pages of newspapers published by and for African Americans, writers such as T. Thomas Fortune, founder of the *New York Globe*, and John Mitchell Jr., editor the *Richmond Planet*, urged adherence to constitutional principles and the rule of law.¹⁴ In Memphis, Ida B. Wells, who had moved to the city from Mississippi, emerged as one of the leading voices in an anti-lynching crusade that gained strength during the 1890s. In response to the lynching of three successful Black grocers in Memphis, who were also her friends, Wells used compelling investigative journalism to challenge white convention. Armed with anecdotal evidence and statistical data, Wells refuted white claims for the supposed need for vigilante justice, calling the idea that Black men assaulted white women “a thread-bare lie.” Wells published her criticisms in the *Memphis Free Speech*, the newspaper she operated on Beale Street, and later in the form of two pamphlets, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* and *A Red Record: Lynchings in the United States*. Forced to flee Memphis, Wells carried on her work in Chicago, New York, and elsewhere, and in 1909 she joined W.E.B DuBois and others in establishing the NAACP, the leading national civil rights organization of the twentieth century.¹⁵

If lynching reinforced white supremacy, so did the Lost Cause. A cultural movement with a political agenda, the Lost Cause manifested itself in a variety of ways—through nostalgia for the Old South, glorification of wartime heroism, and depictions of Reconstruction as an era of corruption and federal occupation. In the decades after Confederate defeat, the movement took shape through the formation of historical and veterans’ organizations, the publication of literary works and history textbooks, and the creation of Confederate holidays and parades. By far the most lasting and visible manifestation of the Lost Cause were the thousands of monuments to the Confederacy and Confederate soldiers erected across the southern landscape. In Memphis, a gathering of Confederate veterans in 1901 prompted a fundraising campaign to erect a twenty-one and a half feet-tall equestrian statue of Confederate Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, who had made his career in the antebellum era as a Memphis slave trader before achieving the rank of lieutenant general in the Confederate Army. After the war, he served as an early leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Although originally buried elsewhere in town, the bodies of Forrest and his wife were moved and re-buried near the center of

¹² “Lynching in America,” 33; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 8.

¹³ “Lynching in America,” 32; Taylor, “A History of Tolerance for Violence Has Laid the Groundwork for Injustice Today,” American Bar Association.

¹⁴ Christopher Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching: Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 13-37.

¹⁵ Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching*, 42-47.

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Memphis in 1905, when local notables unveiled and dedicated the Forrest monument in the middle of “Forrest Park.” It was an unmistakable message to the approximately half of the city’s residents who were Black.¹⁶

The Murder of Antoinette Rappel and the Lynching of Ell Persons

A dozen years after the dedication of the Forrest monument and fifty-one years after the Memphis Massacre, the city again expressed its collective commitment to white supremacy. The brutal murder of Antoinette Rappel in May 1917 set in motion of sequence of events that culminated in the burning and execution of Ell Persons.¹⁷

On May 2, 1917, the body of sixteen-year-old white student Antoinette Rappel was found at the old Wolf River Bridge, near what is now Summer Avenue, in Memphis. Missing since April 30, Rappel had last been seen crossing the Wolf River bridge. She left home that morning to bicycle to her uncle William Wilfong’s dairy to wait for the school wagon to Treadwell School.¹⁸ When she did not return home the next day and no relatives reported seeing her, her uncle organized a search for the missing child.¹⁹ Rappel’s bicycle was found on the west side of the Macon Road bridge, approximately one hundred feet from the road. The girl’s body was found at the end of about fifty feet of drag marks, decapitated and bruised. A doctor stated that she was killed by being struck on the head. It was asserted that she had been sexually assaulted, although whether this happened before or after the death could not be determined.²⁰

¹⁶ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (New York: University of Cambridge Press, 2001), 255-299; Huebner, “Civil War and Its Legacy,” 30-31. See also, Southern Poverty Law Center, “Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy” (2019), <https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy>

¹⁷ For accounts of the lynching see Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith, “‘Unhidden’ Transcripts: Memphis and African American Agency, 1862-1920,” in Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, *The New African American Urban History* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1996); Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 119-140; Darius Young, “‘The Saving of Black America’s Body and White America’s Soul’: The Lynching of Ell Persons and the Rise of Black Activism in Memphis,” in Aram Goudsouzian and Charles W. McKinney Jr., *An Unseen Light: Black Struggles for Freedom in Memphis, Tennessee* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2018), 39-60.

¹⁸ State of Tennessee, State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Certificate of Death, Antonette Rappel, April 20, 1917 [microfilm, vol. 51, page 426].

¹⁹ Sources vary in describing the relationship between William Wilfong and Antoinette Rappel. Based on census records, it is determined that Wilfong was Antoinette Rappel’s uncle, and Minnie Woods’ brother-in-law. *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 3, 1917, 1; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 3, 1917, 1.

²⁰ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 3, 1917, 1.

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Figure 1. Antoinette Rappal. Courtesy of the Memphis News Scimitar, May 3, 1917, 1.

From the discovery of Rappal's body, Sheriff Mike G. Tate seemed fixated on a Black murderer, despite evidence to the contrary and the city police's own theories. The crime scene revealed an ax mark in the ground, a white handkerchief missing the corners, a white vest or coat, and tracks made recently from a car.²¹ The city police suspected a white assailant, as the recovered items would be uncommon among local African Americans and evidence suggested that Rappal was not forcibly taken from the road.²² According to

²¹ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, "The Lynching at Memphis," *The Crisis*, vol. 14, 4 (August 1917), 185.

²² *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 5, 1917, 7; *News Scimitar*, May 7, 1917, 1.

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the *News Scimitar*, a white man was spotted at the Woodstock train depot or a nearby depot acting peculiarly on the day of the murder, but newspapers make no further mention of him.²³ A week later, another white man claimed that the recovered handkerchief belonged to him and reported that he and several friends were searching for ferns in the area on Monday morning, explaining the car tracks. The man also stated that they witnessed another white man acting “excited,” but it does not appear that police followed up on this.²⁴

Unmoved by the city police’s line of reasoning, Sheriff Mike G. Tate focused his attention on the Black woodcutters in the area.²⁵ DeWitt Ford, a nineteen-year-old who was deaf and mute, had reportedly mimed someone’s decapitation on April 30, but he was ignored until Rappel’s body was found. After being taken to the crime scene, Ford indicated that another Black woodcutter, Dan Armstrong, was the culprit. Armstrong was arrested, but his white employer P.O. Stockley assured police that Armstrong had been at his residence at the time of the murder. After another white man confirmed Armstrong’s whereabouts, suspicion moved away from him.²⁶

Ell Persons came under scrutiny after a white man, E.J. Brooks, reported a previous event in which Persons acted strangely with his wife. Brooks stated that in February, Persons “star[ed] wildly” at his wife and told her he had dreamt of her the night before. Brooks recalled wanting to “put a hole in the fiend,” but fired him instead. Sheriff Tate considered the incident indicative of Persons’s “brutish proclivities” and promptly took him into custody.²⁷ Persons’s home was searched for an axe, as were other homes of Black residents, but he could not provide one or explain the absence of it.²⁸ After releasing Persons twice, detectives hoped to follow him as he visited the crime scene. Persons did no such thing, and he was arrested a third time. Beaten by the sheriff and deputies, he maintained his innocence until the detective claimed to see blood on his shoes. The detective removed his shoes and brought them back an hour later claiming they were covered in human blood, at which point Persons supposedly confessed to Rappel’s murder.²⁹

²³ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 5, 1917, 1.

²⁴ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 7, 1917, 1.; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 121-122.

²⁵ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 15, 1959 (clippings in MSCR).

²⁶ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 4, 1917, 1, 12; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 120-121.

²⁷ *Herald*, May 27, 1917, page unknown, as quoted in NAACP, “Memphis, May 22,” 186; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1917, 9.

²⁸ Stephen Haley, “The Last Lynching,” *Memphis Magazine*, 5 (April 1980), 64.

²⁹ The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* says Persons’s final arrest occurred on Sunday, May 6; the *Memphis News Scimitar* reported that Persons was arrested Saturday, May 5.

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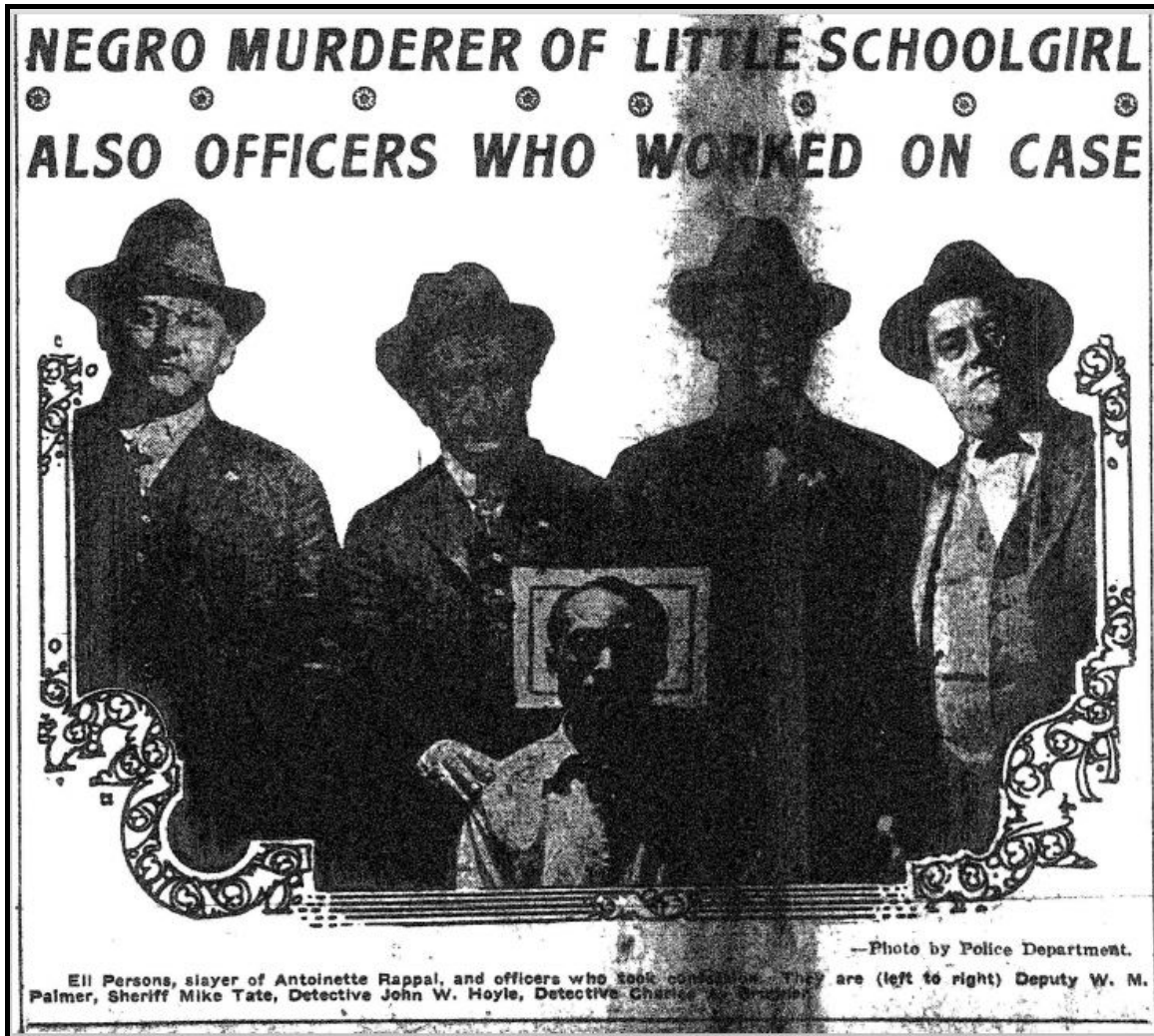


Figure 2. Ell Persons with the officers who investigated the case of Antoinette Rappal. Courtesy of the Memphis News Scimitar, May 8, 1917, 1.

Despite Persons's confession, there is no evidence that he was responsible for Rappal's murder. The *Memphis Press* ran an article the same day as his confession stating that no blood was found on Persons's shoes or clothes, and he was never observed visiting the crime scene.³⁰ Aside from his forced confession, the only other "evidence" appears to be a ludicrous theory that murder victims' eyes would have their last moment imprinted in their retinas. Judge Puryear ordered Rappal's body be unearthed so that her eyes could be photographed, despite a resolution from the Memphis Society of Ophthalmology and Oto-Laryngology stating that this was not possible. The *Commercial Appeal* reported that the photograph revealed "the

³⁰ Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 123; *Memphis Press*, date unknown, quoted in NAACP, "Lynching at Memphis," 187.

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outlines of a full-faced, large-featured man,” while the *News Scimitar* stated “a likeness of Persons” was shown.³¹

The police department noted the likelihood of a lynching before a suspect was even identified.³² Once news of Persons’s confession reached the public, Sheriff Tate immediately relocated him outside the county until his trial. Persons, along with two detectives and a deputy, boarded a train for Nashville in the early hours of May 8.³³ A crowd was waiting at every station, but the sheriff convinced them that their prisoner was not Persons.³⁴ A crowd of about five hundred assembled in downtown Memphis that same morning demanded access to the county jail, which the sheriff granted. Not finding Persons, the mob was granted the same permission to search the city jail. The fruitless search angered the Memphians, and a group confronted the attorney general at the courthouse and demanded to know Persons’s whereabouts. Although telegrams convinced the mob that their target was not in Memphis, by nightfall they had resumed their search.³⁵ Anger and frustration grew, and Sheriff Tate was the target of open threats. The mob moved to the Court Square in downtown Memphis and began assembling a list of all who knew Persons.³⁶ Another search of the city jail took place, and they finally disbanded after not finding him.³⁷ Sheriff Tate ordered Persons returned to Memphis by train with an escort of only two deputies. In Potts Camp, Mississippi, with no resistance from the deputies, a white vigilante group abducted Persons from the train.³⁸

The next day, newspapers announced Persons’s lynching and even predicted his burning.³⁹ On the day of the event, sandwiches and drinks were sold to the spectators, creating a carnival-like atmosphere on the Macon Road bridge.⁴⁰ Several officers, in addition to farmers, workers, and professional men, were reportedly in attendance to watch the planned execution, “no doubt in sympathy with the business at hand.”⁴¹ The crowds were so large that efforts to gain a clearer view resulted in “the jam around the pyre,” and “[b]roken-down automobiles lined the roads from the scene all the way to town.”⁴² Rappel’s mother reached the scene at the same time as Persons, and a police officer announced that she wished to make a statement. She wished for Persons to suffer as her daughter did, and the crowd responded with calls to burn him.⁴³ Given a chance to address the crowd, Persons accused Dewitt Ford and Dan Armstrong of Rappel’s murder. Although the mob

³¹ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1917, 9; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 8, 1917, 1.

³² Memphis Police Department, “Report of Homicide, Antoinette Rappel,” May 4, 1917, Shelby County Archives.

³³ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 8, 1917, 1.

³⁴ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1917, 9.

³⁵ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1917, 1.

³⁶ Lloyd Ostby, Memphis Landmarks Commission, “Court Square Historic District,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1982).

<https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/82004042>

³⁷ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1917, 1, 9; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 9, 1917, 1, 8.

³⁸ *Nashville Tennessean and Nashville American*, May 22, 1917, 9; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 1.

³⁹ *Nashville Tennessean and Nashville American*, May 22, 1917, 1.

⁴⁰ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, p. 1.

⁴¹ Boyce House, *Cub Reporter* (Dallas: Hightower Press, 1947), 105-6.

⁴² *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, p. 1.

⁴³ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 8.

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initially suspended Persons over a pit with a rope, the lynchers changed course and instead chained him to a log. Persons was doused with gasoline, despite protests that he would burn too quickly this way. According to the *Commercial Appeal*, a minister known as “Brother Royal” dismissed suggestions of prayers for Persons, stating that he did not allow Rappel a chance for prayer before her murder. Persons’s body was then set afire, although newspapers differed in how quickly he died.⁴⁴

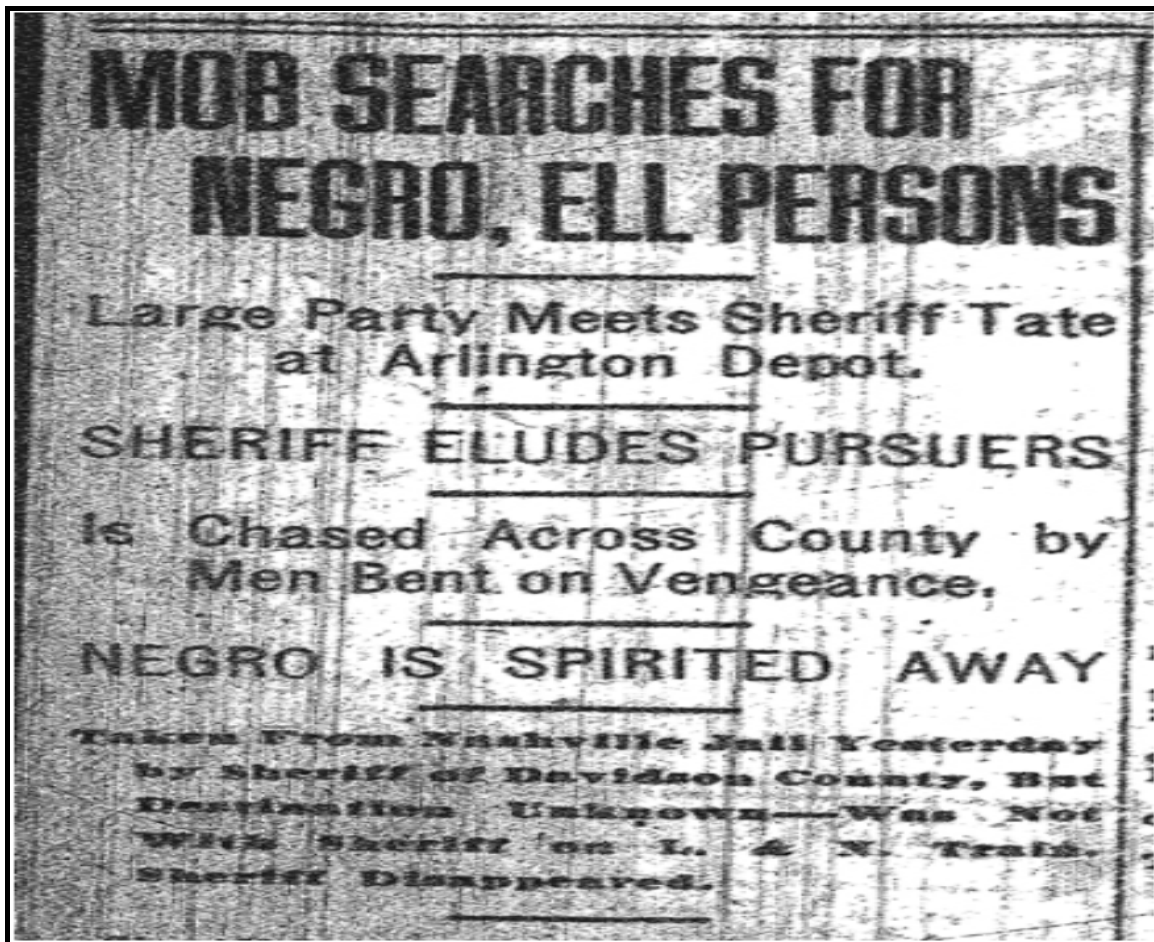


Figure 3: Left: “Mob Searches for Negro, Ell Persons,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 17, 1917.

⁴⁴ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 1, 8; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1, 8; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 128-129.

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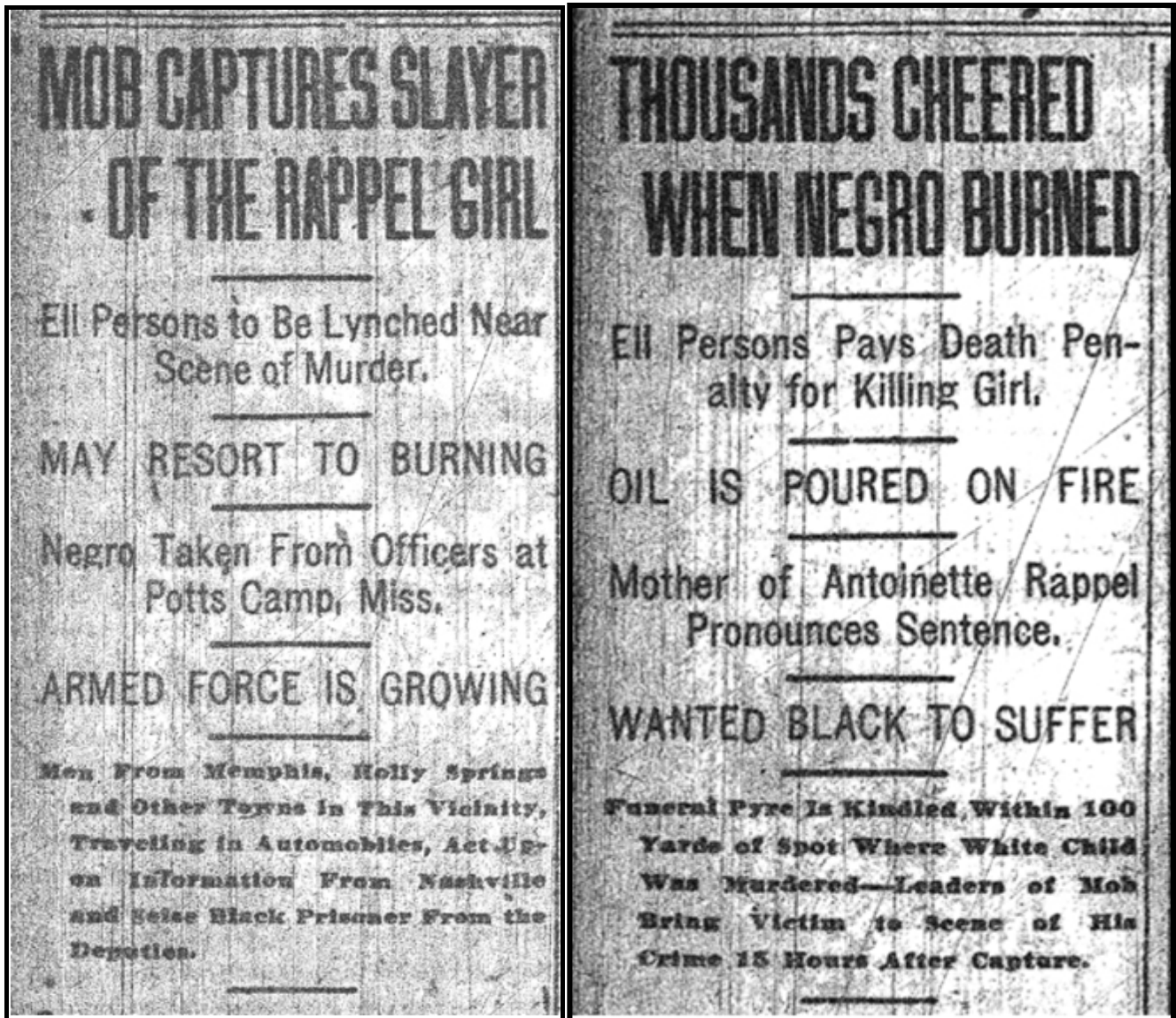


Figure 4 and 5. Left: “Mob Captures Slayer of the Rappel Girl,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 22, 1917; Right: “Thousands Cheered When Negro Burned,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 1.

The only lynching victim known to be burned alive in Shelby County, Persons suffered mutilation after his death. Lynchers cut off his head, cut out his heart, and dismembered his body.⁴⁵ In his report to *The Crisis*, James Weldon Johnson recounted being dispatched to Memphis by the NAACP to investigate. After noting the complete lack of evidence implicating Persons in Rappel’s murder, he described the scene largely untouched since the lynching. The log and iron rail to which Persons was chained remained on top of the

⁴⁵ Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 119, 129; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 1; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1.

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“black and charred” earth where he was burned. He noted an American flag had been posted to mark the site.⁴⁶

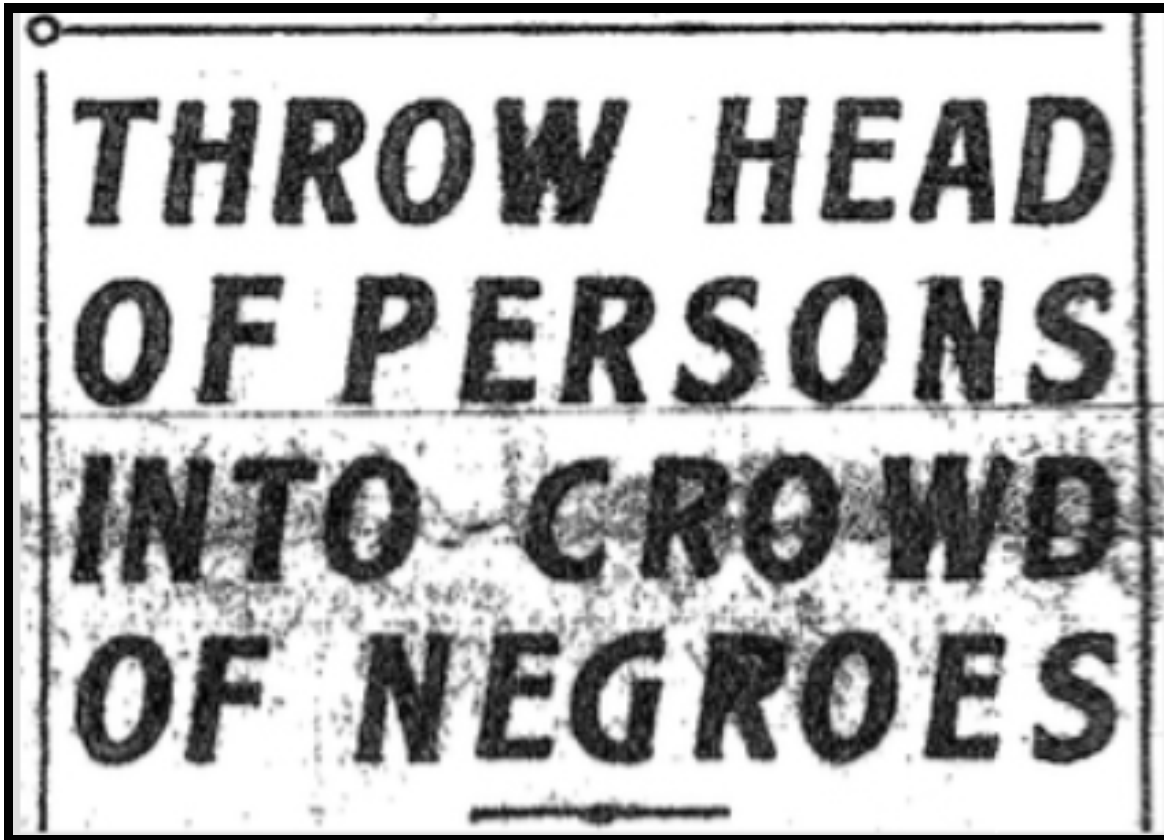


Figure 6. “Throw Head of Persons into Crowd of Negroes,” Memphis News Scimitar, May 22, 1917, 1.

After the gruesome event had concluded, lynchers sent a message to the Black community. Three white men drove to Memphis’s Black commercial district and threw Persons’s charred head and foot at a group of African Americans near Beale Street.⁴⁷ Immediately after Persons’s death, a vigilante group began hunting for Dewitt Ford and Dan Armstrong, who were reportedly implicated by Persons as accomplices. The men were quickly apprehended and after a “trial” along a country lane, were released the same night by the armed groups after providing sufficient alibis.⁴⁸

The lynching of Ell Persons took place with full participation from the white community and local government. The sheriff granted each demand from the mob to search the city and county jails in their quest

⁴⁶ James Weldon Johnson, “The Lynching at Memphis,” *The Crisis*, vol. 14, August 1917, 188.

⁴⁷ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1.

⁴⁸ *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 8; *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 23, 1917, 1.

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for extrajudicial punishment between May 8 and May 18. Although a coroner's jury met at the lynching site the same day Persons was murdered, they concluded his death was from "unknown causes at the hands of unknown persons."⁴⁹ The morgue entry notes that they buried what was left of his body and noted him as responsible for Rappel's death.⁵⁰ A grand jury, charged by Judge D.B. Puryear on May 25, did not charge anyone with Persons's extralegal execution. Significantly, the judge had noted the support of the white community for Persons's lynching and did not grant the jury inquisitorial powers.⁵¹ More than a century later, no one has ever been convicted for either Rappel's or Persons's murder.

Figure 7: Ell Persons Death Certificate, May 24, 1917. Courtesy of Lynching Sites Project of Memphis.

⁴⁹ The coroner was N. T. Ingram, a prominent member of the Ku Klux Klan. *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 23, 1917, 1; Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York, 1967), 55.

⁵⁰ State of Tennessee, State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Certificate of Death, Ell Persons, May 22, 1917 (microfilm, vol. 51, p. 494); Shelby County Morgue Daily Record, May 1917, p. 152, Shelby County Archives; Shelby County Criminal Court, Division One, *State of Tennessee v. L.T. Person* (case jacket), Shelby County Archives.

⁵¹ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 26, 1917, 5.

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It is important to note that the mob participants responsible for Persons's kidnapping and murder appeared to have had no fear of consequences for their actions, legal or otherwise. A *Memphis News Scimitar* article discussed plans for a monument for Rappel and noted that many present at the lynching donated money. The article further listed the contact information for R.H. Brown, who had apparently gathered donations at the scene of the lynching.⁵²



Figure 8. "Contribute \$261 Toward Monument for Negro's Victim," *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 23, 1917, 1.

⁵² *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 23, 1917, 1; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 131.

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Little is known about Ell Persons. His death certificate listed his age as 38 and noted that he was married. His occupation was listed as farmer, although contemporary sources stated he was a woodcutter. Michelle Whitney, a descendant of Persons' brother, has compiled an *Ancestry* family tree and noted several relatives, including a wife, Sallie Taylor.⁵³ The Shelby County morgue record noted that "part of the body such as could be found" was buried in the county cemetery in an unmarked grave.⁵⁴ Its exact location remains unknown.

The lynching of Ell Persons dramatically affected the community and the country. In Memphis, African Americans under the leaderships of Robert Church Jr. organized a chapter of NAACP, as well as a new political organization, the Lincoln League. When a few thousand showed up for the first meeting of Church's organization, he addressed the crowd by saying, "I would be untrue to you and myself as your elected leader if I should remain silent against shame and crime of lawlessness of any character, and I could not if I would hold my peace against either the lynching or burning of a human being."⁵⁵ In Boston, the local branch of the Equal Rights League sent a telegram to President Woodrow Wilson, urging him to protect other potential lynching victims, while in New York marchers assembled to protest the lynchings of Persons and others. The black press expressed its outrage, with the *Chicago Defender* even running a photograph of Persons' severed head within its pages. The national office of the NAACP, meanwhile, dispatched its Field Secretary, James Weldon Johnson to Memphis, and after a ten-day investigation he concluded that Persons had not committed the crime.

In his memoir, *Along This Way*, Johnson later reflected that his visit to the place of Persons' killing—having seen "the paraphernalia of the unspeakable orgy"—prompted him to arrive at the grim conclusion that "in large measure the race question involves the saving of black America's body and white America's soul." A young Abe Fortas, born and raised in Memphis just a few blocks away from Beale Street, was surely affected by the events that swept his hometown. Years later, Fortas, the son of poor Jewish immigrants, recalled "the outrages of the Ku Klux Klan, directed against Jews, Catholics, and Negroes" as part of the reason for his own commitment to the civil rights of Black people. At that point a retired justice of the U.S. Supreme Court who had served during the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, Fortas seemed to say that his childhood knowledge of the lynching had profoundly affected him.⁵⁶

The ghastly killing of Ell Persons, coming a half century after the bloody Memphis Massacre, symbolized the city's history of white supremacy and racial terror, in response to Black freedom. In a larger context, the killing occurred at the peak of post-Reconstruction racial violence in the United States and at the height of the Lost Cause movement in the South. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the 1917 lynching, Black activism persisted.

⁵³ Whitney-Woods Family Tree, *Ancestry*. Retrieved from https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/family-tree/person/tree/6406871/person/230086747388/facts?_phsrc=DWM2&_phstart=successSource

⁵⁴ Shelby County Morgue Daily Record, May 1917, p. 152, Shelby County Archives.

⁵⁵ Young, "The Saving of Black America's Body and White America's Soul," 39-60.

⁵⁶ Timothy S. Huebner, "Memphis and the Making of Justice Fortas," *Journal of Supreme Court History*, 42 (2017), 316.

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Identifying the Site

The location of the lynching site was determined by scrutinizing all available sources that gave details of the location, with particular reliance on the police report of Antoinette Rappel's murder, contemporary local newspaper articles, and James Weldon Johnson's description in *The Crisis*.⁵⁷ All sources agree that both the murder of Rappel and the lynching of Persons took place on the west side of the Wolf River Bridge, the side nearest to Memphis. A close reading of the sources indicates that Rappel's body was found on the south side of the road, while Persons was lynched on the north side. The *News Scimitar* wrote, "[I]t had been decided to burn Persons on the south side of the bridge, near the place where Miss Rappal [sic] was assaulted and killed In order that more spectators might secure a view of the execution, the plans were changed . . . and the scene of execution was laid north of the bridge."⁵⁸ This account matches that of the *Commercial Appeal*.⁵⁹ Johnson's account in *The Crisis* provided the most specific description of the lynching site, noting that the evidence of the crime was "down in a hollow twenty feet, perhaps, below the levee of the road, and on the left side and at the near end of the bridge as approached from the city," which would be the north side of the west end.⁶⁰

Older maps noting the location of the study area are sparse as the area was not incorporated into the city of Memphis until 1956. There are no Sanborn Fire Insurance maps showing the details of the study area at the time of Ell Persons's lynching. The maps that do exist, however, indicate that the layout of the road and bridge remained consistent over approximately 100 years; although the river has been relocated and the bridge and road no longer exist, the remaining bridge substructures make it possible to precisely locate the site.

The site during the nineteenth century

Construction of a plank road from the small settlement of Macon to Memphis was authorized by the Tennessee General Assembly in 1852.⁶¹ This road crossed the Wolf River some miles east of Memphis and entered Memphis near its northeastern edge. Macon Road joined with the Old Raleigh Road at the location of the Poor House and Work House (not far from the Treadwell School Antionette Rappel attended) and continued east into downtown Memphis.⁶²

⁵⁷ Report of Homicide, Antoinette Rappel, Memphis Police Department, May 4, 1917, Shelby County Archives; *Commercial Appeal*, May 3, 1917, p. 1; *News Scimitar*, May 4, 1917, 1; *News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1; *Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 8; "The Lynching at Memphis," *The Crisis*, vol. 14, August 1917, 185-188.

⁵⁸ *News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, 1.

⁵⁹ *Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 8.

⁶⁰ James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (Viking, 1933), 188.

⁶¹ *Tennessee House Journal*, February 25, 1852, 886.

⁶² 1888 Map of Shelby County, Tenn. Library of Congress, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3963s.la000879>.

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The earliest known reference to a bridge over the Wolf River on the Macon Road appears in the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 15, 1860.⁶³ The ambush and murder of a well-known doctor on the Macon Road near the Wolf River bridge in 1867 led to a detailed description of the area in the local press: “Four miles from the junction of the Macon with the Raleigh road is a bridge. A short distance this side [west side] of the bridge the road commences narrowing, and is fringed on each side with a thicket so thickly studded with dogwood, cane, etc., as to seem almost impervious even to pedestrians. Three hundred yards before reaching the bridge the road is so narrow that a horseman riding in the center is within eight or ten feet of either edge of the thicket. The vicinity is wild looking and suggestive of a bloody deed.”⁶⁴

Maps dating from 1869 and 1888 show a bridge on the Macon Road crossing the Wolf River. It is likely that the bridge was replaced several times over the ninety-some years that it was in use. An 1882 notice in the *Daily Memphis Avalanche* reported a request for bids for commissioners “to let out and superintend the building of a Trestle across Wolf River Bottom, on the Macon Road.”⁶⁵ A November article of the same year reported that “Messrs. Hamner and Houston, contractors, are nearing the completion of the immense trestle across Wolf river bottom at the Macon road bridge.”⁶⁶ In 1885, the *Weekly Public Ledger* revealed that the Macon Road was “in a very bad condition” between the workhouse and the bridge and “cannot be repaired by the road hands.”⁶⁷ It remains uncertain whether the bridge built in the 1880s was still standing in 1917.

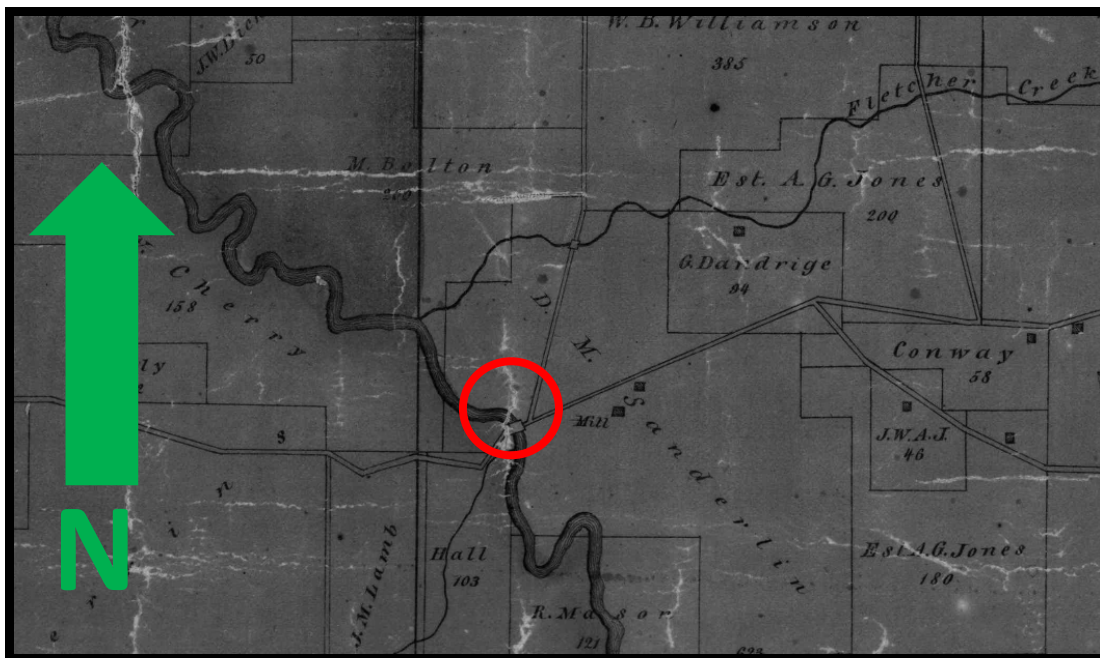


Figure 9: Detail from 1869 Williamson Map. Courtesy of Shelby County Archives.

⁶³ This was an advertisement for a stray mare found “about 1 mile from the bridge on the Memphis and Macon road crossing Wolf river.”

⁶⁴ *Public Ledger*, August 29, 1867.

⁶⁵ *Daily Memphis Avalanche*, August 1, 1882, 2.

⁶⁶ *Daily Memphis Avalanche*, November 5, 1882, 2.

⁶⁷ *Weekly Public Ledger*, October 13, 1885, 1.

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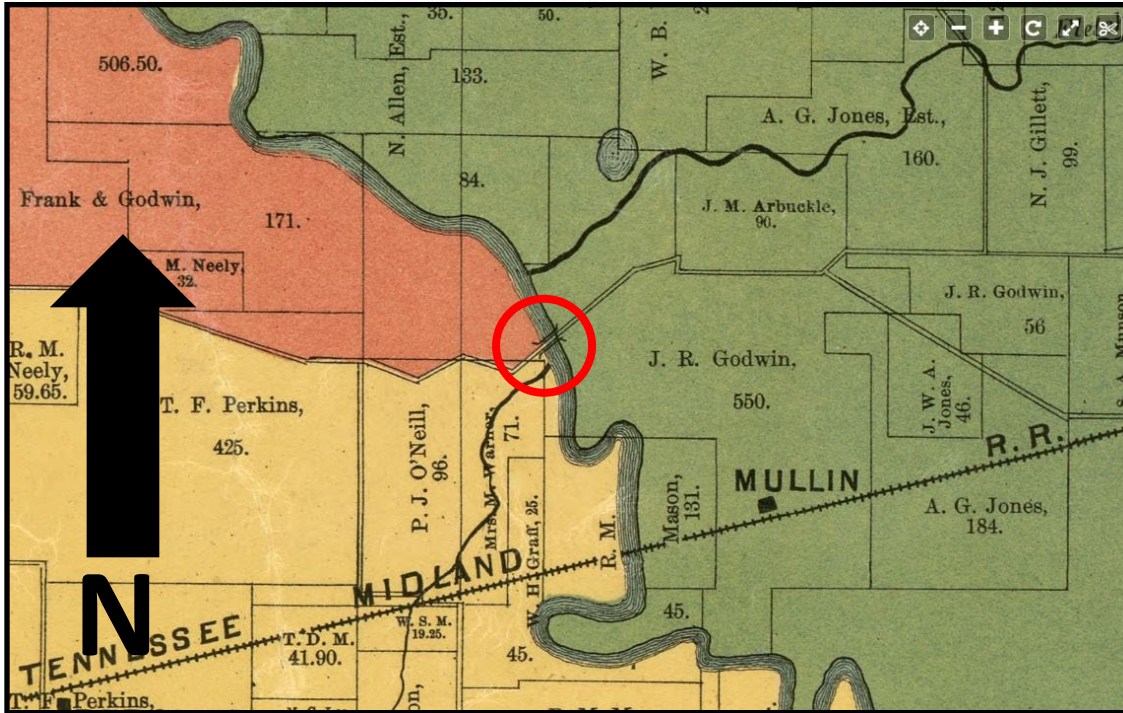


Figure 10: Detail from 1888 Map of Shelby County, Tennessee. Courtesy of Library of Congress, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3963s.la000879>

The site in the early twentieth century:

A 1916 soil survey of Shelby County shows the study area and notes the presence of a bridge along Macon Road over the Wolf River (see Figure 11).⁶⁸ No photograph of the bridge from that period has been located and no remnants of it exist. James Weldon Johnson's report in *The Crisis* described it as long and wooden with iron railings.⁶⁹ Extensive repair or replacement of this bridge probably took place after a damaging flood in 1919; the *Memphis News Scimitar* reported that "forty feet of the Macon road bridge over Wolf river was washed away and the levee on both sides has sloughed off."⁷⁰ On April 1, 1919, the same paper noted that repairs of damage done to area roads and bridges would begin at once.⁷¹ It is likely that the existing concrete substructures date from the period after this flood.

⁶⁸ Shelby County, Tennessee soil map (1916), TSLA Map Collection. Retrieved from <https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll23/id/14/rec/1>

⁶⁹ Johnson, "The Lynching at Memphis," *The Crisis*, vol. 14, August 1917, 188.

⁷⁰ *Memphis News Scimitar*, March 19, 1919, 2.

⁷¹ *Memphis News Scimitar*, April 1, 1919, 6.

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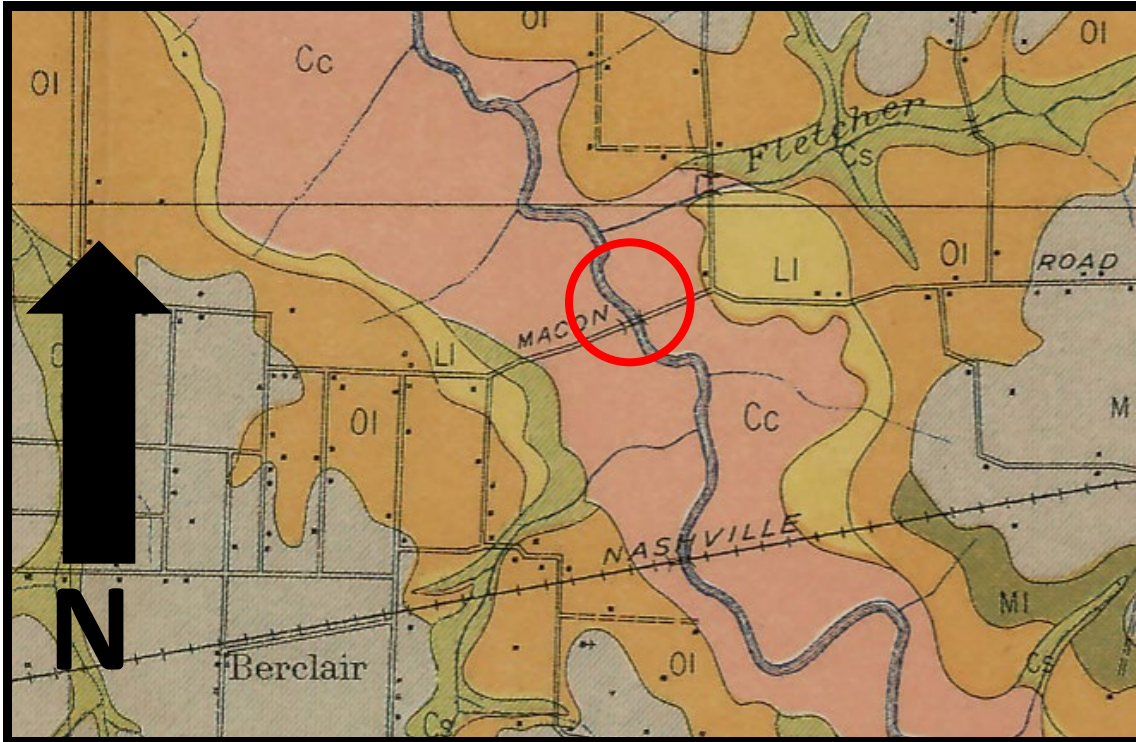


Figure 11. Detail of a Shelby County soil map, 1916. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.
Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.



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Figure 12: Detail from Shelby County, Tenn., Rural Delivery Routes. Undated, probably 1920s-1930s. Courtesy of Tennessee State Library and Archives.

The site in the mid-twentieth century

The Macon Road and bridge continued in use until the second half of the twentieth century. A 1949 aerial view of the study area shows the bridge intact, and a 1954 map of Shelby County indicates the bridge was still extant and useable. A 1956 topographical map shows the new Summer Avenue bridge over Wolf River, and the Macon Road bridge is not depicted. This strongly suggests the bridge was destroyed or fell into disrepair in 1955. The 1961 topographical map indicates the proposed rerouting of the Wolf River and notes “BRIDGE OUT” near the Macon Road bridge.⁷² By 1964, the Army Corps of Engineers had channelized this section of the Wolf River, moving it approximately two hundred yards to the west.⁷³

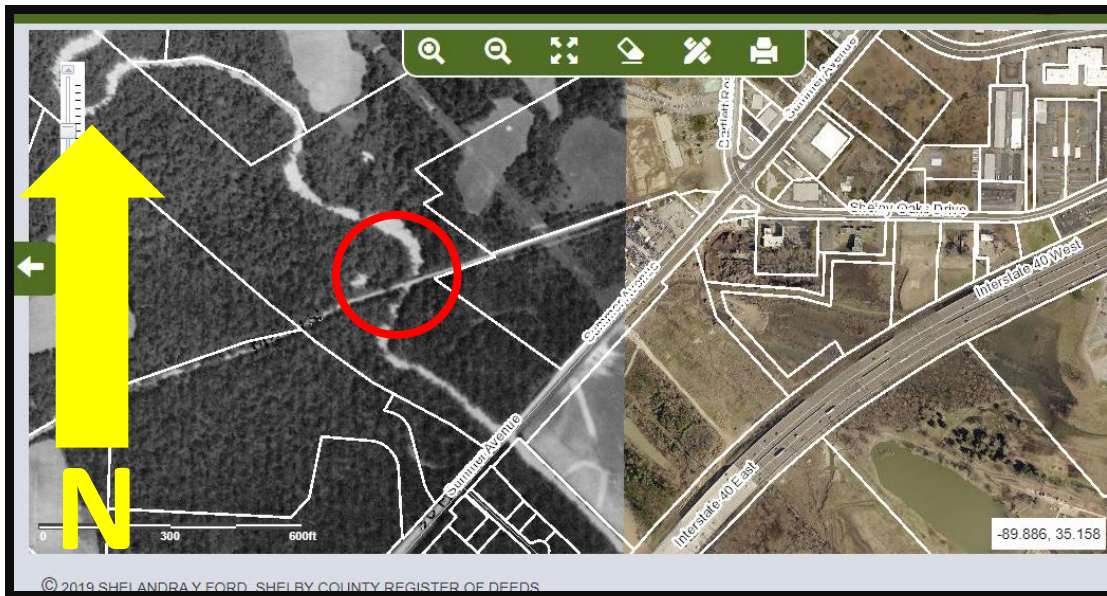


Figure 13. Aerial view of the approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site outlined in red, 1949. Courtesy of Shelby County Register of Deeds.

⁷² Bartlett, Tennessee Quadrangle map, 1961, USGS store. Retrieved from <https://store.usgs.gov/map-locator>.

⁷³ Wolf River Conservancy, “Introduction to the Wolf River,” <https://wolfriver.org/introduction-to-the-wolf-river>.

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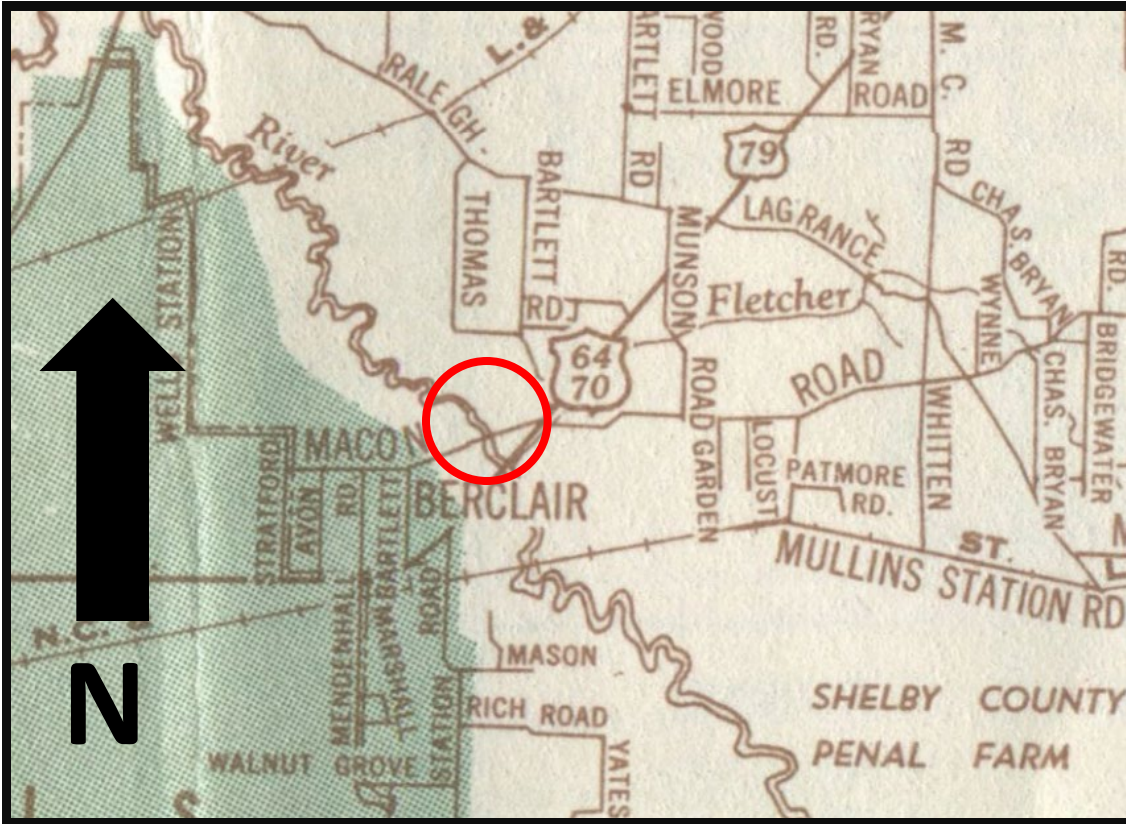


Figure 14. Map of Shelby County, 1954. Courtesy of The Digital Archive of Memphis Public Library. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.

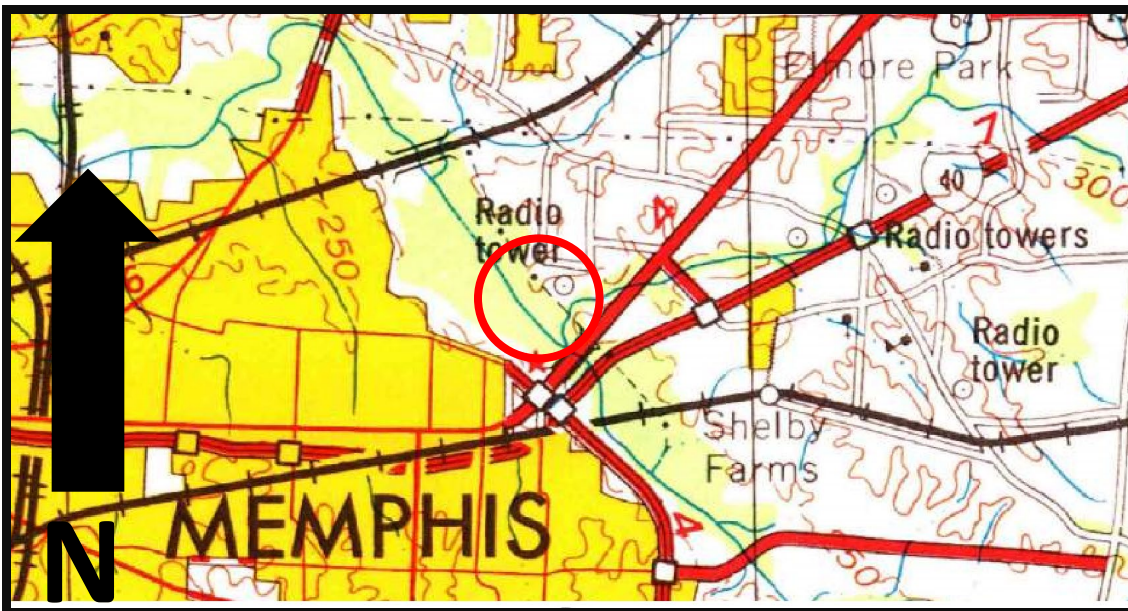


Figure 15: Blytheville, Ak Qua drangle map, 1956, revised in 1970. The Summer Avenue bridge is depicted, but the Macon Road bridge is not. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.

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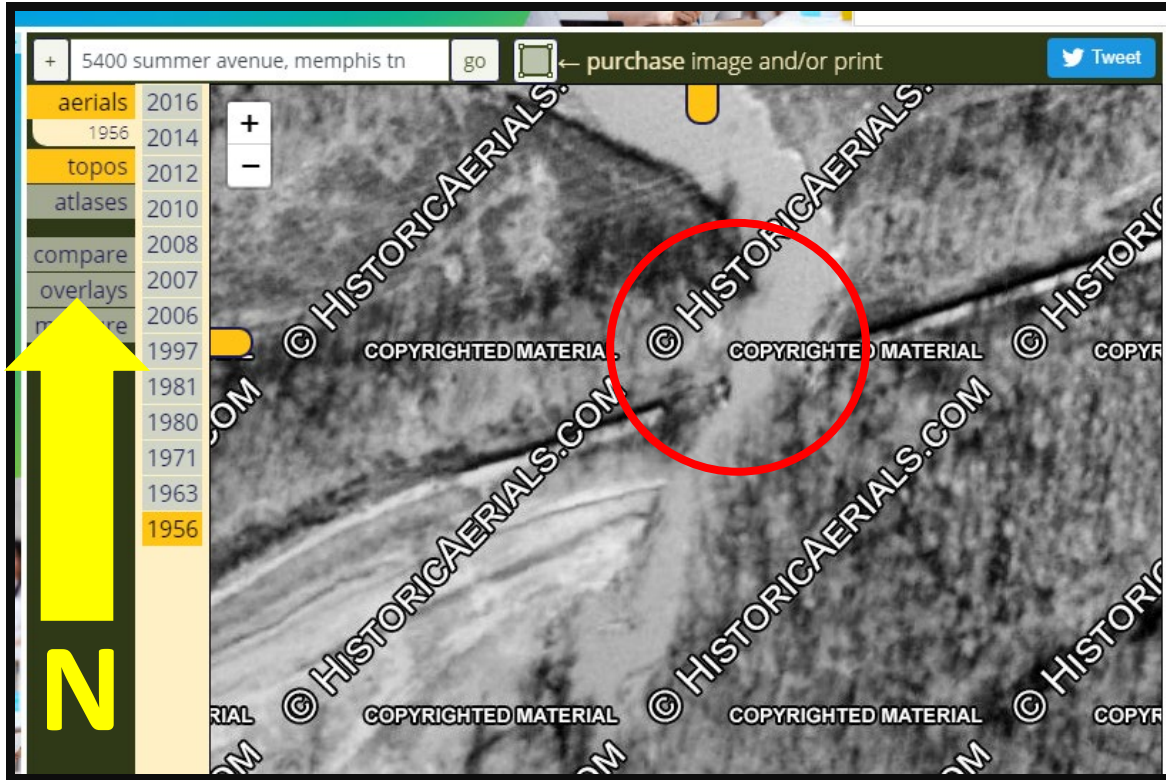


Figure 16. Aerial view of the approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red, 1956. Note the bridge is out over the Wolf River. Courtesy of historicaerials.com/viewer.

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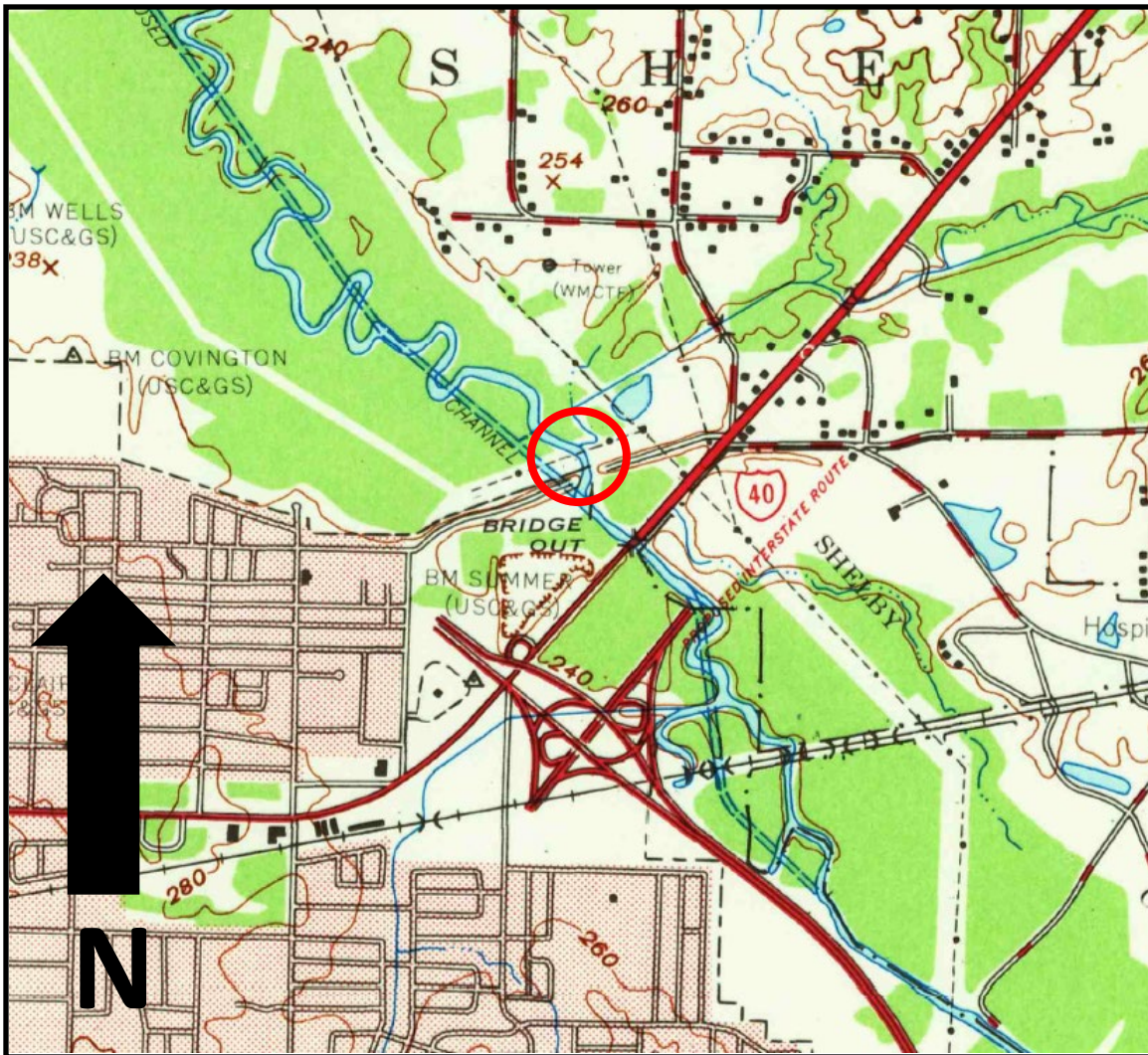


Figure 17. Northeast Memphis Quadrangle map, 1961. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.

The site at present

The roadbed of the Macon Road is not visible, but its course is marked by power lines. The only structures extant at the site are two bridge substructures of concrete construction standing in shallow water. Despite outreach to engineers, GIS analysts, TDOT Environmental Division, Wolf River Conservancy, local historians and archivists, historic organizations, and community members, the study team was unable to conclusively determine the date of the substructures and whether they were at the location when Persons was killed. Given that they are consistent with the position of the bridge as indicated in all the maps above, it is highly likely that they do mark the location of the bridge, and thus of the lynching, in 1917. Despite the extensive development of the city around the site, the location remains isolated from the roads, businesses,

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and houses in the area. The site remains remote and heavily wooded, relatively untouched since the 1917 event, and is owned by the Shelby County Conservation Board.



Figure 18: 1949 aerial view of intersection of Summer Avenue and N. White Station Rd, where Haley stated Persons likely lived. Courtesy of Shelby County Property Assessor.

Discussion of Associated Sites

Contemporary sources provide hints at the historic locations of Persons' home, Antoinette Rappel's home, and her uncle's dairy farm, but no definitive answers. The 1916 Shelby County soil map indicates many buildings near the Ell Persons Lynching Site, but there is no way to identify them as the area was not within city limits at the time it was created. For the same reason, city directories have been equally unsuccessful. According to Haley's article, Persons lived within a half-mile of the murder site, near the intersection of what is today Summer Avenue and N. White Station Road (see Figure 18), likely because Macon Road and the surrounding area "was a prime area for cutting wood."⁷⁴ This reiterated the statement by James Weldon

⁷⁴ Haley, "The Last Lynching," *Memphis Magazine*, vol. 5, April 1980, 63-64.

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Johnson noting that “a number of [Negro wood choppers] worked in the vicinity.”⁷⁵ Persons probably lived in a wooden shack that has long since been demolished.” Haley further noted that Antoinette lived with her widowed mother and grandmother at the time of her death, “some two miles east of the Macon Road bridge over the Wolf River,” and her uncle’s dairy was located at Macon Road and Avon Road.⁷⁶ Efforts to track the locations through property records have been unsuccessful as well.



Figure 19: 1916 photograph of the Treadwell School, courtesy of Joe Walk Collection, Benjamin L. Hooks Public Library.

The Treadwell School is the only historic building related to Antoinette Rappel’s life that still exists and is approximately 3.4 miles west/southwest of the Ell Persons Lynching Site. Rappel was on her way to her uncle’s farm to wait for the school wagon to take her to Treadwell School on the day she was murdered. Located at 3538 Given Avenue in Memphis, Treadwell School was constructed in 1915 by Memphis architects Max Furbringer and Merrill Ehrman.⁷⁷ The school has been significantly altered since its

⁷⁵ James Weldon Johnson, “The Lynching at Memphis,” *The Crisis*, vol. 14, August 1917, 185.

⁷⁶ Haley, *The Last Lynching*, *Memphis Magazine*, vol. 5, April 1980, 63.

⁷⁷ These famed architects also built the Raoul Wellenberg Memorial Shell (better known as Overton Park Shell), the Temple Israel, and the West Tennessee Tuberculosis Hospital, among others. Jennifer M. Tucker, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, listed November 7, 1991), Section 7, 2.

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construction, and for this reason was determined not eligible for the National Register of Historic Places when it was surveyed by Judith Johnson of Memphis Heritage Inc. in 1993.⁷⁸

The Tennessee Historical Commission's GIS viewer shows no extant historic buildings from 1917 or earlier have been surveyed within a two-mile radius of the Ell Persons Lynching Site, only buildings constructed between 1920 and 1980. Worth noting, however, is that Wilfong Road is approximately 1.9 miles north/northwest of the site. Rappel's body was found by her uncle, Will Wilfong. It is possible that this road was named for the Wilfong family who, according to the girl's death certificate that he signed as the informant, lived on Macon Road.

Although historic buildings from 1917 are scarce, items belonging to Antoinette Rappel still exist. The family of Laura Wilfong, a descendant of Antoinette Rappel's family, still has possession of the girl's bicycle basket, books, photos, and gloves. These items were borrowed to display briefly at the Pink Palace (now the Museum of Science and History) in Memphis in 2017.⁷⁹

The Aftermath

As Jennifer Rae Taylor, attorney for the Equal Justice Initiative, explained in "A History of Tolerance for Violence Has Laid the Groundwork for Injustice Today," lynchings and subsequent violence, as in Ell Persons's case, were far from isolated examples of vigilante justice by rogue actors. They were coordinated efforts to uphold a racial hierarchy through violence and intimidation that could not have succeeded without the tolerance or active participation of law enforcement and local and state government. African Americans were intentionally prohibited from exercising their political, financial, and social potential, and subsequent generations have been left to grapple with this trauma. Taylor goes on to say that "[w]hite people who witnessed, participated in, and socialized their children in a culture that tolerated gruesome lynchings also were psychologically damaged."⁸⁰

In 1917, Memphis was a highly developed urban area and the center of the Mid-South region. The extraordinary level of violence attending the lynching, including the dismemberment and mutilation of the body of the victim, were startling enough to draw extensive national attention; newspapers across the country covered the lynching in hundreds of articles. Most shockingly, the *Chicago Defender* ran a photograph of Persons' severed head, which was thrown into a group of African Americans on Beale Street. This act was particularly egregious considering that Beale Street was the center of African American commercial life and

⁷⁸ SY-11649, Tennessee Historical Commission Viewer.

⁷⁹ Gordon Sprague, City of Memphis Park Commission, "Clarence Saunders Home/Memphis Pink Palace Museum," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1980).

⁸⁰ Taylor, "A History of Tolerance for Violence Has Laid the Groundwork for Injustice Today," American Bar Association.

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entertainment during this time. The group would have traveled over twelve miles from the lynching site to this location in a deliberate act to further intimidate Black citizens in Memphis.⁸¹

The complete breakdown of law and order that surrounded the Ell Persons lynching presented a challenge to established institutions. The mob functioned for several weeks as a “invisible government,”⁸² undermining order and essentially assuming the functions of law enforcement and government. In the aftermath, a number of Tennessee whites joined together to form a Law and Order League dedicated to ending lynching in the state.⁸³ Several citizens, white and Black, wrote to Tennessee’s governor immediately after protesting the injustice committed and asking for action.⁸⁴ The Jewish Brotherhood passed a resolution condemning the lynching and organized a protest that took place two days after the event.⁸⁵ A group of twenty clergymen and several African Americans issued a joint statement to the press recognizing their failure to alert the community of impending violence and noting the culpability of community leaders in not resisting vigilante violence.⁸⁶ The Memphis City Club called for Sheriff Tate’s resignation in a resolution, and the Negro Medical Association moved its 1917 convention to Philadelphia to protest the city’s failure to provide justice.⁸⁷ Some Black Memphians, including W. C. Handy, left the city after the lynching. Black professional and fraternal organizations canceled meetings they had arranged to hold in Memphis.⁸⁸

The Ell Persons lynching led to national, highly visible protest against lynching in New York City at the same time as the federal government called for national unity during World War I. As part of a pattern of events in 1915-1917, national attention shifted in 1918 to the issue of the lynching of Black citizens with a published investigation from the NAACP and the introduction of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill by Rep. Leonidas Dyer (R-MO).⁸⁹ The lynching also outraged Black citizens and impeded the U.S. government’s attempts to ready the nation for war. In the aftermath of the lynching, Black men in Memphis refused to sign up for military service and “mobilized the vote and used the national platforms of civil rights organizations to voice their opposition to lynching and white intimidation.”⁹⁰

⁸¹ *Chicago Defender*, September 8, 1917, p. 1; Bobby L. Lovett, “Beale Street,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia* (October 8, 2017), <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/beale-street/>; Cecil McKithan and Horace Sheely, “Beale Street Historic District,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1966).

⁸² *Memphis News Scimitar*, May 22, 1917, p. 1.

⁸³ James R. Sweeney, “The ‘Trials’ of Shelby County, Tennessee: ‘Judge Lynch’ Presiding,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, vol. 63 (Summer 2004), 122; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 171-73.

⁸⁴ *Herald*, May 27, 1917, page unknown, as quoted in NAACP, “Memphis, May 22,” 4.

⁸⁵ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1917, 8.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Berkley Kalin, “A Plea for Tolerance: Fineshriber in Memphis,” in *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*, edited by Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 50-64, 57.

⁸⁷ *New York Age*, June 14, 1917, and June 21, 1917, Tuskegee Lynching Files, reel 221, frames 556 and 561; *Palatka (FL) Advocate*, June 16, 1917, clipping in Tuskegee Lynching Files, reel 221, frame 566.

⁸⁸ Sweeney, “The ‘Trials’ of Shelby County, Tennessee,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 122.

⁸⁹ William F. Pinar, “The NAACP and the Struggle for Antilynching Legislation, 1897-1917,” *Counterpoints* 163 (2001), 623-82.

⁹⁰ Young, “The Saving of Black America’s Body and White America’s Soul’,” 39-60.

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The Persons lynching had lasting implications for the civil rights movement in America. In his history of lynching, Philip Dray stressed the importance of the case, noting that James Weldon Johnson's visit to the site in 1917 "guide[d] the rest of his long battle against lynching."⁹¹ As field secretary for the NAACP, Johnson's work was national in scope; *The Crisis* ran two articles on the case including information Johnson gathered in his 10 day investigation.⁹² Recalling his visit years later in his autobiography, Johnson wrote, "I tried to balance the sufferings of the miserable victim against the moral degradation of Memphis, and the truth flashed over me that in large measure the race question involves the saving of black America's body and white America's soul."⁹³ Johnson developed the Memphis branch with prominent Memphian Robert R. Church, Jr. in response to the atrocity. This branch was the South's fourth chapter. Membership ballooned in the first two years, and it became the South's largest branch. The NAACP's history states that the lynching of Ell Persons and subsequent formation of the chapter "changed the political and social structure of the South."⁹⁴ Scholar Darius Young has documented the effect of the lynching on Church and the NAACP, writing that the lynching of Ell Persons:

contributed significantly to the discussion of antilynching legislation, while shaming the barbaric actions of white southerners. Memphis became one of the most important cogs in the NAACP's strategy to extend its reach in the South, and it provided the foundation for the NAACP to become the preeminent civil rights organization of the twentieth century. It forced Church to transform from a champion of voting rights to a social activist. As his influence increased during the Republican presidential administrations of the 1920s, lynching remained one of the most prominent issues on his platform, and he advised each president to address the problem during his tenure. Persons's death ... helped awaken a passion within the black community to pursue equality and justice by directly confronting white supremacy during the height of Jim Crow. Persons did not lose his life in vain; his death forced the black community to mobilize in its own defense, and it forced the nation to come to terms with its conscience.⁹⁵

The outrage over Persons's murder did not end in Memphis. The famous Silent March of July 1917, in which thousands of Black men, women, and children marched down Fifth Avenue in New York City, was held to protest the lynchings of Ell Persons, Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas, and the riot in East St Louis. Marchers held signs reading: "We march because we want to make impossible a repetition of Waco, Memphis, and East St. Louis by arousing the conscience of the country, and to bring the murderers of our brothers, sisters and innocent children to justice."⁹⁶ Sen. Wesley L. Jones of the State of Washington read

⁹¹ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002), 234.

⁹² NAACP, "Memphis," *The Crisis* 14 (July 1917), 133-35; NAACP, "Memphis: May 22, A.D., 1917," *Crisis Supplement* 14 (July 1917), 1-4.

⁹³ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 317-18; Sweeney, "The 'Trials' of Shelby County, Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 102-127; Young, "'The Saving of Black America's Body and White America's Soul,'" 39-60.

⁹⁴ Johnson, *Along This Way*, 265-67; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 134; "History," National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Retrieved from <http://www.naacpmemphis.org/history/>

⁹⁵ Young, "'The Saving of Black America's Body and White America's Soul,'" 57.

⁹⁶ Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 236.

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into the Congressional record a letter to President Woodrow Wilson written by Professor Kelly Miller of Howard University, referencing the Persons lynching and pleading for national recognition of the horrors of lynchings.⁹⁷ Despite their efforts, it was not until 2022 that lynching became a federal hate crime.



Figure 20: Silent March Down Fifth Avenue. Courtesy of *The Zimm Education Project*.

⁹⁷ Kelly Miller, Howard University, "The Disgrace of Democracy: Open Letter to President Woodrow Wilson by Kelly Miller, Howard University, Washington, D.C.", digitized by Emory University.

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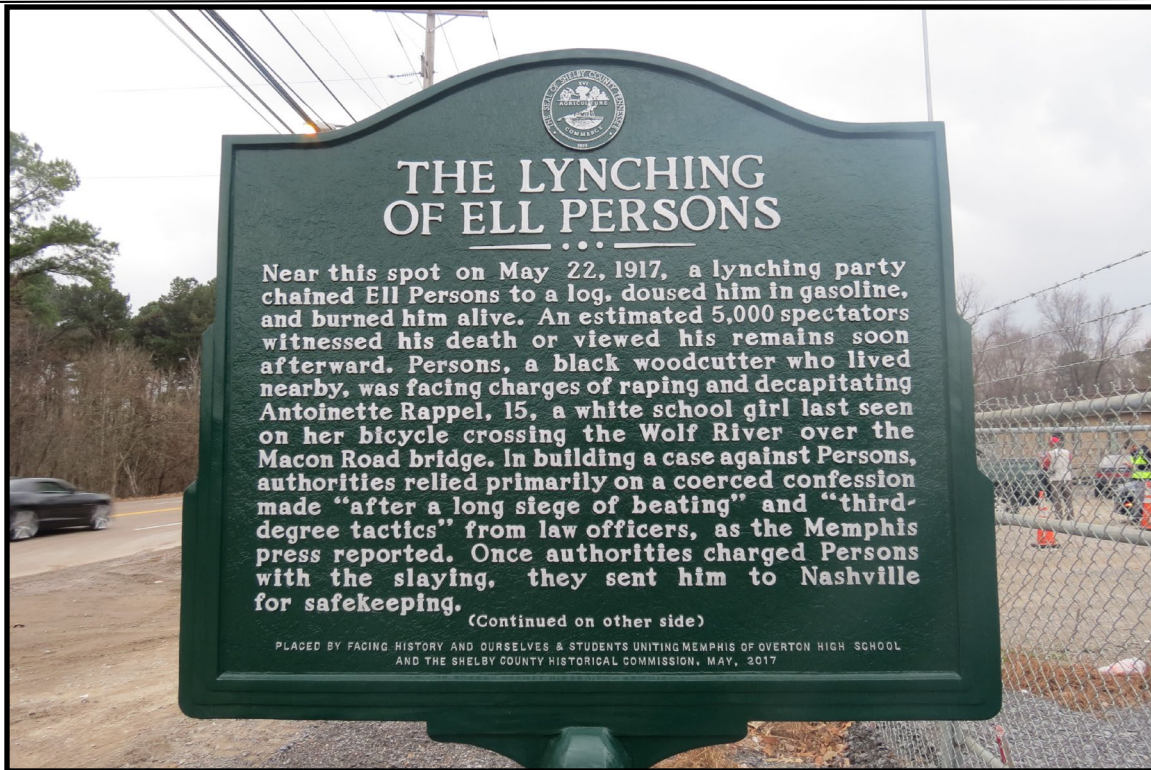


Figure 21: View of Ell Persons historical marker on Summer Avenue.

Scholars concerned with national issues have recognized the importance of the Ell Persons case, characterizing the killing as “one of the most vicious lynchings in American history” and “remarkable even among violent acts for its relentless savagery.”⁹⁸ Tennessee State Historian Dr. Carroll Van West called the event “one of the most nationally significant lynchings in 20th century American history for its impact not just in Memphis but the nation.”⁹⁹ The lynching has been the subject of an article in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* and at least two book chapters.¹⁰⁰ There are currently two historical markers commemorating Persons’s lynching, one placed by Students Uniting Memphis and the Shelby County Historical Commission, the other by Lynching Sites Project of Memphis, the Memphis NAACP chapter, and the National Park Service.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930*, 45; Mary Jane Brown, *Eradicating this Evil: Women in the American Anti-Lynching Movement, 1892 – 1940* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 108.

⁹⁹ Conversation by phone, January 13, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Sweeney, “The Trials of Shelby County Tennessee,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 102-27; Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, 119-140; Young, “The Saving of Black America’s Body and White America’s Soul,” 39-60.

¹⁰¹ Jim and Kim Coleman, “The Lynching of Ell Persons Finds a Lasting Imprint on the Memphis NAACP Chapter,” *High Ground News* (May 24, 2017). Retrieved from <https://www.highgroundnews.com/features/EllPersonsLynchingMemphisNAACP.aspx>

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):		Primary location of additional data:	
preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)			State Historic Preservation Office
previously listed in the National Register			Other State agency
previously determined eligible by the National Register			Federal agency
designated a National Historic Landmark			Local government
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #			University
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #		X	Other
recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey #			Name of repository: Withers Collection Museum & Gallery
Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):			

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property	0.19	USGS Quadrangle	Northeast Memphis, 409 NW Ellendale, 409 NE
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Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: N/A

1. Latitude: 35.161073	Longitude: -89.885665
2. Latitude: 35.161030	Longitude: -89.885642
3. Latitude: 35.161538	Longitude: -89.884018
4. Latitude: 35.161495	Longitude: -89.883984

Verbal Boundary Description

The Ell Persons Lynching Site is located near 5400 Summer Avenue, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee. The corners of the boundaries correspond to the latitude/longitude coordinates above, which is approximately 0.19 acres. The site is roughly bounded by Summer Avenue to the south, Wolf River to the west, Fletcher Creek to the north, and commercial property owned by Gary M. and Glenn A. Rutherford to the east.

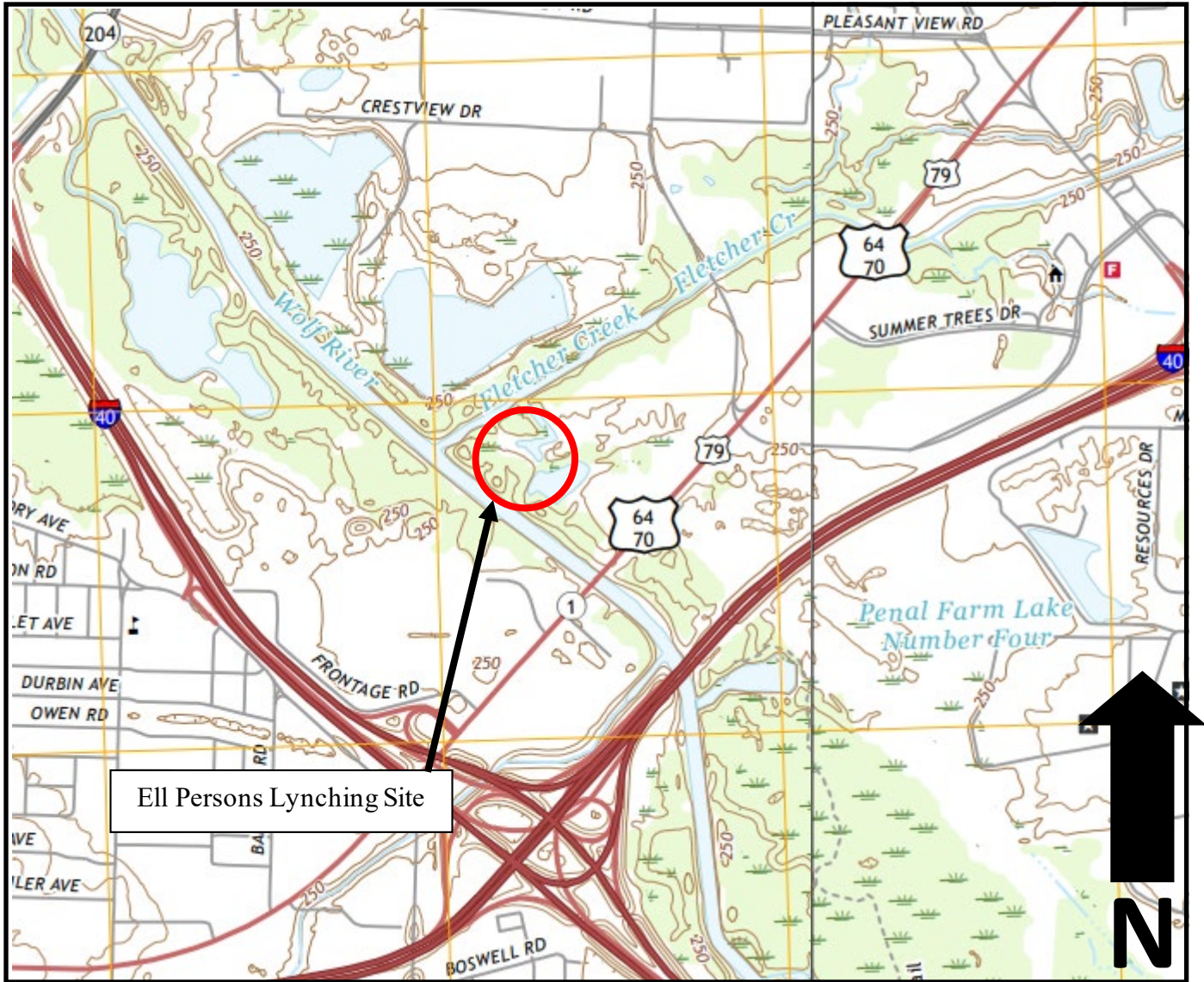
Boundary Justification

The boundary of the Ell Persons Lynching Site includes the historical location of the 1917 lynching of Ell Persons before a crowd of thousands on the north side of the west end of the Macon Road bridge. The boundaries encompass the west side of the Macon Road bridge where Persons was murdered and the roadbed of old Macon Road where the crowd congregated with cars parked along the sides, making the road impassible stretching towards the city. The bridge abutments mark the bridge's location in 1917 and the east-to-west overhead electric powerlines mark the path of the Macon Road roadbed which has fallen into disuse since ca. 1950. The western boundary of the site correlates to the natural boundary of the Wolf River channel right-of-way, created in the early 1960s. The boundaries do not capture the entirety of the crowd location but includes the entire section that we can be certain remains undeveloped and untouched. The bridge and roadbed are no longer extant, but later bridge substructures mark the bridge's location, and the path of the roadbed is marked by powerlines that run along its course. The bridge substructures are most likely from the 1920s, and they are considered contributing structures because they match the historic location of the bridge and are important identifying features. The abutments are included within the Ell Persons Lynching Site boundaries as they note the location of the Macon Road bridge and the lynching. The site maintains its rural character and isolation, leaving it much today as it was in 1917.

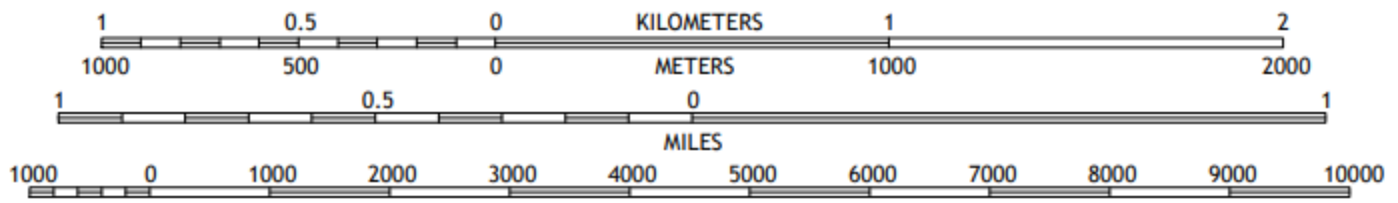
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USGS Topographic Map



SCALE 1:24 000



Northeast Memphis Quadrangle map, 2019, and Ellendale, TN Qua drangle map, 2019. The location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is illustrated with a red circle.

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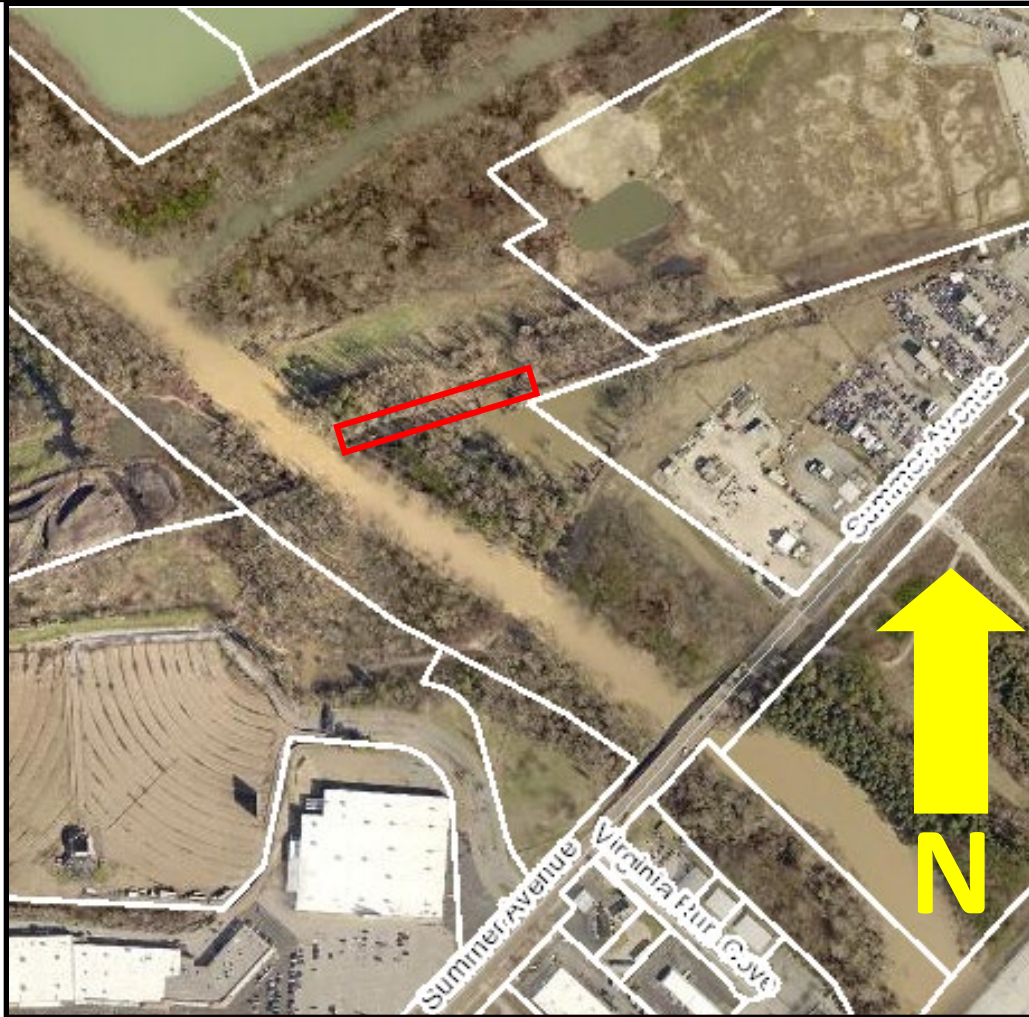
Boundary Map



Approximate boundaries of the Ell Persons Lynching Site.

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Imagery courtesy of the Shelby County Property Assessor's property viewer.
The Ell Persons Lynching Site is not part of a parcel and is outlined in red.

Persons, Ell, Lynching Site
Name of Property

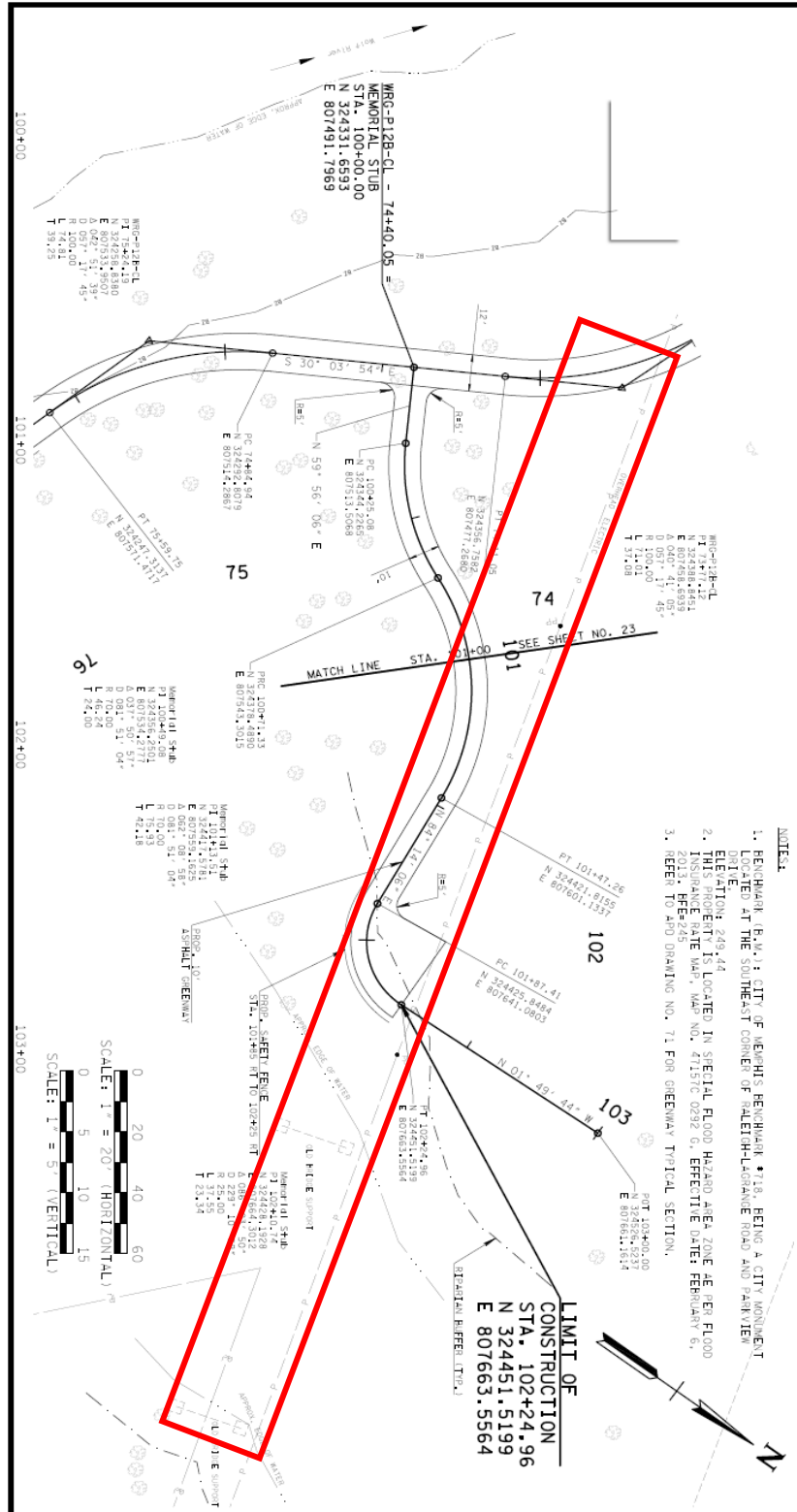
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Ownership Map, courtesy of the Wolf River Conservancy. Note the Ell Persons Lynching Site outlined in yellow, partially owned by the Shelby County Conservation Board and the City of Memphis and Shelby County.

Persons, Ell, Lynching Site
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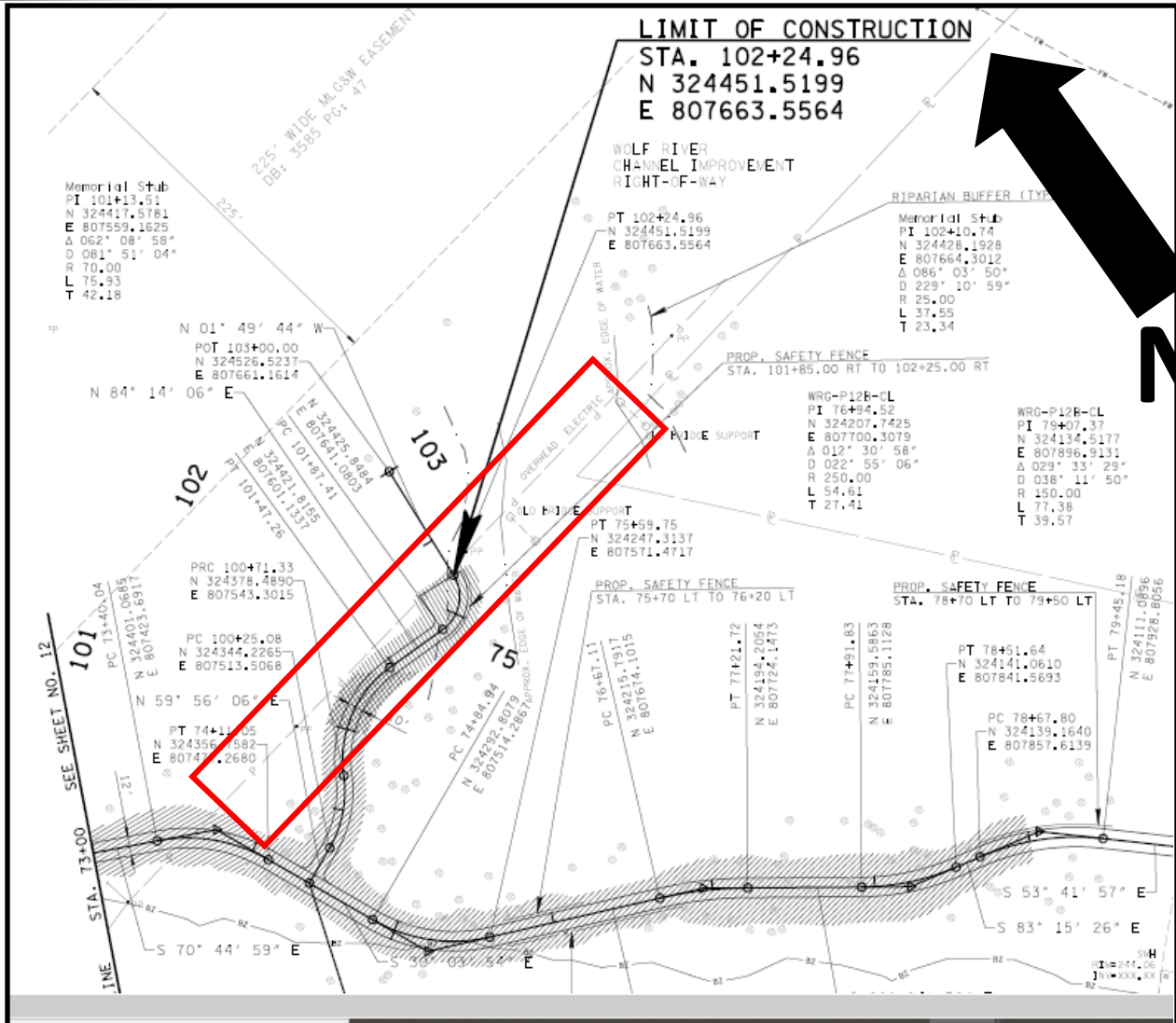
Shelby County, Tennessee
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Wolf River Greenway construction drawings, courtesy of Wolf River Conservancy. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.

Persons, Ell, Lynching Site
Name of Property

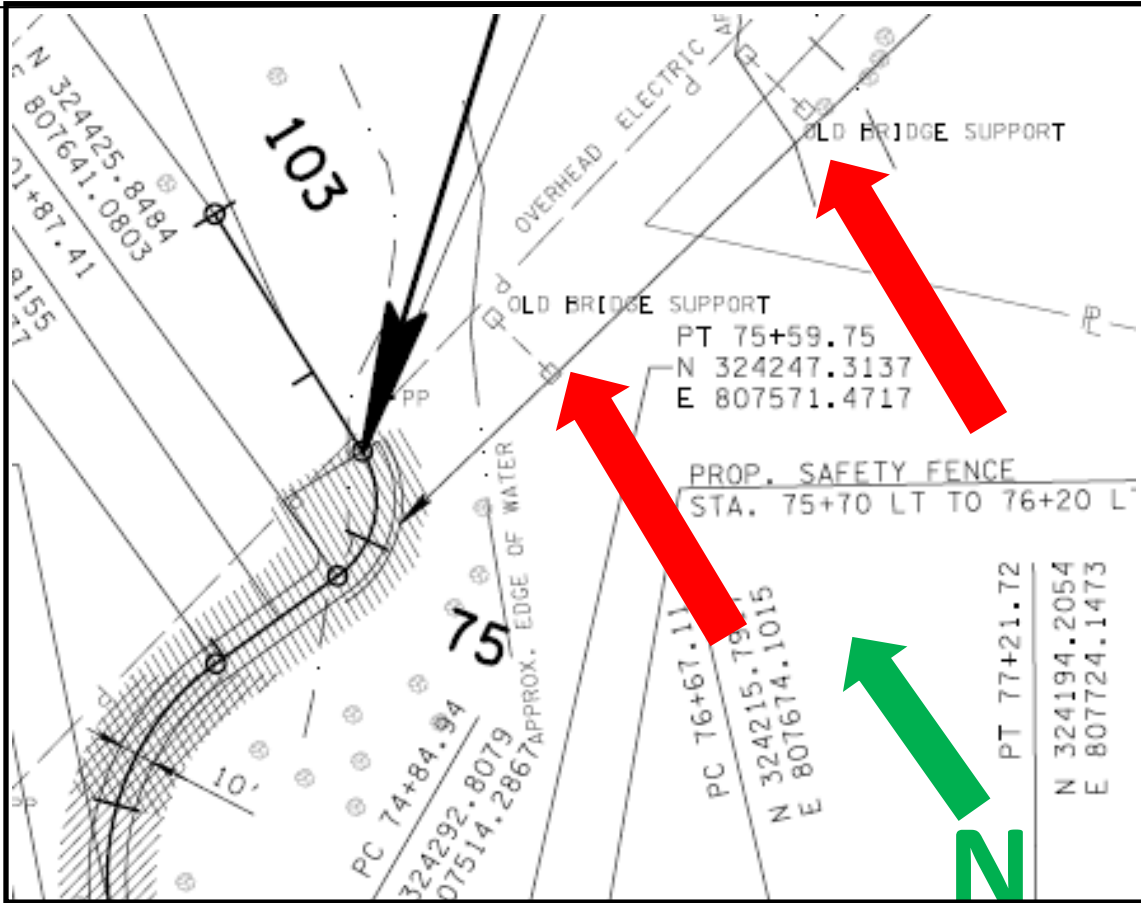
Shelby County, Tennessee
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Greenway spur to Ell Persons site construction drawings, courtesy of Wolf River Conservancy. The approximate location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is outlined in red.

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Closeup of construction drawings showing locations of bridge abutments, courtesy of Wolf River Conservancy.

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11. Form Prepared By

Dr. Margaret Vandiver, Professor emerita, Criminology and criminal justice, University of Memphis;

Dr. Timothy Huebner; Associate Provost and Sternberg Professor of History at Rhodes College, Lynching Sites Project of Memphis Board Member;

Kelsey Lamkin, Historic Preservation Planner, Lynching Sites Project of Memphis

Name Board Member

Organization Lynching Sites Project of Memphis

Street & Number 8169 Kimridge Drive Date August 27, 2022

City or Town Memphis Telephone (615) 200-2812

E-mail kelseylamkinpreservation@gmail.com State TN Zip Code 38138

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to map.
- **Photographs** (refer to Tennessee Historical Commission National Register *Photo Policy* for submittal of digital images and prints)
- **Additional items:** (additional supporting documentation including historic photographs, historic maps, etc. should be included on a Continuation Sheet following the photographic log and sketch maps)

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Lynching Site, Ell Persons

Name of Property

Shelby County, Tennessee

County and State

N/A

Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number Photos and Plans

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Photo Log

Name of Property: Ell Persons Lynching Site

City or Vicinity: Memphis

County: Shelby

State: Tennessee

Photographer: Kelsey Lamkin

Date Photographed: March 22, 2022

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

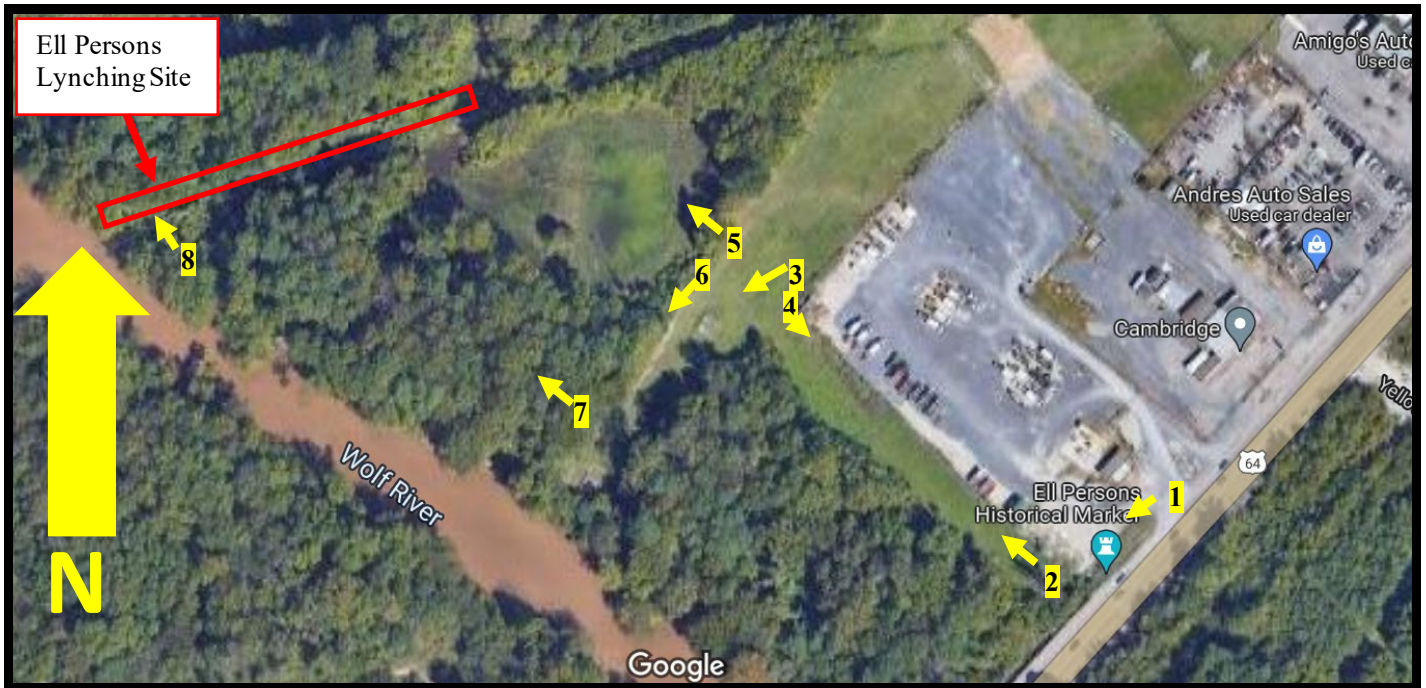
- 1 of 23. 1. A high school class visiting the Ell Persons Historical Marker along Summer Avenue, view to the southwest.
- 2 of 23. Path to the Ell Persons Lynching Site, view to the northwest.
- 3 of 23. Path to the Ell Persons Lynching Site, view to the southwest.
- 4 of 23. Looking towards Summer Avenue from the path to the Ell Persons Lynching Site, view to the southeast.
- 5 of 23. Western bridge abutment at the Ell Persons Lynching Site.
- 6 of 23. Path to the Ell Persons Lynching Site, view to the southwest towards Wolf River.
- 7 of 23. Path to the Ell Persons Lynching Site, view to the northwest.
- 8 of 23. Powerlines along Macon Road roadbed in the Ell Persons Lynching Site, view to the northwest.
- 9 of 23. Macon Road roadbed in the Ell Persons Lynching Site, view to the northeast.
- 10 of 23. Macon Road roadbed in the Ell Persons Lynching Site, view to the southwest.
- 11 of 23. High school class next to western bridge abutment, with Macon Road roadbed behind, view to the southwest.
- 12 of 23. High school class next to the western bridge abutment, view to the southwest.
- 13 of 23. Eastern bridge abutment and eastern portion of Macon Road roadbed, view to the east.
- 14 of 23. Western bridge abutment, view looking to the south.
- 15 of 23. View looking to the north away from the Ell Persons Lynching Site.
- 16 of 23. Western bridge abutment, view looking to the east.
- 17 of 23. View looking to the south from the Ell Persons Lynching Site.
- 18 of 23. View looking south from the Ell Persons Lynching Site.
- 19 of 23. View looking north away from the Ell Persons Lynching Site.
- 20 of 23. View looking northeast along the Ell Persons Lynching Site.
- 21 of 23. View looking south away from the Ell Persons Lynching Site.
- 22 of 23. View looking west to the Wolf River.
- 23 of 23. Macon Road roadbed in the Ell Persons Lynching Site, view to the northeast.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Lynching Site, Ell Persons
----- Name of Property
Shelby County, Tennessee
----- County and State
N/A
----- Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

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Property Owner:

(This information will not be submitted to the National Park Service, but will remain on file at the Tennessee Historical Commission)

Name John Jackson III, Chairman, Shelby County Conservation Board; City of Memphis and Shelby County

Street & Number Vasco A. Smith, Jr. County Administration Building 160 N Main Street; 125 N Main St #514 Telephone (901) 222-7800; (901) 636-6786

City or Town Memphis State/Zip TN 38103



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