Lynching in America:
A Community Remembrance Project

Between the Civil War and World War II, thousands of African Americans were lynched in the United States. Lynchings were violent and public acts of torture that traumatized black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials. “Terror lynchings” peaked between 1880 and 1940 and claimed the lives of African American men, women, and children who were forced to endure the fear, humiliation, and barbarity of this widespread phenomenon unaided. This was terrorism.

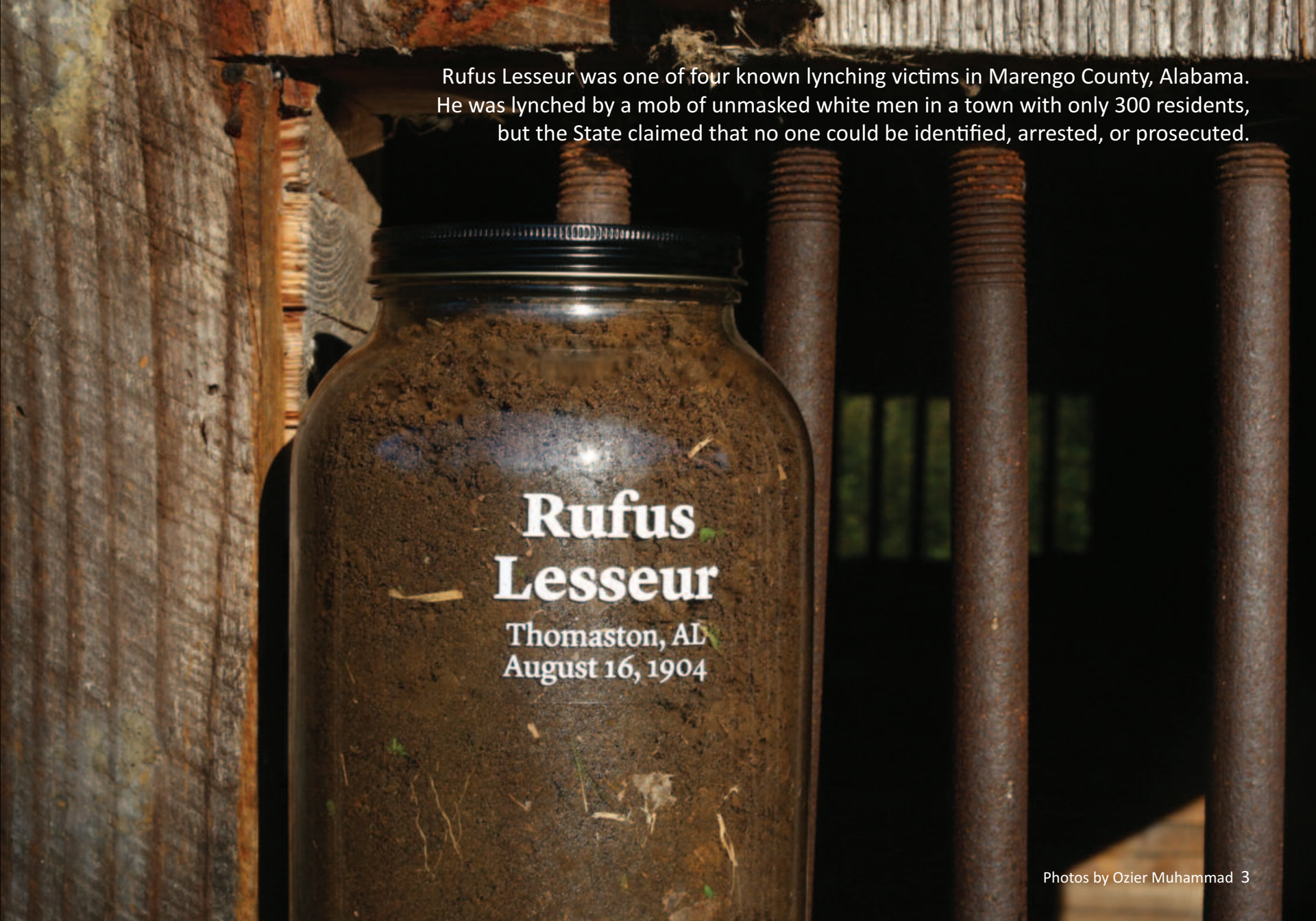
The Equal Justice Initiative has documented more than 4000 racial terror lynchings in 12 Southern states between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and 1950. Lynching profoundly impacted race relations in this country and shaped the geographic, political, social, and economic conditions of African Americans in ways that are still evident today. Terror lynchings fueled the mass migration of millions of black people from the South into urban ghettos in the North and West throughout the first half of the 20th century. Lynching created a fearful environment in which racial subordination and segregation were maintained with limited resistance for decades. Most critically, lynching reinforced a legacy of racial inequality that has never been adequately addressed in America.

EJI has initiated a campaign to recognize the victims of lynching by collecting soil from lynching sites and creating a memorial that acknowledges the horrors of racial injustice. We aim to transcend time and altered terrain to bear witness to this history and the devastation these murders wrought upon individuals, families, communities, and our nation as a whole. We invite you to join our effort to help this nation confront and recover from tragic histories of racial violence and terrorism and to create an environment where there can truly be equal justice for all.

Cover photo and photo opposite by Ozier Muhammad

Equal Justice Initiative Exhibit Room, Montgomery, Alabama

On August 14, 1904, a white woman in Thomaston, Alabama, claimed that a black man had entered her home and frightened her. A posse of white men soon formed and seized Rufus Lesseur, a black man, simply because someone claimed that a hat found near the house belonged to him. During this era, black people often were the targets of suspicion when a crime was alleged, and accusations against black people were rarely subjected to scrutiny. The white men locked a terrified Mr. Lesseur into a tiny calaboose, or makeshift jail, in the nearby woods (*pictured here*) and left him there for more than a day. Then at 3:00 a.m. on August 16, without an investigation, trial, or conviction, a mob of white men broke into the structure, dragged Rufus Lesseur outside, and lynched him, leaving his body riddled with bullets. He was 24 years old.



Rufus Lesseur was one of four known lynching victims in Marengo County, Alabama. He was lynched by a mob of unmasked white men in a town with only 300 residents, but the State claimed that no one could be identified, arrested, or prosecuted.

Photos by Ozier Muhammad

In 2015, EJI began speaking to community leaders about the need to acknowledge and discuss the history of lynching and racial terror in America. We published a report after we documented hundreds of previously unrecognized lynchings across the American South. EJI staff outlined an ambitious campaign to recognize the victims of lynching and racial terror in America by collecting jars of soil from each lynching site. *Pictured*: EJI Executive Director Bryan Stevenson meets with community leaders in Montgomery, Alabama.

 Photo by Ozier Muhammad

Deputy Program Manager
Kiara Boone
Photo by Elvin D. Lang

Staff Attorney Jennifer Taylor

Senior Attorney Sia Sanneh

Executive Director
Bryan Stevenson
Photo by Ozier Muhammad

On October 7, 1910, a white mob in Montgomery, Alabama, tried to abduct and lynch black men being held in jail on suspicion of "miscegenation" or interracial sexual relations. When they were unable to get the men out of the jail, the frustrated mob lynched a black taxi driver named John Dell who was sitting in his cab nearby. No one was ever arrested or prosecuted for his murder.

 Photos by Ozier Muhammad

There has never been any effort to acknowledge the death of Mr. Dell or more than a dozen other lynching victims in Montgomery. In February 2016, legal staff from EJI went to the site of the Dell lynching and collected soil as part of our community remembrance project.

Hundreds of people have come to EJI to learn about the history of racial terror lynchings and the tragic legacy of this era of racial terrorism. Community members have also visited lynching sites across the state as participants in the soil collection and community remembrance project.

 Photo by Elvin D. Lang

At the conclusion of presentations, EJI staff match community group members with particular lynching sites and provide narratives about specific lynchings and directions to the site. Participants are given a jar with the name of a lynching victim and the date and location of the atrocity.

Photo by Ozier Muhammad

College students carry jars and trowels as they embark on a journey to Alabama lynching sites, where they will recover soil to honor victims and commemorate the racial terror and tragic violence that took place at these locations.

 Photo by Ozier Muhammad

On June 18, 1934, a mob of white men lynched an innocent 16-year-old black boy in Pine Level, Alabama. Earlier in the day, a local white man reported that he had been attacked by a black man. A mob formed but could not find the alleged attacker, so the men seized Otis Parham, who told them he knew nothing about the incident. The mob began to beat the teenager. He tried to run, and was then shot to death by the angry crowd. His body was thrown into a ditch. The lynching was not investigated, and no one was arrested or prosecuted for the murder, although most members of the mob would have been known to law enforcement.

In Elmore County, Alabama, two black men were accused of driving carelessly and causing a horse driven by a white farmer's daughters to run away. On November 10, 1912, a white mob of "scores of citizens" responded by finding the two black men and chasing them into the woods. When the men were cornered, they exchanged gunfire with the posse, reportedly killing two members of the mob. When they could no longer defend themselves, the two black men fled to an abandoned cabin. One of the men escaped the cabin. The other man, Mr. Berney, was trapped, shot, and burned to death inside the cabin.

Mr. Berney was one of 13 known lynching victims who were killed in Elmore County, Alabama, between 1895 and 1915. No one was held accountable for this tragic violence.

Elizabeth Lawrence, an older black woman, was lynched by a white mob in Birmingham, Alabama, on July 5, 1933. Earlier that day, Ms. Lawrence was walking home when she was approached by a group of white children who threw rocks at her. In response, she verbally reprimanded the children. They reported her reprimand to their parents, who spread the word that a black woman had dared to rebuke white children. Later that night, an angry mob went to Ms. Lawrence's home, seized her, and lynched her. Her home was burned to the ground. When her son, Alexander, attempted to file a complaint with the sheriff and sought the arrest of his mother's murderers, the mob reorganized and pursued him. He fled to Boston, leaving the South as a refugee from racial terror.

Alabama State University Professor Derryn Moten reflects on the history and legacy of lynching at an EJI community remembrance event where he joined other community members to collect soil at a lynching site.

Participants in EJI's community remembrance project are asked to record or write reflections about their experiences, which are cataloged and stored by EJI.

Photo by Ozier Muhammad

Josephine McCall attends a community meeting at EJI with her daughter. When Mrs. McCall was a young child, her father, Elmore Bolling, was lynched in Lowndes County, Alabama. A successful black businessman, Mr. Bolling was targeted by white residents who resented his economic success. He was murdered in Lowndesboro on December 4, 1947. He was 39 years old.

 Photo by Ozier Muhammad

In 1910, a black man named Bush Withers was lynched in Sanford, Alabama. Mr. Withers was imprisoned at a convict leasing camp where horrific conditions and abuse were widespread. Despite the horrors of convict leasing, which abused thousands of people in a brutal system historians have called "worse than slavery," Mr. Withers was regarded as a faithful employee and "water boy" in the prison camp. One day he went to a nearby farm to get water as he regularly did, and was later accused of criminally assaulting the farmer's daughter. Mr. Withers insisted he was innocent, but the mere allegation was enough. Eventually a white mob formed and brought Mr. Withers to a prominent site in Sanford where, as he begged for his life and insisted he had done nothing wrong, Mr. Withers was tied to a stake, burned alive, and then shot to death. The gruesome lynching was carried out in front of 400 spectators. Local newspapers praised the conduct of the mob as "orderly."

Public spectacle lynchings like the murder of Mr. Withers were common in the American South. Large crowds of white people, often numbering in the thousands, gathered to witness pre-planned killings that often featured prolonged torture, mutilation, dismemberment, and/or burning of the victim. Many were carnival-like events, with vendors selling food and spectators collecting body parts and posing for photographs that were made into postcards and widely distributed through the U.S. Mail.

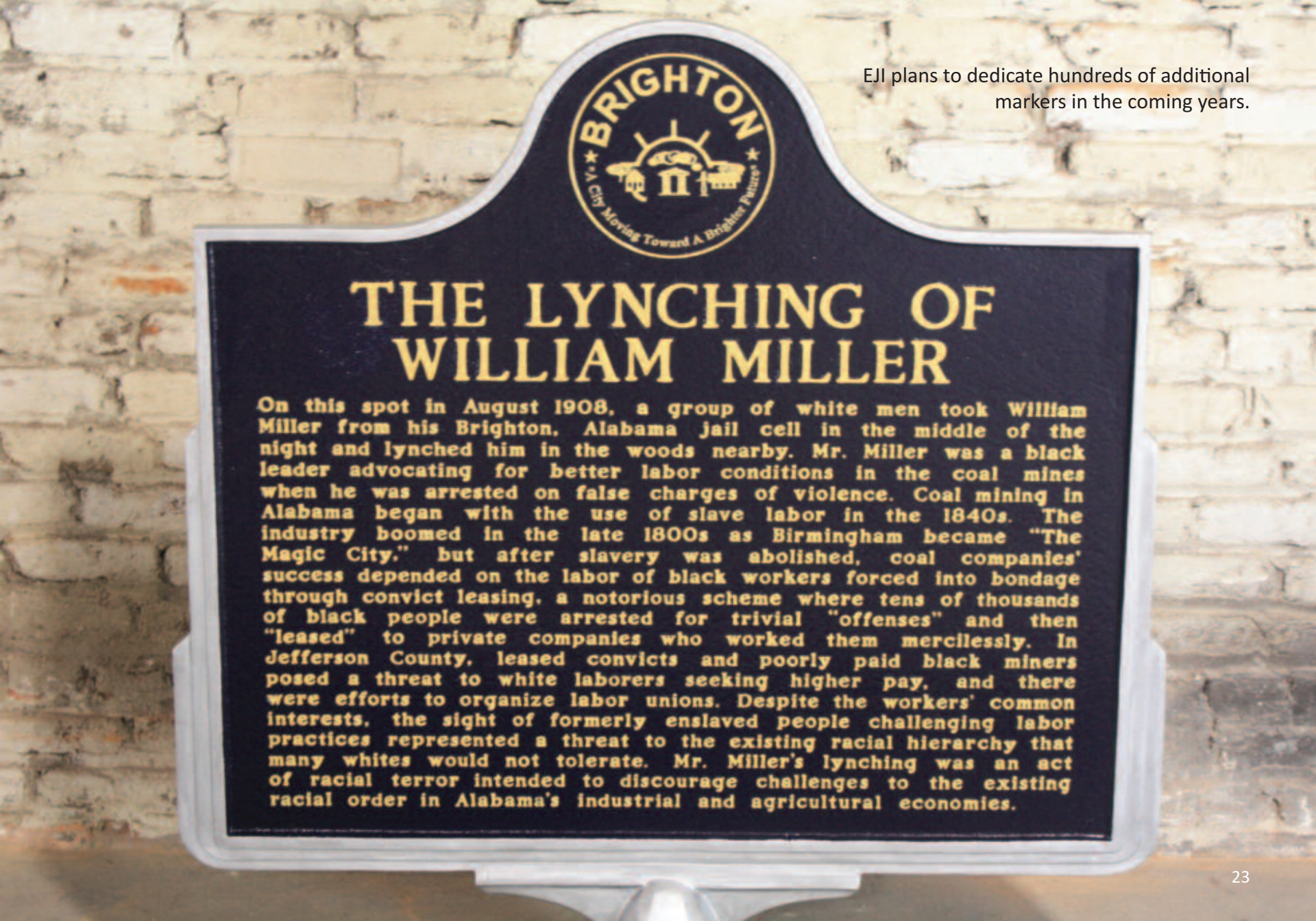
EJI is building a national memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, to honor the victims of racial terror and lynching. Designed with MASS Design Group, the site will allow visitors from all over the world to engage in deep reflection about America's history of racial injustice.

In December 2015, faith leaders from around the country joined EJI to partner with us on our community remembrance project. Leaders visited the site of our planned national memorial to lynching victims to pray and reflect on the importance of confronting racial injustice.

In partnership with Local Projects, EJI is building a museum in Montgomery that will open in the next year. Titled *From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration*, the museum will engage visitors in an intensive and interactive experience that confronts the history of racial injustice in America and examines slavery, lynching, segregation, and mass incarceration.

In 1893, a white mob stormed the jail in Carrollton, Alabama, and lynched Paul Hill, Paul Archer, Will Archer, Emma Fair, and Ed Guyton, four black men and a black woman who had been accused of setting a fire that destroyed a mill and gin house. They did not resist when arrested, insisting that they were innocent and would be cleared quickly. The mob entered the jail with no resistance from law enforcement and slaughtered all five victims in a hail of gunfire. As the great anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells wrote in her investigation of the lynching, the unarmed black people “in their bolted prison cells could do nothing but suffer and die.”

EJI has a project to erect markers at lynching sites around the country. In December 2015, the first lynching marker was erected in Brighton, Alabama, to commemorate the death of William Miller, who was lynched for organizing African American coal miners in 1908. Community leaders gathered for the dedication, where EJI also awarded $6000 in college scholarships to area high school students.



EJI plans to dedicate hundreds of additional markers in the coming years.

Participants engage in discussion and reflection at a community meeting at EJI on the lynching remembrance project. EJI plans to host multiple community meetings in the coming year.

24 Photos by Ozier Muhammad

EJI and many Americans believe that more truthful discourse and reflection on our history of racial injustice is essential for us to achieve racial equity and justice for all. Confronting the legacy of lynching is critical to advancing this conversation.

EJI Photo

We invite you to support EJI's racial justice work by participating in our community remembrance project, visiting EJI for one of our educational programs, or providing financial support for our efforts. Please visit www.eji.org for more information.

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