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A Maryland Community Gathered to Remember the Lynching of George Peck

Montgomery County residents collected soil from the site where Peck was dragged to his death in 1880



A jar of soil collected at the site where George Peck was murdered in 1880 will join others on view at the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama ([Bill Sutton via Wikimedia Commons under CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

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smithsonianmag.com
November 4, 2019

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In January 1880, a 22-year-old African-American man named George Peck was dragged out of a store in Montgomery County, Maryland, blindfolded, and [hanged from a locust tree](#) in front of a Presbyterian church. Peck had been accused—though not tried or convicted—of attempting to assault a white girl. The mob that decided his fate [reportedly shouted “Lynch him!”](#) as it perpetrated the brutal attack.

Peck never received a proper burial. His body was cut down the next morning while white church-goers filed their way into the house of worship. But during a ceremony that took place this weekend, nearly 140 years after his murder, Peck was remembered

at the site where he was lynched.

As Liz Anderson reports for [WTOP](#), members of the Montgomery County community gathered in a “grassy field” across from the Poolesville Presbyterian Church, where they took turns digging up the soil and depositing it into several glass jars. Some of the jars will be sent to local organizations like the [Montgomery County Historical Society](#) and the [Historic Medley District](#) in Poolesville. One will head to the [Menare Foundation](#), which preserves the history of the Underground Railroad, and another will be sent to the Equal Justice Initiative’s [Legacy Museum](#) in Montgomery, Alabama, where it will be added to a collection of jars containing soil from lynching sites.

The EJI-Montgomery County collaboration marks the latest initiative in the Alabama organization’s “[Community Remembrance Project](#)”—a three-pronged undertaking that seeks to recognize lynching victims by collecting soil from lynching sites, erecting historical markers and engaging the public with a national monument.

The EJI’s [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#) opened to the public in 2018; it features 801 six-foot-tall monuments, each marking a county where a lynching took place. According to DeNeen L. Brown of the *Washington Post*, victims’ names, including that of George Peck, are inscribed on the steel columns. Peck is one of at least three lynching victims killed in Montgomery County and one of at least 41 victims lynched in the state of Maryland.

In an effort to expose this dark chapter of Maryland’s history and usher in a process of reconciliation, state governor Larry Hogan recently [signed a law](#) creating a “truth commission” that will investigate racial terror lynchings and their ongoing legacy. As the [act](#) plainly acknowledges, lynchings were “intended to terrorize African American communities and force them into silence and subservience to the ideology of white supremacy.” No person in Maryland was ever tried or convicted for lynchings that happened there, and “[n]o victim’s family or community ever received a formal apology or compensation from State, county, or local government entities.”

Per a [statement](#) published following the bill’s signing, EJI Director Bryan Stevenson said, “By publicly reckoning with the legacy of racial terrorism across the state, a communal process of atonement can guide the necessary development of collective healing.”

In September, Maryland erected a memorial to lynching victims in Annapolis—the [first such monument](#) constructed in the state. On a local level, the Montgomery City Council [introduced a January 2018 bill](#) designed to establish a Remembrance and Reconciliation Commission aimed at promoting a better understanding of the county’s troubled racial history. The commission is responsible for [finding ways to honor the county’s three lynching victims](#): Peck; [John Diggs](#), who was also murdered in 1880; and [Sidney Randolph](#), who was killed in 1896 after being [accused](#) of brutally murdering a 7-year-old white girl. The evidence against Randolph was flimsy, and before being dragged to his death, he insisted on his innocence.

Those present at the memorial ceremony for Peck on Sunday stressed the importance of acknowledging the violence that once took place in the county.

“It’s really heartening to see literally the whole community here—diverse, different ages, different races come here to stand on the ground where George Peck was murdered and ... in a way, give him his own funeral that he never had,” Will Jawando, Montgomery County councilmember at-large, told [WTOP’s Anderson](#).

He added, “We can’t grow, and learn and correct from the past unless we recognize it in all of its brutality.”

About Brigit Katz

Brigit Katz is a freelance writer based in Toronto. Her work has appeared in a number of publications, including [NYmag.com](#), [Flavorwire](#) and [Tina Brown Media's Women in the World](#).