

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## ‘Lynch him!’ A century after a white mob hanged a black man from a tree, soil from the site is being preserved

The Lynching Memorial Project collected dirt from the spot where George Peck was killed in 1880, one of at least 41 lynchings in Maryland

By **DeNeen L. Brown**

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POOLESVILLE, Md. — As flames leaped from a burning store here, an angry white mob tied a rope around the neck of a 22-year-old black man and dragged him out of the store, across the road, and hanged him from a locust tree.

The mob, firing pistols in the air and shouting “Lynch him!” attacked George W. Peck, who had been accused — but not convicted — of attempted assault of a white girl who had been milking a cow in a nearby barn.

“All hands drew him up about five feet above the ground and tied the rope to a fence near the tree,” according to a front-page story in the Jan. 12, 1880, Washington Evening Star. The headline screamed: “LYNCH LAW IN MARYLAND. Outrage on a White Girl. The Guilty Negro Hanged. Full particulars of the Affair.” The dateline was Beallsville, Montgomery Co.

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Peck's lifeless body was left hanging from the locust tree, which stood in front of a church. The next morning, white people on the way to Sunday services looked as Peck's body dangled from the tree.

A constable cut down Peck's body and summoned a jury. "The jury," the Star reported, "rendered a verdict 'that George Peck came to his death from strangulation by the hands of parties unknown to the jurors.' It was subsequently ascertained from an examination by a physician that the child was not seriously injured." No one was ever charged with Peck's murder.

More than 100 years later, community members working with the Montgomery County Lynching Memorial Project collected soil from the site where Peck was unjustly killed — without trial. As part of a remembrance and reconciliation project on lynchings, community members working with the Equal Justice Initiative collected the soil in a jar. They plan to travel with it to Montgomery, Ala., where the jar will be displayed at EJI's Legacy Museum, which opened in 2018.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, blocks from the EJI Legacy Museum, is the country's first memorial dedicated to the more than 4,000 documented lynching victims killed between 1877 and 1950.

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The Peace and Justice memorial, which sits atop a sloping hill on six acres, contains exactly 801 six-foot monuments constructed of corten steel to symbolize the victims' brutal deaths.

*[New lynching memorial confronts the nation's brutal history of racial terrorism]*

Each victim's name is carved into the steel columns, which hang vertically, dangling from beams, much like the lynched bodies of men, women and children dangled from trees.

Peck's name is etched on one of those vertical columns. Peck was one of at least 41 documented lynchings that took place in the state of Maryland, according to the Montgomery County Lynching Memorial Project. At least three lynchings took place in Montgomery County.

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EJI encouraged counties from across the country to collect soil from lynching sites, place historical markers at those sites, then travel to Alabama to claim their “monuments,” to help promote understanding of the country’s history of lynchings.

In January, Montgomery County Council members introduced a bill to create a Remembrance and Reconciliation Commission to raise awareness about lynching, which it described as “violent and public acts of racial terrorism against African Americans that occurred primarily between 1880 and 1940 across the United States.” The council added, “The lynchings are part of Montgomery County’s troubled history of violence and discrimination against African Americans.”

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The three documented lynching victims in Montgomery were identified as:

Peck, who was killed by the white mob on Jan. 10, 1880; John Diggs, a black man who was lynched on July 24, 1880; and Sidney Randolph, a black man who was lynched on July 4, 1896.

White mobs took both Randolph and Diggs from the Rockville jail, which stood in the same location as the current Montgomery County Council Building.

“We cannot mask our history if we are to ever end systemic racism, social injustice and domestic terrorism delivered upon young black men in America even today,” council member Will Jawando (D-At Large) said in January. “Let’s forever remember the names of George Peck, John Diggs and Sidney Randolph, and acknowledge our past of persecuting and murdering African Americans. This resolution is a healing balm on a horrible wound.”

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Council member Craig Rice (D-District 2) said it was crucial to acknowledge the “horrors” in the county’s history, which he said should prompt a dialogue on racism. “Bringing to light the atrocities that happened to George Peck, John Diggs, Sidney Randolph and acknowledging their lynchings is long overdue,” Rice said in a statement. “These victims were murdered and they were denied due process, and this affects our community as a whole.”

Sunday, members of the county’s Lynching Memorial Project retraced the 2½-mile coalition route from Beallsville to Poolesville that George Peck walked more than 139 years ago before he was lynched.

About 50 people gathered at Poolesville Presbyterian Church to commemorate Peck’s life.

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“After the Civil War, Americans tragically embraced a reconciliation that once again left African Americans behind. Slavery led to Jim Crow and segregation; and to poverty and mass incarceration,” council member Hans Riemer (D-At Large) told the crowd. “This inequitable system was maintained through acts of racial terrorism such as lynching. While Montgomery County today is an inclusive and progressive community, the county was nevertheless an actor in the historic injustices that created circumstances we are still grappling with now.”

Elliot Spillers, a fellow from the Equal Justice Initiative, said: “As part of its effort to help towns, cities, and states confront and recover from tragic histories of racial violence and terrorism, EJI is joining with citizens to install historical markers in communities where the history of lynching is documented. EJI believes that by reckoning with the truth of the racial violence that has shaped our history, community members can begin a necessary conversation that advances healing and reconciliation.”

As the sun was setting, the crowd walked across the road to the site where Peck was killed. The Encore Singers of Olney sang under a canopy, and students from Poolesville and John F. Kennedy high school read poems.

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Black and white people lined up, knelt in the dirt, then dug into the soil. Quietly, they scooped the red-brown soil into glass jars, marked with George Peck's name.

"I felt like we were honoring his life. The man was a real human being. He had hopes and dreams that were unrealized. There was no justice. He was dragged through the streets here," said the Rev. Howard C. Copeland of Hosanna Worship Center. "In some part of this field, George Peck's blood is out here."

Copeland said that as he was collecting the soil, he was thinking: "how horrible it must've done for Peck." The soil collection seems to provide Peck some kind of justice. "We were finally able to pay homage to him. I don't know what he did or what he didn't do. But he didn't just get hung on a tree and buried in a place where we still don't know where his body is."

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