

Resistance to Lynching

Overview

Dr. Hasan Jeffries wrote in his preface to [SPLC's "Teaching the Hard History of American Slavery" report](#) that the past does not have to be taught exclusively as a story of despair – "*hard history is not hopeless history.*" While our shared history is filled with complex, difficult and violent narratives such as lynching, it is imperative that we teach this history, but in a way that highlights the ways various individuals, groups, organizations, etc. resisted. In this lesson, students will specifically examine push back against lynching, from artists to activists to government officials. Students will culminate their learnings by creating a mock 1900s editorial that speaks out against the practice of lynching.

Essential/Compelling Questions

- Despite the risk, in what ways did people and organizations resist lynching?
- Given the enormous effort made by so many segments of society to stem the tide of lynchings, why did Congress fail to enact anti-lynching legislation until 2018?

Grades

8-12

Materials

- "Strange Fruit," lyrics (attached)
- Recording of Strange Fruit, such as the one found [here](#)
- "Why did it take a century to pass an anti-lynching law?" packet attached (copy these 6 pages front/back or provide to students electronically)
 - Since this packet has several links to short videos, teachers will either need to ensure students have access to appropriate technology, or organize a way to share the videos with the entire class at once
- "Write An Editorial from the 1900s," assignment sheet attached

Duration

15 minutes for discussion of "Strange Fruit" and resistance; time for remaining materials varies, depending on the pace of how students move through the provided packet

Preparation

- Students should have or be in the process of developing a comprehensive understanding regarding the history of lynching when engaging in this lesson.
- While the study of racial violence and lynching is sensitive, it is important for students to explore such "hard history" to ensure they understand the implications of our past and are empowered to address the challenges of the present. In order to study such topics effectively and safely, teachers must have established a safe classroom community with clear expectations of respect, open-mindedness, and civil conversation. See [Carolina K-12's "Activities" section of the Database of K-12 Resources](#) for ways to ensure a classroom environment conducive to the effective exploration of sensitive and controversial issues. Teachers should also consult Carolina K-12's "[Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom.](#)"

Additional Resources

- [Lynching in America](#), comprehensive report by the Equal Justice Initiative (Chapter IV specifically contains an "Opposition to Lynching" section)
- The [A Red Record](#) resource page includes an extensive bibliography of resources about lynching and its lasting effects on the American landscape and psyche.

Procedure

“Strange Fruit”

1. After reminding students of classroom expectations for discussing sensitive issues and ways to communicate their feelings if they experience troubling emotions throughout this lesson, project or provide copies of the attached lyrics to “Strange Fruit” to students. Give them a few moments to read the lyrics and let them know that you are going to play a [recording of the song](#) by artist Billie Holiday, who first sang and recorded “Strange Fruit” in 1939. Tell students that as they listen, they should write down words or phrases that describe the tone of the song and how it makes them feel. Afterwards, further discuss:
 - What feelings and images came to you when listening to this song?
 - What is the most striking or impactful part of the song in your opinion, and why?
 - What symbolism can you identify in the lyrics? Why is it that Southern trees bear “strange fruit”?
 - What contrast is made between the "gallant South" and the South which bears strange fruit? What is ironic about this contrast?
 - What is this song ultimately about? Why do you think the word "lynching" never appears in the song?
 - Abel Meeropol, a Jewish high school teacher from the Bronx, wrote this as a poem called “Bitter Fruit” in 1937. What do you think his purpose in doing so was?
 - Let students know that Meeropol had seen a photograph of a 1930 lynching of two men in Marion, Indiana, and subsequently published the poem in *The New York Teacher*, a union magazine.
 - What do you already know about Billie Holiday? Why do you think Billie Holiday chose to sing the song in this particular way? Why do you think she wanted to record it? As a black woman, what was Billie Holiday risking by putting this song out?
 - “Holiday first performed the song at Cafe Society in 1939. She said that singing it made her fearful of retaliation but, because its imagery reminded her of her father, she continued to sing the piece making it a regular part of her live performances. Because of the poignancy of the song, Josephson drew up some rules: Holiday would close with it; the waiters would stop all service in advance; the room would be in darkness except for a spotlight on Holiday’s face; and there would be no encore. During the musical introduction, Holiday would stand with her eyes closed, as if she were evoking a prayer.

Holiday approached her recording label, Columbia, about the song, but the company feared reaction by record retailers in the South, as well as negative reaction from affiliates of its co-owned radio network, CBS. Even John Hammond, Holiday’s producer, refused. So she turned to friend Milt Gabler, whose Commodore label produced alternative jazz.” ([Source and more on the history of the song](#))
 - Many consider Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” America’s first great protest song. In what way is the writing of this poem, and even more so Holiday’s eerie performance of the song, a form of resistance?
 - What are other ways in which people resisted lynching? (Note student thoughts on a piece of chart paper up front.)
2. Let students know that despite great risk, repercussions, and the ever-present terrifying threat of lynching, people throughout the 1800s-1900s still resisted and publicly opposed lynching, both in social activism and through the justice system. Tell students that today’s lesson will focus on resistance to lynching.

Why did it take a century to pass an anti-lynching law?

3. Next, provide students with the attached packet, “Why did it take a century to pass an anti-lynching law.” In this packet, students are provided with narrative text, videos, primary source documents, and questions to explore in order to gain an overview of the various ways individuals and organizations resisted lynching. Teachers should determine whether to have students work on this individually or in small groups, and whether/how to break up working through the packet over more than one class period. Regardless of each teacher’s decision, teachers should rotate among students while they work to digest the material, as well as infuse various points of class debrief and conversation throughout. Ensure time to go over the discussion questions and debrief as a whole class upon completion.
 - Optionally, teachers can also [jigsaw](#) the reading, assigning specific sections to students in groups and having each then teach the remainder of the group about their section of the reading.

Write An Editorial from the 1900s

4. To synthesize student learning, provide them with the attached assignment sheet and let them know that they will be using what they have learned in class to create an editorial piece for a 1900s newspaper, inspired by one North Carolina lynching victim from [A Red Record](#). Students will revisit the site, choose an individual lynching victim, and raise questions regarding lynching based on that individual's experience. After going over the assignment, allow students to ask questions and let them know how much class and/or homework time will be provided for completion, as well as the due date. (If students have never written an editorial, instructions can be found via an internet search.)

Strange Fruit

Name: _____

"Strange Fruit" is a song performed most famously by Billie Holiday, who first sang and recorded it in 1939. It was written by a white, Jewish high school teacher from the Bronx and a member of the Communist Party, Abel Meeropol.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop

Reactions:

Assignment: Write an Editorial from the 1900s

Name: _____

Anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett dedicated herself to calling attention to the grotesque and terrorist practices of lynching, despite great risk to her own life. She collected and published the newspaper accounts of hundreds of lynchings of African Americans across the southern states. She also expanded on the raw statistics with accounts of specific incidents in which legal due process was denied, families and individuals were targeted arbitrarily, and innocent people were killed. Doing so not only shined a light on this unjust act, but also rehumanized the individuals who were so callously targeted for their race.

Using what you have learned in class, you will creatively exhibit the spirit of the work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett by creating an editorial for a 1900s newspaper. You will revisit the website [A Red Record](#) and choose one North Carolina lynching victim from the site. You will then use his/her individual story to raise questions regarding lynching during the year his/her murder took place, serving as the voice of resistance today that he/she may not have had then.

Your editorial should:

- be written from the perspective of an anti-lynching advocate or organization you have learned about (i.e., Wells-Barnett, Walter White, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the NAACP, a legislator, etc.)
- explain the causes of lynching and what should be done about it
- use this specific individual's lynching to raise important questions regarding lynching, such as: why nothing was done to prevent this heinous act; why no one was prosecuted; how such extrajudicial killings reflect on the alleged American ideals of justice and equal rights; and what type of legislation you think should be passed to help bring the practice to an end.
- Follow guidelines for editorial writing

Due date: _____**Brainstorming:**

Name: _____

Why did it take a century to pass an anti-lynching law?

On Dec. 19, 2018 the Senate unanimously passed legislation that made lynching a federal crime. Proposed by Sens. Cory Booker, Kamala D. Harris and Tim Scott, the **Justice for Lynching Act** classifies lynching, “the ultimate expression of racism in the United States,” as a hate crime. In its findings, the bill states that at least 4,742 people, mostly African Americans, were lynched in the United States between 1882 and 1968, and that Congress had considered nearly 200 anti-lynching bills in the first half of the 20th century without passing any of them.

For more than a century, Southern resistance and Northern indifference undermined such legislative efforts. Why? Because lynching had remained a powerful terrorist tool to maintain white supremacy. The passage of the Justice for Lynching Act is a reminder that change in America is painfully slow. Yet, the history of lynching also shows how the resistance of individuals and organizations is key to calling attention to and stopping injustice.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett

Begin by watching the short 5 minute video [Ida B. Wells, A Lifetime of Activism](#) (please be prepared that a racial slur is used in this video; such language is hate speech and should never be repeated)

- How did Ida B. Wells respond to an attempt to move her to a Jim Crow car in 1884?
- How did Thomas Moss’s lynching in Memphis, 1892 influence and “open the eyes” of Ida B. Wells?

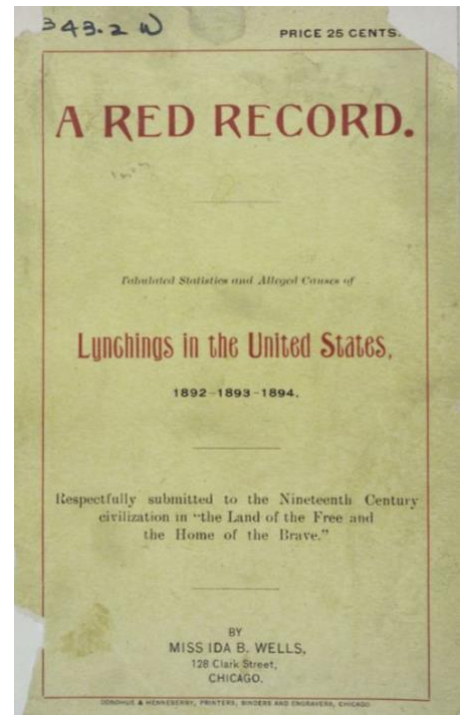
The campaign against lynching began in earnest in 1892 when **Ida B. Wells**, a journalist and social critic who had been born a slave in 1862, published “Southern Horrors: The Lynch Law in All Its Phases.” She lectured publicly and exposed how lynching was a form of violent racial subordination, challenging professed ignorance about lynching with facts - a strategy adopted by the civil rights organizations that would follow her lead.

In *A Red Record*, Wells-Barnett (she married in 1895) exposed the practice of lynching as a tactic designed to maintain white supremacy and limit African American opportunities for economic, social, and political power. Wells-Barnett continued to address and dismantle white southerners’ typical justifications for lynching, which included the alleged threats of “race riots,” the chaos that would result from “Negro rule” should African Americans be allowed to exercise their fifteenth amendment right to vote, and black criminality, specifically the rape of white women.

- Based on what you have learned about life in the 1800-1900s, what do you think Ida B. Wells was risking in resistance such as this, both in her public lectures and her written work?

In *A Red Record*, Wells-Barnett collected and published the newspaper accounts of hundreds of lynchings of African Americans across the southern states for the years 1892, 1893, and 1894 along with their alleged crimes. Wells expands on the raw statistics with accounts of specific incidents in which legal due process was denied, families and individuals were targeted arbitrarily, and innocent people were killed. ([Source](#))

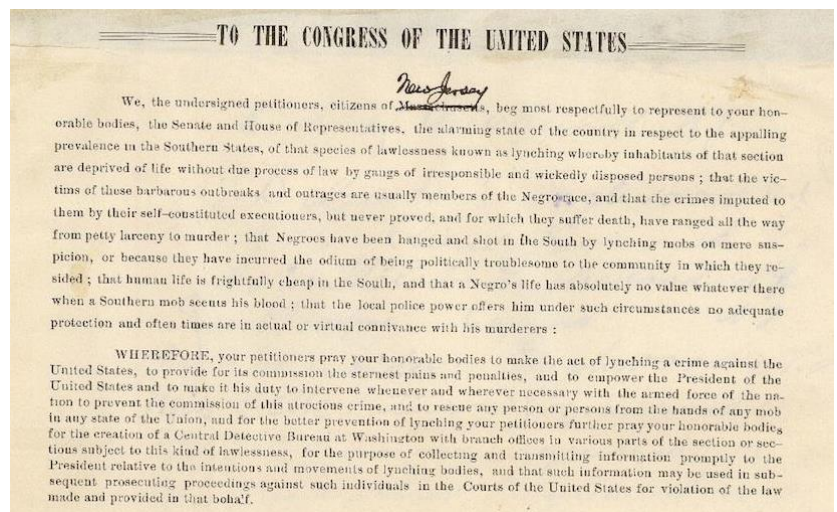
- Examine the cover to A Red Record. According to the cover, to whom did Wells-Barnett submit this report? Why do you think she framed the report in this way?
- Why do you think Wells-Barnett wanted to go beyond the statistics of those who were lynched, highlighting the circumstances and details of these killings?



Wells was constantly threatened physically and rhetorically throughout her career. But her commitment to chronicling the experience of African Americans in order to demonstrate their humanity remained unflinching. In consideration of her own safety she stated, “If this work can contribute in any way toward proving this, and at the same time arouse the conscience of the American people to demand for justice to every citizen, and punishment by law for the lawless, I shall feel I have done my race a service...Other considerations are minor.”

Early Congressional Attempts to Stop Lynching

- What does this document appear to be? What is its purpose?
- What year do you think it was created and what evidence makes you think this?
- How does the author/signatories feel about lynching? What are their goals?
- What specific lines or sections stand out to you and why? If you were to choose a title for this document from the words or a phrase located within the document, what would you title it and why?



In February of 1900, a group of citizens of New Jersey submitted the previous petition to Congress, asking “for lawmakers to redefine lynching as ‘a crime against the United States.’ The group asked that the government create “a Central Detective Bureau at Washington with branch offices” in states prone to lynching, in order to investigate these crimes and provide material for successful prosecution.

While the petition doesn’t offer the name of the group responsible for rounding up these signatures, historian Rosalyn Terborg-Penn writes that African American women “formed the backbone of the anti-lynching crusade,” acting as fundraisers, lobbyists, publicists, and liaisons to white female activists.

George Henry White, North Carolina

Around this same time, George Henry White was elected in 1896 to represent North Carolina in the US Congress. [George Henry White](#) was a Black Indian born to an enslaved woman in 1852. “Strong-willed, eloquent and determined, White devoted his life to educating his people. He became a teacher, school principal, and lawyer. In North Carolina, “fusion politics” between the Populist and Republican parties led to a brief period of renewed Republican and African American political success in elections between 1894 to 1900, during which time White was elected to Congress for two terms after serving in the NC state legislature.

During White's second Congressional term (beginning in 1898), North Carolina amended its Constitution to eliminate African American voters and office-holders through a poll tax, a grandfather clause and a literacy test enforceable in 1902. Black people throughout the southern states were being denied any right to run for Congress or other offices. Because of these actions, White chose not to seek a third term in the 1900 elections. He told the *Chicago Tribune*, “I cannot live in North Carolina and be a man and be treated as a man.” He announced plans to leave his home state and start a law practice in Washington, DC at the end of his term.

On January 20, 1900, White introduced HR 6963, the first bill in Congress to make lynching a federal crime to be prosecuted by federal courts. Congressman White compared lynching to treason and HR 6963 mandated the death penalty for those convicted. By then an average of three African American men, women and children were lynched each week in the southern states. White’s bill died in the House Judiciary committee that year, opposed by Southern white Democrats – and that year 105 Black people died at the hands of lynch mobs.

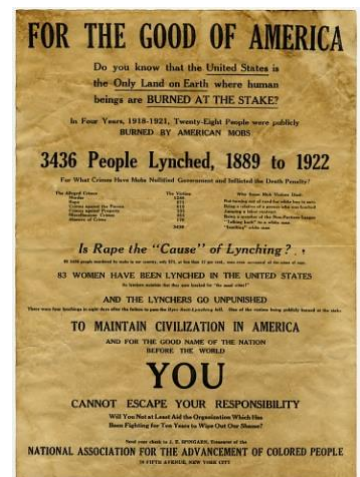
White delivered his final speech in the House on January 29, 1901:

“This is perhaps the Negroes' temporary farewell to the American Congress, but let me say, Phoenix-like he will rise up some day and come again. These parting words are in behalf of an outraged, heart-broken, bruised and bleeding, but God-fearing people; faithful, industrious, loyal, rising people – full of potential force.”

- In what ways did George Henry White resist lynching? Even though his bill did not pass, why was his work still important?
- What type of skills and characteristics do you think George Henry White had in order to serve as an African American legislator at this time? What risks did he take by advocating for rights and justice for African Americans during this period?
- Based on what you have learned in class, why do you think it took from 1900 to 2018 for an anti-lynching bill to actually pass?

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

The NAACP was established in 1909 and is America’s oldest and largest civil rights organization. It was formed in New York City by white and black activists, partially in response to the ongoing violence against African Americans around the country. In the NAACP’s early decades, its anti-lynching campaign was central to its agenda. Its published report, “Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1919,” denounced the United States as “the only advanced nation whose government has tolerated lynching.” The report quoted President Woodrow Wilson, who in July 1918 condemned lynching. But Wilson’s condemnation meant little next to his earlier enthusiasm for “Birth of a Nation,” a film that further legitimized vigilantism. Despite Wilson’s appeal, the report notes, “lynchings continued...with unabated fury.”



These efforts pushed forward anti-lynching legislation. Proposed in 1918 by Rep. Leonidas C. Dyer, a Republican from Missouri, the bill targeted state officials for failing to provide equal protection under the laws to anyone victimized by a mob.

The NAACP worked diligently to cultivate public support for the legislation. **W.E.B. Du Bois**, director of publicity and research for the NAACP, published articles in its magazine, *the Crisis*, to highlight the horrors of lynching and advance legislation to stop it. Between 1920 and 1938, after news of a lynching, the NAACP would hang a flag from its Fifth Avenue offices that read "A Man Was Lynched Yesterday." And yet, while the **Dyer Bill** passed the House in 1922, Southern Democrats in the Senate filibustered and Republicans, who held a majority, allowed the bill to die.

Watch the 3 minute video [Walter White, Reporting the Crime](#) (please be prepared that a racial slur is used in this video; such language is hate speech and should never be repeated)

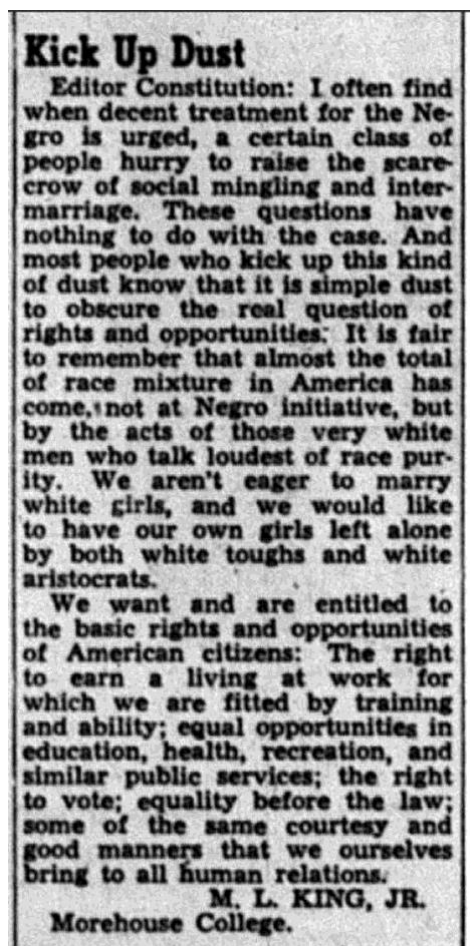
- What research did Walter White, Chief Investigator for the NAACP undertake? What was he risking by engaging in this work?
- How did Walter White feel about his work? What does this and the immense risk he took in doing these investigations say about him and his character?
- What took place in Elaine, AK in 1919?

In the 1930s, the NAACP, under the leadership of **Walter White**, mounted a new effort to secure federal anti-lynching legislation. The **Costigan-Wagner Act**, sponsored in 1934 by Democratic Sens. Edward P. Costigan of Colorado and Robert F. Wagner of New York, targeted law enforcement officials who failed to prevent a lynching. Again, Southern opposition doomed the effort, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, despite being lobbied by first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, disappointed activists by not promoting the bill. He feared losing Democratic votes in the South and support for his New Deal agenda. As such, the House again passed bills in 1937 and 1940, but Senate filibusters once again defeated them.

Nonetheless, cultural awareness of the horrors of lynching spread. In 1935, two anti-lynching art exhibitions were held in New York, one sponsored by the NAACP and the other by the Communist Party's John Reed Club. Images by artists brought the subject to the fore with graphic drawings of grotesquely mangled bodies at imagined lynching scenes and seemingly more mundane depictions of the crowds.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In late July 1946, the lynchings of five African-Americans in Georgia made national headlines and pricked the conscience of a Morehouse College student. The first killing was of Maceo Snipes, an African-American World War II veteran. Snipes was killed in Taylor County, in retaliation for daring to vote in a statewide primary election. For that four white men shot him outside a relative's home. Days later, two black couples, George and Mae Murray Dorsey and Roger and Dorothy Malcom, were killed by a mob at the Moore's Ford Bridge between Monroe and Watkinsville. They were



murdered after Roger Malcom had a dispute with a local white farmer. Dorsey was seven months pregnant when she was beaten and shot to death.

All of this was too much for the 17-year-old Morehouse student. He penned a letter to *The Atlanta Constitution* in which he called out the immorality of racism and showed a burgeoning passion for social justice. The writer also referred to the murderous tactic that had led to so many lynchings across the South: black men erroneously accused of assaulting white women. He signed the letter, "M.L. King, JR."

In the letter, published Aug. 6, 1946, "King is responding to the upsurge of lynchings of returning black soldiers," said Clayborne Carson, editor of King's papers. "During the war there was the double V campaign for black soldiers. It said, 'Yes, we're going to fight against fascism and Nazism, but when we get back home, we're not going to return to the old way.'" But that declaration was met with a rising tide of violence by some whites against soldiers who expected equality after they had served their country.

This was also during a time when the NAACP was championing federal legislation that would declare lynchings a crime. When Congress would not pass such legislation, King wrote his letter. Dr. King would later, as one of the most prominent civil rights leaders of the time, continue to advocate for antilynching legislation: "It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can stop him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important." *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 1963 speech at Western Michigan University*

- Why do you think it was so difficult to get Congress to pass a federal anti-lynching bill? What message is Dr. King trying to convey regarding the importance of such a bill?

Emmett Till

Another horrific image, that of the mutilated corpse of **Emmett Till** in 1955, inspired a new generation of activists. Emmett Till was born in Chicago on 25 July 1941. At the age of 14, he was sent by his parents to visit relatives in LeFlore County, Mississippi. Till was reportedly dared by some local boys to enter Bryant's Grocery and talk to the white woman behind the counter, who owned the store. According to William Bradford Huie, a journalist who later interviewed the accused, Till entered and touched Carol Bryant and whistled at her as his friends rushed him away. Four days later, on 28 August, he was abducted from his uncle's home by Bryant's husband, Roy, and Roy's half-brother, J. W. Milam. Till's mangled body was found three days later in the Tallahatchie River, with a large cotton-gin fan tied around his neck. He had been brutally beaten, his eye had been gouged out, and he was shot through the head.

Till's body was returned to Chicago, where his mother insisted on an open-casket funeral so everyone could see the brutality of her son's death. In releasing the photo, Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley, explained, "the whole nation has to bear witness to this."

Till's family, along with national newspapers and civil rights organizations including the NAACP used his death to strike a blow against racial injustice and terrorism. One hundred days after Till's murder, after months of strategy and planning, Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery city bus and was arrested for violating Alabama's bus segregation laws. Reverend Jesse Jackson told *Vanity Fair* (1988) that "Rosa said she thought about going to the back of the bus. But then she thought about Emmett Till and she couldn't do it." For most of his life, King would use the Till murder as an example of "the evil of racial injustice," preaching about "the crying voice of a little Emmett Till, screaming from the rushing waters in [Mississippi]" (King, 12 May 1963).

In 2008, the Emmitt Till Memorial Commission dedicated a marker commemorating the lynching of Emmitt Till on the banks of the Tallahatchie, near where Till's body was discovered. Since then, the sign has been repeatedly vandalized. According to *USA Today*, "Vandals threw the first sign in the river. The second sign was blasted with 317 bullets or shotgun pellets before the Emmett Till Memorial Commission officials removed it. The third sign, featured in the Instagram photo [showing three University of Mississippi students posting with

rifles in front of the sign], was damaged by 10 bullet holes before officials took it down last week.” According to the Commission, racists have also “defaced [the sign] with acid and have had KKK spray painted on them. The vandalism has been targeted and it has been persistent. Occasionally, the national news has picked up the story. More often, these acts have gone unnoticed and been the responsibility of our community to maintain.” The Commission has plans to dedicate another sign in October 2019. This newest sign will be bulletproof.

In his book, *The Blood of Emmett Till* (published in 2017), Timothy Tyson, a Duke University professor, revealed that Carolyn Bryant confessed to him that she had fabricated the most sensational part of her testimony. “That part’s not true,” she told Tyson, about her claim that Till had made verbal and physical advances towards her. As for the rest of what happened that evening in the country store, she said she couldn’t remember.

- In what way was Mamie Till Mobley’s choice to have an open casket funeral for her 14-year-old son a form of important resistance? Why did this fuel civil rights protests?
- Why do you think racist vandals target the sign commemorating Emmett Till’s lynching? Why do you think the Emmett Till Memorial Commission keeps replacing the sign? What steps could be taken to protect the marker from vandalism?

In a brutal environment of racial subordination and terror, faced with the constant threat of harm, close to six million black Americans fled the South between 1910 and 1970. Many left behind their homes, families, and employment after a lynching or near-lynching rendered home too unsafe a place to remain. This period is known as the **Great Migration**. In each successive decade of the Great Migration, the number of lynchings in the South declined as black departures from the region rose. In 1952, for the first time since the Tuskegee Institute began tabulating records in 1882, a full year passed with no recorded lynchings in the United States.

Justice for Lynching Act, 2018

Legislation may have failed, but bearing witness did not. Perhaps no event in recent years has had a greater impact than “Without Sanctuary,” an exhibition of lynching postcards and photographs that grew out of a book published in 2000.

On June 13, 2005, the Senate agreed to a resolution apologizing to the victims of lynching and their descendants for failing to pass anti-lynching legislation. Family members of those who were lynched sat in the gallery and heard senators speak, including Barack Obama of Illinois, who addressed the importance of righting the country’s wrongs and “completing the unfinished work of the civil rights movement.” “Someone is finally recognizing our pain,” said the great-granddaughter of Anthony Crawford, who was lynched in 1916.

The most recent event to build momentum toward this historic Senate act was the opening of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala. It is a powerful and potent memorial, spearheaded by Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative. It includes hundreds of jars of soil, retrieved from lynching sites, and steel monuments that dangle in the air. America, Stevenson said, “has not done a good job of recognizing this history and we’ve been compromised by that.”

Following the act’s passage, Cory Booker remarked: “Today is an emotional and historic day. For over a century, members of Congress have attempted to pass some version of a bill that would recognize lynching for

what it is: a bias-motivated act of terror. And for more than a century, and more than 200 attempts, this body has failed. Today, we have righted that wrong and taken corrective action that recognizes this stain on our country's history.”

- In summary, what are the various ways people and organizations resisted lynching, despite great risk?
- Based on what you have learned and your own inferences, why did it take a century to pass an anti-lynching law? Why was the passing of an anti-lynching bill important and historic, even though it took until 2018 to do so? In what ways did the ongoing resistance to lynching throughout history lead to this moment?

Sources:

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