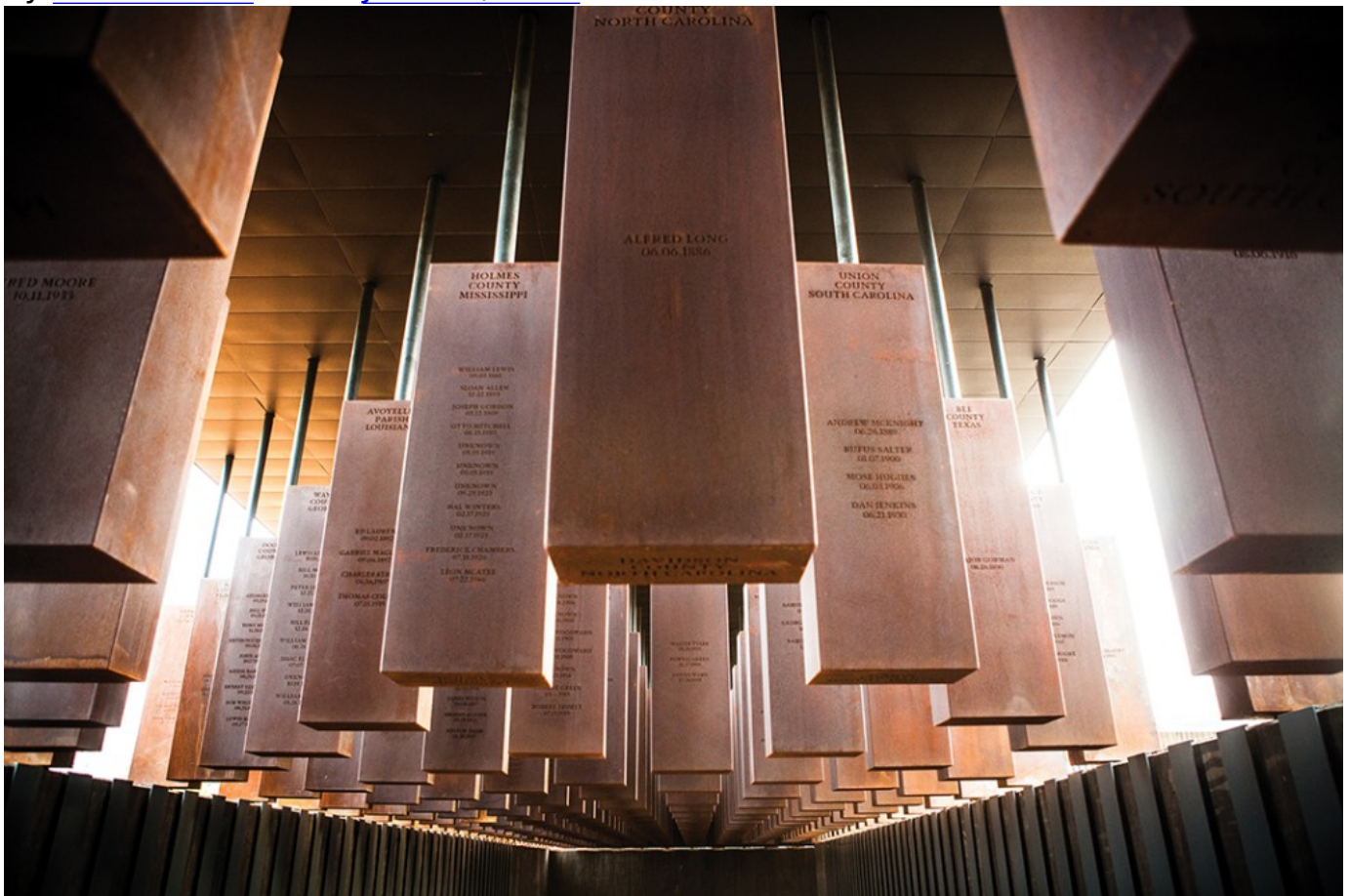


Lynched but not forgotten

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice represents a watershed moment in the idea and practice of what a public memorial can be.

by [Pete Candler](#) in the [June 20, 2018](#) issue



At the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, lynching victims' names have been cut into hanging steel columns that resemble upturned caskets. Photo © Equal Justice Initiative / Human Pictures

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which commemorates African American victims of lynching from 1877 to 1950, is the most extraordinary and promising national memorial in a generation or more. But it is not just a memorial; it is a confrontation. Located in Montgomery, Alabama, the new public exhibit partakes in

that city's history of nonviolent protest. In this case the protest is not for rights but for memory. It elicits a reckoning with the horrors of an essential part of American history that has effectively been evacuated—a history that is just too shameful for many people to talk about, if it is remembered at all.

The memorial opened in April, along with the nearby Legacy Museum. Both are projects of the Equal Justice Initiative, an organization founded in 1989 by Bryan Stevenson, who is part of a distinguished tradition of Montgomery attorneys devoted to civil rights. In addition to its legal activities, EJI serves the work of vigilant memory: it recalls the atrocities committed against a people who have been “kidnapped, terrorized, segregated, and incarcerated.” These four themes form the framework of the story told by the museum, which is situated in a former warehouse on Commerce Street once used for holding enslaved people along with the livestock from whom they were legally indistinguishable. The aim of the museum is not just to carry a candle into a dark and unvisited chamber of American history but to flood it with stadium-grade light.

The memorial focuses that unsparing light on one aspect of the museum's larger narrative: lynching. Designed by Michael Murphy and his team at the MASS Design Group of Boston, it is the architectural embodiment of EJI's unprecedented six-year research project to document and memorialize the African American victims of lynching in 12 southern states. It grows from the same conceptual soil broken by Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., which soberly presents the names of the war dead with no other identifying information. For their families and survivors, who frequently make charcoal rubbings of names onto paper, this has proven to be a powerfully tactile way of connecting to their loved ones. Like the Vietnam Memorial, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice represents a watershed moment in the idea and practice of what a public memorial can be and do and how visitors relate to it.

The confrontation in Montgomery does not come at you all at once but by way of a slow initiation into a subject that everyone and no one knows about, that is rarely explored in depth and at best tacitly taken for granted. The confidence, authority, and incontrovertible evidence with which the memorial presents itself means that the subject can be ignored no longer, not without a grave cost to American—and especially southern—self-understanding.

The site is a grassy six-acre knoll overlooking downtown Montgomery. Newness is everywhere: across the street, aluminum frames on a new building await drywall. Newly paved roads are still tar-black. Workers paint the metal braces on a fence. In the memorial garden in front of the main entrance, recently planted azaleas, hydrangeas, and pansies are still pushing out their roots into new soil.

You enter through a small portal, past a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.—“True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice”—and along an angular gravel path lined with dark concrete walls textured with the shadowy impressions of rough-cut lumber. A series of placards along the way narrows your focus from the museum’s “From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration” narrative to the particular: lynching as the ultimate expression of a white supremacist regime of terror. A sculpture by Ghanaian artist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo depicts African men and women bound together in chains around the neck, wrists, and ankles, striped with worming trails of rusty tears and blood, the vestiges of corrosion.

The memorial itself is a cloister-shaped, open-air canopy, with a mounded green space in the center. As you enter from one corner, six-foot rectangular boxes hang from the ceiling like suspended, upturned iron caskets. They appear to float just above the pale wood floor. There is one box for each county in which a lynching is known to have been committed, and on each box are the names of that county’s known victims. Sometimes there is only one name per county; for others there are dozens. The marker for Phillips County, Arkansas, includes 15 individual names, as well as a sentence collectively remembering the 229 African Americans slaughtered in the Elaine Massacre, one of the deadliest racial conflicts in American history.

There are more than 4,000 names on 800 individual monuments, each one made of Alabama-forged weathering steel. As the steel weathers, it oxidizes and becomes discolored like rust. Each one has a unique personality of its own in hues—cocoa, chestnut, burnt umber, ochre—as varied as the skin tones of the victims it represents. On many of them, the discoloration runs down the steel surface like a trail of blood. Over time, as they are exposed to the elements, the individual county memorials will bleed onto the oak floor and down the ramp that descends deeper into the memorial.

Each name, in a dignified font, has been cut through steel with a high-powered water-jet cutter. When the guide tells me this, I recall the fire hoses of Bull Connor. The names are not engraved the way they are on the Vietnam Memorial but cut out

of the steel, creating a negative space that makes the named person present and absent at the same time.

Past the first corner, the floor seems almost imperceptibly to drop out from under you. It slowly slopes downward, so that by the next corner you are standing underneath the monuments, in the position of the spectators for whom lynchings were postcard material. You can look up at them, but cannot touch them—they are now out of your reach. When you get to the third side, you are entirely underneath steel avatars of black bodies dangling over your head, the floor still descending. In the staggering abundance of names above me, I feel a need to incarnate them into human flesh, to remember that for each name there is a story. I turn back and seek out the few with whose stories I was somewhat familiar before coming here: Sam Hose, Jesse Washington, Joe Spinner Johnson, Wiley Webb, Mary Turner.

As if anticipating this sensation, the designers have placed markers along both sides of the third leg that tell one-sentence stories of some of the victims. At the far end, water cascades down the surface of a 100-foot wall in memory of all the undocumented victims of lynching, the number of which is impossible to calculate.

The waterfall is the only audible feature of the memorial. It is reminiscent of the 9/11 Memorial in New York, and of King's favorite passage from the prophet Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." Or of the waters of baptism, which is what it begins to feel like by the final leg: not a sprinkling but full-on bodily immersion into a legacy of torturous death. The memorial invites you to participate in the resurrection of forgotten names but not without first being drawn into an overwhelming spectacle of brutal and grotesque death.

At the end of the last leg, a path leads up into a memorial square suggestive of the public squares in which so many of these men and women were mutilated and brutalized. The exit to the building leads you past a quote from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*:

And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than

lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.

Across a newly sodded lawn, workers are still shoveling gravel into steel-bordered pathways, laying sod onto the red soil. They aren't done with the memorial yet, and neither are you.

The memorial invites you to participate in the resurrection of forgotten names.

The memorial has been designed to grow and transform over time, like the newly planted saplings lining its perimeter. Outside the main building, in row upon row, duplicates of the individual monuments hanging inside are laid out on their backs, like shipping containers in a boatyard. Brought here as cargo, the dead leave it the same way. There is strange relief in this arrangement, though: the same names that were previously inaccessible to you are right in front of you, to touch, to run your fingers across the weathered steel and feel their coarse absence. The container-like boxes lie supine in purgatorial suspension—in hope that each one will eventually be placed in the county it represents.

Beyond the 800 casket-like monuments, a reflection garden dedicated to Ida B. Wells offers a welcome opportunity to catch your balance and your breath, and to cry your eyes out.

This is not a feel-good story. But the aim of the memorial is ultimately hope: a clear-eyed and unromantic hope, grounded in honesty about the harsh reality of white supremacy and its relentless stranglehold on African American lives. The overall effect of the memorial is immense sorrow but oriented toward the regeneration that comes only from genuine confrontation with horrific injustice, from the recognition that there is no reconciliation without truth.

Visitors respond to the memorial in different ways. For some, it is a corrective to received histories taught in school. William, an African American guide, tells me that growing up in Pittsburgh, his takeaway from Black History Month was slim. “King carried some signs, Rosa Parks sat down, and that was pretty much it,” he tells me. His version is not substantially different from what I grew up with in Atlanta.

For others, it is a wakeup call. William tells me about some Germans who visited a few days before and had been completely unaware of this aspect of American

history. I suspect the revelation will come as just as big a surprise to many American visitors who have grown up believing that slavery simply ended with the Emancipation Proclamation—visitors who, if they encountered the subject of lynching at all, did so only under the aegis of black history, a subject presumed to be important for some people, but not all.

For yet others—most profoundly—the memorial is the cemetery that the descendants of lynching victims never had. The biggest gift the memorial gives them is the public restoration of their memory, the return of their names—names no longer fettered by either iron chains or oblivion.

For me, the effect is awe—at the ingenious beauty of the memorial's design, at the unspeakable cruelty of human beings, and at the lengths to which we white people go to maintain our cherished delusions. The scale of savagery of the collective campaign of lynching in America is frankly not something I was fully prepared for. But to be presented with it, so silently, so unflinchingly, is a gift. Because confrontation with truth—like the lifted burden of a secret, no matter how disorientingly painful—is always a gift.

I try to take the names in, one at a time, until I cannot compass them any more. I weep in the shipyard. I say “Jesus” a lot. I leave through the same small portal through which I entered, but I am not the same.

There is no gift shop.

After I leave, I walk a circuit around the outside of the memorial. New saplings—pecan, poplar, pine—have been planted around the grounds, signs of new life. On the southwest corner of the site, a lone pecan is the only established tree on the site. It is not that old, but old enough to serve as a reminder of the favored instrument of white mob terrorism. West from Montgomery toward Mississippi, great southern trees crowd the margins of Highway 82 as if for some parade procession or protest march. They all look different now. Shortleaf pine, yellow poplar, live oak, shagbark hickory, southern magnolia—their arms seem to reach toward the blacktop with heavy menace.