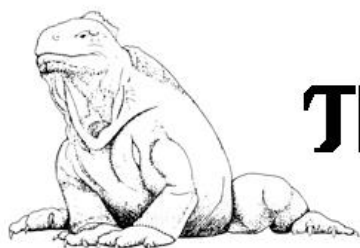


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100-year commemoration of Newberry lynching, Oct. 16

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by *Peggy MacDonald, Matheson Museum Director*

A version of this article originally appeared in the Gainesville Sun on March 6.

An ancient tree stands in the tiny town of Newberry at the site of a horrific crime that remains shrouded in mystery.

“Five Negroes Hanged On One Tree” was the headline of a story on the Newberry lynchings that ran in *The Palatka News and Advertiser* on August 25, 1916. “Wholesale Lynching Occurs In Florida: Two of Victims Women,” stated a subhead.

An *Ocala Evening Star* article on the Newberry lynchings contained a coroner’s report for the victims. Although the lynchings had made headlines in newspapers across the nation, the coroner concealed the victims’ true cause of death. According to the report, the two women died by choking as they fell from a tree. The cause of death for another lynching victim was officially reported as bleeding to death after running into barbed wire.

Tucked away in a shaded cemetery behind Pleasant Plain United Methodist Church, the graves of three of the Newberry Six lynching victims can be seen today. The victims were buried near each other and were honored with unique tombstones that are unlike any of the others in the rural cemetery.

James Dennis’ original tombstone contained an incorrect spelling of his last name. It remains, but a second marker was later added with the correct spelling, indicating that preserving the legacy of this victim of mob violence was important to the local community.

Aside from the three legible tombstones at the graves of James Dennis, Reverend Josh J. Baskin and Andrew McHenry, there is no historical marker that tells the story of the atrocity that took place nearly 100 years ago in Newberry. According to the October 1916 issue of *The Crisis*, a publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the cluster of trees where the Newberry Six lynchings took place was also the site of previous lynchings, which led to the name “Hangman’s Island.”

“The town is a desolate place of shanties and small houses, and has the reputation of lawlessness,” was how *The Crisis* described Newberry in 1916. Raising hogs was a fairly lucrative occupation in Newberry. Farmers often let their hogs roam free and many were not branded, making it difficult to prove ownership. Some white farmers accused Boisy Long of stealing hogs, which led Constable S. G. Wynne and Dr. L. G. Harris to serve a warrant to Long at 2 a.m., according to *The Crisis* and the *Palatka News and Advertiser*. There are conflicting accounts of what occurred when Wynne and Harris (who may have also owned the hogs that were allegedly stolen) attempted to serve the warrant, but at some point Long allegedly shot both men. Long reportedly escaped while a driver took the two injured men to a Jacksonville hospital where the constable died.

When daylight broke on Aug. 18, the hunt for Boisy Long began. According to *The Crisis*, because Long could not be found, locals allegedly tortured Long’s wife, Stella, and Mary Dennis (who was pregnant) in an attempt to get more information and subsequently jailed them. James Dennis was shot and his brother, Bert, was jailed when he went to get a coffin.

Josh Baskin, a preacher, was on his way back from town when a group of white men put him in their car, drove him to a group of trees at “Hangman’s Island” and lynched him. Baskin had previously been arrested for stealing cattle but was released due to a lack of evidence, according to *The Crisis*. Next the men returned to the jail, where they picked up Bert and Mary Dennis and Stella Long, who were driven to the same cluster of trees and lynched. Boisy Long was convicted of murder and executed on October 27, 1916.

There is a growing movement to recognize lynchings and other acts of mob violence by erecting memorials. In 2015 the Equal Justice Initiative released a report, “Lynching in America,” that documents 3,959 lynchings that took place between 1877 and 1950 in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

NOTE: *There will be a 100 year commemoration Sunday, Oct. 16, at 3pm at the Pleasant Plain Church, 1910 NW 166th St. in Newberry, looking toward erecting a memorial there.*