

A Lynching Memorial Is Opening. The Country Has Never Seen Anything Like It.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, opening Thursday in Montgomery, Ala., is dedicated to victims of white supremacy.

By CAMPBELL ROBERTSON APRIL 25, 2018

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — In a plain brown building sits an office run by the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles, a place for people who have been held accountable for their crimes and duly expressed remorse.

Just a few yards up the street lies a different kind of rehabilitation center, for a country that has not been held to nearly the same standard.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which opens Thursday on a six-acre site overlooking the Alabama State Capitol, is dedicated to the victims of American white supremacy. And it demands a reckoning with one of the nation's least recognized atrocities: the lynching of thousands of black people in a decades-long campaign of racist terror.

At the center is a grim cloister, a walkway with 800 weathered steel columns, all hanging from a roof. Etched on each column is the name of an American county and the people who were lynched there, most listed by name, many simply as "unknown." The columns meet you first at eye level, like the headstones that lynching victims were rarely given. But as you walk, the floor steadily descends; by

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The magnitude of the killing is harrowing, all the more so when paired with the circumstances of individual lynchings, some described in brief summaries along the walk: Parks Banks, lynched in Mississippi in 1922 for carrying a photograph of a white woman; Caleb Gaddy, hanged in Kentucky in 1894 for “walking behind the wife of his white employer”; Mary Turner, who after denouncing her husband’s lynching by a rampaging white mob, was hung upside down, burned and then sliced open so that her unborn child fell to the ground.

There is nothing like it in the country. Which is the point.

“Just seeing the names of all these people,” said Bryan Stevenson, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, the nonprofit organization behind the memorial. Many of them, he said, “have never been named in public.”

Mr. Stevenson and a small group of lawyers spent years immersing themselves in archives and county libraries to document the thousands of racial terror lynchings across the South. They have cataloged nearly 4,400 in total.

Inspired by the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin and the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, Mr. Stevenson decided that a single memorial was the most powerful way to give a sense of the scale of the bloodshed. But also at the site are duplicates of each steel column, lined up in rows like coffins, intended to be disseminated around the country to the counties where lynchings were carried out. People in these counties can request them — dozens of such requests have already been made — but they must show that they have made efforts locally to “address racial and economic injustice.”

For Mr. Stevenson, the plans for the memorial and an accompanying museum were rooted in decades spent in Alabama courtrooms, witnessing a criminal justice system that treats African-Americans with particular cruelty, or indifference.

Since 1989, the Equal Justice Initiative has offered legal services to poor people in prison, toiling away in a city awash in Confederate commemorations (Monday was Confederate Memorial Day in Alabama), in a state with the nation’s highest per capita death sentencing rate. Nearly every staff member is a lawyer with clients in the prison system, and they have continued to work a full schedule of legal defense

work even as they painstakingly compiled the names of the lynched and planned the memorial.

Mr. Stevenson, whose great-grandparents were slaves in Virginia, has written about “just mercy,” the belief that those who have committed serious wrongs should be allowed a chance at redemption. It is a conviction he has spent a career arguing for on behalf of clients, and he believes it is true even for the white America whose brutality is chronicled by the memorial.

“If I believe that each of us is more than the worst thing he’s ever done,” he said, “I have to believe that for everybody.”

But the history has to be acknowledged and its destructive legacy faced, he said. And this is particularly hard in “the most punitive society on the planet.”

People do not want to admit wrongdoing in America, Mr. Stevenson said, because they expect only punishment.

“I’m not interested in talking about America’s history because I want to punish America,” Mr. Stevenson continued. “I want to liberate America. And I think it’s important for us to do this as an organization that has created an identity that is as disassociated from punishment as possible.”

The initiative’s headquarters are a few blocks away in a building that was once a warehouse in Montgomery’s sprawling slave market. It is now the site of the Legacy Museum, a companion piece to the memorial.

It is not a conventional museum, heavy on artifacts and detached commentary. It is perhaps better described as the presentation of an argument, supported by firsthand accounts and contemporary documents, that the slavery system did not end but evolved: from the family-shattering domestic slave trade to the decades of lynching terror, to the suffocating segregation of Jim Crow to the age of mass incarceration in which we now live.

The museum ends with a nod toward the future. By the exit is a section with a voter registration kiosk, information on volunteer opportunities and suggestions on how to discuss all of this with students. Given what has come before, it seems a

jarring expression of confidence in the possibility of change. But there are good reasons for it.

Among the accounts given at the museum is that of Anthony Ray Hinton, who spent 28 years on Alabama's death row after being wrongly convicted of two murders by an all-white jury. The case for his innocence seemed straightforward, but lawyers at the Equal Justice Initiative spent 16 years working for his freedom, appealing the case all the way to the United States Supreme Court. Mr. Hinton knows firsthand how stubborn injustice can be, but he is blunt: If people just gave up in despair, he would be dead.

"I refuse to believe that it's hopeless because I am a product of what can happen when you fight," he said. "If we don't fight, who's going to fight?"

A grassy hillock rises in the middle of the memorial. From here you can see the Montgomery skyline through the thicket of hanging columns, the river where the enslaved were sold and the State Capitol building that once housed the Confederacy, whose monuments the current Alabama governor has vowed to protect. It is a striking view. But Mr. Stevenson pointed out that when standing here, you are on view as well, faced on all sides by the names of the thousands who were run down, instantly judged and viciously put to death.

"You might feel judged yourself," he said. "What are you going to do?"

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