

Honors Thesis Prospectus

December 2024

Working title: *The Lynching of Robert Marshall: Documenting African American History in Carbon County, Utah*

Project Purpose:

Earlier this year I took part in the African American Civil Rights Seminar offered at BYU. It is a semester-long experience that consists of learning about the history of African Americans and taking a trip to Alabama and Georgia for an immersive hands-on experience where we visit places relevant to the history and interact with several individuals who have lived through that history. One of the key eras that we learned about in this class is the lynching era. “Lynching became a vicious tool of racial control in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”¹ During our class trip to the South, while I was visiting the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, I came across the names of two African Americans that were lynched in Utah: William “Sam Joe” Harvey in 1883 in Salt Lake City and Robert Marshall in 1925 in Price. There have been documentation and community commemoration for the lynching of William Harvey and others in Utah. To my knowledge, no proper documentation and commemoration has been done for Robert Marshall. With this project, I intend to expand research on the lynching of Robert Marshall as well as add on the history of

¹ Equal Justice Initiative. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*. Montgomery, AL: Equal Justice Initiative, 2015.

African Americans in Utah. Ultimately, this project will culminate in honoring the legacy of Robert Marshall with proper recognition and commemoration.

Project Importance:

The topic of lynching has long been of interest among scholars, including historians, sociologists, and lawyers. For example, James Allen, a historian, compiled lynching photo-based evidence in his book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* that was published in 2000. Other scholars like the lawyer Sherrilyn Ifill have also explored this aspect in the history of the United States. In 2007, she published a book titled *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the 21st Century* where she invites communities to take part in discussions to grapple with the memory and legacy of lynching. This act of acknowledging history and grappling with its effect over generations can lead to healing and justice for communities that have been marginalized or treated with injustice. In 1989, Bryan Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a non-profit organization that advocates for people who have been illegally convicted. The work of this organization has been extended beyond their focus on incarcerated individuals to commemorating and acknowledging the racial history of the United States. As a result, in 2018, the EJI opened the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama “as part of [their] national effort to create new spaces, markers, and memorials that address the legacy of slavery, lynching, and racial segregation.”² These two institutions have been key in documenting the history of African Americans and the hardship they went through in the span of several generations.

To echo Sherrilyn Ifill, it is very important to acknowledge the history of a society, even though it might be uncomfortable. In doing so, one does not intend to attribute blame or instill

² Equal Justice Initiative. Accessed December 13, 2024. <https://eji.org/about>

guilt in descendants of those who have treated others with injustice and violence. Rather, it is an invitation to sit with and understand the history of a place as we move forward together. The lynching of Robert Marshall was an unfortunate event in history that has not been fully acknowledged by the community. Part of the work that the EJI does include placing markers in counties where there has been some known incidence of lynching. This process has been completed for Thomas Coleman and William Harvey in June 2022, and a website is dedicated to documenting their stories.³ However, this has yet to be done for Robert Marshall in Carbon County. Additionally, in the Legacy Museum, the EJI has a display of jars filled with soil collected from the sites of victims of lynching. A soil collection has been organized for both Thomas Coleman and William Harvey in Salt Lake City. This process has not been done to recognize the legacy of Robert Marshall yet.

By expanding research on the lynching of Robert Marshall, I will also contribute to the expansion of African American history in Utah. Historically, documentation of African American history in Utah has mostly been concentrated to the urban areas of Salt Lake City and Ogden, as seen in the case of the lynching of Coleman and Harvey. Looking into the events surrounding the life and eventually the murder of Robert Marshall, I hope to expand on the history of African American in a rural area of Utah—Price. Embracing and correctly telling the history of people who have come before us is an act of respect for them and their descendants.

Project Overview:

To bring this project to life, I have already started doing some literature review of the lynching. So far, we know that Robert Marshall was a coal miner at the time of his murder on

³ Racial Lynching in Utah. Accessed December 6, 2024. <https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/utah-lynching/page/welcome>

June 18, 1925, and that his wife was from Arkansas.⁴ There is also evidence for the presence of a Black community in the Price area. However, it is not clear whether Robert Marshall came from Arkansas to Utah, nor do we know about the circumstances that brought him to Price. These are some of the gaps that my thesis hopes to fill in.

I will use family research tools to investigate whether Robert Marshall was from Arkansas. Then, I will be able to construct a narrative that documents his life from Arkansas to Utah by simultaneously looking into the broader events in history around that time. Using the same family search tools, I will also explore the history of the African American community of Price during the time leading up to and surrounding the lynching of Robert Marshall. Additionally, if there are any descendants of Robert Marshall or his wife that are still alive, I will also conduct some interviews with them to understand how this story has impacted them.

Another significant part of the project will be going to Price to make some connections with community members so that we can organize a soil collection ceremony and implement a historical marker in the area to commemorate the life of Robert Marshall.

Thesis Committee:

- **Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Rebecca DeSchweinitz
- **Faculty Reader:** Dr. Christopher Jones
- **Honors Coordinator:** Dr. Peter Leman

Qualifications of Thesis Committee:

⁴ Larry R. Gerlach, "Justice Denied: The Lynching of Robert Marshall," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1982): 118-133.

All the members of my committee are very familiar with African American history, and the history of lynching in America. Dr. Rebecca DeSchweinitz is a historian who has conducted research on and taught African American history. Her latest book, *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America's Long Struggle for Racial Equality* explores the role of teenagers in the Civil Rights Movements. Dr. Christopher Jones is also a historian who teaches a variety of classes at BYU, including an African American Family History class. Students from Dr. Jones class will also contribute to the research project by using their knowledge acquired in class to practice family history research. And Dr. Peter Leman is the current director of the Africana Studies program at BYU. He is an English professor at BYU and has also conducted research on law in East Africa. He is familiar with the experiences of societies in the African Diaspora, including African Americans.

Project Timeline:

This project will take approximately 5 months to complete, and it will be done by the end of Spring 2025 semester. I will defend my thesis by the end of April 2025, and by June 2025, I hope to have helped organize the soil collection and the historical marker in Price, Utah.

Funding:

Since the historical events I am exploring took place in Price, I will have to travel to and from Price, first to connect with community members, then to take part in the commemoration ceremonies. In addition to gas money, these trips might require overnight stay at hotels in Price. Also, depending on what I am finding in my research, I might have to take a trip to Arkansas for interviews with potential descendants of Robert Marshall. Finally, at the apex of my project, I

might need to travel to Alabama for the implementation of the collected soil in the Legacy Museum. If all these trips are happening, I will need approximately \$1200, which is the maximum amount that can be requested from the Honors Program.

Culminating Experience:

The culminating experience for this project will be to have a historical marker placed in Price and jars with soil collected placed at the Legacy Museum of the Equal Justice Initiative. I also hope to submit my work for publication in history journals and present at conferences in Utah and around the country. In the end, the most significant culminating experience for me will be to have contributed to the documentation of African American history in Utah and the United States as a whole.