

## *Why Now, 2009?*

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Some may ask, why bring up "the past" and these atrocities in the year 2009? We think we should bring them up and face them for many reasons. We should bring them up to acknowledge the lives lost, along with the reality that no justice has ever occurred for the victims, families and many others affected by these events. We should bring them up because few in the region speak publicly about these events yet wonder why race relations in the area are often so strained. We should bring them up because to date these events remain one of the most gruesome cases of racism and racial terrorism in this nation's history, yet they are omitted from the history we teach our children. We should bring them up because Mary Turner's murder remains one of the most horrific crimes committed against a human being in this nation's history. We should bring them up because so far not one historical marker or grave stone is in place to acknowledge these events and the lives lost during that week of terror in May of 1918. And last but not least, we should bring these events up so we can face our collective past in order to see how it might affect our collective pre-

## About Us

The Mary Turner Project is a diverse collective of Valdosta State University students, faculty, and local community members who are committed to racial justice by educating ourselves and others about the presence of racism, effects of racism, and how to become involved in eliminating racism. The group meets bi-monthly and has a number of projects in the work.

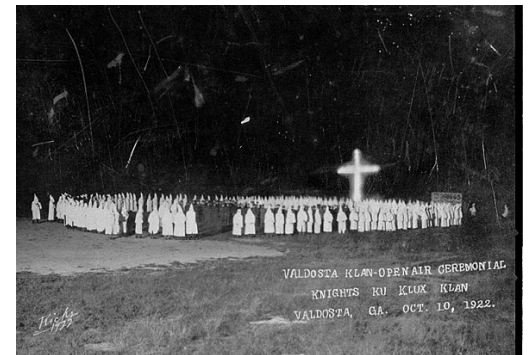
## MTP

Working To End Racism In Our Community

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## *The Lynching of Mary Turner*



Ku Klux Klan Rally Valdosta, Ga 1922

*A History of Racial Terrorism in South  
Georgia*



# The Mary Turner Project

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In May of 1918, Hampton Smith, a 31 year old White plantation owner in Brooks County, Georgia, was shot and killed by one of his Black workers named Sydney Johnson. Hampton Smith was known for abusing and beating his workers to the point few people in the area would work for him. To solve this labor shortage, Smith turned to the debt peonage system of the day and found a ready labor pool. He used that system by bailing people out of jail, people typically arrested for petty offenses, who would then work off their debt to him on his plantation. Nineteen year old Sydney Johnson, arrested for "rolling dice" and fined thirty dollars, was one such person.

After a few days of work on Smith's plantation, and shortly after being beaten by Smith for not working while he was sick, Sidney Johnson shot and killed Hampton Smith. What ensued after the shooting was a mob driven manhunt for Johnson and others thought to be involved in his decision to kill Hampton Smith. That manhunt lasted for more than a week and resulted in the deaths of at least 13 people, with some historical accounts suggesting a higher number of persons killed. One of the people killed was a woman named Mary Turner.



Twenty year-old Mary Turner, 8 months pregnant at the time and whose husband had been killed in this "lynching rampage" on Sunday, May 19th, made the mistake of publicly objecting to her husband's murder. She also had the audacity to threaten to swear out warrants for those responsible. Those "unwise remarks," as the area papers put it, enraged locals. Consequently, Mary Turner fled for her life only to be caught and taken to a place called Folsom's Bridge on the Brooks and Lowndes Counties' shared border. To punish her, at Folsom's Bridge the mob tied Mary Turner by her ankles, hung her upside down from a tree, poured gasoline on her and burned off her clothes. One member of the mob then cut her stomach open and her unborn child dropped to the ground where it was reportedly stomped on and crushed. Her body was then riddled with gunfire from the mob. Later that night she and her baby were buried ten feet away from where they were murdered. The makeshift grave was marked with only a "whiskey bottle" with a "cigar" stuffed in its neck.

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Three days after the murder of Mary Turner and her baby, three more bodies were found in the area and Sydney Johnson was killed in a shoot out with police on South Troup Street in Valdosta, Georgia. Once killed, the crowd of more than 700 people cut off his genitals and threw them into the street. A rope was then tied to his neck and he was drug to Campground Church in Morven, Georgia, 16 miles away. There, what remained of his body was burned. During and shortly after this chain of events, it is reported that more than 500 people fled Lowndes and Brooks Counties in fear for their lives.

If you have any questions o comments please feel free to drop us a line or visit our website.

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