

A Place to Lay Their Heads

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(Great-Grand Nephew of Hayes & Mary Turner)

Hayes Turner, was born in August, 1893 in Brooks County, Georgia. He was one of Ten (10) children born to John Wheeler Turner, Sr. and Charlotte Gay.

Hayes was falsely accused of being complicit in the murder of Hampton Smith, a Brooks County farmer notorious for his brutal treatment of his farm laborers. Upon hearing that he had been implicated in the death of Smith, he fled, and was reported to have been hidden in a fox hole by his mother; who would sneak food and clothing to him in the dead of night.

Following his lynching, Hayes was castrated by those responsible for this heinous act of violence. His father and mother pleaded for the return of his body, but their pleas went unanswered.

His siblings, Joseph, Mary, Martha (who preceded him in death), John Wheeler Jr., George, Julia, Willie, Naomi and Norman were tormented for many years by the memory of their brother's horrific murder. Questions posed by their children and grandchildren regarding the murder of their brother would always result in an overwhelming sense of sadness, accompanied by a distant and terrifying stare; which led one to believe that they were actually witnessing this dreadful act of terror. A deafening silence would follow as tears began to flow.

Hayes wed Mary Hattie Graham, born in 1885 to Perry W. & Betty Graham. Mary was the second of five (5) children born to her parents. The lives of her sisters and brothers, Pearlie, Perry G., Otha and Etha were forever changed. Prior to the capture of her husband, Mary took her two (2) small children, Ocie Lee and Leaster to members of her family for safekeeping. They were reared under assumed names.

Rufus Morrison was only 10 years old when he was hiding in a corn field along Ryalls Road in Barney and witnessed Mary Turner's execution. The memory of a frightened and bewildered woman was forever etched in his mind, as he saw the mob tie a rope to her ankles and hoist her upside down from a tree. They taunted and jeered a terrified Mary as they began to roast her alive. One of the members of the mob, took a swlg of moonshine from a jug and spat it on her as another dared him to slit open her abdomen where her unborn child was impervious to the fate which was about to befall it.

Upon rupturing her womb, the birthing matter which provided nourishment to her unsuspecting baby, spewed over three (3) of Mary's executioners. It was reported throughout the years that each of those who the birthing matter touched, died horrific deaths; one shouting on his death bed, "get that nigga baby off of me". After crushing the head of Mary's baby with his boot, one mob member placed his cigar in the jug of moonshine and used it to mark the ground where the life of Mary and her baby were taken. Those who witnessed this violent act of cowardice stated that the sky became dark as the mob completed its task.

There was no place of safety for Hayes, Mary, their unborn baby or any of the other (15) fifteen victims of the mob mentality that caused the otherwise respectable, law-abiding, Christian men and women of these Southern communities to deteriorate into a pack of roving wild animals bent on destroying the lives of anyone whose skin did not look like their own. Following their violent and brutal deaths at the hands of those who had no shame and never took the blame to be judged on this side of life, these powerless and innocent victims of unspeakable acts of human atrocities had no place to lay their heads.

Today, Hampton Smith, the brutal farmer whose death was the spark that lit the keg of violence in this seemingly peaceful Southern town, has an edifice which stands more than 6 feet to mark his place of rest in the Pauline Cemetery off of Georgia Highway 133. Descendants of those who executed Mary, enjoy roads named in their ancestor's honor, and William Folsom, who owned the property where the life of Mary and her unborn child was so viciously taken, has a bridge which bears his name as tribute to his contributions to the town of Barney. But one is left to ask, who cried for and paid honor to the life Mary, Hayes and their baby?

For many a year, our ancestors have cried out to our spirits, pleading for their stories to be told; today we answer. On Saturday, May 16, 2009 at the Hahira Community Center, nearly 91 years following these unspeakable acts of terror, more than 200 people, both black and white, joined descendants of Hayes and Mary Turner to commemorate this dark stain in our nation's history. The ceremony was organized by those spearheading the Mary Turner Project, a group of faculty and students of Valdosta State University's Women & Gender Studies Department, and residents of the South Georgia community.

In an interesting twist of fate, or perhaps it was just a coincidence, on the very day of this historic and long overdue event the sky again became dark, as it was reported to have been some 91 years ago on that tragic day.

More than 100 vehicles caravanned to the location designated by the Department of Transportation (DOT) as the site for the installation of the marker approved by the Georgia Historic Society. Every oncoming vehicle stopped along the way for the approaching caravan as it moved towards the site of the historic ceremony commemorating the lives of Hayes & Mary Turner, and the other victims of the mob violence perpetrated throughout Lowndes and Brooks counties. They commanded the respect in death that they never received in life as the caravan inched ever so closely to a place to lay their heads.

Mary Turner and the Lynching Rampage of 1918

Near this location on May 20, 1918, Mary Turner, 8 months pregnant at the time, was lynched. Mary was kidnapped and brought to this place for objecting to the lynching of her husband Hayes on May 19.

After being brutally killed Mary's body was buried near here in a makeshift grave marked only by a whiskey bottle with a cigar inserted in the bottleneck. Mary and Hayes' murders were part of a larger lynching rampage that unfolded that week in May of 1918. Other victims include Will Head, Will Thompson, Julius Jones, Eugene Rice, Chime Riley, and Simon Schuman, along with two other unidentified victims. No one was ever formally charged in any of these crimes.

Erected by the Mary Turner Project, Lowndes/Valdosta Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Valdosta State University's Women and Gender Studies Program.