



Flag flown from the NAACP headquarters in New York City, 1936 (Library of Congress)

## Memphis Area Lynching Locations Special Resource Study

The National Park Service is conducting a special resource study (SRS) on lynching locations in the vicinity of Memphis, Tennessee, for their potential inclusion in the national park system, as directed by Congress under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Public Law 117-328). The law identified the following eight lynching locations in Tennessee to be included in the study:

- Christopher Bender and Bud Whitfield in 1868 (Memphis, Shelby County)
- Wash Henley in 1869 (Memphis, Shelby County)
- Thomas Moss, Will Stewart, and Calvin McDowell in 1892 (Memphis, Shelby County)
- Lee Walker in 1893 (Memphis, Shelby County)
- Warner Williams, Daniel Hawkins, Robert Haynes, Edward Hall, John Hayes, and Graham White in 1894 (Kerrville, Shelby County)
- Ell Persons in 1917 (Memphis, Shelby County)
- Jesse Lee Bond in 1939 (Arlington, Shelby County)
- Elbert Williams in 1940 (Brownsville, Haywood County)

Locations to be analyzed include the location of the lynching; where lynching victims were incarcerated or kidnapped; where perpetrators and observers gathered, organized, and/or watched; or where the corpse was mutilated, displayed, or recovered. Locations associated with other lynchings within 100 miles of Memphis, including Tennessee, Mississippi, Kentucky, and Arkansas, not listed in the legislation, may be identified through historical research and public input and added to the list of potential locations to be studied. The authorizing legislation allows three years to complete the study and submit it to Congress. Once received by Congress, the final study will be made available to the public.

Public input is an essential part of this special resource study. Please consider sharing your thoughts and ideas during the public comment period between February 2 and April 3, 2026. Comments are welcome and encouraged from any member of the public.

To provide opportunities to learn more about the lynching locations and the study process, the National Park Service intends to host four public meetings. One meeting will be virtual (online), and the other three will be in-person in the following locations: Memphis, Tennessee; Brownsville, Tennessee; and Oxford, Mississippi. All members of the public are invited to attend.

More information on upcoming public meetings and how to submit comments is included in this newsletter, as well as on the project web page at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/Memphis>.

After the comment period closes, the National Park Service will evaluate Memphis area lynching locations using congressionally established criteria for national significance, suitability, feasibility, and need for direct NPS management to determine whether any of the study locations meet the criteria for inclusion in the national park system. The special resource study may

also consider other management options for locations evaluated during this study process. This study will be submitted to the Secretary of the Interior, who will then transmit findings and any recommendations to Congress for consideration. New units of the national park system can only be established by an act of Congress or presidential proclamation.

Your thoughts and ideas are important to us. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
The NPS Study Team

### About the National Park Service



The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The National Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and

outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world. The National Park Service is a bureau within the Department of the Interior and manages more than 430 park units that comprise the national park system. Administration of park units occurs in many ways, from traditional units that are federally managed to nontraditional units that rely on partnerships and may have little, if any, federal landownership.

### About the Study Area

From the end of the Civil War through World War II, lynchings claimed the lives of thousands of African Americans in communities across the United States. These lynchings—horrific acts of public torture, carried out with impunity and abetted by government officials and community leaders—served to terrorize, disenfranchise, and enforce Jim Crow laws and racial segregation through fear. Lynchings profoundly shaped race relations in the United States and spurred millions of African Americans to flee the South. In Memphis, as elsewhere, lynchings also invigorated African American politics and civil rights activism. From a newspaper office in Memphis, the writings of journalist Ida B. Wells humiliated local leaders in the wake of the 1892 People’s Grocery lynching and outraged both national and international audiences. Wells, a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), would become the nation’s preeminent anti-lynching crusader. Nearly 25 years later, the brutal lynching of Ell Persons would yet again inspire Memphis activists to organize and advocate, this time by establishing what would soon become the NAACP’s largest branch in the South. By World War II, NAACP voter registration efforts in majority-Black Haywood County culminated in the lynching of NAACP organizer Elbert Williams by local authorities.



**National anti-lynching activist  
Ida B. Wells  
(Library of Congress)**

Despite tremendous efforts by the NAACP to obtain justice, Williams’ lynching bitterly illustrated the organization’s limitations in protecting its members in the rural South. This study will assess lynching locations in the study area for their national significance by examining how collective responses to lynching violence sparked social change nationally.

The following eight lynchings in Tennessee were initially identified in this study's authorizing legislation.

### **Christopher Bender and Bud Whitfield in 1868**

On July 31, 1868, a mob lynched Christopher Bender and Bud Whitfield, two young White men accused of stealing a horse in Raleigh, in what is today a neighborhood in north-central Memphis. Bender and Whitfield were apprehended by a posse of private citizens and handed over to the constable in Raleigh, who ordered them sent to the county jail in Memphis. While enroute to the jail, a mob of approximately 40 to 60 armed men "fantastically attired" in conical hats surrounded the prisoner's wagon and removed them from police custody. Bender and Whitfield's bodies were found hanging in a tree "near McConnell's Mill" about a mile from the bridge over Wolf River. Unlike the other lynchings named in this study's enabling legislation, the lynching of Bender and Whitfield was not racially motivated.

### **Wash Henley in 1869**

On January 15, 1869, a group of masked horsemen lynched Wash Henley, a Black Union Army veteran, for having run away with his White employer's teenage daughter in a presumed elopement. Before working for farmer Philip T. Jones near Bartlett, Henley served as a blacksmith for Company B, 59th US Colored Infantry, with the rank of private, from March 1864 to January 1866. His body was found on January 16 near Fletcher's Creek, and there were no efforts to investigate, arrest, or prosecute the lynchers. Henley's burial site is unknown. In October 2019, the Lynching Sites Project of Memphis, the National Park Service, and the Shelby County Historical Commission erected a historical marker on Raleigh Grange Road in Memphis to commemorate the lynching of Wash Henley near that spot in 1869.

### **The People's Grocery Lynchings in 1892**

Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart—co-owners of the successful People's Grocery in the Curve neighborhood of Memphis—were arrested after ongoing harassment by a local White grocer escalated to armed conflict. Instead of being brought to trial, a mob of 75 masked men lynched the three men at the Chesapeake & Ohio railroad yard on March 9, 1892.

The lynching prompted between 2,000 and 6,000 African Americans to leave Memphis and sparked Ida B. Wells' lifelong anti-lynching crusade, as well as her forced exile from the city. Two of her most famous works, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892) and *The Red Record* (1894), detail the People's Grocery lynchings. On June 5, 1991, the Tennessee Historical Commission erected a marker at the historic site of the People's Grocery on the southeast corner of Mississippi and Walker Avenues.



**The People's Grocery in the Curve neighborhood of Memphis (historicmemphis.com)**



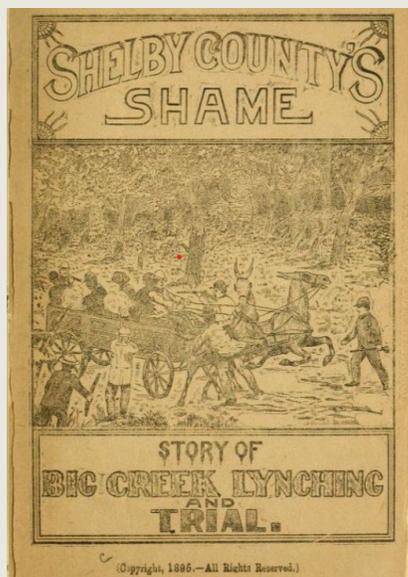
**Ida B. Wells with Thomas Moss's wife Betty and children, about 1893 (The Lynching Sites Project, Memphis)**

### Lee Walker in 1893



Shelby County Jail, 1897 (Library of Congress)

On July 22, 1893, a mob of several thousand attacked the Old Shelby County Jail and forcibly removed Lee Walker, a young African American man who was suspected of aggressively approaching two White women. Just north of the county jail, between Sycamore and Mill Streets, the mob hung Walker from a telegraph pole, where they burned and mutilated his body. Members of the mob left Walker's remains in front of the courthouse. A grand jury indicted the sheriff, two police captains, a deputy sheriff, and several mob leaders, but the prosecutors dropped the charges when they were unable to seat a jury. Ida B. Wells described Walker's lynching in *The Red Record* (1894) as a "scene of shocking savagery." In July 2018, the Lynching Sites Project of Memphis, the National Park Service, and the Shelby County Historical Commission erected a historical marker at the corner of A.W. Willis Avenue and North Front Street.



*Shelby County's Shame; Story of Big Creek Lynching and Trial, 1895* (archive.org)

### Big Creek Bottoms Lynching in 1894

On September 1, 1894, north of the Loosahatchie River in an area known as "Big Creek" and later Kerrville, a mob lynched six African American men—Warner Williams, Daniel Hawkins, Robert Haynes, Edward Hall, John Hayes, and Graham White—who were suspected of burning buildings at the Shelby-Tipton County fairgrounds.

A deputy served the six men with warrants and hired a wagon to transport them to Memphis along Plank Road. A mob stopped the wagon near the Lucy area and shot all suspects on site.

In the wake of the Big Creek Bottom lynching, White leaders called for prompt action in arraigning the murderers. In *The Red Record* (1894), Ida B. Wells argued that the attention given by local leaders in this case was a direct result of the international spotlight on lynching cases in Memphis. Although a grand jury indicted 13 men, the jury found the defendants not guilty.

### Ell Persons in 1917

On May 22, 1917, an estimated 3,000 Memphians congregated to watch the planned extrajudicial execution of Ell Persons, a Black woodcutter, on the west side of the Macon Road Bridge that crossed the Wolf River. Newspapers advertised the lynching the day before, and vendors sold concessions the day of, creating an almost carnival-like atmosphere. So many people arrived that morning that traffic backed up for miles. With the tacit approval of local authorities, the mob set fire to Persons and mutilated his body without any fear of consequences. In a further act of terror, pieces of Persons' body were thrown out of a car window at a group of African Americans on Beale Street, Memphis's Black commercial district. NAACP Field Secretary James Weldon Johnson investigated the lynching and published a special report as a supplement to the magazine *The Crisis*. Johnson found that there was no compelling evidence that Ell Persons had been responsible for the murder of Antoinette Rappel, a 16-year-old White schoolgirl, whose body had been discovered earlier that month. Persons' lynching helped inspire Johnson to organize the New York Silent March of 1917, one of the first mass demonstrations in the nation's history.

Persons' lynching also inspired Robert R. Church Jr. and other local activists to establish the Memphis branch of the NAACP, which soon became a clearinghouse for NAACP reporting on racial violence throughout the South. No one was ever tried or convicted for the murder of either Persons or Rappel.

Robert R. Church Jr. (Church Family Papers Images)



### Jesse Lee Bond in 1939

In April 1939, African American cotton farmer Jesse Lee Bond requested a receipt for his purchase of planting supplies at S.Y. Wilson Store in Arlington, which sparked his murder. When Bond returned to the store on April 28, the store owner and his cashier opened fire, pursuing Bond outside in broad daylight. Bond's body was found days later, staked to the bottom of the Loosahatchie River. On his death certificate, the coroner wrote that the cause of death was accidental drowning. The store owner and cashier were charged with first-degree murder and tried before a jury but were quickly acquitted. The S.Y. Wilson Store is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Arlington Historic District and continues to operate as an outdoor store. Bond was buried in an unmarked grave at Grays Creek Church in Arlington, Tennessee.

### Elbert Williams in 1940

Brownsville NAACP organizer Elbert Williams was taken by police from his home on June 20, 1940, and was never again seen alive. His body was recovered from the Hatchie River on June 23. In rural Haywood County, where Black residents outnumbered White residents three to one, the Brownsville NAACP's efforts to register Black voters in anticipation of the November 1940 election startled the county's White minority. A sustained campaign of White terror in Brownsville, led by some of the town's

most prominent White leaders, sought to destroy the NAACP branch, discourage African American voter registration, and ultimately culminated in the lynching of Elbert Williams. Williams was the first known NAACP member in the United States murdered for his civil rights activity. Though NAACP Special Counsel Thurgood Marshall and the FBI investigated the case, gross mishandling of the FBI case meant the US Department of Justice would not prosecute it. His murder illustrated the limits of the NAACP to protect its members and the mortal danger that NAACP organizers faced in the rural South. In Haywood County, it would be another two decades before African Americans exercised their right to vote in substantive numbers.

### Additional Locations

Other lynching locations that have been identified for evaluation in the study include the 1874 Trenton Massacre (Trenton, Tennessee), Harris Tunstall in 1885 (Oxford, Mississippi), Eliza Woods in 1886 (Jackson, Tennessee), Lawson "Nelse" Patton in 1908 (Oxford, Mississippi), Lation Scott in 1917 (Dyersburg, Tennessee), Joe Boxley in 1929 (Alamo, Tennessee), Elwood Higginbotham in 1935 (Oxford, Mississippi) and Albert Gooden in 1937 (Covington, Tennessee).

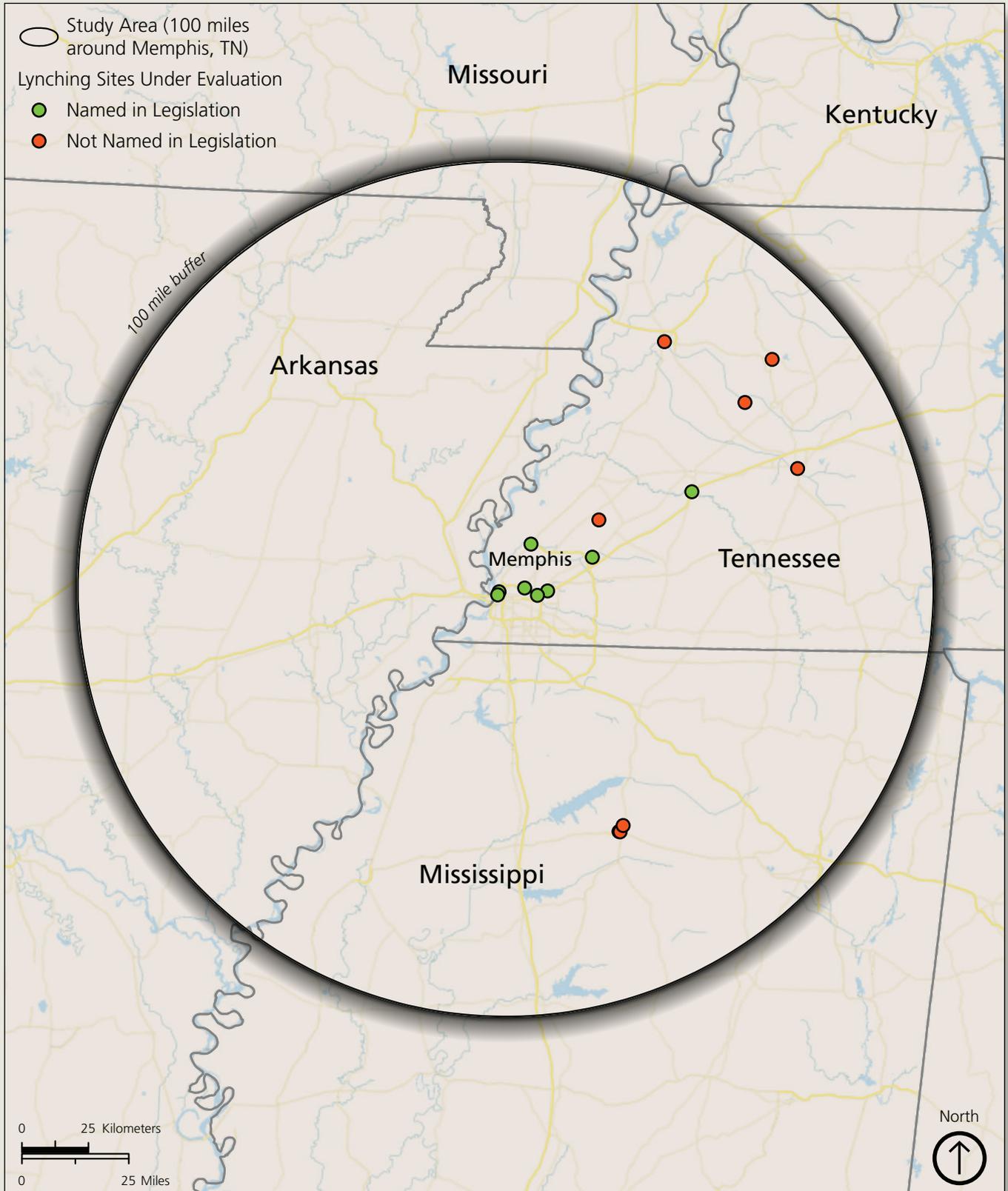


Founding members of the NAACP branch in Brownsville, Tennessee, with Elbert Williams on the far left, 1940 (*The Crisis*, Google Books, n.d.)

# Study Area Map

The Memphis study area radiates 100 miles from the city of Memphis, Tennessee, and includes 60 counties in the states of Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

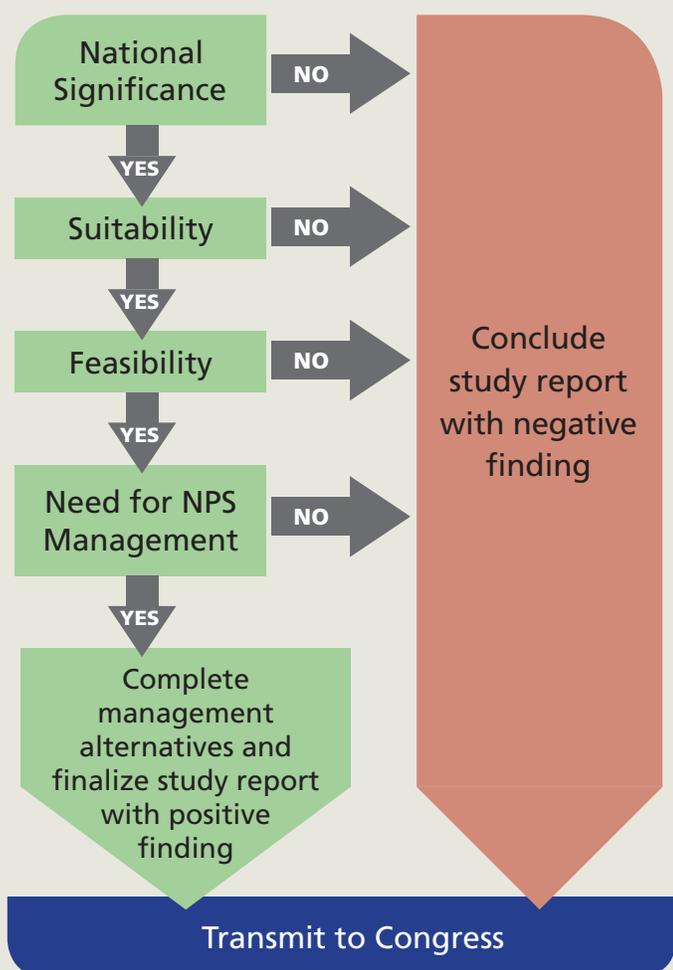
Please note that the dots in the reference map below only indicate the lynching locations for lynchings currently under evaluation at the time of this newsletter's publication.



### What Is a Special Resource Study?

A special resource study evaluates the eligibility of an area to be designated as a unit of the national park system. The National Park Service collects information about the quality of resources in the study area and engages in a successive evaluation of congressionally established eligibility criteria. If the resources meet the criteria, the National Park Service evaluates the potential for visitor enjoyment and efficient management and analyzes the feasibility and appropriateness of different management options. The National Park Service provides its findings to the Secretary of the Interior, who then presents a recommendation to Congress. Regardless the study's outcome, new units of the national park system can only be established by an act of Congress or by presidential proclamation.

### Special Resource Study (SRS) Completion Pathways



### What Role Does Public Involvement Serve in a Special Resource Study?

The first step of a special resource study is gathering information about the study area through research and public input. Information received from the public helps the National Park Service better understand the following: What is most important and unique about the area; how much support exists for preservation, public use, and potential designation; and what the public envisions for the area's future, including management ideas, activities, or experiences. Public comments also inform whether there are any issues or concerns that should be considered during the study process.

### What Qualifies as a Lynching?

For the purposes of this study, the National Park Service will use the definition of lynching as established by the NAACP in 1940, namely that a lynching is a killing committed outside of the law, by a group, and done under the pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition.

### How Will Memphis Area Lynching Locations Be Evaluated?

The 1998 National Parks Omnibus Management Act (54 United States Code 100507) established the process for identifying and authorizing studies of new national park units. Under the law, a study area must meet all four of the following criteria to be recommended as an addition to the national park system:

1. National significance determines if the location has nationally significant natural and/or cultural resources.
2. Suitability determines if the location represents a natural or cultural resource that is not already adequately represented in the national park system or by another land-managing entity.
3. Feasibility determines if the location can be effectively administered by the National Park Service to ensure the long-term protection of the resources and visitor appreciation.
4. Need for NPS management determines if the location requires direct NPS management that is clearly superior to other management approaches.

The National Park Service will evaluate the study area according to the criteria above for national significance, suitability, feasibility, and need for NPS management. For national significance, the National Park Service applies the National Historic Landmark nomination criteria contained in 36 *Code of Federal Regulations* 65.5. The criteria are analyzed in a linear fashion. If, at any point throughout the special resource study process, NPS staff determine that the location does not meet one of the criteria, the study will terminate, and a document with a negative finding will be prepared for Congress.

### **Why Is This Study Focused on the Memphis Area?**

The National Park Service celebrates the critical work of organizations that are working to research, educate, and memorialize instances of racial violence in communities across the United States. The National Park Service acknowledges that the history of lynching is not confined to the Memphis area but was pervasive throughout the country. This study's narrower focus on the Memphis area, however, reflects congressional direction through Public Law 117-328.

### **What Are Some of the Possible Outcomes of the Study?**

Over the last 20 years, approximately one in three completed congressionally authorized studies have resulted in a positive finding whereby the study area meets all criteria. Many studies conclude that resources do not meet the required criteria or that existing management; technical or financial assistance; or local, state, or private initiatives are preferable to the establishment of a new national park unit. If the Memphis Area Lynching Locations special resource study results in a recommendation from the Secretary of the Interior that Memphis Area Lynching Locations warrants addition to the national park system, Congress may or may not act on or follow the recommendation. There is no time frame for legislative action.

### **Does the National Park Service Support Memphis Area Lynching Locations Designation as a Unit of the National Park System?**

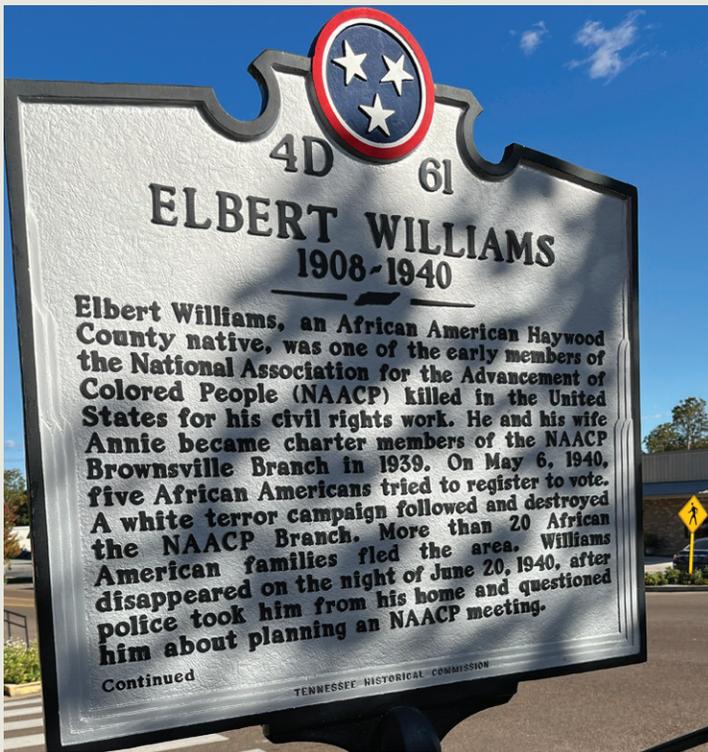
The National Park Service's role in preparing this study is not one of advocacy for or against park unit designation but rather to prepare a report of information and critical analysis for Congress's use and consideration. The study's findings are nonbinding. Separately, the Secretary of the Interior may choose to include their own recommendation when the study is transmitted to Congress.

### **What Happens If Any or All of the Memphis Area Lynching Locations Are Designated as a Unit of the National Park System?**

Developing a new unit of the national park system is a slow process. In the event Congress were to designate Memphis Area Lynching Locations as a national park site, NPS operations would likely be at a minimal level for some time. The National Park Service operates in a constrained fiscal environment and does not have the capacity to open fully staffed units immediately after designation. It may take many years for the National Park Service to develop infrastructure to support visitation at these sites.

### **If a Park Unit Were Designated, Would the National Park Service Acquire the Land?**

The Memphis Area Lynching Locations study area includes lynching locations in 60 counties across 5 states. If a park were to be created, Congress would legislate one or more boundaries that may or may not conform to the study area. Land within that park unit boundary could remain in private hands, or Congress could authorize the National Park Service to acquire property within a park boundary in the future. Generally, these properties may only be acquired by purchase from willing sellers or through donation or exchange.



Marker commemorating Elbert Williams' lynching (NPS photo)

### Could Private Property Rights Be Affected by Being Within a Boundary of a National Park Unit?

No. Private property owners retain rights to their property. The National Park Service does not regulate land uses or activities on private lands within a park boundary. Those lands—including any lands identified as having the potential for acquisition by the National Park Service—are subject to no more restriction than private lands outside the boundary. Federal, state, and local laws and regulations that apply to private land would continue to apply. The study will not propose management actions that would adversely affect private property rights, and the National Park Service would anticipate only working with willing sellers on any future land acquisitions in the study area.

### When Will I Learn the Results of the Study?

The National Park Service will publicly release the study findings after the report has been transmitted to Congress. The National Park Service does not release preliminary findings or drafts of the study, nor does it indicate whether the study is likely to recommend inclusion in the national park system before the study's transmittal to Congress.

### What Other Programs of Support Are Available to Memphis Area Lynching Locations Besides Designation as a National Park Unit?

The National Park Service supports and encourages a variety of management options for resources. Other management models in which the National Park Service is not the direct landowner or manager and instead serves in a support or partnership role can be established. The National Park Service administers the [National Register of Historic Places](#), providing grant opportunities to site owners such as the [Underrepresented Communities Grants Program](#). Other programs include the [African American Civil Rights Network](#) and the [Reconstruction Era National Historic Network](#). These programs encompass sites and research programs that are affiliated with the African American civil rights movement and the Reconstruction Era but are not necessarily managed by the National Park Service. Moreover, the NPS-led [Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program](#) supports community-led projects intended to engage future generations in conservation and the outdoors.

The National Park Service also manages several grant programs that support historic preservation and outdoor recreation. The [Lynching Sites Project of Memphis](#) has received NPS grant assistance through the [Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative Program](#) to erect historical markers for lynchings in and around Memphis. These programs and others allow the National Park Service to support local preservationists nationwide.

National Park Service affiliated areas are nationally significant resources that are protected and interpreted by other governmental entities or organizations and have a formal relationship with the National Park Service. Affiliated areas are established by Congress or by administrative action of the Secretary of the Interior or the NPS director. Unlike national park system units, affiliated areas are not federally owned or managed by the National Park Service. Affiliated areas can receive federal funding and NPS technical assistance under some circumstances.

## We Want to Hear From You!

Your input is important to us. In your comments, we are particularly interested to hear your thoughts and ideas about the following:

- Lynching happened in many parts of the US, especially in the South. What makes the lynching sites in and around Memphis stand out? How do they help us understand this history in a way that other places might not?
- Within 100 miles of Memphis, what places or resources help tell the most important stories about lynching? Are there key stories that don't yet have a place or resource to represent them and need more attention?

Which of these places are the most important for someone to visit to truly understand this history?

- Would you support making lynching sites in the Memphis area part of the national park system? Why or why not? Do you have any thoughts or concerns about how these places should be protected and explained to the public?
- Even if you're unsure about making lynching sites near Memphis part of the national park system, what do you think the National Park Service could do to help people better understand the history of lynching?

## How to Participate

We encourage you to learn more about the special resource study process and share your thoughts and ideas during the open comment period from February 2 to April 3, 2026. You can submit comments in two ways:



Comment Now!

### Online (Preferred)

Visit <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/Memphis> or scan the QR code with a smartphone and click "Open for Comment" on the project web page.

### By Mail

Attn: Memphis SRS / Charles Lawson  
Denver Service Center Planning Division  
National Park Service  
1 Denver Federal Center  
Building 50  
Denver, CO 80228

## Attend a Public Meeting

The National Park Service will hold virtual (online) and in-person public meetings to explain the study process, give a short presentation, and answer questions. Any member of the public with an interest in this study is invited to attend. Check the project web page for meeting details by visiting <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/Memphis> and clicking "Meeting Notices." Meeting dates, times, and locations are also listed below.

### Virtual Public Meeting

Friday, February 27, 2026  
11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. (Central)

[JOIN THE TEAMS LIVE EVENT](#)

### In-Person Public Meetings

**Tuesday, March 3, 2026, Oxford, Mississippi**  
4:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.  
Oxford Public Library Auditorium  
401 Bramlett Boulevard  
Oxford, MS 38655

**Wednesday, March 4, 2026, Memphis, Tennessee**  
6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.  
Rhodes College  
Turley Center for Community Engagement  
613 University Avenue  
Memphis, TN 38112

**Thursday, March 5, 2026, Brownsville, Tennessee**  
6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.  
Carver High School Auditorium  
705 East Jefferson Street  
Brownsville, TN 38012