

AGENDA ITEM: 8

LANDMARKS MEETING: December 22, 2022

CASE NUMBER: NR 2022-005

LOCATION: Near 5400 Summer Avenue

HISTORIC NAME: Ell Persons Lynching Site

APPLICANT: Lynching Sites Project of Memphis (Dr. Margaret Vandiver, Dr. Timothy Huebner, and Kelsey Lamkin)

REPRESENTATIVE: Kelsey Lamkin

REQUEST: Nomination of an individual listing to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places

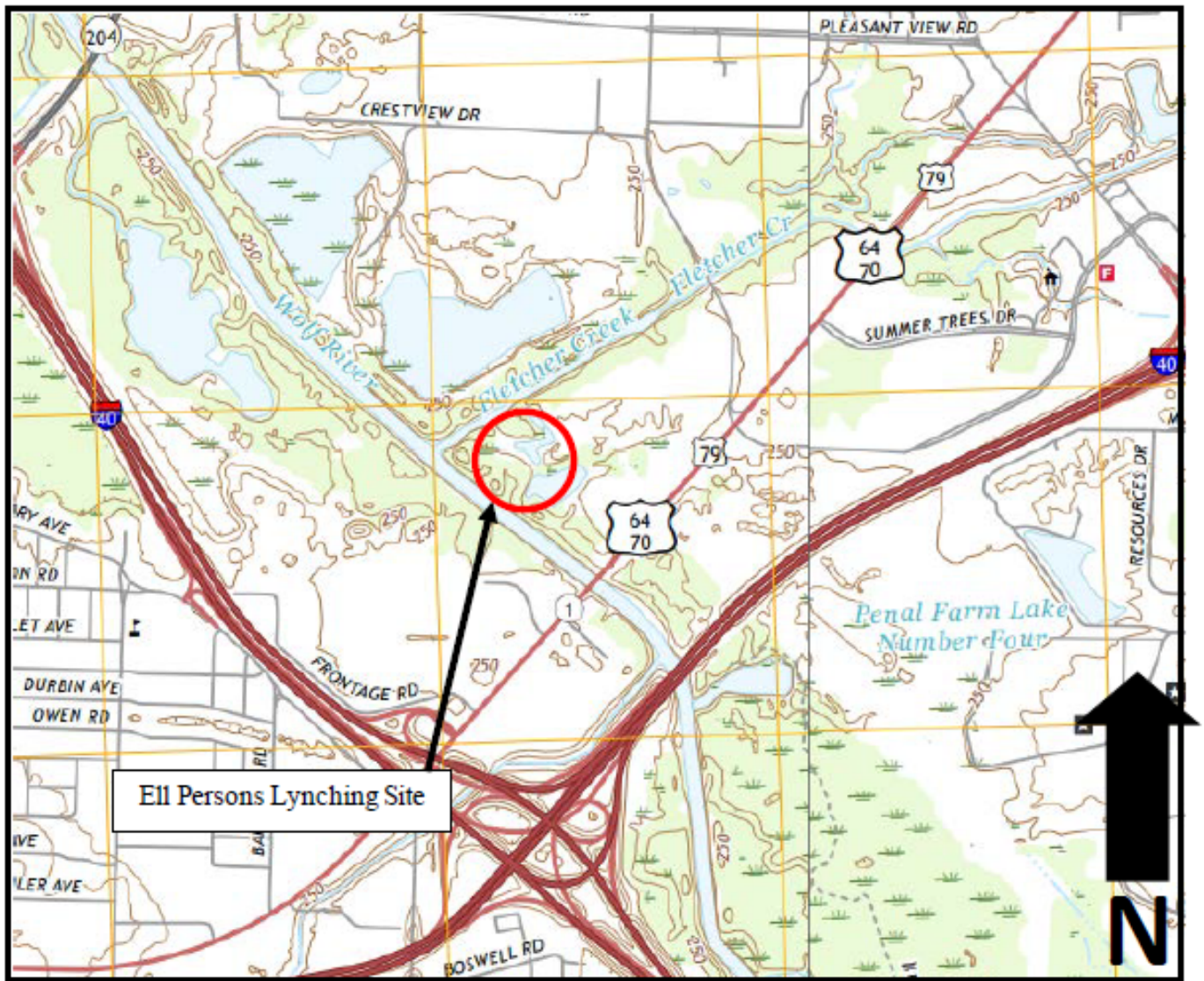
CONCLUSIONS:

1. Subject site is approximately 0.19 acres, bounded by Summer Avenue to the south, Wolf River to the west, Fletcher Creek to the north, and commercial property owned by Gary M. and Glenn A. Rutherford to the east, and is a wooded area near planned Wolf River Greenway Trail updates.
2. The nomination includes inclusion of approximately 0.19 acres of site which represents the location of Persons's lynching and the crowd of spectators that stretched along the road towards the city.
3. The review and decision of the Memphis Landmarks Commission is only to determine if the property merits being placed on the National Register. The decision of whether the property is listed in the National Register lies with the Tennessee Historic Commission and the National Park Service.

RECOMMENDATION:

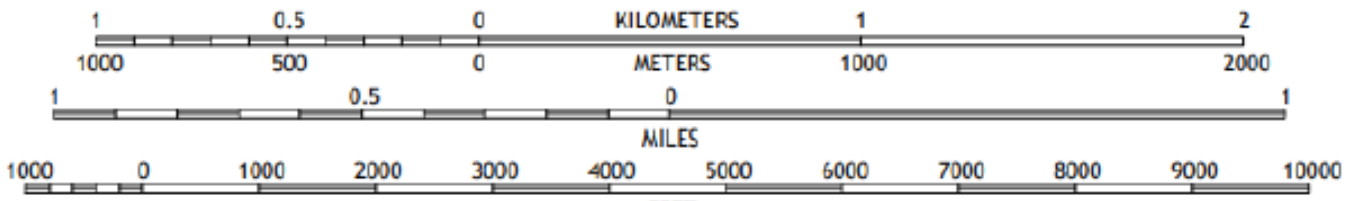
Approval

USGS Topographic Map



Ell Persons Lynching Site

SCALE 1:24 000



Northeast Memphis Quadrangle map, 2019, and Ellendale, TN Quadrangle map, 2019. The location of the Ell Persons Lynching Site is illustrated with a red circle.

Narrative Summary *(As Stated in the Application)*

The Ell Persons Lynching Site, significant for its association with a national pattern of racial terror events that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is located near 5400 Summer Avenue in Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee. Memphis had an estimated population of 651,073 in 2019. The site is approximately a quarter-acre and is in a wooded area near planned Wolf River Greenway Trail updates, scheduled to take place in 2022-2023. The boundaries include the historical location of the 1917 lynching of Ell Person on the north side of the west end of the Macon Road bridge. The bridge and roadbed are no longer extant, but later bridge substructures mark the bridge's location, and the path of the roadbed is marked by powerlines that run along its course. The site is roughly bounded by Summer Avenue to the south, Wolf River to the west, Fletcher Creek to the north, and commercial property owned by Gary M. and Glenn A. Rutherford to the east.

The site maintains its rural character and isolation, leaving it much today as it was in 1917. In addition to being the site where a slain teenager's body, Antoinette Rappel, was discovered, the site was also ideal as it was the city limit boundaries. The site is undeveloped on raw land with hardwood trees and various bushes and undergrowth. Other natural features include the retention pond created when the Wolf River was rerouted by 1964. The vegetation is interrupted by the overhead electric power lines and the maintained grasses below. The old Macon Road followed the path of the powerlines until ca. 1950, and the roadbed grown over with grasses and vegetation. Other man-made features include two concrete bridge abutments marking the east and west sides of the old Macon Road bridge. The bridge abutments are almost certainly from after the 1917 lynching, likely in ca. 1920 after another Wolf River flooding. Despite them not being from the period of significance, the abutments and the electrical powerlines mark the path of the unpaved Macon Road and the bridge where Rappel was found and Persons was lynched, making them significant features of the site. The contributing structures and features include the natural(?) retention pond and two man-made bridge abutments. The noncontributing man-made objects include the overhead electrical lines and several wood utility poles. The boundaries are approximately 0.19 acres and represent the location of Persons's lynching and the crowd of spectators that stretched along the road towards the city.

The Ell Persons Lynching Site retains its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association over a century after the events of May 22, 1917. Due to the unusual level of documentation of the lynching, the exact location has been identified and found to be left largely intact and representative of the area in 1917. The bridge abutments mark the location of the bridge dating back to the nineteenth century and have remained despite the rerouting of the Wolf River by 1964. Ironically, the bridge abutments are unable to be dated conclusively because concrete was used for decades and has no identifying features that would easily distinguish it from one decade to the next. In addition to the design of the site, the setting is also intact, as the site of the road and bridge largely remain as rural and undeveloped as it was in 1917. In 1917, the road and bridge were outside the city limits of Memphis and marked the separation from the urban city and rural outside. The lack of development has ensured the site maintains its feeling and association with rural life on the outskirts of an urban city in the early 1900s.

Statement of Significance Summary *(As Stated in the Application)*

The Ell Persons Lynching Site is the historical location of a racial terror lynching of a local Black man by a white mob on May 22, 1917, on the outskirts of Memphis. The site is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A at the National level of significance in the areas of Ethnic Heritage: Black and Social History: Civil Rights for association with a national pattern of racial terror events that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The period of significance is 1917, corresponding to the lynching event, which falls within the peak of racial terror lynchings from 1880 to 1940. A significant date is May 22, 1917, which was the day of Persons’s lynching. The lynching of Ell Persons came at a critical juncture in the history of American race relations. On May 22, 1917, on the outskirts of Memphis, a white mob attacked, burned, and dismembered Persons, a Black woodcutter, who had been accused of murdering a sixteen-year-old white girl, Antoinette Rappel. Despite the lack of evidence linking him to the crime, Persons was abducted from police custody by the mob, who had gathered after newspapers had announced the lynching. Approximately 5,000 men, women, and children witnessed the gruesome spectacle. After Persons’ death, the mob decapitated the body, and members of the lynching party later tossed Persons’ charred head and foot out of a car window into a group of African American men on Beale Street, at the time known as the “Main Street of Negro America.” The lynching of Persons immediately reverberated throughout the community and the country. In Memphis, African Americans organized a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which would become the largest in the South for a time. In Boston, the local branch of the Equal Rights League sent a telegram to President Woodrow Wilson, urging him to protect other potential lynching victims, while in New York marchers assembled to protest the lynchings of Persons and others. The black press expressed its outrage, with the Chicago Defender even running a photograph of Persons’ severed head within its pages. The national office of the NAACP, meanwhile, dispatched its Field Secretary, James Weldon Johnson to Memphis, and after a ten-day investigation he concluded that Persons had not committed the crime. In his memoir, *Along This Way*, Johnson later reflected that his visit to the place of Persons’ killing—having seen “the paraphernalia of the unspeakable orgy”—prompted him to arrive at the grim conclusion that “in large measure the race question involves the saving of black America’s body and white America’s soul.” A young Abe Fortas, born and raised in Memphis just a few blocks away from Beale Street, was surely affected by the events that swept his hometown. Years later, after a career on the U.S. Supreme Court during the 1960s, Fortas recalled the racial violence of his youth as part of the reason for his own commitment to the civil rights of Black people. The effects of Persons’ horrific murder, in other words, echoed through the decades. The burning and dismembering of Persons in Memphis in May 1917 marked the peak of post-Reconstruction racial terror in the United States, came at the height of the Lost Cause movement in the South, and prompted a renewed wave of black activism in Memphis and beyond that continued for much of the twentieth century. The unusual level of documentation has allowed researchers to pinpoint the exact location of this significant site, a rarity when researching the history of lynching. The rural site has not been developed and remains very much as it was in 1917, maintaining the overall sense of past time and place.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends ***approval*** of individual listing of Ell Persons Lynching Site to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

APPLICATION

See complete application here: <https://shelbycountyttn.gov/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/12447>