

# When a mob ruled the city

## Groups will mark the site of an 1878 lynching for museum

By TOM JACKSON, Sandusky Register 11-2-2019

### SANDUSKY

A terrible chapter in Sandusky's history, the lynching of a black man by a violent mob in 1878, will be remembered with a ceremony.

The Sandusky chapter of the NAACP and representatives of three other groups will have the event in downtown Sandusky at 10 a.m. Nov. 9. Participants will gather at the Gazebo in Washington Park and then walk to Market Street and Columbus Avenue, where William Taylor was murdered Sept. 4, 1878.

The plan is to collect soil from the site to support the Community Remembrance Project of the Equal Justice Initiative, which operates the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The museum has been collecting soil from lynching sites across the U.S. and displaying them in jars.



Daryl Murphy (left), president of the local NAACP, said his organization was contacted by the Equal Justice Initiative and the Mahoning Valley Sojourn to the Past, based in Youngstown, who heard about the Sandusky tragedy. "They contacted us and wanted to know if we would be interested in partnering with them," Murphy said. Murphy said he reached out to officials in the Erie County Historical Society, who also agreed to take part. An official from the Equal Justice Initiative also will be present, Murphy said. The ceremony will be short and everyone is welcome to attend, he said.

William Taylor's murder was largely forgotten, even by local history buffs, until the Toledo Blade printed an article in February 2017, "Lynching mars Sandusky's abolitionist history." The Register then followed up with an article of its own, citing a contemporary account in the Sandusky Daily Register.

According to the account, a young woman named Alice O'Donnell had disappeared. Taylor, a black man, told police he didn't do it but came across O'Donnell's body in a stable in the back of a house on Washington Street where she worked. Taylor said he was afraid to report the crime, so instead, he took a horse and buggy and took the body outside the city, dumping it in the woods. He led police to the body. Her skull had been crushed, her throat had been cut, she was only partially clothed, and a later examination found she had been "outraged," the newspaper account said.

The sheriff, Merrill L. Starr, tried to keep Taylor safe by moving him to an infirmary, with the intent to take Taylor to a jail in Norwalk. Mob members caught up with the sheriff and the prisoner at the infirmary and promised Taylor would be safe if he was returned to the Sandusky jail. But instead, the mob overturned the wagon on Columbus Avenue, seized Taylor, beat him, and dragged him to Washington Park.

Taylor said he was innocent and another man committed the crime. The mob put a noose around Taylor's neck, dragged him to Columbus and Market, and hung him from a lamppost. When the rope broke and the body fell, Taylor was hung again.

A Sept. 8, 1878, account in the New York Times, headlined "A CITY UNDER MOB RULE," differed in some details (it said Taylor "confessed the crime") and emphasized the difficulty of dealing with the mob in the aftermath of Taylor's murder. "Probably no city in the United States is so fully under the sway of mob rule to-day as this," the Times article states. "The town is governed by Democratic officials, mostly Irish Catholics, and they seem to be in sympathy, many of them, with the rioters," the article stated. "The Coroner's inquest was suspended to-day, as those knowing most of the affair fear to testify. They are colored people and have received threats of violence if they say anything."

Racial murders were common in the U.S. for decades. The Equal Justice Institute says it has documented more than 4,400 lynchings in 12 Southern states, with an additional 300 in eight states outside the South, from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 to 1950. It was a form of terrorism largely tolerated by police, the institute says.

Murphy noted history that puts Sandusky in a positive light is much more visible. The city has a downtown sculpture and historical markers recalling Sandusky's role as a stop on the Underground Railroad, which spirited escaped slaves to Canada.

Sandusky's abolitionist history is a great legacy, Murphy said. "But unfortunately something bad happened here as well," he said. Knowing what has happened is a way of healing, and it's important to remember everything, Murphy said. "History has happened," he said. "How can we learn if we don't talk about it?"

At some point, a tasteful historical marker ought to be placed at the site, Murphy said. "We want all of our youth to know the history of Sandusky," he said. "We would hate for them to find this out later, and say no one ever shared this information in our hometown."