

An Introduction to *A Red Record*

Overview

The history and lasting legacies of lynching in North Carolina and throughout America remains with each of us, even though many prefer to avoid such hard and violent history. In this activity, students will be introduced to the website [A Red Record](http://lynching.web.unc.edu/), which documents lynchings across North Carolina by plotting the locations of these violent murders and linking each entry to primary source news articles. As part of this activity, students will explore the definition of lynching and its prevalence across the state throughout 1860-1950, as well as examine and discuss the countless lives impacted by lynching and how statistics, and even primary sources, fail to convey the substantial impact of this violent practice. Students will also explore the historical context for various periods and how local, state, national, and international events impacted and/or intersected with the practice of lynching. Finally, students will discuss and understand that even though difficult, it is critical that we face this aspect of our shared past today in order to heal, as well as effectively respond to present-day issues of racial injustice.

Essential/Compelling Questions

- What is lynching and what was its purpose?
- Who were the victims and perpetrators of lynchings in North Carolina?
- For what reasons were black people lynched (both in reporting, and in reality?)
- What information do statistics and primary sources fail to convey about the countless lives impacted by lynching?
- How did lynchings impact: the families & descendants of those lynched? The NC communities in which the lynching took place? The perpetrators and descendants of those in the mob? Society in general?
- What were the immediate and long-term consequences of lynching?
- Even though this is hard history to study and comprehend, why is it nonetheless critical that we face this aspect of our shared past today?
- How can the history of lynching help us understand and respond to present-day issues of racial injustice? How does ignorance of the history of lynching make us susceptible to misunderstanding the present?

Grades

8-12

Materials

- Projector with internet access
- Laptops (one per student or per partner/group of 3) with access to *A Red Record* at <http://lynching.web.unc.edu/>
- Exploring *A Red Record*, worksheet attached
- Optional images for prompting discussion and understanding of historical context during various periods lynchings were occurring:
 - [Civil Rights marchers](#) (Paul Schutzer/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images)
 - [Nazi soldiers in Vichy Paris](#) (Credit:Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock)
 - [A family living in a tent village during Great Depression](#) (Dorothea Lange / National Archives)
 - [Early photo of U.S. border guards interacting with border crossers](#) (1948, Keystone / Getty)

Duration

60 minutes (varies depending on amount of site exploration and discussion time)

Preparation

- Students should have a foundational understanding regarding the history of lynching. See the Equal Justice Initiative’s teacher’s guide [here](#) for comprehensive units on teaching about lynching, racial terror and the legacy of such. (Download the PDF at the bottom of the page in the “For Educators” section.)
- While this lesson deals with sensitive topics of race and violence, it is important for students to explore such “hard history” to ensure they understand the implications of our past and are empowered to address the challenges of the present. In order to study such topics effectively and safely, teachers must have established a safe classroom community with clear expectations of respect, open-mindedness, and civil conversation. See [Carolina K-12’s “Activities” section of the Database of K-12 Resources](#) for ways to ensure a classroom environment conducive to the effective exploration of sensitive and controversial issues. Teachers should also consult Carolina K-12’s [“Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom.”](#)

Additional Resources

- [Lynching in America](#), comprehensive report by the Equal Justice Initiative
- The [A Red Record resource page](#) includes an extensive bibliography of resources about lynching and its lasting effects on the American landscape and psyche.
- History of Tolerance for Violence Has Laid the Groundwork for Injustice Today: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/black-to-the-future/tolerance-for-violence/

Procedure

What Is Lynching? (8 min. discussion)

1. After reminding students of classroom expectations for discussing sensitive issues and ways to communicate their feelings if they experience troubling emotions throughout this activity, let students know that they are going to spend class researching lynchings that took place across North Carolina via a website, [A Red Record](#). Ask students to begin by sharing what they believe the definition of lynching is (again, reminding them to be respectful of the nature of the history they are discussing.) As students share, note their thoughts up front and ask probing follow up questions such as:
 - What components of a crime need to be present for it to be considered a lynching?
 - How does lynching differ from a murder?
 - Is race always a factor in lynching? If so, in what ways?
 - Are there emotional aspects of a crime that need to be present for it to constitute a lynching? Explain.
2. As students discuss, share that in the 1920s, in efforts to lobby Congress to enact laws against lynchings, the NAACP and other anti-lynching advocates struggled to define exactly what constituted a lynching. Initially, in 1921, the NAACP proposed setting the size of the mob at no fewer than five, and later determined that for a killing to qualify as a lynching, the killers had to act under pretext of service to justice, their race or tradition. Their final determining definition included:
 - There must be evidence that someone was killed
 - The killing must have occurred illegally
 - Three or more persons must have taken part in the killing
 - The killers must have claimed to be serving justice or tradition
3. Discuss:
 - What is your opinion of the NAACP’s qualifying factors? Does this definition work? Why or why not?
 - Is there anything surprising to you about this definition, or missing? (Many students picture hanging when first contemplating lynching, but the violence was often inflicted in additional heinous ways.)
 - Why do you think the NAACP focused on these criteria in 1921?
 - What problems exist with this definition?

- What do you think the purpose of lynchings were? Why did aggressors use this form of violence?
4. Layer in the [Equal Justice Initiative's](#) definition of lynching by showing their 1.30 minute video: [What is a racial terror lynching](#). Discuss:
 - How does EJI define lynching?
 - How does this lynching compare to the earlier definition created by the NAACP? Which definition do you think is more accurate?
 - Why does EJI consider lynching terrorism?
 - According to EJI, why is it important to know about the history of lynching in America?
 5. Tell students that while an exact definition of lynching has been debated throughout history, a basic definition of lynch is “to put to death by mob action, without legal authority” and as the Equal Justice Initiative notes, lynchings were “violent and public events that traumatized black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials.”

Also ensure students understand the broad purpose of lynching, which was effectively terrorism that was meant to spread fear and disempower African Americans, as well as maintain white supremacy in the economic, social and political spheres. Anti-lynching activist [Ida B. Wells-Barnett](#) highlighted exactly how lynching was a violent form of subjugation — “an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized ...and down,” she wrote in a journal.

“These lynchings were also distinct from hangings and mob violence committed against white people because they were intended to terrorize entire black communities and enforce racial hierarchy. Unlike frontier justice in the West, racial terror lynchings generally took place in communities with functioning criminal courts—viewed as too good for African Americans. Despite its lawlessness and terrifying unpredictability, lynching was sanctioned by law enforcement and elected officials, and the perpetrators acted boldly and with impunity. Victims were sometimes publicly tortured for hours before their brutalized bodies were left out on display to traumatize other black people. Members of the mob frequently documented their atrocities by posing for photographs with a dangling, bloodied, or burnt corpse.”
([Source](#))

Students must also understand that this widely supported, brutal tactic is part of our history and woven into the fabric of the United States. Thousands of men, women and children were subjected to violent deaths as an intimidation tactic to keep Black people politically and socially powerless.

Exploring A Red Record (20+ minutes)

6. Tell students that they are going to spend some time in partners/small groups examining lynching throughout North Carolina by exploring the website [A Red Record](#), which documents lynchings across North Carolina between the years of 1860-1950. Let students know that the creators of *A Red Record* site used a variety of sources to identify and plot recorded lynchings, including sources such as the NAACP, Tuskegee Institute, Chicago Defender, and more recent database's such as the [CSDE Lynching Database](#). *A Red Record* researchers added additional lynchings that they found in newspaper reports or other archives.
7. Remind students of expectations for dealing with sensitive content. Also remind students that as they grapple with this difficult content, they should ask for assistance if they find themselves feeling upset, angry, or having trouble handling the material. Pull up and project the site for students - click on the tab that says “[Map](#).” Allow students a few silent moments to take in the image of North Carolina covered in dots that plot lynching's then ask for initial observations. What do students see? What strikes them, surprises them, etc.? What questions do they have? What predictions might they make based on lynching in NC based on this cursory glance?
8. Next, provide students with a quick overview of the map's features, pointing out how they can sort by:
 - County

- Decade (color coded)
- Race (of the victim)
- Demonstrate how clicking on a particular dot will pull up primary source news articles about the lynching.

9. Pass out the attached “Exploring *A Red Record*” worksheet to each student. Either individually, in partners or small groups, instruct students to explore the site and fill out the sheet as they work. (Teachers can also paste the worksheet into an online form for students to fill out if desired.) Teachers should float among students the entire time they work, monitoring discussions and assessing student reactions. Teachers should ask probing questions and correct any misinformation or inappropriate interaction with the material. The worksheet asks students to consider and answer the following questions:

- What’s your initial reaction to this site? What are you surprised by? What questions do you have?
- Is there a geographic area of North Carolina where lynchings were more common? Less common? Why might this have been the case?
- According to the site, which race of people was most commonly lynched?
- During which years does it seem that lynchings were most prevalent in North Carolina? Why might this have been the case?
- Select three specific lynchings to investigate further. Click on the dot to pull up primary sources and additional information regarding the crime and fill out the following chart. (If the victim is “Unidentified,” note this where their name would go.)
 - Summarize the event.
 - How does the paper describe the event and/or the victim? (Note any words/phrases that stand out.) What can *this* tell us about how these events were treated by larger society at the time?
 - What connections can you make between the date of this lynching and other significant historical and cultural moments occurring at the same time? How might this event have reflected or been impacted by this historical time period in America?
 - When debriefing this question with students, teachers may want to project images from various time periods that can help prompt student thinking regarding the historical context at the time. For example:
 - [Civil Rights marchers](#) (Paul Schutzer/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images)
 - [Nazi soldiers in Vichy Paris](#) (Credit:Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock)
 - [A family living in a tent village during Great Depression](#) (Dorothea Lange / National Archives)
 - [Early photo of U.S. border guards interacting with border crossers](#) (1948) (Keystone / Getty)
- What, if anything, did you find that the cases you looked at had in common? (For example, the race of the victim, alleged crime committed, manner of reporting, etc.)
- What information do these statistics and primary sources fail to convey about the countless lives impacted by lynching?
- Why do you think this site was created? What is its purpose?
- Why do you think this site is named *A Red Record*?
 - After students have shared their thoughts, let them know that in 1892, Ida B. Wells, a Black journalist in Memphis launched a crusade against lynching, despite the risk to her life in doing so. Wells lost several friends to lynching and she became dedicated to highlighting this heinous practice to the country. She published several articles discussing the executions of her friends, a pamphlet called, “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases.” Having examined many accounts of lynchings due to the alleged “rape of white women,” she concluded that Southerners cried rape as an excuse to hide their real reasons for lynchings: Black economic progress, which threatened white Southerners with competition, and white ideas of enforcing Black second-class status in the society. Black economic progress was a contemporary issue in the South, and in many states whites worked to suppress Black progress. In this period at the turn of the century, Southern states, starting with Mississippi in 1890, passed laws and/or new

constitutions to disenfranchise most Black people and many poor white people through use of poll taxes, literacy tests and other devices. Wells-Barnett recommended that Black people use arms to defend against lynching.

- In her publication [A Red Record](#), a 100-page pamphlet describing lynching in the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. It also covered Black peoples' struggles in the South since the Civil War. *A Red Record* explored the alarmingly high rates of lynching in the United States (which was at a peak from 1880 to 1930). Wells-Barnett said that during Reconstruction, most Americans outside the South did not realize the growing rate of violence against Black people in the South. She believed that during slavery, white people had not committed as many attacks because of the economic labor value of slaves. Wells noted that, since slavery time, "ten thousand Negroes have been killed in cold blood, [through lynching] without the formality of judicial trial and legal execution."

Debriefing *A Red Record* and the Lives Impacted

****Teachers should ensure that they leave at least 20 minutes of class time (or more) to debrief student work and reactions to A Red Record prior to class dismissal. Given the difficult subject matter, students should NOT leave without processing under the teacher's facilitation.*

10. Bring the class back together and discuss the questions provided on the worksheet, pulling up material on the projected screen as needed and asking follow-up questions. Additional discussion questions to pose include:

- Who were the victims of lynchings in North Carolina? Who were the perpetrators of lynchings? (Discuss the concept that on both sides, these were everyday people, with lives and families. It is important students not sensationalize this history and rather understand what it says about human nature.)
- For what reasons were Black people lynched according to the white mob perspective and the reporting in some of the newspapers you read? In actuality, why were Black people lynched?
 - Discuss with students that "Sexual violence became the most common justification for deadly vigilante violence targeting black men and terrorizing black communities. In fact, fewer than 25 percent of documented African American lynching victims were accused of sexual assault and less than 30 percent were accused of murder. Because African Americans were presumed guilty and dangerous, accusations lodged against them were rarely scrutinized; nearly all were lynched without an investigation, much less a trial.

In common but much-less-publicized incidents, lynching victims were targeted not for allegations of crime but for pursuing political and economic equality. Dozens of black sugar cane workers were lynched in Thibodaux, Louisiana, in 1887 for striking to protest low wages. In 1884, after Calvin Mike cast a vote in Calhoun County, Georgia, a white mob attacked and burned his home, killing his elderly mother and his two young daughters, Emma and Lillie. Reverend T. A. Allen was lynched in Hernando, Mississippi, in 1935 for organizing local sharecroppers.

Others were lynched for refusing to address a white man as "sir" or demanding to be served at the counter in a segregated soda shop. William Brooks was lynched in Palestine, Arkansas, in 1894 for asking to marry his white employer's daughter. In Labelle, Florida, in 1926, Henry Patterson was lynched for "attempting to assault" a white woman; soon after his death, news spread that his "offense" had actually been asking for a drink of water.

Hundreds more black people were lynched on allegations of arson, robbery, non-sexual assault, and vagrancy. In 1930, a 65-year-old black woman named Laura Wood was hanged with a plow chain in Barber, North Carolina, for allegedly stealing a ham." ([Source](#))

Discuss with students that despite any alleged crime the victims may have been accused of, lynching was a violent act meant to terrorize, traumatize and disempower black people.

- How did lynchings impact: the families & descendants of those lynched; the NC communities in which the lynching took place; the perpetrators and descendants of those in the mob; society as a whole? What were the immediate consequences of lynching? What do you think the long-term impacts of lynching were and are?
 - Discuss with students that “Importantly, these lynchings were not isolated hate crimes committed by rogue vigilantes; they were targeted racial violence perpetrated to uphold an unjust social order. Lynchings were terrorism. This violence left thousands dead; significantly marginalized black people politically, financially, and socially; and inflicted deep trauma on the entire African American community. White people who witnessed, participated in, and socialized their children in a culture that tolerated gruesome lynchings also were psychologically damaged. State officials’ tolerance of lynching created enduring national and institutional wounds that survived to oppose the goals of the civil rights movement and modern calls for equality.

Facing the constant threat of attack, nearly 6 million black Americans fled the South between 1910 and 1970 as traumatized refugees, abandoning homes, families, and work in hopes of escaping racial terror. When parts of Georgia experienced a mass black exodus after gruesome lynchings in 1915 and 1916, the local planters “attributed the movement from their places to the fact that the lynching parties had terrorized their Negroes.” Lynching profoundly reshaped the American landscape and burdened already vulnerable communities with pain and disadvantage still with them today.” ([Source](#))

 - *The Equal Justice Initiative’s “[Lynching in America](#)” report discusses these questions in further detail; the chapter on Trauma & the Legacy of Lynching” (p. 65) specifically talks about the significance of this history to people today.*
- Think about opening the newspaper and finding an article like the ones you just reviewed. This was the reality. How do you think people who were otherwise “uninvolved” in lynchings felt and what did they think when reading these articles? (Discuss the different ways people of different races may have reacted. Further discuss the concept of a “bystander.” Were community members culpable if they did not speak out?)
- If we were to put those responsible for a lynching on trial, who should be tried and why? (Consider not just the people responsible for capturing the victim and inflicting the actual wounds, but also those who attended and watched, knew about the lynching but did nothing to stop it or read about it in the news and did not speak out, law officials who did not step in, public leaders who remained quiet, etc.)
- What does it say about society and/or human nature that lynching was allowed to occur in North Carolina and in America for such a long period of time and to so many people?
- How much did you know about lynching, and specifically lynching in North Carolina, before this class? Why do you think the history of lynching in America, and in North Carolina in particular, more prominently known and discussed? Why are some parts of our history better known than others?
- How is society today impacted by the history of lynching? Why is this history still very relevant to each of us, regardless of race? ([This ABA article](#) discusses many intersections between racial terror lynchings and the justice system, such as the use of the death penalty today.)
- Even though this is hard history to study and comprehend, why is it nonetheless critical that we face this aspect of our shared past today? How can this history help us understand and respond to present-day issues of racial injustice? How does ignorance of the history of lynching make us susceptible to misunderstanding the present?

Name: _____

Exploring A Red Record

Instructions: Go to <http://lynching.web.unc.edu/> and as demonstrated, click on the “Map” tab. Take some time to explore the map and the various sorting features. Remember that you can:

- Sort by specific counties in North Carolina
- Sort by decade (each decade is color coded)
- Sort by the race of the victim
- Click on each dot to pull up primary source news articles about the lynching that took place in that location

1. What’s your initial reaction to this site? What are you surprised by? What questions do you have?

2. Is there a particular geographic area of North Carolina where lynchings were more common? Less common? Why might this have been the case?

3. According to the site, which race of people was most commonly lynched?

4. During which years does it seem that lynchings were most prevalent in North Carolina? Why might this have been the case?

5. Select three specific lynchings to investigate further. Click on the dot to pull up primary sources and additional information regarding the crime and fill out the following chart. (If the victim is “Unidentified,” note this where their name would go.

Victim’s Name: _____ Victim’s Race: _____ Date of lynching: _____

Location of lynching: _____

Summarize the event:

How does the paper describe the event and/or the victim? (Note any words/phrases that stand out.) What can *this* tell us about how these events were treated by larger society at the time?

What connections can you make between the date of this lynching and other significant historical and cultural moments occurring at the same time? How might this event have reflected or been impacted by this historical time period in America?

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6. What, if anything, did you find that the cases you looked at had in common? (For example, the race of the victim, alleged crime committed, manner of reporting, etc.)
7. What information do these statistics and primary sources fail to convey about the countless lives impacted by lynching?
8. Why do you think this site was created? What is its purpose?
9. Why do you think this site is named "A Red Record?"