

Re-presenting Aaron, Anthony, and Randall: Victims of Racial Terror Lynching in Washington County

By RoAnne Elliott and Valandra

The pillars of the National Monument in Montgomery, Alabama, arranged by state and county are etched with names of victims of racial terror lynching in the United States between 1877 and 1950, the years included in the exhaustive research conducted by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), the organization that established the Memorial in 2018. There are pillars representing 73 counties in Arkansas. There is no Washington County pillar in the monument because there were no documented lynchings in the county during the span of years within EJI's research parameters. EJI supports communities in memorializing specifically identified victims of racial terror lynchings that occurred in years outside of the 1877-1950 time period.

Having attended the opening ceremonies of the National Monument, the authors came together with a small group of black and white residents of Fayetteville and learned of racial terror lynchings of three enslaved people in the summer of 1856. Aaron, Anthony, and Randall were

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accused of killing James Boone, the enslaver who owned Anthony and Aaron. These two defendants were seized by a mob of white citizens and lynched on July 7, 1856, after the court failed to convict them. Randall, who was enslaved by Boone's neighbor David Williams, was found guilty and his request for a re-trial was denied. He was subsequently hanged by the state on August 1, 1856.¹

Because doubt exists regarding the reliability of the evidence used to convict Randall,² and because of the court's refusal to retry the case, his hanging amounted to a state sanctioned lynching. The group of Fayetteville residents organized itself into the Washington County Community Remembrance Project Coalition and was granted community partnership status with the EJI for the purpose of honoring the humanity of the three men in the form of a memorial marker to be placed in Oaks Cemetery in Fayetteville.

The recorded history of Washington County is silent regarding the lives of Aaron, Anthony, and Randall and most of the other enslaved people of the county. This article acknowledges that their lives mattered and explores the meaning of the erasure of their life stories.

“THE LOSS OF STORIES SHARPENS THE HUNGER FOR THEM”³

The historical record yields only that the three people were enslaved, they were accused of murder on evidence that was certainly inadequate and possibly fraudulent, and that they were subsequently lynched by the State of Arkansas and prominent citizens of Washington County.

It would be exhilarating to be able to finally “right” the stories of Aaron, Anthony, and Randall, but how can that be done without creating fiction where real life had been? From what corners of the archive can the writer draw? How do truths emerge from or about members of a systematically silenced and devalued population, long dead?

There is nothing in the record that gives an inkling of what Aaron, Anthony, and Randall might have said, thought, or felt in their lives at any time before or during the ordeal they suffered. Extant documentation of black life in 1850's Washington County reveals more about enslavers than about the enslaved. Learning about the undocumented lives of enslaved black individuals using conventional methods usually requires gathering bits and pieces from a review of the copious detail that has been recorded about the white people who held them as property. The fragments about black life gleaned in that process are sparse, questionable, and jaggedly unconnectable, making it less a process of fitting puzzle pieces together, and more one of mining for gems buried beneath the immovable mountain that is the history of white peoples' deeds, thoughts, and ideas. Even the most painstakingly conducted search of this kind cannot lead to a story that would bring to light the full humanity of these three men. It would be staggeringly naïve to expect the truth about their lives to come somehow from the people who, believing themselves superior to them, claimed

ownership of their bodies, brutalized, and debased them. Whether or not historians and archivists have deliberately and maliciously misled, the archive is always culturally contingent. What is set down in the record is consistent with the values, beliefs, purposes, and interests of the white people who created and kept the records. After all, power is at the heart of the relationship between a society, its archives, and its recorded history.⁴

It is important then, to look askance, or at least look beyond interpretations of those who held the power to make records, write history, and influence a community's collective memory.

This article consults historical sources and archival records, yet resists their primacy as the unimpeachable authorities on the value and significance of the lives of Aaron, Anthony, and Randall. The intention here is not to debunk the historical record, but to recognize and incite curiosity about the gaping holes in the recorded history – spaces where the sentence of enslaved people is intact, spaces where the writer can take on the responsibility to voice doubt, raise questions, speculate, and engage the imagination to, as Saidiya Hartman puts it, "... tell an impossible story and amplify the impossibility of its telling."⁵ The ethics involved in telling that which is impossible to know yet essential to consider requires speculation. It is a question of ethics because with every re-telling that simply echoes the record, there occurs a re-lynching.⁶

Repeating the horrific events through the eyes of white people who perpetrated it and witnessed it, with no intent or device to allow the humanity of the victims to come forth, is a continued assault on the men and offers no clear path to new insight or inspiration for critical questions. The long-term effect of this kind of accounting of the past has been to reduce enslaved people into an amorphous tragic mass of historic matter, and to distort the memory of the fullness of their humanity, the key factor in the survival and the triumphs of their descendants. Thus, the method here is to scrape the archive and stoke the imagination in the hope of awakening stories of possibility that have been deadened under the weight of historic white dominance in Washington County as in the rest of the nation.

HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE WERE ENSLAVED IN WASHINGTON COUNTY BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE LIFETIMES OF AARON, ANTHONY, AND RANDALL.

The stories of white people's travails and achievements in conquering the rugged landscape of early Washington County reverberate across the generations of families who brought the people they owned here, and proceeded to settle in, creating farms, factories, other businesses, and a system of government. The stories are often told with gaps that create and perpetuate a racially unblemished self-image of Washington County, as a place where slavery hardly existed and had little or no social or economic significance – a place where racism took a mild form in which enslavers were benevolent, and the enslaved worked contentedly alongside their masters who may have owned only one or two people.⁷ Blevins discuss

es this in his study of slavery in the Ozarks when he asserts that "... areas with comparatively small slave populations carried the perception that these mostly white places were not subject to the same kinds of deep-seated racism and racial conflict found in the lowland south...."⁸

Stories of enslaved people who were beloved by their kindly masters and who in their intense loyalty risked their lives to protect their enslavers, contribute to a perception of benign enslavement in the Ozarks that endures to this day. An often referenced Washington County story is that of Adeline Blakeley who had been enslaved in Washington County and reportedly recalled her days in slavery as happy ones to white interviewers for the Federal Writers' Project.⁹ Such stories cover up a wound that refuses to heal, and reflect a resistance to confront hard history especially when it is of one's own place, and one's own people are implicated.

Wilma Dunaway's study of Appalachian counties,¹⁰ which like Ozark counties, had no large plantations and were not what would be called 'slave societies,'¹¹ finds that the economics and politics of such areas were very much bound up in slavery even though they had comparatively low percentages of slaves and slaveholders. Grif Stockley discusses the outsized political power wielded by the relatively few slaveholders in the state's northern counties.¹² The biggest slaveholders in Washington County were influential in the political systems of the county and the state.¹³ While contrasts in the cultures of lower south plantations and smaller holdings in northwest Arkansas are well documented, and the enslaved people certainly had varied experiences across those differing cultures, the fact remains that slavery in this county as elsewhere in the United States was a brutal and dehumanizing injustice.¹⁴ As Ira Berlin asserts in his description of slavery in the cotton belt, "The plantation did not just happen, it had to be made to happen."¹⁵ Similarly, the worthwhile



The Oaks Cemetery. Photograph by Valandra. Placemaking in the face of discrimination, denigration and hostility is a practice that has sustained black life over the generations. Oaks cemetery, though established within a context of racial segregation, graces Fayetteville today through the natural determination of black people to revere, remember, and celebrate black lives. The memorial to Aaron, Anthony, and Randall stands in this place.

ness of Washington County slaveholding didn't just happen, it had to be made to happen through the various techniques enslavers used to enforce discipline, reinforce the social order, manage productivity, suppress the natural tendency of the enslaved to resist, and squelch any behaviors they perceived to be threats to white dominance.¹⁶

With that as backdrop we consider the lives of Aaron, Anthony, and Randall, the three people who the Remembrance Project will memorialize with a marker in Oaks Cemetery.

WHO NAMED AARON, ANTHONY, AND RANDALL?

On historical monuments honoring the lives of individuals and recognizing their achievements, it is common to see the name, date of birth, and/or date of death chiseled in stone to reflect the identity of the person. This is one of the ways society enshrines individual distinctions, recognizes humanity, lets the world know this particular person lived uniquely, belonged, and made memorable contributions. In the case of enslaved people like Anthony, Aaron, and Randall, by the design of white supremacy that rendered their bodies “property,” we cannot assume that the names we inscribe on the marker venerating their lives, are their actual names. We know nothing about the day they were born, or the unique contributions each may have made to the world. We only have the tragic manner of their death as evidence that they lived.

In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman interrogates the manner in which the terror and violence of slavery is routinized and perpetuated through seemingly mundane practices such as the “fashioning of identity, and the processes of individuation and normalization.”¹⁷ The paternalistic practices of constructing slave families and naming slaves are two of the ways slave owners enacted the violence of subjugation through a narrative of simulated agency.¹⁸ Thus, it seems possible that the three people we refer to as Anthony, Aaron, and Randall, may have called themselves by different names entirely.¹⁹ Furthermore, they may have been named otherwise by their parents. As male children, it is possible that they bore the names of their father or their father's father. Given that no surnames are indicated in the records, we might easily conclude that they were named by their enslavers, a common practice in slave-holding societies in the South.²⁰

Small farms, such as were common in Washington County, were subjected to greater economic instability leaving enslaved families at greater risk and less capable of maintaining bonds and caring for children. Based on the narratives of formerly enslaved Arkansans, Moneyhon^{21,22} nevertheless asserts that slave families in Arkansas “played important roles in the socialization of children and the development of a slave world independent of that of the masters and provided a critical support for the formation of African American culture.”²³ What does socialization and development of enslaved children look like “independent of the mas

ter,” when, as Hartman describes, one way “domination of power” was demonstrated “consisted of changing the names of slave children on a whim to emphasize to slave parents that the owner, not the parents determined the child’s fate?”²⁴

Although generations removed from the first Africans brought to this country in chains, we might re-imagine the possibility that as American-born enslaved, the parents of Anthony, Aaron, and Randall may have named their children using a kinship system that linked them to their distant African ancestry.^{25,26} Perhaps for them as for many African American families even today, naming a child can mean balancing the dual legacies of West African traditions against the institution of slavery in which white enslavers attempted to eliminate any traces of African culture from the daily lives of enslaved peoples.²⁷ Despite such efforts to diminish and erase, enslaved parents found ways to name their children, honoring and adapting many of the naming traditions and patterns of West African culture.²⁸ Had this been true for Anthony, Aaron, and Randall, they may have been given a day name by their parents to reflect the day of the week in which they were born, a nickname, basket name, or phrase name to represent particular conditions or events around the time of their birth.²⁹ Had they been first-born children, their names will have reflected such significance. Their loved ones, friends, and neighbors may have used these names in secrecy, out of earshot of their enslavers, to recognize their kinship, community, and to honor, shape, and influence their lives within the confines of enslavement.^{30,31} Historians who rely on slave birth records produced by slaveholders and their agents are more likely to only see the enslaved child’s birth and name along with perhaps a mother’s name, rarely would two parents be indicated, and certainly no clues as to the significance of the child’s name.³²

It is also possible that the parents of Anthony, Aaron, and Randall complied with the cultural habits and naming patterns of their enslavers. As a means of survival, they might have accepted and replicated the names given their children by their enslavers in the assimilationist attempt to relinquish in mind, body, and spirit the traditions of their African ancestry. They may have wanted to equip their children with names that would best help them thrive in a culture that devalued their very existence except as chattel. Aaron’s parents may have embraced Christianity and so had given him a biblical name. Perhaps the parents of the three had attached no meaning at all to the names given to their children. These identity markers may have done nothing in elevating their status or importance beyond the physical boundaries imposed on them as enslaved persons. However, what if the parents of Aaron, Anthony, and Randall had known their children as they had known themselves, as human beings with human psyches? Within their own souls they would have longed for freedom for themselves and their children. If it couldn’t be physical, it would be psychic, it would be an inner space where the child would

belong to himself. This longing of one soul for the freedom of another passed through the generations to allow minds and hearts to overcome the unyielding barriers of the physical world. The parents of Aaron, Anthony, and Randall may have hoped, *If I can't wrest my child free from the chains on his body, let there be no chains on his heart, his mind, or his soul.* When each child was born, and as he grew, his parents surely imagined a day when he would walk through the world unfettered and known by his own name as a free citizen.

Aaron, Anthony, and Randall each had his own identity and his own unique personality. Although the three appear as one black body in Washington County's history of racial terror, each one of these men was much more than the faceless, enslaved victim of white racial brutality. Each man had connections with people and places, each was beloved by parents and families, connected in kinship whether they lived together or had been separated. Their parents had likely socialized them with survival tactics including deference to whites while maintaining respect for themselves and their own people.³³ Each had learned early how to avoid harsh treatment by white men, women and children, how to covertly practice resistance, and how to claim himself for himself right under his master's nose.³⁴ Like other enslaved children, Aaron, Anthony, and Randall were taught by their elders the protective device of wearing "the mask" a way of being free to have their own true thoughts, while displaying facial expressions and body language that belied those thoughts in interactions with white people.³⁵

Because we know that each of these individuals was a human being, we know that each experienced pleasure and anger and love and exhaustion, joy, longing, and anxiety and trauma. Each of them had questions, ideas, and dreams. Each wanted acceptance, tenderness, fun, and wanted things that he could claim as his own. Anthony may have been sensitive and shy. Aaron's mischievous tendency toward risk-taking perhaps exasperated his elders, and Randall may have been known as a natural leader. Because literacy among enslaved was suppressed and punishable, it is unlikely that Aaron, Anthony, and Randall ever learned to read or write, though they may have picked up some literacy skills from white children, or from free and enslaved black adults who had somehow managed to become literate.³⁶

It is likely that from childhood all three did farm work including cultivating crops and tending livestock, although their owners might also have hired them out to do other kinds of work for other white people.³⁷

Like other enslaved people in Arkansas, Aaron, Anthony, and Randall likely stayed alert for opportunities to escape captivity.^{38,39} They likely also prized opportunities to be out of sight of their masters to talk openly together, to plan, to practice reading and writing, to be playful and to imagine freedom. It is also possible that the three sought opportunities that were available to some enslaved people in the county to make money.⁴⁰ They might have dreamed of purchasing freedom for themselves and their loved ones.

AARON, ANTHONY,
AND RANDALL ARE NOT
FORGOTTEN.

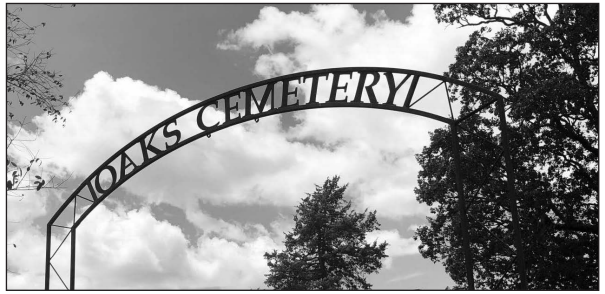
The three people may have known something about the murder of James Boone, or been completely unaware of it until they were hauled into jail. They may have heard the multiple stories that were circulating about the death of the slaveholder, and possibly had their own theories. There is no way of knowing. But as the archive tells us, they were born into slavery, and they worked from childhood until they were murdered by a white community led by slaveholding white men, Aaron perhaps still in his teen years and Anthony and Randall in their 20s.⁴¹ Mentioned nowhere in the written record, but undoubtedly true, is that the loved ones of Aaron, Anthony, and Randall were most certainly devastated to lose them and were outraged and terrorized by their violent deaths.

To the white community, and to the keepers of the Washington County archives, Aaron, Anthony, and Randall counted only as property, not as people. To themselves, to the people who cared for them, to their descendants, and to the descendants of other enslaved people, their lives mattered and matter still. That is the fact that motivates and gives meaning to the Remembrance Project.

UNCOVERING HARD HISTORY

The meticulous research of Washington County genealogists and historians have over the years provided accounts of the lives of the area's white people in stunning detail. Though enslavement was a fact in the county during the time that Aaron, Anthony, and Randall lived and died here, the historic record yields little about black life, how white and black people were linked as a social fact, the specifics about how white slaveholders and other white citizens benefited from slavery, and how the county's economic and political life was impacted by slavery. A blanket of innocence has settled comfortably over these hidden details, effectively subduing critical inquiry and rendering the county's hard history undiscussable.

There are no monuments to the black people who through legal enslavement were forced to care for white men, women and children, and to help white men build and maintain wealth and prominence in Washington County. There is no acknowledgement of racial terror as part of the story of Washington County. EJI's report on Lynching in America links



Entrance to The Oaks Cemetery. Site of the memorial to Aaron, Anthony, and Randall. Photograph by Valandra.

this silence of denial to ongoing injustice when it states that, “Avoiding honest conversation about this kind of history has undermined our ability to build a nation where racial justice can be achieved.”⁴² The Community Remembrance Project endeavors, through its memorial to Aaron, Anthony, and Randall, to inject honesty into discussions of the history of Washington County with a belief in the possibility of justice for all.

 ENDNOTES

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⁵Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” p. 11.

⁶Ibid.

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¹¹Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press Of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 9. Berlin contrasts ‘slave society,’ in which slavery was central to productive processes, and ‘society with slaves’ in which slavery was one form of labor and not at the center of productive processes.

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¹⁷Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjugation: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 4.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Laura Álvarez López, “Who Named Slaves and Their Children? Names and Naming Practices Among Enslaved Africans Brought to the Americas and their Descendants with Focus on Brazil,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 27, no.2, (June 2015), pp. 159-171.

²⁰Cheryll Ann Cody, “There was no ‘Absalom’ on the Ball Plantations: Slave-naming Practices in the South Carolina Low Country, 1720 – 1865,” *The American Historical Review* 92, no.3, (June 1987), pp. 563-596.

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²³Ibid, p. 24.

²⁴Hartman, *Scenes of Subjugation*, p. 8.

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²⁶Margaret G. Lee, "African American Naming Patterns," *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture - Language*, vol. 5. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

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