

FROM HOLY GROUND; TO HOLY GROUND

This is Holy Ground, Sanctified Ground. Revered by those of many faiths. On the East side of this courthouse is Philips High School, now Philips Academy, where Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth was beaten nearly to death by Klansmen wielding chains for his efforts to fight back against the Southern Racist Redeemers and desegregate Birmingham Schools.

But eons before Birmingham was City, before Alabama was a state, and this was a County, this valley in which the Courthouse is situated was revered as holy by the indigenous people of the day, the Creek, Choctaw and Cherokee nations.

Anthropologists say that those nations did not use this area much to live in, instead it was used for hunting, fishing and especially religious ceremonies as the magnetic qualities of the iron ore buried in the hills surrounding this valley imparted mystical properties.

This ground is sanctified ground by the struggle of people yearning to be free. This is Women's History month, and while we are here, we must honor a Black woman named Indiana Little - a black schoolteacher, who in 1926!, y'all, 1926!, led a predominantly Black female throng of a thousand people to the steps of this Courthouse demanding the immediate end of Black disenfranchisement. That's 1926, six years after white women finally got the right to vote.

However, County officials refused to listen to her, and instead arrested her for vagrancy.

And in 1939, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, SNYC, the first SNCC, organized the "Right to Vote Committee" and held a march on the Courthouse in the pouring rain carrying signs that read "Poll Tax Denies Democracy", "Vote the American Way: Vote to Unchain the Ballot", and "Let Us Vote: We Are Americans, Too!"

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Finally, On Friday, November 23, 1883, Lewis Houston, a Black man, was accused of assaulting a white woman. Police officers arrested him from his place of work and brought him to the jail on Fourth Avenue North. Rumors swirled about plans to lynch him. A mob of white men began to gather outside the jail. On Saturday evening, November 24, 1883, a mob of 150 men approached the jail to apprehend Lewis. The mob of men broke into the jail with pistols and took Mr. Houston from his cell.

Who gave them the key?

The mob dragged Mr. Houston from Fourth Avenue North to Capitol Park, now known as Linn Park, where we are today.

The mob took Mr. Houston to a pine tree in this park and told him to confess to raping the woman. Lewis responded, "Gentleman, before God, I didn't do it." Following this, the mob adjusted the rope around his neck. His last words were "Jesus, take me home."

It's important to note the intended effects of the mob choosing to drag Lewis Houston from jail to this public space for his murder. Both by mob force and militia, the goal was to systematically repress the black community socially, politically, and economically. These events were not only an attack on Lewis Houston, but efforts to maintain white supremacy in Birmingham and in Alabama.

This was the first lynching in Jefferson County.

Folks, we're still fighting to unchain the ballot; we're still fighting mass incarceration and the criminalization of Black youth, well, Black people.

Forward together, not one step back.