

Descendant tries to find truth behind lynching



Chris Corbin, of Alexandria, Ky., poses inside the Black Covered Bridge north of Oxford, Ohio. Corbin's ancestor, Henry Corbin, was lynched and hanged near the bridge in 1892.

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Corbin wants to reconcile official, family histories

Mark Curnutte Cincinnati Enquirer | USA TODAY NETWORK

OXFORD – Near the yellow daffodils in Memorial Park, Chris Corbin dug a spoon into the black soil and scooped it into a clear glass jar. An hour later, she knelt in a creek bed just north of this college town and scraped brown clay into the same jar.

Her cousin twice removed, Henry Corbin, an African-American handy-man, was lynched in 1892 in Oxford. He was hanged without a trial by a white mob. Yet from that point, the

official and family versions of what happened that January day don't match — even after 20 years of research by the 68-year-old retired accountant.

Chris Corbin, who grew up in Oxford, can't even be certain where her ancestor was killed. She can't retrace his final steps with any confidence. So she recently collected soil from both potential sites where his blood was shed, saving the jar for a national memorial to lynching victims that opened April 26 in Alabama.

The official version reported in *The Enquirer* is that Henry Corbin died in Oxford's public square. A white mob seized him from jail and took vengeance on him for allegedly murdering his white employer.

Yet the oral history passed by family members says the 30-year-old man was hanged near the Black (Pugh's Mill) Covered Bridge near Ohio 732. The only crime Henry Corbin committed, say his descendants, was having the audacity to speak to a white woman.

"I'd like to think he's at peace," Chris Corbin said, "and I'd like to think he's innocent. When I think about it, it hurts my soul. It's hard to comprehend that it happened."

Henry Corbin and another young black man, Sim Garnett, 21, were the two African-Americans lynched in Butler County — both in Oxford — during the last quarter of the 19th century.

Their names are believed to be inscribed in a rust-colored steel monument in the new lynching memorial that opened April 26 in Montgomery, Alabama. Garnett, who was shot three times through the head while in the local jail in 1877, was accused of sexually assaulting a white woman.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice names the 4,400 African-Americans lynched during a reign of racial terror unleashed across the United States from 1877 through 1950. The memorial is the first of its kind, according to officials at the nonprofit legal and civil rights group responsible for creating it and an accompanying museum, the Equal Justice Initiative.

The group says its list of lynching victims is incomplete, despite seven years of research. The list, for example, doesn't include Noah Anderson, hanged and shot in the Clermont County river town of New Richmond in 1895 without trial after being accused of killing a prominent white businessman.

Accused of killing wealthy widow he worked for

Like Henry Corbin, more than half of the 4,400 black people memorialized were accused of killing or raping whites, according to the Equal Justice Initiative 2015 report "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror."

The Enquirer reported Henry Corbin's death without a trial in great de-tail in its Jan. 15, 1892, edition.

Corbin, described as "very black," 25 years old, 5-feet, 6-inches tall and weighing 150 pounds, had worked for two years as a handyman for a prominent white woman, Georgianna Horner. One January afternoon, The Enquirer reported, Corbin killed the elderly widow by striking her on the head with a piece of firewood. Her daughter, Lizzie, surprised Corbin during the violent act, and he turned his weapon on her before escaping.

Corbin's motive, The Enquirer re-ported, was cash and jewelry that the elder Horner kept in her home.

The daughter stumbled into the street, where she was found. She told passersby that Corbin had killed her mother and struck her. Word spread quickly through town. A reward of \$1,500 was offered for his capture. Corbin was found hiding in a shed not far from Horner's home, according to one newspaper account. He turned a small pistol on himself, firing a single but non-fatal shot into his forehead. Police took him to the village prison.

There, a mob of white men overpowered the marshal. Taking custody of Corbin, angry white men fixed a noose around his neck, pulled him across the street and hanged him in the town square before a large crowd that filled in around what is today the corner of High Street and East Park Place.

The Enquirer published a drawing of the hanging. "Corbin's body was dragged to a tree in the park," the caption read.

Enquirer headlines convicted Corbin without a hint of due process: "Red spots stained the white snow, drop-ping from the body of Mrs. Horner's slayer. Vengeance for cruel murder only partly satisfied."

Onlookers fired 400 pistol balls into Corbin's body, leaving his body strung up for at least another 24 hours, the Ohio State Journal reported.

When the tree was cut down 20 years later, it broke the saw blade at the mill, according to documents Chris Corbin found in her research. The wood was compromised by thousands of pieces of metal: bullets, pistol balls, nails.

Family: All he did was talk to a white woman

Chris Corbin heard a different version growing up about Henry's lynching. She began studying her family's genealogy when her mother died in 1998. She soon found newspaper ac-counts of Henry's lynching.

“I was shocked and devastated when I read the stories,” said Chris Corbin, who lives in Alexandria, Kentucky, with one of her adult sons.

“It was not the story I’d heard as a child growing up. I sat around all the time with the family and heard about Henry’s lynching.”



Chris Corbin collects soil from Oxford Memorial Park at the approximate site where her ancestor, Henry Corbin, may have been lynched in 1892. “I was shocked and devastated when I read the stories,” she said.

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Chris Corbin looks out from the Black Covered Bridge. The Equal Justice Initiative's lynching report documents 15 lynching of African-Americans in Ohio.
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The family's oral history passed down through the generations goes like this: Henry was walking in Up-town Oxford, made direct eye contact with a white woman and spoke to her before first being spoken to.

That night, a group of white men came to the house at 400 Withrow St. where the family lived, kidnapped Henry and took him to the covered bridge to hang him.

After searching for Henry all night, his grandfather found him as the mob had left him — bound, hanging from a rope, head slumped, a noose tight around his neck.

Henry Corbin's body is buried in an unmarked grave in Woodside Cemetery off East Chestnut Street in Oxford. So are other members of the Corbin family and some black Boone County natives who served in the 117th regiment of the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War.

Ohio was not 'beneficent toward black people'

Lynchings took many forms. They were not necessarily hangings. Victims were also burned, beaten, dis-membered, drowned, dragged by horses or automobiles, shot or murdered in a variety of combinations.

Photographs of the killings often were turned into postcards. Historians say the reason for killing African-Americans without trials in public was to send this warning to the black community: Know your place.

White mobs lynched whites in a show of frontier-style justice but at a much lower rate than blacks. From 1882 through 1968, researchers at Tuskegee University documented 1,297 lynchings of white people, 3,446 of African-Americans.

Robert Thurston, professor emeritus of history at Miami University and author of two books on lynching, studied the Henry Corbin and Sim Garnett cases.

“It’s peculiar, given its reputation in the Underground Railroad, but Ohio was by no means beneficent toward black people,” he said.

The Equal Justice Initiative’s lynching report documents 15 lynching of African-Americans in Ohio.

In September 1877, a mob broke into the Oxford town jail, where Garnett, a 21-year-old black man, was held. He had been accused of raping a white woman in College Corner, about five miles northwest of Oxford. The mob overpowered a guard. One man knocked Garnett unconscious with a sledgehammer. Three bullets were fired through his head. They dragged his lifeless body into the street.

The Enquirer’s headline on the story detailing Garnett’s death, dated Sept. 4, 1877, read: “Swift justice meted out to the Negro desperado of Oxford. Indignant citizens break open the prison and end the career of the black brute.”

Spoken history leads descendant to bridge

Little is known of Henry Corbin beyond the official details of his death. Newspapers reported that he had been held in positive regard by Oxford townspeople and his employer, the widow he was accused of murdering.

Chris Corbin, his descendant, talked about Henry and lamented his death and divergent accounts of his death during her recent visit to Oxford.

As she scooped black soil into a jar into Uptown Oxford, car tires clicked and clacked, rolling over brick-paved High Street just a few feet from where she sat on a sunny but cool spring afternoon.

She heard little, if any, of the back-ground noise. She patted the wet dirt and mulch until it stained her palm. “I’m feeling something,” she looked up and said.

She refixed her attention on the soil, out of which a sturdy tree had grown 126 years ago. It was the tree from which official accounts say her ancestor was hanged in a lynching.

“It’s sad to think of what happened to a relative of mine,” she said after dropping the last spoonful of black soil into her jar.

Then she went north of town, to the covered bridge that spans Four Mile Creek to collect more soil.

She lived most of her childhood in Oxford, graduating in 1969 from Talawanda High School. Her family lived at 120 W. Sycamore St., in the segregated black section of Oxford. The family’s church had Sunday after-noon picnics in a park near the bridge. Her grandmother always refused to go.

“She said, ‘A relative of ours was lynched there. I won’t go.’ She never did as far as I know,” Chris Corbin said.

She walked across the bridge, remembering her childhood when some of the thick wooden planks were missing and she could see the water below.

The family’s oral history explained Georgianna Horner’s death, too. Her daughter, Lizzie, planned to marry a man from Cincinnati of whom her mother did not approve. The matriarch planned to prevent the wedding. An enraged Lizzie killed her mother with the firewood club. Henry Corbin, who had been held in good standing by the family, heard the commotion and rushed in. Lizzie turned her rage on him. He broke away from Lizzie, injuring her in his escape.

“I can’t reconcile the two versions. I have tried,” said Chris Corbin, leaning against a fence on a paved path near the bridge that is now a fitness course.

For one, newspapers reported that Henry Corbin was “very black.” Chris Corbin said that many of her ancestors, like her, are biracial with fair complexions and often confused for being white.

They are descendants of a white Boone County slaveowner — also named Henry Corbin — who had property in Union and impregnated many of the black slaves. Several Corbins were part of a documented migration from Boone County to Oxford, a stop on the Underground Railroad en route to Canada that was known to be tolerant of African-Americans.

Collecting soil from lynching sites as a remembrance

In 20 years of research into her family’s history, Chris Corbin has collected hundreds of documents and artifacts.

She was about to add to her collection. Near the covered bridge, she put her purse down, removed the glass jar and climbed the fence. She walked slowly down a steep grade and made her way toward the stream. She stopped at a large sycamore tree and pressed both hands against its large trunk.

“I feel him here, too,” she said of her cousin Henry. “I know this sounds weird, but I feel more than one person who was lynched here.”

She stood in silence with her hands on the tree. The water bubbled. A car sped past on Ohio 732 in a swoosh.

After a few minutes, Chris Corbin dropped to her knees, opened the lid and scraped clay-colored soil into her glass jar with the spoon.

She’d learned about how the lynching memorial and museum in Alabama had what it calls the Community Remembrance Project. Soil from lynching sites has been collected in jars — which are labeled with the victim’s name, date of death and location of the lynching — and stored in an exhibit.

Chris Corbin stood and tightened the lid on her jar. The light-brown clay from the creek bed contrasted with the black dirt that she’d gathered earlier in Oxford’s square — much like the irreconcilable narratives of her ancestor’s death that she continually struggles to resolve.