

Reconciliation Sunday

The Oregon Remembrance Project

Hello, my name is Taylor Stewart and I have started an organization called the Oregon Remembrance Project (ORP) to memorialize the history of lynching and memorialize Oregon's only documented African American victim of lynching, Alonzo Tucker. I have been working with an organization from Alabama called the Equal Justice Initiative on what's called the Community Remembrance Project. The Community Remembrance Project aims to work in the communities where the lynchings of African Americans took place to find healing and reconciliation through a sober reflection on history. The Equal Justice Initiative has documented nearly 6,500 lynchings of African Americans between the years of 1865-1950. There was at least one lynching of an African American in Oregon. His name was Alonzo Tucker, and he was lynched in Coos Bay, OR in 1902.

Bryan Stevenson, Executive Director of the Equal Justice initiative, says "truth and reconciliation are sequential." So, in order to get to reconciliation, we must first engage in the requisite truth telling and we have started this truth telling work in Coos Bay. On February 29, 2020 we held a soil collection ceremony for Alonzo Tucker near the spot where he was killed. We collected two jars of soil, one that was shipped back to a museum in Montgomery, and the other that is now on display at the Coos History Museum. Hidden in this soil was the story of Alonzo Tucker. The soil was gathered from three locations and each bit of soil tells part of the story. The first bit was gathered from the mudflats underneath the local docks. After being wrongfully accused of sexually assaulting a White woman, Alonzo Tucker was arrested, and a mob formed with the intention of lynching him. In the midst of being transported away from the mob, Alonzo Tucker escaped and hid in the mudflats underneath the local docks. The mob stationed guards across town and kept watch throughout the night. So, in this soil holds what must have been the longest, most sleepless night of Alonzo Tucker's life. This soil also holds where Alonzo Tucker was eventually found the next morning with the crucial detail being that he was discovered by two young boys. Meaning that just like a Southern lynching, this Oregon lynching had become so communal that even children were involved in the hunt for Alonzo Tucker. Alonzo Tucker would try to escape the mob, and despite being once shot in the leg, he managed to run into a shop and cry "Lord, have mercy on a colored man." However, there would be no mercy for him and so the soil gathered from the second location was where Alonzo

Tucker would once again be shot, this time in the upper body. This left him incapacitated and allowed the mob to put a noose around his neck and throw him in the back of a truck with the intention of lynching him from the spot of the alleged assault. However, they wouldn't make it that far as Alonzo Tucker would die from the gunshot wounds. So, the third bit of soil was gathered from where the old Marshfield Bridge use to be, which was where the mob strung up Alonzo Tucker from a light pole in front of a crowd of 300 and left his body hanging there for several hours.

We began this truth telling work with the soil ceremony and we will continue this work by permanently installing this story into the geographic memory of Oregon. On June 19, 2021 we will be installing an Equal Justice Initiative historical marker in Coos Bay. The historical marker will be two-sided. One side will tell the story of lynching in America as a whole and the other side will tell the story of Alonzo Tucker. This visible acknowledgement will serve to memorialize Alonzo Tucker in the collective memory and collective consciousness of Coos Bay. By giving voice to this story in such a permanent way, we hope to get closer to reconciling our relationship with history. However, we find reconciliation for this lynching not by our acts of remembrance but by how those acts of remembrance change us. We find reconciliation not by our knowledge of lynching but by what we do with that knowledge. We find reconciliation not by reflecting solely on the past but by critically evaluating the present.

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ORP is looking to partner with faith communities across the state of Oregon to continue this conversation on truth and reconciliation. ORP is inviting church congregations to attend in tune in to the live stream of the June 19 historical marker installation and continue this conversation with their community into the next day (Sunday June 20). While the lynching of Alonzo Tucker occurred in Coos Bay, the rest of Oregon was complicit as newspapers across the state celebrated his killing. There were 300 people at the lynching and my goal is to have more than 300 people paying witness to that lynching on June 19. We are burdened by our history of injustice, but more importantly, we are burdened by our history of silence and inaction. ORP hopes this reflection on the lynching of Alonzo Tucker will inspire faith communities across Oregon to undertake their own truth and reconciliation projects to repair the harms of the past.

Truth and reconciliation are a fundamental part of the Christian faith. The story of Daniel serves as one prominent example. We all want to be faithful like Daniel. However, we too often

overlook the faithfulness Daniel showed when he prayed to God to find repentance for the sins of his ancestors. Daniel understood that he was burdened by his ancestors' legacy of sin and felt the need to right himself with God. Daniel sought reconciliation with history in the same way we need to seek reconciliation for our legacies of injustice today. Reconciliation Sunday hopes to inspire dialogue on communal sin, communal repentance, but also what we can do to find communal redemption. We need faith communities that are more committed to being like Daniel. I pray you'll join us for this statewide conversation on Reconciliation Sunday.

Sincerely,

Taylor Stewart