UA Students enrolled in a Southern memory course tell the stories of Tuscaloosa County lynching victims.

BY ERIN MOSLEY AND JAMON SMITH | PHOTOS BY JEFF HANSON, ERIN MOSLEY AND MARGARET LAWSON

Dr. John Giggie describes the era most Americans refer to as Reconstruction, the Gilded Age and the Roaring Twenties as periods of racial terror for a significant portion of the country’s population. “At a time when the United States was in fact growing and prospering, many African-Americans feared for their lives,” says Giggie, associate professor of history and African American studies at The University of Alabama and director of the Summersell Center for the Study of the South.

More than 4,000 black people in 12 Southern states were lynched between 1877 and 1950, according to the Equal Justice Initiative, a Montgomery, Ala.-based nonprofit human rights law firm whose mission includes challenging racial and economic injustice. And these are just the cases EJI has documented. At least 360 lynchings took place in Alabama, and at least 10 Tuscaloosa County men were murdered in this way.

In Tuscaloosa, as in most places where lynchings occurred, there was no present-day trace of this brutal past, and the lives of victims were largely forgotten. In Spring 2017, Giggie and students in a service-learning course he created helped change this.

Dr. John Giggie (left) and members of the Spring 2017 HY 300/AAST 395 class helped advocate for a historical marker commemorating the lives of Tuscaloosa County lynching victims.
Giggie took the Equal Justice Initiative’s baseline data on lynchings in Tuscaloosa County and asked his students to delve deeper.

Fifteen UA students enrolled in HY 300/AAST 395 Southern Memory: Lynching in the South collectively spent more than 1,000 hours documenting the lives and circumstances surrounding the deaths of 10 Tuscaloosa County residents who were lynched between 1884 and 1933. They created a digital humanities website to share their findings with the public and serve as a database for lynchings in the South. Students also worked in partnership with the Equal Justice Initiative to advocate for a historical marker commemorating victims. On March 6, 2017, the marker was erected in front of the old Tuscaloosa County Jail, a group of white men dressed as police officers carried him out of his home and shot him more than 20 times.

“One of the takeaways was recognizing the astonishing similarity between the way that lynchings were being justified in 1933 and the ways that police violence and brutality are still being justified,” Giggie says. “In many ways, the state of Alabama is still lynching people—not only through extra-judicial police violence, but also through the courts and the ways in which the death penalty is applied and administered in our state.”

One of the Equal Justice Initiative’s most high-profile cases was that of Anthony Ray Hinton, a black man who served on death row for 30 years before he was exonerated in 2015. His lawyer, Bryan Stevenson, was the keynote speaker at the ceremony for the Tuscaloosa County lynching victims. “If you want to solve a problem, you have to get up personal and close to it,” Stevenson said. He said Tuscaloosa and other communities will never heal without recognizing their pasts. Ceremony attendees ranging in age from high schoolers to the elderly spoke about their experiences with racism in Tuscaloosa and the South.

“I think there is a lot of white comfort that depends upon not having to remember this history or acknowledge the community orientation about it,” Sweeney says. Giggie says his class has multiple goals. The first is to help equip students with high-level research skills and the third is to share the documents and information students collect, building a digital testimony to the victims’ lives that will exist long after the class. The digital humanities website students are building is at alabamamemory.as.ua.edu.

Aaron Drake, a 21-year-old senior from Selma, Ala., double majoring in history and communication studies, says the research work was difficult, but worth the effort. “It’s not like your traditional research because we don’t have much there, and it forces us to do some heavy, creative digging,” he says. “We have to utilize sources such as newspaper databases, court records, census records and other legal documents. I’m grateful for the opportunity to shed light on the importance of one of the darkest moments of our nation’s history.”

Giggie plans to continue the class, extending the research to Pickens and Jefferson counties. “I’m also looking at developing a curriculum for other classes to pursue a similar pedagogy and have it be a national model, working with EJI,” he says.

For more information about HY 300/AAST 395 Southern Memory: Lynching in the South, contact John Giggie at jmgiggie@ua.edu or 205-348-1859.