THE LEGACY, LIFE, AND LYNCHING OF GEORGE TOMPKINS

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DEDICATION

To my husband for his love and support, my son for providing an excellent push to finish, my sister for encouraging me to start all of this in the first place, my mother for answering all of my mid-thesis stress phone calls, and my grandmother for the original inspiration.

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Haley Renee Brinker

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In 1922, George Tompkins was found dead in an isolated area of Riverside Park. Though the media and evidence present pointed to Tompkins having been the victim of a lynching, the official ruling was that of suicide. Almost a century later, a multiracial, driven group of individuals set out to memorialize Tompkins as a victim of lynching and challenge the ruling that he had taken his own life.

In discussing deaths such as George Tompkins', it is vital to remind oneself that the victims of lynchings were more than just statistics in the ongoing epidemic of anti-Black violence that has permeated the history of the United States. By employing a victim-centered methodology, we can examine the lives of these victims before the worst happened to them and recognize the three-dimensionality of their lived experiences.

This work examines the lived experience, lynching death, and memorialization process one hundred years later of George Tompkins. In understanding the means by which he lived, died, and was remembered, we can better understand the ways that this process can play a role in multiple contemporary communities.

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Introduction

Racial Terror Lynching. The words alone conjure images of brutality, inhumanity, depravity, and Black suffering and death. They are reminders of the painful and ongoing history of anti-Black violence in the United States. Discussions that follow mention of the words are often focused on the white perpetrators of the violence and the details of the crime they committed. The lives of the victims themselves often become sidelined in their own stories, the white mob taking precedence over the lives that were lost. Even when the victims are the focus, it is often the gruesome details of the violence committed against them that are discussed. Yet the Black men and women who suffered at the hands of these mobs were so much more than victims.

Historian Mari N. Crabtree provides a different model for scholars who study violent acts, cautioning against a focus on the details surrounding the deaths of victims of racial terror violence. We must not, Crabtree argues, "re-objectify victims and reproduce the spectacle of historical violence." Our focus remains, instead on the victims themselves during their lives. Crabtree provides an example in her own work discussing lynchings by "revisiting the horror… but just once" and advocating for historians to "write traumatic histories that pause life mid-stride," meaning historians must not wallow in the gory details of a lynching death but instead focus on the life that ended so suddenly. By focusing on victims' lives and not sensationalizing their deaths, we can highlight the humanity of our subjects and remember them for more than the worst that ever happened to them.[1] This victim-centered methodology can produce a fuller picture of their lives.

[1] Mari N. Crabtree, "The Ethics of Writing History in the Traumatic Afterlife of Lynching," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 24, no. 3–4 (2020): 351–67.

Modern historians can often be complacent about the fact that the historical subjects being studied were real, living people. When the human aspects of people are left out of the story, it is a disservice to the subjects. They are reduced to what has been deemed important about them, rather than for the fullness of their entire being. This is not entirely the fault of modern historians, though. We are left with only what we can find in archives, the things that we can prove about our subjects. Census records, death certificates, and newspaper articles cannot always inform us about the humanity of our subjects. Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls these sources and our desire as historians to stick as closely to them as possible as "the seraphic comfort of the text."[2] In embracing this comfort, we flatten our subjects into two-dimensional stand-ins for themselves.

In the case of lynching victims, the problems multiply. In the past, white historians have often described the details of a lynching without seeming to recognize that what they are describing actually happened to someone. It becomes almost voyeuristic, an ill-advised attempt at putting the reader at the event. One example of this is famed Hoosier historian James Madison's *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America*. Aside from incredibly detailed descriptions of the torture done to the two victims, J. Thomas Shipp and Abram S. Smith, Madison chose a photograph of the victims' lynched bodies as the cover of the book.[3] Madison's choice to portray Black suffering and death as the first impression of the story sets the tone; despite his attempts to discuss the complicated aspects of the Marion lynching of 1930, his choice of cover shows a lack of empathy for his subjects.

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[2] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015), 146.
[3] James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

This public history thesis explores the story of the long-hidden racial terror lynching of George Tompkins that took place in Indianapolis, Indiana, on March 16, 1922 and the remembrance events that marked the 100th anniversary of his death in 2022 through the lens of a victim-centered methodology.[4] Tompkins' story had disappeared from public and private memory, as far as is known, until IUPUI archaeologist Paul Mullins uncovered the story in 2016. His death remained hidden for so long because it was officially ruled to have been a suicide rather than a lynching.

[4] IUPUI Chancellor's Professor and historical archaeologist Paul Mullins published his findings in "Forgotten Memorials and Ignored Tragedy: Inside Memorial Grove," on his blog, Invisible Indianapolis: Race, Heritage and Community Memory in the Circle City, November 1, 2016.

The Legacy of George Tompkins

For almost a century after his death, Tompkins and his story were largely forgotten. The wooded area near the river where his body had been found became wilder, covered with low brush and weeds. Time marched on, and the violence committed against three young, Black men in Marion, Indiana just eight years later would overshadow anything that had happened in Indianapolis for a very long time.[5] IUPUI professor and historical archaeologist Paul Mullins uncovered Tompkins' story in 2016 and wrote about it. When a small, well-meaning group of individuals from Indianapolis, the Indianapolis Remembrance Coalition (IRC), who were hoping to work for racial healing in the community, came across Mullins' account, they found an opportunity to acknowledge a past injustice.

The IRC was formed after a fateful trip to the Equal Justice Initiative's memorial in Alabama in 2018. The Equal Justice Initiative is the organization behind the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which is the first memorial in the United States for lynching victims across the country. The Memorial contains "a grim cloister, a walkway with 800 weathered steel columns, all hanging from a roof. Etched on each column is the name of an American county and the people who were lynched there, most listed by name, many simply as 'unknown.'"[6] Upon seeing the names etched into the markers, the members of the IRC felt moved to action. Speaking of this experience, founding member Arlene Coleman, Ph.D., a former educator and racial justice advocate, recalled this

[5] Cynthia Carr, *Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, a Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2006).
[6] Campbell Robertson, "A Lynching Memorial Is Opening. The Country Has Never Seen Anything Like It," *The New York Times*, April 25 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/us/lynching-memorial-alabama.html.

transformative experience, stating, "viewing…the lynching victims' monuments hanging from the ceiling and on the ground…resonated with me" and moved her to perform this work in Indiana.[7] Along with Coleman, several other individuals felt that same drive. They wanted to make a difference in terms of racial equality and memorialize the death of a young man said to have taken his own life nearly a century prior.

My path crossed with that of the IRC's when searching for a research topic. The avenues I had worked down on other topics had all but hid dead ends, and I was searching for something new. When it was suggested to me that I join the IRC and explore the story of George Tompkins, I knew it was exactly what I had been searching for. I was interested not just in the death of this young man from Kentucky, but in the all the disparate details of his life before the worst thing that ever happened to him. I wanted to fill in those gaps and showcase a narrative that highlighted the life that George Tompkins had lived before it was robbed from him. Upon joining the IRC, I first just attended meetings, learning more about what the group was intending to do and how they intended to do it. In July of 2021, I took a more active role and took on managing the IRC's website and Instagram presence.

The mission of the IRC is as follows: "The Indiana Remembrance Coalition (IRC) is committed to remembering and acknowledging past and present racism and racial violence in Central Indiana. The IRC engages communities in education, dialogue, and reflection to promote racial healing and justice."[8] Embracing their deep connection to the

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[7] The Indiana Remembrance Coalition, "About Us," *Home* (blog), June 29, 2021, https://ircoalition.com/blog/. As part of my participation in the IRC, in addition to regularly attending the bi-weekly meetings, I began assisting in their digital engagement beginning in July 2021, which included building and maintaining their website and Instagram. I was also an active member of the IRC during this time and attended the March 2022 memorial event in person.

[8] IRC Mission Statement, February 3, 2022.

Equal Justice Initiative, the IRC is currently working with EJI to memorialize the life and untimely death of George Tompkins. The EJI's Community Remembrance Project encourages community stakeholders and associated parties to engage with the history of racial injustice in an area or community and work toward the memorialization of relevant events. Community Remembrance Projects must have Black leadership and engage with the public via educational opportunities regarding this history. After the steps are all taken, CRP committees can participate with the EJI's Soil Collection Project, where soil from racial terror sites are collected and catalogued, placed into jars labeled with the name of the victim, as well as the location and date of their death. This process is usually then followed by a historical marker being placed at the site or in an associated place, which gives an overview of the racial terror event. Throughout this process, groups must educate, fundraise, engage, and raise awareness in order to move forward.[9]

Historical archaeologist Paul Mullins found that almost all of the interviewees questioned by Art Jipson, a sociology professor at the University of Dayton whose research includes the impulses behind the erection of "roadside memorials," felt that a memorial "at a… place of death was more meaningful than the graveside itself."[10] This concept of memorializing a death or the site of a death is especially relevant to this work, as it encompasses the IRC's work to not only mark the grave of George Tompkins, but also to eventually place a memorial at the site of his death.

While beginning to work with the EJI, the IRC also undertook its first project related to Tompkins' memorialization: placing a headstone at his grave. Mullins had

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[9] "EJI CRP Catalog," https://simplebooklet.com/crpcatalog.
[10] Arthur J. Jipson's findings as discussed by Paul R. Mullins, *Revolting Things: An Archaeology of Shameful Histories and Repulsive Realities* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2021), P. 72.

identified the place of Tompkins' burial as Floral Park Cemetery in Indianapolis.[11] When the IRC first discovered Tompkins' story, they attempted to seek out the exact location of his burial. After contacting Flanner Buchanan, the funeral home associated with Floral Park cemetery where Tompkins was laid to rest, it was discovered that his grave had never had a marker. After a thorough examination of their records, Flanner Buchanan identified the location of the unmarked grave and placed an orange flag at the site of Tompkins' grave in order for IRC members to be able to locate it. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Tompkins' grave, marked with an orange flag. The ground had been disturbed as part of the process of confirming that a marker had never been placed there. Credit: Philip Bremen

After this discovery, the IRC determined that the first order of business was to place a gravestone on the grave, as well as hold a funeral service of sorts in order to

[11] Mullins, "Forgotten Memorials."

memorialize Tompkins' life. Before anything else, though, the group had to decide what date to use for Tompkins' date of birth, which was to be placed, alongside his name and death date, on the gravestone. A notebook found with Tompkins at the time of his death identified his birth year as 1901, although Paul Mullins and other members of the IRC were inclined to believe that 1902 was the correct year of birth, because it matched the date of Tompkins' death certificate, as well as a 1910 census in Frankfort, Kentucky that listed his age as eight, though Mullins concedes that the reality of historic documents is often inconsistency of certain details.[12]

On March 12, 2022 at the Flanner Buchanan funeral home, near Floral Park cemetery, the IRC hosted a memorial service for Tompkins and a dedication of the tombstone. Speakers at the event included Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett and Chief Deputy Coroner for Marion County Alfie McGinty. During the ceremony, the greatest surprise for many of the attendees was an announcement made by Chief Deputy Coroner McGinty. The IRC had petitioned the coroner's office to change the manner of Tompkins' death from "suicide" to "homicide" in the official record. The chief coroner decided to change Tompkins' manner of death to homicide. After the emotional announcement, this news was received with a standing ovation from all those in attendance at the memorial service.

After the ceremony, a graveside service was held beside the newly unveiled headstone placed on Tompkins' grave. Almost one hundred years to the day his body was discovered in Riverside Park, George Tompkins' life and death were memorialized by a coalition of individuals from all walks of life. This memorial was covered by numerous

[12] Email correspondence with Paul Mullins and IRC members regarding the date for the tombstone, June 6, 2021.

news media outlets, such as CNN, NBC, WRTV Indianapolis, and Indianapolis' Black newspaper of record, the *Indianapolis Recorder*.[13] This reaction highlights the importance that these types of memorials have and the ways in which affected communities embrace the catharsis that goes alongside them.

[13] Ebrahimji, Alisha, "George Tompkins: A Black Man's Death Was Ruled a Suicide a Century Ago. A Coroner Now Says It Was a Lynching - CNN," CNN, March 16, 1922, https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/16/us/lynching-victim-george-tompkins-death-indiana-homicide/index.html; Li, David K., "Black Man's Death in Indiana Ruled a Lynching Nearly 100 Years Later," NBC News, March 14, 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/black-mans-death-indiana-ruled-lynching-nearly-100-years-later-rcna19955; Kaufman, Michelle, "Man's 1922 Lynching Death Ruled Homicide, Local Group Provides Headstone," WRTV Indianapolis, March 14, 2022, https://www.wrtv.com/news/local-news/mans-1922-lynching-death-ruled-homicide-local-group-provides-headstone; Fenwick, Tyler, "Lynching Victim Remembered 100 Years Later with Headstone, Corrected Death Certificate," *The Indianapolis Recorde*r, March 16, 2022, https://indianapolisrecorder.com/lynching-victim-remembered-100-years-later-with-headstone-corrected-death-certificate/.

The Life of George Tompkins

George Tompkins was born near Frankfort, Kentucky (Franklin County) at the turn of the twentieth century. Like many people whose stories have been largely lost in the passage of time, the exact details of his birth remain obscure. Tompkins was likely born either on November 23, 1901 or November 20, 1902.[14] The November 23, 1901 birth date came from the inside cover of a small notebook that was found with Tompkins at the time of his death. Tompkins' 1922 death certificate, however, listed November 20, 1902 as the year he was born. The death certificate also listed Tompkins' age as twenty years old, but if he had been born on November 20, 1902, he would have been nineteen when he was killed.[15] This author is inclined to believe that the 1901 birthdate from the notebook is the correct one, as the date was likely written in Tompkins' own hand, making Tompkins twenty at the time of his death.

Tompkins was the only known son of William Tompkins and Laura Basey.[16] According to a 1912 city directory for Frankfort, Kentucky, William Tompkins worked as a laborer, while Laura Basey worked as both a laundress and a cook.[17] At nine months old, George Tompkins was placed into the care of his maternal great aunt and uncle, Fannie and Robert Smith.[18] This blended family lived at 312 Second Street in Frankfort, Kentucky. According to the 1910 United States Census, Robert Smith made his living by performing odd jobs as a laborer, while Fannie Smith took in washing in her home. The census taker recorded that George Tompkins shared his aunt and uncle's home with five

[14] "Mystery in Death of Young Negro Unsolved," *The Indianapolis News*, March 17, 1922.
[15] George Tompkins, Death Certificate, Indiana, U.S., Death Certificates, 1899-2011, available on Ancestry.com.
[16] No evidence has been located that reveals whether Tompkins and Basey ever married.
[17] 1912 Frankfort KY City Directory, available on Ancestry.com
[18] "Mystery in Death of Young Negro Unsolved," *The Indianapolis News*, March 17, 1922.

cousins ranging in ages between sixteen and twenty-three. Another cousin, Robert Basey, who was likely the son of Tompkins' mother's brother, eighteen, also resided in the home. Tompkins, at eight years old, was the only person listed in the household as attending school.[19] Beyond this, there is not much to be gleaned about Tompkins' childhood from available records.

Robert and Fannie Smith moved their family north in 1920, settling in Indiana. Their move was part of a larger demographic shift happening in the United States known as the Great Migration, which would ultimately include the movement of around six million Black Americans from the South to the North between 1910-1970.[20] This demographic shift can be seen in Franklin County, Kentucky, where the Smith family resided, and from which they departed, during the first decade of the Great Migration. Between 1910 and 1920, the Black population of Franklin County dropped from 3,746 to 2,861; a decrease of about 24%. This is about five times the percent decrease of the white population in Franklin County over the same period of time, which was only about 5%.[21]

The Great Migration was fueled by availability of jobs and better compensation for those jobs as well as the hopes of escaping the brutal racial landscape of the former Confederacy.[22] The Northern United States was rapidly changing as industrialization

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[19] 1910 United States Federal Census, available on Ancestry.com. https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/7884/images/31111_4329921-00066?pId=8555137.
[20] "The Great Migration," https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration.
[21] Bureau of the Census, "Population 1910: Reports by States, with Statistics for Counties, Cities, and Other Civil Divisions," Census Report, Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Commerce, 1910); Bureau of the Census, "Population 1920: Composition and Characteristics of the Population by States," Census Report, Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920 (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Commerce, 1920), https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1922/dec/vol-03-population.html.
[22] Between 1877 and 1950, there were an estimated 4,084 deaths by lynching of African Americans in the American South. Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* (Montgomery, AL: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017).

transformed the economic landscape. Suddenly, industrialists were on the hunt for additional labor, an absolute necessity to keep their profits rising at a tidy pace. They did not need to look hard, though. Black migrants from the South viewed the industrialized Northern United States, as stated by historian Carole Marks, as a sort of "promised land;" far more promising at least than the mostly agrarian environment of the South.[23] The jobs and the necessary skills to carry out those jobs were many and varied. Hopeful migrants to the North could also have the opportunity to get paid almost double for their work and for fewer hours. Marks noted that "unskilled" laborers in Alabama "received $2.50 for a ten-hour day," whereas similar laborers in Illinois could make up to "$4.24 per nine-hour day."[24]

The new Black migrants also held a particular advantage over some of their white counterparts. Foreign-born white workers were a significant part of the workforce, but many struggled to learn English quickly while under the pressure of also performing a great deal of labor. In this capacity, Black American migrants, who already spoke the language, were often noted to be a better choice. As one packing company superintendent stated: "We can talk to a man and tell him what to do, where to go to do the work and how to do it, we can accomplish a whole lot more than if we had to send an individual with him constantly from place to place to show him how to do it."[25]

While Black migrants moving northward were excited at the prospect of better wages and a possible escape from southern racism, a lethal and oppressive force was rising in Indiana. The Ku Klux Klan was in the midst of a resurgence. Gone were the

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[23] Carole Marks, *Farewell, We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration*, *Blacks in the Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 110.
[24] Marks, *Farewell, We're Good and Gone,* 113.
[25] Marks, *Farewell, We're Good and Gone,* 114.

days of the Reconstruction-era Klan, but this new incarnation utilized a "100 percent American" approach, depicting themselves as the ultimate upholders of virtue and goodness in the state.[26] This Klan prided itself on 'respectability,' and upholding traditional, Protestant, white values. They railed against vices, especially the newly prohibited alcohol. This new Klan was anti-Catholic, anti-Jew, and, as much as their previous incarnations, decidedly anti-Black. They would accomplish their goals through violence, political savvy, and propaganda. It is also important to note that the KKK in 1920s Indiana held incredible political sway, so while Black migrants were attempting to make a new life for themselves in the state, KKK members or those loyal to their anti-everything-not-white-and-Protestant ways were doing everything in their power to make it all the more difficult.

In Indianapolis, Indiana, the Black population grew from 21,816 to 34,678 between 1910 and 1920; an increase of almost 60 percent.[27] Indianapolis was an exciting place for Black newcomers, especially those leaving behind rural farmsteads and sparsely populated counties. Black Indianapolis was thriving, and the center of Black life in the city was Indiana Avenue. The Avenue was the flourishing center of Black business and culture in Indianapolis. By 1920, Indiana Avenue had been the epicenter of Black culture and economic success in Indianapolis for almost fifty years and would remain so through the 1950s.[28] (Figure 2) George Tompkins' family settled just south of the Avenue at 1049 Holborn Street.

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[26] James H. Madison, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Heartland* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020), 84.
[27] Marks, *Farewell, We're Good and Gone,* 122.
[28] Wildstyle Paschall, "The Ethnic Cleansing of Black Indianapolis," New America, https://newamerica.org/indianapolis/blog/indiana-avenue-ethnic-cleansing-black-indianapolis/.

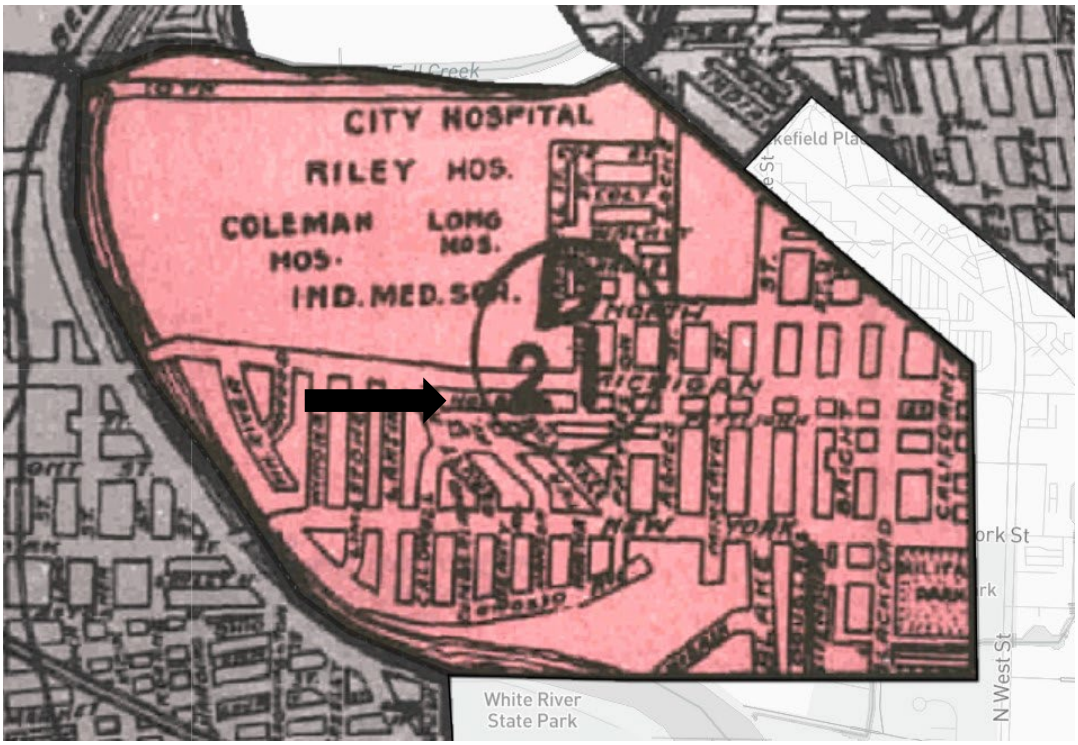

Figure 2. Home Owners' Loan Corporation map of Indianapolis, Tompkins' Area
According to a federally-mandated Home Owners' Loan Corporation map of Indianapolis in 1937, the area in which Tompkins lived was graded 'D' (the lowest rating), due to the Federal Housing Authority's discriminatory practice of labeling largely Black neighborhoods as "undesirable."[29] The "D" can be seen inside the circle at the center of the map. An arrow points to Holborn Street, where the Smiths had lived in 1922 (added by author). Although the map was produced 15 years later, the neighborhood was predominantly populated by Black Americans at the time the Smiths resided there. This area today is largely the IUPUI campus. Map from Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., "Mapping Inequality," *American Panorama*, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers.

One can only imagine the wonder and elation and possible fear that a teenaged Tompkins felt as he walked this urban, Black landscape for the first time in 1920. He had ventured far from the rolling hills of Kentucky into the hustle and bustle of a modern metropolis. In addition to likely frequenting the Black-owned businesses and shops along

[29] Camila Domonoske, "Interactive Redlining Map Zooms In On America's History Of Discrimination," *NPR*, October 19, 2016, sec. America, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/10/19/498536077/interactive-redlining-map-zooms-in-on-americas-history-of-discrimination.

the Avenue, Tompkins may have visited the famous jazz clubs there, joining countless others who flocked to hear the sounds of famous musicians traveling what was then known as the "Chitlin Circuit." The circuit was made up of Black-friendly music halls that covered the American South, Midwest, and parts of the East Coast. These venues provided a means for both Black musicians and their fans to play and appreciate the famous jazz music of the age.[30]

During his time in Indianapolis, Tompkins found employment at the Fairmount Glass Works, located at the intersection of Prospect Street and Keystone Avenue just southeast of downtown.[31] (Figure 3) Originally founded in Fairmount, Indiana, located around 60 miles northeast of Indianapolis, in 1889, the Fairmount Glass Works relocated to Indianapolis in 1906.[32] According to a 'Help Wanted' advertisement placed by the Fairmount Glass Works in *The Indianapolis Star* in 1920, they hired people of color and could be reached quite easily by trolley, stating "MEN, boys and colored girls. S. Keystone ave. and Belt railroad. Take Prospect car to end of line. FAIRMOUNT GLASS WORKS."[33] This combination of employment circumstances would have been attractive to an Indianapolis newcomer such as Tompkins: the company was known to hire people of color, located just south and east on the opposite side of downtown from where he lived, and could be traveled to without much trouble.

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[30] Richard K. Yu, "Chitlin' Circuit: Blues Culture and American Culture," *Medium*, May 14, 2018, https://medium.com/@richardkyu/chitlin-circuit-blues-culture-and-american-culture-785c913d5add.
[31] "Disagree Over Death Solution," *Indianapolis Star*, March 18, 1922; "Fairmount Glass Works, Bottles of All Kinds, Indianapolis," Indiana Historical Society, 1925, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/dc013/id/1055.
[32] Indiana Historical Society, "Fairmount Glass Works, Bottles of All Kinds, Indianapolis."
[33] "Help Wanted," *The Indianapolis Star*, April 26, 1920.

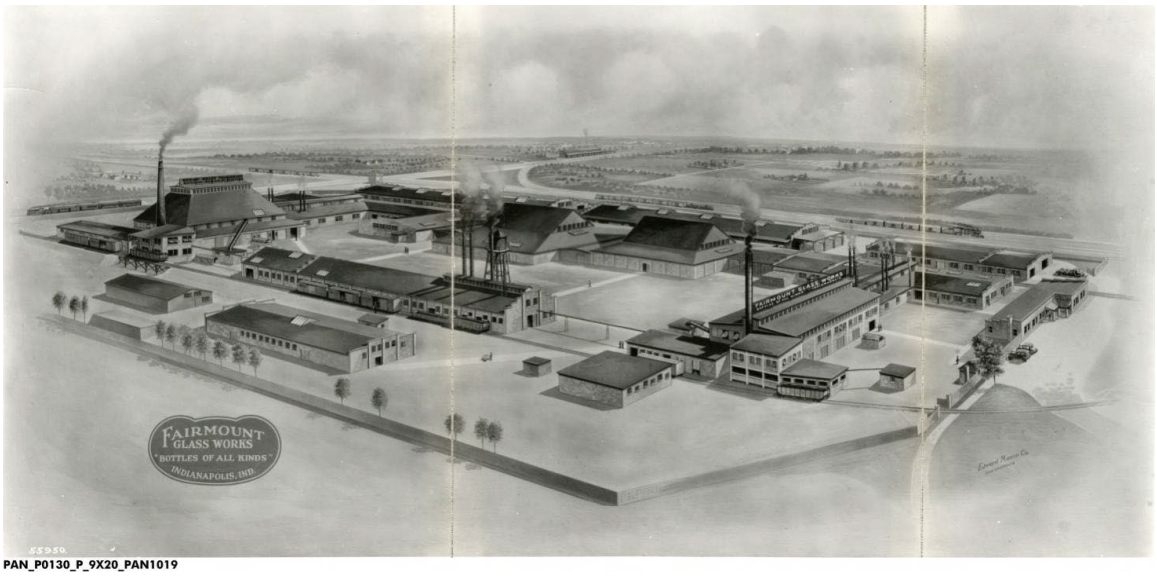

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Figure 3. Drawing of Fairmount Glass Works, circa 1925. Courtesy of Indiana Historical Society Panoramic Photograph Collection.

Tompkins' exact position at the glassworks is unknown. It was common for young male workers in a glass factory to be manual laborers, but experience could lead to quick upward momentum to higher paid positions in the facility. Wages were also slightly higher at glass factories compared to other positions for manual laborers at the time due to the work environment, and a typical work week would have been fifty hours or more. Working at the factory was a difficult affair, with high temperatures and possible hazards resulting in injuries, such as third-degree burns.[34] Tompkins had been on a leave of sorts from the glassworks at the time of his death. He had informed his uncle that he was going to "lay off" for a time, but was intending on returning to work on Wednesday, March 22nd.[35]

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[34] "All About Glass," Corning Museum of Glass, https://www.cmog.org/article/jobs-19th-century-glass-factory.

[35] "Still Seek Motive in Negro's Hanging at Riverside Park," *Indianapolis Times (Indianapolis Daily Times)*, March 17, 1922, https://newspapers.library.in.gov/?a=d&d=IPT19220317&dliv=userclipping&cliparea=1.1%2C1789%2C4536%2C1541%2C1873&factor=8&e=------192-en-20--1--txt-txIN-%22George+Tompkins%22------.

The Lynching of George Tompkins

For two years, George Tompkins lived and worked in the city of Indianapolis, until his death on March 16, 1922. On that Thursday morning, Tompkins left the residence on Holborn Street around 7:30. Tompkins' family later noted that he was in "good spirits" when he departed the residence.[36] In the early afternoon that same day, a white man named Joseph Bostar was walking through what was then known as Glendale Park (Riverside Park today) when he made a grisly discovery: the body of an unidentified Black man in a small thicket of trees.[37] Bostar immediately fled to the nearby Casino Gardens and contacted authorities. Upon their arrival, he led them back to the scene.[38] (Figure 4)

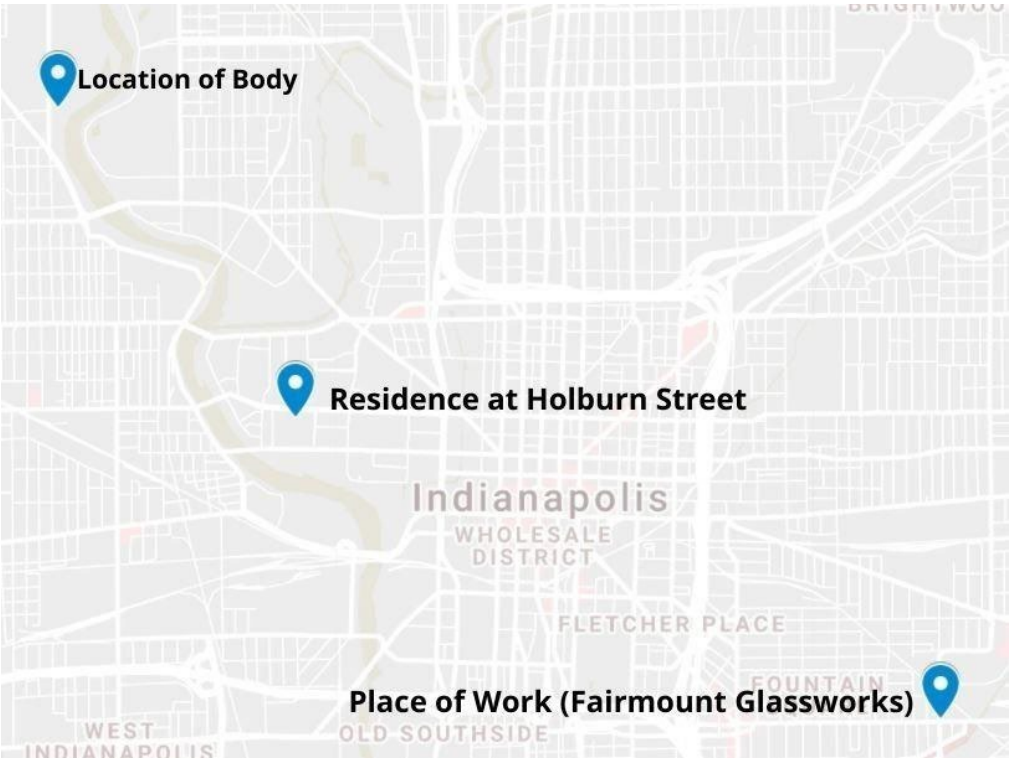

Figure 4. Map of Indianapolis showing locations of Holborn Residence, Fairmount Glassworks, and where Tompkins' body was discovered.

[36] "Disagree Over Death Solution," *Indianapolis Star,* 1922.
[37] "Mystery in Death of Young Negro Unsolved," *Indianapolis News*, 1922.
[38] "Believe Body Was Dragged Over Ground," *Indianapolis Star,* 1922.

Initial investigations performed by the first officials on the scene, Sargent Deeter and Detectives Darnaby and Marren, suggested murder of some kind, although some officials suggested suicide as the cause of death initially as well.[39] As an enormous part of this story is to prove that Tompkins' death was a result of homicide and not suicide, some discussion of the details of Tompkins' death and crime scene is necessary. In following with Crabtree's methodology, each detail showing that homicide was the cause of death will be discussed only once and with respect to the deceased.

From newspaper articles published at the time of his death, there is a wealth of evidence pointing to the fact that George Tompkins was murdered and did not take his own life. Three main points highlight the impossibility of Tompkins dying by suicide. First, Tompkins' feet were "resting on the ground" when he was discovered.[40] It was also noted by another outlet that the branch the rope was tied to "was very small, hardly large enough to bear the weight of the body."[41] Second, when his body was discovered, Tompkins' hands were bound behind his back.[42] Multiple outlets reported that not only were his hands bound with a handkerchief, but that the material was "not tight," but in a "hard knot." Detectives initially investigating the scene noted that "it was impossible for Tompkins to have committed suicide… from the way his hands were tied."[43]Third, small branches were removed from the tree "apparently with a small pen knife" on the portion of the trunk where Tompkins' body was placed.[44] Combining these three points, the coroner, Dr. Paul F. Robinson, who was on the scene when Tompkins' body was

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[39] "Believe Body Was Dragged Over Ground," *Indianapolis Star,* 1922.
[40] "Mystery in Death of Young Negro Unsolved," *The Indianapolis News*, March 17, 1922.
[41] "Believe Body Was Dragged Over Ground," *Indianapolis Star*, March 17, 1922.
[42] "Mystery in Death of Young Negro Unsolved," *The Indianapolis News*, March 17, 1922.
[43] "Still Seek Motive in Negro's Hanging at Riverside Park," *Indianapolis Times (Indianapolis Daily Times)*, March 17, 1922.
[44] "Mystery in Death of Young Negro Unsolved," *The Indianapolis News*, March 17, 1922.

discovered, stated that he believed that Tompkins had been murdered and tied to the tree after death. He noted that "the man could not have hanged himself."[45]

An *Indianapolis Star* article from March 17, 1922 stated that some police officers had suggested that Tompkins was killed following "an attack on a white woman," though the paper stated that they had investigated and determined there had not been any such reports made the previous evening. The accusation that Tompkins' may have attacked a white woman related to a much larger issue: the then-prevailing white narrative that Black men who were lynched had been killed in the defense a white woman they had somehow wronged. According to historian Crystal N. Feimster of Yale University, Reconstruction-era white men worked diligently to portray Black men as "beastly" and establish the narrative of the "Black rapist." In doing so, they sought to "justify the practice of lynching."[46] In fact, some Southern politicians pushed back against passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, a failed piece of anti-lynching legislation working through Congress in 1922, by stating that lynchings were a response to the rape of white women, and legislation surrounding lynchings should be left in the hands of the states.[47] This notion had been disproven decades before by anti-lynching crusader and investigative journalist Ida B. Wells, who found that the majority of Black men who were lynched "were never accused or rape but died for a variety of real or concocted offenses."[48] Like numerous victims before him, white authorities attempted to somehow smear Tompkins'

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[45] "Mystery in Death of Young Negro Unsolved," *The Indianapolis News*, March 17, 1922.
[46] Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.
[47] Megan Ming Francis, ed., "Anti-Lynching Legislation and the Sinking of the Republican Ship in Congress," in *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 98–126, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139583749.004.
[48] Mary Jane Brown, "Advocates in the Age of Jazz: Women and the Campaign for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill," *Peace & Change* 28, no. 3 (July 2003): 378–419, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0130.00268.

reputation with baseless accusations of an attack. Unlike those victims, however, Tompkins' was immediately cleared of this thanks to due diligence from reporters at the *Star*.

Most of the coverage that this story received came from one of two of the white newspapers in Indianapolis, the *Indianapolis Star* and the *Indianapolis Daily News*. In a time when a huge quantity of newspapers were tied to political parties and therefore beholden to particular political agendas and party lines, both the *Star* and the *Daily News* were labeled as independent, deliberately placing themselves in a position to report the happenings of their cities in as unbiased a manner as possible.[49] Indianapolis' most well-

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[49] Beth Murphy and Jyoti A. Verderame, "Indianapolis Star," in *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis* (Indianapolis, IN, 2021), https://indyencyclopedia.org/indianapolis-star/. In the case of the aforementioned Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, for example, both newspapers dedicated multiple articles over the entirety of 1922 reporting the current news tied to its journey through the House of Representatives and the Senate, as well as the debate between the Republican and Democratic parties. From January to December of 1922, this author located fourteen articles in the *Indianapolis Star* tracking the debates of the bill, its passage in the House, and its ultimate failure due to usage of filibustering by Southern Democrats in the Senate. By contrast, only three articles are available from that same time period from the *Indianapolis News* referencing the bill, one each in May, July, and August, which appear to focus on specific political actors, rather than the bill itself or passage thereof. "House Debates on Dyer Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 5 Jan 1922; "The Anti-Lynching Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 10 Jan 1922; "State's Rights Fight Revived," *Indianapolis Star*, 19 Jan 1922; "Democrats in House to Fight Dyer Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 22 Jan 1922; "Anti-Lynching Debate Closes," *Indianapolis Star,* 26 Jan 1922; "House Passes Lynching Bill: Eight Democrats and 222 Republicans Vote Aye-Fixes Drastic Penalties," *Indianapolis Star,* 27 Jan 1922; "Lynching Bill May Hit Rocks," *Indianapolis Star,* 18 Feb 1922;"An Explanation is Due Colored Men and Women," *Indianapolis Star,* 30 Apr 1922; "Leash of Restive Solons Slated for Slash Late Today: Lynching Bill Foes Win," *Indianapolis Star,* 22 Sept 1922; "President May Call Special Session Nov. 20," *Indianapolis Star,* 14 Oct 1922; "President Calls Session of Congress for Nov. 20: Important Bills Left Over," *Indianapolis Star,* 10 Nov 1922; "Filibuster Halts Anti-Lynching Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 29 Nov 1922; "G.O.P. Despairs of Passing Dyer Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 30 Nov 1922; "May Abandon Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 2 Dec 1922. "House Debates on Dyer Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 5 Jan 1922; "The Anti-Lynching Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 10 Jan 1922; "State's Rights Fight Revived," *Indianapolis Star*, 19 Jan 1922; "Democrats in House to Fight Dyer Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 22 Jan 1922; "Anti-Lynching Debate Closes," *Indianapolis Star,* 26 Jan 1922; "House Passes Lynching Bill: Eight Democrats and 222 Republicans Vote Aye-Fixes Drastic Penalties," *Indianapolis Star,* 27 Jan 1922; "Lynching Bill May Hit Rocks," *Indianapolis Star,* 18 Feb 1922;"An Explanation is Due Colored Men and Women," *Indianapolis Star,* 30 Apr 1922; "Leash of Restive Solons Slated for Slash Late Today: Lynching Bill Foes Win," *Indianapolis Star,* 22 Sept 1922; "President May Call Special Session Nov. 20," *Indianapolis Star,* 14 Oct 1922; "President Calls Session of Congress for Nov. 20: Important Bills Left Over," *Indianapolis Star,* 10 Nov 1922; "Filibuster Halts Anti-Lynching Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 29 Nov 1922; "G.O.P. Despairs of Passing Dyer Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 30 Nov 1922; "May Abandon Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill," *Indianapolis Star,* 2 Dec 1922.

known and continuing Black newspaper, the *Indianapolis Recorder*, would have likely reported on the case of George Tompkins. Unfortunately, historians at this point in time cannot say. This is due to the fact that the issues from the years 1917-1925 are missing from the historic record, and unavailable in any archive. It is unfortunate that we, therefore, must rely on entirely white voices in regards to the newspapers available from the time.[50]

It was a March 17, 1922, article from the *Indianapolis Daily Times* that described the most details regarding George Tompkins' life of any article so far located. It detailed his parentage and how he came to be in the care of his aunt and uncle, when he arrived in Indianapolis from Kentucky, the makeup of his family, and detailed his time off of work. This is also the only article in which a photograph of Tompkins was included, and is the only photograph of Tompkins that has been located by this author. (Figure 5) Tompkins' photograph is inset on a larger one depicting the sapling from which his body was hanged, emphasizing his death, rather than his life, as being the significant part of Tompkins' story.[51]

[50] "Indianapolis Recorder," IUPUI University Library, https://ulib.iupui.edu/digitalcollections/IRecorder.
[51] "Still Seek Motive in Negro's Hanging at Riverside Park," *Indianapolis Daily Times.*

Figure 5. Photograph from *Indianapolis Daily Times* depicting scene where Tompkins' body was discovered with small photograph of Tompkins (the only known depiction of Tompkins) inset. March 17, 1922, 13.

That same day–March 17– a *Chicago Tribune* headline shouted in all caps, "INDIANA YOUTH FOUND HANGED; HINT LYNCHING," The short article described the crime and stated that the coroner's report revealed that the cause of death was "strangulation," and that detectives at that time on March 17 believed that he had died "at the hands of a lynching party."[52] The *Tribune* made no mention of any suicide theories, accepted that Tompkins had been murdered, and that it was likely he had been the victim of racial terror violence.

[52] "Indiana Youth Found Hanged; Hint Lynching," *Chicago Tribune*, March 17, 1922.

In Indianapolis, concern about labeling the crime a lynching arose from the local branch of the NAACP. Harry D. Evans, a salesman for the Madam C.J. Walker Company in Indianapolis, was the chairperson for the local chapter of the NAACP. While the local chapter would truly hit its stride two years later in 1924 in response to the rising tide of Klan activity, Evans with his salesman charm and endless energy was ever on the watch for threats to the Black community of Indianapolis.[53] Evans' hesitancy to label the crime a lynching is evidenced in a letter he wrote on March 18 (two days after the crime) to Walter White, Assistant Secretary at the national headquarters of the NAACP in New York City. "They [the newspapers] have taken something that on the surface appears to be a murder and played it up in a lynching style," wrote Evans.[54]

His letter went on to list the details circulating about the crime: there were no leads as to who committed the murder or when the crime occurred; the positioning of the body showed that Tompkins likely was not killed at the site where his body was discovered; the loops of rope binding Tompkins' were not tight and could have possibly been removed if Tompkins had been alive or conscious when he was bound; the tree where he was found could not have held Tompkins' entire weight. Evans also noted that Tompkins' history and reputation did not give any indication that he had any enemies. Evans outlined the actions taken by the local NAACP branch, which included appointing a committee to speak with the mayor, as well as a personal assurance that the branch

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[53] James H. Madison, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Heartland* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020), 121.

[54] Indiana Historical Society, "Walker Company Contract with Harry D. Evans, October 20, 1919" (Madam C.J. Walker Collection, Indiana Historical Society, October 20, 1919), M0399_Box7_Folder18_002, Indiana Historical Society, https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/m0399/id/6344; Harry D. Evans, "Letter from Harry D. Evans to Mr. Walter White," March 18, 1922, Indiana University Bloomington, NAACP Papers, Proquest.

would protest against any "misleading headlines and stories" from newspapers referring to the crime as a lynching.[55]

Evans' quote that it was a murder "played… up" as a lynching raises an important question: what is the difference between a lynching and a murder? Today, the NAACP defines a lynching as "the public killing of an individual who has not received any due process."[56] According to this definition, George Tompkin's murder would not be defined as a lynching, as it occurred outside of the eye of the public. Similarly, *Lynching Sites Project of Memphis* defines a lynching as "a killing committed outside of the law, by a group [generally taken to mean three or more persons], done under the pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition." This definition originated in the 1940 Tuskegee Institute's meeting of anti-lynching activists, and according to Lynching Sites of Memphis, remains the standard definition today.[57] While this definition leaves out the public aspect, Tompkins' murder would not fit into its parameters either, as the motivations and numbers of whoever committed this crime were never uncovered.

Other recent work has attempted to expand the definition of lynching to include more Black men and women who were murdered as a result of white supremacist violence. The Equal Justice Initiative argues that only two perpetrators need to have

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[55] Evans, "Letter from Harry D. Evans to Mr. Walter White," March 18, 1922.
[56] NAACP, "What are Lynchings?" https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america.
[57] Further discussing this definition, the Lynching Sites of Memphis argues that it is critical to have a common definition of lynching: "No one has ever claimed that this is a perfect definition, but activists at the time and academics more recently have used it in order to provide clarity and consistency. There is now a large body of research based on this definition and it is unusual for scholarly studies of lynching to use any other definition. One reason for this is that if we all use the same definition of lynching, our data will be comparable across different periods of time and different places, allowing for statistical analysis that looks at the causes of lynching, comparisons of high and low rate areas, and the lingering effects of lynching on modern racially tinged practices. None of this can be done without a commonly used working definition." "About the Definition of Lynching," The Lynching Sites Project of Memphis, https://lynchingsitesmem.org/lynching/definition. As discussed, however, others are at work to broaden the definition of lynching.

committed an act for it to be categorized as a lynching.[58] In *Hostile Heartland: Racism, Repression, and Resistance in the Midwest*, historian Brent M.S. Campney accounts for lynchings that took place outside of the public eye. He argues that as lynching came to be seen as unacceptable in modern society in the 1920s, that these acts moved "underground" in "midwestern cities of any size," committed outside of public view with the only evidence of the event being a missing person or a recovered body. Campney states that whites "now understood that lynching had largely lost its legitimacy." If individuals wanted to carry out this type of crime, they had to do so covertly, lest they be subjected to public scrutiny and criminal charges for their crimes.[59] George Tompkins' death fits neatly into Campney's understanding of an underground lynching.

In his reply to Evans a week after the crime, Walter White congratulated Evans on his handling of the event, but added a suggestion: "When" the police announced that the crime was a murder and not a lynching, the local branch needed to put out a story that corroborated that finding, White recommended, "so that Indianapolis will not have the stain of a lynching on its record." White did not address this, but it is important to note that Indianapolis already had not one, but two, separate lynching incidents staining its record for quite some time.[60]

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[58] Gabrielle Daniels, Equal Justice Initiative Zoom meeting with members of the Indiana Remembrance Coalition, March 3, 2022 (attended by Rebecca K. Shrum).
[59] Brett M.S. Campney, *Hostile Heartland: Racism, Repression, and Resistance in the Midwest* (Champaign, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 174-80.
[60] Walter White, "Letter from Walter White to Mr. Harry D. Evans," March 21, 1922, Indiana University Bloomington, NAACP Papers, Proquest. While White was likely talking about wanting Indianapolis to avoid being associated with a lynching in the present moment, Indianapolis had been the location of at least two previous lynchings: In 1840, John W. Wilson, a "mulatto" man, married a white woman, Sophia Spears. After news of the marriage spread, a crowd gathered outside of their residence. According to some accounts, Wilson was simply chased out of town. According to others, however, Wilson was lynched by the mob, with "a hole cut through the ice… [accounting] for his absence." Just five years later, John Tucker, a Black man, was attacked by a mob on Independence Day in broad daylight. Members of the mob hurled detritus and calls for death at Tucker, who was killed as he attempted to escape. On these events, see: "Indiana. Our Readers Know That Arnold Buffum...," *The Liberator (Boston, Massachusetts)*,

At first glance, the fact that both the white detectives and the local NAACP chapter members were on the same page in ensuring that Tompkins' death was not referred to as a lynching seems an unlikely case of allyship. However, further research shows that the city of Indianapolis and the local branch of the NAACP had converging interests in keeping Indianapolis' supposedly pristine record clean.

In 1922, the Indianapolis branch of the NAACP was not yet ten years old. It had been founded nine years prior by Mary Cable, then president of the Colored Women's Civic Club, and all of the officers were also women. Almost a year later, the women asked Black men in the community to take over as the men "had more time."[61] The 1920s were an incredibly busy period for the fledgling chapter. While anti-lynching was a concern, there was also the constant fight for fair housing rights for Black citizens, anti-segregation work and the fight to keep Black students in schools alongside their white counterparts, and the ever-looming and ever-rising tide of Klan activity both locally and statewide.[62] With all of these enormous, systemic issues facing Black citizens of Indianapolis, it is possible that the lynching of a young, Black man from out of town seemed more of a thorn in the side of the organization, rather than a possible rallying cry. In fact, in the days prior to Tompkins' death, the branch was fighting against the Klan.

On March 15, 1922, the Indianapolis Board of Public Works had held a meeting to make an important decision. The Ku Klux Klan had arranged for rental of Tomlinson

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February 21, 1840; "Yesterday Morning, Mr. Johnson Presented the Petition of Sophia Spears, the White Female, Who Recently, in This Town, Connected Herself in Marriage with a Light Mulatto Man, Praying a Divorce," *Richmond Weekly Palladium*, February 15, 1840; Brent Campney, *Hostile Heartland*, 27; "Marion County Circuit Court," *Indiana State Sentinel*, August 13, 1845; "Mob in Indiana," *The Liberator*, August 8, 1845.

[61] "Branch History," NAACP 3053 Website, accessed July 1, 2022, https://www.indynaacp.org/branch-history.

[62] "Branch History," NAACP 3053 Website, accessed July 1, 2022, https://www.indynaacp.org/branch-history.

Hall, a public meeting house located on the corner where Delaware Street and Market Street intersected, for Saturday, March 17, 1922. However, after a suggestion by the city's legal counsel, Taylor E. Groniger, the Board moved to reverse their decision. The use of the public space by the Klan was declared "against public policy" and risked possible "race and class feeling" among local citizens.[63] This presented a timeline where the Klan meeting was cancelled on the 15th and a young, Black man was found lynched the following day. Could a group of angry whites have decided to take out their frustrations on a young Black man walking alone near a wooded area?

All of this provides the backdrop to the unlikely alignment of desires of white and Black political figures of Indianapolis in ensuring Tompkins' death not be labeled a lynching. What would drive political leaders on opposing sides to work together? The likely answer is preservation of Indianapolis' image as a modern and sophisticated city. The white figureheads of Indianapolis did not want the city to be seen as one where violence could happen in broad daylight. The influx of Black migrants from the American South provided the city with a large labor force, which kept Indianapolis on the path toward economic prosperity and industrial progress. The Black community, namely the leaders of the local branch of the NAACP, also wanted to ensure that Indianapolis was not seen as violent or a place where Black newcomers would be unsafe. In order to keep their political clout on the rise and the Black community thriving, Evans and his colleagues needed to keep a case of lynching out of the spotlight. If Black migrants were

[63] "Board of Works Bars Klan from Tomlinson Hall," *The Indianapolis Star*, March 16, 1922, Morning edition; Madison, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Heartland,* 115.

frightened of the city, they would bypass Indianapolis, moving north to Chicago or Detroit instead, where Klan membership had not yet peaked.[64]

Regardless of the opinions of the Coroner, members of the police force, much of the press, and the NAACP of Indianapolis, the undated death certificate issued by the coroner's office agreed with the detectives on the case who argued that Tompkins committed suicide. (Figure 6) This meant that the white authorities chose to believe that Tompkins took his own life by tying his own hands behind his back before strangling himself with the rope tied about his neck.[65] The cause of death was listed as "strangulation by hanging from the neck." Although the contributory line showed the word OPEN having been written in at first, it was later crossed out and "verdict suicide" written in handwriting unlike that of the rest of the certificate. Signed by Dr. George R. Christian, the verdict of suicide held and investigations into Tompkins' death ceased.[66] In the end, the NAACP did not have to ensure his death was not declared a lynching. The white authorities did not need to repair a damaged city reputation. Declaring Tompkins' death a suicide seemed to have fixed any problems before they even started.

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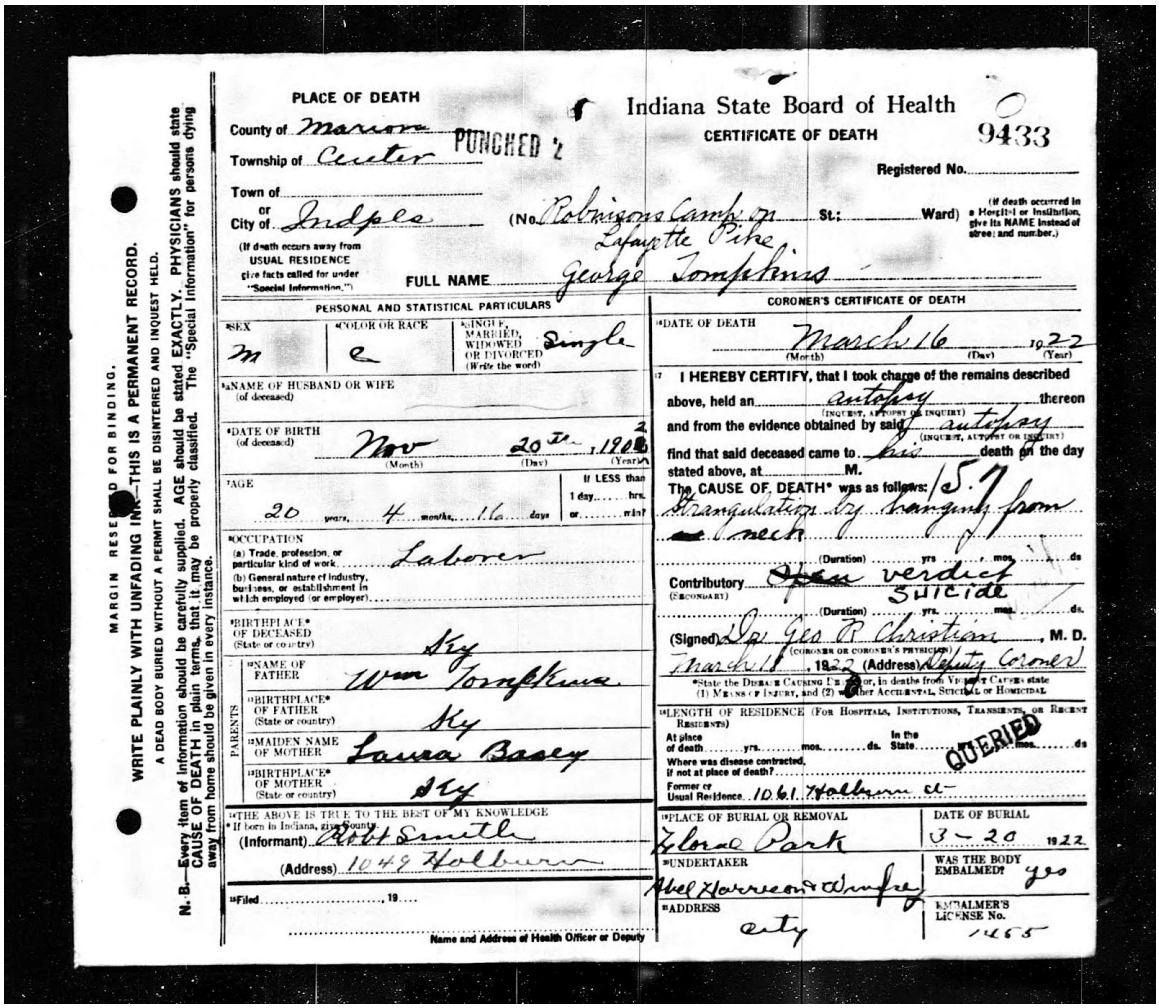
[64] "See the Rise of the KKK in the U.S., 1915-1940," Mapping the Second Ku Klux Klan, 1915-1940, https://labs.library.vcu.edu/klan/.
[65] "Mystery in Death of Young Negro Unsolved," *The Indianapolis News*, March 17, 1922.
[66] State of Indiana, "Indiana State Board of Health Certificate of Death of George Tompkins," March 20, 1922.



MARGIN RESERVED FOR BINDING.
WRITE PLAINLY WITH UNFADING INK. THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD.
A DEAD BODY BURIED WITHOUT A PERMIT SHALL BE DISINTERRED AND INQUEST HELD.
N. B.—Every item of information should be carefully supplied. AGE should be stated EXACTLY. PHYSICIANS should state CAUSE OF DEATH in plain terms, that it may be properly classified. The "Special Information" for persons dying away from home should be given in every instance.

PLACE OF DEATH
County of Marion PUNCHED 2
Township of Center
Town of
or
City of Indpls (No. Robinsons Camp on Lafayette Pike St.; Ward) (If death occurred in a Hospital or Institution, give its NAME instead of street and number.)
(If death occurs away from USUAL RESIDENCE give facts called for under "Special Information.")
FULL NAME George Tompkins

Indiana State Board of Health
CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
9433
Registered No.

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS
SEX: M
COLOR OR RACE: C
SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED OR DIVORCED (Write the word): Single
NAME OF HUSBAND OR WIFE (of deceased)
DATE OF BIRTH (of deceased): Nov (Month) 20th (Day) 1900 (Year)
AGE: 20 years, 4 months, 16 days; If LESS than 1 day hrs. or min.
OCCUPATION (a) Trade, profession, or particular kind of work: Laborer (b) General nature of industry, business, or establishment in which employed (or employer):
BIRTHPLACE OF DECEASED (State or country): Ky
PARENTS
NAME OF FATHER: Wm Tompkins
BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (State or country): Ky
MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER: Laura Basey
BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (State or country): Ky
THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE
If born in Indiana, give county
(Informant) Robt Smith
(Address) 1049 Holburn
Filed ....., 19....
Name and Address of Health Officer or Deputy

CORONER'S CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
DATE OF DEATH: March 16 (Month) (Day) 1922 (Year)
I HEREBY CERTIFY, that I took charge of the remains described above, held an autopsy (INQUEST, AUTOPSY OR INQUIRY) thereon and from the evidence obtained by said autopsy (INQUEST, AUTOPSY OR INQUIRY) find that said deceased came to his death on the day stated above, at M.
The CAUSE OF DEATH* was as follows: 1 5 7
Strangulation by hanging from a tree
(Duration) yrs. mos. ds.
Contributory (SECONDARY) verdict suicide
(Duration) yrs. mos. ds.
(Signed) Dr. Geo P. Christian, M. D. (CORONER OR CORONER'S PHYSICIAN)
March 18 1922 (Address) Deputy Coroner
*State the DISEASE CAUSING DEATH, or, in deaths from VIOLENT CAUSES state (1) MEANS OF INJURY, and (2) whether ACCIDENTAL, SUICIDAL or HOMICIDAL
LENGTH OF RESIDENCE (FOR HOSPITALS, INSTITUTIONS, TRANSIENTS, OR RECENT RESIDENTS)
At place of death yrs. mos. ds. In the State yrs. mos. ds.
Where was disease contracted, if not at place of death?
Former or Usual Residence 1061 Holburn ave
QUERIED
PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL: Glore Park
DATE OF BURIAL: 3-20 1922
UNDERTAKER: Abel Harrison & Wimpfer
ADDRESS: city
WAS THE BODY EMBALMED? yes
EMBALMER'S LICENSE No. 1465

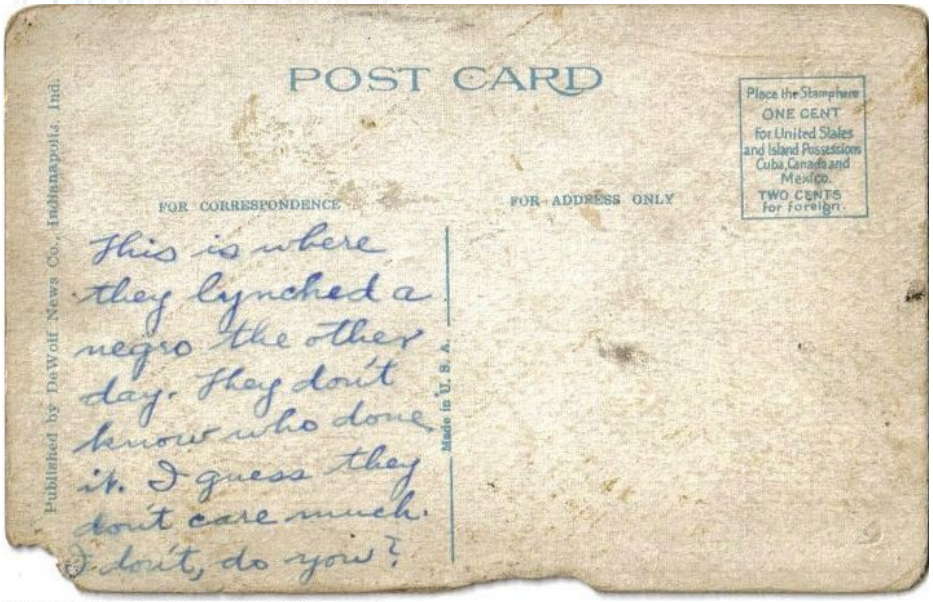
Figure 6. George Tompkins' original death certificate issued by the Marion County Coroner's Office in Indianapolis, Indiana.

There were only two mentions of Tompkins after this point. First, there was a paragraph in the *Indianapolis Star* in April, 1923, titled "Year's Baffling Killings." The paper noted that numerous individuals believed that Tompkins had been "strangled and had been carried to the place" but that detectives "declared Tompkins had committed suicide."[67] The second was an undated postcard. (Figure 7) It provided a clue that Indianapolis whites knew that Tompkins' death had actually been a lynching. A postcard

[67] "Year's Baffling Killings," *Indianapolis Star*, April 26, 1923, 8.

depicting Riverside Park where Tompkins' body was discovered had a note added that stated that a lynching had occurred there. The sender of the postcard stated that a lynching had occurred at the park and the assailants had not yet been caught, suggesting that it might have been sent fairly closely in time to the 1922 lynching. That we know the postcard sender was white comes from the racist sentiment expressed when the author wrote, "They don't know who done it. I guess they don't care much. I don't, do you?"

The Indiana Album: Mike Stehlin Collection



The Indiana Album: Mike Stehlin Collection

Figure 7. Front of postcard depicting boats on the river (top) and back of postcard with script reading, "This is where they lynched a negro the other day. They don't know who done it. I guess they don't care much. I don't, do you?" (bottom). Courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society.

Although the perpetrators of the lynching of George Tompkins were never identified, let alone brought to justice, recent work by the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project can help us better understand why and how his death was named as a suicide. This project has uncovered over twenty cases between 1930 and 1956 where

Black men were killed by lynching and white officials declared their deaths to be suicides. Two of the cases identified by this group, those of Ab Young and Felix Hall– share striking similarities with Tompkins' story.[68] In both of these cases, there was clear evidence that the victims were killed at the hands of another person (or several other people) and a determination of suicide as the cause of death by coroners.

In the case of Mississippian Ab Young, who was killed in 1935, numerous local newspapers detailed his lynching at the hands of a white mob, with some reports even going so far as to say that Young was allowed to say a prayer before he was killed.[69] Despite this media storm, Young's death was declared a suicide.[70] Just a few days after the lynching, Young's story disappeared from the newspaper reports. What was front page news in the days following his death disappeared completely by a week after. It was as if the declaration of suicide effectively ended the promise made by the prosecuting attorney, E.C. Wright, to investigate and discover "those responsible for the lynching."[71]

Felix Hall, killed in 1941, was discovered near a ravine, hanging with his hands bound behind his back, after having been missing for over a month. Hall had been a Private in the U.S. Army at the time of his death, which took place at the then segregated military base, Fort Benning, in Georgia.[72] Newspaper reports after the fact stated that his death could have been a lynching or a suicide, but those reports also neglected to mention

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[68] The final report from this project has not been released. The two cases from the project included here were discussed in Stacey Patton, "Perspective | Police Say Deaths of Black People by Hanging Are Suicides. Many Black People Aren't so Sure," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/22/black-victims-hanging-suicide/.
[69] "Lynch Party Being Probed," *Clarion-Ledger*, March 14, 1935; "Negro Found Lynched in School Yard," *Sun Herald*, March 13, 1935.
[70] Patton, "Perspective."
[71] "Lynch Party Being Probed." *Clarion-Ledger.*
[72] Jacey Fortin and Alexa Millis, "Felix Hall, a Soldier Lynched at Fort Benning, Is Remembered After 80 Years," *New York Times*, August 20, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/us/felix-hall-soldier-lynching-wwii.html.

the detail regarding Hall's hands being bound.[73] Even a military doctor who performed an autopsy on Young declared his death a homicide, going so far as to put homicide as his cause of death. The official military declaration, however, was suicide.[74] Again, no mention of the official declaration of suicide appeared in the paper; no further investigation was undertaken.

Tompkins' case and those of Young and Hall beg the questions: who was this declaration of suicide for and why did a declaration of suicide end any mention of their cases in the newspapers? Were the declarations made to silence community dissent? Did associated shame with suicide silence Black community members? How aware were members of the larger Black and white communities in these places that the final verdict of death was suicide? Without the ability to ask, we cannot truly know the answers to those questions.

[73] "Missing Soldier Found Dead Near Fort Benning GA.," *Statesville Daily Record*, April 9, 1941; "His Death a Mystery," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 26, 1941; "Dead Soldier Revealed as Montgomery Youth," *The Huntsville Times*, April 8, 1941.
[74] Patton, Stacey, "Perspective."

Conclusion

Memorializing the life and death of a Black young man killed by lynching can seem an incredibly complicated thing. How do historians move past the divides and push back against those that want this past to remain buried? First, this difficult history must be acknowledged. The fact is that the structures that contributed to these brutal and violent events still exist, and that those structures work to benefit white people above all. Historians must work to examine ourselves and those around us to dismantle those structures, to move against them thoughtfully and actively, to be not just not-racist, but *anti*-racist.

Today, George Tompkins is no longer forgotten. By pushing back against previous narratives of the end of his life, George Tompkins' life, death, and legacy can tell a larger story of the ways that politics and prejudice can alter historical events and their ramifications for decades. For one hundred years, George Tompkins was silenced. He is silent no longer.

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