

Friends of the Library Excellence in Research Award
Process Paper | Emma Bredthauer | T01303718
September 2019

I have written many research papers at Oberlin, but the project I am writing about today is the first that truly showed me how thrilling the research process is. I was often uncomfortable excavating the archive: I had to ask for favors that felt too big, shine a light on facts that felt too ugly, ask questions that felt too invasive. But I never wanted to turn back, emboldened by the thought that every human being alive today is a product of choices made by people now dead, choices that we cannot understand without dusting off the traces they left behind. Our physical bodies, social systems, implicit attitudes, and cultural landscapes are projects we build collaboratively with the dead. And it is imperative that we understand the dead's contribution to this inheritance—not to predict the future, but to give us the full range of choice to alter its influence in the present.

I cannot think of a project that better illustrates this idea than the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). I did not know much about the EJI until Alicia D'Addario, one of the EJI's lawyers, gave a lecture on campus last spring. D'Addario's presentation showed that the EJI is doing all it can to expose and rectify the anti-black racism embedded firmly within the criminal justice system: it offers pro-bono representation for victims of a racist law enforcement system, disseminates materials that demonstrate the link between yesterday's race-based slavery and today's racist justice system, and invites localities across America to reckon with their own histories of anti-black violence. One element of D'Addario's presentation stunned me in particular—the EJI map displaying where and how many racial terror lynchings occurred in a given county across America. The more lynchings that occur in a certain area, the darker red that county appears. Ohio was covered in red spots—and one spot was right next to Lorain County.

I banded together a group of my classmates—me, Claire Stevenson, and Bethany Gen—to research this explosive act of racial terror, in which William Taylor was lynched by a mob in Sandusky, Ohio in 1878. We wanted to investigate how the fingerprint of this moment bears on life in Sandusky today. We ultimately did not have time to complete an ethnographic analysis, though we were able to collect field research, including interviews with Sandusky law enforcement. The

questions our research engaged were what happened, why did it happen? For secondary research, my focus was racial violence in Ohio. Articles that I found most clarifying were "Race, Sex, and Riot: The Springfield, Ohio, Race Riots of 1904 and 1906 and the Sources of Antiblack Violence in the Lower Midwest" by Jack S. Blocker, Jr. and "Black Lynching in the Promised Land: Mob Violence in Ohio, 1876-1916" by Marilyn K. Howard, found through OBIS and JSTOR. Another major piece I contributed to our research is that I first contacted Jeremy Angstadt, the director of the Sandusky Public Library's historical archive, and Paul Sigsworth, Sandusky Chief of Police. These men helped Bethany, Claire and I turn up a trove of primary documents relating to the lynching in Sandusky's newspaper archive and the newspaper archives of towns nearby. I interviewed both Angstadt and Sigsworth about what they knew of the lynching. Paul Sigsworth put me in contact with Luvada Wilson, Erie County Clerk of Courts. Her staff, in particular Buffy Land and Cookie Miller Lee, took time out of the work day to help me search through Erie County jail registers dating from the time of William Taylor's lynching. Taylor did not appear in these registers as having committed any crime, typical of the complete lack of rule of law in lynching cases. The College Archives *did* contain a record of the incident in the form of an article from the *Oberlin Weekly*. This document was not cited in any of the secondary literature we looked at, and I hope to make it more widely accessible to future historians of this time and place. I also contacted the Sandusky branch of the NAACP and received a list of contacts—elderly black Sandusky community leaders who I was encouraged to interview. This work fell outside the scope of the project, but I hope to undertake it in the future. I was able to converse with Clerk of Courts staff about the project (over a delicious taco lunch) and I have maintained contact with one woman who is quite interested in the work. She wants to see a historical memory event held to honor the struggle and sacrifice of black Sanduskians and make the history of anti-blackness in Sandusky more widely acknowledged. I owe a debt of gratitude to her for her support, and she more than anyone makes me wish to return to Sandusky and continue the search for answers.