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LOCAL

## Lynchings in Maury County: Why this researcher wants Black victims publicly recognized



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The white mob forced him to climb a ladder in front of a cedar tree.

One of them put a blindfold over his eyes.

One of them put a rope around his neck.

Cordie Cheek was 17 years old when he was castrated and lynched in Glendale on Dec. 15, 1933. He had been accused of raping a white girl, but the charges had been dropped by a Maury County grand jury for lack of evidence.

Amateur sleuth and historian Elizabeth Queener, who is now 84, wants you to know what happened to Cheek and so many other Black men like him. She is the descendant of farm owners who enslaved 140 people, and she is partly driven by shame.

And partly by anger.

Maury County is now the home of the remains of Nathan Bedford Forrest, slave trader, noted Confederate general and the first ever Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, which was founded in nearby Pulaski in Giles County.

"If they're going to bury that sorry (expletive), we can have a plaque for those who were murdered," she said.

"To not know history is to repeat it" are the words at the base of a plaque she had made to honor Cheek and 19 other Black men who were lynched, killed or disappeared by the Ku Klux Klan or white mobs in Maury County.

Queener, who now lives in Nashville, grew up on a Maury County farm where her family's cook was Claudia Cheek, Cordie Cheek's sister.

Even though Queener knew Claudia for decades, the story of Cordie Cheek "was never mentioned."

Queener's goal is to end the silence about her county's ugly past. But she ran into a disagreement with another researcher and a perception of government inaction.

The problem is she's not sure the public recognition of the brutality will ever get done. Here's what she doesn't know. She helped start a movement that might go further than she ever dreamed.

As of today, her plaque has been placed, but not where she wants it located.

## **'It's bad downtown'**

Born in 1938, Queener grew up on her family's farm just outside Columbia. Her father, Millard Queener was a Yale-educated attorney. Her mother, Adeline, was a homemaker.

Queener remembers the farm was filled with Black faces.

"The first face I saw in the morning was Miami Harlan," Queener said.

Harlan was the Black woman who was paid to care for her. Other Black people became her friends. The farm's foreman was William "Sweet Potato" Kennedy.

The driver was Hosey Blue. Another worker, Gee Gibbs, read to Queener and helped her start a stamp collection.

When Queener was 8, a fight erupted in the Castner-Knott Department Store in Columbia, which was owned by Queener's mother. The fight, between James Stephenson, who was Black, and William Fleming Jr., who was white, spilled into the street on Columbia Square.

Queener heard her father say, "It's bad downtown."

A large group of white men, including police, marched toward the Black business section of town that many now refer to as the Bottom. Shots were fired and two Black men — James Johnson and William Gordon — were hit. They both died after they were refused medical attention at Columbia's King Daughters Hospital.

Twenty five Black men were arrested and charged. They were defended in court by a team that included Thurgood Marshall, the civil rights pioneer and future U.S. Supreme Court justice. Charges were eventually dropped against all the defendants.

"It was difficult for me to grow up in all that," Queener said. "I was upset by the unfairness of it all."

That incident, which Queener calls the "1946 Black Resistance in Columbia" is mentioned in a paragraph on her plaque.

***Special report:*** *How a dispute over a broken radio launched a civil rights movement*

## **Angered by Nathan Bedford Forrest**

She worked for an airline, then for two travel agencies. She got to see the world — Cairo, London, Paris and too many other cities to list.

She worked in nonprofits, raising funds, organizing and doing research for the Jack Massey Foundation.

It wasn't until she was in her 80s when she started turning her attention to the atrocities.

And there was one defining event.

In 2019, Columbia became the permanent home of the remains and statue of Forrest.

The long-running controversy of what to do about Forrest sparked something in Queener.

"They buried him with great ceremony," Queener said. "How on earth can you do this?"

Queener joined the Historical Justice Commission, a local group of historians, and she began looking for atrocities in Maury County history.

***'A different image of the city': Pulaski memorializes overlooked history, starting with U.S. Colored Troops***

***'Forgotten history': Can Columbia's East 8th Street neighborhood be revitalized?***

This is when it got dicey. As Queener found more and more horrible history, she began to aggressively pursue recognition among Maury County and Columbia city officials.

She wrote lots of emails, and two of her targets were Columbia Mayor Chaz Molder and Maury County Mayor Andy Ogles. She said she has not heard back from either.

"I don't call on the phone because I'm prone to get angry," she said.

Queener also said she ended up in disagreements with others in the community about how to proceed to best honor and remember the past.

***Maury County history: Maury Black history flourishes under decade efforts of African American Heritage Society***

So Queener, who said she spent about \$2,000 on a "Memorial to Black Maury County Citizens Murdered by KKK, Mobs and Others," has just about given up.

She said she is going to place the plaque on her 42-acre family farm in front of a cemetery that holds the remains of formerly enslaved people.

"Where else can I put it?" she said.

She thought her farm would be the only place the lynchings and murders would be publicly recognized.

## **Her idea is not dead**

Queener has made more of an impact that she knew.

The Tennessean received a series of emails from Molder about Queener's plans.

"I am aware of Ms. Queener's longstanding efforts undertaken to recognize difficult parts of our community's history, which I do believe entirely appropriate, so that we can learn from our past, and be better for it — by having conversations and creating awareness which will ultimately bridge the gaps that we still see in today's society," Molder wrote.

Molder said an effort is being made to recognize the people Queener wants honored.

"The City of Columbia is working with several local partners to ensure this portion of our city's history is told, and never forgotten," Molder wrote.

Queener's plaque is not dead.

"I think Ms. Queener's option would be considered," Molder said. "She had previously been working with one of the local groups, as I understand it, but only recently separated from that group for some reason. That group is going through a very exhaustive process of identifying location, goals, placement, potential museum sites, etc, and I believe the City would be more inclined for there to be a thorough process like that group is currently considering and working on.

"But, that does not mean that there can just be one group telling the story. It just means that open lines of communication, presenting to City Council and other planning must be done so as to maximize our efforts."

Still Queener was skeptical of Molder's words.

"They never told me that," Queener said. "Ask them in 10 years if they're still working on it."

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