

Over the Memorial Day weekend fourteen of us, from Savannah Presbytery, went on a pilgrimage to civil rights places in Montgomery Alabama. At one museum, there was a memorial to those African Americans who had been publicly lynched. There was row upon row of suspended steel boxes each with a county name and then the names and dates of those known to have been lynched. My fellow pilgrims and I went from box to box checking out the counties where we had lived. There was a Bailey from Neshoba County Mississippi, my grandfather's home county. Was there any connection?

After thousands of names, we had gradually descended below ground level, and a wide, black granite wall with water streaming down confronted us. A sign recognized there were so many more than the names we'd just passed, that had been murdered without justice and had been largely relegated to anonymity. This was a stopping place for me.

My great grandfather, Earnest Price Mangum, was the patriarch who had established a large farm in Tunica County, Mississippi in 1895. He was a pillar in the Presbyterian Church and widely remembered as a great adult Sunday School teacher for over 40 years. Upon my ordination I was given his bible. This, my mother's side of my family, was reared to follow his stalwart faith and principled living.

But, about 5 years ago, my cousin Bill visited Savannah, and told me that our great-grandfather had killed two African Americans and was never even charged. I still do not know what to do with that discordant part of my heritage. Knowing that about him still burdens me.

The black wall drew me close, and I placed my hand on it with the water streaming over my hand. I took the two men, who I knew nothing about except their unjust killing, remembered them and any descendants of theirs to the Lord for sanctification. I broke the water that would flow past that violence decades ago and pressed it on that black granite. Whether or not my great-grandfather, E. P. Mangum, would appreciate it or not, he was pressed on that black granite too.

I left the Memorial with a stronger awareness of the terror so many had lived under. I, also, left with some settledness from a sacred place where conflicted heritage can be tagged. What a Memorial Day!