

The following paper was prepared under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Dickey at Kennesaw State University for an Introduction to Public History course.

The Leo Frank Lynching historical marker sits very near where Leo Frank was lynched in 1915 in Marietta, Georgia. The marker, erected by the Georgia Historical Society, the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation, and Temple Kol Emeth, tells the story of Frank to a modern audience.ⁱ While the marker tells the history of Frank's death, it also ties up a history that is still evolving with time.

While many in the crowd watched the Confederate veterans march in their annual parade in 1913, Mary Phagan, a thirteen-year-old girl, was brutally murdered at the National Pencil Company in Atlanta where she was employed. She had gone to collect her weekly earnings and never returned home. Suspicion fell squarely on Leo Frank, the superintendent of the factory, who was a man of the Jewish faith. He was arrested and put on trial for the murder of Mary Phagan, found guilty, and sentenced to death. Governor Slaton, fearing that the trial had been fixed, commuted his sentence to life in prison. Some within in the community did not agree with the alteration of Frank's sentence and kidnapped Frank out of the state prison in Milledgeville. He was taken to Marietta and hanged by the crowd that had gathered. In 1986 Leo Frank was given a posthumous pardon.ⁱⁱ

This case was well known and well documented, however there were a lot of assumptions made; and those assumptions had cost a man his life. It was not until many years later that another view point of the events that had occurred that Confederate Memorial Day emerged. Alonzo Mann, a fourteen-year-old factory employee, was asked to give testimony on the death of Mary Phagan in court. He had been in the building the day of her death and had not seen Leo Frank. He saw another man carrying what he thought looked like a girl wrapped in a sheet. The man he had seen was Jim Conley, a custodian of the factory, who had threatened to kill Mann if

he ever spoke about what he had seen. Mann's parents had feared for their son's life and agreed that it would be wisest to say nothing; so, Mann kept quiet about what he saw until he could keep quiet no longer. ⁱⁱⁱ

Throughout the twenty-nine-day trial, Jim Conley gave his testimony, but he seemed to contradict himself. He claimed two women had been present after the murder had taken place, but the time he gave did not match up with the records. He also said he was told to wrap Phagan in "bed ticking," but it was later confirmed that no such material was in the factory at the time.^{iv} This evidence, mixed with the fact that it looked as if the jury had been forced to vote in a certain way, made the Governor decide it would be best to commute Frank's sentence from death to life imprisonment.^v By changing the sentence, Governor Slaton showed that while he may not have thought Frank innocent, he did not know without a shadow of a doubt that Frank was guilty either. This was a complicated case, but it seemed the people wanted Frank to be guilty even if the facts presented to them seemed altered.

The people were outraged by the Governor's decision. They felt that justice had not been done and decided that they would finish this themselves whether the law approved or not. Members of the community drove to the Georgia State Prison in Milledgeville and grabbed Frank. He had been stabbed by an inmate earlier and was still recovering from the wound when he was kidnapped and forced to Marietta.^{vi}

To those involved, the lynching was an act of justice. They truly believed that Frank had been the sole killer of Mary Phagan and felt if the law would not help them, then they must take matters into their own hands. The lynching of Frank in Marietta was seen as a triumph by those who had witnessed it.^{vii} This emotion has not gone away even though over one hundred years has elapsed. Places like the grave site of Mary Phagan are covered with plaques and monuments that

reject the 1986 posthumous pardon given to Frank. The pardon, however, was not granted to declare Frank's innocence or guilt. It was given for the failure of the state to protect him while he was prisoner, to keep him alive and allow him to appeal his verdict, and to bring his murderers to justice.^{viii} This shows just how emotionally charged this story is. The public seems to be split, with some believing that Frank was innocent and others believing he was guilty.^{ix} The truth of Phagan's murder remains less straightforward.^x

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ⁱⁱ "Leo Frank Case," *New Georgia Encyclopedia* (November 5, 2018).

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ⁱⁱⁱ "Statement of Alonzo Mann," *The Tennessean* (March 7, 1982/ Accessed September 17, 2018).

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^{iv} "Governor Slayton Congratulated; Hanged in Effigy" *The San Francisco Examiner* (June 22, 1915/ Accessed September 20, 2018). <https://www.newspapers.com/image/457445462>; "Lessons of a Century" *The Atlanta Constitution*. <https://www.newspapers.com/image423249899>.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} "Leo Frank Lynched by Mob After Swift Ride to the Home of Murdered Mary Phagan," *Evening Public Ledger* (August 17, 1915/ Accessed September 21, 2018). <https://www.newspapers.com/image/164906194>.

^{vii} Steve Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* (Vintage Books, 2004), 567.

^{viii} "Leo Frank Case," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank*.