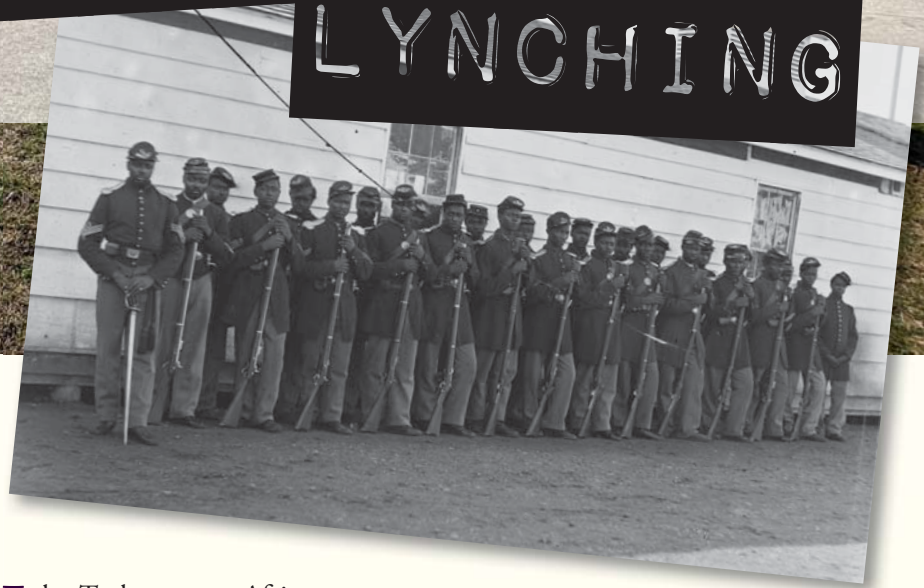


Reckoning With a Troubled Past

THE JOHN TAYLOR LYNCHING

BY JACOB MCCORMICK

In 2018, the story of an Ingham County lynching was raised by a retired Holt High School history teacher via a column in the Lansing State Journal. That article brought the memory of John Taylor and his gruesome murder into the twenty-first century, piquing the interest of many community members and raising the question of a beloved area park's name, which may have been falsely tied to the 1866 lynching.



John Taylor was an African-American man who was born enslaved in Kentucky in the 1840s. During the early years of the American Civil War, he was liberated by Union troops and moved north to Michigan. He worked as a servant in Hillsdale, then moved on to Jackson County. On August 9, 1864, Taylor enlisted in the 1st Michigan Colored Infantry Regiment, Company G, in Jackson.

The 1st Michigan mustered into the 102nd U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment in 1864, with Taylor joining in October of that year in South Carolina. He mustered out of service in September 1865 upon the conclusion of the Civil War. He was just 17 years old but had already experienced much in his life.

After the war, Taylor returned to Jackson County. He subsequently moved north and found work as a farmhand in Ingham County's Delhi Township for farmer John Buck. In mid-1866, a presumed pay dispute led Taylor to leave Buck's employ and move on to another local farm.

On the evening of August 23, 1866, Taylor returned to the Buck farm to collect the pay due to him. During Taylor's return to the farm, John Buck was away, and contemporary accounts allege that Taylor encountered Buck's wife, daughter, and mother-in-law. It was reported that Taylor picked up an ax from the farm to defend himself. During the interaction with the three Buck women, he struck them with the ax and fled.

Above top: A view of the Delhi Township park whose name was the subject of recent controversy due to its assumed ties to John Taylor's lynching in 1866. (All color photos throughout the article courtesy of the author.) Above: A company of the U.S. Colored Infantry during the Civil War. Taylor served in the 102nd U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-B817-7890.)

Law enforcement officials from Lansing tracked Taylor and arrested him near Bath in Clinton County. According to some period accounts, Taylor confessed to the violent confrontation under duress from Lansing officials, who then transferred him to the Ingham County jail in Mason and into the care of Ingham County sheriff Frederick Moody. Full confessions and biographical accounts of Taylor's life were published in local and national newspapers—which were said to be transcriptions of his own words following his capture. Rife with racial epithets, the accuracy of those published accounts remains unclear.



The pernicious story of a triple ax murder of the three Buck women spread like wildfire throughout the area. In reality, John Buck's wife, Mariah Fisher Buck, died in 1884; his daughter, Martha, died in 1897; and his mother-in-law, Mary Fisher, died in 1890—decades after the 1866 incident. None of them were killed by Taylor. However, a mob made up of farmers from Ingham County and beyond formed as a result of the false triple-murder rumor.

A group of concerned citizens reportedly approached Sheriff Moody, bringing the angry mob to his attention and informing him of the mob members' intention of removing Taylor from jail and taking the law into their own hands. Moody apparently declined to put any

additional safeguards in place at the jail, trusting the existing system and security to protect the inmates.

On August 27, 1866—four days after the alleged incident—Taylor was seized from the Ingham County jail in Mason by the mob that had formed over the prior 96 hours. The mob took John Taylor to a tree near the Mason Depot and hanged him. The group had concluded his guilt with no due process.

Because of the gruesome nature of the death Taylor suffered, his remains have been lost to time, and his final resting place is unknown. It is believed that he was originally buried on the Hogsback, a glacial esker traversing the landscape between Mason and St. Johns. The Hogsback was prominent throughout Delhi Township, and its location can be traced by the water-filled gravel pits that follow its footprint today.

Located adjacent to the Hogsback, the “Dead Man’s Hill” park, a popular winter recreation site, may have been falsely tied to Taylor’s murder over the years. There is local memory of that land being known as Dead Man’s Hill dating back to at least the 1940s.



Nobody was ever held responsible for Taylor’s murder. A grand jury was summoned in January 1867 and brought indictments against five local men. Charges were dropped against four of them. One person

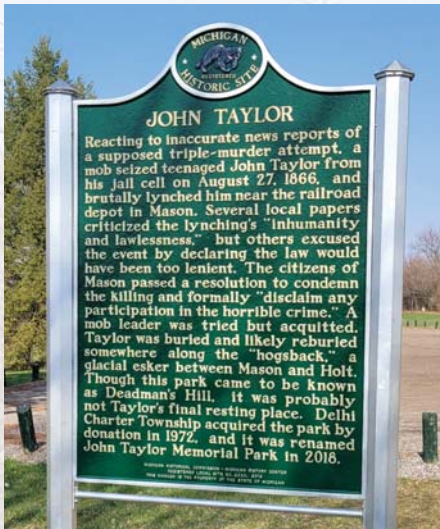
was tried but acquitted for the crimes associated with Taylor’s death. Former Michigan governor Austin Blair played a notable role in the trial as an assistant prosecutor alongside county prosecutor Rollin Dart. Blair had just come off two terms as the wartime governor of Michigan. Politically, he was a staunch abolitionist and strong supporter of President Lincoln. The case of Taylor’s lynching must have struck him as important since he took on a rural county assistant prosecutorial role after serving in the Capitol as the state’s executive.

When the parkland was gifted to Delhi Township in 1972 by Lansing developer Francis Fine and Detroit developer Leonard Farber, the name Dead Man’s Hill was intently discussed for many months—though the topic was ultimately dropped. The Delhi Township Parks Commission again discussed the name in 1987 upon the publication of *A Michigan Sesquicentennial History of Delhi Township*, a definitive published history of the community that raised Taylor’s story back into the public’s interest.

It would be another three decades, however, before any action occurred on the topic. In 2018, following the widely read newspaper column in the *Lansing State Journal*, the Delhi Township Parks Commission appointed a citizens committee to research, discuss, and provide a recommendation on how to address



Far left: News reports in various state and national papers, such as this clipping from the *New York Daily Herald*, told both fact and myth surrounding the story of the John Taylor lynching in the 1860s. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Chronicling America.) Middle left: The sign that used to adorn the Delhi Township park prior to its renaming. Left: Austin Blair served as an assistant prosecutor in the Taylor lynching case in 1867. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-82923.)



Above top: The entrance sign for the now-renamed John Taylor Memorial Park. Above: The back of the two-sided Michigan Historical Marker that tells the story of Taylor's life and death.

the history and name of the park moving forward.

In just three short months, the committee recommended that the park name be changed to "John Taylor Memorial Park." The commission acted on that recommendation, with the name change occurring swiftly.

But the community movement surrounding John Taylor did not end there. Over the ensuing 16 months, more than 100 pages of research were submitted to the Michigan Historical Commission for the purpose of obtaining a Michigan Historical Marker designating John Taylor as a historic person in Michigan's

history and formally telling his story. Despite the misconnected history—falsely placing Taylor's lynching or final resting place in the park—Delhi Township was committed to righting the wrong that occurred under its domain.



While research on John Taylor has been done by many historians in the past, certain details had often been settled on because a single source presented them as fact when they were not. The research process proved to be challenging. Period newspapers and media reports were some of the most readily available materials on the topic—however, the Lansing and Ingham County newspapers of 1866-1867 have not been digitized or indexed.

Tediously combing through newspaper microfilm at the Library of Michigan yielded a great majority of the content gathered. Media reports of the attack varied widely, and partisan newspapers took sides, even justifying the lynching. Some papers exaggerated, and others embellished, but most included the core elements that have been winnowed into the most basic version of John Taylor's story. The Archives of Michigan yielded Taylor's Civil War service records. However, fictionalized accounts and the still-sealed grand jury records made for speed bumps in synthesizing the story into its bare facts.

In November 2019, Delhi Township erected a Michigan Historical Marker in John Taylor Memorial Park, creating a lasting monument to a long-forgotten man who met a gruesome fate in the small mid-Michigan community. The ceremony included a military salute provided by the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, 14th Michigan Infantry, 102nd U.S. Colored Infantry Regiment, and the Michigan Grand Army of the Republic Memorial Hall & Museum—officially recognizing Taylor's military service.

Other efforts to remember John Taylor locally are ongoing. Today, the beloved park now educates residents and visitors alike on the young man whose life was cut short at the hands of a mob more than 150 years ago.

Lynchings are most often associated with the American South. But the fact cannot be ignored that those heinous murders occurred throughout the North, in the Midwest, and right in our own backyard. John Taylor's murder is one of a handful of recorded lynchings in Michigan's history. Of the state's lynchings, those that included a European-American mob murdering an African-American man all included the accusation of rape or harm of European-American women.

Taylor's lynching is a dark and notable piece of Ingham County's history. Often ignored as a scar on an otherwise average Midwestern community, no more can the generations-old atrocity be hidden from view. Our history is our history—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and all aspects must be addressed head on for today's residents to see. ■

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