



A24 Hidden in a Dark Past: The 1887 Thibodaux Massacre of Black Sugarcane Workers

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how hidden histories perpetuate modern-day cycles of structural violence and how applied forensic anthropology can work within communities to break this cycle.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing an understanding of the contemporary social relevance of preliminary forensic anthropology casework involving historic human rights violations.

In November of 1887, underpaid Black sugarcane laborers went on strike in Lafourche Parish and surrounding parishes in south Louisiana. The refusal of sugarcane planters to negotiate better wages and working conditions led to violence on November 23, 1887, in Thibodaux, when a group of White vigilantes sought out and gunned down unarmed Black laborers, including their families.¹ The murderers targeted Black neighborhoods. The systematic killings lasted a minimum of two hours. At least 8 individuals were killed, based on medical examiner records, although oral histories suggest 30 to 60 individuals were murdered.¹ According to oral accounts passed down within the community, the remains of the victims were buried in a mass grave on property owned by the city of Thibodaux. By the 1920s, the land was being used as a city dump with an incinerator. Today, the purported location of the mass grave is owned by the historically Black Raymond Stafford American Legion Post No. 513, which is located on the property.

Not only was this event hidden from history by the absence of written records, but stories of the event have also been altered as they have been passed down from one generation to the next.² Perceptions of the event in community memory have been split into two starkly different accounts. Modern descendants of the individuals that perpetrated the massacre and others in the community provide a diluted account of the events that took place on November 23, 1887. Their knowledge of the event portrays a mere skirmish in which disgruntled African American sugarcane laborers needed to be taught a lesson. In contrast, descendants of the victims offer a more vivid and horrifically detailed account of a massacre.²

The 1887 Thibodaux massacre resulted in the subjugation of Black community members in Thibodaux to various forms of violence and inequity, not unlike the different forms of structural violence that permeate many other communities across the United States. This structural violence reinforces inequalities and represents an injustice perpetuated throughout subsequent generations. Forensic anthropology, cultural anthropology, and forensic archaeology can unearth the truth by uncovering the actual physical evidence of historic events. In bringing to light historic events that have been intentionally hidden and altered, an investigation of the Thibodaux massacre challenges the veracity of dominant history. To date, there has been community outreach and a preliminary archaeological and geophysical investigation of the presumed gravesite. Based on the results of this investigation, recommendations will be made for additional fieldwork, including excavation, community outreach, and descendant interviews.

The forensic scientific community stands to benefit from working with communities in illuminating hidden histories. The 1887 Thibodaux massacre was one of many instances of organized, post-Reconstruction violence in the United States. In addition to racially fueled hatred for formerly enslaved people and their descendants struggling to achieve equal rights, the hidden history of Thibodaux reveals individuals and families striving to attain humane working conditions above starvation wages.

Reference(s):

¹ DeSantis J. *The Thibodaux Massacre: Racial Violence and the 1887 Sugar Cane Labor Strike*. Charleston: The History Press, 2016.

² DeSantis J. Phone communication with author, April 24, 2018.

Human Rights, Massacre, Post-Reconstruction