

Tyra Hatley

Africana Studies

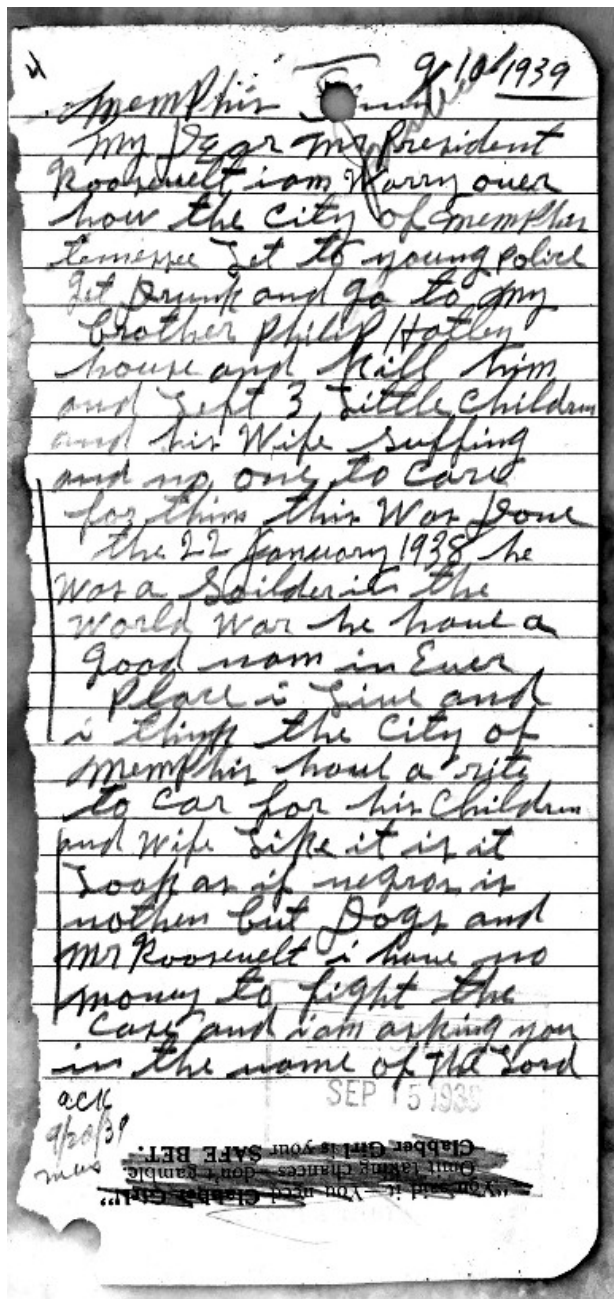
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Hometown Essay

This historical essay, based on events from my hometown, Memphis, Tennessee, surrounds my great-grandfather and his experience with police brutality. The historical context takes place in the 1930s. On January 22nd of 1939, Phillip Hatley was shot and killed by 2 drunk, off-duty police officers. These drunk police officers chased Hatley through his own home, forcing him to flee to his backyard, where they shot him in the back as he was running. The specific officer who shot him was a rookie with little supervision or experience (Kebede-Twumasi, Laura, “Civil Wrongs”). All of this took place while my grandfather, Eugene Hatley, was present in the home and within earshot of the events. He was only 5 years old at the time, and carried the burden of his father’s murder with him his whole life.

After the shooting, Phillip Hatley’s brother, James Hatley, wrote a letter to the president at the time, Franklin D. Roosevelt. He requested assistance in handling the situation and investigating the case. An official replied, saying that they unfortunately could not interfere with state cases, and wished them well. Though this case had support from local officials, the family was silent on the situation and did not pass information about the killing onto the next generation. This appears to be a common theme among some black families, where past tragedies are brushed under the rug and traumas are pushed down in order to continue functioning the best one can in an adverse society. In the modern day, this issue persists. However, in 2024, the Phillip Hatley case was unveiled and brought to light once again, bringing a sense of closure to his descendants. The Hatley family has been able to set up multiple events

and organizations in part in his honor, providing a platform for other families who have gone through similar things.



Phillip Hatley's brother, James Hatley, wrote to then-U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt requesting federal aid in the family's case against the City of Memphis after a police officer shot

and killed Phillip Hatley as he was fleeing. (Photo courtesy of Civil Rights & Restorative Justice Project) [<https://www.psrmemphis.org/civil-wrongs/undue-process-the-killer-wore-a-badge/>]



The Northwest Enterprise, a Black-owned newspaper in the Pacific Northwest, ran an article about Phillip Hatley's death in 1939. (Courtesy of Civil Rights & Restorative Justice Project)[<https://www.psrmemphis.org/civil-wrongs/undue-process-the-killer-wore-a-badge/>]

Memphis, Tennessee, during the 1930s, was a very challenging setting for the local Black community. While fighting for civil rights and against discrimination, the community also struggled with the effects of the Great Depression and the economic hardships that came with it. Many minority groups were greatly impacted, with Black families in particular facing starvation

and poverty. Because of the focus on the Black community at that time, the Phillip Hatley case may have gained more attention, leading to its documentation and recent rediscovery.

The great depression hit especially hard for Black people in urban cities, according to John Hope Franklin. In his academic text, *From Slavery to Freedom*, he described the widespread unemployment and deprivation faced by the community, stating, “In the mid-1920s...thousands of African Americans lost their jobs...while in rural areas their wages were driven down to starvation levels.” These struggles persisted throughout the entire country, particularly causing issues for the city of Memphis, which had a large Black population. City officials were receptive to the ongoing economic troubles and provided some resources to locals. In his article, “Dateline: Memphis November 1931 – January 1932”, G. Wayne Dowdy describes the actions that Mayor Watkins Overton took to help support citizens. He states, “In order to combat the growing crisis, Mayor Watkins Overton established the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment Relief in December 1930, providing work at the city wood yard in exchange for food, clothing, and fuel.” Based on Overton’s actions, it can be inferred that there was a certain level of care for Memphians that allowed for tangible support. This connects to the care taken with Phillip Hatley’s case; a tangible level of documentation for a common hate crime, with officials’ support for the victim.

Hint To Care And Share



Just to remind downtown Christmas shoppers that there are hundreds in the city in need of food and clothing, this employe of the Mayor's Employment Committee carries a huge "We Care-We Share" coin box about the streets. Fifteen thousand miniatures of the box are being distributed in homes over the city to collect money for the needy.

The Commercial Appeal, December 20, 1931

Courtesy of NewsBank [<https://storyboardmemphis.org/featured-story/dateline-memphis-great-depression/>]

In conclusion, through this experience, I have learned how my family and hometown's history directly connect to the subject matter discussed in our textbook. I have learned more about Black history in general while getting more insight into personal family matters and being able to visualize how my history directly correlates with the larger Black community's. Particularly, how some social movements I was not aware of prior to this experience influenced the documentation of my family history. While I knew about The Great Depression, I was not aware of its effects on the Black population, nor was I aware of the outpour of support for Memphis citizens at that time. Forming a deeper connection with my history and lineage has been a very positive experience for me in recent years. During further independent research with this assignment was very cathartic and enlightening.

Works Cited

- Dowdy, Wayne. "Dateline: Memphis November 1931 - January 1932." *StoryBoard Memphis*, 25 May 2022, storyboardmemphis.org/featured-story/dateline-memphis-great-depression/.
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- Killing of Philip Hatley in Tennessee in 1939 | The Burnham-Nobles Digital Archive*, crrjarchive.org/incidents/1326. Accessed 31 Oct. 2025.
- Franklin, John Hope, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *AP® African American Studies: From Slavery to Freedom*. McGraw Hill, 2026.