



# Confronting the Past Through Storytelling: Developing Critical Thinking in Grade 12 Boys

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## Further Information

This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>

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## Introduction

Too many students report that History class is boring, and they are not wrong to think so. Far too often, high school History classes encourage the memorization of content over the development of skills. I wondered what a History class might look like if, instead of asking students to passively read other people's stories, they had to do the kind of work that a historian does, by actively investigating and then reconstructing stories from the past.

## The Research Question

How can investigating and retelling the forgotten stories of racial violence in Virginia develop critical thinking skills in Grade 12 boys?

## Research Context and Participants

Blue Ridge School serves 185 boys in grades 9-12 in an all boarding environment with a college preparatory curriculum. The students involved in this action research project were the ten boys in my Grade 12 United States History class. Our school is located just north of Charlottesville, Virginia, a beautiful and historic city which was regrettably the site of a white nationalist rally in August 2017. This event shocked our community, but forced us to look anew at the disturbing, complicated, and under-studied history of racial violence in Virginia. It was one of the reasons why I chose to have my students investigate this topic.

## The Research Action

The central action of this project was to invert the way that students gained knowledge about the history of lynching in Virginia. Instead of asking them to read accounts that other people had written, or listening to me talk about it, students were tasked with creating the stories for themselves. In order to do this, they had to become historians by locating and analyzing primary sources and then corroborating different accounts of the same event in order to create a coherent and factual narrative.



In October 2018, we traveled to nearby James Madison University to meet Dr. Gianluca De Fazio, a History professor, who has studied lynchings in Virginia.

## Data Collection and Analysis

### Coding Student Generated Questions:

- Before the project began, each student read the same newspaper article about a lynching in Virginia. I asked each to write as many questions as he could about it and then highlighted questions that reflected our working definition of critical thinking. We did this activity throughout the project, and I coded each question.

### Student Research Journals:

- I allowed regular time for students to write about what they were finding and how they felt about it. I looked for evidence of critical thinking and engagement with their work in these journal entries.

### Post Project Questionnaire:

- Each student completed a post-project questionnaire that asked them to reflect on the entirety of their experience. Most of the quotes I included in my report came from these.

## Key Findings and Discussion

- The process of **constructing stories allowed boys to practice critical thinking skills** in ways that they do not when they read stories. As boys consistently read conflicting accounts of the same event, they had to make decisions about what information they could trust and what they could not. Perhaps no skill is more important in today's political climate.
- By the end of the project, **every boy in the class was asking the types of questions that historians do when they examine primary sources**. Questions about basic factual information gradually gave way to questions about the veracity or biases of the sources themselves.
- **Boys developed a better understanding of what a historian actually does and what history is**. Much of their experience with high school History to this point had been focused on memorization and repetition of information, rather than on its discovery and analysis.

## Conclusions

- **Challenging boys to construct stories from the past is a powerful teaching tool**. Throughout the project, students displayed a sense of ownership over their work. They felt a responsibility to get these stories right and communicate their importance to a larger audience.
- **This approach to teaching History can be applied to any topic**. Fundamentally, if students are being asked to do the work of a historian, they will necessarily have to practice vital 21st century skills like critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. I will continue to employ this approach and will encourage my colleagues to do the same.
- **A depth over breadth approach to teaching History is effective**. In order to allow enough time to complete this project, I had to allocate less time to other topics and units that I would normally cover in a school year. I can conclude, however, that this sacrifice was well worth it and the the "depth over breadth" approach toward teaching History is one that I will continue to embrace.

## Key Readings

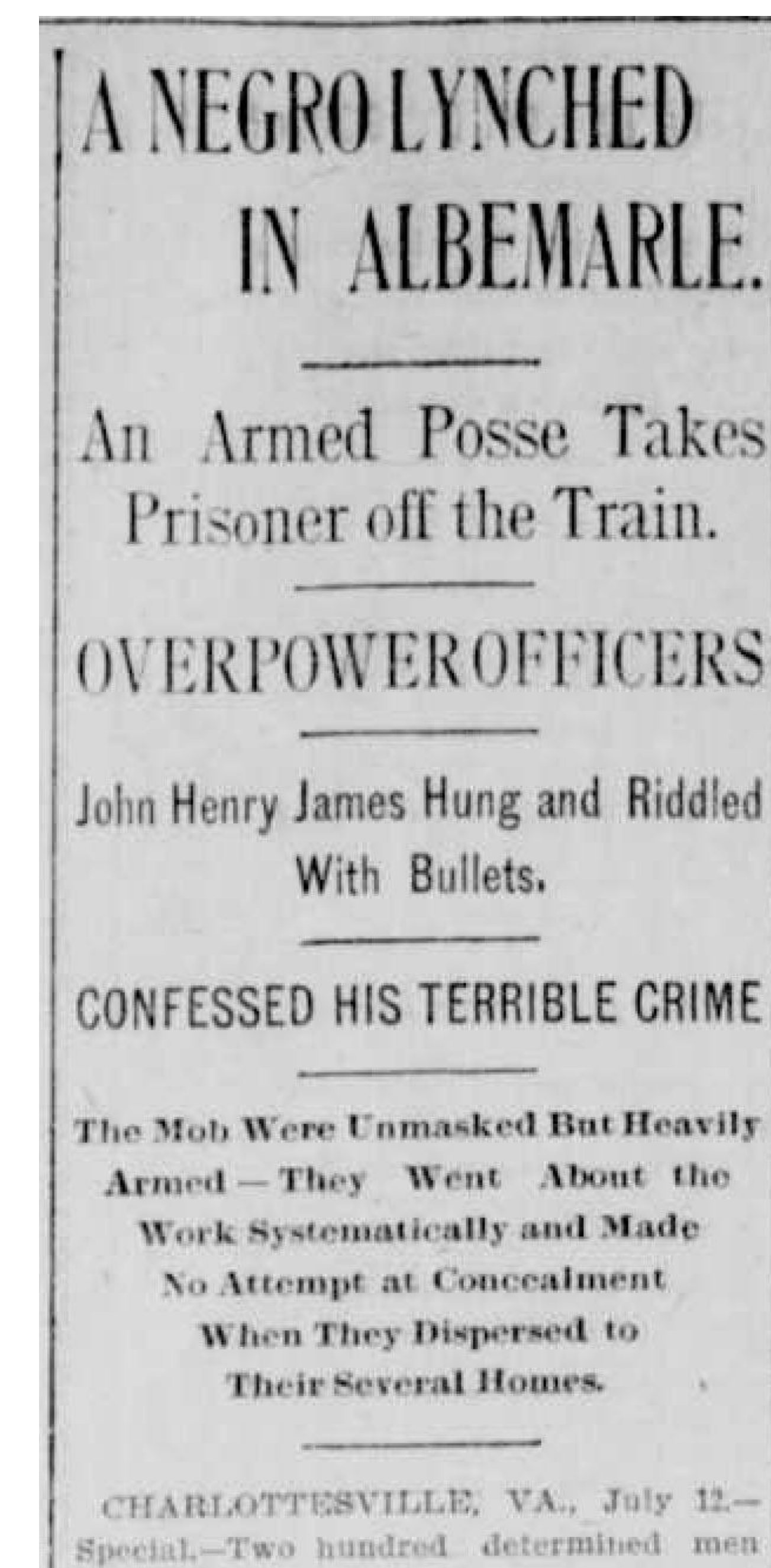
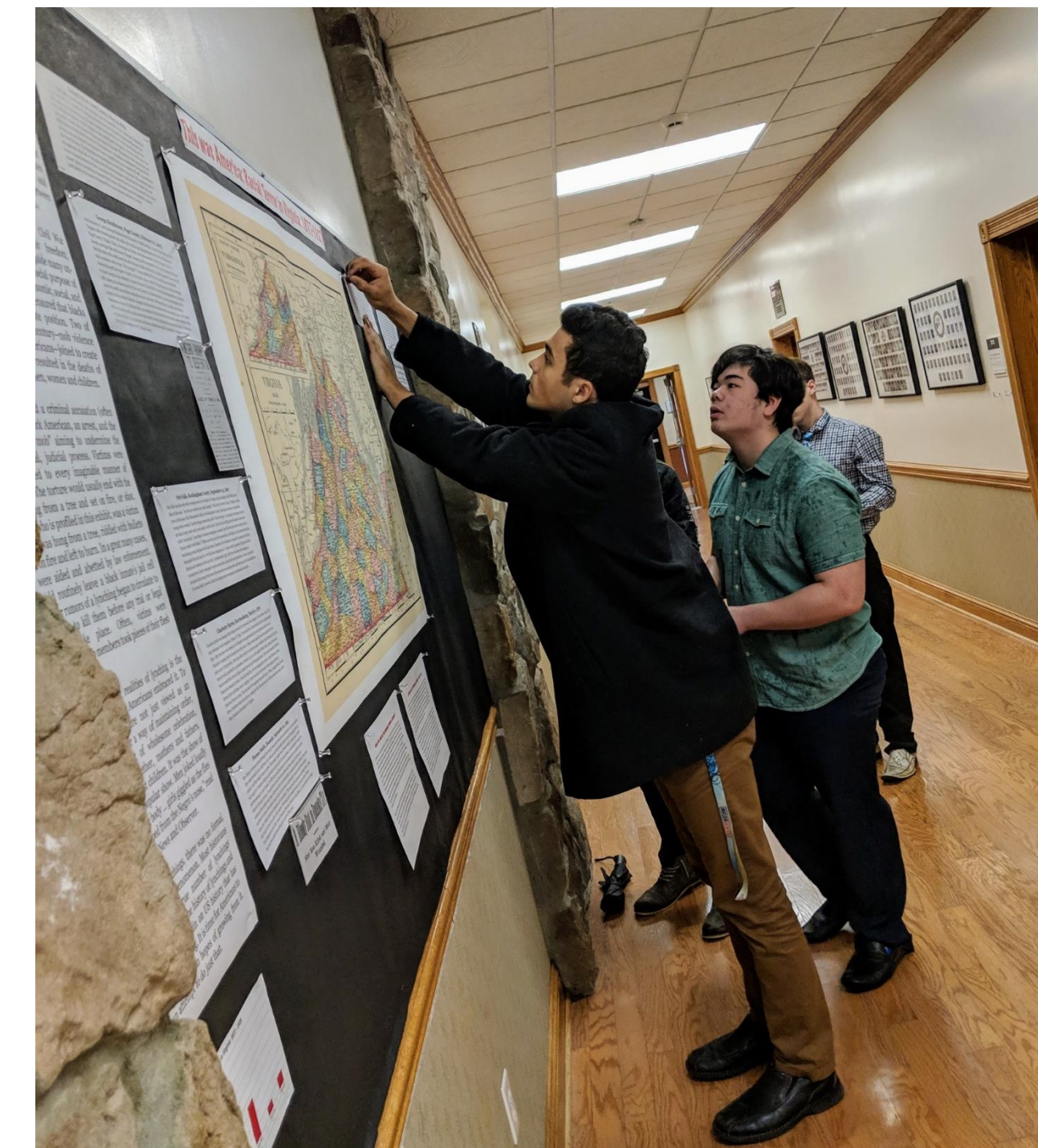
- Lesch, B. (2010). *Why don't you just tell us the answer: Teaching historical thinking in Grades 7-12*. Portsmouth, NH: Stenhouse.
- Wineburg, Sam. (2018). *Why learn History when it's already on your phone*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## What Students Said:

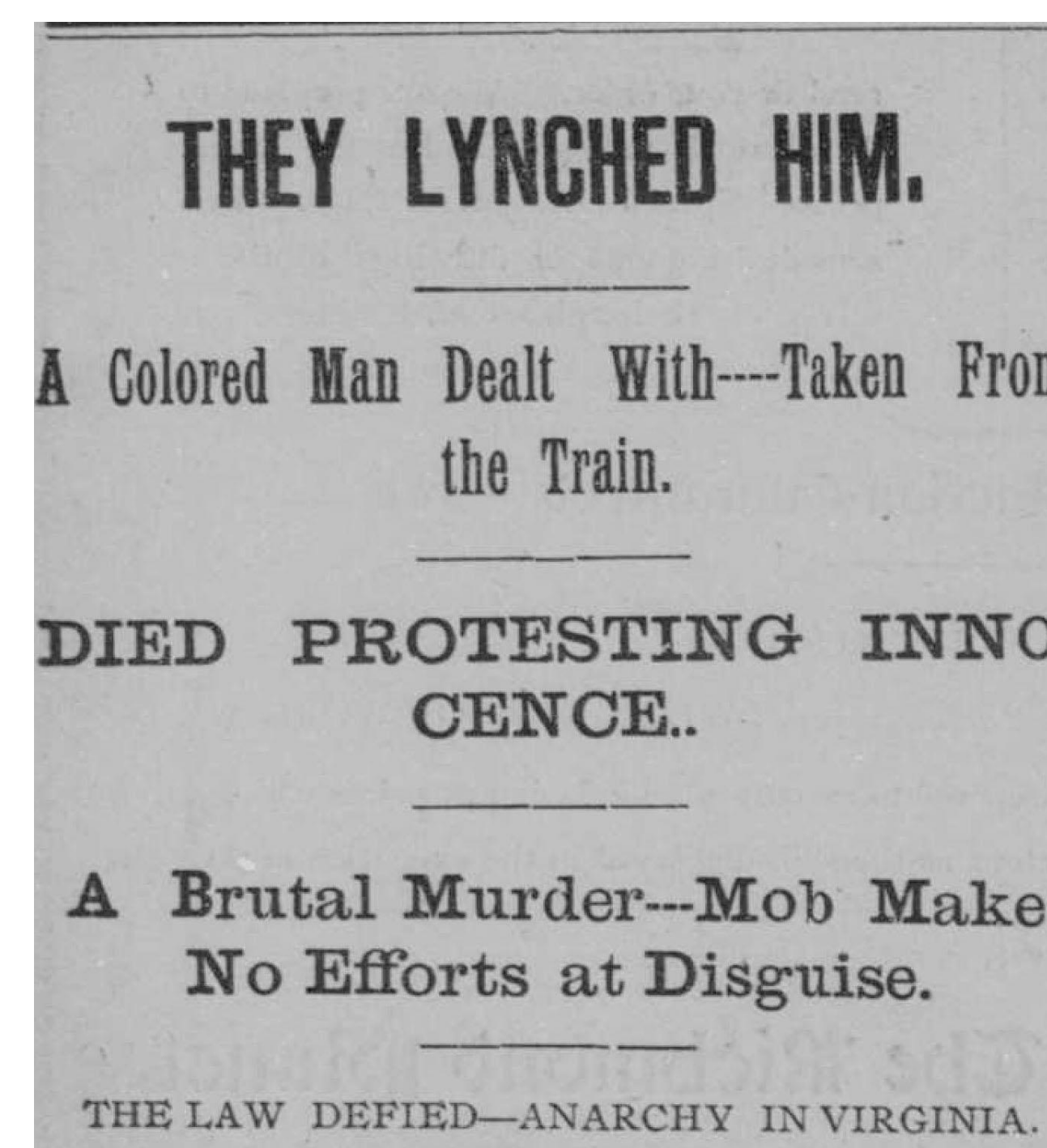
*"Nobody knows much about the life of Charlotte Harris (a lynching victim) and having the opportunity to bring her story to life was amazing."*

*"Before this project, I wasn't sure exactly what historians did at all....I have a newfound respect for historians of every time and place."*

*"When we unveiled our exhibit, I saw the way people reacted to the information on our exhibit, and I could clearly see that it had touched their hearts which added to the pride I felt in the work....I have never been more proud of any school project I've contributed to."*



Article from the *Richmond Times*, July 13, 1898



Article from the *Richmond Planet*, July 16, 1898

**Above:** Boys working on the museum-style display that showcased their work to our community.

**Left and Immediately Above:** As they uncovered primary sources, boys encountered many conflicting accounts of the same events. It was up to each to do the work of a historian and corroborate or refute these wildly differing stories. Pictured are two conflicting headlines about the same 1898 lynching in Charlottesville.



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**Boys and Stories: Pathways to Learning**

