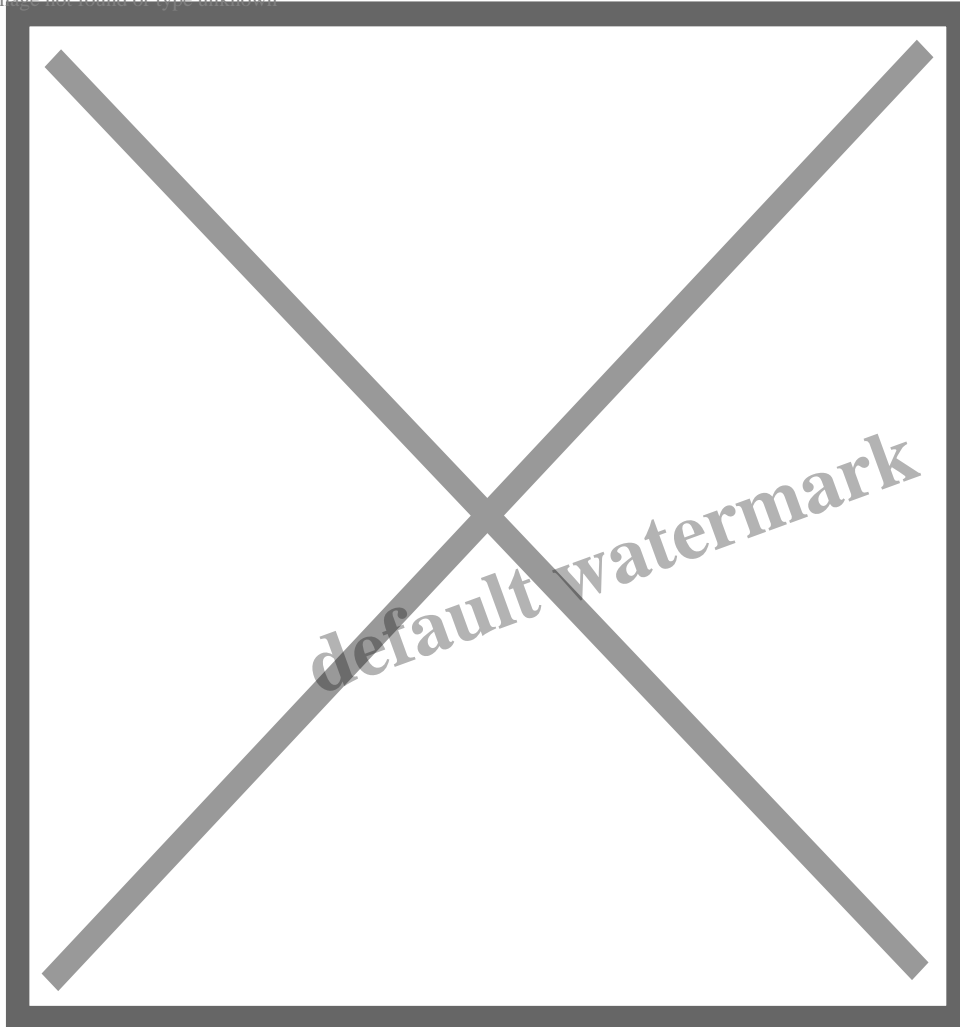


Witnessing the past: memories and hope in trees and wood

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[Hanging Tree Guitars](#)

Freeman Vines made guitars with wood from a tree in which a man had been hanged. Trees bear witness to the many things humans do to the environment, and to each other – and can remind us of the past but also provide hope for a better future.

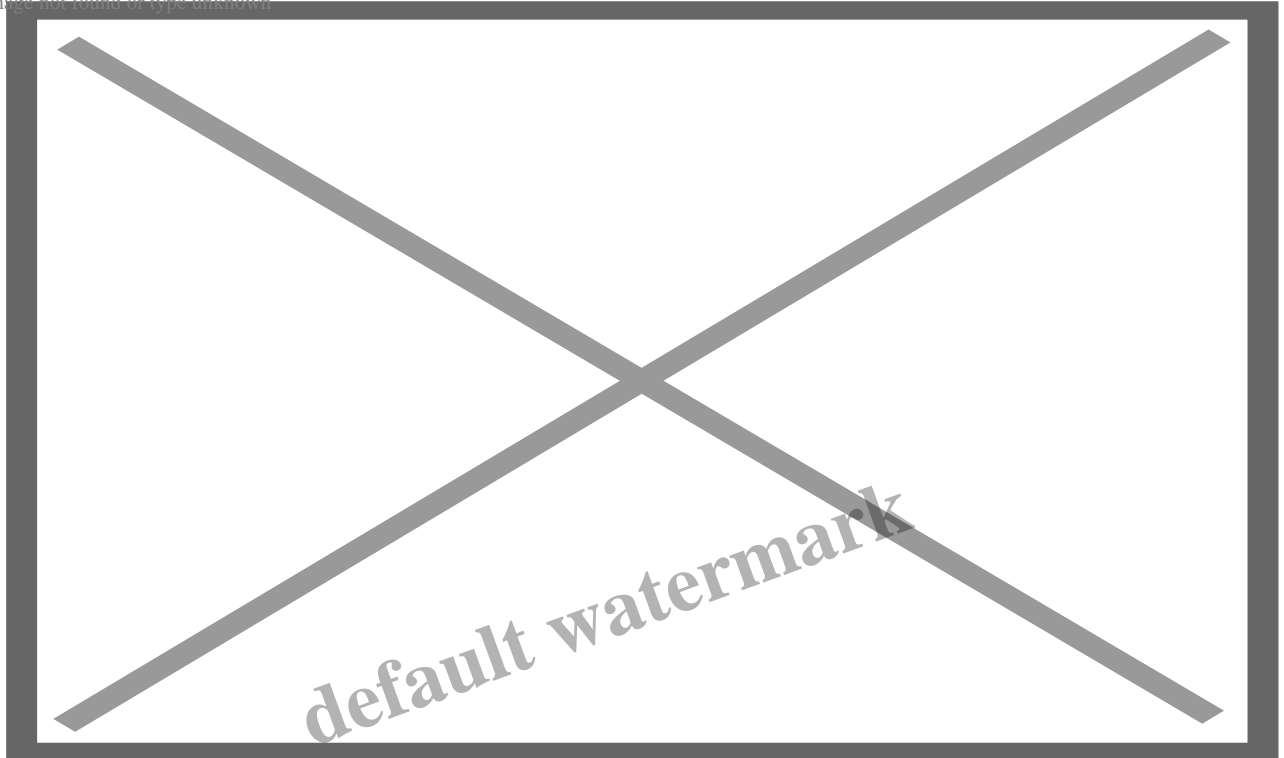
Freeman Vines and the Hanging Tree Guitars

[Freeman Vines](#) was born in 1942 to a North Carolina [sharecropping](#) family. Vines learned to play guitar as a youngster, on an instrument that an older neighbour let him play. He started making guitars in the 1950s, quickly moving on from very basic hand-made instruments to more elaborate designs. He played guitar in a band for a while, and sold instruments to local musicians – he also had various other jobs and did some time in jail. Now nearly 80, he's been making guitars for over 50 years – until

recently at his home outside the small town of Fountain, North Carolina.

Many of Vines' guitars are part sculpture, part musical instrument. He uses a wide range of wood for his guitars, mostly recycled from other uses – such as an old water trough or an old piano.

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Freeman Vines and a selection of his guitars. (Source: [Jive Radio](#))

When he picked up some old planks of walnut from a neighbour, the neighbour told him that the wood had come from a tree in which a man had been lynched. Vines didn't know whether to believe this or not, took the wood, but didn't do anything with it for a while. At about that time, [Music Maker Foundation's](#) Tim Duffy came to meet Vines. The foundation "seeks out the carriers of America's oldest roots music traditions" and aims to assist artists marginalized by age, poverty, race or gender.

When Duffy heard the story of the wood from the hanging tree, he decided to look into the story and uncovered the history behind it.

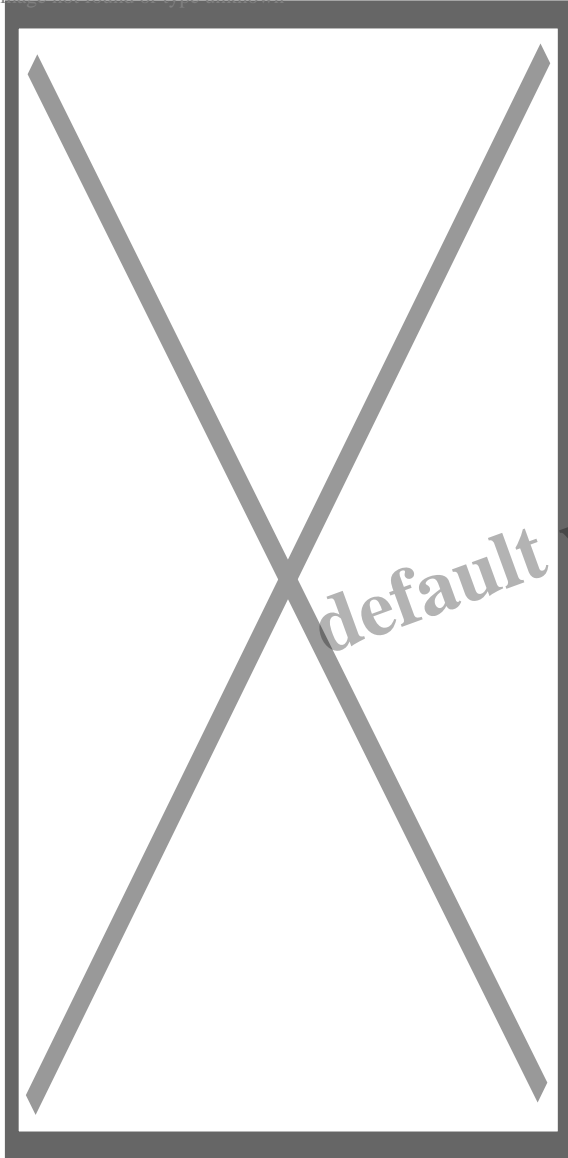
Sure enough, talking to locals and a look through libraries and old newspaper archives pointed to a tree stood outside the home of a man named [Oliver Moore](#), who, in 1930, had been lynched on that tree.

Moore was a 29-year-old tenant farmer accused of raping two of his white employer's young daughters and was imprisoned in Edgecombe County Jail. But Moore was murdered before there could be a trial to establish his guilt or innocence. A news article from the Bismarck Tribune, in North Dakota, reported that Moore was lynched on August 20, 1930, after a mob of more than 200 masked men seized him from his Edgecombe County Jail cell and dragged him to his home 15 miles away in Wilson County. Watched by Moore's family, they strung him to a tree and shot him numerous times.

Vines eventually made four guitars from the hanging tree wood, as well as using it for some sculptures

and elements of other guitars. He works by letting the wood guide him when working on guitars, and the hanging tree wood already had a design in it, according to Vines. In an [NPR piece](#) from 2020, Vines is quoted as saying: “Working with that wood was a spiritual thing. Not good, not bad, and not ugly. But just strange.” He said the finished instruments “.. don’t sound exactly like nary instrument I ever messed with. Not an eerie sound, not a comfortable sound, but just a sound. Hard to explain. Won’t get into that though because it’s too deep.”

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[Hanging Tree Guitar No. 2](#)

In a 2020 [Smithsonian Magazine](#) article, Ted Scheinman writes: “When I ask Vines what it feels like to play the guitars from that black walnut, Vines recalls that ‘the sound was awesome’ when they first put one of the instruments through an amplifier. It’s ‘something strange and supernatural’ Vines says, as though the wood itself is trying to tell you a story when you pick on the strings.”

In association with Tim Duffy and Zoe van Buren, a [book](#) has been produced featuring writings by Freeman Vines and photos of his guitars taken by Duffy. Published in 2020, the book has been widely

acclaimed. It was accompanied by an exhibition of Vines' work at the Greenville Museum of Art in Greenville, North Carolina— and it's planned that the exhibition will be shown elsewhere too. Vines was also able to take up an old store in Fountain to use as a work studio.

Freeman Vines: Hanging Tree Guitars, July 2021

Talking trees

“Wood ain't dead like they think it is. Trees and stuff actually cry. They have feelings, they do just like an elephant. When a wind blows, somethin' happen to the trees and everthing. When they bobbin' together and all that right there, they're communicating. Folks think I'm a nut, 'cause I know that, but I know what I'm talking about, 'cause I used to go sit in the woods and listen at 'em. The trees be sayin' somethin'”.

“It's hard to explain. But wood has characteristics that are supernatural stuff. Once you start messing with it, you find out it can communicate with you and you don't know how its' communicating or why. But it has things – wood has things it wants to be done to it...”

Freeman Vines (from the YouTube segment above)

Whoa, I hear you saying! That Vines guy is saying some pretty out-there things. Trees know and say stuff? Certainly, there's a long history of trees being regarded as keepers of wisdom or sacred spirits. They are significant in many of the world's [mythologies](#), and have been given deep and sacred meanings throughout the ages. Tree spirits were important in many societies, and many [tree deities](#) have been noted.

The idea of trees being sentient beings pops up in modern literature too – perhaps most famously in the tree-like [Ents](#) in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. Like many ageing university professors, the Ents were slow and ponderous, but very wise.

But can trees really communicate with each other and with humans? Do they retain memories of things that have happened around them? And does this memory linger in the wood from the tree?

Interestingly, there are numerous strands of scientific research that are providing fascinating new insights relating to these questions.

It turns out that trees are far more alert, social, sophisticated—and even intelligent—than we thought. Connections among trees in a forest and between parent and sibling trees exist. Trees [communicate](#) when they are in trouble. And they may even pass on “memories” to their offspring. The reason it's taken so long to recognise these phenomena is that the communication doesn't take place in any form we may necessarily be aware of without [careful observation](#). And a lot of it takes place [underground](#).

These ideas have recently found their way into popular thought in a series of books by authors Suzanne Simard, Peter Wohlleben and David George Haskell.

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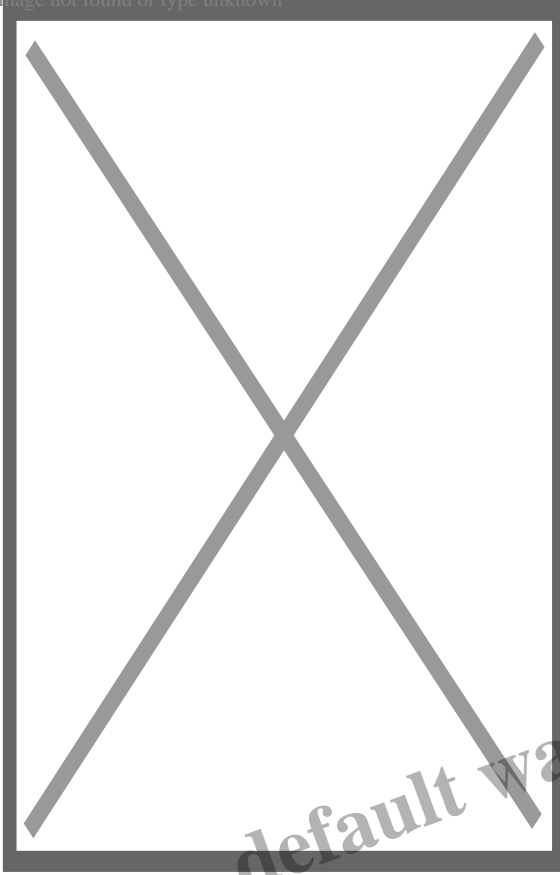
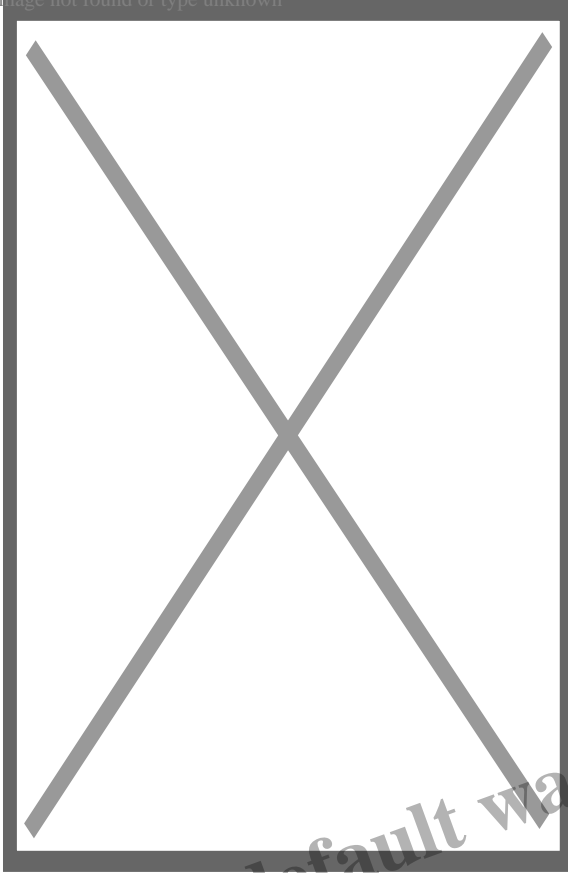
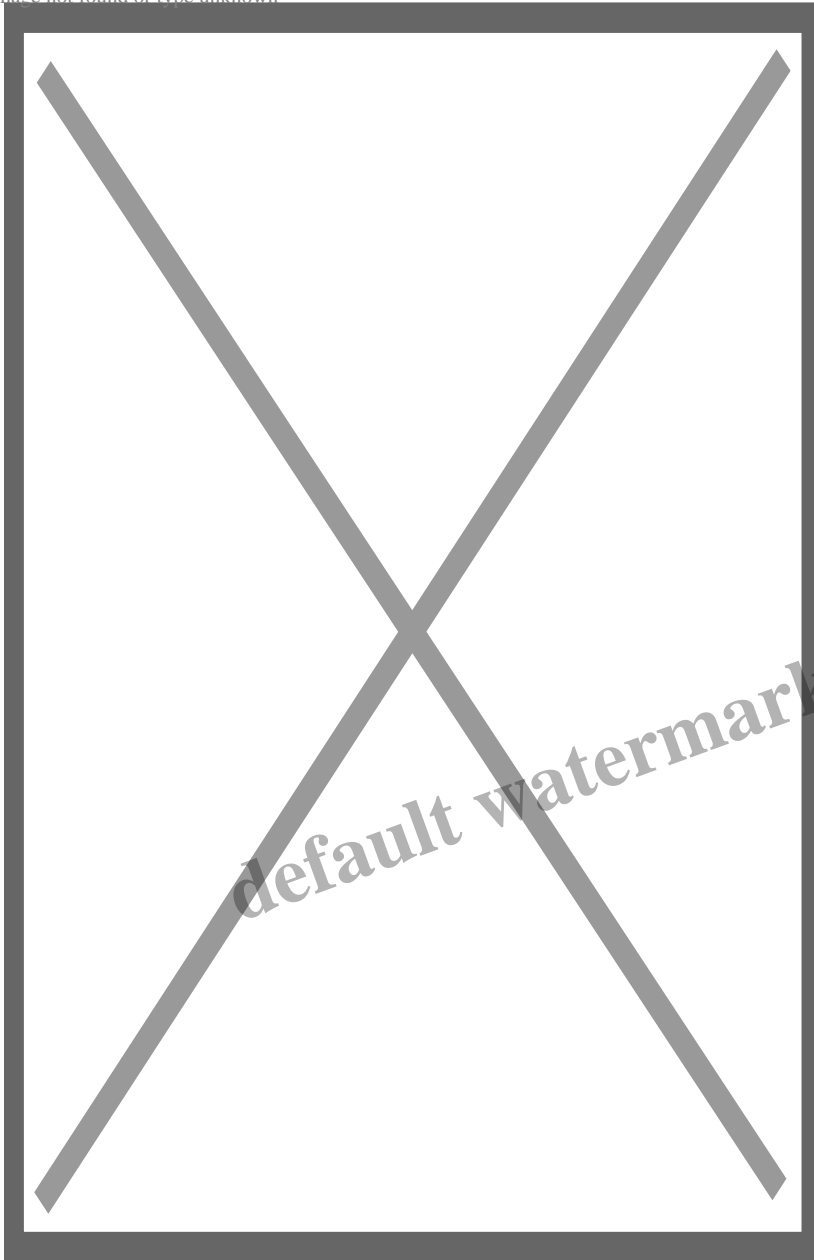


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Recent books discussing new understandings of how trees communicate: Authors are [Suzanne Simard](#), [David George Haskell](#) and [Peter Wohlleben](#)

The work of Suzanne Simard was featured in a 2021 article in [Scientific American](#) with the title: “*‘Mother Trees’ Are Intelligent: They Learn and Remember*”.

So, yes, we’re gradually getting to grips with the idea that trees know stuff and can communicate. And they retain memories of the past in an array of different ways.

Memory written in tree rings and survey reports

It’s been recognised for some time that trees store “memories” in their growth rings. The science of [dendrochronology](#)

is well-established and aims to date tree rings to the precise year they were formed. Tree rings are usually produced annually and result from the different rates of growth occurring over annual seasonal cycles. Especially where winters are cold enough for growth to effectively stop over winter, very distinct annual rings are produced.

The good thing is that you don't need to cut a tree down to observe the growth rings. A method of inserting a tool into the tree trunk that extracts a small core provides enough material to work with in most instances. Tree rings allow the ages of trees to be established but also provide a record of the environment in which the tree grew. Characteristics such as the width of rings can provide information on [past climates](#) and how they've changed.

[Fire scars](#) embedded in the rings can also yield information on how frequently fires have occurred at different times of the past, and other features can hint at past outbreaks of pests.

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Tree rings can provide snapshots of past climate conditions. Source: [NASA](#)

By carefully matching patterns of tree rings from trees of different ages and also from dead trees, timelines can be stretched back centuries and even occasionally millennia.

In addition, the process can be used to accurately date [wooden artefacts](#). If it's known where the wood has come from and a tree-ring chronology is available, the tree ring patterns on the wood may be able to be matched with equivalent patterns in the tree ring record.

Another source of tree history may also provide valuable insights into the past. Early land surveys designed to produce a grid for townships and farmland used a process of marking section corners and

recording up to four “witness” or “[bearing](#)” trees. The process is described in an excerpt from an [article](#) on bearing trees in Wisconsin:

“Between 1832 and 1866, the GLO surveyed the area that would become Wisconsin. Surveyors divided the landscape into a grid of townships and sections, and documenting information about vegetation, soils, wetlands, and cultural features. At each section and quarter section corner, surveyors set a wooden survey post and identified up to four bearing trees. Each tree was “blazed” (marked) and its species and diameter was recorded in the surveyor’s notebook, along with the direction and distance to the tree from the corner post.”

This information is still available and used to good effect in attempts to [visualise](#) what pre-colonization landscapes would have looked like.

The road to the hanging tree

In an earlier [post](#), I mentioned the dad-daughter roadtrip I took through the American south in 2017. While primarily a musical odyssey tracing the roots of American music and visiting guitar makers, we couldn’t help but soak in the multiple layers of history overlaying the landscapes of the south – which of course helped shape the music too.

The Native American influences, diminished through centuries of colonial conquest and conflict, were still there if you looked for them. The [American Civil War](#) and its bloody battles remained prominent, as did the trials and tribulations of the Black communities that culminated in the [Civil Rights Movement](#) and the tumultuous events of the 1950s and 60s.

The Civil War was fought in large part over the question of slavery. The North wanted an end to the practice while the South pushed to retain the economic and social system that relied heavily on slave labour. The defeat of the Confederate South led to the end of slavery and emancipation of previously-enslaved black Americans. And yet, a hundred years after the Civil War, the Civil Rights movement signified an ongoing need to improve the lot of many, if not most, Black Americans.

What had happened in the interim? While the Civil War and Civil Rights stories are well known, the social history in between has been less well promulgated. The unfortunate reality is that there was only a brief period after the Civil War when Black Americans enjoyed virtually the same freedoms and opportunities as whites.

In the book “[Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II](#)” Douglas Blackmon discusses the advent of “industrial slavery”. White-dominated Southern state legislatures passed Black Codes, “an array of interlocking laws essentially intended to criminalize Black life”, to restrict the economic independence of Blacks and provide pretexts for jail sentences. Prisoners were then leased to plantations, lumber camps, and mines to be used for forced labour. Many Black people ended up in worse situations than endured under slavery.

A horrific part of the systematic suppression of Black people was the practice of [lynching](#).

Lynchings were informal public executions – often in the form of hanging – by a mob in order to punish individuals purported to have committed a crime (whether there was any evidence for this or any actual connection between the person and the crime). Lynchings often drew large crowds and were widely

reported, often with graphic photographs, in newspapers at the time. Although such acts were illegal, the perpetrators were rarely brought to justice. And although a few white men were the victims of lynching, most were Black.

The shocking nature of lynchings is hauntingly portrayed in the song “[Strange Fruit](#)” recorded in 1939 by Jazz singer Billie Holiday. A huge departure from her normal repertoire, the song went on to be her biggest hit and an influential protest song.

The original 1939 recording of “Strange Fruit” sung by Billie Holiday. You can also see a live performance from 1959 [here](#).

“Southern trees bear a strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root. Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”

— “Strange Fruit,” written by Abel Meeropol and recorded in 1939 by Billie Holiday

Trees as witness

This was the backdrop to the lynching of Oliver Moore on the walnut tree that was eventually turned into guitars by Freeman Vines. The commonness of the practice of lynching meant that there must have been many trees across the southern landscape that were used for that purpose.

Some, like that walnut tree, have undoubtedly gone now, but some also undoubtedly remain. I recently watched the documentary “[Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America](#)”. Right there in the movie is a segment about a lynching tree standing in the middle of a street in Charleston, North Carolina.

“Who We Are” – trailer (2022)

These trees have witnessed horrible events, and are only sometimes recognised as reminders of these past events. Other trees have witnessed other types of violence – indeed, a number of trees in the American South are now called “[Witness Trees](#)” because of their presence at the great battles of the Civil War. These trees provide living connections with the events of that time.

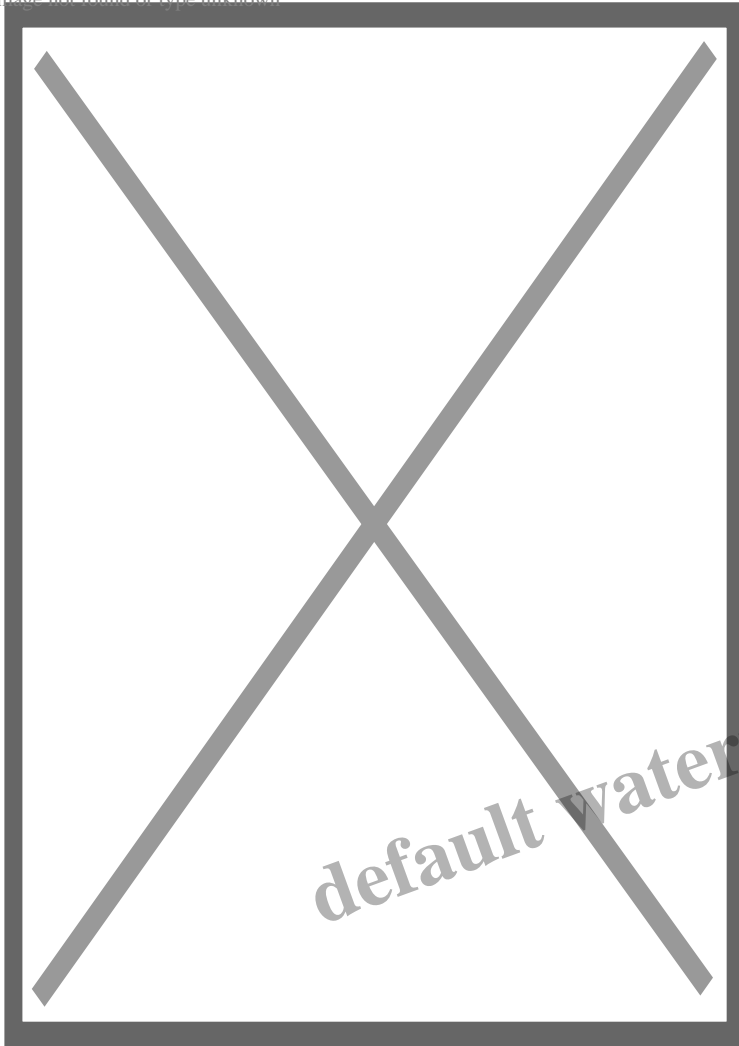
Other trees are also being nominated as witness trees – not necessarily because they have experienced extraordinary events, but rather because they are experiencing life in a changing, humanised world. Harvard forest witness tree. For instance, the [Harvard Forest Witness Tree](#) was chosen “specifically because it is not unusual. It is one of thousands of similarly picturesque, interesting, and ecologically valuable red oak trees at Harvard Forest”

Yet other trees have experienced unbelievable events and survived to tell the tale.

Trees that survived an atomic bomb

On August 6, 1945, the US B-29 bomber Enola Gay dropped a 9,000 pound [atomic bomb](#) over the city of Hiroshima in Japan. That, and the subsequent bomb dropped on the city of Nagasaki, was used in an attempt to force Japan surrender and hence end the Second World War.

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The explosion of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

The bomb destroyed 90% of the city and 80,000 people died immediately in the bomb blast and subsequent firestorm, with thousands more dying later from the effects of radiation. In addition to the loss of human life and the destruction of built infrastructure, most of the city's trees and other plants were also destroyed. The city was almost completely black.

Amazingly, however, within a year of the explosion, shoots of green started appearing on apparently dead, blackened trees a few kilometers from ground zero. While severely damaged above ground, the trees had managed to survive below ground and were now producing new growth.

Since then, the City of Hiroshima, tree experts, and citizen volunteers have lovingly tended [the trees that survived the bomb](#). 170 trees – Ginkos and other species – that were alive after the bombing remain alive today. Each bears a name plate reading *Hibakujumoku* (survivor tree).

A group called [Green Legacy Hiroshima](#) has also been established to collect and look after the seeds and saplings of the survivor trees. These are distributed worldwide. Their vision is to have the trees planted on former nuclear tests and on sites of conflict, as symbols of peace, regeneration and reconciliation. As Nassrine Azimi, who started the initiative, [said](#):

“While silently testifying to the inhumanity of nuclear weapons, they also tell us of the importance of resilience, tolerance and living in harmony with nature.”

Hiroshima: The trees that survived an atomic bomb – BBC World Service 2020

A survivor of 9/11

Few people need much reminding of the [events of September 11, 2001](#) when a series of terrorist attacks hit the US. I remember for some reason switching on the TV just before bedtime here in Western Australia to see images of a passenger jet aircraft flying into one of the towers of the World Trade Center in New York. Then the ensuing images of another plane hitting the second tower and the subsequent collapse of the towers with all the destruction and loss of life that resulted. The world changed again that day, as it had when the atomic bombs were exploded over Japanese cities in 1945.

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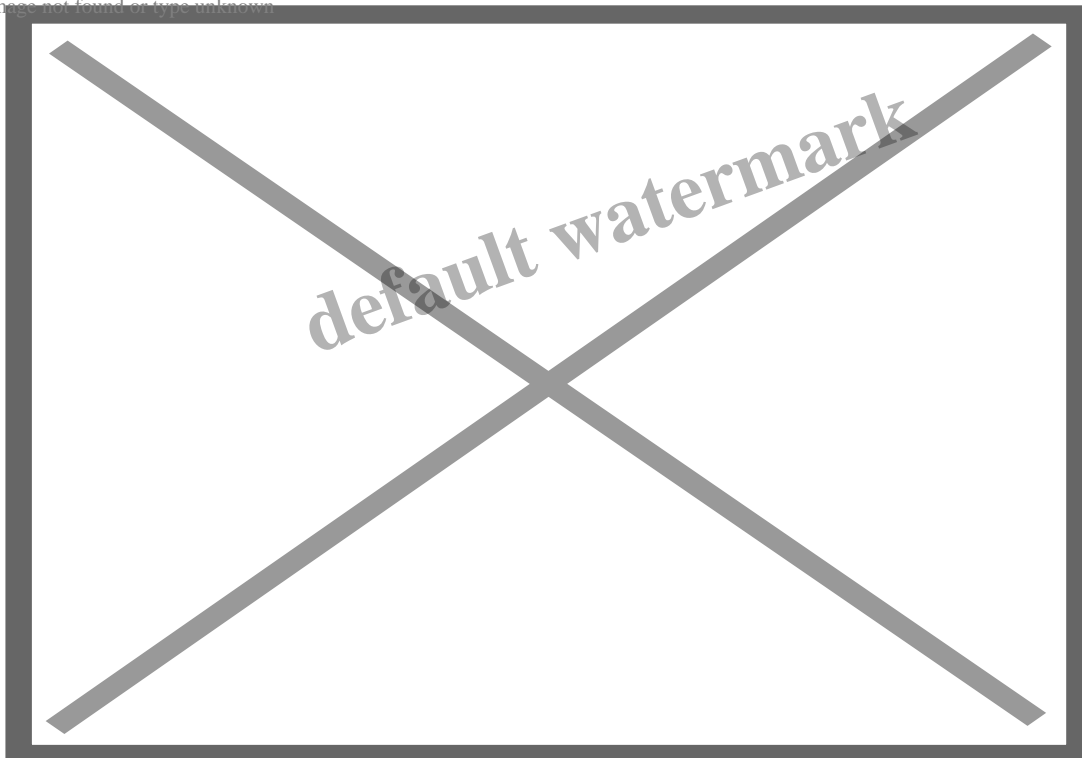


Photo by Robert Clark, from the window of his studio in Brooklyn as the second plane was about to hit the second tower. From: [Time Magazine](#)

The stories of [rescue, recovery and rebuilding](#) on the World Trade Center site are truly remarkable. Where the twin towers stood is now the [National September 11 Memorial](#), a remarkable park with many symbols to remind people of the horrors of the day but also providing a wonderful open space for people to walk, reflect and just be.

When I visited the Memorial a few years ago, I came across another amazing story of survival. The “[Survivor Tree](#)” is a large pear tree that grows effusively there.

The tree was discovered at Ground Zero (where the twin towers had collapsed) about a month after

the attacks. It had been severely damaged, but the finders realised that it was still alive. The tree was carefully removed from the debris and taken to a nursery in the Bronx where it was looked after by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.

After years of careful nurturing, the tree [not only survived but thrived](#). It was taken to the new Memorial site in 2010, and there it remains as a living symbol of resilience, survival and rebirth.

A Survival Story: The Survivor Tree, 2013

As in Hiroshima, efforts are now made to [distribute seedlings](#) from seeds collected from the survivor tree. Seedlings are sent out as symbols of hope to many other communities that have suffered loss or trauma.

“In this great future, you can’t forget your past, so dry your tears, I say” (Bob Marley)

Freeman Vines and his Hanging Tree guitars provided a reminder of a forgotten dark incident from the past, and in the process turned something awful into an amazing piece of art capable of making wonderful music. The Hiroshima Survivor Trees survived the horrors of the first nuclear bomb blast in history used against an enemy in wartime, and now stand as symbols of survival and peace. The 9/11 Survivor Tree was plucked from the wreckage resulting from an unprecedented terrorist attack and, with help from dedicated and caring individuals, now stands as a symbol of resilience and hope.

All provide compelling allegories for the damage humanity has done -and continues to do – to the planet and to itself. But at the same time, they illustrate the potential for a better future in which nature teaches important lessons and, in turn, can be nurtured and restored.

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