



## A Family's Silent Burden: The Killing of Arthur Davis

Arthur Davis died on June 30, 1950, but the details surrounding his death raised questions about what really happened to him. His story was buried for years, until his grandson started investigating. Through family oral history, neighbor accounts, and troves of documents, Reginald Crawford was finally able to piece together how his grandfather died. Reported by Pamela Kirkland.

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Pamela Kirkland: This episode discusses the lynching of a Black man. If this subject is uncomfortable for you, please listen with a friend, listen when you feel ready, or skip to the next episode in our series. As always, take care of you.

Reginald Crawford: It was a beautiful day. It was sunny. It probably was 80 degrees. Wasn't a cloud in the sky. It was a soft breeze. Cause you know, when you are on the water, it seems like the, the air flows smoother and beautiful and, and it got this breeze that you could just stay out there forever.

It was almost as though my grandfather was giving me approval for being there. You know, they say your ancestors would pour their spirit in you. I never had really a great desire to want to know about my mother's people, but that changed all of a sudden.

My name is Reginald Crawford and I am the grandson of Mr. Arthur Davis by his youngest daughter, Miss Darker Davis Crawford. My mother never spoke about her father or his death. She never spoke about her family. I was curious to find out more information about my grandfather.

And so that's how the story and the journey to discovering the true history of his death began. People ask me a lot, why are you doing this? Why do you have such a great interest in something that happened so long ago? God has his hand and everything and if it's a word to call, he will help you. And like I said, when we got to that land, I could hear my grandfather with the creation all around me telling me, thank you, thank you.

Kirkland: Land can hold memories. Even memories, We ourselves have never had memories, like whispers in the wind, find their refuge in the very soil beneath our feet. They linger entwined within the roots, waiting to be discovered.

This is hallowed ground for Reginald Crawford, the land his grandfather worked, tilled, with his bare hands, the land where he died. It is here that Reginald embarks on a journey, one that dives into the depths of generational pain. This is the unfolding of forgotten stories and the awakening of forgotten memories.

Reginald likes to say the spirit of his grandfather is what has driven him to uncover what really happened in 1950. Over the course of five years through speaking with relatives and neighbors while digging up historical documents and delving into who Arthur Davis really was, Reginald and I experienced what it means when we say the truth can't hide from the light.

I'm Pamela Kirkland, a reporter and producer.

The conversation around reparations can seem both overwhelming and contradictory. On one hand, it's hard to imagine how society could ever fully atone for the centuries of injustice and atrocities committed against Black and Brown communities. On the other hand, there's the belief that reparations are not only achievable but essential to healing and moving forward.

What we know is that reparations are owed to these descendants. And frankly, the bill is past due.

Reginald vividly remembers seeing the land where his grandfather lived,

Crawford: Grass was like Kentucky green grass. It was beautiful, like somebody hand painted the grass, but the earth was very rich.

Kirkland: He's in Eufaula, Alabama gazing at a small tract of land that sits just off the Chattahoochee River. To find the exact spot his grandfather and his mother would have lived almost 70 years earlier, he relied on a neighbor who was a young boy back in the 1950s.

Crawford: We left from Montgomery, trailing each other to Abbeville, Alabama to meet Mr. Daniels at a church on top of a hill. And he drove us down some winding roads to the property. As I looked over into the pasture, I could see a great body of water from the trees. And so I asked Mr. Daniels, what was that?

And he said, that was the Chattahoochee River, and that's the area that your grandfather lived on.

Kirkland: It was the culmination of Reginald's journey to find out what happened to his grandfather, Arthur Davis—a preacher, a farmer, a widower, and a family man. His life was tragically cut short, but his spirit was very much alive that day.

Crawford: Even though I never heard him talk before. I could hear my grandfather with the creation all around me telling me, thank you, thank you. You know, it is terrible to die and not be recognized. It's terrible to die and no one knows why you died. An

unjustified death speaks volumes. An unjustified death, you never die. You know, you can throw dirt on the truth, but you can't bury the truth.

Kirkland:

Before we get to Arthur Davis's story, we have to understand the history of this part of Alabama. Southeastern Alabama is sometimes referred to as "Wiregrass" country, named for the tough, wiry grass that grows in the region. It's landscape is marked with rolling hills, pine forests, lakes, rivers, and streams. But its beautiful scenery, the area is also haunted by stories of violent racial terror after Reconstruction.

The small, rural town of Abbeville, Alabama, just a short drive from Eufaula, where Reginald stood, is more [recently known for the rape of Recy Taylor](#) and [lynching of Wesley Johnson](#). Recy Taylor, a 24-year-old Black mother and sharecropper, was walking home from a late night church service in 1944, when she was abducted and gang-raped by six white men.

As Recy and her friend, Fannie Daniel, walked together along the road, accompanied by Fannie's 18-year-old son, West, they were suddenly stopped in their tracks by an old, battered green Chevy truck. The truck screeched to a halt beside them.

Recy was kidnapped at gunpoint then brutally raped and assaulted by the men, who then abandoned her in the dark woods, threatening her life if she dared to report them. In the documentary, "The Rape of Recy Taylor" she talks about that night in her own words.

Recy Taylor:

They talked about killing me. They had on white shirts. I remember that. They had on white shirts. One of them was Lawrence Lee's boy, who didn't try to do nothing to me in the car. They laid me down and had sex with me. I cried that night, trying to get away from them. They wouldn't let me go.

Kirkland:

The crime, which N.A.A.C.P. activist Rosa Parks investigated and garnered extensive coverage in the Black press, never saw an indictment for the accused. Despite the overwhelming evidence and the fact that one of the attackers confessed, two all-white, all-male grand juries failed to indict any of the men involved.

Wes Johnson was lynched in Tumbleton, fifteen minutes from Abbeville, in 1937. A 26-year-old tenant farmer, he had been accused of assaulting a white woman, though no concrete evidence supported that claim. A mob of white men came and broke Wes Johnson out of county jail, according to a distant cousin of his. He was shot, beaten, and then strung up from a gnarled oak tree.

According to a local historian, Wes Johnson was the last known victim of lynching in Henry County, Alabama. But some believe there were other incidents that have gone undocumented.

Kirkland: So it's raining on my way to Montgomery right now. Leaving from Birmingham, driving the hour and a half to Montgomery, Alabama to meet Reggie Crawford, who says that he thinks his grandfather was lynched in 1950, Abbeville, Alabama, which is a small town, in what they call the Wiregrass country. It's in the southeastern part of the state, not far from the Georgia border. If the maps that I found are correct, it's actually just across Lake Eufaula. And on the other side is actually the state of Georgia.

So I'm on my way now to go meet Reginald. We've talked on the phone many, many times, but we haven't actually met face to face yet. So this will be the first time we meet. And I'm not exactly sure what we do during this visit other than just have him recount what he believes happened, what family oral history has been, and what he's heard about the circumstances of his grandfather Arthur Davis' death.

I met Reginald Crawford for the first time in June of 2018. I was working on a story about the Equal Justice Initiative's new lynching remembrance memorial—an overdue commemoration of the racial terror suffered by thousands up to 1950. I came across an [editorial he'd written](#) for a small local newspaper in his hometown, "The Dothan Eagle" about the opening of the museum.

Crawford: I've been haunted by the unanswered true story of the lynching of my grandfather, Mr. Arthur Davis, Abbeville, Alabama in 1949. His children were left orphans by his death, Dorcas, Cyrus, Annie Paul, James, and Alma. Because of their ages and the need to get them out of Abbeville, their stories remain vague. Some claim his death to be suicide. I have eliminated that theory. His hands were tied behind his back and he hung from a tree.

If there is anyone old enough to remember the facts of my grandfather's murder, please contact me. Sincerely, Reginald Crawford.

Kirkland: Inspired by the national memorial to victims of lynching, Reginald had decided he would find a way to have his grandfather included.

Crawford: I saw the EJI had built this memorial and so I was intrigued by it. And Oprah Winfrey was visiting with Bryan Stevenson, and he was giving her a tour of it.

And I reflected back on my mother and what my aunt had told me about the death of my grandfather. So I was trying to say, how can I get him in into that memorial to be recognized so that the world would know what had happened to him, and especially after I found out that it wasn't a suicide. It was a murder, a lynching.

Kirkland: Arthur Davis was born around February 1896 in Eufaula, Alabama.

His father, Josh Davis, was a farmer and a laborer. He and wife Elizas Davis had eight children: Arthur, Josh, Harriet, Juda, Cornelius, Ephelia, Queenie and Ruth.

Born in South Carolina in 1849, Josh Davis could read and write. According to census records, he also owned the land the family lived on.

His eldest son, Arthur, would eventually become the steward of that land. His father told him never to sell it, to keep it in the family.

Arthur Davis spent most of his life in rural Henry County, Alabama. The population in that area in 1940 was around 985 people.

Arthur was a handsome man, even though he seldom smiled. He had big locks of dark, thick, curly hair. His draft card described him as short and slender with gray eyes and brown hair. A portrait Reginald sent me of his grandfather shows him looking scholarly in a dark suit and light slacks holding a large Bible. The family explained to me that Arthur was always self-conscious of his hand. He was missing at least a few fingers on his left hand. The book in the photo was placed to disguise his injury.

Reginald's uncle, Cyrus Davis, said he remembered his father as a dedicated man. He was strict, but he loved his children.

Crawford: Daddy was so hard on me. And I asked the question why was he so hard on you? He said, because I didn't have an education. So he knew that if I had to do anything, I had to really know how to work to survive. He said he was a firm, very disciplined man. And he didn't beg or borrow.

Kirkland: He married his wife Carrie and the couple had five children. Arthur also took in a young girl named Johnnie Mae, who'd been cast out of her family.

Crawford: I spoke to my uncle and I asked him, did he know who Johnnie Mae was? And he said, of course I know who Johnnie Mae was. He said, my father, Mr. Arthur Davis took Johnnie Mae as a child, a very small child. He reared the child in his house from a baby to a teenage age. She was old enough to go out on her own. And my uncle said he only saw his father, Mr. Arthur Davis, cry two times. He said that's when Johnnie Mae left, and when he broke his arm years ago. He said that's the only time he ever saw his father cry.

Kirkland: His family says Arthur was a hard worker—both a farmer and a dedicated Seventh Day Adventist. Religion was one of the reasons Arthur wasn't close with his siblings, according to Cyrus Davis. The rest of the family was Baptist or Methodist, much more common, especially for Black families at that time.

Arthur's close knit family was torn apart after the tragic death of his wife Carrie. Oral history puts her death sometime around 1946 or 1947, although we were unable to find records to confirm those dates.

The Davis family had a shallow well in the front yard.

Crawford: The well didn't have a border around it, it just was a hole in the ground that was the well.

And he said that his mother had a seizure and she fell into the well. He said when she fell into the well, her husband got her out of the water, but they didn't know what to do in terms of CPR or something like that.

So she drowned. He said, I believe if Daddy had known what we know now about CPR or something like that, his mother would not have died. He said the neighbors came and they put her in a pine box and they brought her in the house and he said, they went to sleep around the pine box until the next morning when someone came with a wagon and a horse.

He said he and his brother sat on top of the pine box and they took their mother to a burial site. He said, Reginald, he said, our life was so hard.

Kirkland: As the Davis family began to heal from the devastating loss of Carrie, the shadow of tragedy continued to loom large. Arthur, now a widower, shouldered the immense responsibility of raising his children on his own, while also managing the farm. But even with the struggle, the year 1950 brought a glimmer of hope with the harvest turning out to be one of the best they'd had in years.

Like a sudden summer thunderstorm that appears out of nowhere, dark clouds gathered once more on the horizon as Arthur Davis would soon meet his own untimely end, under suspicious circumstances. The puzzling nature of his demise left the family searching for answers and grappling with the painful question of why a man who seemed to be on the cusp of a better life would suddenly be taken away.

On June 30, 1950, Arthur Davis went for a walk that he would never return home from.

Crawford: This was a letter on Saturday, August 11th, 2016. I wrote that to Mr. Lush. Excuse me. Hold on one minute. I don't want get before myself.

Kirkland: How big is your file now like of all the documents you've collected over the years?

Crawford: Uh, I got, this is it. This is a book of all of his relatives, all my mother's relatives. I got his death certificate... it's by suicide.

Kirkland: Reginald's collection of documents related to the death of his grandfather has only grown since we started working together all those years ago. My own file is pretty large at this point, too. He's interviewed his family members countless times, been in touch with the Equal Justice Initiative. We've collected historical documents, oral histories, found neighbors who lived in the Abbeville area at the time of Arthur Davis' death—and put the story together piece by piece.

As far as what happened that day in 1950, what we know for sure is he never made it back home to his beloved children.

Crawford: The day he died, uncle James said that they had never been doing so well in the farming industry. He said his father was very happy. He saw him that morning when he left and he said when he came back they told him that they found him hanging from a tree.

Kirkland: Reginald spoke with James Davis, the eldest of the Arthur Davis' children about his father's death. When I spoke with Cyrus Davis in 2018, he told me something similar. That after he returned home from work that day, his uncle was at the house and told him they had found his father in the woods with haywire around his neck, strung up from a tree, with his hand tied behind his back. They told him that he had committed suicide and it would be safest if they didn't ask any questions about what happened.

Arthur Davis' body was taken to a funeral home run by the Holman family. They still run the funeral home in Headland, Alabama to this day. A man named Ben Lightner put the body on a wagon and brought it to the funeral home. Three days later, Arthur Davis was buried in a pauper's casket.

Crawford: The price of the casket was \$18.50. The city of Abbeville paid for it.

Kirkland: There was no article in the paper, no obituary, no police report, and no investigation by the Sheriff – just five kids left without both parents in just a few short years. Relatives took some of the children to Dothan, Alabama, where they eventually went their separate ways. James headed to North Carolina to work on tobacco farms, while Cyrus found his way to Ohio. Two of the girls, Dorcas and Annie Paul remained in Dothan for a time. Reginald recalls his uncle Cyrus telling him...

Crawford: When Daddy died, nobody wanted to take us.

Kirkland: A family that had already had their world turned upside down was now pulled apart even more.

But out of tragedy, there was a love story. Dorcas Davis, Reginald's mother, cleaned houses around town after taking her from Abbeville. She met the woman who would eventually become her mother-in-law while cleaning. She took Dorcas in after hearing about what happened to the children.

Crawford: And that's a beautiful story because my grandmother treated her like a daughter, not a, not a daughter-in-law. I mean, she actually loved my mother. They raised her. My mother got that love. The other brothers and sisters did not get that love. So they were tossed from one family to another family to another family.

Kirkland: While Reginald was close with family on his father's side, he didn't know much about his mother's side—especially his maternal grandparents.

Crawford: My mother never spoke about her father or his death during the entire time that she was my mother and I was old enough to listen to stories. She never spoke about her family.

They never talked about my grandfather. Never, never. And I never asked any questions because my mother, on my father's side, I got so much love from his mother, which was my grandmother, that I never felt, a disconnection of not being loved by a grandparent.

Kirkland: It wasn't until Reginald's mother faced her own battle with cancer that another story began to unfold.

Crawford: When my mother became very ill, I just always wondered about her people. And it was a aunt of mine on my father's side that told me that your grandfather did not commit suicide. It was something my mother had told me once when I did ask her about it, she said, well, my father killed himself. And that was many, many years. I probably was a teenager.

Alice Hawkins: Hello?

Pamela: Hi, is this Miss Hawkins?

Hawkins: Yes...

Kirkland: How are you?

Hawkins: Alright, how are you?

Kirkland: Reginald's aunt, Alice Hawkins, had some of the clearest recollections of what she overheard happened to Artuhr Davis. His aunt on his father's side had heard the suicide of Arthur Davis actually wasn't a suicide at all.

Crawford: I called my aunt, and I told her that I was concerned about my mother because she was in this great depression. And I said, you know, I think she might do something to herself because, you know, suicide runs in her family. And I said, you know, her father killed herself. And so my aunt said, "What the hell did you say?" I said, "My grandfather killed himself." And she said, "The hell he did." She said, "The white folks killed your grandfather."

Kirkland: I was looking through my old notes, and found from your Aunt Alice Hawkins when we spoke with her back in 2018 about this, she was saying she was about five or six when it happened, and that she heard the details through her grandmother, in a way. She said I was quilting on the machine with the older people, while the other kids were playing.



They were talking about it. That's how I heard it. I didn't see it. And she said that they thought he was a white man in the beginning. They found out he was a Black man. Had big locks of curly, nice hair. He was mixed, I guess mulatto, one of the kids looks white. All three of his daughters, he had two sons.

So she heard this all, just kind of sitting around listening to what the adults were saying, is what she had said. And I asked her, did the family talk about the lynching? She said, "We used to talk about it all the time, like it was the news, but then all of a sudden everyone just stopped talking about it and it just didn't really come up anymore."

Crawford: I asked my mother, I said, "Mama". I said, "Alice said your father didn't kill himself. She said he was lynched." And she said, "Yeah, Reginald. Yeah. He was lynched." So I said, "Mama, why did you tell me he committed suicide?" She said, "Reginald, I was a child. And we were always told that he killed himself." And she said, "I really don't want to talk about it, Reginald."

Kirkland: Alice Hawkins passed away in 2021, but her revelations lit a fire in Reginald that couldn't be extinguished. Why would his mother have told him that her father committed suicide, knowing it wasn't the truth? Who killed Arthur Davis? And most importantly, why?

The one family member I couldn't reach was Alma Davis. According to family members, Alma may have seen part of what happened to her father.

Crawford: My uncle told me that she was the one that found her father, in the tree. And so I imagine with her losing her mother three years earlier, and then the trauma of finding her father, um, it just, she never was the same.

Kirkland: Alma Davis also passed away in 2021.

Kirkland: What we know is that Arthur Davis was religious, that things were going really well in 1950, despite having lost his wife a couple years prior. But as far as work and the farm goes, things were good. He loved his children. He only had a few fingers on his left hand. And so all of those things have led you to the conclusion that you don't, you don't believe the cause of death is the actual cause of death.

Crawford: I could never comprehend him doing that. The story of Johnnie Mae, really solidified my belief. Uh, and, and him killing himself because... it's just incomprehensible.

Kirkland: With this new information, Reginald reached out the Equal Justice Initiative to see if he could have his grandfather included in the Peace and Justice Memorial. The oral history from the family and neighbors and evidence suggesting Arthur Davis' wasn't suicidal led them to conclude he was, in fact, lynched.

Some of the most damning evidence is recollections from neighbors at the time. He was found with his hands tied behind his back, and though we know he was

missing digits on his left hand, he had fashioned a wire noose and hanged himself from a tree overhanging a waterway. Reginald and his aunt Alice also believed that Carrie Davis may have been white. And that land he inherited from his father? He apparently refused to sell it to white speculators.

Black people who occupied coveted land, like Arthur Davis did, were regularly targeted by "whitecappers" - bands of poor, white farmers active in the rural South during the 20th century. In most cases, local law enforcement was indifferent or ineffective in protecting Black residents from these attacks, allowing whites to employ violence and murder to eliminate economic competition without fear of any legal repercussions.

[According to EJI](#), Henry County, Alabama was the site of 13 *documented* lynchings between 1877 and 1950. Many more went undocumented.

Kirkland: In July 2018, Reginald traveled from Montgomery, Alabama to Abbeville to visit the site where his grandfather lived and to collect the soil where he died. With the help of a man named Sam Daniels, they found the tract of land.

Crawford: We dug up the earth and put it in a jar that EJI does this for the memorial in recognition of those that were lynched or killed. And the land we saw was so beautiful and so soft and so rich.

Kirkland: Sam Daniels lived in the same area as the Davis family. He was actually schoolmates with one of Arthur Davis' children, Annie Paul. He knew the family and had heard about what happened. Despite the passage of time, fear still held him back from discussing his death openly.

Crawford: When I met Mr. Daniels, and I started to ask Mr. Daniels some questions about the murder, Mr. Daniels withdrew, as though he was afraid that those same white people might be in town and you know, he has to live there in Abbeville. And I was really shocked that after so long, 70 years.

Crawford: Wow. I said, I said, "So they really, really did kill him and take his land." And he said, "Well, son, that's why I brought you here."

Kirkland: In the [Remembrance and Peace Museum](#), the soil Reginald and his wife Janie collected that day now sits on a shelf in a jar. Arthur Davis's name rests with hundreds of others throughout the museum, testimony of lives taken too soon.

It is a somber reminder of the many other Black men who suffered a similar fate, their names forever etched in history. Beside Arthur Davis's jar is one for Jesse Jefferson, killed in Jackson, Georgia, in 1948. Above it, another jar commemorates George Armwood, who was killed in Princess Anne, Maryland, in 1933.

Dennis Cross, James Royal, John West, Alex Smith, and Hurley Owen are but a few of the names alongside Arthur Davis's, each representing a life ended by racial violence and terror.

- Crawford: This was monumental because it was swept under the rug. And it is one of those stories that nobody knew, but somebody had to be bold enough to tell the people. And I was bold enough to go to tell the people, and God put the, the media pieces together to get it out there in a greater magnitude.
- Kirkland: The Remembrance and Peace Museum not only commemorates the lives lost to racial terror, but also brings up a crucial question: What is owed to the families who have been devastated by such unspeakable acts of violence?
- Crawford: You hear a lot of lynchings but like you trying to get to, you say reparations. What did it do? The damage that it did, that it caused to a whole family, over generations. So that would be my main objective to tell the victim's story.
- And the victim's story never gets told too often. It just ends with a murder, but it never talks about the victims of that murder. My aunt and uncles were the victim and myself.
- Kirkland: For Reginald, the museum is an acknowledgment of this country's brutal history, but it's acknowledgement isn't enough.
- Crawford: Sometimes people will put you to sleep with awards and applause. He doing the great work. But don't get sidetracked by the symbolism.
- Kirkland: Reginald believes his family members didn't know how to love because they were victims themselves, cut off from their roots.
- Crawford: They didn't have love. They didn't know how to love. They were guilty of not loving each other, but they were the victim of not knowing what love was because they did not have a family connection.
- They were cut off from the root. You lose a mother at an early age and then your father is killed at a early age and you're taken in by people that don't really want you, but they have an obligation because they know nobody else wants you. So all your life you've been unwanted. That's a great tragedy.
- Kirkland: Love is retelling his true history. Reginald's love for a man he never met. His love of truth and justice.
- Crawford: what happened to us as a people, the tree was pulled up from his roots, not a branch broke off, but his roots. And so it's almost amazing that anything good could come outta something if you pull something up from his roots, unless a particle regenerated itself.
- Kirkland: Reginald believes that repair is essential, but to heal the wounds the death of Arthur Davis caused, he isn't quite sure where to even start.

Crawford: The impact of his death, I don't think you could measure it. It's like building a car without a motor. You know it's a car, but it don't have a motor. You know, it looks good. You think you can drive it. It got, it, got the seats in there, it got a steering wheel in there and, and they got tires on it, but it don't have a motor. That's the kind of life that was left for them. They didn't have anything. It is almost like, I could say they didn't have a soul.

They had a soul, but the soul wouldn't function.

Kirkland: It's the pain in the Gil Scott Heron song. "Who Will Pay Reparations for My Soul?" Who will pay reparations for Arthur Davis' soul?

Crawford: in the word reparations, is the word repair. And so, first you must repair. How do you repair something that God put together? How do you repair something that God put to coexist with each other until the time that he calls you to eternity?

How can, when a man comes and intervenes in that process and does so much unimaginable damage and brings so much tragedy to people, to five little children. So how can you repair that? So I would say to those that's talking about reparation, it's necessary. But I would like to see your calculation and your formula that you're using.

Kirkland: 1950 was not that long ago. For the Davis family, it feels even more recent.

Reginald's journey and connection to racial terror highlight the pervasive nature of generational trauma. How the pain and suffering experienced by one generation reverberates through the lives of their descendants, leaving a lasting impact on entire families.

While he may not have a specific reparation amount in mind for his family, he often dreams of the beautiful land by the Chattahoochee River, representing what was lost and what might have been.

One of Reginald's proudest accomplishments is ensuring that Arthur Davis's story will not be forgotten. By sharing his family's history, Reginald keeps his grandfather's memory alive and reminds us of the ongoing quest for justice and the unearthing of the truth.

Kirkland: Special thanks to Reginald Crawford, the Davis descendants, T. Larry Smith and Delicia White.

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