

Three pursue posthumous pardon

They want to clear name of convict executed in 1919

By ANDREA F. SIEGEL
SUN STAFF

Near a fence in Brewer's Hill Cemetery, a cracked and chipped concrete slab streaked with gold-colored fungus marks the grave of John Snowden, the last person to die on the gallows in Anne Arundel County.

On Feb. 28, 1919, the black iceman was hanged for the murder of a pregnant white woman, an execution that so riled parts of Annapolis that the National Guard was called out to prevent riots.

But questions remain about whether Snowden did kill 20-year-old Lottie May Brandon, questions that disturb several generations of the city's black community who wonder about a belated, anonymously penned confession, questions that disturb a niece who never knew him.

Now a renewed request for a pardon is being made by a man who — though of no relation — shares the last name of the hanged man and works in a government office built on the spot where John



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On a mission: *George Phelps Jr., a historian and president of the cemetery association, is trying to clear John Snowden's name.*

Snowden died proclaiming his innocence.

Carl O. Snowden, a black activist and former Annapolis alderman who is an assistant to Anne Arundel County Executive Janet S. Owens, is asking Gov. Parris N. Glendening to pardon John Snowden.

"There is enough circumstantial evidence that indicates now that he may not have been guilty of the

crime," Snowden said. "There may have been a rush to judgment."

Others support the effort. "This is something that will show the criminal justice system is a working system, even in death," said George Phelps Jr., a black historian who, as president of the cemetery association, is one of few people who can point to the site where the community buried Snowden.

"This thing with Snowden is like an obsession with me," he said, standing by the blank, tilted gravemarker for a man he fervently believes was wrongly convicted. If this request for a pardon is successful, he says, it will "change the hearts and minds of so many people — it would set history straight."

Hazel "Missy" Snowden, Snowden's niece, also wants her uncle pardoned. "It would clear his name, and it reveals that he is not the one who did it," she said.

As a child growing up in Annapolis, the Landover woman remembers her father retelling the story of his brother, a story that embittered him, a story she thinks of every day, a story she hopes to turn into a book.

In his letter that arrived yesterday at the governor's office, Carl [See *Pardon*, 5B]

3 seek pardon for man executed in 1919 killing

[Pardon, from Page 1B]

Snowden asked for the pardon because John Snowden might not have been guilty.

Carl Snowden also wants the pardon for symbolic reasons, to show reconciliation. His letter listed instances where he felt the governor had shown sensitivity to racial issues. He referred to similar cases elsewhere in the country,

including that of a Tennessee man lynched in 1906 for a crime he did not commit and who was vindicated several weeks ago.

This is the second request. Snowden's first request went a decade ago to then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer. The Maryland Parole Commission, which investigates such requests, forwarded no recommendation to the governor, but why is unknown, said spokes-

man Leonard A. Sipe's Jr. Phelps said the investigator dropped the ball.

The Maryland Parole Commission does a cursory review of the record "unless somebody steps in and presents more evidence," said Mike Morrill, spokesman for the governor. "You would have to show that there was a miscarriage of justice."

He said parole officials are un-

sure if they have the files on the case and what they contain.

"While this case may carry symbolic significance, no pardon is issued for symbolic reasons," Morrill said. Each request for a pardon, posthumous or not, is evaluated on whether convincing evidence shows the person was wronged.

Newspaper accounts say that, on Aug. 8, 1917, Valentine Brandon returned from his job as a stenographer at the Naval Experiment Station to find his pregnant wife of 10 months, Lottie, dead on their bed, in their home on what used to be 29 Second Street, now Lafayette Street, in Annapolis. She had been hit in the head, her body was bruised, she had scratches on her neck and she may have been sexually assaulted. Nothing was stolen.

Amid swirling rumors and gruesome descriptions that captured the imagination of readers from Baltimore to the victim's hometown of Washington, theories of the killing abounded.

A New York City sleuth who solved a famous murder mystery came to town; police suspected the Brandons' next-door neighbors because they heard the man of that house paid undue attention to Lottie Brandon; witnesses changed their stories; an autopsy report said beneath the white victim's fingernails was the clawed flesh of a black person.

Five days later, police arrested Snowden, by newspaper accounts an iceman. He maintained his innocence to the gallows, saying he was tortured and beaten by police who put a gun to his neck and threatened to kill him if he did not confess.

It took a jury 20 minutes to convict Snowden.

Amid pleas to the governor for clemency and court appeals, the New York sleuth said the day before the murder that neighbors told her a man other than Brandon answered the Brandons' door. Eleven people on the jury asked that Snowden's life be spared.

The day before the hanging, a man from Washington offered to take Snowden's place on the gallows. Supporters brought new clothes to Snowden in jail. The National Guard arrived to keep peace.

Shortly after Snowden was hanged, an anonymous letter was sent to the *Evening Capital* newspaper, from a man who said he was the killer. "I could not stand to see another man live with my heart so I put Lottie out of the way," the letter said.

A decade ago, a private investigator, his interest piqued by newspaper reports, re-examined the case and concluded that the evidence did not add up to Snowden as the killer. No bloodstains were found anywhere else in the house but on the bed and no murder weapon was found.

The story is one that Trudi Brown McGowan, now 74, vividly remembers her mother telling her, the one about the innocent man who was hanged.