



Elated: "I feel like my uncle's soul is rejoicing and my father's soul is rejoicing," says Hazel "Missy" Snowden, who recalls how the execution haunted her father.

LINDA COAN O'KRESIK : SUN STAFF

Glendening pardons black in 1919 murder

6-01-2001

Governor attempts 'to correct inequity'

By JAY APPERSON
AND ANDREA F. SIEGEL
SUN STAFF

More than eight decades after convicted killer John Snowden professed his innocence all the way to the gallows, Gov. Parris N. Glendening determined yesterday that the man's execution "may well have been a miscarriage of justice" — and granted him a posthumous pardon.

"The more I looked into it, the more I said, 'Something's just not right here,'" Glendening said, describing his pardon in the 1919 case — which involved a black man and a white woman — as an effort "to correct a past inequity."

Pointing to questions that have lingered over the case for years — including changing witness accounts and a request from jurors that Snowden's death sentence be commuted — the governor added: "Certainly, given that much doubt, there should never have been a hanging."

In part- [See Pardon, 11A]

Glendening pardons black executed for 1919 murder

[Pardon, from Page 1A]

doning a black man who some contend was rushed to a hangman's noose, the governor's action highlighted some of the issues that lawmakers cited this year as they sought a moratorium on executions in Maryland.

And, coming more than a decade after black leaders in Annapolis began campaigning for a Snowden pardon, the governor's decision seemed to affirm the beliefs that the city's African-Americans have long held about the case.

The story of John Snowden has been handed down from generation to generation in Annapolis' black community — the story of a black man hanged in an intolerant time for a crime he probably did not commit.

Hazel "Missy" Snowden, 44, remembers how as a young child she saw a picture of her uncle in a newspaper clipping at home, and how the execution haunted her father.

"I feel like my uncle's soul is rejoicing and my father's soul is rejoicing," said the Landover woman, whose father was John Snowden's younger brother. "God says in his word, I may not come when you want me, but I am always right on time."

"The final chapter written on this book is the one we always wanted: that there was great doubt," said Carl O. Snowden, a longtime activist in the Annapolis black community, who is not related to John Snowden.

But a relative of the slain woman said she is baffled by the governor's decision.

"'Pardon,' it is a very strong word. Pardon has an interpretation of innocence — that is where I am concerned," said Judy Kulawiak, 51, of Millersville, a great-niece of murder victim Lottie May Brandon. She, too, grew up with the story of the murder, though a different version — of a young woman, recently wed and pregnant, killed at home.

"I always grew up feeling a sense that justice had been served," she said.

According to newspaper accounts, Valentine Brandon returned from his job as a stenographer at the Naval Experiment Station on Aug. 8, 1917, and found Lottie, his pregnant wife of 10 months, dead in the bedroom of their Annapolis home. She had been hit in the head, and her partially clothed body was bruised and scratched.

The crime made headlines in Baltimore and in the victim's hometown of Washington, as reporters chronicled police efforts to pursue leads.

At one point, investigators suspected that a woman might have killed Brandon out of jealousy. But other witnesses said they'd seen a man resembling Snowden, who made his living delivering ice, near the Brandon home on the day of the murder. Snowden, 26, was arrested. The victim's body was exhumed, and a report was released saying the clawed flesh of a black person was found beneath her fingernails.

A jury deliberated 20 minutes before convicting Snowden. A judge sentenced him to hang.

As the execution date neared, Gov. Emerson Harrington rejected appeals for mercy. As the iceman was to be hanged in February 1919, Annapolis was tense. The state militia patrolled black areas of the city, the Baltimore Police Department sent reinforcements and a machine gun detachment set up arms near the execution site, according to a historian with a committee seeking Snowden's pardon.

Snowden's last statement was: "I have been imprisoned one year and six months and now am about to shake hands with time and welcome eternity, for in a few hours from now, I shall step out of time into eternity to pay the penalty of a crime I am not guilty of."

Shortly after the execution, an anonymous writer sent letters to the *Evening Capital* and the county sheriff, claiming responsibility for the killing.

In 1990, Carl Snowden, a former Annapolis alderman, asked Gov. William Donald Schaefer to review the case. During his term, Schaefer granted a rare, posthumous pardon to Jerome S. Cardin, who was convicted of stealing from savings- and loan depositors. But records do not indicate that any action was taken in the Snowden case.

Last year, Carl Snowden wrote to Glendening. Parole and probation investigators assembled trial transcripts and newspaper accounts and submitted a report to the parole commission.

Chairwoman Patricia K. Cushwa said yesterday that the commission was persuaded to recommend the pardon because of questions surrounding the case.

A key, she said, was that "no investigation was ever authorized to re-examine the claims of the key witnesses or to consider the reasons for the appeal for clemency from the jurors."

Glendening said yesterday that it is impossible to establish with certainty whether Snowden is innocent, but that "substantial doubt" about the case convinced him that the man should not have been executed.

Del. William H. Cole IV, a Baltimore Democrat who backs a moratorium on executions while researchers determine whether racial bias plays a role in Maryland's use of capital punishment, said he sees parallels between the Snowden case and the current debate.

"It illustrates once again that there are problems with our penal system and the implications of the death penalty," Cole said. "It just proves that if we're going to use it, as a society we have to be certain we are using it fairly."

Glendening said the Snowden case was weighed on its merits and that the pardon was issued without regard to broader issues.

"It was," he said, "just intended to say we are committed to fairness."



LINDA COAN O'KRESIK: SUN ST.

Long time coming: Black leaders in Annapolis campaigned for years for a pardon for Hazel "Missy" Snowden's uncle, John Snowden.