

Keeping attuned to past, present

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■ **State song:** *Lawmakers will debate today whether to replace Maryland's fiery, pro-Confederate anthem with a tamer version.*

11A

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SUN STAFF

It was April 1861, and James Ryder Randall of Louisiana couldn't sleep. He had just read a newspaper account of how his former college roommate was killed in a Pratt Street riot between Confederate sympathizers and Union soldiers from Massachusetts.

"I could not dismiss what I had read in the paper from my mind. About midnight I rose, lit a candle, and went to my desk," Randall recalled 20 years later. "Some powerful spirit appeared to possess me, and almost involuntarily I proceeded to write the song of 'My Maryland.'"

He was 22, a sickly and romantic schoolteacher living far from his hometown of Baltimore. The verses of his impassioned song, particularly the ones branding Lincoln a despot and spurning the "Northern scum," would soon thrill Confederate troops.

Today in Annapolis, lawmakers, historians and descendants of Confederate veterans will debate whether to scrap Randall's "Maryland, My Maryland" as the state song and replace it with one written by a Cumberland schoolteacher in 1894 and conveniently titled "Maryland, My Maryland."

Both songs will be analyzed, as will the loyalties of Maryland's citizenry in 1861. But one fact will be beyond debate: The battle over Randall's bloodthirsty anthem has far outlasted the War Between the States.

"It's sort [See Song, 10A]

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of a mini-Civil War that we're still fighting," said Jean Harvey Baker, a Goucher College history professor who argues that the song didn't represent Marylanders in 1861, when a majority were either neutral or favored the Union. "In the northern and western part of the state, you won't find anybody who sings it. It's been repellent."

Poets and politicians have tried for 50 years to strip Randall's song of its official status, which it gained in 1939. This year, advocates hope

the patriotism that has seeped into public debate since Sept. 11 will reach the Senate committee where the song bill will be heard.

"We've never had stronger evidence of the importance of these inclusive kinds of songs since Sept. 11," said Baker. "We all weep a little bit when we sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'"

Sen. Jennie M. Forehand, a Montgomery County Democrat who sponsored the bill after happening upon White's poem, agrees. Forehand's relatives were on opposite sides of the Civil War. She finds

Maryland's song divisive and humiliating: "In this time when we're really appreciating our freedoms and wanting to preserve them so strongly, I would hope that a patriotic song for our state would certainly be a priority. I don't like the reference to Northern scum, to 'blood and gore of Bal-ti-more.'"

John T. White, a pious Allegany educator, apparently didn't like Randall's lyrics either.

White, whom the 1898 Portrait and Biographical Record describes as "popular in the best social circles of Cumberland," wrote

"Maryland, My Maryland" in 1894 and bade his students sing it to the tune of "O Tannenbaum" — the tune that also accompanies Randall's song.

But the defiance of Randall's verses — "Thou wilt not cower in the dust, Maryland! Thy beaming sword shall never rust, Maryland!" — is in White's poem exchanged for the pastoral: "In twain the Chesapeake divides, Maryland, my Maryland, While oceanward its water glides, Maryland, my Maryland."

State archivist Edward C. Papenfuss supports the switch,

writing that Randall's "is an embittered confederate Civil War poem unbecoming a state that has contributed so much to the union."

These arguments outrage Patrick J. Griffin III of Montgomery County, past national commander in chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, whose members plan to testify: "If anything is divisive, it's these people who have nothing better to do than change the song. I'm appalled and incensed by their devious creativity. ... We can all understand our history better, but to erase part of it is not the way."

These arguments have been raging since at least the turn of the century — and even White's seemingly innocuous poem has been pulled into the fray.

In 1910, the editor of a book of Randall's work (which featured many love poems) defended the song against those who, "by some mistaken idea of false regard for sectional feeling," shunned the last stanza and its line, "Huzza! She spurns the Northern scum!" Well into the 1920s, only three of Randall's nine stanzas were sung — the ones seen as safely referring to the Revolutionary War.

In 1934, lawmakers urged on by the Maryland Federation of Music Clubs pushed a bill to make the song Maryland's anthem. (Amid lusty committee-room renditions of the song, some objected, offering their own lyrics — and White's.) The bill passed, but Gov. Harry W. Nice vetoed it as unnecessary. Some papers reported Nice wanted "offensive" verses removed.

The bill resurfaced and was signed into law in 1939, 100 years after Randall's birth, and, as World War II took hold, another era of patriotic feeling. The bill's sponsor was Del. Charles F. Argabright of Baltimore, a Virginia native who wore a derby to Annapolis and made no secret of his disappointment over the South's defeat.

Disapproving factions have complained every decade since. In the 1970s, the legislature endorsed what became a clamorous contest to replace the song. The state's then-poet laureate offered lyrics and was swiftly accused of plagiarizing White.

In the 1980s, then-Sen. Howard A. Denis stopped trying oust the song only after a death threat. And last year, anti-song testimony from a Montgomery County teen-ager left a House committee unmoved.

Randall remained loyal to the Confederate cause until his death in 1908, but despite his fierce lyrics he was known as a gentle soul. His famous poem, he said in 1882, "was not composed in cold blood, but in what may be called a conflagration of the senses, if not an inspiration of the intellect."

Staff researcher Paul McCardell contributed to this article.