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Teen Leads New Quest to Drop Md. Song Assembly Revisits Lyrics Debate

By Lori Montgomery
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, March 5, 2001; Page B01

Ben Meiselman had no idea what he was singing. He was 9 years old, for heaven's sake.

Onstage with his classmates for a fourth-grade assembly, the boy innocently denounced Abraham Lincoln as a "despot" and called the Union Army a band of "Northern scum."

Afterward, parents clapped politely. But Ben's father never forgot the bizarre sight of all those black and brown kids -- not to mention his Jewish son -- belting out the lurid Confederate call to arms that serves as Maryland's state song.

Last fall, when Ben needed a topic for a school civics project, his dad proposed a campaign to deep-six the anthem. Ben agreed and, with two classmates, persuaded Del. Peter Franchot, a Montgomery County Democrat, to introduce a bill. This week, Ben will ask the General Assembly to strike "Maryland, My Maryland" from the list of official symbols that represent the Free State to the world.

"The words are dense and hard to understand. And besides, the theme

— Song Excerpts —

Excerpts from "Maryland, My Maryland," by James Ryder Randall

I
The despot's heel is on thy shore,
Maryland, my Maryland!
His torch is at thy temple door,
Maryland, my Maryland!
Avenge the patriotic gore
That flecked the streets of Baltimore,
And be the battle queen of yore,
Maryland, my Maryland!

VI
Dear Mother! burst the tyrant's chain,
Maryland, my Maryland!
Virginia should not call in vain,
Maryland, my Maryland!
She meets her sisters on the plain
Sic semper! 'tis the proud refrain
That baffles minions back amain,
Maryland, my Maryland!
Arise in majesty again, Maryland, my
Maryland!

VIII
Thou wilt not yield the Vandal toll,
Maryland, my Maryland!
Thou wilt not crook to his control,
Maryland, my Maryland!
Better the fire upon thee roll,
Better the shot, the blade, the bowl,
Than crucifixion of the Soul, Maryland,
my Maryland!

IX
I hear the distant thunder-hum,
Maryland, my Maryland!
The Old Line bugle, fife, and drum,
Maryland, my Maryland!
She is not dead, nor deaf, nor dumb
Huzza! She spurns the Northern scum!
She breathes! She burns! She'll come!
She'll come! Maryland! My Maryland!

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understand. And, basically, they tell Maryland to secede from the Union," said Ben, now 15 and a sophomore at Montgomery Blair High School. "Most parts you can't understand. And the parts I *can* understand, I don't like."

At first glance, Ben's assault on the state song might be dismissed as the latest in a long line of state-symbol proposals paraded annually through Annapolis. Thanks in part to the winning charms of earnest schoolchildren, Maryland lawmakers have designated a state dinosaur (*Astrodon johnstoni*), a state drink (milk), a state sport (jousting) and a state fossil (*Ecphora gardnerae gardnerae*). This year, they are auditioning a state cat (calico) and a state shrub (pinxterbloom azalea).

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But his campaign has more in common with the recent angry battle to remove the Confederate flag from the South Carolina statehouse dome and earlier controversies over references to "darkies" in Florida's and Virginia's state songs. Nearly 140 years after the nation descended into civil war, many Southern and border states are still divided over whether to preserve such bits of history or to wipe them out.

That debate is surprisingly passionate in Maryland, which remained loyal to the Union but only after Lincoln imprisoned a good portion of the General Assembly to head off a secession vote. The sons and husbands among many prominent Maryland families fought proudly for the South, and the last time a state lawmaker tried to tamper with "Maryland, My Maryland," his office received death threats.

"I also got a petition signed by thousands of Confederate sympathizers. There was very strong sentiment to retain it," said Howard A. Denis, a former Republican state senator who now serves on the Montgomery County Council.

"Maryland is not just the Maryland we see in the Washington suburbs," Denis said. "In Southern Maryland and the Eastern Shore, slavery was the underpinning of the economy. Out there, Lincoln didn't get too many votes."

Unlike some state songs, "Maryland, My Maryland" is no nostalgic ode to fallen soldiers or bygone plantation days. ("Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," for example, was written in 1870 by James Bland, a black minstrel from New York. Virginia retired the song in 1997 and is still searching -- uneasily -- for a replacement.)

The Maryland song's lyrics were written in 1861, days after the first shots of the Civil War were fired in downtown Baltimore. A secessionist mob had attacked a regiment of Massachusetts soldiers changing trains en route to Washington to join the Union Army, and some rioters were killed. James Ryder Randall, a native Marylander working as a teacher in Louisiana, surveyed these events and penned an overwrought poem calling his "mother state" to battle.

"The despot's heel is on thy shore, Maryland! His torch is at thy temple door, Maryland!" Randall warns in the first verse, which is regularly taught in Maryland fourth-grade social studies classes.

"Avenge the patriotic gore that flecked the streets of Baltimore and be the battle queen of yore, Maryland! My Maryland!"

Ben's dad, Neal, a Maryland native and a Silver Spring divorce lawyer, notes that "the words actually get worse as you go along."

In addition to "despot," Lincoln is cast as a "tyrant" and a "vandal." Maryland's loyalty to the Union is compared to "crucifixion of the Soul." And in a final verse, Randall imagines Maryland rising for the South ("She breathes! She burns! She'll come! She'll come!") and spurning "the Northern scum" -- Southern code for mongrel troops of German and Irish immigrants, according to Jean H. Baker, an American historian at Goucher College in Towson, Md..

Set to the tune of "O, Tannenbaum," Randall's poem joined "Dixie" as a popular Confederate marching song. Decades later, for reasons that remain a mystery, the 1939 General Assembly moved to adopt "Maryland, My Maryland" as the official state song, inscribing all nine stanzas into state law.

There it stayed until 1980. Then Denis, inspired by a chat with a former Senate president who refused to sing the anthem in deference to his Union ancestors, proposed that it be repealed.

"We have the only state song that calls for the violent overthrow of the government. I thought it would be a tiny corrective bill," Denis said in a recent interview. But the bill was shot down in at least three sessions, and the song remained.

Then and now, state historians are divided on the matter. Some, like Baker, say the song is "an insult" to Marylanders who fought with the Union Army and who do not wish to be associated with the goals of the Confederacy, including the defense of slavery. This might include the 27 percent of Maryland residents whose ancestors may themselves have been enslaved.

Others, like State Archivist Edward C. Papenfuse, argue that the song is part of Maryland's shifting Civil War legacy and should be preserved as a precious artifact of that time, a living piece of history.

In a recent e-mail to state lawmakers, the eminent Maryland historian Robert J. Brugger posed, "What kind of history do we have if we whitewash it?"

"How can we come to any mature understanding of ourselves and our condition if we play make-believe with the record?"

Supporters of the repeal effort say they aren't talking about toppling the State House or airbrushing paintings of Revolutionary War patriot Charles Carroll with his slaves. They just want to get the "patriotic gore" off the lawbooks and out of the fourth grade.

"This is not like the calico cat. This is like having the entrails of the calico cat right there in the state code. The lyrics are hateful," Franchot said.

The measure, House Bill 1057, does not propose a replacement. Ben is scheduled to testify in its support at a hearing Wednesday before a House committee. Frankly, he doesn't understand the fuss.

"By making it not the official state song, that doesn't mean it's not part of our history. People can still look at it and say, 'Oh, that used to be the Maryland state song.'

"It just means it doesn't represent us anymore," Ben added. "I don't think I want it representing me."

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