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### MARYLAND

## Maryland commission holds hearing on 1885 Towson lynching of boy

By Ngan Ho

Baltimore Sun • Jun 07, 2022 at 9:14 am



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Baltimore County public hearing. On July 13, 1885 Howard Cooper, 15, was hanged from a sycamore tree next to the Baltimore County jail by a mob of white men after being convicted of assault and rape with less than a minute of deliberation. June 4, 2022. (Kim Hairston/The Baltimore Sun )

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Howard Cooper, a 15-year-old Black boy, was dragged from his cell and hung from a sycamore tree outside the Towson jailhouse in Baltimore County by a mob of white men in 1885.

His tragic lynching was covered during a public hearing Saturday at the Baltimore County Council Chambers in Towson by the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission (MLTRC).

“We started the process of acknowledging the legacy of racial lynching in the state of Maryland,” said Charles Chavis, vice chair of MLTRC. “And it’s really just the beginning” of that endeavor with these public hearings, he said.

The commission was established in 2019 through House Bill 307. It’s the first of its kind in the United States and is dedicated to researching cases of racially-motivated lynchings in the country.



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The MLTRC is authorized to hold public meetings and regional hearings where lynchings of African Americans by a white

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Dozens of people heard from speakers, including community leaders and scholars, who recounted Cooper's case, explored the role of local government and news outlets at that time and its significance today.



Juliet Hinley gives descendant testimony at the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission public hearing on the July 13, 1885 lynching of Howard Cooper in Towson. Cooper was 15 years old when he was hung from a sycamore tree next to the Baltimore County jail by a mob of white men after being convicted of assault and rape with less than a minute of deliberation. Hinley's great-great-grandfather, Milton Walters Offutt, was identified as the leader of the lynch mob. June 4, 2022. (Kim Hairston/The Baltimore Sun )

An all-white jury convicted Cooper of assault and rape of a white teenage girl in an area then known as Rockland in Baltimore County. He was sentenced to death by a jury that deliberated for less than a minute. Neither Cooper nor Gray said Gray was raped, only a doctor who examined Gray testified to that, said Jennifer Liles, a public historian.

Why Cooper allegedly attacked Mary Catherine Gray is unclear, but records show Cooper said he did it for the "devilment" of it, Liles said, alluding to undiagnosed personality disorders as culprit. Rape was punishable by death back then.

Fearing the verdict might be reversed upon appeal, a mob of masked white men dragged Cooper from his cell and hung him from a sycamore tree outside the Towson jailhouse. He was one of approximately 40 Black Marylanders lynched, as [documented by historians](#).

MLTRC's hearing process allows members of the public, including the descendants of victims, witnesses, and perpetrators, the opportunity to offer testimony about how these murders have impacted their lives and their communities in addition to allowing them the opportunity to make recommendations for achieving racial healing.

Juliet Hinley, a descendant of one of Cooper's lynchers, told attendees it may be insufficient for her to apologize on behalf of her ancestors, but she is grateful that the truth came to light. Hinley's great-great-grandfather, Milton Walters Offutt, was identified as the leader of the lynch mob.

“I am in awe of the archive that brought this truth to light,” she said, holding back tears. “I believe that the crime of Howard Cooper’s murder is no longer unresolved, that his perpetrators are no longer in control of his legacy.”

Earlier this week, The Baltimore Sun’s editorial board published an [editorial acknowledging their unbalanced reporting](#) of Cooper’s case.

According to an April 1885 account in the newspaper, The Sun described Cooper as much older than he was — “about 24 years of age” — “stout,” about 5 feet 9 inches tall, and “well known” as a criminal offender, though writers offered no specifics.

Other articles recounted the circumstances law enforcement faced and the righteous anger of the white community, but almost nothing was said on behalf of the lynching victims, the lack of due process they were afforded, or the effects their murders had on Black communities, according to the editorial.

Will Schwarz, founder of [The Maryland Lynching Memorial Project](#) (MLMP), a coalition of 13 county chapters working to document the history of lynching in Maryland, said there’s 400 years of pain that still lingers and needs to be addressed.

“I hope that today’s testimonies has helped illuminate the dark history of Baltimore County that we’ve examined and will motivate each of us to look for ways that we can heal that pain,” Schwarz said.

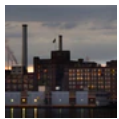
MLMP last year [memorialized Cooper with a marker and ceremony](#) near the Towson jail where he was imprisoned. There are five of such markers memorializing lynching victims installed throughout Maryland to date.

Gov. Larry Hogan last year also granted posthumous pardons to 34 Maryland lynching victims, including Cooper.

Saturday’s public hearing in Baltimore County is the second public hearing conducted by MLTRC. The first MLTRC public hearing was held in Allegany County and examined the 1907 lynching of William Burns.

“I know we’re united by a desire to advance the cause of racial justice, but also by our belief that we can move the needle and be united by hope,” Schwarz said. “These are not easy times to be hopeful, but really that is what makes it so much more important that we maintain it and nurture.”

*This article has been updated to reflect the correct number of markers that memorialize lynching victims in Maryland.*



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Rushern Baker has announced he’s dropping out of the race for the Democratic nomination for governor.

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