



PLAYLIST

WAMU 88.5
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY RADIO

DONATE



NATIONAL

Maryland Panel Tasked With Investigating State's Lynching History

September 28, 2020 · 4:16 PM ET

Heard on All Things Considered

[4-Minute Listen](#)[PLAYLIST](#) [Download](#)
[Transcript](#)

NPR's Ailsa Chang talks to Charles Chavis Jr. of the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is beginning its two-year investigation of the state's harrowing history of lynching.

AILSAL CHANG, HOST:

In Maryland, the first government-backed commission of its kind is about to start investigating a harrowing part of the state's history. The Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission has set out to document the state's 42 known racial lynchings. The panel delivered an interim report to Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan earlier this month. Charles Chavis Jr. is the commission's vice chairman. He joins us now to share the commission's plans and goals for this project.

Welcome.

CHARLES CHAVIS JR: Thank you so much for having me.

CHANG: So tell us, where did the idea to create this commission originally come from?

CHAVIS: Sure. Most historical scholarship concerning racial terror lynching is centered in the Deep South. And so you have states such as Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi and the like who get noticed for their history of racial terror. However, it's important for people to understand that lynching took place throughout the United States, and one of those states that is often overlooked is the state of Maryland. And so we call Maryland the middle ground in many ways because it represented, like most border states, a style that was Southern, but it also had a progressive leaning. And so this oftentimes caused the state to be overlooked in terms of looking at the legacy of racial terror.

CHANG: And tell us, what are the primary goals of this commission?

CHAVIS: The commission is tasked with investigating lynchings that took place in the 19th and 20th century in Maryland. And we are centered and focused on salvaging the humanity first of the victims and then really laying out each case individually and hopefully bringing about some semblance of justice to the family members and the descendants of the deceased victims.

CHANG: Can you talk about a specific case that the commission is investigating right now?

CHAVIS: Sure. Yes. We're looking into the lynching of Matthew Williams, which took place in Salisbury, Md., in 1931. And so Matthew Williams was a young laborer who got into a dispute with his employer over discrepancies in his pay. Following that, his employer was found dead and Williams was actually hospitalized after the employer's son shot him. And the lynch mob descended upon the hospital and drug him out of the first-floor window, and the lynching commenced. And he was eventually taken to the - drug to the courthouse lawn in front of thousands, along with local law enforcement, politicians, religious leaders, who did nothing. And eventually, as if that wasn't enough, he was eventually burned.

CHANG: And no one was ever held accountable.

CHAVIS: And no one was ever held accountable.

CHANG: So what does the commission do with a case like this today? Your ultimate goal, I imagine, is trying to figure out exactly what happened to Matthew Williams.

CHAVIS: Yes. That is the ultimate goal. And it's important to note that we see the racial terror lynchings of old that took place in Maryland directly in relationship to the ongoing racial terror that we're witnessing in the United States. And so that's important to consider when we're looking at this and investigating this today in this fractured America that we're seeing as it relates to race relations.

And so, yes, the truth is what we're seeking getting to the bottom of it seeing who indeed was complicit and involved, whether it was locals and state government officials, because we believe that the descendants are owed this truth, as is the state. I mean, what we hope the citizens of Maryland and the citizens of the United States learn from this work that we're undertaking is that truth comes first. And if we have the truth, then there could one day possibly be reconciliation.

CHANG: Charles Chavis Jr. is the vice chairman of the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And he is an assistant professor of conflict resolution and history at George Mason University.

Thank you very much for joining us today.

CHAVIS: Thank you so much for having me.

Copyright © 2020 NPR. All rights reserved. Visit our website terms of use and permissions pages at www.npr.org for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by Verb8tm, Inc., an NPR contractor, and produced using a proprietary transcription process developed with NPR. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Accuracy and availability may vary. The authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio record.

Sign Up For The NPR Daily Newsletter

Catch up on the latest headlines and unique NPR stories, sent every weekday.