

One year in, Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group illuminates history of lynchings

By ANA FAGUY
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There's a cart at the Maryland State Archives waiting for Howard County resident Marlena Jareaux. It is piled high with seven containers worth of Reconstruction-era archival documents.

All that separates Jareaux, 53, from that metal cart is the coronavirus pandemic.

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Since March, she has visited the Annapolis facility six times, rapidly flipping through indexes and taking pictures on her iPad to revisit when she gets home as she pieces together Howard County's lynching history.

"It's a mad dash to amass as much I could get and then sort it later when I get home," Jareaux said. "Compressing two hours, it does make you research differently. It makes you much more judicious in terms of your allocation of time. It forced me to really do research from home."

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After each of her two-hour visits — limited because of pandemic restrictions, not her stamina — Jareaux sorts through her thousands of photos, backing them up and categorizing the day's findings, hoping she's found more segments of the story.

[Bringing a dark chapter to light: Maryland confronts its lynching legacy »](#)

"I won't know what I'm looking for until I find it," she said.

She's not alone in her mission to complete the incomplete history Howard County currently recognizes and teaches in schools. In fact, Howard is among 18 counties in Maryland currently reckoning with their racist pasts.

Jareaux is one of the four founders of the [Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group](#), which has spent the past year piecing together the history of lynching in Howard County. It is a layered one in which two African American men were killed and one was reported to be killed, but was not, in the late 19th century.

"Howard County is not a place that embraces at all the history of the county, the history of enslavement," she said.

In the year since it formed as part of a statewide effort called the Maryland Memorial Lynching Project, Howard County Truth & Reconciliation has been digging through remnants of the past, uncovering new and discarded information, and subsequently sharing and explaining the findings to residents via Facebook and emailed newsletters.

More than [40 African Americans were lynched in Maryland](#) between 1854 and 1933 by white mobs, according to Maya Davis, 40, who works as a research archivist and legislative liaison for the Maryland State Archives.

“We’ve been mandated to research and get to the truth and hold hearings in the community,” Davis said of her role.



The founding members of the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group, from left, Gina Richardson, Marlana Jareaux, Lynn Mumma and Annora Bailey, stand by the wall to the rear of the old Howard County jail in Ellicott City on Monday. The group has spent the past year piecing together the history of lynching in Howard County. (Dylan Slagle / Baltimore Sun Media Group)

How it started

On Dec. 14, 2019 — before the coronavirus pandemic had taken root in the United States — the [Maryland Memorial Lynching Project](#) hosted a meeting at the Owen Brown Interfaith Center in Columbia. Jareaux was one of approximately 30 attendees.

The Maryland Memorial Lynching Project is a nonprofit organization that formed in March 2018. According to its website, it “works to advance the cause of reconciliation in our state by documenting the history of racial terror lynchings,

advocating for public acknowledgment of these murders and working to honor and dignify the lives of the victims.”

Jareaux said the statewide group held the meeting in Columbia to gauge community interest in forming a local group to look at the lynching activity that happened in Howard.

When the question was directly posed to the audience — “Raise your hand if you’re interested in doing this research?” — Jareaux’s hand shot up above attendees’ heads.

“No one was raising their hands. So I raised my hand,” she said.

When she walked into the interfaith center that night, Jareaux had been a concerned citizen attending a local meeting.

“I left that meeting with the understanding that things have to and should happen differently because of the history that’s largely unknown,” Jareaux said.

[The Maryland Lynching Memorial Project seeks remembrance and reconciliation »](#)

About a month later, Jareaux and three other women from the meeting — Lynn Mumma, Gina Richardson and Annora Bailey — founded the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group in the cafe area at Wegmans in Columbia.

The group had a choice: They could work alongside the Maryland Memorial Lynching Project or go it alone. They walked away that cold January night in agreement. If they were going to do this work, they would do it their way and on their own.

“Our opinion is that each community [is] unique. We don’t want to do the cookie-cutter way,” Jareaux said.

In the months that followed, the group held meetings at the Miller Branch library in Ellicott City, mapping out research plans. Then, in mid-March, the pandemic reached Howard County.

Not alone

Howard is not the only county looking into its past with lynching. There are 18 counties in the state with documented lynchings. Thirteen of those counties are working alongside the Maryland Memorial Lynching Project to document their histories, while five, including Howard, are going it alone.

The effort first began after Del. Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk, a Prince George's Democrat, sponsored legislation in 2019 to form a state-backed lynching commission.

In April 2019, Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan signed the legislation into law, creating the [**Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission**](#) to investigate and document lynching cases in the state.

The state commission is set to conduct public hearings in the 18 jurisdictions where lynchings are known to have occurred, giving individuals the opportunity to share personal or familial local histories that could be beneficial to county and state histories. The commission submitted an interim report in September and will release a final report in December 2023. Howard County's hearing is currently scheduled for January 2022.

"The commission is the first of its kind in the United States, and as such, holds the potential to serve as a model for communities across the country that continue to bear the weight of the brutal history of racial terror lynching," the commission's interim report reads.

Shawn Gladden, executive director of the Howard County Historical Society, said the society had identified a few attempted lynchings before the formation of the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group but had not gone into the detail the group has.

"Now someone is coming in and giving context and some story, instead of it being another location that has a black mark with regards to lynchings in Maryland," said Gladden, 46.

"It brings that story to the forefront and gives us the opportunity to look at this with some fresh academic eyes."



The Howard County commissioners are recognized on a stone marking an 1878 addition to the old Howard County jail in Ellicott City. Both of Howard County's known lynchings in the late 19th century involved men being abducted from the jail by a mob. (Dylan Slagle / Baltimore Sun Media Group)

Understanding lynching

Davis spends her days at the Maryland State Archives researching the antebellum period of slavery, digging up old newspaper ads to build narratives of enslaved individuals, an effort she described as “a labor of love.” Most recently she has been researching coroners’ requests as a way of piecing together more parts of an individual’s story.

“We want to tell a fuller story than how their life ended,” Davis said.

To collect information across the state and within the counties, researchers and archivists are heavily reliant on information in the public record, which is a challenge given how common erasure was at the time, Davis said.

There are a few universal themes when it comes to lynching in the Reconstruction era in the U.S. According to Davis, a lot of the incidents being researched right now are of individuals falsely accused of crimes. A bulk of the lynchings currently being investigated across the state are for accusations of raping a white woman.

Davis said the public messaging of the time was one of white supremacy: “This could be you too if you don’t adhere to the way we think things should go.”

“It’s setting a tone in the community to all the Black people in the community that white supremacy reigns,” Davis said. “Your community needs to stay in its place.”

Davis said there are lynchings that likely went unrecorded over time.

[Towson residents working to memorialize 1885 lynching of 15-year-old Howard Cooper »](#)

“Anyone who does history for a living knows African American history is whitewashed,” Gladden said. “[The Howard County Truth & Reconciliation] work allows us to have a much better and inclusive look at our county and our state’s history.”

Beyond the specific cases likely missing from records, Gladden said Reconstruction is an under-researched time in U.S. history.

“I think that for a very long time the stories of African Americans in this country were coming from the top down,” Gladden said.

Historians spent time digging through archives and material that originated from court cases. Telling history from a document standpoint presents a black-and-white perspective of history, Gladden said. That’s the lens through which lynching in Maryland has been viewed until the statewide research began.

“Telling the stories from the bottom up with these oral histories, that’s what’s missing from Howard County African American history,” he said. “In the end, we’re going to have a much, much better understanding of that era of our history and the African American aspect of our own history as well.”

Howard’s history

According to Howard County Truth & Reconciliation, there are two known lynchings and one “near lynching” that took place in Howard County from 1884 to 1895.

The “near lynching” the group has completed researching is that of the Rev. Hezekiah Brown.

The “near lynching” of Brown in December 1884 was a result of newspapers, including The Baltimore Sun, reporting that a “colored man has been ordered to leave” for allegedly marrying a white woman, which was considered miscegenation and illegal. Through her research, Jareaux found that Brown was already married at that time. Despite newspapers reporting Brown’s lynching “13 miles west of Ellicott City,” records show he was not killed.

This case follows the common narrative of the time of a Black man raping a white woman, Davis said.

The first known lynching in Howard County took place Sept. 18, 1885. Nicholas Snowden was killed after being abducted from the Ellicott City jail by a mob.

Jareaux and the group are still collecting and archiving information surrounding the Snowden case, but so far they concluded that it was a combination of two factors: hysteria prevailing and individuals not having faith in the existing systems.

“Hysteria took over. People took the law into their own hands; they didn’t wait until the system could do it,” Jareaux said.

Jacob Henson Jr. was killed May 28, 1895, marking the second lynching in Howard County. Henson was killed while standing trial for the murder of a white shopkeeper, Daniel F. Shea, who he worked for on Main Street in Ellicott City. Like Snowden, he was abducted from the Ellicott City jail by a mob.

Descendants of Henson are working with the group to collect information and complete research surrounding his death. So far, the group has found that Henson’s case changed the process of where individuals accused of crimes in Maryland were to be kept. After Henson’s lynching, then-Gov. Frank Brown ordered that any person awaiting execution would be tried locally then transferred to the State Penitentiary in Baltimore to be executed.

“The three cases in Howard were in line with what was going on [at the] time,” Davis said. “Not one lynching was there anyone ever committed to jail for killing folks of color. It’s no surprise that no one was charged. Who’s going to charge them when [white] folks were watching or participating?”



The founding members of the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group, from left, Lynn Mumma, Marlena Jareaux, Annora Bailey and Gina Richardson, stand in front of the old Howard County jail in Ellicott City on Monday. The group has spent the past year piecing together the history of lynching in Howard County. (Dylan Slagle / Baltimore Sun Media Group)

Community engagement

From the beginning of the state process in 2019, community engagement has been layered into the work.

Jareaux continues posting updates on her research findings on the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation Facebook group and in emailed newsletters to 69 subscribers.

Questions asked and comments made continue to point the group in new directions.

Like when C. Vernon Gray, the first Black Howard County Council member who served from 1982 to 2002, joined the group and began tracking Jareaux's findings. The two subsequently spent hours on the phone discussing the county's history.

"We still have a long way to go in this country and this county," Gray said. "I think it's important that people know what has happened. Things that happened a long time ago still resonate now. These things are passed down subliminally or subconsciously. People have to know that unless you learn the lessons of history you're bound to repeat them."

Beyond virtual interactions, the biggest form of community engagement in the project is through the role of the state commission's public hearings, set to begin next year.

Davis, one of the public hearing committee members, will oversee public testimony at the Howard hearing. This will provide the dual opportunity of informing many county residents with unfamiliar stories and providing family members with the chance to share their history.

"It gives people an opportunity to counter what's in the government record because the government record has bias," Davis said. "It gives us an idea to see how these histories have affected present-day African Americans."

[Carroll County group aiming to acknowledge lynching history, begin 'process of healing and reconciliation' »](#)

Davis said the commission relies on communities across the state to bring people, including descendants, to the public hearings. There is a lot of information that exists in oral histories that does not exist in public record, she said.

"It is our hope that people are willing, both who are descendants of victims but also [descendants of] who took part in the lynchings, [to come to the public hearing]," Davis said. "A lot of children were there and present when the lynchings took place, but that is not a choice. I imagine that it has a great impact on white children who witness this."

Davis suggested hearing from descendants of those white children would also be helpful to create a complete history.

“To have this be a successful venture, one there would be some closure for the families; two we will have done an exhaustive study of what is in the government record and make that available to the public; three [there will be an] improvement on public safety,” Davis said. “Making sure that in our history we tell a balanced narrative.”

The end goal

For now, Jareaux and the other members of the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group are sifting through archives to put together complete histories of Brown, Snowden and Henson to present next year.



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Discovering and documenting the true history is the first step in this process, Jareaux said.

“We believe you cannot have reconciliation until you know what you need reconciliation for,” she said.

The truth chapter, Davis said, will bring some closure to the families personally affected. By the end of this, Davis hopes they will be able to prove whether certain individuals were innocent or guilty.

“We have to get to the truth first before we see what reconciliation looks like,” Davis said.

In the future, Davis expects other states to follow in Maryland’s footsteps, forming their own statewide commissions.

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“Years from now, we’ll probably look like an early adopter of this work,” she said.



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