

## **Commission releases final report on historic lynchings, reconciliation**

*The Star Democrat* (Easton, MD)

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After six years of research and 14 public hearings throughout the state, the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or MLTRC, released its final report on racial terror lynchings last month.

Nicholas Creary, the chair of the commission, initially approached Del. Joseline Peña-Melnyk (D-Prince George's, Anne Arundel) after conducting research on lynchings at Bowie State University. Over coffee, Peña-Melnyk contacted the state legislature's bill drafting office, and the commission was created in 2019 to write the document and connect with the community on crimes that happened "right in our backyard," Creary said.

The over 600-page report is split into two sections: the details of each documented lynching case in Maryland and a breakdown of the 84 recommendations the commission proposes for legislation.

The recommendations are organized into nine categories: apology and acknowledgement of responsibility, material reparations, criminal justice, community healing, education, mental health, symbolic reparations, media and implementation, which includes funding and monitoring.

"[We] really worked hard to put together these things and to do it in such a way that they were as comprehensive as possible," Creary said. "This is in response to this gross and systematic failure of the legal system to protect the rights of, in this case specifically, African Americans, or, as we say, descendants of people who were held in chattel slavery."

The idea of monetary reparations has caused some concern, specifically following Democratic Gov. Wes Moore's decision to veto the bill and the General Assembly's decision to vote against his veto last month.

As Creary explains, “This isn’t just direct monetary compensation. We were very careful about crafting this to say this is for the families and the descendants and the communities where the racial terror lynchings occurred.”

Many of the other recommendations will not cost the state much if any money, such as public apologies and incorporation of educational material, Creary said. The commission is sending 13 bills to the next General Assembly session, which starts on Jan. 14.

“Given current events and the current administration in Washington, I think we need to be able to stand firmly and to speak out loudly and boldly and say this is important. You cannot erase or ignore this history,” Creary said.

According to the report, 38 lynchings occurred in Maryland from 1854 to 1933; two were in Caroline County. There are no documented cases of lynchings in Dorchester or Talbot counties.

David Thomas, 34, was lynched by an angry mob outside a Denton jail on October 9, 1854. According to the report, Thomas had been convicted of second-degree murder of a white man and sentenced to over 16 years in a Baltimore penitentiary.

“Dissatisfied with the verdict, a mob of white Denton locals gathered outside the Denton jail threatening to take the law into their own hands through ‘lynch law,’ ” the report states.

The report, citing The Baltimore Sun, says that a local mob broke inside the jail, tied up the sheriff and lynched Thomas on a plank outside the window of the jail building’s second story.

The report argues that in the area, at the time it was “widely understood that acts of vigilante violence like this were often driven more by a desire to reassert white dominance than to avenge a specific individual.”

Jim Wilson, 28, was lynched outside the Denton jail on November 1, 1862. The MLTRC report says that Wilson was suspected of the murder of 8-year-old Edith Plummer.

Wilson was hung, shot, quartered and burned, before being tried for the alleged crime, according to the report.

“The media played as significant role as the mob in Jim Wilson’s lynching,” the report states. “News sources at the time of, and years after, Jim Wilson’s lynching condoned the behavior of the mob.”

Many local and regional papers would condone the lynchings and not hold the perpetrators accountable, Creary said. In the report, one headline reads, “A Little Girl Murdered by a Negro” when reporting on Wilson’s death.

The media recommendations section encourages journalism training and media accountability, including collaborations with Maryland’s historically black colleges and universities and hiring diverse reporters to provide a variety of perspectives on newsworthy items and to “make sure that we’re not vilifying entire communities,” Creary said.

Another recommendation related to symbolic reparations — such as apologies, memorials and public acknowledgements — have already started over in St. Mary’s County, Karen Stone, museum division manager, said.

In 2019, the Old Jail Museum, which was the original jail where Hance was held, included a soil sample from the lynching in an exhibit. Then, in 2021, Leonardtown placed a historic marker to remember the cruel act.

“It was part of our history and it was allowed to happen,” Stone said. “This opens the door for more stories of our history. We can’t change history by pretending it didn’t happen.”

Other counties, however, may struggle with the lack of support for recognizing the area’s history and involvement in racial terror lynchings or the designated space to place a marker. The goal is to guarantee that “every lynching in the state is marked in some way,” Stone said.

While the MLTRC is set to conclude in June now that they have completed their report, one of the implementation suggestions is to create a “permanent agency … dedicated to implementing the commission’s recommendations and monitoring progress toward their full realization,” the report states. A dedicated staff would hopefully prevent the work from falling to the wayside.

“Working with and collaborating with the folks on the reconciliation committee to put together that part two with all the recommendations … was just a phenomenal experience,” Creary said.