

Sign of change

A county on Maryland's Eastern Shore quietly takes down a Confederate memorial, after years of rejecting the idea





The plaque honoring Confederate Gen. John Winder is taken down last month by a group including Wicomico County Executive Bob Culver, far left, and Director of Administration Wayne Strausburg, far right. (Courtesy of Mike Dunn)



Amber Green, a community activist, took a leadership role in the effort to get Worcester County officials to remove a historic marker on the courthouse lawn honoring a Confederate general. (Todd Dudek for The Baltimore Sun)

By Jonathan M. Pitts

Even worse, the tribute to Winder — a native of a rural Eastern Shore enclave with no known connection to Salisbury or Wicomico — stood within feet of where a mob of whites is known to have lynched a Black resident, Matthew Williams, in 1931.

“If you asked yourself why that sign should be there, in that place, the only possible reason left is the one people want to shy away from: to show that justice is truly not equal,” says Green, an African American community activist and youth counselor in Salisbury. “And some people wonder why minorities haven’t felt comfortable coming downtown.”

Now a broader range of people in the Eastern Shore county can feel a little more welcome in its biggest city.

One Friday afternoon last month, four years after Green and a few dozen friends started a grassroots campaign to have the sign removed, Wicomico County officials arrived in a van, threw the marker in the back seat and drove away.

With no fanfare, a memorial that had stood in Salisbury for more than half a century — a signpost of history for some, an emblem of hate for others — was gone.

Though a cadre of tradition-minded local residents remains upset at the decision, an increasingly vocal segment of the community, including the 38-year-old mayor, Jacob Day, and dozens of younger business leaders, hopes the removal foreshadows more enduring changes in a part of the state never known for its progressive racial politics.

“I can understand, up to a point, the argument that some Confederate leaders at least fought with distinction for something they believed in,” says Dan O’Hare, 44, a Salisbury filmmaker who has produced a documentary, “The Sign,” about the controversy. “But [Winder] was so uniquely odious it was hard to see that marker as anything but a symbol of white supremacy.”

The removal “is a sign there’s a crack in the armor, that we have a chance to be honest about our past, to learn from it and move forward.”

Unlike many of the monuments that protesters have defaced or toppled across the United States in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd, a Black man, at the hands of Minneapolis police in May, the Winder sign was nothing elaborate.

A modest metal plaque mounted on a pole, it contained a simple set of facts: that Winder was born near Nanticoke, an unincorporated place 20 miles from Salisbury in what is now Wicomico County; that he attended and taught at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York; that he fought in “the Seminole and Mexican Wars,” and that he “eventually directed all the Confederate prisons east of the Mississippi.”

It resembles the scores of markers that dot Maryland's highways in honor of historic places and people.

Unlike most of those, though, it was produced courtesy of the Maryland Civil War Centennial Commission, a panel charged in the mid-1960s with choosing how the state would mark the 100th anniversary of the Civil War, according to David Buck, a spokesman for the Maryland Historical Trust.

That panel "did not attempt to decide who was right and who was wrong [in the war], or to make decisions on other controversial issues," according to one of its other works, a plaque that was removed from the Maryland State House last month.

The sign in Salisbury was installed in 1965, at a time when civil rights activists like Gloria Richardson of Cambridge were leading high-profile marches for equality in various places on the Eastern Shore.

Local historians point out that its original location — near the busy intersection of U.S. Business 13 and U.S. 50 in Salisbury — stood where a historically Black neighborhood was razed in 1950s to make room for the highways.

Drivers hit and damaged the marker so many times that the Maryland Sons of Confederate Veterans lobbied the county to have it moved to a safer place. It was planted on a pole in a concrete abutment on the courthouse grounds in 1983.

"I've always wondered whether those accidents on Highway 13 were really accidents," says Day, the Democratic mayor. "I do know it was safe from vehicles in its new place."

No one seems to know whether those who chose the location knew of the site's full history, much of it violent and tragic.

Slaves were traded in front of a tavern that occupied the site before the courthouse opened in 1878. Two years later, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass delivered a two-hour speech there to raise funds for a church.

A mob of whites lynched an 18-year-old African American man, Garfield King, in front of the jail on the courthouse grounds in 1898.

In 1931, another mob pulled Matthew Williams, a laborer accused of killing a white man, out of his second-floor hospital room, dragged him to the courthouse lawn, hanged him from a tree and set his body on fire.

"It seems like that was the lynching spot," says Green, founding director of the Fenix Youth Project, a nonprofit that encourages area young people to apply their creative talents toward social justice work.

Lifelong residents, Black and white, say they were never taught those aspects of local history in school, and that older family members rarely discussed them — one reason, perhaps, that so many simply got used to seeing the Winder marker.

“It’s such an ordinary-looking sign that I think many people didn’t even fully realize it was there,” says Wayne Strausburg, director of administration for Wicomico County until retiring June 30.

But a debate was stirred when a handful of local residents got involved in the efforts of the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit working to commemorate the more than 5,000 Black people killed nationally in “racial terror lynchings” between the end of the Civil War and the 1950s.

While helping organize a vigil to Williams, Salisbury resident James Yamakawa began digging more deeply into the life of Winder, a man he learned had jurisdiction over Andersonville Prison in Georgia, where conditions were so cruel one historian dubbed it “America’s first concentration camp.”

The camp’s commander and Winder’s direct subordinate, Capt. Henry Wirz, was tried and hanged for war crimes in connection with the camp. Most agree that Winder would have met the same fate had he not died of a heart attack in 1865. (He’s buried in Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore.)

Yamakawa, a Harford County transplant of white and Japanese ancestry, shared what he knew about Winder at the vigil, which Green also attended. He then organized a local chapter of the national group Showing Up for Racial Justice, wrote letters to the editor of the local paper and wrote a petition calling for the sign’s removal that drew dozens of signatures, including Day’s.

The effort met plenty of resistance, Day and Yamakawa say, some of it from county officials, some from longtime residents, some in the form of anonymous threats on the internet.

After Green, Yamakawa and others suggested removing the marker at a County Council meeting in 2017, Day says he encountered a high-ranking county official who told him privately that the sign wasn’t going anywhere.

“‘Over my dead body’ was the way he put it,” Day says.

Because the plaque was on county property, it would be up to the county executive and his senior staff to make the final call.

The discussion percolated over the next three years, with a growing contingent arguing online for removal, attending rallies and pushing the merits of the case at work and in local taverns. O’Hare repeatedly screened his film.

Traditionalists continued defending the marker, mainly arguing that Winder and his legacy should be respected as part of the area’s history.

“A monument is public property, and in order for something of a public nature like to be moved or taken away, it should require a quorum vote of the people in the jurisdiction,” says Ed Tinus, 61, a Wicomico resident who shared the argument at a rally in Salisbury two years ago.

But as the national conversation around race changed this year, and young activists staged anti-racism rallies around Salisbury over a course of weeks, a momentum developed.

Last month, local contractor Blair Carey wrote a petition in support of removal and posted it online. “Although this may be history, [the sign] marks an ugly time for our country,” Carey, 31, wrote, “a time where human bondage and slavery existed. Why do we need to honor a person who fought for these things?”

It garnered more than a thousand signatures, many from young members of the business community.

Strausburg was among a small group that joined County Executive Bob Culver in removing the sign the next day.

Culver, who is battling illness, was not available for comment, but Strausburg described the logic behind the decision.

“It was something that was clearly dividing our community unnecessarily,” he said. “We felt it was the right thing to do to remove it, and the right time to do it, and in doing so, we hoped it would help this community heal itself and have a positive discourse with regard to race relations.”

More change is underway. Green and Yamakawa, now co-directors of the loosely knit Wicomico County Truth and Reconciliation Initiative, are working to get a marker commemorating the lynching of Matthew Williams installed on the courthouse lawn.

Green notes that Salisbury is forming a task force to study and promote criminal justice reform, and Day points to a new mural near the original site of the Winder sign. It depicts five heroes of Georgetown, the Black neighborhood that was torn down to make room for routes 13 and 50.

Day says such moves reflect a growing demographic within a county still generally viewed as one of the most conservative in Maryland.

“There is this cadre of young people that is realizing they can change policy and change the narrative if they work together,” Day says. “There’s a generation of people doing that, and it’s working.”