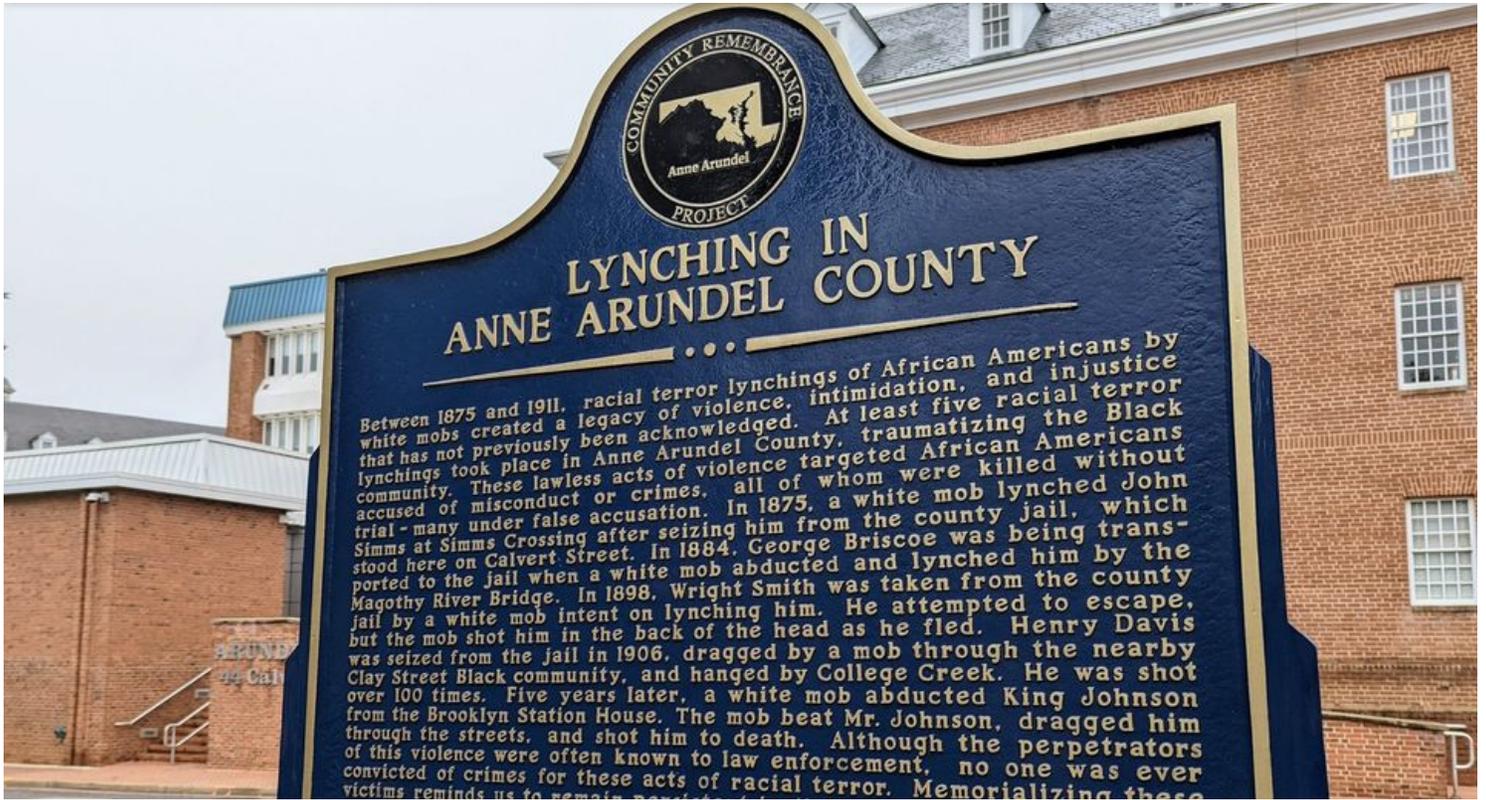




Meanwhile, in Annapolis

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## Maryland lynching commission arrives in Annapolis. Lots of questions. Few answers.

Maryland panel will look at the murders of Henry Davis, Wright Smith, John Simms, George by Briscoe and King Johnson as part of a statewide study



Rick Hutzell

Oct 6



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After more than a century, no one really expects justice to suddenly arrive on Saturday.

That's the day that the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission convenes in Annapolis to explore the murders of Henry Davis, Wright Smith, John Simms, George Briscoe and King Johnson. Between 1875 and 1911 these four Black men were murdered by white mobs in Annapolis,

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The killers are long dead, and no descendant is going to step forward to reveal that it was great-grandpa who broke down the jailhouse door, swung the noose or fired the fatal shot.

So, what do truth and reconciliation look like when justice is long out of reach?

David Fanuel, chairman of the commission, said when the group completes its research into all 38 known Maryland lynchings, it will report its findings and a series of recommendations to the General Assembly and the next governor. The deadline is 2024.

Memorials, like the marker placed on Calvert Street by the [Connecting the Dots](#), are a start. Reparations are not off the table, Fanuel said, but education is more likely.

“We’re using this as a platform to look at the damage that racial oppression has caused,” he said.

[Charles Chavis](#), vice chair of the commission and its lead researcher, said you have to document history to get past it, to remedy the legacy of racial injustice.

“We understand that, in most cases of racial terror lynchings, if not all, these lynchings are state-sanctioned. And oftentimes, they are led by or promoted by those who are in positions of political-social power, including law enforcement and other agencies,” he said.

Chavis has been studying the history of Maryland’s known lynchings as part of a national effort on reconciliation. A professor of history and conflict resolution at George Mason University, he knows some facts may never be revealed, like the names of the killers.

named and try to identify their records and get insight into whether or not they referenced the investigation in the case.”

Here is what is known about the lynching of Henry Davis:

## **ANNAPOLIS LYNCHERS HANG AND SHOOT NEGRO**

**Break Into Jail to Get White  
Woman's Assailant.**

**MOB'S WORK QUICKLY DONE**

**Gov. Warfield Was in the City, but  
Knew Nothing of the Attack—  
Negro Had Confessed.**

ANNAPOLIS, Md., Dec. 21.—Henry Davis, alias Henry Chambers, the negro who attacked Mrs. John Reid five miles from Annapolis last Friday, and who had confessed his crime, was taken from the jail here this morning by a mob of about thirty masked men and lynched. He was hanged and then several shots were fired into his body.

The jail is in Calvert Street, an isolated part of the city. About 2 A. M. a man appeared outside the jail. He said that he had a prisoner. Deputy P. J. Smalley

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Newspapers around the country reported on the lynching of Henry Davis, including the New York Times.

Annie L. Reid, a 48-year-old Crownsville shopkeeper's wife, told authorities she was riding her buggy home from Annapolis on Dec. 14 when a man dragged her to the ground and tried to rape her. She fought him off with a horsewhip until help arrived and he fled.

Not much is known about Davis. What is clear comes from sometimes conflicting news accounts in newspapers like The Evening Capital, The Evening Star, The Washington Herald and The Baltimore Sun. Newspapers around the country, the only source of news then, reported on the lynching.

Davis was a laborer who was about 30 at the time of his death. He was known to some as Henry Chambers, and others as "Toe and Foot" because of a limp. In 1900, he was sentenced to two years in jail for assaulting a Black woman.

When sheriff's deputies arrested Davis on Dec. 16, they took him to Reid's home where she identified him as her attacker. Deputies said he confessed. Rumors of a lynch mob started to spill around the saloons of Annapolis, then a town of about 8,500 people.

Sheriff Thomas Linthicum urged a quick trial because of the threat. But newspaper accounts said Reid was still too injured to testify, so Davis was locked up on the third floor of the county jail on Calvert Street.

Linthicum correctly saw the danger. In 1898, Wright Smith was accused of assaulting a white woman in Annapolis. A mob grabbed him from deputies on the way to the jail. As they were dragging him to be lynched, he broke free. They shot him to death as he fled down Calvert Street.

So, Linthicum placed some of his deputies at the jailhouse and asked Annapolis Police Chief George Hahn to join them and the regular jailers as

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When a group of more than 100 men showed up at the jail at about 1:30 a.m. on Dec. 21, they were led by a dozen masked men. First, they tried tricking their way in, saying they were deputies. When that didn't work, they stole tools from Black residents' homes, broke through a door and confronted the guards at pistol point.

The mob dragged Davis to a spot known as Brickyard Hill on a rail line into the city, beating him and kicking him until he confessed again. He was hanged from a tree overlooking College Creek, newspapers reported, then shot more than 100 times.

It was a violent message meant to instill terror, and the stories of that night were passed down in the Black families who were its intended target. As the details of the Davis, Smith, Simms, Briscoe and Johnson murders are retold Saturday, social workers will be on hand.

"My work looks to make connections between the lynching of Henry Davis and the continued, unrelenting anti-black violence that we can continue to see manifest. We have to recognize those connections are a direct line. And it definitely is emotional, especially when you see that there's so much fear and violence taking place that is traumatizing," Chavis said.

Genealogists with the commission are still working to identify family members. One woman whose family lore claims Davis as a relation is waiting for those results before speaking out. Instead of family accounts, much of Saturday's hearing will involve statements from organizations that failed Davis and the others.

Annapolis Mayor Gavin Buckley will speak, as will Anne Arundel County Executive Stuart Pittman. The Annapolis Police Department will be present. Alderwoman Ellie Tierney and County Councilwoman Lisa Rodvien will read resolutions apologizing.

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The Naval Academy was invited to send someone, but it's unclear whether any statement will be read. Some "midshipmen candidates" were spotted in the mob that gathered on the St. John's campus.

St. John's College students were reportedly there, too. Its students were said to be among the first to assemble around 1 a.m. outside a campus building even though the school was on winter break. College President Nora Demleitner will read a statement.

"Our understanding of the incident, which the college fully condemns, comes from the newspaper reports from the time. These reports indicate a crowd assembled on the grounds of the campus and one witness reported that some members of the crowd were dressed in a manner in which students typically dressed," she said in a statement released Wednesday.



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The above message is directly from Rick Hutzell.

Contemporary reporting on that night's events sounds suspiciously like eyewitness accounts, and it's hard to tell what the unnamed reporters saw first-hand and what they were relaying unattributed from witnesses. That's not unusual, given the journalism standards of the day.

"Word started about Annapolis midnight that a mob was to be formed and that the place of formation was to be behind the senior building of St. John's College," The Sun reported on Dec. 22. "When the time arrived, a large crowd was present. Not satisfied with meeting in the rear of the building, the mob took possession of the vestibule."

Math professor B.H. Waddell, who lived in the building, said the noise

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Members of the mob pulled handkerchiefs over their faces or used burned cork to blacken their features as disguises. The Sun reported that the lights in the building went out, and the crowd of mostly young men headed for the jail a few hundred yards away.

After being alerted that Davis had been taken, Sheriff Linthicum said he searched but didn't discover where the mob took him until it was too late. When the morning light dawned, Davis' body lay where the mob left him.

Davis was buried in an unmarked grave in what is today Brewer Hill Cemetery, where a memorial to lynching victims was placed in 2001. The Sun reported that the grave was dug by a Black laborer named Horace Burley.

No one appeared willing to admit they heard any of this happening, despite the small size of Annapolis, the proximity of white residents and the fact that noise travels far along quiet creeks on a cold December morning.

Maryland Gov. Edwin Warfield said he'd arrived at his residence a few blocks from the murder scene about 8 p.m. and slept through the night. He called for a robust investigation.

Annapolis police Sgt. Charles Obery, who would become the city's first permanent chief a year later, lived even closer in what is now the Clay Street neighborhood. His name never appears in any of the news coverage of the lynching.

And although the mob gathered at St. John's, and witnesses said students were in the crowd, then college President Thomas Fell said he found no evidence of college involvement. He told The Herald he saw no reason to conduct an investigation of student involvement until that changed.

"Why should we? We have no evidence to implicate them in any way," Fell

Certainly, white Annapolis didn't seem overly concerned by a public murder.

Reid's daughter, in a statement to The Herald, said her mother thanked the mob for killing Davis. Reid fades from local history after this, although her name shows up in social columns occasionally over the next decade.

"Public opinion general approves the deed, and it is unlikely that anyone will have to pay a penalty for their part in the affair," The Star wrote.

Nicholas H. Green II, the state's attorney, told newspapers he would work to find those responsible. But even as he said it, he didn't sound sympathetic to the victim. He blamed the murder on Maryland law – saying Davis might not have been murdered if only it was clear to the public that he would be executed. Attempted rape was not a capital crime.

"The fact that this was doubtful led to the action of last night, I think," he told the Star.

Green would lead a grand jury investigation the following spring but settled for a finding that "unknown persons" murdered Davis.

Chavis said the prosecutor is someone deserving of a closer look. None of his personal papers appear to be at the Maryland State Archives.

"There may be private papers associated with Mr. Green that I would attempt and look for, and try to identify," Chavis said.

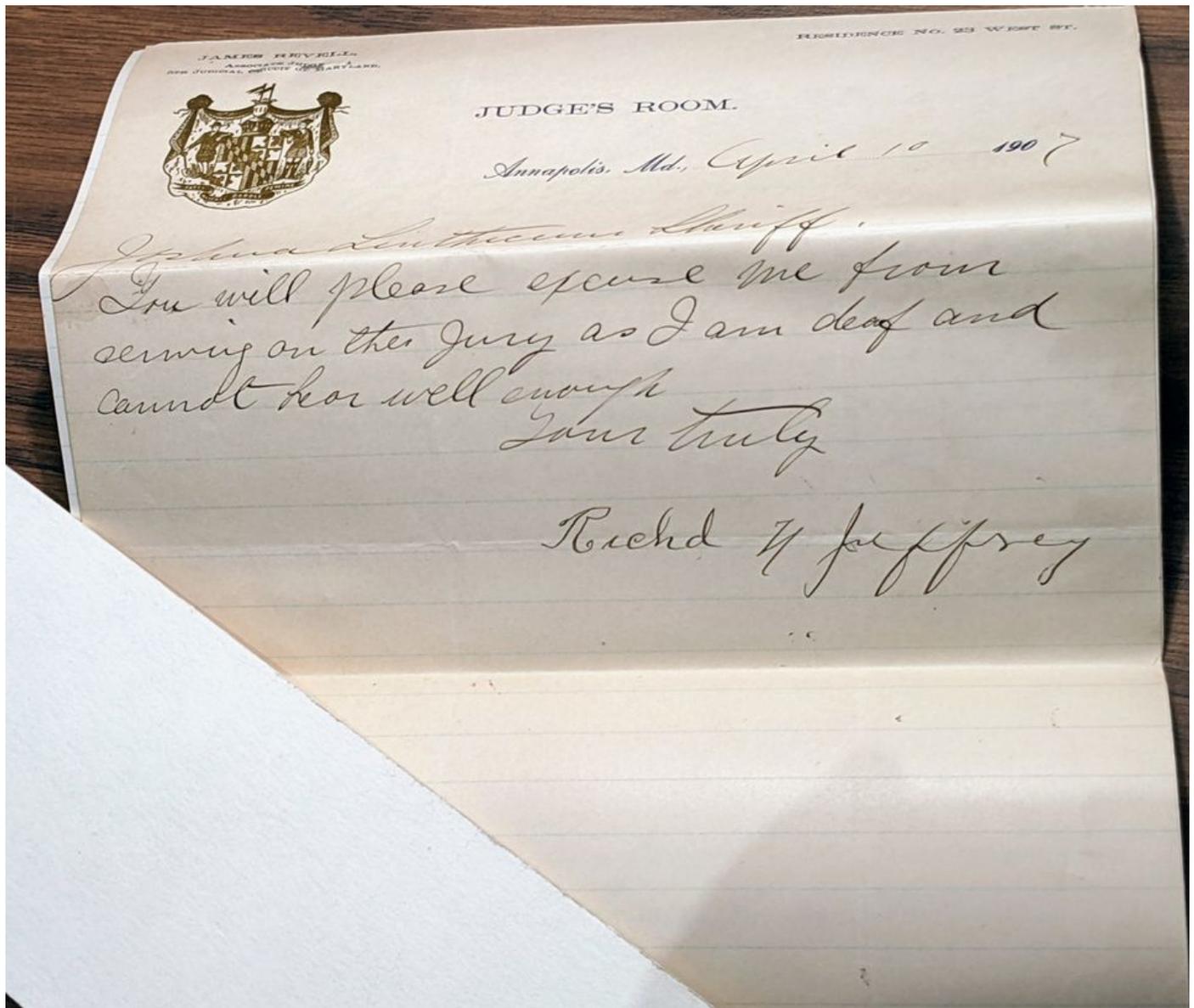
Green had connections to St. John's. He was a graduate and later became a member of the Board of Visitors. Those St. John's students were never identified by newspapers that covered the investigation, and the press never again mentioned professor Waddell as a witness.

The Herald, without attribution, reported that the rope used to hang Davis was twisted together from three thin lines used to hold up tennis nets on

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Judge James Revell, who called the grand jury into session and oversaw the selection of its members, said the killers should be punished but added that he sympathized with their motivation. He was also a St. John's graduate who served on the board.



A handwritten jury excuse note on Circuit Court Judge James Revell's personal stationery is in the state archives, but no record of the grand jury investigation into the murder of Henry Davis. (Rick Hutzell)

Looking for documents related to the crime, or the investigation has produced little.

Anne Colt Leitess, the current county state's attorney, said there are no

there would have been no obvious reason to keep notes or correspondence.

Scott Poyer, the clerk of the county court, said no records have turned up in the courthouse, either. He'll testify before the commission Saturday about court record keeping, and how historical records and other material are turned over to the Maryland State Archives.

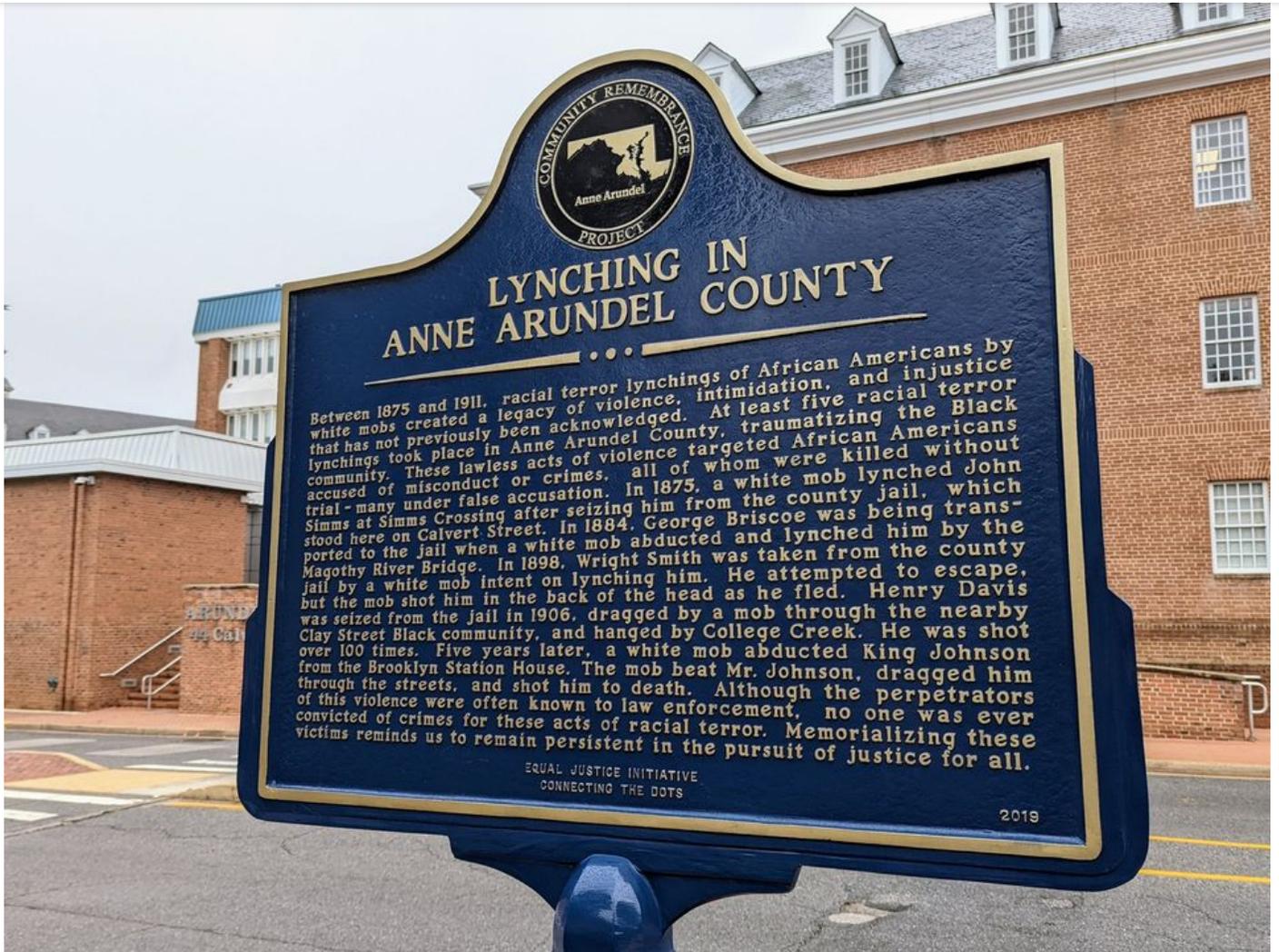
At the archives building in Annapolis, records from the grand jury that investigated the lynching in the spring of 1907 make no mention of the investigation. There are names of the jury members and hand-written correspondence on Revell's stationery, accepting excuses from men who asked not to be included.

Chris Haley, research director for the Legacy of Slavery in Maryland project at the archives, isn't surprised. People from around the state come to the archives looking for information on lynchings. There's just not much to research in most cases.

State law requiring the archives to keep court records for 90 years didn't come along until the 1920s, and there really wasn't any incentive for leaders of a white community to look too deeply into who was responsible for a race terror crime.

"The people who were murdered by mob violence were disregarded," he said. "There wasn't much regard for them as individuals. And who had the responsibility for finding justice for those individuals, or the individual survivors?"

When you put those two elements together with the lack of rules for keeping records, the amount of time that's passed, and a lack of respect from those who kept the records – it's not a surprise there's just not much to find.



The Maryland Lynching Memorial Project installed this sign on Calvert Street in Annapolis, just across Calvert Street from spot where a mob broke Henry Davis from jail and lynched him. (Rick Hutzell)

Correction: This essay has been updated to correct the name of the organization that placed the lynching memorial in Annapolis. The memorial was a project by Connecting the Dots Anne Arundel County, in partnership with the Equal Justice Initiative of Montgomery, Alabama.

*This is local journalism you won't find anywhere else.*