

Maryland governor grants posthumous pardons for 34 Black lynching victims

By Michael Brice-Saddler

Local reporter

May 8, 2021 at 8:08 p.m. EDT

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R) on Saturday granted posthumous pardons for 34 Black victims of lynchings in the state, a sweeping action he said would be a step toward rectifying the killings of youths and men who were denied due process.

Hogan announced the pardons on a rainy morning in Towson, standing feet away from a building that was once a jail. There, nearly 136 years ago, 75 men, their faces concealed with masks, pulled 15-year-old Howard Cooper from his cell and hanged him from a nearby sycamore tree.

Historians say Cooper, who had been accused of rape and was scheduled to be executed, was lynched before his attorneys could appeal his case to the U.S. Supreme Court. At a ceremony to memorialize Cooper on Saturday, Hogan decried how the teenager's life was "taken so violently and so senselessly by an angry mob unwilling to give him the due process he was entitled to." Hogan declared he would posthumously pardon Cooper as well as 33 other victims of lynching in the state between 1854 and 1933.

He read each of the victims' names aloud before signing the pardons, ending his list with a 13-year-old boy named Fredrick, whose full name, the governor said, "was lost to history." The boy was hanged from a tree in or near Cecilton, a small city about 35 miles southwest of Wilmington, Del., around September 1861.

"Studying [Cooper's] case led me to dig deeper and to seek out details" in all the documented cases, Hogan said. "My hope is that this action will at least in some way help to right these horrific wrongs — and perhaps bring a measure of peace to the memories of these individuals and their descendants."

Several states have offered posthumous pardons to individuals who were falsely accused of a crime and then lynched, dating back at least as far as Georgia's decision in 1986 to pardon Leo Frank, a Jewish man wrongly convicted of killing a child and then lynched in 1915 in a famous case of Southern anti-Semitism.

But Hogan, a Republican who is barred by state law from seeking a third term in 2022 and is exploring future political options, is the first to make a systematic pardon of all known lynching victims in any state. The Equal Justice Initiative's "Lynching in America" project has documented more than 4,000 lynchings across the South from 1877 to 1950, as well as dozens of them in other states, including Maryland.

Flanked by state leaders and racial justice advocates, Hogan said his actions were partially inspired by a petition from middle school students at nearby Loch Raven Technical Academy in Towson, calling on him to consider the posthumous pardon for Cooper. The petition was sent to Hogan earlier this year by the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project, which has sought to document the history of extrajudicial hangings throughout the state and has identified at least 40 lynchings in Maryland.

Michael Ricci, a spokesperson for Hogan's office, said the pardons were granted to victims who were charged with some type of offense and eligible for posthumous clemency.

Among them were George Peck, who was lynched in 1880 while he was being transported to trial; King Johnson, who was seized, beaten and fatally shot in 1911 by eight men after he was left unguarded in jail; and Jacob Henson, who was removed from jail by a mob near Ellicott City while planning his own

appeal for a murder conviction in 1895.

Maryland House Speaker Adrienne A. Jones (D-Baltimore County), the first Black person and first woman to hold her leadership position in the state, said it was noteworthy that three White men — Hogan, Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr. (D) and Attorney General Brian E. Frosh (D) — “stand here with us to say this was wrong . . . and we should collectively acknowledge it to move forward into the next chapter.”

In recent years, Maryland, a slaveholding border state that remained in the Union during the Civil War, has focused on confronting lynchings in the state, an indelible and deeply painful part of American history.

The Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a government-backed panel, is in the midst of a three-year study examining the acts in 19th- and 20th-century Maryland and the impact it had on the state. The commission was assigned counsel from the state attorney general’s office and issued an interim report on its findings last year to Hogan and the leaders of the General Assembly.

“Cooper was one of the youngest victims we were tasked with investigating — we don’t know a lot about these individuals,” said Charles L. Chavis Jr., the commission’s vice chairman and an assistant professor of conflict resolution and history at George Mason University. “We don’t know what he liked to do as a child, we don’t know what his pastimes were. The humanity for these individuals were stripped in the acts of violence.”

Two months before Cooper was killed in 1885, an all-White jury deliberated for less than a minute and declared him guilty of assaulting and raping a White woman — even though the victim did not testify she had been raped, according to Will Schwarz, president of the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project.

That charge triggered the death penalty, but Cooper’s attorneys fought to overturn the conviction, arguing that his 14th Amendment rights had been violated because Black people were barred from serving on juries in Maryland.

His attorneys unsuccessfully appealed the conviction in Maryland, and the mob broke into the old Baltimore County Jail and lynched Cooper before his case could go to the Supreme Court. No one was held accountable for his killing.

On Saturday, leaders with the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project and the Equal Justice Initiative unveiled a blue marker erected steps away from the jail, detailing Cooper's story.

Louis Diggs, who has written 13 books about Black history in Baltimore County, pulled the tarp off the memorial plaque. He said he hoped other communities would make a similar effort because “we need to know our history.”

The plaque notes that pieces of the rope used to kill Cooper were “given away as souvenirs,” and that Cooper’s mother, Henrietta, collected her son’s remains and buried them in an unmarked grave.

“A child was lynched right here. Why would we ever want to forget that?” Schwarz asked. “Well, we’re here today to make sure no one does.”

Julie Zauzmer and Ovetta Wiggins contributed to this report.

