



# 19th Century Lynching In Towson To Be Remembered Saturday

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John Lee /

The historic Towson jail



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A jail cell door that dates back to the 1850s is on display inside the historic Towson jail.

This weekend, a marker is being put on the site in Towson where Howard Cooper, a Black teenager was lynched in 1885. He was dragged out of the Towson jail by dozens of masked men and hanged from a nearby sycamore tree.

According to the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project, which is documenting lynchings that took place in the state, Cooper was one of at least 40 Black men lynched in Maryland between 1854 and 1933.

Organizers say it's important to remember the victims of lynchings to come to terms with the legacy of white supremacy in America.

Cooper was convicted by an all-white jury that deliberated for less than a minute of assaulting and raping Katie Gray, a young white woman. After losing one appeal,

Will Schwarz, president of the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project, said people were angry about the appeal.

“They didn’t want to risk that he would get out of it,” Schwarz said.

He said 40 to 75 masked men began gathering the night of Sunday, July 12, 1885.

“But they waited until after midnight because they didn’t want to lynch anyone on a Sunday,” Schwarz said.

They used a flagpole as a battering ram to break down the Towson jail’s door. According to a New York Times article the following day about the lynching, the mob used a crowbar to break into Cooper’s cell. After hanging him, the mob left his body on display until midday for all to see. Once he was taken down, portions of the rope were handed out as souvenirs.

But Howard Cooper was not the only victim that night.

Jennifer Liles, an historian who is digging into records to find clues about his mother, says she wants the woman’s “name to be known.”

“She was Henrietta Cooper.”

Liles says she can find no record of Henrietta Cooper before 1870, which means she was “probably enslaved.”

Henrietta’s husband and another son had died before Howard’s murder. She lived near the jail and accounts at the time said she heard the mob go by and surmised they were going to lynch her son.

News reports at the time said Howard was in his early 20s. Liles said her research shows he was 15.

Liles said, “He didn’t look out and see somebody he loved, to feel that connection of like, ‘I’m scared.’ He looked out at a mob of people who hated him. And that was the last thing he saw. And I imagine what he wanted to see was his mom. And what she wanted to be was there for him.”

Henrietta Cooper collected her son's body after it was over. He is buried in an unmarked grave.

The old Towson jail still stands at the intersection of Bosley Avenue and Towsontown Boulevard.

Tony Azola, an owner of Azola Building Rehab, said Baltimore County was going to mothball the building until his company and the county reached an agreement. The county retains ownership but gave his company a 100-year lease.

The company reopened it as an office building in 2010 following a major renovation.

Azola said the exterior walls of the jail date back to 1854, but little remained inside the building from the time Howard Cooper was held there. He said the county rebuilt the interior in 1904.

"They really ripped out everything," Azola said. "Literally just the stone walls were left. Everything else was gutted."

Azola supports the effort to shed light on what happened to Howard Cooper.

"Good or bad, history has to be told and it's a good thing for people to understand that's one of the things that happened here," Azola said.

Troy Williams, Baltimore County's Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, also heads a county commission examining how to make policing more equitable and accountable. He said telling Howard Cooper's story relates to that.

"We want to make sure that we don't have unfortunate, tragic, state-sponsored issues like this moving forward," Williams said.

Schwarz, of the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project, said the legacy of lynchings is felt today, from the murders of Black men by police, to the disproportionate numbers of Black people who die from COVID-19.

"These are all manifestations of, I believe, of 400 years of white supremacy," Schwarz said.

The marker that's being unveiled Saturday will bear the names of both Howard and Henrietta Cooper.

The ceremony is schedule for 11 am at the old Towson jail. It will be livestreamed on the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project's [website](#).

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