

**NEWS**

# 'Truth rising and lies dying': Commission reviews roles of public institutions in Anne Arundel lynchings

By Dan Belson  
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Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners Carl Snowden, left, Charles Chavis, Jr., David Fakunle, Chris Haley and Maya Davis hear testimony from Annapolis Alderwoman Elly Tierney during the commission's public hearing at City Hall on Saturday. (Dan Belson / Capital Gazette)

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Police, prosecutors, judges, jailers and local media played a part in aiding mobs who lynched five Black men in Anne Arundel County, historians told a state panel convening in Annapolis on Saturday.

The participants in the five known racial terror lynchings that took place in Anne Arundel County between 1875 and 1911 have never been criminally prosecuted, despite scores of witnesses and several botched investigations.

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During Saturday's hearing in Annapolis City Hall, the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission took testimony from experts and the public on the forces that allowed the killers of five Black men — Henry Davis, King Johnson, George Briscoe, John Simms and Wright Smith — to walk free.

Commission Chair David Fakunle wore a noose to the hearing.

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"I want this to become a relic of the past," he said. "We're not there yet. Even if it's not tangible, it hurts."

Most documentation of the five killings came from local, white-owned newspapers, which cited unreliable sources and mainly focused on the alleged crimes the lynching victims had committed, according to State

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Archivist Elaine Bachmann, who testified on Saturday.

The local media accounts, such as those from the Evening Capital and The Baltimore Sun shown during Saturday's hearing, cast the lynchings as justifiable and used "one-sided and incendiary" language to describe the victims of lynchings, said Emma Buchman, a member of Anne Arundel Connecting the Dots, a coalition of organizations and citizens working on connecting the dots between past and present racism.

[ [\*Maryland confronts its lynching legacy\*](#) ]

Simms, who was dragged out of a jail by 28 masked men and hanged from a tree about a mile outside of Annapolis, was dubbed the "Piney Woods Monster" by local media for the allegation he accosted a young white woman in 1875 in what is now Odenton.

After Briscoe, a 40-year-old accused of a string of robberies, allegedly offended a judge in 1884 by "display[ing] bravado" during a court hearing, a group of men swarmed a carriage in which deputies were escorting him to jail and hanged him from a tree near the Magothy River. The Evening Capital wrote that the lynching was the "only way to rid a community of so a desperate a character."

"These articles show the complicity of the media in these lynchings," said Commissioner Tony Spencer, who represents Anne Arundel County on the commission. "These newspaper articles were messages to the people living in nearby African American enclaves."

Saturday's testimony detailed the attempts and failures of local officials to bring justice to the lynching victims. Although juries convened to investigate the killings, silence from witnesses and hesitance from judicial officials led to no findings.

A grand jury discarded an anonymous letter containing the names of eight people who clubbed Johnson unconscious before shooting him four times in 1911, the latest of the five documented lynchings, author Rik Forgo testified.

The next year, new Maryland Gov. Phillips Lee Goldsborough started a secret investigation, hiring Archer Owens, a Black private investigator from New York. Owens gathered information and drafted a 700-page report, leading to the arrest of four men, all on whom were later released. One of them was later implicated as being part of the mob in an unrelated court matter. His case was not reopened, and the commission is still searching for the lengthy report prepared by Owens.

When Smith, of Baltimore, was hauled by a mob of 30 white men from the Annapolis jail on Calvert Street and shot dead after being accused of assaulting a white woman near Jones Station in September 1898, Annapolis' City Council rejected a measure by then-Alderman Wiley H. Bates to condemn the lynching.

A jury of inquest failed to identify any culprits in the [killing of Davis](#), who was taken from the Calvert Street jail to College Creek through the “Old Fourth Ward”— a historically African American section of the city.

“The whole neighborhood was terrorized,” local historian Janice Hays-Williams said. “They deserve the same justice as the lynching victims.”

The City Council has [since apologized](#) for the lynchings and other racial injustices on behalf of the city. [The Capital](#) and [The Sun](#) both published editorials in the past two years apologizing for actions that helped racism flourish and promoted the oppression of Black Marylanders.

“We have to tell the truth, we have to speak truth to power,” Annapolis Police Chief Ed Jackson said.

“Lynching was allowed to go on for the first 150 years of our nation’s history because our Congress did nothing — they condoned it. Our state legislatures did nothing.”

Closing the commission’s meeting, Carl Snowden, a commissioner and convener of the Caucus of African American Leaders, recalled a ceremony held in Annapolis on behalf of Davis in 2001, 95 years after Davis was killed.

“I believe these hearings demonstrated truth rising and lies dying,” he said.

