

Landmark commission begins tackling ‘unconfronted truth’ of racially motivated lynchings in Md.

By **Ovetta Wiggins**

September 18, 2020 at 6:49 p.m. EDT

A state panel will begin documenting Maryland’s 42 known racial terror lynchings, the first such government-backed commission created to confront a jurisdiction’s brutal history of lynchings and increase the public’s understanding of the practice.

The Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission is expected to begin taking oral histories and collecting documents in the coming months as part of an intensive, three-year study of the killings, which were often by hanging and committed by perpetrators who were never held accountable.

The panel released an interim report to Gov. Larry Hogan (R) and the presiding officers of the General Assembly on Friday that provides a timeline for its work over the next two years and protocols it has put in place for its monumental task.

“The dark history of racial terror lynching in America and in Maryland was largely ignored or denied” before grassroots and community-led organizations began documenting the history, the report says. “An important goal of the [commission] is to advocate for the public acknowledgment of these crimes to help Marylanders know and confront the truth about this shameful history.”

Outside of the South, where lynchings were most active, Maryland is one of eight states where the torture was common, according to a [2015 report by the Equal Justice Initiative](#), a nonprofit legal and civil rights group that has documented thousands of lynchings and created the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala., to memorialize the victims.

Documented lynchings took place between 1854 and 1933, in 18 of Maryland’s 24 jurisdictions. Anne Arundel and Prince George’s counties recorded the highest numbers in the state.

“We feel there is a direct through line that can be drawn from the racial terror lynchings of old to the current anti-Black violence that we’re witnessing today, and so that’s one of the reasons our work is so important and timely,” said Charles L. Chavis Jr., the commission’s vice chairman and an assistant professor of conflict resolution and history at George Mason University. “In addition to truth telling, our goal is to salvage the humanity of these individuals. At the end of the day, they were someone’s loved one.”

The commission, which has been assigned counsel from the state attorney general’s office, can authorize the issuance of subpoenas for testimony. Last week, it sent letters to the state’s attorney offices asking for documents related to any investigations. Any state, county and local government entities or news organizations that had any involvement in

cases of racially motivated lynchings also will be identified.

Town hall meetings will be held next year in communities where lynchings took place.

The panel's work grows out of research done by the EJI and the [Maryland Lynching Memorial Project](#). Del. Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk (D-Prince George's) sponsored legislation in 2019 to form the state-backed commission.

"Given what is happening in this country with the level of divisiveness, the racism . . . it's important to know your history because if you don't know you're history, like the famous quote says, you are bound to repeat the mistakes," Peña-Melnyk said.

The delegate, who also represents Anne Arundel County, pointed to the county's high number of hate and bias incidents — the highest in the state — and its high number of lynchings.

"This is real," she said. "It's a real issue."

Sherrilyn Ifill, who wrote "On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-First Century" and has consulted with the commission on its work, said the panel will tackle "the unfronted truth of our [country's] history" and will play an important role in helping Maryland recognize the impact the killings continue to have on society — and redress it.

"You can't address a sickness until you properly diagnose it," said Ifill, the president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

Kirkland Hall Sr., a member of the commission and a retired professor at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, said he recently attended a rally in Somerset County following the Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd. Hall said he spoke about the 1933 lynching of George Armwood, who was beaten, stabbed and set on fire. Armwood, a 21-year-old Black man who was mentally ill, was accused of attacking an elderly White woman. He was never tried and instead taken by a mob of thousands from a county jail and hung from a tree.

"The skin of George Armwood was scorched and blackened while his face had suffered many blows from sharp and heavy instruments," according to an article in the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper at the time. "A cursory glance revealed that one ear was missing and his tongue, between clenched teeth, gave evidence of his great agony before death."

Hall said most of those who attended the rally, a diverse group of Black and White residents, young and old, said they had never heard of Armwood.

"Women brought their children by to see the burned body," Hall said. "That's the part that I don't understand."

David Fakunle, the commission chair, said the panel is expecting to hear testimony from descendants of both victims and perpetrators, as well as the community members that continue to feel the impact of the killings.

"It's about telling the whole story," Fakunle said. "It's not to mitigate. It's to understand the impact. . . . We are trying to bridge the narrative of racial terror in the past with racial terror of today."