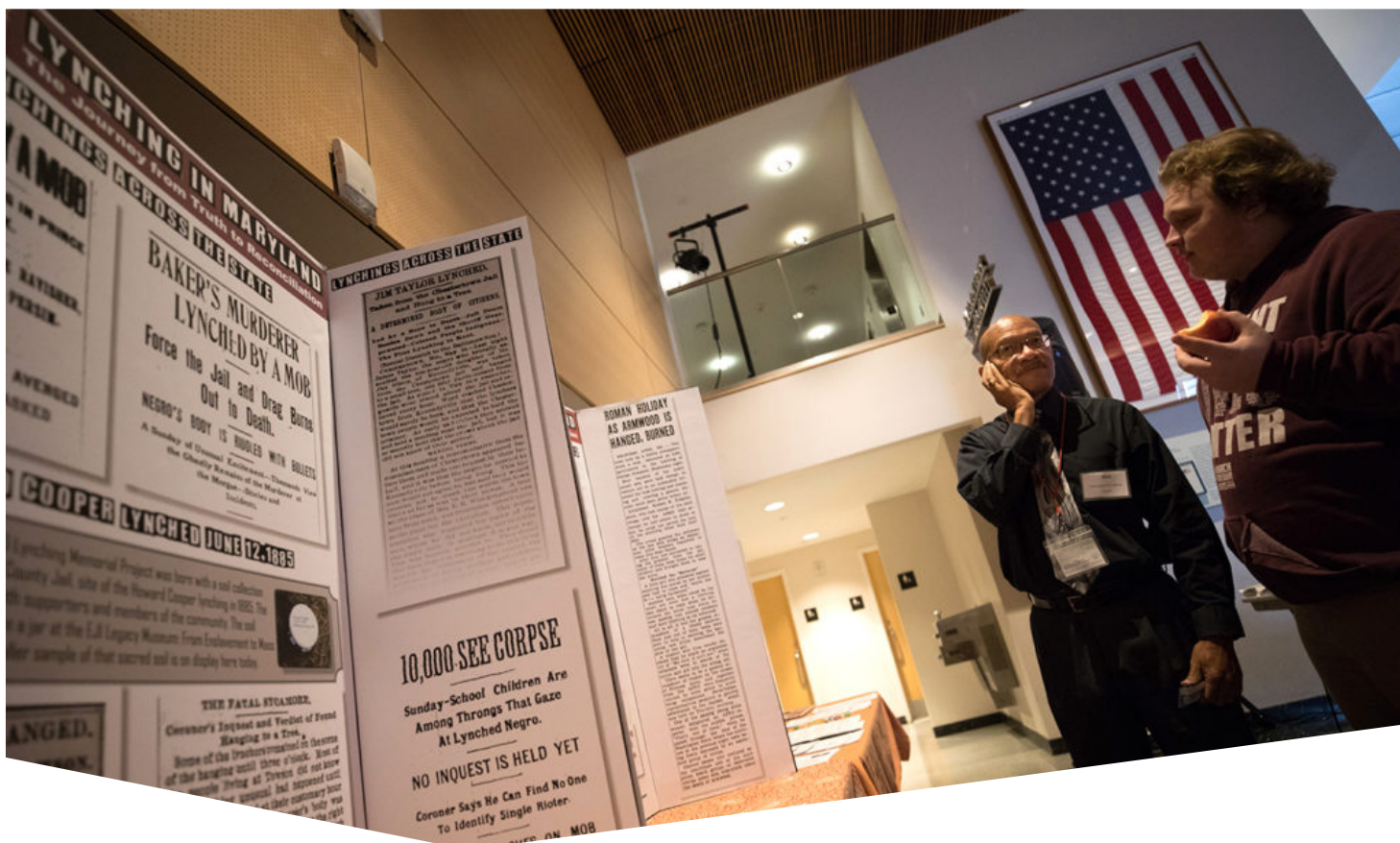




RACIAL JUSTICE

Truth and Reconciliation for Lynching Victims and Their Families



Maryland becomes the first state to consider recommendations for addressing its legacy of lynching.

BY DJ CASHMERE

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According to family lore, George Armwood was a happy, quiet, and hard-working young man. He could often be heard whistling and was said to have a beautiful singing voice, as well. But

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when Armwood arrived at his cousin Mary's house on October 16, 1933, he was in a panic. "I didn't do it! I didn't do it!" he yelled. "They're gonna kill me. I didn't do it!"

More than a half-century later, Mary Armwood recounted this moment to her granddaughter, Tina Johnson. As Johnson recalled recently, the two of them were sitting in the living room watching the soap opera *The Young and the Restless* and discussing the recent arrest and incarceration of one of their family members over a verbal altercation with a White woman. This, Johnson says, sparked her grandmother's memory. Mary told her about how police had come to search her house for Armwood, who'd been accused of assaulting a White woman; how her family had seen Armwood being violently dragged past their house after he'd been found in the woods; how a White mob had later dragged his body by the house again, after they lynched him, "so that we could see it."

Sherrilyn A. Ifill, in her 2007 book *On the Courthouse Lawn*, fills in the details. When Armwood was arrested, he wasn't taken to the nearest jail, in Princess Anne, Maryland, because lynch mobs were already forming there. He was instead taken to Wicomico County, then farther away, to Cecil County, then all the way to Baltimore, where he was presumed to be safe. But local officials in Princess Anne, under intense pressure from their White constituents, ordered his return. A local judge promised the governor that Armwood would be safe.

That night, Ifill writes, hundreds of White men, women, and boys gathered outside the jail. They first taunted the state police guarding the jail, then threw stones and bricks, then forced their way inside. They found Armwood hiding under a mattress in a cell. They stabbed him and dragged him out by his feet, letting his head hit every metal step on the way downstairs and outside. The White mob kicked him, pummeled him, cut off his ear, dragged him through the streets, and hung him from a tree near the home of the judge who had promised his safety. Then they dragged him back to the courthouse and set him

on fire. They left his body in a lumberyard. Black children saw it the next morning on their way to school.

The old Baltimore County Jail in Towson, Maryland where Howard Cooper, a Black teenager, was killed in 1885. Photo by DJ Cashmere.

Ifill, who serves as director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, spends the first half of *On the Courthouse Lawn* chronicling the lynchings of Armwood and Matthew Williams, who was lynched two years before Armwood in nearby Salisbury. She places the murders in context, taking pains to note the complicity of local governments, newspapers, and other institutions that played key roles in supporting race-based domestic terrorism. She then turns her attention from past to present, from history to how-to. Drawing lessons from South Africa and other post-conflict regions, Ifill spends Part Two of her book laying out a practical roadmap for those interested in confronting the legacy of lynching in Maryland in the 21st century.

Now, more than a decade after the publication of *On the Courthouse Lawn*, Ifill's suggestions are coming to life. Maryland recently became the first state in the nation to launch a Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The commission has the potential to redefine how America confronts white supremacy.

Forming a Commission

Historian Nicholas Creary began researching lynchings in Maryland about five years ago with his undergraduate students at Bowie State University. They ultimately found at least 40 cases in which Black people had been lynched in the state between 1854 and 1933. Creary, who has since moved on to the University of Iowa, took the findings

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to Joseline Peña-Melnyk, his local representative in the Maryland House of Delegates, and asked her whether they could do something to hold the state accountable. Peña-Melnyk, whom Creary described to me as a “force of nature,” readily agreed.

Originally from the Dominican Republic, Peña-Melnyk has been a state delegate since 2007. She represents two counties, Anne Arundel and Prince George’s, in which a total of at least 10 Black people were lynched. “It’s the right time to have a discussion on race,” she told me via phone, citing recent incidents in Maryland in which swastikas were found on college campuses, KKK literature was distributed in neighborhoods, and a noose was hung at a middle school. “You need to know your past,” Peña-Melnyk is fond of saying, “in order to understand your future.” She and Creary got to work.

The resulting bill, known as HB 307, was a remarkable piece of legislation. After citing the deaths of at least 40 African Americans by lynching, it notes that “no person was ever tried, convicted, or otherwise brought to justice for participating” in the lynchings; that “State, county, and local government entities colluded in the commission of these crimes and conspired to conceal the identities of the parties involved;” that the crimes were unjust and “intended to terrorize African American communities and force them into silence and subservience to the ideology of white supremacy;” and that “no victim’s family or community ever received a formal apology or compensation from State, county, or local government entities for the violent loss of their men.”

Peña-Melnyk expertly navigated HB 307 through Maryland’s General Assembly. The bill passed both Democratic-led chambers of the Assembly with overwhelming bipartisan support. It was signed into law by Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican, in April 2019.

The inaugural meeting of the Baltimore County Lynching Memorial Committee held in Towson, Maryland on Jan. 25, 2020. Photo by DJ Cashmere.

Over the next two years, the commission is charged with discovering and documenting racial terror lynchings, holding regional hearings in those areas where lynchings took place, investigating the complicity of both government agencies and the media in the lynchings that occurred, soliciting input from the community about how to address and reconcile these crimes, and submitting to the governor and General Assembly “recommendations for addressing the legacy of lynching that are rooted in the spirit of restorative justice.”

A Historic Opportunity

Creary, who is now a commissioner, told me he had been stunned and pleased when the bill passed. But he knew that hard work still lay ahead. “There’s complicity at every level of government,” he says, noting that the commission was set to investigate dozens of lynchings—what he referred to as “open murder cases”—cases in which the police often knew who was responsible but hadn’t pressed charges. The commission will receive support from the State Attorney General’s office—an assigned staff member who can subpoena witnesses or documents in connection with the commission’s investigation and hearings. “If we do it right, it can serve as a model for other states,” he says. “To let there be a reckoning.”

Creary’s sentiments were echoed by David Fakunle of the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, who is acting chair of the commission. Fakunle calls the work a “historic opportunity” that may well define the legacy of its members. “We [will] set the tone for how we address the sins of this country’s history,” he says. And while there hasn’t been much pushback yet, Fakunle says he expects and welcomes it as “a natural byproduct of something this revolutionary.”

Not a single one of these crimes was justified, he says, adding, “I dare somebody to tell me otherwise or [try to] convince me otherwise...

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We will make them look like fools. And everything that we do will be recorded. Everything that we do will be immortalized.”

Evan Milligan, left, and Elliot Spillers of the Equal Justice Initiative listen to a panel discussion during the inaugural conference of the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project. Photo by Cheryl Diaz Meyer/The Washington Post/Getty Images.

At the commission’s public launch this past September, Ifill gave the keynote address. She reminded the audience that the lynching practice was not carried out by masked men, but by neighbors. Violence, she says, was a necessary component of white supremacy, a key strategy in maintaining Black subordination. “That is not just a historical fact. That is a fact that is true, and therefore lives with us today, and is a caution to us about the violence that we ignore.”

The Work is Local

Researchers at the Equal Justice Initiative have documented more than 4,400 racial terror lynchings in 20 states. Public interest lawyer Bryan Stevenson founded EJI in 1989 as a nonprofit legal clinic. It has since become one of the nation’s leading civil rights organizations.

To bring the reality of lynching and its modern-day descendant, mass incarceration, into the national spotlight, EJI has created the Community Remembrance Project, which offers a series of steps that people around the country can take to commemorate the lives lost to racial terror lynchings. The first step is a soil collection, wherein concerned citizens and descendants of victims can gather earth from the site of a lynching to store and display in a glass jar with the victim’s name and the date of their murder. (More than a hundred of these jars are now being exhibited at EJI’s Legacy Museum in

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permanent historical marker to expose local communities to the reality of the long-silenced crime.

A few years ago, when documentary filmmaker Will Schwarz saw Stevenson speak in Baltimore, Schwarz was inspired to act. He decided to host a soil collection for Howard Cooper, a Black man killed in 1885, not far from Schwarz's present-day Maryland home. There, he met Creary, with whom he began working on HB 307.

The two also teamed up on another project: founding the nonprofit Maryland Lynching Memorial Project. The project, of which Schwarz is now President, supports the organization of local committees in counties across the state who are working on community remembrance initiatives. The first EJI-sponsored historical marker was erected last September in Annapolis, the state capital.

Soil from the location of where Howard Cooper is said to be buried is displayed at the inaugural conference of the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project. Photo by Cheryl Diaz Meyer/The Washington Post/Getty Images.

On a recent Saturday morning, Schwarz helped lead the inaugural meeting of Baltimore County's Lynching Memorial Committee. Nearly five dozen participants, about a quarter of them Black, were seated in four long rows of chairs in an airy college atrium.

Schwarz screened *Outrage in Rockland*, a short film he'd recently produced about the lynching of Howard Cooper. The film's emotional climax comes after Cooper's burial. The narrator explains that White newspapers at the time of Cooper's death reported his age as somewhere between 19 and 24. But when local public historian Jenny Liles attended the 2018 soil collection organized by Schwarz, she was

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inspired to do some research. When Liles found Cooper in U.S. Census records, she learned he was in fact no older than 15.

After the film, the assembled community members processed their feelings. A Baltimore County employee named RaMona Brown-Carter, who is Black, noted that she was particularly struck by Cooper's age. She had brought her son Elijah with her to the meeting. Elijah was also 15.

He later told me that he could relate to Cooper, "because a lot of people mistake my age. They think I'm older than what I actually am. My mom always says I have to be careful, because people aren't just going to see me as a 15-year-old boy, they're going to see me as some Black guy who just tried to do something... that could easily get me killed."

Memorials Are Not Enough

The group also discussed next steps for putting up an EJI historical marker at the site of Cooper's lynching. For RaMona Brown-Carter, this seemed an important step. Like her son, she couldn't help but put herself in the victims' shoes.

"I can only imagine them taking that final breath and looking out and seeing mobs of people wanting to see them die. [They must have been thinking,] 'Does anybody even care who I am? Can anybody hear me?'" For Brown-Carter, these memorialization efforts are a way of answering across the years: "We heard you, and we care."

And yet, one thing everyone agrees on is that memorialization, while important, is insufficient. Even if every lynching were to be commemorated with a soil collection and a historical marker, more work is needed to move from truth to reconciliation. That is where the commission's recommendations come in. They could include changes to the public school curriculum, formal apologies from governments and newspapers, mandatory antiracism training for public employees, financial reparations for the victim's families and

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their communities, and more. Each idea would pose political difficulties. Some might prove impossible.

The Colored Methodist Protestant
St. John's Chapel of Baltimore
County, where Howard Cooper is
said to be buried in an unmarked
grave. Photo by DJ Cashmere.

“One of the biggest challenges for lots of truth commissions is that they need to manage expectations for themselves as well as for local communities,” says Ereshnee Naidu-Silverman, the senior director for the Global Transitional Justice Initiative at the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. Originally from South Africa, she has worked in the field of transitional justice for more than 20 years. She is an expert on the lessons learned from her own country’s famed Truth and Reconciliation Commission and similar efforts around the world.

Naidu-Silverman was optimistic about Maryland’s effort, noting that the state’s sponsorship of the work “is a coup in itself.” Still, “they need to make their mandate very clear,” she cautions. Because ultimately, “those recommendations are what’s going to count.”

DJ CASHMERE is a print and audio journalist in New York who covers education, urban policy, and culture.

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