

Allegany County Truth & Healing Sessions  
regarding the lynching of Robert Hughes aka William Burns

Saturday, October 2, 2021 at 11:00am

Allegany County  
Cumberland, Maryland

a public hearing with  
Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission,  
Allegany County Truth & Reconciliation Committee,  
descendants of the Hughes and Page families,  
and community representatives

ALLEGANY COUNTY LYNCHING  
**ACLTRC**  
TRUTH & RECONCILIATION COMMITTEE  
[www.thebrownsvilleproject.com/acltrc](http://www.thebrownsvilleproject.com/acltrc)

The **Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission** was established by House Bill 307. The Commission is authorized to research cases of racially motivated lynchings and hold public meetings and regional hearings where a lynching of an African American by a white mob has been documented.

The **Allegany County Lynching Truth & Reconciliation Committee** mission is to acknowledge and memorialize Robert Hughes aka William Burns, who was lynched in Cumberland, Maryland, while helping Allegany County residents reconcile with the intergenerational harm caused by lynching and other violent acts against the African American community.

“The MLTRC’s hearing process will allow members of the public, including the descendants of victims, witnesses, and perpetrators, the opportunity to offer testimony about how these murders have impacted their lives and their communities in addition to allowing them the opportunity to make recommendations for achieving racial healing. Members of the public will also be able to submit written testimony. The hearings will also provide an opportunity to identify and bring to light possible cases of racial terror lynching that are remembered in families and communities but for which there is little or no documentation. ‘Through these hearings, we not only are able to gain proximity to the truth but also gain proximity to how later generations were shaped by these atrocities in interpreting history and their own place in contemporary American society,’ Dr. Charles Chavis, Commission Vice-Chair and Director of African and African American Studies at George Mason University.

The hearings will also explore the involvement of State, county, and local government entities and news media in cases of racially motivated lynching. In 1898, for example, the Maryland General Assembly failed to pass proposed anti-lynching legislation. It is also well documented that county sheriffs and jailers allowed mobs to take men from jail with impunity, county state’s attorneys refused to identify and bring charges against members of lynch mobs, county coroners routinely claimed that the victims of lynching died ‘at the hands of parties unknown,’ and newspaper coverage of these events helped to perpetuate a culture that condoned and encouraged racial terror lynchings.”

-- *MLTRC press release for Allegany County public hearing*

“We [Allegany County] are thinking of these hearings as truth and healing sessions that will be the beginning of the hard yet necessary work to grow stronger as one community, one human race, one American family.”

*ACLTRC leader and Civil Rights Activist, Clory Jackson*

Shortly after midnight on Sunday, October 6, 1907, a large white mob lynched an 18-year-old African American man known as William Burns in Cumberland, Maryland.

After being involved in an altercation with a local white police officer on October 3, 1907 that resulted in the officer's death, Mr. Burns was arrested and driven to the local police headquarters and held in a cell. The next morning, he was transported to the county jail in Cumberland, Maryland. While he awaited trial, a mob entered the jail, abducted Mr. Burns, and beat and shot him to death.

Although several local officials were present, no one would identify members of the mob, and no one was ever held accountable for the lynching of William Burns.

Originally from Fauquier County, Virginia, Mr. Burns relocated to Allegany County and had been living there for six months before October 1907. Before his death, Mr. Burns was employed as a porter at Alpine Hall, a hotel in Cumberland, and as a driver for George Palmore, who operated a local saloon. After work on Thursday, October 3, Mr. Burns and another Black man named Jesse Page visited a couple of local saloons near the canal wharf in Cumberland. While at the second saloon known as Kate Preston's, Mr. Burns was accused of disorderly conduct and thrown out. Shortly thereafter, August Baker, a local white police officer on the Cumberland Police Force, arrived on the scene to arrest Mr. Burns.

Before the officer could take him into custody, a struggle ensued, wherein Officer Baker struck Mr. Burns with a mace. Mr. Page was later also taken into custody. Reports stated that during the struggle, Officer Baker was shot in the abdomen by Mr. Burns, but he was still able to handcuff Mr. Burns. After calling for assistance, the officer had a Black ice wagon driver named Humphrey Green and another witness, Abram Speck, transport Mr. Burns by cab to the Cumberland police station before he was placed in the local jail. While Mr. Burns was incarcerated, word spread around Cumberland that Officer Baker had been shot, and on Saturday, October 5, Officer Baker's death was publicly pronounced by a coroner's jury.

Reports indicate that Mr. Burns feared retaliation from the citizens of Cumberland.

As anger rose in the white community, Sheriff Horace Hamilton chose not to put extra guards on duty at the jail, stating that he did not fear an uprising.

In most cases of racial terror lynching, local law enforcement failed to intervene or use force to repel lynch mobs, even when the threat of lynching was evident and underway. Despite their legal responsibility to equally protect anyone in their custody, law enforcement were often found to be ineffective in preventing, or even complicit in, the seizure or lynchings of Black men, women, and children by abdicating their responsibilities or yielding to mobs' demands.

That evening, Deputy Sheriff Noah Hendley was the only person standing guard at the jail.

Mr. Page had been cleared of any charges and released earlier that day.

By midnight on October 5, a group of approximately 50 white men gathered in the streets near the jail "with their coats turned inside out and handkerchiefs bound over their faces." By the time the mob reached the jail, there were several hundred participants. Contemporary reports described conflicting accounts of how the mob was able to enter the jail and abduct Mr. Burns. According to Deputy Sheriff Noah Hendley, the mob stormed the jail and demanded keys to enter, which he refused. He stated that the mob then obtained a pole, which they used repeatedly in an effort to break down the door. Unsuccessful, the mob then held him at gunpoint, stripped his clothing, and took the keys, which they used to enter the jail. Alternatively, some informants reported that Deputy Sheriff Hendley gave them the keys, which allowed them to enter the jail. Other reports claim that Hendley's wife convinced him to give up the keys or that the mob forcefully gained entry.

After entering the jail and locating Mr. Burns, the mob beat and dragged him outside.

Reports indicate that by this time the mob had grown to approximately 2,000 active white participants and spectators.

A local white attorney, Benjamin Richmond, who arrived as the mob was beginning to storm the jail, attempted to locate other officers who could intervene. Richmond later reported that after he left the jail, he managed to find one additional officer, by the name of Goss. Richmond convinced officer Goss to take him to the police station in search of more officers. Once there, they found four policemen, with Lieutenant Schmutz among them, sitting quietly with the door locked and lights low. After the officers returned to the jail, the mob had already dispersed.

Richmond stated that when he urged the officers to go after the mob, they "moved in a rather leisurely fashion," and "of course... they arrived too late."

The mob dragged Mr. Burns from outside the jail to an area across the street from the courthouse. Some members of the mob demanded that Mr. Burns confess to killing Mr. Baker, but he would not. Other members of the mob were already convinced of his guilt. Intent on proceeding with the lynching, at approximately 12:40 am on Sunday, October 6, the mob beat Mr. Burns and shot him repeatedly even after he had already expired. The mob intended to burn Mr. Burns' body but Reverend William Cleveland Hicks, the rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church, pleaded with the white mob to stop the mutilation of Mr. Burns' body.

The Cumberland police officers failed to arrest any of the mob participants who had participated in lynching Mr. Burns. After William Burns' lynching, Richmond strongly criticized the Cumberland police force, stating,

“The conduct of the police of Cumberland was simply shameful and disgraceful. Although the disorder was going on for more than half an hour, not one of them appeared on the scene until after the negro was dead, and would not have come then but for my action.”

Reverend Hicks also spoke out against the lynching. Delivering a sermon later in the day on the Sunday that Mr. Burns was lynched, Reverend Hicks stated that, “Last night a crime far worse was committed, committed in cold blood. The righteous anger of Thursday and Friday was cast to the winds, and license, vengeance, and savagery were given full sway. Ah, my friends, who are responsible for these awful crimes against civilization and against God? Is it that band of men alone who dragged the criminal from his cell and who fired those shots? No. It is your fault and it is mine. We must share in this disgrace, for we, as a city, have allowed that pesthole, the saloon, to spring up everywhere, and to bring forth its deadly, devilish offspring.”

Although officials and community members like Richmond and Reverend Hicks at times expressed condemnation of racial terror lynchings, this outrage rarely led to meaningful outcomes in holding white mobs accountable for lynchings.

On October 12, Allegany County commissioners offered a reward of \$500 for the arrest and conviction of those responsible for the lynching of William Burns. Despite the fact that the mob that lynched Mr. Burns had grown to at least 2,000 people, Deputy Sheriff Hendley stated that he was unable to identify anyone in the crowd, “some of whom seemed respectable and others who were not.” Other witnesses also claimed they could not remember, let alone identify, those who participated in the lynching. Chief Judge A. Hunter Boyd then directed a grand jury to investigate Mr. Burns' lynching. The jury convened, but returned a verdict on October 19th that no one could be identified for prosecution of the crime.

The Afro-American Ledger, a Baltimore-based Black-led newspaper, published an article on October 12, writing about the white mob that killed Mr. Burns, stating that, “without doubt, everyone of them is guilty of murder in the first degree and justice will not be done until everyone implicated in it is brought before the bar and receives the penalty of his crime.” The article also implicated Deputy Sheriff Hendley, stating that,

“. . . without doubt, the deputy sheriff should be immediately removed for he certainly failed in his duty, if he did not connive with the law breakers in carrying out their deadly purpose. The idea of a man standing with a weapon in his hand, allowed by the law to use it, and then failing to protect not only the prisoners, under his charge, but the property of the government of the state. The sheriff heard that there were threats being made, but took no interest in the matter save to remove himself as far from the scene as his duty would allow.”

Mr. Burns’ sister arrived from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania hoping to transport her brother’s body back to Pittsburg, but she was not able to acquire the funds to do so. On October 10, Mr. Burns was buried at the Sumner Cemetery in Cumberland, Maryland. An announcement in the local newspaper stated that “the funeral will be quietly conducted.”

Despite the mob’s lawlessness and failures of law enforcement that resulted in the lynching of William Burns, no one was ever held accountable for his death. William Burns is one of at least 29 documented African American victims of racial terror lynching in the state of Maryland between 1877 and 1950.

*ACLTRC works with the Equal Justice Initiative.*

*Visit [eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america/](http://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america/) to read their report and learn more about community remembrance projects.*

ROBERT W. HUGHES  
(AKA William Burns)  
July 23, 1888 – October 6, 1907

From the Hughes Family:

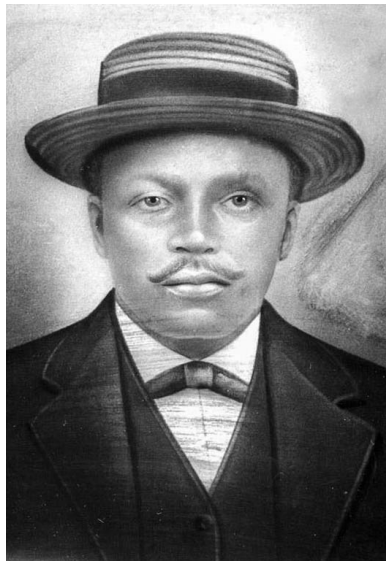
What we know and share about Robert W. Hughes is through our family's history, vital records and accounts provided by the team here in Cumberland.

## The Beginning

Robert W. Hughes was born at the Pot House in the village of St. Louis, Loudoun County, Virginia. His parents were Wormley H. Hughes, a Baptist minister, and Georgetta Burbridge Hughes, a public-school teacher. Robert's father, Wormley (1848-1901); grandfather, Robert (1821-1895) – also a Baptist minister; and great grandfather, Wormley (1780-1858), were born in Albemarle County, Virginia. Robert's mother was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (In the 12th Annual Report of the Public Schools of Pittsburgh, 1880-1881, Georgetta is listed as a pupil at Pittsburgh Central High School. She was scheduled to complete her studies in 1883 or 1884.) Wormley, a widower, and Georgetta married in 1885 in Washington, D.C.



Robert's grandfather\*  
Rev. Robert Hughes



Robert's father  
Rev. Wormley Hughes



Robert's mother  
Georgetta Burbridge Hughes

Young Robert's siblings included sister, Selena Leslie, his twin sister Ethel May, brother, John Henry and sister, Sarah Myrtle. At least one of Robert's relatives, an uncle, lived in Covington, Kentucky, and other relatives lived in Pennsylvania and Albemarle County, Va.

## Early Life

As a young boy, Robert certainly attended church with his parents and siblings. Churches would have been in the villages of Morgantown, Orlean, Ashville and St. Louis. His father, Wormley, played significant roles, e.g., founder, pastor, and moderator, in the early days of these congregations. At age 8, in 1896 Robert experienced the founding of the Northern Virginia Baptist Sunday School Union in which his mother was one of the founding members. Robert was a student of his mother. Oral history and county records support that she taught school in Morgantown, 1891, Delaplane, 1893-94, Orlean, 1896-97, Gainesville 1909-1910, Paris 1916-1917. Per her granddaughter, Louise Smith Thompson, she continued teaching until the day before her death - lastly in Front Royal, Warren County, Va. Losing his father at an early age, 13, impacted Robert and his family. We here today can imagine him claiming the new role of "man of the house." His sister Selina, who lived in Pittsburgh along with his mother Georgetta's brother Grafton (who was employed there as a carriage driver in 1880 prior to his death in 1886) and likely her sisters Anna and Adessa, mentioned in news reports that prior to moving to Cumberland he lived and worked near Pittsburgh as well.

## In Cumberland

According to Cumberland's history, Robert arrived here sometime in the Spring of 1907. We do not know whether he visited any of the local churches in Cumberland. He did find work at Alpine Hall, a hotel, and served as a porter. He also worked as a driver for George Palmore, an African American saloon owner. Robert frequented social venues. These venues perhaps offered an exciting change from what he knew in the rural farmland of Fauquier County. In Cumberland, Robert was no longer under the strict supervision of his widowed mother. Although he would have met many people in Cumberland, we can name only a few: Jesse Page, Kate Preston, George Palmore.

## Final Days

To our knowledge at age 18, in 1907, Robert was not married and had no children. Unfortunately, on October 3, 1907, Robert was in a saloon and according to records became rowdy; the law was called in to act. However, during the arrest the officer, August Baker, was shot and mortally wounded. Robert was handcuffed and taken to jail. On the day of his arrest, he was in the company of a Mr. Jesse Page who was also arrested, released, and re-arrested. Present at this scene were Abram Speck, white, and Humphrey Green, African American. Officer Baker died the following day.



With knowledge of Officer Baker's death there was the potential for unrest within the community. One account indicates that Robert, too, was concerned, even fearful. The Cumberland Sheriff was Horace Hamilton. The evening of October 5, on guard at the jail was only one officer, Deputy Sheriff Noah Hendley.

A group of men forcefully entered the facility. Robert was removed from jail by force. Appeals for assistance with mob control were not heeded. Robert died a tragic death as what has been described, "at the hands of a mob." His body was mutilated. It is recorded that his body lay in the street and later in the mortuary where even children were allowed to view the remains. Reverend William Cleveland Hicks, the rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church, "pleaded with the white mob, to stop the mutilation." No arrests followed this execution by mob rule. Robert's older sister, Selina Johnson, who was living in Pennsylvania at the time, came to Cumberland and claimed his body. We do not know who accompanied her to Cumberland. Robert is said to have had a quiet funeral service with Rev. D.W. Shaw officiating. Robert was laid to rest at Sumner, the County's first African American Cemetery, Cumberland, Maryland, on October 10, 1907.

## Family History -- Looking Back

Parents: In 1901, Robert's father, Wormley, suffering with overall failing health and depression, was hospitalized, died and buried on Central State hospital grounds in Petersburg, Virginia. At the time of his death, he was a "watch care" member at the Mt. Nebo Church in Morgantown.\*\* Robert's mother, Georgetta, died May 15, 1921, at the home of her son, John Henry, in the community of Ashville, in Marshall, Fauquier County, Virginia. At her death, the family received condolences from the Methodist in Front Royal. With her children, Ethel, and John Henry, living in Ashville, it is likely that she was eulogized at the First Ashville Baptist Church. She is buried on family property near Delaplane, Fauquier County, Va.

## 1900 and after

Per the 1900 census, the entire family is living in Marshall, Fauquier County, Virginia: Wormley, age 49, Georgetta, age 34, Leslie age 14, Ethel and Robert age 11, John Henry aged 8 and Sarah age 1. Ten years later recorded on the 1910 census, only John Henry, age 19, and Sarah, age 11, are living in the same household in the Scott district of Fauquier County with the family of William A. Jones. In this same census year, 1910, their mother, Georgetta, is living in Gainesville in Prince William County, Va. She is listed as a widow, schoolteacher, and boarder in the home of Louisa Peterson.

Robert's sister, Selina, married Haywood Johnson in 1906, in Pittsburgh. Selina's children included William Clark Johnson who died in 1906, at 9 months old, a stillborn female in 1908, and son Haywood Johnson 1911-1999. Following the death of her husband, Haywood in 1911, she married William Francis Turner. Selina and William had one son, William Francis Turner, born October 26, 1916, and died January 1980. In 1907, Ethel May married Harold R. Smith (1885-1919), and they are living in Philadelphia. Later the family returned to the Ashville Community. Their four children lived to adulthood: Margaret, Louise, Harry M., Edward. After Harold's death, Ethel married Wm. H. Washington in 1921, and they had one daughter, Mary, who was born 1922. This marriage ended in divorce. Ethel again used the surname, Smith, and moved with her children to Washington, D.C., after 1930. All are deceased. In 1911, Robert's brother, John Henry, married Mary M. Wanser (d. 1978) in Washington, DC. Their seven children were Mary M., Annie W., Henry G., Ethel P., Lloyd A., Mildred E., and James R. All are deceased.



Robert's twin sister  
Ethel May Hughes  
Smith Washington



Robert's brother  
John Henry  
Hughes



Robert's sister  
Sarah Myrtle  
Hughes

## Death of Robert's Siblings

His sister, Sarah, died at age 16 on February 9, 1915, at the University of Virginia Hospital in Charlottesville, Albemarle County, Va. Brother, John Henry, died in Fauquier County, Va., 1986, at age 95. His twin sister, Ethel M. Smith, in her 100th year, died January 20, 1989, in Washington, D.C. To date, we do not know the death date for sister, Selina Johnson Turner. All of Robert's first generation and many second-generation nieces and nephews are deceased.

## We Remember and Reflect

Still today, Robert has many grandnieces and grandnephews. His known living great nieces and nephews are Thelma Brown, daughter of Mary M., Earlene Gray, daughter of Henry G., Doris Ann Fletcher, daughter of Ethel P., Angela Davidson, Karen White, Lloyd A. Hughes, Jr., Aaron L. Hughes and Timothy L. Hughes, children of Lloyd A., and Sandra Hughes Bell, daughter of James R. Also, another three generations of nieces and nephews currently live throughout the mid- and eastern United States. These family members are direct descendants of John Henry and Mary W. Hughes. With publicity stemming from today's occasion, we hope to locate other relatives and descendants of Robert's sisters, Ethel May Hughes, and Selina Leslie Hughes.

For many years, the mystery surrounding Robert's death plagued us. His brother and our grandfather, John Henry, only told a few of us that Robert was executed but never elaborated; other times he might say only that he went away. Robert's niece, Annie, once told Angela while riding together from Virginia to DC, that Robert's sister, Ethel, only would say that the truth never came out about his death. Annie surmised that he had been hanged for some crime. Was Robert guilty of rowdy behavior and resisting arrest? Perhaps. Was he guilty of murdering Officer August Baker? Facts do not confirm this. Was he given the right to due process via a court of law? We know and facts confirm that he was not.

On today, August 28, 2021, the family of Robert W. Hughes expresses our thanks and appreciation for the work done here in Cumberland to bring the circumstances of Robert's death to light. Your research and conversations have given us more than we ever expected concerning our uncle, Robert W. Hughes.

We thank Maryland Governor Hogan for the pardons in May 2021 for crimes in which Robert (Wm. Burns) and other victims of lynching were accused. Only in such circumstances of disclosure and conversation can our nation heal from the many atrocities against African Americans.

Thank you!

The Family

## Moving forward we can wonder

1. Why did Robert leave Fauquier? For work? Why then did he leave Pittsburgh for Cumberland?
2. Why in Cumberland did Robert choose to be called William Burns? Did he know one William Burns?
3. Were there relatives in Cumberland?
4. Who in Cumberland knew to contact sister, Selena Johnson, in Pittsburgh about his death?
5. To whom did Robert ask not to tell his mother about the events that led to his arrest?
6. Were there others in Cumberland from Fauquier that Robert knew?

Moving forward we know that our Uncle Robert is resting with many others who experienced life's tempestuous seas, but with assurance of a safe landing ahead.

### Notes

\* Robert's great grandfather, Wormley Hughes (1780-1858), was an enslaved nailer and gardener at the Monticello home of Thomas Jefferson. He is recorded as the individual who dug Jefferson's grave. According to Jefferson's descendants as Wormley aged he often said, "I'm No Ways Tired," thus the selection of this song. In 1850, having gained his freedom, the senior Wormley, 70 years old, was living with the Burwell Colbert family in Albemarle County. Later he is living with the family of Jefferson's granddaughter and her family. He died there in 1858.

\*\* Courses available to Georgetta in what was described as the "D" year were Algebra, General History, U.S. Constitution, Drawing, Elocution, Composition, Hygiene. She would have chosen from the electives of Latin, German, or English Grammar, and select an optional course in Bookkeeping.

\*\*\* Wormley moved to Loudoun County during the Civil War. Per records from Thomas Jefferson's descendants, he followed the Union Army from Charlottesville through Virginia to Loudoun and remained there. In Loudoun he married a widow, Betsy Shorts, in 1872. To date, our research indicates they had no children together. Betsy passed away in 1882.

### Sources

Family oral history; Ancestry; AAHA (Afro American Historical Association of Fauquier County) Archives; Information provided by ACLTRC, The Brownsville Project; 12th Annual Report of the Public Schools of Pittsburgh, 1880-1881; Northern Virginia Baptist Sunday School Union 100th Anniversary Book, 1996.