

Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group illuminates history of lynchings

By Ana Faguy March 27, 2021 at 10:10 p.m. UTC

Correction: An earlier version of this story misstated the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group's formation. It was not part of a statewide effort called the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project.

There's a cart at the Maryland State Archives waiting for Howard County resident Marlena Jareaux. It is piled high with seven containers worth of Reconstruction-era archival documents.

All that separates Jareaux, 53, from that metal cart is the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

Since March, she has visited the Annapolis facility six times, rapidly flipping through indexes and taking pictures on her iPad to revisit when she gets home as she pieces together Howard County's lynching history.

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"It's a mad dash to amass as much I could get and then sort it later when I get home," Jareaux said. "Compressing two hours, it does make you research differently. It makes you much more judicious in terms of your allocation of time. It forced me to really do research from home."

After each of her two-hour visits — limited because of pandemic restrictions, not her stamina — Jareaux sorts through her thousands of photos, backing them up and categorizing the day's findings, hoping she's found more segments of the story.

"I won't know what I'm looking for until I find it," said Jareaux, who identifies as biracial.

She's not alone in her mission to complete the incomplete history Howard County

currently recognizes and teaches in schools. In fact, Howard is among 18 counties in Maryland now reckoning with their racist pasts.

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Jareaux is one of the four founders of the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group, which has spent the past year piecing together the history of lynching in Howard County. It is a layered one in which two African American men were killed and one was reported to have been killed, but was not, in the late 19th century.

“Howard County is not a place that embraces at all the history of the county, the history of enslavement,” she said.

In the year since it formed, the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation has been digging through remnants of the past, uncovering new and discarded information, and subsequently sharing and explaining the findings to residents via Facebook and emailed newsletters.

More than 40 African Americans were lynched in Maryland between 1854 and 1933 by White mobs, according to Maya Davis, 40, who works at the Riversdale House Museum.

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“We’ve been mandated to research and get to the truth and hold hearings in the community,” Davis said of her role.

On Dec. 14, 2019 — before the pandemic had taken root in the United States — the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project hosted a meeting at the Owen Brown Interfaith Center in Columbia. Jareaux was one of about 30 attendees.

The Maryland Lynching Memorial Project is a nonprofit organization that formed in March 2018. According to its website, it “works to advance the cause of reconciliation in our state by documenting the history of racial terror lynchings, advocating for public acknowledgment of these murders and working to honor and dignify the lives of the victims.”

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Jareaux said the statewide group held the meeting in Columbia to gauge community

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interest in forming a local group to look at the lynching activity that happened in Howard. When the question was directly posed to the audience — “Raise your hand if you’re interested in doing this research” — Jareaux’s hand shot up above attendees’ heads.

About a month later, Jareaux and three other women from the meeting — Lynn Mumma, Gina Richardson and Annora Bailey — founded the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group in the cafe area at Wegmans in Columbia.

The group members had a choice: They could work alongside the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project or go it alone. They walked away that cold January night in agreement. If they were going to do this work, they would do it their way.

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“Our opinion is that each community [is] unique. We don’t want to do the cookie-cutter way,” Jareaux said.

Howard is not the only county looking into its past with lynching. There are 18 counties in the state with documented lynchings. Thirteen of those counties are working alongside the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project to document their histories, while five, including Howard, are going it alone.

The effort began after Del. Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk (D- Prince George) sponsored legislation in 2019 to form a state-backed lynching commission.

In April 2019, Gov. Larry Hogan (R) signed the legislation into law, creating the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate and document lynching cases in the state.

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The state commission is set to conduct public hearings in the 18 jurisdictions where lynchings are known to have occurred, giving people the opportunity to share personal or familial histories that could be beneficial to county and state histories. The commission submitted an interim report in September and will release a final report in December 2023. Howard County’s hearing is scheduled for January 2022.

“The commission is the first of its kind in the United States, and as such, holds the potential to serve as a model for communities across the country that continue to bear

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/maryland-lynching-history-documented/2021/03/27/69ab12ec->

the weight of the brutal history of racial terror lynching,” the commission’s interim report reads.

Shawn Gladden, executive director of the Howard County Historical Society, said the society had identified a few attempted lynchings before the formation of the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation group but had not gone into the detail the group has.

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“Now someone is coming in and giving context and some story, instead of it being another location that has a black mark with regards to lynchings in Maryland,” said Gladden, 46. “It brings that story to the forefront and gives us the opportunity to look at this with some fresh academic eyes.”

Davis used to work as a research archivist and legislative liaison for the Maryland State Archives. She would spend her days researching the antebellum period of slavery, digging up old newspaper ads to build narratives of enslaved individuals, an effort she described as “a labor of love.” She has been researching coroners’ requests as a way of piecing together more parts of an individual’s story.

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“We want to tell a fuller story than how their life ended,” said Davis, who identifies as African American.

To collect information across the state and within the counties, researchers and archivists are heavily reliant on information in the public record, which is a challenge given how common erasure was at the time, Davis said.

There are a few universal themes when it comes to lynching in the Reconstruction era in the United States. According to Davis, a lot of the incidents being researched now are of people falsely accused of crimes. A bulk of the lynchings currently being investigated across the state are for accusations of raping a White woman.

Davis said the public messaging of the time was one of white supremacy: “This could be you too if you don’t adhere to the way we think things should go.”

According to Howard County Truth & Reconciliation, there are two known lynchings and one “near lynching” that took place in Howard County from 1884 to 1895.

The “near lynching” the group has completed researching is that of the Rev. Hezekiah Brown.

The “near lynching” of Brown in December 1884 was a result of newspapers, including the Baltimore Sun, reporting that a “colored man has been ordered to leave” for allegedly marrying a White woman, which was considered miscegenation and illegal. Despite newspapers reporting Brown’s lynching “13 miles west of Ellicott City,” records show he was not killed.

The first known lynching in Howard County took place Sept. 18, 1885. Nicholas Snowden was killed after being abducted from the Ellicott City jail by a mob.

Jareaux and the group are still collecting and archiving information surrounding the Snowden case. “People took the law into their own hands; they didn’t wait until the system could do it,” Jareaux said.

Jacob Henson Jr. was killed May 28, 1895, marking the second lynching in Howard County. Henson was killed while standing trial in the killing of a White shopkeeper, Daniel F. Shea, whom he worked for on Main Street in Ellicott City. Like Snowden, he was abducted from the Ellicott City jail by a mob.

Descendants of Henson are working with the group to collect information and complete research surrounding his death. So far, the group has found that Henson’s case changed the process of where people accused of crimes in Maryland were to be kept. After Henson’s lynching, then-Gov. Frank Brown (D) ordered that any person awaiting execution would be tried locally, then transferred to the state penitentiary in Baltimore to be executed.

“The three cases in Howard were in line with what was going on [at the] time,” Davis said. “Not one lynching was there anyone ever committed to jail for killing folks of color. It’s no surprise that no one was charged. Who’s going to charge them when [White] folks were watching or participating?”

From the beginning of the state process in 2019, community engagement has been layered into the work.

Jareaux continues posting updates on her research findings on the Howard County Truth & Reconciliation Facebook group and in emailed newsletters to 69 subscribers.

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Questions asked and comments made continue to point the group in new directions.

Like when C. Vernon Gray, the first Black Howard County Council member, who served from 1982 to 2002, joined the group and began tracking Jareaux's findings. The two subsequently spent hours on the phone discussing the county's history.

"We still have a long way to go in this country and this county," Gray said. "I think it's important that people know what has happened. Things that happened a long time ago still resonate now. These things are passed down subliminally or subconsciously. People have to know that unless you learn the lessons of history, you're bound to repeat them."