

Resolution calls for commission to consider Negro Mountain name change

Feb 13, 2020



[Teresa McMinn](#)



A sign for Negro Mountain is seen along the eastbound lanes of Interstate 68 in Garrett County on Sept. 21, 2017. Signs for the mountain were removed last year.

Times-News file photo___

CUMBERLAND — Negro Mountain might get a new name, but there's doubt whether it should be Nemesis.

The recently introduced House Joint Resolution 12 calls for the establishment of a commission to inform Maryland's governor, General Assembly, state archives, geological survey and Department of Natural Resources of a new name for Negro Mountain by the end of the year.

The resolution would establish a commission to rename the Garrett County peak that occupies a 30-mile stretch of the Alleghenies from Deep Creek Lake north to the Casselman River in Pennsylvania.

The document is similar to a proposal introduced last year solely by Del. Nick Mosby, D-Baltimore, but is backed by 15 additional sponsors.

"It is believed that Negro Mountain is named in honor of an African American man named Nemesis, who gave his life on the mountain in the 1700s," the latest resolution reads. "More study is needed to verify the history behind the naming of Negro Mountain and if the mountain is found to be named for Nemesis then the name of the mountain should be changed to Nemesis Mountain in his honor."

The Garrett County portion of the ridge reaches 3,075 feet at its peak along U.S. Alternate Route 40. In Somerset County, Pennsylvania, it is the highest point in the state.

Roughly 13 years ago, Maryland's National Historic Road officials installed a marker that states "Nemesis, a black frontiersman ... was killed here while fighting Indians with Maryland frontiersman Thomas Cresap in the 1750s. Legend tells us that he had a premonition of his death. In his honor, they named this mountain after him."

Other stories indicate the black frontiersman's name was Goliath.

According to Western Maryland's Historical Library, a letter sent to the Maryland Gazette in 1756 by Cresap states that a free black man, who accompanied his volunteer rangers during the French and Indian War, died heroically in the battle while saving Cresap's life.

A similar account was published in June 1756 in the Pennsylvania Gazette.

Neither of the publications named the black man.

Another version of the story states Capt. Andrew Friend was hunting with companions on the mountain when the group was attacked by Indians. During the fight, Friend's African American servant was wounded and died and the mountain was named in his honor.

'Not reliable'

LaVale resident Francis "Champ" Zumbrun was forest manager at Green Ridge State Forest from 1979-2009, and from 1990 to 2009 served as a commissioned police officer with the Department of Natural Resources.

He authored the book "A History of Green Ridge State Forest" and coauthored "Cresap's Rifles: The Untold Story of the Riflemen Who Helped Save George Washington's Army."

Zumbrun is working on a book, expected to be complete in a couple of years, about Cresap — the first permanent European American that settled with his family in the area above the South Branch of the Potomac River circa 1741.

Cresap, in his written accounts, did not identify the black frontiersman by name, Zumbun told the Cumberland Times-News in November.

Additionally, the names Goliath and Nemesis didn't appear in writing until roughly 120 years after the reported incident on the mountain, he said.

"The names Goliath and Nemesis are therefore not reliable pertaining to the name of the person believed to have saved Thomas Cresap in 1756," Zumbun said.

Lynn Bowman has authored multiple books on African American history, including "Ten Weeks on Jonathan Street, the Legacy of 19th Century African American Hagerstown, Maryland."

She is an adjunct associate professor of English and speech at Allegany College of Maryland and also serves as a member of the state's Commission on African American History and Culture.

Multiple story versions surrounding how Negro Mountain got its name suggest legend, not history, she said.

Bowman also said the mountain is referred to as (N-word) Mountain in "The Old Pike" by Thomas B. Searight, a book published in 1894 that looks at the region's highways.

Signs removed

The Maryland Department of Transportation State Highway Administration last year removed four Negro Mountain signs — two from Interstate 68 and two from U.S. Alternate Route 40.

According to Lora Rakowski, acting director of the state highway agency's office of communications, the removal of the signs cost \$212 in staff time.

On Sept. 17, MDOT SHA officials met with members of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History Inc. to discuss the issue.

"We remain committed to working with the association and other stakeholders to discuss ways to fulfill our mission and respect Maryland history," Rakowski said around that time.

Past attempts

Efforts have been made for nearly three decades to change the mountain's name.

According to the Washington Post, in 1992, a Pennsylvania man wrote then-Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) to ask that the name be changed to Black Hero Mountain.

In 1994, the Interior Department's Board on Geographic Names rejected a proposal to change it.

In 2011, efforts in the Maryland General Assembly to rename Negro Mountain and Polish Mountain in Allegany County failed.

Last year, the Maryland House of Delegates did not vote on Mosby's proposal to establish a commission to look at alternate names.

"It's unacceptable and does not reflect what Maryland as a state is today or how we are as a country," Mosby told the Washington Post in September.

What's next

A hearing on the establishment of a commission to rename Negro Mountain will be held at 2 p.m. Feb. 24 at the House Office Building, Room 150, 6 Bladen St. in Annapolis.

On Tuesday, Bowman said in an email that she's pleased legislators are moving forward to change the mountain's name.

"I am delighted the (resolution's) language is so open ... and that it states the need for additional study," she said.

On Wednesday, Mosby's chief of staff, Brittany Lewis, talked of how the signs for Negro Mountain impacted her when she was younger and growing up in Frederick.

"I personally did not feel safe going to that part of Maryland," she said. "Especially being a person of color, it (was) very concerning."

She said her office has heard some Western Marylanders ask why a delegate from Baltimore wants to get involved with the mountain's name change.

"Baltimore City sends a lot of students to Frostburg," she said of the local state university. The name Negro Mountain "is quite shocking for a lot of folks."