

THE BALTIMORE BANNER

Why do lawmakers care about 300-year-old witches? Correcting a 'historical wrong'

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An illustration depicts a woman being burned at the stake for the crime of engaging in witchcraft, circa 1692. (Kean Collection/Getty Images)

Supporters are hopeful that any living descendants of Maryland's witches will reach out

More than 300 years after Maryland's last documented witch trial, state lawmakers are considering a proposal to exonerate people who were accused of witchcraft here during the Colonial era.

The [resolution](#) would posthumously absolve the seven women and one man who faced allegations of “Conjuration, Witchcrafte and dealing with evill and wicked Spirits,” as it was described in [the 1604 statute](#) later used to prosecute accused witches in the British colonies.

“It’s never the wrong time to do the right thing,” said Del. Heather Bagnall, the Anne Arundel County Democrat who introduced the resolution. “We can’t make them whole, but Maryland did repeal that law, and we never exonerated the people that were harmed by it.”

The resolution includes a formal apology to those who suffered because they were labeled witches — an accusation that was often based in personal resentment, religious intolerance or [misogyny](#).

Supporters of the resolution are hopeful that living descendants of Maryland's “witches” will be interested in the exoneration effort, too.

“We would love to have them reach out and participate in this,” said Elizabeth Pugliese-Shaw, a lawyer from Howard County who runs the [MD Witches Exoneration](#)

[Project](#) website and brought the idea for the resolution to Bagnall.

“Even though there’s no stigma attached anymore, we still want them to know we care about this historical wrong.”

Maryland did not experience a witchcraft panic on the scale of the infamous Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts, which, along with [Connecticut](#), has exonerated people [convicted of witchcraft](#). Among the eight people known to have been accused of witchcraft here, three were cleared in court and two were killed at sea aboard ships that had not yet reached the Province of Maryland.

Perhaps the most famous person accused of witchcraft in Maryland is a woman who was never charged in a court of law: [Moll Dyer](#), a reputed herbalist who lived in St. Mary’s County in the late 1600s. Though little is known about Dyer, [she was a real woman](#), and the story goes that she was blamed for a deadly flu epidemic and fled into the woods as a group of villagers went to her humble cabin and burned it down.

Dyer died of exposure, and her story slowly settled into legend: [The rock](#) that she reportedly clung to in the woods, which may or may not be cursed, now sits outside the St. Mary’s County Historical Society. Her tale is said to have been a source of inspiration for the [Maryland-set Blair Witch Project](#), though the film’s co-director, Eduardo Sánchez, said they only learned about the similarities after filming.

It's also possible there are more accused Maryland witches whose identities were lost to history — the victims of vigilante justice whose names were never written down. That's why Bagnall's resolution includes "those who were indicted, forced to flee, banished, or acquitted who continued to live with their reputations destroyed and their family names tarnished."

"We don't know how many Moll Dyers there were," Pugliese-Shaw said.

The only woman officially convicted and hanged for witchcraft in Maryland's history is [Rebecca Fowler](#), who worked as an indentured servant before she and her husband bought a plot of land in Prince George's County they called Fowler's Delight.

Another indentured servant, perhaps jealous of Fowler's good fortune, accused her of witchcraft in 1685. Fowler was indicted, convicted by a jury, and hanged a few days later on Oct. 9, 1685.

"I think that most of this was social hysteria," said Rissa Miller, a local historian who has researched Maryland's witches. Though Maryland's historic courts had relatively stringent requirements for witchcraft accusations, the signs that someone was a witch were broad and open to interpretation: They included "provok(ing) any person to fall in love," revealing the location of lost or stolen goods, or intending to hurt a person, even if they were not physically affected.

A woman could be accused of witchcraft for cursing, failing to keep her home tidy, or for any number of social improprieties, and the consequences could be devastating. Entire families could face the loss of their property and their good names.

Miller said exonerating Maryland's witches should serve as a reminder that we are still susceptible to social hysteria and demonizing out-groups.

"The context has changed, but we haven't changed," she said, "so I feel like bringing this back out, bringing it back to light, is a great way to reflect on how we can not do this again, not just to women, but any marginalized group. How can we learn from the past and not repeat it?"

These accusations are not just a historical curiosity. The United Nations Human Rights Council passed a resolution in 2021 calling for the elimination of witchcraft accusations and associated attacks, which still take place in the modern world.

"Every year, thousands of individuals around the world are accused of witchcraft or subject to ritual attacks, particularly in Africa," a UN expert wrote in 2021. "They are harassed, bullied, beaten, banished, mutilated, ill-treated, tortured and killed."

By exonerating people who were accused of witchcraft centuries ago, Maryland can set a positive precedent for places where these claims are still a very real threat, supporters of the resolution say.

Bagnall is the sole sponsor on the resolution, but said she will open it up to other sponsors after receiving a flood of interest from fellow lawmakers and from historians, women's advocacy groups and Wiccan organizations. She is hopeful the resolution will especially resonate in an era when [women's reproductive rights](#) face political threats.

"This isn't just an interesting piece of history," Bagnall said. "It's an important piece for us to understand, to remember, to reconcile. It serves as a warning, as well."