

My name is James Yamakawa. I founded the Wicomico Truth and Reconciliation Initiative in 2019 for the express purpose of educating on the history of white supremacy in our community. It is largely due to our efforts that in 2021, the eastern shore of MD (once known as “the lynching shore”) had installed the first memorial to the three “known” victims of racial-terror lynching in Wicomico County. Garfield King (May 25th, 1898), Matthew Williams (December 4th, 1931) and Unknown (December 4th, 1931).

I will not retell the history of what was done to them; as Marylanders you should already know some of it, or at the very least know where to find out more.

My purpose instead is to call upon you to support and pass Senate Joint Resolution 0003, which would apologize for and acknowledge the state of Maryland’s role in the racial terror lynching of 38 of its citizens.

These acts of domestic terrorism were targeted not only at the individual victims, but at the Black community as a whole. Oftentimes these acts of violence were followed by further actions taken against said communities. For example, following the racial terror lynching of Matthew Williams, the black neighborhood of Georgetown - located in downtown Salisbury - was targeted for systematic destruction and its citizens forced to move to other parts of the county. The only surviving structure from this thriving neighborhood is the former John Wesley United Methodist church (Matthew’s home church- now the Charles Chipman Cultural Center). Most of it lies underneath Route 50, Route 13, and a parking lot...

Racial terror lynchings were tools of white supremacy, designed to exert control over Black lives. That they served this purpose is exemplified by the fact that no one was ever meant to be held responsible.

That does not mean that those responsible were not known.

In his 2021 book “The Silent Shore: The Lynching of Matthew Williams and the Politics of Racism in the Free State”, author and professor Charles Chavis Jr. details the result of years of research into an undercover investigation paralleling the “official” one. In it, he reveals evidence that implicates local officials directly involved in the lynching. Among them are two Wicomico sheriffs (Murry Phillips and Donald A. Parks), the city police chief (Nicholas H Holland), and most notably Salisbury Fire Chief Frederick A Grier, who supplied the mob with the rope that was used to hang Williams.

That it took several years and countless meetings to even get a watered-down apology from the city of Salisbury (one that refused to take responsibility for the targeting of the larger Black community- one of the hallmarks of racial terror lynchings) even though the evidence was made

clear, speaks not only to the constant struggle to keep history from being buried once more, but to the reticence of local municipalities to even begin to grapple with their own complicity.

Malcolm X once compared the oppression that Black Americans regularly experience as having a “knife in the back”. He goes on to say that progress is not just pulling the knife out partway - or even all of the way - but in healing the wound. But they (America) will not admit that the knife is even there.

That is why I call on members of the Maryland legislature to stand behind and fully support SJ003. It is time that this history be fully accepted and acknowledged. And it is well past time that the legal, financial, and moral debt which is owed to the residents of our communities is paid in full.

To do so would be the first step towards a true “unity” based on our common humanity. A step which not only removes the knife from our collective backs, not only cleans and bandages the wound which was made (and continues to be made), but ensures that no more harm will come because of willful ignorance and purposeful forgetting.

To do so would be brave, indeed.

But to ignore this moment, would be to prove the lynch mob right.

Sincerely,

James Yamakawa
Founder- Wicomico Truth and Reconciliation Initiative