

**Retropolis**

'A shameful affair': The last man lynched in Montgomery County, Md.

By Eugene L. Meyer

August 22 at 7:00 AM

In an unmarked grave off Veirs Mill Road, 3½ miles from downtown Rockville, rest the remains of Sidney Randolph, the last man lynched in Montgomery County.

It happened on the Fourth of July in 1896, near the train tracks east of today's Route 355, less than a mile from the county seat.

Around 1 a.m., a lynch mob overpowered the county jailer and whisked away the doomed man, an itinerant worker from Georgia. He had been accused in the ax murder of 7-year old Sadie Buxton, a white girl, as she slept at the family farm in Gaithersburg. Sadie's 16-year old sister and parents were also wounded in the attack but survived. Randolph maintained his innocence to the end.

The sordid story in this now progressive, multicultural county is largely forgotten, as with other lynching victims across Maryland, where 40 — all black except two — met a similar fate between 1867 and 1933. Three lynchings occurred in Montgomery: two in Poolesville in 1880 and Randolph's, 16 years later.

ADVERTISING



Replay

All three men were African American. Randolph, 28, described as muscular and 6 feet tall, was one of 78 black Americans lynched in 1896, the year the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* made “separate but equal” the law of the land.

No arrests were ever made in the lynching. In Randolph’s case, the coroner’s jury concluded that he had been lynched “by hands unknown.”

“The region around ... the capital of the Nation has become notorious for the punishment of colored criminals by Lynch law, and for a public sentiment which supports those who in this way administer what they believe justice demands,” the New York Times wrote after the Poolesville lynching of George Peck, a man described in The Washington Post on Jan. 13, 1880, as “a disreputable negro.”

The day after the May 25, 1896, attack at the Buxton home, Randolph and George Neale, a local black man, were arrested and taken to Baltimore for their own protection, while up to a thousand “angry and excited men from all sections of the county” massed in Rockville, The Post reported.

The case was front-page news in Washington, but the coverage was surprisingly nonjudgmental. The Washington Times reported there were white suspects and hinted at more revelations to come. Randolph was taken to the District’s old Garfield Hospital, where the Buxtons were recovering. Sadie’s mother was unable to identify him or the race of her assailant.

The evidence was circumstantial — and conflicting. Randolph claimed to have been in Georgetown the day before the incident, but others said they saw him around Gaithersburg. Then, “blood” on Randolph’s undershirt was shown to be red paint. There was also a question of motive: Randolph lacked one. Washington detectives brought into the case weren’t convinced of his guilt.

On the evening of June 9, both Randolph and Neale were brought back to Rockville from Baltimore, arriving by train at 10 p.m. On June 12, a coroner’s jury declared Neale to be innocent and released him. But Randolph remained in custody, pending a grand jury, which was not set to meet until November.

To keep him safe, the sheriff removed Randolph from his cell to an undisclosed location every night. But the accused was in his cell soon after midnight on July 4, when a man claiming to deliver a prisoner knocked on the jail door. Twenty or 30 men, faces hidden behind red handkerchiefs, barged in and demanded the keys to Randolph’s cell.

The men, The Post reported, dragged the prisoner out “like a dog,” put him a wagon and drove away. Soon after, in the early morning of July 4, 1896, on the 120th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Randolph was strung up from a chestnut tree in the woods across the train tracks from Frederick Road, now Route 355.

The governor offered a \$1,000 reward for apprehension of the lynchers. His offer was not well received locally, but that attitude was not universally shared. The Post on July 8 termed the lynching a “shameful affair” and said Sadie’s father, who was also a Gaithersburg town commissioner, also “deplored the outrage.”

On July 20, the Washington Times called the lynching “a crime against the community as a whole” but claimed “there is not a scintilla of evidence ... that the lynching of Randolph was prompted by race hatred and prejudice.” Yet, the paper continued, “Randolph was made the vicarious sacrifice for another man’s crime.”

He was buried in a plain coffin at county expense “near the almshouse,” just south of today’s downtown Rockville. When the county sold the property for a development of townhouses in the late 1980s, the 38 remains, presumably including Randolph’s, were moved to Parklawn Cemetery, off Veirs Mill Road, where they were interred in unmarked Section 18.

Sadie Buxton’s grave, by contrast, is easily identified by a small obelisk in the Forest Park cemetery just off 355 and by the county fairgrounds in Gaithersburg. “Take this little lamb, says he, and place her on my breast,” reads the inscription. “Protection she shall find in me. In me, be ever blest.”

The restless ghosts of more than 4,000 lynch victims have recently stirred with the opening of a new museum and memorial erected by the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Ala. EJI continues “to receive numerous requests each day” and is working to “move through them,” a spokesman wrote in an email.

Last November, EJI staffers came to Maryland’s Eastern Shore to help residents collect soil from six lynching sites for transport back to the memorial. Separately this spring, the Maryland Lynching Memorial Project was founded to bring “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.”

“This whole history has been hidden for the most part from the public,” its president, Will Schwarz, said. “It’s been a secret. This is an attempt to turn the ship of state toward empathy.” In the future, Schwarz hopes, there will be a historical marker at the site where Randolph was murdered and a long overdue memorial service for Montgomery County’s last lynching victim.

Eugene L. Meyer, a former Washington Post reporter and editor, is the author of “[Five for Freedom: The African American Soldiers in John Brown’s Army.](#)”

Read more on Retropolis:

[‘GREAT EXCITEMENT. Runaway Slaves’: The slave uprising that Maryland seems to want to forget](#)

[Ads for runaway slaves in British newspapers show the cruelty of the 'genteel'](#)

[Hunting down runaway slaves: The cruel ads of Andrew Jackson and 'the master class'](#)

['My Old Kentucky Home': The Kentucky Derby's beloved, fraught singalong about slavery](#)

[An archaeological dig unearths one of the earliest slave remains in Delaware](#)

The Washington Post

The story must be told.

Your subscription supports journalism that matters.

Try 1 month for \$1