6-01-2001

Symbol of Justice, Source of Pain

80 Years Later, Pardon Comes for Black Man Hanged in Annapolis

By MATTHEW MOSK
Washington Post Staff Writer

Maryland Gov. Parris N. Glendening pardoned John Snowden yesterday, more than 80 years after the African American ice wagon worker was convicted of murdering a pregnant white woman, and hanged despite lingering doubts about his guilt.

Glendening (D) issued the posthumous pardon in response to pleas from the close-knit black community in Annapolis, where Snowden's final expressions of innocence have been handed down through generations and represent a potent symbol of racial inequities that checker the city's past.

"The search for justice has no statute of limitations," Glendening said. "When faced with the possible miscarriage of justice, even one from the distant past, our values compel us to take a second look."

Those who sought the Snowden pardon believe their request was blessed by a political climate that has become increasingly conducive to righting past wrongs.

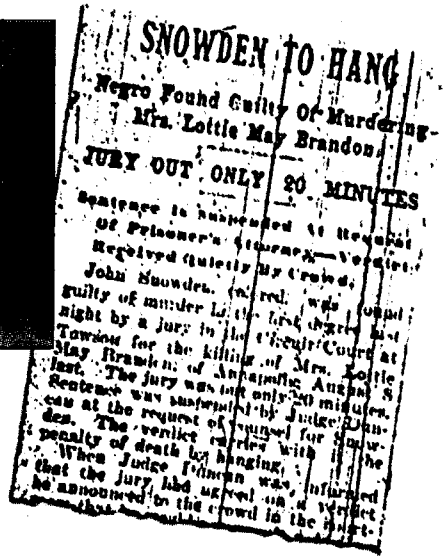
Last year, a Tennessee judge set aside the 1906 conviction of a black man who was lynched after an all-white jury, in a highly suspect proceeding, convicted him of raping a white woman. And a legislative panel in Oklahoma urged the state to pay reparations for the Tulsa race riots in 1921, when white mobs killed about 300 people and left the prosperous black community of Greenwood in ashes.

Glendening said he treated the Snowden appeal as he would any other death sentence review. But by delving into the yellowing files of a 1917 murder case, Glendening inched closer to addressing the more sweeping in-

See PARDON, *A19, Col. 1*

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL WILLIAMSON—THE WASHINGTON POST

Hazel G. Snowden, John Snowden's niece, shows some of the scores of papers on the case she's collected over the years. She says she's happy that "justice has been done."



SNOWDEN TO HANG

Negro Found Guilty Of Murdering Mrs. Lottie May Brandon

JURY OUT ONLY 20 MINUTES

Judy Kulawiak is the great-niece of victim Lottie Mae Brandon, who was killed in 1917. "I don't know that there's a strong reason for granting a pardon," she said. At right, a newspaper account of the trial.

Glendening Pardons Man Hanged in 1919

PARDON, *From A1*

justices inflicted on blacks who wore the shackles of slavery in Maryland. African American state lawmakers have said a formal apology for slavery from the governor will be one of their primary goals next year.

"The record suggests that race was a factor in this case," Glendening said in an interview yesterday. "If an injustice was done, it is within my power to at least correct the historical record. We need to recognize the great inequities, the great injustices" suffered by blacks during that period.

In granting clemency, the governor also pried open two very different family histories. For Snowden's only known descendant, the pardon soothed the wounds of a perceived injustice. For relatives of the victim, Lottie Mae Brandon, the decision exposed a gruesome collective memory that still weighs heavily after eight decades.

"It was the iceman that committed that murder," said Charlotte Wotring, 75, of Rockville, whose mother was one of Brandon's eight siblings. "We're just flabbergasted that this is happening after all these years."

Judy Kulawiak, Brandon's great-niece, said, "When I hear the word pardon, that's a strong word, and I don't know that there's a strong reason for granting a pardon. I think the correct decision is no ruling at all."

Last year, letters from African American leaders in Annapolis and an appeal from Hazel G. Snowden, John Snowden's niece, persuaded the state's parole board to delve into the case. Two weeks ago, the board presented Glendening with its findings, along with trial transcripts, appellate briefs and news accounts from the period.

Though much of the record has been lost, Glendening said he saw enough compelling material to conclude that the execution should never have occurred.

FILE PHOTO/BY ROBERT A. REEDER—THE WASHINGTON POST

Annapolis residents William Snowden Keyes (no relation), left, and George Phelps Jr. at grave site.

On Aug. 17, 1917, Valentine Brandon returned to his Annapolis row house and found his wife lying in a pool of blood at the foot of her bed. Published reports said she had been struck in the forehead with a blunt object and strangled with her own hair.

Police turned their attention to Snowden five days later. Two neighbors said they saw a man emerge from Brandon's home, look up and down the alley, drink from a flask and walk away. They later picked Snowden from a lineup. Their testimony, along with dark skin found under Brandon's fingernails, made up the basis of the state's case against Snowden—who repeatedly proclaimed his innocence.

"If God were to come down to this jail, he would tell you I am innocent. I never went in the woman's house, and I never spoke a word to her in my life," he reportedly said.

Over time, according to a 1919 report in The Washington Post, the local black community became increasingly doubtful of Snowden's guilt. The outcry grew so strong that Gov. Emerson Harrington (D) entertained a hearing on the matter shortly before the execution. He was presented with a petition, signed by the jury foreman and 10 other jurors, asking the governor to commute Snowden's sentence to life in prison.

But Harrington said that he had read the trial transcript three times and that it was the most complete case based on circumstantial evidence that he had ever seen, according to published reports.

The evidence was more than enough to persuade the 20-year-old victim's father, who ignored the chanting of protesters as he stood in a public square in Annapolis and watched an executioner drape a hood over Snowden's head and hang him for the crime.

"To a small degree, that brought peace to my grandfather," said Beverly Sassa, 65, of Potomac, another of Brandon's nieces. "But none of the family ever fully recovered."

For Hazel Snowden's father, who was 18 when his older brother John was executed, the hanging had the opposite effect.

"It tore him apart," she said yesterday. "It made him very bitter. He went to his grave believing his brother was innocent."

Glendening's pardon satisfies a personal mission for Hazel Snowden. For blacks in Annapolis, the case is part of a broader quest for recognition of all the indignities their ancestors endured.

At the center of the city's historic downtown is the spot where Kunta Kinte, a Gambian whose saga was chronicled in Alex Haley's Pulitzer Prize-winning book "Roots," was sold at auction in 1767. From 1882 to 1933, there were 30 lynchings in Maryland, said Carl O. Snowden, a former Annapolis alderman who is not related to John Snowden, but whose research helped bolster the pardon request.

"For the African American community, this has been a long, long struggle. What this decision says," Carl Snowden said, loosely quoting Martin Luther King Jr., "is that no lie can live forever, and truth crushed to the earth will rise again."