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'This gives him a voice in life'



Times-Mirror/John Battiston

Cousins Michelle Lane and James Howard speak Wednesday at the unveiling of the first lynching memorial marker in Loudoun County, which remembers their great grand-uncle Orion Anderson. He was hanged at the age of 14 in 1889.

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COVER STORY

'We are part of the fabric of this nation'

County learns the sad tale of Orion Anderson, looks to the future

BY NATHANIEL CLINE
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Cousins James Howard and Michelle Lane didn't know about their great grand-uncle who grew up in the late 1800s.

It's understandable why Howard, Lane and other family members didn't know about their relative until last week. That's because their uncle did not live his adult life — he was hanged and shot at the age of 14.

But now, the descendants and hundreds of other Loudoun County residents will remember their late family member, Orion Anderson, and where he was hanged.

Loudoun County's first lynching memorial was unveiled in southwest Leesburg Wednesday night.

Howard told the Times-Mirror he was overwhelmed by the dozens upon dozens of people who came out for the ceremony on a steamy Wednesday night. Joined by his cousin, his wife and daughters, Valerie and Jazmyne, Howard said he hopes the opportunity will be used to celebrate his uncle's life and bring awareness to the history of lynching.

"We are not celebrating the lynching. We are celebrating his life just like you would any relative," Howard said. "I think this gives him a voice in life, because otherwise he would've been known as somebody that was just lynched, and I'm glad they were able to research and find the families, otherwise nobody would've known."

Located in southwest Leesburg, near the intersection of Washington & Old Dominion Trail and Harrison Street, the first marker was established to remember Anderson, who was targeted for allegedly scaring a white, teenaged girl in 1889.

But before Anderson's day in court, researchers say a small mob broke into his jail cell, dragged him to the Leesburg freight depot in southeast Leesburg, hanged him and shot him.

Wednesday's unveiling brought out community members and elected officials to join representatives from the Loudoun County NAACP, Loudoun Freedom Center, Loudoun Black History Committee, Friends of Balch Library and NOVA Parks to remember Anderson in the first of a series called Loudoun Remembrance and Reconciliation.

Loudoun Freedom Center Executive Director and Leesburg Town Councilman Ron Campbell started the program by sharing Anderson's story where the teenager was held at the old jailhouse, now a parking lot. Loudoun County Historic Records Manager Eric Larson and Historical Preservation Planner Heidi Siebentritt joined Campbell in remarks before the group proceeded to where Anderson was hanged in southeast at the former Leesburg depot.

ADAMS Boy Scouts Troop 2019, with



Above, Loudoun NAACP members Phillip Thompson, left, Michelle Thomas and Ron Campbell collect soil from the Leesburg site where Orion Anderson was hanged and shot in 1889. At left, Thomas addresses the crowd at Wednesday's event remembering Anderson and sharing his story.

Times-Mirror Photos/John Battiston

an escort from the Leesburg Police Department, led the half-mile walk through town.

At the site where Anderson would meet his death, several people spoke as a soil collection was taken up, flowers were laid out in remembrance and the marker was unveiled.

St. Andrews Presbyterian Church Rev. David Mylan offered the invocation followed by greetings from Loudoun County Chairwoman Phyllis Randall (D-At Large) and Congresswoman Jennifer Wexton (D-Va.).

"We've come a very long way since what happened to Mr. Anderson, and don't let anybody tell you we haven't," Randall said. "... but we have a long way to go, and we will do it standing together, standing in peace and standing in love."

Wexton, who commended the organizers for their work, shared that one of her most memorable trips since being elected

and 1902, according to researchers. Anderson was lynched in 1889, Page Wallace in 1880 for an alleged rape and Charles Craven in 1902 for an alleged murder.

All the lynching victims were initially believed to be between the ages of 18 and 25, but further research concluded that Anderson was just 14 years old, prompting historians to begin a search for all of the victims' descendants. Previous records showed Anderson to be around 19 and 20.

"What's wrong with Virginia is that there is a grave omission of African American history," Loudoun Freedom Center and Loudoun County NAACP President Michelle Thomas said. "Only 2 percent of historical land markers throughout Virginia is dedicated towards African American history. In Loudoun County, 1 percent is dedicated to African American history. Today, we add to the narrative to say that 'we are a part of the fabric of this nation.'"

Shortly after Loudoun County NAACP member Phillip Thompson, the organization's previous president, announced efforts to establish the markers last summer, the Remembrance and Reconciliation Initiative began with a group of researchers investigating the descendants of those lynched. Graduate students from George Mason University's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution aided in the process through research and discussion.

Efforts to establish the remaining two markers are ongoing. Community members with additional information about the lynchings are encouraged to reach out to the members of the Loudoun Freedom Center or Loudoun County NAACP.

"This is not a long time ago. This is just a generation ago, and we need to remember this," Thompson said.

Once the project is completed, the soil from each site will be collected and sent to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, also known as the National Lynching Memorial.

Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring (D), who is still dealing with backlash following this year's admission that he wore blackface as part of a costume in the 1980s, attended Wednesday's ceremony. Herring said the marker is a step that Loudoun is taking toward justice, equality and reconciliation.

"I think that we as a community should be proud that we are doing this together. Because not every community in Virginia is ready or willing yet to take that important step," the attorney general said. "It says something about the character of this community that we are strong enough to be honest and unafraid to do the right thing in commemorating the life of Orion Anderson. And hopefully soon we will do the same for Page Wallace and Charles Craven. Orion Anderson's life ended here in 1889. But with this marker, his name, and his story, will live on."

to Congress last November was her visit to Alabama to tour the Memorial for Peace and Justice, which holds one of the largest historical records collection of lynchings.

"The only way that we will be able to move forward is by recognizing our past and not repeating it," Wexton said. "The only way we are going to lead Virginia into the future that we want is by recognizing and reconciling with our past, and events like this and groups like the Loudoun Freedom Center are so helpful in helping us do that."

NOVA Parks Chairman Michael Nardolilli spoke, as did Donna Bohannon and Lori Kimball from the Loudoun Black History Committee and Friends of Balch Library, respectively. They provided Anderson's history and genealogy.

Anderson was one of three black men lynched in Loudoun County between 1880