

# *Archives of Maryland* (Biographical Series)

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## **Henry Davis**

*MSA SC 3520-13635*

**Lynched in Annapolis, December 21, 1906**

### **Biography:**

Henry Davis, an African American laborer, was lynched in Annapolis on December 21, 1906. Davis was arrested the week prior on suspicion of committing the assault of Mrs. John Reid at their country store in Iglehart Station in Anne Arundel County. Davis was seen fleeing the store from neighbors in the area who responded to the Mrs. Reid's screams. It was reported that Mrs. Reid was able to beat her attacker away with a horsewhip. Sheriff Linthicum and Deputy Sheriff Bryan pursued Davis as he was running along the railroad tracks heading towards Annapolis.<sup>1</sup> However, Davis was able to avoid capture for several days until he was arrested in the City of Annapolis on December 16th on Northwest Street. Henry Davis, aka William Davis, aka Henry Chambers, also had the nickname "Toe and Foot" due to the limp he has developed after a bout with frostbite. Davis was positively identified as the attacker by an African American woman eyewitness Josephine Johnson of Parole, who picked Davis (Chambers) out of a line up. Johnson notes that she believed that Davis fit the description of the attacker, and spotted him in the vicinity of Reid's Store at 3:00pm on the Friday afternoon of the assault. The positive identification was needed because Mrs. Reid was left in such a condition that she was partly paralyzed and blinded in one eye. It was reported in the *Evening Capital* that the punishment for an attempted assault was 10-years in the penitentiary, however, the punishment for an actual assault is death by hanging. Even at this early stage, talk of lynching the prisoner was apparent, and the Sheriff's Department stated it was doing all that was in their power to protect the prisoner until his trial.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Reid was able to eventually positively identify Davis as her attacker when he was taken to her home a few days after the attack. It was reported that once Mrs. Reid identified Henry Davis, he made a full confession to the attack.<sup>3</sup> Even with the positive ID, Davis was still held in the Annapolis jail until his trial. It was urged by the community and repeated by State's Attorney Nicholas H. Green for the courts to conduct a speedy trial in accordance of the law, but ultimately it was up to the courts to hold a special session for the trial of Mrs. Reid's attacker.<sup>4</sup> State's Attorney Green stated that he was not prepared to call for a special session of the court to try Henry Davis without the testimony of Mrs. Reid. Sheriff Linthicum felt that he had enough positive evidence in-hand to try Davis even without Mrs. Reid testimony, and continued to urge the court to convene with the trial in order to avoid any fallback from the community, as it was well known that there was talk of lynching Henry Davis.<sup>5</sup>

On the night of December 21, the Sheriff's Department was at the city jail house protecting its prisoners. Davis was removed from the jail on Calvert Street and paraded through the town, before being shot numerous times and hanged in a tree along College Creek.<sup>6</sup> As the guards

stood their posts at the jail house, a mob of dozens simply overpowered the men, and were able to reach their target with little delay. There was much talk about the possibility of students from St. John's College being involved, as it was reported that a large gathering had taken place at one of the dormitories on campus. A professor approached the crowd and urged them to leave the premises, unaware of their intentions at the time. It could not be confirmed that any of the students actually participated in the lynching of Henry Davis, but it can be assumed that they at least stood by as spectators to the event. It was reported by "a reliable witness" that he saw a number of youths in the crowd donning ribbon bands on their heads, as was the style among students, but it could not be confirmed to what capacity those students held during the spectacle.<sup>7</sup>

Governor Warfield was asleep in his room at the Governor's residence during the hours the lynching took place, he was unaware of the event until he read the accounts found in newspapers the following morning.<sup>8</sup> Governor Warfield stated that "I hope the grand jury of Anne Arundel County will immediately take steps to discover and punish the men participating in the affair. I greatly regret the occurrence, and do not hesitate to deprecate and denounce such lawless acts."<sup>9</sup> The Reid family heard about the events, and in a public statement at their home near Crownsville, Mrs. Reid's daughter Lillian read a statement that thanks those who were able to reach Davis, and punish him for his crime. She continued to thank those involved for also sparing her mother, or any mother, daughter, sister or wife for that matter, to have to approach the witness stand and relive such a terrible event.<sup>10</sup> There was a calm atmosphere in Annapolis the days after the lynching, and there were even reports of postcards being printed which showed the mutilated body as it lay on the hill near College Creek.<sup>11</sup>

During the April Term, a jury of inquest was assembled in order to look at the details of the Henry Davis lynching. Judge Revell reminded the members of the jury that this was a lawless act and must be investigated.<sup>12</sup> After a month of investigating the crime, and although the jury had attempted to find clues to who the lynchers were, it was unable to "fix" the lynching to any one person or persons.<sup>13</sup> Henry Davis is buried in the smallpox section of Brewer Hill Cemetery, however he was placed in an unmarked grave and his exact final resting place is unknown. A plaque was dedicated at Brewer Hill Cemetery on December 20, 2001, to honor Davis and other victims of mob justice.<sup>14</sup>

### Footnotes

1. "Woman Assaulted, Assailant Escapes." *Evening Capital*, 14 December 1906.
2. "The Suspect Is Arrested." *Evening Capital*, 17 December 1906.
3. "Accused Negro Confesses." *Evening Capital*, 19 December 1906.
4. *ibid.*
5. "Wants Jury Reconvened." *Evening Capital*, 20 December 1906.
6. "The Assault on Woman Avenged - Davis Dragged from Jail and Lynched - Mob Riddled Negro Ravisher with Bullets." *Evening Capital*, 21 December 1906.
7. "Victim Told of Lynching." *Evening Capital*, 22 December 1906.
8. "Governor Denounces It." *The Sun*, 22 December 1906.
9. *ibid.*
10. "Victim Thanks Lynchers." *The Sun*, 23 December 1906.
11. "Gruesome Postal Cards." *Evening Capital*, 24 December 1906.
12. "The April Term of Court...Judge James Revell's Charge to the Jury Very Forceful - He Denounces Lynching in Strong Terms." *Evening Capital*, 15 April 1907.
13. "Circuit Court." *Evening Capital*, 27 April 1907.
14. "Plaque unveiled to honor lynching victim." *The Evening Capital*, 21 December 2001.

**Resources:** <http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/013600/013635/html/13635bio.html>