

Our Say: The Capital helped racism flourish in Annapolis. We can do better.

By CAPITAL GAZETTE EDITORIAL BOARD

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The Maryland State Archives has an original copy of the July 11, 1776, Maryland Gazette which printed a copy of the newly signed Declaration of Independence in its pages. The publishers of the newspaper also ran notices offering bounties for runaway slaves and auction notices for newly enslaved people. They even sold black Americans they owned, including a woman and her infant child. (Paul W. Gillespie / Capital Gazette)

Annapolis first learned of the Declaration of Independence within the pages of the Maryland Gazette, sister paper of The Capital.

In those same pages, readers of the era could find bounties for runaway slaves, auction notices for African captives and — on at least one occasion — a note from the publishers that they had a black woman and her infant child for sale. Like many other institutions in America, this news organization played a role in planting racism and helping it flourish from its very beginnings.

Acknowledging that role is a step toward tearing it out.

The Capital was founded in 1884 by Robert Abbot, who later purchased the Maryland Gazette and made it part of a celebrated legacy of community journalism.

The Civil War was almost 20 years past, but Reconstruction was over too. Maryland stayed with the Union and in 1873 Annapolis elected the first black man to its City Council, William Henry Butler Sr. But it remained a segregated city, and in those early years of the newspaper relished in the hatred of its time.

The Evening Capital was a racist source of news about the black community in Annapolis for all of its early history. Hannah Jopling, a white anthropologist who published “Life in a Black Community” in 2015, collected stories of discrimination from the community. In the 1890s and early 20th century, Jim Crow laws were in force across Maryland and the newspaper’s white reporters commonly used demeaning names for black people and insultingly mimicked what they considered African American dialect.

Then on Dec. 15, 1906, the newspaper hit its moral bottom when reporting on the assault of a white woman near the old Best Gate train station. Sheriff’s deputies were looking for a black man with a limp. The news staff published a front-page story that reads dangerously close to a call for violence:

“Talk of lynching is prevalent in Annapolis today, and even conservative citizens express the hope that the negro may be disposed of before he gets under the protection of the law, provided that he may be identified beyond any doubt.”

Within days Henry Davis was dead. Arrested, dragged from his jail cell and lynched by a white mob. No one was ever charged with his murder.

The newspaper did no better in covering legally sanctioned executions. The Evening Capital covered the swift arrest, conviction and hanging in 1918 of John Snowden for the murder of a white woman. Then, three days after Snowden was hanged it printed an anonymous letter from someone claiming to be the real killer. There was no demand for justice in these pages, no effort to find the truth. It took another 90 years for Snowden to get a posthumous pardon.

By the middle of the 20th century, change was starting to come through the Civil Rights movement. The newspaper published fewer stories that perpetuated the stereotype of blacks as criminals. Language became less hateful, often in response to criticism from black and white readers.

The Rev. Leroy Bowman pointed out in a 1943 letter to the editor that his church was Christian, and that was what mattered, not that the church was

“colored” as the paper described it in its religion listings. As Jopling retold the story, the editor apologized and dropped the word. Other words tied to segregation and race remained.

The first black writer for the newspaper was Eloise Richardson, who wrote a column on black social life for eight months starting in 1948. She ended her tenure with an attack on the paper for limiting positive news about her community to a single weekly column as “following the pattern of this state, and in Annapolis in particular in the continuance of Jim Crowism.”

She went on to write a column about Annapolis for the Afro American in Baltimore that, as historian Janice Hayes Williams has explained in *The Capital*, became a touchstone for the black community.

By the 1960s, the newspaper seemed oblivious to the end of segregation coming across the nation. It failed to grasp the importance of a sit-in by black protestors at the whites-only Terminal Restaurant on West Street, or the pickets in front of other businesses. It didn’t see the injustice of suspensions meted out to black students taking part in peaceful demonstrations.

Changes arrived from Washington in the form of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights act. In Annapolis, it came when Phil Merrill purchased the paper in 1966. At the suggestion of community leaders, the paper began to print obituaries for black people for the first time in more than two centuries.

Longtime editor Ed Casey was later instrumental in forming the Boys and Girls Clubs in Annapolis to help children in some of the city’s poorest black neighborhoods.

By 1990 the paper’s name was changed to *The Capital*, and Merrill, Casey and Managing Editor Tom Marquardt put its support behind then-alderman Carl Snowden’s legislation denying liquor licenses to private clubs that banned membership to African-Americans, women and Jews. It was a landmark change in the life of Annapolis and the paper’s support mattered.

Change that began under Merrill has continued under Baltimore Sun Media, which bought the paper in 2014. In recent years, we have had honest internal

discussions about equity, sought to hire a more diverse staff of journalists and tried to listen more to the public on how we can better serve all communities of Anne Arundel County. We are sorry for what has come before and know that we can still do better.

In a recent letter, longtime reader Phyllis Adams took us to task for an editorial cartoon depicting the history of violence against black Americans to make the point that the anger isn't just about George Floyd. She wrote that the drawings confirmed for her what many in the black community believe, that the newspaper is racist.

We want to believe we are better than that. But her words are what matter in this case.

“Without a lot of diversity in the workforce, without diversity training, you will never understand how it feels to go through what we went through,” she wrote. “I truly believe if the situation were reversed maybe you would understand.”

Since Richardson left the paper some 70-plus years ago, many minority journalists have worked on the news staff of The Capital.

We currently have two black members of our small reporting staff, Naomi Harris and Donovan Conaway, and two Latino members, Olivia Sanchez and Alex Mann. Our current news staff may be the most diverse we have ever had. But no black person has ever been the top editor or the publisher at The Capital.

We have more work to do.

Until recently, we routinely carried mugshots of crime suspects — a majority of them black men — without thinking too deeply about how they fit into the stereotype of black people as criminals we helped root in this community almost 300 years ago with advertisements for runaway slave bounties.

You will see far fewer of these photos in the future.

We cannot change the past, but we can learn from it. We believe we have made progress, but hope black residents of this community will continue to tell us

how The Capital can change to help end the racism that is holding us all back.
We're listening.