

A Second Reckoning: Race, Injustice, and the Last Hanging in Annapolis. By Scott D. Seligman. (Lincoln, Neb.: Potomac Books, 2021. Pp. xvi, 258. \$32.95, ISBN 978-1-64012-465-3.)

On the evening of August 8, 1917, Valentine Brandon, a white stenographer at the Naval Engineering Experiment Station in Annapolis, Maryland, found his pregnant wife, Lottie, half-clad and dead in their home. An autopsy determined that Lottie had been bludgeoned and strangled, and the ensuing five-day investigation led to the arrest of John Snowden, a twenty-seven-year-old Black man who drove an ice delivery cart. Snowden was interrogated and possibly tortured by police, yet he maintained his innocence and did not corroborate witness accounts. Detectives concluded that Snowden was the murderer anyway, and after his conviction by an all-white jury that deliberated for a mere twenty-two minutes, he was hanged on February 28, 1919. Snowden was the last person executed on the Anne Arundel County gallows, an act regarded by many Annapolitans, both Black and white, as a “legal lynching” (p. 181).

Using a raft of primary sources from both the Black and mainstream presses, historian Scott D. Seligman constructs a detailed narrative chronology of the investigation and trial. The book’s thirty-nine illustrations give *A Second Reckoning: Race, Injustice, and the Last Hanging in Annapolis* the feel of a true crime novel, allowing readers to visualize the injustices as they unfold on the page. However, as meticulous as Seligman’s recounting is, and despite many Annapolitans’ insistence that Snowden was wrongly convicted, the author cannot conclusively declare Snowden’s guilt or innocence. As Seligman admits, the extraordinary circumstances surrounding Snowden’s conviction create far too many loose ends. What readers can feel certain about, however, is that the death penalty should not have been imposed under those circumstances, and that justice was not delivered to Snowden, the Brandon family, or the Annapolis community. As Seligman notes, quoting a 2001 press release from the office of Maryland governor Parris N. Glendening after a reexamination of the case, “Not only did two key trial witnesses recant their testimony, but 11 of the 12 jurors wrote letters asking [Governor Emerson C. Harrington] to commute” (p. 193).

Seligman documents yet another racist miscarriage of justice within the Jim Crow legal system. But, as the title implies, the importance of *A Second Reckoning* is that it clarifies how those injustices persisted into future generations. Seligman, for example, discusses how Black Annapolitans recounted Snowden’s story to their children, and how the case inspired an ambitious Black activist and local politician, Carl Snowden (no relation to John), to push the state to reassess the case and “examine the potential racial bias in the imposition of the death penalty in the state” (p. 224). Carl’s efforts began in 1990 and, by 2003, had helped push Governor Glendening to grant a full pardon to John Snowden, to order a moratorium on capital punishment in Maryland, and to commute the death sentence of Eugene Colvin-el, a Black man convicted by an all-white jury on circumstantial evidence. Ten years later, Maryland abolished the death penalty.

Seligman notes the hostility of state and federal governments to posthumous pardons, but he takes the orders seriously as a way for institutions to

make amends for past wrongs and to “send an affirmative message that the discredited values of the past are no longer the values of the present” (p. xiii). He deftly argues that—like the removal of Confederate monuments after the 2020 murder of George Floyd—pardons are powerful symbolic actions that signal governmental willingness to right structural inequalities and that can inspire new generations of freedom fighters. Posthumous pardons are for the living, Seligman argues, but they have an important role to play in the current movement to remove nationalist symbols dedicated to the enslavers and white supremacists. In this effort, alongside the executive and legislative branches, the “third leg of the stool—the judiciary—must not be overlooked” (p. 213).

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