

*This article was researched and written by Sarah Hedlund, Librarian/Archivist for Montgomery History, in September of 2019, with edits by Tony Cohen of the Menare Foundation. Special thanks to Doug Hill and Scott Jung of the Montgomery County Genealogical Society for their contributions to the research.*

### The Story of George Peck

George W. Peck lived in the Poolesville area of Montgomery County since he was enslaved as a child. He is first documented in the 1867 census of those emancipated in Maryland after the end of the Civil War, as a nine-year-old boy enslaved by William Poole.<sup>1</sup> There is no trace of his having family members nearby, then or later. However, after emancipation he continued to live in the same neighborhood, seen living in 1870 with Howard Griffith and his family, near Beallsville.<sup>2</sup> By early 1880 at about age 22, he was working, still in Beallsville, for the local storekeeper, Lemuel Beall.<sup>3</sup>

Lemuel Beall also employed a young girl named Ada Hayes,<sup>4</sup> whose family had recently moved to the Poolesville area from Loudoun County, Virginia. Hyrcles M. Reeves, and his wife Mollie E. (Reeves) Hayes had been married in 1873,<sup>5</sup> when Mollie was a widow with two young girls, Annie and Ada. The couple had four more children by 1880,<sup>6</sup> when Ada was 11 years old. H.M. Reeves was the stepfather of Ada, and the entire family might have been living with Beall.<sup>7</sup> It is also possible they were boarding elsewhere in the region while Ada alone was living at Beall's property and working for him. The Reeves family had left Montgomery County by the time of the 1880 census,<sup>8</sup> so this is guesswork based on local customs, and the clear indication that the family was not wealthy, nor did they own any land.<sup>9</sup>

According to multiple, and often conflicting, newspaper accounts (the only records of the incident that survive), on the morning of Saturday, January 10, 1880, the Reverend Mr. Calvin Amy heard screams in the barn near his house, and discovered George Peck, allegedly in the act of attacking Ada Hayes, forcing her into the straw rick against her will.<sup>10</sup> Calvin Amy was the recently-installed pastor at the Baptist Church in Poolesville, having moved his family to a house down the street from Lemuel Beall's in 1879.<sup>11</sup> Amy intervened and informed Lemuel Beall of the incident; meanwhile, George Peck returned to his duties on the farm.<sup>12</sup> Ada was examined by Dr. John W. Ayler and said to be somewhat bruised but otherwise unharmed.<sup>13</sup> Beall and Amy went to fetch the constable from Poolesville, a young man named James Uriah "Hugh" Miles. Miles was actually the nephew of Beall, the son of Lemuel's sister Elvira.<sup>14</sup> According to one account, when he saw the officer approaching, Peck tried to run into the nearby woods, but was captured by the other men, handcuffed and chained. Other accounts record him being captured without taking refuge in the woods. He was taken to Poolesville (about 1.5 miles away) and brought before local Justice of the Peace Stephen G. Donohue, where he reportedly admitted his guilt.<sup>15</sup>

It is assumed Peck was not immediately taken to the jail in Rockville because it was a Saturday afternoon. Therefore, he was held by Constable Miles at the Oddfellows Hall in Poolesville, who intended to take him to Rockville on Monday morning.<sup>16</sup> As news of the reported incident spread through the small town, an angry crowd began to gather around the building where Peck was being held, and Miles became nervous. He allegedly decided to move Peck from the Oddfellows Hall to his own residence for the night, perhaps thinking not to leave him unguarded.<sup>17</sup> By 11:00 p.m., the crowd had seemed to disperse, and Miles, taking the bound Peck with him, walked across the street to the general store run by William T. Walter to pick up a few items on his way home.<sup>18</sup> (Several sources state this incident took place between 11:00 pm and 12:00 am, though it seems unlikely that a general store would still be open at this time of night). A gunshot sounded in the street, thought to be a signal, and the reassembled group of 35-100 men (accounts vary widely on numbers, though 35 seems more likely given the population of the town) entered the store and seized Peck, overpowering Miles. Some were wearing masks, but most "made no

effort whatever to conceal their identity, and were easily recognized, nearly all of them being residents of Beallsville.<sup>19</sup> Cries of “Lynch him!” were heard. Some accounts state Miles was held and blindfolded to subdue him, others that he was injured in the struggle to fight off the mob. One account states the stove was pushed over in the chaos, almost setting fire to the store.<sup>20</sup> The men forced a noose around Peck’s neck and dragged him across the road, throwing him over a post-and-rail fence into a vacant lot. Peck verbally pleaded for his life, but made little physical resistance. Then they tossed the rope over a low branch of a locust tree, hoisting Peck five feet in the air, and tied the end to the fence rail. Once he was thought to be dead the mob dispersed, though several accounts state that a few men fired bullets into Peck’s body, which “took effect,” suggesting he was not yet dead from strangulation.<sup>21</sup>

Reports indicate that Peck was left hanging, in full view of the townspeople and only 50 yards from the Presbyterian Church, until 9:00 or 10:00 the next morning, when his body was finally cut down (possibly by Miles himself). A jury of inquest was summoned by Justice Donahue to hear testimony and render a verdict. It is unclear if it was the role of the jury to determine the identities of the perpetrators, to determine if the mob’s actions were warranted, or to determine Peck’s guilt or innocence after the fact, in the absence of a fair trial. The *Baltimore Sun* states that the jury could not unanimously agree on the statement of verdict, as some insisted on endorsing the actions of the mob, and therefore this first jury was discharged. That report then listed a second jury, comprised of Charles Elgin, Fremont Jones, Frank Williams, William Griffith, Lemuel Beall, Richard Spates, Frank Spates, Frank Sparrough, Charles Matthews, G. Mackintosh, Thomas Davis, and Thomas Fyffe, who “re-entered a verdict of death by strangulation at the hands of unknown parties.”<sup>22</sup> These men were all established landowners and community leaders from families with residential longevity in the Poolesville/Beallsville area at the time; some were former slaveholders.<sup>23</sup> The names of the initial discharged jurors were not given. Other accounts do not mention names of any jurors, nor the existence of a discharged jury, and state that no attempt was made to identify the members of the mob (though according to earlier statements, most were easily recognized).<sup>24</sup> All reports attempt to frame George Peck as a known convict who had been in jail before and accused of similar crimes in the past, though it seems unlikely he would still be employed in the same small town in which he had lived his entire life if this was the case. There are no records or newspaper accounts extant to support these statements of his previous deeds alleged in the press.

After his body was cut down, Peck was moved to a stable shed, and was later “buried quietly” in a field.<sup>25</sup> According to the *Sun*, within days he was “exhumed by colored people and buried in their churchyard near the village.”<sup>26</sup> This probably refers to the Elijah United Methodist Church Cemetery on Beallsville Road just outside of Poolesville, which was property used by the African American community for a church, school, and cemetery since 1872. The earliest extant stone in this graveyard dates to 1879, and there is evidence of earlier burials, most unmarked, which predated the construction of the first church building.<sup>27</sup> On the 1879 Hopkins atlas, it is marked as the “colored schoolhouse” (later called Love and Charity/Loving Charity Hall). It is likely that George Peck’s remains are buried there still, and if true, this act of claiming his body and the dignity conveyed by a churchyard burial suggests he was not a notorious criminal, but simply a member of their community. Unfortunately, the records of this church were lost in a fire in 1950.

The 1880 census was taken in June of that year, six months after the lynching, and by then both Reverend Amy’s family and the Reeves family had left Montgomery County. The Reeves moved to Baltimore; Annie and Ada, the older Hayes girls (now with the last name Reeves) were recorded as working in a cotton mill near Hampden at ages 11 and 14.<sup>28</sup> Twenty years later, by the next extant census in 1900, many of the Medley District people named in the incident were either deceased or had dispersed to other areas.<sup>29</sup>

Note: spellings of names vary during this time period between newspaper accounts and census records, both of which are known to be frequently inaccurate. If spellings used in this narrative differ from the newspaper accounts, it is because better information was found to support the corrected spelling.

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<sup>1</sup> Sween, Jane (ed.) Slave Census: Montgomery County, Maryland, 1867. Jane Sween Research Library and Special Collections, Montgomery History: Rockville, MD.

<sup>2</sup> United States Census, 1870.

<sup>3</sup> "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law." *Montgomery County Sentinel*: Rockville, MD. January 12?, 1880.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.^ (Note: most newspaper accounts spell the name Hays, though her mother's marriage record indicate the name was Hayes.)

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Marriages, 1785-1940.

<sup>6</sup> United States Census, 1880.

<sup>7</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland." *Shepherdstown Register*: Shepherdstown, WV. January 17, 1880.

<sup>8</sup> United States Census, 1880.

<sup>9</sup> Montgomery County Land Records. Active Indices: Grantee Index. Accessed from mdlandrec.net on September 9, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland" [Special Dispatch to the Baltimore Sun]. *Sun*: Baltimore, MD. January 13, 1880.

<sup>11</sup> Weishampel, J.F. (Jr.). History of Baptist Churches in Maryland. Baltimore, MD, 1885.

<sup>12</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland." *Wheeling Register*: Wheeling, WV. Volume 17, Issue 157. January 14, 1880.

<sup>13</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland" [Special Dispatch to the Baltimore Sun]. *Sun*: Baltimore, MD. January 13, 1880.

<sup>14</sup> Beall Family File. Jane Sween Research Library and Special Collections, Montgomery History: Rockville, MD.

<sup>15</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland" [Special Dispatch to the Baltimore Sun]. *Sun*: Baltimore, MD. January 13, 1880.

<sup>16</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland" [Special Dispatch to the Baltimore Sun]. *Sun*: Baltimore, MD. January 13, 1880.

<sup>17</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland." *Wheeling Register*: Wheeling, WV. Volume 17, Issue 157. January 14, 1880.

<sup>18</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland." *Shepherdstown Register*: Shepherdstown, WV. January 17, 1880.

<sup>19</sup> "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law." *Montgomery County Sentinel*: Rockville, MD. January 12?, 1880.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.^

<sup>21</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland." *Shepherdstown Register*: Shepherdstown, WV. January 17, 1880.

<sup>22</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland" [Special Dispatch to the Baltimore Sun]. *Sun*: Baltimore, MD. January 13, 1880. Note: several of the names were misspelled or given incorrectly in the newspaper article. Names listed here have been corrected.

<sup>23</sup> Sween, Jane (ed.) Slave Census: Montgomery County, Maryland, 1867. Jane Sween Research Library and Special Collections, Montgomery History: Rockville, MD.

<sup>24</sup> "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law." *Montgomery County Sentinel*: Rockville, MD. January 12, 1880.

<sup>25</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland." *Shepherdstown Register*: Shepherdstown, WV. January 17, 1880.

<sup>26</sup> "Lynch Law in Maryland" [Special Dispatch to the Baltimore Sun]. *Sun*: Baltimore, MD. January 13, 1880.

<sup>27</sup> Montgomery County Cemetery Inventory. Montgomery Preservation, Inc. 2018.

<sup>28</sup> United States Census, 1880.

<sup>29</sup> United States Census, 1900.