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Repairing Senate's Record on Lynching

'Long Overdue' Apology Would Be Congress's First for Treatment of Blacks

By Avis Thomas-Lester
Washington Post Staff Writer
Saturday, June 11, 2005; Page A01

Anna Holmes remembers hearing about the bridge when she was a little girl.

It stood somewhere near the spot where the Collington and Western branches of the Patuxent River met in Upper Marlboro, less than a quarter-mile from the Marlboro jail.

"I used to hear them talking about the lynchings," said Holmes, 79, who grew up in central Prince George's County.

It was on the bridge that a black man named Stephen Williams, accused of manhandling a white woman, was beaten and hanged about 3 in the morning on Oct. 20, 1894. A masked mob snatched him from his jail cell and dragged him as he pleaded for his life.

"When the Marlboro bridge was reached the rope was quickly tied to the railing and amid piteous groans Williams was hurled into eternity," The Washington Post reported.

At the time, there was no federal law against lynching, and most states refused to prosecute white men for killing black people. The U.S. House of Representatives, responding to pleas from presidents and civil rights groups, three times agreed to make the crime a federal offense. Each time, though, the measure died in the Senate at the hands of powerful southern lawmakers using the filibuster.

The Senate is set to correct that wrong Monday, when its members will vote on a resolution to apologize for the failure to enact an anti-lynching law first proposed 105 years ago.

"The apology is long overdue," said Sen. George Allen (R-Va.), who is sponsoring the resolution with Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.). "Our history does include times when we failed to protect individual freedom and rights."

The Senate's action comes amid a series of conciliatory efforts nationwide that include reopening investigations and prosecutions in Mississippi. Advocates say the vote would mark the first time Congress has apologized for the nation's treatment of African Americans.

Allen's involvement could help mend his rift with black Virginians who criticized him for hanging a noose outside his law office, displaying a Confederate flag in his home and proclaiming a Confederate History Month while governor.

Landrieu said she was motivated to propose the bill after seeing the book "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America," a collection of postcards taken at lynching scenes.

"The intensity and impact of the pictures tell a story . . . that written words failed to convey," Landrieu said. "It has been an extremely emotional, educational experience for me. And the more I learned, the more sure I became [about] the effort to pass this resolution."



Fred Tutman of Prince George's County sits next to a tree on his family's land that a previous owner used for lynching. (By Marvin Joseph -- The Washington Post)

75 Years Later, Scars Linger

James Cameron can still recall the feel of the rope around his neck.

A Heavy Toll

Reported U.S. lynchings from 1882 to 1968: 4,743 Total

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