

Salisbury black community troubled by Confederate general's marker

Jeremy Cox, jcox6@delmarvanow.com Published 1:26 p.m. ET Aug. 4, 2017 | Updated 7:03 p.m. ET Aug. 4, 2017

When Daisha Berry read the historic marker dedicated to Confederate Gen. John Henry Winder for the first time, the message struck her as "subtle, but frightening."

"It makes it sound like it's a huge, great accomplishment that needs to be honored and recognized because he was this huge, great person," she said.

A town hall called to address the controversy surrounding the marker Thursday night drew near-unanimous support for its removal from the lawn outside the historic Wicomico County courthouse.

It was hard to tell whether the audience reflected the sentiments of the community at large since the event was heavily promoted by a local civil rights group.

(Photo: .)

But it was clear that for African-Americans like Berry, the sign resonates as a profound slap in the face.

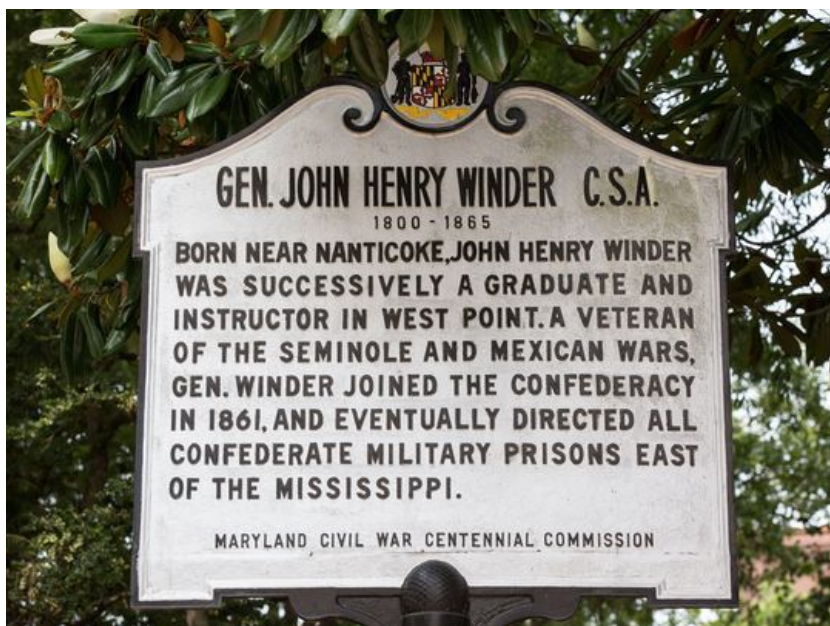
Amber Green said it's telling there's a marker on the lawn for Winder, who wasn't born in Salisbury, but rather in the western side of the county.

Meanwhile, no public acknowledgement exists, she said, for two events significant in the community's black history that actually took place just steps from the spot: the 1931 lynching of Matthew Williams and the 1880 speech Frederick Douglass gave inside the courthouse.

"That's history and that is accurate history to that place and that particular spot," said Green, a founder of the Fenix Youth Project, a group that promotes leadership through the arts. "My issue is people are picking and choosing what history to look at."

No one disputes that Winder was an important historical figure. The fault line in the debate runs through the sign's content and placement.

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A view of a placard memorializing Confederate Gen. John Henry Winder on Wednesday, June 14, 2017. (Photo: Staff photo by Ralph Musthaler)

"The plaque doesn't really do anything to make anyone discuss the war crimes that were committed by the general," said Briana Murphy, who is black.

More: [Supporters of Confederate Gen. Winder plaque rally in Salisbury \(/story/news/local/maryland/2017/07/08/john-henry-winder-plaque/462073001/\)](http://www.delmarvanow.com/story/news/local/maryland/2017/07/08/john-henry-winder-plaque/462073001/)

The take-it-down movement argues that the lawn is a place of honor and is no place for a figure who took up arms against his own country. They also point to Winder's abysmal record as the commissary general of the South's prisoner-of-war camps; thousands of Union soldiers died while in captivity, suffering from exposure, disease, starvation and other ills.

While the sign mentions Winder's tenure in the upper echelon of the Confederacy's ranks, it is silent on the grim consequences of his work.

The marker's defenders counter that its removal would be nothing more than erasing history for the sake of political correctness. They note that Winder's efforts to improve prison conditions were impeded by the South's declining fortunes toward the end of the war.

Many of the marker's supporters like to point out they have a personal stake in the matter because their ancestors fought for the Confederacy, Murphy said.

"But they never want to think about there are people who live in Salisbury who are descendants of slaves," she said.

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Michele Ennis of Tri Community Mediation leads a forum Thursday, Aug. 3, at the Wicomico Public Library about the controversy involving the historic marker dedicated to Confederate Gen. John Henry Winder. (Photo: Staff photo by Jeremy Cox)

The sign was erected in 1965 on South Salisbury Boulevard near the Messick Ice Plant by the Wicomico County Historical Society and Maryland Civil War Centennial Commission, according to research by local historian Linda Duyer. The ice plant is now the home of the Evolution Craft Brewing Co.

After the sign was hit a few times in traffic accidents, it was moved to the courthouse lawn in 1983.

Despite the marker's perch on county-owned property, it's unclear who has jurisdiction over it. Maryland Department of Planning officials have maintained that they're researching the issue.

But James Yamakawa, who founded the local Showing Up for Racial Justice chapter, provided a July 19 email from an official with the Maryland Historical Trust that suggests it has the ultimate authority.

More: [Marker controversy shows Gen. Winder's life still defined by darkest chapter \(/story/news/2017/07/14/marker-controversy-shows-gen-winders-life-still-defined-darkest-chapter/476588001/\)](https://www.delmarvanow.com/story/news/2017/07/14/marker-controversy-shows-gen-winders-life-still-defined-darkest-chapter/476588001/)

"If requested by Wicomico County, MHT would consider, in coordination with the State Highway Administration, the relocation of the Gen. Winder marker," Nancy Kurtz wrote. "MHT has not, as yet, received such a request."

The controversy in Salisbury began with a pair of dueling online petitions, including [one \(https://www.change.org/p/wicomico-county-council-remove-the-marker-for-confederate-general-john-h-winder-from-salisbury-md\)](https://www.change.org/p/wicomico-county-council-remove-the-marker-for-confederate-general-john-h-winder-from-salisbury-md) by Yamakawa's group, posted on the site Change.org in early June. The [other \(https://www.change.org/p/wicomico-county-council-keep-the-marker-for-confederate-general-john-h-winder-at-the-courthouse\)](https://www.change.org/p/wicomico-county-council-keep-the-marker-for-confederate-general-john-h-winder-at-the-courthouse) was created by Jonathan Taylor, the author of the local blog LowerEasternShoreNews.com.

It has turned into a microcosm of the nationwide debate over Confederate symbols. Cities ranging from San Antonio to Boston and from New Orleans to

Richmond have witnessed calls to remove the markers and statues — and some have done just that.

The outcry began after a 2015 shooting inside a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, in which a white man shot and killed nine African-Americans. The Confederate markers, opponents say, are not-so-subtle reminders of an era of white supremacy.

Several dozen people attended Thursday's forum, led by Tri Community Mediation in the basement of the Wicomico Public Library.

The marker should be relocated or removed altogether, all of the speakers said — with one exception.

"We're dealing with history, and I'm a firm believer that if you don't know history you're going to repeat the mistakes of the past," said Joe Perry, who is white. "It's a remembrance of a horrible thing."

Winder died of a heart attack before the war ended. But if he had lived, he probably would have been hanged as a war criminal just as one of his subordinates was, said Mark Decker, who is also white.

"The sign itself doesn't convey any of that history," said Decker, a member of the city's Human Rights Committee. "In that sense, it fails as a historical marker."

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Mary Ashanti is head of the Wicomico County NAACP chapter. (Photo: File photo)

Mary Ashanti, president of the Wicomico NAACP chapter, told DelmarvaNow in an email that the marker belongs in a museum.

"Government properties should not be used. The Civil War was and still is a controversial war," she said. "The way this country treated African-American people during slavery, Jim Crow era and well into the 1980's was not honorable. We are not trying to rewrite history. Our point is, not everything in this nation's history is worth honoring."

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