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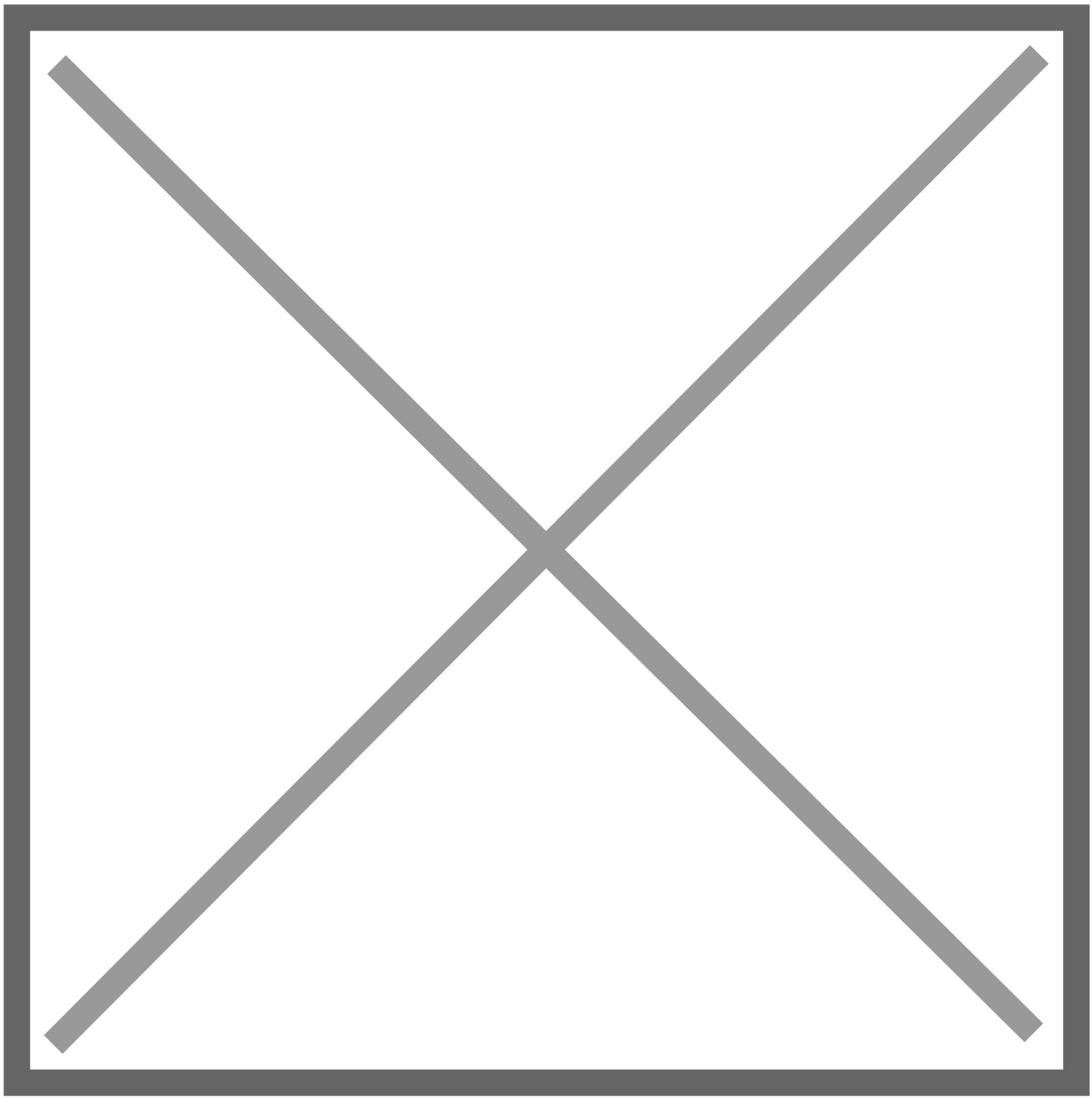

This J.J. Walker engraving depicts the 1861 Baltimore Pratt Street Riot. (CNS photo/Dr. Michael Echols' collection via Catholic Review)

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Baltimore — March 31, 2021

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After decades of criticism for its unabashed support of the Confederacy, "Maryland, My Maryland" is closer than ever to being removed as the official song of the "Free State."

The Maryland General Assembly has voted to get rid of it and now the legislation goes to the desk of Republican Gov. Larry Hogan Jr.

It's not known if or when Hogan will sign the measure, but The Associated Press reported March 30 that a spokesman for the governor said the state's chief executive does not like the song. The bill had not yet reached Hogan's desk.

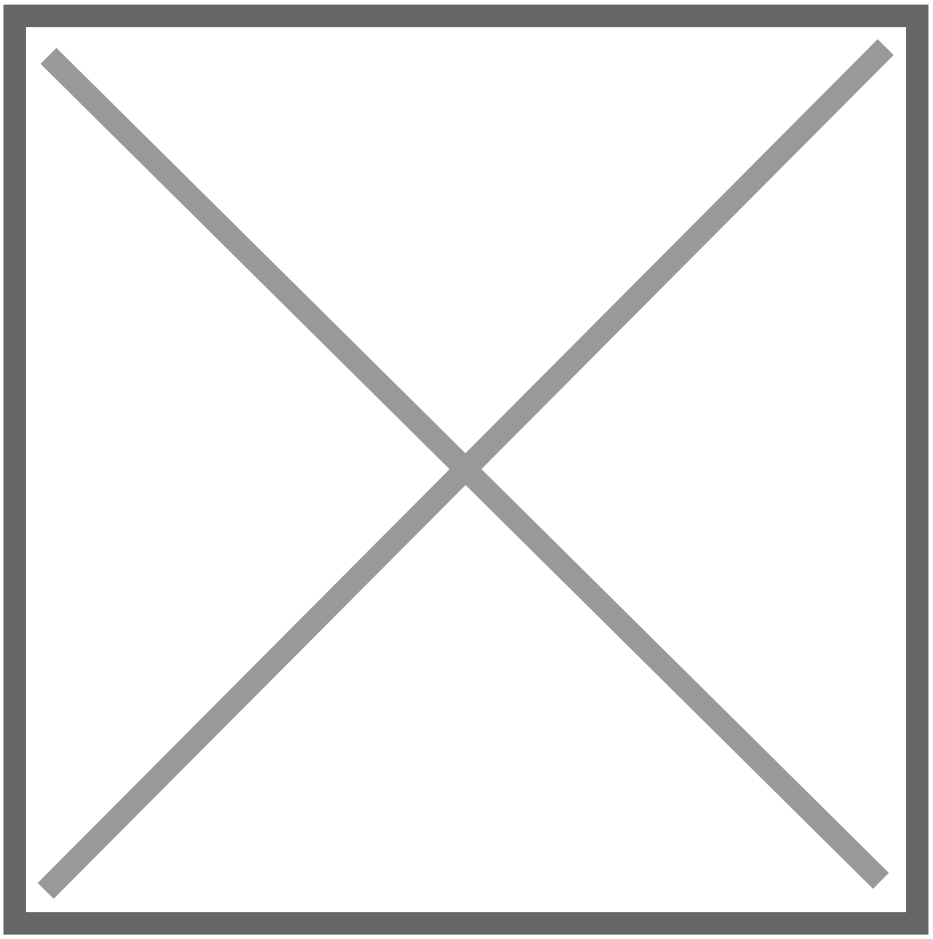
A Baltimore-born Catholic named James Ryder Randall was inspired to write the poem that would eventually become the state song after the professor of literature at Poydras College in Louisiana's Pointe Coupee Parish, read a newspaper report about the Pratt Street Riot in Baltimore in 1861.

The violence erupted after an angry mob of pro-Southern Baltimoreans hurled paving stones, bottles and rocks at soldiers from the 6th Massachusetts Regiment that was traveling through the city on its way to defend Washington at the outset of the Civil War.

Several civilians were wounded or killed during the melee, including one of Randall's friends. It is considered the first blood spilled in the Civil War.

The poem's verses refer to newly elected President Abraham Lincoln as a "tyrant" and a "despot." They violently encourage Maryland to "avenge the patriotic gore

that flecked the streets of Baltimore" and refer to the Union as "Northern scum."



Father Raymond Harris, pastor at Holy Family Parish in Randallstown, Md., is seen in this undated photo. He is a member of Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori's working group on racism. (CNS photo/courtesy Catholic Review)

Fr. Raymond Harris, pastor of Holy Family in Randallstown and a member of Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori's working group on racism, said he can't understand why any Marylander today would want to sing a song that celebrates the Confederacy.

"Part of dealing with racism and reconciliation is that we must deal with the truth," Harris said, "and part of the truth of the Confederacy was that it was raised up to perpetuate the institution of slavery as part of the economy and it treated enslaved peoples as commodities. To continue to celebrate that in song is really against the dignity of human beings."

Harris said there is a need to embrace national unity.

"The Civil War is over," he said.

Jenny Kraska, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, legislative lobbying arm of the state's bishops, said the move by lawmakers "reflects an awareness of the pain and impact that words have."

She noted that in his 2019 pastoral letter, "Journey to Racial Justice," Lori "calls for us as Catholics to make an 'honest examination' of our own past. We see the General Assembly doing that as a legislative body, and seeking to end the pain caused by the lyrics of this Civil War-era song."

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Quoting the U.S. bishops' 2018 letter against racism, "Open Wide Our Hearts," Kraska said the lawmakers' vote is an example of "conversion of heart, a conversion that will compel change, and the reform of our institutions and society."

There have been numerous efforts going back to the 1970s to remove "Maryland, My Maryland" as the state song, but none has come this far.

Set to the tune used in the Christmas song "O Tannenbaum" ("O Christmas Tree"), the song wasn't officially adopted until 1939.

In written testimony submitted in favor of the legislation to remove the song, Edward Papenfuse, a former archivist for the state, noted that Republican Gov. Harry Nice vetoed legislation to make "Maryland, My Maryland" the state song. The General Assembly passed the bill again and Democratic Gov. Herbert O'Conor ultimately signed it into law.

Papenfuse said the song has been labeled the "Marseillaise of the Confederacy" and was sung by soldiers charged with defending the institution of slavery. In addition to stirring sectional prejudice, Papenfuse said Randall's words glorify the actions of the mob.

"They enshrine a world in which slavery was considered righteous and mob violence a virtue," he said.

Following the Pratt Street Riot, Lincoln put parts of Maryland under martial law and suspended habeas corpus. During the Civil War, some journalists who sided with the Confederacy were arrested. Among them were Michael J. Kelly and John B. Piet, publishers of The Catholic Mirror, predecessor to the Catholic Review, the news outlet of the Baltimore Archdiocese.

Kelly and Piet were twice arrested for printing works of a "treasonable character." They were detained at Fort McHenry during one of those arrests.

Fr. Donald Sterling, pastor of New All Saints in Liberty Heights and a member of Lori's working group on racism, told the Catholic Review "something different needs to be drafted" for a state song, one "that is inclusive and acknowledges the mistakes that have been made as we move toward unit."

Sterling suggested it would be "conceptually interesting" to show in song that Maryland is "all inclusive."

Several alternatives to "Maryland, My Maryland" have been proposed, including one composed by two staff members and a former student of DeMatha Catholic High School in Hyattsville.