

With scoop by scoop of soil, Alexandria remembers lynched Black teens



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Alexandria City High School students Naeem Scott, right, and Nathan Desta place soil from the locations of Joseph McCoy's and Benjamin Thomas's deaths into jars during a commemoration Saturday. (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)

One by one, they scooped a clump of gray-brown soil and poured it into glass jars.

First came the descendants of one of the victims, then local faith leaders and elected officials, and finally two high school students who had just delivered monologues as [Joseph McCoy](#) and [Benjamin Thomas](#), the two Black teenagers lynched here in Old Town Alexandria.

More than 350 people in total helped fill the jars to the very top Saturday afternoon, taking part in an effort by this Northern Virginia community to commemorate the horrific 19th-century episodes of racial terror.

Under an overcast sky, they gathered outside Alexandria City Hall and heard the stories of how McCoy and Thomas were both dragged out of jail cells and killed by White mobs. How the pair never got trials for crimes they said they never committed. How police and city leaders ignored or even encouraged the mobs to brutalize the adolescents, who were hung from lampposts just a few blocks away.

“This soil cries out, and it demands a response,” said the Rev. James G. Daniely, pastor at Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church, turning his blessing of the soil into a question for the audience: “What will your response be? Will it be another monument that’s tagged on a wall somewhere, or will you really be moved to fight for justice?”

Once a notorious slave pen, it is now a museum on slavery — and freedom

That challenge was posed by several speakers at the soil-collection ceremony, organized by the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, a two-year-old initiative to inform the public of the city’s “history of racial terror hate crimes.”

Dozens of communities around the country, including [Poolesville, Md.](#), and [Charlottesville](#), have organized similar events in recent years to commemorate the lynchings that took place on their own ground, sending glass jars filled with soil to the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Ala. More than 160 Alexandria residents will travel by bus next month to deliver the jars filled for McCoy and Thomas and add them to a display at EJI’s Legacy Museum. They also will retrieve a pillar from the [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#) and bring home a six-foot steel pillar engraved with the names of both victims.



Soil samples from lynching sites across the country are on display at the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Ala., as seen in 2018. Each sample lists a date of the lynching and the name of the victim. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post)

Audrey Davis, the Alexandria project's co-director, said there was no better way to honor the two teenagers' lives than to lead community members on that journey, the culmination of more than two years spent unearthing their stories.

"If we're going to tell accurate history, you have to own the terrible parts of your history," Davis, who is also director of the city's Black History Museum, said in an interview. "You can't deny that these crimes were committed and two young boys lost their lives."

As ceremony speakers recounted, McCoy was arrested on April 23, 1897, for allegedly assaulting an 8-year-old White girl. The news set off a mob of more than 150 White men, who used a battering ram to break through the police station where he had been jailed.

Joseph McCoy was lynched by a mob in 1897. At a virtual remembrance, officials vowed not to forget.

Police managed to contain them, but 500 people returned later that night and dragged McCoy into the street, hanging the 18-year-old from a streetlamp on the corner of Cameron and Lee streets in Old Town. The mob beat him with clubs and cobblestones and shot him three times until he stopped breathing in the early hours of the following day.

Just over two years later, on Aug. 8, 1899, Thomas was killed a few blocks away in similar circumstances. After the 16-year-old was arrested for an alleged assault of a White girl, local African American leaders tried to protect him at the city jail, in defiance of instructions from city leaders.

In a summer of racial protests, Alexandria remembers a young lynching victim

The incident — in which 15 Black men were arrested — revived tensions from McCoy's lynching, prompting as many as 2,000 White Alexandrians to attempt to break into the jail the following night. Seeking to calm the mob, then-Mayor George L. Simpson vowed that if Thomas was not indicted and executed, he would lead a group to lynch Thomas himself.

But he never had to make good on that promise. Some in the mob managed to get inside, dragging Thomas by a rope down St. Asaph Street as they kicked and bludgeoned him. They hung him from a lamppost at the corner of King and Fairfax streets, where he remained alive for 20 minutes — until someone fired a gun straight at his heart.



The soil-collection ceremony was organized by the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, a two-year-old initiative to inform the public of the city's "history of racial terror hate crimes." (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)

In now-urbanized, paved-over Alexandria, event organizers collected soil from areas around the city that were associated with the lives, arrests and deaths of its two victims. A wooden cart containing soil for McCoy's jar was filled at his boyhood home on South Alfred Street and his home church nearby, where one of the city's oldest African American congregations hosted his funeral. Soil for Thomas was excavated from his home in the mostly Black neighborhood of Uptown and at the site of his lynching.

But both vessels also had soil mixed in from sites of importance to Alexandria's African American community — ranging from the building that once housed Parker-Gray High School, which educated Black students in segregated Alexandria, to the library where Black lawyer Samuel Tucker led a sit-in in 1937.

"There's so many areas that still have tragic histories or difficult histories or were parts of our civil rights journeys as well," Davis said. "It's all part of the greater story, and Black history shouldn't be divided into singular incidents." Neither McCoy nor Thomas would be able to imagine the city, or the country, that had emerged from the one they experienced in the late 19th century, she said.

That reality weighed heavily as two Black students from Alexandria City High School, Naeem Scott and Nathan Desta, delivered the monologues Saturday afternoon recounting those lynchings, each giving voice to one of the teenagers describing their final hours.



From left, the Rev. Robert Lewis Taylor, cousin Michelle Hill and her mom, Debra White, draw soil from the location of McCoy's death. (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)

The Rev. Robert Lewis Taylor, who is about five or six generations removed from McCoy, sat in the front row of the audience with his two cousins during the ceremony as he watched Mayor Justin M. Wilson (D) recount the lynching of their relative and deliver a formal proclamation of apology.

Despite living in nearby Fairfax County, Taylor, 70, said he'd never learned this piece of family history until he received a message earlier this year from Alexandria residents who had been researching the incidents for the commemoration project.

"It rocked me," Taylor said. "Today was wonderful, but it's still mind-blowing to know that that happened to someone in your family."

The ceremony, he said, "gives us a chance to work on reconciliation. You can't say closure, but you can say reconciliation."