

The Lynching of Joseph H. McCoy, April 23, 1897

Alexandria Community Remembrance Project

Report by the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Research Committee, April 2020

THE LYNCHING

On the morning of April 23, 1897, an African American teenager named Joseph McCoy was lynched in Alexandria, Virginia. On the night of April 22 and the early morning of April 23 a white mob made two attempts to break into the police station where he was being held. In the second attempt the mob forcibly took him from his jail cell, shot him, bludgeoned him, and hanged him from the lamppost on the southeast corner of Cameron and Lee Streets. McCoy was buried in a pauper's grave at Penny Hill Cemetery.

After this lynching, the Governor of Virginia, Charles T. O'Ferrall, launched an inquiry into the event. He dispatched Colonel G. Percy Hawes to Alexandria to begin the investigation. The Governor was highly critical of Alexandria's failure to anticipate and prevent this incident.

Before the McCoy arrest, racial tensions in Alexandria were elevated because of accusations regarding the sexual assault of a white woman in nearby Fairfax County a week earlier. Alexandria police officer Weston Atkinson and William Webster, the son of Alexandria Police Chief James Webster, had travelled to Charlottesville on April 18 to arrest African American James Lewis for the crime.¹ After Joseph McCoy was lynched, Fairfax County Sheriff George Gordon heard rumors that men in lower Fairfax County were contemplating lynching Lewis. Sheriff Gordon spoke with officials from Alexandria to determine the veracity of the rumors.² There were also rumors that Lewis was to be transported from the Fairfax County Courthouse to the Alexandria Station House for safekeeping. Instead, Sheriff Gordon transported Lewis under guard to Herndon for an overnight stay and then to Leesburg where he was held pending trial specifically to avoid possible lynching.³

A Note on Race Relations in Alexandria at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Although Alexandria had experienced radical changes in race relations as a result of the Civil War and Reconstruction, the departure of federal authorities from the U.S. South by 1876 allowed governments to pursue segregationist policies, also described as "slavery by another name," on a massive scale. Southern politicians, with the support of the white electorate, passed numerous race-based restrictions, popularly known as Jim Crow laws, that circumscribed every aspect of African American life—marriage, transportation, housing, schools, libraries, etc. The U.S. Supreme Court's rulings in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which legalized the idea of "separate but equal," and *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898), which

¹ William Page Johnson, II, "The Last Hanging in Fairfax County," *The Fare Facts Gazette: Newsletter of History Fairfax City, Inc.*, Summer 2016

² *Evening Star*, April 24, 1897; *Alexandria Gazette*, April 24, 1897.

³ *Alexandria Gazette*, April 24, 1897.

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permitted voter disenfranchisement, meant that (for the time being) African Americans had no legal recourse to fight against these policies.⁴

In Virginia, segregation laws were passed at particular historical moments that related to popular attitudes about race relations in the state. Virginia's post-Civil War Constitution, also known as the Underwood Constitution (1868), not only included the 13th and 14th Amendments, but also segregated the state's newly established public-school system. A few years later, the Readjuster Party (1877-1883) produced a coalition of black and white voters who worked together to curtail racist legislation in Virginia, which the General Assembly had begun to pass. The collapse of the Readjuster Party, however, created a political vacuum that gave rise to the Democratic Party, which dominated Virginia politics until the 1960s and instituted Jim Crow policies similar to other states. The 1902 Constitutional Convention codified the use of literacy tests and poll taxes, which adversely affected African American access to the ballot box. By the 1920s, eugenics, a pseudoscience used to promote selective breeding among humans, appeared in Virginia's laws, most notably the Racial Integrity Act (1924), the strictest one-drop policy in the country.⁵

For many white residents, these laws were not enough. Lynching, a form of extra-legal violence used to terrorize African American communities in the U.S. South, became another vehicle to ensure domination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lynching was never a federal offense. The most common excuse for a lynching was an alleged sexual assault by a black man against a white woman.⁶

A Note on Perspective

What follows is a timeline from Thursday, April 22 to Saturday, April 24, 1897, of the events leading up to, and immediately after, this hate crime. The documentary sources are taken from the *1897 Governor's Investigation of McCoy Lynching* and more than 25 local and national newspapers. It should be noted that the testimonies given are almost entirely from the white community in Alexandria, including police officers, the mayor, members of the Alexandria Light Infantry, and newspaper reporters. We are left to surmise the reactions, perspectives, and opinions of the African American community. An editorial from the African American newspaper the *Richmond Planet* gives us one glimpse into that perspective; it concluded "The damage to the city of Alexandria is incalculable, in that it places that community before the world as a city of lawlessness, where officials disregard their oaths of office and without warrant or excuse suspend the law. What must be thought of a people who would elect such material to office? It shows that the city government is rotten to the core."⁷

⁴ Dr. Krystyn Moon, "Navigating Everyday Life in Jim Crow Alexandria," *Alexandria's Equal Justice Initiative*. Presentation, November 16, 2019.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: the Lynching of Black America*. New York: The Modern Library, 2003, n.d., pg. x. During the period between the Civil War and World War II, thousands of African Americans were lynched in the United States. Between 1882 and 1968, 100 Virginians, including at least 11 in Northern Virginia, were lynched. The lynchings were among 4,743 reported nationwide during the same period [[Lynching, Whites and Negroes, 1882–1968](#), Tuskegee University.] In 1897, more than two documented lynchings occurred every week in the United States [Dray 2003].

⁷ "The Lynching at Alexandria," *Black Virginia: The Richmond Planet, 1894-1909*, accessed February 11, 2020, <https://blackvirginia.richmond.edu/items/show/1158>.

THE TIMELINE

THE ARREST (Evening Thursday April 22, 1897)

The events began on April 22 at about 6:30 p.m., when Richard Lacy and his neighbor, John Nelson, met with Lt. James Smith of the Alexandria Police Department at Smith's home.⁸ The men alleged that Joseph McCoy, an African American teenager who had worked for Lacy for sixteen years, had sexually assaulted one of Lacy's daughters.⁹ Since Lacy had threatened to "kill the negro," Lieutenant Smith accompanied Nelson back to the Lacy property, leaving Lacy behind. Lieutenant Smith arrested McCoy on the Lacy property, without a warrant, implying he was afraid Lacy would carry out his threat.¹⁰

After returning to the Station House with McCoy, Lieutenant Smith commented, "I did not tell him that he was arrested until I got him here. After I informed what he was arrested for he denied it."¹¹

McCoy was then locked up in a cell at the Alexandria Police Station House.¹² Subsequently, with *Washington Times* reporter John H. Strider as a witness, Lieutenant Smith interrogated McCoy, and he reported that the prisoner confessed to the crime despite his earlier denial.¹³

BEFORE THE FIRST ATTACK (Evening Thursday April 22, 1897)

At about 8:30 p.m., Leonard Marbury, Commonwealth Attorney and a Lieutenant in the Alexandria Light Infantry, reported in a conversation with Lieutenant Smith, that there was no danger of "any mob attacking the station." He added that "if they did, they were fully prepared for them." He told Lieutenant Smith that he should be notified of any future trouble so he could alert the head of the Light Infantry.¹⁴

However, Marbury also testified that as he left the Station House, there were "a good many people there I knew, but I don't suppose there was a man in the crowd at that time who had any idea of a

⁸ The Lacy house was located on South Washington Street, opposite St. Mary's Cemetery. [*Evening Star*, April 23, 1897.]

⁹ The allegation of rape originated from a doctor's examination of Annie Lacy that took place on Friday evening at Dr. O'Brien's office. Directly after this discovery, Officer Smith was notified of the alleged crime. The first news of the lynching was in morning newspapers. *The Washington Times* reported that Annie and her older sister Lizzie were both assaulted. It was not until the afternoon/evening papers came out that the allegation was made that all of Lacy's children were victims. This appears to be a coordinated effort to condemn McCoy and justify the lynching that had already occurred.

¹⁰ Virginia. Governor (1894-1898: O'Ferrall). Executive papers of Governor Charles T. O'Ferrall, 1894-1897. Accession 43210, Box 3, Folder 7. State government records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The Alexandria Police Station House, commonly referred to as the "Station House" was located at 126 North Fairfax Street on the east side of City Hall. [Amy Bertsch, *Alexandria Police Department*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2006; Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Alexandria, Independent Cities, Virginia. Sanborn Map Company, Aug, 1896, Image 10. Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn08968_003/]

¹³ Virginia. Governor (1894-1898: O'Ferrall). Executive papers of Governor Charles T. O'Ferrall, 1894-1897. Accession 43210, Box 3, Folder 7. State government records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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lynching.”¹⁵ This reflects a common thread throughout the narrative – if anyone in the crowd *was* recognized, they were not acknowledged by the white officials to have been part of the mob involved in the actual lynching.

At about 10 p.m., Alexandria Mayor Luther Thompson stated that, as he walked home,¹⁶ he met “some young men” who said, “Oh well, he shouldn’t come to trial.”¹⁷ This could be interpreted as an early indication of the mob’s intention to lynch McCoy.¹⁸

Lieutenant Marbury claimed that when he was at the Station House between 8 and 11 p.m., there was “...no apprehension of trouble - not the slightest.”¹⁹ These statements were met with some incredulity by the Governor’s representative, Colonel Hawes.

THE FIRST ATTACK (Evening Thursday April 22, 1897)

The *Washington Post* reported that a crowd of 150 men gathered at the station house around 11 p.m. They were ordered to disperse by the police but remained in the area. Sometime between 11 and 12, the mob attacked the front doors of the Station House using a long piece of lumber from a local yard as a battering ram.²⁰ The front doors were broken open and some of the mob entered the station. According to Mayor Thompson, “The crowd organized somewhere almost in an instant, and poured into the station house through every door and window; they knew the geography of the whole place, and in less time than it takes to tell it they overpowered the officers.”²¹ Lieutenant Smith reported that the officers fired their pistols in the air and the crowd was driven back. Four members of the mob were detained by police, they gave their names as Frank Spink, Ferdinand Knight, James W. Frank and Charley Armour.²² The police then used the lumber, along with a ladder, to brace the Station House doors closed.²³

It was alleged by the *Alexandria Gazette* and Commonwealth Attorney Leonard Marbury that Richard

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mayor Luther Thompson lived at 501 South Fairfax Street. [*Virginia State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1897-98*. Richmond, VA: J.L. Hill Print. Co., 1896.]

¹⁷ Virginia. Governor (1894-1898: O’Ferrall). Executive papers of Governor Charles T. O’Ferrall, 1894-1897. Accession 43210, Box 3, Folder 7. State government records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

¹⁸ However, according to the *Washington Post*, before the first attack, “small crowds congregated in various parts of town urging immediate action. Then came a message from the mother of the girl that the little one was dying. This settled it.” [*Washington Post*. April 23, 1897.]

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Washington Post*, April 23, 1897. *Alexandria Gazette*, April 23, 1897. It is possible that the wood came from the nearby Smoot Lumber Yard. Smoot & Co.’s lumber yard was located at the north-east corner of Cameron & Lee Streets, a block away from the Station House. [Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Alexandria, Independent Cities, Virginia. Sanborn Map Company, Aug, 1896, Image 9. Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn08968_003/]

²¹ Virginia. Governor (1894-1898: O’Ferrall). Executive papers of Governor Charles T. O’Ferrall, 1894-1897. Accession 43210, Box 3, Folder 7. State government records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

²² *Washington Post*, April 23, 1897.

²³ Virginia. Governor (1894-1898: O’Ferrall). Executive papers of Governor Charles T. O’Ferrall, 1894-1897. Accession 43210, Box 3, Folder 7. State government records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

Lacy was present at the first attack and locked up with those who had been arrested. His presence was not reported in any other newspapers, nor provided in any testimony other than Marbury. It is possible the city officials were providing Lacy with an alibi so that they could avoid bringing charges against him for lynching McCoy.²⁴

Lieutenant Smith then addressed the crowd, pleading with them to leave: "Gentlemen, I hope and pray that each and every citizen will go home; this man will be dealt with according to law, and be given a fair and impartial trial, and I hope if he is guilty, he will get his just desserts, and I am satisfied he will."²⁵

Despite the attack on the station, officials continued to claim, when interviewed by the Governor's investigator Colonel Hawes, that the crowd had no intention of removing and lynching McCoy. Lieutenant Marbury of the Alexandria Light Infantry stated, "I did not think there was any idea of allowing the man to be lynched, nor did I think that the crowd around there would attempt to lynch him."²⁶

Colonel Hawes asked Lieutenant Marbury a question that would be asked of many of the other white witnesses there that night (including police officers, members of the Light Infantry, and the Mayor himself): "Did you recognize any of the men that were in the mob...?" The answer, repeated by these witnesses almost verbatim, was: "Not a one of them sir."

This seems to contradict Marbury's testimony about the exchange Lieutenant Smith had with the mob. Marbury reported that the crowd in front of the Station House had been "good natured," and joked with the Lieutenant as he urged them to return to their homes. This implies that they were local men, and at least some of them were known to the Lieutenant.²⁷

Lieutenant Marbury stated that he then took Lacy from the station and walked him to "a back room on Royal Street." Marbury claimed that he stayed with him in order to persuade him not to return to the area of the Station House and, presumably, to the mob.²⁸

BUILD UP TO THE SECOND ATTACK (Night of Thursday April 22, 1897 to early morning of Friday April 23)

At 12:15 am, Mayor Thompson reported that he was woken by his wife who heard knocking at the door. A court constable reported to him the circumstances of the first attack. He claimed that he was told that no further trouble was expected, so he went back to sleep. This was met with skepticism by Colonel Hawes, who questioned him repeatedly as to why he did not deem it necessary to take further action: "You did not think it of enough importance to go down to the station house to investigate the condition

²⁴ *Alexandria Gazette*, April 23, 1897. Virginia. Governor (1894-1898: O'Ferrall). Executive papers of Governor Charles T. O'Ferrall, 1894-1897. Accession 43210, Box 3, Folder 7. State government records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

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of affairs yourself?"²⁹

Hawes also seemed surprised that the mayor was not awoken by the ringing of the alarm bell. At around 1 a.m., Lieutenant Smith had ordered the bell to be rung. We learned from Lieutenant Smith that the mayor's house is "five blocks" from the Station House and from the armory.³⁰

When asked if he had made any effort to ascertain the identities of the mob members, the mayor refused to answer: "You will have to see the Commonwealth's Attorney about that."³¹

At 1 a.m., Marbury heard the alarm bell and proceeded to the station. He claimed that the mob that soon assembled there was, "as a whole" comprised of different men from the first attack. This is another example of a recurring theme among the witnesses—that they recognized no one, and that the second mob, who actually carried out the lynching, was comprised of different individuals than the first group.³²

Mr. W.H.F. Beckham, one of the Coroner's jurors, stated that he "could not recall any face." This contradicts other reports that members of the Alexandria Light Infantry were present in the mob. Also repeated is the claim that the second mob came from "the outskirts of the city," or "the hill," suggesting that outsiders rather than Alexandria residents were to blame.³³

THE SECOND ATTACK (1 a.m., Friday April 23, 1897)

At 1 a.m., the mob attacked the Station House and gained entrance through doors and windows, despite another fusillade of shots above their heads from the police officers. Police Captain James Webster testified that when he left his office and came down the stairs to the first floor, "the place was full of men; they had come through the doors and windows on all sides."³⁴

Again, the officials claimed that they recognized no one in the crowd. Lieutenant Smith said, "There were a great many strangers" and "the lights were out and many of the men in the crowd had their hats pulled down over their eyes, which obscured their features."³⁵

This is in contrast to some newspaper reports:

"many prominent citizens took part in the affair."³⁶

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ The Armory was located at 208 South Royal Street. [*Washington Post*, April 25, 1897.] Mayor Thompson's house was two and ½ blocks from the Armory and five blocks from the Station House.

³¹ Virginia. Governor (1894-1898: O'Ferrall). Executive papers of Governor Charles T. O'Ferrall, 1894-1897.

Accession 43210, Box 3, Folder 7. State government records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Evening Times*, April 23, 1897.

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“Most of the Alexandria Light Infantry were in the mob.”³⁷

The officers in the Station House were quickly overpowered and some were injured. Captain Webster was upstairs and, when he descended, he was knocked to the ground and held down: “I think four men laid on me; I think it was about that time they cut the door loose, where the prisoner was.”³⁸

Weston H. Atkinson, an Alexandria police officer, stated that he was overpowered, taken out to the street, and choked until unconscious. Policeman William J. Wilkinson also reported that he was overpowered and carried out into the street by the mob.³⁹

The door to the cell was broken with an axe. Lieutenant Smith recalled the “little man” with the axe: “...when I caught hold of him I grabbed the axe and forced him partly away from the door, but before I could say Jack Robinson I suppose at least twenty men must have had me; they carried me out to the middle of the street...and there they held me.”⁴⁰

THE LYNCHING (Friday April 23 at around 1:20 a.m.)

The mob broke down Joseph McCoy’s cell door and carried him out into the street. John Strider, a citizen and reporter for the *Washington Times* who was at the Station House at the time, reported that he waited for around five minutes and then followed the mob out. He “went to Cameron and Lee Street and the fellow was lying on the pavement dead.”⁴¹

Joseph McCoy was hanged from a lamppost, shot several times, and bludgeoned with an axe.

The *Alexandria Gazette* added that “other indignities were heaped upon his quivering remains.”⁴²

More details are contained in a *Washington Post* article:

“The body of McCoy was left hanging to the lamppost for 15 minutes before it was cut down. Three bullet holes were found, one in the left shoulder and two bullets in the left thigh. The left eye was much swollen. As he was strung to the lamppost he was struck on the head with a cobblestone... A pool of blood was at the base of the post.”⁴³

³⁷ *Washington Post*, April 23, 1897.

³⁸ Virginia. Governor (1894-1898: O’Ferrall). Executive papers of Governor Charles T. O’Ferrall, 1894-1897. Accession 43210, Box 3, Folder 7. State government records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. Joseph McCoy was hanged from the lamppost at the south-east corner of Cameron and Lee Streets, one block east from the Station House. [Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Alexandria, Independent Cities, Virginia. Sanborn Map Company, Aug, 1896, Image 9. Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn08968_003/; *Washington Post*. April 24, 1897.]

⁴² *Alexandria Gazette*, April 24, 1897.

⁴³ *Washington Post*, April 24, 1897.

CORONER'S INQUEST, WILLIAM DEMAINE AND SON, UNDERTAKERS (7 p.m. Friday April 23, 1897)

The postmortem on Joseph McCoy was conducted in the morning at Demaine and Son Funeral Home.⁴⁴ Coroner William Purvis stated that McCoy's cause of death was "strangulation by person or persons unknown."⁴⁵

Dr. William Smith and Dr. Snowden performed the autopsy. They testified "that Mr. McCoy's body had a burn on his face, likely from gunpowder; an open wound above his forehead and a contusion on the back of his head; and 3 gunshot wounds to the left breast. None of these injuries were sufficient to cause death."⁴⁶

The Coroner jury's verdict determined that "Joseph McCoy, came to his death from strangulation at the hands of parties unknown to the jury, and....that the officers of the police force did all in their power to protect the prisoner."⁴⁷

THE FOLLOWING DAYS (Friday April 23, 1897 to Monday April 26, 1897)

The *Washington Post* reported that many people stood around discussing the event on the streets the next day. Doubt was cast on the claim that no local people were involved when the Post reported that "a large majority...approved the action of the mob."⁴⁸

Among the white population, there was a stated fear of an uprising from the local African American community. On both Friday and Saturday nights, rumors swirled of mobs bent on revenge. Crowds of armed white men gathered around the Lacy house. No actual threat from the African American community emerged.

In contrast to their actions on the night of the lynching, the Alexandria Light Infantry came to the defense of the Lacy family in order to protect them from these rumors.

On the evening of April 24, more perceived trouble came from outside of the city. Commonwealth's Attorney Johnson, located in Arlington, stated that more than 100 "negroes were congregating near Arlington with the avowed purpose of marching on Alexandria and wreaking their revenge upon its [presumably white] inhabitants." The news continued to spread of this "crowd of negroes...on their way to Alexandria, shouting, singing, and cursing, and swearing revenge against the [presumably white] inhabitants of Alexandria."⁴⁹

When this news was received in Alexandria, the reaction of the white authorities and citizenry was the

⁴⁴ Demaine and Son Funeral Home was located at 817 King Street. [*Virginia State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1897-98*. Richmond, VA: J.L. Hill Print. Co., 1896.]

⁴⁵ *Alexandria Gazette*, April 24, 1897.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Washington Post*, April 24, 1897.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Washington Post*, April 25, 1897.

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exact opposite of what had transpired on the night of Joseph McCoy's lynching. The military alarms were rung, the Alexandria Light Infantry gathered at the armory (out of 75 members, 67 responded), the "whole white male population of the city was upon the street by this time, and began to arm themselves," ("8,000 cartridges had been sold by dealers"). Mayor Thompson was offered, and accepted, the services of the Confederate Veterans and the Alexandria Fire Department.⁵⁰

"The military were ordered to move, and accompanied by the R. E. Lee Camp, and followed by nearly the entire white male population of Alexandria, took up their march out the Washington road. The Alexandria Light Infantry were commanded by Capt. Albert Bryan, and at their head rode an advance guard of several men armed with shotguns..."⁵¹

And yet, no one arrived. After more "alarming rumors" of other incidents taking place in different parts of the city also turned out to be unsubstantiated, the militia was recalled, and the white, male citizens of Alexandria went home to bed. Nonetheless, several local African American citizens were arrested "on suspicion."⁵²

In the days following the lynching, the Station House and the street corner where the lynching occurred were visited by "2000 strangers" and on the lamppost itself "some enterprising tobacco firm had placarded cigarette advertisements."⁵³

JOSEPH MCCOY'S FUNERAL (3 p.m., Saturday, April 24, 1897)

An aunt of McCoy's visited Demaine and Son and told them, "As the people killed him, they will have to bury him."⁵⁴ This brief but powerful statement seems to lay the blame for the death squarely on the shoulders of the City of Alexandria and her white citizens.

McCoy's body was "clothed in a dark coat, light trousers and a white shirt." He was buried "in a common pine coffin, furnished at the expense of the state, the relatives of the colored man refusing to pay the costs of the funeral."⁵⁵

Joseph McCoy was buried in a pauper's grave at Penny Hill Cemetery.⁵⁶

The funeral service was conducted by Rev. William Gaines, pastor of Robert's Chapel.⁵⁷ The *Washington*

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Washington Post*, April 26, 1897.

⁵⁴ *Alexandria Gazette*, April 24, 1897.

⁵⁵ *The Times*, April 25, 1897.

⁵⁶ *Alexandria Gazette*, April 24, 1897. Penny Hill Cemetery is located on South Payne Street near Franklin Street. Penny Hill was established in 1795 by request of the Alexandria Council, as a burial ground for indigent paupers and the poor. [Historic Cemeteries of Alexandria. City of Alexandria. Accessed February 10, 2020. <https://www.alexandriava.gov/114411#PennyHillCemetery>]

⁵⁷ Robert's Chapel is located at 606 South Washington Street. Today it is known as Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church.

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Post reported that “several colored people” from the southern part of the city attended the funeral.⁵⁸

Rev. Gaines said “...we cannot indorse mob violence and lynch law. Nor do we believe that the best citizens of this city approve of such. I trust that the time will soon come when all people will realize the fact that the same judgment which they measure to others will be measured to them at the bar of God.”⁵⁹

CRITICISM OF THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE LYNCHING

Governor O’Ferrall dispatched his investigator to Alexandria on April 26, 1897, to answer a series of questions.⁶⁰

Here are the answers that Colonel Hawes provided to the Governor:

1. When was Joseph McCoy taken to the Station House?

“One Joseph H. McCoy, negro, was captured about 7 o’clock, on the evening of April 22, 1897, by Police Lieutenant James Smith, of the city of Alexandria. Said capture was made without a warrant, but upon a verbal report of a citizen.”⁶¹

2. When was the first indication of a determination to resort to violence and put the prisoner to death?

“The first indication of a determination to resort to violence, and to put the prisoner to death, was seen about 11 o’clock on the night of the 22nd of April, 1897.”⁶²

3. When was the first effort to seize the prisoner made, and how many were involved?

“The first effort to seize the prisoner was made about 11.15 or 11.20 o’clock p.m. This effort was not, apparently, violent, nor a determined one, and the mob seemed to be without leadership. Their numbers was [sic] estimated to be from two to three hundred men and boys, many of whom seemed to be looker-on, and not participants.”⁶³

4. How many were present when the lynching occurred? How many of the mob were injured by the officers and how many officers suffered injuries at the hands of the mob?

“The number present when the lynching occurred, was estimated to be from four to six hundred,

⁵⁸ *Washington Post*, April 25, 1897.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Col. Hawes stated in his report that he arrived in Alexandria on Monday, April 26 at 10:52 p.m. and began interviews.

⁶¹ Virginia. Governor (1894-1898: O’Ferrall). Executive papers of Governor Charles T. O’Ferrall, 1894-1897. Accession 43210, Box 3, Folder 7. State government records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

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under the leadership of an unknown man. It is not known how many of the mob were injured by the officers. All of the officers engaged in the defense of the prisoner were handled roughly, and several of the policemen badly beaten, one being choked into a state of insensibility. The Police Lieutenant in charge of the station house was badly wrenched in the arms and legs, and otherwise bruised. I examined several of the policemen, and found them bruised and sore.”⁶⁴

5. Did the the Mayor of the city of Alexandria call the Alexandria Light Infantry at any time?

“There was no call for the military made by the Mayor, at any time during the night of the 22nd of April, notwithstanding the fact that he was notified between the first and second attacks that the first attack had been made, and repulsed by the police.”⁶⁵

6. Was a military alarm sounded at any time? If so, when? How many commissioned and non-commissioned officers and men responded to the alarm by assembling at the Armory, who were they, and how long did they remain?

“At the time of the second attack on the police station by the mob, the officer in charge, Lieutenant Smith, ordered the military alarm to be sounded. This alarm was responded to by one commissioned officer, Lieutenant Marbury, 2 Corporals and 15 privates. These soldiers remained at the Armory for sometime, and being notified that their services were not needed, they returned to their homes.”⁶⁶

7. How many commissioned and non-commissioned officers and men, if any, were engaged in the lynching directly or indirectly, with the mob or were present at the Station House when the prisoner was seized and hanged? Who were they?

“None of the members of the military were present on the occasion of either attack of the mob, as far as could be ascertained.”⁶⁷

8. How far is the Mayor’s Office to the Station House? How far is it from the Mayor’s Office to the Armory? How far is it from the Armory to the Station House?

“The distance from the Mayor’s night office (which is his residence) to the police station, is about five blocks. The distance from the Mayor’s night office (his residence) to the Armory, is about five blocks. The distance from the Armory to the station house, is between two and three blocks.”⁶⁸

In his final message upon leaving office at the end of 1897, Governor O’Farrell stood against mob law and censured the Alexandria police officers for dereliction of duty and failure to protect the prisoner, Joseph McCoy.

“In the city of Alexandria I regret to say that in my opinion there was dereliction of duty somewhere. That city has the largest military company in the State. A man was arrested, charged with a vile felony. He was committed to the station-house where several

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

policemen were on duty. The excitement became intense and a crowd assembled at the station house in a threatening manner. Later another crowd gathered, broke into the station-house, seized the policemen in charge, battered down the door of the cell in which the prisoner was confined, took him out and hung him to a lamp post on the street. The Mayor, though clothed with the power to summon the military company to aid the civil authorities, issued no order and took no steps to protect the prisoner, notwithstanding the excited condition of the city, of which he had full notice.

There may be no doubt the prisoner was guilty of a most heinous crime, committed under the most diabolical circumstances, and deserves death, but he was in the custody of the law officers, safely confined, and yet a mob was permitted in a city of 18,000 population, with a strong military force at the command of the Mayor, to bid defiance to the law and trample down the authority of the Commonwealth. There can be no possible excuse offered for the success of the mob.”⁶⁹

The editorial writers of the African-American *Richmond Planet* also expressed outrage:

“Almost within the shadow of the capitol at Washington, within a few minutes ride of the official residence of the President of the United States and the halls of Congress, with Virginia militia as spectators, and the United States troops a few steps away, a murderous mob, composed of men who knew better on Friday, April 23, 1897, took from the station-house at Alexandria, Va., the crouching trembling form of Joseph McCoy and hanged him to a lamp-post.

This act was in violation of the laws of Virginia and the statutes of the United States. It was murder pure and simple and as it was premeditated, executed with precision, it was murder of the first degree.

Every citizen, white or black, young or old who took part in this disgraceful proceedings is guilty of as heinous a crime as the one with which McCoy stood charged.”⁷⁰

Many in the white community of Alexandria and beyond did not share the outrage. There were reports of a festive, celebratory atmosphere as the sites involved in McCoy’s lynching drew crowds from the city and surrounding area. There is no sense here of any regret or disapproval, or indeed any fear of reprisals from the black community.

An article in the *Alexandria Gazette* on April 26 reported:

“SUMMER WEATHER.-- Yesterday was a summer day with the temperature too high for comfort. It was generally conceded that there were more visitors in the city than on any Sunday in the city’s history. Several hundred went to the station house for the purpose of seeing the damage inflicted by Thursday night’s mob, and the lamp post from which McCoy was hanged was also an object of interest. Hundreds came here on bicycles and spun through the streets. The electric cars and boats were crowded on each trip. A large

⁶⁹ *Washington Post*, December 2, 1897.

⁷⁰ “The Lynching at Alexandria,” *Black Virginia: The Richmond Planet, 1894-1909*, accessed February 11, 2020, <https://blackvirginia.richmond.edu/items/show/1158>.

number went to Riverside Park during the day. There were a number of excursions to the river resorts, and at night the return of the steamers and the strains of music were suggestive of summer time.”⁷¹

The ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) is a part of a national EJI Community Remembrance Project inspired by the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The memorial includes over 800 steel monuments, or pillars, one for each county in the United States where a racial terror lynching took place, with the names of the lynching victims engraved on the pillars. Alexandria’s pillar has two names on it. The ACRP is dedicated to telling the story of those two men. The Research Committee of the ACRP is committed to performing a thorough search for historic documents, providing historical context, and sharing that history widely in order to shed light on the infrastructure of injustice in our history that continues to inform our present. It is the ACRP’s hope that making this history visible will help move our community through honest, uncomfortable discussions that will challenge our government, civic and faith organizations, and citizens to self-reflection and response that affects real change in Alexandria. For more information about this project, visit Alexandriava.gov/historic.

⁷¹ *Alexandria Gazette*, April 26, 1897.