

ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



April 2023 Edition

Rectifying and Reconciling

In the wake of the Civil War, Alexandria was a place of possibility and hope for thousands of self-liberated African Americans, as well as for a stronghold of people who were free before the war. Black Alexandrians built and supported new schools, started banks and businesses. They hosted the Virginia Colored Convention at the Lyceum in 1865, they joined political parties and made their newly recognized voices heard. They sent delegates to the constitutional convention in 1868, they voted to ratify it, and the 14th and 15th amendments. Then, in 1869, they elected representatives to the statehouse to translate the ideas in the new constitution into reality.

The years leading up to the elections of 1870 through 1873 were an inflection point in state and city's history. In that brief period between occupation and self-government, when the state and city were attempting to rebuild, there was an opportunity to break away from the past and transform. It would require Black and white, Republican and Conservative to share power.

During and after Reconstruction, a majority of freedmen and formerly free found a political home among the Radical Republicans. They wanted to hold those who rebelled against the government accountable by curtailing their ability to seek and hold office. They believed every citizen had a right to free education and the vote.

But their political nemesis - the Conservative Party, (also known as the Conservative Democrats) - made up of former Confederates and wealthy white men, saw education and the ballot box as privileges, not rights. And more than anything, they did not want Black men to rule over them.

The majority of white Alexandrians aligned themselves with the Conservative Party. In 1870, the Conservatives won a majority on the Common Council, and after the election of 1873, the party also gained control of the General Assembly and the Governor's Mansion.

The Conservative Democrats remained in power in this city for a century. Under their rule, Blacks were not represented, they were marginalized and, in effect, disenfranchised. Schools and public spaces were segregated. Blacks were not hired onto the police force, instead they made up the majority of those forced to labor on the chain gang. And newspapers wrote solely to a white audience.

The conservatives had successfully created two Alexandrias.

On April 23, 1897, citizens of this divided city lynched Joseph McCoy, a native Black youth accused of crossing over from the other Alexandria. He was failed by city authorities, officers of the law and his fellow citizens. The white power structure protected the white people as it was intended to and no one was held accountable.

The same thing happened two years later, on August 8, 1899, when a lynch mob murdered 16-year-old Benjamin Thomas, because a 7-year-old white girl said he was inappropriate around her. Had there been Black police officers, or white men willing to listen to leaders from the Black community who requested protections for Thomas, his murder could potentially have been avoided.

One hundred years of conservative rule in Alexandria produced schools that failed Black children because they were centered on whiteness and promoted white history, culture and expectations, a housing system that limited African Americans to Black neighborhoods, burning crosses on schoolhouse lawns, the harassment and sometimes killing of Black youth.

When Massive Resistance failed, the old guard left town and conservatives hold on the city cracked. In that opening, in 1964, the first Black man - Ferdinand T. Day - was appointed to the Alexandria School Board. In 1970, Ira Robinson became the first Black man elected to City Council since Reconstruction. For his opening legislative salvo, Robinson convinced Alexandria to stop flying the Confederate Flag, which they did, with the exception of a few holidays.

Power sharing had begun, but Alexandria has yet to transform.

On April 26, 2018 Bryan Stevenson opened the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and launched a movement that encourages communities to explore and be honest about their history, to acknowledge racial injustices and consider how to repair.

On March 28, 2023, at an event in Charlottesville, Stevenson said, "When it comes to race and civil rights, we don't talk about remedies. After a century of disenfranchisement, it isn't enough to pass a civil rights law, you have to remedy," then he added options, such as automatically registering every Black person to vote on their 18th birthday, or better yet, going to their house on election day to record their vote.

In the wake of the Pandemic, the protests ignited by the murder of George Floyd, in the midst of Stevenson's inspired movement, it feels like Alexandria is at another inflection point that is offering us another opportunity for transformation. What will we do with it?

In The News

An Evening With Bryan Stevenson

Members of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project went to Charlottesville, Va., on March 28, 2023 to hear Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative speak. The event, held at the John Paul Jones Arena on the University of Virginia's campus was titled "Act Justly, Love Mercy, Exploring the Heart of Equal Justice." Stevenson spoke inspirationally about what keeps him going as he daily wrestles with injustice. He said he opened The Legacy Museum and The National Memorial for Peace and Justice because he didn't feel that America had a narrative museum dedicated to enslavement, especially one as powerful as an Apartheid museum in South Africa or the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. He wants people to get to the end of The Legacy and say, "never again." His hope is that future generations "won't be burdened by the legacy of slavery and bigotry."

Pilgrimage Update

Some of those who joined us on the pilgrimage to Montgomery, AL, last fall are participating in "Process and Progress," a series of workshops meant to help interpret personal experiences while deepening awareness of how ethnicity effects perception. The hope is to lay a foundation for future potentially difficult conversations about justice and equity. The workshops were developed by Kiki Davis and Joe Wenger, who head up the diversity program at St. Stephens, St. Agnes. They joined us on the pilgrimage and wrote about their experience in the school magazine, please take a moment to [read about their experiences here](#).

Upcoming Events

Remembrance Events for Joseph McCoy 2023

Restorative or Transformational Justice? What is Justice?

Saturday, April 22, 11 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Charles Houston Recreation Center Gymnasium

All are welcome!

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project is excited to hear Bilqis Wilkerson, Managing Director at the Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center at Howard University speak about the meaning of restorative, or transformational justice. Wilkerson will explain how communities can address the historic wrongs of enslavement, lynching, segregation, and mass incarceration in a positive way that brings justice, healing and transformation. Please join us as we consider how to reckon with racial terror events in Alexandria's past.



Joseph McCoy Remembrance Wreath Laying Ceremony

Sunday, April 23, 2023 from 2 p.m. (gather at 1:45 p.m.)

Fairfax Street Side of Market Square

All are welcome!

Alexandria community members will remember the 1897 racial terror lynching of Joseph McCoy with a procession from the doors of the police station where he was kidnapped by a white mob to the corner of Cameron and Lee Streets where he was lynched, and lay a wreath at the foot of a light post. Those who wish to join the ceremony are asked to gather on the east side of City Hall.

In Memoriam: Illumination of Sites of Significance

Friday-Sunday April 21-23

The community is encouraged to visit the [In Memoriam](#) webpage to learn more about McCoy, pay their respects at the site where the lynching took place, and view the remembrance marker. As part of the [Alexandria Community Remembrance Project](#), City Hall, the old Station House Door of City Hall on N. Fairfax Street, the lynching location on N. Lee Street, and the George Washington Masonic Memorial will be illuminated in purple, the color of mourning, throughout the weekend to provide belated accountability, reconciliation, honor, and respect for McCoy.

Get a yard sign! Please consider placing a yard sign about the lynchings in your yard, window or balcony in recognition and remembrance. They can be picked up on Friday, April 21 at The Alexandria Black History Museum, and/or at Charles Houston on Saturday, April 22 from 10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Please take our survey! ACRP's Steering Committee is interested in finding out how our members would like to honor Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. [Please take our short survey to let us know.](#)

Alexandria Library Black Family Reunion

Saturday, April 29, 2023 from 11 am - 3 pm

In front of the Kate Waller Barrett Branch Library, 717 Queen Street

Alexandria Library is hosting its first ever Black Family Reunion on Saturday, April 29, 2023. The event, at the Barrett Branch Library in Old Town, aims to bring neighborhoods together and help fill gaps in the documented history of Alexandria's African American community. The event will feature music, games, food trucks, and more. Guests who bring a picture of people or places that have to do with Alexandria's black neighborhoods will receive a ticket for a free meal and dessert. The ACRP will have a booth at the event!

Book Talk, not to be missed!

Sunday, April 30, 2020 3 p.m.

Lloyd House

Free event, books available for purchase onsite.

Brenda Mitchell-Powell, Ph.D., author of *Public in Name Only: The 1939 Alexandria Library Sit-In Demonstration*, presents a summary and contextual framework for the nation's first known and recorded protest for Black access to a Whites-only public library. The book talk will be followed by a book signing and refreshments.

Equal Justice Initiative Scholarship Award Ceremony

Saturday, May 20, 2023 11 a.m. - 12 p.m.

City Council Chambers

Come and celebrate our kids! The essay contest is one of the EJI Remembrance Programs' expectations for localities who are engaging in the work of truth-telling, memorializing, and transforming their communities. A collaboration between ACRP and ACPS, the essay contest closed on March 17, 2023, and winners will be announced and celebrated at the May 20 event.

Upcoming Committee Meetings

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Marker Committee (formerly soil and marker) will meet virtually on Thursday, April 20, at 7 p.m. [To join, register here.](#)

Committee Meetings

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Steering Committee met in person on April 18, at 5 p.m. at The Alexandria Black History Museum.

[Joseph McCoy](#) [Benjamin Thomas](#).

[*For more information*](#)

[*Donate to the Project*](#)

ACRP@alexandriava.gov

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) is a city-wide initiative dedicated to helping Alexandria understand its history of racial terror hate crimes and to work toward creating a welcoming community bound by equity and inclusion.

**Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia**



[HOME](#) | [LEARN](#) | [VISIT](#) | [DONATE](#) | [SHOP](#)