

The Lynching of Benjamin Thomas, August 8, 1899

Alexandria Community Remembrance Project

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Introduction

Around midnight on August 8, 1899, a 16-year-old African American teenager named Benjamin Thomas was lynched in Alexandria, Virginia. A white mob comprised of Alexandria citizens attacked the city jail on St. Asaph Street, and Benjamin Thomas was pulled by a rope half a mile to the southwest corner of King and Fairfax streets, opposite Market Square:

He was dragged, with a rope around his neck, three squares over cobble stones and over the roughest streets of that rough old town, surrounded by a mob of 2,000 whites, who pelted him with stones, brickbats, pieces of iron, pocket knives, and sent bullets through his body for every inch of that distance.¹

Although Benjamin Thomas was hanged from a lamppost, the medical doctor who testified at the coroner's inquest stated that he died from a bullet wound to the heart.²

Two years before, on April 23, 1897, another African American teenager, Joseph McCoy, was lynched in Alexandria. A white mob attacked the city's police station and pulled McCoy from his cell and hanged him on the corner of Cameron and Lee Streets, just blocks from where Benjamin Thomas was later murdered.³

Some things had changed in Alexandria since 1897.⁴ A different mayor and governor were in office, and members of the Alexandria Light Infantry had recently returned from the Spanish American War and had not yet reorganized. However, there are striking commonalities between these two lynchings. They illustrate a much larger and wider history of systemic racism, injustice, and violence that persists in Alexandria, and America, to the present day.

This narrative highlights the inconsistencies, biases, sensationalism, and falsehoods in official statements and the white press' reporting about the lynching. In both Alexandria lynchings, the white authorities were deliberately complicit in their refusal to name and bring to justice members of the white mob.

In the case of Benjamin Thomas, the officers defending the jail were not prepared to do everything in their power to protect the prisoner. In fact, city officials and law enforcement officers obstructed and punished members of the Black community who were willing to stand up to white violence.

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 permitted voter disenfranchisement, meant that, for the time being, African Americans had no legal recourse to fight against these policies.⁵

In Virginia, segregation laws were passed at particular historical moments related to popular attitudes about race relations in the state. Virginia’s post-Civil War Constitution, also known as the Underwood Constitution (1868), included the 13th and 14th Amendments, but it also segregated the state’s newly established public-school system. After enslavement, white Virginians separated themselves from Black people culturally and legally. A few years later, the General Assembly had begun to pass additional racist legislation, which led to the rise of the Readjuster Party (1877-1883) - a coalition of black and white voters who worked together to curtail such legislation in Virginia. The collapse of the Readjuster Party, however, created a political vacuum that gave rise to the Democratic Party, (known as Conservatives) which dominated Virginia politics until the 1960s. This party was responsible for instituting Jim Crow policies similar to other states. The Democrats called another Constitutional Convention in 1902 with the purpose of disenfranchising Black Virginians. The new Constitution that was enacted by the courts - instead of through a referendum - 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.⁶

White residents enforced compliance with these laws through intimidation, violence and disenfranchisement. Lynching, a form of extra-legal violence used to terrorize African American communities in the U.S. South, became a tool wielded to ensure white domination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most common excuses for lynchings were murder and alleged sexual assault against a white female.⁷ However, people have been lynched for as small a thing as a perceived slight - because they “offended” the false racial hierarchy established by white southerners after regaining political power. Although it was extrajudicial murder, lynching was not considered a federal offense.

The Accusation, Arrest, and Murder of Benjamin Thomas (Monday, August 7, 1899)

"It is now generally admitted that he was not guilty." --Reverend R.E. Hart

On Monday, August 7, 1899, the Alexandria police arrested Benjamin Thomas on the charge of attempted criminal assault on Lillian Kloch, the daughter of Edward and Julia Kloch, who lived at 702 Patrick Street. Benjamin Thomas was a 16-year-old African American Alexandrian. Lillian Kloch was a seven-year-old white girl who lived next door. The arresting officers were Herbert Knight and William Wilkinson. Thomas asserted his innocence at the time of his arrest.⁸

Mayor George L. Simpson directed Knight to confine Thomas in the police Station House until the next

morning. The *Alexandria Gazette* reported that he had directed Knight to do this “quietly,” but the same article states that Thomas’ arrest and alleged crime had “caused some excitement in the community.”⁹

The next morning, Tuesday August 8, Thomas appeared before the Mayor’s Court at City Hall. Lillian Kloch testified. The accusation varied in telling both before the court and in the press. Lillian was either sent next door to borrow¹⁰ or retrieve an ax,¹¹ or she was walking by Thomas’ house.¹² She was either alone or with her younger brother.¹³ She was “seized” in the house or, as Lillian herself stated in court, she was “passing by Thomas’ house, when the latter dragged her indoors...”¹⁴ The accused allegedly “seized her” and/or “attempted to take liberties with her.”¹⁵ Lillian was either rescued immediately¹⁶ or Thomas “fled when she made an outcry”¹⁷ or “she had only escaped by running away and screaming.”¹⁸ It does not appear that anyone testified on Benjamin Thomas’ behalf, including Thomas himself.

On the evening of Tuesday August 8, an armed white terror mob pulled Thomas from the jail. They placed a rope around his neck, dragged him half a mile through the streets of Alexandria, and lynched him.

The *Baltimore Sun* later wrote that: “The offense for which the negro Ben Thomas suffered did not include any violence to the person of the child, but on her complaint of the way Thomas had treated her, her father spoke to some of the white residents of the neighborhood and on their advice swore out the warrant upon which Thomas was arrested and committed to the police station.”¹⁹

Discrepancies in witnesses’ reports and newspaper accounts are reflected in the comments of Reverend R.E. Hart, of Israel Christian Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. Hart visited Alexandria the day after the lynching as part of an investigation on behalf of the National Organized Brotherhood of Afro- Americans. The *Cleveland Gazette* interviewed Rev. Hart and reported:

*It is now generally admitted that he was not guilty. The mother of the girl, I learn, told him when interviewed that the young man was not guilty and that she had known him from a youth to be a good boy.*²⁰

Benjamin Thomas was born around 1883 in Alexandria.²¹ His parents were George Thomas, a laborer, and Elizabeth Washington, a laundress. They were married in Washington, D.C. on March 3, 1864.²² Although newspaper articles at the time reported his age as 20 or 21 years old, Benjamin Thomas was only 16 at the time of his murder.²³ Two years earlier, he had been baptized and “received the right hand of fellowship” at age 14 at Shiloh Baptist Church.²⁴ Prior to his death, Thomas resided with his mother, Elizabeth, at 700 North Patrick Street, next-door to the Kloch Family.²⁵

Lillian Kloch was the daughter of Edward and Julia Kloch, who lived at 702 Patrick Street on the western edge of the African American neighborhood referred to as Uptown. African American families lived on either side of the Kloch’s.²⁶ The family made their living “by selling milk and doing odd jobs.”²⁷ The pronunciation of the family name was very much like Clark, and the newspapers initially reported the name as Clark or Clarke.²⁸

Protecting Benjamin Thomas After His Arrest, Monday Night, August 7 to Tuesday Morning, August 8, 1899

They "proposed to offer their lives in his defense." -- Times (Washington, D.C.) August 9, 1899.

After his arrest on Monday, Benjamin Thomas was detained at the Alexandria Station House at 126 N. Fairfax Street, on the east side of City Hall by Market Square.²⁹

Alexandria's African American community soon became aware of the arrest and the nature of the accusations against Thomas. Neighborhood conversations revolved around the potential threat of a recurrence of the 1897 lynching of Joseph McCoy. As concerns grew, some Black men organized themselves, intending to aid the police in defending the accused.³⁰

While Black citizens grew concerned, Mayor George Simpson walked the streets until after midnight, conversing with groups of presumably white Alexandrians. He later stated that he perceived no threat. Lt. James Smith also conducted patrols and reported no danger to the prisoner.³¹

Simpson and Smith's statements contrasted with the experience of African American resident James Turley, who was returning home from work when he was confronted by a group of white men, who were loudly threatening to lynch the accused man at the station. Turley returned to the streets to find out the identity of the prisoner and to organize men in the prisoner's defense.³²

As midnight neared, another Black man, Albert Green, also organized and led a group of men. The *Times* described the group as "a mob of several hundred colored people, headed by Albert Green, [who] paraded the principal streets of the city, and several times passed the police station."³³ Lieutenant Smith observed the men and activity on the streets around the Station House, including several men passing back and forth in front of the Station House doors. Reports of the crowds outside the station varied dramatically, ranging from several to several hundred.³⁴

Throughout the city, the Black community demanded protection for Thomas, adamantly stating their willingness to help in his defense. This desire to aid both the accused and officers is repeatedly portrayed in newspaper articles as an affront to the white community and a threat of direct violence against white residents of Alexandria.³⁵

Nearby, Mayor Simpson was at his home at 126 N. Columbus Street when a delegation of Black men arrived slightly after midnight. The men pleaded with the mayor to provide extra protection for Thomas due to fears of his threatened lynching. They reiterated the community's fear of another act of violence like the 1897 killing. The mayor denied their requests and instead threatened the men with arrest for being on the street.³⁶

At one point during the evening, Bob Arnold, white, arrived at the Station House to complain about the

groups of Black men he had seen on the streets.³⁷ Officers on the streets of The Berg also reported increased concern about Black residents congregating in streets and alleys, discussing their fears about an attempt on Thomas' life.³⁸

Around 1 a.m., Lieutenant Smith made his way to the mayor's home. He did not come to report any of the concerns voiced by the Black community. Instead, Smith expressed concerns about the growing numbers of Black men "parading" and forming groups in the vicinity of the Station House.³⁹

In response, Simpson ordered Smith to direct officers to report to the Station House and begin clearing the streets and arresting Black residents. He dismissed the residents' desire to help, instead of seeing it as aggressive behavior that he needed to suppress.⁴⁰

Following the mayor's orders, Smith directed eight officers--Jefferson Beach, Benjamin Bettis, James Deane, James Hall, James Howson, William Lyles, Frank Spinks, and Banner Young--to the streets around the Station House.⁴¹ Officers Lyles, Howson, and Spinks were then dispatched to the lumber yards by the waterfront but returned quickly with no unusual activity to report.⁴²

In later testimony, Lieutenant Smith declared that no actions of the white citizens justified the Black community's fears Monday evening. Reports also stated that white citizens on the streets were determined to assist the police in subduing Black men who organized to defend Thomas. Police officers later enlisted a number of these white men to help detain Black citizens.⁴³

Upon returning to the vicinity of the Station House after 1 on Tuesday morning, Lieutenant Smith confronted a group of Black men at the corner of Cameron and Fairfax streets. Led by Albert Green, the men once again tried to impress upon the officer their fears about an impending lynching. Green stated the men's intent to put their lives between Thomas and white mob violence. They "proposed to offer their lives in his defence."⁴⁴

Lieutenant Smith rebuffed the men, discounted their fears, and ordered them to disperse. He threatened arrest in response to their pleas, just as Mayor Simpson had done earlier. When the men continued to protest, Smith arrested Albert Green for being "very insolent." Green was then taken to the Station House by Officer Weston Atkinson.⁴⁵

This detention of Black leadership forced the rest of the group to move.⁴⁶ The men walked north, but Lieutenant Smith and his officers continued to harass and move them along until they reached the corner of Fairfax and Princess street, known as "Hard Corner."⁴⁷ Here, the men continued to talk amongst themselves.

Officer Smith again accosted the group and ordered them to get off the streets and return home. At this point, Smith rushed the group and arrested two more men, Alfred Mason and Harry MacDonald, both Black.⁴⁸ Smith turned them over to Officer Spinks and Harry Fisher, a white bystander. Fisher and other

white men had apparently followed the police into the predominantly Black neighborhood and aided the officers in harassing and detaining the men who advocated for Thomas's protection.⁴⁹

Elsewhere in Alexandria, Officer Atkinson and a group of white men accosted other Black citizens who were also trying to protect Thomas. One group they confronted was led by James Turley—the Black citizen who had previously overheard the threats to lynch Thomas. When confronted, Turley and Richard Washington spoke for the group of Black men, expressing their desire to help protect the prisoner.⁵⁰

Atkinson and three white men arrested Turley and Washington. The white men, David Makely, William Schoeni, and a third unnamed individual, were not police officers but were empowered and encouraged by the police officers to detain Black residents.⁵¹

Throughout the night, police and white citizens patrolled the African American neighborhoods looking for Black men who were congregating. Seven additional Black men were arrested. It is unclear if these men were part of the groups organizing in defense of Benjamin Thomas or if they were simply going about their business on the streets of their own neighborhoods. These men, Edward Gibson, Robert Buckner, Allen Carter, John Haskins, James Alexander, Edward Payne, and Thomas Elzie (also spelled Eley), appeared in the Mayor's Court the following morning. They, as well as Green, Mason, MacDonald, Turley, and Washington, were brought forward on various charges, including carrying concealed weapons, disorderly conduct, and inciting a riot.⁵²

Only James Turley was reported to possess a firearm, but others among the arrested men were carrying weapons like cobblestones and bricks in order to defend the Station House from the threat of white violence. In contrast to reports of uncontrolled gunfire from the white mob at the lynching the next night, none of the Black men used their weapons in any way. Although armed, they went with the police, without incident, at the time of their arrests.⁵³

The white press portrayed the actions of the Black community in a purely negative light. Newspaper articles depicted their attempt to defend the Station House and aid the police as, "demonstrations against the whites."⁵⁴ *The Times* of Washington, D.C. claimed Black organizers said they would "kill every white man in the city" if needed.⁵⁵

The African American *Richmond Planet* presented a different perspective:

We are pleased to notice the attitude of the colored men of Alexandria in organizing to prevent a lynching. Our only regret is that they did not go further, and be more combative. Oh, what a pity that the colored men dispersed and failed to re-assemble again! However, they acted manfully. Let colored men in other sections do likewise. Let them defend colored men threatened with lynching even if they have to sacrifice a dozen lives in so doing.⁵⁶

In the following days, white newspapers would celebrate the “prompt action of Lieutenant Smith and his men” in dispersing the Black crowd and returning the city to its “normal state.” This normal state would include a brutal murder the following night by the city’s white residents.⁵⁷

The African American Activists Appear Before the Mayor's Court Tuesday Morning, August 8, 1899

“Was there ever a greater parody upon justice...?” --Richmond Planet. August 12, 1899

On Tuesday morning, following the Black community’s successful protection of Benjamin Thomas, white Alexandria was in an uproar. Newspapers and word-of-mouth inflamed sentiment through exaggeration, falsehoods, and distortion. Wild stories told of hundreds of armed Black men attempting to break the accused free, of cries to lynch a white man, and of willingness to kill white residents. Edward Kloch arrived at the mayor’s office with a box of stones, claiming they had been used to attack his home. While the Black community defended their intent to aid in protecting Thomas, authorities and journalists blamed them for roiling the white residents. Articles steadfastly claimed that no white resident knew of the case prior to the organized effort at defense. On the street, affronted white Alexandrians spoke of lynching.⁵⁸

Talk of the Black community’s reaction crossed the river into the District of Columbia. White newspaper reports assured readers that another lynching attempt later that night would not be similarly thwarted. At one Washington hotel, a white former Virginian was overheard saying that if the lynchers needed any help he would gladly return home and assist them to the extent of his power.⁵⁹

Amid this atmosphere, Mayor Simpson convened the court at City Hall.⁶⁰ Well before court commenced, Alexandrians began crowding around the Station House. The mayor took his seat before a full courtroom.⁶¹ The court, presided over by Simpson, ruled on minor offenses, and decided which cases would be held over for a grand jury.

The first case before the court presented Edward Gibson, Alfred Mason, Harry McDonald, and James Turley—the Black men who had been arrested the previous night. They were tried for disorderly conduct, carrying concealed weapons, and inciting a riot.⁶²

Lieutenant James Smith testified first, recounting his version of Monday night’s events. He stated that the town was very quiet until shortly before midnight when several Black men passed the Police Station House together, and Black men congregated in their neighborhoods.⁶³ This was enough for Smith to report to the mayor’s house at 1 a.m.⁶⁴ The mayor then ordered Smith to round up officers and clear the streets by dispersing or arresting the Black residents.⁶⁵ During his testimony, Smith claimed that he saw no gathering of white citizens.⁶⁶

Following Smith, police officer Weston Atkinson testified about arresting James Turley. He described confronting a group of Black men, of whom Turley and Richard Washington appeared to be the spokesmen.

The newspapers do not describe why Turley and Washington were arrested for offering to defend Thomas and the Station House. Turley's charge for carrying a concealed weapon was only determined at the Station House, where he was found to have a firearm.⁶⁷

Officers Banner Young and Benjamin Bettis testified next. Young described the Black men as "obdurate" and "bent on mischief," stating "there seemed to be no corner in the eastern part of town without its squad of rioters." Calling the Black men "rioters" stands in stark contrast to the officers' descriptions of their encounters and conversations with the Black men they met.⁶⁸

Several white citizens testified as well, repeating the accusations of the police officers. They described the night's events as "riotous" and continuing until 2 a.m. All mirrored the sentiment of the mayor and police that "no threats of lynching were heard on the part of the whites."⁶⁹

The only man to speak on behalf of the group arrested was James Turley. Represented by attorney Joseph Flanigen, Turley pleaded innocent to the charge of causing disorder. He testified that he was returning home from work when he encountered several white men threatening to lynch a man. He had gone to find out what the trouble was and to discover the man's identity.⁷⁰

Following Turley's testimony, Mayor Simpson berated the accused men and the Black community for a "boisterous display of regard for the safety of one of their own race," one where they "noisily congregate and recklessly invite a catastrophe." He described Alexandria's white community as completely unaware of any trouble. He found the first four men guilty and punished them⁷¹ with fines of \$20 each,⁷² or 30 days on the chain gang.⁷³

During the hearing, John Nelson and William Washington were seated in the courtroom audience. Witnesses pointed to the two Black men, declaring them to have been part of the previous evening's events. The two were immediately placed in custody and charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot alongside the second group of men. This group included Albert Green, Allen Carter, Robert Buckner, John Haskins, James Alexander, Edward Payne, Thomas Elzie, and Richard Washington. Witnesses provided the same evidence, and the mayor gave his verdict. Albert Green was fined \$20 for his role as a leader. Carter, Buckner, Haskins, Alexander, Payne, Elzie, and Richard Washington were all fined \$5.⁷⁴ The cases against John Nelson and William Washington were dismissed.⁷⁵

The African American newspaper, *The Richmond Planet*, reflected upon the proceedings:

Was there ever a greater parody upon justice than the sight of citizens of Alexandria, colored citizens hauled before a white mayor and fined \$20 for doing their duty? Mayor Simpson is a disgrace to the office. He, a sworn official of the law fining other citizens who were anxious to see the laws upheld.⁷⁶

Benjamin Thomas Hearing Tuesday Morning, August 8, 1899

"The child was the only witness examined." --Alexandria Gazette, August 8, 1899.

Sixteen-year-old Benjamin Thomas' hearing came next. One journalist described him as "perfectly calm" but having had a restless night. Another described him as "cowed and frightened." The same writers would go on to describe the remarkable intelligence and poise exhibited by seven-year-old Lillian Kloch.⁷⁷

Lillian Kloch, who sat next to her parents Edward and Julia Kloch, was the only witness.⁷⁸ She testified that she was passing by Benjamin Thomas' house near Patrick and Wythe Streets. She described finding him seated on an inside stairway. She stated that he grabbed her, drawing her toward him. She accused Thomas of attempting "to take liberties with her" in front of her little brother, but that "he committed no assault." Lillian said she was able to break away from the man and run home screaming, where she informed her mother.⁷⁹

Lillian's testimony was the sole evidence offered to the court. There is no record of Benjamin Thomas being allowed to testify in his own defense. Immediately following the girl's testimony, Mayor Simpson remanded Thomas into the city sergeant's custody. Thomas was to be held at the Alexandria Jail until a trial by the grand jury for a capital offense. Under Virginia law of the time, he could be hanged for this crime.⁸⁰ Benjamin Thomas was taken immediately from the court and transported to the Alexandria Jail by Officer William Ferguson, "followed by a crowd of whites and blacks."⁸¹

The city's turbulent atmosphere did not subside after the court adjourned. Following the trial, Mayor Simpson was handling a pistol that had been confiscated the night before. He accidentally fired the weapon into the office wall, alarming the people in the street. This incident fed white anxiety and inspired multiple rumors, including one of an attempted escape by Benjamin Thomas.⁸²

The Mood in the City Tuesday Afternoon, August 8, 1899

"Threats of lynching freely made" --Richmond Planet. August 12, 1899.

By many accounts, there was a sense of excitement in Alexandria beginning on Tuesday morning. Small groups of white men gathered on the streets to discuss the arrests of Benjamin Thomas and the African American men who sought to protect him the evening before. Depending on the source, journalists "hardly thought Thomas would be lynched" or heard "threats of lynching freely made" all during the day.⁸³ Police Lt. James Smith, too, reported that there was talk of lynching in the streets.⁸⁴ An observer from Washington, D.C., described small crowds of white men gathering along King, Fairfax, and St. Asaph streets. He said, "I do not believe there was a man in those groups who had not bought or borrowed a firearm."⁸⁵ The *Richmond Planet* reported that "The stock of firearms and ammunition in the city was exhausted, and expeditions were made to Washington to increase the supply."⁸⁶ The *Baltimore Sun* quoted an Alexandria citizen who observed a train car full of white men unknown to him entering the city in the afternoon.⁸⁷

The *Alexandria Gazette* described the scene toward evening:

As the hours passed the groups of men in the streets increased and although scattered over considerable ground they like fragmentary clouds floating in different quarters of the heavens designed to mingle and precipitate a storm. People grew more apprehensive every moment, and in cases people living in some quarters of the city passed the night with friends and relatives residing in other neighborhoods.⁸⁸

Although he stated that he was “apprehending no trouble,” Mayor Simpson ordered Police Chief Webster to fortify the jail with additional personnel for the evening and assured citizens that “every means will be resorted to in order to protect the prisoner.”⁸⁹ Webster selected four “trustworthy officers” and, depending on the report, ten or twenty additional “guards,” “special policemen,” “special officers,” or “sworn citizens.” It would be their combined responsibility to defend the prisoner from any action by the white crowds. Additionally, officers removed Thomas from his cell and hid him in the cellar of the jail.⁹⁰

A crowd began gathering in front of the jail late Tuesday evening. In addition to the groups of men who had been gathering throughout the day, the *Alexandria Gazette* reported that “One hundred women are said to have been on the streets and in the neighborhood” where people were congregating.⁹¹

At one point, gunfire was exchanged between Black and the white crowd, and a Black man was injured. The *Times* reported that the incident occurred when “the negroes attempted a charge on the mob of whites at the jail.”⁹² The *Alexandria Gazette* claimed “a crowd of colored people gathered near the brewery and when a party of white men passed shots were exchanged.”⁹³ George Hammond, African American, was shot in the back and taken to the infirmary where his wound was “not thought to be serious,” and “an attempt was made to keep the matter quiet.”⁹⁴ Both papers report that the Black men left the streets after these incidents.⁹⁵

A witness from Washington, D.C., observed of the growing white mob, “There was a leadership...of the highest ability...The first movement on the jail was orderly, and not until the engagement with the police did the fury of the mob, which had now become lawless and uncontrollable, show itself.”⁹⁶ The *Gazette* wrote that “The march toward the jail was made almost in a double-quick, and the surging mass of humanity was in less time than it takes to tell it surrounding the lockup...”⁹⁷ Sometime between 11 p.m. and midnight, the mob of “enraged white citizens,” which numbered somewhere between 500 and 2,000, came together at the jail and began demanding that Benjamin Thomas be handed over to them.⁹⁸

Mayor George Simpson arrived at the scene with lawyer Samuel Brent. He mounted the steps to the jail to address the crowd, urging them to return home:

“Fellow citizens, if you will disperse and go away quietly, I will promise you that a court will be convened today, and a true bill found by the grand jury. If this is not done, I will give you my word, as a man of honor, that I will personally lead a mob tomorrow night to lynch Thomas...”⁹⁹

The mob was undeterred by the Mayor’s words. Reports varied as to whether the crowd briefly “listened to him in absolute silence” or whether his attempt was a “pitiable spectacle,” but all agreed that ultimately his effort was in vain.¹⁰⁰ The *Fredericksburg Free Lance* reported that the speech was immediately followed by cries of: “‘Give us the nigger!’ ‘He won’t be here tomorrow!’”¹⁰¹ The *Evening Star* confirmed “The mayor’s voice was drowned in a perfect tumult.”¹⁰²

In contrast with the African American men who had sought to defend Thomas the night before, almost no white Alexandria residents were mentioned by name in any subsequent reporting. There are conflicting reports about the composition of the crowd at this point. In an interview with Mayor Simpson the next day, he indicated that he “thought that legal proceedings could be instituted against those who took part in the lynching. He said that when he reached the jail he recognized several prominent citizens as leaders of the mob.” In the same interview, he backed off this statement and said, “Later on, however, these very men were the most prominent in advocating the rule of law and order.” and others assumed leadership.” His continued indecision on this matter, at a minimum, confirms that many members of the mob were known to him:

I did all I could by persuasion and force to disperse the mob. My efforts seemed of no avail. I was trampled upon in defending the dignity of the city. My friends, however, stood by me and all of the respectable citizens who were in the mob did the same, but the lawless element overpowered them. The mob element, although it may be composed of some of my friends, will be prosecuted as far as I am able to the fullest extent of the law.¹⁰³

Denials about the role of white citizens of the city began to appear in the white press immediately. A witness quoted in the *Baltimore Sun* declared, “It is a fact that strangers led the lynching party, and that while nearly a thousand Alexandrians were congregated on the occasion, more of them endeavored to restrain the crowd and to uphold the law than participated in the lynching. This is a plain statement of the facts.”¹⁰⁴

The Mob Grows Violent Tuesday Evening, August 8, 1899, around 11:00 p.m.

“The rope was thrown over the lamp post, willing hands pulled at the loose end, and in a few moments Thomas’ life went out.” --Richmond Planet, August 12, 1899.

The white mob took a heavy piece of wood from a nearby construction site and used it as a battering ram against the jail door, which soon yielded.¹⁰⁶ One newspaper reported that shots were fired from both sides, but the dearth of recorded injuries casts doubt on this account.¹⁰⁷

Chief of Police James F. Webster attempted to stop the crowd but was injured.¹⁰⁸ An account in the *Baltimore Sun*, published several days later, blamed a “very large stranger” for injuring Captain Webster, echoing claims that people from outside of Alexandria comprised the lynch mob.¹⁰⁹

The mob surged into the jail and “overpowered” the officers, then used axes to beat down the heavy, interior iron door.¹¹⁰ The enraged crowd demanded that the guards turn Thomas over to them, but the guards refused.¹¹¹ Members of the white terror mob took the cell keys from the wardens and began to search for him.¹¹² Every cell and room in the jail was “invaded by the frenzied people.”¹¹³ Two Black prisoners, John Dogan and Boden Rowe, were pulled from their cells, assaulted by the mob, and, in the case of Dogan, almost killed.¹¹⁴

The *Alexandria Gazette* reported that Thomas had been “taken to the cellar and placed in a fish barrel in the hope that should the building be forced no one would think of looking in such a hiding place.”¹¹⁵ Other accounts describe that Thomas was hidden in the cellar,¹¹⁶ or crouching in a hole that extended

under the building.¹¹⁷ Jail-keeper Hayes was also in the cellar, attempting to protect the prisoner.¹¹⁸ The *Times* described that “A great shout went up when Thomas was found and one hundred willing hands dragged him out and up the stairs” onto the street.¹¹⁹

Officer Wilkinson, who was by the jail door, declared that the lynch mob had seized the wrong man, drew his pistol, and commanded the crowd to keep away.¹²⁰ Thomas attempted to escape and tried to conceal himself in the entryway of the adjoining Sincox residence. He was soon discovered, however, and the crowd pulled him from this hiding place.¹²¹

The *Evening Star* reported that “A dozen stalwart hands now fastened their grip upon him.”¹²² The excited white mob bound Thomas with a rope around his neck, in his mouth, and under his arms.¹²³ The hooting and jeering mob¹²⁴ dragged the young man, his head bumping over the rough cobble-stones, south down St. Asaph Street.¹²⁵ The *Richmond Planet* wrote that “Thousands of spectators” followed close behind.¹²⁶ Estimates of the size of the lynch mob ranged from 300¹²⁷ to 500,¹²⁸ to as many as 2,000.¹²⁹

The *Alexandria Gazette* reported that “The excitement at this time was at fever bent.”¹³⁰ Later, numerous accounts described, with exhilaration and relish, the murderers’ brutalization of Benjamin Thomas.¹³¹ The frenzied mob pelted him with stones and bricks.¹³² They struck him with pieces of iron.¹³³ They stabbed him, kicked him, and fired “bullet after bullet” into his body. Wounded and bleeding, Thomas “cried in vain for his mother.”¹³⁴

The *Evening Star* reported that:

The outspreading limbs of a convenient tree presented themselves and a halt was called, but it was soon decided to seek another place. Vainly Thomas strove to free himself. He fought with the ferocity of a demon. But the rope had so caught over his head as to make him powerless. In the struggle every particle of clothing was torn from his body, so that his feet alone were protected. His cries and moans were heartrending, but the mob was relentless. Down to King Street the crowd proceeded, shouting and firing pistols in the air.¹³⁵

At the corner of King Street, the mob turned eastward, then stopped at the intersection of King and Fairfax streets, which is half a mile from the Alexandria Jail.¹³⁶ The choice was no accident. This intersection, known as “Leadbeater’s Corner,” was among the most prominent in Alexandria.¹³⁷ At that point, according to the *Times*, Thomas’ head “was crushed and battered by the terrible drag over the stones, while his breast and legs were a mass of bullet holes.”¹³⁸

Across from Market Square and under the shadow of City Hall, a noose was quickly made,¹³⁹ and the rope was thrown over a lamp post;¹⁴⁰ “willing hands pulled at the loose end, and in a few moments Thomas’ life went out.”¹⁴¹ The murderers then used Thomas’ corpse as a “target for a number of pistols which were emptied into it.”¹⁴² The *Times* reported that 200 shots were fired into Thomas’ body, riddling it with bullets.¹⁴³ One participant proudly reported snatching souvenirs of the crime from the body, including bloody scraps of clothing, a bit of rope, and part of a bullet casing that went through Thomas’ head.¹⁴⁴

The white terror mob, “after being satisfied that he was dead, dispersed,”¹⁴⁵ “leaving the body suspended as a terrible warning.”¹⁴⁶

According to the *Evening Star*, "While the body was dangling and scarcely before firing had ceased Officer Wilkinson dashed forward and cut Thomas down."¹⁴⁷

The Day After the Lynching Wednesday August 9, 1899

"We, the jury, find that Benjamin Thomas came to his death by the hands of a mob, the members of which are unknown to the jury" --*Alexandria Gazette*. August 9, 1899.

As day broke on Wednesday, August 9, 1899, the *Alexandria Gazette* reported that "the streets gradually resumed their normal quiet."¹⁴⁸

There was a tone of ghoulish excitement in the newspapers, which reflected the mood of many of the white citizens. Words and phrases such as "excitement," "theatre," and "topic of conversation" were used.¹⁴⁹ There was also talk in the white community about laying the blame for the incident on the gathering of Black men who attempted to protect Thomas on Monday night at the Station House. The prevailing white sentiment was that the actions of the African American community caused the behavior of the white mob and the subsequent lynching.¹⁵⁰ The *Baltimore Sun* reported "the popular feeling had culminated in the idea that a class of negroes were carrying things with a high hand..." and "This led to the lynching."¹⁵¹

The *Alexandria Gazette* reported that "The authorities have taken decided steps to prevent any further breach of the peace." These precautions were taken to constrain the Black community, as the white mob had already achieved its purpose.¹⁵²

An inquest was held on the morning of August 9 at Demaine's Funeral Home in the 800 block of King Street. It was conducted by the city coroner, Dr. William Purvis, who had also conducted the inquest into the lynching of Joseph McCoy in 1897. The first witness was Dr. T. Marshall Jones, who had completed the autopsy. Jones testified that Thomas "had several bullet wounds; that he was bruised on the neck without the neck being broken, and that a bullet wound in the heart caused death." The verdict stated that: "We, the jury, find that Benjamin Thomas came to his death by the hands of a mob, the members of which are unknown to the jury, immediate cause of death being due to gunshot wound of heart."¹⁵³

The idea that the members of the white mob were "unknown to the jury" clearly contradicted earlier reports that prominent citizens were present and involved, but mirrors the conclusions reached in the lynching of Joseph McCoy in 1897 and responses to lynchings throughout the country.¹⁵⁴ In both of Alexandria's terror lynchings, white citizens, officers, and officials refused to name the white men who took part in the murders.¹⁵⁵

Indeed, the boldness of these denials seemed to have grown in the two years since Joseph McCoy was killed. After the 1897 lynching of Joseph McCoy, excuses referred to the darkness of the night, hats obscuring faces, and claims that the mob was largely composed of men from outside the town. In 1899, the white community did not attempt to make excuses. The *Times* of Washington D.C. stated that "the lynchers wore no masks" and that the mayor and police officers were certainly close enough to have identified members of the mob.¹⁵⁶ The crime was committed with full confidence that the perpetrators would never be brought to justice.

To cement the violent assertion of white dominance over the Black community, Mayor Simpson ordered the Alexandria Light Infantry to “hold themselves in readiness for any emergency.”¹⁵⁷ By 3 p.m., a shipment of 60 rifles and ammunition had arrived by train from Richmond and been sent to the armory on South Royal Street for the use of the Infantry, under the command of Captain James E. King. This appears to have been in response to a group of prominent white citizens who approached the mayor that morning to voice fears over possible retaliation from the Black community.¹⁵⁸ One newspaper reported that the lynching “has awakened the State to its unprotected condition.”¹⁵⁹

Members of the Infantry and the police spoke to reporters and expressed a readiness to quash any trouble. The *Times* reported that one police officer “in speaking of the colored people generally, [stated] that ‘they ought to be shot on sight.’” A private in the Alexandria Light Infantry, who was detailed as a sentinel at the entrance to the Armory, told the reporter “I hope there’ll be plenty of trouble. What’s the difference?”¹⁶⁰

The Night After the Lynching Wednesday August 9, 1899

“...a crime that had again brought disgrace on Alexandria and its white citizens” --Cleveland Gazette, August 26, 1899.

By Wednesday evening, newspapers described the atmosphere in Alexandria as returned to its “normal condition.” However, observers hinted that the Black community felt both fear and anger in the wake of the lynching. There are only a few articles describing the mood among Black citizens. The *Times* reported that they were mostly absent from the streets and “...some sat in the doorways of their homes. There was no suggestion of an uprising.”¹⁶¹ There were, however, signs of other forms of resistance. The *Times* reported that “numerous colored servants have refused to return to their work in the homes of white families.”¹⁶²

As they did after the McCoy lynching, white citizens reportedly expressed “sorrow and humiliation at the work of Tuesday night.”¹⁶³ An article in *The Independent, a journal of religion and politics*, throws further light on this idea. It is clear that Alexandrians’ dismay resulted from the blow to the town’s reputation, not the pain, suffering, and injustice the lynching caused:

...while there is doubtless a strong reaction of public sentiment and of judicial opinion which leads Alexandria to deplore this tragedy, that is simply because the memory of it, and especially the civilized world’s condemnation of it, wounds the civic pride of the people and not because it troubles the civic conscience.¹⁶⁴

Numerous conflicting rumors circulated that there would be retaliation by the Black community. The *Times* described the situation in this way: “Yesterday afternoon lurid rumors, magnified or distorted in transit, flashed from lip to lip.”¹⁶⁵ These rumors proved to be unfounded. This did not prevent the mayor from issuing orders limiting gathering by the African American community.¹⁶⁶ No similar restrictions were placed on Alexandria’s white citizens, who were out in abundance in the vicinity of City Hall and the site of the lynching. White sightseers, revelers, and even groups of young boys and girls gathered.¹⁶⁷

The Kloch house on North Patrick Street was guarded by a squad of police during the night,¹⁶⁸ and armed white men patrolled the streets. The reason given was “to prevent threatened injuries to the Kloch house.” No such attacks occurred.¹⁶⁹ *The Cleveland Gazette*, an African American newspaper,

described the situation in this way:

...an angry militia [of presumably white citizens] was armed with Winchesters looking out for a 'race riot,' as the authorities claimed, in order to divert public attention from a crime that had again brought disgrace on Alexandria and its white citizens.¹⁷⁰

There were no reported incidents of violence or trouble on the night of August 9. A single quote in the *Times* conveyed the resignation and fear expressed by the Black community:

...what have we to be violent with? You have the arms and the wealth. We have neither. The law is with you and against us. We would simply invite our annihilation were we to provoke a conflict.¹⁷¹

The Funeral and Memorial Service Thursday August 10, 1899 and Monday August 28, 1899

"The blood of Ben Thomas will be forever upon this city and upon the hands of those who participated in the crime." --Reverend Henry H. Warring.

Benjamin Thomas' body remained at Demaine's undertaking establishment after the post-mortem and inquest. The *Evening Star* reported that the body was visited by hundreds, but not by Elizabeth Thomas, Benjamin's mother, who "could not bear to look upon her boy... and would have nothing to do with his funeral."¹⁷² The *Washington Post* indicated that Mrs. Thomas was "said to have been extremely ill as a result of the lynching."¹⁷³ On Thursday, August 10, there was a simple service at Demaine's. According to the *Post*, "There was no minister present and no pallbearers. The friends and relatives of Thomas did not attend the funeral. The corpse was placed in a stained pine coffin..."¹⁷⁴

At 10 a.m., Thomas was interred at Penny Hill Cemetery. The *Times* reported that "no one shed a tear over the grave," although the *Post* observed that "At the grave three colored women peered into the sepulcher to pay their last respects."¹⁷⁵ The city paid for the burial in the pauper's graveyard.¹⁷⁶

On Monday, August 28, a memorial service was held for Benjamin Thomas at Shiloh Baptist Church at West and Duke streets. A large crowd, estimated at 600, attended. In addition to Shiloh's pastor Rev. Henry H. Warring, the speakers included Rev. William D. Loving of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Rev. William H. Johnson of Beulah Baptist Church, and Rev. Junius Loving of Enon Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.¹⁷⁷

Rev. Warring spoke of Thomas as a moral, honest boy, who was innocent of the crime that led to his lynching. He asked, Who can tell how this poor innocent boy felt as he crouched in the cellar at the jail and listened to the howling mob crying for his life's blood; when the rope was placed about his neck and into his mouth; when he was dragged mercilessly through the streets and bullets were being poured into his body by his heartless persecutors, as he cried in vain for his mother?¹⁷⁸

The Shiloh Baptist pastor condemned the city for failing to protect the prisoner; he said that when concerned citizens urged officials to move Thomas out of the jurisdiction for his safety, the mayor had refused, stating that such an act would reflect badly on Alexandria. Rev. Warring continued,

The blood of Ben Thomas will be forever upon this city and upon the hands of those who participated in the crime. The day of sober thought has arrived; the day for wiser men to devise a remedy for lynching. It is the duty of every man, white or Black, to denounce the crime.¹⁷⁹

Rev. Warring advocated charging anyone guilty of the lynching with criminal assault, and he exhorted the congregation to boycott businesses of anyone who had been in the lynch mob: "Men stand behind counters selling you goods whose hands are stained with the blood of Ben Thomas. Don't spend another dollar with them."¹⁸⁰

The African American community mobilized to assist the Thomas family financially and to raise money to move Thomas' body from his pauper's grave into Douglass Cemetery. A "pound party," attended by "very many colored people...added something to the means of supporting the family."¹⁸¹ The African American Odd Fellows' Harmony Lodge hosted a cakewalk, with live music furnished by Murray's Band.¹⁸² Money was also collected at the memorial service.¹⁸³ However, there are no records indicating Thomas body was ever moved from Penny Hill.

Aftermath

"It is charged that the police practically surrendered the prisoner without protest, or at the most without opposition." --Times (Washington DC), August 10, 1899.

The papers reported that the day after the lynching, the remaining Thomas family members left the house they had rented at 700 Patrick Street and moved to a home on Pendleton Street.¹⁸⁴ However, the 1900 Census indicates the family moved to Washington, D.C.

Lillian Kloch's father, Edward Kloch, was involved in an incident that same morning. At around 10 a.m., he discharged a gun at his home. Some reports claimed he was cleaning the gun and it went off accidentally. Others suggested it was discharged during an altercation with two white men who remonstrated Kloch for suggesting they were involved in the arrest of Benjamin Thomas. Another report tied it to an alleged attack on his home involving stone-throwing and then a subsequent argument with a Black neighbor, Susan Gregory. She was arrested and put in a cell at the Station House. Kloch appears to have gone unpunished for his part in this incident.¹⁸⁵

The days after the lynch mob killed Thomas, two white men reported gunshot wounds from the evening of the lynching. William May, a former representative from Alexandria to the Virginia House of Delegates, was struck twice by stray shots while sitting at a window of his home at the corner of Cameron and St. Asaph streets. His wounds were not serious.¹⁸⁶ Another white man, William Bradley, sustained an injury to two fingers of his left hand that were lacerated by a bullet.¹⁸⁷ Reports suggest Bradley's injury occurred outside the jail, making him the only white man named as being present in the mob during the lynching.

Mayor Simpson claimed in press interviews on August 9, that legal proceedings would be instituted against those who took part in the lynching.¹⁸⁸ James Tyler, Governor of Virginia, said "With all good citizens I deplore the awful crime and its horrible consequences. I have full confidence that the local authorities will do their duty."¹⁸⁹ Commonwealth's Attorney Leonard Marbury promised that the crime would be thoroughly investigated and the perpetrators dealt with according to the law.¹⁹⁰ However, there appears to have been little or no effort to ascertain the names of anyone in the white mob, let

alone charge them. This is despite clear indications that the mob members did not hide their identities. "The lynchers wore no masks," one newspaper reported, "and it is held that as the mayor and the police were reasonably close to them, some arrests should follow."¹⁹¹

Quotations from the *Evening Star* illustrated how quickly the white community backtracked on claims that prominent, white Alexandria citizens were recognizable in the mob and were involved in the lynching. Mayor Simpson said:

...when he reached the jail he recognized several prominent citizens as leaders of the mob. Later on, however, these very men were the most prominent in advocating the rule of law and order, and others assumed leadership.¹⁹²

An article the following day contradicted the statement that the "leading citizens were most prominent in the affair." The white individuals who objected maintained that the mob "was a miscellaneous congregation," not composed of Alexandrians.¹⁹³

Despite their promises, local and state authorities never investigated the events of the lynching. There were no arrests or prosecutions of the perpetrators who killed Benjamin Thomas. The authorities and the press were quick to move the blame for the lynching away from Alexandria's white citizens.

Beginning the evening of August 7, officials suggested that the real culprits were the African American men who attempted to protect Benjamin Thomas at the Station House. At the police-court on August 8, as reported by the *Alexandria Gazette*, Mayor Simpson:

took occasion to say that the case exhibited a most remarkable condition of affairs. A man accused of a heinous offense quietly arrested, the white citizens of the community unaware of any trouble and attempting no demonstration, and yet colored men, with most boisterous display of regard for the safety of one of their own race noisily congregate and recklessly invite a catastrophe.¹⁹⁴

After the lynching, many white newspapers concluded that Thomas' murder would not have occurred if the Black men had stayed home the night before. "The information that Alexandria had been patrolled during the night by a mob of several hundred negroes," the *Evening Star* summarized, "fell upon the people as would a thunderbolt at noonday."¹⁹⁵

Some news accounts defended the actions of the mayor and the police. There were claims that the authorities "made a heroic resistance."¹⁹⁶ Deputy City Sergeant Braxton B. Smith stated that the police used every means in their power to defend the prisoner.¹⁹⁷ The *Evening Star* wrote that it "was but a vain and hopeless effort," but the "conduct of Captain Webster, who was slightly hurt, and his officers, is also the subject of praise."¹⁹⁸ Other reports contended that the officers fought the mob every step of the way and "contested every inch of the ground...both at the jail and over the route to the spot of the lynching."¹⁹⁹ It was reported that Officer Wilkinson attempted to save Thomas by cutting the noose from his neck at St Asaph Street, but that the crowd tied it back together.²⁰⁰

Other accounts denounced Alexandria's response, reporting that the police "practically surrendered the prisoner without protest."²⁰¹ John Craven, white, a former janitor at Alexandria City Hall, claimed that Deputy Sergeant Smith was anxious to see that the lynching happened and that Chief Webster had not

made a sufficient effort to repel the mob.²⁰² *The Times* pointed out that although the police claimed to make a heroic resistance, “no man in the mob was injured by a policeman and no policeman was hurt by any man in the mob.”²⁰³

The mayor’s role in Benjamin Thomas’s murder was vehemently condemned by the *Richmond Planet*, the leading African American newspaper in the state. The *Planet* criticized Simpson for detaining and convicting Black men who sought to protect Thomas without even investigating the white lynchers. The newspaper asked, “When Mayor Simpson punished the colored citizens and ignored the crime of the white citizens, was he violating his oath?”²⁰⁴ The *Planet* condemned Simpson for his actions during the lynching as well, writing, “the crowning infamy of the whole affair was the declaration of the Mayor of Alexandria that if Thomas was not tried and sentenced to be hanged within thirty days, he would lead a mob to lynch him.”²⁰⁵

Public opinion about the lynching in the white community was mixed. The *Times* interviewed people around town and reported a variety of sentiments. In the bars, the “men who drained their glasses told the *Times* reporter that lynching is a proper thing.” In the cigar stores, there was a division of opinion, though “a majority appeared to support the lynchers.” Most interviewed in the drug stores opposed lynching. And in the “substantial homes the sentiment was strongly against it.”²⁰⁶ Newspapers reported that some felt that the evidence in the case was insufficient.²⁰⁷ Others reported that citizens were concerned about the “stigma upon the community” caused by the lynching.²⁰⁸

Conversely, the African American community’s opinion was not solicited by the white newspapers. Black newspapers soundly condemned the actions of Alexandria’s white citizens and officials²⁰⁹ Speakers at Thomas’ memorial service, representing several Black churches in the area, stated that the “blood of Ben Thomas will be forever upon this city,” and exhorted the African American community to boycott white businesses in protest of the owners’ complicity in the lynching.²¹⁰ Black Alexandrians’ response to the activism of the men who strove to protect Thomas on the eve of the lynching went unrecorded in the newspapers. Despite the lack of documentation in the newspapers, it is clear that the white terror lynching of Benjamin Thomas and the suppression of the Black citizens who attempted to save him affected Black citizens of Alexandria, as the lynchers intended.

Conclusion

“The blood that stained the rugged street, Where horses tread with noisy feet, Still cries to heaven for Justice sweet...” --Reverend Albert Lott, Colored American (Washington, D.C.) August 26, 1899.

Whether commonly known or not, the lynching of Benjamin Thomas, like the earlier lynching of Joseph McCoy, is part of the civic DNA of the city of Alexandria. These violent murders reflect who Alexandrians were, informed what Alexandria would become, and continue to affect what Alexandria is today.

In an article on the front page of the *Alexandria Gazette* one week after the lynching, Thomas Risheill, a prominent businessman who served as an Alderman and on the Common Council, advocated candidly for the role lynching played in creating the ‘well ordered’ society he wished to live in: During the time that slavery existed in the south and for twenty years after the negro was freed, lynching was not thought of or practised in the south. During the civil war when the father, husband and son left home for the battlefield, the mother, wife and children were placed under the protection of the slave and they knew they were safe. But since that time a new generation has appeared who have been taught to believe that they are entitled to equal rights, politically, socially and otherwise. From this generation we get the criminals who merit the rope

and shot gun...

Lynching is not approved of by the great mass of people in the south. But so long as the attorney can put in evidence that the criminal is not responsible for his acts, and so long as the courts postpone trials indefinitely, and so long as the unmentionable crime is committed, no man who takes part in the lynching bee will be punished.²¹¹

In 1899, a man was murdered in police custody. The Black community stood up to object. They were labeled rabble-rousers and were arrested.

Today, the echoes ring loud as we watch police murders of Black Americans. Politicians and prominent citizens today might not use Thomas Risheill's words and criticize African Americans who feel "entitled to equal rights,"²¹² but unarmed Black individuals are murdered by those charged with public safety. Officials still label today's civil rights activists as "thugs" and "looters" and arrest peaceful protesters. One hundred and twenty-one years after Benjamin Thomas called for his mother with a noose around his neck, George Floyd used his dying breath to do the same.

In Alexandria, we walk among the ghosts of our history, past 200-year-old buildings on carefully preserved cobblestone streets to a seat of city government that remains at Market Square. The legacy of systemic racism and white supremacy still surrounds us and influences our daily lives. Alexandria's white leaders and citizens never faced the legal consequences for their roles in the lynchings of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. If Alexandria is ever to become the just and equitable city to which it claims to aspire, it must address its complicity in these two lynchings and all the history that precedes and follows them.

The following poem was written in 1899 by Alexandria resident Reverend Albert A. Lott in response to the lynching of Benjamin Thomas.

"TAKE HIM OUT"

What means this howling, hideous shout
"Take him out! Take him out!"
What can be all this noise about,
"Take him out! Take him out!"

The midnight shriek reached the
sky, All over town both far and
nigh, The sound shocks every
passer by, "Take him out! Take
him out!"

Is this for crime that some one did,
That fiends should keep the secret bid,
And enter doors the laws forbid,
Crying-
"Take him out! Take him out!"

What means this running through the street,

As though upon a swift retreat,
And crying as they stamp their feet,
“Take him out! Take him out!”

Look! How they rush with furious glare,
While at the jail they wildly stare;
Shooting their pistols in the air,
Shouting-
“Take him out! Take him out!”

See! They have him in their grasp,
The rope around his neck is fast,
They drag him through the street at last,
Crying-
“Take him out! Take him out!”

The victim pleads but all in vain,
Their fury he could not restrain,
With murder stamped upon their brain,
Crying-
“Take him out! Take him out!”

Upon a lamp post now hard by,
The furious mob did swing him high,
And left him all alone to die,
Without Crying-
“Take him out! Take him out!”

The blood that stained the rugged street,
Where horses tread with noisy feet,
Still cries to heaven for Justice sweet,
Upon the cryers-
“Take him out! Take him out!”

O! Land of Liberty and might, Can Justice look
on such a sight, As on that memorable night,
When they-
Took him out! Took him out!

Eternal King! Almighty God,
Send not Thy judgment hence abroad.
Keep back Thy terrible, chastening Rod,
From those who-
Took him out!
Took him out!²¹³

Benjamin Thomas Historical Narrative Glossary of Names²¹⁴

| | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Alexander, James | Arrested for trying to protect Thomas on Monday evening. | Black |
| Alexandria Light Infantry | Local volunteer State militia. | White |
| Arnold, Bob | Police informer. | White |
| Ashton, Horace D. | Coroner's Juror. Resided at 206 N. Royal Street. | White |
| Atkinson, Weston H. | Alexandria Police Officer. Resided at 119 S. Columbus Street. | White |
| Baggett, Wilbert | Alexandria Police Officer. | White |
| Beach, Jefferson | Alexandria Police Officer. Resided at 329 N. St. Asaph Street. | White |
| Bettis, Benjamin F. | Alexandria Police Officer. Resided at 517 S. Fairfax Street. | White |
| Boothe, Gardner L. | Virginia Commonwealth Attorney. Law office, 128 S. Fairfax Street; Home, 711 Princess Street. | White |
| Bradley, William A. | Mob member injured during the lynching. Resided at 414 King Street. | White |
| Brent, Samuel G. | Lawyer who appeared with Mayor Simpson on the steps of the jail prior to the lynching. Law office, 107 N. Fairfax Street; Home, 115 N. Columbus Street. | White |
| Buckner, James M. | Harmony Lodge of the Colored Odd Fellows, Chairman of Entertainment Committee. Resided at 306 N. Patrick Street. | Black |
| Buckner, Robert | Arrested for trying to protect Thomas on Monday evening. Resided at 414 N. Pitt Street. | Black |
| Carter, Allen | Arrested for trying to protect Thomas on Monday evening. | Black |
| Cliff, Pierson E. | Coroner's Juror. Resided at 400 Prince Street. | White |
| Craven, John | Former City Hall janitor who throws doubt on the police account of jail's defense. Resided at 216 Wolfe Street. | White |
| Davis, Keith M. | Alexandria Police Captain. Resided at 212 Prince Street. | White |
| Deane, James B. | Alexandria Police Officer. Resided at 315 N. St. Asaph Street. | White |
| Demaine, William H. | William Demaine & Son, Funeral Director. 819 King Street. | White |
| Desmond, William | Coroner's Juror. 315 N. Resided at Pitt Street. | White |
| Dogan, John | Prisoner in jail at the time of the lynching. | Black |
| Elzie (or Elsey), Thomas | Arrested for trying to protect Thomas on Monday evening. | Black |
| Ferguson, William A. | Alexandria Police Officer. Resided at 226 S. Lee Street. | White |
| Fisher, Harry D. | Vigilante assisting police. Resided at 210 Prince Street. | White |
| Payne, Richard W. | Lieutenant, Alexandria Light Infantry. Resided at 435 N. Columbus Street. | White |
| Perry, Albert | Man who was in alleged altercation with Edward Kloch. Resided at 620 N. Patrick Street. | White |
| Purvis, William R. | Physician and City Coroner. Resided at 112 S. Columbus Street. | White |
| Risheill, Thomas | Businessman and Alderman in Alexandria, wrote about the role of lynching in 'a well-ordered society.' Resided at 316 Duke Street. | White |
| Rowe, Boden | Prisoner in jail at time of lynching. | Black |
| Schoeni, William S. | Vigilante assisting police. Resided at 208 S. Lee Street. | White |
| Simpson, George L. | Mayor of Alexandria. Resided at 126 N. Columbus Street. | White |
| Sincox Family | Residents of home at 413 N. St. Asaph Street, where Benjamin Thomas hid from white lynch mob. | White |
| Smith, Braxton B. | Deputy Sergeant, Police. | White |
| Smith, James | Alexandria Police Lieutenant. Resided at 221 N. Fairfax Street. | White |
| Spinks, Frank | Alexandria Police Officer; during the McCoy lynching, Spinks was not yet a police officer and was detained as one of the first members of the mob to enter the Station House. Resided at 326 Commerce Street. | White |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Swain, Charles C. | Coroner's Juror. Resided at 203 Wolfe Street. | White |
| Thomas, Benjamin | Teenager who was lynched by a white terror mob. Resided at 700 N. Patrick Street. | Black |
| Thomas, Elizabeth (née Washington) | Mother of Benjamin Thomas. Resided at 700 N. Patrick Street. | Black |
| Thomas, George | Father of Benjamin Thomas. | Black |
| Turley, James B. | Arrested for trying to protect Thomas on Monday evening. Resided at 1221 Queen Street. | Black |
| Tyler, James Hoge | Governor of Virginia. | White |
| Vincent, Millard P. | Foreman of Coroner's Jury. Resided at 810 Prince Street. | White |
| Warring, Henry H. Rev. | Reverend of Shiloh Baptist Church, Alexandria. Resided at 507 S. Columbus Street. | Black |
| Washington, Richard | Arrested for trying to protect Thomas on Monday evening. | Black |
| Washington, William | Arrested for trying to protect Thomas on Monday evening. | Black |
| Webster, James F. | Chief of Police. Resided at 408 Wilkes Street. | White |
| Webster, William | Son of Chief of Police. Resided at 406 Wilkes Street. | White |
| Wheatley, Benedict | Undertaker. Resided at 807 King Street. | White |
| White, Dr. | Witness to lynching. | White |
| Wilkinson, William J. | Alexandria Police Officer. Resided at 1021 Oronoco Street. | White |
| Wilson, John | Arrested for trying to protect Thomas on Monday evening. | Black |
| Young, Banner T. | Alexandria Police Officer. Resided at 301 Queen Street. | White |

End Notes:

¹ *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH.), August 26, 1899, page 1. The *Richmond Planet* says the mob was comprised of "thousands," *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2.

² *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 3.

³ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.

⁴ In the late 1890s Alexandria was a city of some 14,500 persons; 31% or about 4,500 were African American. [https://www.academia.edu/25968918/The African American Housing Crisis in Alexandria Virginia 1930s-1960s](https://www.academia.edu/25968918/The_African_American_Housing_Crisis_in_Alexandria_Virginia_1930s-1960s), page 34.

⁵ Moon, Dr. Krystyn. "Navigating Everyday Life in Jim Crow Alexandria." *Alexandria's Equal Justice Initiative*. Presentation. November 16, 2019.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Dray, Philip. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. New York: The Modern Library, 2003, n.d., page 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, Philip. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. New York: The Modern Library, 2003, n.d.] Since first publishing this report, the Equal Justice Initiative has updated these numbers in its report, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*. EJI found that over 6,500 racial terror lynching occurred in this country between 1865 and 1950. This includes the lynching of two Black teens in Alexandria and at least 99 lynchings in Virginia. Twenty five percent of the lynchings EJI documented were for the accusation of sexual assault and 30 percent were accused of murder.

⁸ Newspapers at the time misidentified Benjamin Thomas' age as 20 or 21: *Evening Star*, August 8, 1899, page 8. *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3; Lillian was born in April 1892 according to the 1900 census; Newspapers at the time identify Lillian Kloch's age as 7 or 8: *Sun and New York Press*, August 9, 1899; *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, p. 8. The arresting officers were reported in *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2, and *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 7; Thomas protested his innocence to

the officers: *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 7.

⁹ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.

¹⁰ *Wilkes-Barre Times* (Wilkes-Barre, PA), August 9, 1899, page 1.

¹¹ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 7; *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2.

¹² *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), August 13, 1899, page 11.

¹³ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.

¹⁴ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.

¹⁵ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.

¹⁶ *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), August 13, 1899, page 11.

¹⁷ *Wilkes-Barre Times* (Wilkes-Barre, PA), August 9, 1899, page 1.

¹⁸ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.

¹⁹ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5.

²⁰ *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 26, 1899, page 1.

²¹ *Washington Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 29, 1899, page 4.

²² Ancestry.com. District of Columbia, Marriage Records, 1810-1953 [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016; Original data: Marriage Records. District of Columbia Marriages. Clerk of the Superior Court, Records Office, Washington D.C.; 1880 United States Federal Census, Ancestry.com, Year: 1880; Census Place: Alexandria, Alexandria, Virginia; Roll: 1351; Page: 355B; Enumeration District: 004. Record for George Thomas; 1870 United States Federal Census Place: Alexandria Ward 3, Alexandria (Independent City), Virginia; Roll: M593_1632; Page: 99A; Record for Elizzie Washington.

²³ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.

²⁴ Lillian Patterson, Historian, Shiloh Baptist Church, Alexandria, Virginia, Personal Communication, June 26, 2020; Benjamin Thomas did not appear on the 1880 Federal Census with the rest of his family, suggesting he had not been born yet [1880 United States Federal Census, Ancestry.com, Year: 1880; Census Place: Alexandria, Alexandria, Virginia; Roll: 1351, page 355B; Enumeration District: 004. Record for George Thomas].

²⁵ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2. Elizabeth Washington was the daughter of Violet Washington. The Washington family members were all born in Virginia, while George Thomas and his parents were all born in Maryland. All of the Thomas and Washington family members were likely enslaved before the Civil War as none appeared as free people of color on either the 1850 or 1860 Federal Census. *Virginia*; Roll: M593_1632; Page: 99A; Record for Violet Washington; 1880 United States Federal Census, Ancestry.com, Year: 1880; Census Place: Alexandria, Alexandria, Virginia; Roll: 1351; Page: 355B; Enumeration District: 004. Record for George Thomas. Benjamin Thomas's siblings included James H., Ella, and Julia. [1880 United States Federal Census, Ancestry.com, Year: 1880; Census Place: Alexandria, Alexandria, Virginia; Roll: 1351; Page: 355B; Enumeration District: 004. Record for George Thomas]. Julia died at the age of two from 'spasms.' [Wesley E. Pippenger, Alexandria, Virginia Death Records, 1863-1868 (The Gladwin Record) and 1869-1896 (Westminster, MD, Willow Bend Books, 2000).

²⁶ 1900 Federal Census, Place: Alexandria Ward 3, Alexandria City, Virginia; Page: 6; Enumeration District: 0096; Record for Edward Kloch. The last name is often misspelled as Clarke, Clocke, or Klock. Edward Kloch was born in March 1858 in New York and died in 1917. He is buried in Bethel Cemetery in Alexandria. He married Julia Brooks, a Virginian. The family rented their home at 702 N. Patrick St from 1897 to 1920. He had various occupations; dairyman [1899 Alexandria City Directory], vendor [1906 Alexandria City Directory], salesman [1910 Alexandria City Directory], confectionary salesman [1910 Federal Census], helper [1913 Alexandria City Directory], candymaker [1911-1912, 1914-1917 Alexandria City Directory]. In the 1910 Census, all his sons were at home, mostly working as laborers. His children were: Dunwood [or Deerwood?], born 1890, age 10 in 1900; Lillie, born 1892, age 8 in 1900; Henry, born 1895, age 5 in 1900; Roland, born 1897, age 3 in 1900; Francis, born 1899, age 1 in 1900. [1900 Federal Census, Place: Alexandria Ward 3, Alexandria City, Virginia; Page: 6; Enumeration District: 0096; Record for Edward Kloch].

²⁷ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5.

²⁸ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 7; *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.

²⁹ The location of the Station House is listed in the 1899 City Directory, Alexandria.

³⁰ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 7; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.

- ³¹ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.
- ³² *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.
- ³³ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ³⁴ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.
- ³⁵ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3; *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5.
- ³⁶ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3. The address of the mayor's house was listed in the 1899 Alexandria City Directory.
- ³⁷ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.
- ³⁸ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.* *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.
- ⁴⁰ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.
- ⁴¹ During the April 1897 lynching of Joseph McCoy, Frank Spinks was not yet a police officer. At that time, Spinks was in the vanguard of the white mob that assaulted the Station House. He was one of four men arrested by police officers when the mob broke open the station doors during the first attack. He would later be released without charges. The following year, 1898, Mayor Simpson appointed him as a police officer. *Alexandria Gazette*, November 18, 1898, page 3; *Washington Post*, April 23, 1897, page 1.
- ⁴² *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8; 1899 Alexandria City Directory.
- ⁴³ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3. This informal deputizing of white citizens reinforced the assumption that they had extrajudicial power over Black bodies.
- ⁴⁴ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8; *Times* (Washington, D.C.) August 9, 1899, page 2; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ⁴⁵ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ "Hard Corner" was the northeast corner of North Fairfax and Princess Streets in the Berg neighborhood. [Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Alexandria, Independent Cities, Virginia, page 16; Sanborn Map Company, Aug. 1896; Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C.].
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3; *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2; Many of the African American men arrested for attempting to protect Benjamin Thomas and aid in the defense of the Station House were active leaders and organizers in Alexandria's African American community. Albert Green, William Washington, John Nelson, and Turley were all involved in republican party organizing and leadership [*Evening Star*, September 15, 1888, page 5; *Alexandria Gazette*, June 12, 1896, page 3; *Evening Star*, August 9, 1898, page 7; *Alexandria Gazette*, April 6, 1900, page 3]. Green, Washington, and Robert Buckner helped to plan and marshal major events like Emancipation Celebrations and agricultural & industrial parades [*Washington Times*, August 22, 1902, page 3; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 6, 1896, page 3]. Green and Washington helped create the Pallbearers Union [*Alexandria Gazette*, October 18, 1907, page 3]. Buckner helped organize the Alexandria Ex Slave Pension Club [*Alexandria Gazette* July 3, 1912, page 2]. These men were part of the fabric of the city. James Turley and his family had been free in Alexandria since before the Civil War [1850 Federal Census, Place: Alexandria, Virginia; Roll: 932; Page: 399A]. Some, like John Haskins, owned their homes and had for generations [1900 Federal Census; Place: Alexandria Ward 2, Alexandria City, Virginia; Page: 19; Enumeration District: 0093; FHL microfilm: 1241733; 1910 Federal Census; Place: Alexandria Ward 2, Alexandria (Independent City), Virginia; Roll: T624_1620; Page: 21B; Enumeration District: 0004]. These were native Alexandrians who advocated for, worked for, and lived amongst their neighbors. They refused to stand by and allow another lynching to occur. They gathered men and spoke out against Alexandria's white power structure. They were arrested, fined, and reported as sent to the chain gang, effectively removing their leadership just when it was needed [*Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3].
- ⁵³ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.

- ⁵⁴ *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ⁵⁵ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ⁵⁶ *Richmond Planet*, August 12, 1899, page 5.
- ⁵⁷ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 3.
- ⁵⁸ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3. *Democratic Advocate* (Westminster, MD), August 12, 1899, page 3. *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 7: “indignation”, “talk of lynching;” *Southern Aegis* (Bel Air, MD), August 11, 1899, page 3: “if hadn’t made threats...;” *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2: whites wouldn’t have known / demonstration against the whites; *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8: lynch Bob Arnold; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2: even if they had to kill every white man; *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5: Clarke/stones.
- ⁵⁹ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 2.
- ⁶⁰ Mayor’s Court: A court established in some cities, in which the mayor sits with the powers of a police judge or committing magistrate concerning offenses committed within the city, and sometimes with civil jurisdiction in small causes, or other special statutory powers. [Black’s Law 4th Edition, 1968.] “He shall have and exercise all of the powers of a justice of the peace within the said city.” The Charter and Laws, of The City of Alexandria, Va., and an Historical Sketch of its Government, City Council, Alexandria, Virginia, 1874, page 25.
- ⁶¹ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.
- ⁶² *Ibid.* “It shall be the duty of the policemen to bring before the mayor or some justice of the peace within the city of Alexandria, all riotous, noisy and disorderly boys, or other persons, if detected in so conducting themselves in the streets, lanes or alleys of the city, or in or about churches, or any public places, as to annoy the citizens and disturb the quiet and good order of the community; and upon proof being had before the mayor or justice of the peace or any boy, or other person having been guilty of cursing, or swearing, or using noisy, boisterous, insulting or obscene language, of breaking the peace, or any other disorderly conduct; such offender or offenders shall be fined not less than fifty cents nor more than five dollars for each offense, one-half for the use of the informer.” The Charter and Laws, of The City of Alexandria, Va., and an Historical Sketch of its Government, City Council, Alexandria, Virginia, 1874, page 76.
- ⁶³ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.
- ⁶⁵ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.
- ⁶⁷ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ The Alexandria city charter gave the mayor the right to commit persons who could not pay fines, or provide collateral, to the common jail or city workhouse. The charter also empowered the superintendent of police to organize any persons confined in the city jail or workhouse into a chain gang. This chain-gang was employed in street cleaning and repair, and other labor overseen by the superintendent of police. [The Charter and Laws, of the City of Alexandria, Va, and an Historical Sketch of its Government. Printed 1874, pages 25, 65, 66, 79.]
- ⁷² \$20 in 1899 is the equivalent to \$617.82 in 2020 [CPI Inflation Calculator: <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1899?amount=20>]. In 1900, the average American earned about \$675 annually, including workers of all races/ethnicities [Baer M., “The History of American Income, Bizfluent, September 26, 2017. Online: <https://bizfluent.com/info-7769323-history-american-income.html>]. According to research published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor in 1897, the weekly income for an African American “laborer” was \$5.09 in Nashville (TN) (for an annual income of \$264.68), and \$4.15 in Atlanta (GA) (for an annual income of \$215.80). [*Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor*, Volume II, No. 10, May 1897.]
- ⁷³ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8. For over a century, starting around 1800, the Alexandria Almshouse (poor house) stood on the outskirts of the city, near what is now the Del Ray neighborhood. The buildings and farmland along Poor House Lane, presently 420 E. Monroe Ave., housed the poor and indigent. [<https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/oha/info/TrailSignDelRayAlmshouse.pdf>, <http://www.freedmenscemetery.org/resources/documents/paupersdeaths.pdf>, Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from

Alexandria, Independent Cities, Virginia. Sanborn Map Company, Aug. 1921. Map, page 31. https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn08968_007/. It also served as a workhouse for those unable to pay the fines imposed by the court for minor offenses and those deemed a threat to the peace. Men and women confined to the almshouse were forced to work the land and maintain the grounds to keep the institution self-sustaining. In addition, inmates were tasked to the chain gang by the superintendent of police or sentenced to it by the court. The chain gang was “employed in cleaning, opening and repairing streets, or such work as is usually performed by the superintendent of the police.” The city charter and laws gave broad powers and multiple avenues to end up in the workhouse. If there were accusations that a person had acted in a way “to annoy the citizens and disturb the quiet and good order of the community,” or if proof was provided “before the mayor or justice of the peace of any boy, or other person having been guilty of cursing, or swearing, or using noisy, boisterous, insulting or obscene language, of breaking the peace, or any other disorderly conduct,” a person could be fined. Half of this fine would go to the informer who provided the accusation. An inability to pay the fine or provide collateral could have the person sent to the workhouse and the chain gang. This system provided a financial incentive to individuals and supplied the city with free labor [The Charter and Laws, of the City of Alexandria, Va. and an Historical Sketch of its Government. Printed 1874, Pages 25, 65, 66, 75, 76, 79, 101].

⁷⁴ \$5 in 1899 is the equivalent to \$154.45 in 2020 [CPI Inflation Calculator:

<https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1899?amount=20>].

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 5.

⁷⁷ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, p. 3; *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.

⁷⁸ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.

⁷⁹ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 3; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3; *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8.

⁸⁰ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 3; *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 5; The jail was located on the northeast corner of St. Asaph and Princess streets. [Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Alexandria, Independent Cities, Virginia, page 16; Sanborn Map Company, Aug. 1896; Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C.].

⁸¹ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 3.

⁸² *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.

⁸³ *Fredericksburg Free Lance* (Fredericksburg, MD), August 10, 1899; *Wilkes-Barre Times* (Wilkes-Barre, PA), August 9, 1899; *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899; *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899.

⁸⁴ *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2. ⁸⁵ *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.

⁸⁶ *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2.

⁸⁷ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5.

⁸⁸ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.

⁸⁹ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.

⁹⁰ *Daily Press* (Newport News, VA) August 8, 1899, page 2; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Evening Star*, August 9, 1899, page 2; *Sun and New York Press* (New York, NY), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 9, 1899, page 1; *Wilkes-Barre Times* (Wilkes-Barre, PA) August 9, 1899, page 1; *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Fredericksburg Free Lance* (Fredericksburg, MD), August 10, 1899, page 3; *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2.

⁹¹ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.

⁹² *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 11, 1899, page 3.

⁹³ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4. Portner’s Brewery was a block away on St. Asaph Street between Pendleton and Wythe streets. [Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Alexandria, Independent Cities, Virginia, page 14; Sanborn Map Company, Aug. 1896; Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C.].

⁹⁴ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 11, 1899, page 3.

⁹⁵ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4. *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.

⁹⁶ *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.

⁹⁷ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.

⁹⁸ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Sun and New York Press* (New York, NY), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2.

- ⁹⁹ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH) August 13, 1899, page 11; *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 5; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Shenandoah Evening Herald*, (Shenandoah, PA), August 9, 1899, page 5; *Daily Press* (Newport News), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Boston Herald* (Boston, MA), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Daily Nonpareil* (Council Bluffs, IA), August 9, 1899, page 1; *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 9, 1899, page 1; *Delaware Republican*, August 9, 1899, page 3; *The Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Bridgeton Pioneer* (Bridgeton, NJ), August 10, 1899, page 6; *Shepherdstown Register* (Shepherdstown, WV), August 10, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁰¹ *Fredericksburg Free Lance (Fredericksburg, MD)*, August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ¹⁰² *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁰³ *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Times* (Washington, D.C.) August 9, 1899, page 2; *Evening Star*, August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Times* (Washington, D.C.) August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Boston Herald* (Boston MA), August 9, 1899, page 2 just says Webster “was hurt.”
- ¹⁰⁹ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5.
- ¹¹⁰ *Shepherdstown Register* (Shepherdstown WV), August 10, 1899, page 4; *Times* (Washington, D.C.) August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹¹¹ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 9, 1899, page 1.
- ¹¹² *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Times* (Washington, D.C.) August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹¹³ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ¹¹⁴ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2.
- ¹¹⁵ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ¹¹⁶ *Daily Press* (Newport News, VA), 8 Aug 1899, page 2.
- ¹¹⁷ *Sun and New York Press* (New York, NY), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹¹⁸ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ¹¹⁹ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Wilkes-Barre Times* (Wilkes-Barre PA), August 9, 1899, page 1.
- ¹²⁰ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹²¹ 1899 City Directory shows Minnie and William Sincox at 413 [N] St Asaph Street and lists him as a cabinetmaker. The *Richmond Planet* lists this name as “Sincox” *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2; *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 9, 1899, page 1; *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹²² *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹²³ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ¹²⁴ *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2.
- ¹²⁵ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹²⁶ *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2.
- ¹²⁷ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ¹²⁸ *Sun and New York Press* (New York, NY), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 3.
- ¹²⁹ *Democratic Advocate* (Westminster, MD), August 12, 1899, page 4; *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 26, 1899, page 1; *Wilkes-Barre Times* (Wilkes-Barre, PA), August 9, 1899, page 1; the *Richmond Planet* says the mob was composed of “thousands.” *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ¹³⁰ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ¹³¹ *Washington Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2.

- ¹³² *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹³³ *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 26, 1899, page 1.
- ¹³⁴ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 29, 1899, page 4; *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 26, 1899, page 1; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹³⁵ *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹³⁶ *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 26, 1899.
- ¹³⁷ *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899, page 2.
- ¹³⁸ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹³⁹ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁴⁰ "It is a dismantled post at the southwest corner of King and Fairfax Streets... The lamp was removed and the iron post permitted to stand when the electric lighting system was installed several years ago. On this post is a United States letter box." *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ¹⁴¹ *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 12, 1899.
- ¹⁴² *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4. (This is the wrong reference and it is not likely multiple bullets were fired at Thomas.)
- ¹⁴³ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁴⁴ *Evening Times* 9 (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁴⁵ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore MD), August 9, 1899, page 1.
- ¹⁴⁶ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁴⁷ *Evening Star*, (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁴⁸ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵⁰ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁵¹ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5.
- ¹⁵² *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁵³ *Ibid.* The McCoy verdict also blamed "a person or persons unknown." Similar verdicts were rendered in most lynchings in America [Dray, Philip. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: the Lynching of Black America*. New York: The Modern Library, 2003].
- ¹⁵⁴ City of Alexandria EJI Research Group, *The Lynching of Joseph H. McCoy*, April 23, 1897, Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, <https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/historic/info/blackhistory/McCoyLynchingNarrative04162020.pdf>.
- ¹⁵⁵ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁵⁶ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, page 3.
- ¹⁵⁷ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁵⁸ *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁵⁹ *Sun and New York Press* (New York, NY), August 10, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁶⁰ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶² *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶³ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 1.
- ¹⁶⁴ *The Independent*, Volume 51, 1899, pages 2355-2358.
- ¹⁶⁵ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ¹⁶⁶ *Evening Star*. (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 1.
- ¹⁶⁷ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ¹⁶⁸ *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), August 11, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁶⁹ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5.
- ¹⁷⁰ *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 26, 1899, page 1.
- ¹⁷¹ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ¹⁷² *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 1.
- ¹⁷³ *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), August 11, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

- ¹⁷⁵ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 11, 1899; *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), August 11, 1899. 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/51968#OtherAlexandriaBurialSites>].
- ¹⁷⁶ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5. Two years earlier, the city also paid for the Penny Hill burial of Joseph McCoy after his lynching. His aunt said, “As the people killed him, they will have to bury him.” *Alexandria Gazette*, April 24, 1897, page 3.
- ¹⁷⁷ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 29, 1899, page 4; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 28, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁷⁸ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 29, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁷⁹ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 29, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁸⁰ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 29, 1899, page 4; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 29, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁸¹ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 17, 1899, page 8 (Guests bring a pound of food, i.e., butter, flour, etc. for the family.).
- ¹⁸² *Alexandria Gazette*, August 23, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁸³ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 26, 1899, page 4; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 28, 1899, page 4; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 29, 1899, page 4.
- ¹⁸⁴ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 11, 1899, page 3; *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5.
- ¹⁸⁵ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3; *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁸⁶ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4; *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2; *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 10, 1899, page 5.
- ¹⁸⁷ *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 10, 1899, page 5; *Evening Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁸⁸ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁸⁹ *The Norfolk Virginian* (Norfolk, VA), August 10, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁹⁰ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁹¹ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ¹⁹² *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁹³ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 1.
- ¹⁹⁴ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, page 3.
- ¹⁹⁵ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 8, 1899, page 8; *The Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3; *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 9, page 1; *Southern Aegis* (Bel Aire, MD), August 11, 1899, page 3; *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1899, page 5; *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 26, 1899, page 1.
- ¹⁹⁶ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ¹⁹⁷ *Evening Times* (Washington D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁹⁸ *Evening Star* (Washington D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ¹⁹⁹ *Evening Times* (Washington D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ²⁰⁰ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 9, 1899, page 4.
- ²⁰¹ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ²⁰² *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 15, 1899, page 7. This emerged in a newspaper report detailing an altercation between Craven and Webster’s son.
- ²⁰³ *Times* (Washington D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ²⁰⁴ *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 26, 1899, page 4.
- ²⁰⁵ *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 19, 1899, page 4.
- ²⁰⁶ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3.
- ²⁰⁷ *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 9, 1899, page 2.
- ²⁰⁸ *Evening Star*, (Washington D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 1; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 10, 1899, page 3; *The Independent*, Volume 51, 1899, pages 2355-2358.
- ²⁰⁹ *Richmond Planet*, August 12, 1899, page 2; *Richmond Planet*, August 19, 1899, page 4; *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA), August 26, 1899, page 4; *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 26, 1899, page 1; *Colored*

American (Washington, D.C.), September 2, 1899, page 4.

²¹⁰ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 29, 1899, page 4; *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 29, 1899, page 4.

²¹¹ *Alexandria Gazette*, August 16, 1899, page 1; Risheill, born c. 1837 in Port Clinton, PA, was the owner of Risheill & Sons, a prominent sawmill and planing business located at Royal and Wilkes streets. He was a regular contributor to the *Alexandria Gazette* as "T.V.R." His obituary appeared in the *Alexandria Gazette* on June 29, 1910, page 3.

²¹² *Alexandria Gazette*, August 16, 1899, page 1.

²¹³ *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), August 26, 1899, page 4. Reverend Lott was an early organizer of the Afro-American League in the District of Columbia and lived at 818 North Columbus Street. *Alexandria City Directory*, 1899.

²¹⁴ Addresses on said glossary were listed in the 1899 and 1900 *Alexandria City Directory*.

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) is inspired by the Equal Justice Initiative Remembrance Project and is dedicated to telling the story of the two men lynched in this city in 1897 and 1899. The Research Committee that issued this report performed a thorough search of historic documents, provided historical context and shared this history widely in Alexandria to shed light on a historical infrastructure of injustice that continues to inform the present. It is ACRP's hope that making this history visible will move our community through honest, uncomfortable discussions that challenge our institutions, organizations and citizens to reflect and respond in a way that affects real change. For more information about this project, visit Alexandria.gov/historic.

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