

ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT

NEWSLETTER



July 2023 Edition

The Original Sin of Enslavement

After the August 1899 lynching of Benjamin Thomas, instead of blaming the mob for the youth's death, white authorities and newspapers said the Black community was responsible because they had agitated white citizens and broken perceived protocols on the night of Thomas' arrest. In reality, the terror of that night was born from enslavement, a sin that falsely defined race and set up a hierarchy that outlived the civil war, emancipation and constitutional amendments, creating a society capable of horrifying hypocrisy. Another legacy of slavery that played a role in Thomas's murder was the elevation of poor whites that started when enslavers created a social class a step above the enslaved in order to prevent alliances between the two and rebellion against an inhumane economic system.

In 1705, the Virginia Assembly approved laws that stripped Black, mulatto and Native Americans of their humanity, defining them as slaves and relegating them to "real estate." They approved laws permitting white "masters" to kill enslaved people without punishment.

The law stated enslaved people found guilty of rape or murder were to be hanged. Marriage between white and Black people was forbidden as was procreation. If the enslaved dared to "associate with whites" they were to be "whipped, branded, or maimed." As the system of slavery became further entrenched in the colonial economy, white people who were not enslavers were pressed into service to the system, forced to patrol and search for fugitives, and they were expected to use violence to "keep order."

"These practices helped lead to latter-day lynching by making African Americans the legitimate targets of violence, by implicating large numbers of whites in that violence, and by legalizing violence outside of the government," according to Historian Manfred Berg and the Virginia Encyclopedia.

After the war to end slavery and preserve the Union federal troops left Alexandria in 1870. Almost immediately, white conservatives regained local and state power and began to systematically marginalize Black citizens. Seven years later, when white Republicans struck the compromise that put Rutherford B. Hayes in the White House, they sent a symbolic message to the South that they were done helping African Americans secure their rights. After that, Black Alexandrians were kept from holding public office, their votes were courted, counted and forgotten; mainstream newspapers disregarded their voices and ignored their readership; churches, street cars, eateries and schools were segregated. Black lives only intersected with whites in servitude, as laundresses, laborers, cooks and servants. Except in African American neighborhoods

like Uptown where working poor whites lived among Alexandria's Black community.

The family of the seven-year-old girl who accused Benjamin Thomas, 16, of being too familiar with her when she stopped by to retrieve a borrowed ax, were described by the *Baltimore Sun* as poor - the head of the rented home was a dairy worker who also did odd jobs. The Kloch's lived between two Black families in Uptown.

Lillian Kloch complained "of the way [Benjamin] Thomas treated her" and although Thomas had not broken any laws, he had "associated with" a white child as an equal. The child's father, Edward, exercised his privilege and swore out a warrant having Thomas arrested on the charge of "attempted assault."

That night, Alexandrian James Turley, who also lived in Uptown, overheard a group of whites talking about a lynching. Turley and several other prominent Black leaders informed the police and mayor of the threat to Benjamin Thomas' life. When authorities refused to acknowledge the danger, Black Alexandrians organized to guard the police station where the youth was being held. Although no laws were broken, many of the men were arrested, charged and fined. Their actions were perceived by whites as an affront to the authority of the white police officers who falsely testified at the next day's hearing that the Black men were attempting to start a riot. Officer Atkinson said he heard one of them yell, "Boys, what say you? Let's lynch Bob Arnold," a white man who had gone to the police to alert them that Black people were gathering around the station house.

That afternoon, the *Evening Star* newspaper ran a story entitled "Startling Information Imparted to Citizens This Morning, Alleged Attempt to Incite Riot, Exciting Scenes in the Mayor's Court During Trials." The lead stated, "A startling surprise greeted the citizens of this city when they awoke this morning from the quiet slumbers of the night. The information that Alexandria had been patrolled during the night by a mob of several hundred negroes fell upon the people as would a thunderbolt at noonday. Excitement was portrayed on many faces as the story of an attempted assault, heinous and fiendish, on a little ... white girl went the rounds with its sequel of a midnight gathering of negro sympathizers determined to protect by force the alleged perpetrator of the crime, then behind the police station bars."

Benjamin Thomas' hearing followed that of his protectors on Tuesday morning, Aug. 8, although the mayor heard only from his accusers and Thomas wasn't given counsel or an opportunity to speak. Edward Kloch, the child's father, held a box of stones that he said had been thrown at his house during the night. The *Star* reported that afternoon, "a mob of negroes had attacked his house about 2 o'clock this morning, breaking several windows with stones. Talks of lynching are to be heard on all sides."

After Thomas was lynched, it came out that he was innocent, even the mother of Lillian Kloch said he wasn't guilty and that she knew him to be a good boy. A number of white people spoke out against the lynching, according to Freeman H.M. Murray, a prominent Black Alexandrian who wrote in his diary, "a boy, Ben Thomas, was arrested here for attempted assault. The evidence was very meager - the little girl saying he pulled up her clothes. The next night he was lynched brutally, dragged, etc. It has been a fearful shock to the city, the colored people particularly. Many whites deplore it."

Newspapers threw the blame on the Black community, poor whites and outsiders. On Aug. 11, 1899, the *Baltimore Sun* reported on the causes, writing, "Popular feeling had culminated in the idea that a class of negroes were carrying things with a high hand in undertaking to punish a poor man because he had complained to the authorities of an insult to his daughter. This led to the lynching."

The *Alexandria Gazette*, wrote, "Last night's affair was greatly stimulated by the disorderly behavior of the crowds of armed negro rowdies who roamed the streets the night before, threatening attacks upon the white people..."

Historian Howard Smead wrote in *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker*, that the mob "turned the act into a symbolic rite in which the Black victim became the representative of his race and, as such, was being disciplined for more than a single crime...the deadly act was a warning to the Black population not to challenge the supremacy of the white race."

Harold Snowden, then the editorial writer for the *Gazette*, recalled the old Virginia laws governing white and Black relations when he wrote, "The victims of the crime for which lynching has become the natural punishment in the South are usually among those of white people who associate on terms of equality with negroes." In the same piece he implied it was the working poor who carried out the lynching.

By 1899, those Alexandrians who were 36, or younger, had been raised in a country where African Americans

were free, had the rights of citizenship and were supposed to be treated as equals. They had never known slavery, but were riddled with a cancer rooted in legal and social justifications for an economic system that enslaved people. That is why it is so important to retell this history, recognize and acknowledge it, so that people might become aware of the predispositions woven into their DNA and work for a cure.

In The News

Black Education in Alexandria: A Legacy of Triumph and Struggle

On Juneteenth, the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project and the African American History Division published a comprehensive 230-year History of Black Education in Alexandria on Alexandria Black History Museum's webpage. The three part research report can be [read here](#).

Hallowell School for Black Girls, built by George Seaton, paid for by the local Black community, Alex J. Wedderburn's Program, Historic Alexandria Virginia, Illustrated.



Upcoming Events

Benjamin Thomas Remembrance Event, Tuesday, Aug. 8, 2023

At the Corner of Princess and Asaph Streets 6 p.m.

Ends at the Corner of Fairfax and King Streets at 7:30 p.m.

Please join us in front of 401 N. St. Asaph Street for the unveiling of a new historic marker that tells the story of Benjamin Thomas. From here participants will be invited to solemnly follow the trail of terror the mob took down St. Asaph Street to King Street and then to the intersection with Fairfax Street where we will lay a wreath and acknowledge the lynching of Thomas and the actions the white community took against him, his family and the Black community in 1899. Transportation will be provided for those who can not easily walk the half-mile from 401 St. Asaph to the lynching location. Please email acrp@alexandriava.gov to reserve a seat on the bus by Aug. 5.

Upcoming Committee Meetings

Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Steering Committee, Aug. 1, at 5:00 p.m. in-person at the Black History Museum.

Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Marker Committee Thursday, Aug. 25, 7 p.m. virtual meeting, [register here](#).

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

[For more information](#)

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ACRP@alexandriava.gov

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) is a city-wide initiative dedicated to helping

Alexandria understand its history of racial terror hate crimes and to work toward creating a welcoming community bound by equity and inclusion.

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



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