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‘Illiberal America: A History’

On this date in 1899, Alexandria Police took Benjamin Thomas, 16, into custody for mistreating the 7-year-old daughter of Edward Kloch. The dubious legality of such an “attempted assault” charge and the rumored threat of a lynching caused Black Alexandrians to organize.

Their leadership reminded then-Mayor George Simpson and the police about the lynching of Joseph McCoy two years earlier and asked them to protect Thomas. The men were not taken seriously and were told to go home, but they chose to stay outside the station where Thomas was being held. They were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to start a riot.

The next day, Thomas was lynched by white Alexandrians and Washingtonians, who said they killed the youth, not because of the accusation against him, but because

Black residents confronted those in power in an attempt to ensure the law was upheld. For two nights, armed white Alexandrians patrolled the streets where Black Alexandrians lived and arrested anyone found outdoors.

New York University history professor and author Steven Hahn has said that the long history of political violence in this country was “usually to the benefit of people with wealth and power and people who want to exclude others from power.”

This analysis seems to fit – white Alexandrians used violence, overriding the rights of Black residents, to snuff out what they saw as a threat to their social and political power. It is another example of the illiberalism Hahn says can be found throughout this nation’s past.

In the case of the lynching of Thomas and its aftermath,

the use of political violence in reaction to the agency shown by Black Alexandrians only invited more resistance. Across the region, Black people refused to work for their white employers. In protest, more than 600 people attended a memorial service held for Thomas at Shiloh Baptist Church. And Black citizens organized a boycott targeting those involved in the lynching.

Hahn has emphasized similar stories showing the common competition in America between liberalism and illiberalism in his recent book, “Illiberal America: A History.”

In earlier works, Hahn has highlighted the agency shown by African Americans and the significant role they played in their liberation. In 2004, Hahn won the Pulitzer Prize in History for “A Nation Under Our Feet,” a comprehensive history of Black politics before, during and after the Civil War.



PHOTO/SHILOH BAPTIST CHURCH

On Friday, the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project will hold a conversation with Hahn about political violence and the ongoing struggle for democracy at 6:30 p.m., at Shiloh Baptist Church, located at 1401 Jamieson Ave., in remembrance of Benjamin Thomas. Both books mentioned in this article will be available for purchase at the free, public event. All are welcome.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.

CLARK

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Alexandria and Springfield: all have been blighted by this self-reinforcing gentrification. Save for Old Town, whose Beltway traffic is eroding yet another cherished community.

Transportation funds should instead be entrusted to the above communities to alleviate the source of traffic, which is

dependency on the Beltway itself. Human scale architecture, walkable infrastructure, family owned enterprises, multi-generational housing and bustling sidewalks all go hand-in-hand like a virtuous circle.

Communities become self-sufficient the more they follow these time-honored traditions. It is VDOT’s job to help us in our own destinies, not to

force us onto a highway.

Given the chance, our neighborhoods would likely prefer to control their own destinies. It is the basis of a free society. But VDOT saps this foundation in the well intended dependency they have created.

So, I ask you, when we are dependent on our cars and the Beltway and big boxes and soulless apartments, how free

are we? Do you feel wealthier? Do you expect your children to flourish in such conditions? What else can you imagine besides this for your neighborhood? What else around you do you need that isn’t being fulfilled?

VDOT, our fates are in your hands now. Good luck.

-James Clark, Alexandria