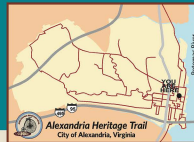


City Jail: A Site of Racial Terror in Alexandria

Lynching of Benjamin Thomas, 1899

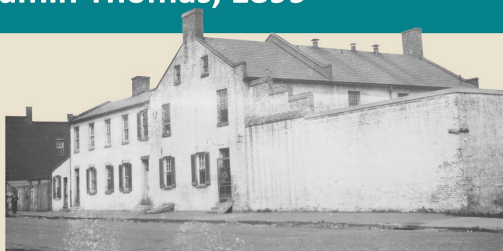


At this intersection, a jail opened in 1827 when Alexandria was a part of Washington, D.C. In the 19th century, it housed criminals, debtors, and Civil War military prisoners. Before Emancipation, the jail was among the locations where enslaved people were sold. Later, Alexandrians arrested for Black Code violations, such as vagrancy, and sentenced to work on the chain gang were housed here. Attached to the jail was a tall, whitewashed wall, enclosing a courtyard that served as the site of several executions.

In the summer of 1899, this jail was the scene of the lynching of Benjamin Thomas, a Black teen accused by a 7-year-old white child of attempted assault.

Alexandrian Freeman H.M. Murray 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. There has been a great deal of lynching & white capping in the South this summer." On the night Thomas was arrested, a threat of a lynching drew out Black leaders to protect him. Authorities would later blame these heroes for upsetting the white community and causing the lynching.

In the 1980s, the jail closed, and the property was developed into a townhouse community. A portion of the jail's facade and exterior wall remain today as part of these private residences.



Constructed in 1827, the Alexandria jail was located at the northeast corner of Princess and North St. Asaph streets. After the jail closed in 1987, the west facade was preserved and incorporated into new homes standing today. Grigg-Lamond Photo Collection, Alexandria Library, Special Collections

A "Public Prison" for the Enslaved

Long before a lynch mob abducted Benjamin Thomas from the Alexandria jail, this site was one of racial oppression, particularly due to its connection to slavery. Within a decade of Congress authorizing \$10,000 to build this jail, the American Anti-Slavery Society featured it in an oversized broadsheet documenting how "public prisons" in the nation's capital - funded by taxpayers - were associated with slavery.

The jail regularly held Black people who had been captured after attempting to escape from bondage until their enslavers claimed them. Some enslaved people were publicly auctioned at this site, often because their enslaver did not want to claim them, or to pay off a dead enslaver's debt.

Enslaved people charged with serious crimes in Alexandria City, and County - present-day Arlington - were frequently incarcerated here. In 1858, Jenny Farr, was executed in the yard after being sentenced to death for killing her enslaver's wife who had abused her. A local paper wrote, "five hundred persons witnessed the sad scene."

Sponsored by Walter E. Steimel, Jr.

Aerial View Route of Thomas Lynching

The jail and jail yard are visible in this photograph taken from a plane and looking east over Alexandria in 1999. Red boxes and arrows show the six-block path the lynch mob took after abducting Benjamin Thomas. They dragged Thomas down St. Asaph Street and then east on King Street to the southwest corner at Fairfax Street where they hanged him from a lamp post and shot him to death.



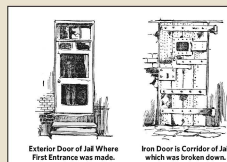
Harris & Ewing, Library of Congress

Trail of Terror

On August 8, between 500 and 2000 people were outside this jail demanding authorities turn over Benjamin Thomas. Police refused to give him up. Gunshots rang out and the guards sought cover in an interior office. After ramming the jailhouse door with a beam, at least 50 men entered the building looking for Thomas, but they were confronted with a fortified iron door. While they worked to open it, Mayor George Simpson appealed to the crowd to go home, promising to call a Grand Jury the next day to "legally" hang Thomas.

After breaking into the hall, the lynchers terrorized prisoners while searching for Thomas. "As the mob caught sight of him, a piercing shriek of exultation rent the air. Pistols were fired and a throng of hundreds charged down upon the helpless victim," wrote *The Washington Post*, August 9, 1899.

According to news accounts, they placed a rope around his neck, in his mouth and under his arms, the "hooting and jering mob" dragged him; "his head bumping over cobblestones." For over a half of a mile, they struck, stabbed, and kicked Thomas who cried out for his mother.



Washington Evening Star newspaper on August 9, 1899. Evening Star, Library of Congress

"His cries and moans were heartrending," wrote the *Evening Star*, "down to King Street the crowd proceeded, shouting and firing pistols in the air."

At the corner of King and Fairfax Streets, they hanged Benjamin Thomas from a lamp post, then fired rounds of bullets into his body.

April 23, 1897

Joseph McCoy is lynched.

August 7, 1899

8:00 p.m.

Benjamin Thomas is arrested.

8:00 p.m. - 2:00 a.m.

Alexandria's African American community alerts officials to a lynching threat.

August 8, 1899

2:30 a.m.

Black Americans are arrested for disorderly conduct, carrying concealed weapons and attempting to incite a riot.

12:00 p.m.

Thomas is sent to this jail to await a grand jury.

10:00 p.m.

An armed lynch mob assembles outside the jail.

11:00 p.m.

The mayor tries to persuade the mob to leave by promising a "legal" execution the next day.

11:00 p.m. - 12:00 a.m.

The mob takes Thomas and hangs him at the corner of King and South Fairfax streets.

August 9, 1899

11:00 a.m.

A Coroner's Inquest determines Thomas died of two gunshot wounds to his heart.

12:00 p.m.

A Coroner's Jury finds that Thomas came to his death "from gunshot wounds inflicted at the hands of a mob unknown to the jury."



CITY OF ALEXANDRIA EST. 1749

The Alexandria Community Reconciliation Project is a citywide initiative dedicated to helping Alexandria understand its history of racial terror hate crimes and to work toward creating a welcoming community bonded by equity and inclusion.

ALEXANDRIA
COMMUNITY
RECONCILIATION
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