

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria
 COMMUNITY MEDIA

A dangerous age

Rev. W.H. Warring looked out from the pulpit upon hundreds of faces. Despite the August humidity, Shiloh Baptist Church was overflowing. Warring was flanked by three ministers from Alexandria churches and another from Georgetown – they had to do some serious ministering. A few weeks earlier, a lynch mob shot an unarmed Black man in the back then lynched a 16-year-old Alexandrian on a child's vague allegation.

There had been plenty of warning that a lynching was in the works. The night of Benjamin Thomas' arrest, Black community leaders alerted the mayor and police of credible threats. Officials and authorities refused to provide protection. The Black community responded with a vigil to protect the accused until they were arrested.

The next night, Alexandrians, joined by some Washington residents, formed a lynch mob at the jail. Community members confronted them, but gunfire hit George Hammond and forced a retreat.

The mob easily overcame police, took Thomas

and dragged him to the corner of Fairfax and King streets where they hanged and shot him. For the next two nights, the Alexandria Light Infantry and armed Alexandrians paraded through the streets, intimidating and arresting Black citizens.

During the 25 years preceding these events, Black Alexandrians witnessed a steady erosion of the constitutional rights granted to them after the Civil War. The Supreme Court took a narrow view of the 14th and 15th Amendments and invalidated the Civil Rights Act of 1875. Their decisions encouraged mobs to become violent and denied Black victims recourse.

Virginia took full advantage of the court's leniency, making it harder for Black people to vote or hold office, keeping them out of the jury box, failing to recognize first class tickets on street cars, arresting them on vague charges and forcing them to labor for free, then looking the other way when violence was used against Black citizens.

In Alexandria, use of the chain gang, or incarcerated



The Benjamin Thomas soil jar collected in the 2022 Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Soil Collection Ceremony.

PHOTO/OFFICE OF
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people who were disproportionately Black men, to care for the streets skyrocketed in the 1890s.

Joseph McCoy was lynched in 1896, Benjamin Thomas was lynched in 1899 and two years later, the vote was stripped from Black men with Virginia's new constitution. Black citizens had no representation, no vote and no recourse.

In the wake of Thomas' killing, the mayor promised a full investigation but failed to follow through. No one was held accountable for Thomas' lynching, nor for the shooting of Hammond. But Black Alexandrians had another way to hold people accountable with work stoppages and boycotts. They called for a Mass Meeting on Aug. 28, 1899, that more than 600 people attended.

Warring rose, approached

the podium and began, "We are living in dangerous times..."

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project invites the public to Shiloh Baptist Church 1401 Jamieson Ave. on Aug. 28 for a night of music and conversation about this moment in time featuring NAACP Attorney Myesha Braden. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. and the Benjamin Thomas Remembrance program begins at 7 p.m.

Tours of the historic sanctuary where the Mass Meeting & Memorial for Thomas was held in 1899 will be available from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. at 1400 Duke St. For more information, please visit alexandriava.gov/cultural-history/alexandria-community-remembrance-project.

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