



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Alexandria was part of the sordid history of lynchings

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Image: Scene of the Lynchings. Courtesy, Alexandria Gazette.

On Feb. 2, the Alexandria Black History Museum will screen the film “An Outrage.” This short film deals with the issue of lynching in the south. Richmond-based filmmakers Lance Warren and Hannah Ayers will be present to discuss the making of the film, which premiered in 2017. It has won multiple awards, including the Audience Award at the Indie Grits Film Festival and the Jury Award for Best Short Documentary at the Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival.

Between 1880 and 1930, it is estimated more than 400 people were lynched in the United States. In Virginia during this same period, it is estimated that 86 people were lynched, and all but 16 of them were African American. Lynchings were not just a way to express outrage about a particular behavior or crime; they were a way to control and intimidate African Americans. Unlike their white counterparts, the lynchings of African Americans were turned into spectacles, with mobs subjecting the victims to torture and humiliation before and after the executions.

It is known that there were at least 11 lynchings in Northern Virginia between 1882 and 1968. Two of those lynchings occurred in Alexandria. Joseph McCoy was lynched on April 23, 1897 on a lamppost at Lee and Cameron Streets. He had been accused of raping the nine-year-old daughter of his employer. The body was mutilated after he was killed. On Aug. 8, 1899, Benjamin Thomas was lynched on a lamppost at Fairfax Street near King Street. He was accused of attempting to assault an eight-year-old girl. While the Virginia Anti-Lynching Law was signed in 1928, and was the first in the country to name lynching specifically as a state crime, no white person was ever convicted under this law.

Today, we are aware that lynchings are a form of terrorism disguised as law enforcement. They are hate crimes. For more than a decade, the Equal Justice Initiative researched the history of racial injustice and offered assistance to those impacted by it. On April 26, 2018, the EJI opened The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration in Montgomery, Alabama.

On the same day EJI also opened The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. It is the nation’s first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence.

One of the goals of EJI is to document and memorialize all of the lynchings in the United States. To that effect, the Alexandria Black History Museum is working with EJI to bring the monument they have created, which acknowledges the lynchings of McCoy and Thomas, to Alexandria. Please check the Black History Museum website for updates about how to participate.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Please note, the location for the film screening has changed to The Lyceum, located at 201 S. Washington Street. The start time is 2 p.m., and the cost is \$5. Tickets are available online at <https://shop.alexandriava.gov>. Parking is limited.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.