



# Alexandria Times

*Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### The Equal Justice Initiative in Alexandria

*Alexandria Times, August 8, 2019*

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, but 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.

There were at least 11 known lynchings in Northern Virginia between 1882 and 1968. Two of those 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 City of Alexandria is working with community members and organizations to bring an EJI pillar, which acknowledges the lynchings of McCoy and Thomas, to Alexandria. The first public meeting for Alexandria's Equal Justice Initiative is on Sept. 21 at the Charles Houston Recreation Center from 1 to 3 p.m.

The process involved in retrieving Alexandria's pillar from the National Memorial for Peace and Justice includes holding:

- A series of public programs related to the Equal Justice Initiative; •
- A public ceremony to collect soil from the location of the two Alexandria lynchings;
- Recognitions at the site of the lynchings;
- A public pilgrimage to the EJI museum to "claim" the pillar;
- A ceremony in Alexandria to install the pillar.

Please check the Office of Historic Alexandria's website, [alexandriava.gov/historic](http://alexandriava.gov/historic), for updated information on public meetings and programs as well as how to participate in this important Community Remembrance Project.



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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For more information, read Audrey Davis' column "My View: Lynchings in Alexandria" on page 18 of the August 8, 2019 issue of the [Alexandria Times](#). The writer is director of the Alexandria Black History Museum.

*"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.*