

ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT

NEWSLETTER



July 2021 Edition

Fined and Confined

On Sunday, August 6, 1899 in a factory town outside of Greenville, S.C., churches were emptied by rumors that Tack Moore, a Black man, had been or would soon be lynched. More than 25 African American men came to his defense standing their ground against police and a mob of white factory workers. The next night, similar scenes unfolded in Alexandria, Va. when the African American community learned that one of their young men had been accused of the attempted assault of a white child.

In the summer of '99, African American's living in the South were plagued by a spate of lynchings and white terror crimes. A great number of the weeks-long manhunts and lynchings had happened in Georgia. The news poisoned the entire region and set many on edge. Hysteria had infected southern whites who were indiscriminately accusing Black men of sexual assault and increasingly the alleged victims were children.

For such a crime, Benjamin Thomas, the Black teenage son of Elizabeth and George, was lynched in Alexandria on Tuesday, August 8, 1899. What makes his story extraordinary is that members of the African American community tried to save his life while upholding state and local law, and had those same laws not been used to punish them, they may have succeeded.

Recalling the lynching of Alexandrian Joseph McCoy just two years prior, some members of the Black community were determined that it not happen again. John Mitchell, the firebrand editor of the African American newspaper, *The Richmond Planet*, wrote in May of 1897, "Colored men should see to it that their people are defended. With proper organization at Alexandria, the life of Joseph McCoy could have been saved, and the honor of the city of Alexandria upheld."

On Monday, August 7, 1899, the night sky was clear and temperatures were comfortable. At 8 p.m., two police officers knocked on the front door of the house at 700 N. Patrick Street and arrested Benjamin Thomas. The little white girl who lived next door had accused Thomas, who was Black, of assaulting her. The officers brought the young man to the Station House on Fairfax Street to wait for his case to be heard the next morning.

Sometime after the arrest, James Turley, 57, was on his way home from working in the brickyards. The African American, whose family had been in Alexandria for generations, lived on the 1200 block of Queen Street. Turley was well established in the Black community and was a leader in the local Republican party. As he walked toward home, Turley overheard a clutch of white men talking about lynching "some negro." Concerned, he sought out information and learned that Thomas was sitting in a cell at the police station for the same type of allegation that resulted in the lynching of McCoy two years earlier.

By the end of the night, Turley, like Thomas, would be locked up at the Station House awaiting a hearing the next morning, as would several other Black Republicans, including Capt. Albert Green. Republicans

John Nelson and William Washington would be recognized in the courtroom during Turley's hearing and taken into custody.

Robert Buckner, also arrested for trying to ensure Benjamin's safety, was an African American community activist who worked on the Emancipation Parade and would later help establish an Ex-Slave Pension Club. William Washington's younger brother Richard was arrested at the same time as Turley - the brothers may have been cousins to Thomas whose mother, Elizabeth was a Washington.

Toward midnight, Capt. Albert Green, who led the young Black men who made up the Robinson Industrial Guards, was in charge of about 100 men who were marching in front of the Station House on Fairfax Street. Their stated goal was to prevent any attempt to lynch young Benjamin.

It was reported in the newspapers that around 12:15, a delegation of Black men went to Mayor George Simpson's home on N. Columbus Street to ask him to provide protection for Benjamin. But the Mayor did not think it was necessary and threatened to arrest them if they did not go home right away.

Soon after, Lieut. Smith, who was in charge at the station, also went to the mayor's house and informed him that large groups of Black Alexandrians were congregating near the police station. The mayor gave him permission to disperse the crowds and arrest anyone who gave them trouble.

Capt. Green was the first caught in Lieut. Smith's crosshairs as he approached the men at the corner of Fairfax and Cameron. Lieut. Smith ordered the Black men to go home. Capt. Green told the police that some whites were threatening to lynch Thomas and the men were there to stop the lynching even if it meant they would lose their own lives.

Lieut. Smith arrested Capt. Green.

The African Americans then moved away from the station house and regrouped at the corner of Princess and Fairfax.

The officers followed them.

Lieut. Smith ordered the Black men to go home. The African American citizens declared they did not want what happened to Joseph McCoy to happen again. Then, Lieut Smith had Alfred Mason and Harry McDonald arrested.

In another part of town, Policeman W. Atkinson arrested James Turley and Richard Washington who were also reportedly "ringleaders."

In the early hours of Tuesday, August 8, Turley, Richard Washington, Capt. Green, Alfred Mason, Harry McDonald, Robert Buckner, Allen Carter, John Huskins, Edward Payne, Thomas Elzie, Edward Gibson and James Alexander were arrested for disorderly conduct, inciting riot and in Turley's case, carrying a concealed weapon. At the hearing the next day, William Washington and Nelson were spotted in the courtroom and were accused of having been with the others the night before; they were also charged with disorderly conduct and trying to incite a riot. It is possible that they were not involved in the previous night's affairs and were in the courtroom to support their fellow Republicans and neighbors.

Mayor Simpson, who was justice of the peace in small matters, presided and stated that there was nothing to show that Benjamin Thomas was in "the slightest danger" yet the Black community attempted to start a riot that would have ended with their own lynchings.

James Turley, Edward Gibson, Alfred Mason, Harry McDonald, Albert Green and Allen Carter were fined \$20 each or 30 days on the chain gang. Robert Buckner, John Haskins, James Alexander, Richard Washington and Edward Payne were fined \$10 each or 30 days on the chain gang. William Washington and Nelson were dismissed and not fined.

In 1899, \$20 was worth about \$620 today. The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists \$5.09 as an average weekly income for African American laborers in 1897 in Nashville, Tenn.

All but two of those fined \$20 were sent to the chain gang for 30 days because they couldn't pay, according to the *Washington Evening Star*, which did not list their names.

John Mitchell wrote a scathing editorial the following week, "Was there ever a greater parody upon justice than the sight of citizens of Alexandria, colored citizens hauled before a white mayor and fined \$20 for doing their duty? Mayor Simpson is a disgrace to the office. He, a sworn official of the law fining other citizens who were anxious to see the laws upheld."

Even the *Evening Star* newspaper, whose editorial desk held the racist views of the day, had a go at the hypocrisy displayed by this punishment, writing on August 9, 1899: "When the negroes fearing this departure from legal procedure in punishing a criminal of their race gathered in protest the reflection thereby cast upon the law and the community's law abiding spirit was resented, and the law laid its hand

upon these men and they were arrested and imprisoned. Within a few hours the lawless deed which they feared, and the suggestion of which was treated by Alexandria as an insult, had been committed. Will the law which punished for disorderly assembly those who would forestall lawless homicide punish the actual homicide? Probably not.”

It was not. Benjamin was tortured and murdered. Leaders in the Black community were fined and confined and could no longer defend him. No white lynchers were ever held accountable.

In The News

Benjamin Thomas Remembrance Event

Please join ACRP members at Market Square on August 8 at 7:00 p.m. for a service honoring the memory of Benjamin Thomas. The historic marker that details the lynching of Thomas on August 8, 1899 will be unveiled at the ceremony. In addition, his name and the date will be projected onto City Hall in purple, the color of mourning, from Friday- Monday.

NPS Honors Alexandria's Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial

On June 28, the National Park Service listed Alexandria's Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial on the African American Civil Rights Network. The Network is a collection of 57 historic resources from across the country that commemorate, honor and interprets the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle for racial equality. The Alexandria Memorial is the oldest and first site in Virginia to be added to the network.

Upcoming Events

Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial Civil Rights Network Event Saturday, July 24, 8 – 9 a.m., 1001 S. Washington Street (at the corner of Church Street)

Join Historic Alexandria in honoring Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial's inclusion in the African American Civil Rights Network (AACRN). The free dedication will include a wreath laying by the 31st Masonic District, a reading by representatives of the United States Colored Troops (USCT), and remarks by Reverend Taft Quincey Heatley. The ceremony will take place rain or shine. Seating is limited.

Public Meeting: Marking and Recognition of Burial Grounds in Fort Ward Saturday, July 31, 10-11:30 p.m., Fort Ward Park, parking lot behind the Museum at 4301 W. Braddock Rd.

.Join this public meeting and discuss marking, protection and recognition of key cemetery areas and burial sites related to the African American Fort community. City staff from the Office of Historic Alexandria will lead a discussion on issues and ideas for demarcating and memorializing these sacred areas. Attendees will meet City staff in the parking lot behind Fort Ward Museum and walk to the four major burial sites. In the event of rain, the meeting will be held in the reception hall at Oakland Baptist Church, 3408 King Street, Alexandria.

Virtual Lecture: Lynching Photography, Memory, and Representations of Racial Violence in the United States Tuesday, August 3, 4-6 p.m.

Lynching was an important method of enforcing white supremacy in America for more than a century. Through the constant threat of extreme racial violence, lynching served to control Black communities politically, socially, and culturally. This lecture will discuss how lynching photography and representations of lynching in American art provide historical information and context for racial violence in the United States. We will also discuss how lynching photography has shaped our understanding of depictions of racial violence in contemporary society.

Dr. LaNitra M. Berger is an award-winning scholar, educator, and social justice advocate working towards making higher education accessible to low-income, first-generation, and minority students. Her scholarly interests are in art and social activism in the African and Jewish diasporas. For over 15 years, her work as an educator focuses on creating and expanding education abroad opportunities for underrepresented students, particularly in international education. *Register online [here](#).*

On Exhibit

The New Project Studio at the Torpedo Factory is hosting an exhibition highlighting The American Institute of Architects 2021 competition. As readers of the ACRP newsletter know, ACRP was the inspiration for student-created designs that would transform Market Square and display the Equal Justice Initiative's Pillar

memorializing Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. There is an ACRP kiosk outside the exhibit that explains our project and engages more Alexandrians in our work. Drop by anytime from June through the middle of August. You can learn more about the exhibit [here](#).

Upcoming Committee Meetings

August 24, The Community Remembrance Project Marketing Committee 7-8 p.m. The August meeting will be held in person, location to be determined. The committee is not meeting in July.

August 26, The Community Remembrance Project Soil and Marker Committee 7-8 p.m. The August meeting will be held in person, location to be determined. The committee is not meeting in July.

September 15, The Community Remembrance Project Steering Committee 5 p.m. in-person at the Alexandria Black History Museum.

September TBD, The Community Remembrance Project Education/Programming time and in-person location to be determined.

The Pilgrimage Committee will not meet in July.

Committee Reports

The Soil and Marker Committee met on June 24 and reviewed the text for Benjamin Thomas marker, as well as, summarized the committee's work to date. The next steps will be to create a plan and ceremony for harvesting soil relevant to each lynching victim. The committee will not meet in the month of July.

The Pilgrimage Committee met on June 28 and discussed potential costs for the pilgrimage to Montgomery, Alabama. These preliminary numbers will help the Steering Committee make some initial decisions to help other committees in their work. This is a great start and the committee remains on schedule for a Autumn 2022 trip.

Outreach Committee – a presentation on Alexandria's Community Remembrance Project was given to the City of Fairfax as part of their Connecting Fairfax City for All series. The committee is seeking volunteers to represent ACRP at Alexandria farmer's markets. Residents can express interest through this [form](#).

Fundraising Committee-meetings have been on hold during the pandemic. However, we continue to receive donations from generous members of the community. Funds are being used to support the ACRP public programs and create markers for the Joseph McCloy and Benjamin Thomas lynching sites.

Marketing Committee - due to attrition during the pandemic hiatus, we have lost committee members and only two active members remain. We discussed ideas for convening the larger ACRP community group again this fall, outdoors, and encouraging conversations among members of the group, perhaps also sponsoring a season of social justice.

Education and Programming Committee- met on July 7th at Lloyd House. Items for discussion were: ideas for the upcoming remembrance of Benjamin Thomas, ideas for a fall 30-day Challenge were discussed. Finally, updates from the ACRP's Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) representative were shared. These updates regarded developing the structure for a student essay contest cosponsored by EJI that will launch in 2022. An update on the ARP Funds awarded to the ACRP and were discussed, as was the desire of the committee to book speakers with larger honorariums.

Research Committee-has completed narratives of the lynchings of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. These stories that were researched and written by members of the Research Committee are available on the ACRP website. The work of this committee continues to inform the other committees, however, their meetings are currently on hiatus.

[Joseph McCoy](#) [Benjamin Thomas](#).

[For more information](#)

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The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) is a city-wide initiative dedicated to helping Alexandria understand its history of racial terror hate crimes and to work toward creating a welcoming

community bound by equity and inclusion.

**Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia**



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