

Alexandria Times

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Benjamin Thomas and Emmett Till

BY PERCY WHITE

In August of 1619, the English pirate ship White Lion landed at Point Comfort, in present-day Hampton, Virginia, heavy with Africans kidnapped from their homeland. They were transported to Virginia and some “20 and odd” Africans were traded to English settlers in exchange for food.

For generations, whites used violence to control Africans, historically referred to as slaves, the derogatory “niggers,” negros, coloreds and blacks. Accepted forms of control included beatings, maimings and lynchings, all deeply rooted in the culture and laws of Virginia and the United States.

Thousands of lynchings occurred in the U.S. over generations. Many of them involved accusations that a Black man assaulted a white woman. The Equal Justice Initiative discusses lynching in its report, “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.” <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>.

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Benjamin Thomas and Emmett Till are two examples of the many lynchings that stand out.

On Aug. 8, 1899, a 16-year-old African American teenager, Benjamin Thomas, was lynched for allegedly attempting to assault Lillian Kloch, an 8-year-old white girl. Benjamin was hanged from a lamppost at the intersection of King and Fairfax streets. He was buried in a pauper’s graveyard.

On Aug. 28, 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American teenager, was lynched for allegedly whistling at Carolyn Bryant, age 21. Till lived in Chicago and on Aug. 21, visited his uncle Moses Wright and cousins in Money, Mississippi.

On Aug. 24, Till rode into town with his older cousins to get candy and soda from Bryant’s Store. He walked in, paid for his items, and walked out. Bryant, co-owner of the store, came out behind him. That is when Till allegedly



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whistled at her. Years later, Bryant admitted she made it up. She was never charged in Till’s murder case.

In the dark early morning hours of Aug. 28, Carolyn Bryant’s husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother J.W. Milam, kidnapped Till from

his uncle’s home.

Till’s partially submerged, mutilated body was found in the Tallahatchie River on Aug. 28.

On Sept. 22, 1955, Jet Magazine published an article with pictures of Till’s disfigured body.

Bryant and Milam were charged with murder and found not guilty. They admitted to killing Till in a Jan. 24, 1956 Look Magazine article.

The likelihood of these two Black teenagers being lynched increased exponentially by them living in a culture of racism and perceived white supremacy. Their deaths would not have been possible without the collaboration, official or unofficial, between residents, business owners and local governments.

Benjamin Thomas and Emmett Till call out to us to remember them and to fight for a more just and equal society.

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