

# OPINION

## Joseph McCoy: Lynched in Alexandria, April 23, 1897

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Americans are attached to their phones. We bemoan the fact that almost everyone everywhere is engrossed in texting, watching videos, or responding to social media. An annoyance, or convenience, if you are African American the smartphone has been a lifeline, a visual record, an epitaph — it has changed the racial injustice landscape. Incidents of discrimination, intimidation, torture, and murder, a frequent occurrence for the African American community, have been documented in real time for the world to see, and remarkably racial terror hate crimes persist.

Americans look, sympathize with victim families, protest, and vow it will never happen again ... then repeat the cycle when it does. I have heard some in Alexandria say we are lucky that racially motivated murders of African Americans never occurred in our city. Except they already have....

In the 1890s, long before the era of smartphones, two young Black Alexandria men died at the hands of a white mob. Today, I write about one of them, Joseph

McCoy, who was lynched on April 23, 1897.

The eighteen-year-old McCoy was accused of molesting the daughter of his white employer of sixteen years. Without a trial, he was kidnapped from the Alexandria police station (today the site of City Hall) and lynched at the corner of N. Lee and Cameron streets in the early morning hours of April 23. There were many witnesses for McCoy's death and the perpetrators (including some of Alexandria's most upstanding citizens) used this to their advantage to create a climate of fear for African Americans in Alexandria.

Is that climate of fear any less today for African Americans? After the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, when a pandemic lockdown world could not turn away from his brutal death, politicians, celebrities and citizens around the world pledged to end racially motivated violence. Still it persists.

George Floyd was denied compassion and legal redress as Joseph McCoy was denied it 124 years before. Both men are part of a chain of racially motivated deaths — a chain with thousands of links for every man, woman and child of color murdered in the US because of hate. Why has nothing changed? How many more people of color

will become links on this chain?

When people say life today is better for Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC), we have to ask ourselves how much better? When a traffic stop, a walk or jog in a neighborhood could end with the loss of life, when unemployment, housing, health care and food inequalities have decimated BIPOC communities. How far have we really come as a society?

On April 23, 1897, none of these issues were going through the mind of Joseph McCoy. He just wanted to survive, but he knew he would not. He died looking into the eyes of people he had grown up with, people who granted him no mercy. For a young Black man growing up in America today can we reassure him that times have changed?

This week, Alexandria remembers the life of Joseph McCoy. Established in 2019 by City Council, the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) is committed to educating Alexandria citizens about the city's history of racial terror hate crimes and the two lynchings that occurred in Alexandria.

Everyone has the power to effect change and fight inequality. The two most important things a person can do is to understand Amer-

ican race history and Speak Truth to Power. By understanding America's history of racial hate crimes people can call out injustice when witnessing it. If you don't know where to start, become a part of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, visit the city's museums and libraries and learn about Alexandria's Black history.

This weekend, learn more about Joseph McCoy on the In Memoriam page [Alexandriava.gov/Historic](http://Alexandriava.gov/Historic), pay your respects at the lynching location, and view the newly installed remembrance marker. City Hall will be illuminated in purple, the color of mourning, throughout the weekend. It is our hope that this April 23, 2021 memorialization will provide belated accountability, reconciliation, honor, and respect for Joseph McCoy.

This Saturday, April 24th at 1 p.m., as part of the remembrance, ACRP is sponsoring a free virtual lecture. Distinguished historian Susan Strasser will facilitate our understanding of lynching in the broader context of racial hate crimes. Dr. Strasser will offer two more social justice-themed lectures this spring.

To read the full account of April 23, 1897, and to sign up for the monthly ACRP newsletter, please visit: [Alexandriava.gov/Historic](http://Alexandriava.gov/Historic).



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