

## This commemorative broadside is dedicated to the memory of Joseph McCoy, who was lynched at the corner of N. Lee and Cameron Streets, a block from city hall, on April 23, 1897.

*Alexandria, Va., April 23* – An unarmed 18-year-old African American male accused of sexual assault was killed Friday while in police custody.

Joseph McCoy, 18, was accused, taken to the police station and within hours became the latest victim of white terror.

The dateline on this story is all that distinguishes it from a news story that could run in papers today. Nearly 125 years after Alexandria native Joseph McCoy was lynched by violent rioters on the streets of Old Town, African Americans continue to have a very different experience with policing and the judicial system than white people do.

On this day, in the early hours of Friday, April 23, 1897, McCoy was lynched less than a dozen blocks from his house by hundreds of white Alexandrians angry over rumors that he sexually assaulted at least one of his white employers' preteen daughters.

For African Americans living in post-reconstruction Alexandria, to be accused was to be convicted. True due process was rarely found, but the community usually held a trial before executing the accused. Young McCoy, the first person to be lynched in Alexandria, would not get the chance to step foot in the city's courtroom.

On Thursday night around 11 p.m., a mob of white Alexandrians began rioting outside the police station on Fairfax Street where



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McCoy was being held. The rioters made two attempts to break into the police station. The police were able to ward off the initial insurrection. Mayor Luther Thompson was informed of the attack, but he didn't call up the local militia. Thompson said he believed the police had the situation under control and he didn't believe there would be a second attack, so he went back to bed.

After midnight, the mob grew to approximately 500 people. They broke through the station doors, forcibly took McCoy from his jail cell and dragged him across Fairfax Street. The violent rioters beat and injured the police officers who tried to stop them. The mob shot McCoy, bludgeoned him with an ax and hanged him

from a lamppost on the southeast corner of Cameron and Lee Streets. Several police officers were injured during the raid.

McCoy was accused and arrested based solely on the testimony of his employer of 16 years, Richard Lacy. The police did not serve the teen with a warrant and tricked McCoy into coming to the police station for his own protection. It had been reported by police that Lacy threatened to kill McCoy.

When questioned by police, McCoy denied the crime before confessing while still in police custody, according to a Governor's inquest.

Law enforcement expected he would have been found guilty and executed by the state and advocated for the rule of law prior to the vigilante murder.

While four white rioters were detained after the first attempt on the station house, the mayor chose to release them. Not a single white person was held accountable for this young man's death.

In the Alexandria Gazette that came out Friday evening, just hours after McCoy was murdered by his fellow community members, an editorial states: "... few people familiar with the particulars of the wretch's terrible offence, are at all desirous that those engaged in inflicting his well-deserved punishment shall be called to account for it, certainly none in this city. When the negroes shall cease to commit such monstrous crimes,

lynchings in the South will cease, but not before ..."

This editorial was likely written by Mayor Thompson, who was a reporter and editor at the Gazette. According to his testimony before a Governor's inquest on the lynching, Thompson said he wrote several of the pieces published that day.

McCoy's would be the first of two lynchings that happened in Old Town. His death is one of 11 that occurred in Northern Virginia and 100 in the Commonwealth from the end of Reconstruction through 1968.

Unfortunately, Alexandria's story is similar to that of many communities. Guided by the work of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and the impact of their National Memorial for Peace and Justice, the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project began critical work in 2019 to acknowledge the city's history of racial terror hate crimes. Today, the names of Alexandria's lynching victims are being added to the city's historical narrative.

All are invited to join in the Remembrance of Joseph McCoy, a black teenage resident who was killed by a lynch mob at the corner of Lee and Cameron Streets in 1897. This weekend, learn more about Joseph McCoy on the [Alexandriava.gov/Historic](https://alexandriava.gov/Historic) "In Memoriam" page, 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.

ACRP hosts public programs and produces literature that explores, contextualizes and takes steps toward atonement for the racial injustices of Alexandria's past. Everyone is welcome to attend. This Saturday at 1 p.m., as part of the Remembrance, ACRP is sponsoring a free virtual lecture. Distinguished historian Susan

Strasser, Ph.D will facilitate our understanding of lynching in the broader context of racial hate crimes. 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](https://alexandriava.gov/Historic).

*This piece was provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria. OHA thanks the Alexandria Times for their generous donation for this broadside.*



Alexandria Police Station