

Alexandria Gazette Packet



25 CENTS

SERVING ALEXANDRIA FOR OVER 200 YEARS • A CONNECTION NEWSPAPER

AUGUST 12, 2021

'Face Yourselves'

BY JEANNE THEISMANN
GAZETTE PACKET

As twilight descended across the city, the powerful strains of "We Shall Overcome" rang out at the intersection of Fairfax and King streets as a crowd gathered Aug. 8 to remember Benjamin Thomas, a 16-year-old who was lynched at that site 122 years ago.

It happened around midnight, Aug. 8, 1899, when a mob of 2,000 white Alexandrians attacked the city jail on North St. Asaph Street. With a rope around his neck, Thomas was dragged to the intersection known as Leadbeater Corner opposite Market Square. Along the way, he was pelted with stones and pieces of iron, stabbed and shot several times before being hanged from a lamppost.

"We can never bring justice for Benjamin Thomas but with perseverance we can begin to tell the truth, which will move to reconciliation," said Rabbi David Spinrad of Beth El Hebrew Congregation just prior to unveiling the historic marker at the site of the lynching.

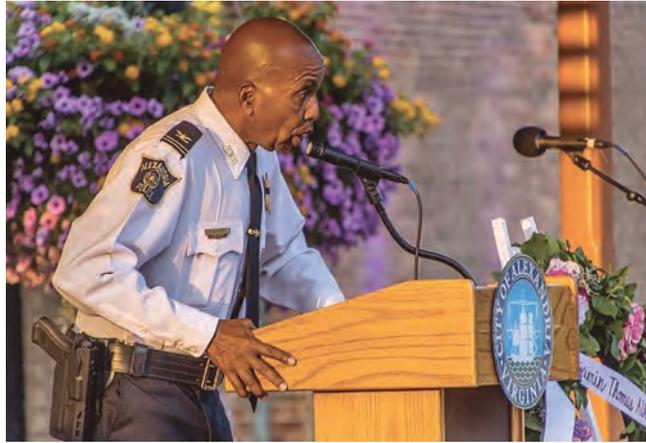
Two years earlier, on April 23, 1897, another African American teenager, Joseph McCoy, was lynched at the corner of Cameron and Lee streets after being pulled from his cell at the police station. A historic marker was dedicated at that site earlier this year.

Both markers are part of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, which is working with the Equal Justice Initiative based in Montgomery, Ala. The Equal Justice Initiative published "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror" in 2015 and opened The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in 2019.

The memorial includes over 800 steel monuments, or pillars, one for each county in the United States where a racial terror lynching took place, with the names of the lynching victims engraved on the pillars. Communities across the country will be able to claim their pillars and install them in the counties they represent and the ACRP is working towards that end.

Joining Spinrad in the remembrance ceremony for Thomas were Alexandria Mayor Justin Wilson, Acting Chief of Police Don Hayes, Sheriff's Office Captain Sean Casey, Alexandria Poet Laureate KaNikki Jakarta, Shiloh Baptist Church Rev. Taft Quincey Heatley, Beulah Baptist Church Rev. Professor Quadricos B. Driskell, and vocalist Tanya Wilkins. Worshipful Grand Historian McArthur Myers, 31st Masonic District Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Virginia, led the wreath laying procession from Market Square across the street to the site where Thomas was murdered.

Research by the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project committee showed



Acting Chief of Police Don Hayes speaks at the Aug. 8 remembrance ceremony for Benjamin Thomas, a 16-year-old who was lynched at the corner of Fairfax and King streets on Aug. 8, 1899.



Worshipful Grand Historian McArthur Myers, 31st Masonic District MHPHGLVA, leads the wreath laying procession from Market Square to the corner of Fairfax and King streets on Aug. 8, 2021 as part of the remembrance ceremony and marker dedication in memory of Benjamin Thomas. Thomas was 16 years old when he was lynched at that intersection on Aug. 8, 1899.

that in both Alexandria lynchings, the white authorities were deliberately complicit in their refusal to name and bring to justice members of the white mob. In the case of Thomas, the officers defending the jail were not prepared to protect the prisoner. Instead, city officials and law enforcement officers obstructed and punished members

City dedicates marker in memory of lynching victim Benjamin Thomas.



A crowd gathers at the corner of Fairfax and King streets Aug. 8 to dedicate a marker commemorating the Aug. 8, 1899, lynching of 16-year-old Benjamin Thomas.

PHOTOS/CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



A crowd fills Market Square Aug. 8 for the twilight ceremony commemorating the lynching of 16-year-old Benjamin Thomas, which took place Aug. 8, 1899. A marker was dedicated at the corner of Fairfax and King streets where the lynching took place.



Alexandria City Hall is illuminated in purple, the color of mourning, in honor of Benjamin Thomas, a 16-year-old who was lynched at the corner of Fairfax and King streets on Aug. 8, 1899. Carlyle House and the George Washington Masonic Memorial were also illuminated in purple from Aug. 6-9 in memory of Thomas.

of the Black community who were willing to stand up to white violence.

In closing the remembrance ceremony, Rev. Driskell quoted novelist and activist James Baldwin: "You cannot lynch me and keep me in ghettos without becoming something monstrous yourselves.... Not ev-

erything can be changed that is faced, but nothing can be changed unless it is faced."

Driskell concluded simply, "Face yourselves."

To learn more about Benjamin Thomas and the events of Aug. 8, 1899, visit the In Memoriam page at Alexandriava.gov/Historic.