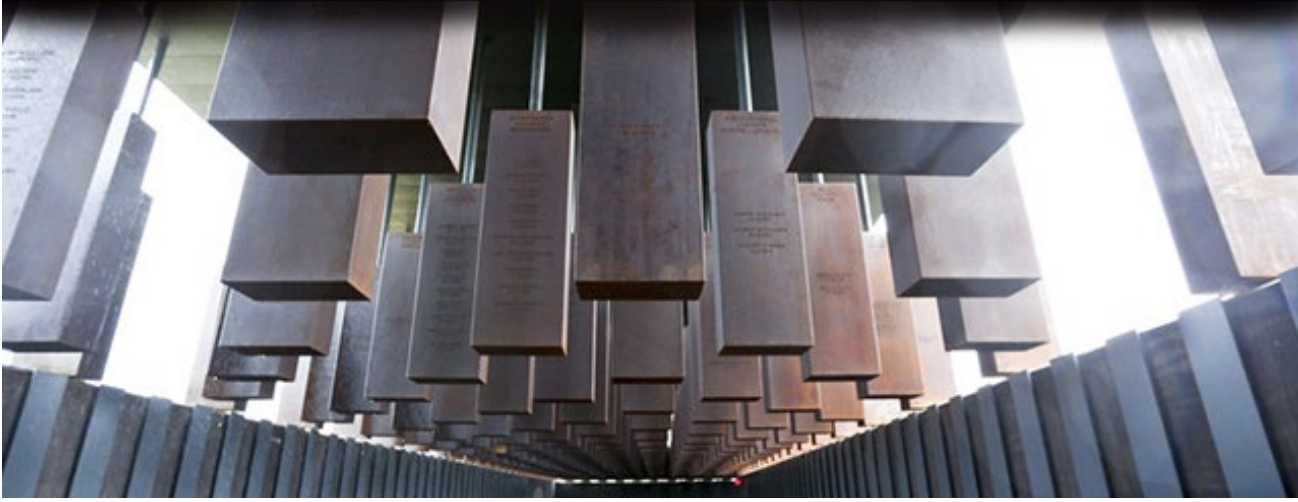


# ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



## January 2024 Edition

### Stories Matter

When she first heard her mother's story about a thwarted lynching in a small Mississippi town where Grace Hale's grandfather was the sheriff, the author of *In the Pines: A Lynching, A Lie, A Reckoning*, was a college student. The family lore inspired Hale, who is white, to focus her graduate studies on "whiteness," which led to the publication of her earlier book, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South 1890-1940*.

During a visit to her grandmother's house, Hale discovered the 1947 front page article detailing the lynching of Versie Johnson. The graduate student immediately realized the news account wasn't true.

"I had read Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. DuBois. I knew the newspaper was lying," Hale told ACRP members who gathered at the Lloyd House to hear her lecture on January 27. The reason she was so sure was that the paper reported that Johnson had asked to leave the relative "safety" of the prison to return to the scene of the crime. Hale then admitted she didn't have the courage to keep digging and uncover the truth, until the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017.

When Hale saw men holding tiki torches, who had taken over her neighborhood and her place of work to spew hate, surround some of her students who were counter protesting, she changed her mind.

"Over one hundred years of scholarship exists since the 19th century, and yet these lies circulate. People refuse to understand history. We historians have failed. We have not taught America the real history of this country. History is not abstract...how can we make people understand it is close and intimate?" she asked on Saturday.

In the wake of the tragedy in Charlottesville, Hale realized she had to stop running away from her own family story. She had to find out what really happened to Johnson and the Black community in Prentiss, Mississippi, and what role her grandfather Oury Berry played.

The research was not easy. She found fewer than ten documents to prove Versie Johnson existed. Hale described the available sources as "fragments rather than a whole, a man described not by how he lived, but by how he died."

ACRP has experienced a similar challenge as we have tried to better understand the lives of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. The problem has been that those in power do not value Black lives the way they do

white lives.

- They did not begin to record the names and details of Black people in the census until 1870, (even then, many white censors didn't try very hard misspelling names, places or leaving people out completely);
- They did not consider Black peoples experiences worth recording into history books ([entire free towns existed](#) that most people don't know about);
- Mainstream newspapers, responsible for the first draft of history, did not consider the Black experience nor did they write as though Black people were consumers of their publications;
- Historically, personal papers, journals and family histories of Black people have not been sought out for preservation by libraries and collectors.

"White supremacy doesn't just shape the structures, or the collective history, it also very much shapes the archives, the documents that survive, the way they were created and what survives for us to study the past," Hale said.

Hale then encouraged people to think differently about the past. "What you don't see is very powerful," she said, giving the following example. When a group of people arrived in Mississippi to start the town that would become Prentiss, they watched as the Choctaw people left against their will.

"In Mississippi, the expansion of slavery and the theft of Native American land went hand in hand. By 1840, relatives of the original four Berry siblings owned hundreds of acres...in what would later become Jefferson Davis County," Hale wrote in the book. Later, when the history of the settlement was recorded, it was written as though the white people settled on "empty" lands.

It is human nature to not want to see certain things, so we don't, but that becomes a big problem when it is "coded into the law." The tragedy of post-Civil War reality is that we passed the 13, 14 and 15th Amendments to the constitution, but then we ignored them and lied until some people [to whom the omission helped] could no longer see them, according to Hale.

In a final point, Hale brought up "white innocence," explaining that most white families have benefited from white supremacy in some way, whether through generational wealth, redlining, enslavement, the slave trade, financing based on mortgaging enslaved people, but we have yet to acknowledge it and talk about it within our families.

"We need to figure out a way to talk about this - acknowledge it as a material part of our politics and economy," she said.

The Equal Justice Initiative agrees stating, "creating a more just society is possible, but it requires us learning from our past and being willing to confront the silence and false narratives that have maintained injustice in our present. How we live with the past - repeating its legacies or disrupting legacies of injustice - depends on how we remember and talk about the past."

ACRP's newsletters have focused on the parts of this city's history that haven't been widely shared, but there is more that each of us can do. By relearning what you were taught in school and by digging into your family's past, finding out where your ancestors came from and how they lived, we can transform the collective understanding of our shared history.

Grace Elizabeth Hale's book, *In the Pines*, is available in the museum shops of the Alexandria Black History Museum, the Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum, and the Freedom House Museum. The January 27 lecture was recorded and will be available on the ACRP website soon.

## Upcoming Events

### Tables of Conscience Dinner

Saturday February 3, 6-9 p.m.

Tickets \$125

Book to be discussed: [It's the Little Things. Everyday Interactions that Anger, Annoy and Divide the Races](#), By Lena Williams

A few [tickets](#) are still available for the Feb. 3, Tables of Conscience book-themed dinner. Ticket holders will

receive an email with the name and address of the hosts. These dinners are a great way to get to know other ACRP members better while having meaningful conversations about important social justice issues. All proceeds benefit ACRP's scholarship in the names of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas.

### **Book Launch: *African American Emancipation in an Occupied City***

Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum, 201 S. Washington Street

Feb. 3, 11-2 p.m.

Register for this free event [here](#).

Audrey Davis and the authors of the book *African American Emancipation in an Occupied City* will share stories of formerly enslaved and self-emancipated people in this city during the Civil War. Books will be available on-site for purchase and a book signing will follow the authors' presentations.

### **African American Heritage Trail Ribbon Cutting**

Founders Park, 351 N. Union Street

Feb. 10 11a.m. -1 p.m.

Register for this free event [here](#).

The African American Heritage Trail Committee invites the public to join in a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the installation of new interpretive signs along Alexandria's historic waterfront. These 11 signs and 2 orientation panels illuminate the history of the African American community in Alexandria over the span of several centuries. A reception will follow the ribbon cutting in the Overlook Room on the third floor of the Torpedo Factory at 105 Union Street.

### **Joseph McCoy Ancestry Reveal**

Feb. 25 at 2 p.m.

Alexandria Black History Museum, 902 Wythe Street

Genealogist Char McCargo Bah, the official genealogist for the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, discovered the family of the first of Alexandria's lynching victims Joseph McCoy who was lynched in Alexandria on April 23, 1897. Learn the secrets to investigating a family tree that does not have many leads. The lecture is suited for beginner or established genealogist. The lecture is free. Register [here](#).

### **Meaningful Conversations: Welcoming the Stranger: An Interfaith Perspective on Immigration and Refugees**

Feb. 29, 7-9 p.m.

Alexandria Black History Museum, 902 Wythe Street

Join others who want to discuss important issues related to race and social justice. The conversations are sponsored by the Baha'i faith, ACRP and ABHM. No rsvp required.

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### **Upcoming Committee Meetings**

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Steering Committee**, Feb. 6, 5-6 p.m. the monthly planning meeting will be at Alexandria Black History Museum (902 Wythe Street).

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project McCoy Remembrance Planning Committee**, Feb. 15, 12-1 p.m. at the Lloyd House (220 N. Washington Street).

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

[For more information](#)

[Donate to the Project](#)

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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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