

# ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



## April 2021 Edition

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### 124 Years Ago Joseph McCoy Was Murdered By Fellow Alexandrians

During the first hours of Friday, April 23, in 1897, Joseph McCoy was pulled from a hiding spot above his cell door and dragged to Cameron and Lee Streets where he was hung on a lamppost - killed at the hands of his neighbors. Jeering and cheering rippled through the crowd as the young man dangled from the gaslight, "There will be no more outrages on white women in this town," someone yelled, "Let it be a warning for the future."

Fourteen hours later, on the 300 block of Prince Street, newsboys poured out the doors of the Alexandria Gazette building. Holding evening papers still warm from the press, they hawked the pages, "Hanged by a Mob, Joseph McCoy, Ravisher of Little Annie Lacey, Hanged from a Lamp Post " and "Thrilling Scenes at Police Headquarters."

A week later, the Richmond Planet, a weekly African American newspaper started by former slaves, had a more subdued headline that simply read, "Murdered Him" with subtitles: "A Disgraceful Proceeding, Hanged to a Lamppost, City Officials Implicated..."

Virginia Governor Charles T. O'Ferral (D) sent a telegram to Alexandria Judge Norton on Friday morning, stating: "It seems most irregular to me that in Alexandria with a police force and a strong military company that such a thing should happen. Where rests the blame? Is it with the civil officers?" He then launched an investigation into the lynching.

Later that day, the Gazette published a news story and an editorial justifying the "righteous indignation of old Alexandria." The editors, Harold Snowden and Luther Thompson were prominent Democrats. Thompson was the Mayor at the time of the lynching and Snowden's brother Hubert was the President of the Common Council responsible for governing the city. Under Harold's leadership, Thompson was the City Editor at the paper and would have been responsible for covering the lynching, as well as for the editorials on local issues.

The Gazette's coverage paints a defensive picture of leading officials and businessmen trying to convince a determined mob of strangers to respect the rule of law. McCoy is described as a "fiend" and "ravisher" guilty of the crime of raping a white female child. It excuses the Alexandria community's "natural righteous

indignation” over the fourth instance where “females have been shamefully treated” in less than a year.

The Planet’s editor John Mitchell Jr., a prominent Republican who had served on the Richmond city council in years past, didn’t mince words implicating city officials, leading businessmen and members of the Alexandria Light Infantry in the lynching. There were two attacks on the police station. The first attempt to steal away the prisoner was repelled by officers. Mitchell reports the first and last names of four white men arrested during the first attack on the police station, who were subsequently released by Mayor Thompson. The Gazette failed to mention that anyone was arrested or released.

Mitchell also stated that Officer Atkinson was injured when he tried to keep the crowd from McCoy, information confirmed by the Governor’s inquiry. However, the Gazette reported that while the officers were handled roughly by the mob, none were hurt. Conveniently, if no officers were harmed by the white rioters then no one would need to be held accountable for assault.

McCoy is not assumed guilty in the Planet’s pages, his crime is “alleged.” His child accuser is “closely questioned, reticent and reluctant” in making the accusation of sexual assault. The Planet story describes how the girl’s father, Richard Lacey, had taken on Joseph McCoy when he was just a child (most likely as a farm hand).

“Sixteen years ago, Mr. Lacey took McCoy to raise and since that time he has been looked upon by the family as a good servant,” Mitchell wrote, adding that when Lacey and his wife would go to the country, they left their three girls in McCoy’s care. Indicating there must have been a level of trust and comfort between the Lacey’s and Joseph McCoy.

The reporting by the two papers also diverges over the calling up of the Light Infantry. The Planet reported that “During the last attack on the station a call for the military was sounded on the fire bells, the officers hoping that the Alexandria Light Infantry would respond. Most of the members, however, were in the crowd about the station house.”

The Gazette report said the Mayor did not sound the alarm because there was no warning for the second attack and the “mob” returned so “suddenly” that the company could not have been summoned in time to have stopped the lynching.

The inquiry found that although the Mayor did not call up the Infantry, the police officer in charge did sound the alarm. A commissioned officer, two corporals and 15 privates responded to the alarm. They met at the Armory on the 200 block of S. Royal Street. After taking attendance they were told they were no longer needed and were sent home. The document further states: “None of the members of the military were present on the occasion of either attack of the mob, as far as could be ascertained.”

Both versions of the lynching of Joseph McCoy provide a window into racial tensions and bias. Please take the time to read each with a critical eye.



Please click on the images to link to a legible version of each newspaper

## In The News

This month ACRP is focused on the lynching of Joseph McCoy. This year, the anniversary of McCoy's death will fall on a Friday as it did 124 years ago. Read in more detail about his death in *The Alexandria Times*.

Also be sure to read a powerful editorial memorializing McCoy by Audrey Davis, executive director of Alexandria Black History Museum, in the *Alexandria Gazette*. Of McCoy's last moments, Davis writes, "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?"

[Joseph McCoy: Lynched in Alexandria, April 23, 1897](#)

*Op-Ed by Audrey P. Davis, Director, Alexandria Black History Museum  
Alexandria Gazette, April 22, 2021, page 6*

[Commemorative Broadside](#)

*Alexandria Times, April 22, 2021, page 28*

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## Upcoming Events

### April 23, 8-9 a.m., Joseph McCoy Lynching Remembrance

The City of Alexandria's Community Remembrance Project invites Alexandrians 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 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.

This event takes place at the corner of North Lee and Cameron Streets.

For more information, please visit [here](#).

### April 24, 1-2:30 p.m., VIRTUAL: Lecture "A White Historian Confronts Lynching"

Join us for a series of four free lectures with historian Susan Strasser supporting the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project. Susan Strasser is an award-winning historian and a Distinguished Lecturer for the Organization of American Historians. She has been praised by the New Yorker for "retrieving what history discards: The taken-for-granted minutiae of everyday life." Sponsored by the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project. Please note this event will not be recorded.

[Register to attend this free virtual event](#)

### April 29, 6:30-7:30 p.m., VIRTUAL: Archaeology After Dark - Nat Turner

Alexandria had one of the largest free Black populations in the country during the first half of the nineteenth century, but their neighbors, customers, and family members included enslaved and white individuals. After the Nat Turner uprising in 1831, 46 free Black residents of Alexandria published a petition in the local newspaper asserting their loyalty to the "authorities of the town." Dr. Garrett Fesler, will share his ongoing research into the residents and signers of the petition, and how this adds to a better understanding of free Black Alexandria during that time.

[Alexandria After Dark](#) is a free event sponsored by the Friends of Alexandria Archaeology that brings together professional archaeologists and historians for informal lectures on topics

relating to the rich archaeological heritage of Alexandria and the surrounding area.

### **May 15, 1-2:30 p.m., VIRTUAL: Lecture "A White Historian Explores Black Voting Rights"**

Join us for a series of four free lectures with historian Susan Strasser supporting the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project. Susan Strasser is an award-winning historian and a Distinguished Lecturer for the Organization of American Historians. She has been praised by the New Yorker for "retrieving what history discards: The taken-for-granted minutiae of everyday life." Sponsored by the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project. Please note this event will not be recorded.

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## **Upcoming Committee Meetings**

### **April 22 Community Remembrance Project Soil and Marker Committee Meeting**

7-8 p.m.

Virtual meeting held via Zoom. Register to [join](#).

### **April 26 Community Remembrance Project Pilgrimage Committee Meeting**

7-8 p.m.

Virtual meeting held via Zoom. Register to [join](#).

### **May 19 Community Remembrance Project Steering Committee Meeting**

5-7 p.m.

Virtual meeting held via Zoom. Register to [join](#).

### **May 25 Community Remembrance Project Marketing Committee Meeting**

7-8 p.m.

Virtual meeting held via Zoom. Register to [join](#).

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## **Committee Reports**

The Soil and Marker Committee has been meeting virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic on a monthly basis. The committee is drafting the text for the Benjamin Thomas marker.

The Pilgrimage Committee has been meeting virtually during the COVID -19 pandemic on a monthly basis. The members are designing social justice themed travel itineraries that will be posted on the website. They continue to plan the 2022 trip to Montgomery, Alabama to deliver soil from the lynching sites of Joseph H. McCoy and Benjamin Thomas.

Outreach Committee - A presentation is available for local organizations (via zoom!) who would like to learn more about the ACRP. Contact the Office of Historic Alexandria at [historicalexandria@alexandriava.gov](mailto:historicalexandria@alexandriava.gov).

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

[For more information](#)

[Donate to the Project](#)

[HistoricAlexandria@alexandriava.gov](mailto:HistoricAlexandria@alexandriava.gov)

*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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