

OPINION

Say Their Names: In Remembrance: Benjamin Thomas, August 8, 1899

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During the early morning of August 8th in 1899, at the corner of King and Fairfax streets, just across from Market Square, a 16-year-old boy named Benjamin Thomas was lynched by a mob of thousands. In life, he was denied the right to a fair trial and protection. Benjamin Thomas deserved better from his community.

On August 8, 2020, the City of Alexandria will honor Benjamin Thomas' memory with a virtual remembrance ceremony.

The event is part of the City's renewed commitment to social justice, which is exemplified by the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project.

This project is inspired by the Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The memorial includes over 800 steel monuments, or pillars, one for each county in the United States where a lynching took place, with the names of the lynching victims engraved on the pillars. The goal of the Community Remembrance Project is to bring Alexandria's pillar to the City, displaying it in a

prominent location. The pillar has two names on it: Joseph McCoy, who was killed on April 23, 1897; and Benjamin Thomas.

Recently, our country has faced terrible crises – the global COVID-19 pandemic and the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd. While the unjust deaths of African Americans was not new, recent pandemic “stay at home” orders forced Americans to see in real-time the abuse that African Americans have been reporting for years. We've seen rac-

“I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.”

—Angela Y. Davis, Educator and Activist

ist rants captured on cell phones, but also corporations and Hollywood apologizing for their lack of inclusivity. Most importantly, we saw Black Lives Matter protests grow into an international movement.

The Serenity Prayer, a very familiar prayer for Americans, asks for the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to

know the difference. Today, more of us are unwilling to accept the status quo. Accountability is the only acceptable course, and many are willing to change the things they can no longer accept.

In 1897 and 1899, there was no accountability for the murders of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. There has been little to no accountability for the deaths of millions of African Americans beginning with slavery until the present day. In our country, all people are created equal, and all are innocent until proven guilty.

Now more than ever, we must stand up for what is right, true and fair. In the words of the late John Lewis, we must ... Get in good trouble, necessary trouble ... Today we all must walk the walk of social justice in our daily lives.

Due to the pandemic, the remembrance for Benjamin Thomas will be virtual. On Aug. 8, the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project asks Alexandrians to do two things. First, say the name of Benjamin Thomas, and remember him and his family. We also ask everyone to say the names of the African American men who tried to save Benjamin Thomas' life. Please take a moment to recite the following:

I / We say their names to remember ... to never forget ... to know there are people who will stand on the right side of history, even at great personal cost. Today we say their names...

James Alexander
Robert Buckner
Allen Carter
Thomas Elzie
Edward Gibson
Albert Green
John Haskins
Alfred Mason
Harry McDonald
John Nelson
Edward Payne
James Turley
Richard Washington
William Washington
John Wilson

They live on in our hearts as we strive to make Alexandria a welcoming and inclusive city. Today, we also remember Benjamin Thomas and all African Americans who died at the hands of racist terror hate mobs. We keep their memories alive as we vow to fight against racism and injustice.

For more information about future programming, ways to participate, or how to donate, please visit the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project website: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/blackhistory/default.aspx?id=106501>.



www.AlexandriaGazette.com

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An independent, locally owned weekly newspaper delivered to homes and businesses.

Published by
Local Media Connection LLC

1606 King Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Free digital edition delivered to your email box. Go to connectionnewspapers.com/subscribe

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