

Stop To Remember Benjamin Thomas

The teenager was lynched across from Market Square on Aug. 8, 1899.

BY AUDREY DAVIS

On Sunday, Aug. 8 at Market Square, Alexandria citizens will stop and remember Benjamin Thomas who was lynched across the street from the plaza on that date in 1899. He was a Black teenager who was accused of a crime but denied his right to a fair trial. Just two years earlier, on April 23, 1897, Joseph McCoy, another young Black man, was lynched a few blocks away. Both lynching sites were close to the location of today's City Hall.

Market Square, in the heart of Old Town Alexandria, stands for everything that we are proud of in our city. Market Square is where we welcome new citizens and honor the victims of the Holocaust and Sept. 11. It is where we welcome political leaders, enjoy festivals, art shows, and our famous farmer's market. Every day at Market Square you can see the diversity that makes Alexandria a vibrant place to live and work.

Now imagine being African American living in Alexandria be-

fore the turn of the century ... You would recognize the u-shaped building known as City Hall — built in 1872 after a fire gutted the original building in 1871. It was still the hub of the city. You might have lived in one of the historic Black enclaves like Hayti, the Bottoms, the Berg, or Uptown. You and your family probably worshipped at one of Alexandria's historic Black churches, which functioned as spiritual and social refuges, places where you could speak freely.

As an African American, your life was spent navigating a system with laws that always changed for people of color. As a hub of the domestic slave trade that sentenced thousands of African American men, women, and children to a lifetime of bondage and cruelty, this city was complicit in the treatment of Black people as property whose humanity was never considered.

This did not change with the end of the Civil War. As an African American, you had little recourse if you had to challenge the white establishment. The threat of violence to you or your family was

always there. While Alexandria's documented lynchings were in 1897 and 1899, incidents of racially based hate crimes occurred throughout Virginia from shortly after the arrival of the first Africans to the present day. Today, we fight to end that legacy.

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) is a city-wide initiative dedicated to helping Alexandria understand its history of racial terror hate crimes and working toward creating a welcoming community bound by equity and inclusion. Since its approval by Alexandria City Council in 2019, the ACRP has encouraged hundreds of Alexandria citizens and friends to get involved in a community-wide journey to make equity a core city value. The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project has presented multiple programs on social justice with an impressive list of speakers working in African American history and social justice. The ACRP has been acknowledged by the Equal Justice Initiative for its work toward community engagement. Alexandrians can find the first tangible result of

these committees in the new markers installed at the lynching sites of McCoy and Thomas. You can also see the presence of the initiative in the annual remembrances for both men and the inclusion of this history in Alexandria's historical narrative.

On Sunday, Aug. 8 at 7 p.m., Alexandria will host a Remembrance Ceremony at Market Square to instill hope and renewed pride in all residents.

It is the moment Alexandrians will come together as a community to remember the short life and horrific death of Benjamin Thomas and pledge to fight for equality, justice, and safety from racial terror hate crimes for every person in our community. Learn more about the lives of Benjamin Thomas and Joseph McCoy on the Alexandria Community Project website - <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic/blackhistory/default.aspx?id=106501>

Join us in becoming part of this movement - all are welcome.

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