

## This commemorative broadside is dedicated to the memory of Benjamin Thomas who was lynched at the corner of King and Fairfax streets, just opposite Market Square, on Aug. 8, 1899.

His torture and murder at age 16 was one of thousands of racially motivated lynchings that occurred in the United States. In the Commonwealth, between 1882 and 1968, there were 100 documented lynchings, 11 of them in Northern Virginia.

Benjamin Thomas, an Alexandria native living in this city with his family, deserved much more from his community. Denied the right to

a fair trial and protection, his death is a sad counterpoint to the freedom his family had gained only 30 years before.

The mayor and City Council established the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project in 2019, inspired by the Equal Justice Initiative's National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, to help our community understand its history of

racial terror and work toward racial equity and social justice. The EJI memorial includes more than 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. A goal of the Community Remembrance Project is to bring Alexandria's pillar to the city and display it in a prominent location. The

pillar has two names on it. The first is Joseph McCoy, who was lynched on April 23, 1897. The second is Benjamin Thomas.

On Aug. 8, 2021, at 7 p.m. on Market Square, Alexandria as a community will gather to remember the life of Benjamin Thomas. Please join us in person for this important reflection. All weekend, Alexandria's City Hall, the Masonic Memorial, the Carlyle

House and the lynching location at the corner of King and South Fairfax Streets will be illuminated in purple to mark this solemn historical event. A special Alexandria Community Remembrance Project marker will be dedicated on the lamp post at King and South Fairfax streets.

More than 300 Alexandria residents have joined the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project

and pledged their commitment to social and restorative justice in the city. Many serve on committees and have been working via Zoom this year on the research, marker, pilgrimage and education committees. If you would like to actively participate on a committee, attend lectures, or just learn about the current initiatives, please sign up for the monthly newsletter at [Alexandriava.gov/Historic](http://Alexandriava.gov/Historic).



The August 1899 view of King and S. Fairfax streets, then known as "Leadbeater's Corner."

Today, like in 1899, the southwest corner of Fairfax and King streets is a busy intersection opposite Market Square and in the shadow of City Hall. Around midnight on Aug. 8, 1899, a 16-year-old Black teenager named Benjamin Thomas was lynched at this site by a white terror mob comprised of Alexandria citizens. They attacked the city jail on North St. Asaph Street, and Benjamin Thomas was dragged half a mile before being hanged from a lamppost in the heart of today's Old Town.

The day before, Aug. 7, 1899, Alexandria police arrested Thomas on the charge of attempted criminal assault on an 8-year-

old white girl. He denied the allegations.

In the lynching's aftermath, the community generally acknowledged that he was not guilty of these charges.

After his arrest, Thomas was detained at the Alexandria Police Station House at 126 N. Fairfax St., on the east side of City Hall by Market Square. Alexandria's Black community soon became aware of the arrest and the nature of the accusations against Thomas. Just two years earlier, a white mob pulled another young African American teenager named Joseph McCoy from the same station house and lynched him. Hoping to prevent a repeat of that crime, several groups of Black men organized themselves and offered their services to aid the police in defending Thomas.

Both the police and Alexandria Mayor George L. Simpson rejected their concerns. Many of the Black men who sought to protect Thomas were arrested. Their efforts, however, were enough to keep Thomas safe for the night. The names of the men arrested, who risked their lives to protect Thomas, are:

**James Alexander**  
**Robert Buckner**  
**Allen Carter**  
**Thomas Elzie**  
**Edward Gibson**  
**Albert Green**  
**John Haskins**

**Alfred Mason**  
**Harry McDonald**  
**John Nelson**  
**Edward Payne**  
**James B. Turley**  
**Richard Washington**  
**William Washington**  
**John Wilson**

The next morning, most of these men were heavily fined or sentenced to serve time on the Alexandria chain gang. The mayor ordered Thomas to be detained at the jail on St. Asaph Street.

By the evening of Aug. 8, a white mob had gathered. Sometime between 11 p.m. and midnight, the mob, which numbered somewhere between 500 and 2,000 people, descended upon the jail and demanded that Thomas be handed over to them. Witnesses remarked that the mob included many prominent white Alexandrians. Simpson made a plea for calm, while at the same time promising a swift trial and stating that if this did not happen, "I will give you my word, as a man of honor, that I will personally lead a mob tomorrow night to lynch Thomas."

The mob was undeterred. They broke down the front door and surged into the jail. The Alexandria Gazette described that "a great shout went up when Thomas was found and one hundred willing hands dragged him out and up the stairs" onto

the street.

Many white newspapers praised the actions of the police in defending Thomas. However, other reports suggested that not enough was done to prevent the mob from breaching the jail. John Craven, a white citizen, claimed that at least one officer was anxious for the lynching to happen and that Police Chief Webster did not make an earnest effort to repel the mob.

The hooting and jeering mob dragged the 16-year-old south, down St. Asaph Street, his head bumping over the rough cobblestones. They pelted him with stones, bricks and pieces of iron. They stabbed him, kicked him and shot him. Wounded and bleeding, Thomas cried out for his mother.

At the corner of King Street, the mob turned eastward, then stopped at the intersection of King and Fairfax streets, half a mile from the Alexandria jail. The mob quickly fashioned a noose and Thomas was lynched from a lamppost outside Leadbeater's Apothecary.

Although city authorities were not able, or willing, to prevent the murder of Thomas, they did react quickly to white citizens' concerns about a perceived threat of retaliation from the Black community the next day. Simpson issued orders limiting gatherings in the African American community. No similar restrictions were placed on Alexandria's white citizens, who were out in abundance in the vicinity of City Hall

and the site of the lynching. White sightseers, revelers and even groups of young boys and girls gathered there.

Thomas' body was taken to Demaine's Funeral Home on King Street, where it was visited by hundreds. This did not include his mother Elizabeth who, according to the Evening Star "could not bear to look upon her boy." At 10 a.m. on Aug. 10, Thomas was interred at Penny Hill Cemetery. On Aug. 28, a memorial service was held at Shiloh Baptist Church at West and Duke streets.

Reverend Warring, of Shiloh Baptist Church, spoke of Thomas as a moral, honest boy, who was innocent of the crime that led to his lynching. He asked, "Who can tell how this poor innocent boy felt as he crouched in the cellar at the jail and listened to the howling mob crying for his life's blood; when the rope was placed about his neck and into his mouth; when he was dragged mercilessly through the streets and bullets were being poured into his body by his heartless persecutors, as he cried in vain for his mother?"

Reverend Warring advocated charging anyone guilty of the lynching with criminal assault, and he exhorted the congregation to boycott businesses of anyone who had been in the lynch mob: "Men stand behind counters selling you goods whose hands are stained with the blood of Ben Thomas. Don't spend another dollar with them."

Mayor Simpson, however, failed to investigate any members of the white mob

responsible for Thomas' murder. More than a dozen Black men had been arrested for protecting him on the night of Aug. 8, but not a single white citizen was charged with his murder the next night.

*The research and writing of this narrative was created by the Research Committee of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project. We invite you to read the full narrative and learn more about the lynching of Benjamin Thomas and Alexandria's history of racial injustice at [Alexandriava.gov/Historic](http://Alexandriava.gov/Historic) - Alexandria Community Remembrance Project.*



Today's view of the corner of King and S. Fairfax streets, where 16-year-old Benjamin Thomas was lynched on Aug. 8, 1899.