Alexandria Community Remembrance Project

Reflections on the History of Racial Terror
Walking Tour

This walking tour through historic Old Town Alexandria allows you to explore a few of the sites associated with a disturbing part of Alexandria's past. Thirty years after the Civil War, white conservative democrats were in control of Alexandria's government, economy, police, and its major newspaper. The lynching of Joseph McCoy in 1897 and Benjamin Thomas in 1899 and the aftermath terrorized the African American community in this city.

This short self-guided walking tour will take about 45 minutes to an hour. This is a difficult history to reflect upon and we recommend preparing mentally prior to starting.

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Jail House designed by architect Charles Bulfinch and completed in 1827.

1) **Alexandria Jail House** (where police failed to stop a lynch mob from snatching Benjamin Thomas)

401 North St. Asaph Street

Benjamin Thomas was just 16 when the little girl who lived next door – 7-year-old Lillian Kloch - accused him of lifting her dress when she went to his home to retrieve a borrowed ax. Her father, Edward Kloch, reported Benjamin to the police for attempted assault and swore out a warrant.

Police arrested Benjamin Monday night, August 7, 1899, and brought him to the station house at today's City Hall.

That night, after hearing of a threat, a group Alexandria's African American men organized. They were united in their determination to protect Benjamin Thomas from

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sharing the same fate as Joseph McCoy's who was lynched by Alexandrians two years before. The leadership of the group went to the police, told authorities they heard rumor of a lynching, and offered to aid in the defense of the prisoner. The police did not believe them, nor did they welcome their help.

Late into the night, more than 100 Black Alexandrians stood vigil around the station protecting Benjamin until Lieut. James Smith ordered the leaders arrested. The next day, Mayor George Simpson severely punished the heroes for "rioting" and ordered the majority into forced labor. There was no one left from the Black community to protect Thomas.

Mayor Simpson then ordered Benjamin Thomas be sent to the City Jail at the corner of St. Asaph and Princess. For the rest of the day on Tuesday, August 8th the streets of Alexandria were awash with lynching talk and hardware stores and gun shops sold out of arms and ammunition.

That night a howling mob of white men collected outside of the jail – intent on lynching Benjamin. Mayor Simpson spoke to the masses and advocated for allowing the law to take its course because, he said, he expected Thomas would be convicted and hanged. But, the mob was fixed and Mayor Simpson accepted their determination, "and permitted mischief to take what course it would," according to the Washington Post.

For more than an hour, the lynch mob rooted through the cells with little interference from the police. Ringleaders continually moved back and forth from the crowd outside to inside where they were having trouble breaking through the sturdy iron bars. Eventually, they found Benjamin hiding in the cellar. They threw a noose around his neck and pushed him into the street. "As the mob caught sight of him, a piercing shriek of exultation rent the air. Pistols were fired and a throng of hundreds charged down upon the helpless victim." They placed a rope around his neck, in his mouth and under his arms and began to march toward King Street while firing their pistols into the night.

Along the Path from St. Asaph & Princess to King and Fairfax Streets

The boy was literally pulled over St. Asaph Street's cobble stones toward the center of town. For half-a- mile, to King Street and then to Fairfax Street, they marched the boy toward his death. While crying out for his mother, Benjamin was pulled, struck with stones, brickbats, pieces of iron, he was pierced with knives, bludgeoned, spat upon, chastised, crushed and wounded. His clothes were torn from his body by the time he reached the southwest corner of King and Fairfax, opposite Market Square and City Hall.
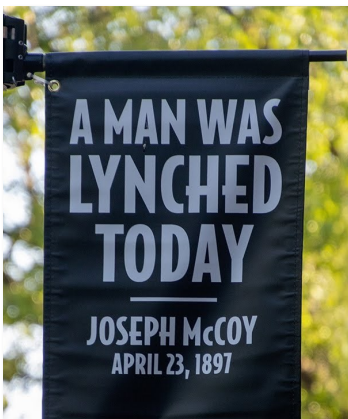
2) Leadbeater's Corner (where an angry white mob murdered Benjamin Thomas on August 8, 1899.)

Corner of King Street and South Fairfax Street

Leadbeater's Corner

It was on this corner, that the Alexandria lynch mob hung the naked teen from a lamp post. He did not die at first. The Washington Post reported that "the rope was so fixed that it did not strangle him readily, and he was fully twenty minutes dying." They fired bullets into his body. In the end, Benjamin Thomas died from a bullet wound to the heart.

In the wake of the devastating murder, the African American community rallied. More than 600 people attended Thomas memorial service at Shiloh Baptist Church. They protested the terror by boycotting the shops in old town, and they stubbornly clung to the truth that Benjamin Thomas was innocent.

Two years before, on April 23, 1897, another African American teenager, Joseph McCoy, was lynched in Alexandria. A white mob attacked the city's police station and pulled McCoy from his cell, dragged him with a rope around his neck, and then hanged him on the corner of Cameron and Lee Streets, only three blocks from where Benjamin Thomas would later be murdered.

3) The Alexandria Station House

100 Block of North Fairfax Street

photo taken at a Remembrance for Joseph McCoy on April 23, 2021 at the corner of Lee and Cameron Streets

On a mild April evening in 1897, Joseph McCoy agreed to follow a police officer to the station house on N. Fairfax Street. The officer did not tell the 18-year-old African American that he was under arrest until he had him in custody. Lieut. James Smith took McCoy into the Chief of police's empty office and accused him of sexually assaulting his employer's 8-year-old daughter whom he had known since birth.

According to all accounts, Joseph "flatly" denied the allegation, however, after "a little persuasion" McCoy "broke down and acknowledged that he was guilty of the crime charged against him," according to newspapers.

News of the arrest and rumors of the reason for it ignited a racist fury that brought more than 150 men to the police station just after 11PM. Using a battering ram lifted from a nearby lumber yard, they broke through the doors eager to find McCoy. Richard Lacy, Joseph's accuser, was among them. The police managed to repel the lynch mob, arrest the ring leaders, and secure the entrance with the same timber used to break in. Around 12:15 a.m. the police sent word of the attempted lynching to Mayor Luther Thompson. It was within Thompson's power to summon the largest military company in the state to defend the rule of law, he also could have moved McCoy to a new location or added more police to protect him. Instead, the mayor told police to free the leaders of the attack and then went back to bed.

At 1:00 a.m., at least 500 people were outside the station house. Within the crowd were leading citizens and members of the militia. The white mob surged forward, smashing shutters, chopping window sashes, hacking at the building with axes, sledges, crowbars, and picks. They dragged Joseph into the street where he begged his neighbors to spare his life. They force marched him to Cameron Street and then toward the river and Lee Street.

Along the path from the Station to Lee Street

From Fairfax to Cameron to Lee, there was a moment when the crowd thought Joseph had escaped because he fell to the ground. A howl of despair rose as the lynch mob despaired at the thought of being denied. But then he was discovered under foot and the crowd calmed again determined in their plans.

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4) Southeast Corner of Cameron and Lee Streets

In this spot, in the first hour of Friday, April 23, the white people of Alexandria hanged Joseph McCoy from a streetlamp and denied him his right to a trial. Joseph's neck didn't break. The angry crowd beat him, struck his head with cobblestones, sliced into his neck with a knife and shot him three times. He died because he could not breath.

Although the Commonwealth Attorney Leonard Marbury was in the building when Joseph was abducted by the lynch mob, he did not identify the perpetrators. Instead of pursuing justice, he participated with the mayor, the police, and other officials in a coverup of the crime to protect the lynchers.

No one was ever held accountable for Joseph's death or for the days of triumphalism and nights of terror that followed.