

ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



December 2022 Edition

This year-end edition of the ACRP Newsletter features an account of a part of our history with which Alexandria has yet to reckon.

Subject to the Chain Gang: Forced Labor in Post-War Alexandria

Forty weeks and a day after Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant to end a bloody civil war in which more than 250,000 Confederates died to preserve slavery, Virginia passed a law intended to claw back slavery and revive the economy.

An act “for the punishment of Vagrants” approved by the Virginia Assembly on Jan. 15, 1866, allowed local officials to arrest unhoused or unemployed people, along with those convicted of petty crimes, and put them to work for up to three months on a chain gang. It was a way to address a severe farm labor shortage at the same time that massive numbers of Black people were unemployed and searching for long-lost family members. (*See End Note 1*)

The Vagrancy Law was a blatant attempt to control the newly freed. The preamble to the Act stated, “There hath lately been a great increase of idle and disorderly persons in some parts of this Commonwealth, and unless some stringent laws are passed to restrain and prevent such vagrancy and idleness, the state will be overrun with dissolute and abandoned characters.”

By the end of the war, African Americans made up half of Alexandria’s population. A study of death records indicated that “many of these people, especially the elderly and women with many children, were poor by the standards of the day, even destitute.” (*See End Note 2*)

On April 11, 1865, Alexandria’s Military Governor General John Slough wrote to the people of Alexandria that the military authority would cease in most ways after the first of May. He requested that, “as about one half the present residents of the city are colored persons, full protection to the persons and property of these colored persons be given, and that all local laws, drawing a distinction between whites and blacks, upon the subjects of punishments and testimony, be repealed.” (*See End Note 3*)

In the fall of 1866, an article in the *Alexandria Gazette* titled “Pauper Negroes” bemoaned a US Government decision requiring localities to take responsibility for their poor.

“Six years ago, all the negroes in this State had comfortable homes – secured to them, apparently for life. The

moral sentiment of the community in which they resided compelled their then masters to provide for them good livings; and when an occasional slave owner was so devoid of the common instincts of humanity as to be unwilling to attend to the wants of his aged and sick negroes, stringent statutory laws were in active operation to compel such attention.”

The editor, Edgar Snowden, Jr., had grown up in a slave-owning family. He argued it was not Black people’s fault their “condition changed,” and said they should be pitied for their cold and hunger. “As the government induced the present deplorable condition of the negroes, it is bound by every law, human and divine, to ameliorate it, if possible.” (See *End Note 4*)

Hence, the Virginia Vagrancy Act of 1866. The law offered cities and towns tools to take care of poor Black people at little-to-no-cost to taxpayers. Their labor could be leased out, or if there was no business in need of employees, their labor could be used to tackle much-needed public works.

However, it wouldn’t be until 1870 that Virginia localities could govern themselves and it would not be until 1872 that Conservative Democrats would gain enough control of the city government to institute a chain gang. By the time Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas were lynched in 1897 and 1899, the chain gang worked regularly on Alexandria’s streets. (See *End Note 5*)

Elections May 1870

Virginia ratified the 14th and 15th Amendments along with a new state constitution in late 1869. In January 1870, Congress accepted the Commonwealth and her representatives into the governing of the United States. Reconstruction had officially ended and localities prepared to hold municipal elections on May 26.

Ex-confederates and sympathizers called themselves Conservatives. Later they would adopt the term Conservative Democrats and then - just - Democrats. Those Alexandrians who sided with the Union, as well as, soldiers from northern climes who migrated after the war, and most of the city’s Black population voted with the Radical Republicans, who later dropped “radical” to become simply - the Republican Party.

The night before the election, with partisan tensions running high, orders went out to shutter the bars. Extra police were hired to stand by.

The *Alexandria Gazette* reported that a “colored procession was marching through the streets until after midnight. A rock was thrown by an unknown party into the crowd at the Conservative meeting, but no one was hurt.”

Alexandria was divided into four wards - the fourth being the only one where a majority of the residents were African American, although there was also a significant Black community living in Ward 3. By sundown on Election Day, 1,793 white men and 1,314 Black men had voted.

- Ward 1 votes: 454 white and 230 Black
- Ward 2 votes: 280 white and 158 Black
- Ward 3 votes: 598 white and 435 Black
- Ward 4 votes: 491 Black and 460 white

When the ballots were counted, Conservative Democrats had solidly won almost all the seats representing Wards 1, 2 and 3, failing to take just one in Ward 3, which went to a Republican. The Republicans won all positions in Ward 4.

Two Black men were elected to office - both in Ward 4: G.W. Parker, elected councilor and T.P. Pinn, who was elected magistrate. (See *End Note 6*)

Conservative Democrat Hugh Latham beat William Berkley by 140 votes to become mayor. Berkley, a white, Radical Republican who had been mayor during the military occupation, sued, along with 14 other plaintiffs. They said the election was “illegal and the returns thereof false and erroneous.”

Those appointed to recount the ballots found “great mistakes” were made, but only in Ward 4, saying there was “no evidence of errors in the other three wards.” They determined that the fourth ward miscounted, blaming the errors on problems with their “addition.” They stopped short of calling it fraud.

On June 22, 1870, Judge Lowes decided that “the evidence established beyond all possible controversy, that the corrected returns of this election fairly, fully and correctly expressed the choice of the electors.” (*See End Note 7,8*)

Three months later, on Oct. 11, 1870 the new city council considered “An Act to establish a chain gang in and for the city of Alexandria.”

During a meeting of the Board of Aldermen, Henry L. Simpson, the father of George L. Simpson who would be the mayor when Benjamin Thomas was lynched, opposed instituting a chain gang.

“I sympathize keenly with the sufferings of those unfortunate citizens of this city who were compelled to wear a ball and chain here during the war,” Simpson said.

W.H. Marbury, also a Conservative Democrat and president of the alderman agreed and said he had known many who had been convicted of crimes but then reformed, “and made good citizens.” Marbury was the father of Leonard Marbury, the Commonwealth Attorney who failed to find anyone responsible for the lynching of Joseph McCoy.

Col. French, also a Conservative, countered Marbury’s argument, saying “the idea is to utilize this element and make it self-supporting instead of a tax on the community as it is presently.”

At the meeting of the Common Council, a list of all the people convicted of misdemeanors and sentenced to jail since July 11, 1870 was read out by Clerk of the Court Morton Mayre, a former member of the rebel 17th Virginia Regiment.

The issue was sent to committee. It resurfaced again in December when the Board of Aldermen met to revise and amend the Charter of the Corporation of Alexandria. French said the city should organize a chain gang to strike “terror into criminals” and put the vagrant labor that is just sitting in prison to good use.

Simpson continued to be opposed, calling the chain gang “repugnant to all that is right. The city has no right to disgrace a criminal by putting him on a chain gang.”

Republican J.P. Agnew, who would rise to be a white leader in Virginia’s Republican Party by the time Alexandria’s two lynchings took place, agreed with Simpson. And then it seems nothing more was said of it. (*See End Note 9*)

For months and months after the debate, the mayor, as Justice of the Peace, heard the few cases of those accused of petty crimes. In each guilty case, he fined the person and they were discharged.

It wouldn’t be until May, 1872, after Conservative Democrats won every office except for mayor and the seats of the Fourth Ward, that the chain gang gained traction.

An Act in Relation to a Chain Gang

Berkley, who had narrowly lost two years earlier, was elected mayor of Alexandria by a slim majority. The dry goods merchant, who lived at 508 Prince St., won only because Ward 4’s Black voters pushed him over the top by 87 votes. Ironically, Berkley would sign the first citywide chain gang law that would disproportionately affect African Americans into the 20th century. (*See End Note 10*)

In March, before the May election that solidified the Democrats power, the *Alexandria Gazette* published “Chain Gangs - The following is the act of the Legislature approved Feb. 21st in relation to chain gangs.” The brief article said the legislature expanded the vagrancy law by including anyone sentenced for misdemeanors “or any offence deemed infamous at law, or sentenced to confinement in jail for a failure to pay a fine” for a conviction, will be credited .25 cents a day to work on “the streets in the cities and on the roads in the country,” until their fines are paid.

On Sept. 25, 1872, Ward 3 Conservative Alderman J.B. Johnson, introduced a chain gang bill. “This is the second effort, I believe, which has been made to pass an act to organize a Chain Gang for the city of Alexandria.”

He exalted the benefits of cheap labor and suggested the city pass his bill as an experiment that could be done away with if the chain gang didn’t prove to be profitable. Johnson said it would be a great way to show the criminal element and “vagrants and vagabonds” that jail is “no holiday.”

“Once they have to “earn their daily bread by the sweat of their brow... they will decide it will be better to work for themselves at one dollar and fifty cents a day than for the Corporation at 25 cents a day as a credit to pay their fines,” Johnson said.

Ward 4 Alderman John Seaton, a Radical Republican from a historically free Black family, rose from his seat, towering above his fellow representatives. “I was not informed that the Committee on the Poor had met on this issue,” the 6-foot-6-inch, 275-pound Seaton said. (See *End Note 11*)

Committee Chair, LL Loving, was a Conservative who had served in Virginia’s 8th Infantry Div. in the fight to keep slavery. He told the Radical Republican that he had sent a message about the meeting to him, implying it was Seaton’s fault not his, if the Alderman didn’t read his messages.

Johnson said he was sure Seaton wasn’t kept in the dark on purpose.

Johnson’s act would empower the mayor to assign people to the chain gang, placing them under the authority of the superintendent of police, who would employ them “in cleaning, opening and repairing streets, or such work as is usually performed by the Superintendent of the Police, and while at work [they] shall be required to perform [their] duty in a quiet and orderly manner.”

Seaton moved to postpone the bill until he could discuss it with his constituents who, he argued, would be the most affected by its passage.

Col. Montigue D. Corse, who fought with Virginia’s rebel 17th Infantry Regiment, said he endorsed the chain gang act, but understood Seaton’s desire to speak with his constituents before approving it. He seconded the Alderman’s motion.

“This bill will have a big impact on the poor, it will further oppress them,” Seaton pressed.

But Johnson refused to delay.

The aldermen voted six ayes to Seaton’s one nay. In the next hour, the Common Council adopted the act.

“I hope a time will come when the poor have some representation on this council,” Seaton said before being reprimanded for insulting the rest of the council with his statement. (See *End Note 12*)

Reaching back to 1792, Alexandria had a poor house on Monroe Ave. where the indigent - who were often old and sick - were housed, clothed and fed. It also served as a workhouse where those convicted of petty crimes, usually drinking, stealing, sex work or vagrancy - were forced to work off their fines by farming or making caulk for the joints of sailing ships. (See *End Note 13*)

The preamble to An Act in Relation to A Chain Gang in Alexandria read:

“Whereas, the city of Alexandria has continued, from time to time, within its jail and workhouse, a number of persons serving out their respective periods of punishment for offenses against the laws of the Corporation and the Commonwealth of the State, therefore be it enacted by the City Council of Alexandria, that the superintendent of police shall have power, and is hereby empowered, to organize such persons into a chain gang, in accordance with the instructions and provisions of an act of the General Assembly of Virginia, approved February, 21, 1872.”

Mayor Berkley, signed the bill into law and it was printed in full in the *Alexandria Gazette* on Sept. 27, 1872.

Off to a Rough Start

It wasn’t even a month later that prisoners protested the stripes and chains.

“A revolt occurred among them the other day, and with horrid oaths, and unprecious dire, the prisoners refused to work on the streets until their ornamental appendages, in the shape of balls and chains, were taken off. They were humored in this, but still they are not happy. Scarcely a day passes but some of them mizzle down back alleys and escape, or are taken conveniently and violently with cramps in the stomach whenever they are brought in contact with work,” according to a Washington newspaper. (See *End Note 14*)

By the fall of 1874, the number of people assigned to the chain gang had greatly increased and Alexandria was becoming dependent upon forced labor for the upkeep of its streets. The most commonly cited crimes of those assigned to the gang included drunkenness, disorderly conduct and abusing police officers.

The work meted out to the chain gang included:

- Cleaning streets and alleys;
- Filling holes;
- Digging ditches;
- Grading;
- Macadamizing;
- Hauling dirt, sand and gravel;
- Repairing the soup house;
- Building a wall and roofing the city jail;
- Repairing bridges.

Articles from the *Alexandria Gazette*, provide a glimpse into how the gang was used:

“The chain gang, twelve strong, under the command of Capt. Sipple, assisted by acting Lieut. Mathew Latten, were at work upon the St. Asaph Street improvement this morning. Their clothing was not of the most substantial character - in fact had very much the appearance of that worn by the Confederates towards the close of the war, and one of them was without a hat. The force is much stronger, but their quarters in the jail are so comfortable that many of its members in order to remain in them, play sick and some even tear their clothes to pieces in order to avoid being taken out to work. The superintendent of police, however, has directed that one of the latter be taken out tomorrow even if he appears in puris naturalibus.” – Sept. 1, 1874.

“The chain gang, under its old commander, Captain Dillon, was out today by order of the Superintendent of Police, engaged in cleaning the snow and ice from the market square. Its members, though bleached a little from long confinement, looked fat and slick, and did not hurt themselves by hard work and three of them, Tom Jones and Chas. Gray, colored and Eddie Meads, refused to work at all, asserting as their reason for so doing the want of clothes, and had to be locked up in the station house.” – Feb. 12, 1875.

Each month many of the prisoners managed to escape the iron chains and the grinding drag of a 12 pound weight, leading the superintendent of police to plead with the City Council to pay additional overseers and police. The council did so and also passed a law that offered rewards for information that would lead to the re enslavement of those who managed to get away. (See *End Notes 15,16*)

Growing Pains

While paid skilled and unskilled day laborers built and repaired streets, bridges and alleys, the chain gang provided menial labor and cleaned the streets. But over the next two decades, Alexandria authorities consistently struggled to force those on the gang to produce, and the city leadership’s disdain toward the people they pressed into service grew.

In 1887, then-Mayor Ethebert Downham urged City Council to deal with Alexandria’s “evildoers” who he said “do not fear” the chain gang and take advantage of the kindness shown by the city that clothed, housed and fed them by escaping.

“Many offenders sentenced to the gang do not work, but somehow manage to get beer and whiskey. Some, too, nearly naked when sentenced, as soon as they are clothed, escape and provide no further service,” Downham wrote in a message to Council. (See *End Note 17*)

The mayor urged the council to build an addition to the jail where those who refused to work could be forced to break stone for use on the streets by the chain gang.

Over the years, detractors on the City Council sought to end the use of the chain gang by defunding it. Not because they believed people were unjustly punished and enslaved, but because they wanted “honest laborers” to work the streets. These attempts were often singular and did not lead to change.

Changes to the Chain Gang

In June 1894, City Council approved amendments to the City Code “empowering the Mayor or any Justice of the Peace to put all vagrants, beggars and notoriously lazy people on the chain gang,” according to the *Alexandria Gazette*. Most people sent to the gang were convicted of “crap shooting, petty thefts and slight offenses,” the paper wrote. Now, vagrants who had been sent to the workhouse in prior times, would be sent to jail and drafted onto the chain gang.

The police were instructed to bring “all able-bodied persons not having the wherewithal to support themselves, all beggars, tramps, drunkards or notoriously idle or disorderly persons and all proprietors of gaming establishments of any kind, who shall be considered as vagrants” to Mayor Henry Strauss “to be dealt with accordingly.” (See *End Note 18*)

In December of 1895, City Council moved authority of the chain gang from the superintendent of police to the city engineer who was now responsible for keeping city streets, alleys and gutters clean and in good maintenance. The new law put the city engineer under the Committee on the Streets, and required him to use low-bid contract work whenever possible, but they also gave him the power to organize prisoners at the city jail or workhouse into a chain gang to work for him.

“The chain gang shall be employed in cleaning, opening and repairing the streets, or such work as may be directed by the City Engineer,” the council wrote, adding that it must be done “in a quiet and orderly manner.”

The amendment passed on Nov. 26, 1895. W.H. Marbury presided over the Board of Aldermen, Hubert Snowden over the City Council (Snowden was also president of the Council when McCoy and Thomas were lynched). The measure was signed by the appointed-Mayor Luther H. Thompson - who was the mayor and *Gazette* reporter when Joseph McCoy was lynched. (See *End Note 19*)

Mayor Thompson’s Court

Just two months earlier, on Aug. 30, 1895, Thompson had become mayor by default. Earlier that year, the *Alexandria Gazette* reporter had lost the Democratic primary for mayor, but when the people’s choice couldn’t fulfill his duties, City Council President Hubert Snowden, who was also a publisher of the *Alexandria Gazette*, put Thompson forward.

The people of Alexandria had elected the Democratic primary’s pick for mayor - John G. Beckham. The former confederate, who had run with Mosby’s Raiders, suffered from severe depression and couldn’t perform the job. On Thursday, Aug. 29, 1895, Beckham tendered his resignation to then acting Mayor Snowden. The next night, the council and Snowden appointed Thompson mayor. (See *End Note 20*)

Thompson would be a lame duck when Joseph McCoy was lynched in 1897. On April 21, he lost the primary again, this time to George Simpson who would be mayor when Benjamin Thomas was lynched two years later.

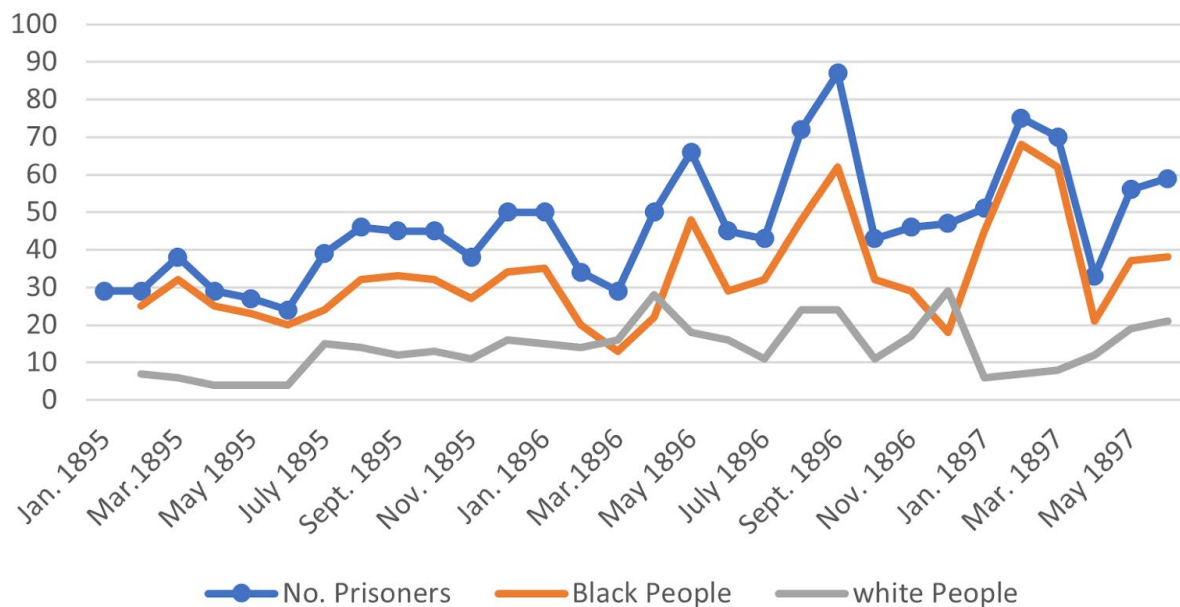
But in September 1895, it was with enthusiastic vigor that Thompson embraced his new and unexpected role. Beginning with Thompson, Alexandria experienced a prison boom, according to the Jail Register from Jan. 1, 1895 to June 30, 1897. By the time he was voted out of office by his own party, Thompson would boast that he had collected more fines than any previous mayor.

He zealously utilized forced labor, queuing up prisoners for the gang, fining and convicting a record high of 87 people in the month of September 1896 alone, according to his own hand-written ledger entries. (See *End Note 20*)

Consider how Strauss, Beckham and Snowden ran their courts. Records show that from February through August 31, 1895, 232 prisoners were convicted and sentenced to the chain gang. Of those, 181 were Black and 51 were white. The most common charge was disorderly conduct for which Black Alexandrians were twice as likely to be convicted as white residents. Members of the Black community were three times as likely than whites to be convicted for misdemeanors, three times more likely for vagrancy and five times more likely for assault. (Note that Thompson became Mayor September ‘95.)

Contrast those records with the same period the following year, from February to August 1896, when Thompson sent 339 prisoners to the chain gang. Sixty-three percent were Black, making Alexandria’s African Americans two times more likely than whites to be forced to work on the city streets.

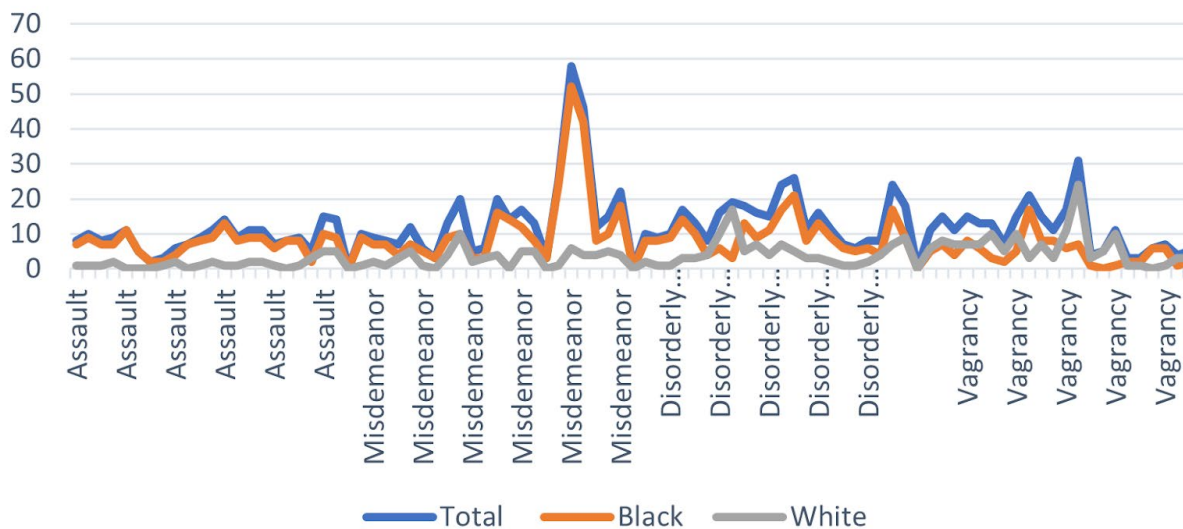
Subject To The Chain Gang



Over the course of his administration, Thompson also increased the number of white people who were fined and subjected to forced labor. Most of the white people were brought in for disorderly conduct, often associated with drinking, or they were impoverished and unhoused -convicted of vagrancy.

During Thompson's term as mayor, the population of Alexandria was approximately 14,000. He wielded his power to fine and imprison convicting at least 1066 people, 736 of whom were Black and 330 white. Those who could not pay the fines imposed were sent to the chain gang.

Thompson's Convictions '95-'97 Sent to the Chain Gang



Over the 22 months Thompson was in charge, 110 prisoners escaped from the chain gang - 71 of whom were Black.

In the spring of 1899, Thompson challenged then-Mayor George Simpson during the Democratic primary, but again his bid failed. When it came time for the election in May, Black Alexandrians in Ward 3, led by James Turley, who would later lead a delegation of Black men in an attempt to protect Benjamin Thomas, threw their support behind Simpson. They announced their endorsement in the *Alexandria Gazette* saying they wanted “colored men employed on our streets. We think it unfair to discriminate against the taxpayers on the street work. We commend the action of the Alexandria Water company for employing negro labor. We recommend police commissioners. We urge upon this ward to vote for no man who is not in sympathy with these resolutions.” (See *End Note 21*)

The American Civil War established that slavery was unacceptable, but the 13th Amendment that enshrined the concept that all men were free included an exception when it came to those convicted of a crime. Virginia was quick to discover the loophole and urban Alexandria found a way to make use of Richmond’s tools. They unashamedly brought a new kind of slavery - forced labor - back to our storied streets, which were built on the backs of the Black community and poor whites.

End Notes:

1 “In this way, a labor shortage on the plantations was answered,” according to an exhibit on the topic at Virginia’s Museum of History and Culture.

2 Alexandria Paupers' Deaths, 1813-1904, special collections, Alexandria Library, Queen Street.

3 General John Slough, name, [info and portrait](#), Alexandria.gov, Office of Historic Alexandria, *Alexandria Gazette*, April 12, 1865, p. 2.

4 *Alexandria Gazette*, Oct. 1, 1866, p. 3.

5 In March 1867, the Radical Republicans controlled Congress and Virginia and Alexandria were once again placed under military rule, this time, to force both to recognize the rights of Black citizens. After much hesitation, late in 1869, Virginia ratified the 14th and 15th amendments and agreed to a new state constitution. In response, Congress allowed Virginia’s elected representatives and Senators to take their seats in January 1870. Reconstruction in Virginia ended and localities prepared to hold municipal elections.

6 *Alexandria Gazette*, May 28, 1870, p.3.

7 *Alexandria Gazette*, June 22, 1870, p.4.

8 Among those who were elected to the Board of Aldermen were W.H. Marbury, the father of Leonard Marbury who would be Commonwealth Attorney when Joseph McCoy was lynched; and H.L. Simpson, whose son George L. Simpson was mayor when Benjamin Thomas was lynched; Lt. James Smith, who played a prominent role in both lynchings was elected constable for Ward 2, and James Webster, who was Chief of Police during both lynchings, failed in his bid for Constable of Ward 1 to Bernard Cline.

9 *Alexandria Gazette*, Oct.12, 1870, p.3.

10 *Alexandria Gazette*, May, 24, 1872, p. 2.

11 *Alexandria Gazette*, Oct. 1, 2018, “John A. Seaton, A Giant of a Man.”

12 *Alexandria Gazette*, Sept. 25, 1872, p.3. Col. Montigue D. Corse was Harold Snowden’s commanding officer in Virginia’s 17th Infantry Regiment during the Civil War. Harold and his brother Edgar Snowden Jr. edited the *Alexandria Gazette*.

13 Alexandria Paupers' Deaths, 1813-1904, special collections, Alexandria Library, Queen Street.

14 *Evening Star*, Dec. 20, 1872, “Chain Gang Revolt.”

15 “This Week in Reconstruction,” December 1-15. 1866, University of Richmond.

16 *Alexandria Gazette*, Aug. 10, 1874, p.2; *Alexandria Gazette*, Oct. 28, 1874, p. 3;*Alexandria Gazette*, Nov. 11, 1874, p.3.

17 *Alexandria Gazette*, Nov. 11, 1887, p. 3.

18 *Alexandria Gazette*, June 27, 1894, p.3

19 *Alexandria Gazette*, Dec. 5, 1895, p. 2.

20 *Alexandria Gazette*, Aug. 31, 1895, p.2.

21 Jail Register from Jan. 1, 1895-June 30 1897, Alexandria Special Collections, Queen Street Library, Barret Branch.

22 *Alexandria Gazette*, May 24, 1899 p. 3.

Researched and Written by Tiffany Pache, ACRP Coordinator.

Special thanks to the staff at Alexandria's Local History/Special Collections at the Barret Branch of the Alexandria Library for pulling a bunch of records for me and helping me locate the jail register.

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

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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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