

**Benjamin Thomas Remembrance Ceremony**  
**August 8, 2023**  
**Remarks of Sheriff Sean Casey**

Good evening.

As I have said before, law enforcement's history of racial oppression must be acknowledged, particularly by those of us who serve in this profession. We cannot change the past, but we hope, by acknowledging our failures, we might begin to encourage healing and build trust.

Soon you will hear what happened to young Benjamin Thomas. But I want to share the story of courage in the community that swelled up the day before, the story of the heroes who risked their own freedom to help Benjamin Thomas.

When Black Alexandrians heard of Benjamin Thomas's arrest, they were rightly concerned for his safety. African American community members remembered what had happened to Joseph McCoy just two years before – and they were determined to protect Benjamin Thomas from the same atrocities.

James Turley, who lived near the Thomases, overheard a group of whites talking about a lynching. Mr. Turley and several other prominent Black leaders informed the police and mayor of the threat to Benjamin Thomas' life. The mayor denied their request and instead threatened them with arrest for being out on the streets.

Another group of men went to the police station where Benjamin was being held so they could provide protection and support in case a lynch mob tried to force entry. But Lieutenant James Smith rebuffed the men, discounted their fears, ordered them to disperse and threatened them with arrest. The men protested and Lieutenant Smith promptly arrested Albert Green for being "very insolent."

Authorities refused to acknowledge the danger to Benjamin Thomas but took issue with the presence of Black Alexandrians on the streets. The mayor ordered police to clear the streets and start arresting Black citizens. Rather than consider their concern and desire to help, City officials viewed it as aggressive behavior that had to be suppressed.

That night, police arrested at least a dozen Black men. In some cases, police encouraged white citizens to assist them in detaining Black residents who were congregating in public places. None of the men had engaged in violence and most were charged with disorderly conduct.

But they were arrested and held in custody where they could no longer challenge City officials. Their presence and actions had been perceived by whites as an affront to the authority of white police officers – and to be honest, a threat to white supremacy.

As we have acknowledged and apologized for our predecessors' role in failing to protect Benjamin Thomas, we also deeply regret that law enforcement officers abused their power, violated public trust, and arrested the heroes who had peacefully assembled to protect him. Police put white supremacy first, above the law and above public safety, adding to the legacy of racial oppression that continues to impact our community and country today.

Thank you.