

## ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



### May 2024 Edition



*ACRP Chairs Audrey Davis and Gretchen Bulova (right) award the Benjamin Thomas Memorial Scholarship to ACHS Senior Maurice Hodge.*

Photo Credit: Mayor Justin Wilson

### **ACHS Students Awarded Memorial Scholarships Honoring McCoy and Thomas**

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project hopes to foster an inclusive city that offers all people the dignity that comes with experiencing equality and justice every day. We recognize that our past is filled with accounts of divisions between our communities caused by a racial hierarchy embedded in centuries of white supremacy. In order to build a fair and just foundation, ACRP made a historic investment in Alexandria's youth while honoring this city's two lynching victims.

On Wednesday, May 22, the Joseph McCoy Memorial Scholarship was awarded to Gabriella Holmes by descendants of the McCoy family and the Benjamin Thomas Memorial Scholarship was presented to Maurice Hodge by ACRP Co-Chairs Audrey Davis and Gretchen Bulova.

Getting to this moment of acknowledgement and repair has been a long journey that began years before McCoy and Thomas' lives were cut short in 1897 and 1899.

In 1870, Virginia established a statewide free common school system. While it was under construction in the General Assembly, African American legislators and their allies fought for Black and white children to learn together. In the end, conservative lawmakers won the battle and students were kept apart, denying generations of students an opportunity to grow up together, develop friendships, and celebrate each other's achievements. Instead, despite the Constitutional promise of

equality, schools were used to further support and grow white supremacy. Alexandria's children learned about their differences, inferiority for Black children and superiority for the white boys and girls, ensuring Alexandria's communities, especially those in the middle and lower classes, would remain divided.

In Alexandria, white authorities disempowered education leaders in the Black community. To avoid investing in Black children, those in charge took over two schools that had been built and paid for by the Black community soon after the Civil War, then they let the schools decay.

On May 18, 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court's Plessy Decision held up white supremacy by enshrining segregation in policy and law with the "separate but equal" doctrine. Justice John Marshall Harlan dissented, invoking the promise of the 13th and 14th amendments claiming the Court "yielded to public sentiment at the expense of constitutional safeguards."

In April 1897, less than a year after the Plessy Decision, Joseph McCoy, 18, who likely attended the segregated Snowden School for Boys on S. Pitt Street, was lynched by a mob made up of his white neighbors. Then in August 1899, 16-year-old Benjamin Thomas, who probably attended the same school as McCoy, was accused by a 7-year-old white girl of assault - she lived next door to him. At the time of the lynchings, Alexandria's students could have been learning together for 30 years.

Fifty-five years after Thomas was murdered, on May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed itself by ruling that separate was not equal. This was just four years after Alexandria had [finally opened a high school for the African American community](#). At the end of the sixties, most of Alexandria's Black teens were reassigned to George Washington or T.C. Williams while Hammond High remained almost entirely white. Soon after, school rivalries turned violent - a 14-year-old African American student was beaten bloody during a football game between Hammond and GW; at sporting events students threw rocks and firebombs at one another; adults burned crosses on school yards. Unfortunately, the divisions peaked on May 29, 1970 when T.C. Williams 11th grader Robin Gibson was killed by a white shopkeeper at the 7-11 on Glebe Road. Alexandria's communities were seething with animosity toward one another.

A year later, in May 1971, School Superintendent John Albohm addressed the crisis and met federal demands by bringing together 11th and 12th graders from all three high schools at T.C. Williams. That fall, Coach Herman Boone, who was Black and Coach Bill Yoast, who was white, took their mixed football team all the way to the championships and gave Alexandria's divided communities a reason to come together.

Still a number of white families decided to leave the city or send their children to private schools to avoid integration. This white flight lasted several decades furthered by the trope started in 1870 and rebooted during Massive Resistance that Black students could not perform as well as white children, and Black students were more likely to commit crimes and be violent.

An economic downturn in 2008-09 drove many families to try and then stick with Alexandria's public schools. Many of those students are graduating this year.

In the Spring of 2017, Gretchen Bulova and Audrey Davis, both of the Office of Historic Alexandria wrote to the Equal Justice Initiative to let them know Alexandria wanted to participate in what was then known as the nonprofit's Historical Marker Project (the original name for EJI's Remembrance Project).

In February 2019, City Council established a Steering Committee for the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project and the first citywide meetings were held in the fall of that year. Nearly 400 Alexandrians volunteered to research and expose what happened to Joseph McCoy, Benjamin Thomas and explore the impact of the lynchings on this city's African American community. Then on May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by white policemen.

That September, amidst a national reckoning on race, this year's graduates began high school. One of the first things students focused on was the name of the high school. They led a campaign to change the name from one that honored a notorious segregationist to Alexandria City High School.

In 2022, ACHS students joined ACRP as we acknowledged the wrongs perpetrated against Joseph McCoy, Benjamin Thomas, their families and the Black community. They were among the 164 people who traveled to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Alabama and learned about our nation's struggle with racial terror and white supremacy.

Over the past year, ACRP began an effort to raise money for two memorial scholarships to acknowledge this history, offer repair and honor Alexandria's amazing young people. In the process, white and Black Alexandrians came together to have dinner and discuss racial justice issues and build relationships.

It is fitting that these two historic scholarships were presented to Holmes and Hodge in the month of May. This same month holds more than a century of significant moments, including, the 1896 Plessy Decision, the 1954 Brown Decision, the 1970 murder of Robin Gibson, the 1971 decision to integrate high school students, the 2020 murder of George Floyd and the first ever awarding of the Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas Memorial Scholarships to two deserving graduates of Alexandria City High School.

Gabriel Holmes will attend Virginia Commonwealth University to study for a career in Clinical Radiation Sciences. She says she has always had a keen interest in medicine, especially after facing her own health issues. "I'm very excited to add to the number of Black healthcare workers in this country," she wrote in a thank you note.

Hodge, who opened the 38th annual Scholarship Fund of Alexandria Award Ceremony singing the National Anthem acapella, intends to attend a four-year liberal arts school and has interests in teaching, music and business administration. His teachers say he is best known at ACHS for his leadership on the school choir and his ability to bring joy to his classmates.

ACRP established the Memorial Scholarships in partnership with the Scholarship Fund of Alexandria in the fall of 2023. Our organization has committed to providing two \$3000 scholarships annually to ACHS students. In the first year, nearly \$20,000 was raised from individual contributions, through an annual fundraising appeal and Tables of Conscience Dinners. In order to sustain these scholarships from year-to-year, we have set a fundraising goal of \$150,000. The Old Presbyterian Meeting House's generous gift of \$10,000 has set us on this pathway and we hope that more churches, organizations, and individuals will help us meet this goal. Anyone [interested in donating can do so on our SFA campaign page](#), and/or by attending one of our Tables of Conscience Dinners in the fall or winter. We are currently looking for hosts to hold these book themed dinners in the months of October, November, January (25) and February (25). If you are considering hosting please contact [tiffany.pache@alexandriava.gov](mailto:tiffany.pache@alexandriava.gov).

## In the News

[Segregation Academies Still Operate Across The South. One Town Grapples With Its Divided Roots](#), by Jennifer Berry Hawes, Propublica

This in depth report on how the ghosts of massive resistance still haunt many southern towns is a must read for those who care about racial justice issues. As more southern states choose to provide vouchers to families to attend private and religious schools, segregation academies are among those getting a boost while public schools are undermined.

## **Volunteer Opportunity – Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Cleanup, June 8th**

In 2014, the City of Alexandria held a dedication ceremony for the individuals buried during and shortly after the Civil War at Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery. The 10th anniversary of the cemetery's dedication is coming up this fall. Descendants, Alexandria Archaeology, and volunteers will lend a hand in cleaning and renewing the cemetery on Saturday, June 8, from 9 to 11 a.m. Volunteers will remove weeds and dead grass to uncover the hidden grave markers and clear the walkways and spaces around the memorial. This requires time spent bending or kneeling on the ground.

[Sign up to volunteer here.](#) More information is on the sign-up sheet.

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## **Upcoming Events**

### **Lost Buildings of Alexandria - The Berg & Parker-Gray**

*Every Saturday in May*

*10 a.m.-12 p.m.*

*Tours begin at Lee-Fendall House Museum, 614 Oronoco Street*

*\$20/50% off for Lee-Fendall museum members.*

*Tickets can be purchased [online](#).*

In honor of Historic Preservation Month, Lee-Fendall House and Carlyle Historic Park bring a new "Lost Buildings" walking tour, focused on the Berg and Parker-Gray neighborhoods. The City of Alexandria has seen older buildings and spaces being restored, preserved, and reused in different ways. However, there were many buildings that were not preserved. Explore the Berg and Parker-Gray neighborhoods of Alexandria and stop at locations where historic buildings once stood. The program is a joint effort between the Lee-Fendall House and Carlyle Historic Park. The tour includes walking over many city blocks, so please dress appropriately for the terrain and weather. Tours are limited to 10 people. For more information, please call (703) 548-1789 or email [contact@leefendallhouse.org](mailto:contact@leefendallhouse.org).

### **Story Time for Little Historians**

*Saturday, June 8*

*10-10:45 a.m.*

*Alexandria Black History Museum, 902 Wythe Street*

This Free, fun, and educational story time is geared to children ages 5-8 years old and features stories related to Black History. The program uses books written by and about African American people and other communities of color to educate and inspire our youngest visitors.

### **Juneteenth Celebration with the Washington Revels Jubilee Voices**

*Wednesday, June 19*

*2 p.m. Revels Performance*

*Market Square, 300 King Street*

*Free*

If you have not yet seen the Washington Revels perform do not miss this opportunity to hear Singing the Journey: Juneteenth Joy! This institution has been performing for more than 35 years, sharing cultural traditions in music, dance, storytelling, and drama with audiences in the Washington area. For those with little ones, come at 1:30 for a special story time with children.

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## Committee Reports

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Steering Committee** met at 5 p.m. on May 7 at Alexandria Black History Museum. Meeting notes are [available here](#).

## Upcoming Meetings

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Planning for Benjamin Thomas Remembrance** June 4 at 3:30 p.m. at Alexandria Black History Museum, the [agenda is here](#).

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Steering Committee** June 4, 2025 at 5 p.m. at Alexandria Black History Museum, the [agenda is here](#).

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

[For more information](#)

[Donate to the Project](#)

[ACRP@alexandriava.gov](mailto:ACRP@alexandriava.gov)

*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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