

This year's McCoy remembrance

To the editor:

On April 23, more than 300 Alexandrians met at Market Square to remember the lynching of Joseph McCoy that happened 125 years ago to the day. For those in our community who could not attend the McCoy Remembrance, we want to share some important points that were made:

Mayor Justin Wilson shared an insight into then Virginia Gov. Charles Triplett O'Ferrall's thinking on lynching. The governor launched an investigation and condemned the inaction of then Mayor Luther Thompson and censored the police department, leading many today to think him righteous. But as Wilson pointed out, O'Ferrall's endgame was to use the law to hang McCoy, the thinking being: Why resort to extrajudicial mob justice when you have the power of the courts on your side?

Current Police Chief Don Hayes used his first public appearance as our new chief to belatedly apologize to Alexandria's African American community for the poor leadership of his predecessor in 1897, his inaction and complicity in the lynching of McCoy, as well as his allowing the lynchers to go free.

Bryan Porter is the 11th Commonwealth's Attorney to serve Alexandria since Leonard Marbury, who also played a role in the lynching.

"Marbury conspired with other public officials, to include the mayor, the police chief, and the commander of the local militia, to cover up the culpability of Alexandria's white elites, providing uncorroborated alibis to those under suspicion and overtly lying to the investigators sent by the Governor to look into the lynching," Porter stated. He added that Marbury did not prosecute a single person for the murder even though he almost certainly had

first-hand knowledge of the participants. Porter's moving words included an expression of his personal shame and grief over his predecessor's choices.

Yahney Marie Sangare, Alexandria City High School sophomore and vice president of the Black Student Union, drew a standing ovation for her remarks – many in attendance likened her passionate statement to those made by the young poet Amanda Gorman who read "The Hill We Climb" at the inauguration of President Joe Biden in 2021.

"I would love to end this speech with a call to action. I would love to tell you to do something as simple as protest, or vote, or read an article, or check your bias: and I do commend those who take those actions and encourage them. But I am afraid such an ultimatum of improvement is a naive prayer. I enlist you, in this forum, remembrance," Sangare said, later adding, "I enlist your remembrance, in hopes that in knowing, we may find love. For what is love, if not revolution?"

Finally, Rev. James Daniely of Roberts Memorial Methodist Church gave a passionate eulogy for Joseph McCoy – to loud and constant applause – memorializing him as his predecessor did 125 years before. He implored participants to work to bring equal justice to all.

"To become peacemakers during confrontations of hate. To make this American nightmare into the reality where all men and women in these United States are treated as equals, that they are protected by their governments to ensure their rights, that among these are equal justice to good representation, an opportunity to be trained for gainful employment, access to good health care,

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and education. Then, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness has the same meaning to the sisters and brothers in the Burg as well as Beverley Hills and Chirilagua. And that we will, by any means necessary,

protect this grand thought and make it a reality for all of us. And ‘all’ is one of those inclusive terms that leaves no one out! It’s not enough to hold others accountable. We, each of us, must be accountable to each other because we are our brother and sister’s keepers,”

Daniely said.

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project has posted the written remarks on our website and can be accessed at: www.alexandriava.gov/cultural-history/in-memorial-2022-joseph-mccoy-april-23-1897.

I hope that those who were not able to join us will take the time to read these healing words.

-Audrey Davis,
director, Black History Museum; co-director, Alexandria Community Remembrance Project