

Black Defiance

The story of the night Black Alexandrians protected Benjamin Thomas

By Tiffany Pache for the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project

In the summer of 1899 the Southern U.S. countryside had been the scene of weeks-long manhunts and gruesome lynchings. The region was on edge as a contagious hysteria gripped the white population, and a record number of Black men were accused of the one crime that whites believed justified death – sexual assault against a white woman.

On Sunday, August 6, in a factory town outside of Greenville, S.C., the Black community heard a rumor that a man arrested for an alleged sex crime would be lynched. At least 25 men rushed to his defense. It was the same across the South. Black men, abandoned by the federal government more than two decades earlier, stood up and put themselves between the accused and white mobs. Newspapers published dire warnings of a looming war between the races. *(See End Note 1)*

It was in this hyper-tense atmosphere that at least a hundred Black Alexandrians acted to prevent a mob from repeating the April 1897 lynching of Joseph McCoy.

On Monday, August 7, 1899, the city's African American community rose up to protect one of their own, Benjamin Thomas, 16, who had been arrested allegedly for attempting to assault a white girl.

They were heeding the advice of the Black firebrand *Richmond Planet* editor John Mitchell, who wrote in May 1897 that “Colored men should see to it that their people are defended. With proper organization at Alexandria, the life of Joseph McCoy could have been saved, and the honor of the City of Alexandria upheld.”

Six hours after police officers ripped Thomas from his mother's arms, at least 15 African Americans were arrested for trying to protect him from a lynch mob.

The prisoners spent the night behind bars alongside Thomas, waiting for their cases to be heard in the morning by Mayor George Simpson.

The following story reveals the forgotten history of their heroic efforts. The unfolding of events is documented in news accounts from the following white-owned presses: *Alexandria Gazette*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, the *Washington Evening Star* and *The Baltimore Sun*.

No African Americans were interviewed and the few quotes attributed to them came from reporters wielding prejudiced pens. The story has been pieced together without finer details, such as exact timing, exact numbers and the exact words that were exchanged. It has been written with a touch of liberty, but with confidence that this is a more truthful representation of the events that occurred on the night of Aug. 7, 1899.

It was the first Monday of August, the night sky was clear and temperatures were surprisingly comfortable. African American James Turley, a 57-year-old native Alexandrian from a prominent family, free before the war, was making his way home from working a late shift at the brickyards.

In May, Turley's Queen Street home burned down when a neighbor's gas stove exploded. Since then he had been living at 421 N. Patrick St. His new address was less than three blocks from the Thomas family home, where 16-year-old Benjamin Thomas had been arrested at 8 p.m. for allegedly assaulting his next door neighbor 7-year-old Lillian Kloch. *(See End Note 2)*

The Washington Times reported the next morning that soon after the arrest "some indignation was felt by the white population of the city" and that some people were talking of a lynching. *(See End Note 3)*

Turley, still covered in soot and brick dust, was looking forward to a good wash. As he neared home, he noticed a clutch of white men talking loudly and acting rowdy. As he drew closer he overheard them "threatening to lynch some negro."

Concerned, Turley immediately retraced his steps to find out who was in trouble and for what. He understood all too well that a sexual assault charge was a death warrant for a Black man.

When he learned that Thomas was the accused, Turley moved to protect the boy at all costs.

Turley headed up the Republicans in his ward. He was also a life-long member of Roberts Memorial Chapel and belonged to various colored organizations. He knew the leadership of Alexandria's Black community and that's who he reached out to that night, including:

- Captain Albert Green, 36, leader of Robinson's Industrial Guards, a club that marched in local and national parades. Green was also sergeant-at-arms for the Colored Republicans Club;
- John Nelson, 44, a stalwart Republican with deep roots in the free Black community who lived in the "Burg" neighborhood, near Green and -
- William Washington, 33, who followed his father into politics becoming an active Republican. In later years, Washington and Green would start a Pallbearer's Union to support grieving Black families.

It wasn't difficult for Turley to convince these men to help Thomas and they soon had a plan. They alerted the police about the lynching threat and offered their help to protect the young man.

At the station house, the men told police about the threat Turley had overheard and said they believed a lynch mob was organizing. *(See Endnotes 4,5,6)*

The officers argued that there was no way the white community could know about Thomas's arrest - they had followed Mayor Simpson's instructions to keep it quiet. *(See Endnote 7)*

Still, the Black community leaders insisted that an attack was imminent.

Police officers said Thomas was safe in their custody. If word had gone around about what he had done to the little Kloch girl, the officers said, he was probably safer with them than on the streets.

The Black delegation reminded the officers about the terrifying events of 1897 when Joseph McCoy was dragged from the station house to Cameron and Lee Streets and hanged.

They offered to bring men to the station house to protect Benjamin Thomas and ensure the law was upheld to keep Alexandria's reputation intact.

Lieutenant James Smith, who was listening to the exchange, had been in charge the night McCoy was murdered. Just hours before the lynch mob attacked, Lt. Smith had rejected Leonard Marbury's offer to alert the Alexandria Light Infantry and the local militia adamantly claiming that he and his officers could defend the station and protect the prisoner. *(See Endnote 8)*

On this August night, Lt. Smith told the concerned men the police didn't need their help. Then, he told them to go home.

They left the station, but had no intention of giving up and leaving the boy undefended. Splitting up, Green and some of the men went into the Burg to knock on doors and call on men from the community to help. *(See Endnote 9)*

Turley led a delegation to the mayor's house to alert him of the plot to lynch Thomas.

Mayor Simpson was a moral crusader who rode into office on a wave of public outrage over gambling and police corruption. He was a law-and-order man who surely wouldn't want Alexandria's reputation to be scarred by a second lynching.

The delegation would ask him to shore up protection for Thomas. If the mayor wanted to, he could deputize them, allowing them to help the officers. White citizens were often authorized to defend prisoners and jails.

Turley might have held some small optimism as he knocked on the door at 126 Columbus St. at 12:15 a.m., but it surely withered at the sight of Simpson's face.

Respectfully, the delegation explained the threat to Benjamin and their fear that 1897 would be repeated. They requested additional protections to ensure the law was upheld.

Simpson's arguments were similar to those of the police officers. He reiterated his order for the arrest to be made quietly and seemed sure that his officers had done so successfully. It simply wasn't possible that anyone knew about Thomas's arrest or the allegations against him. He personally had not heard anyone "threatening to lynch Benjamin" in town that night.

The mayor ordered them to "get off the streets, go home" and stop causing excitement. *(See Endnote 10)*

Meanwhile, Green had organized 'a considerable number" of men into a "semi military organization." At least one hundred Black citizens were stationed strategically on street corners and alleyways leading to the station house. They used whistles to communicate – should a mob approach they would warn the other squads with shrill alarms. *(See Endnote 11)*

Bob Arnold, a white citizen who noticed the men crowding the corners about the station house, went into the headquarters to tell the police. Inside, he found David Makely, William Shoeni and Harry Fisher, who had done the same. The white men offered to help police if the Blacks attacked. *(See Endnote 12)*

Lt. Smith was looking out the station house window and saw several Black men walk past. He surreptitiously slid out the side door to do some reconnaissance. As he walked the nearby alleys and streets he noted the organized knots of African Americans. *(See Endnote 13)*

As the town clock struck 1 a.m., Lt. Smith headed to Simpson's house. For a second time in the early hours of Tuesday, Aug. 8, Simpson answered his front door.

Lt. Smith reported that Black men were positioned all around the police station and were marching up and down Fairfax Street.

The mayor advised Lt. Smith to pull his officers off their beats and order them back to the station to defend it in case the Blacks should attack. As for the men

parading the streets, he told the lieutenant to order them to disperse and, if any refused, to arrest them. *(See Endnote 14)*

Smith called officers Atkinson, Bettis, Beach, Hall, Young, Spinks, Lyles, Howson and Deane off their beats. He tore into the station house with his men behind him and deputized the white citizens who complained about the Blacks. *(See Endnote 15)*

In one body, the group filed out the double doors. Armed with pistols and clubs, they headed to the corner of Cameron and Fairfax, where Green and a large group of men stood in the shadow of the Braddock House Hotel.

Lt. Smith ordered them to disperse or face arrest. *(See Endnote 16)*

Distinguishing himself from the squadron, Green stepped into the light that fell from the hotel windows.

“We will not leave Benjamin Thomas unprotected,” he said. *(See Endnote 17)*

Lt. Smith might have used the word ridiculous as he explained, with some exasperation, that the boy was protected. It had apparently escaped the lieutenant that the police were in the streets confronting the Black citizens while Benjamin sat in his cell undefended.

Why risk arrest, Lt. Smith asked while another officer jeered something about the chain gang needing a fresh set of hands. *(See Endnote 18)*

“Look, those white people said they were going to lynch Benjamin and we are not going to let that happen, even if we have to give up our own lives,” Green said.

“Officer Atkinson, arrest this man,” Lt. Smith commanded.

“You can arrest me, but you can’t fit all of us in that jail house,” muttered Green, who would later be called insolent by the press. *(See Endnote 19)*

As Atkinson cuffed Green, Allen Carter did something that caused the policeman to arrest him, too. The men were taken into headquarters and charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot.

After Green and Carter had been dragged off, the police tried again to disperse the men. Thomas' Black defenders reacted by moving north one slow step at a time. Police and deputized citizens were at their heels pushing them away from the station house. The group stopped for a long minute at the intersection of Queen Street as they tried to keep Ben Thomas' holding cell in view. A few walked backwards to keep watch - now two blocks away from the police station- they could still run to the boy's aid if a lynch mob materialized.

Continuing to order the men to disperse, Lt. Smith, his officers, and the deputized citizens advanced, forcing the group past Queen Street.

They moved slowly, together, until they reached Hard Corner -where Princess crosses Fairfax Street - and there they halted. Neighbors watching from their doorways stepped forward, bolstering their courage.

An increasingly smaller line of white police officers and deputized citizens found themselves facing a growing mass of Black Alexandrians as the crowd grew to 200 strong. *(See Endnote 20)*

The Black men steadied themselves; they were determined to persist.

Lt. Smith reportedly ordered everyone to go home.

Under his breath, Turley said, "stand your ground."

The tension snapped as Lt. Smith plunged into the crowd. He seized Alfred Mason and Harrie McDonald and handed them to officer Spinks and volunteer deputy Harry Fisher to arrest.

Officer Atkinson went for Turley, who he described as their leader. With the help of citizen deputies Makely and Shoeni, he slapped cuffs on Turley's wrists.

During the melee, young Richard Washington, who might have been related to Benjamin Thomas, was reported to have threatened to lynch Bob Arnold. Atkinson grabbed the boy's shirt and dragged him along to the station house, too. *(See Endnote 21)*

While being booked, Turley offered to surrender his pistol and cartridges. Officers charged him with carrying a concealed weapon. Edward Gibson, Alfred Mason and Harry McDonald were also charged with carrying. All four were also put down for disorderly conduct and trying to incite a riot. On Tuesday morning they were fined \$20 each. *(See Endnote 22)*

Green, who was also likely charged with carrying a concealed weapon, and Carter were also fined \$20.

Robert Buckner, John Haskins, James Alexander, Edward Payne, Thomas Elzy, Richard Washington and John Wilson were charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot. They each were fined \$10.

John Nelson and William Washington were not arrested on August 7, but at the trial of the other Black men were recognized by an officer who said they had been present the night before. The two were then charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot, but the charges were later dropped and they were not fined.

All but two of the men charged went to the chain gang for 30 days because they were unable to pay the fines, which would amount to more than \$700 dollars and more than \$350 dollars today. *(See Endnote 23)*

During the trial Tuesday morning, arresting police officers testified that the Black men threatened the lives of white Alexandrians. These allegations, reported by a sensationalizing press, made it appear that Thomas' Defenders were parading the streets with dangerous weapons while white Alexandrians slept. The articles preyed on white fear creating conditions for a race riot - or more accurately - white violence against African Americans.

The men who tried to protect Benjamin Thomas maintained they did nothing that could be called "a demonstration" and said they never intended to resort

to violence. They just wanted to uphold the law and ensure Thomas had a fair trial.

The Washington Times paraphrased their argument this way: “What do we have to be violent with? You have the arms and the wealth. We have neither. The law is with you and against us. We would simply invite our annihilation were we to provoke a conflict.” (See Endnote 24)

After the hearing, Simpson reiterated that Benjamin Thomas was never in the “slightest danger, yet the colored people had attempted to incite a riot which might easily have led” to the lynching they said they wanted to prevent.

The *Evening Star* reported that the white authorities and community at large “do not for once admit that the colored men assembled to uphold the law.”

After the trial Benjamin Thomas was moved to the jail at St. Asaph and Princess Streets. The rest of the day, white people crowded about the previous night and armed themselves. Before midnight on August 8, 1899, Benjamin Thomas was kidnapped, tortured, shot, beaten and hanged from the lamp post at the corner of King and Fairfax Streets.

On Aug. 9, the *Evening Star* asked if the same laws used to punish Thomas’ defenders for disorderly assembly for trying to stop “lawless homicide” would be used to punish the lynchers who murdered Benjamin Thomas. They answered their own question: “Probably not.” (See Endnote 25)

That August, after Alexandria City arrested and lynched 16-year-old Thomas for allegedly assaulting a 7-year-old white girl, an Alexandria County jury deliberated for 15 minutes before convicting a nearly 80-year-old Black man, William Dodson, for the attempted rape of 9-year-old Viola Elliot who was white. Dodson took the stand to declare his innocence and the child’s doctor testified he couldn’t find any evidence of a crime. Yet the all-white jury sentenced Dodson to 10 years at a state penitentiary.

END NOTES:

- 1 "Race Clash in Greenville," *Washington Post*, Aug. 8, 1899.
- 2 *Evening Star*, "Explosion Causes Fire" May 13, 1899 & 1900 Census.
- 3 *The Washington Times*, August 8, 1899, p. 6.
- 4 Turley was from an old established family in this city. His grandfather, Simon Turley, bought his freedom from enslavement and then purchased freedom for his wife, children, and siblings. Simon joined 45 other African Americans in Alexandria to sign a letter to the Mayor promising authorities they would not put Alexandria in jeopardy after the Nat Turner rebellion and he was among the original eight trustees at Roberts Chapel. Turley's sister married George Seaton in 1874, the most prominent post civil war Black man in this city who served in the Virginia legislature. James Turley, a widower by 1899, was a long time member of the Radical Republicans, and had served in many leadership roles with the Alexandria party over the decades. In 1899, he was the President of the Third Ward Republicans and worked alongside Magnus Robinson, W.A. Carter, J.M. Buckner, Albert Green, John Nelson and William Washington. Ref: Source: Year: 1850; Census Place: Alexandria, Virginia; Roll: 932; Page: 399a Source: Year: 1860; Census Place: Alexandria, Virginia; Page: 962 Year: 1880; Census Place: Alexandria, Alexandria, Virginia; Roll: 1351; Page: 311A; Enumeration District: 002
- 46 Petitioners: Social Justice in the Age of Nat Turner, Dr. Garret Fessler.
- Turley's marriage: Roberts Chapel Records, 00073 Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church, Batch 1 Marriage Records
- Turley's sister's marriage to George Seaton Census: Year: 1880; Census Place: Alexandria, Alexandria, Virginia; Roll: 1351; Page: 277D; Enumeration District: 001
- Political activity detailed in multiple news accounts over several decades of the *Alexandria Times*, *Evening Star* and *The Washington Times*.
- 5 James Turley, Albert Green, John Nelson, James M. Buckner, and William Washington were all leading Black republicans who often worked with Magnus Robinson, editor of *The Leader* and son of Roberts Memorial Chapel Rev. R.B. Robinson. There were at least one hundred men assembled to protect Benjamin, other papers reported that 200 and 300 men were prepared to keep the boy safe, however, we can only confirm the names of those who were arrested and listed in the newspapers. After the lynching, James Buckner organized a cake walk benefit for the Thomas' family, a secret meeting at the colored Odd Fellows Hall on N. Columbus and was involved in planning a Mass Meeting for Benjamin Thomas memorial service. *Alexandria Gazette*, August 26, 1899, p.3. Prominent Black Alexandrians: William A. Carter, Magnus Robinson and Rev. Robert B. Robinson were in Ohio for a national gathering of the Black Masons on August 7, 1899. *Evening Star*, August 3 and August 7, 1899, p. 3.
- 6 "They say that it was rumored on Monday that Thomas would be lynched. They formed, they say, and marched to police headquarters, where they offered their services to the authorities to aid in the defense of the jail," *The Washington Times*, August 10, 1899.
- 7 In fact, Mayor Simpson did assign two of the officers he trusted to arrest Benjamin, Officer Herbert Night and Officer William Wilkinson, however these officers were not on duty during the confrontations with the Black community on Monday night. It is possible that these two officers did what they could to keep the arrest under wraps. It is important to understand that the police were divided into two factions, one had been in power since the end of the war and was corrupted. Among those who did not enjoy the Mayor's trust were Lieutenant James Smith, Captain James Webster and his son Constable Will Webster. This information is from a series of articles that ran in the *Evening Star* from 1897 to 1901.
- 8 In July 1898, Mayor Simpson suspended Lt. James Smith for neglect of duty. Officer Knight and then- City Hall Janitor John Craven testified against Smith implying that he had been visiting a woman in a house on Cameron Street on multiple occasions while on duty. *Evening Star*, July 23, 1898.
- 9 African American neighborhood known as Petersburg or the "Burg."
- 10 *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899, p.3.
- 11 *The Washington Times*, August 8, 1899, p.2.
- 12 *Evening Star*, August 8, 1899.
- 13 *Evening Star*, August 8, 1899.
- 14 *Alexandria Gazette* and *Evening Star*, August 8, 1899.
- 15 Officer Spinks was in the lynch mob the night that Joseph McCoy was murdered, Joseph McCoy Narrative, Alexandria Community Remembrance Project webpage.
- 16 *Alexandria Gazette*, *Evening Star*, *The Washington Times*, August 8, 9 1899.
- 17 This quote is not exact, it is derived from *The Washington Times*, August 9, 1899:
"Albert Green, who appeared to be the leader stated that it had been intimated that an attempt would be made to lynch Thomas, his people, he said, did not propose to submit to such an occurrence, and that if such an attempt were made they proposed to offer their lives in his defence, even if they had to kill every white man in the city. Green was very insolent to the officer." The prejudiced sections were not included. *Ibid*.
- 18 These quotes are not exact, but derived from a report in *The Washington Times*, August 9, 1899.

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19 These quotes are not exact, but are derived from the above report in *The Washington Times*, August 9, 1899.

20 *Evening Star*, August 8, 1899.

21 This scene is derived mostly from *The Washington Times* and *Evening Star* reports, August 8, 1899.

22 The *Evening Star*, Aug. 8, reported:

“Turley had a large pistol and a box of cartridges on him when he was searched at the station house,” however, it is more likely he would have handed these items over to the police for his own safety. Further, none of the armed men wielded their weapons or tried to use them against the police. It was obvious they only had them to try and stop the unlawful capture of Benjamin Thomas if a lynch mob were to attack.

23 *Alexandria Gazette*, August 8, 1899.

24 *The Washington Times*, August 10, 1899.

25 *Evening Star*, August 9, 1899.