

For more information, please visit the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project page:



Do you have a family connection to the lynchings that occurred in Alexandria? If you are comfortable sharing this information, please reach out to Audrey.Davis@alexandriava.gov.

Remembrance Planning Committee

Amy Bertsch, Gretchen Bulova, Audrey Davis, Rose Dawson, Quardricos Driskell, Mark Farkas, Darrlynn Franklin, Taft Quincey Heatley, Linda Howard, Michael Johnson, Jean Kelleher, Letty Maxwell, Brenda Mitchell-Powell, McArthur Myers, Tiffany Pache, and David Spinrad.

Alexandria Community Remembrance Project
AlexandriaVA.gov/Historic



Remembering Benjamin Thomas Lynched in Alexandria August 8, 1899



Remembrance, Recognition & Reflection August 8, 2022

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| Musical Prelude | Shiloh Baptist Church Choir |
| Welcome | Reverend Professor Quardricos B. Driskell, Beulah Baptist Church |
| Narrative | Read by Alexandria City High School Students |
| The Arrest | Lyric Tyler, Senior |
| The Defense | Naeem Scott, Senior |
| Court Appearance | Rodase Demissie, Senior |
| The Lynching | Miracle Gross, Senior |
| Hands Unknown | Yahney-Marie Sangare, Junior |
| Remarks | Hon. Sean Casey, Sheriff |
| "In Memory of Benjamin Thomas, 1883-1899" | Poet Laureate Zeina Azzam |
| Recognition of Benjamin Thomas & Recognition of the Heroes | Rev. Driskell |
| Call and Response | Led by Rev. Driskell and Alexandria City High School Students: Jenaba Bah, Junior Reema Gaal, Senior Amel Mohali, Senior Andrea Funes Quiñones, Senior Torenzo Ricks, Junior Amna Shamseldin, Senior Chellseigh Waruzi, Senior |

***Audience Response: After hearing "Say His Name,"
please respond with the hero's name.***

After Thomas was interred at Penny Hill Cemetery, the Black community mobilized to assist the Thomas family to raise funds to move his body from a pauper's grave into Douglass Cemetery, but the relocation was not recorded. There is still a question as to the final resting place of Benjamin Thomas.

Thank you to the members of the Soil and Marker Committee as well as the Research Committee for their dedicated and thoughtful work on the development of this marker remembering the life of Benjamin Thomas.



Sankofa Healing Our Community By Learning From Our Past

Chalk Art by Nicole Wandera

"I approach my artistic practice through the lens of an African woman living in diaspora. My heritage is a vital source of inspiration. The richness of my culture is prevalent in my work through color, texture and themes. This chalk art uses an Adinkra symbol from West Africa called the Sankofa, which means "to return, to retrieve" associated with the proverb "Se wo were fi na wasonkofa a yenyki" meaning "it is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten." We must learn from the past, so that we do not repeat the same atrocities in the future as we look towards reconciling and healing our communities."

Ms. Wandera, an interdisciplinary artist, was born in Nairobi, Kenya and currently is based in Northern Virginia. She graduated with a BFA in Communication Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University. Ms. Wandera works primarily with acrylics, and the integration of art and technology as part of her artistic process. Nicole believes that we all deserve a life of dignity, equality, and respect, regardless of our religious beliefs, skin color, gender, or whom we love. Nicole is always searching for a new way to express and share her stories and experiences and believes that creating is the practice of nurturing visual ideation. *To learn more, visit her website at nicolewanderawork.myportfolio.com/*

Benjamin Thomas Marker Text

Close to midnight on Tuesday, August 8, 1899, Benjamin Thomas, a 16-year-old Black Alexandrian, was lynched from a lamppost on this corner.

Earlier, white rioters attacked the City Jail on N. St. Asaph Street, where they seized and dragged Thomas for a half-mile on a cobblestone street, hitting him with bricks, iron, and stones, as he cried out for his mother. Under the shadow of City Hall and the police station, he was stabbed, kicked, shot, and hanged.

On Monday, August 7, 1899, police had arrested Thomas on the word of an eight-year-old white neighbor and charged him with assaulting her.

When Alexandria's Black community learned of Thomas' arrest, they feared another lynching. Two years earlier, a white mob murdered a local Black teenager, Joseph McCoy, based on similar allegations. Attempting to protect Thomas from such a fate, groups of Black men organized, offering their aid to police. The police and Alexandria's mayor, George Simpson, ridiculed their concerns.

Mayor Simpson stood on the steps of the jail and asked the mob to leave, saying, "Fellow citizens, if you will disperse and go away quietly, I will promise you that a court will be convened today.... If this is not done, I will give you my word, as a man of honor, that I will personally lead a mob tomorrow night to lynch Thomas...."

The police arrested many in the Black community that night and the mayor sentenced them to heavy fines or jail time. Yet, no whites were held accountable for the lynching of Benjamin Thomas.

After the brutality inflicted on Thomas, his body was taken to Demaine funeral home on King Street. His mother, Elizabeth Thomas, "could not bear to look upon her boy." At the memorial service at Shiloh Baptist Church, a crowd of 600 people heard Rev. Henry H. Warring proclaim Thomas an honest boy, innocent of the crime that led to his lynching.



"We Shall Overcome"

Shiloh Baptist Church Choir

Procession to Lynching Site

Wreath Laying

Worshipful Grand Historian McArthur
Myers, 31st Masonic District
MWPHGLVA

Reflection and Benediction

Reverend Dr. Taft Quincey Heatley,
Shiloh Baptist Church

"This Little Light of Mine"

Shiloh Baptist Church Choir

Read more about Benjamin Thomas and the Heroes
at ACRP's In Memoriam Page



Benjamin Thomas' Defenders

The following profiles were written after significant investigation and reflect the most accurate historical research to date. In 1899, there were multiple people with the same names living in Alexandria, and official records regarding Black life are conspicuous for their lack of detail and accuracy. We welcome any additional information about the tragic events of August 7 & 8, 1899.

Mr. James Alexander, 32, son of Willis and Mary, was a black laborer who lived on Royal Street in the Berg (Petersburg). His home was just one block from Hard Corner, at the intersection of Fairfax and Princess Streets, where the majority of the arrests were made on August 7, 1899. Alexander was charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot and he was fined \$10, or \$357 today.

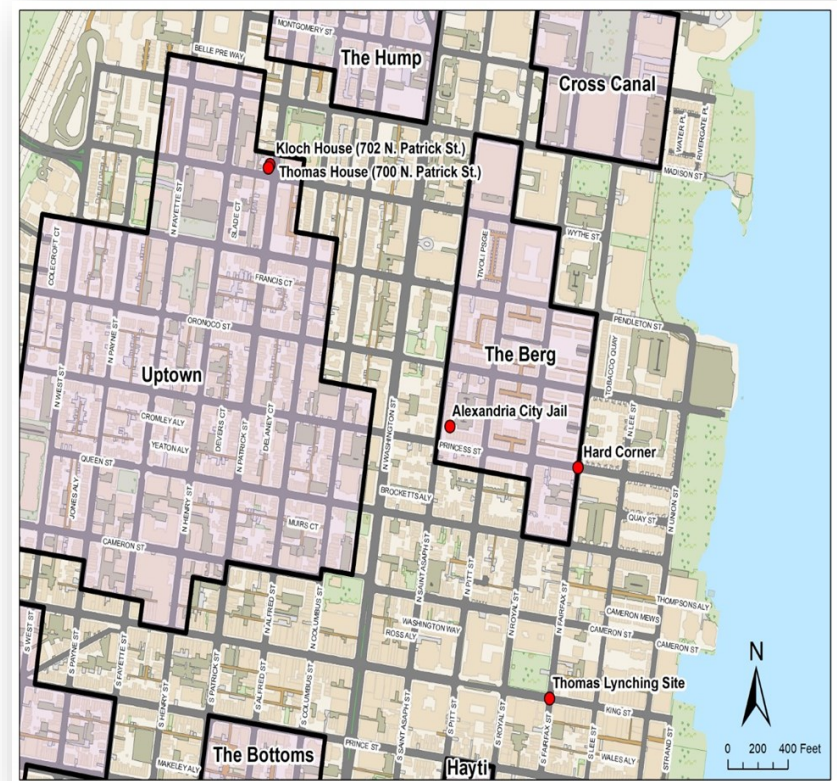
Mr. James Buckner, 53, was active in African American fraternal organizations and was a leader among Black republicans. Buckner chaired the Committee on Entertainment at the Harmony Lodge of Colored Odd Fellows, and organized a cake walk (an event similar to musical chairs, but with slices of cake) to raise money for the Thomas family. During this event, a secret meeting was held to consider whether Benjamin Thomas' remains could be moved from a pauper's grave to Douglass Cemetery. Buckner lived at 306 N. Patrick Street and worked the presses at the Alexandria Gazette. If James Buckner was involved in trying to protect Thomas on April 7, 1899, his name was not included in news accounts of those arrested.

Mr. Robert Buckner, 49, was from an established Black family, he was the son of William, a shoemaker, and Mary. Robert served in the US Army, worked for the railroad and married Mary Cox.. They lived in the Berg at 414 N. Pitt Street. Buckner worked tirelessly to establish a national pension fund for the formerly enslaved. When he died in 1917, the Alexandria Gazette wrote: "Robert Buckner, a respected colored resident, died at the Alexandria Hospital last night." On the night he was arrested for trying to protect Thomas, Buckner was charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot. He was fined \$10, or \$357 today.

Mr. Allen Carter, 19, most likely lived at 128 S. Royal Street. One of the first men arrested, along with Capt. Green, Carter was charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot. He was fined \$20, or \$714 today.

Hart, but he persisted and Simpson admitted Benjamin's guilt was "doubtful." The Cleveland Gazette wrote of Rev. Hart, "He deserves great credit, and it shows pluck to have gone into such a community to investigate such an outrage, where an angry militia armed with Winchesters was looking for 'a race riot,' as the authorities claimed, in order to divert public attention from a crime that had again brought disgrace on Alexandria and its white citizens."

Sites of Significance August 7 & 8, 1899



Map by Benjamin Skolnik, Office of Historic Alexandria

fighting for his life. George survived his bullet wound and after he recovered he moved his wife and daughter to Jersey City, N.J. where he lived out the rest of his days working for the railroad.

Mr. John Dogan was a teen when the lynch mob mistook him for Benjamin Thomas. Alexandria police were familiar with young Dogan whose antics first brought him before the mayor's court in 1895. On August 8, 1899, Dogan was behind bars for pickpocketing \$19 from a man he was "helping" over a fence. His case came up on July 13, but instead of hearing it, the Judge continued it until October when the court would be in session. Members of the white mob pulled Dogan from his cell, put a rope around his neck and readied to kill him before learning he was not Thomas. Dogan was a victim of racial terror.

Mr. Boden Rowe (a.k.a Alexander Rowe) was also mistaken for Benjamin Thomas. He stole a horse and wagon from Alexandria and sold it to McGrath & Kennelly in Washington, D.C. for \$25. Then he went to New York City. On July 7, police there arrested him. Deputy Sergeant B.B. Smith brought Rowe back to Alexandria July 13, and he was being held in the jail until court reconvened. The papers reported that the mob shot at Rowe as he ran from them. After they realized he was not their target, it appears Rowe worked with the few officers trying to protect Benjamin Thomas. He was given permission to follow the mob down St. Asaph Street. He returned to the jail with police officers later that night having witnessed the torture and killing of an innocent Black boy.

Mrs. Susan Gordon (Gregory), 56, arrested for disorderly conduct after Benjamin Thomas was lynched was most likely Susan Gordon, a widow and mother. It was reported that she stood outside the Kloch home and engaged in a verbal altercation with the family who had accused Thomas. Before he died, her husband Elijah Gordon fought in the Civil War and worked for the railroads. She was a washerwoman, and most likely lived at 218 N. Henry Street. Mayor Simpson dismissed the charges against her.

Rev. R.E. Hart was the leader of Israel Christian Methodist Church (Washington, D.C.) He also represented the National Organized Brotherhood of Afro-Americans and showed great bravery by coming to Alexandria hours after Benjamin Thomas was lynched to investigate on their behalf. He spoke with Julia Kloch, the mother of the child who accused the boy, who said Benjamin was not guilty and added that she had known him to be a good boy. Mayor George Simpson tried to avoid

Mr. John Thomas Elzie (Elsey, Elzy), 19, lived in the Berg. He served in Company C with the 10th Immunes during the Spanish-American War. Elzie was among those recruited in Alexandria, as was Benjamin's older brother James Thomas; others who served and were implicated on August 7, included: Edward Gibson and William Washington. In 1902, Elzie married Mary J.E. Lewis. On the night he defended Benjamin Thomas, Elzie was charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot. He was fined \$10 or \$357 today.

Mr. Edward Gibson was a war veteran twice over serving with the 24th Colored Infantry in the Civil War and again during the Spanish-American War. On July 12, 1899, Edward was honorably discharged and less than a month later was arrested for defending Benjamin Thomas. Gibson lived near the railroad at 221 Commerce Street and worked as a driver. On August 7, 1899, Gibson was charged with carrying a concealed weapon, disorderly conduct and trying to incite a riot. He was fined \$20, or \$714 today.

Mr. Albert Green, 37, grew up in the Berg at 721 N. Pitt, was a leader among Black republicans and had military experience. After working on the canal as a teen, it is likely Green joined the all Black militia the 6th Virginia Volunteers. By 1892, he was Captain of Robinson's Industrial Guards and marched in Emancipation Day parades. In 1900, Green was selected, along with James Turley and John Nelson to meet with then-President William McKinley. In February 1904, he was arrested for hiding George Hobday - who was accused of assaulting a white woman - from police. In 1907, he helped establish The Pallbearer's Union with William Washington. On Tuesday, August 7, Green was the first arrested, he was charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot. He was fined \$20, or \$714 today.

Mr. John Henry Haskins, 21, was from an established Black family in Alexandria. Haskins and his wife Ella raised four children and several grandchildren in the Berg at their house at 515 N. Pitt. Haskins served in World War I. He died in 1939 and is buried at Douglass Cemetery. On Tuesday, August 7, Haskins was charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot. He was fined \$10, or \$357 today.

Mr. Alfred Mason, a young man living in the Berg at the time of the lynching, would eventually work at Virginia Carolina Chemical Co. and serve his country in WWI. Mason died in 1922 and is buried in Douglass

Cemetery. On August 7, 1899, he was charged with carrying a concealed weapon, disorderly conduct and trying to incite a riot and was fined \$20 or \$714 today.

Mr. Harry McDonald may have been a hired driver when he was arrested on August 7, 1899. McDonald was charged with carrying a concealed weapon, disorderly conduct and trying to incite a riot. He was fined \$20, or \$714 today.

Mr. John Nelson, 44, was from a family that was free before the Civil War. Nelson was an active Republican and held leadership positions in the Party. He lived in the Berg at 315 Princess Street - next to Hard Corner. Nelson was not arrested on August 7, but an officer pointed to him while testifying in court the next day and said Nelson had been involved. He was brought before the court and charges were dismissed. In 1900, Nelson joined Turley and Green when they met with President McKinley.

Mr. Edward (Ned) Payne, 40, lived "at the back of 418 N. Royal" in the Berg and was no stranger to a fight. Payne had a history of taking a stand. In the early 1880s, Payne was arrested after being involved in a violent street clash between whites and Blacks. In March 1899, while serving on the chain gang, he led a strike. On August 7, 1899 Payne was charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot. He was fined \$10, or \$357 today.

Mr. James B. Turley, 49, was a widower who worked as a burner of bricks. His family was free before the war and helped found Roberts Chapel. He was related to Simon Turley and George Seaton, two famous Black Alexandrians, who were well respected by both the white and Black communities. Turley was the head of the Republican Party for his ward in August 1899, serving in many party offices and delegations over the decades. Turley, on his way home from a late shift at the Brick Yard on Monday, August 7, 1899, heard some whites talk of lynching "some negro." He immediately set out to find out who was being threatened and organize men to ensure the rule of law held. He didn't want Benjamin Thomas to meet the same fate as Joseph McCoy had two years earlier. That night, Turley was charged with having a concealed weapon, disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot. Although he hired a lawyer to represent him at the trial, he was still fined \$20, or \$714 today. Turley was also among those selected to meet with President McKinley in 1900.

Mr. Richard Washington, 26, the son of James, a coal worker and Fannie, a seamstress was most likely the same man identified in the newspapers as Richard Washington who was arrested for trying to protect Benjamin Thomas. He lived at 925 Oronoco, between Alfred and N. Patrick Streets, three blocks from Benjamin and around the corner from James Turley. In 1899, Richard was working as a porter for the railroad and living at Robert Buckner's old house at 205 Peyton Street. Robert Buckner also worked for the railroad, as did Benjamin Thomas' older brother James who was also a porter. On August 7, Washington was charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot. He was fined \$10, or \$357 today.

Mr. William Washington, 33, was the only son born to Susie and James Washington. He grew up in the Berg at 512 N. Royal St. when it was a hotbed of radical republicanism - his father was a party activist, as well as a member of the Colored Free Masons and the Colored Odd Fellows. Once grown, he followed his father into local republican politics working alongside Turley, Green, Nelson and others. William worked on-and-off as a bartender, likely served in the Spanish-American War and in 1907, he and Green started The Pallbearers Union. Washington was not arrested on August 7, but an officer pointed to him while testifying in court the next day and said he had been involved. When he was brought before the court the charges were dismissed.

Mr. John Wilson, 20, born in Greenville, S.C. was living in Alexandria in 1899. Wilson, a well-educated, clever Black man often found himself in conflict with white police officers. On August 7, 1899, Wilson was charged with disorderly conduct and attempting to incite a riot. Several years later, Wilson would be sent to the state prison for other petty, nonviolent offenses. As WWI broke out, Wilson was drafted. In August 1918, he was the last passenger listed on the Lenape as it left Hoboken, NJ. Wilson served in Company B of the 140th Machine Gun Battalion. For his role in the Thomas event, he was fined \$10, or \$357 today.

Mr. George Hammond, 23, was with a band of Black Alexandrians who met at the railroad yards near Portner's Brewery determined to try to stop the whites who were forcing their way into the prison. Hammond moved to the city from Mount Vernon and worked as a porter for the railroad. On August 7, 1899 his wife, Cora was at home caring for their infant daughter as he and the men approached the lynch mob on St. Asaph Street. Upon sight, the whites aimed their guns and opened fire. George was shot in the back and dragged to safety. Two days later he showed up in the infirmary