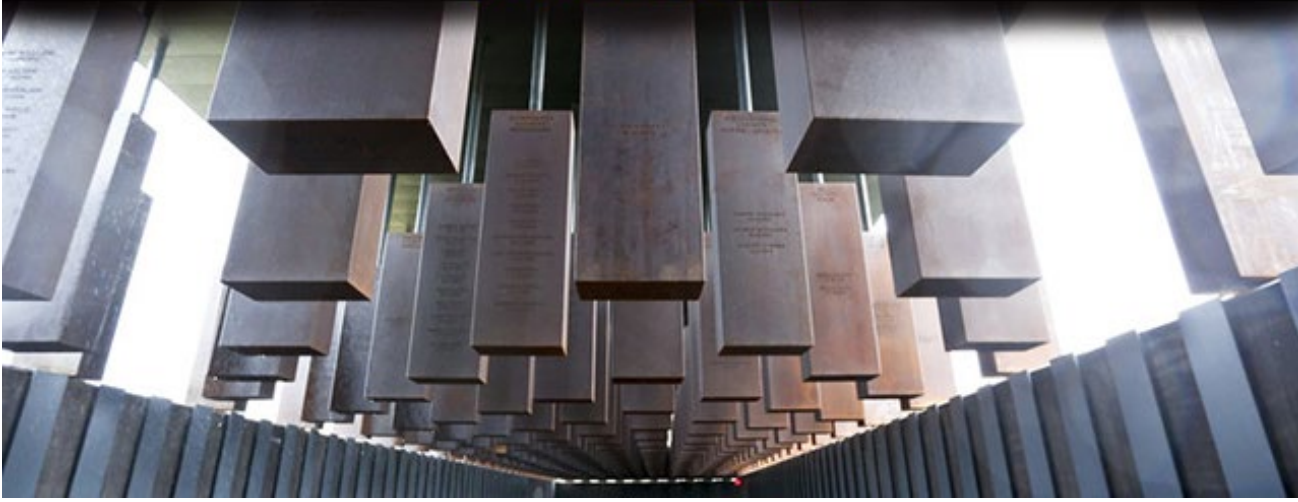


ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



June 2023 Edition

A Lesson From Black History: Segregation's Legacy is Still With Us

In the 19th century, while Alexandria was part of Washington, D.C., free and enslaved Black Alexandrians had access to education. A dark period followed when the city retroceded back to Virginia, but when the U.S. Army operated here during the Civil War, schools for Black students once again proliferated. Soon, a cadre of experienced Black educators emerged who were supported by African American leaders and advocates.

By 1870, Black Alexandrians had good schools administered by seasoned educators. When Conservatives gained control of Richmond and city politics, they segregated the schools, took them over, and marginalized Black community leaders. Over the next century, white authorities eroded the once thriving schools, denying Black youth a quality education that lasted well beyond desegregation.

The way many conservative whites saw it, public schools were being forced on them. In order to rejoin the Union, after their violent insurrection, they had to agree to a constitution written by Blacks, Republicans, and Unionists that required the state to pay for free schools for all citizens. The whole idea of government supported education clashed with Virginia's aristocratic, antebellum traditions that limited education to the children of parents who could pay for it.

After gaining control of a majority in the statehouse, Conservatives moved to tame the public education obligation with a precondition that schools be segregated. They were joined by a number of white Republicans. Alexandria Rep. George Seaton and other Black lawmakers fought for integration, believing it was the only path to equality, and to dismantle the racial hierarchy established by white supremacy, but they failed. From the first day school doors opened in Alexandria they were segregated, and the legacy of policies enacted by local white authorities continued to disadvantage Black youth into the 21st century.

White Alexandrians were skeptical of the new free schools and had to be cajoled into taking advantage of them. Then, as white interest grew, segregation was the lynchpin necessary to maintain their buy-in.

On the other hand, the Black community remained supportive of their schools. The city continued to use the two buildings Black Alexandrians had previously built to operate the Black public schools and employed the same seasoned teachers. Alexandria's Black children had a superior start and better quality schools than their white peers, and it showed when they outscored them on test day at the end of the first academic year.

But soon, white officials began to wear down the educational community established by the city's African Americans. They underpaid teachers and denied the community necessary resources. As early as 1876, officials stopped paying rent for Black school buildings, but promised to maintain them. By 1911, both buildings had fallen into disrepair. In 1915, Snowden, the boys school, was consumed by fire, and the girls school was dilapidated and unsafe. Black School Administrators, fearful of being labeled agitators, cautiously advocated for new buildings only after seeking permission from the superintendent.

Still, it took several years, and in 1920 when the city built Parker-Gray to replace Snowden, they cut costs and educated boys and girls together. Three years after opening, the school was overcrowded, but it would be another 15 years before officials would agree to build a second elementary school. By then, Black students were taking high school courses at Parker-Gray elementary school. Meanwhile, there were two all white high schools that were consolidated into the new George Washington High School on Mount Vernon Ave. Alexandria did not build a high school for the Black community until 1950. When they did, it was to avoid a possible lawsuit for violating the Plessy decision's "separate but equal" doctrine. Four years after Parker Gray High School's doors opened, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Plessy and ordered schools to desegregate in 1954.

While parents in the African American community had to force Alexandria's white leadership to comply with Brown by taking them to court, desegregation didn't take hold for nearly two decades, during which the Black community had to deal with:

- Racial terror in the form of police brutality, burning crosses and intimidation;
- White teachers, who controlled student grades and therefore future opportunities, and who had lower expectations for Black students;
- White teachers who would rarely meet with Black parents, and white parents who excluded them from Parent Teacher Associations;
- After 1971, teachers had the power to expel students not just from their classrooms, but from school - without appeal - again controlling Black futures;
- White parents who complained that school quality had gone down since Black students were admitted, and who also said Black children caused discipline problems and raised safety concerns;
- White parents who fought school officials on bussing to keep their children at their neighborhood schools and put the burden solely on Black children.

Alexandria City Public Schools were fully desegregated in 1973. The next year, 1000 more white middle and upper class students left the school system for private institutions. Others joined the exodus to whiter suburbs to take advantage of de facto segregation. This white flight and the perceptions that drove it exposed the link between segregation and white support for public schools. Their reactions "created patterns and traditions of private school attendance that persist to this day," according to Douglas Reed, author of *Building the Federal School House*.

In an attempt to keep white families engaged, school officials catered to their concerns by establishing a Gifted and Talented Program. They also segregated students within each building. A majority of African American students were placed in remedial or general education classes with lower expectations, while most white students were assigned to classes with more rigor and higher expectations.

After a decade of tracking, in 1985, Superintendent Robert Peebles published test results that documented a significant racial achievement gap. The drastic reversal in student performance from the early 1870s, when Black students were taught by experienced Black instructors and outscored their white peers, illustrates the impact racism has had on Alexandria's schools.

The achievement gap is the culmination of more than a century of atrophy caused by segregation - de jure and de facto. Different expectations can create vastly different educational experiences, and while Alexandria's schools have been striving to dismantle these harmful legacy policies, they still have a Gifted and Talented program and continue to encourage different expectations by offering general education and honors courses. The white community, for whom these programs were put in place, has a role to play.

In "White Parents are Enabling Segregation if it Doesn't Hurt Their Own Kids," Noah Berlatsky writes that white Americans have stopped trying to desegregate, "Instead, they have chosen to focus on maximizing their own choices and the success of their own children. It's natural for people to want their kids to do well. But how well are you really doing when you are collaborating in a society built on injustice and inequality? Despite the best efforts of activists and scholars, the dream of desegregation in America is dying. Our children are worse off as a result."

On Juneteenth, a research report that details the last 230 years of Black Education in Alexandria will be available on the Alexandria Black History Museum's website. Please take the opportunity to go more in depth into this part of our history that has not been told before with this three part research series.

In The News

On Saturday, June 10, the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Association unveiled a bench dedicated to Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The stone bench inscribed with inspirational quotes from MLK, sits at the top of the hill, surrounded by cherry trees. McArthur Myers called it The Reflection Grove. At the dedication ceremony, Third Baptist Rev. James V. Jordan compared MLK to Moses who led his people as far as he could before he died. Now, he says, it is up to us to fight to "make the American dream equally available to all Americans." Executive Director of the Memorial Association George Seghers also spoke and read a proclamation. In addition to Mayor Justin Wilson, City Manager James Parajon, McArthur Myers and Rosa Byrd, Executive Director of the Memorial Association George Seghers made remarks and read a proclamation. Tanya Brown-Wilkins sang *Amazing Grace* and *Precious Lord*.



Upcoming Events

Juneteenth at the Alexandria Archaeology Museum

June 16, 11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Alexandria Archaeology Museum

Visit the Alexandria Archaeology Museum for a hands-on activity related to a free Black site excavated in Alexandria. The activity is paired with the new Lee Street Site permanent archaeology exhibit. The Lee Street Site answers questions like: what is urban archaeology; what did the city look like in the past; and what do archaeologists do? The newly designed exhibit centers the experiences of free and enslaved African Americans in Alexandria.

Douglass Cemetery Remembrance

June 17, 10 -11:30 a.m.

Douglass Cemetery

Join supporters and volunteers at this historic Black cemetery to place purple ribbons of remembrance on the gravestones and attend a short ceremony following in honor of those buried in Douglass Cemetery and the Juneteenth holiday. In partnership with the Social Responsibility Group (SRG) and the Friends of Douglass Cemetery.

Washington Revels Jubilee Voices Concert - Singing the Journey: Juneteenth Joy

June 19, 2 p.m.

Market Square

Enjoy traditional African American songs of struggle and freedom with the Washington Revels Jubilee Voices ensemble. The ensemble is committed to the preservation of African American history and traditions – presenting songs and stories of struggle and perseverance, trials and triumphs, as expressed through a cappella music, drama, and dance. Inaugurated in 2010, the group now performs regularly at heritage sites throughout the Washington D.C. area, singing, sharing, and learning the stories of the people in those communities. Event is weather dependent.

Black Education in Alexandria: A Legacy of Triumph and Struggle

June 19, 2023

Alexandria Black History Museum will also mark the holiday with the publication of a research paper on the website that takes an indepth look at the 230 year history of Black education in Alexandria.

Special Juneteenth Museum Hours & Storytime

On Monday, June 19, enjoy special extended hours from 11 a.m. – 5 p.m. at Alexandria Black History Museum & Freedom House Museum. At 10 a.m., come to Black History for a special encore Storytime and craft with Lillian S. Patterson.

Around Town

You can always explore Alexandria's African American history on your own by visiting [Alexandriava.gov/SelfGuidedTours](https://www.alexandriava.gov/SelfGuidedTours) for the African American Heritage Trail and <https://www.alexandriava.gov/museums/juneteenth-a-time-of-reflection-and-rejoicing> for Juneteenth information. At Market Square, also enjoy Juneteenth flags and City Hall illumination.

Upcoming Committee Meetings

Planning Committee for Benjamin Thomas Remembrance Event will meet July 11 at 1 p.m. in person at the Lloyd House. [Read the agenda.](#)

Alexandria Community Remembrance Marker Committee will meet Thursday, June 22, at 7 p.m. on Zoom, [Register here.](#) [Read the agenda.](#)

Alexandria Community Remembrance Steering Committee will next meet on Tuesday, Aug. 1, 2023, at 5 p.m. in-person at the Alexandria Black History Museum.

Committee Meetings

Ad-Hoc Thomas Remembrance Planning Committee met on June 7, at 3 p.m. at the Lloyd House. A preliminary draft for a Remembrance Walk from the site of the old jail at Princess and St. Asaph to the lynching site was discussed.

Alexandria Community Remembrance Marker Committee met via Zoom on May 25, at 7p.m. and discussed components of a new marker for Benjamin Thomas at the site of the old jail in Alexandria.

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

[For more information](#)

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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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