



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Benjamin Thomas was innocent

*Alexandria Times, July 28, 2022*

On Aug. 8, 1899, a group of Alexandrians dragged an innocent 16-year-old Black boy through the cobblestone streets of Old Town, kicking, beating and shooting him – before hanging him. Confronted with an innocent man's death and a mob's disrespect for the law, the white establishment blamed the Black community for inciting a mob, and poor whites for lynching Benjamin Thomas.

Edward and Julia Kloch, whose 7-year-old child Lillian came home without the ax she was told to retrieve from next door, were a poor, quickly growing white family. "Lilla" explained her failed errand by telling her parents that Thomas tried to assault her. Kloch swore out a warrant for Thomas' arrest.

Thomas told police officers he was innocent and after his lynching, most of Alexandria agreed. Yet the only people punished were members of the city's Black community. On Aug. 9, Alexandria Gazette Editor Harold Snowden called the mob's actions deplorable, but made it clear that when a white woman or girl is sexually assaulted, Alexandrians won't forcefully intervene to stop a lynching.

Thomas was in prison awaiting trial based solely on the testimony of the Kloch child – who admitted Thomas was not violent with her but complained of the way he treated her, wrote the Baltimore Sun.

Alexandrian Freeman H. M. Murray wrote in his diary that the evidence against Thomas was "very meager." "The little girl" said he "pulled up her clothes."

Rev. R. E. Hart of Washington, D.C. investigated the lynching and spoke with the Cleveland Gazette, which reported: "It is now generally admitted that he was not guilty. The mother of the girl told him [Hart] ... the young man was not guilty and that she had known him from a youth to be a good boy."

Even Mayor George Simpson told Hart Thomas' guilt was "doubtful."

White authorities, compromised for allowing an innocent man to be lynched, blamed members of the Black community who had tried to protect Thomas. The night Thomas was arrested, Black Alexandrians alerted police and the mayor of a threat to lynch him. They asked for added protection for him and offered to help. When their services were refused, the men stood guard anyway until police arrested the leaders.

The next morning, at the trial of the Black men, police didn't testify that they wanted to protect Thomas, but said the Blacks were openly threatening the white community. After the trial, white Alexandrians complained, saying the Black men acted "high handed," and believed it was because the victim's family was poor.





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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The Washington Post reported that city officials blamed the African Americans for “making threatening demonstrations,” that “spurred the whites on to decisive action.” The article also said those participating in the lynching were trying to establish “white supremacy” over Blacks.

Snowden blamed poverty, writing victims of sexual assaults that resulted in lynchings were “usually among those white people who associate on terms of equality with negroes, and with them, as with others, bad company almost invariably produces ill effects.”

At the conclusion of their trial, the Black men were fined, and those who couldn't pay went to the chain gang. John Mitchell, editor of the Richmond Planet wrote, “Was there ever a greater parody upon justice than the sight of citizens of Alexandria, colored citizens hauled before a white mayor and fined \$20 for doing their duty? Mayor Simpson is a disgrace to the office. He, a sworn official of the law fining other citizens who were anxious to see the laws upheld.”

Those who denied Thomas' constitutional rights and killed an innocent boy not only weren't punished – they weren't even charged.

*“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.*