

Alexandria Times

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A tradition and a new reminder

Historic Alexandria and the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project invite the public to join us on August 8 at 6 p.m., in front of 401 N. St. Asaph St. for the unveiling of a new historical marker that tells the story of Benjamin Thomas.

At 7:30 p.m., participants will solemnly follow the trail of terror the mob took down St. Asaph Street to King Street and then to the intersection with Fairfax Street where we will lay a wreath and acknowledge the lynching of Thomas and the actions the white community took against him, his family and the Black community in 1899. A shuttle bus is available for those who cannot easily walk the half-mile from 401 St. Asaph St. to the lynching location. Please email acrp@alexandriava.gov to reserve a seat on the bus by August 5.

The new marker tells the history of the Old Jail at the corner of Princess and St. Asaph Streets through the per-



PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

spective of Alexandria's African American community. Long before the lynching of Benjamin Thomas, the building incarcerated enslaved people who had escaped their enslavers but were captured. Some, whose enslavers did not want them or were deceased, were auctioned off at this site.

The sign also notes the execution of Jenny Farr in the jail courtyard in 1858 for killing the abusive wife of her enslaver. The new historical sign includes a description of the murder of Benjamin Thomas, including the attempts of the local African American community to protect him after his arrest and incarceration in

the building. The sign also includes a 1919 aerial map of the route the lynch mob took from the Old Jail to the murder site on the corner of King and Fairfax Streets.

On Aug. 8, 1899, a lynch mob hunted, tortured and killed 16-year-old Benjamin Thomas, an African American boy and native Alexandrian. On Aug. 7, 1899, Thomas was arrested for allegedly assaulting a white girl, but this was never proven. On the contrary, a minister later stated that the mother of the girl who Thomas was accused of assaulting insisted on his innocence.

That night, Black community leaders warned police and the mayor that another lynching might occur, like the lynching of Joseph McCoy two years earlier on April 23, 1897. When the authorities refused their entreaties, the African American Alexandrians tried to protect Thomas themselves, standing guard near where

he was being held. The police arrested them, and the next morning, they were tried, fined and sent to the chain gang. None of Thomas' murderers faced accountability in a court of law.

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project 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.

The ACRP is part of the African American History Division of Historic Alexandria. This division, formed in 2023, will ensure the continued inclusion of Black History in city museums and public programming, as well as advancing the city's goal of building a welcoming community through equity and inclusion.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.