

Remarks by Commonwealth Attorney Bryan Porter on April 23, 2022, the 125th year since the lynching of Joseph McCoy in Alexandria City, Va.

Thank you.

I consider it an honor and a privilege to be asked to speak this afternoon as we remember and reflect on the violent and disturbing death of Joseph McCoy, who was lynched from a lamppost near this very spot one hundred and twenty-five years ago.

At first blush, one hundred and twenty-five years may seem long ago, but, in the grand scheme of things, it is the blink of an eye. One hundred twenty-five years is just outside the longest recorded human lifespan. My father's grandfather—my great grandfather— was a young adult in 1897. I am just the eleventh Commonwealth's Attorney to serve the City since Leonard Marbury, who held my office at the time of Mr. McCoy's murder and who played a prominent role in the lynching. With a little perspective, 125 years is revealed to be not that long ago at all, and this in turn means Mr. McCoy's lynching is not ancient history, but a real, tangible event with an impact on us assembled here today in 2022.

Likewise, Joseph McCoy was a real, tangible human being, who laughed and loved and lived. He was born and raised in Alexandria. He had hopes, and dreams for the future, which were all stolen from him, in an instant, through the brutality of an enraged mob.

As I prepared my remarks, three specific facts about the lynching drew my attention, three facts – or collections of facts – which make the McCoy murder more terrible. First, the fact that an angry mob assembled outside of the jail cell where Mr. McCoy was being held and, collectively, decided to serve as judge, jury, and executioner serves as a stark reminder of human

viciousness. An angry mob, comprised of regular white Alexandrians – of doctors, of business owners, and even lawyers – surging and seething in a vengeful fury, usurped the law and committed an atrocity.

One has to ask how this happened. The answer to that question is complex. From my experience investigating violent offenses, I know a person who is a member of a group is far more likely to commit an act of violence than if he is alone. We call that “pack mentality.” Either motivated by the collective rage of the mob, a sense of anonymity as one member of a group, or by the fear of “not fitting in” with other members of the group, individuals can commit unspeakable acts of violence when assembled with other people.

The second lesson is that rage based in overt racism leads to unpredictable results. The fear of those who are different – whether the difference be race, religion, or ethnicity – has sadly always motivated men to atrocities throughout human history. A large group of people, brought together by a sense of racist resentment, are capable of terrible actions.

But, given my position as Commonwealth’s Attorney, the third lesson is the most chilling. In the McCoy case, Alexandria’s public officials, to include the police and the Commonwealth’s Attorney, not only looked the other way as the lynching commenced, but they were also complicit in its completion, and compounded their guilt by doing nothing to bring the perpetrators to justice. A review of the Governor’s inquiry into the lynching shows repeated instances of public officials shading the truth, downplaying their role, or downright lying to the investigators about their actions.

Alexandria’s mayor did not call in the local militia to restore order and protect McCoy. The police stood aside as the lynch mob entered the station house. Marbury, the

Commonwealth's Attorney, did nothing to protect McCoy, despite personally observing the large crowd gathering outside of the police station. Marbury was conveniently away from the station at the time the mob first attempted to breach the door. In between the first and second breaching attempt, McCoy's accuser Richard Lacy was arrested for inciting the crowd, but Marbury quickly decided to release him, betraying his sympathy for Lacy. Marbury led Lacy away, providing him an alibi when the second breaching attempt was successful, and McCoy was seized.

Marbury then conspired with other public officials, to include the mayor, the police chief, and the commander of the local militia to cover-up the culpability of Alexandria's white elites, providing uncorroborated alibis to those under suspicion and overtly lying to the investigators sent by the Governor to look into the lynching. Obvious untruths were uttered, for example, the police chief telling the investigators that he could not recognize any of the men comprising the mob because it was dark and they "had their hats pulled down low, which obscured their features." Numerous contemporary news reports refuted this assertion, noting that any number of prominent and identifiable Alexandrians participated in the lynching. In the end, Marbury did not prosecute a single person for the murder, notwithstanding the fact that he almost certainly had first-hand knowledge of many of the participants.

An editorial from the African American newspaper the *Richmond Planet*, written right after Mr. McCoy's murder, lays clear the treachery of City officials: "The lynching places the Alexandria community before the world as a city of lawlessness, where officials disregard their oaths of office and without warrant or excuse suspend the law. This shows the city government is rotten to the core." Those of us who hold public office and are entrusted by the citizenry to execute their duties impartially and without fear or favor to any person, would do well to

remember what happened to Joseph McCoy as a reminder of what havoc may occur when good people stand by and do nothing.

125 years ago, Joseph McCoy was brutally lynched by a racist mob, without the benefit of due process. Perhaps it would be easier to consider this terrible act as ancient history, but it isn't. As we stand here today, remembering, I feel shame and grief that my predecessor in office—a man who may have been able to prevent a murder had he simply done something and not stood mutely by—was complicit in a murder. While it is far too little and far too late, I apologize to Mr. McCoy, and to his family, and I solemnly affirm that, today, as I speak, I am soberly contemplating the lessons to be learned from Mr. McCoy's death.

Again, I consider it a privilege to be asked to speak to you today.

Thank you.

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