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‘Do You Hear the Blood?’

City remembers lynching victim Benjamin Thomas.

By JEANNE THEISMANN
GAZETTE PACKET

The powerful strains of “We Shall Overcome” rang out as a crowd gathered in Market Square Aug. 8 to remember Benjamin Thomas, a 16-year-old who was lynched at the corner of King and Fairfax streets 123 years ago.

It happened around midnight, Aug. 8, 1899, when a mob of 2,000 white Alexandrians attacked the city jail on North St. Asaph Street. With a rope around his neck, Thomas was dragged to the intersection known as Leadbeater Corner opposite Market Square. Along the way, he was pelted with stones and pieces of iron, stabbed and shot several times before being hanged from a lamppost.

“When you visit Alexandria for fun and joy in this great land, do you hear the blood crying from the ground?” said Shiloh Baptist Church Rev. Dr. Taft Quincey Heatley as he spoke to the crowd gathered at the site of the lynching. “I can tell you how to hear it but first you have to see me as your brother. You have to see those who look differently than you as your brothers and sisters.”

Two years earlier, on April 23, 1897, another African American teenager, Joseph McCoy, was lynched at the corner of Cameron and Lee streets after being pulled from his cell at the police station. A historic marker was dedicated at that site last year.

Both markers are part of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, which is working with the Equal Justice Initiative based in Montgomery, Ala. The Equal Justice Initiative published “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror” in 2015 and opened The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in 2019.

The memorial includes over 800 steel monuments, or pillars, one for each county in the United States where a racial terror lynching took place, with the names of the lynching victims engraved on the pillars. Communities across the country will be able to claim their pillars and install them in the counties they represent and the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project is working towards that.

Joining Heatley in the remembrance ceremony for Thomas were Alexandria Sheriff Sean Casey, Alexandria Poet Laureate Zeina Azzam, Beulah Baptist Church Rev. Professor Quadricos B. Driskell and students from Alexandria City High School who read the narrative of the event.

Worshipful Grand Historian McArthur Myers, 31st Masonic District Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Virginia, led the wreath laying procession from Market Square across the street to the site where Thomas was murdered.

“I am here to pay homage to a spirit whose
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Alexandria City High School senior Miracle Gross tells the story of the 1899 lynching of Benjamin Thomas during the remembrance ceremony Aug. 8 in Market Square.



Alexandria City High School students prepare to tell the story of the Aug. 8, 1899, lynching of Benjamin Thomas. Pictured are: Yahney-Marie Sangare, Miracle Gross, Reema Gaal, Naeem Scott, Amel Mohdali, and Andrea Funes Quinones.



Shiloh Baptist Church Rev. Dr. Taft Quincey Heatley, left, addresses the crowd at the site of the 1899 lynching of Benjamin Thomas as Sheriff Sean Casey looks on.



Worshipful Grand Historian McArthur Myers, 31st Masonic District, leads the procession from Market Square to the lynching site of Benjamin Thomas at the corner of King and Fairfax streets Aug. 8 in Old Town.

PHOTOS BY JANET BARNETT/GAZETTE PACKET



Worshipful Grand Historian McArthur Myers, 31st Masonic District, bows his head in silence after placing a wreath at the site of the 1899 lynching of Benjamin Thomas Aug. 8 at the corner of King and Fairfax streets.

City Remembers Lynching Victim Benjamin Thomas

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soul lives now and into the future,” Myers said. “Benjamin Thomas was only 16 and hadn’t had the chance to start life before his life was ended. He will never be forgotten.”

Research by the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project committee showed that in both Alexandria lynchings, the white authorities were deliberately complicit in their refusal to name and bring to justice members of the white mob. In the case of Thomas, the officers defending the jail were not prepared to protect the prisoner. Instead, city officials and law enforcement officers obstructed and punished members of the Black community who were willing to stand up to white violence.

“We can remember and commemorate but as Martin Luther King echoed in his book, ‘Where do we go from here?’” Driskell said. “As a community, as a people, it is incumbent upon our white brothers and sisters to really ask that question and dig deep into their souls because there is still reconciliation that needs to take place. Unless they are going to take action, then what they do today is irrelevant.”

The Shiloh Baptist Church choir provided musical interludes and chalk art by Nicole Wandera displayed the names of those who tried to defend Thomas the night of his lynching.

“It still hurts,” Heatley said. “I still can’t fathom that a human would want to do this to another human being, let alone a teenager who had his life ahead of him, simply because he was African American. He was put in a situation from which he could not be delivered given the unjust laws and inhumanity of the country and community he lived in.”

Added Alexandria City High School senior Miracle Gross, “We need to pay homage to Benjamin Thomas and those involved in helping him, including the Black Alexandrians and their family members. Alexandria has such a rich history, good and bad, and everyone needs to learn and really under-



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stand that history.”
To learn more about Benjamin Thomas and the events of Aug. 8, 1899, visit the In Memoriam page at Alexandriava.gov/Historic.

Shiloh Baptist Church Rev. Dr. Taft Quincey Heatley, left, with Beulah Baptist Church Rev. Professor Quardricos B. Driskell and McArthur Myers at the site of the 1899 lynching of Benjamin Thomas during a remembrance ceremony Aug. 8.



Chalk art by Nicole Wandera lists the names of those who tried to defend Benjamin Thomas the night of his lynching on Aug. 8, 1899.



A crowd listens to remarks during the Aug. 8 remembrance ceremony of the 1899 lynching of 16-year-old Benjamin Thomas.