



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Lynching of McCoy Condoned By Alexandrians

Alexandria Times, April 21, 2022

Three decades after the Civil War, Alexandria's political, business and cultural landscape was dominated by white conservatives. In charge of the government, police and newspapers, racism and white supremacy were normalized. African Americans held little to no governing or economic power, the few who did were considered "respectable colored residents" and were expected to outwardly agree with the white community.

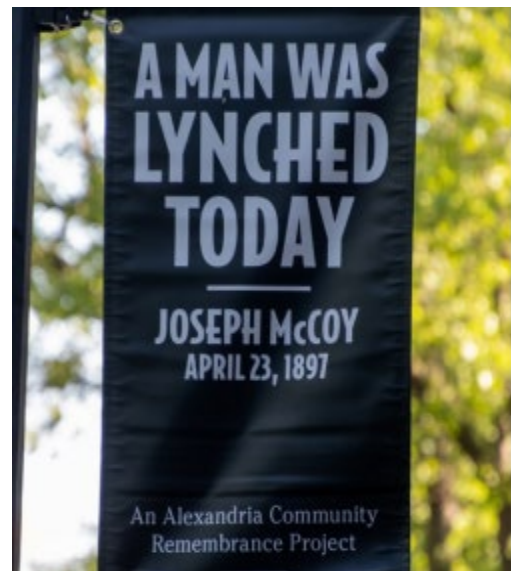
It was in this atmosphere that Joseph McCoy was lynched on Friday, April 23, 1897. McCoy was accused, arrested and charged Thursday night. At 11:20, a mob attacked the police station but was repelled when officers fired dozens of rounds into the air and arrested the ring leaders. Just after 1 a.m. 500 white men returned, overpowered police and killed McCoy. The militia was not initially called, but when they were they didn't respond. The *Washington Post* reported that Alexandria Light Infantry (ALI) members were among the lynchers.

The Snowden Family, publishers of the *Alexandria Gazette*, had tremendous influence in 1897. Hubert Snowden was President of City Council. His brother Harold, an ex-confederate, was editor of the daily *Gazette*.

In 1895, when newly elected Mayor J.T. Beckham resigned shortly after taking office, Hubert pushed through the nomination of Luther Thompson, foreman and local news editor at the *Gazette*. Thompson continued to serve both as Mayor and reporter.

The Police Department was divided into factions made worse by a recent gambling sting led by Sergeant James Smith that revealed some police were on the take. Chief James Webster sidelined Smith and any officers loyal to him.

Webster preferred Lieut. James Smith who was in charge the night of the lynching. Smith brought McCoy to the station but didn't tell him he was arrested until he arrived. McCoy's pleas of innocence were ignored and after lengthy questioning, he confessed.



A banner commemorating the lynching of Joseph McCoy. Office of Historic Alexandria.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Thompson was aware of the arrest and charges. He admitted that crowds gathered on street corners and talked of lynching. Yet, he didn't move McCoy to a safe place and he didn't alert the ALI, the largest militia in the state.

When an officer went to Thompson's house to inform him about the first attack, Thompson again didn't call up the militia, and instead freed the ringleaders.

Likewise, the failed attempt didn't inspire Chief Webster to move the prisoner or to ask for backup. Two officers suffered severe injuries trying to stop the mob. They were likely the only policemen who tried to protect McCoy.

No arrests followed. There wasn't an investigation to find the lynchers, and the police further obstructed justice by testifying under oath that they didn't recognize anyone in the mob.

This made Commonwealth Attorney Leonard Marbury's job easier, as it was his responsibility to bring to trial anyone identified. Marbury also chaired the Democratic Committee for the 8th District and was second in command of the infantry that failed to rally when the alarm sounded.

Marbury was at the police station around 9 p.m. He could have contacted the Captain at any point to call up the ALI and protect McCoy. Instead, he chose not to recognize any perpetrators and later provided an alibi for McCoy's accuser.

In the days that followed, Harold Snowden, Thompson and John Strider, democratic councilman and reporter at *The Washington Times*, appear to have worked in concert reporting stories condemning McCoy, exonerating officials, police and the lynchers. They often used the same wording in their stories, and at times the same sentences show up in testimony given by themselves, the Police Chief and Lieutenant, and the Commonwealth Attorney when questioned by Gov. Charles O'Ferrall's investigator Col. Percy Hawes.

In a closing speech, at the end of O'Ferrall's administration, he said lynchings would stop when enforceable laws were enacted and when "the public press no longer caters to the spirit and condones the crime of lynching as some of the papers in Virginia, be it said to their shame, have done recently."

By Tiffany Pache, coordinator for the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project. An edited version of this article appeared in the Alexandria Times on April 21, 2022.

"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.