

# ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



## March 2022 Edition

### Giving Voice to the Voiceless

Learning the truth about the most essential pieces of the stories of the lives of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas - who their people were and where they are today - has been a struggle. This nation's tragic history of enslavement and the legal scaffolding that followed emancipation has entombed many aspects of the histories of African American families and silenced too many of their pasts.

In a [Chicago Tribune article](#), African American author Lolly Bowean describes how it feels to struggle with this legacy by depicting a time when one of her college students asked her about her last name.

"Before we were Boweans, we were Norwoods and Wakefields rooted in a small town in western North Carolina — near the mountains. Those names are connected back to England. "Those are my people," she told the student.

"I know some Norwoods and some Wakefields from western North Carolina," the student replied "almost with an instant giddy excitement. It seemed that for a moment she thought we had found common ground. I'm sure she thought that maybe we knew some of the same people," Bowean wrote.

Next, the student "almost whispered: "But they're white."

Bowean continues, "As we both stood in the silence, we didn't speak about the legacy of American slavery. Yet this is the moment when race and what it means to be African-American comes creeping into the most fleeting of encounters. It's these unexpected confrontations with history that trigger what writer and social commentator James Baldwin called the "constant state of rage."

Untangling family lines of African Americans is challenging. For those who were enslaved, they may have been assigned first names by their enslaver, but were rarely given surnames and neither first nor last names were recorded by a government body.

While the government required information on tax records, the lives of Black men and women were reduced to a few columns of dehumanizing marks and dashes.

Even those African Americans who were free before the Civil War were ignored by official record keepers. The first time their names appeared on the United States Census was in 1870.

Some improvements in record keeping came after the Civil War, but they were hampered by the racism of the registrars.

At the war's end, there was enormous pressure on the freed to choose names and register as citizens. Because of this, and due to the forced separation of families during enslavement (and the hope of reuniting), many African Americans chose the surname of their former enslaver. This resulted in multiple families sharing the same surname, but not the same blood.

Other newly freed Blacks wanted nothing to do with their enslavers and chose completely different first and last names that were unrelated to blood relations who may have been sold away from them.

On top of that, because Virginia forbade the schooling of enslaved and free Blacks after the Ned Turner rebellion, slightly new spellings of old names entered into the records. White officials responsible for registering the newly freed didn't care enough to correct spellings. This combined with white census workers' lack of interest in ensuring every Black person and family was named and counted adds to today's genealogical confusion.

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project's teams of volunteers spent thousands of hours researching the family history of Joseph McCoy and we are still not sure why he was called McCoy and not Chase.

The 1880 Census documents that a one-year-old baby called Joseph Chase (b. 1879) was living in the household of his grandmother Cecelia McCoy. We have assumed Joseph was Ann McCoy and Samuel Chase's son, but in 1880 Samuel, a 50-year-old widower, was living with Sarah, 47 and their 1 year-old son James (b. July 1879). Samuel and Sarah married later, in 1885, according to records kept by Robert's Memorial Chapel.

The 1890 Census was destroyed when the Commerce Building was consumed by fire in 1921, making it difficult to know more about both Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas, who was not yet born when the 1880 census was taken.

It could be that Joseph chose his grandmother's last name, or it could be that his parents were not Ann (McCoy) and Samuel Chase. ACRP researchers identified seven people who could be Joseph's parents.

When ACRP volunteers had exhausted the obvious trails, it became clear expert help was needed to identify any possible living descendants of the two men.

As 2021 was winding down, Leslie Anderson was hired to uncover Joseph McCoy's family ties and McCargo Bah was asked to focus on Benjamin Thomas' genealogy. Both women bring a wealth of experience and sensitivity to the task.

[Anderson won the National Genealogical Society's Family Research Award in 2013](#) for her deep dive into the family history of Tabitha (Bugg) an enslaved African American born in 1838.

And the detailed work of Char McCargo Bah in 2014 resulted in the participation of a number of the descendants of those buried at the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery at the dedication of the Memorial.

If Anderson and Bah are able to locate living relatives to either McCoy or Thomas, ACRP will be very intentional when contacting them. As Bah reminds us, finding out your history can be an emotional and personal experience. ACRP will handle this information with gentle respect.

"In order to put the past to rest or bury it is to know about it, to study it and take from it to make yourself strong," Bah told the [Alexandria Times](#), adding, "we should take the time to know who we are and be able to take that to do better, to make ourselves better."

## In The News

### Harriet Jacobs, Champion for Alexandria Public Education

[Watch the video](#) produced by Susan Thomas for ACPS that tells the story of "one of the most important historical figures in Alexandria's early public education system." Jacobs was a formerly enslaved woman, who

in the wake of the Civil War, built the first tuition-free school in Alexandria that was run by African Americans for African American children.

### **Commemorating Hidden History in Arlington and Alexandria, Local “Green Book” locations may soon be designated historic sites**

Michael Pope reports in the [Alexandria Gazette](#) about legislation under consideration by the General Assembly that would identify and commemorate Virginia’s Green Book locations. The travel guide used by African Americans during segregation to locate safe places to stay, eat, refuel and get services, has two locations in Alexandria.

### **News Blast From The Past**

It was November 13, 1897, when African American John Mitchell reported on page two of the *Richmond Planet* that history was being erased by white people who were uncomfortable with the truth of it.

“The Confederate Veterans have been making a disgraceful exhibition of themselves. It is broadly hinted that members of the history committee have been bribed by northern book concerns.

The cause of the trouble is a systemic effort to falsify the truths of history, by excluding from the public schools all records of that late unpleasantness which bear the stamp of impartiality.

The adoption of Shinn’s History as a text-book was a reckless pandering to prejudice at the expense of the pupil. It is a book, not only unfit for use as a scholarly production, but it is a failure as a means of engraving upon the human mind that which it is most profitable and beneficial for it to know. Conservative educators, both of the Democratic and Confederate type have regarded with alarm and apprehension this outburst of the old issue, thirty-two years after the surrender at Appomattox Court House, Va.”

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### **Upcoming Events**

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project McCoy Remembrance Planning Committee, Wednesday, March 16 2:30-4pm at The Lloyd House.**

The subcommittee will meet in person at the Lloyd House to plan for the Joseph McCoy remembrance to be held on April 23, 2022, 125 years after his extrajudicial murder.

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Steering Committee Tuesday, March 22, 2022 4-5pm Virtual meeting on Zoom, [Register here.](#)**

The Steering Committee will meet and learn about ACRP’s recent trip to EJI in Alabama and discuss the upcoming Joseph McCoy Remembrance.

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Pilgrimage Committee Monday, March 28, 7-8pm Virtual meeting on Zoom, [Register here.](#)**

The Pilgrimage Committee will review insights from ACRP’s trip to EJI to inform planning for the October pilgrimage to Montgomery, Alabama.

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project McCoy Remembrance Planning Committee, Tuesday, March 29 3-4:30pm at The Lloyd House.**

The subcommittee will meet in person at the Lloyd House to plan for the Joseph McCoy remembrance to be held on April 23, 2022, 125 years after his extrajudicial murder.

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Soil and Marker Committee Thursday, March 31, 7-8 pm Virtual Meeting on Zoom, [Register here.](#)**

The Soil and Marker Committee will get an update from ACRP on their trip to EJI and on planning for soil collection ceremonies for McCoy and Thomas.

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[Joseph McCoy](#) [Benjamin Thomas](#).

[For more information](#)

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*The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) 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.*

**Office of Historic Alexandria  
City of Alexandria, Virginia**



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