

Benjamin Thomas Was Innocent

*By Tiffany Pache for the
Alexandria Community Remembrance Project*

On August 8, 1899, Alexandrians literally dragged an innocent 16-year-old Black boy through the cobblestone streets of Old Town, kicking, beating, and shooting him - before hanging him. Confronted with an innocent's death and a mob's disrespect for the law, the white establishment blamed the Black community for inciting a mob, and poor whites for lynching Benjamin Thomas.

Edward and Julia Kloch whose 7-year-old child Lillian came home without the ax she was told to retrieve from next door were a poor, quickly growing white family. "Lilla" explained her failed errand telling her parents Thomas tried to assault her. Kloch swore out a warrant for Thomas' arrest.

Thomas told police officers he was innocent and after his lynching most of Alexandria agreed. Yet the only people punished were members of the city's Black community. On August 9, *Alexandria Gazette* Editor Harold Snowden called the mob's actions deplorable, but made it clear that when a white woman or girl is sexually assaulted, Alexandrians won't use violence to stop a lynching.

Thomas was in jail awaiting trial based solely on the testimony of Lillia Kloch who admitted he was not violent with her, but complained of the way he treated her, according to the *Baltimore Sun*.

African American Alexandrian Freeman H. M. Murray wrote in his diary that the evidence against Thomas was "very meager." "The little girl," Murray wrote, said he "pulled up her clothes."

Reverend R. E. Hart of Washington, D.C. investigated the lynching and spoke with the *Cleveland Gazette*, which reported: "It is now generally admitted that he was not guilty. The mother of the girl told him [Hart]... the young man was not guilty and that she had known him from a youth to be a good boy."

Even Mayor George Simpson told Hart Thomas' guilt was "doubtful."

White authorities, compromised for allowing an innocent man to be lynched, blamed members of the Black community who had tried to protect Thomas. The night Thomas was arrested, Black Alexandrians alerted police and the mayor of a threat to lynch him. They asked for added

protection for him and offered to help. When their services were refused the men stood guard anyway until police arrested the leaders.

The next morning, at the trial of the Black men, police didn't testify that they wanted to protect Thomas, but said the Blacks were openly threatening the white community. After the trial, white Alexandrians complained saying the Black men acted "high handed," and believed it was because the victim's family was poor.

The Washington Post reported that city officials blamed the African Americans for "making threatening demonstrations," that "spurred the whites on to decisive action." The article also said those participating in the lynching were trying to establish "white supremacy" over Blacks.

Snowden said poverty had a role in the lynching, writing: victims of sexual assaults that result in lynchings were "usually among those white people who associate on terms of equality with negroes, and with them, as with others, bad company almost invariably produces ill effects."

At the conclusion of their trial, the Black men were fined, and those who couldn't pay went to the chain gang.

John Mitchell, editor of the *Richmond Planet* wrote, "Was there ever a greater parody upon justice than the sight of citizens of Alexandria, colored citizens hauled before a white mayor and fined \$20 for doing their duty? Mayor Simpson is a disgrace to the office. He, a sworn official of the law fining other citizens who were anxious to see the laws upheld."

Those who denied Thomas' constitutional rights and killed an innocent boy weren't punished, they weren't even charged.

The *Evening Star* pounced on this hypocrisy writing, "Will the law which punished for disorderly assembly those who would forestall lawless homicide punish the actual homicide? Probably not."

Alexandria's Community Remembrance Project invites the citizens of Alexandria to join in recognizing the heroes who defended Benjamin Thomas and reflect on his lynching at 6 p.m. on Market Square, August 8, 2022.