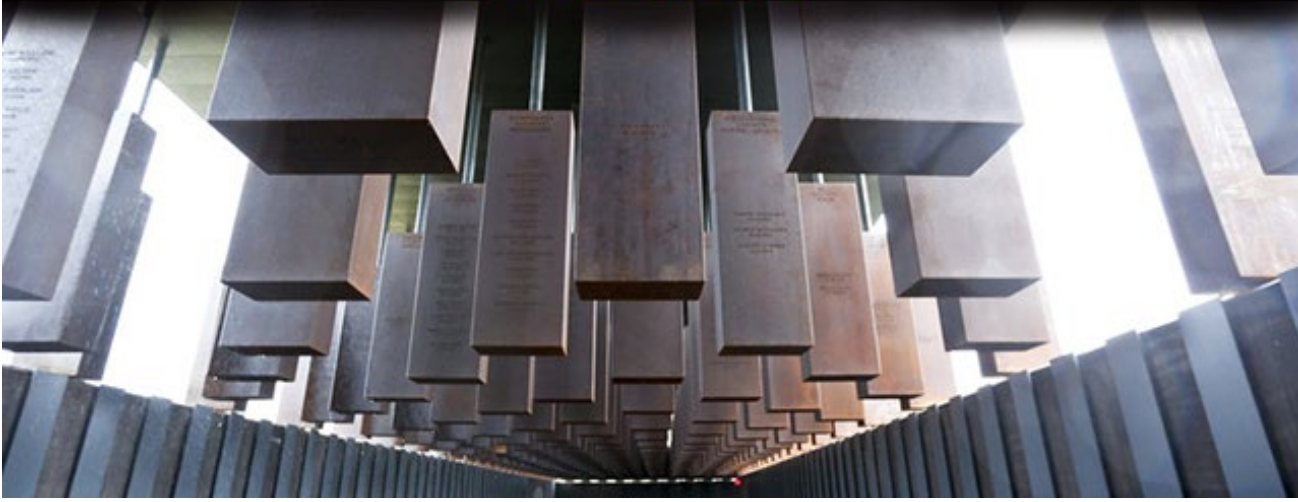


# ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



## January/February 2023 Edition

### Justice Deferred

On Saturday, August 14, 1886, James Henderson, a 23-year-old Black man born and raised on Pitt Street in the Petersburg neighborhood of Alexandria, was shot and killed by Chief of Police Capt. James F. Webster.

Shortly after 7 p.m., Fannie Chapman knelt in the twilight at the rear of John Rice's grocery store. She was holding James' lifeless body. Surrounded by a hundred of her neighbors who had been drawn to the sound of gunfire, Fannie wept and cried out with regret because she had asked for help.

James had recently returned from serving three months in jail. While he was away, Fannie had decided she was through with him and his drinking. When James was released and showed up at the home they used to share on Pitt Street he was, of course, inebriated. Fannie tried to throw him out, but she was no match against the short, yet muscular James who easily evaded her. Fannie yelled and carried on while James tried to convince her to let him stay. When he couldn't, a wobbly James drew a pistol and shot at her. He missed. Fannie ran out the door and straight to the police station to swear out a warrant.

Officer Frank Bettis and Capt. Webster set out to look for Henderson. It didn't take them long to track him down. They found him at Rice's store on the corner of Fairfax and Princess streets.

It was obvious to those in the shop that James Henderson was "very drunk," he was "scarcely able to stand."

Bettis went inside while the Captain headed to the rear of the building. When James saw the police officer he ran out the back door into a weedy and marshy lot.

"There he goes," Bettis yelled to the Captain.

Just before clearing the marsh, James fell into the tall grass and briefly disappeared. When he pulled himself back up, Capt. Webster was just five feet away.

"Halt," Webster said as he fired his pistol. The ball drove through Henderson's back hitting him between his shoulder blades. James fell face down into the mud.

"I can't stand this," Capt. Webster muttered before swiftly disappearing. Witnesses said he ran away and newspapers reported he went back to the station house.

"I'm shot," Henderson gasped.

"It serves you right, you shouldn't have broken away from me," Officer Bettis scolded.

Saturday night James' mother, Maria Henderson went to the station house looking for her son. She was turned away without an explanation. The next day, she went to Wheatley's undertaking establishment on King Street determined to see her only boy, but again she was not permitted.

The coroner, Dr. Powell, held an inquest that afternoon. Drs. Fairfax, Smith and O'Brien joined Powell to perform an autopsy. (Eleven years later, Dr. O'Brien would tell Richard Lacy that his daughter had been violated setting in motion the lynching of Joseph McCoy.)

The coroner's jury found that James Henderson died from an "unintentional" gunshot wound delivered by Capt. Webster while he was discharging official duties.

James Henderson's body was finally released to his mother. Hundreds of Black Alexandrians called on her to pay their respects.

Capt. Webster, who had headed the force since its organization in 1870, appeared before Mayor John B. Smoot's court the following Monday morning. Attorney S.G. Brent, who was active with the Conservative Democrats, represented the Chief. (Thirteen years later, Brent stood with Mayor George Simpson as he asked a lynch mob to let the law take its course promising that if a jury failed to convict Benjamin Thomas, he would personally lead a mob to lynch the 16-year-old Alexandrian.) [End Note 1]

Leonard Marbury, the same Commonwealth Attorney who prosecuted the case against Webster, was at the station house the night of Joseph McCoy's lynching and refused to hold any perpetrators accountable.

The majority of those called to testify at Chief Webster's trial were white Alexandrians who had not been at the scene when the murder took place.

The few African Americans who testified, including John Payne, a local leader in the Republican Party, were not quoted in the *Alexandria Gazette* newspaper since, "their testimony was unimportant, and threw no additional light on the affair."

The press depicted Henderson as a "desperado" and a man to be feared, while Capt. Webster was described as "cool headed" and a "faithful officer" of the law.

The unobjective reporting in the *Alexandria Gazette* stated that law abiding folk were breathing easier knowing that "fierce and dangerous characters" were dead, adding, "The New Testament, with all its consolatory words, terms the characters of which Henderson was a type, 'Brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed,' and when a policeman, in the legitimate discharge of his duty, is made the instrument in the Creator's hands of ridding the earth of such pests, no right-thinking person should regret the dispensation..." [End Note 2]

The Mayor, who acted as judge and jury, called the murder "unfortunate," and released Capt. Webster from culpability. Webster remained Chief of Police and it was on his watch that Joseph McCoy was taken from the station house by a lynch mob on April 23, 1897. Two years later he was on duty at the city Jail when another mob pulled Benjamin Thomas from the building and brutally murdered him. On both accounts, Webster testified that he didn't recognize any of the white men who murdered the Black Alexandrians. Yet, when he died in 1910, the *Washington Post* wrote that he was, "Honest, fearless, and [had] a remarkable memory for facts and faces, even in his old age." [End Note 3]

On April 23, 2022, Alexandria's Chief of Police Don Hayes apologized for Capt. Webster's decisions at a Remembrance for Joseph McCoy. [End Note 4]

"Those who actually wore this uniform on that date in time did not do what was right," he said, adding that at that time in history law enforcement was used "as a tool of terror."

The best way to ensure people are treated fairly by those in uniform is to hire and train police to realize that all people deserve justice, according to Hayes.

"I, as your Chief of Police, promise that to you. More than that, as a person

who cares about all life, we have to work together to make sure this is never forgotten, but it is also never repeated.”

While speaking of McCoy and the era he and Henderson lived in, Hayes words extend to all the victims of police terror throughout Alexandria’s long history. Because justice deferred is always justice denied.



### **Bibliography and End Notes:**

The story was developed using news accounts from *The National Republican* “Accidental Shooting” Aug. 16, 1886, p.1; *Alexandria Gazette*, “Negro Desperado Killed,” Aug. 16, 1886, p.3.

### **Notes:**

1 A native Alexandrian, James F. Webster became a policeman in 1866. In 1870, Alexandria organized the first police force under a new government and he soon became Chief. At that time, Black Alexandrians active in republican politics complained that Webster wouldn’t allow Black men on the force.

2 *Alexandria Gazette*, Aug. 16, 1866, p.3

3 *Washington Post*, Nov. 19, 1910, p.5

4 Don Hayes, Chief of Police, [video of McCoy Remembrance April 23, 2022](#); min.17:00. *Photo Caption: Chief of Police Don Hayes at the McCoy Remembrance Ceremony in 2022. The photograph by Jeff Hancock Photography.*

*Story researched and written by Tiffany Pache, Office of Historic Alexandria.*

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### **In The News**

#### **Alexandria Police React to Tennessee Police Brutality**

In the aftermath of the death of Mr. Tyre Nichols at the hands of Memphis police officers, Chief Hayes and Alexandria’s Police Department have issued a statement of condemnation and commitment to serve our community with integrity and empathy and promised to uplift the sanctity of humanity. [Read the statement.](#)

#### **EJI Essay Contest Opens!**

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project is pleased to announce the launch of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) Essay Contest in collaboration with Alexandria City Public Schools. The scholarship contest went live on Monday, Jan. 16 in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. The Equal Justice Initiative’s contest question asks students to examine the history of a topic of racial injustice and discuss ways in which its legacy endures today in an 800-1000 word essay. Students are encouraged to use specific historical events to explore how injustice continues and imagine solutions for a future free from racial injustice. The contest closes at midnight on March 17, 2023. EJI will judge the entries and announce winners in the Spring. EJI provides prizes totaling at least \$5000 to the winning entries. The contest is open to students in grades 9-12. For more information, visit [here](#).

#### **New African American Waterfront Heritage Trail Route Is Open!**

On Saturday, Feb. 4, the Office of Historic Alexandria launched the southern portion of the African American Waterfront Heritage Trail. The route illuminates the history of the African American community with some prominent and lesser-known stories over several centuries. Contributions of free and enslaved Black

Alexandrians along our waterfront will be highlighted. [Please visit OHA's website](#) to read about the stops along the route.

### **How a Once Notorious Site of Enslavement Became a Bastion of Black History in Alexandria, Virginia**

Read [Preservation Magazine](#) Tim O'Donnell's interview with Audrey Davis, Co-Chair of ACRP. Together they explore Alexandria's effort to tell our entire history with the purchase of Freedom House and the new museum there.

### **Black History Receives Clothing of Enslaved Woman**

The curator of Costume and Textiles at The Valentine Museum in Richmond, VA, just transferred a bonnet and dress (circa 1898) worn by Harriet, who had been enslaved by the Mankins family in Alexandria, to the Black History Museum. The 1875 City Directory lists Charles Mankin as living at 36 N. Patrick Street, earlier census records show that the Mankin family owned at least two enslaved people. Descendants of the Mankin family donated the clothing to the museum.

### **Preserving their Names: Black Lives Remembered Collection**

The Alexandria community's response to the death of George Floyd will open at The Black History Museum the last week of February.

When the exhibit opens to the public we will post the information at [Alexandriava.gov/Historic](http://Alexandriava.gov/Historic).

### **Tell Historic Alexandria Why History Matters**

Help Historic Alexandria answer the question, "Why does history matter?" OHA wants to better support and engage the community in 2023 and beyond. To learn more about how they can do this, they are participating in a national survey sponsored by the American Alliance of Museums. Please take a few minutes + [take this survey](#) plus share with your friends! Your thoughts + feedback as our close stakeholders will help guide future work.

### **Oral History Program Seeks Soil Collection and Pilgrimage Participants Voices**

It isn't too late to sign up to participate in an oral history recording. ACRP hopes to gather reflections from the pilgrimage and the soil collection ceremony. The recordings will become an archive of memories and stories for future Alexandrians. To sign up for a recording appointment, please reach out to Francesco De Salvatore at [francesco.desalvator@alexandriava.gov](mailto:francesco.desalvator@alexandriava.gov), or at 703.946.2687.

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### **In Remembrance**

#### **Ms. Lillie Finklea**

On Dec. 27, Alexandria lost a social justice crusader who spearheaded the fight to restore The Contraband and Freedmen's Cemetery. A long-time Alexandrian, Lillie attended Lyles Crouch primary school and Parker-Gray High School. Finklea was 83 when she died. To learn more about her, please read her obituary in the [Alexandria Times](#) and the [Alexandria Gazette](#).

#### **Mr. Percy White**

On Jan. 10, the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project family lost one of our own. Percy White was a member of ACRP and the Soil and Marker Committee. His important contributions to text for both Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas historic markers are now a part of his legacy. Percy's deep interest in African American history led him to build [findfamilyroots.com](http://findfamilyroots.com) to share photographs and offer genealogy services. He worked for the City of Alexandria as a Gang Prevention Coordinator. City Manager James Parajon said Percy provided Alexandria's youth with "tremendous support and guidance." For more information about Percy visit [here](#).

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## Committee Meetings

A Steering Committee planning retreat was held at Hollin Hall on Jan. 4, 2023. At the retreat, three new members were welcomed onto the committee from Alexandria City Public Schools: Kennetra Wood, Sarah Whelan and Ra'Alim Shabazz.

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## Upcoming Committee Meetings

The Steering Committee will meet on Feb. 28 at 5 p.m. at the Lloyd House.

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

[For more information](#)

[Donate to the Project](#)

[ACRP@alexandriava.gov](mailto:ACRP@alexandriava.gov)

*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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