

## Alexandria Times

**Denise Dunbar**  
 Publisher & Executive Editor  
 ddunbar@alextimes.com

**Margaret Stevens**  
 Sales Director  
 mstevens@alextimes.com

**Caitlyn Meisner**  
 Managing Editor/Reporter  
 cmeisner@alextimes.com

**Wafir Salih**  
 Reporter  
 wsalih@alextimes.com

**Arwen Clemans**  
 Photo Intern

**Audrey Keefe**  
 Intern

**James Matheson**  
 Intern

### ADVERTISING

**Margaret Stevens**  
 mstevens@alextimes.com

**Marty DeVine**  
 mdevine@alextimes.com

**Patrice V. Culligan**  
 pculligan@alextimes.com

**Tina Franco**  
 Office Administrator  
 tfranco@alextimes.com

### DIRECTOR OF ART & DESIGN

**Jessica Kim**  
 graphics@alextimes.com

### CONTRIBUTORS

**Kerry Boyd Anderson**  
**Kim Davis**  
**Mark Eaton**  
**Mark Edelman**  
**Thompson Eskew**  
**Kim Gilliam**  
**Ryan Hopper**  
**Kim Jackson**  
**Lexie Jordan**  
**Louise Krafft**  
**Brianne McConnell**  
**Jim McGrath**  
**Kaitlin Murphy**  
**Erin Shackelford**  
**Dr. Vivek Sinha**  
**Dr. David Weintritt**  
**Amy Will**

### ALEXTIMES LLC

**Denise Dunbar**  
 Managing Partner

**The Ariail family**  
**Suzanne Brock**  
**William Dunbar**

# Benjamin Thomas' Homegoing: Grieving and protest

August 8 marks the 125th year since Benjamin Thomas, a 16-year-old Black Alexandrian, was lynched.

In the immediate aftermath, Thomas' distraught mother could not "bear to look upon her boy," let alone hold a funeral. The city quickly buried him at Penny Hill Cemetery. In the days and weeks that followed, Black Alexandrians were furious authorities hadn't prevented the lynch mob, held none of the unmasked perpetrators accountable and then placed Thomas in a pauper's grave instead of at Douglass Memorial Cemetery. The community called for a mass meeting, a popular protest tool used by the antilynching movement.

"A mass meeting of colored people [sic] will be held this evening in Shiloh Baptist Church when the funeral and memorial services will be held for Benjamin Thomas, who was lynched here on the night of Aug. 8," reported the Evening Star on Aug. 28, 1899.

By designating Thomas' Memorial Service as a mass

meeting, Black Alexandrians drew outside attention to the lynching, while holding their neighbors accountable by calling them out and pricking their conscience.

Black funerals have long been centers of subversion and protest. Rooted in the Middle Passage, a belief that the deceased returned to their home country, grew overtime into "homegoing ceremonies." Initially, funerals and homegoings afforded Black people a safe space to gather away from their enslavers. But sometimes insurrections were planned, as was the case in Richmond in 1800, according to George Mason University Professor Suzanne Smith. Enslavers reacted by impeding on this last sanctuary. After the Civil War, the homegoing tradition and Black funerals coalesced, becoming a central part of Black faith and a way to oppose Jim Crow laws.

On a sufferably warm Monday, more than 600 people from Alexandria and Washington packed into Shiloh Baptist Church on Duke Street. Benja-

min Thomas' homegoing was an elaborate affair with gospel music, multiple eulogies and sermons from several pastors. The event drew reporters from every major paper on both sides of the Potomac.

Shiloh's Rev. W.H. Warring warned, "We are living in a dangerous age, white people need only say that a negro [sic] is guilty of rape for the accused to be hurled into eternity without either judge or jury. It is the duty of every man, white or black, to denounce" lynching. Then, calling for a boycott, he said, "Men stand behind counters selling you goods whose hands are stained with the blood of Ben Thomas. Don't spend another dollar with them."

At Benjamin Thomas' homegoing, communities from Washington and Alexandria stood together and cried out for justice. This picture of Black suffering, of a system rigged against them by their oppressors, gave voice to their anger, to their feelings, it was a moment meant to inspire change.



PHOTO/SHILOH BAPTIST CHURCH

Warring ended his remarks presciently, "The blood of Benjamin Thomas will cry out for all time against the city of Alexandria."

Members of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project are holding a Remembrance of Benjamin Thomas on Thursday at 6:30 p.m. at Shiloh Baptist Worship Center on Jamieson Avenue. For more information, please visit alexandriava.gov/cultural-history/in-memoriam-2024-benjamin-thomas-august-8-1899.

*Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.*