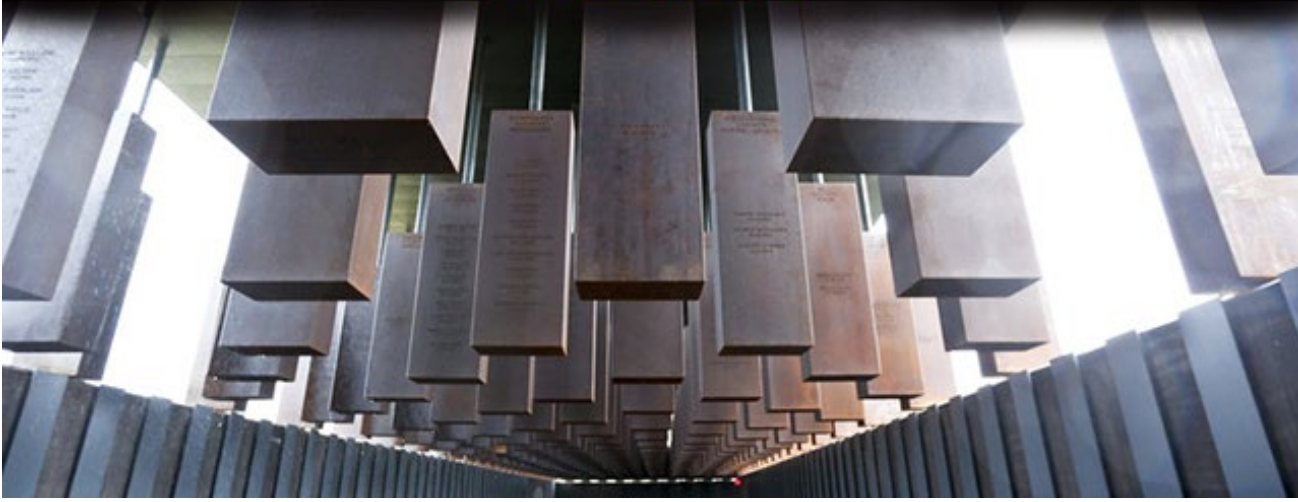


# ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



## April 2022 Edition

### When the Pen is Also the Sword

For the eight days leading up to the lynching of Joseph McCoy, major news outlets fed Alexandrians a steady, detailed diet about the rape of a white woman by Black Alexandrian James Lewis. After McCoy was lynched, these same papers and their reporters failed to speak truth to power, and in some cases justified the actions of the lynchers while helping to hide their identities.

Ida von Bethmann Riedel, a 63-year-old German native who lived just past the Alexandria City line in Fairfax County, said she was raped in the early morning of Wednesday, April 14. Riedel accused Lewis, who occasionally worked at nearby farms, setting off a manhunt that spanned Alexandria and Fairfax Counties. He was eventually arrested at his parents house in Charlottesville, VA. Two Alexandria policemen brought Lewis first to Alexandria where he was charged before transferring him to Fairfax to await his trial at Fairfax Courthouse.

Local reporting normalized racism and made white supremacy acceptable; it excited the community over the interracial rape and hunt for Lewis stoking fears to a crescendo right at the time of McCoy's arrest; and after his lynching, the papers did not question the lawlessness of Alexandrians and instead provided understanding and rationalizations.

While the *Alexandria Gazette* dominated the local news scene, three Washington papers had an Alexandria bureau or presence - *The Washington Times*, *Evening Star*, and *Washington Post*. All but the *Washington Post* were intimately tied to the conservative democrats in city government.

*The Alexandria Gazette* - which is still published today - can trace its roots to Samuel Snowden and 1792. Over the decades, the Snowden family became a dynasty wielding enormous influence in



Alexandria. This family used their publication more than any other paper to justify the lynching of McCoy and to protect those responsible.

*Photo Credit: From the Souvenir Virginia Tercentennial 1907*

In 1897, Hubert Snowden was the President of the City Council. His brother, Harold Snowden was a medical doctor by trade, a confederate surgeon during the war who represented Alexandria in a rebel general assembly, and editor of the *Gazette* since 1865. He wrote editorials and daily stories about Washington and national politics until his death in 1901. He was also active in the leadership of the R.E. Lee Camp.

Luther Thompson, foreman and local news editor at the paper, was the Mayor at the time of McCoy's lynching. He did not win the democratic primary in 1895, but was appointed Mayor at Hubert Snowden's suggestion and City Council's approval when newly elected Mayor J.T. Beckham resigned shortly after taking office. Thompson continued to serve both as Mayor and reporter, even after a conflict of interest arose in January 1897 when he had other reporters barred from the police station after being scooped by *The Evening Star*.

The correspondent for *The Washington Times* - a paper with morning and evening editions - was also a local politician. John Strider, was an active Democrat, member of the city council, friend of Thompson and Chief of Police James Webster. Because Strider was also a councilman, he was allowed to continue to gather news at the police station when others were barred.

*The Evening Star's* Correspondent William Beckham, was a native son who had attended the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria before becoming a newspaperman. He was the son of the former mayor, who was considered to be a Civil War "hero" and conservative democrat.

There are those who believe the pen is mightier than the sword, but these white Alexandrians leveraged both to a devastatingly powerful effect.

Beginning April 14 and leading up to the day of McCoy's lynching, the *Gazette*, *Times* and *The Star* spent a lot of ink on the rape and hunt for Lewis. A few selections show how the coverage set the stage.

- *Evening Star*: "The entire community is aroused over this dastardly act, and if Lewis is caught there is apt to be a stranger in the other world within a few minutes after they get their hands on him."
- *Alexandria Gazette*, editorial: "There would be no lynchings of negroes in the South if the negroes would abstain from the commission of the crime that deserves the faggot, or hanging by the ribs." [In this quote, faggot refers to the burning alive of a human being.]
- *The Washington Times*: "The people in this city and the county are terribly excited over the affair, and should Lewis be captured, mob violence is feared, so wrought up are the people."
- *Alexandria Gazette*, reported that Lewis was not in Charlottesville, adding information that was not reported in any other paper: "It seems that he has not been in that locality for several years, he having ill treated a twelve-year-old girl there a long time ago. His record at Charlottesville is bad...."
- *Evening Star*: "... there is a rumor afloat that if he is caught he will be summarily dealt with and a strange face will appear on the other shore within a few minutes thereafter."

- *The Gazette* reported hearsay to corroborate Lewis' guilt before saying that over 100 people were waiting at the Fairfax Train Station to greet Lewis crying "get a rope" but "no trouble ensued."
- *The Washington Times* story stated that Mrs. Riedel picked Lewis out of a room of 12 prisoners and then, "Threats of lynching were freely made..."

Wednesday, April 21, with Lewis in custody, the papers took on a calming tone. *The Washington Times* wrote that reports that a lynching was afoot "have no foundation." *The Evening Star* reported that the people in Fairfax were "determined that Lewis shall have a fair and impartial trial" and then reminded readers the penalty for rape is death.

The next evening on Thursday, April 22, McCoy was accused and arrested for raping his employers 8-year-old daughter. He was lynched in the first hour of Friday, April 23.

In the days that followed, Thompson and Strider appear to have worked in concert to report stories with "facts" no other paper had, and at times, with exactly the same wording that also matched testimony given to the Governor's investigator by themselves, the Chief and Lieutenant of police and the Commonwealth Attorney.

Together they changed the narrative to the benefit of those in power in Alexandria.

As for James Lewis, he clung to his innocence through three trials before being sentenced by an all white jury to death by hanging. During all three of Lewis' trials, there was a constant demand for his lynching, and criticisms were lobbed at jurors for their inability to sentence a Black man to death. Lewis was the last man tried and hanged by Fairfax County.

## In The News

### ACRP Stands With Descendants of Montpelier's Enslaved

In light of the recent actions of the Montpelier Foundation Board to strip the Montpelier Descendants Committee of seats at the table, silencing their voices in the historic site's power structure, ACRP stands firm in our commitment of support.

Less than a year ago, in June 2021, the board that manages James Madison's Montpelier estate [announced plans to share authority equally](#) with descendants of those once enslaved there in the governance of the museum. On Friday, March 25, the board moved to strip that power sharing from the Descendants Committee.

"What was seen in 2021 as a groundbreaking commitment to elevating the African American voice in American history, is now another broken promise to Black Americans," said Audrey Davis, director of Alexandria's Black History Museum and co-director of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project.

Board members claim they are [not backing away from parity and are just resetting the process](#), but staff fear the aim is to avoid conveying a more honest view of history.

"The current actions by the Montpelier Foundation Board, to rescind their commitment to truth telling about American slavery reinforces African American skepticism about plantation sites, where enslaved Black labor was exploited to build these grand homes. Today, African Americans continue to be exploited as their history is used to bring in tourists and for fundraising," Davis said.

ACRP stands with the [Association of African American Museums](#), the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#), [Lincoln's Cottage](#) and other sites, museums and organizations in condemning the actions of the Montpelier Foundation Board.

Hollow virtue signaling hurts not only Montpelier, but the faith and trust Americans place in historic sites to set the standard for accurate and equitable history for all.

### After 200 Unsuccessful Attempts, Federal Anti-Lynching Law is Signed

On March 29, more than 100 years after anti-lynching legislation was first introduced in Congress, [President Biden signed the Emmet Till Antilynching law](#) making it a federal hate crime punishable by up to 30 years.

Racial terror reinforces social hierarchies, marginalization and undermines the U.S. Constitution.

“This Act is an overdue correction to tragic failures of the past. It is a promise that our nation must never allow bigotry and violence to undermine the fundamental rights of every American to be secure and protected by our government when threatened with lawlessness,” stated [Equal Justice Initiative Director Bryan Stevenson](#).

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## Upcoming Events

### **Community Remembrance Ceremony for Joseph McCoy Marking the 125th Year Since Brutal Lynching**

*Saturday, April 23 at Market Square at 3 p.m.*

Alexandria is invited to a community reflection to belatedly recognize this city’s responsibility for the lynching of Joseph McCoy and the racial terror that it spread throughout the African American community. As we attempt to reconcile our past with our present, we recall the words of Maya Angelou, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” A procession from Market Square to the corner of Cameron and Lee will conclude the service.

### **ACPR Member Reception**

*Thursday, April 21, The Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum 6:30-8:00 p.m.*

ACRP members are invited to a special reception as part of the April 22nd Spaces for Remembrance Symposium that will consider ways to memorialize difficult history. The head of Germany’s Memorial Museums Department at the Topography of Terror, Dr. Thomas Lutz, who will be presenting at the Friday Symposium, will be on hand Thursday evening to share a few remarks with ACRP about how his country has [created a landscape of memory that acknowledges Nazi crimes and remembers their victims](#). Mischa Kuball, a conceptual artist and professor at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne will join Dr. Lutz to talk about artistic approaches to creating memorable spaces. Equal Justice Initiative Founder Bryan Stevenson has said that The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Berlin was one of the inspirations for the steel pillar’s that hang in EJI’s National Memorial for Peace and Justice. It is a goal of ACRP to bring the companion pillar recognizing Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas from Alabama to Alexandria.

### **History from the Pens of Women of the Black Press**

*Tuesday, April 26, Virtual event offered by the National Museum of African American History and Culture 1-2:30 p.m. Register [here](#).*

Join ACRP member Blair Forlaw as she lifts up the stories of seven African American journalists who were instrumental in writing the first draft of history during their lifetimes.

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## Upcoming Committee Meetings

### **Alexandria Community Remembrance Project McCoy Remembrance Planning Committee**

*Tuesday, April 12, 3-4:30 p.m. at The Lloyd House.*

### **The Community Remembrance Pilgrimage Committee**

*Monday, April 25, 7-8 p.m. Virtual meeting held via Zoom. [Register Here](#).*

### **The Community Remembrance Soil and Marker Committee**

*Thursday, April 28, 7-8 p.m. Virtual meeting held via Zoom. [Register Here](#).*

## Committee Reports

**The McCoy Remembrance Planning Committee** met in person at the Lloyd House on [March 16](#) and [March 29](#) to plan for the April 23 remembrance ceremony for Joseph McCoy.

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Steering Committee** met [Tuesday, March 22](#), and heard about the staff’s recent trip to EJI and discussed the upcoming Joseph McCoy Remembrance.

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Pilgrimage Committee** [met virtually on March 28](#), to review the recent trip by staff to Montgomery, Alabama and plan next steps.

**Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Soil and Marker Committee** [met virtually on March 31](#), to review the recent trip by staff to Montgomery, Alabama to better understand and discuss needs for the soil ceremonies to be held in Alexandria and then in Montgomery. They also received an update on the search for descendants of the lynching victims.

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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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