

Virtual Remembrance Held for Joseph McCoy, Lynching Victim

City officials and others honor teenager murdered in Old Town in 1897

By Kevin Dauray

Yesterday morning the city remembered Joseph McCoy, a teenager lynched on April 23, 1897 in Old Town. The murder, which occurred at the corner Cameron and Lee Street, is part of a very dark chapter in Alexandria and the country's history.

For prior remembrances, attendees have gathered at the site of the horrific crime. Today though, because of Virginia's stay-at-home order, they came together virtually. Regardless, the significance of the event, and the emotions felt, were still undoubtedly powerful for all.

The Equal Justice Initiative

The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to fighting poverty and racial injustice. It was founded in Montgomery, Alabama in 1989.

Alexandria is deeply involved in EJI's Community Remembrance Project. There is a pillar for the city, which is part of a monument recognizing where lynchings took place throughout the U.S., in the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Located in Montgomery, the memorial requires that counties work to "claim" their pillar. Alexandria, with two documented lynchings and as one of 800 locations, is taking steps to do so. Yesterday's remembrance served as one of those steps.

Who Was Joseph McCoy?

McCoy lived his entire, short life in Alexandria. Born at the beginning of the Jim Crow Era, he lived on South Alfred Street with his parents, siblings, and extended family. McCoy was the youngest of five children. The McCoy's did not stay in school for long, opting to work. Joseph did manual labor for a White man named Richard Lacy.

On the night of April 22, 1897, Lacy accused the young McCoy of attacking his children. The 19-year-old was subsequently arrested, even though police did not possess a warrant. The next morning, he was taken by a mob from his cell and lynched, with no chance of speaking against the accusations in court.

A Summary of the Remembrance Proceedings

Mayor Justin Wilson opened the ceremony, remarking into the camera, "I was hoping we'd be gathered at the corner of Lee and Cameron for this important observance today." Then he read the city's official proclamation memorializing the incident.

During the nearly three-hour event, Alexandria's poet laureate KaNikki Jakarta, performed a poem she wrote for the occasion, and Reverend James Daniely, Pastor at Roberts United Methodist Memorial Church, shared a prayer to honor McCoy. Formerly known as Robert's Chapel, the church was the site of McCoy's funeral service 123 years ago.

Final Words

When asked for comment, Alexandria Living Legend and EJI Outreach Education Committee member McArthur Myers, offered the following:

“[Yesterday was] truly a complex day of emotions for me. This man was killed out of hate. And here we [are] today witnessing America[‘s] leaders spilling hate, [while] a killer virus is plaguing the world. The beauty [of] Mr. Joseph McCoy is not forgotten.”