

Written Public Comments
November 12, 2020 Virtual School Board Meeting
Comments by Elizabeth Lockwood

Renaming of TC Williams High School

I am writing to you as a member of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Research Group that has worked for the past year to research and write the narratives of the two lynchings that occurred in Alexandria. I am also a parent of two TC graduates-- one in 2010 and the other in 2013-- and a long-time resident of the city.

On the morning of April 23, 1897, an African American teenager named Joseph McCoy was lynched in Alexandria. The evening before, a white mob made two attempts to break into the police station where he was being held. In the second attempt the mob forcibly took him from his jail cell, shot him, bludgeoned him, and hanged him from the lamppost on the southeast corner of Cameron and Lee Streets. McCoy was buried in a pauper's grave at Penny Hill Cemetery.

Two years later on August 8, 1899, a 16-year-old African American named Benjamin Thomas was lynched in our city. A white mob comprised of Alexandria citizens attacked the city jail on St. Asaph Street, and Benjamin Thomas was dragged half a mile to the southwest corner of King and Fairfax streets, opposite Market Square. The mob pelted him with debris and shot at him. Benjamin Thomas was hanged from a lamppost at "Leadbeater's Corner." He, too, was buried in Penny Hill Cemetery.

There were no arrests or prosecutions of the perpetrators who killed Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. Although it is clear that law enforcement, prominent businessmen, elected officials, and ordinary white citizens were complicit in these acts, the authorities and the press were quick to move the blame for the lynchings away from Alexandria's white residents.

As we all know, Alexandria's racist history does not begin with these lynchings. Nor does it end there. The legacy of systemic racism and white supremacy still surrounds us and influences our daily lives. We can hope that we are at an inflection point in the history of our city and our country. We have the opportunity to take responsibility for our past and make amends. It will be very hard. Removing the name of a known racist, whose actions and legacy directly hurt the Black citizens of our city, is not hard. It is only a crucial first step.

Alexandria's white leaders and citizens did not achieve a reckoning in any way with their roles in the lynchings of the teenagers Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. If Alexandria is ever to become the just and equitable city to which it claims to aspire, it must address its complicity in these two lynchings and all the history that precedes and follows them. Removing the name of Thomas Chambliss Williams from our city's only high school is the bare minimum of a first step.