

**Benjamin Thomas Remembrance Ceremony**  
**August 8, 2022**  
**Remarks of Sheriff Sean Casey**

Good evening, please join me in thanking these remarkable students.

Thank you for your words, your powerful presence, and your commitment to telling the story – the true and full story – of what happened to Benjamin Thomas 123 years ago.

The words I share today cannot compare to those we just heard. But like Chief Hayes, Chief Brown before him and my predecessor Sheriff Lawhorne, I speak to you today because we won't hide behind a badge or a false history. Our profession's history of racial oppression and white supremacy cannot be overlooked and it should not be overlooked.

Yet some people ask, "Shouldn't we just move on? Why do we have to keep bringing up the past?"

In Alexandria, we value the past, don't we? We have historic districts and architecture and museums that make our city a destination. We welcome visitors here to explore our history and we attract newcomers and businesses who see Alexandria's rich history as an asset. They want to walk down cobblestone streets and see where George Washington dined and danced.

But we cannot simply cherry pick and celebrate the proud moments that we are comfortable with. We cannot just acknowledge the history that suits us.

And that is definitely the case in law enforcement where we recognize, with deep regret, how our history oppressed others:

Through the slave patrols, where early policing in much of the south began and then holding those who were captured in our local jails so they could be returned to their enslavers.

Even after freedom, law enforcement continued to oppress Blacks through convict leasing and enforcement of Jim Crow laws.

In violent white-on-black crime, including sexual assaults, police often failed to properly investigate crimes committed against African Americans.

Police abused their authority, by refusing to intervene when white mobs attacked peaceful civil rights activists, and targeted peaceful demonstrators with violence themselves.

More recently, law enforcement relied on racial profiling and only in the past few years have we begun to address unconscious bias.

Our profession must recognize and apologize for its major role in racial oppression, and today, specifically, our part in the lynchings of thousands of African Americans, through inaction or by deliberate action.

In working with the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project and the Equal Justice Initiative, we acknowledge this difficult and painful history and we are deeply sorry. I apologize for our predecessors – Alexandria police, jail staff and law enforcement leadership – who not only failed to protect young Benjamin Thomas, but who took actions that allowed the lynching to occur, the assailants to go free, and the brave community members seeking to keep him safe to be arrested.

To ensure this history is known, both the Sheriff's Office and the Police Department share the facts of Benjamin Thomas and Joseph McCoy's lynchings with our staff.

We refuse to hide this history. We will remember Benjamin Thomas and the courageous citizens who risked their own freedom to protect him. And I pledge to work with the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project and support their efforts as they move forward, shining light on the truth and working toward reconciliation.

Thank you.