

Our View

Remembering Samuel Tucker, a great Alexandrian

The year was 1939. Franklin Roosevelt was President of the United States. World War II started in Europe. Baseball great Lou Gehrig retired after being diagnosed with ALS. "Gone with the Wind" and "The Wizard of Oz" were released in movie theatres. A loaf of bread cost eight cents.

While future U.S. civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was 10 years old and a schoolchild in Atlanta, by 1939 Mahatma Gandhi had been practicing non-violent non-cooperation for 25 years in his quest for racial equality and political independence in India.

In the Alexandria of 1939, Jim Crow laws were rigidly enforced and blacks were not allowed to attend school, sit in a restaurant or use the public library with whites.

Onto that stage Alexandria native Samuel Wilbert Tucker, age 26, boldly strode with his brother Otto in 1939, as part of an organized sit-in at the Alexandria public library.

Twelve years earlier, Samuel, Otto, their brother George and a friend had been arrested when they refused to move out of the whites-only section of a streetcar on their way home from high school in D.C. They had to make this trek daily because blacks could not attend any of Alexandria's high schools.

The four boys were later acquitted by an all-white jury, but Tucker's determination to work for civil rights was sealed. Samuel Tucker once said, "I got involved in the civil rights movement on June 18, 1913, in Alexandria. I was born black," according to the Arlington Cemetery website.

After graduating from high school and Howard University in D.C., Tucker studied law and passed the Virginia bar. Once he was 21, he began practicing law in the state, arguing and winning multiple civil rights cases before the U.S. Supreme Court.

This week's "Out of the Attic" on page 28 tells the story of the famous library sit-in Samuel Tucker organized and Otto Tucker participated in 80 years ago. While not deliberate, the connections between several items in this week's Times Opinion pages are inescapable:

First, the very institution that perpetuated this racial discrimination in 1939, Alexandria's public library, now helps lead the way in commemorating Black History Month during February. A link to those commemoration events is in this week's "Out of the Attic." Further remembrances of Tucker's sit-in are planned in city libraries this summer.

In his monthly column on the facing page, ACPS Superintendent Dr. Gregory Hutchings, Ed.D, points out that equity issues remain paramount in his school district, which is now comprised mostly of minority students. Hutchings offers a useful reminder that, while our city has come a long way in 60 years – as he demonstrates daily with his personal biography – we still have miles to go.

In addition to the 80th anniversary of the sit-in, 2019 is the 60th anniversary of the integration of Alexandria city schools. As with the library, it is Alexandria City Public Schools that is, along with the Alexandria Black History Museum and the Alexandria Times, leading the way in commemorating this integration.

Samuel Tucker is one of the most compelling figures in Alexandria's long history. Time can't diminish the contribution he made to racial equality both in Alexandria and the United States – but his is a story that should be more widely known.

The entire story of Tucker's life, the sit-in yes, but also his determination to become educated despite Jim Crow obstacles, his bravery at age 14 on that streetcar, his military service in WWII and his success at the Supreme Court, should be known by every Alexandrian of every race and age.

Opinion

"Where the press is free and every man is able to read, all is safe."

- Thomas Jefferson



Your Views

Vision Zero data is disappointing and alarming

To the editor:

While I applaud the carrot approach for enticing people to get out of their cars and use transit or ride a bike to work, it apparently is not working well in this country. Vision Zero, rather than improving injury statistics, is having the opposite effect. Since Alexandria transportation officials' mantra is that all department decisions are data-driven, it's time to delve into national data that shows commuters are ditching transit and are continuing to drive cars or hail Uber rides.

To wit, New York City's annual mobility report, dated June 2018, details that "strap-hangers" are ditching the subway for Uber. Half of the people interviewed said they used this ride-hailing app rather than continuing to use transit. The for-hire vehicle boom coincided with the first drop in subway ridership since 2010 in New York City.

Then there's Los Angeles. A local attorney had an op-ed in the Jan. 20, 2019, Wall Street Journal titled "Vision Zero, a Road Diet Fad, is Proving to Be Deadly." Christopher LeGras cites LA's 2017 adoption of the Vision Zero initiative, which immediately put some streets on what he's calling "road diets."

He claims this is the most radical transformation since the introduction of the freeway era 75 years ago, and that by any metric, eliminating and narrowing lanes and adding bicycle lanes has been a disaster. Pedestrian deaths have nearly doubled from 74 in 2015 to 135 in 2017. And after years of improvement, LA again has the world's worst traffic, according to Inrix, a transportation research firm.

Miles of vehicles idling in gridlock have reduced air quality to 1980s levels. Lane reductions, bike lanes, new meridians and other innovations designed to reduce vehicle speeds are making it difficult for bulky ambulances and fire trucks to react quickly. And while pedestrian deaths are lower in NYC under Vision Zero, deaths of bicyclists, motorcyclists and people in vehicles are higher.

LeGras posits that while it's a good thing to want to make America's streets safer, government officials should not impose projects that don't work on communities.

Alexandria is doing exactly what LA is doing, so let's hope no more measures are