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## LAWLESSNESS IN FLORIDA, 1848-1871

by RALPH L. PEEK

THE CLASH OF IDEOLOGIES, conflicts over rights and status, and a struggle for power, all of which have marked man's efforts to achieve a society satisfactory to himself, created an intense conflict in Florida during the years of Reconstruction, particularly in the period 1868-1871. In this bloody struggle the issue at stake was the possession of local, state, and national political and economic power, and this issue was colored and made more complex by social and racial elements, including the most virulent race hatred. The incipient conflict, created by the aftermath of war and the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, flared into open violence shortly after the reins of government were surrendered by the military in July, 1868. Protracted tension and violence ended with the victory of Southern white conservatives which was apparent by 1871. The familiar story of political reconstruction in the defeated South, and in Florida, does not need repeating here. This story furnishes the backdrop for the drama of conflict which was played out during the years 1868-1871. It is the purpose of this article to describe some of the elements of violence and intimidation which proved so effective in Florida during this period.

Violence and lawlessness in Florida during 1866-1867 followed no discernible pattern, but was the result of four years' total and devastating war which had demoralized society in all Southern states.<sup>1</sup> But after the resumption of civil government in July, 1868, an organized campaign of violence began in Florida and became so intense that in some sections of the state, notably Jackson County, a virtual state of warfare existed for short periods. Two sections of Florida furnished the setting of the most sustained and vicious outbreaks during 1868-1871. One section, in north central and northern Florida, comprised the counties of Alachua, Lafayette, Suwannee, Hamilton, Madison, and Columbia. The other, in west Florida, included Jackson and Calhoun counties. There were notable single instances

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1. As a result of mounting disorders, civil government was suspended by the federal authorities in Alachua, Madison, Levy, Santa Rosa, and Escambia counties in 1866. See the *New York Times*, July 12, 1866.

of violence in other counties also, some of which are analyzed. Young Men's Democratic Clubs incorporated local white men who perpetrated threats, physical assaults, floggings, and murders, all for the purpose of making the Democratic Party paramount and defeating the Republicans.<sup>2</sup> These combinations were highly mobile and their activities struck fear into the hearts of the Negroes, intimidating and confusing them, and decimating Radical ranks.

William Bryson, judge of the Third Judicial Circuit which included the counties of Columbia, Lafayette, Suwannee, Hamilton, Madison, and Taylor, testified to the effectiveness of the combinations in his district. Bryson, who was a native of North Carolina and who characterized himself as not having "a democratic hair on me," described conditions in the area as "bad."<sup>3</sup> Many crimes had been committed for which no one had been punished. It was virtually impossible to bring the guilty to trial because of two factors: First, an organization existed whose purpose was to obstruct justice - an organization popularly known as "Ku Klux" which always operated in favor of the Democratic Party. Second, widespread sympathy for the organization and its purposes existed in the area, and it was impossible for law officers to enlist the aid of white people in apprehending those guilty of violence and intimidation. Moreover, armed resistance had prevented service of warrants in some of these counties,<sup>4</sup> and Negroes had been driven from the polls by armed men.<sup>5</sup> Six or seven colored Republicans had been murdered in Columbia County during the eighteen months following the fall of 1868, and the conditions under which these killings occurred struck fear into the hearts of Negroes.<sup>6</sup> Among the first to be killed was Thomas Jacobs, active Negro Republican, who was called to his door in the middle of the night and shot dead. Lishu Johnson was taken from a hiding place in a white man's house one eve-

2. *United States Congress*. Joint Select Committee on Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States (42nd Congress, Second Session, *House Report 22, Series no. 1541*), 13 Volumes. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872). Vol. 13, 226-240; see also 157-158 for copy of constitution usually adopted by each of the county organizations; see also 109, 258, 271, 307. Cited here after as *House Report 22, XIII*.

3. *Ibid.*, 258-260.

4. *Ibid.*, 264.

5. *Ibid.*, 225.

6. *Ibid.*, 263.

ning, and no trace was found of him except a heap of clothing in the woods. James Green, another Negro Republican, was abducted by armed and disguised men, tortured and forced to reveal the strategy of the local Union League, the Negro political action group, and finally killed, his body being discovered later in a pond in the woods.

In the fall of 1868, a group of Negroes of Columbia County had gathered in the home of Prince Weaver for a social occasion. A group of disguised men fired into the house from the yard, killing Weaver's thirteen-year-old son and wounding three other persons. Weaver had previously been warned against holding political meetings at his house. Timothy Francis, a Negro who was very active in the political life of the county, was threatened and fled to another county in fear of his life. However, his flight was to no avail, for he was shot down and killed at his new job two weeks later.

These incidents created deep fear in the hearts of local Republicans. Dr. E. G. Johnson, white physician of Lake City and a leading Republican in Columbia County, testified that he had lived in fear of his life for some time. Johnson, who was assistant to the United States Assessor for Florida, William Purman, and a commissioner for Columbia County, had been elected to the state senate in the election of 1871. He immediately received a letter from the Ku Klux threatening terrible consequences if he did not resign his senate seat immediately.<sup>7</sup> Previous to this threat, the physician testified, he had been so fearful for his life that he had not slept in his own house for a year. He affirmed that armed resistance had prevented the service of federal processes, and testified that armed bands of men who regularly rode into Lake City were beyond the control of municipal authorities and violated the law with impunity.<sup>8</sup> On November 7, 1871, a large body of mounted, armed men, in cavalry formation, thundered into Lake City, "hollering, yelling, cursing, and inquiring for Radicals," riding all through the town, firing pistols and breaking up a procession of Negroes moving from a political meeting at a church to the town square. Only one Negro was wounded, but several left town, refusing to stay and vote the next day.<sup>9</sup> Combinations such as these were identified by Johnson as

7. *Ibid.*, 262 (extracted from *Lake City Herald*, October 28, 1871).

8. *Ibid.*, 262.

9. *Ibid.*, 225.

“Democratic Clubs” whose organization extended to other counties also.<sup>10</sup>

Lafayette County was the scene of eight murders which were attributed to the “Ku Klux” by the widow of the most prominent victim, Dr. John Kreminger. Dr. Kreminger, a physician, had been drafted into Confederate service but had crossed the lines at the first opportunity and enlisted in the Union army, serving most of the war with the Union. After the war he settled in Lafayette County where he became prominent for his outspoken Union sentiments. Yielding to the urgings of unionists in the county, Kreminger entered politics and was elected delegate to the constitutional convention in 1868, representative in the state legislature, and, finally, county judge. He was murdered as he sat on his front porch one morning. His murder was, according to the testimony of his wife, Rebecca Kreminger, the work of the Ku Klux whose purpose was to remove him from the political scene. Moreover, she said, the other murders in Lafayette County were perpetrated for the same reasons.<sup>11</sup>

In Baker County, public sentiment favored the activities of the extra-legal combinations, commonly called Ku Klux. This point was stressed by R. W. Cone, a Negro who was an active Republican, whose family was the target of a night attack.<sup>12</sup> Twelve men broke into the house where Cone and his family were in bed, struck him on the head repeatedly, causing him to feign unconsciousness to escape more blows. His wife, who was about six months pregnant, was “. . . knocked down, [they] gave me a kick on my head and one on my shoulder and . . . tore my hair a great deal. . . . They took me by both hands - I was then on my knees-and . . . dragged me by both hands until they let me loose.”<sup>13</sup> Cone, entreating the attackers to leave his wife alone because of her condition, was dragged bodily into the yard, his night-shirt was twisted up over his head, and he was savagely beaten. When his wife tried to come out into the yard to aid him, she was told by one of the men that if she made one move or an outcry that he “would blow her damned brains out.” Cone was told that his court testimony against a white man and in favor of Negro voting rights was the cause of this attack. When

10. *Ibid.*, 262.

11. *Ibid.*, 183.

12. *Ibid.*, 65-75.

13. *Ibid.*, 72.

he denied that he had served as a witness and said that he had only served on the jury that day, the beating was resumed on the grounds that this was an even worse offense. Ten days before this incident he had received a letter from the Ku Klux, warning him against further political activity.<sup>14</sup>

In Alachua County, nineteen individuals were murdered during these turbulent years, and only five men were tried (and acquitted) for all these offenses.<sup>15</sup> In addition, many assaults had occurred, meetings were fired upon, houses shot into, and physical violence often occurred in open day. There were about six organizations of Young Men's Democratic Clubs in the county, and their purpose was to go anywhere and do anything to remove obstacles in the way of the Democratic Party.<sup>16</sup> A former member of one of the county organizations, testifying before the congressional committee investigating the violence in Florida, asserted that the secret service committee of each organization was the agent of violence and intimidation, the object of this committee being to "prevent certain parties [Negro political leaders] from exerting too great an influence with the colored population of that county..."<sup>17</sup> The audacity of the members of resistance groups is revealed by an attack on William Birney, District Attorney for the Fifth Judicial Circuit. The attack, which was designed to kill Birney and eliminate him from the political scene, was launched in open daylight in the streets of Gainesville. Birney managed to outdistance his pursuers in a protracted footrace and escaped harm.<sup>18</sup> But the incident serves to illustrate the prevailing sentiment in Alachua County as one hostile to national as well as local government. The local press was vociferous and enthusiastic in its efforts to fan this hostility.<sup>19</sup>

The Collector of Internal Revenue for the United States government, L. G. Dennis, who resided in Gainesville, received at least a dozen threatening letters, some of them signed "KKK" and containing such allusions as:

"Dead men tell no tales! Dead! Dead! Under the Roses.

"Our Motto is, Death to Radicals - Beware! KKK,"<sup>20</sup>

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14. *Ibid.*, 67.

15. *Ibid.*, 268.

16. *Ibid.*, 163.

17. *Ibid.*, 158.

18. *Ibid.*, 159.

19. *Ibid.*, 267.

20. *Ibid.*, 268.

Dennis was given a mock trial in the streets of Gainesville by the Ku Klux, convicted of being a Radical, and sentenced to be hanged. The men trying him, all members of prominent local families, according to Dennis, boasted of having killed two or three Negroes each. During the "trial" their conduct became so boisterous that the mayor caused their arrest. In the trial that followed the mayor acted as judge and the men were convicted on charges of breach of the peace. However, the conviction was immediately appealed to the county court which was then in session, and the men were acquitted. The mayor of Gainesville was accosted as he left the courthouse after the trial and was "cuffed and kicked all about the yard."<sup>21</sup> Yet, when compared with some other counties in Florida at this time, Alachua was tranquil.<sup>22</sup>

Property questions figured prominently in many cases where violence was used to intimidate Negroes. One such case involved the family of Doc Rountree, a thirty-seven year old Negro of Suwannee County who owned a seven acre farm there. One evening at nine o'clock, a group of armed men broke into his home, dragged him and his wife out of doors, "flung my children out of doors," and "they said to me, didn't I know they didn't allow damned niggers to live on land of their own?" Members of the group took turns beating Rountree, his wife, and four of his twelve children, and then "they gave me orders to go the next morning to my master, John Sellers, [who was one of the attackers] and go to work."<sup>23</sup> Sellers told Rountree that he would expect all the children to come to work for him, and that he would pay their wages in food and clothes. Rountree identified all the members of the group as Ku Kluxers and said that the organization was very strong in Suwannee County.

Madison County Negroes were victims of a campaign of terror and intimidation which, they believed, was designed to prevent their owning farms of their own.<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Tidwell, white Republican appointee of the governor to the county judgeship and a Confederate veteran who had become a reconstructionist, testified that he had conducted inquests over the bodies of about twenty-five murder victims in Madison County from

21. *Ibid.*, 271.

22. *Ibid.*, 268.

23. *Ibid.*, 279.

24. *Ibid.*, 114-125.

1868 to 1871, and that sworn testimony of witnesses at these inquests invariably fixed the blame for the murders on the Ku Klux. Moreover, he said, every Republican, white or colored, in Madison County knew of the existence of this organization by personal experience and observation. Most of the murder victims were Negroes prominent in political leadership; they were murdered at night by unknown persons, often in disguise, and the perpetrators could not be identified. Law enforcement officials met with a wall of silence when they sought aid from local people.

In Jackson County, Negroes were shot down, beaten, or threatened for expressing political opinions, and were often driven off their places, some abandoning comfortable homes.<sup>25</sup> Charles Pearce, Negro Methodist minister and member of the Florida legislature from the Tallahassee district who made the assertions above, attributed these troubles to the Ku Klux Klan, and said that it was very difficult for a Negro to buy land in most of the counties in Florida, especially the more sparsely populated ones. Another Jackson County resident, Emanuel Fortune, testified that a Negro could not buy land in Jackson County.<sup>26</sup> Fortune, a thirty-four year old carpenter, had been a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1868, and a representative of Jackson County in the Florida legislature. Fortune, a Negro, asserted his personal belief that an organization existed in Jackson County which was responsible for all these circumstances, and that its purpose was to kill all the leading Republicans. He had fled the county in fear of his life in 1871.

Clay County furnished an outstanding example of conflict and intimidation over property questions.<sup>27</sup> There a particularly brutal episode illustrated the ruthless determination of some white people that Negroes would not rise in the economic scale. Samuel Tutson, a Negro farmer, bought three acres of land from Ben Thompson, a white farmer. This purchase, which contained certain improvements, such as a house and outbuildings, was supplemented by a homestead tract of one hundred sixty acres. Three years after the original purchase, Isaac Tire, a white farmer, asserted a claim to Tutson's farm on the grounds that the improve-

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25. *Ibid.*, 166.

26. *Ibid.*, 95.

27. *Ibid.*, 54-62.



ments were not paid for. The Negro refused to evacuate, citing his deed to the property and his occupancy for three years as sufficient validation of his claim. About a week later nine men broke into the Tutson home late at night, launching an attack that for sheer savagery would have done credit to the German SS of Nazi Germany. After breaking the bedroom door from its hinges the men seized Tutson and his wife. The woman was choked into silence, and the child in her arms was jerked from her and hurled to the floor, receiving a crippling injury to its hip. Despite Tutson's efforts to prevent it, his wife was dragged into the yard, over a fence, and through a field to a point about a quarter-mile from the house. There she was bound to a tree, struck several times with a pistol-butt, and told that she'd better pray. Then her clothing was ripped from her, and the four men began beating the woman with wide leather saddle girths with buckles affixed. After this had continued for a short time three of the men retired a short distance away, leaving her alone with George McCrea, a deputy sheriff of Clay County and the assailant who had injured her child. McCrea endeavored, unsuccessfully, to rape Mrs. Tutson, and then the others returned and the beating was resumed. The other men withdrew two more times, and each time McCrea attempted unsuccessfully to have sexual intercourse with the woman, inflicting upon her in the course of his assault a permanent genital injury.

Meanwhile, Samuel Tutson had been dragged bodily into a nearby field, breaking down a fence as he was dragged over it. He was stripped naked by his five assailants, laid over a log, and beaten unmercifully. Then, while he lay semi-conscious in the field, the men demolished his house, tore down his fences, and drove livestock into his crops which were totally destroyed. The children had fled into the fields where they lay in terror all through the night, not moving or uttering a word until found the next morning by their mother.

The savage attack against the Tutsons was inflicted because the Negroes refused to surrender land for which they possessed, or they thought they possessed, a valid title. Later, these men who attacked them were arrested and tried, but they were acquitted. Samuel Tutson and his wife were given jail sentences for "swearing falsely" because he testified that the men had whipped his wife while she testified that they had choked her.

This discrepancy was viewed as perjury, although the woman had been beaten and choked. The attackers went free, though McCrea was discharged from his job as deputy sheriff.

Negroes in Jefferson County found it difficult to acquire land. Robert Meacham, Negro superintendent of Jefferson County Schools and clerk of county court, testified that whites either refused to sell land to Negroes or set the price so high that they were not able to buy it.<sup>28</sup> According to Meacham, Negroes had experienced much trouble in their relations with whites concerning labor contracts, for most of the colored folks were ignorant of the meaning of contracts and often did not know the provisions of those they signed. As a result they often signed contracts containing liens on their crops and got little or no return for their labor. They were often discharged on a pretext immediately before harvest and got nothing for a whole season's labor.<sup>29</sup> Because of conditions like these, colored people were being advised by their friends to acquire places of their own instead of hiring out at the risk of being defrauded of their wages.<sup>30</sup>

The cases cited above reveal a deep, fundamental antipathy between the races and the determination of the Southern white people to establish white supremacy at all costs. The physical violence inflicted upon Negroes as a means of economic and political control was intensified by the racial hatred which became stronger with the progress of Reconstruction. A comment by a Jackson County conservative during the worst of the violence there reveals the general feelings: "The damned Republican Party has put niggers in to rule us, and we will not suffer it . . . intelligence shall rule the country instead of the majority . . . this is a white man's government . . . [and] the colored man . . . [has] no right that white men . . . [are] bound to respect."<sup>31</sup>

Jackson County was the scene of the bloodiest acts in the drama of violence. Here racial hatred and conflict reached a climax that threatened a general conflict between the races.<sup>32</sup> A total of one hundred fifty-three persons were murdered in

28. *Ibid.*, 102.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 109.

31. *Ibid.*, 94.

32. John Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida* (Kennesaw, Georgia: The Continental Book Company, 1959. Date of original publication, 1888), 107.

Jackson County during the turbulent years of Reconstruction.<sup>33</sup> In striking contrast, neighboring Gadsden County had no killings or floggings at all.<sup>34</sup> Why such a striking difference existed in contiguous areas is an interesting question. It is certainly true that adverse economic conditions in Jackson County had created intransigence among the planter class.<sup>35</sup> This class was impoverished by the war, for the loss of slave labor had prostrated agriculture and inflicted economic disaster upon the planters. Business suffered an extreme depression and the economy was virtually paralyzed. In addition, the planters were politically impotent and were forced to witness the political ascendancy of their former slaves. Moreover, the Freedmen's Bureau, under the leadership of Colonel Charles Hamilton, had instituted a contract share-cropping system which abolished the wage-labor system devised by the planters immediately after the war. This change was highly controversial and caused heated disputes and protests.<sup>36</sup>

The economic condition of the planters of Jackson County made large-scale defaults in tax payments inevitable. As a result Republican county officials, appointed by the governor, sold thousands of acres of tax-delinquent land for nominal sums. Every such sale added more fuel to the flames of hatred and strife. There is little doubt that the sale of tax-delinquent land was a major cause of the eventual conflagration in Jackson County.<sup>37</sup> All the circumstances combined to turn "the most peaceful and conservative county in Florida, before the war, into the most irreconcilable section of the South toward the Reconstruction policies imposed upon it."<sup>38</sup>

The Freedmen's Bureau accomplished a great amount of humanitarian work in Jackson County, as it did elsewhere in the South. Colonel Charles Hamilton was appointed military governor of the west Florida district and in this capacity he was director

33. *House Report 22*, XIII, 222.

34. *Ibid.*, 75-93.

35. J. Randall Stanley, *The History of Jackson County* (Jackson County Historical Society, n.d.), 203.

36. *Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands*, Selected Documents (Microfilm), Special orders and reports, 1866 to 1868. Reports of William Purman, October 1, 1867, and November 12, 1867, *passim*; Report of Charles Hamilton, December 31, 1867. For a description of the share-cropping contracts see report of John Dickinson, September 17, 1868.

37. *House Report 22*, XIII, 274.

38. Stanley, *op. cit.*, 197.

of the Bureau in this district, with headquarters in Marianna. He was assisted by Major William Purman who served as agent for the Bureau. These two men were extremely zealous in carrying out the policies of the Freedman's Bureau, and both their zeal and their methods aroused fierce antagonism among their former Confederate foes. One report made by Hamilton revealed that the planters often had to be threatened with arraignment before the military commander in Tallahassee before they would grant their Negro laborers "their equitable rights."<sup>39</sup> Other reports reveal that Hamilton and Purman were very effective in organizing and leading the Negroes in political and social organizations and in encouraging them and seeking to establish them on an equality with their former masters. Purman was especially effective with the Negroes, and the white people hated him. An insight into Purman's attitude is furnished in a report made while he was still agent. He said, "The loyal people are impatient to break their long thralldom, but . . . lack loyal leaders . . . who have the capacity and will."<sup>40</sup> Purman apparently regarded himself as the leader needed by the Negroes, and he set out to assert strong leadership. In this course of action he incurred the undying enmity of white people in Jackson County, but this fact bothered him very little, for both he and Hamilton had the utmost contempt for these people.<sup>41</sup>

Purman and Hamilton were so skillful in their leadership of the Negroes that they dominated the political scene in Jackson County for several years. Hamilton was elected to Congress, and Purman replaced him as head of the Freedmen's Bureau in the western district of Florida on January 1, 1868.<sup>42</sup> A few months later Purman was elected as delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1868, and also to the state senate, being given leave of absence with salary for as long as these duties demanded his attention.<sup>43</sup> In August, 1868, Purman was appointed County Judge of Jackson County and resigned his Bureau position, being succeeded by John Dickinson, an agent for the Bureau.<sup>44</sup> Judge Allen Bush had been County Judge until the suspension of civil

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39. Report of Charles Hamilton, November 30, 1866, *loc. cit.*

40. Report of William Purman, June 7, 1867, *loc. cit.*

41. *House Report* 22, XIII, 288.

42. Special Order No. 1, January 1, 1868, *loc. cit.*

43. Special Order No. 40, June 7, 1868, *loc. cit.*

44. Special Order No. 52, August 31, 1868, *loc. cit.*

government in 1867,<sup>45</sup> and Purman was the first to hold this office after military government was terminated. He served as state senator until 1872 when he was elected to Congress. It is interesting to note that Purman and Jesse J. Finley, one of Florida's most respected Confederate officers, served together in 1876 as Florida's representatives.

The incendiary statements made by William Purman and Charles Hamilton were thought by many to be a major contributing cause of increased tension in Jackson County.<sup>46</sup> The slightest show of authority by these men was met with scorn and criticism. On one occasion, when Purman lectured several young girls for stripping the grave of a Union soldier of the flowers placed there on Memorial Day, 1867, such a storm of criticism was aroused that the press called for a separate cemetery in which to bury the town's dead, apart from the northern soldiers' graves.<sup>47</sup>

Smoldering racial hostility was fanned by an incident arising out of a dispute between a young white farmer named McGriff and several Negro contract laborers. McGriff had referred the dispute to the Freedmen's Bureau, but before any action could be taken McGriff was shot and badly wounded by unknown persons. McGriff left for Alabama, leaving his farm in charge of a Mr. McDaniel. The Bureau was blamed for this incident, and feelings ran high.<sup>48</sup> This episode marked the beginning of an intensification of the activities of extra-legal bands who sought to strike back with methods of terror.<sup>49</sup>

Further fuel was added to the flames of conflict on February 26, 1869, when Dr. John Finlayson, County Clerk in Jackson County, was killed while walking late in the evening with William Purman, who was the intended victim. Finlayson had been a private in the Confederate Cavalry, and in 1867 had been ap-

45. Stanley, *op. cit.*, 36.

46. Wallace, *op. cit.*, 110, quotes a Reverend Gilbert, Negro Methodist minister of Jackson County, to the effect that Purman had advised the Negroes in meetings where he had been present to bum the gin-houses and other property of the whites - an injunction which usually resulted in such burnings.

47. *House Report* 22, XIII, 282 ff. See also the article in the *Marianna Courier*, May 30, 1867, which condemns Purman for the arrest of the girls.

48. *House Report* 22, XIII, 282; Wallace, *op. cit.*, 108.

49. W. W. Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1913), 566.

pointed medical officer of the Freedmen's Bureau in Marianna at Hamilton's request. Because of his support of the Bureau and the Radical county government, Finlayson had incurred the hostility of his neighbors in Marianna.<sup>50</sup> As the two men walked together an assailant fired from the shadows. Purman was struck in the neck, the bullet passing through and striking Finlayson in the temple, killing him instantly.<sup>51</sup> Purman asserted later that he was aware of the fact that there was \$1,000 in gold on deposit for the man who killed him, and that an assassin had been hired to kill him instead of Finlayson.<sup>52</sup>

Two days after his narrow brush with death, Purman was visited by a committee of twelve Negroes who told him that they had about eight hundred armed men surrounding Marianna at that moment and that they planned to sack the town in revenge for the shooting. Purman dissuaded the committee, making them swear to him that they would not take such action, though he "knew he was sparing the lives of men who would kill him if they could."<sup>53</sup> Thus if Purman's testimony is to be accepted at face value, Jackson bounty's incipient racial conflict verged on open warfare, and bloodshed was avoided only by Purman's intercession.

The next day, March 1, 1869, saw the beginning of a series of violent attacks by both factions.<sup>54</sup> James Colliete, a white Democrat who had denounced the Freedmen's Bureau, was murdered in his home as he prepared for bed. Two weeks later the caretaker at McGriff's farm, the young McDaniel, was called to the door at night and shot dead by unknown persons. In the same neighborhood, two weeks later, two Negroes were severely wounded, but survived. In mid-April, Richard Pousser, later elected constable, was wounded in his home, as were three other Negroes. Racial enmity and political strife led to a mounting crescendo of violence, as the secret societies went about their work, seeking to intimidate the Negroes.<sup>55</sup> In August, 1869, two guards at the state penitentiary at Chattahoochee, acting

50. Report of Charles Hamilton, May 31, 1867; and July 31, 1867, *loc. cit.*

51. *House Report* 22, XIII, 144-156.

52. *Ibid.*, 152.

53. *Ibid.*, 155.

54. *The Weekly Floridian*, Tallahassee, Florida, April 27, 1869, "Statement of affairs in Jackson," letter by anonymous person.

55. *House Report* 22, XIII, 109-114; 302-305.

of the tip of a Negro and seeking to apprehend a man named Bond for Finlayson's murder, were riddled with bullets by a large group of men which included Bond.<sup>56</sup> The situation remained in precarious balance for a few more weeks as tension mounted, but the inevitable explosion soon came.

On Tuesday, September 28, 1869, a group of twenty-five Negroes on their way to a picnic was fired upon from ambush and a man and a two-year old boy were killed.<sup>57</sup> The alleged target of the volley was Calvin Rogers, Negro constable in Marianna (the constable was the only elected official in the county government - all others were appointed by the governor). Rogers was not wounded, but the incident triggered an unprecedented wave of violence. When he heard the news of the ambush, Samuel Fleishman, Hebrew merchant of some twenty years standing in the county, said to several Negroes in his store that the Republicans should kill two or three whites, whether guilty or innocent, for every Negro killed, and that if the Negroes desired to kill the whites they could get ammunition from him, free of charge.<sup>58</sup> Fleishman had been the target of native white resentment before because of his support of the Radical county government, and had often been greeted publicly by such remarks as "I smell a radical and he stinks like a nigger;" or, "There's a Republican-he's no better than a dog."<sup>59</sup> But his remark on the occasion of the ambush was to have dire consequences for him.

The next day, September 29, saw another ambush nine miles from Marianna. Two Negroes, Columbus Sullivan and George Cox, were shot and severely wounded as they hauled a load of cotton homeward at dusk. There were no clues to the identity of the assailants.

Friday evening, October 1, was filled with foreboding tension. The results of the inquest in the picnic ambush had been announced earlier in the evening - the verdict was "shot by an unknown." A group of three persons was seated on the porch of the Marianna Hotel, talking and enjoying the crisp fall air. In the group was James McClellan, a former lieutenant colonel of infantry in the Confederate service and now practicing law

56. *The Weekly Floridian*, August 17, 1869.

57. *House Report* 22, XIII, 78.

58. *Ibid.*, 190; see also the letter of a Marianna citizen in the *Weekly Floridian*, October 19, 1869.

59. Report of Charles Hamilton, July 31, 1867, *loc. cit.*

in Marianna, his daughter, Maggie, and James Coker, wealthy landowner and merchant of Jackson County. Coker was the leader of resistance to the Radical county government, and was reputed to have spent considerable sums in financing armed violence in the county - particularly, certain men who were called "hired assassins" by the Radicals.<sup>60</sup> Coker was in the forefront of resistance from the very beginning, and was the intransigent, undisputed leader of the white people in Jackson County.<sup>61</sup> His son, William, was evidently a fiery and unrestrained youth, for several recorded incidents reveal him as guilty of assault, vandalism, and murder.<sup>62</sup> As the group was conversing a volley of shots blazed from the darkness below the front steps. Miss McClellan was killed instantly, her father was wounded, and James Coker escaped unscathed, although he was the actual target.<sup>63</sup> Colonel McClellann later asserted that he recognized the voice of Calvin Rogers giving the command to fire.<sup>64</sup>

The sun rose Saturday morning on a scene of wild excitement, and a riot seemed imminent.<sup>65</sup> A large, organized group of younger men, most of them "drunk and desperate," were seeking Calvin Rogers for the McClellan murder. Rogers was sighted by the mob, but managed to outdistance his pursuers.<sup>66</sup> Then Matt Nickels and Oscar Granberry, Negroes who were friends and suspected accomplices of Rogers, were seized and forced to march ahead of the mob to "hunt Calvin." Granberry was shot and killed, but Nickels escaped.<sup>67</sup> The county clerk, John Dickinson, who had succeeded William Purman as head of the Freedmens Bureau in Marianna and who had succeeded Finlayson as clerk, wrote that "drunkenness and . . . excitement" prevailed all through the day.<sup>68</sup>

The colored people of Marianna denied that Rogers was guilty of the McClellan murder, and cited the fact that Colonel McClellan had had a fight with a certain white man a few days before and that it must have been this man who had killed Miss

60. *House Report 22*, XIII, 190, 191, and 192-some of these men are discussed, and even named.

61. Report of Charles Hamilton, July 31, 1867, *loc. cit.*

62. Report of Charles Hamilton, December 31, 1867, *loc. cit.*

63. *House Report 22*, XIII, 191.

64. *Ibid.*, 207, 290.

65. *Ibid.*, 79.

66. *Ibid.*, 290.

67. *Ibid.*, 79.

68. *Ibid.*



McClellan while trying to kill her father.<sup>69</sup> The white people thought that the incendiary statement made by Samuel Fleishman on the day of the picnic ambush was responsible for the killing.<sup>70</sup> This belief led to a subsequent decision to eliminate Negro Republican leaders, according to evidence revealed in later acts of the mob.

Excitement continued and the condition of near-riot which prevailed Saturday was unabated. James Coker requisitioned guns and ammunition from Samuel Fleishman's store to "defend the town in the present excitement."<sup>71</sup> An armed band of men sought several prominent Negro Republicans but were unable to seize them because they had gone into hiding, or, in two cases, they escaped under fire. White and colored leaders met together on Monday evening in Judge Bush's office and sought to bring peace to Marianna, but their efforts were unavailing.

On Tuesday, Samuel Fleishman was told by a committee of Marianna citizens, for whom James Coker was the spokesman, that he must leave town immediately or be killed.<sup>72</sup> He was urged to leave quietly, for it was feared that his death might lead to twenty or thirty other deaths, a needless tragedy that ought to be avoided. Fleishman did not leave voluntarily and was forcibly removed from his home that evening, carried into Alabama, and told never to return to Marianna.<sup>73</sup> That same evening saw armed bands seeking Negro Republicans, but by this time most of these were in hiding. On Wednesday evening the mob seized Richard Pousser, a prominent Negro Republican, and forced him to march ahead of them out of town, intending to kill him. However, Pousser escaped, despite severe wounds from shotgun blasts.<sup>75</sup>

On Thursday a number of white citizens met at noon to discuss the dangerous situation existing in Marianna. Two factions contended for control in this meeting; one group wanted peace or, at least, an amelioration of the situation. The other group,

69. *Ibid.*, 310.

70. *Weekly Floridian*, October 19, 1869.

71. *House Report* 22, XIII, 82.

72. *Ibid.* Fleishman's account included the names of Arthur Calhoun, John R. Ely, James Coker, William Robinson, J. M. Drummonds, Thomas Clark, Charles Ely, James Chastain, Wilbur Jenkins; he also said that there were about twenty other members.

73. *Ibid.*, 80.

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.*, 80 and 274.

headed by James Coker, saw such proposals as an affront to the young men who had led the violence, "who had had a little too much and had acted hastily."<sup>76</sup> William Coker had been one of the most prominent leaders. Coker's faction carried the day, and that afternoon the avengers found Matt Nickels, the suspected accomplice of Calvin Rogers in the McClellan murder. William Coker, W. S. Alderman, and Jack Myrick marched Matt Nickels, his wife, and his son to a limesink a quarter-mile from their home and slaughtered all three. A daughter who had escaped notice witnessed the killings from a distance.<sup>77</sup> The bodies of the Nickels were discovered by two men who also reported seeing Calvin Rogers in the vicinity with almost thirty armed men. Marianna immediately became an armed camp, awaiting an attack by Rogers, but the night passed without further incident.<sup>78</sup> This bloody climax brought a lull in the violence. The Nickels' murderers fled to escape warrants which were issued by John Dickinson. It was rumored that Dickinson was in league with Rogers, and he was threatened with imminent assassination.<sup>79</sup>

On Monday morning, October 11, John Dickinson observed armed men leaving Marianna on the Chattahoochee Road.<sup>80</sup> Later that morning, after he had drafted a letter to the governor telling him that there was no need of material law in Marianna because the situation seemed to be better, a report came that a white man was lying dead in the Chattahoochee Road, about twelve miles from Marianna. This body was that of Samuel Fleishman.<sup>81</sup> The merchant had made his way to Bainbridge, Georgia, where he told Louis Gamble, a resident of Jackson County, that he intended to return to Marianna. When Fleishman passed through Chattahoochee, about twenty-five miles from Marianna, he appealed to Malachi Martin, warden of the state prison, for protection. Martin could do nothing to help Fleishman and sought to persuade him not to return to Marianna. Fleishmann felt, however, that his family and his business interests made his return necessary and he could not be dissuaded. He was met by a white youth named Sims when about thirteen

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76. *Ibid.*, 80.

77. *Ibid.* See also 288.

78. *Ibid.*, 80.

79. *Ibid.*, 78.

80. *Ibid.*, 80.

81. *Ibid.*, 81.

miles from Marianna and warned not to proceed. Fleishman was killed shortly after this encounter.<sup>82</sup>

After Fleishman's funeral on Wednesday, Dickinson revised his letter to the governor. On Thursday a new sheriff, Thomas West, arrived. Two weeks later, on October 26, troops moved into Marianna to enforce martial law, but even then violence and unrest continued.<sup>83</sup> William Purman and Charles Hamilton fled Jackson County, and were never able to come back there to live.<sup>84</sup> When they returned to hold a political rally in August, 1870, they were confronted by an armed mob. Prominent among the mob were several "twenty-dollar men" from Columbus, Georgia - that is, men of whom it was said that they'd kill anybody for twenty dollars. Purman and Hamilton were virtually besieged in Sheriff West's home, and a few days later it was necessary for the sheriff to select ten hostages from the mob to escort the two men out of town. Purman testified later that they intended to kill the hostages if they were attacked and to kill anyone who attacked them.<sup>85</sup>

Violence and unrest continued in Jackson County for many months. Marcellus Stearns, one-armed Union veteran who was in charge of the Freedmen's Bureau at Quincy, Florida, and who later became governor of Florida, testified before the congressional committee investigating the situation in Florida that "that county [Jackson] is the only one entirely and effectually in the hands of a mob. . . . The state government and the Republican Party have no more control in Jackson County than if they did not exist."<sup>86</sup> The situation was further described by John Dickinson in 1871, shortly before his assassination: "Human life is counted cheap [in Jackson County] when passion or politics calls for its sacrifice, and the frequency and cold blood which have characterized our murders . . . [are not as bad] as the carelessness with which the public learns of a new outrage." He went on to say that "the press has been . . . abusive of everything Republican, and, at times, openly seditious."<sup>87</sup> One hundred fifty-three people were murdered in Jackson County during Reconstruction; sixty-nine were murdered in all the other counties

82. *Ibid.*, 189-190.

83. *Ibid.*, 81.

84. *Ibid.*, 144; *Weekly Floridian*, October 26, 1869.

85. *House Report* 22, XIII, 152.

86. *Ibid.*, 89, and 90.

87. *Ibid.*, 222.

of Florida during the same period.<sup>88</sup> Very few people, if any, were ever punished for acts of violence, for it was impossible to levy punishment in a county where “. . . at any moment one hundred fifty of the best men, armed, can be raised to resist any process.”<sup>89</sup> Governor Harrison Reed offered a reward of \$50,000 for the arrest and conviction of the murderers in Jackson County.<sup>90</sup> This reward was never claimed.

The violence had its intended effect. In November, 1870, a white Democrat was elected representative over a Negro Republican by a one-vote majority.<sup>91</sup> In this election the Republican vote was decreased because people were afraid to vote Republican. The election of 1868 had seen two hundred white men voting the Republican ticket which had a majority of eight hundred in the county that year.<sup>92</sup>

Sheriff Thomas West, a member of an old Tallahassee family and a brother to Dr. Theophilus West, Marianna physician, was harried by a feeling of helplessness as he sought to stem the tide of lawlessness during these turbulent days.<sup>93</sup> He was aware that public opinion was against him and that his life was in constant danger. He dared not go outside the bounds of Marianna to perform his duty. In March, 1871, he bowed to the terror and resigned.

After West's resignation John Dickinson was the only Republican official left in Jackson County. Dickinson, a native of Vermont and a graduate of Harvard, bore a reputation of courage and conviction, but he was hated by local people because of his alleged speculation in land sold for taxes, and his life had been threatened many times.<sup>94</sup> Not long after West's departure, Dickinson was shot down with buckshot on the spot where Finlayson had died, and his assailant stood over him and administered the *coup de grace* with a pistol shot through the head.<sup>95</sup> The cool determination of the assassin eliminated the last white Republican in Jackson County, as well as the last Republican official.<sup>96</sup> The killing was sanctioned by press and public alike,

88. *Ibid.*

89. *Ibid.*, 83.

90. *Weekly Floridian*, November 9, 1869.

91. *House Report* 22, XIII, 174.

92. *Ibid.*, 175, and 224.

93. *Ibid.*, 148.

94. Stanley, *op. cit.*, 37.

95. *House Report* 22, XIII, 85.

96. *Ibid.*, 152.

for a widely-accepted rumor said that Homer Bryant, a Negro Republican, had killed Dickinson because he had been intimate with Bryant's wife.<sup>97</sup> But Republicans called this a political murder, and said that the hired assassin, Luke Lott, had killed Dickinson.<sup>98</sup>

Since February, 1869, two county clerks had been murdered; Purman and Hamilton, Jackson County's political bosses, had fled the county; the sheriff had resigned; Calvin Rogers had been cornered and killed;<sup>99</sup> and the successor to Rogers, Richard Pousser, had been terrorized and rendered ineffectual. This situation was characterized by a Jackson County resident in a letter to a friend: ". . . they have things their own way now. There is not a damned nigger that dares to speak in Jackson County; . . . Purman dare not go back again; . . . Dickinson was the last leader among the Republicans there, and . . . there are no more damned niggers to make speeches. . . ." <sup>100</sup> The Democrats then asserted control by nominating a slate of county officials and dictated their appointment to the governor. <sup>101</sup> The governor, speaking to a convention of Negro Methodist ministers in Tallahassee in June, 1871, said that the state government did not have the power to protect "loyal" - i.e., Republican - people in Florida against violence and intimidation, affirming what the Democrats had known for some time. <sup>102</sup>

In neighboring Gadsden County, which had 1,400 Negro voters to 1,000 white voters, the election of 1870, unlike all previous elections, was very turbulent. <sup>103</sup> Negroes and whites were armed on election day, and the greater number of the Negroes made it impossible for all of them to vote at the poll reserved, by common consent, for the Negroes. White men formed a barrier before the white poll to prevent Negroes' voting there. An ugly situation immediately developed, knives and pistols were drawn, and Marcellus Stearns, white Republican leader, attempted to quiet the crowd. Former acting Governor A. K. Allison rushed into the midst of the crowd, demanding that someone shoot Stearns down. The sheriff was caned as he

97. *Ibid.*, 91, and 206.

98. *Ibid.*, 83.

99. *Ibid.*, 206.

100. *Ibid.*, 156.

101. *Ibid.*, 148.

102. *Ibid.*, 165.

103. *Ibid.*, 76.

attempted to restore order, but miraculously no one was killed and order was restored. But it was sundown before the poll could be cleared, and many Negroes were unable to vote. Allison, who had succeeded Governor Milton, was later convicted on the charge of intimidating voters, fined, and sentenced to six months in jail.<sup>104</sup> The Republican majority in the county was reduced from four hundred to sixteen.<sup>105</sup>

The survey of the records of the lawless era leads to the obvious conclusion that the former Confederates were determined to regain their former status at any cost. The tremendous changes brought about by four years' disastrous conflict occurred in the midst of a shattered agrarian society in which once subservient elements had gained the dominant position. The former ruling classes saw a mortal threat to their future in the Reconstruction policies effecting these changes and they began a program of resistance to the death. The methods used show the grim determination of the white conservatives.

The evidence shows that the violence was executed by the "better sort" of white people, i.e., as distinguished from the "cracker" class, or poorer element. The younger men of the upper class made the night rides, waged a campaign of intimidation by beatings, floggings, and murders, and characterized all Republicans as incendiaries who, because they agitated racial strife, deserved to be "killed like dogs . . . [because they are] damned yankees . . . [and] damned radicals."<sup>106</sup> The alternative was Negro domination, and this the Southern conservatives could not endure. The upper class—the old Southern Whigs—was completely opposed to Reconstruction, although some of them had been unionist in sentiment all through the war, and they encouraged the campaign of intimidation which was designed to end Radical rule.

The evidence does not show that the Ku Klux Klan existed as such in Florida. The organized bands whose campaign of terror successfully thwarted Radical power were agents of "Young Men's Democratic Clubs," a state-wide organization whose county branches operated under identical constitutions.<sup>107</sup> Their tactics were so effective that it is doubtful whether they could

104. Stanley, *op. cit.*, 219.

105. *House Report* 22, XIII, 76.

106. *Ibid.*, 147.

107. *Ibid.*, 226-240.

have been defeated by any measures short of a proclamation of insurrection and the use of the United States Army.

By the latter part of 1871, the application of the Ku Klux Enforcement Act had brought a cessation of violence and a restoration of peace.<sup>108</sup> By this time the Democrats had consolidated their power in most of the counties of Florida and the battle was over.

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108. *Ibid.*, 93.