

Passion and Belief:
The Story of the Untold Story of the Colfax
Massacre

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Why doesn't everybody know? The 1873 tragedy at Colfax, Louisiana, should be as familiar as the Boston Massacre, as Sacco and Vanzetti, as the killing fields at Wounded Knee, Kent State, and Tulsa, Oklahoma. This event was not hidden. In its day, the Colfax Massacre inspired magazine covers, overlapping government investigations, hundreds of indictments, and the judicial intervention of the Supreme Court of the United States. U.S. Grant, the sitting president, condemned the violence in a special message to Congress, while soldiers from the 19th U.S. Infantry and the 7th Cavalry occupied the town.

The town of Colfax had wanted everyone to know. In the years after the massacre and the legal defeat of *U.S. v. Cruikshank*, the federal prosecution of Colfax perpetrators, the white citizenry of the town – having won by force control of local political institutions – erected a marble monument to the three white casualties of the 1873 battle, inscribed with a tribute to those who died "fighting for white supremacy."¹ The State of Louisiana, still in thrall to white supremacy in 1951, installed a historical marker on the site, which stands today, and reads:

Colfax Riot: On this site occurred the Colfax Riot in which three white men and 150 negroes were slain. This event on April 13, 1873, marked the end of carpetbag misrule in the South.

The marker stands directly on the unmarked grave of the remains of half or more of the African American victims, for which it serves as the only acknowledgment.

Last Sunday, April 13, residents and activists performed public ceremonies of commemoration on the site of the Colfax Massacre – the first to be racially integrated and dedicated to healing. Participants included African nationalists, courtly southern Civil War buffs, and revisionist historians, as well as my dad, Sam Keith, a retired machinist and drag-racing enthusiast from Huntsville, Alabama. We ate meat pies and talked about ancestry and responsibility and the future. We acknowledged that the town of Colfax – by the very act of steadfastly proclaiming its allegiance to the deposed racial order– has held a candle on a dark place and in so doing held onto something rich and important.

Black history is a gift, a restitution. Only in its context can we view the spiritual and economic alignment of the races in today's United States.

It is not the fault of people in Colfax that this story was untold. Professional historians must shoulder the blame. Those who wrote the first major studies of Reconstruction in the late 1800s and early twentieth century made a choice to suppress this history. The choice reflected conscious solidarity with the white perpetrators of the massacre at Colfax. In the words of the most eminent early professor in the field, William Archibald Dunning of Columbia University, African Americans properly constituted "a separate class in the civil order." Historians deferred to local whites in the belief, as Dunning put it, that "no one not in the midst of them could appreciate the appalling magnitude and complexity" of the failings of the race.²

Instead of Colfax, historians' accounts highlighted evidence of "carpetbag misrule," and denounced Louisiana, where African Americans made the most dramatic advances, as the "*reducto ad absurdum*" of white people's Reconstruction tragedy.³

Indeed, the story of the untold story of the Colfax Massacre illustrates the dynamics of what W. E. B. DuBois called a "field [of study] devastated by passion and belief."⁴

DuBois himself had played a role in hiding its history in plain sight. Colfax, Louisiana, is nowhere to be found in his great 1935 history, *Black Reconstruction*. Forced by segregation laws – and the likelihood of violence – to forgo archival research

in the southern states, the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard relied on the selective accounts of Dunning School historians. His sources were imperfect but his perspective was subversive. "As a Negro," he wrote, "I cannot be committed to this writing without believing in the essential humanity of Negroes, in their ability to be educated [and] to take their place as equal citizens with others."⁵

The case of Colfax proved to be an early test of this conviction, in which African Americans' bid for equality and opportunity was met by crushing violence and lasting oppression. Its unwritten history illustrated the devastating impact of passion and belief in our reckoning with Reconstruction and the history of the Deep South.

Passion — aroused by slavery, with its wrenching combination of political and personal stakes— the strong emotion of war and defeat: in Colfax and the former confederacy the suffering of generations was exalted like an art or religion. Beliefs hurtled headlong in conflict on the site of the Colfax standoff: that all men are created equal; that the government that governs least governs best; give me liberty, or give me death.

Viewed through the prism of passion and belief, the history of the Colfax Massacre and its participants illustrates three key eras in the history of the South and the United States: slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the Era of Jim Crow and its aftermath. In each period, the site of the massacre presents extreme examples of the fundamental passions and beliefs in the American experience.

The history of Colfax helps us to understand slavery as an intimate experience, an experience of families. We begin with the family that established the plantations along seven miles of bottom land on the shores of the Red River in Central Louisiana. Meredith Calhoun was a Philadelphian who early on departed from the philosophy of brotherly love. An international financier, with years of experience on merchant ships and international commodities exchanges, Calhoun chose to invest his personal capital in the purchase of slaves. In partnership with his wife's grandfather, Calhoun assembled a caravan of 1,000 slaves and 1,000 mules which set out for the future site of Colfax from the market town of Huntsville, Alabama, in the spring of 1836.

Meredith Calhoun's slave caravan proceeded westward in an era of multiple forced migrations, including the removal of Indians in the five major southeastern tribes. An estimated one million slaves would make the journey between 1820 and

1860, forcibly separated from families and homes in the eastern slave states in the service of the expanding cotton frontier.

At its core, the forced migration was a crisis for families. In an era when distance and illiteracy made separation total and permanent, the western exodus resulted in the break-up of one in three slave marriages, and the separation of half of all children from their parents.

The Calhoun caravan was a particularly severe example of the trend. Calhoun, who had owned no slaves prior to his marriage, became one of the top ten or fifteen slaveholders in the history of the United States in 1835 and 1836, buying an estimated 750 slaves on the Huntsville market. Census records clearly indicate that nearly everyone was fifteen to twenty-five years old. Thus a highly artificial population of men and women in their prime years for labor and reproduction was created by the destruction of hundreds of families in the vicinity of Huntsville.

The passion of men and women held in bondage sustained great works of literature and nonfiction in the twentieth century. No counterpart to Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs would emerge from the crowds in Calhoun's caravan. And yet a single act – a crime of passion, we might say – survives in the record to testify to the strong emotions produced by the assembly of the slave migration. In Huntsville in 1836, Meredith Calhoun's infant son would fall or be thrown from the arms of a slave nursemaid with sufficient velocity to break his back. The boy survived as a hunchback, marked by hatred and his father's crimes.

No account of the injury to young William Smith Calhoun suggested that the nursemaid had intended to hurt him. To say as much would be to violate one of the South's most instinctive taboos: to speak of the hatred of slaves for their masters. Instead of passion, slaveholders chose to emphasize the agency of mutual interest, care, and obligation in their relationships with slaves. The crime-of-passion explanation, therefore, ran counter to the principle of patriarchy, the foundation of the slaveholders' beliefs.

The belief that slavery was a moral and sustainable system was the philosophical lynchpin of the southern hierarchy. Meredith Calhoun went farther than most slaveholders in his defense of the system. "The proprietor believed that the negro race was expressly designed by Providence for servitude," wrote Frederick Law Olmsted, the Central Park designer and one-time abolitionist reporter, who visited the Calhoun

plantations in Louisiana during the whirl of excitement produced by the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 1850s. In Meredith Calhoun, Olmsted had found his Simon Legree – the Red River slave master whose name became a synonym for cruelty.

"Look at the condition of negroes where they were allowed their freedom," Calhoun exhorted, "and you will find them in a most melancholy condition." In contrast, Olmsted wrote, "their condition when in slavery he thought to be superior to that of any white laboring class in the world."⁶ Calhoun had visited the manufacturing cities of Europe during the era that inspired Engels and Marx, and seen ample evidence of suffering and degradation.

"As to the moral condition of the slaves, he asked . . . who there was to throw a stone. Look at the condition of things in New York, where thousands of virtually disposed women were forced . . . to a most loathsome prostitution – a state of things that had no parallel, and never could have, in a slave country."⁷

Belief in the morality of slavery – even the sanction of the sexual abuse of slaves by their masters – allowed slaveholders such as Calhoun to contemplate their roles with a clean conscience. As citizens, moreover, they were sustained by their belief that their ownership of slaves was made legal and unassailable in the Constitution of the United States. By the 1850s, when Olmsted recorded the Calhoun philosophy, this conviction had produced a widening gulf in American political life between those who would safeguard and expand the slave economy and the growing movement to contain it and destroy it. A transcendent belief – that the house divided would not stand, that we could no longer continue half slave and half free – would break the impasse finally in the era of secession and Civil War.

War and Reconstruction channeled new passions and created new emotions. Traditional enthusiasms, such as the southern fascination with the ancient obligations of chivalry, were refined and exalted. The white chivalry of the central Louisiana parishes responded avidly to the outbreak of hostilities between the North and South. Motivated by their sense of honor, they formed volunteer companies and elected officers well in advance of the Confederate draft. The Stafford Guards, the Rapides Invincibles, and the Cheneyville Rifles travelled east to serve under Robert E. Lee in the Army of Northern Virginia. The Red River Rebels, the Rapides Rangers, the Louisiana Tigers, and the Pineville Sharp Shooters joined the Army of Tennessee. Rich planters carried their personal servants to war, and slave troopers became the mascots of

Confederate companies. Men of more modest means gave their all in the war to sustain the slave system. Their military service nurtured a sense of importance and entitlement among ordinary whites that would not be forgotten after the war.

The passion for military valor would not be limited to southern whites. Wherever the northern invasion opened opportunities, refugees from slavery thronged the Union lines. Their desperate courage created severe logistical problems for the unintentional agents of wartime Emancipation, a problem tragically illustrated at the future site of Colfax. During the Red River Campaign of 1864, U.S. troops under General Nathaniel P. Banks invaded Central Louisiana in the company of a navy flotilla of fifty battleships and transports. Encountering fierce Confederate resistance north of Colfax, the Union forces were forced to retreat through the thousands of escaped slaves that had crowded their column. Some two hundred of these – crammed onto the decks of an unprotected utility boat – lost their lives in the vicinity of Colfax when a Confederate battery launched a cannonball into the boiler, scalding to death nearly every person on board. Determined to achieve their freedom despite the risks, the victims of the Champion No. 3 disaster put themselves in harm's way in what is thought to be the most terrible incident of civilian casualties in the war.

A more traditional display of valor arose from the creation of black military units in 1863. The unsuccessful Red River campaign created a new category of combatants in the local population in 1864, as men who had escaped from slave plantations joined the Army of the United States. Poor recordkeeping in the U.S. Census, which did not record the names of slaves, and in the U.S. Army, which often enlisted African Americans under names already on their rolls, makes it difficult to recreate the relationships between black soldiers and the plantations they abandoned. In the case of the Calhoun estate, however, we can observe the careers of three men who successfully made the transition from slavery to citizenship in the Civil War. Alabama Mitchell, who did not know his father's name until after the war, enlisted in the midst of the Red River offensive under his master's name, calling himself Alabama Calhoun. He would serve in the 70th and 71st U.S. Colored Infantry alongside Edmund Dancer, another escaped slave from the Calhoun plantations. A man known as Cuffy or Loyal Gaines, married to Alabama Mitchell's sister, joined the 4th U.S. Colored Cavalry and fought in the siege of Port Hudson in southern Louisiana. By chance, the brothers-in-law would encounter one another when their units moved through Natchez, Mississippi. Years

later, Gaines would still remember the thrill of seeing Mitchell in the uniform of a U.S. soldier.

We can recreate the experiences of Mitchell, Gaines, and Dancer in part because they responded to the ongoing call to valor in the Reconstruction era. The three remained passionate in their defense of wartime gains, returning to the Calhoun plantations and participating in the build-up of black institutions on the site. To understand their transition from slaves to soldiers to members of a black militia, we must first observe another display of passionate intensity and moral courage.

Perhaps it was because he was a hunchback that William Smith Calhoun developed a different perspective than the majority of southern whites. In a life spent looking up, the young master of the Calhoun estates may have cultivated the sensibilities of underdogs. In the destruction of his patrimony, Poor Willie found an opportunity for valor. He would make his mark as the greatest former slaveholder ever to embrace the cause of black equality, and devote his life to the advancement of his family's former slaves.

In an era when the sweet potato became the great enemy of gang labor and commercial agriculture, the scalawag Willie Calhoun rented out hundreds of acres for subsistence farming. He operated a freedmen's school on his property, where African Americans of all ages could satisfy their hunger for learning. He stood for election, served in the Louisiana legislature, and voted to ratify the 14th Amendment, which made citizens of slaves. In 1869, he engineered the creation of a new parish and parish seat to include his family holdings on the Red River and named them for the Radical champions of racial uplift, President Ulysses Grant and Vice President Schuyler Colfax. As white resistance mounted, he recruited black soldiers to Grant and Colfax, and tapped the services of veterans in his own community, including Mitchell, Gaines, and Dancer. Under his sponsorship, Grant Parish and the new town of Colfax emerged as centers of black power, where former slaves could pursue their passion for family security, personal growth, and political participation.

The transformation set the community at Colfax on a collision course with prevailing beliefs in the white community. The belief in black inferiority – so aggressively articulated by Meredith Calhoun and his contemporaries – persisted in the post-Civil War era among an overwhelming majority of southern whites. Radical Reconstruction had joined this old conceit to the longstanding suspicion of

government authority, made sacred in 1776. "Rebels before, our fathers of yore; rebel the noble name Washington wore, so be ours the same."⁸ Faced with military occupation, taxes, and a variety of government programs to elevate African Americans to the status of equals, southern whites engaged in massive resistance in the firm conviction that their actions were consistent with the higher law.

In Louisiana and elsewhere, true believers in white supremacy could justify a range of illegal actions in the service of their cause. Politically active blacks, white scalawags, and carpetbaggers were subjected to threats and feints at violence, as members of the Ku Klux Klan and similar organizations fired guns into schoolrooms, committed arson, and donned costumes to intimidate their rivals. Murder marked no moral boundary at Grant Parish, which was destined to deliver the largest number of victims in the history of civilian violence in the United States.

Southern Republicans of both races agitated on behalf of their own rights with equal conviction. Their belief in the essential humanity of black people and in the principle of "one man, one vote," inspired them to bolster the authority of the federal government to combat the rising threat of Ku Klux Klan violence and southern resistance. At the center of this effort were the Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871, known among supporters as the Ku Klux Klan acts and in the opposite camp as "Force Acts," because they strengthened the hand of the federal oppressors.

The Enforcement Acts created new categories of federal criminal offenses – the first to be added to the prerogatives of government since the ill-fated Alien and Sedition Acts of the 1790s. The legislation parsed the notion of making war on the United States, taking a cue from the white supremacists' own inflammatory rhetoric. Individuals who conspired or participated in acts of violence with political intentions would now be subject to a kind of double jeopardy, allowing U.S. attorneys and federal courts to hear cases when local officials and state courts were unwilling or unable to proceed. The new laws also equipped U.S. marshals and other officials with the power to detain individuals without charge, and even to suspend habeas corpus, the right to a speedy trial, in areas the president had designated as rebellious. Calhoun and his allies in Grant Parish benefited from the new laws when federal officials arrested a number of the most dangerous area whites and detained them in New Orleans pending Enforcement Act prosecutions.

The 1872 elections would provide the testing ground for the Enforcement Acts in their campaign against Klan-type organizations. In Louisiana, where the Knights of the White Camellia and other white supremacist groups had endured multiple arrests and skirmishes with law enforcement, the belief that the laws were unjust inspired an open challenge to the results of the first elections to enjoy the new Enforcement Act protections for black voters and their allies.

The result was dual government, the first of several to appear in the former Confederate states. Disregarding the ballot count, white supremacists allied with the Democratic Party and more moderate Republicans inaugurated their own governor, John McEnery, and denounced the victory of the carpetbagger candidate, William Pitt Kellogg, as illegitimate. Simultaneously, they established a rival session of the Louisiana legislature in a New Orleans building only blocks from the Republican-controlled statehouse. Two sets of officials jockeyed for control of every office in the state.

In Colfax, the struggle centered on the modest building that William Smith Calhoun had converted from a stable to serve as the Grant Parish Courthouse. Early in 1873, a group with ties to Calhoun's secret black militia took possession of the courthouse on behalf of the Republican candidates for sheriff and judge.

The display of radical determination at the Colfax Courthouse mobilized the old energies of passion and belief. Among whites, a call to action appealed to the old standards of chivalry and valor. They were quick to associate the challenge to political subordination with other, more visceral passions, suggesting repeatedly, in the words of one participant, that the black men intended "to clean out the white men and take their women folks for wives."⁹ The spirit of unvanquished southern resistance attracted militants from parishes in a 100 mile radius, as dozens of white men formed paramilitary companies.

Blacks, in contrast, would ground their own resistance in political convictions. Their belief in the premise that all men were created equal served to fortify their courage in the face of extreme danger. Black recruiters fanned out among families that had scattered from the slave quarters, urging men and boys to come and fight "for the United States." Their defense of the courthouse embodied the political imperative to choose between liberty and death.

The battle that broke out on Easter Sunday, April 13, 1873, demanded the full measure of conviction of many of its black participants. Crimes of passion, including the execution of an estimated forty-eight black prisoners in its aftermath, sullied the high-minded ideals that white supremacists pretended to uphold. More devastating than the battlefield deaths and the murders, however, was the blow to the cause of law and order that the Colfax Massacre delivered through the courts.

The Ku Klux Klan Enforcement Acts provided a straightforward remedy to the organized violence on display in the Colfax fight. A courageous U.S. attorney in New Orleans, supported by the state militia and a detachment of federal troops, pursued justice with both passion and conviction. His indictment included nearly one hundred names of suspected white participants, charged with conspiring to deprive African Americans in Colfax of their civil and political rights. *U.S. v. Cruikshank*, as the case became known, employed the testimony of some 300 witnesses to the violence and its aftermath, mostly rural African Americans whose voices had never before been heard in court.

The results were disappointing. An underground railroad of southern whites helped the Colfax perpetrators to evade arrest, and the small docket of defendants benefited from the assistance of a first-rate legal team. Even before the convictions were overturned by the Supreme Court, *U.S. v. Cruikshank* had made dead letters of the Enforcement Acts, which had stirred passions and conflicted with traditional beliefs in ways that legal processes could not control.

In the aftermath of Colfax and *Cruikshank*, the southern counterrevolution proceeded with historic and sustained political momentum. Using violence and manipulation, southern whites first diluted and later disallowed the black vote. Equipped with control of political institutions, white supremacists reconstructed the criminal justice system to serve the needs of the white establishment, purging people of color from police forces and the judge's bench, and developing a system of convict leasing that gave slavery a modern face and suppressed wages throughout the South. Segregation and substandard education provided daily affirmations of the social and political hierarchy.

Against the tide of disappointment and withdrawal, African American leaders urged the perseverance of belief. The permanent powers of government are all on our side, declared Frederick Douglass, with passionate conviction, at the dawn of the Jim

Crow Era in the 1880s. "What though for the moment the hand of violence strikes down the negro's rights in the South," he wrote, "those rights will revive, survive, and flourish again."¹⁰

NOTES

¹ The obelisk can be found in the Colfax cemetery off the main square. The marker described in this paper is located outside the Grant Parish Courthouse. Full text and photographs of each and full citation of all primary material in this article can be found in LeeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxi, 168.

² William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic* (New York Harper and Brothers, 1907), 219.

³ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁴ William Edward Burghardt DuBois and David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: A Reader* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 212.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶ Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the Southern States* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 270, 277; Frederick Law Olmsted, "The South: Letters on the Productions, Industry, and Resources of the Slave States," originally published serially in the *New York Daily Times*, reprinted in Charles E. Beveridge, Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Volume 2: Slavery and the South, 1852-1857* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 217.

⁷ Olmsted, "The South," 217.

⁸ Quoted in Bertram Wyatt Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s to 1890s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 184.

⁹ O.W. Watson, "An Incident of My Boyhood Days," Robert DeBlieux Collection, Folder 265, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Northwest Louisiana State University, Natchitoches, LA.

¹⁰ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass in The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*, William L. Andrews, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 296.