

“THE RECONSTRUCTION OF WHITE SUPREMACY: THE KU KLUX KLAN IN  
PIEDMONT NORTH CAROLINA, 1868 TO 1872”

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## **ABSTRACT**

Bradley David Proctor: "The Reconstruction of White Supremacy: the Ku Klux Klan in  
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(Under the direction of W. Fitzhugh Brundage)

This thesis explores the construction of white supremacy through a close study of Ku Klux Klan violence in the piedmont counties of North Carolina during Reconstruction. It has two central goals. First, it explores the ways Klan violence illustrates competing social and political ideas among North Carolinians during Reconstruction. It contends that the localized, episodic violence committed by the Klan simultaneously mirrored and constructed the public form of white supremacy. Second, this thesis aims to explore tensions within the Klan as well as between its members and its victims. The Klan was not a static ideological bloc. Rather, the Ku Klux Klan was a crucible within which ideologies of white supremacy were forged.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

On a snowy February evening in 1870 on Cherry Mountain in Rutherford County, North Carolina, a den of the Ku Klux Klan met to plot a raid. The eight to ten men present ranged from around twenty to upwards of fifty years of age, and they were united by more than their newly-formed secret society. Most had engaged in illegal whiskey distilling—especially Alexander McIntyre, their leader—and they were determined to visit revenge upon some neighbors who had reported their bootlegging to revenue authorities. They also shared a belief in the politics of white supremacy. Several nights previous seven of them had tried out their disguises and tactics by badly whipping Nelson Birge, a local elderly African American man. They told him that it was for his politics—he had voted for Republicans in the previous election—but it had also served as a trial for future attacks.<sup>1</sup>

After exchanging secret passwords and signs, they donned their pale red disguises, covering their faces as well as their bodies. Amos Owens, whose farm was near the meeting spot, had supplied the cloth for six robes, but Decatur DePriest, one of their younger members, had bought his own, deeper red disguise. For this night, they

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<sup>1</sup> The principal source for this essay is Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, 42d Congress, 2d Sess., House. Rept. 22., Vol. 1484-1496 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872). The first volume will be cited as KKK; the second volume, dealing exclusively with North Carolina, as KKK NC; quotes will be identified with the name of the individual's testimony; quotes from supplementary trial transcripts included in the North Carolina volume will be identified as trial testimony. For an overview of the investigation of Congress's Joint Select Committee, see Allen W. Trelease, White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 392-396. For this particular raid and subsequent related violence, see multiple testimonies, KKK NC 16-24, 27-28, 105-108, 111-113, 153, 165-166, 222-229, 306-307, 367, 440, 443; Trelease, White Terror, 336-348; Daniel Wayne Jolley, "The Ku Klux Klan in Rutherford County, North Carolina, 1870-1871," Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1994; Randolph Abbott Shotwell, The Papers of Randolph Abbott Shotwell, ed. J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton and Rebecca Cameron (Raleigh: The North Carolina Historical Commission, 1931), II, 357.

targeted James McGaha and Almon Owens (of unknown relation to Amos), white farmers of small means.<sup>2</sup> Both were rumored to have reported on their attackers' bootlegging, and neither was well liked. Both talked too much and worked too little for the Klan's liking. Around midnight, with plan set (and likely after more than a few swallows of illegal whiskey), the Klansmen descended the mountain to punish those who had ratted them out.

They reached the small McGaha farm near Logan Store, but James was not home. He was out hunting with his son, trying to provide some meat to supplement a winter diet already thin from the lean postwar years. McIntyre's Klansmen pounded on the door and demanded to speak to James. As they burst in, James's wife Malinda protested that he was away. They ransacked the house, looking for James and loudly demanding his shotgun and pistol. Malinda again maintained that James was gone, and had his guns with him hunting. One of the Klansmen roughly shoved her against the fireplace. Only the Klansmen, Malinda, and her four children in the house know exactly what followed, but future accounts maintain she suffered no further injuries or abuse.

The Klansmen, not waiting for James's return, left empty-handed. They then broke into the nearby home of a white widow in search of her elderly black cook, Ibbey Jenkins, who had been the widow's slave before emancipation.<sup>3</sup> After the Klansmen

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<sup>2</sup> McGaha apparently also used the spelling "McGahey." Testimonies to the Joint Select Committee use "McGahey", but court proceedings of trials in Raleigh list his name as "McGaha". The 1870 census recorded James McGaha, age 36, in Logan Store Township; U.S. Census Bureau, [Ninth Census of the United States, 1870](#), Series: M593 Roll: 1159 Page: 122, HeritageQuestOnline.com. Ten years later, the 1880 census recorded James McGahey, born in North Carolina, living in French Lick, Indiana, with children of the same names as those of the James McGaha in the 1870 census; U.S. Census Bureau, [Tenth Census of the United States, 1880](#), Series: T9 Roll: 302 Page: 138, HeritageQuestOnline.com.

<sup>3</sup> The cook's name is not included in subsequent Congressional or trial testimony, but the name "Ibbey Jenkins" is included in an extensive list of victims of Ku Klux Klan violence in North Carolina contained in a 1909 senior thesis. "Ibbey Jenkins" appears directly after Almon Owens and Nelson Burge, and is listed as

broke down the door, they struck the widow on the head and dragged Ibbey Jenkins outside. Jenkins had been targeted because several nights previous she had fired a pistol to scare off what she believed were chicken thieves. They had been Klansmen, who next whipped her severely for the supposed act of aggression. They then proceeded to Almon Owens' home, where again they broke into their victim's house and administered a whipping, informing him that he was being beaten for his laziness and for reporting on their illegal distilling to the revenue authorities.

At some point during the night, James McGaha returned to his farm to find his wife distraught. He quickly gathered friendly neighbors and formed a posse to avenge the assault. He found tracks in the snow leading from his house to the farm of one of his nearby neighbors, Samuel Biggerstaff, one of the Klansmen that night. After storming McGaha's house the Klansmen likely went to Samuel's farm for a brief respite before proceeding on to the other two victims' homes (and given the centrality of alcohol to many Klan raids, perhaps to have another drink). Samuel Biggerstaff's cabin was well known to McGaha's party, not only because of its proximity, but because Samuel's half-brother Aaron Biggerstaff was in the posse attempting to attack the Klansmen. The half-brothers had had a feud dating back to when they took opposite sides in the war. McGaha's posse fired several shots into Samuel Biggerstaff's cabin, to no apparent effect. The Klansmen were either in hiding or had left to whip Ibbey Jenkins and Almon Owens. McGaha's posse disbanded and returned home.

The next morning, Malinda McGaha told James that one of her attackers was Decatur DePriest, whose face she believed she had seen through his homemade mask.

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"colored" and having been "whipped" by the Klan. Donald Fairfax Ray, "The Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina," Senior Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1909, 11-14.

Decatur was a neighbor, farming nearby with his father Randall. Seeking vengeance for the assault upon his wife and home, James McGaha went to the DePriest farm, knocked on the front door, and asked for Decatur. When Decatur—returned from his night riding—opened the door, McGaha shot him dead.

This night of violence in rural Rutherford County, while important in its own right, is also illustrative of most Ku Klux Klan violence committed across the North Carolina piedmont, part of the complex and chaotic struggle of Reconstruction. The Klan attacked both whites like Malinda McGaha and Almon Owens as well as blacks like Nelson Birge and Ibby Jenkins. Klansmen and their victims came from the same towns and often shared ties of blood, social standing, and economic means. Violence during Reconstruction was waged within, and not between, southern communities. As the murder of Decatur DePriest suggest, this violence was not unidirectional. It was disproportionate, however, as far more people were killed by the Klan than killed Klansmen.

This kind of violence was new for the South. Antebellum life had seen much violence—especially within the system of slavery—but it was violence circumscribed by law and norms of practice. Slave owners whipped slaves, but gangs of whites did not don disguises to systematically whip their free neighbors, white and black. Four years of civil war destroyed slavery; three years after war's end, vigilante violence exploded throughout piedmont North Carolina. That violence was willful and explicitly political. The Klansmen from Cherry Mountain—as with members of the Klan throughout the South—used vigilante violence to reorder society around a nascent understanding of a new form of racial hierarchy. The Klan was both a destructive racist terrorist



organization and one that worked to construct an ideology of white supremacy in the aftermath of emancipation.

The end of slavery had removed the legal basis for racial hegemony in the South. Before 1865, slavery had anchored a system of racial oppression and had been the principal unifying structure for southern society. Southern whites had understood freedom to exist in contrast to black slavery. The conservative white planter elite had used slavery to consolidate their control and to politically unite whites of disparate means and interests. Southern states had seceded in order to ensure control over slavery, and many white southerners had fought in the Civil War to defend racial slavery and maintain the long standing social, cultural, and political systems it created and sustained.<sup>4</sup> The course of the war and the abolition of slavery exacerbated existing political, economic, and social differences among southern whites. Southerners openly contested ideas about democracy, citizenship, class differences, and racial hierarchies throughout the war, and particularly after its end. Before 1865 had ended, ex-Confederate states, their legislatures dominated by conservative Democrats, enacted “Black Codes,” myriad laws that attempted to restore antebellum order by creating labor relations little different than slavery—thereby attempting to reestablish a legal basis for racial hegemony. In 1867, the Republican-controlled United States Congress overturned most Black Codes through with the Military Reconstruction Acts. Consequently the struggle for racial hegemony by conservative southern whites shifted from the legal realm to the local community.

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<sup>4</sup> For the intimate relationship between the defense slavery and the motivations of Confederate soldiers, see Joseph T. Glatthaar, *General Lee’s Army: From Victory to Collapse* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney: Free Press, 2008), particularly 29-41.

The emerging ideology of white supremacy offered many white southerners an answer to the perceived problem of a South no longer ordered by racial slavery.<sup>5</sup> White supremacy was not a static construct, carried over from the days of slavery. It had to be recreated and reinterpreted in the aftermath of abolition. It was not yet the mobilizing slogan it would become in the political campaigns of the 1890s. During Reconstruction, conservative whites violently asserted that southern society should be restructured hierarchically in the absence of slavery—with certain white elites reconsolidating social, economic, and political control under an ideology of inherent racial superiority (predicated upon a belief in inherent racial difference). In addition to politically silencing African Americans, white supremacy involved punishing southerners, white and black, who would challenge hierarchies of race, class, and gender. White supremacy was not a conflict between whites and blacks; instead, it provided a coherent organizing principle through which select elite whites could control southern society. Accordingly, many southern whites opposed white supremacy because they opposed both those who stood to rule and the means by which they intended to do so. A political and social fight broke out throughout the South. A major group in the fight for the future of the South was the Ku Klux Klan, which worked to codify the tenets of white supremacy by policing its challengers.

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Kantrowitz has contended that “‘white supremacy,’ more than a slogan and less than a fact, was a social argument and a political program,” in Ben Tillman & the Reconstruction of White Supremacy (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

Given the centrality of Klan violence to Reconstruction, there are surprisingly few scholarly works dedicated to a detailed treatment of the Klan.<sup>6</sup> The two most significant studies are more than twenty years old: Allen Trelease's *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction*, published in 1971, and George Rable's *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction*, published in 1984.<sup>7</sup> Both eschew a discussion of violence as a social phenomenon, episodic and contested in meaning, instead preferring to focus directly on its electoral implications. As with many works on the Reconstruction-era South, neither examine the construction of white supremacy through violence.

This essay explores the construction of white supremacy through a close study of Ku Klux Klan violence in the piedmont counties of North Carolina during Reconstruction. It has two central goals. First, a study of the Ku Klux Klan allows an examination of the multiple players in the fight to make white supremacy: white Republicans, African Americans, conservative white Democrats. The Klan's goals were those of many white southerners—elite, middling, and poor—but not all. North Carolinians, black and white, had strikingly different ideas about the ways race played into politics and their everyday lives. This essay explores the ways Klan violence illustrates competing social and political ideas among North Carolinians during

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<sup>6</sup> More recent books on the Klan itself have been the works of hobbyists or minor treatments. For example, Jerry L. West, *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County, South Carolina, 1865-1877* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, 2002), and J. Michael Martinez, *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan: Exposing the Invisible Empire During Reconstruction* (Lanham; Boulder; New York; Toronto; Plymouth UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007). There have been several articles that examine specific facets of the Klan, but they have not substantively impacted the larger historiography of Reconstruction. For example, Elaine Frantz Parsons, "Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan," *The Journal of American History* (December 2005), 811–836.

<sup>7</sup> George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984).

Reconstruction. It contends that the localized, episodic violence committed by the Klan simultaneously mirrored and constructed the public form of white supremacy.

Second, this essay concurrently aims to explore tensions within the Klan as well as between its members and its victims. Many historians have treated the Klan as a static group with easily understood aims. While the Klan was working to establish electoral victories for Democrats, the larger goals of the construction of white supremacy were not always self-evident; neither were its appeals. The Klan was not a static ideological bloc. Rather, the Ku Klux Klan was a crucible within which ideologies of white supremacy were forged. This essay deals less with the specific mechanisms of the Klan—ranks, passwords, robes and regalia—than on how tensions within the Klan highlight the hard work of the construction of white supremacy.

The first section of this essay explores the rise of the Klan during Reconstruction, its victims and its members. Following that, individual sections will examine three central elements of this battle—politics, gender, and class—exploring how different ideas about race played out during the battle over white supremacy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This essay owes a debt to Thomas C. Holt's admonition to explore the ways "global ideological claims [about race] unfolded at the local level, how they were interpreted, reproduced, or parried in the hands of ordinary people," in "Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History", American Historical Review 100 (Feb 1995), 12. Its focus on non-elite whites' role in solidifying white supremacy owes much to David R. Roediger's argument for "a consideration of the agency of the working class in the social construction of race," in The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 9-10.

## II. THE RISE OF THE KLAN, AND ITS MEMBERSHIP

Widespread vigilante violence was largely unknown during the three years immediately following the Civil War. The numerous battles, national and local, being fought during the postwar years largely remained within the realm of electoral politics. In 1867, rejecting President Andrew Johnson's lenient Reconstruction policies, the United States Congress required the states of the former Confederacy to redraft their state constitutions, and required that African Americans be allowed to vote in the elections for the new constitutional conventions. Conservative Democrats (who had favored secession and categorically opposed black suffrage) controlled the North Carolina legislature and governorship, but the newly drafted state constitution expanded the franchise and opened the state to a wider electorate, including African American men. Republicans looked to gain a sizable and substantial victory in the upcoming 1868 election through a biracial alliance. Conservative Democrats cast about for ways to hold onto their power against the coming Republican wave. To many, violence appeared the most viable political tactic.<sup>9</sup>

The Ku Klux Klan had been founded in Pulaski, Tennessee in early 1866 by the sons of prominent local lawyers and politicians. Quickly evolving from a juvenile imitation of antebellum fraternities to a violent secret political organization, by 1867 the

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<sup>9</sup> For the political battles immediately after the Civil War, see Dan T. Carter, When the War Was Over: The Failure of Self-Reconstruction in the South, 1865-1867 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985). For North Carolina politics during Reconstruction, see Paul D. Escott, Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina: 1850-1900 (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) and William L. Barney, The Making of a Confederate: Walter Lenoir's Civil War (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Klan had captured the imagination of disaffected Tennessee Democrats eager to overthrow the Republican governor. Disguised in ornate robes with hoods, masks, and horns, Tennessee Klansmen rode the countryside after midnight, attacking white and black Republicans. They intimidated voters, killed political leaders, and tried to destabilize black communities.

By spring of 1868 the Klan had spread to North Carolina. In April, David Schenck, a prominent Lincolnton lawyer and former secessionist, approvingly noted in his diary,

“Ku-Klux-Klan” is now organizing through the whole South. Its movements and designs are still so mysterious that no one has a [illegible] idea of its designs; but by cabalistic signs, methods and advertisements they strike terror into the hearts of the blacks, threatening all manner of punishment even to assassination. They dress in white, move exclusively at night, carry skulls and skeletons around use every means to give themselves an unnatural character.<sup>10</sup>

By October, friends had convinced Schenck to join the Klan “to promote the interests of the democratic party.”<sup>11</sup>

In the November 1868 election, however, the Klan’s tactics proved insufficient. Riding a wave of biracial support, Republicans swept to power. Ulysses S. Grant, as president, and William Woods Holden, as governor, came into office with large electoral mandates. David Schenck ranted that Grant’s election “settles for all time negro suffrage upon the South and leaves us a prey for two years at least to Carpet-baggers and ‘Scallawags’—newcomers and vile traitors to their race—and this is long enough to uncivilize and corrupt and bankrupt any Government.”<sup>12</sup> Schenck’s prediction was less

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<sup>10</sup> Diary, David Schenck Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, April 12, 1868.

<sup>11</sup> Testimony of David Schenck, KKK NC, 363.

<sup>12</sup> Diary, David Schenck Papers, SHC, November 21, 1868.

than prescient, as the Klan proved to be an able and effective force in limiting black suffrage and establishing white supremacy.

The Klan was not exclusively a reactionary organization, as evidenced by its existence before 1868, but Republican successes helped fuel its growth. Some years later a prominent Republican noted that “the negro did not become a potential factor in Southern politics until the fall of 1867, and that no governments were organized through his influence or under Republican auspices until the midsummer of 1868.”<sup>13</sup> At that point the Klan was still a nascent political organization, but the 1868 elections changed the southern political landscape. For Democrats to gain substantial electoral victories, they needed to eliminate Republican votes. Violence escalated, concentrated in central piedmont counties in 1868 and 1869, particularly Alamance, Chatham, Caswell, and Orange, while western piedmont counties like Rutherford, Cleveland, Gaston, and Lincoln saw extensive violence later in 1870 and 1871. The Klan was most active in places where Republican support was extant but vulnerable: white majority counties with notable African American populations.

Many similar but independent organizations were collectively lumped under the “Ku Klux” umbrella. In North Carolina these included the Invisible Empire, the White Brotherhood, and the Constitutional Union Guard. Several groups declared themselves “Ku Klux Klan” without approval from the larger organization begun in Tennessee. Groups in the western counties close to the South Carolina border (Rutherford, Lincoln, Gaston, Mecklenburg) were known as the Invisible Empire; they were based on the structure of and shared ties with the Klan in South Carolina. The Constitutional Union

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<sup>13</sup> Albion Winegar Tourgée, *The Invisible Empire*, with Introduction and Notes by Otto H. Olsen (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1989 [1880]), 23.

Guard operated in the eastern part of the state and was considered a separate organization.

At a certain point, parsing who was or was not explicitly “Ku Klux” becomes pedantic. Contemporaries understood the organizations to be loose and varied. In 1871, the United States Congress formed a Joint Select Committee to investigate the violence being committed by the Klan. A United States marshal later testified to the Committee that he had

been in the habit of calling them Ku-Klux; some of them say the name is White Brotherhood, and others, Invisible Empire. I have heard different names for them. They themselves say... that they are not human beings; that they come from the bone-yards of Richmond; that they have been seven years in the bone-yards of Richmond, and have come for vengeance.<sup>14</sup>

These secret societies all shared common roots, goals, and tactics, as well as loose affiliations with each other and with out-of-state counterparts. They drew on a common spectral imagery, attempting to disguise their humanity as well as their identities. They believed their masks, robes, and rhetoric would intimidate their victims and add to their power. They also explicitly linked themselves to the defeated Confederacy. All were part of a shared phenomenon of Reconstruction-era racial violence.

The vast majority of victims of that violence were African Americans like Nelson Birge and Iby Jenkins. Klansmen beat, raped, or murdered thousands of African Americans across the South. Precise numbers are impossible to determine because of the disjointed nature of the Klan and brother organizations, as well as the inability and occasional disinterest of local and federal governments to defend African Americans. A United States marshal deputized to prosecute the Klan throughout North Carolina

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<sup>14</sup> Testimony of Joseph Hester, KKC NC, 17.



described the process of a beating in dry prose: with a tree limb, “it was just to raise up the hand and bring it down... just first one [Klansmen] and then the other would give a few licks.”<sup>15</sup> The physical wounds inflicted by the heavy wooden scourges were severe—as were the social ones. For men and women recently out of slavery, trying to assert their autonomy, a public beating at the hands of whites signaled a loss of personal freedom reminiscent of slavery.<sup>16</sup>

The Klan also attacked elite whites: prominent Republicans, northern carpetbaggers, and southern capitalists. William R. Howle, a railroad contractor from Richmond, Virginia working in Chatham County, had his construction work repeatedly disrupted by Klan attacks. Hiding in the bushes for his life, Howle heard Klansmen exclaim one night that “they intended to make the damned Yankee railroad contractors leave their work; if they didn’t, and if they got hold of them, they would hang them to the first tree they could find.”<sup>17</sup> Though a southerner, Howle was considered an outsider by Chatham County locals, and was told “that if [he] interfered with North Carolina politics they would Ku-Klux [him].”<sup>18</sup> The close imbrication of politics and economics this specific attack illustrates will be explored later; what is notable here is that Klansmen attacked white Republicans across the socioeconomic spectrum.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>16</sup> For a study of African American’s explorations of their newly found freedom, see Tera Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press: 1997). For honor and shame in southern society, see Betram Wyatt-Brown, Honor and Violence in the Old South (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> Testimony of William Howle, KKK NC, 59. Howle was a slaveholder and soldier in the Confederacy, but claimed to oppose slavery because he “thought it was wrong”; after the war he was specifically targeted by the Klan because of his vocal Republicanism and his railroad work; KKK NC, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 51.

Additionally, Republican politicians were specifically targeted. Most infamously, Republican state senator John W. Stephens was assassinated by the Klan in Caswell County. He was also a vocal Republican and strongly advocated for political equality for African Americans. On May 21, 1870, Klansmen lured him into a back room of the Caswell County courthouse, strangled and stabbed him.<sup>19</sup> Stephens's murder, while the most prominent political assassination in North Carolina during Reconstruction, is only one of many instances of violence against politicians.

Stephens's murder is also notable because Stephens was poor; he was born to a poor family and was essentially illiterate.<sup>20</sup> The majority of white victims of the Klan were—like Stephens—from the middling yeomanry, working white farmers with little to no property. These white victims also came from backgrounds lower in social standing. A Republican official later testified to Congress that most of the outrages “were perpetrated upon what might be called persons of not much character; that was the case at first. But here of late I might say they have been inflicted upon all classes; but at first they were confined to people of low character.”<sup>21</sup> As will be explored later, class entailed both economic and social standing.

James and Malinda McGaha and Almon Owens were typical white victims of Klan violence. They had transgressed a societal norm by denouncing bootleggers to authorities. The McGahas were middling farmers, working side-by-side with their children on a farm in Logan Store, North Carolina. For the recent census the McGahas reported no real estate holdings and held only \$100 in personal property—either their

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<sup>19</sup> Trelease, White Terror, 213.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>21</sup> Testimony of J. B. Eaves, KKK NC, 167.

land was not assessed for value, or (perhaps more likely) they lived and farmed on land owned by someone else.<sup>22</sup> Almon Owens was a fifty-year-old farmer whose land had been assessed at \$250 in real estate property and who owned only \$75 worth of personal property.<sup>23</sup> Most known white victims of Klan violence were similar small to middling landowners or tenant farmers working on another family's farm.

The Ku Klux Klan's origins among young elites and the widespread membership of elites have led some historians to claim that "the evidence of [the Klan's terror] campaign points toward an upper-class, not a lower-class, origin and inspiration for the Klan."<sup>24</sup> Certainly elites used Klan violence to protect their political and economic interests. Klan members and contemporaries also stressed the participation of elites in the Klan. A prominent Democrat contacted by Governor Holden to help prevent Klan violence in Orange County testified that the men that he contacted within the Klan were all "of respectable position."<sup>25</sup> However, many contemporaries understood that while elites played a role in leadership, they were not its only members. James M. Justice, a white Republican member of the North Carolina legislature from Rutherfordton, was attacked by the Klan and nearly hanged because of a speech he made denouncing the elite leadership of the Klan. He had said that instead of "the youths of the country, the hard-laboring plow-boys" being imprisoned for violence, elites should be. Justice explicitly connected secession and the emerging battle about white supremacy. He claimed that

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<sup>22</sup> Census 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1159 Page: 122.

<sup>23</sup> Census 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1159 Page: 111.

<sup>24</sup> Paul D. Escott, "White Republicanism and Ku Klux Klan Terror: The North Carolina Piedmont During Reconstruction," in Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Charles L. Flynn, Jr., eds., Race, Class, and Politics in Southern History: Essays in Honor of Robert F. Durden (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1989), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Testimony of Pride Jones, KKK NC, 12.

the same secession leaders had organized this midnight and exceedingly dangerous organization, and were pushing the poor men, the laboring men, forward to commit these deeds, and that when the day of trial came their secession leaders would step behind the curtain and say, "I had nothing to do with it," and leave the poor boys to suffer.<sup>26</sup>

Many poor and middling whites—the "hard-laboring plow-boys" to whom Justice referred—perpetrated Klan violence. A. Webster Shaffer, the United States commissioner in Raleigh who led the statewide investigations into the Klan, testified to the Joint Select Committee that "there is none of them, generally, that have any property of any amount." Philadelph Van Trump, a Democrat from Ohio opposed to Republican Reconstruction policy, asked Shaffer to clarify: "None of whom?" Shaffer responded, "None of these parties that go about the country disguised." Van Trump pressed further: "You say these Ku-Klux are generally men without property?" Shaffer responded, "I refer to these persons who go about in the country in this way, who belong to the organization, and who take an active part in it."<sup>27</sup>

These Klansmen of little to no property were often neighbors to their victims, as the rural world of Reconstruction-era North Carolina was dominated by personal and intimate relationships.<sup>28</sup> Even newcomers to North Carolina knew many of their attackers personally, with one telling the Joint Select Committee, "Your strongest friends in the day-time are your enemies at night; they will drink toddy with you in the day-time, and Ku-Klux you at night."<sup>29</sup> Victims, black and white alike, could almost always

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<sup>26</sup> Testimony of James M. Justice, KKK NC, 115.

<sup>27</sup> Testimony of A. Webster Shaffer, KKK NC, 34.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the personal world of the rural South during the later Jim Crow-era, see Mark Schultz, The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Testimony of William Howle, KKK NC, 62.

identify several of their attackers despite robed disguises. The personal world of rural North Carolina meant that victims and perpetrators were familiar with each other across racial lines. One black victim could easily identify his attackers, having grown up amongst many of them, and he estimated that most Klansmen he knew lived no farther than four miles from his farm.<sup>30</sup>

As evidenced by Samuel and Aaron Biggerstaff, the Klan even pitted brother against brother. James M. Justice testified that Lafayette and Spencer Eaves, of high standing in Rutherford, were also divided; Lafayette was a “respectable” merchant reputed to be a local Klan chief, and Spencer was a “very decided” Republican “in great terror of his life” because of his politics.<sup>31</sup> Previous community tensions also exacerbated Klan tensions. Aaron Biggerstaff had been sued by Adolphus DePriest in 1870; though the existing court records do not contain the basis or details of the suit, no doubt tensions from Aaron’s support of Union troops during the war and outspoken Republicanism did him little favors with many of his neighbors.<sup>32</sup>

Victims and Klan members were connected beyond familiarity or family. They often were of common economic standing. A preliminary analysis of men mentioned in the Joint Select Committee testimony reveals that the Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan, far from being confined to elite North Carolinians, contained a great diversity of members. Ranging from landless tenant farmers to pillars of the white community, Reconstruction-era Klan members were anything but socioeconomically monolithic.

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<sup>30</sup> Testimony of Essie Harris, KKK NC, 91.

<sup>31</sup> Testimony of James M. Justice, KKK NC, 147-148.

<sup>32</sup> Adolphus DePriest vs. Aaron Biggerstaff, Rutherford County Superior Court, Minute Docket, 1869-1876, North Carolina State Archives. The suit was dismissed in a special term of the court in 1870.

Most names of rank-and-file Klansmen mentioned in the Congressional report were young men of less than \$2000 combined real and personal estate; many were poorer.<sup>33</sup> Julius Fortune, who raided the home of James and Malinda McGaha in Rutherford County, joined the Klan at age 17; in 1870 he was 18 and working his father's farm valued at \$1400.<sup>34</sup> Edward Cooley, who participated in the large Klan raid on James M. Justice in Rutherfordton, lived in Hickory Grub; he was a 23-year-old farmer living in the unvalued home of his mother Elizabeth Cooley.<sup>35</sup>

Though termed "one-horse plowers," many were too poor to afford horses. Julius Fortune testified that in the raid on Justice, Amos Owens lent three of his horses to younger, poorer Klansmen who owned none.<sup>36</sup> Owens had also donated the cloth for the original robes used in the Birge, McGaha, Jenkins, and Almon Owens raids. That Amos Owens lent his horses hints at the social connections existing between elite and nonelite; these poorer Klansmen were indebted to their economic and social superiors, and were used by these elites to accomplish political goals.

Though the work of non-elite Klansmen was often consonant with the larger aims of the conservative elite, they were not always in perfect harmony. Tensions were rife between whites of similar political beliefs but different class backgrounds, yet together they worked to make white supremacy. Both the process of constructing white

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<sup>33</sup> The roughly one hundred names of Klansmen given by witnesses in the testimony of the KKK NC ought not be considered comprehensive, but those that have entered the public record are the only source available to investigate. A precursory demographic analysis suggests that the Ku Klux Klan shared a roughly similar socioeconomic makeup as the Army of Northern Virginia as profiled in Glatthaar, General Lee's Army, 473-475. Both the Klan and Lee's army drew heavily from small to middling landowners.

<sup>34</sup> Trial testimony of Julius Fortune, KKK NC, 440; Census 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1159 Page: 46.

<sup>35</sup> Trial testimony of M.M. Jolly, KKK NC, 428; Census 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1159 Page: 163.

<sup>36</sup> Trial testimony of Julius Fortune, KKK NC, 441. Owens had some \$2000 in combined property; Census 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1159 Page: 67.

supremacy and the tensions between Klansmen operated in the concurrent realms, a central one of which was political.

### III. POLITICS AND RACE

One night around Christmas, 1870, members of the Ku Klux Klan attacked Essie Harris, an African American tenant farmer in Chatham County.<sup>37</sup> They broke into his house and stole his shotgun. The Klansmen disarmed several other African Americans that night, occasionally stopping to drink and dance to a fiddle. Several weeks later, Harris's wife suddenly woke him. His dog was barking. The dog almost never barked at strangers; the last time it began barking inexplicably was the first Klan attack. A crowd of some forty or fifty white men, most dressed in red-trimmed white robes and masks with horns and grotesque painted faces, again approached Harris's cabin. Harris barricaded the door with a sack of corn, grabbed his new shotgun—one procured after the first raid—and sought cover.

After spewing verbal abuse at Harris, Klansmen began firing. Bullets and shot tore into the wooden walls of the cabin and rained splinters down on Harris's terrified wife and children, who remained unharmed. Harris was not so lucky; he was hit nine times, sustaining injuries in his foot, leg, shoulder, and arm. But he still had his gun and his life. After shooting for nearly an hour and a half, the crowd believed it had slain the cabin's inhabitants. Leaders of the raid selected Joe Clark to enter and remove the bodies. A twenty-four-year-old illiterate tenant farm laborer and illegal whiskey distiller,

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<sup>37</sup> For the specifics of the attack on Essie Harris, see multiple testimonies, KKK NC, 32-35, 50, 74-77, 86-102.



Clark was new to this kind of work.<sup>38</sup> Joined by friend and fellow bootlegger Barney Burgess, Clark began knocking down the barricaded door. Harris contemplated shooting. He had previously filled his gun with a light load for hunting squirrels, and knew it probably would not kill the men terrorizing his family. He feared no gun could. Later testifying to the Joint Select Committee, he recalled, “They always said in my country that a man could not kill a Ku-Klux; they said that they could not be hit; that if they were, the ball would bounce back and kill them. I thought though that I would try it, and see if my gun would hit one.”<sup>39</sup> As the door opened, Harris pulled the trigger. The scattered shot hit Clark in the chest and Burgess in the eye. The Klansmen fled, startled by Harris’s resistance, taking the injured men with them.

At first glance, the attack on Essie Harris might seem to suggest little about the construction of white supremacy beyond merely serving as an example of racialized violence: white Klansmen attacking an African American. Harris knew well the two men he shot, having “bought many a quart of whisky” from Burgess, so his story might seem to best demonstrate the close, personal relationships between victims and perpetrators of Klan violence.<sup>40</sup> It might also appear to be more atypical than representative. Harris’s account survives with incredible detail because he was one of few African Americans to testify to the Joint Select Committee of Congress about an attack. He was also lucky to have lived to successfully defend his family.

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<sup>38</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1129 Page: 110, HeritageQuestOnline.com.

<sup>39</sup> Testimony of Essie Harris, KKK NC, 89-90.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

The two attacks on Essic Harris, however, strikingly illuminate central features of the political fight for white supremacy. They well demonstrate some of the expressly political implications of everyday activities of African Americans during Reconstruction. During Reconstruction, politics were understood to represent both electoral concerns and wider power relations. Gun ownership and the use of guns for self-defense were prevalent among African Americans in piedmont North Carolina, and many African Americans, male and female, had relatively easy access to guns. Ibbey Jenkins was trusted by her former owner to use a gun to scare off supposed chicken thieves. African Americans less well armed resorted to other kinds of defense; a Republican legislator testified that in Cleveland County, “the negroes have killed two or three with axes when they attacked them. I say two or three; that is the general impression.”<sup>41</sup> For people recently out of slavery, violent self-defense ought to be considered a political act.

Additionally, contemporaries debated reasons for the attack upon Essic Harris. Republicans testifying to the Joint Select Committee stressed that Harris had a strong reputation in the local community; he was known throughout the county as “a man of the best reputation, always quiet and minding his own business, and never troubling anybody.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, and perhaps surprisingly, debates over how precisely political Klan violence was dominated both contemporary and early historiographic discussions about the Klan. In Congressional hearings, witnesses and members of the Joint Select Committee sparred over whether or not the organization was political. Some on both sides denied that it was a political organization.

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<sup>41</sup> Testimony of James M. Justice, KKK NC, 137.

<sup>42</sup> Testimony of A. Webster Shaffer, KKC NC, 50.

Yet contemporaries understood that any attack upon an African American—whether a prominent politician or a hardworking family man—had significant political implications. An Orange County Democrat who did not participate in the Klan testified that “the fact that [violence] assumed a party aspect was simply owing to this: The persons who were hung or otherwise punished were negroes, and was done by white people.”<sup>43</sup> Despite being factually incorrect in claiming that only blacks were targeted, this connection of politics and race was reasonable, as the two were intimately linked. A. Webster Shaffer, the United States commissioner in Raleigh who helped prosecute many Klansmen, echoed the claim that the political goal of the Klan was “the driving of the whole negro race out of the country... the disorganization of the people, white and black.”<sup>44</sup>

Klan contemporaries, early chroniclers, and modern historians alike have posited the Klan as emerging in response to the formation of the Union League, a political group that advocated for the rights of recently freed slaves and supported the Republican Party.<sup>45</sup> Klansmen specifically targeted the Union League, black politicians, and black community leaders, and the Klan torched black churches, schools, and homes. The frequency with which the Klan attacked black social and political institutions demonstrates both the extensiveness of black political organizing as well as the

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<sup>43</sup> Testimony of Pride Jones, KKK NC, 4.

<sup>44</sup> Testimony of A. Webster Shaffer, KKK NC, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Testimony of David Schenck, KKK NC, 362; Walter L Fleming, Introduction to J.C. Lester & D.L. Wilson, Ku Klux Klan: Its Origins, Growth, and Disbandment (New York: AMS Press, 1971 [1905]), 24; Steven Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003), 265-272.

perception on the part of conservative whites that such work was threatening enough to warrant violent response.

Most importantly, the Klansmen attacking Harris knew very well that they were engaging in political violence, the point of which was to reassert elite white political control. Before they attacked Harris's cabin on the second raid, they visited his neighbor Sampson Perkins, another African American farmer. They disarmed him as they had Harris weeks before. Harris later testified that the Klan berated Perkins by asking, "This is a white man's country; do you know it?" He answered, "Yes, sir; I know it." Then they said, "We want all the guns; we are going into another war."<sup>46</sup> The explicit purpose of Klan violence was to reestablish white political power in the face of the perceived threat of black independence. Their chief strategies were to weaken black resistance and undermine black community ties. Despite the three years between the end of the Civil War and the outbreak of widespread Klan violence, Klansmen also claimed their work as a direct extension of the Confederate war struggle.

This conscious expression of the political work of the Klan was reflected in the very oaths often taken by Klansmen when being sworn into its ranks. The first two tenets of the constitution of the Ku Klux Klan in Rutherford County were:

- I. I am on the side of justice and humanity and constitutional liberty, as bequeathed to us by our forefathers in its original purity.
- II. I reject and oppose the principles of the radical party.<sup>47</sup>

Upon joining the Klan, then, members not only were joining a popular social organization, nor were they joining a mindlessly violent mob. They were joining a

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<sup>46</sup> Testimony of Essie Harris, KKK NC, 92.

<sup>47</sup> KKK, 25.

political organization for specific racial and electoral concerns. In alluding to an “original purity” of the constitution, they were explicitly celebrating a pure, white government—one originally coexistent with slavery. In slavery’s absence, they were attempting to create a society with African Americans absent from the body politic.

The notion of a white-only government was used as the principal pitch to attract members. A young man in the Cherry Mountain den that raided the McGahas, Ibby Jenkins, and Almon Owens testified that when he was sworn into the order, Alexander McIntyre “came and tied a handkerchief over my face, and said if I wanted to belong to a white man’s government I must be blindfolded and take the oath while I was blindfolded.”<sup>48</sup> Despite knowing intimately well those swearing them in, white men interested in joining the Klan had to express their loyalty while ostensibly blind to their compatriots’ identities. Their pledge was given not to their friends and neighbors, but instead to the larger political appeal of a “white man’s government”—understood to be a white conservative Democratic one.

While a central feature of the racial hierarchy conservative Democrats were constructing entailed violently removing African Americans like Sampson Perkins and Essie Harris from society’s political realm, building white supremacy also required attacking whites who disagreed with their political program. The violent attacks of the Klan upon white Republicans suggest two things: one, that the “white man’s government” envisioned by the Klan did not include every white man, and that many whites opposed the idea of a narrow, racially pure body politic. Unsurprisingly, many victims of Klan violence were members of the various Republican political organizations

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<sup>48</sup> Trial testimony of Jason Wethrow [Wetherow], KKK NC, 446.

that dotted the western piedmont of North Carolina. The Union League, as well as Unionist and Republican groups like the Red Strings or Heroes of America, had substantial numbers of yeoman and poorer whites as members. Several of these political organizations were for whites only, and the Republican Party at the time was not advocating for social equality between blacks and whites.

Many white southerners did favor an expanded electorate, however, and many disagreed strongly with the political tenets that the Klan was using to construct white supremacy. Some believed that only a political alliance of blacks and whites would solve the problems facing the postbellum South. Historian Paul D. Escott has described North Carolina piedmont Republicanism during the early years of Reconstruction as “a progressive social force” that “took the opportunity presented by Reconstruction to ally with black voters and work for a more open, more democratic society.”<sup>49</sup> In the 1868 and 1872 elections, in piedmont counties, whites voting Republican ranged from about one fourth to as much as one half of the total white male populace.<sup>50</sup> These white men were acting in direct opposition to the Klansmen who wanted white Republicans and blacks of all political persuasion removed from politics. Many poor and middling whites shared deep anger at the planter elite whom they blamed for drawing the South into an unwise and destructive war for secession. Some even went so far as to see commonalities with African Americans as victims of the planter elite.

Klansmen were explicit in their targeting of these Republican political organizations. David Schenck of Lincolnton, testifying to the Joint Select Committee,

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<sup>49</sup> Escott, “White Republicanism,” 5. See also Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 281-345.

<sup>50</sup> Escott, “White Republicanism,” 11-12.

claimed that “a great many ignorant white men were attracted to them, and I was informed that this ‘Invisible Empire,’ whose name I did not know then, was gotten up as a counteracting movement to these republican societies.”<sup>51</sup> Aaron Biggerstaff, a member of the McGaha posse, was a prominent and vocal member of the Heroes of America. In early 1865, he helped Federal cavalry steal horses throughout Rutherford County. This action prompted the fierce feud with his half-brother Samuel; it was to Samuel’s house the tracks in the snow led, and into Samuel’s empty house that Aaron Biggerstaff and James McGaha fired in retribution for the attack on Malinda. Contemporaries gave Aaron’s feud with Samuel, his membership in the Heroes of America, and his vocal support of the Republican Party as reasons for the multiple attacks he later suffered at the hands of the Klan.<sup>52</sup> Much of the violence in Rutherford County stemmed from the McGaha and Biggerstaff affairs, where political and familial tensions, kindled during the Civil War, erupted into violence during Reconstruction.

Klansmen targeted individual white Republicans who they saw as vocally supporting political power for African Americans. James M. Justice, a white legislator in Rutherford County, was dragged out of bed one evening, clubbed on his head, and threatened with execution by Klansmen. He later testified that the leader of the mob excoriated him, saying, “He thought it would do me good to bleed, to take the negro equality blood out of me.” Justice argued and begged for his life. The crowd

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<sup>51</sup> Testimony of David Schenck, KKK NC, 385.

<sup>52</sup> Multiple testimonies, KKK NC, 21, 112, 146, & 170-171. Biggerstaff was a landowner with combined property valued around \$1300 in 1870, but was he not an elite; Jolley, “Ku Klux Klan in Rutherford County,” 23 and Census 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1159 Page: 111. His prominence and political influence in Rutherford County was also contested, with Klan opponents characterizing him as an important Republican while supporters claimed that his influence was minimal; see testimonies of J.B. Carpenter, KKK NC, 21 and Plato Durham, KKK NC, 307.

stopped and had a conversation with me about my political course. They asked if I was not ashamed of being of that party that put negroes to rule and govern. They said the white men would not suffer such things; that I had been warned; that my course would not longer be borne by the whites of this country; that they had brought me there to put me to death.<sup>53</sup>

White Klansmen denied that Justice was one of “the whites of this country” because of his political “course.” Rather than seeing black suffrage as a democratic expansion of the franchise, conservative whites claimed that black suffrage was intended to allow African Americans to “rule and govern.” Klansmen’s response was to try to prevent blacks from voting through a widespread campaign of violence. William Howle, whose railroad was raided in Chatham County, testified that during the raid he “heard [Klansmen] repeatedly damn the negro, say he should not vote, and that they intended to keep him from the polls.”<sup>54</sup>

Members of the Ku Klux Klan also understood that politics extended beyond the electoral realm. They were concerned with the state’s involvement in their social lives. Klansmen targeted many African Americans and whites alike for violations of social rules, only one of which was reporting illegal whiskey distilling to revenue authorities. Many Klansmen were bootleggers, and throughout the piedmont, reporting neighbors for illegal whiskey distilling could result in a Ku Klux raid.<sup>55</sup> The Klan did not protect every bootlegger, however; in fact, there were reports that illegally making and selling whiskey—without Klan protection—could prompt Klan violence. One Republican testified that an “old [white] woman who was Ku-Kluxed had been selling whisky to the

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<sup>53</sup> Trial testimony of James M. Justice, KKK NC, 419.

<sup>54</sup> Testimony of William Howle, KKK NC, 63.

<sup>55</sup> For the Klan’s role in bootlegging whiskey, see Bruce E. Stewart, “When Darkness Reigns Then Is The Hour To Strike: Moonshining, Federal Liquor Taxation, and Klan Violence in Western North Carolina, 1868-1872,” North Carolina Historical Review, Vol. 80, No. 4. (October 2003), 453-474.



neighbors to help support herself, for the country is so poor that without some means of that kind some of the people would be almost starved.”<sup>56</sup> An elderly farmer in Chatham County testified that “there was another act of violence done about Jonesborough ... on the edge of Moore County.” The Klan whipped John Campbell, among others; “Campbell kept a little grog-shop on the road, and he was a cripple. I think they went there one night and whipped them.”<sup>57</sup> The Klan also abducted a white man known as Mr. Hanks, described as “a poor old man. He is this kind of a man: He would come and build you a right good house; and if you gave him a little money to get drunk on, he would stay with you perhaps a year or two.”<sup>58</sup> The social control that the Klan attempted to instill through violence extended beyond concerns with whiskey, as will be explored in significant depth in the following sections. It is important to stress here that Klan violence can be understood as political in several iterations.

How, then, is the nexus of race and politics during Reconstruction to be interpreted, and what was the Klan’s role in it? First, it is clear that some conservative white southerners were willing to commit serious acts of violence and terrorism in order to remove African Americans from politics by preventing them from voting and punishing those working to gain political power. Second, conservative whites saw politics in a broad sense, as members of the Ku Klux Klan exercised violence in order to effect social as well as electoral concerns. They attempted to stop African Americans from arming and defending themselves, and attempted to regulate the relationship between bootleg whiskey and the authority of the state.

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<sup>56</sup> Testimony of William Howle, KKK NC, 64.

<sup>57</sup> Testimony of Elias Bryan, KKK NC, 75.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

White Republicans had vastly different ideas about the relationship between race and political power. While many whites felt that African Americans were social or biological inferiors, some white Republicans saw them as political allies or equals. The existence of the common enemy of the Ku Klux Klan suggests potential political and ideological links between black and white North Carolinians. Many were attacked and some, like John W. Stephens, died for the suggestion of political racial equality. These stories also convincingly demonstrate that many African Americans believed that voting was a constitutional right, and that they supported the political party that most agreed with that principle. They took active steps to protect themselves privately and assert their political rights publicly. Either of these steps put their lives at considerable risk.

As suggested by the stories of violence resulting from bootlegging, it is clear that political concerns during Reconstruction extended beyond the ballot box. Social control formed a chief concern of the Ku Klux Klan and an essential part of the political establishment of white supremacy. A concurrent and related part of that process was establishing new rules governing gender and sexuality.

#### IV. RACE AND GENDER

For most attacks committed by the Ku Klux Klan, few details survive beyond a skeletal sketch of the events. A typical victim was Frances Gilmore, a twenty-year-old black mother of two who lived near the town of Oakland.<sup>59</sup> One night Klansmen broke into her house, whipped her, and stripped her naked. They beat her with a board, scarred her with a knife, and burned off her pubic hair with a match.<sup>60</sup> She was fortunate to survive the attack.

Even without surviving contemporary contextualization or explanation of the motivation of the Klansmen, this incident, while notable for its ferocity, fits within most understandings of gendered violence during Reconstruction.<sup>61</sup> As previously established, members of the Ku Klux Klan targeted African Americans for the political purpose of terrorizing blacks to weaken community ties. Perhaps the attack on Frances Gilmore was undertaken for electoral reasons—though as a woman she could not vote, she could have been a vocal Republican advocating for black political involvement. Or perhaps white Klansmen attacked Frances Gilmore purely for perverse sexual stimulation. Much Klan violence against women was heavily sexualized, and witnesses to the Joint Select Committee testified of widespread violence and rape by the Klan done to African

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<sup>59</sup> Census of 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1129 Page: 139.

<sup>60</sup> Testimony of A. Webster Shaffer, KKK NC, 36-37.

<sup>61</sup> See particularly Hannah Rosen, Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

American women. Essie Harris testified that Klan rape of black women had become so prevalent that “it has got to be an old saying.”<sup>62</sup>

Rape involved power as well as sex; in attacking African American women after emancipation, white Klansmen were building a crucial piece of the larger structure of white supremacy. During the antebellum period, white men could rape black women with legal impunity—so long as their victims were chattel property.<sup>63</sup> As with other forms of Klan violence, sexualized violence during Reconstruction took a previously unusual form: extralegal vigilante violence, with mobs of whites attacking free blacks. In so doing, conservative white southern men were asserting a new form of racial hierarchy that echoed back to certain features of slavery, including the rape of black women.

Yet another aspect of Klan violence during Reconstruction that was new to the South was widespread violence against white women. This trend is illustrated by an attack on another young woman in Chatham County, North Carolina, also named—apparently by pure happenstance—Frances Gilmore. This other Frances Gilmore of Chatham County was a young white woman around eighteen years old, who stayed with her mother Sarah and several siblings. They lived close to the new Chatham Railroad line being built near Cape Fear. One night a very large group of Klansmen broke into the rail yard, “firing right and left, and hooting and hallooing.”<sup>64</sup> Scaring off the contractors and workers, the Klansmen proceeded to the nearby house in which Gilmore was sleeping.

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<sup>62</sup> Testimony of Essie Harris, KKK NC, 100.

<sup>63</sup> For example, see Deborah Gray White, Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South, revised edition (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

<sup>64</sup> Testimony of A. Webster Shaffer, KKK NC, 37.

The Klansmen found two African American men lying on pallets inside; one they dragged outside and whipped, the other they shot and wounded as he attempted to run. The white women in the house were whipped. The Klan dragged out a young woman (likely Frances Gilmore, though some accounts are unclear); “they took her clothes off, whipped her very severely, and then lit a match and burned her hair off, and made her cut off herself the part that they did not burn off with the match.”<sup>65</sup> The connection by name of these two women is a strange historical coincidence; the similarity of the violence committed against them is not.<sup>66</sup>

In contrast to the story of the black Frances Gilmore, the attack upon the white woman of the same name attracted more commentary in testimonies to the Joint Select Committee. The Klansmen’s motivation for the targeting of the white Frances Gilmore was suggested by Elias Bryan, a white Chatham County farmer. Bryan referred to it as “the Buchanan affair,” after a white male neighbor also whipped that night. In discussing a woman attacked (most likely Sarah Gilmore, Frances’s mother), Bryan related that:

She is an old woman who married and had a good many children. About fifteen years ago she had a black child. About three or four years ago she was very poor... She put up a kind of a distillery, making about a gallon of whisky at a time. Her visitors are mostly colored men.

Question: Her house was frequented mostly by colored men?

Answer: Yes, sir...

...Question: She was a woman of very bad character?

Answer: Yes, sir.

Question: What was the character of the girls she had about her?

Answer: I reckon they were about the same.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> It is possible that A. Webster Shaffer, the United States commissioner assigned to prosecute the Klan in North Carolina, conflated the details of the two cases in his testimony. Shaffer believed Frances was the older woman of the house, but census records suggest that Sarah was older and that Frances was one of her daughters; Census of 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1129 Page: 37. However, that these two women were attacked is separately corroborated by the testimonies of Essie Harris, in the case of the black Frances Gilmore, KKK NC, 99, and Elias Bryan, in the case of the white Frances Gilmore, KKK NC, 74-75.

Question: Do you think it made much difference whether white or black men came about there?

Answer: No, sir.

Question: Are not those women generally considered as strumpets?

Answer: Yes, sir, certainly.

Question: The house is a house of ill fame and a drinking house, frequented mostly by colored people?

Answer: Yes, sir, that is what the neighbors say. Her neighbors are generally what we call “one-horse plowers”—honest, straight-forward citizens. She is right in the center of them.<sup>67</sup>

This attack was not unique; several white women who slept with black men were whipped or raped. Members of the Klan abhorred the idea of a poor white woman living amongst “straight-forward” white citizens and engaging in interracial prostitution and unsanctioned distilling. In attacking both Frances Gilmores, the Ku Klux Klan was engaging in a process of constructing a new, clear racial hierarchy through policing those who challenged gender and sexual norms.

Social and sexual intimacy between whites and blacks directly challenged white supremacy. Social intimacy could foreseeably lead to realizations of commonalities and political collaboration. As importantly to advocates of white supremacy, the possibility that white women might bear black children would undermine the assumption of race as a strictly biological construction and problematize an assumed distinct line between white and black. Accordingly, the Ku Klux Klan, in working to construct and solidify white supremacy, violently attacked those who challenged the boundaries of race through social and sexual interaction. That the Klan used violence against white and black women suggests the level to which the structure they were constructing was both unnatural and new to the South. In abolition’s aftermath, then, the Ku Klux Klan worked to establish

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<sup>67</sup> Testimony of Elias Bryan, KKK NC, 84.

the boundaries of acceptable gendered and sexual interactions between whites and blacks through the use of vigilante violence.

Recent scholarship has given significant attention to the role of gender during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Many of these works have allowed scholars to tease apart the interconnected threads of race, class, and politics, and they have helped to get at the root of the way people conceptualized their world during Reconstruction. Some works have focused on interracial sex, some on sexual violence against blacks or whites, and others on the changing definitions and implications of manliness and femininity during the wider period.<sup>68</sup> The picture that emerges is one of a society whose rules of social and particularly sexual interactions remained in flux. What remains largely unexplored in the literature is the Klan's direct role in this process. The deployment of gender in the construction of white supremacy during Reconstruction needs further exploration.

As with the political realm, members of the Klan understood the issues of race and gender to be inseparable, and were explicit about their goals. Thomas Tate, a member of the Horse Creek Den of the Invisible Empire in South Carolina, joined North Carolina Klansmen in the raid on James M. Justice. Called to testify in the trial of those arrested for the raid, Tate declared the purpose of the Klan as "to keep down the colored un's from mixing with the whites." When asked how, Tate responded, "To keep them from marrying... and to keep them from voting."<sup>69</sup> This imbrication of the electoral and

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<sup>68</sup> See, for instance, Martha Hodes, White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), Diane Miller Sommerville, Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), Laura Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), and Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>69</sup> Trial testimony of Thomas Tate, KKK NC, 430.

the social reflects the explicit goals of Klansmen—both elite and poor—to overturn biracial Republicanism, establish Democratic white supremacy, and ensure sexual separation of black and white.

Issues of gender were also specifically written into the constitution used by the Invisible Empire in both South Carolina and western North Carolina. Members swore, “Females, friends, widows, and their households shall be the special object of my care and protection.”<sup>70</sup> James M. Justice, a Republican state representative from Rutherfordton attacked and beaten by the Klan, testified that he knew of one raid he considered apolitical, when a man was scourged “for being a very dissipated man, for having maltreated his wife, and for having associated with bad persons.”<sup>71</sup>

As dramatically evidenced by the attacks on the two France Gilmores, this protection did not extend to all women. Black and white women who seemed to be in violation of social and political norms were subject to considerable violence, as were men. Henderson Judd was attacked in Chatham County; he had “been a very wealthy man; but he always slept with one of his negro women, and got children by her, and is looked upon as rather a low character,” both before and after the war.<sup>72</sup> Judd, while not unusual among elite white men for having a sexual relationship with a black slave or servant, had abrogated his right to respectability by continuing to live with her after the war. Challenging a direct sexual separation of black from white, he was considered “low” and subject to violence. The Ku Klux Klan, as with many perpetrators of southern

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<sup>70</sup> KKK, 25.

<sup>71</sup> Testimony of James M. Justice, KKK NC, 104.

<sup>72</sup> Testimony of Elias Bryan, KKK NC, 78.



vigilante violence, mobilized violence to eliminate sexual and social challenges to racial hierarchies.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to punishing white women who slept with black men, part of this process involved constructing the myth that black men wanted to rape white women. Recent scholars have argued that the myth of black rape was still inchoate during the period of Reconstruction, not yet codified into the program it became in the late nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> Yet even in its nascent stages, to some conservative whites the threat of sexualized violence on the part of African Americans was also justification for Klan violence. Conservative apologists for the Klan justified its existence by claiming it policed black crime, particularly the crime of black rape of white women. Pride Jones, a conservative Democrat who did not actively participate in the Klan, claimed in congressional testimony that:

the poorer classes in the community, women who carry blackberries, cherries, eggs, butter, and things of that sort to town to sell, were afraid to go to town by themselves; they would only go when they could form large companies for mutual protection. Formerly, and even now, they could go singly just when they were ready. But just about that time they were afraid to go to town alone for fear of being insulted or ravished by negroes.<sup>75</sup>

Jones's contention is one of very few to mention the threat of black rape to Congress; it is possible that the rumored fear of black male sexual rapacity was just beginning to be systematically mobilized. Perhaps Jones was using rumors of fear to partially justify the outrages of the Ku Klux Klan, and most white women might have had no such fears.

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<sup>73</sup> Wyatt-Brown, Honor and Violence, 154.

<sup>74</sup> See in particular Hodes, White Women, Black Men and Sommerville, Rape and Race.

<sup>75</sup> Testimony of Pride Jones, KKK NC, 8.

It is also possible that some poor and middling white women did experience a fear of black rape. Though there seems to be no evidence of white women actively committing Klan violence, many supported, at least tacitly, Klan violence. Jones said as much in his testimony. When asked if the Klan “would have gone to the extent they did,” if many whites had denounced the outrages, Jones replied, “I think it probable they would not.”<sup>76</sup> The role of conservative white women in the construction of white supremacy during Reconstruction needs further exploration.

From this survey, several conclusions about Reconstruction become more clear. Conservative white southerners, along with believing that African Americans were unfit for participation in the body politic, believed African Americans were unfit partners with whom white North Carolinians could have consensual sex. Blacks and whites who violated social, sexual, and gender norms were targeted for violent punishment—sometimes sexualized punishment. Some whites, however, believed that living with and having sex with black southerners was desirable and acceptable enough to risk violence on the part of the Klan. Others felt that blacks were social inferiors, but all agreed that opposition to Klan violence necessitated an opposition to extralegal violence in defense of social standards. Some African Americans believed that living with and having sex with white southerners was acceptable on an individual basis. Others felt it was sufficiently desirable to risk violence on the part of the Ku Klux Klan.

The Klan used violence to exercise a degree of social control in regard to gender roles and norms of sexuality in its work to establish white supremacy. Wrapped up in

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<sup>76</sup> Testimony of Pride Jones, KKK NC, 4.

this realm is another measure of social control, and another facet of the ideology of white supremacy: class hierarchies and social standing, which the next section addresses.

## V. LABOR, CLASS, & RESPECTABILITY

Members of the Ku Klux Klan were working to construct a new racial hierarchy for the South, one that entailed political, social, and sexual rules. Additional branches of that hierarchy were twin aspects of class: labor relations and social standing. As several scholars have documented, violence during Reconstruction was used to construct a new system of labor in slavery's aftermath.<sup>77</sup> African Americans were often attacked for being insufficiently hard-working. A white Republican from Rutherford testified that one of his conservative neighbors believed Klan violence was necessary for labor purposes:

An old gentleman with whom I had been in the habit of staying told me that this Ku-Klux was a capital thing, that they could not live without it; that the boys did some bad deeds sometimes which they ought not to do, but that the organization was a good thing, and was necessary to control the negroes. When he told me this it was a very cool morning, and he said, "If it was not for them we would not be sitting here by this fire this morning, for the negroes would take it away from us." Said he, "The negroes are working well, and the fear of the Ku-Klux keeps them about right and proper." His idea was that the Ku-Klux was essential to the welfare of the community; but he condemned some of the bad deeds that they had done.<sup>78</sup>

As with all justifications for Klan violence, white North Carolinians were not spared; several like Almon Owens were also targeted by the Klan for also not "working well." These forms of violence were notable because—instead of being used to punish recalcitrant slaves—they were being used to punish free labor.

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<sup>77</sup> See Foner, Reconstruction, Charles Flynn, White Land, Black Labor: Caste and Class in Late Nineteenth-Century Georgia (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), and Scott Reynolds Nelson, Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction (Chapel Hill and London: the University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>78</sup> Testimony of James M. Justice, KKK NC, 137.

Beyond the creation of a pliable workforce, Klansmen also attacked symbols of northern capitalism. While much of it was funded or directed by southerners, the Klan particularly targeted the emergent postwar the railroad industry. Frances Gilmore, the white woman, was mutilated during a larger raid upon the Chatham Railroad being built by Virginian William Howle. During the attack, apparently drunk Klansmen shouted

that they had cleaned out one damned Union hovel, and they intended to make the damned Yankee railroad contractors leave their work; if they didn't, and if they got hold of them, they would hang them to the first tree they could find; and if they didn't find them, they intended to kill their stock.<sup>79</sup>

Though a Virginian and a Confederate veteran, North Carolina Klansmen considered Howle a “Yankee” because of his politics and his work in building railroads.<sup>80</sup> This and similar attacks on railroad construction sites throughout the state were both political and economic, as Reconstruction was rife with struggles over industrialization between planters and capitalists.

More interesting are the tensions within the Klan over class, particularly in regards to social standing. As previously seen, poorer whites—middling landowners or tenant farmers—who committed Klan violence often held political beliefs consonant with those of elites instead of their Republican neighbors. Those political beliefs helped drive their membership in the Klan. Both elite and poor conservative whites understood well the relationship among violence, Democratic politics, and the goals of white supremacy. As historian Betram Wyatt-Brown has argued, though “one is easily tempted to reduce these rival groups to a simple dichotomy between rich and poor, ... economic position alone did not make one man a friend to blacks and another an implacable enemy of the

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<sup>79</sup> Testimony of William Howle, *KKK NC*, 59.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

race.”<sup>81</sup> The question Chatham County Klansmen posed to Essie Harris’s neighbor—“This is a white man’s country; do you know it?”—highlights the extent to which non-elite Klansmen understood the connection between Democratic politics and the emergent ideology of white supremacy.<sup>82</sup> Rather than being ignorant of the political goals of elites, many poor and middling perpetrators of Klan violence intimately understood and agreed with those goals of black subjugation and disenfranchisement.

However, that political agreement did not paper over class differences between conservative whites. A key example of class tensions between white Klansmen is the story of David Schenck, an elite lawyer from Lincolnton, North Carolina. Few personal reminiscences of poor and middling Ku Klux Klan members exist, and the elite members or suspected members whose accounts do exist often deny or obscure the nature of their involvement. Schenck testified to Congress in 1871 that he had joined the Invisible Empire in October 1868, yet in his personal diary on December 18, 1869, he still was writing about the Klan as an abstract organization. He wrote that “the results of the organization are generally to suppress negro imprudence and to quash their political arrogance and in this way the Society commends itself to the sympathy of a large majority of good men in the country.”<sup>83</sup>

Non-elite members often identified elites as masterminds behind Klan raids in order to avoid prison sentences and indict elite whites for the violence plaguing the North Carolina piedmont. Thus unsurprisingly, Schenck’s account of his passive involvement in the Klan was contradicted by fellow members of the Klan. T.A. Hope, a twenty-three-

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<sup>81</sup> Wyatt-Brown, Honor and Violence, 159.

<sup>82</sup> Testimony of Essie Harris, KKK NC, 92.

<sup>83</sup> Diary, David Schenck Papers, SHC, December 18, 1869.

year-old farmer and wagoner from Lincoln County, gave a federal deposition in which he swore that Schenck had ordered Hope and some friends to commit violence. Hope testified that a chief of a Klan den near Iron Station in Lincoln County had told Hope in a Klan meeting “that Schenck had sent him there with orders to organize a raid upon Isaac Revels, a negro, who lived in Gaston County, near Westley’s Ford, on the South Fork. The negro had been accused of barn-burning.”<sup>84</sup> Hope gave details about the secret signs and passwords the Klan used, including those given by Schenck to verify his involvement.<sup>85</sup> Schenck, confronted with Hope’s deposition in front of the Joint Select Committee, categorically denied it, saying, “I desire to state generally, right here, that I never in my life had any knowledge of any raid, or ever aided in it directly or indirectly, or ever countenanced it, or was in any way accessory to it in my life.”<sup>86</sup>

The specifics of the charge of Schenck’s involvement in the Klan are in some sense irrelevant. To Schenck, it was poor and middling whites who had perpetrated the violence he felt necessary to denounce. While Schenck fully supported the goals of white supremacy and was a vocal Democrat, he professed opposition to violence, particularly if committed by poor whites. Though Schenck often served as a defense counsel for poor whites arrested for Klan activity—underscoring the extent to which he supported the Ku Klux Klan—he described his clients and fellow Klansmen unflatteringly. “They are in the lower orders of life,” he testified to the Joint Select Committee. “In our county there are iron manufacturers and there are large numbers of coalers and wood-choppers—the lower order of negroes and whites... These coalers are squatted all over that, and they

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<sup>84</sup> Deposition of T.A. Hope, read into testimony of David Schenck, KKK NC, 399.

<sup>85</sup> Deposition of T.A. Hope, read into testimony of David Schenck, KKK NC, 399.

<sup>86</sup> Testimony of David Schenck, KKK NC, 400.

have mostly committed these outrages... They are always in broils with the negroes, and fighting backward and forward.”<sup>87</sup>

Schenck, attempting to distance himself from violence, declared more violent Klansmen as arising “from the lower orders of life,” in both economic position and social standing, despite his own unconditional support of white supremacy. Schenck simultaneously blamed corrupt Republicans for falsely accusing elites of Klan violence. By his telling, a corrupt Republican detective “would go out by himself, go to the cornshuckings and arrest four or five” poor whites on charges of being Klansmen. They would confess, implicating elites as the leaders of the Klan. The detective would then “have them discharged, and they would have a jollification” together after being paid for the arrest.<sup>88</sup>

For southern whites who supported white supremacy, social standing depended as much upon political beliefs and actions as purely economic status. At the top of their social hierarchy were elite white Democrats like David Schenck, who found Klan violence distasteful but supported its political and social goals. Next stood those who actually committed Klan violence, often poorer and middling white Democrats, and at the bottom of the southern social hierarchy were white Republicans and African Americans. One young middling farmer from Rutherford arrested for the raid on James M. Justice, was asked if the other Klansmen he knew were “generally low-down or respectable men.” He responded, “They were all conservatives.” He was asked to clarify; “How did

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 412-413.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 379.



they stand in the country?” He answered, “They stood pretty fair.”<sup>89</sup> When asked about economic standing, this Klansman responded about political affiliations; and in contrast to men of “good” standing, the men of Cherry Mountain “stood pretty fair”—above Republicans but below elites. One of the elites who orchestrated the raid on Justice later affirmed, “with the sanctity of an oath,” that he “never knew of, read of, or in any way heard of a single instance of punishment by the Ku Klux Klan that was not plainly and unmistakably deserved by the recipient... Radicalism and rascality became nearly synonymous in those days, especially in Western North Carolina.”<sup>90</sup> To elite Klansmen, Republicans of any economic standing were socially inferior to Democrats, rich or poor, and deserving of violence.

Rather than monolithically supporting the goals of the elite, then, the Ku Klux Klan was a crucible within which members engaged the wishes of elites and forged their own ideologies. This tension can be further seen in the testimony of J.R. DePriest, a thirty-six-year-old shoemaker and chief of a Klan den in Rutherford County.<sup>91</sup> Testifying in Raleigh in the 1871 trial of Klansmen arrested for the raid on James M. Justice, he was asked by the defense counsel for the purpose behind the Ku Klux Klan. DePriest answered, “Well, sir, to get men in by intimidation or otherwise, and swear them, and get their vote in that way.”

Question: Did you swear that these raids were made by men low down and reckless?

Answer: Yes, sir; reckless men.

Question: But low-down men?

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<sup>89</sup> Trial testimony of Jason Wethrow [Witherow], KKK NC, 449; Census 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1159 Page: 66.

<sup>90</sup> Shotwell, Papers, II, 345.

<sup>91</sup> Census 1870, Series: M593 Roll: 1159 Page: 48.

Answer: I don't know about that, sir.

Question: Were they irresponsible men?

Answer: I don't know as I can say so. They were mostly by young men who wanted fun.

Question: Ever upon their own hook?

Answer: Well, sir, I think it was often done upon their own hook.

Asked by the prosecution to "tell why it was done on the young men's own hook,"

DePrest answered, "They wanted some fun, and would get a party and go raiding. I said

it was done by the young chiefs and young men."

Question: Were the chiefs young men?

Answer: Yes, sir.

Question: Were there not some from good, respectable families?

Answer: Yes, sir; generally, very respectable.

Question: Are you a member of the church?

Answer: No, sir.

Question: You are opposed to raiding?

Answer: Yes, sir.<sup>92</sup>

The Klan was made up of white men both "in the lower orders of life" and "from good, respectable families." Social demarcations sometimes stemmed from economic standing, but often intertwined with political beliefs and actions taken. Those who acted "upon their own hook," particularly if poor, might be denounced by the elite despite sharing similar political goals.

From this, many of the contemporary ideas class emerge. Conservative whites felt strongly that African Americans during Reconstruction were suitable principally for subservient farm labor. Along with discouraging black suffrage, Klan violence against African Americans served as means of controlling black labor and creating a pliable workforce. Targeting black and white Republicans, the Klan worked to solidify the white elite's control of the political, social, and labor environment of the South. White

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<sup>92</sup> Trial testimony of J.R. DePriest, KKK NC, 427.

Republicans engaged in the work of industrialization, considering African Americans to be suitable wage employees. They also opposed the social hierarchy of political beliefs forwarded by conservative whites, seeing respectability and class standing differently. African Americans sought to be employed as they wished, either as wage laborers or working farm land to feed their own families. Many white and black North Carolinians would likely have strongly disagreed with the contention made by Pride Jones that the men in the Klan were all “of respectable position.”<sup>93</sup>

Most importantly, significant disagreements about the usefulness of violence and notions of social respectability existed within the Ku Klux Klan. Rather than a single monolithic organization, it was a socially diverse one whose members actively worked to construct white supremacy both within its ranks and through the violence it perpetrated on its victims.

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<sup>93</sup> Testimony of Pride Jones, KKK NC, 12.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The 1870 murder of state senator John Stephens in Caswell County prompted Governor William W. Holden to crack down on the Klan throughout North Carolina, raising a militia under the command of Colonel George W. Kirk. The crackdown, dubbed the “Kirk-Holden War,” along with Holden’s flirtation with the suspension of habeas corpus, caused a conservative backlash. The hostile Democratic response, accompanied by further Klan violence and intimidation, led to the Democratic takeover of the state legislature and the impeachment of Holden and his removal from office. By 1871 William Howle claimed that, though “there are a great many” Republicans still in North Carolina, “they are afraid to be known;” there would be more Republicans “if they could go to the polls and vote freely.”<sup>94</sup> He also said, “The republicans feel particularly unsafe; they are afraid to talk politics at all; you can seldom get a white republican to express his opinions. I only know two in the whole neighborhood I was in, in parts of the two or three counties; they said they were republicans, but were afraid to have it known.”<sup>95</sup>

A. Webster Shaffer, when asked in testimony if the Klan had “succeeded in bringing about a better state of morals and order in that community,” responded,

Well, sir, they have so utterly demoralized the people that they do not have any confidence in the safety of their lives from day to day; many of them live out in the woods. I do not know that the people are more immoral socially than they

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<sup>94</sup> Testimony of William Howle, KKK NC, 63.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

were before; but the present condition of affairs is, I believe, the result of any attempt to teach people morality by immoral means.<sup>96</sup>

By this point, local and federal governments had begun to limit some of the violence. The Joint Select Committee had grown out of anti-Klan Congressional legislation in 1871, and federal courts in Raleigh arrested and convicted numerous Klansmen, shipping some to federal penitentiaries in Albany, New York. By the end of 1872, Klan activity began to disappear in North Carolina, though due almost as much to the accomplishment of its political goals as to the success of federal prosecution.

In Rutherford, Judge Logan of the County Superior Court led an investigation and prosecution that netted the names of some three hundred Klansmen.<sup>97</sup> Most escaped prosecution, and many that had previously been arrested—including Klansmen Jesse DePriest, Adolphus DePriest, and Joseph Goode—had their cases dismissed in 1873. James McGaha, still wanted for the murder of Decatur DePriest, successfully evaded capture until spring of 1873, when the local case was dropped because he could not be found.<sup>98</sup>

The four years of Klan violence succeeded in intimidating black and white Republicans from voting, evidenced by the double-digit drop in the percentage of piedmont whites who voted Republican from 1868 to 1872.<sup>99</sup> James M. Justice testified that the violence “has had a very material effect with regard to the way people vote. Some have changed their votes, I think on account of terror, and a great many have failed

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<sup>96</sup> Testimony of A. Webster Shaffer, KKK NC, 47.

<sup>97</sup> Testimony of J.B. Eaves, KKK NC, 174.

<sup>98</sup> State vs. James McGaha, Rutherford County Superior Court, Minute Docket, 1869-1876, North Carolina State Archives.

<sup>99</sup> Escott, “White Republicanism,” 11-12.

to go to the polls.”<sup>100</sup> Democrats nationwide had portrayed politics as a zero-sum game for whites. Representative Philadelph Van Trump, Democrat from Ohio and a dissenting member of the Joint Select Committee, wrote that “it was an oft-quoted political apothegm, long prior to the war, that no government could exist ‘half slave and half free.’ The paraphrase of that proposition is equally true, that no government can long exist ‘half black and half white.’”<sup>101</sup> The Ku Klux Klan helped ensure that the resulting government was all white.

Biracial politics were not completely silenced by the end of Reconstruction. In the 1880 presidential election some twenty-one percent of all white men in North Carolina voted Republican, as did approximately sixty-seven percent of all black men.<sup>102</sup> The Klan was merely one piece of the complicated puzzle of Reconstruction politics, but the terror and suffering it inflicted made it an essential part of the establishment of white supremacy. Elite Democrats used white supremacy to eliminate competition between political parties and remove political control from those less privileged, white and black.<sup>103</sup>

Though the Ku Klux Klan’s founders in Pulaski, Tennessee were primarily young sons of local elites, and despite the substantial elite leadership of the North Carolina Klan, a sizeable number of perpetrators of Ku Klux atrocities were lower-class whites who visited violence on their neighbors. They ought not be seen as ignorant dupes easily

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<sup>100</sup> Testimony of James M. Justice, KKK NC, 136.

<sup>101</sup> KKK, 519.

<sup>102</sup> J. Morgan Kousser, The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restrictions and the Establishment of the One-Party South (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 15.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

swayed and misled by the elite, especially given the rhetorical battles waged between elites and poorer whites. Many whites actively supported the tenets of white supremacy. Some knew their ability to inflict violence formed one of their few viable political outlets. For them, the Ku Klux Klan was an essential mechanism for securing a place in society: a means to leverage power between Republicans, black and white, and the Democratic white elite. For others, the Ku Klux Klan helped destroy the biracial political alliances they saw as the best means to reorder their world.

White supremacy was not finalized in the 1870s, and needed considerable further campaigns of violence to codify into Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement. But the work of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction laid the groundwork a society structured around hierarchies of race in the aftermath of slavery. The direct cost was born by the many victims of the horrific violence the Klan committed. The wider cost of white supremacy was born by southerners across spectrums of race, gender, and class.

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