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## **Militias, Manhood, and Citizenship in Reconstruction Mississippi, 1868-1875**

*by Jacob S. Clawson*

Reconstruction violence is a challenging topic. While Americans in the 1860s and since have found ways to make palpable the mass slaughter of the Civil War, the subsequent murders, hangings, lynchings, rapes, and riots that scarred the southern landscape after the guns fell silent at Appomattox have been difficult to characterize. This has been especially true of Mississippi. Having concluded his investigation of the state's 1875 election, United States Senator George S. Boutwell of Massachusetts demonstrated this affinity for contrasting the violence of the Civil War with that of Reconstruction, declaring that voters experienced "all the horrors of open war, without its honor, dignity, generosity, or justice." Nor was he alone. One Union veteran testified to Congress that he would rather "ten thousand times . . . go into a battle" than attempt to approach a poll during the state's "shot gun campaign."<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite these attempts to differentiate violence across the 1865 divide, there were important continuities between the killing of the war and that of the ostensible peace. This essay seeks to explain these ideological and institutional links, as well as their role in reconstructing southern political life.

This articles will also analyze violence and politics during Reconstruction through a consideration of militias and paramilitary organizations. Your author argues that southerners of both races defined and defended competing visions of citizenship and manhood through these institutionalized forms of violence, which in turn were manifest in two radically different conceptions of democracy. In particular, black southerners sought to stake their claims to manhood and political participation while forging a new biracial democracy, while conservative white southerners sought to reinstitute a Herrenvolk democracy based on racial

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<sup>1</sup> *Mississippi in 1875. Report of the Select Committee to Inquire into the Mississippi Election of 1875, with the Testimony and Documentary Evidence* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1876), 44<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 1876, Senate Report. Vol. I, xxviii, 527; *Ibid*, Vol. II, 1248.

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subordination.<sup>2</sup> As Mississippians undertook to forge two very different societies in the aftermath of a war that had normalized violence as a part of the political process and created a hyper-masculine political milieu, militias provided a powerful form of political expression for both races.<sup>3</sup> Militia service stood at the fulcrum of questions pertaining to who was a man, who was a citizen, and who would possess access to political and social power in the South at a pivotal moment in its history.<sup>4</sup> As political institutions and forms of political engagement, militias are critical to understanding not only Reconstruction in the state of Mississippi, but also the

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<sup>2</sup> Although Michael Perman has argued that some white southerners did seek to stake out a moderate position, these efforts were largely abortive in the states that the writer seeks to examine. Moreover, Perman largely fails to account for the critical role that violence played in Reconstruction. It is my contention that examining this violence bears out in sharp relief the ideological strength of white southerners' exclusionary impulse. Moreover, if Perman argues that white Democrats did not begin to utilize white supremacy and home-rule as campaign rhetoric until after the failed election of 1872, an analysis of postwar violence demonstrates that this tendency was at work before then, even if it was not a facet of organized political campaigns. See Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> The term hyper-masculinity plays a prominent role in this article, and therefore warrants some explanation. In 1984, psychologists Donald Mosher and Mark Serin employed the term to describe a series of personality traits that diverged from a normative center of masculine behavior. According to these authors, hyper-masculinity embodied a personality type defined by callous sexual attitudes, violence, and an affinity for danger. In a later article, Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins elaborated on this theory and posited that this personality type was reinforced by the "ideology of the warfare" and the social stratification that comes from the conclusion of wars, such as victors dominating the vanquished and masters taking slaves. See: Donald Mosher and Mark Sirkin, "Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation," *Journal of Research in Personality* 18, no. 3 (1984): 150-163; Donald Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins, "Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation," *The Journal of Sex Research* 25, no. 1 (1988): 60-84.

Rather than viewing hyper-masculinity as a personality trait, the writer instead historicizes this phenomenon. Hyper-masculinity, as described within this specific context, flowed from the confluence of racial and gender ideologies that crystallized during and after the Civil War. These ideologies linked masculinity, racial violence, and notions of citizenship. Moreover, it consisted of three general characteristics. First, rather than viewing women narrowly as sexual objects, this form of hyper-masculinity cast women as political objects and signposts of the social order and encouraged the use of violence to maintain hegemony over women's bodies as a means of protecting the political capital that they represented. Second, it provided white men with the basis to contest the meaning of manhood in exclusionary, racialized terms that were consistent with Herrenvolk democracy. Finally, and most importantly, it glorified violence as a critical component of the political process and conflated the exercise of violence with the construction of manhood and citizenship. Moreover, with this emphasis on violence, it provided a counterpoint to bourgeois, middle class notions of manliness that emphasized restraint. In the context of Reconstruction Mississippi, hyper-masculinity and the exercise of institutional violence, rather than middle class restraint, were often normative...

<sup>4</sup> Scholars of gender and politics have especially noted the link between social and political power. Stephanie McCurry has examined this dynamic in the South Carolina low country, where she argues that gender and common claims to mastery—over both women and slaves—provided the basis for white men's political participation. Laura Edwards has traced a similar dynamic during Reconstruction in North Carolina. In particular, she argued that gender and especially claims to manhood were inextricably tied to political power. Thus, emancipation was necessarily a gendered process and when black men staked their claims to manhood and as patriarchs, they were necessarily making political claims as well. See Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Words: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Laura Edwards, *Gender Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

history of the South in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Beginning with the scholars of the Dunning School, historians' renderings of Reconstruction violence have been both contentious and decidedly political. Scholars such as William A. Dunning, Claude Bowers, and James Garner cast Reconstruction as an ill-advised attempt at biracial democracy that was doomed due to black southerners' supposed depravity and inability for self-government. Moreover, both explicit and implicit in the Dunningite interpretation was the notion that black Americans, lacking the ability to govern themselves or others, harbored an unquenchable thirst for violence that if left unchecked would be unleashed on white southerners. As Kenneth Stampp wrote in 1965, the Dunningites lent credence to the view that "the ignorant, barbarous, and sensual Negroes...threatened to Africanize the South and destroy its Caucasian civilization."<sup>5</sup> This view, moreover, was not limited to historical scholarship. Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* and its film adaptation, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, reinforced this view to popular audiences. Indeed, the wave of disfranchisement and repression directed at African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century simultaneously drew upon and reinforced this historicized view of black violence casting it as an existential threat to white civilization. This white mindset served the political needs of whites just as it obfuscated the extent and meaning of racial violence in years following the Civil War.

While the historiography of the last fifty years has revised this view, these newer works have generally suffered from one of two flaws. First, they often fail to account for African Americans' use of violence during Reconstruction. Just as the Dunningites exaggerated and mischaracterized Reconstruction violence for certain political ends and to legitimize their view of white supremacy and black depravity, the scholars writing since the civil rights movement have typically shied away from recognizing that black violence was an important factor in Reconstruction, even if not for the reasons that the Dunningites posited. While these newer works have gone to great lengths to cast black southerners as active political actors during Reconstruction in regards to voting, holding office, operating schools, and organizing as laborers, they have been reticent to recognize that the freedpeople

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<sup>5</sup> William Archibald Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (New York: Harper, 1962); James W. Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968); Claude Bowers, *The Tragic Era: America After Lincoln, the Dark that Followed the Dawn of Peace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929). Kenneth Stampp provides an excellent historiographic essay on the Dunning School in *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 5.

could participate in the era's violent politics as well.<sup>6</sup> Second, when they have acknowledged as much, they have misread the ideological implications of what collective and institutionalized access to violence meant as blacks used each to assert their claims to manhood and citizenship.

These flaws are evident in the work of scholars such as Allen Trelease and George Rable, who, although providing path-breaking studies, failed to account for the extent and meaning of African Americans' use of force. Trelease's work on the Ku Klux Klan portrayed the organization as a loosely affiliated but extremely violent terrorist organization that served as the armed-wing of the postbellum Democrat/Conservative Party. Yet, looking at Mississippi, Trelease was most concerned with the Klan's campaign against schools and on specific violent episodes, such as the Meridian riot. His work failed to account for how black Mississippians met these threats with violence of their own, much less what the ideological and gendered implications of Klan and anti-Klan violence were. Rable's *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* deserves plaudits for offering a concise and tightly woven synthesis of Reconstruction violence. Yet, Rable is most concerned with describing the evolution of anti-Reconstruction violence over time, as it mutated from being an exigency of postwar social unrest to a political tool of white counterrevolutionaries. Lost in his interpretation are the efforts of black southerners and their white allies to answer this counterrevolution. Even in the brief summary that Rable provides of Adelbert Ames's ill-fated attempt to create a state militia and constabulary force in Mississippi – as Henry Clay Warmoth and William Pitt Kellogg did in Louisiana – Rable treats the institution as a temporary impediment to the Redeemers rather than as a serious attempt to maintain order in the state. Even Otis Singletary's *Negro Militia and Reconstruction* was more concerned with explaining why Republican militias failed to uphold Reconstruction governments than with explaining what militia service and access to institutionalized

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasizing African Americans' experiences during Reconstruction is best embodied by, but certainly not limited to, the scholarship of historians such as Willie Lee Rose, Peter Kolchin, and Eric Foner. These historians expanded the narrative possibilities of Reconstruction in a way that took a generally positive view of the freedpeople and their political activism. Yet, in recognizing southern blacks' agency, they failed to consider that just as the freedpeople sought to build a biracial democracy in the South—a goal most historians now consider laudable—so too did they participate in Reconstruction's more unsavory episodes. Thus, to understand black agency and political participation in Reconstruction, historians ought to weigh their positive achievements—such as their political and labor activism—with their more troubling participation in violence. Moreover, it is important to note that to do so is not to revitalize or legitimize Dunningite interpretations of black “misrule.” Instead, it is to integrate a pivotal period in African American political history with an era of American history that was especially violent. See: Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); Peter Kolchin: *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama's Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

violence meant for the South's freedpeople.<sup>7</sup>

This propensity to understate and misunderstand the ideological and gendered importance of black violence and militias has persisted in recent scholarship as well. Although Douglas Egerton's work on the overthrow of Reconstruction in Mississippi takes Republican militias and paramilitaries more seriously than did Rable, the white campaign to overthrow Republican officeholders and to marginalize politically active freedpeople drives his narrative. Black violence in his rendering is reactive, while political activities such as holding office, organizing the Republican Party on the local level, and forming schools receive much greater emphasis. Indeed, for Egerton to suggest that this era was "progressive," he must necessarily emphasize these peaceful forms of political engagement and the violent Democratic campaign to end them. Unfortunately, this framework leaves little possibility for Egerton to consider how and why institutional violence provided African Americans with the means to construct new ideas about citizenship and manhood, nor how this development was central to their political experience during Reconstruction. In this sense, there was nothing progressive about Reconstruction given the close relationship between institutionalized violence and political participation. Black and white southerners alike understood this, and they did so far better than do the historians who have studied them.<sup>8</sup>

A number of recent works have provided a step in the right direction toward understanding how Republicans used violence to counter the efforts of conservative white insurgents. Moreover, these scholars have placed state militias at the forefront of their analyses. Whatever their strengths, however, these works only obliquely focus on the question of what militia service meant for African Americans as a form of political engagement. For example, James Hogue and Benjamin Severance both have provided valuable contributions to historians' understanding of state militias in Louisiana and Tennessee. Hogue's work examines five "street battles" in New Orleans. Rather than framing these affairs as riots or massacres, he argues that these discrete acts of collective violence constituted battles due to both their intensity and political implications. Moreover, such was the extent of organized violence in the state that Hogue posits that Louisiana experienced its own civil war in the decade following 1865. Overall, however, Hogue is more concerned with using the militia to analyze Louisiana's internal strife than he is with considering what access to state-sanctioned violence meant for African Americans and their quest for a place in the body politic. Looking at the State Guard in Tennessee, meanwhile, Severance provides a thorough account of Reconstruction politics in the state and what role the state militia played in maintaining the integrity of its elections. Despite the Republicans' occasional use of heavy-handed tactics, Severance argues that the

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<sup>7</sup> Allen Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper, 1971); George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985); Otis Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957).

<sup>8</sup> Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

militia performed its duties admirably. Yet, as useful as this revisionist reading of the State Guard is, Severance is also less concerned with interrogating what state-sanctioned violence meant for larger questions about citizenship, manhood, and the discourse connecting each than he is with attempting to vindicate the State Guard's actions. Ultimately, despite the important role that African Americans played in each institution, these authors are concerned with militias as organizations rather than their ideological meaning for those who served in them.<sup>9</sup>

Recent works that consider the relationship between violence, gender, and citizenship have also portrayed freedpeople primarily as targets of white violence rather than describing how they responded to white terrorism with violence of their own. Kidada Williams's *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* provides a powerful reading of how African Americans resisted violence after the Civil War by testifying about their experiences. Williams illustrates how freedpeople, including those in Mississippi, utilized their ability to testify to create a public record that documented white violence. With this record, they could make claims on the state for protection. While Williams succeeds in elucidating how testimony served as a form of resistance, she fails to account for how African Americans' own use of violence proved just as important, if not as successful, as ex-slaves sought to navigate and shape Reconstruction politics.<sup>10</sup>

Some scholars have recognized African Americans' role in Reconstruction violence, but their interpretations do not necessarily recognize the institutions such as militias and paramilitary groups that made this violence possible. Carole Emberton's recent work provides an important contribution to Reconstruction scholarship with its description of how violence and gender ideology infused the racial politics of Reconstruction with a potent and volatile meaning. The Civil War, Emberton contends, produced a discourse that linked violence, freedom, and manhood together in a constellation that provided the rough contours of postwar citizenship. This resonated during Reconstruction, lent itself to the militarization of political campaigns, and played a salient role in how Americans viewed citizenship through the lens of "martial manhood." Maintaining their claims to "martial manhood" compelled southerners to view freedom as "nothing less than a violent struggle between men," a reality that reemerged throughout the 1870s and culminated in Redemption.<sup>11</sup> In constructing this narrative, Emberton argues that military service provides a baseline for understanding both the limits and possibilities of black manhood and citizenship. She posits that a paradox emerged

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<sup>9</sup> James Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Benjamin Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Kidada Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence From Emancipation to World War I* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 6-9.



during the 1860s as soldiering represented a means for African Americans to assert their claims to citizenship, but that also piqued white fears of uncontrolled black violence. Moreover, while military service might have charted a path for African Americans to become citizens, it promised a form of citizenship based on the ex-slaves' obligations to the state rather than what the state owed them. African Americans' claims to citizenship therefore rested on an inherently unstable foundation, a reality that contributed to white northerners' eventual retreat from Reconstruction.<sup>12</sup>

This essay challenges Emberton's interpretation even as it builds on her foundations. Rather than arguing that the effort to legitimize black citizenship failed because of the unstable foundation upon which it stood, this essay looks to Mississippi to emphasize the success of conservative white southerners in appropriating "martial manhood" for their own ends. The ambivalence that Emberton finds in respect to whites' attitudes toward black violence is the result of her decision to focus solely on perceptions of violence rather than violence itself.<sup>13</sup> Her work emphasizes what whites' expectations were concerning soldiering and its implications for black citizenship rather than accounting for how African Americans viewed violence as a positive exercise in citizenship formation. This essay instead considers, first, how freedpeople in Mississippi viewed political violence and contributed to the creation of gendered forms of citizenship through their militia participation, and second, how white Mississippians appropriated the meaning of citizenship by committing violent acts and controlling perceptions of what political and racial violence meant.<sup>14</sup> Finally, rather than viewing soldiering as the point of departure for understanding the relationship between citizenship and black manhood, this essay suggests that scholars should instead consider what

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 102-106; Carole Emberton, "Only Murder Makes Men: Rconsidering the Black Military Experience," *Journal of the Civil War Era*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2012): 370-372.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Emberton focuses on print culture extensively, as well as how northerners interpreted southern violence as a sort of spectacle. Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*, 39-54; Ibid, 102-106; Ibid, 192-205.

<sup>14</sup> The question of how the freedpeople viewed violence is undoubtedly difficult to answer. Yet, it is not impossible, and this essay uses a number of methods to interrogate this issue. First, it uses ex-slaves' testimony before Congress, as well as white testimony about freedpeople and their actions (For more on this, see footnote 26). Second, the writer utilizes Republican newspapers to ascertain how party organs contributed to the postwar discourse of violence and manhood. Last, because a discourse consists of more than just words – it consists of symbols and actions as well – this essay uses the actions of black and white militias alike to determine how each influenced the discourse of postwar citizenship and manhood. The writer assumes that their actions were derived from some sense of intentionality that was meant to have a broader meaning. African Americans' appropriation of public spaces speaks to this method's use. Specifically, although it is impossible – given the absence of extant sources – to know what a black militia member said about drilling on a courthouse lawn or how he justified his actions, the reality that militia units chose to do so in these public spaces – and did so repeatedly – suggests that their actions were intentional, were made from an awareness that others would judge these actions, and that by engaging in these public displays of martial pageantry, that their importance was generally understood to be significant for black and white southerners alike. Thus, in these cases, one can use the outer boundaries of the discourse of manhood and citizenship to read back and decipher African Americans' intentions and ideologies by way of how they contributed to the discourse's creation.



role postwar militias played in the process of citizenship formation.

Mississippi provides a particularly useful lens to view this transformation. Not only did the state witness some of the grisliest violence of Reconstruction, but this violence was often institutionalized in the form of the Ku Klux Klan, white-line paramilitaries, armed segments of the Union League, and, despite historians' propensity to disregard it, the Republican state militia. Here, Mississippi's experience with institutional violence was typical of other southern states such as Louisiana and South Carolina, where Republicans held onto power into the middle of the 1870s. Understanding institutional violence and its ideological implications in Mississippi therefore provides a useful point of departure for understanding the relationship between violence, gender, and citizenship in other southern states.

Although historians have often viewed Adelbert Ames's attempt to organize a state militia in 1875 as the height of militia politics in Mississippi, black paramilitaries emerged on the local level in the latter part of the 1860s to counter the Ku Klux Klan. Before the white-line campaign of 1875 "redeemed" Mississippi, the Klan provided a powerful and violent challenge to African Americans' new freedom. The Klan, according to Trelease, intended "to keep the Negro in his place socially and economically," and to return the freed population to "the ante-bellum fashion as circumstances allowed."<sup>15</sup> White southerners did so as a means of checking the freedmen's ability to assert their autonomy, manhood, and citizenship, for it was the brazen assertion of each that whites saw as a threat to the South's social, political, and economic order. White Mississippian James Lynch recalled with marked derision in 1879 how after the war freedmen had abandoned their labor contracts at will, an expression of autonomy that represented a serious threat to white supremacy. Attempting to undermine African Americans' claims to political and economic autonomy through fear and intimidation, the Klan strategically directed violence at African Americans who sought to assert their prerogatives as free men. Klansmen did so in forms that held symbolic, gendered meanings, by dragging black men out of their homes in front of their families, destroying their firearms, and administering corporal punishment such as whippings that were not only reminiscent of slavery, but that degraded black men's claims to masculine autonomy and power.<sup>16</sup>

If black economic autonomy troubled white southerners, so too did veterans of the United States Colored Troops. When black veterans returned home, white southerners seethed at their assertiveness. Gone were the supposedly docile "Cuffees" and "Sambos" of the antebellum years, replaced in many cases with men who had earned their freedom with the bayonet. White Mississippians noticed the change in attitude that military service and freedom engendered, and the transformation proved unnerving. Vicksburger James M. Gibson remembered how "young Negroes who had served in the U. S. Army" came back to Mississippi with "wild barbaric

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<sup>15</sup> Trelease, *White Terror*, 275.

<sup>16</sup> James Lynch, *Kemper County Vindicated: And a Peep at Radical Rule in Mississippi* (New York: E. J. Hale & Son, 1879), 92.

assumptions.”<sup>17</sup> What Gibson meant by “barbaric assumptions” remains vague. It could have ranged anywhere from economic autonomy, a willingness to take part in militia musters, or the freedmen’s supposed lust for the bodies of white women, but the odium that he cast on black freedom and martial spirit pervades his memoir. In the case of these returning veterans, Gibson lauded the ability of the Klan to “stay” their supposed barbarity and animality. For whites, the Klan provided a corrective to the freedmen’s assertiveness and the claims to freedom and manhood that military service had entailed.

For all of the terror the Klan directed at the freedpeople, many ex-slaves did not stand by idly as white Mississippians sought to circumscribe their newly won freedom. African Americans responded to the Klan’s campaign of terror by forming paramilitary organizations, joining state militia companies, and employing violence in defense of their rights as citizens and as men, and they did so in the counties where Klan violence was most acute. Due to the lack of a natural border with Alabama, white vigilantes from the Yellowhammer state often crossed into Mississippi in clandestine fashion and wreaked havoc. With Klan violence reaching its apogee in 1870, and with the federal government unable to prosecute the organization throughout the entirety of the South, Republican Governor James L. Alcorn signed a bill in July authorizing the creation of state-sanctioned militia companies. The state’s militia rolls immediately swelled with recruits. In Bolivar County, 206 freedmen mustered for the county’s militia. Approximately 1,413 freedmen mustered in Lowndes County. In nearby Noxubee County, a resounding 2,962 freedmen mustered for militia service across the county’s various beats. Rather than cowering in the face of white terrorism, significant numbers of freedmen joined Alcorn’s militia and demonstrated their keen understanding of what militia service meant for their ability to defend their tenuous claims to freedom and equality in the face of escalating violence.<sup>18</sup>

Black resistance took on a number of forms, and it began with African Americans using militias and paramilitary organizations to contest the political meaning of public spaces. In doing so, they used the militia as not only a means of exercising violence, but also as an institution whose threat of violence permitted them to remap the social and political geography of local communities and counties, thereby providing a visible counterpoint to the Klan’s campaign of terror. Their militias represented an extension of a form of resistance that Stephanie Camp has described during the antebellum period, where slaves created “rival geographies” on and around plantations as a form of “every day” resistance. Before emancipation, slaves utilized these geographies to engage in clandestine gatherings, to avoid labor, and to create pockets of individual autonomy within their slave quarters. Camp

<sup>17</sup> J. M. Gibson, *Memoirs of J. M. Gibson: Terrors of the Civil War and Reconstruction Days* (Privately printed, 1966), 70.

<sup>18</sup> Trelease, 290; Ibid, 277; Militia Rolls, 1870-1874, Mississippi Adjutant General’s Office, Series 212, Box 6098, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (cited hereafter as MDAH), Jackson, Mississippi. The only available militia rolls for 1870 are from Bolivar, Chickasaw, Lowndes, and Noxubee counties.

argues that in doing so, slaves temporarily stole themselves from their masters and transformed their bodies into sites of resistance rather than sites of white domination.<sup>19</sup> These attempts to manipulate the social meaning of space continued during Reconstruction. Rather than creating rival geographies, however, freedmen used paramilitary organizations and militia companies to appropriate visible, public spaces that had previously been sites of black subjugation and white hegemony.<sup>20</sup>

One of the more prominent spaces was the plantation. In 1871 in his testimony before a United States Congress Joint Select Committee, Charles Baskerville recalled that after the passage of Alcorn's militia bill, the black tenant farmers to whom he rented land began mustering and drilling on his Noxubee County plantation. "Some of my negroes got to drilling on the place at night," Baskerville lamented. He implored them "to stop it, upon the principle that they had no right to be mustering upon the plantation; that when they got ready and organized companies they must do like other people did; but I did not want them to be organizing into a militia company on my plantation . . ."<sup>21</sup> Baskerville's testimony is telling. From his use of the first-person possessive to refer to the blacks on his plantation, it is clear that Baskerville was unable to accept the reality of emancipation, much less black citizenship and autonomy. Nor could he accede to the freedmen's intransigence on what had only six years before been a geography that embodied the fullest expression of planter domination. The martial pageantry performed by his ex-slaves, in the form of mustering, drilling, and marching, forced Baskerville to confront the reality of black citizenship as it occurred on his property.

Black militias also congregated on courthouse lawns. As Ariella Gross has shown, antebellum southern courthouses represented public spaces that solidified slaves' dishonored position in southern society vis-à-vis their masters. Nothing confirmed the postwar inversion of the South's social hierarchy quite like the sight of black militiamen drilling on the public squares, courthouse lawns, and in the streets of Mississippi's towns. In 1874, P. C. Hall brought his black militia company into Vicksburg and with their rifles in hand, began drilling at the courthouse and marching in the streets. Vicksburg had been a fertile ground for the recruitment of black regiments during the Civil War, and units belonging to the United States Colored Troops had served on occupation duty in the city.<sup>22</sup> The reappearance of

<sup>19</sup> Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> For other scholars who have looked at how control of public space demonstrates changing power relations, see Yael Sternhell, *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 129-140 and Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2005), 12-104.

<sup>21</sup> *Testimony Taken By The Joint Select Committee To Inquire Into The Condition Of Affairs In The Late Insurrectionary States*, 13 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), vol. XI, *Mississippi*. vol. I, 388. Hereafter cited as *Testimony Taken By The Joint Select Committee*.

<sup>22</sup> Ariella Gross, *Double Character: Mastery and Slavery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Anthony Kaye discusses the creation of USCT units in Warren County in *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 196.

armed African Americans conjured up the ghosts of Confederate defeat and the humiliation wrought by black martial identity. Much to the chagrin of the town's white citizens, marching black militiamen drove white women and children off sidewalks, while, as white-liner H. H. Miller recalled with disgust, "carriages containing gentlemen who had been out to places of entertainment were stopped and examined by armed men."<sup>23</sup> The sight of black militia companies drilling on courthouse lawns provided a dose of both rich irony and devastation for white onlookers who were unsettled by the sight of militarized black men appropriating public space. Of course, for the freedmen drilling on these grounds the meaning was much different. By appropriating geographies of symbolic importance, African Americans expressed their own freedom and claims to citizenship with visible displays of martial pride and by defying white violence on the very venues that had once been the grounds of their own oppression. Through the rituals of drilling, marching, and displaying their own martial efficacy, the presence of African American bodies, in shows of force and martial pride, transformed courthouses into forums for their claims to citizenship and manhood. Militias provided the central institution through which they could perform this transformation.

Black militias affected a similar transformation of polling places, as voting itself became a means to express black martial identity and citizenship. Further, if the importance of black militias and paramilitary units marching on polls held symbolic importance, it had a practical application as well in that it afforded freedmen protection. In Noxubee County in 1869, for example, white Republican James H. Rives remembered a company of freedmen, armed with pistols, going to the poll in Brooksville to vote in the face of Klan violence.<sup>24</sup> Six years later, after Mississippi's version of various and sundry rifle clubs had replaced the Klan as the most prominent threat to black citizenship, the state's freedmen again carried their martial identities to the polling place. Reuben Davis, a pre-war United States congressman from Aberdeen, testified before Congress and remembered with disdain how freedmen would go to vote dressed in military garb. He recalled how Mississippi's freedmen travelled to the polling places as militia units and voted in "companies," protecting themselves as voters and, in the eyes of Davis, circumscribing whites' access to the polls.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, by going to the poll as a militia unit, these freedmen used their militia membership and martial identity to transform the voting place into a hyper-masculine geography that linked militia service, martial identity, and guns as symbols of citizenship and voting. This practice was consonant with the era's increasingly violent politics, as well as how the freedmen imagined themselves as citizens within this militarized environment. Mississippi's freed population contributed to this environment out of necessity in the early 1870s, and it would be a salient feature of Mississippi politics until Redemption.

In addition to the symbolic acts of mustering, marching, drilling, and voting—

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<sup>23</sup> *House Reports*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 1875, No. 265, 46; *Ibid*, 377.

<sup>24</sup> *Testimony Taken By The Joint Select Committee*, vol. XI, *Mississippi*. vol. I, 555.

<sup>25</sup> *Mississippi in 1875*, 527, 1053.

and the concomitant alterations and appropriation of public space connected to each—Mississippi's freedmen also used the militia to express their claims to citizenship and reaffirm their manhood in the face of white repression through violence itself. In 1870, nearly seventy Klansmen in Monroe County rode to the home of Alexander Willis, a freedman who had recently brought legal suit against a prominent local planter. Attempting to intimidate Willis, the Klansmen entered his home, pulled him into the road adjacent to his house, and commenced whipping him. Unfortunately for the normally secretive Klan, word of their incursion had spread. Washington Willis and other members of the local Loyal League followed the armed gang to Willis's home, waited for the marauders to congregate in the road, and opened fire on the Klansmen. Willis noted with pride and bemusement that the white interlopers fled so quickly that their disguises fell by the wayside.<sup>26</sup>

At other times, Republican paramilitary groups proved much more proactive. This was especially true in Kemper County, where Reconstruction witnessed an endless campaign of killings and recriminations. Under the guises of the Klan, white Democrats assaulted freedpeople at night in their homes and attempted to assassinate Republican judges and constables in the streets of DeKalb. For example, Democrat Joseph Ball attempted to murder Republican judge W. W. Chisholm due to his cooperation with the United States Army as it attempted to quell Klan violence in the county.<sup>27</sup> When this failed, Klansmen from Alabama descended on Kemper County and attempted to assassinate Chisholm and intimidate black Republicans. Rather than being cowed, the Republicans responded in kind. Chisholm organized a biracial posse that not only policed the county, but that also responded to raids from Alabama by pursuing Klansmen across the state line.<sup>28</sup> Other times, Republican paramilitaries co-opted the Klan's tactics. In 1871, a black paramilitary group associated with the Loyal League invaded Ball's home as he slept, drove him from his bedroom, and gunned the Klansman down in a thicket adjacent to his house. Ball was able to crawl back to his home and inform his wife of his assailants' identities before he died.<sup>29</sup> Here, a black paramilitary group not only answered Klan violence, but it did so by using the Klan's own devices against it. Violating Ball's home and masculine dominion, the Loyal League symbolically undermined his claims to manhood and patriarchy via violence of their own, all the while making a stark assertion of their political prerogatives, citizenship, and self-defense by killing a

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<sup>26</sup> *Testimony Taken By The Joint Select Committee*, 1184.

<sup>27</sup> James M. Wells, *The Chisholm Massacre: A Picture of Home Rule in Mississippi* (Chicago: Agency Chisolm Monument Fund, 1877), 54-55.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-84.

<sup>29</sup> Lynch, *Kemper County Vindicated*, 107. Both Lynch, a Democrat, and Wells, a Republican, discuss the murder of Joseph Ball. Wells argues that Ball was murdered by Klansman out of fear that he planned to collaborate with federal authorities. Lynch, on the other hand, argues that the murder occurred shortly after Ball tried to assassinate Chisholm and that his dying declaration to his wife was that his assailants were local Republicans. While both accounts are undoubtedly partisan and polemical, in this case, Lynch's rendering of the affair is more detailed and supported by evidence in the form of the dying declaration and Chisholm's refusing to prosecute the men after Ball's death.

man who had played a prominent role in the Klan's campaign of terror.

In these skirmishes, African Americans emerged victorious. Yet, even when blacks did not prevail, the notion that violence was a necessary tool for the defense of their citizenship and manhood persisted. Asked why he fired on a white paramilitary unit during the Vicksburg riot of 1874, Washington Henderson stated the obvious to his Congressional interrogators: "I would be a pretty fool to stand there and see them shoot at me and do nothing. All I had to do was to fight as well as I could."<sup>30</sup> Henderson had ventured to Vicksburg in order to restore peace to a city that had just witnessed a putsch against the county's black sheriff. He had descended into the bowels of the white-liners' bastion of power to defend African American political legitimacy, and by extension the claims to citizenship and manhood that undergirded it. Violence was necessary for the defense of both. Indeed, the Vicksburg riot of 1874 witnessed the synthesis of black martial identity and violence into a hyper-masculine and warlike expression of citizenship that sought to affirm black political legitimacy. Although historians have perhaps rightly viewed the Vicksburg incident as a turning point in Mississippi given that it undermined the authority of Republican governor Adelbert Ames, the clash at Vicksburg also possessed a powerful, symbolic meaning in the way that its participants used the rationale of martial manhood to justify their participation in the affair. Ironically, it was on the old battlefield and in the faded trenches that had served as the turning point of the Civil War that Mississippi witnessed the turning point of Reconstruction and the fullest expression of black political violence.<sup>31</sup>

Following the Panic of 1873, Vicksburg, a city with a well-deserved reputation as a rough-and-tumble river town, experienced an acute economic crisis. While this development would have been problematic in any year, the fact that it occurred during the period of Republican governance exacerbated white Vicksburgers' festering angst. To compound Warren County Republicans' tribulations, in late 1874 it became apparent that a number of prominent black politicians were guilty of corruption and the misuse of public funds. When the implicating documents disappeared, the local taxpayers league blamed African American sheriff Peter Crosby. On December 2, a group of nearly six-hundred armed whites accosted Crosby and forced him to resign his office.<sup>32</sup> Crosby chose prudence over valor and acquiesced to their demands. Two days later, however, Crosby telegraphed Ames that he "would not be able to obtain peaceable possession" of his office.<sup>33</sup> Given

<sup>30</sup> *House Reports*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 1875, No. 265, 278.

<sup>31</sup> George Rable and William C. Harris each provide fine interpretations of the events surrounding the Vicksburg riot. However, their intent is not to look at what the violence meant for notions of citizenship and manhood, as I seek to do. I instead build upon and complement Emberton's analysis of the relationship between political participation and violence, two forces that were complimentary during the years following the Civil War. Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, 145-149; Harris, *Days of the Carpetbagger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 645-649; Emberton, *Beyond Redemption*, 139-153.

<sup>32</sup> Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, 145-150.

<sup>33</sup> Crosby to Ames, December 4, 1874, Adelbert Ames Governor Papers, Record Group 27, Box 994, Folder December 1-4, 1874, MDAH.

the absence of a statewide constabulary force, and because African Americans had maintained their arms and continued to muster independent of state sanction, Ames instructed Crosby to organize a posse comitatus and to retake his office. Crosby issued a call for assistance to the environs surrounding Vicksburg, and on December 7, 1874, Andrew Owen, an African American, brought between 120 and 500 armed freedmen to the city. After a brief discussion with the leader of the white militia, firing commenced. The better-armed whites defeated three separate columns of Owen's posse. Approximately twelve freedmen died, compared to one white man, with nearly twice that many black men suffering wounds.<sup>34</sup>

Analyzing the motivations and rationale for marching on Vicksburg and attempting to reinstate Crosby illuminates how these African Americans deciphered the links between militia service, violence, manhood, and citizenship.<sup>35</sup> Before the riot, J. W. Smith, a veteran of the Union Navy happened upon the militia. Owen stated in his House Committee testimony that he reminded his men that anyone who did not have the courage to march to Vicksburg should fall back to the rear, for he planned to take the town, even if it meant wading through the town knee-deep in blood.<sup>36</sup> M. E. Kline, a white Vicksburg resident who also saw the militia outside of town, testified that black women were imploring their husbands to "Go on and fight for your rights," a not-so-subtle nod to the gendered motivation underlying these men's claims to citizenship and manhood.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Kline noted that when he chastised the men for marching on the town against a better-armed foe, one freedman retorted, "he had but one time to die, and he would just as well die at one time as another, die fighting."<sup>38</sup> The reason for this, the man averred, was that he refused to live under the authority of an unelected government installed by force. To die fighting seemed necessary, even honorable, as he refused to legitimate the whites' putsch through his own submission. This language is telling, and each of these comments points back to the central role of organized violence in providing these men the means to guard their claims to masculinity and citizenship. Of course, this attempt at armed resistance ultimately did fail, and African Americans living in Vicksburg and its environs suffered from reprisals after the battle. Nonetheless, to read this incident as a failure misses the larger point of what access to collective

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<sup>34</sup> Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, 148-149; *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1875, No. 265, VII; Gibson, *Memoirs of J. M. Gibson*, 75-77.

<sup>35</sup> The voices of African Americans in the South have been notoriously difficult to excavate given issues of illiteracy and, in the case of the Congressional investigations used in this essay, the reality that fear could often mute African Americans' protests given the public nature of the hearings. Moreover, when looking at whites' testimony concerning black violence during Reconstruction, historians have noted the propensity of many whites to exaggerate fears of black violence given their festering sense of racial paranoia. For this portion of the essay, however, I use white testimony given to Congress concerning what the African Americans who marched on Vicksburg said, and I take their testimony seriously. It is my contention that if those in Owen's posse were motivated enough to join the armed group and bring their own weapons to Vicksburg, then they were also quite likely to use the bellicose rhetoric detailed here to justify their actions.

<sup>36</sup> *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1875, No. 265, 437.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*



violence meant for these African Americans. The men who marched on Vicksburg to reinstate Crosby understood the importance of using force and what it meant for their own claims as equal citizens and men.<sup>39</sup>

The nation as a whole also took note of the affair. Violence in the state highlighted the tension evident between state intervention and the freedmen's ability to claim their status as citizens and as men. How could the freedmen, many northerners asked, claim to be free and autonomous men who were worthy of citizenship when they depended on the power of the federal government to ensure their equality. Congressmen Omar D. Conger of Michigan and Stephen A. Hurlburt of Illinois articulated this tension in the starkest of terms in their 1876 summary of the affair when they asked northerners if they should,

say to the enfranchised voters of the South—creatures of its own word, staunch, true, and faithful to its government – we have given you these rights – we have made you men and citizens – we have given you the right to bear arms and to vote; now work out your own salvation as others have done; fight your way up to full manhood, and prove yourselves worthy of the endowments you have received at our hands.<sup>40</sup>

Although Conger's and Hurlburt's interrogative was rhetorical, by 1875 many northerners and southerners would have replied in the affirmative. Even many freedmen seemed to recognize this reality, and, as their militia service indicates, they proved willing to muster, drill, march, and ultimately fight to prove both their "full manhood" and their prerogatives as citizens. These freedmen staked, in the starkest terms possible, their claims to citizenship at a time when they were most under siege. Only through militia service and the warlike pageantry that it engendered were their claims legible on the violent political canvas of the world the war made.

A month after the United States Army reinstalled Peter Crosby as the sheriff of Warren County, Governor Ames went before the Mississippi legislature and called for the reconstitution of the state militia, the creation of a constabulary force, the purchase of up to four Gatling guns, and sixty-thousand dollars in defense funding.<sup>41</sup> While the bill had the obvious goal of providing the government with a mechanism to enforce order, the language that Ames employed to justify its passage evinced a gendered subtext related to the political value of masculinity and violence in Mississippi. Ames reminded the state's representatives that, "A free people should resort to every legitimate means to maintain, for their government, peace and order; and for themselves, personal security and liberty. It is now for you to decide how

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 437; Ibid, 432.

<sup>40</sup> *Mississippi in 1875*, xvi, 527.

<sup>41</sup> Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, 151; James Lynch, *Kemper County Vindicated*, 188.

that can best be done. The nation cannot regard with favor the appeal for help sent forth by those who supinely refuse to help themselves.”<sup>42</sup> Ames well understood that within Mississippi and the nation at large there was an expectation that citizens and men defended their freedom. After the white-line coup in Vicksburg, Mississippi’s Republicans appeared both ineffectual and unmanly. Northerner Charles Nordhoff, for example, lambasted Ames and the Mississippi Republicans for not using an “iron grip” to subdue anti-Reconstruction insurgents as the Republicans had done in Arkansas. The militia bill provided a response to the critique that Mississippi’s Republicans lacked the ability and requisite manliness to enforce order. Most important, it signaled that Ames and the state’s Republicans would not allow their opponents to gain a monopoly on violence and the masculine political capital that came with it.<sup>43</sup>

This bill’s intent was not lost on Mississippi’s white-liners. Their reaction to the bill was as swift as it was acerbic, and they used its passage as an opportunity to turn the militia and the possibility of black violence into a divisive political issue. Framing the creation of a militia as racialized despotism, the state’s Democratic newspapers cast the military organization as a hyper-masculine threat to white supremacy and manhood. *The Hinds County Gazette* proclaimed that the bill was nothing less than “Ames’s great effort to get up a standing army to intimidate and overawe the people of Mississippi.”<sup>44</sup> To some extent, of course, it was. Yet, when the Democratic press began to imagine what this “standing army” meant for white manhood, it struck at the very essence of how white men defined themselves. Addressing the Vicksburg white-liners on February 5, the *Jackson Daily Clarion* mocked what it saw as Ames’s heavy-handed response and wryly remarked, “You would not permit your homes to be invaded by a lawless mob with murderous intent, and because you repelled them and protected your hearthstones and your wives from slaughter, and worse than slaughter—take that!”<sup>45</sup> The *Clarion* continued five days later in more provocative terms, suggesting that a Republican militia meant the destruction of white male patriarchy and white men’s sexual monopoly over white women’s bodies, warning that, “When your wives and your children are driven out from their homes by the remorseless tax gatherer,” they will then, “go with them.”<sup>46</sup> The *Clarion*’s prophesy undoubtedly wreaked havoc in white Mississippians’ imaginations, conjuring up apocalyptic visions detailing the demise of white patriarchy and a reign of Republican sexual misrule that would overshadow their supposed malfeasance at the helm of the government. The state militia would provide the vehicle for this cataclysm. The *Clarion* warned its readers that once the militia took the field, “husbands and fathers will be torn from the fond embraces of their wives, amidst the piteous cries

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<sup>42</sup> Governor Adelbert Ames to the Legislature of Mississippi Session 1875 (Jackson, Mississippi: Pilot Publishing Company, 1875), MDAH.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Nordhoff, *The Cotton States in the Spring and Summer of 1875* (New York: Appleton and Co., 1876), 80–81.

<sup>44</sup> Untitled, *Hinds County Gazette*, February 10, 1875.

<sup>45</sup> Metropolitan Police Atrocity,” *Jackson Daily Clarion*, February 5, 1875.

<sup>46</sup> Untitled, *Jackson Daily Clarion*, February 10, 1875.

of helpless children.”<sup>47</sup> Fears of black men’s masculinity and sexuality became inseparable from Ames’s attempt to organize the militia.

The *Clarion’s* rendering of women as political objects and their sexuality as a signpost of the social order provided a potent rhetorical tool that framed the militia as a threat to the sexual and political sovereignty of white men. Nothing ignited the rage and anxieties of white southerners like the image of black men having sexual dominion over white women, and an anonymous pamphleteer writing under the pen name “Sister Sallie” evoked this nightmare scenario in lurid fashion. As Albert T. Morgan, a northerner living in Yazoo County, recalled, Sister Sallie, “declared that all the woes with which the South had been afflicted during the twenty years’ war which the Yankees had waged against them, were directly traceable to the unnatural and wicked relations which had previously existed between the white men of the South, her brethren, and their female slaves.” Sallie contended that their indiscretions had wrought all of the maladies of the era: war, disfranchisement, and economic hardship. This, however, was only the beginning of God’s smite. The pamphleteer added that “there was but one step remaining to complete their degradation to the level of the negroes, and that was the ‘marriage of their sister – their own, dear sister Sallie, to a buck negro.’”<sup>48</sup> The book’s appeal to politics, power, and sex resonated with the state’s white men, and surely frightened more than a few. Morgan recalled that, “old and young read it with avidity, and renewed their oaths of allegiance to Sister Sallie and to King Cotton’s ‘Table-round.’”<sup>49</sup> The passage of the Gatling gun bill, the *Clarion’s* warning of the threat the militia posed to white masculinity, and Sister Sallie’s suggestion that a racial and sexual reckoning was imminent all contributed to a political milieu in which black masculinity presented a dire threat to the very foundation on which white men’s patriarchal authority rested. Ames’s attempt to raise the militia embodied this threat.

Sister Sallie’s admonishment of southern white men contained more than a hint of imagination. Nonetheless, imagination can achieve resonance when it exposes the fissures and anxieties inherent in existing social structures. As circumstances would have it, when Sister Sallie’s prophesy of a racial and sexual apocalypse seemed to become manifest, white southerners acted accordingly. In Claiborne County, whites’ fear of miscegenation came to fruition in the biracial marriage of Haskins Smith and Ellen Smith in late 1874. Exacerbating these tensions, the community’s freedmen, understanding the threat that this marriage posed to Haskins Smith’s safety, began accompanying him on his trips into town, often armed and in *ad hoc* paramilitary groups. In the eyes of Claiborne County’s white population, here were armed black men, moving through public space in militarized fashion, and guarding a man who mocked the most precious shibboleth of white male authority. These freedmen not only provided a visible display of black manhood, but they used their

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Albert T. Morgan, *Yazoo; or, on the Picket Line of Freedom in the South* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), 455-456.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

militia organization in order to uphold Smith's sexual prerogative.<sup>50</sup>

Smith and his defenders incensed the county's whites. J. D. Vertner detailed his outrage to Congress in 1876: "I told the sheriff—a colored man—by the eternal god, if ever again such a thing were repeated, blood was thicker than water, and we would kill the last son-of-a-bitch."<sup>51</sup> Vertner made good on his word. In response to this interracial marriage and the black community's subsequent use of force to defend Smith, whites in Port Gibson and Claiborne County organized into military companies. As political objects, women's bodies provided an imagined battlefield in an ideological war over the meaning of manhood and political power, an ideological war in which hyper-masculine freedmen threatened to undermine the foundations of white male authority. In order to affirm and defend their own claims to masculinity and patriarchal authority against this perceived threat, Vertner and his white neighbors formed a militia company. These companies provided an institutional vehicle through which white men expressed their contested claims over the sexual access to women's bodies, thereby affirming their own claims to manhood and political power in the process.<sup>52</sup>

The specter of hyper-masculine and militarized freedmen—organized into military units and ostensibly ready to seize control of white women's chaste bodies -- induced a heightened sense of crisis for white men. They responded to the threat of black militias first by extolling their own sense of martial manhood, and then by denigrating the martial efficacy and manliness of the freedmen. This was especially evident in the aftermath of the Vicksburg riot. To be sure, while the city's white population effectively "won" the violent confrontation, how they imagined and remembered the riot proved as important as the outcome of the riot itself. The *Vicksburg Herald*, for example, framed the riot as a battle, and did so as a means of contrasting the martial efficacy and masculinity of the city's white men with the supposed cowardliness and unmanliness of the freedmen. According to the paper, when the two forces collided, "firing commenced on both sides," with, "the negroes fleeing after the first rounds, followed by the citizens with a desultory fire." The *Herald* noted for good measure that the white-liners followed by making a "terrific charge" that swept the remnants of Crosby's posse from the field.<sup>53</sup> This second battle of Vicksburg represented, for whites, nothing less than a violent ritual that confirmed their manhood and citizenship, and not in just the mere fact that they drove the "invaders" away from the city. The fashion in which they achieved their victory proved important in the way that it assuaged white men's beleaguered sense of masculinity through rituals of warfare—their spectacular charge and synchronized volleys—while also disparaging the supposed cowardice of the retreating invaders. The combat experience that militia service provided allowed

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<sup>50</sup> *Mississippi in 1875*, 159, 527; *Ibid*, 192.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>53</sup> Origins and progress of the Vicksburg Troubles as reported daily in the columns of the *Vicksburg Herald*: the responsibility clearly fastened on Gov. Ames (Vicksburg, MS: Vicksburg Herald Company, 1874), 6, MDAH.

white men to communicate their claims to masculinity and white supremacy at a time when they perceived both to be under siege.

By the late summer and early fall of 1875, Democratic paramilitaries began to reassert white supremacy through calculated displays of violence across central Mississippi. In Vicksburg, the city's white liners patrolled the streets day and night, halting black men in the streets and sometimes shooting them. In a petition to Ames, some of the city's residents warned the governor that they would refuse to vote unless he sent protection. In Yazoo City, local white-liners descended upon a Republican club meeting in early September, commenced shooting, and staged a *coup* against Republican sheriff Albert T. Morgan. In Clinton, white-liners disrupted a local Republican club meeting in the summer of 1875 and attacked the event's speakers and participants. Such was the scale of the chaos that militia companies from as far away as Vicksburg took the train to Clinton to participate in the affair, while the town's black population poured into Jackson in order to gain refuge. In each town, white militia groups used violence as a means of reaffirming white supremacy and challenging the African Americans' fragile claims to freedom.<sup>54</sup>

Scholars have often read the end of Reconstruction with a decidedly teleological lens. They have taken the Panic of 1873, the Democratic tidal wave in the midterm elections of 1874, and the brazen use of violence by white paramilitary groups in 1875 as inevitably leading to Redemption. In Mississippi especially, they have viewed the fractious nature of the Republican Party under Ames and the success of white violence in the state's various race riots with a sense of foreboding. The Republicans' acquiescence to violence was, however, both contingent and contested. Their initial response to this surge in white violence reflected the political milieu of the era that exalted militia service, violence, and masculinity. Furthermore, if, as Emberton has argued, Americans after the Civil War viewed freedom as little more than a violent struggle between men, Republicans well-understood this reality when they attempted to meet the white-liners' threat. Recognizing the political meaning and uses of violence, many Republicans openly embraced the prospect of confrontation as a means to prove both their masculinity and their claims as citizens.

White and black Mississippians held similar views about the relationship between masculinity, militia service, and citizenship, with the noted exception that white Mississippians viewed the relationship between the three in exclusionary, racialized terms. Nonetheless, they agreed that violence made men, and that militia service provided men with a stage to act out their claims to manhood and citizenship. Republican newspapers drew on this mutual understanding when they commented on white violence in the late summer of 1875. Speaking for Republicans in Hinds County, the *Daily Mississippi Pilot* lampooned Democrats who hid "in ambush" and cowardly attacked Republicans with "infamous chicanery

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<sup>54</sup> *Mississippi in 1875*, vol. II, 1353-1354; Vicksburg voters to Ames, September 14, 1875, Adelbert Ames Governor Papers, Record Group 27, Box 997, Folder September 11th-14th, 1875, MDAH; Morgan, *Yazoo*, 474; *Senate Reports*, 44th Cong., 1st Sess., 1876, No. 527, 308; Gibson, *Memoirs*, 98.

and fraud.”<sup>55</sup> “Give us the buccaneer,” the paper exclaimed, or, “the blood dyed ruffian, the intrepid highwayman,” rather than “the cowardly being who dogs our footsteps after nightfall and shoots our head off from behind a protecting tree.”<sup>56</sup> In lambasting the Democratic paramilitary groups that had taken to terrorizing the state’s black voters, the *Pilot* attacked them in language that would have been mutually intelligible to all men, regardless of race. The newspaper sought to cast white militias as cowardly and unmanly, while the men who joined these dastardly groups were unworthy of the prerogatives of manhood and citizenship.

Conversely, the paper framed the state’s Republicans as exemplars of manliness who were willing to engage in violence, albeit the right kind of violence. “The Republican party of Mississippi is not afraid,” the *Pilot* boasted. “It has its ranks unthinned, its confidence undimmed. If the Democracy feels that the best way to defeat is in an open contest, let it come on. If, on the contrary, it thinks than an ambush will serve, let it too try that. The Republicans will be prepared for both kinds of attacks.”<sup>57</sup> In late September, after Ames officially called the state militia into service, the paper continued with its bellicose rhetoric. It quoted Henry V before the battle of Agincourt and excoriated “weak-kneed” Republicans. Rather than appearing meek and unarmed, the paper encouraged Republicans to arm themselves with Winchester rifles. Most significantly, it provided a stark counterpoint to Democrats’ claims that the Republicans were weak and ineffectual, while encouraging the party rank-and-file to maintain a manly stance against white aggression: “The black men are not cowards. There are individual instances of recent occurrences that say they are brave and true. And the time has come when all Republicans are expected to show that they are not pusillanimous recreants and craven-hearted wretches that it were a slander to call men. They can do this by keeping up their organization; by holding their club meetings as usual; by calmly attending to their duties as citizens.”<sup>58</sup>

One such duty of citizens was participation in the state militia. In response to the violence at Clinton and the breakdown of civil government and order in the state, Ames activated the state militia in late September of 1875. The militia had a nominal strength of two regiments, was concentrated in Jackson, and undertook its only notable field action in a march into western Hinds County. Given the limited scope of its actual operations during the month before the election, historians have seen Ames’s October militia as more farcical than effective, as a tepid attempt by Ames to assert his fledgling authority at a time when any semblance of civil government was crumbling.<sup>59</sup> This assessment was not, however, the view that Mississippians of both races took of the militia. As a symbolic display of black martial efficacy, the militia, however short-lived, provided a display of black martial skill and masculinity that emboldened the freedmen and piqued the ire of white

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<sup>55</sup> *Daily Mississippi Pilot*, July 29, 1875.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, September 29, 1875.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, September 28, 1875.

<sup>59</sup> Rabale, *But There Was No Peace*, 157.

Democrats. The militia, remembered white Mississippian and anti-Reconstruction author James Lynch, held the potential to enable the state's blacks to "perpetrate in furtherance of the general scheme of carrying the State by violence." He continued, arguing that state-sanctioned violence encouraged the freedmen to be "intolerably arrogant and impudent."<sup>60</sup> Of course, it is easy to read Lynch's statement for what it was: a hyperbolic rant by a nineteenth century racist. Yet, what Lynch saw as arrogance and impudence might well have been an African American insistently asserting his political rights. Likewise, what Lynch saw as a despotic institution bent on carrying the state's election by force might have represented to the freedmen the only institution that allowed them to exercise the legitimate use of violence as a means of protecting their political prerogatives.

Whether it took the field or not, Republican newspapers also saw the militia as a sign of black manhood and citizenship. The ever-bellacose *Pilot* led the charge in defending black manhood and the militia. On October 13, 1875, the paper warned that the white-liners who had joined the campaign of terror and disfranchisement "must and will be punished if it requires the balance of the decade to do it. This is no holiday militia, with glittering regimentals . . . of empty show and pageantry. They are the posse comitatus of peace officers, and their enlistment and their arms mean business."<sup>61</sup> The next day, the paper counseled the "terror stricken White Leagues to let the colored militia alone if you do not like them. If you do not trouble the militia, nor in any other way violate the laws, the militia will not trouble you."<sup>62</sup> Adopting hyper-masculine and warlike language, the paper argued that the militia was prepared and willing to do battle with the state's white-liners, both physically and rhetorically. Casting the militia as the final arbiter of violence and authority in Mississippi, the paper appropriated a potent discourse of manhood and violence and argued that the state's freedmen possessed legitimate access to both.

This brazen assertion of manhood did not merely rebut the attempts of white Mississippians to delegitimize black militia service; importantly, it also spoke to a national discourse centered on the issue of political violence and the question of whether the freedmen were manly enough to exercise the prerogatives of citizenship. President Grant, for example, chided Governor Ames in September, urging him to show to the country that Mississippi Republicans "have the courage and the manhood to fight for their rights and to destroy the bloody ruffians."<sup>63</sup> This conflation of manhood, political rights, and violence was also evident in northern newspapers. *The Chicago Tribune* asked that since African Americans, "have been made free and given the ballot, why don't they resort to the bullet when assailed by the White Leagues?" Moreover, comparing southern violence to the U. S. Army's war against the Sioux on the Great Plains, the paper averred that, "Indians will

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<sup>60</sup> James Lynch, *Kemper County Vindicated*, 191.

<sup>61</sup> Untitled, *Daily Mississippi Pilot*, October 13, 1875

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, October 14, 1875.

<sup>63</sup> Edwards Pierrepont to Ames, September 14, 1875, Adelbert Ames Governor Papers, Record Group 27, Box 997, Folder September 11-14, 1875, MDAH.



fight for their lives, is the Negro less manly and less plucky than the Indians?"<sup>64</sup> It mattered little to these armchair observers of biracial democracy that virulent white terror plagued Mississippi and had diluted the authority of the state government. Freedom was the privilege of men, and freedom was all the better when forged in the crucible of violence and warfare. Ames's militia organization, at least initially, provided the state's freedmen with an institution through which they could assert their manhood and citizenship within a political discourse that synthesized freedom and violence.

That the militia was an integral component in constructing black manhood and citizenship makes it even more notable that Ames disbanded it. While it was not Ames's intent, dissolving the militia and discouraging the state's freedmen from using violence deprived them of their most efficacious means of expressing their claims to citizenship and manliness. It was not a decision that Ames made lightly, nor was it an easy one. After the war, Ames wrote to historian James Garner that he "had a Mission with a large M," and it was to guide the state's freedmen toward citizenship. "The ballot," Ames reminded Garner, "is the free man's weapon of defence—the ex-slave was to be armed with it. I had to do with the working out of the problem."<sup>65</sup> Yet, while Ames did in fact have a problem, it was not in the way that he perceived it; Ames was a prisoner to the racist paranoia of his day, and his racial sensibilities and fear of a race war would ultimately overshadow his desire to arm the freedmen. Heeding the shrill cries of the state's Democrats, he feared that a race war was imminent if the militia continued to exist. On October 13, in what was euphemistically labeled a "peace conference," Governor Ames tendered his surrender to the white-liners. After meeting with Democratic leader James Z. George, Ames disbanded the militia and deposited its arms at the United States armory in Jackson in return for a promise from George that the state's Democrats would cease their violent campaign. The decision was as ignominious as it was ill-founded. It erased whatever façade of authority Ames continued to claim and ceded it to the state's Democrats and white-liners. Most importantly, however, it deprived the state's Republicans of an institution through which they could not only defend themselves, but that also allowed them to legitimate their claims to masculinity and citizenship. Disbanding the militia emasculated the state's Republican Party in the eyes of the white-liners, who now possessed a monopoly on violence and the claims to manhood and citizenship that came with it. If Ames's "mission with a capital M" was to secure for the freedmen the rights of citizenship and the ballot,

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<sup>64</sup> *The Chicago Tribune* article is quoted in the *Daily Mississippi Pilot* on October 2, 1875.

<sup>65</sup> Ames to James Garner, January 17, 1900, Garner (James W.) Papers, Z/0432.000, MDAH.

he aborted his mission when he surrendered the militia to the state's Democrats.<sup>66</sup>

The nature of white political violence and its relationship to notions of manhood and citizenship had always eluded Ames to an extent. In early 1875 he opened his address to the state legislature with an anti-dueling diatribe, lecturing his audience that, "The duelist fights either to prove the absence of cowardice or to kill his opponent. The years are but few since everyone had the opportunity to perfect his record for bravery."<sup>67</sup> This might have been true for a Union general who had seen victory in 1865, but for Confederate veterans the project of forging manhood through violence did not end at Appomattox. For the white-liners, Redemption came to represent this project's fruition. When the state militia wilted away following the October peace conference, and with the Federal government unlikely to intervene, the white-liners could now indulge in terror and claim sole authorship of the postwar discourse concerning violence, manhood, and citizenship. The words of the white-liners demonstrate as much. White Mississippian W. B. Cunningham remembered that in Madison County, after a compromise between local Republicans and Democrats, "the young bloods of the democrats were very much disheartened because they did not get a chance to use their guns they had bought."<sup>68</sup> While it was popular to blame the violence on either young party members or the poor, white southerners nonetheless began to reconcile violence with respectability. When interrogated on the character of an officer in his paramilitary company, H. R. Ware answered in the affirmative when he asked if the man was "worthy," "upright," and a "good citizen." Tellingly, Ware assured his interrogators, "He is a very violent man, but a man who is a good citizen." The two were not mutually exclusive. In fact, in the violent world the war made they were inseparable.<sup>69</sup>

This affinity for violence manifested itself at polling places across the South. On these decidedly masculine and political geographies, white southerners used their militias to act out rituals of masculinity and violence that served to illustrate white supremacy and solidify black disfranchisement. Historians have often noted the manner in which white paramilitary groups and militia companies patrolled polling places and employed violence as a means of intimidating black voters. Yet, this superficial rendering of white paramilitaries only begins to capture and reconstruct the political meaning of white violence and its pervasiveness at polling places across Mississippi. Specifically, the manner in which these groups appropriated and

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<sup>66</sup> Frank Johnston, "The Conference of October 15th, 1875 Between General George and Governor Ames," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, 6 (1902): 68-72. Editor's Note: Johnston, who, among others, was present at the conference between Governor Adelbert Ames and Democratic leader James Z. George, evidently relied on his memory in stating some twenty-seven years later that the meeting was held on October 15, 1875. The meeting was held on October 13 in the west parlor of the Governor's Mansion. See: *Mississippi in 1875*, xii-xiii. Letter book, Governor's Office, Administration of Adelbert Ames, July 27, 1875-March 20, 1876, Record Group 27, Series 802, 270, 275, MDAH.

<sup>67</sup> Governor Adelbert Ames's Address to the Legislature of Mississippi Session 1875 (Jackson, Mississippi: Pilot Publishing Company, 1875), MDAH.

<sup>68</sup> *Mississippi in 1875*, 527, 834.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 1227.

dominated political space held a potent meaning about the relationship between manhood, militias, voting, and citizenship. Just as black militias transformed the social meaning of space in order to express black manhood and citizenship, so too would white militias use violence and hyper-masculine displays of force to pursue a similar goal. In doing so, they rewrote the definition of manhood and citizenship by circumscribing blacks' access to political space. White Mississippians used their militias to transform the meaning of political space and who possessed access to it, thereby creating an exclusionary definition of citizenship and manhood that buttressed white supremacy.<sup>70</sup>

Transforming the social meaning of political space took a number of forms, but it often began with white men drawing on their martial identity as Confederate veterans and soldiers to transform polling places into racialized, hyper-masculine, and militarized geographies. In Monroe County, John E. Meek, a white southern Republican, recalled that white-liners dressed in Confederate military garb and acted as sentinels at polls. Other times, this transformation entailed the physical alteration of political space itself. At a polling place in Peytona in Claiborne County, one resident recalled that a local white militia, "had a trench dug, probably three or four days before the election, commanding the place where the polling was held, and they had their arms stacked there as we used to do in war."<sup>71</sup> The local militia company then practiced taking up their arms and manning their trenches. While such a scene might have conjured up images of trench warfare at Vicksburg or Petersburg in the previous decade, in this war over the meaning of manhood and citizenship, Mississippi's white-liners found a new use for their old skills. They terra-formed the topography of the polling place, bending it to conform to their warlike definition of politics, as well as who they thought ought to have access to politics. White men thus acted out a martial identity that gave them the sole authority to define, with the threat of violence, who had access to political space. They did so in rituals that were necessarily warlike and that spoke in a language that all Mississippians understood. War and politics were each the domain of men, and by expressing their martial efficacy, white Mississippians sought to stake a monopoly on the claims to manhood and citizenship that martial efficacy entailed.

The white-liners also expressed their dominance of political space by donning their weapons in a way that highlighted their martial prowess. The historical record abounds with accounts of white men bringing rifles, pistols, and, most notably, cannons, into public spaces. In Clay County, the local Democratic club carried an artillery piece to their political rallies, using it as a show of force and a symbol of the Democratic strength.<sup>72</sup> In Monroe County, T. B. Sykes recalled that the local white-line militia fired a piece of artillery in the mornings leading up the election, ostensibly to intimidate the county's freedmen. In this case, domination

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<sup>70</sup> Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, 144-162; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, 560-563.

<sup>71</sup> *Mississippi in 1875*, 527, 1140; *Ibid*, 179.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

of the freedmen's sensory perception, as well as political space, served to solidify the white-liners' claims to martial and political power.<sup>73</sup> No one summed up the symbolic meaning of weapons—and especially cannons—at polls better than Reuben Davis, who averred that in the racial and gendered strife of Reconstruction there was “power and strength” in having a cannon.<sup>74</sup> Artillery represented a technology that not only provided an imposing presence over political space, but that also offered a symbolic confirmation for the very basis of white authority. Just as they had imagined Ames's Gatling gun bill as a threat to their own claims to citizenship and manhood, the use of artillery pieces at courthouses, political rallies, and polling places confirmed white men's own sense of self in the way that it allowed them to dominate the state's warlike political milieu.

In other instances, the threat of violence gave way to the application of violence itself. This represented the fullest expression of white martial manhood and a concomitant debasement of the freedmen's claims to citizenship. In Starkville, one white Republican witnessed a white-line militia unit open fire on a black company that was marching away from a Republican meeting. Such was the severity of the violence that the man told Congress that, from that point, “there were no meetings held, and no attempt made to hold republican meetings there, because they thought it was not safe.”<sup>75</sup> This intimidation continued at polling places. In Claiborne County, white men brought their pistols to the polls and fired into crowds of freedmen. If politics had become a violent struggle between men, the white-liners' use of force rendered black militias and the freedman impotent. This was done, first, through the white-liners' ability to appropriate and then monopolize violence in the absence of the Republican militia. Second, violence allowed the white-liners to turn political space into venues for the expression of white manhood and white supremacy. Without access to masculine spaces and the claims to citizenship and manhood that these spaces entailed, freedmen's claims to citizenship proved untenable. In the eyes of the white liners, then, the violent social transformation of political space affected, simultaneously, the making of white citizenship and the unmaking of black citizenship. This had less to do with contradictions inherent to black manhood and citizenship, as Emberton contends, and more to do with white Mississippians' ability to appropriate the discourse of citizenship and manhood by violently writing African Americans out of it.<sup>76</sup>

The responses of Republicans were varied, and some did attempt to reciprocate the white-liners' terror. According to freedman W. W. Edwards, he was “tired of running away. We had to fight.”<sup>77</sup> Sharing this sentiment, some freedmen maintained possession of their private arms, even if they only possessed shotguns, while some went to the polls in squads. More important, some freedmen continued to employ violence collectively. A number of freedmen in Wilkinson County retaliated against

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 1158.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 1054.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 1202.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 1356.

the local Democratic club for whipping a black man and threatening black women and children.<sup>78</sup> Thus, even if the freedmen unwillingly ceded their claims to political space, the franchise, and their ability to join state-sanctioned militias, some stopped short of surrendering their control over the bodies of black men, women, and children to the would-be Redeemers. Nonetheless, one could hardly label this a victory. Due to a confluence of ineffective leadership in Jackson, the failure of Grant to intervene with the Army, and the infinite rage that fueled white discontent, the white-liners' wave of violence carried the election. Without an institutional basis for state-sanctioned militia organizations and facing a torrent of white terror that undermined their local political and self-defense networks, the freedmen lacked the ability to participate in this hyper-masculine and warlike political discourse.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, historian James Garner set out to write his dissertation on Reconstruction in Mississippi. As he pursued his research, Garner reached out to an aging Adelbert Ames. In their correspondence, Garner asked the former governor and architect of the "radical" faction in the state about the causes underlying Reconstruction's failure. Responding to Garner, Ames highlighted what he saw as the dominant trope in Mississippi politics: "Though the colored men were in the majority, they made no attempt to deprive the white men of their rights as the whites have since done to them."<sup>79</sup> Of course, to the modern reader this is unsurprising, as the subjugation of the state's blacks provided the basis for white equality. Yet, while white supremacy undoubtedly played a role in the logic of Redemption and the tragic events that followed, conflict over the meaning of manhood and citizenship undergirded racial inequality. Moreover, because the Civil War produced a hyper-masculine political milieu that extolled the virtues of political violence, militias provided the most important vehicle through which Mississippians of both races defined, defended, and contested competing conceptions of manhood and citizenship. Militias provided the state's freedmen with a means of asserting their new autonomy, freedom, and, most importantly, their masculine claims to political participation. For the state's conservative white southerners, militias provided a means for implementing their exclusionary and hierarchical view of democracy. Militias, then, provided a malleable form of political engagement that served the varied purposes of both races. These purposes were necessarily violent. Such was the nature, however, of the world the Civil War made. Militias provided Mississippians with a means of both understanding this world and shaping it.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 1536; Ibid, 1538.

<sup>79</sup> Ames to James Garner, January 17, 1900, Garner (James W.) Papers, Z/0432.000, MDAH.