Journal of Mississippi History

Volume 75
Number 4 *Special Civil War Edition*

Article 6

2013

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On October 5, 1863, as the Civil War raged, Confederate Major Amos McLemore was shot to death in Jones County, Mississippi, while visiting with Confederate Representative Amos Deason in Deason's Ellisville home. At the time of his death, Maj. McLemore and his soldiers were on assignment to arrest deserters in McLemore's home county. His murder has long been attributed to Jones County's most notorious deserter and guerrilla leader, Newt Knight.[1]

Newt Knight and Amos McLemore are likely the most famous figures in one of many inner civil wars that occurred throughout the South. As recent studies of Civil War guerrilla warfare demonstrate, politically-divided home fronts sometimes became unofficial battlefields. Disaffection in the ranks and incipient Unionism plagued the Confederacy, bringing the brutality of war to the very doorsteps of civilians and slaves.[2]

A small farmer who owned no slaves, Newt Knight typified white southerners whose view of the Civil War as a "rich man's war and poor man's fight" led them to desert the Confederacy. Just eight days after

[1] For discussions of Amos McLemore's murder, see Thomas J. Knight, *Life and Activities of Captain Newton Knight and His Company and the "Free State of Jones"* (n.p. 1935), 74–75; Ethel Knight, *Echo of the Black Horn* (n. p., 1951), 165–66; Rudy Leverett, *Legend of the Free State of Jones* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 62–67; and Victoria Bynum, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 105–6.

[2] The burgeoning historiography on southern Unionism and guerrilla warfare is too voluminous to cite here. Recent overviews include Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: the Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), and Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Harvard University Press, 2010). A promising new work on dissent in Civil War Mississippi is Jarret Ruminski's *Southern Pride and Yankee Presence: The Limits of Confederate Loyalty in Civil War Mississippi, 1860–1865* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Calgary, 2012). For a contemporary account of Piney Woods, Mississippi, Unionists, see R. W. Surby, *Grierson's Raids, and Hatch's Sixty-Four Days' March, with Biographical Sketches and the Life and Adventures of Chickasaw, the Scout (Chicago: Rounds and James, 1865).*

the murder of Major McLemore, Newt and about fifty-five men gathered together, vowing to fight against the Confederacy and, as they later claimed in depositions, to support the United States Government. They elected Newt captain and named the ad hoc military unit the "Knight Company." The Free State of Jones, as it is known today, thus was born.[3]

Although the story of Jones County is steeped in myth and clouded by conjecture, there is no doubt that its citizens fought an internal civil war, one in which the Knight Company played a central role. Organized, armed, and deadly, the band was composed of men descended from the region's oldest white settlers. Of the approximately 95 to 125 who eventually joined, the majority owned land but no slaves.[4]

A common factor in such uprisings was kinship. Among the Knight band's fifty-five core members, twenty-six shared the same six surnames. These families had intermarried for several generations—in some cases, long before entering Mississippi Territory. Most were related either to Captain Newt Knight, or to his first and second lieutenants, James Morgan Valentine and Simeon Collins. In fact, the band might more accurately be termed the Knight-Valentine-Collins Company.[5]

Social divisions, as well as kinship, shaped pro- and anti-Confederate neighborhoods. Branches of the same families were often divided according to whether or not they owned slaves. Pre-war feuds, marital alliances, and economic relations all shaped one's loyalties, and the band relied heavily on support from family members. One family, the Collinses, was so consistently pro-Union that one could pretty well predict the Unionism of any family branch that intermarried with them.

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[3] The date and details of formation of the Knight Company are detailed in depositions contained in Records of the U.S. Court of Claims, 1835–1966, RG 123, Committee on War Claims, Claims of Newt Knight and Others, #8013 and 8464, Claims of Newton Knight, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter cited as Claims of Newton Knight). My thanks to Kenneth Welch for providing me with copies of these files.

[4] Federal Manuscript Population and Agricultural Censuses, 1850–1880, Jones, Covington, and Jasper Counties, Mississippi. Mississippi's Piney Woods region was not a land of cotton plantations. Only 12.2 percent of Jones County households held slaves, compared to a state average of over 55 percent. Leading supporters of the Confederacy belonged to its small slaveholding and commercial elite (Amos McLemore, however, was a non-slaveholder who had initially opposed secession).

[5] Kinships were compiled from various genealogical records, esp. the Federal Manuscript Population Census Reports, and through correspondence with descendants. For the importance of kinship in three different settings, see Victoria Bynum, *Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

Newt Knight himself credited Jasper Collins with having convinced him to desert the Confederacy.[6]

The course of the war accelerated desertion among men from Jones County. In October 1862, the Battle of Corinth, combined with passage of the Twenty-Negro Law, caused increasing numbers of soldiers to flee their units. The 1863 siege of Vicksburg was the last straw for many of the 7th battalion Mississippi Infantry, which included Newt Knight among its ranks. Assigned to Hebert's Brigade, the 7th proceeded toward Vicksburg on May 17, 1863. According to Private O. C. Martin, however, Newt avoided Vicksburg by deserting at Snyder's Bluff. Although Martin remained loyal to the Confederate Army even after being pinned down in Vicksburg, many other soldiers from the 7th never returned after signing loyalty oaths in exchange for parole by General Ulysses S. Grant.[7]

Within five months of Maj. McLemore's murder and formation of the Knight Company, deserters had reportedly taken over Jones County. On March 3, 1864, Gen. Dabney Maury informed Confederate Secretary of War James Seddon that Jones's deserters, whose numbers extended well beyond Knight's band of men, were well-armed and 500 strong. "They have been seizing Government stores," he wrote, " . . . killing our people, and have actually made prisoners of and paroled officers of the Confederate army."[8]

On the same day, Lt. Gen. Leonidas Polk reported to Confederate headquarters that Jones County deserters had murdered a conscript officer, pillaged loyal citizens' houses, and launched a successful

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[6] For extensive treatment of the Unionism of the Collins family in both Mississippi and Texas, see Bynum, *Long Shadow of the Civil War,* and Ed Payne, "Kinship, Slavery, and Gender in the Free State of Jones: The Life of Sarah Collins," *Journal of Mississippi History* 71, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 55–84. Newt Knight's statement that Jasper Collins convinced him the Civil War was a "rich man's war and poor man's fight, is from his interview with Meigs Frost, *New Orleans Item*, March 20, 1921.

[7] Brig. Gen. Louis Hebert, Hdqrs, Hebert's Brigade, Vicksburg, report to Maj. S. Croom, Asst. Adj. Gen., Forney's Division, July 9, 1863, http://www.civilwarhome.com/siegeofvicksburg.htm; Deposition of O.C. Martin, March 6, 1895, Claims of Newton Knight. On the battle of Corinth, see Peter Cozzens, *The Darkest Days of the War: The Battles of Iuka and Corinth* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); on Vicksburg, see especially Michael B. Ballard, *Vicksburg: The Campaign that Opened the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

[8] Maj. Gen. Dabney H. Maury to Secretary of War James A. Seddon, March 3, 1864, U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), series 1 (hereafter referred to as *Official Records*), 32 (2): 688–89.

raid (which Newt Knight later took credit for) on government stores at Paulding in neighboring Jasper County. Alarmed by such reports, the Confederacy sent two major expeditions into Jones County during the months of March and April 1864, the most important of which was headed by Col. Robert Lowry, who later served as governor of the state.[9]

The infamous "Lowry raids" severely crippled the Knight Company, resulting in the deaths of ten band members.[10] At least sixteen additional men were captured and forced back into the Confederate army on threat of execution. Soon, these men found themselves fighting the battle of Kennesaw Mountain, Georgia, where they were captured in July 1864 and sent to Yankee prison camps for the remainder of the war. In the immediate aftermath of Lowry's raid, a general fleeing of men from the Piney Woods region of Mississippi produced over 200 enlistees for the Union Army's 1st and 2nd Regiments of the New Orleans Infantry.[11]

About twenty members of the Knight band, including Capt. Newt Knight and First Sgt. Jasper Collins, remained in the swamps throughout the war. A Knight family slave, Rachel, helped obtain food, supplies, and vital information for the men. After the war, Newt and Rachel's lives remained intertwined as their families lived and worked together on his Jasper County farm. Rachel's children, all of whom apparently had white fathers, grew up with the nine children of Newt and his wife, Serena.[12]

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[9] Lt. Gen. L. Polk to Gen. S. Cooper, March 3, 1864, *Official Records,* 32 (3): 580. The initial recommendation that troops be sent to Jones County came a month before Polk's letter to Cooper, but did not occur until March 2, when Col. Henry Maury entered the county. Lowry's raid followed in mid-April, 1864. Lt. Gen L. Polk to Gen Dabney H. Maury, February 7, 1864, *Official Records* 32 (2): 688–89). Newt Knight discussed the Knight Company's raid on Paulding in 1921 with journalist Meigs Frost, *New Orleans Item,* March 20, 1921.

[10] On May 5, 1864, Col. William N. Brown described the Knight Company deaths in his report on Lowry's raid to Governor Charles Clark (Governors' Papers, RG 123, Mississippi Department of Archives and History). See also *New Orleans Item,* March 20, 1921; Leverett, *Legend of the Free State of Jones,* 90; and Bynum, *Free State of Jones*, 115–29.

[11] Bynum, *Free State of Jones,* 124–25. On men from this region who fled to New Orleans and joined Union forces, see Ed Payne, "Crossing the Rubicon of Loyalty: Piney Woods Enlistees in the Union, 1st and 2nd New Orleans Infantry," May 26, June 7, and July 1, 2011, http://renegadesouth.wordpress.com/2011/05/26/crossing-the-rubicon-of-loyalties-piney-woods-enlistees-in-the-union-1st-and-2nd-north-orleans-infantry/.

[12] Rachel was the slave of Newt's grandfather, John "Jackie" Knight, and later Newt's uncle, Jesse Davis Knight.

This was no simple story of a white man crossing the color line with a woman of color. Not only did Newt and Rachel have children together, two of Newt and Serena's children—Molly and Mat—also married two of Rachel's children—Jeffrey and Fannie. Newt presided openly over this mixed-race community, eventually distributing land among his mistresses as well as his children and grandchildren.[13]

Newt Knight's important role in defying Confederate authority during the war was rewarded during Reconstruction, during which time he received appointments under the administrations of two Republican governors: William L. Sharkey and Adelbert Ames. Under provisional governor Sharkey in 1865, Newt was designated "commissioner to procure relief for the destitute in a part of Jones County," a position that empowered him at one point to return two formerly enslaved children to their parents, and in another to seize dry goods from former Confederate representative Amos Deason. Under Governor Ames, Newt was appointed deputy U.S. Marshal for the Southern District of Mississippi on July 6, 1872. Though ultimately unsuccessful in his petitions for federal compensation for himself and fifty-four members of the Knight Company between 1870 until 1895, several state leaders supported those petitions.[14]

Over the course of 150 years, the facts of the Jones County rebellion have been both denied and embellished to support contradictory versions of the story. Just as politicians, historians, and novelists regularly interpret and reinterpret the meaning of the Civil War, so are the motives and character of Newt Knight regularly reinterpreted.

In 1886, for example, as northern industry increasingly penetrated the South, Union veteran G. Norton Galloway of Pennsylvania looked back on the uprising as emblematic of the restless and violent southern

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[13] After Rachel's death in 1889, Newt also fathered two children with Georgeanne Knight, Rachel's oldest daughter by another man. On the history of mixed-race Knights, see Bynum, *Free State of Jones,* 149–190, and *Long Shadow of the Civil War,* 97–135.

[14] Documents on Newt Knight's role as "commissioner of relief" are from his first federal claim, filed in 1870 (Newton Knight Folder, HR 1814, RG 233, House of Representatives, Accompanying Papers Files, 42nd Congress, box 15, NARA). Newt was appointed deputy U.S. Marshal for Mississippi's southern district by U.S. Marshal Shaughnessy. Various politicians who sponsored Newt's petitions to Congress included Republican representatives LeGrand W. Perce, George C. McKee, George Whitmore (of Texas), and Albert R. Howe. Other sponsors included Republican senator Blanche K. Bruce and Democratic representative Thomas R. Stockdale. For a detailed analysis of Newt Knight's thirty-year quest for compensation, see Bynum, *Long Shadow of the Civil War*, 77–96.

society that lay beneath a thin veneer of white upper class gentility. Galloway argued that during the war poor whites of Jones County formally seceded from the Confederacy and declared their county a "free state." He estimated that the band of deserters known as the Knight Company included approximately 10,000 men! He portrayed them not as patriots to the Union cause, but as "miscreants" who took feuding to "bloodcurdling" heights during the Civil War. Plain white southern men were a savage, backward bunch, thanks to the degrading effects of slavery, he made clear. But northern industrialists, he thanked God, were poised to civilize them.[15]

Galloway's wildly inaccurate version of the Jones County uprising was given intellectual legitimacy by Harvard professor Albert Bushnell Hart, who repeated many of Galloway's errors—including the myth of secession-within-secession—in the December 1891 issue of *The Nation* magazine. Under Hart, Newt Knight was transformed from a brutal savage into a noble savage patriot.[16]

Characterizations of Newt would soon change again. By 1900, builders and believers of the "Lost Cause" had subverted northern images of a glorious war of liberation. The publications of the newly-founded Mississippi Historical Society touted Confederate leaders as the soul of republican virtue in their fight to maintain constitutional principles against an increasingly oppressive federal government. Southern Unionists were generally dismissed as misguided poor whites—ignorant and thankfully few in number.[17]

But despite this political atmosphere, Laurel lawyer Goode Montgomery published the first balanced and well-researched account of the Free State of Jones in the Society's journal. In thoroughly refuting Galloway's "warped" claims, Montgomery drew a picture of an uprising made up of respectable farmers who had either opposed secession before the war or become dissatisfied with the Confederacy during the war.[18]

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[15] G. Norton Galloway, "A Confederacy within a Confederacy," *Magazine of American History* (Oct. 1886), 387–90.

[16] Albert Bushnell Hart, "Why the South Was Defeated in the Civil War," *New England Magazine* (Nov. 1891), 363–76.

[17] See, for example,. J. S. McNeilly, "The Enforcement Act of 1871 and the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society,* 9 (1906): 171.

[18] Goode Montgomery, "Alleged Secession of Jones County," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* 8 (1904): 13–22. See also Alexander L. Bondurant, "Did Jones County Secede?," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* 1 (1898): 103–6.

In the aftermath of the Great Depression, as historians rediscovered the virtuous plain white southern farmer and explored connections between southern white Unionism and pre-Civil War class divisions, Newt Knight's brand of southern rebellion came back in style. In 1943, James Street published *Tap Roots*, his pro-Union novel inspired by Newt. Then, in 1946, Newt's son, Thomas Jefferson Knight, published a worshipful biography of his father. In 1948, Universal Studios made a movie, *Tap Roots*, based on Street's novel.[19]

Lost Cause devotees struck back against the portrayal of Newt Knight as a heroic David who took on the Goliath of white slaveholders by refusing to fight their war. In 1951, Ethel Knight, Newt's pro-Confederate grand-niece, went after him with a vengeance in *The Echo of the Black Horn*. She condemned him as a man who had committed treason against his government—and against his race.[20]

Capitalizing on southern white opposition to the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, Ethel made public an open secret—that Newt had crossed the color line during and after the Civil War. Her book revealed that Newt had fathered numerous children by Rachel, the former slave of his grandfather. Furthermore, Ethel claimed, he forced two of his white children to marry across the color line. Newt and Rachel's own great-grandson, Davis Knight, she pointed out, had been convicted of miscegenation in 1948 for daring to marry a white woman.[21]

In the 1950s segregated South, Newt Knight was finished as a hero except for those few who looked beyond Ethel's saga of forbidden lust and banditry to the story of insurrection in which it was wrapped. While the legend of the Free State of Jones largely disappeared from academic works, locally, it became the tale of a demented white man, a manipulative, seductive, green-eyed mulatto, and one hundred or more men who were persuaded to join a misbegotten plot to overthrow the noblest government on earth—the Confederacy.[22]

Two subsequent historical works pitted tall tales against documentable facts in separate efforts to puzzle out the true story of Civil

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[19] James Street, *Tap Roots* (Garden City, NY: The Sun Dial Press, 1943); Thomas J. Knight, *Life and Activities of Capt. Newt Knight*; the movie, *Tap Roots,* was produced by Universal Studios in 1948.

[20] Knight, *Echo of the Black Horn*, 70–95, 279–300.

[21] Ibid., 7–10, 300.

[22] Ibid., 82, 99.

War Jones County. Drawing primarily from military records and the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Rudy Leverett's *Legend of the Free State of Jones* (1984) effectively proved that no "secession within secession" ever took place in Jones County. Leverett stopped short, however, of researching the backgrounds of the Knight Company members, dismissing them as outlaws. He chose not to discuss Newt's interracial family at all.[23]

Building on Leverett's work, my own study, *The Free State of Jones* (2001) drew on state, county, and territorial records, federal censuses, and memories to recreate a community war deeply rooted in kinship ties and neighborhood divisions. Interracial alliances, as well as alliances between families opposed to secession before the war and those no longer willing to fight the war, were forged. Parents, wives, children, and slaves thus became embroiled in home front schisms, both among themselves and with Confederate troops sent to the region.[24]

Despite these works, many readers remain polarized in their opinions of the Free State of Jones. Just as pro-Confederate enthusiasts have long dismissed the Jones County uprising as the work of a treasonous murderer—Newt Knight—so also do pro-Union enthusiasts continue to elevate him to hero status. In 2009, for example, sports journalist Sally Jenkins and Harvard professor John Stauffer co-authored *State of Jones: the Small Southern County that Seceded from the Confederacy,* whose very title revived the myth of secession-within-secession. Jenkins and Stauffer recast Newt Knight as a devoutly-religious abolitionist much in the model of John Brown who "envisioned" and "fought" for a world of racial equality before and after the war.[25]

Although evidence suggests that Newt's parents chose not to own slaves and that Newt himself disliked slavery, his wartime stance was more consistent with those of disaffected non-slaveholders, not

[23] Leverett, *Legend of the Free State of Jones,* 37, 75, 79.

[24] Bynum, *Free State of Jones*, 71–113.

[25] Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer, *The State of Jones: The Small Southern County that Seceded From the Confederacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 3–4, 45, 141. Further suggesting that Newt's life paralleled that of John Brown, the authors included an 1859 excerpt from John Brown's "Last Address to the Virginia Court" just before their table of contents. A 2009 online article by James Kelly, "Newton Knight and the Legend of the Free State of Jones," makes a similarly inflated claim that Newt Knight "married" his mixed-race mistress, Rachel. See http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/309/newton-knight-and-the-legend-of-the-free-state-of-jones.

abolitionists. Likewise, his political actions during Reconstruction identify him as a Republican who advocated rights of citizenship for former slaves, but tell us nothing about his views on racial equality. Certainly Newt's acceptance of his mixed-race descendants, which included their financial support and education, is remarkable. But again, there is no evidence, contrary to the inflated claims by Jenkins and Stauffer, that he ever opposed legal segregation of the races, although there *is* evidence that he objected to his light-skinned descendants being defined and treated as "Negroes."[26]

Newt Knight continues to fascinate historians and journalists. James Street's comment that he was a "rather splendid nonconformist," juxtaposed against Rudy Leverett's opinion that he revealed a "penchant for shooting his victims in the back," indicates, however, that we will likely never agree on who Newt really was.[27] A mercurial and charismatic man of bold actions, his private thoughts, inner feelings, and motives remain mostly hidden from view. His convictions appear strong, but subject to change—not surprising given the times in which he lived, for the Civil War was clearly transformative for many of his generation. Newt first entered military service voluntarily, later deserted, was captured and sent back to camp, then deserted again. By May 1863, he was living in the woods, and by October of that year, he was captain of the Knight band.[28]

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[26] Although Newt's grandfather, John "Jackie" Knight owned at least twenty-two slaves, Newt's father, Albert Knight, apparently avoided slave ownership most of his adult life. In 1952, Rachel Knight's granddaughter, Anna Knight, referred to Newt (without naming him) as "one of the younger Knights who did not believe in slavery," Anna Knight, *Mississippi Girl: An Autobiography* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1952), 11–12. Thomas Knight and Ethel Knight both claimed that Rachel Knight attempted around 1870 to send her mixed-race children to a white public school. According to former slave Martha Wheeler, when the children were denied entrance, someone (rumored to be Newt) burned the school down (Thomas J. Knight, *Life and Activities of Captain Newton Knight* 96–97; Ethel Knight, *Echo of the Black Horn,* 266–67; George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography,* Supplement, series 1, vol. 10, *Mississippi Narratives,* pt. 5 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972), 2269. According to Knight family historian Sondra Yvonne Bivins, Newt's mixed-race contemporaries and kinfolk contended that he counseled his mixed-race descendants to identify and marry as white. See "Yvonne Bivins on the History of Rachel Knight," http://renegadesouth.wordpress.com/2009/09/11/part-2-yvonne-bivins-on-the-history-of-rachel-knight/.

[27] Street, *Tap Roots,* foreword; Leverett, *Legend of the Free State of Jones*, 45. Most recently, Associated Press reporter Laura Tillman tackled the story with her July 4, 2013, AP wire account: "Jones County's Rebel's Descendants Seek New Facts."

[28] On August 17, 1861, Newt was enrolled by Capt. Sansom in Co. K, 8th regiment, Mississippi Volunteers in Jasper County. After the company's muster into the Confederacy, it became Co. E, 8th

As further evidence of his strong convictions, after the war, Newt lived among his rapidly-expanding mixed-race family, served two state Republican administrations and for thirty years tenaciously though unsuccessfully petitioned the federal government for compensation as a Unionist. Then, late in the century, his convictions changed again. Around 1892, Newt declared that non-slaveholders should have risen up and killed the slaveholders rather than be "tricked" into fighting their war for them. In hindsight, he now favored a class revolution rather than cooperation with Union forces as the most effective means by which the slaveholding class might have been defeated once and for all.[29]

Studies of nineteenth century dissent and insurrection remind us that both the Old and the New South were infinitely more interesting and complex than many imagine. Whether we revere or revile Newt Knight, his personal journey is important for the light it sheds on southern Unionism and guerrilla warfare during the Civil War. His life is also worth studying—but on its own terms, not ours—for the insights it offers into questions about southern class and race relations and the ways in which the Civil War impacted both.

Mississippi Infantry Regiment. After receiving an early discharge, Newt was conscripted on May 12, 1862, into Co. F, 7th Battalion, Mississippi Infantry.

[29] J. M. Kennedy, "History of Jasper County," *Jasper County News,* May 16, 1957, June 13, 1957.