

2023

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### Recommended Citation

Sutton, William R. (2023) "The Friars Point Coup and Aftermath: Historical Memory and Personal Character in the Era of Redemption," *Journal of Mississippi History*. Vol. 85: No. 1, Article 3.  
Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/jmh/vol85/iss1/3>

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# The Friars Point Coup and Aftermath: Historical Memory and Personal Character in the Era of Redemption

*By William R. Sutton*

## Prelude

The Mississippi Delta—a two hundred-mile swath of extraordinarily flat and fertile land drained by the Yazoo River and its tributaries, the Sunflower, the Coldwater, and the Tallahatchie rivers—was originally an area of dense swamps, heavy forests, and languid bayous. The land was difficult to clear but profitable when it was, especially when worked by large workforces of enslaved people or, later, freedmen. Coahoma County lies in the northern third of this area and, due to its proximity to the Mississippi River, was settled early, after the Choctaw chief Greenwood LeFlore duplicitously sold out his people to the United States in exchange for protection of his antebellum slaveholding empire. By 1860, roughly three-fourths of the population of Coahoma County were enslaved, and the population percentages remained stable as they transitioned to freedom after 1865.

The Delta has long been renowned for cotton production and the blues, both inextricably linked by labor systems (first slavery, later sharecropping) enriching White planters (the beneficiaries of the cotton industry) and exploiting Black workers (the originators of blues music). While both cotton and the blues are still rightly celebrated in the Delta, the grinding poverty of the area remains problematic for residents and noticeable to visitors, like President Bill Clinton, who in 1999 came to Coahoma County in the heart of the Delta as one of the five areas highlighted in his nationwide Poverty Tour.<sup>1</sup> Predictably, Clinton celebrated the Delta's claims to fame and promised government aid to address the poverty, but, equally predictably in these public displays where historical

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<sup>1</sup> Twenty years later, Coahoma County would still rank ninth in the entire country in terms of “deep disadvantage,” a rubric developed to include health, education, and social mobility statistics as well as the usual measures of poverty. <https://news.umich.edu/new-index-ranks-americas-100-most-disadvantaged-communities/>.

memory might conflict with the present, there was no acknowledgement of the historical dynamics that have contributed so much to racialized poverty in the Delta. It is the purpose of this paper, then, to explore one aspect of those dynamics as revealed in the story known as “the Friars Point riot” of 1875 and to draw attention to the effects of historical memory, as revealed in competing versions of the causes and results of the event itself, as well as in contradictory judgments of the ethics and integrity of the leading participants.

The interplay between race and poverty in the Delta is complex. For example, a year after President’s Clinton’s brief visit in 1999, Dorothy Jenkins, a former sharecropper and president of the Farrell-Sherard Habitat for Humanity affiliate, received word from the national office in Americus, Georgia, that her organization had won the coveted Jimmy Carter Award for the most productive small affiliate in the entire country. In an area recognized for its high rates of poverty and once considered by Habitat officials to be too small and impoverished to be viable, this recognition was a remarkable accomplishment. Farrell and Sherard are largely Black hamlets in western Coahoma County, and the unincorporated crossroads of Sherard shares its name with a remarkably successful planter family that has thrived in the Delta since eighteen-year-old John Holmes Sherard arrived in 1874. Accompanied by ex-slaves from the family holdings in Alabama and continuing for the next five generations, the Sherard family and these African-American workers labored, tied inseparably to the land and its cotton economy while occupying separate socioeconomic spheres and epitomizing the dynamics of paternalism, according to the exigencies of sharecropping and the mores of the Jim Crow South.<sup>2</sup> Thus, those present at Ms. Jenkins’s public announcement of the prize at the Sherard Volunteer Center in March 2002 represented an interesting mix: a contingent of proud Black homeowners (Habitat partners whose hard work and hospitality had inspired countless observers), representatives of the Sherard family (wealthy planters who had donated land and the Center to Habitat), and a group of outside volunteers (people who would have once been known as “carpetbaggers”).

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<sup>2</sup> J. H. Sherard’s paternalism was legendary in Coahoma County. Miriam Dabbs, “The One Hundred Years of J. H. Sherards,” *Here’s Clarksdale* 7 (Jan.-Feb. 1974), 6-7; Abigail Davis, “Race, Religion, and Reform in the Modern Mississippi Delta” (unpublished senior honors thesis, University of Illinois, 1997, in possession of author, 1-2).

## Introduction

At the heart of this well-deserved celebration of community improvement in 2002 lays a darker tale. In his later years, John Holmes Sherard, the patriarch of the family donating the land for the Farrell-Sherard Habitat affiliate, had remarked humorously that Coahoma County in the early days was a jungle requiring him to “kill the bears and run out the carpetbaggers,” with the latter category, of course, referring to the post-war biracial Republican Party that ruled Mississippi until it was ousted violently by White supremacist Democrats in the mid-1870s.<sup>3</sup> The key event in that process in Coahoma County, known as the “Friar’s Point Riot,” directly involving the young John Sherard,<sup>4</sup> followed a pattern previously established by groups throughout Mississippi known as “white-liners,” “bull-dozers,” or “tax-payers,” in the infamous “struggle of the white men to . . . re-establish white supremacy in the State,” by whatever means necessary, in the words of one of its proud instigators.<sup>5</sup> In Vicksburg, Yazoo City, and Clinton during 1874 and 1875, similarly orchestrated “riots” had driven Radical Republicans from office and killed hundreds of Black Mississippians.<sup>6</sup> White insurrectionists rationalized their extra-legal behavior by claiming that biracial Republican political

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<sup>3</sup> Dabbs, “One Hundred Years of J. H. Sherards,” 6.

<sup>4</sup> Sherard’s involvement is mentioned by another young participant, George Maynard, who went on to become a widely respected lawyer in Coahoma County. George Maynard, ed., *Memoirs and Letters of George Fleming Maynard* (Privately published, Carnegie Public Library, Clarksdale, MS, 2003), 100.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Johnston, “The Conference of October 15, 1875 between General George and Governor Ames,” *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, 6 (1902), 65; Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (New York, Hill and Wang, 2007), 292-94.

<sup>6</sup> As Louisiana freedman and subsequent Exoduster Henry Adams explained to a Senate hearing in 1880, “If the colored men are attacked, they call it a riot, because they are killing the colored men. You never hear of the colored man raising the riot, because he never gets the chance. If he shoots at a white man, they kill fifty colored men for the one white man that was shot.” Adams, in Dorothy Sterling, ed., *The Trouble They Seen: Black People Tell the Story of Reconstruction* (New York, De Capo Press, 1976), 438. For more on Adams, see Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 71-107. See also Vernon Wharton’s instructive typology of such “riots.” Vernon L. Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890* (New York, Harper & Row, 1965), 221-22 and Nicholas Lemann, “Deconstructing Reconstruction,” *Washington Monthly*, Jan./Feb. 2013. ([http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january\\_february\\_2013/features/deconstructing\\_reconstruction042046.php?page=2](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january_february_2013/features/deconstructing_reconstruction042046.php?page=2)).

corruption was at the root of oppressive taxation and embezzlement<sup>7</sup> and that federal protection for freedmen had encouraged the ex-slaves to make secret Nat Turner-style plans to massacre innocent Whites. In reality, however, White supremacist goals revealed that the aspiring planter class was desperate for the re-establishment of an exploitable, controllable labor force to replace that lost with the abolition of slavery. As one Delta planter put it bluntly to one of his sharecroppers, “This plantation is a place for me to make the profit, not you.”<sup>8</sup> This perspective was not lost on the ex-slaves: “[M]y people can never do well and generally become land-owners in the South. Our old masters will ever regard us as legal property, stolen and forcibly taken away from them, and if they can’t get our labor for nothing in one way, they will invent some other plan by which they can, for they make all the laws and own all the best lands.”<sup>9</sup> Of course, presumably as a result of the Union victory in the Civil War, the federal government held the upper hand in legislating postwar arrangements, but when the Grant administration refused to enforce its own laws, the new planter aristocracy achieved impressive advances in consolidating its power by the 1870s.<sup>10</sup>

When White supremacists in Coahoma County organized their rebellion in October 1875, they targeted Sheriff John Milton Brown, a heretofore respected Black transplant from Oberlin, Ohio, an evangelical Protestant hotbed of pre-war abolitionism. The leader of the attack on Brown was the chameleonic James Lusk Alcorn (erstwhile Republican, former governor, and current U.S. senator), one of the richest men in the South and a political opportunist par excellence, eager to regain his lost political power. Equally involved was James R. Chalmers (ex-Confederate general, former aide to the notorious Nathan Bedford Forrest, and deeply implicated in the atrocities of the infamous Fort Pillow mas-

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<sup>7</sup> Republican corruption was “paltry” compared to Democratic excesses after Redemption because “conservatives simply had more experience in government in Mississippi and knew where the money was.” Donald Mabry, “Reconstruction in Mississippi, 1865-75,” *Historical Text Archive*, <http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?action=read&artid=587>.

<sup>8</sup> Sydney Nathans, “Gotta Mind to Move, A Mind to Settle Down’: Afro-Americans and the Plantation Frontier,” in William J. Cooper, Jr., Michael F. Holt, and John McCardell, eds. *A Master’s Due: Essays in Honor of David Herbert Donald* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 218.

<sup>9</sup> Albert T. Morgan, *Yazoo; Or, On the Picket Line of Freedom in the South: A Personal Narrative* (Washington, DC, 1884, reprinted by Russell and Russell, New York, 1968, introduction by Otto Olsen).

<sup>10</sup> Jared Black, “Forcibly If They Must: The Construction of False Justifications for the White Supremacist Revolution in Mississippi, 1875” (unpublished senior honors thesis, University of Illinois, 2011, in possession of author, 15-22).

sacre),<sup>11</sup> who was called upon by Alcorn to provide an extra-legal army to support his insurrectionist plans. As always, the stated rationales hinged on charges of political cronyism, economic malfeasance, and threats of Black mass murders of Whites. True to plan, only a handful of Blacks and one or two Whites died in the confrontation, but to “run out the carpetbaggers,” in J. H. Sherard’s memorable phrase, was an accurate description of the work of the White “Redeemers” involved in the Friars Point “riot.” Also accomplished in the uprising and even more significant, however, was the economic agenda behind the illegal political action. At the height of the melee, as reported by participant George Maynard (and presumably within the hearing of his fellow combatant, J. H. Sherard), Chalmers’s commanding voice could be clearly heard shouting the essential instructions: “Don’t kill these negroes, boys; we need cotton pickers.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> On April 24, 1864, the *New York Times* reported, “The blacks and their officers were shot down, bayoneted and put to the sword in cold blood. . . . Out of four hundred negro soldiers only about twenty survive! At least three hundred of them were destroyed after the surrender! This is the statement of the rebel General Chalmers himself to our informant.” Cited in Richard Fuchs, *An Unerring Fire: The Massacre At Fort Pillow* (Rutherford, NJ, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984), 84. For more on Fort Pillow, see Andrew Ward, *River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War* (New York, Viking Press, 2005); John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow, A Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Bruce Tap, *The Fort Pillow Massacre: North, South, and the Status of African-Americans in the Civil War Era* (New York, Routledge Press, 2014); and James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historical Sites Get Wrong* (New York, Touchstone, 2007), 233. Chalmers delivered his own self-justification to Congress fifteen years after the fact. James R. Chalmers, *A Personal Explanation by Hon. J. R. Chalmers of Mississippi, Delivered in the House of Representatives of the United States, May 7, 1879* (Washington DC, 1879).

<sup>12</sup> George Maynard in “Friars Point Riot” vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library. In another version, Maynard quoted Chalmers: “Don’t shoot, Boys. Let the poor devils go. We need them to pick our cotton. Wait until they pass, then we’ll get on our horses and give them a good chase.” Maynard to Mary Robinson, in “Friars Point Riot” vertical file. As Wilber Gibson, another eyewitness, later noted, “The cotton was all in the fields and if they had wanted to kill them, they couldn’t have afforded to do so.” Wilber Gibson in “Friars Point Riot” vertical file. After a similar White supremacist attack earlier in Yazoo City, Albert Morgan recorded, “It was proclaimed in the streets, ‘Spare the niggers’ so long as they behave themselves.” J. S. McNeily, “Climax and Collapse of Reconstruction in Mississippi, 1874-1896,” *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* v. 12 (1912), 408. Chalmers’s animosity toward the aspirations of freedmen was longstanding. His brutal conduct toward surrendered Black soldiers at Fort Pillow was well documented, as an eyewitness tentatively identified him even ordering the murder of an eight-year-old African American boy captured during the conflict. *U.S. Congress Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, “Fort Pillow Massacre.”* House Report No. 65, 38th Congress, 1st Session, 5, 51.

Thus, there was in fact no massacre at Friars Point as there had been two years earlier at Colfax, Louisiana.<sup>13</sup> Sheriff Brown, however, was successfully run out of town, and, after narrowly escaping with his life, he moved to Topeka, Kansas, where he continued his civic service as an agent for the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association, extending opportunities to many so-called "exodusters" fleeing similar White supremacist violence that had resulted in his own ouster. During that same period, however, Alcorn, Chalmers, and other White Mississippians (including J. H. Sherard) had successfully solidified their control over every aspect—economic, political, social, and legal—of life in Coahoma County, instituting the exploitative system of sharecropping that would create decades of racial discrimination and disempowerment and would contribute to patterns of poverty that Habitat for Humanity would be challenging a century and a quarter later.

While the Civil War led to the abolishment of slavery, the decade following its official military end made it abundantly clear that the war's results were not accepted, especially in Mississippi.<sup>14</sup> The counter-revolutionary aspects of the incident at Friars Point in 1875, no surprise to historians of Reconstruction, was a significant moment in the long and calculated White supremacist project to expel Black leadership from positions of power and to deprive the freedmen of their political rights. An oft-neglected subtext to this story line, however, has concerned itself with creating historical memories and, ultimately, public memorials to make this insurrectionary and violent process appear much more honorable, both in terms of the reports of those directly involved at the time but also in the judgments of later histories.<sup>15</sup> This necessity, in turn, required the construction of a narrative of alleged injustice being corrected by methods, quasi-questionable to be sure but ultimately capable of rationalization. In this narrative, the personal moral character of the major agents becomes a focal point, and the conclusions drawn from these character comparisons continue to inform and justify the dominant interpretations of the Friars Point conflict. Thus, this incident (and its

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Lane, *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction* (New York, Henry Holt, 2008); Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 12-20; Bianca Zaharescu, "A Tale of Two Riots" (unpublished manuscript in possession of the author, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Lehmann, *Redemption*, 241.

<sup>15</sup> Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 11-15; Douglas Overton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 346-57.

subsequent aftermaths) warrants deeper examination, both in the events of the “riot” itself, and in the ethical comparisons of the most prominent personalities involved—James Lusk Alcorn and John Milton Brown.<sup>16</sup>

### Historiography

The historiography of Reconstruction in Mississippi has paid scant attention to the Friars Point incident. Both James Garner’s 1901 study, *Reconstruction in Mississippi*, and an extended article in *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* (1912) by J. S. McNeily, editor of the influential *Greenville Times*, entitled “Climax and Collapse of Reconstruction in Mississippi, 1874-1896,” barely mention Friars Point and conclude that Reconstruction was a colossal failure due to misguided attempts to involve politically inexperienced freedmen prone to the machinations of opportunistic politicians like carpetbagger Adelbert Ames.<sup>17</sup> Of course, W. E. B. DuBois challenges these interpretations in *Black Reconstruction in America*, as he focuses on the economic aspects of Reconstruction, especially the planters’ determination to use race as a way to exploit both poor Whites and Black sharecroppers, but Garner’s work remained the standard interpretation and sustained the Lost Cause narrative.<sup>18</sup>

By the 1960s, revisionist historians proved ready to question the conclusions of what DuBois called “the southern white fairytale.”<sup>19</sup> Vernon Wharton’s *The Negro in Mississippi 1865–1890*, Otis Singletary’s *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, and Herbert Aptheker’s *To Be Free: Studies in American Negro History*, question many of the myths surrounding the justification of White supremacist illegality, but the Friars Point riot and its protagonists played a supporting role to better-known incidents

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<sup>16</sup> Alejandra Collopy, “Character Comparison in Historical Memory: John Milton Brown and James Alcorn,” Avanti Chajed, “Albert T. Morgan and Racialized Respectability” (unpublished papers in possession of author).

<sup>17</sup> James Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (New York, Macmillan Company, 1901); McNeily, “Climax and Collapse,” *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* (1912), 283-474.

<sup>18</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York, Free Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 715.



in Vicksburg, Yazoo City, and Clinton.<sup>20</sup> More recently, William Harris's *The Day of the Carpetbagger: Republican Reconstruction in Mississippi* includes some coverage of the riot but unfortunately relies exclusively on James Alcorn's self-serving and disingenuous versions presented to the *New York Tribune*.<sup>21</sup> The most recent historiography of Mississippi Reconstruction emerges in the shadow of Eric Foner's seminal *Reconstruction*, with examples being Nicholas Lemann's *Redemption* (in which he argues that the struggle in Mississippi was simply part of the larger, as-yet-unfinished Civil War), Nancy Bercau's *Gendered Freedoms*, (in which she recasts this conflict as a struggle over patriarchal authority rather than a contest over economic opportunity), and Douglas Overton's *The Wars of Reconstruction* (in which he exhaustively details the successes of White supremacist violence in preventing Black activists and their White allies from turning the promises of freedom into reality for the ex-slaves.)<sup>22</sup> Again, however, the Friars Point story is either short-changed or ignored entirely, and in none of these works is there any discussion of the character issue of the chief antagonists, Alcorn and Brown.

Though the staunchly anti-secessionist Alcorn joined the Confederacy purely to retain his credibility in Southern society, though he openly undercut the Confederate war effort by trading directly with the Yankees, and though he later masqueraded as a Republican in order to establish himself politically as well as to keep Black voters under control, his standard biographer, Lillian Pereyra, ascribes Alcorn's long

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<sup>20</sup> Singletary gives the conflict a paragraph, Wharton, just two sentences (191-92) and, despite insightful treatment of the Vicksburg and Clinton troubles, Aptheker never mentions it at all. Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi*; Otis A. Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1957); Herbert Aptheker, *To Be Free: Studies in American Negro History* (New York, International Publishers, 1969).

<sup>21</sup> William C. Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbagger: Republican Reconstruction in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana University Press, 1979). Harris devotes only four pages to Friars Point, and he uncritically accepts Alcorn's version. But Harris in another work writes that Alcorn's corruption charges were "exaggerated, "as did James Garner. William C. Harris in Otto Olsen, ed., *Reconstruction and Redemption in the South* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 95; Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi*, 320. See also Molly R. Smith, "The Friars Point Coup" (unpublished paper in possession of author, 14).

<sup>22</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York, Harper & Row, 1988); Lemann, *Redemption*; Nancy Bercau, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861-1875* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2003); Overton, *Wars of Reconstruction*. Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003) mentions Friars Point as one of the "riots" that "seemed to epitomize the 'Mississippi plan,'" (p. 298) but also gives no details.

and convoluted political machinations to nothing more pernicious than his “persistent” Whiggery.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in the most careful coverage of the incident and the personalities of its principal rivals, Linton Weeks highlights Alcorn’s “mercenary mercantilism” and blithely concludes, “In other words, Alcorn’s main concern remained the same as usual: enough war and hatred, let’s get back to business.” In addition, he finds nothing objectionable in the actions of Alcorn’s ally, ex-Confederate general James R. Chalmers whom Weeks simply credits with “restoring order to the county.”<sup>24</sup> In a surprising twist, however, Weeks (like many of Brown’s contemporaries, White and Black) finds the sheriff a sympathetic character—particularly noteworthy since the other works either ignore Brown or facetiously repeat the derogatory comments offered by his arch-nemesis, Alcorn.<sup>25</sup>

But John Milton Brown, it turns out, does not actually disappear from the historical record at all—mention of his career after leaving Mississippi, however, only appears in sources related to the history of African Americans in Kansas.<sup>26</sup> Randall Bennett Woods, for instance, in *A Black Odyssey*, calls Brown, with no evidence cited, “ambitious and evidently unscrupulous”—a “ruthless” politico, one of “a quadrumvirate of ambitious and colorful politicians” seeking control of patronage

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<sup>23</sup> Lillian Pereyra, *James Lusk Alcorn, Persistent Whig* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1966). Alcorn even manages to win praise from W. E. B. DuBois, who refers to the crafty politician as the “most advanced Reconstructionist” in Mississippi. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 436. And Kenneth Stampp calls Alcorn “a man of complete integrity.” Kenneth Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction: 1865-1877* (New York, Vintage Books, 1965), 184.

<sup>24</sup> Linton Weeks, *Clarksdale and Coahoma County: A History* (Clarksdale, Carnegie Public Library, 1982), 54-57. Using a plethora of primary sources available in the Clarksdale Public Library vertical files, Weeks’s locally published work is the basis for Nicholas Lemann’s summary of the “riot.” Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 13-14. Despite his centrality to the story, Chalmers has been largely ignored in this secondary record, with an exception being Ward, *River Run Red*, 369. Other authors mention his interrupted service in Congress, memorable for being overturned for voter fraud by a challenge from the Black politician, John Lynch. Robert Fulton Holtzclaw, *Black Magnolias: A Brief History of the Afro-Mississippian—1865-1980* (Shaker Heights, OH, The Keeble Press, 1984), 35. See also John R Lynch, *The Facts of Reconstruction* (New York, 1913).

<sup>25</sup> Weeks, *Clarksdale*, 43, 56-57; Lemann, *Promised Land*, 12-14. Steven Hahn actually quotes Brown’s testimony before the Senate in describing the situation faced by the Ex-odusters, without mentioning his name. Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 359. William Harris discusses the careers of exiled Radicals after 1875, even some who ended up in Kansas, but Brown is not among them. Harris, *Day of the Carpetbagger*, 714-23. Neither does he appear in Eric Foner’s list of Black Republicans run out by the Redeemers. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 607-08.

<sup>26</sup> George Maynard’s laconic summation was “John Brown settled in Kansas and moved his family there and died.” Maynard to Mary Robinson, September 7, 1929, in “Friars Point Riot” vertical file.

power within the “black and tan” wing of the Kansas Republican Party. Thomas Cox (*Blacks in Topeka, Kansas, 1865–1915*) and Robert Ahearn (*In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879–1880*), on the other hand, emphasize Brown’s acclaimed work with the Kansas Freedmen’s Relief Association, a reputable charitable organization that both helped thousands of Black emigrants and also allowed Brown to continue his respectable career as a race spokesman.<sup>27</sup> Tellingly, the authors do mention Brown’s Mississippi career in passing, though they assiduously avoid any discussion of why he left. Thus, the complete narrative of John Milton Brown’s exceptional career, which extends far beyond his ignominiously enforced exit from Mississippi, remains unwritten, despite the extensive testimony he delivered before a U.S. Senate committee investigating “the Causes of the Removal of Negroes from the Southern to the Northern States” in 1880.<sup>28</sup> Such an omission is truly unfortunate, because this story provides an important window into the character of the other antagonists in the Friars Point “riot” and into the subsequent public memories of Reconstruction and Redemption based on those personal comparisons.<sup>29</sup>

### Coahoma County in the Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction

The Civil War touched the residents of Coahoma County the way war often affects people—no great battles, a glaring absence of martial glory, a few examples of individual heroism—but mostly reports of general disruption and the occasional acts of thievery and extortion against civilians by both sides. The official end of the fighting left the county in confusion and occasional conflict, with freedmen determined to appropriate their access to genuine freedom and White supremacist planters

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<sup>27</sup> Randall Bennett Woods, *A Black Odyssey: John Lewis Waller and the Promise of American Life, 1878-1900* (Lawrence, The Regents Press of Kansas, 1981), footnote 35, 209, 16-18; Thomas C. Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas, 1865-1915: A Social History* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Robert G. Ahearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-1880* (Lawrence, The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978).

<sup>28</sup> Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 17; Cox, *Blacks in Kansas*, 57. This omission is particularly problematic in the latter work, as Cox simply states “John M. Brown, a black Topekan, emigrated from Mississippi in 1877” and then cites for this information, with no further comment, Brown’s highly significant story about his flight from Mississippi in footnote 35 on page 57. Brown’s forty-odd pages of testimony appear in *Report and Testimony of the Select Committee of the United States Senate to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes from the Southern to the Northern States, in Three Parts*, 3 vols. (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1880), 2:351ff.

<sup>29</sup> Orville Vernon Burton, “The South as ‘Other,’ the Southerner as ‘Stranger,’” *Journal of Southern History*, v.74 (February, 2013), 15.

equally determined to return Black workers to their pre-war condition as an exploitable, controllable labor force.<sup>30</sup> And conflict did erupt on March 31, 1866, when one of those White planters killed an ex-slave in a labor dispute. The planter was former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest, who in 1861, had left his Green Grove plantation (just south of where John Sherard would later establish his operation) to become one of the most begrudgingly respected cavalry officers of the Civil War. But, as mentioned previously, Forrest's reputation had been sullied during the conflict by allegations that his men (including his aide, James Chalmers) had cold-bloodedly slaughtered surrendered Black Union troops in the infamous Fort Pillow massacre in 1864—a crime many believed compatible with his pre-war occupation as a slave trader.<sup>31</sup> After surrendering to Union forces at Gainesville, Alabama, in 1865, Forrest returned to Coahoma County to run his plantation, worked by two hundred contracted freedmen when this fatal incident occurred.<sup>32</sup>

Thomas Edwards, the freedman Forrest killed, was every bit as hard-bitten as the ex-general; in fact, Edwards's reputation for violence included stories of animal abuse and wife-beating.<sup>33</sup> Just weeks before his death, Edwards had led the Green Grove freedmen in a dispute over the terms of their contracts, even contacting the Freedmen's Bureau for help, and Forrest had decided to reassert his authority over his work force by ordering them to clean the grounds on their Sunday off, which is when the altercation with Edwards took place.<sup>34</sup> As might be expected, many of the freedmen present objected strenuously to the killing of Edwards and forced Forrest to take refuge in his mansion, where he remained until local officials arrived to arrest him. Forrest

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<sup>30</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, xxv-xxvi; James Loewen and Charles Sallis, eds., *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* (New York, Pantheon Press, 1974), 149-159.

<sup>31</sup> John Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort, Jr., "Fort Pillow Revisited: New Evidence about an Old Controversy," *Civil War History*, 28 (December 1982), 293-306; Court Carney, "The Contested Image of Nathan Bedford Forrest," *Journal of Southern History*, 67 (August, 2001), 601-30. "His life was an incredible combination of hard work, shrewd dealing in not-quite-honorable professions, brilliant tactics, and racism toward Black people. These characteristics all combined help explain his success as a slave trader, general, and planter." Loewen and Sallis, eds., *Mississippi*, 128.

<sup>32</sup> Nine-year-old J. H. Sherard actually witnessed the surrender (in which James Chalmers was also paroled). Interview with J. H. Sherard, July 22, 1936, in "Nathan Bedford Forrest" vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library.

<sup>33</sup> *Friars Point Coahomian*, April 20, 1866; Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms*, 117-18.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-37. The freedmen's success included a clause preventing White overseers from supervising Black workers, thereby impressing a Freedmen's Bureau official who commented, "I find that when one or more freedmen becomes dissatisfied, others are very liable to sympathize with them, in case one leaves, others will follow." Dan Pleck, "Timeline of Coahoma County History" (unpublished paper in possession of author, 2.)

was ultimately released on \$10,000 bail, and after a cursory investigation, he was exonerated.<sup>35</sup> By then, however, Forrest had had enough of Coahoma County; he immediately sold out and ended up a year later in Pulaski, Tennessee, where he became the leader of a newly formed fraternal organization dedicated to White supremacy and indigenous terrorism, the Ku Klux Klan.

Despite his well-earned prominence, however, Nathan Bedford Forrest was not the most powerful planter in post-war Coahoma County. That honor went to the county's largest landholder and most powerful politician before, during, and after the Civil War—James Alcorn. Personally opposed to radical secessionists before the War, Alcorn decided to follow the path of least resistance in 1861 and secured for himself a commission as a brigadier general in "The Army of Mississippi," which was composed of state troops. After his unremarkable sixty-day enlistment expired, a disgruntled Alcorn returned to his plantation in Coahoma County where, except for one month of desultory militia service, he devoted himself to increasing his personal wealth by breaking the Confederacy's self-imposed cotton blockade.<sup>36</sup> As he explained forthrightly to his wife safely established on her family's plantation in northern Alabama in December 1862:

I have been very busy, hiding and selling my cotton. . . . If I escape the burners I will be able to realize \$20,000 or more. I am busy I assure you and am making my time count. I got back from Helena last night, took in two days fifteen bales and sold them for \$3200.00 over two hundred dollars per bale, I am now selling at 40 cents per pound; in addition to the money I have on hand. . . . I wish, however, to fill my pocket—and should the war continue, we will spend our summer in New York—and leave them to fight who made the war. . . . If I live, and the sky should again clear up, and the political sea become calm, I can in five years make a larger fortune than ever.<sup>37</sup>

Always the astute businessman, Alcorn insisted that his northern buyers pay for his smuggled cotton in gold, and, by the end of the war, Alcorn was widely considered one of the wealthiest men in the South.

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<sup>35</sup> *Friars Point Coahomian*, April 20, 1866; "Nathan Bedford Forrest" vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library.

<sup>36</sup> Pereyra, James Alcorn, 53-55; 68-69; Steven Yafa, *Big Cotton: How a Humble Fiber Created Fortunes, Wrecked Civilizations, and Put America on the Map* (New York, Viking, 2005), 170-71. His militia charge was to round up runaway slaves and Confederate deserters in Coahoma County.

<sup>37</sup> Weeks, *Clarksdale and Coahoma County*, 43; Pereyra, *James Alcorn*, 63.

As his biographer summed it up (with no sense of judgment), “His adroit responses to the challenges of the war years had enabled him to save a good part of his fortune.”<sup>38</sup>

When the war ended, Alcorn quickly affiliated himself with the Republican Party. His political stance toward the freedmen was vintage opportunism—he favored Black suffrage for the purposes of political power and patronage, but privately disparaged any suggestion of actual economic or social equality between the races. Alcorn quickly won election to the United States Senate but was denied his seat in 1865 as Congress struggled to come to grips with Southern postwar intransigence. In 1869, Alcorn won the Mississippi governorship as a Republican,<sup>39</sup> but resigned in 1871 to take a seat in the U.S. Senate. In one calculated and effective move as he left the governorship, Alcorn established an all-Black college, commemorating himself, and named as president the respected Black U.S. senator, Hiram Revels, in the process maintaining a segregated University of Mississippi and removing a potential threat to his political ambitions.<sup>40</sup> During the next four years, he would be locked in a bitter battle with Radical Republican Adelbert Ames, a decorated Union veteran from Maine and a staunch proponent of rights for freedmen, with a strong aversion to political hypocrisy. In 1873, Ames defeated Alcorn decisively in the race for governor, as even Alcorn’s own sharecroppers voted for Ames.<sup>41</sup> While the country continued to wrestle with the implications of political restructuring, racial equality, and economic recovery, the meanings of Union victory and Confederate defeat became increasingly clouded. And nowhere were these uncertain developments more conflict-ridden than in Mississippi.

### **The Counter-Revolution: Redemption in Mississippi**

By the summer of 1874, the situation in the Magnolia State was getting worse for Black citizens. White supremacists, including James Alcorn when he was governor, had come to eschew the night-riding

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> On a train ride back to Coahoma County from college in Virginia in 1867, George Maynard overheard a heated conversation between Alcorn and someone identified only as “Colonel,” in which Alcorn clarified his reasoning in joining the Republican Party: to “save our people from being robbed by ‘carpetbaggers and scalawags.’” Maynard, ed. *Memoirs*, 18-19.

<sup>40</sup> Holtzclaw, *Black Magnolias*, 100.

<sup>41</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 539.



terrorism of the formally disbanded Klan but now armed Democrats publicly drilled in open defiance of the state government, its largely Black militias, and the increasingly disinterested federal troops stationed in Mississippi.<sup>42</sup> In Vicksburg, Yazoo City, and Clinton, White supremacists sufficiently subverted the electoral process through intimidation and outright violence, with an intermittent but half-hearted federal response. The apparent lesson of those last six months in Vicksburg—that unsubstantiated charges of corruption would be tolerated while outright terrorism might not be—was not lost on other Mississippi White supremacists.<sup>43</sup> This was the context in October 1875, as White supremacists in Coahoma County mounted a concerted effort to oust Sheriff John Milton Brown.

Brown, like other politically effective ambitious and idealistic sheriffs Peter Crosby and Albert Morgan, allied himself to the Radical Republican governor, Adelbert Ames.<sup>44</sup> Though Ames and James Alcorn remained implacable foes, there was no hint of overt tension between Brown and Alcorn in the early months of Brown's tenure, and a number of prominent Coahomans had posted the requisite bond for Brown to assume his elected position.<sup>45</sup> But that all changed in early October when White rabble-rousers began to gin up an incendiary discourse aimed at Brown specifically and Black participation in politics generally. According to James Chalmers, Brown "had been making speeches to the Negroes, advising them to prepare for a fight, and that he had secretly brought in ammunition," and Chalmers called on Whites "to prepare

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<sup>42</sup> Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 160.

<sup>43</sup> Black, "Forcibly If They Must," 15-22; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 558-60; Holtzclaw, *Black Magnolias*, 44. One of the leaders of the Tax-Payers was Robert Alcorn, James's cousin and editor of the Democratic Jackson (MS) *Weekly Delta*. This was just one example of Alcorn family "nepotism" in the Delta. Pereyra, *James Alcorn*, 133 n. 30, 172.

<sup>44</sup> Reflecting on his decision to enter Mississippi politics, Ames later wrote, "[I]t seemed to me I had a mission, with a big M." Dunbar Rowland, ed. *Encyclopedia of Mississippi History: Comprising Sketches of Counties, Towns, Events, Institutions, and Persons*, 2 vols. (Madison, WI, Selwyn Brant, 1907), 1:85.

<sup>45</sup> McNeily, "Climax and Collapse," 283, 303-10. For the important role of bondsmen in attempting to rein in the power of elected but impecunious Black officials, see Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 256-59.

themselves.”<sup>46</sup> Further stoking tensions, rumors abounded that Friars Point was soon to be visited by Congressman (later Senator) Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar, a crafty Democratic leader who had made



*Cotton field scene of Friars Point coup confrontation by Clark's Bridge over the Sunflower River. Image courtesy of William R. Sutton.*

himself nationally noteworthy in a fawning eulogy over his longtime political opponent, the abolitionist and Radical, Charles Sumner, but who still raised the suspicions of Radical Republican and Black voters.<sup>47</sup> In the midst of this growing tension, Black and White Republicans met in Friars Point on October 2 to choose a slate for upcoming elections.

The end result of this activity was almost predictable. Alcorn publicly accused Brown of embezzling \$4,725, planning to steal \$7,000 more, and plotting to arm the county's freedmen in his attempt to create a corrupt political ring in Coahoma County. Brown promised to respond to Alcorn's

<sup>46</sup> McNeily, "Climax and Collapse," 399. The ex-Confederate Chalmers had become something of a local White supremacist enforcer during Redemption. When freedmen in Tunica County just north of Coahoma had rampaged through the town of Austin in August 1874, after a White man had been found innocent of the murder of a Black child, Chalmers led 300 armed White vigilantes to punish and arrest the offenders. Greenville Times, August 15, 1874, cited in Willis, *Forgotten Time*, 132-33; Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi*, 190; Ward, *River Run Red*, 369

<sup>47</sup> *Report of the Select Committee*, 2:352. Lamar may have backed out because he feared further agitation would cause Governor Ames to send in Black militia to protect Brown. That, in turn, might spark a violent confrontation that could force President Grant to send in federal troops—an intervention which the White supremacist leaders feared most. Singletary, *Negro Militia*, 94. A silver-tongued hypocrite, Lamar loved nothing better than to stir up racist riff-raff and then pose as the bastion of respectable reason in his quasi-apologetic rationalizations for their outrageous behavior. For more on Lamar, see Harris, "Mississippi" in Olsen ed., *Reconstruction and Redemption*, 92 and <https://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/lucius-quintus-cincinnatus-lamar>



unsubstantiated allegations publicly, but before such a meeting could be held, word reached Friars Point on October 5 of Blacks aiming to “plunder and burn” Friars Point.<sup>48</sup> They were allegedly led by “General” Bill Peace, an ex-slave and former Union soldier described (by Whites again) as something of a plantation enforcer. He was said to be leading a small “army” of Blacks toward Friars Point on foot or mule-back and armed with pistols and shotguns.<sup>49</sup> In reaction to these growing rumors, Alcorn and Chalmers organized a similarly small group of Whites and advanced toward the bridge over the headwaters of the Sunflower River, southeast of Friars Point. There, joined by white-liners from Helena, Arkansas, and all under Chalmers’s command, they attacked the group of freedmen from two directions and quickly scattered them, apparently killing no one in the process.<sup>50</sup> The Blacks fled southeast towards Clarksdale with Whites in close pursuit, but under orders not to harm their foes.<sup>51</sup>

For two days, chaos reigned after the White army got word that Blacks had murdered an uninvolved White man named Scott. In the end, Alcorn summed up the death toll of the “riot”—two Whites, one of whom shot himself accidentally, and five Blacks killed, with the murders of the latter all justified due to the evil initially unleashed by the nefarious Brown.<sup>52</sup> Brown, in the meantime, with help from White friends, had ended up in Helena, Arkansas, across the Mississippi River from his county. Denying vehemently that he was in any way the instigator of the trouble, Brown sent a flurry of telegrams to Governor Ames asking for help and asserting, “My county is in charge of an armed force. It is out of my power to restore law and order. I have been driven from my county by an armed force. I am utterly powerless to enforce or to restore order.”<sup>53</sup> But Ames, under attack from all sides and deserted by the

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<sup>48</sup> *Report of the Select Committee to Inquire into the Mississippi Election of 1875, with the testimony and documentary evidence* Senate Report no. 527 (2 vols.), 44th Congress, 1st Session [hereafter known as the Boutwell Report], 1:69-70. A similar report fueled White supremacist violence in Yazoo County after Albert Morgan’s ascension, as the local paper confidently announced that Blacks were “coming in to burn the town.” Morgan, Yazoo, 388. And, in Columbus, District Attorney Henry Whitfield reported a White attack on a peaceful Black parade and a subsequent “reign of terror, caused by an alleged combination of the negroes to fire the city.” Bradley G. Bond, *Mississippi: A Documentary History* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 137.

<sup>49</sup> Wilber Gibson, in “Friars Point Riot” vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library.

<sup>50</sup> Singletary, *Negro Militia*, 141.

<sup>51</sup> George Maynard, in “Friars Point Riot” vertical file. Clarksdale Public Library.

<sup>52</sup> Boutwell Report, 1:71.

<sup>53</sup> John Brown, telegrams to Adelbert Ames, October 6-8, 1875, Ames Governor’s Office papers, MDAH, Jackson, MS.

federal government, had nothing to offer, and Brown stayed hidden, in fear for his life.

Meeting less than two weeks after the conflict, the County Board of Supervisors declared Sheriff Brown's bond void and declared that "John Brown is no longer Sheriff of Coahoma County."<sup>54</sup> The supervisors ordered a special election for November 2 (eventually won by M. L. Alcorn, son of James) while Brown made his last fruitless attempt to regain his rightful position.<sup>55</sup> After three weeks, however, it had become clear that no help was forthcoming and Brown fled the area.<sup>56</sup> Alcorn disingenuously concluded his summation of the affair to a subsequent federal inquiry, "The election which succeeded was peaceable. The [anti-Brown] republicans carried the county by a large margin." General Chalmers was equally smug in his summary, "We killed two negroes and wounded five that were caught with arms and pardoned all the rest. Sheriff Brown fled the county. The negroes swear they will kill him if he returns. All quiet now."<sup>57</sup> But what had happened in Coahoma County was not really a riot—it was actually an extralegal paramilitary coup, with the duly elected power structure removed by Chalmers's armed vigilantes and replaced by Alcorn's duplicitous allies. As a Republican who had observed the entire affair wrote to the Senate Committee later investigating the travesty of democracy, "The slaughtered dead of Coahoma speak in thunderous tones against the treachery of the pretended friend and betrayer of the negro—Alcorn."<sup>58</sup> But that portrayal—as accurate as it was—would not be the last word on the Friars Point incident. Instead, James Alcorn would immediately initiate a public relations battle to

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<sup>54</sup> Board of Supervisors minutes, 150, in "Coahoma County—Reconstruction" vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library.

<sup>55</sup> Ironically enough, Alcorn's "rebellious son" was one of the few White Republicans to support Brown, and Brown corroborated this to the Senate Committee years later. Boutwell 1:26; *Report of Select Committee*, 2: 382. Alcorn, obviously aware of this family schism, nevertheless lied about it in his Senate testimony in 1876. Boutwell, 1:67. This may well have been a reflection of Alcorn's unwillingness to acknowledge that he had lost control of his family, a point of immense pride in the paternalistic world of the Delta planters, and Milton would commit suicide in 1879. Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms*, 1-2; Pereyra, *James Alcorn*, 186.

<sup>56</sup> John Brown, telegrams to Adelbert Ames, October 24, 26, 1875, Ames Governor's Office papers, MDAH, Jackson, MS; George Maynard to Mary Robinson, September 7, 1929, in "Friars Point Riot" vertical file.

<sup>57</sup> McNeily, "Climax and Collapse," 399.

<sup>58</sup> E. Stafford to George Boutwell, June 5, 1876, cited in Foner, *Reconstruction*, 560.

legitimize the coup by justifying actions that one observer called “most . . . unjustifiable.”<sup>59</sup>

### **The Opening Savior: The Alcorn Version of “the Friars Point War”**

Besides concocting the charges leading to the “riot,” James Alcorn and his people produced a coherent narrative that utilized the coded language of White supremacy to defend their vigilante actions. The first report started sensationally, “Negroes threaten to burn Friars Point, Coahoma County, Miss.,” and went on to repeat the essentials of the Alcorn agenda—Brown had embezzled, Brown had returned from Memphis with massive amounts of ammunition, and Brown had stirred up Blacks “with speeches” designed to convince them “that the whites intended to kill them.”<sup>60</sup> In response, readers were urged to come to Friars Point, armed and ready to aid Alcorn and Chalmers.<sup>61</sup> Later reports began to shift attention (and the basic nature of the race-based discourse) toward freedman leader “General” Bill Peace, who like Thomas Edwards, had a reputation for martial organization and fierce independence. In the world of Redemption, however, these positive attributes became racialized and therefore condemned; in this new account of the fray, Peace was a neighborhood bully and, most tellingly, “a big, black Negro,” with hatred in his heart and mayhem on his mind.<sup>62</sup> Emphasizing the race angle now also enabled Alcorn to de-politicize the process as he insisted that “both Democrats and Republicans” were “united to resist an incendiary effort on the part of Sheriff Brown” who has been organizing Blacks into

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<sup>59</sup> Blanche Butler Ames, comp., *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century: Family Letters of Blanche Butler and Adelbert Ames, Married July 21st, 1870* (1935), 211.

<sup>60</sup> *Memphis Appeal*, cited in *New York Times*, October 6, 1875. Though the *Times* dutifully reported this “news,” it followed with a qualifying sub-headline, “The Danger Believed to Be Magnified.” For the next few days, newspaper reports from Memphis and Helena (AR) sources were republished in papers all around the country, including *Hartford (CT) Courant*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, and *New York Times*, and *Tribune*.

<sup>61</sup> “The Sheriff of Coahoma County caused our town to be invaded this morning by an armed band of negroes. We drove them back. We are fully organized for defense, with Senator Alcorn and Gen. Chalmers in command. The Sheriff has fled the country. Send us aid immediately.” *New York Times*, October 7, 1875.

<sup>62</sup> Fifty-five years later, Wilber Gibson would describe Peace in typically racist terms. “Dr. Peace had a good deal of trouble keeping the negroes from stealing his cattle and hogs in those days. So Bill suggested to the doctor to let him recruit a company of negroes and he would keep order on the plantation. This turned out just like things generally do when a negro is placed in power.” Wilber T. Gibson in “Friars Point Riot” vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library.

“armed bodies.”<sup>63</sup>

With politics eliminated as a source of contention and the blame fixed squarely on Brown, Peace, and the Black population of Coahoma County, the public relations war over numbers (and the implicit threat of Black violence) kicked in. As the *New York Tribune* noted, Blacks outnumbered Whites five to one in Coahoma County, but the actual “riot” was initially reported as pitting seventy cavalymen and forty infantry (armed, to be sure, with the latest Winchester rifles) against two hundred Blacks on foot or mules armed with shotguns and pistols.<sup>64</sup> Slowly, however, these numbers began to grow, until two hundred fifty Whites were challenging three hundred Blacks.<sup>65</sup> By October 7, however, reports had Black forces numbering five hundred, and in the very same article, citing new evidence from the *Helena Avalanche*, the number became one thousand.<sup>66</sup> Many years later, in the ongoing project to justify the necessity for White extra-legality, the number (referred to as a “regiment”) would balloon to five thousand, roughly equivalent to the entire Black population of the county, according to the 1870 U.S. Census.<sup>67</sup>

James Alcorn’s ability to access White fears and to turn the entire issue to achieving his own political interests led him to send a self-effacing telegram to U.S. Attorney General Edward Pierrepont, two days after the skirmish at Clark’s Bridge.

Having read several incorrect and sensational dispatches touching the recent race troubles at Friar’s Point, I beg to assure you there need be no alarm for the peace of this county. Several hundred armed negroes who have been incited by an ill-tempered Sheriff, marched into our town and were rapidly repulsed by the whites under the lead of the most prominent citizens, who have been following up the armed bands of negroes and dispersing them with as little violence as possible, and urging them to go home. The mob has been dispersed and I think will remain quiet. There is no question of politics in this excitement. The whites are to a man for defense. Those of the negroes who have been misled are fast being reconciled.

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<sup>63</sup> *Memphis Appeal*, cited in *New York Times*, October 7, October 8, 1875.

<sup>64</sup> Wilber T. Gibson in “Friars Point Riot” vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library; *New York Tribune*, October 10, 1875.

<sup>65</sup> *Helena Avalanche*, cited in *Hartford Daily Courant*, October 6, 1875.

<sup>66</sup> *Memphis Appeal*; *Helena Avalanche*, cited in *Hartford Daily Courant*, October 7, 1875.

<sup>67</sup> *New York Tribune*, October 7, 1875; *Helena Avalanche*, cited in *Hartford Courant*, October 6-7, 1875; *Memphis Appeal*, cited in *Hartford Courant*, October 7, 1875; George Maynard, “Friars Point Riot” vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library; Wilber T. Gibson, “Friars Point Riot” vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library. The official population figure in the 1870 census for Black people living in the county was 5,381.

A community of planters may be relied upon for the kind treatment of the laborer. The whites have made no demonstration of hostility toward the negroes of this county, but are anxious to cultivate the most friendly relations. My name has been most ridiculously associated in the matter. I trust you will not give credence to the share given me in this affair by the telegrams. Respectfully,

J. L. Alcorn  
United States Senator<sup>68</sup>

Pierrepoint was receptive to Alcorn's disingenuous claims; the attorney general himself had written Adelbert Ames just three weeks earlier, quoting President Grant's unfortunate capitulation to White supremacist terrorism to the beleaguered governor: "The whole public are tired out with these annual autumnal outbreaks in the South, and the great majority are now ready to condemn any interference on the part of the government."<sup>69</sup>

In a lengthy summation strategically sent October 12 to the *New York Tribune* and a week later to the *Jackson Clarion*, James Alcorn laid out the entire rationalization for the Friars Point coup specifically and for White supremacist Redemption generally. Entitled "THE FRIAR'S POINT WAR: AN ACCOUNT BY SENATOR ALCORN," the piece was provocatively subtitled "Sheriff Brown the author of all the mischief" and provided its national audience a picture of a respectable and wronged electorate reaching the end of its patience with longstanding political corruption. Alcorn began by explaining how "a number of wealthy planters, all Conservatives" became Brown's bondsmen "so that Brown might be controlled in the interests of peace." Even this, however, failed to stop Brown from establishing a political "ring for the plunder of the county" by granting multiple offices to his cronies and by coercing reluctant Black voters to support him, all of which had duly "alarmed the tax-payers."<sup>70</sup>

Six weeks prior to this dispatch, Alcorn alleged, Brown began agitating local Blacks in preparation for the upcoming elections, as he "stirred their blood by recitations of Clinton and Vicksburg."<sup>71</sup> In anticipation of similar potential threats in Coahoma County, Brown "urged

<sup>68</sup> *Hartford Courant*, Oct. 8, 1875.

<sup>69</sup> Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 304-05; McNeily, "Climax and Collapse," 394-95. For Ames's disappointed response to his wife, see Ames, *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century*, 183.

<sup>70</sup> *New York Tribune*, October 12, 1875.

<sup>71</sup> Black, "Forcibly If We Must", 15-34; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 558-62; Aptheker, *To Be Free*, 177-84.

them to arm themselves” because “the white man had had his day,” and was bragging that the county now belonged to Blacks. To make the point clear, Brown “was reported to have brought a large amount of ammunition to the county.” But the clincher came on October 2 when Brown’s henchmen, according to Alcorn, forced a Republican nominating convention to endorse his corrupt ticket and reinforced the results “with the deafening noise of many drums” in an impromptu and intimidating victory parade through the streets of Friars Point.<sup>72</sup> In response to such aggressive tactics, Whites “now began to counsel for defense.”<sup>73</sup>

October 2 was also the day that James Alcorn made his first public charge regarding John Brown’s alleged embezzlement. In his dispatch, Alcorn claimed that Brown responded angrily to the charges and drew his pistol, but the presence of so many aroused Whites prevented any violence from erupting at that point. Brown did promise to reply officially to the charges, after being so urged by his White bondsmen, but the official reply, of course, never came, because on that Tuesday (October 5), “several hundred” Blacks, “armed with shotguns, pistols, and sabers” and “much excited by liquor” approached Friars Point threateningly. When Brown went out to “turn the negroes back,” he encountered the “negro General” [Bill Peace] who allegedly “swore at Brown and threatened to shoot him for his cowardice.” As a result, the Black force retreated for a couple of miles (to Clark’s Bridge, south of Friars Point) to regroup and add reinforcements, at which point “nearly 100” mounted White men attacked. “The Whites charged,” wrote Alcorn. “The negroes ran. Brown and Smith [a Black ally of Brown] threw down their arms and ran for life. Both escaped. No one was killed or wounded. The Whites pursued, and it was thought that the negroes had dispersed.”<sup>74</sup> The Friars Point “riot, according to James Alcorn, was over.

The rest of the “war” was anticlimactic. According to Alcorn, Blacks under General Peace retreated across the county to Jonestown, where

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<sup>72</sup> “Black Republicans had a custom of bringing drums to political rallies and banging on them. . . . But in southern plantation country drums carried a special charge, since for Negroes they represented an importation of African culture and were also useful as a potential means of communication between plantations. Therefore, for whites, drums conjured up the possibility of insurrection by the Negro majority.” Lemann, *Redemption*, 152. See also Bond, *Mississippi*, 137 and M. Susan Orr Knopfler, *Where Rebels Roost: Mississippi Civil Rights Revisited* (self-published, 2005), 105.

<sup>73</sup> *New York Tribune*, October 12, 1875.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* “Smith” was George C. Smith, a political operative who would later factor into Brown’s Kansas story but was unmentioned in any other account of the incidents in Mississippi.

they instituted temporary chaos in that town, stealing ammunition from stores and “violently” threatening Whites there. Ex-General Chalmers, however, quickly disbanded these dangerous and lawless elements, and soon, “all was quiet.” Alcorn concluded:

Peace, the negro general, escaped. Not more than four negroes have been killed. One of these was brutally shot. He had come from an adjoining county. Added to the above casualties, two white men under arms were seriously wounded. This is all. The county is much disordered. We have lost a week’s work, but believe there will be no further trouble, unless Brown . . . supported by the Governor, attempts to return to the county. Should this be done, I cannot guess at the consequences. You have the facts as I believe them to be.

J. L. Alcorn, United States Senator  
Friars Point, Miss., via Helena, Ark., Oct. 11, 1875<sup>75</sup>

Though Alcorn had been careful to cite the obligatory rationalizations for the coup (political corruption, economic malfeasance, and the threat of race war waged against Whites), his conclusion inadvertently revealed the truth behind the Friars Point coup. As freely articulated by his cousin George, “[T]his trouble will cost the people, white and black, a great deal, as no cotton is being gathered, and every day counts.”<sup>76</sup> But Alcorn himself remained optimistic as he asserted, “there need be no alarm for the peace of the country” because the “community of planters may be relied upon for kind treatment of laborers.”<sup>77</sup> A year later, in testimony before a Senate committee investigating the abuses in Mississippi and with apparently no sense of irony at all, Alcorn would proclaim his “abiding faith in the bright future of our section of the country” where “the vicious will be restrained before the majesty of the law” and where “peace with all its incident blessings will abide with us forever.”<sup>78</sup>

### **The Later Rebuttal: John Milton Brown Before the U.S. Congress**

Five years after fleeing such “peace,” John Brown’s appearance before the United States Senate Select Committee (investigating the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Though this is Alcorn’s only mention of outside Black agitators, within five years, this claim would become central to the justification narrative. *New York Times*, March 27, 1880; *Atlanta Daily Constitution*, March 28, 1880.

<sup>76</sup> *Helena Avalanche*, cited in *Hartford Daily Courant*, October 7, 1875.

<sup>77</sup> *Hartford Courant*, October 8, 1875.

<sup>78</sup> *New York Times*, August 17, 1876.



causes of the “Exodus” of southern African Americans in response to Redemption violence) painted a very different picture. In forty-one pages of sworn testimony, interspersed with hints of both humor and horror, Brown made it abundantly clear that the violence was a coup not a riot, and he received a sympathetic hearing from many of the senators even as he elicited antagonism and ridicule from others, especially Democratic (and ex-Confederate) Senator Zebulon Vance of North Carolina. Typical of the banter between Brown and Vance was an exchange related to the actual likelihood of Brown’s assassination.

Q [Vance]: Well, in all these troubles, you were not murdered?

A. [Brown]: No, sir; I believe not.

Q: When did you get back again; you were going to speak of that?

A: I went back on a Saturday, once when I thought that everything would be quiet, and I asked for twenty days’ time in which to fix up my business with them; and said that after that, if they were determined, I should leave the State, I would than [sic] go; that all I wanted was a chance to fix up my affairs; but I was informed that very evening was fixed for my murder; that men were gathered for that purpose, white and black both, and they intended to murder me that night; so I took the advice of my wife, whom was ill at the time, with a little babe, and she begged me to leave, and I took her advice, and went to Helena that evening.

Q. They always managed to let you know what they were going to do, and to give you a chance to get away, it seems?

A: Yes, sir; I had some friends there among both the whites and blacks.<sup>79</sup>

Brown’s testimony started with his decision, back in 1873, to abandon his nascent teaching career at Hopson’s Bayou in southern Coahoma County for the attractions of political office, being nominated for sheriff on a pro-Ames Republican ticket that included Alcorn’s estranged son, Milton, for treasurer and a White Democrat for county surveyor. According to Brown, Alcorn had hated him ever since, “because I ran against his nephew [D. F.] and beat him for sheriff. He went against the [local Republican] party and I went for it. I carried our county against him. I had no particular bad feeling against him, but I knew that he had against me.” This subterranean “bad feeling” would erupt in full-blown revolt two years later, as Alcorn switched allegiances again to join local Democrats who “had the names of all the leading Republicans on their dead-list,” with Brown’s name heading it, and “when we met they were

<sup>79</sup> *Report to the Select Committee*, 2:374.



to come out and take us out and hang us or shoot us.”<sup>80</sup>

Brown’s background discussion of the coup began with two separate incidents of racial violence in counties next to Coahoma (Tunica to the north and Tallahatchie to the southeast) that provided invaluable context. The first such incident occurred in Austin in Tunica County in the summer of 1874. A White passenger on a Mississippi River steamboat had taken exception to a Black man’s singing and when the latter refused to stop on the grounds of his newfound social equality, the White man opened fire, wounding the man and killing his child. When the murderer was subsequently released on low bond, local Blacks objected and in the resultant backlash, led by the ubiquitous enforcer, James Chalmers, six Blacks were killed, with no White casualties.<sup>81</sup> The second incident occurred earlier in 1875 when three young White drunks from Tallahatchie County, with no legal authorization, had threatened to arrest a Black citizen of Coahoma County for allegedly voting fraudulently. The accused man ran, and the Whites shot at him but missed. In their intoxicated frustration, the young men then rampaged through a nearby plantation, insulting some Black women living there. Black representatives then demanded that authorities in Tallahatchie County arrest the perpetrators, but Tallahatchie Whites refused. With the threat of an armed confrontation looming, Brown successfully defused the situation.<sup>82</sup> But these situations would tie directly into the tense atmosphere developing in the autumn of 1875. More importantly, they provided a context for a more accurate assessment of Alcorn’s misleading assertion that Brown had been encouraging Coahoma County Blacks to arm themselves and prepare for violence. Caught in a classic case of “damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” Brown directly addressed this disingenuous claim when he later referenced the Tallahatchie tensions. To the consistently obnoxious questioning of ex-Confederate Senator Vance who asked him, “And you said in your speech that they should prepare their guns, or fix them up and make them serviceable?” Brown replied:

Only in this way. The Tallahatchie people had started over

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:351-52, 392.

<sup>81</sup> *The Greenville Times*, August 15, 1874, cited in Willis, *Forgotten Time*, 132-33; Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi*, 190; *Report of the Select Committee*, 2:356-57. Chalmers, incidentally, as a Mississippi congressman, was in the audience during Brown’s testimony, and corroborated points of it. *Ibid.*, 2:377. This fact outraged Brown’s Kansan co-worker, Laura Haviland. Laura S. Haviland, *A Woman’s Life Work: Labors and Experiences of Laura S. Haviland* (Cincinnati, 1881), 493. See also Morgan, *Yazoo*, 439.

<sup>82</sup> *Report of the Select Committee*, 2:357.

to murder them. I told them that I would not advise them to stand by and see their families and themselves die and be murdered, without resistance, without an effort to defend themselves. I told them to keep their guns in readiness; but not to make any demonstration until they were attacked; but that if these white men should come to pillage and to murder, I told them they had a right to protect themselves. But I told them to abide by the law.<sup>83</sup>

Senator Vance and Brown continued to spar throughout the latter's testimony. When Vance insolently inquired, "You think that a colored man is as good as a white man?" Brown retorted, "In every respect. If I did not, I would not be a Christian."<sup>84</sup> But when Vance asked Brown to verify Alcorn's entire *New York Tribune* statement to the committee, he inadvertently provided Brown with the opportunity to correct the record, and the former sheriff made the most of it. To the claim that he (Brown) had recruited General Peace, Brown asserted that, instead, he had in his possession back in Topeka "a written statement . . . given under oath, that I never sent for him." Brown also systematically carefully explained the origins and inaccurate interpretations of the allegations related to the embezzlement charges—charges made possible by Alcorn's relative, D. L. Alcorn, manipulating the records in his position as county treasurer.<sup>85</sup> But the most chilling parts of his testimony dealt with the violent and murderous nature of the coup—details completely ignored in Alcorn's white-washed version but corroborated in essence by later eye-witness accounts of the perpetrators themselves.

Whereas Alcorn's report placed Brown at the center of the tensions, Brown explained to the committee the various ways he sought to defuse the increasingly volatile situation. On the night before the confrontation, Brown approached the White leaders and told them, "If you are going to kill me, do so, but do not disturb the other people." This opportunity, however, did nothing to satisfy the White supremacist need for a scenario in which they could justify such a murder, so Brown went home unharmed. The next morning, as groups of armed Blacks and Whites gathered near Friars Point, the sheriff approached both "armies" asking for immediate dispersal, but, instead, Chalmers and his men rode out of town to attack the freedmen and Brown left to seek the help of Tunica County Sheriff Manning in forestalling the violence. His efforts,

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 2:383.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 2:386.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 2:381-3.

however, proved to be in vain; instead, Brown reported, after dispersing Peace's forces, the Whites set off on a terroristic rampage, murdering unoffending Blacks as well as potential leaders like Monroe Lewis, following a well-established White supremacist pattern of assassinating freedmen who could become leaders of Black communities.<sup>86</sup>

After listening to Brown's lengthy description of the coup and its deleterious effects on the majoritarian Black population of Coahoma County, Senator William Windom of Minnesota steered the testimony to Brown's work in Kansas among the Exodusters. When asked directly why freedmen were fleeing the South, Brown replied, "They generally give in answer three causes. They said there was no security for life, liberty, or property. This is about what they claim." When pressed for further detail, Brown elaborated on the travesty of the "shot-gun policy." "They say that since the war, and for the last few years especially—since 1875, I suppose—hundreds of colored men have been killed in the State of Mississippi . . . in riots and private broils, or have been shot down by white men, but that they never saw a white man hung or sent to the penitentiary . . . for killing a colored man; I know I have never heard of one." The ex-sheriff then concluded that "every colored man's life is at the tender mercies of the lowest white man in the community."<sup>87</sup>

Besides the lack of legal protection, Brown also explained the dynamics of racial discrimination devised by the planter-merchants and their lawyers in the exploitative system of sharecropping emerging among the freed population, and the concomitant refusal of Whites to admit publicly its illegality.

They claim that there is no discrimination under the laws between white and black. The trouble is there is discrimination in the execution of the laws; if a colored man comes before court in a case with a white man the white man will get the best of it. They charge high prices for the land they rent. . . . The rent must be paid first, out of the crop; next in order comes the merchant's lien, owing for supplies furnished; this is arranged so as to take up all that has been raised on the place. . . . Just before picking time comes, the merchant sends men around from place to place to see how the crop is getting along; how many bales will probably be made. By this means the merchant knows how large to make his bill. He lets the

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:353-54. George Maynard told in his memoirs of two Blacks captured by White troops after the death of the plantation manager, Scott, and subsequently executed. George Maynard, to Mrs. Mary Fisher Robinson, September 7, 1929, in "Friars Point Riot" vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library.

<sup>87</sup> *Report to the Select Committee*, 2:361.

colored man come and buy a few things, run up an account, charging four or five prices for everything. For instance, he will charge twenty to twenty-five cents a pound for sugar, for which you or any white man would pay eight or nine cents; . . . If the colored man refuses to pay the bill, which is as I have said, is always made large enough to cover the value of the entire crop, after paying the rent, the merchant comes into court and sues him. . . . And the colored men soon learn that it is better to pay any account, however unjust, than to refuse, for he stands no possible chance of getting justice before the law.<sup>88</sup>

But, of course, the Black man was still necessary to maintain as a source of labor; that was precisely why the exodus was considered a problem worthy of the Senate's time. Reminiscent of Chalmers's memorable instructions to his men to refrain from a Colfax-style massacre at Friars Point, southern planters still needed cotton pickers, and the freedmen were the first option.

### Post-coup Aftermath: Alcorn, Brown, and Historical Memory

Despite John Brown's detailed report to the Senate in 1880, the conflict at Friars Point in October 1875 continues to be known, when it is referenced at all, as a riot of unruly Blacks intent on damaging the interests of Whites and threatening them with personal violence.<sup>89</sup> This falsehood was due to the success of the Alcorn narrative, and John Brown acknowledged as much in a critical exchange with Senator Windom at the end of his Senate testimony.<sup>90</sup> When Windom asked Brown, "Is not [Alcorn's] dispatch to the *Tribune* about the character of the dis[putes] generally sent North whenever there were any difficulties between the races in the South?" the ex-sheriff responded, "Yes, sir; that was the character of them, and that is where we lost the South. It was our understanding that dispatches like that were sent North and believed

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 2:361-62. Yale anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker, studying Delta economic arrangements in depth in the 1930s, estimated that three-quarters of the planter-merchants in the area routinely cheated sharecroppers. Lemann, *Promised Land*, 19. For more on this horrific dynamic, see Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation* (New York, Crown Publishers, 2008).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 13-14. See also [wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarksdale,\\_Mississippi](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarksdale,_Mississippi).

<sup>90</sup> "Senator Alcorn of Mississippi writes to the *New York Tribune* a clear and concise account of the outbreak at Friars Point from which it appears that Sheriff Brown, a colored carpetbagger from Ohio, was responsible for the whole trouble. The evidence all goes to show that in this case the whites have been the victims of outrage." *Boston Daily Globe*, October 13, 1875.

there. . . . These were sent to keep the eyes of the Northern people turned away while they got ahold of the States.”<sup>91</sup> Besides presenting a skewed view of the incidents themselves, this narrative also made it possible for the public and posterity to pass judgment on the personal characters of the principals involved.

By scapegoating John Brown, the Redeemer narrative of the Friars Point coup deflected attention from contemporary Mississippians’ conflicted assessments of the two White leaders involved, James Alcorn and James Chalmers. Despite being well known as a political chameleon and distrusted as such, Alcorn found “no barrier to his presiding over a Delta domain in a style befitting a prince” after the coup, just as he had promised his wife while he was smuggling cotton during the war, and was generally celebrated as a prominent Redeemer, as he worked tirelessly to promote funding for a levee system to protect the interests of planters like himself.<sup>92</sup> His main ally, James Chalmers, however, did not fare as well in the court of public opinion; after gaining a seat in Congress fraudulently and then losing that seat, even his own hometown paper concluded “Every honest man in this district knows that Mr. [John R.] Lynch was elected by over five thousand majority, and Gen. Chalmers counted in by fraud. When Congress meets and Mr. Lynch takes his seat, Gen Chalmers will have plenty of time to find out what a little man he really is.”<sup>93</sup> Five years later, the paper continued its attack. “But ambition, or rather vanity, has been his bane. He is one of the ablest men in Mississippi and better informed on political questions than any other man I have ever heard speak. . . . But for all that, he is

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 2:361-62. Yale anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker, studying Delta economic arrangements in depth in the 1930s, estimated that three-quarters of the planter-merchants in the area routinely cheated sharecroppers. Lemann, *Promised Land*, 19. For more on this horrific dynamic, see Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation* (New York, Crown Publishers, 2008).

<sup>92</sup> “Gen. Alcorn was a Whig up to ’59, a Union man in ’60, a secessionist in ’61, a fire-eater in ’62, a peace-man in ’63, a growler in ’64, a rebel in ’65, a reconstructionist in ’66, a scalawag in ’67, a radical in ’68, and a bitter-ender in ’69,” complained one political opponent (and that was before the conflicts of Redemption). Amos R. Johnston, *Speech of Hon. Amos R. Johnston, at Sardis, Mississippi, October 13, 1869, on Alcorn’s Record*, cited in Pereyra, *James Alcorn*, 102. See also Harris, *Day of the Carpetbagger*, 715; Foner *Reconstruction*, 605, and James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992), 93.

<sup>93</sup> *Friars Point Gazette*, July 15, 1881. See also Elaine Gu, “John Roy Lynch: Epitome of Respectability” (unpublished paper in possession of author, 4-5.) In the aftermath of Fort Pillow, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles suggested that Chalmers, as well as Forrest, be tried for murder, but President Lincoln demurred. Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles in Three Volumes* (1911), vol. 2:25.

one of the most unreliable and dangerous men in Mississippi, and under his leadership, the ship of State would soon be wrecked.”<sup>94</sup>

βThe character defects of White supremacists, however, paled in significance when compared to their self-appointed negative referent, the allegedly pernicious John Brown. In the Redeemer narrative, Alcorn could present himself, ably aided by Chalmers, as a disinterested Cincinnati, re-engaging politically only when his beloved Coahoma County was being threatened by a rapacious interloper—a man, according to Alcorn, who thrived by surreptitiously stoking racial tensions and succeeding in his schemes only through the Machiavellian manipulation of the easily misled majority. As fascinating as this picture appears, however, participants in the coup themselves explicitly rejected this demonized depiction of John Brown so painstakingly presented to the public by Alcorn. The lawyer George Maynard, a recent college graduate in 1875, recalled fifty years later that “most of us knew in Friars Point, that John Brown did not start the riot and was really opposed to it.” Maynard’s brother, Joe (a veteran of Pickett’s charge at Gettysburg), in fact, was so convinced of Brown’s innocence that he risked his own safety to insist on providing safe passage for the deposed sheriff through the armed White vigilantes who had been looking to kill him.<sup>95</sup> Another White observer, Wilber Gibson, similarly concluded years later, “Now John Brown was not a bad Negro, as I saw some of his checks to his bondsmen twenty years after he had made his escape across the river and out West where he had been successful. I doubt very seriously his getting [embezzled funds].”<sup>96</sup> Thus, the pretext for the coup—Brown’s alleged corruption—seemed improbable even to his opponents in the power struggle. Instead, Brown’s actions throughout the confrontation now appear exemplary—rather than risk an all-out race war, in which the unorganized and out-gunned Black community would likely fare poorly, Brown gave up his constitutional rights and, long after his coerced departure, insisted on repaying bond debts caused solely by the

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<sup>94</sup> *Friars Point Gazette*, July 16, 1886. See also Rowland, *Encyclopedia of Mississippi History*, 1:390-91.

<sup>95</sup> Maynard to Mary Robinson, in “Friars Point Riot” vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library.

<sup>96</sup> Wilber Gibson, in “Friars Point Riot” vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library.

illegal violence of his White opponents.<sup>97</sup>

This picture of a frustrated and unsuccessful peacemaker came through powerfully in his Senate testimony in 1880. The real story of John Brown's character, however, becomes obvious in his subsequent career in Topeka, Kansas, where he established a small farm north of the city in 1877. Two years later, Brown joined the newly-incorporated Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association (KFRA) as its general superintendent, appointed by Governor John P. St. John, working alongside Quaker abolitionist veterans Elizabeth Comstock and Laura Haviland and local philanthropists, and performing "what they deem to be simple duty to a very much abused people."<sup>98</sup> In real terms, this meant helping the Exodusters find employment and suitable living situations in Topeka and other areas of Kansas, in order to assuage local fears that the refugees "would become a burden on the corporation of Topeka."<sup>99</sup> This action was part of the larger agenda to encourage respectable habits "through education, discipline, and moral training" among the refugees, as a way to refute the racism that so often plagued them.<sup>100</sup> During the first year alone, Brown estimated that the KFRA had helped 25,000 refugees from Southern states, and by the end of its operation, 60,000, with two-thirds of that number "in a destitute condition when they arrived."<sup>101</sup>

According to observers impressed with the work of the KFRA, John Milton Brown was at the very heart of the success of the mission. One admirer, after spending two days with Brown in an extensive tour of the operation, called the general superintendent "a colored man of unusual cultivation and executive ability" and commented about him, "We were

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<sup>97</sup> In a final indignity, the Mississippi state legislature passed a bill in 1877, allowing the state to sell Brown's abandoned land holdings in Coahoma County to pay off one of his bondsmen, John Clark, James Alcorn's brother-in-law and the namesake of Clarksdale. H. K Sage papers in "Coahoma County—Reconstruction" vertical file, Clarksdale Public Library. This action provided the basis for a later slander in a Jackson paper. "John Brown, run out of Coahoma County after a 'race riot' during the campaign of 1875, six years later was declared to have embezzled a large sum for which his sureties were liable." *Jackson Weekly Clarion*, July 21, 1881, cited in Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi*, 169.

<sup>98</sup> Gov. John St. John to Horatio Rust, January 16, 1880, in Rust Papers (LM 504), Kansas Historical Society. St. John's selection of Brown also speaks to the latter's character, as the governor was explicitly worried about "charges of corruption against those engaged in distributing moneys and supplies." Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 30.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 30; *Report of the Select Committee*, 2:359.

<sup>100</sup> Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 46. See also Brent M. S. Campney, "W. B. Townsend and the Struggle Against Racist Violence in Leavenworth," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 31 (Winter 2008-2009), 262-64.

<sup>101</sup> Ahearn, *In Search of Canaan*, 60; *Report of the Select Committee*, 2:359; Topeka *Daily Capital*, March 19, 1881.



favorably impressed with his earnestness and devotion to the cause of his brethren at the South; and with his efforts to elevate and assist to an independent position those who had come under his care." His co-worker, Elizabeth Comstock, praised Brown as "our very able and efficient superintendent" and hailed him as "second only to Fred. Douglas [sic] as an orator."<sup>102</sup> As far as Brown's charges themselves were concerned, they could hardly express enough gratitude to the man who personified access to opportunity promised them but so long delayed.

When the KFRA finished its task of getting the first wave of refugees somewhat settled, John Brown turned his attention back to his fruit farm and began to involve himself in Republican politics again. In 1886, however, this decision inadvertently resurrected the ghost of the Friars Point coup, in the person of George Smith, a man of questionable reputation from Brown's Mississippi Reconstruction days.<sup>103</sup> Smith, a newly arrived ally of Edward McCabe (Brown's opponent for the state auditor's nomination), immediately dredged up James Alcorn's old embezzlement charges against Brown, as a way of clearing the way for a McCabe victory in the primary.<sup>104</sup> Brown responded vigorously to the charges, but subsequently lost the election and, in an unusual twist, sued Smith for libel.<sup>105</sup> During the much publicized trial six months later, the judge forced Brown to not only establish that Smith was lying but also that Smith's falsifications had actually cost Brown the nomination. Facing such obstacles, Brown still managed to convince eight of the twelve White jurors of the validity of his claims, even as he lost the case.<sup>106</sup> But, in the process, Brown also produced a highly creditable witness, J. B. Johnson (Speaker of the Kansas House of Representatives), who testified that, after making trips to Mississippi in 1881 and 1886 to check Coahoma County records, he could corroborate all of Brown's assertions of honesty!<sup>107</sup> As a result of this manufactured imbroglio, then, John Brown had actually managed once again to enhance his hard-won reputation,

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<sup>102</sup> Elizabeth Comstock, "A Circular Letter," in Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association miscellaneous documents file (LM 504), Kansas Historical Society; Comstock, "A Day Among the Kansas Refugees."

<sup>103</sup> J. S. McNeily named Smith as one of those who "went north with their stealings." McNeily, "Climax and Collapse," 456. The race was noted back in Mississippi, with Brown still condemned as a "defaulter." *Friars Point Gazette*, July 2, 1886.

<sup>104</sup> Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 88-89.

<sup>105</sup> *Topeka Daily Capital*, June 6, 1886.

<sup>106</sup> *Topeka Kansas Daily State Journal*, June 28, 1886.

<sup>107</sup> *Topeka Weekly Commonwealth*, January 27, 1887; *Topeka Kansas Daily State Journal*, January 25, 1887; *Topeka Daily Capital*, June 4, June 5, June 6, June 13, 1886.



with one local paper reporting their “hearty approval” of a man they commended for retaining his “individual honesty and capacity . . . even in the face of personal defeat.”<sup>108</sup>

For the next ten years, John Brown continued to attempt to bring real political clout to Kansas’s Black communities.<sup>109</sup> In 1897, however, he finally gave up on a quarter century of working for biracial Republicanism by joining the Populist-Democratic reform movement of Governor John W. Leedy.<sup>110</sup> One year later, with the advent of the Spanish-American War, Brown enlisted in the U.S. Army, and, in light of his previous service as colonel in the “colored” state militia, was commissioned as major of the all-Black 23rd Kansas Volunteer Infantry. Though his unit arrived in Cuba after the actual fighting had ceased, the troops participated in the repatriation of Spanish soldiers and the construction of various public works projects in the San Luis province and earned a reputation for being orderly and disciplined.<sup>111</sup> The unit returned in 1899 and at that point, John Brown retired from public life to attend to his prosperous one hundred-acre farm north of Topeka.<sup>112</sup> There, he became a leader in the Sunflower State Agricultural Association, an



*Sherard commissary in Coahoma County. Image courtesy of William R. Sutton.*

<sup>108</sup> *Topeka Kansas Daily State Journal*, June 28, 1886.

<sup>109</sup> Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 104-05.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 115; Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 131.

<sup>111</sup> Woods, *A Black Odyssey*, 194.

<sup>112</sup> Museum of the Kansas National Guard, Historic Units. <http://www.kansasguard-museum.org/dispunit.php?id=32>; Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., “Kansas Negroes and the Spanish-American War,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 37 (Autumn, 1971), 300-13; <http://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/cool-things-african-american-officer-s-saber/16803>.

extension service for Black farmers in Kansas, and continued to advocate for political and economic rights for African Americans.<sup>113</sup> He died on January 11, 1923, and was powerfully eulogized in the *Plaindealer*, Topeka's leading Black newspaper. In the death of Colonel John Milton Brown, the paper asserted,

Kansas and America loses a great man who was faithful and honest to a cause and Race. He was a born leader. . . . He took the light of Liberty to Mississippi after the Civil War. He was Sheriff of Cohoma [sic] Co., Miss. and stood up for human rights. . . . He came to Kansas and superintended the Barracks in North Topeka where thousands of colored men came from the south and had to be cared for by friendly whites who gave money, food, and raiment. Col. Brown was one of the leaders who saw to their welfare. If it had not been for him Kansas would not have had near the colored citizens. . . . He is the last of the Old Heroic Race spirited [sic] who lived and worked for a Race in Kansas. . . . He was of the Fred Douglas [sic] type. . . . He bought a farm . . . over thirty-five years ago which has grown in value every year since. Some say they thought it was too much money to go into a black man's hands. . . . Peace to the ashes of the last great colored man of Kansas of the old school who left a history of doing things and not all talk.<sup>114</sup>

### Postscript

“We study history,” asserts Douglas Overton, “not as a quaint exercise in antiquarianism, but to understand the present,”<sup>115</sup> and “the present” in Coahoma County remains rooted in the racial injustice of the past. Moreover, these patterns of injustice are manifested psychologically as well as socioeconomically, with monuments to White contributors sanitized while monuments to Black contributors remain largely non-existent.<sup>116</sup> Despite the clear evidence of John Brown's integrity presented by White contemporaries like George Maynard, Joe Maynard, and Wilbur Gibson (and presumably shared by their co-insurrectionist,

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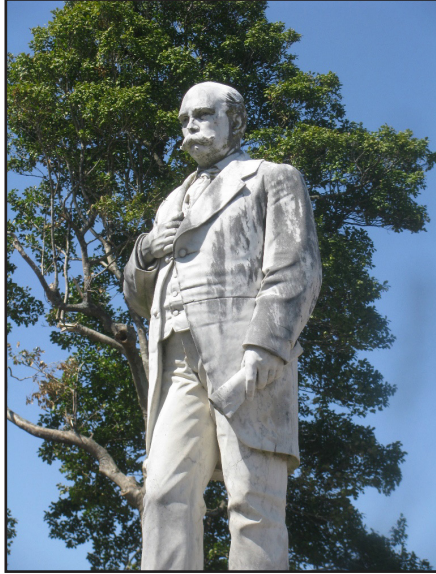
<sup>113</sup> *Topeka Journal*, December 9, 1914; *Topeka Mail and Breeze*, February 2, 1900; Cox, *Blacks in Topeka*, 157.

<sup>114</sup> *Topeka Plaindealer*, January 12, 1923.

<sup>115</sup> Overton, *Wars of Reconstruction*, 346.

<sup>116</sup> Selective historical amnesia is not unusual in the Delta. Not until 2007 was a marker erected at the Tallahatchie County courthouse in Sumner, to commemorate the infamous scene of the acquittal of Emmett Till's murderers. In that same year, the biracial Emmett Till Memorial Commission sent a letter of apology to Till's family, which begins, “We the citizens of Tallahatchie County believe that racial reconciliation begins with telling the truth. We call on the state of Mississippi, all of its citizens in every county, to begin an honest investigation into our history. While it will be painful, it is necessary to nurture reconciliation and to ensure justice for all.” *Resolution of the Emmett Till Memorial Commission May 9, 2007*.

J. H. Sherard) and corroborated by the Kansas Speaker of the House in the Brown-Smith libel trial, and despite the tremendous significance of the Friars Point coup to subsequent developments in Coahoma County and the entire Delta, there is no representation of any of this in the White-dominated collective memory. In Friars Point today, there are



*Gravesite statue of James Alcorn in Alcorn Cemetery in Friars Point. Image courtesy of David Bergvelt*

three historical markers. One commemorates the origins of bluesman Robert Nighthawk, one marks the site of an old Methodist church, and one draws attention to a building slightly damaged by a Yankee gunboat when the house was sitting closer to the river. On a road between Friars Point and Clarksdale that approximates the route taken by Peace's scattered followers after Chalmers's attack is the memorialized location of the cabin (now reconstructed in the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale) where ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax first recorded the Delta farm worker soon to be known as "Muddy Waters" on his path to worldwide musical influence. A few miles in the other direction, on Highway 1, a marker proudly illustrates the folly and failure of the Union plan to dig a ditch to connect the Yazoo drainage to the Mississippi, so that Union forces could bypass the Confederate stronghold at Vicksburg. Ten miles south on the same highway, an old plantation commissary, appropriately marked, "Sherard, 1874," still functions as an office for

the largest operation in the area.

Farther east, just off legendary Highway 61, a marker celebrates James Alcorn as former governor, senator, and creator of the levee system that protects the area from the flood ravages of the Mississippi. Two miles further, atop an old Indian mound on the shores of Swan Lake in the family cemetery, stands a statue of Alcorn posing as the model of the heroic planter-patriarch, overlooking his sprawling Eagle's Nest plantation. But nowhere is there a mention of the Friars Point coup, nor, of course, is John Milton Brown (or any other "carpetbagger" the young John H. Sherard was forced to "run out"<sup>117</sup>) remembered.<sup>118</sup>

Though John Holmes Sherard played only a minor role in the Friars Point coup, his personal history shares remarkable similarities to John Milton Brown's. Sherard was born in 1855 and came to the Delta in 1874; Brown was born in 1853 and came to the Delta in 1871. Both arrived as vigorous and ambitious young men, both lived long and productive lives, and both persevered through significant trials and personal challenges.



*Farrell-Sherard Habitat for Humanity (now Fuller Center for Housing) dorm in Clarksdale. Image courtesy of William R. Sutton.*

Sherard, the White man, encountering no political or economic resistance after the Friars Point coup, built an impressive, still prosperous Delta empire bearing his name. He was involved throughout his life in charitable operations, including the founding of the Methodist Hospital

<sup>117</sup> Dabbs, "One Hundred Years of J. H. Sherards," 6.

<sup>118</sup> For similar contests over properly memorializing racial conflicts in Selma, AL and Charleston, SC, see Overton, *Wars of Reconstruction*, 351-57.

in Memphis, still one of the premier medical institutions in the South,<sup>119</sup> and his name rightly remains a benchmark of personal character in that section of the Delta.<sup>120</sup> The Black man, Brown, on the other hand, met so much resistance in his effort to access postwar opportunity that he was forced to remove permanently from the Delta, saddled with unfair bond debt, and bedeviled by interminable political whisperings. Despite these obstacles, Brown proved resilient and he, too, succeeded professionally and socially, becoming equally well-respected in his community at his time of death, but his name has disappeared in the collective historical memory. Moreover, where Sherard's ambition was celebrated and the moral ambiguities surrounding his empowerment through the results of the Friars Point coup were historically ignored, Brown had to fend off repeated attacks on his ethical character in regard to his success, both in Mississippi and in Kansas. Both Sherard and Brown were eminently respectable men, but, as so often is the case, race trumps respectability, so their stories are remembered very differently.

Regardless of the subsequent histories of Sherard and Brown, the racialized poverty that was one result of the Friars Point coup and similar White supremacist attacks on law and order in Mississippi during Redemption remains to bedevil the future of the Delta, and while it is never easy or comfortable to confront the present by unearthing a disturbing or contentious past, it is undoubtedly still necessary.<sup>121</sup> Though Coahoma County has made some remarkable strides in pioneering attempts to address the effects of poverty and to affect racial reconciliation through, for instance, the collaborative work of Habitat for Humanity and its successful Collegiate Challenge program (begun in the tiny hamlet of Coahoma and responsible for sending by now a quarter million college students all over the world to do Habitat work over their spring breaks), the work of addressing injustice through the

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<sup>119</sup> Methodist Health Systems, *Building a Dream: The Story of Methodist Hospitals of Memphis* (Memphis, Taylor Publishing, 1986), 1-7, 16. The family dictum was "Never sell the family land and love the Methodist Hospital!" Interview with Maggie Sherard in Davis, "Race, Religion and Reform."

<sup>120</sup> Similarly, Sherard's co-insurrectionist, George Maynard, exhibited his personal character when he decided to accept the legal case of poor black farmers, Lewis and India Thomas, against prominent white planter, William Dickerson, in 1886. Vladimir Alexandrov, *The Black Russian* (New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013) 16.

<sup>121</sup> Overton, *Wars of Reconstruction*, 350. For insights related to this dynamic, see Ward, *River Run Red*, xv.

proper memorializing of events remains to be accomplished.<sup>122</sup> How ironic (and perhaps hopeful) that, now, the descendants of planters (like the current Sherard family) and the descendants of sharecroppers (like Dorothy Jenkins), along with a new wave of volunteer “carpetbaggers” (like the ones whose research efforts have contributed significantly to this recovery of the historical relevance of the Friars Point coup) have found ways like Habitat to work together to alleviate some of the pernicious effects of its outcome.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> William R. Sutton, “Challenging Legacies of Economic Oppression and Religious Neglect: Habitat for Humanity in the Mississippi Delta,” in David L. Weaver-Zercher and William H. Willimon, eds., *Vital Christianity: Spirituality, Justice, and Christian Practice* (New York, T & T Clark, 2005), 212-24.

<sup>123</sup> James Loewen, *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History* (New York, Teacher College Press, 2009).