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Reporting Rumors in the Reconstruction South: The Aftermath of the New Orleans Riot of 1866

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Reporting Rumors in the Reconstruction South:
The Aftermath of the New Orleans Riot of 1866

by

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Abstract

At the end of the American Civil War, political divisiveness, economic turmoil, and violence plagued the South. Riots occurred across the Reconstruction South, from New Orleans to Memphis. Though scholars have examined the causes of Reconstruction violence, this study examines the role of newspapers in promulgating fear, paranoia, and violence in Southern communities in the wake of the New Orleans Riot of 1866. This thesis analyzes nine Louisiana newspapers to investigate whether newspapers published local and national rumors of violence or potential uprisings in the first three months after the riot. Though the rise of telegraphic news aided the rapid spread of information, it also enabled the pervasive circulation of rumors, gossip, and paranoia. Conservative newspapers often offered stories of mob activity, chaotic insurrections, and senseless violence, occurring within the state and in other regions of the South. The menace of Radical Republicanism appeared real to conservative editors, and publishing elaborate radical conspiracies, distorting the number of fatalities, and spreading rumors of instability seemed viable outlets for changing public opinion in favor of the Democratic Party.

Key words: Reconstruction, Radical Republicanism, Louisiana, New Orleans Riot of 1866

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I. Introduction

The New Orleans Riot of 1866 and the Reconstruction South

On July 30, 1866, white and black Louisianans gathered at the Mechanics' Institute in downtown New Orleans to attend the state's constitutional convention, which convened to discuss the contentious issue of extending suffrage to black men. While many Republicans supported the movement for black suffrage, white Democrats opposed granting black men the vote, insisting that "the loyal voters of the south are not yet prepared for political equality of the negro with the white man."¹ The convention drew a large crowd of both Republicans and Democrats eager to hear the outcome of the convention. Shortly after noon, a procession of 100 to 150 black people marched through the streets of New Orleans toward the Institute, excited about the possibility of universal suffrage. However, when words were exchanged between members of the procession, the police, and a nearby crowd of militant whites, the march turned deadly. A young white boy had begun taunting the black men, crying "Damned sons of bitches!"² As the black men advanced toward the young boy, one of the police officers who had been surveying the scene from the corner of Canal and Dryades rushed to take the boy from the hostile confrontation. Then, the first shot rang through the crowd as one of the black men had pulled out his revolver and fired, sending the convention into a state of chaos. The whites on Canal "rushed up the street toward the institute," and the black men of the procession retaliated, shouting insults and throwing bricks.³ Some white men carried bloody slug

¹ Gilles Vandal, *The New Orleans Riot of 1866: Anatomy of a Tragedy* (Lafayette, La: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1983), 112.

² James G. Hollandsworth, *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 101.

³ Hollandsworth, 101.

shots and boasted of their murderous street battle victories.⁴ The city policemen, who had quickly lost control of the scene, joined in the violence and attacked the Institute, firing indiscriminately upon those inside the main hall. Though blacks and whites attempted to defend themselves, the results of the riot were catastrophic. The day after the riot, the front page headline of the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* declared the massacre “A Terrible Day” for New Orleanians, and the official report of the riot affirms these sentiments.⁵ The report lists 38 casualties and 146 wounded in the riot, with black participants suffering disproportionately from the massacre. Thirty-four of the 38 killed were black, as were 119 of the 146 wounded.⁶

At the end of the American Civil War, political divisiveness, economic turmoil, and violence plagued the South. Michael Perman’s *Reunion without Compromise: The South and Reconstruction, 1865-1868* shows that discord existed across the nation as the South reentered the Union. Federal troops occupied the South, and Confederate armies were disbanded. White southerners could no longer rely on slave labor for economic support, and the South’s agriculture suffered for the new expenses of waged employment.⁷ After formally surrendering their political power over the South and losing the backbone of their economy to emancipation, white southerners feared they had lost their autonomy, and they were subject to the will of the North. Reconciliation between the North and the South was difficult to accomplish, especially as the question of universal black suffrage loomed in the air.⁸ In the summer and fall of 1865, southern

⁴ Hollandsworth, 102.

⁵ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, July 31, 1866.

⁶ Vandal, *Anatomy of a Tragedy*, 215-222.

⁷ Michael Perman, *Reunion without Compromise: The South and Reconstruction: 1865-1868* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 14.

⁸ Perman, 82.

politicians waited expectantly for President Andrew Johnson to release his plans for restoring the South to the Union. Despite their recent defeat, white southerners maintained their defiance to Northern rule and staunchly opposed black enfranchisement. They warned that economic disorder and anarchy would occur if the North did not administrate the process of reunification with care and consideration of the South's demands.⁹

Though the New Orleans Massacre was not the first race riot to occur in the former Confederate states, it is notable for its political origins. Social and economic disturbances were familiar to the South prior to Reconstruction, but the New Orleans Massacre marked a transitional event, one where outbreaks of violence began to be based primarily on political grievances.¹⁰ Many historians, such as James G. Hollandsworth, George C. Rable, and Gilles Vandal have examined the causes and events of the New Orleans Massacre, but few scholars have attempted to uncover how large-scale political violence affected Southern communities.

Recent historical scholarship has viewed the New Orleans Riot as an attempt of white southerners to disenfranchise and terrorize blacks during the early years of Reconstruction. In *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866*, Hollandsworth provides a detailed narrative of the race riot, but he also analyzes the political and racial motives that compelled white southerners to retaliate against the supporters of the convention. Hollandsworth viewed the riot as a critical factor in establishing the "Solid South," where white conservatives held the highest social status

⁹ Perman, 34-35.

¹⁰ George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 43.

and blacks remained marginalized in their communities for years after slavery had been abolished.¹¹ Historian James K. Hogue compared the riot to a type of “uncivil war,” where vigilantes, paramilitaries, and white supremacist militias in Louisiana used counterrevolutionary measures against the growing threat of black enfranchisement and a new egalitarian racial order. The riot was not an isolated event of sporadic violence, but it was a reaction to the social upheaval that accompanied the end of the war.

Previous historical scholarship has examined the ways in which white southerners attempted to maintain economic, political, and social control over their communities after the war had ended. George C. Rable’s *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* argues that conservatives in the South tried to retain white supremacy by spreading violence and terror throughout the former Confederate states. Rable uses several case studies of violent outbreaks from across the South to support his claim that white southerners used violence as a counterrevolutionary instrument against Federal Reconstruction policies. Rable’s findings have broader implications for those studying the social history of the South during Reconstruction. In the wake of the Confederacy’s defeat, white southerners faced the loss of their economic livelihoods, racial dominance, and political power. Violence was one way in which white southerners could maintain their antebellum status in the post-war years.¹²

Stetson Kennedy arrives at a similar conclusion as Rable in *After Appomattox: How the South Won the War*. Like Rable, Kennedy argues that white southerners attempted to uphold the southern oligarchy of the antebellum period through violence and terror. However, Kennedy takes a different approach to his analysis of Reconstruction

¹¹ Hollandsworth, 3.

¹² Rable, 187-89.

violence by comparing the social and racial inequalities that existed among the Old and New South. He concludes that the end of the Civil War did not result in immediate improvements in the political and social status of African Americans. Blacks were still subject to mob violence, lacked fair political representation, and found that they lacked many of the freedoms that a Union victory had promised.¹³ In the case of the New Orleans Riot, Louisianans who attempted to establish black male suffrage in the state were met with utter resistance from white conservatives, who retaliated against the changing status quo by sparking the mob violence of the New Orleans Riot.

The Nineteenth-Century American Press

The New Orleans Massacre received both local and national attention, and the way in which newspapers interpreted the details of the riot, aftershocks of violence, and reports of social instability reveals how the public might have perceived the massacre in its aftermath. To appreciate the role of newspapers in spreading rumors of violence from one southern town to another, it is important to understand how news circulated among communities in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as how political biases operated in the press. The nineteenth-century was a period of rapid industrial and technological growth in the United States that marked the beginning of national news wire services. Menahem Blondheim's *News over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844-1897* describes how the invention of the telegraph contributed to a centralized network of news gathering and distribution across the United States.¹⁴ Her most important conclusion, that the centralization of news networks integrated American

¹³ Stetson Kennedy, *After Appomattox: How the South Won the War* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 57-59.

¹⁴ Menahem Blondheim, *News over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844-1897* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

society across the constraints of distance, is useful in understanding how the rapid spread of public information impacted the way communities received news of Reconstruction violence.

With the development of the telegraph and the national news wire services, individuals began to use the new technology to further promote their specific political views. Mark Wahlgren Summers describes the connections between politicians and the press in the Reconstruction Era in *The Press Gang: Newspapers and Politics, 1865-1878*. According to Summers, partisan interests defined independent presses during Reconstruction, as political coverage provided much of the news and amusement for those of the time.¹⁵ Recognizing the power of the party press, politicians sought to shape public opinion by forming alliances with reporters who shared similar political interests.

The dissemination of partisan news became a viable practice for journalists, especially with the development of party presses in the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. Republican papers allowed Unionists to spread their platform items across the Confederate states, even though their policies were not well received by the majority of white Southerners.¹⁶ The press played a powerful role in spreading political dissent and controversial opinions to regions where they might not have otherwise been heard.

The Post-war Spread of Fear, Paranoia, and Rumors

Fear and paranoia permeated the social atmosphere of the South, aided by the publications of party presses that spread rumors across communities. White conservatives feared emancipation and racial equality, and they worried that blacks were prepared to

¹⁵ Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Press Gang: Newspapers and Politics, 1865-1878* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 43-44.

¹⁶ Richard H. Abbott, "Civil War Origins of the Southern Republican Press," *Civil War History* 43, no. 1 (March 1997), 38-58.

wrest equality from whites through violent insurrections. These fears existed, and they present challenges to historians who wish to study rumors in past societies.

In studying fear, paranoia, and rumor in historical scholarship, causality can be difficult to establish, and there is not always an overt link between a report of an insurrection and how seriously the community feared these reports. Despite these challenges, studying fear is not a hopeless endeavor, and several historians have provided useful frameworks for considering how to interpret rumors among primary sources. Mark Wahlgren Summers's *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction* examined newspaper reports of rumors and political cartoons to understand how paranoia shaped public political sentiment toward Federal Reconstruction.¹⁷ Rather than using rumor as evidence for events that may or may not have occurred, Summers uses rumor as a tool for interpreting the social atmosphere of the Reconstruction South. Summers's work shows that no matter the motive behind reporting a rumor or perpetuating misinformation, those who spread such speculations had the potential to generate substantial fear in their communities.

The "Christmas insurrection scare of 1865" demonstrates the ways in which rumors circulated across the South in the post-Civil War period. During the Christmas season following the end of the war, both black and white southerners believed that the Federal government would institute a major process of land redistribution, allocating former slaveholders' land to their newly freed slaves. According to historian Steven Hahn, white Southerners feared that blacks would initiate a violent Christmas uprising if

¹⁷ Mark Wahlgren Summers, *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009).

they did not receive the land they believed would be given to them.¹⁸ The spread of these rumors show the economic uncertainty that existed in the Reconstruction South, and they also reveal how blacks and whites used rumor to contend for control over local areas in their communities.

Hahn provides a valuable framework for studying rumors and fears in the Reconstruction South, one based upon the work of political scientist James C. Scott. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott studies the furtive political conduct of subordinate groups, such as the behaviors of slaves in the antebellum United States.¹⁹ He argues that the powerless of society create “hidden transcripts” to critique the dominant groups who hold power in society. These hidden transcripts can be expressed as rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, and jokes, among others. Scott argues that the hidden transcripts of subordinate groups provided a secretive framework within which the powerless could resist the authority of the empowered.²⁰ The slaves of antebellum society, as well as the freed blacks of the Reconstruction Era, could use hidden transcripts, such as rumor and gossip, to fight covertly for power in their communities. The white conservatives of Louisiana did the same in the aftermath of the New Orleans Riot, but their transcripts did not need to be hidden. Rather, they were published for public consumption in the daily papers.

This study will use the work of Summers, Hahn, and Scott as a guide for investigating rumors in historical study. Rather than viewing the rumors published in

¹⁸ Steven Hahn, “‘Extravagant Expectations’ Of Freedom: Rumour, Political Struggle, and the Christmas Insurrection Scare Of 1865 in the American South,” *Past & Present*, 1997, 151-52.

¹⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

²⁰ Scott, xii-xiii.

newspapers after the New Orleans Riot as factual evidence for events that occurred, this study will examine them as “hidden transcripts,” or ways in which one social group critiques the authority of another social group. In this particular study, the social groups who critique and the social groups who are critiqued will vary depending on the bias and intentions of the newspaper that published the rumor.

The goal of this study is not to examine the motivations behind and the events of the New Orleans Riot of 1866; such topics have already been covered in length by previous Reconstruction scholars. Rather, this study uncovers how the riot and the Louisiana press affected the social atmosphere of New Orleans in its aftermath. Reports of insurrections or rumors of violence persisted in the city for months after the riot occurred and even spread across the state. By publishing such reports, newspapers contributed to the heightened level of social instability that existed in the wake of major Reconstruction riots. By building upon previous historical scholarship and using unique frameworks for analyzing rumor and fear, this research adds to a broader social history of the South during Reconstruction.

II. The Bloody Details

In the aftermath of the riot, many Louisiana papers attempted to discern the events of the massacre and calculate the total number killed and wounded in the affair. The Shreveport *South-western* reported, “None regret the bloody details of yesterday more than we do – it was horrifying; but there seemed no alternative; fanaticism ruled for the day.”²¹ The “bloody details” of the New Orleans Massacre were staggering. The congressional record of the riot later listed 38 casualties and 146 wounded, but many Louisianans were uncertain of how many were killed or injured until that report was released in January of 1867.²² In the absence of a definitive answer regarding the human cost of the clash, rumors abounded as to how many individuals lost their lives on the streets of New Orleans that fateful day. As they speculated about the bloody details of the riot, newspapers were able to shape public perception of the affray.

Uncertain of the actual number of fatalities, Louisiana papers circulated various estimates of the number killed in the New Orleans Riot, ranging from “two whites and several negroes” to around sixty.²³ The count rose and fell as papers gleaned additional information over the wires. The July 31 issue of the *Baton Rouge Tri-Weekly Gazette & Comet* declared that “upwards of fifteen persons” had been reported killed. Revealing the ongoing flux in the casualty figures, the *Comet*’s next issue printed an article published previously in the *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, stating that “so far as we have been informed, about thirty negroes were killed and several white persons were dangerously

²¹ *South-western*, August 8, 1866.

²² Select Committee on New Orleans Riots, *Report of the Select Committee on the New Orleans Riots*, 39th Cong., 2d sess., 1867, H. Rep. 16, 25, 176.

²³ *Baton Rouge Tri-Weekly Gazette & Comet*, July 31, 1866; *South-western*, August 1, 1866.

wounded.”²⁴ Newspapers played a crucial role in conveying the violent extent of the New Orleans Massacre, despite not knowing the true magnitude of the riot themselves. Editors relied on telegraphic news from nearby cities, and the estimates of those killed varied considerably. For instance, the *South-western* published several telegrams in its August 1 issue. While one telegram from Jackson reported that “the number of killed is estimated at 60 – all negroes,” a separate count from New Orleans painted a different picture. The New Orleans dispatch declared, “The casualties sum up; thirty negroes killed, and several whites, including a number of policemen, dangerously wounded.”²⁵ The *South-western* resorted to publishing both conflicting reports, though readers could not be certain which report was true.

Desperate to find some source of information about the riot, newspapers turned to one another to figure out how many lives were lost at the Mechanics’ Institute. Telegraphic news reported in the *South-western* was able to spread to other Louisiana papers as well, revealing the far reach of the rumors. The same telegrams reported in the August 1 issue of the *South-western* were published in August 4 issues of both the *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times* and the *Bellevue Bossier Banner*. The *Times* and the *Banner* published the *South-western*’s article verbatim, but the *Times*’ piece featured the bold, incendiary headline, “Riot in New Orleans!! 60 Negroes Killed!”²⁶ For the editors of the *Times*, the exaggerated count undoubtedly made for a more eye-catching headline, even if their article subsequently admitted that the casualty figures fell closer to thirty than sixty.

Throughout August, papers continued to report rumors of the number killed and

²⁴ *Baton Rouge Tri-Weekly Gazette & Comet*, August 2, 1866.

²⁵ *South-western*, August 1, 1866.

²⁶ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 4, 1866; *Bossier Banner*, August 4, 1866.

wounded in the riot. However, the estimates of the fatalities declined dramatically from the *South-western*'s initial count of "60 – all negroes."²⁷ On August 8, the *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times* stated, "It is impossible yet to arrive at the exact number of casualties of the riot on Monday. Twenty-two deaths black and white, are all we can sum up. There were many wounded, and death may be the consequence in many of these cases."²⁸

While acknowledging the impossibility of determining the actual casualty figures, the *Times*' reported fatalities dwindled even further from the truth, demonstrating the instability of reports that circulated on the numbers of those killed and wounded.

Over two weeks after the New Orleans Riot occurred, the *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times* continued to waver in its reports of fatalities resulting from the massacre. The *Times*' numbers shifted again, this time escalating to an almost accurate count of forty casualties. On August 15, the *Times* featured a piece titled, "The Responsibility," which purported that the riot "originated by two colored men of the mob firing on the police, and the rioters endeavoring to prevent the arrest of their comrades."²⁹ The *Times*, proposing that the rioters were prepared for such an occasion, also claimed that their actions resulted in "the killing of forty men, and wounding of about one hundred and sixty." While placing the casualties in the context of their own political leanings, the editors of the *Times* noted, "Among the number of killed, there was one policeman and a citizen; and among the wounded forty one policemen, and five citizens."³⁰ Their account pays special attention to the policeman and citizens killed in the riot, depicting them as victims of the rioters' brutal actions. However, it glazes over

²⁷ *South-western*, August 1, 1866.

²⁸ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 8, 1866.

²⁹ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 15, 1866.

³⁰ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 15, 1866.

the overwhelming loss of life that affected the black population. In actuality, thirty-four of the 38 killed were black, as were a majority of the wounded.³¹

In the same August 15 issue, the *Times* printed a statement issued by Lieutenant Governor Albert Voorhies, Attorney General A.S. Herron, and New Orleans Mayor John T. Monroe that outlined their views of the riot and provided yet another estimate of the casualties. Notably, the numbers of those killed and wounded were presented in a different manner than in the previous piece. The men contended that “forty-two policemen and several citizens were either killed or wounded by them [the rioters]” and “twenty-seven rioters were killed and a considerable number wounded.”³² By combining the numbers of the killed and wounded policemen and citizens, Voorhies, Herron, and Monroe made the non-rioters appear as the real victims of the New Orleans Massacre, the ones who suffered considerable loss of life. Their estimates also undercount the true casualty figures for the black population. The men’s ambiguous wording and erroneous approximations left room for a range of misguided interpretations as to what actually occurred at the New Orleans Riot.

When conservative papers like the *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times* reported the deaths of African Americans, who were seen as the conspirators of the riot, they were often minimized in comparison to the deaths of white policemen. On the day after the New Orleans Massacre, the *New Orleans Bee* reported, “Twenty-two policemen were wounded, of whom we obtained the following names: Theard, McDonnelly, Hennessy and Sokoloski. The two latter are not expected to live. Police officer Waggaman is dead. Corpl. Barnell, police officer, is also dead. We could not learn the total casualties among

³¹ Vandal, *Anatomy of a Tragedy*, 215-222.

³² *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 15, 1866.

the negroes, but we can safely say there was not less than 25 killed outright. Four dray loads were carried off from the Mechanics' Institute."³³ The *Bee* identifies the names of the officers who were wounded and killed in the affray, but they describe the deaths of the black population in terms of how many carts it took to move the bodies.

Like the *New Orleans Bee*, the *South-western* and the *Bossier Banner* devoted more consideration to identifying the white policemen and citizens who were harmed than identifying the blacks who were wounded and killed in the riot. On August 8, the *South-western* published an account of the riot that had originally appeared in the *Times-Picayune* of New Orleans. The article reveals the different attentions that were accorded to the white and black peoples involved in the massacre. It reads:

In our present report we will not endeavor to give a list of the names of the negroes who were wounded or arrested. At the first district there were upwards of one hundred and fifty or two hundred taken. At the second district station fifty-three were received. Three died after being brought to the station, and three others are supposed to be mortally wounded. In all, I suppose there has been about fifty negroes killed...Officer Sokoloski, a well-known and faithful officer, received a ball in the groin, and is not expected to recover. Officer James Henry is also said to be mortally wounded...A son of Dr. Cenas, a medical student...received a shot in the neck from one of the windows in the Hall, and expired immediately. He had nothing to do with the battle then raging.³⁴

The number of black casualties is once again erroneous, but the more striking aspect of the report is the disparate treatment of the killed, wounded, and arrested among

³³ *New Orleans Bee*, July 31, 1866.

³⁴ *South-western*, August 8, 1866.

the races. The paper does not attempt to identify any blacks who lost their lives in the riot, opting instead to describe them only in terms of their sheer number. However, the piece does provide an extensive list of the whites who were killed, wounded, and arrested. The account identifies the officers by name, and even the innocent bystander is recognized as “a son of Dr. Cenas, a medical student.”³⁵ A few days later, the *Bossier Banner* reprinted the article from the *South-western*, revealing how other papers received and transmitted these supposed facts of the New Orleans Massacre.

The Alexandria *Louisiana Democrat* also spread rough estimations of the casualty figures that did not adequately or accurately capture the true extent of the violence. The August 8 issue of the *Democrat* offered “such particulars of the affair as our corps of reporters was able to glean” and provided a more dramatic account of the massacre. Though the article had acknowledged that the riot was “attended by more loss of life and maiming of body than any similar occurrence in this history of New Orleans,” it could only ascertain that “over twenty dead men lay in the street about 3 o’clock when we left this calamity.”³⁶ The *Democrat* did not mention the casualty figures again until a month later, when they provided a brief update of the fatality count. Publishing a succinct summary of the official report from the military authorities of New Orleans, the *Democrat* stated only that there were “38 killed, 48 severely wounded, and 98 slightly wounded.” Though this was more accurate than the *Democrat*’s past report, their numbers still failed to recognize the impact of the riot on the black population. As in the case of the *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, the ambiguity allowed room for various

³⁵ *South-western*, August 8, 1866.

³⁶ *Louisiana Democrat*, August 8, 1866.

interpretations of the New Orleans Riot, and papers possessed the power to report the fatalities in a way that suited their political framework.

Some conservative papers, like the *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, realized that blacks had borne the brunt of the violence. Still, they framed the reports of those killed and wounded in ways that portrayed blacks as utterly inferior to whites. On July 31, the paper published a piece titled, “A Terrible Day,” mourning the riot’s overwhelming casualties while interjecting their social commentary. The *Crescent* declared, “Some twenty or thirty negroes were killed in this encounter. The universal expression of sentiment was that of regret that the poor negro, who was incited to demonstrations of violence, was the victim of the contest, while the white man, who had inflamed him, escaped. Nevertheless, a few of those who seemed to love incendiarism, met their fate.”³⁷ After presenting a brief glimpse of the casualties among the blacks who had been present at the Convention, the *Crescent* added their own political twist to the massacre. In their version of the events, the riot began when “white men, standing on the steps of the State House, exhorted the negroes to kill every white person – man, woman or child – who interfered with them.”³⁸ As soon as the day after the riot, Louisiana papers like the *Crescent* recognized that blacks were the ones who ultimately suffered in the massacre. However, the paper’s portrayal of blacks as those who helplessly succumbed to the urgings of white leaders and wrought chaos upon the city reveals the way in which they perceived the disparity in power among the races. From the *Crescent*’s perspective, the blacks were powerless to the whims of white citizens, and if incited, would risk their own lives to commit radical acts of violence.

³⁷ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, July 31, 1866.

³⁸ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, July 31, 1866.

Like the *Crescent*, the West Baton Rouge *Sugar Planter* used its reports of the numbers killed and wounded to depict the black victims as inferior and powerless. Declaring that its readers “must be in possession of all the particulars of the great riot in New Orleans on Monday last,” the *Planter* refrained from publishing a report on the riot or providing an exact count of the number they believed to be killed or wounded. Rather, its editors offered a sentiment comparable to the one made by the *Crescent*, stating, “For the negroes who fell victims to the wiles of the Conventionists, we have but one feeling which is shared, in by a large majority of our friends – and that is sorrow. We saw several killed during the riot, but not until the command to surrender had been repeatedly given. Poor, deluded people! They were made to suffer for the sins of those who pretended to be their friends...”³⁹ The *Planter*’s account portrayed the blacks who lost their lives as victims of their own delusions who suffered because of their weak-willed nature.

In the days and weeks after the New Orleans Massacre, Louisiana newspapers were vital sources of intelligence for those seeking to understand the particulars of the riot. However, information varied considerably among the papers, and the rapid spread of speculative casualty figures shows the uncertainty that characterized the state in the riot’s aftermath. No matter which paper they read, Louisianans were unable to determine the true scope of the massacre. An unfortunate consequence of such speculative reporting was that the blacks who lost their lives at the Mechanics’ Institute were often described as nameless casualties, their deaths serving as political fodder for shaping public perception of the New Orleans Riot. For many conservative papers, their deaths were “bloody details,” and nothing more.

³⁹ *Sugar Planter*, August 4, 1866.

III. “Excitement Should Be Avoided”: Rumors of Riots, Violence, and Insurrections

Rumors of Violence within New Orleans

Police records published in the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* reveal the heightened levels of fear, paranoia, and violence across the city in the wake of the riot. A front-page column in the August 2 issue of the *Crescent* contains several rumors of uprisings within the city, including an allegation that “a large number of negroes from the west side of the river had crossed below the Third District, and were crossing to attack the white population.”⁴⁰ A different rumor led to the arrest of Boyd Robinson, who was charged with “inciting negroes on the levee to attack white persons.”⁴¹ The same piece warned of another riot, this one reported by an officer, Lieutenant William H. Manning. Manning telegraphed the Chief of Police there was “every expectation of a riot on Main street, between Royal and Bourbon streets” that evening.⁴²

The rumored insurrections fizzled. The Second District police reported that the rumor that blacks were attempting to attack the whites was “officially found to be untrue.”⁴³ Robinson was brought before the District’s recorder and soon discharged for reasons that remained unclear. As to the riot on Main Street, Manning ordered his men to guard the scene but later telegraphed the chief, “Everything quiet. No prospect of any disturbance.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 2, 1866.

⁴¹ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 2, 1866.

⁴² *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 2, 1866. Manning’s full name is not found in the *Crescent*, but it is retrieved from Hollandsworth’s *An Absolute Massacre*, 103.

⁴³ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 2, 1866.

⁴⁴ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 2, 1866.

Much like the *Crescent*, the West Baton Rouge Parish *Sugar Planter* was quick to spread rumors. The weekly paper promoted the parish's economic development while condemning Radical Republicanism. The *Planter* published two conflicting opinions on the condition of New Orleans in their August 11 issue. In one article, the paper alleges that, "Rumor, with her multitude of tongues, says the Convention will meet *nolens volens* on the 3rd of September next, but whether the Radical Wells will have stamina enough to carry his threat into execution remains to be seen."⁴⁵ On the same page, the *Planter* offers another story, this one from the *New Orleans Times*: "The rumors which fly thick and fast through the streets, of riots and uprisings in and around New Orleans, says the *Times*, are all unfounded, and the offspring of heated imagination – so we are informed by the Chief of Police." Without knowing the certainties of the riot, or whether or not a major outbreak of violence might occur again, the *Sugar Planter* resorted to publishing rumors, though they claimed that they understood "the true position of affairs" in New Orleans.⁴⁶

While these incidents might have been causes for authentic concern for the New Orleans police, they reveal something else about the social atmosphere in the city at the time. Groundless or not, paranoia still seeped through the public mind and was reflected in the reports of local newspapers. In his book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, political scientist James C. Scott describes the idea that rumors thrive "in situations in which events of vital importance to people's interests are occurring and in which no reliable information – or only ambiguous information – is available."⁴⁷ By reporting these rumors in spite of their speculative nature, the *Crescent* was able to spread

⁴⁵ *Sugar Planter*, August 11, 1866.

⁴⁶ *Sugar Planter*, August 11, 1866.

⁴⁷ Scott, 144.

politically charged news rapidly, even if such news was vague or fallacious. Truth was not a prerequisite for publication in a Louisiana paper.

Few pieces of intelligence were relayed with absolute certainty in the Louisiana press, but what wound up in the local papers reveals much about how journalists perceived the social instability that existed in the wake of the riot. A report published by the *Crescent* demonstrates the prevailing paranoia that blacks were preparing to launch an attack on the local population. On the evening of August 2, a discharged United States soldier alerted an officer of the Third District police of “a gathering of about two hundred armed negroes assembled some two miles below the barracks.”⁴⁸ Lieutenant Joseph Jacobs, head of the Third District police, sent a patrol to where the crowd was rumored to have assembled to determine the veracity of the soldier’s statement. According to the report published by the *Crescent* the following day, “nothing additional had been heard from Lieut. Jacobs in relation to the matter.”⁴⁹ Though the actual presence of the gathering was not confirmed, it still garnered attention from the local press.

At the same time that the *Crescent* was publishing rumors of insurrections in their daily papers, they maintained a firm stance against those who sought to spur outbreaks of violence. In an article titled, “Excitement Should Be Avoided,” an unknown journalist expresses concern that “fierce instincts have been incited, dormant passions have been aroused, latent enmities have been developed, and ancient grudges have been revived” among local black men and women as a direct result of the New Orleans Riot.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁸ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 3, 1866.

⁴⁹ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 3, 1866. Lieutenant Jacobs’s full name is not found in the *Crescent*, but it is retrieved from Hollandsworth’s *An Absolute Massacre*, 113.

⁵⁰ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 3, 1866.

article charges the “worst of [the city’s] whites” with teaching and rousing blacks to “take an initiatory step in such a revolution as must wholly change the fundamental organization of society, and lead through horrible crimes to the destruction of all that is valuable in our government.”⁵¹ The *Crescent*’s dramatic flair does not come as a surprise. As Mark Wahlgren Summers notes in *The Press Gang: Newspapers and Politics, 1865-1877*, Southern journalists in the Reconstruction Era often wrote with language that was “truculent and apocalyptic,” in order to suit their partisan perspective.⁵² The writing of the *Crescent* falls in line with Summers’ statement. The conservative author displays a hostile attitude toward the Radical Republicans who incited the riot, insisting that they will be the cause of civil government’s demise. The *Crescent* also cautions its readership, which one can presume included few radicals, that insurrectionary actions of Radical Republicans presented a serious threat to the safety of the city, its businesses, and its residents. Therefore, the “thinking and calm” citizens of New Orleans were responsible for assuaging the agitators of public peace and stopping the spread of evil influences within the city.⁵³

Despite warning for “excitement to be avoided,” the *Crescent* itself did little lessen public excitement in the weeks after the New Orleans Riot.⁵⁴ The paper continued to publish stories of street disturbances, mob activity, and indiscriminate violence against local citizens and policemen. On August 16, the front page of the *Crescent* reported that “four negro soldiers armed with muskets threatened to kill Mr. Palegau,” who was the

⁵¹ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 3, 1866.

⁵² Summers, *The Press Gang*, 208.

⁵³ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 3, 1866.

⁵⁴ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 3, 1866.

owner of a grocery store on the corner of Derbigny and Conti Street, a few blocks from the Mechanics' Institute, where the New Orleans Massacre had occurred almost four weeks before. Palegau was not the only one purported to be in harm's way. The unidentified soldiers stood in front of his store, "threaten[ing] the lives of officer Cook and several private citizens, present."⁵⁵ Shots were not fired, and the soldiers fled before they could be arrested. The *Crescent's* account does not include any other details surrounding the violent incident, including the motive behind it. Whether the editors at the *Crescent* did not know the reason for the intimidation, or desired to depict it as a senseless act, is impossible to determine.

Again and again, the *Crescent* returned to reports of black soldiers organizing against local citizens, especially those who were also members of the police. Almost two months after the riot, an article in the *Crescent* bore the rousing headline, "Negroes Shooting and Cutting the Police," depicting two stories of reckless shootings and rebellious behavior. Shortly after midnight on September 23, a band of black soldiers, allegedly representing the 9th United States Colored Cavalry, attacked the police at the intersection of Conti and Treme. Despite firing several shots at the police, "none of the shots took effect," and the soldiers soon bolted the scene. However, they did not evade capture. The men were arrested on Bienville Street and later charged with attempted murder. The *Crescent* notes that the men were found with the "new revolvers" they had used against the police.⁵⁶ Again, the *Crescent* does not provide a motive for these men's

⁵⁵ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 16, 1866.

⁵⁶ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, September 24, 1866.

actions. Instead, it depicts the affair as one in which armed black soldiers assaulted innocent policemen at random and without reason.

The second story reported in the *Crescent* article also tells of irrational violence against the police. In the early hours of a Friday morning, “a negro ball on Franklin street, between Customhouse and Canal streets, was closed by the police for the disorderly behavior of the people in it, the men amusing themselves by going on the street and firing pistols.” In retaliation against the police who had shut down the ball, Robert Mac, a black man attending the party, cut one of the officers with a razor. Mac was soon arrested, but not before he let the police know that “he was a soldier.”⁵⁷

In September, the paper published an article titled, “Negro Riot,” a headline reminiscent of the reports following the July 30 massacre. According to the article, the episode began when two police officers arrested two black prostitutes near Corduroy Alley, a “neighborhood [that] is filled with lewd negresses, and is much resorted to by discharged negro soldiers, and blacks still in service.” The situation escalated when the local blacks, supposedly a mob of several hundred, staged their own rescue of the two female prisoners by heaving bricks and stones at the arresting officers. Additional forces arrived to assist the policemen in the arrest, and “the combined forces made a demonstration which dispersed the mob without resort to violent measures.” However, the article claims that the mob succeeded in injuring the arresting officers, who were “very roughly used” after the incident. The report alleges that the black men throttled and

⁵⁷ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, September 24, 1866.

knocked the officers down, and “the women bit them severely, to force them to relinquish their hold” on the prostitutes.⁵⁸

Though this riot resulted in relative peace, it reveals the concern among some New Orleans papers that the presence of armed black men in certain neighborhoods contributed to the outbreak of mob violence. On October 1, the *Crescent* published news of a separate incident where “a large crowd of negroes were disturbing the peace, at the corner of Barracks and Treme streets.” One member of the mob, a man named Joseph Manuel, was arrested for having a musket in his possession and was charged with an attempt to kill. Like other *Crescent* reports of riots and violent outbreaks, the article fails to mention whether or not the arrested party was convicted. Rather, it tells a hollow, oft-repeated story of armed black men rioting on the streets of the city without an apparent motive or cause.

The *Crescent* was not the only paper to publish on the condition of New Orleans in the aftermath the riot. Newspapers located in towns across the state often reported about affairs in the city. Many papers, like the *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times* and the *Baton Rouge Tri-Weekly Gazette & Comet*, insisted that the city was peaceful and that rumors surrounding the outbreaks of violence in New Orleans were untrue, aside from a few minor provocations that occurred among the people.

One week after the New Orleans Riot, the *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times* published a thorough account on the “State of the City and Results of the Conflict.”

⁵⁸ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, September 13, 1866.

While asserting that “there has been no disturbance of public tranquility” among New Orleanians, the account also tells of several incidents that occurred since the riot:

On Common street, on Monday evening, an infuriated negro assailed an elderly Irish woman. She wrenched his club from him, and held him at bay until a white man came to her assistance and prostrated him... The negroes were talking of holding a meeting in their church on St. Paul street last evening to concert measures for taking vengeance on the white people. The more discreet of the colored population were advising against the meeting, and we believe it was not held... A lot of negroes living in a house on Victory street, between Enghien and Poet streets, shot at several citizens passing on the street... Acting Corporal Brooks reports that four negroes, armed with revolvers, formed themselves in a line on Claiborne street, about twelve o'clock, and prevented all white persons from passing... Sergeant Adams reports that a squad of the eighty-first colored infantry broke open a store on the corner of Poyfarre and Annunciations streets and carried off with three revolvers and a shot gun.⁵⁹

Though their account indicates otherwise, the *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times* stood by their belief that “the people both white and black are setting down to a peaceful condition.”⁶⁰

The *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times* shared this conviction with other Democratic papers, like the *Baton Rouge Tri-Weekly Gazette & Comet*. Echoing the *Times'* statement, the *Comet* reported that “the late civil commotion has been so

⁵⁹ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 8, 1866.

⁶⁰ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 8, 1866

thoroughly quieted down, as no longer to necessitate a continuance of absolute military law.”⁶¹ In his book, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877*, historian Joe Gray Taylor argues that this was a somewhat common pattern among other Louisiana papers. Especially in the initial weeks after the riot, some Louisiana papers “preferred, if possible, to play down the riot, even though it led to what amounted to martial law in New Orleans.”⁶² By claiming that there was peace within the city, papers like the *Times* and the *Comet* held a certain level of authority over the Radical Republicans who had supposedly incited the riot. In the eyes of Democratic papers, the Radicals attempt to usurp authority was unsuccessful, and the peaceful state of the city was sure proof of their failure.

In the days, weeks, and months following the New Orleans Riot, Louisiana papers took several tacks to reporting on the state of the city. While some overestimated the level of mob violence occurring on the streets, others downplayed the rumors of bedlam and insisted that the city was at peace once more.

Rumors of Violence across the South

Aside from reporting on the condition of New Orleans after the riot, conservative editors filled their papers with reports of mob violence occurring in other places across the United States. None gained as much traction in the Louisiana press as the New Orleans Riot, but each rumor of insurrection still generated provocative headlines among the daily papers.

⁶¹ *Baton Rouge Tri-Weekly Gazette & Comet*, August 7, 1866.

⁶² Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 111.

In late September 1866, the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* published a report from the *Pensacola Observer* that described a clash between Tallahassee police officers who had attempted to arrest a black man. Following his arrest, a large crowd of blacks attempted to wrest the prisoner from the policemen with little success. Later that evening, the group gathered once more at the courthouse, this time armed with loaded guns and pistols. They fired one shot before fleeing the scene. No one was seriously injured; however, the report mentioned that a bullet passed through the skirt of a female bystander.⁶³

In October, news of an insurrection made its way into the pages of the *South-western*, the *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, and the *Opelousas Courier*. The *South-western* described a “serious disturbance” at Cat Island, Arkansas, located only twenty-five miles below Memphis, a city itself fraught with intense racial violence just five months earlier.⁶⁴ According to the dispatch, fifty blacks armed themselves to launch a mass uprising against the local whites. A skirmish erupted when black men fired their revolvers at two white men. In the ensuing melee, two black men were killed, and three others were wounded. The ones supposed to incite the rebellion then scattered, and the whites reportedly “armed themselves and went in pursuit” of the leaders of the affray.⁶⁵

The *New Orleans Daily Crescent* and the *Opelousas Courier* engaged in more rabble-rousing versions of the affair. While the *South-western* deemed the events at Cat Island a mere disturbance, the *Crescent* and the *Courier* opened with the provocative

⁶³ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, September 29, 1866.

⁶⁴ *South-western*, October 17, 1866.

⁶⁵ *South-western*, October 17, 1866.

headline, “Negro Insurrection.”⁶⁶ The *Crescent* published a detailed account of the uprising reprinted from the *Memphis Avalanche*. According to the *Crescent*, after obtaining gunpowder, rifles, and ammunition from a local trading boat, several black men employed at a local plantation planned an attack on the white men who lived and worked nearby. Not only does the *Crescent*’s version include an account of the ensuing conflict, it also offers an examination of the origin and motives behind the attack. The black men, acting under direction from white men in Memphis, intended to seize the plantations and murder those who stood in their way. The men involved were instruments of a larger scheme, one where the black population sought to become their own rulers in society, rather than being subject to the whims of white leaders.⁶⁷ To the *Avalanche*, as well as the *Crescent*, the events at Cat Island signaled disastrous consequences for Southern society. The article closed with a disconcerting question for white Southerners: “Who could tell where it would end, had it [the riot] been successful in the beginning?”⁶⁸ By presenting incendiary versions of the Cat Island affair, the *Crescent* and the *Courier* had the potential to generate greater paranoia surrounding rumored outbreaks of violence in the South.

The *Courier* offered a similar report as the one published in the *Crescent* but added their particular partisan spin on the matter. The article stated that fifty or sixty black men, deciding that they would no longer work on a nearby plantation, took up arms with a pledge to kill the first white person who crossed their path. When the armed men met the owners of the plantation at which they worked, they instigated the brutal conflict

⁶⁶ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, October 11, 1866; *Opelousas Courier*, October 20, 1866.

⁶⁷ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, October 11, 1866.

⁶⁸ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, October 11, 1866.

described in the *South-western*. The *Courier* claimed the Cat Island riot was an unsurprising consequence of radical republican teachings, calling it, “one of the many acts of barbarism which the poor, uneducated negro, bolstered up to think that he is the equal of the white men, is led to do by others, when if he was in his proper position, would never dream of committing such atrocities.”⁶⁹ The articles published in the *Courier* and the *Crescent* serve as yet another reminder of the political motivations that influenced which stories were modified, embellished, and put into circulation.

Conservative southern papers used these outbreaks to undercut the legitimacy of the new political and racial order. There was scant information available to the presses about the truths of the riot and its aftermath, but each paper molded the news that they had acquired to reflect their partisan interests and accomplish certain goals. Regarding this rapid circulation of fabricated stories among Southern papers after the New Orleans Riot, Summers comments “Facts were inconvenient things.”⁷⁰ In the case of many Democratic presses, they were seldom necessary to sell a paper.

⁶⁹ *Opelousas Courier*, October 20, 1866.

⁷⁰ Summers, *A Dangerous Stir*, 122.

IV. A Radical Plot

On August 4, the *New Orleans Daily Crescent* published a piece titled, “The Spirit of Our People,” describing the incendiary atmosphere in the city in the wake of the riot. The article also reveals a common sentiment among conservative papers who reported on the massacre. In its opening sentence, the author declared, “From indications already made apparent, it is certain that the radicals and their backers in this city will try to make it appear that the riots of Monday last were the outbreak of a fanatical hatred against the negro race.”⁷¹ To the *Crescent*, this was an inaccurate rendering of events. The paper insisted that the riot was not racially motivated but began when “law-abiding people” attempted to stop the actions of “a set of unprincipled, ambitious and vindictive schemers, who were plotting to subvert the State authorities, and to seize possession of the government by means which in all communities would be recognized as revolutionary and treasonable.”⁷² According to the *Crescent*, the riot was not a matter of escalated racial tensions, but it was the beginning of the radicals’ elaborate plot to take over the South.

In the weeks after the riot, conservative editors like those at the *Crescent* changed the public conversation regarding the New Orleans Massacre. In their words, it was undeniable that the radicals planned the event as part of their grand scheme to claim control of the government. Instead of viewing the riot as a tragedy, Democratic newspapers turned it into yet another reason to publicly condemn the insurrectionary Radical Republicans. Historian Mark Wahlgren Summers describes this phenomenon in his book, *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction*.

⁷¹ *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 4, 1866.

⁷² *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, August 4, 1866.

According to Summers, southern editors insisted that the radicals who incited the New Orleans Riot had acted under the instruction of the Republicans on Capitol Hill.⁷³ Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, “the allegation that Republican leaders had approved of the convention in advance, or even ordered it, had become a staple of Democratic reporting.”⁷⁴ Conservative papers, like the *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, the *Southwestern*, and the *Louisiana Democrat*, among others, circulated the rumor that there was “a Radical plot to disfranchise white ex-Confederates, enfranchise blacks, and without taking a vote of the people in Louisiana, bring the state into the Union under its new, bogus constitution.”⁷⁵

The *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times* was a strong proponent of the radical conspiracy in the weeks following the New Orleans Massacre. On August 4, the *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times* expressed their fear that in the wake of the riot the “lately emancipated slaves” would receive the right to vote under the leadership of the Radicals.⁷⁶ In one article, the *Times* exclaimed, “From the speeches lately uttered in public meetings, in New Orleans, it is evident that the Radical leaders are determined to carry their intentions into effect, even if it involve the State in anarchy and blood. Let the Conservative element of the country act in harmony, and act with vigor, in a crisis so alarming.”⁷⁷ To the editors at the *Times*, it was shocking that the Radical Republicans, so determined to obtain suffrage for African Americans, had been willing to risk innocent lives to fulfill their grand scheme. While chaos and violence ran rampant under

⁷³ Summers, *A Dangerous Stir*, 123.

⁷⁴ Summers, *A Dangerous Stir*, 123.

⁷⁵ Summers, *A Dangerous Stir*, 123.

⁷⁶ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 4, 1866.

⁷⁷ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 4, 1866.

Republican influence, Louisiana's Democrats were charged with returning peace to the state.

In their next issue, the *Times* expounded upon the perceived radical plot to overthrow the State government and denounced the Convention's instigators. On August 8, the *Times* printed a lengthy account of the New Orleans riot, which included their blatant condemnation of Radical Republican politicians and their disappointment that the black men of the city would follow their leadership:

It seems, from the testimony of the leading colored members of the convention, that great preparation had been made by the white leaders of the riot, to have the negroes armed and how they should commence the scene for bloodshed and plunder. It is strange that men who profess to be good and honest citizens should embrace such a suicidal hallucination, as to inaugurate a war of races to perpetuate their passionate and unpolitic fanatical theories. It seems almost impossible that men with healthy conscience and sound intellect should allow themselves to be carried into the current of a Radical stream of unpopularity, and adhere to a party of broken down politicians and disappointed and demented fanatics, who are attempting to overthrow the government and scatter their schemes of discord and riot in every parish of the state.⁷⁸

After blaming the Convention members for falling prey to the wiles of Radical Republicans, the *Times* argued that the riot was part of a larger conspiracy, one that sought to incite violence across the state and to take over Louisiana's government. One

⁷⁸ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 8, 1866.

week later, on August 15, the *Times* reported, “The origin of this affair must be traced to an understanding between the Radical members of Congress, on the one hand, and on the other, the Governor and other waifs of the Banks Government at New Orleans. In their programme the main object was to subvert the State Government in order to inaugurate on which would hold communion with the rump Congress...”⁷⁹ The paper also issued a warning to its readers: “the people of this State, must be ready to witness a renewed and perhaps more bloody attempt on the part of the anarchists to revolutionize our State Government.”⁸⁰ The *Times* insisted that the New Orleans Riot was not an isolated event; it was the beginning of a large-scale rebellion that the Radical Republicans in Congress had furtively planned.

To the *Times*, the New Orleans Riot heralded a great crisis in the nation’s history. In an August 19 article, aptly titled “The Conspiracy,” the *Times* claimed, “It is useless to conceal the fact, that this very day, there is on foot within the limits of the State, a reckless conspiracy to subvert our State and Municipal Governments – a conspiracy which is clothed with peril, since it forms a link of the great conspiracy, by which radicalism contemplates the overthrow of the General Government.” Just as the *Times* reported in previous issues, the article insisted that the New Orleans Riot was proof that a greater plot existed to bring the civil government under strict Republican leadership, and they believed that radicals were working within the city “to plunge the State in another revolution.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 15, 1866.

⁸⁰ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 15, 1866.

⁸¹ *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 19, 1866.

In the eyes of many Louisiana newspaper editors, the New Orleans Massacre offered yet another opportunity to express contempt of Radical Republicanism and to intensify the growing paranoia that a larger rebellion might occur in the state. Just five days after the riot, the *Sugar Planter* published their speculations on the cause of the massacre. On August 4, its editors declared, “It is clear to every unbiased mind that this riot was a premeditated affair on the part of the Conventionists who desired political, or other martyrdom, that the Radical party of Congress might recover their arbitrary sway over Louisiana.”⁸² The *Planter* claimed with certainty that the Conventionists had planned to provoke the violent massacre in a futile attempt to gain control of the state’s government. Though the *Planter* presented this as fact, there was room for doubt in their version of the events. As Summers demonstrated in *A Dangerous Stir*, many members of the Convention arrived to the Mechanic’s Institute unarmed, and “the proposition that delegates would show up unarmed to be slaughtered for a good Republican sensation” was implausible.⁸³

In a later issue, the *Planter* insisted that the “radical throats of the North” were responsible for inciting the riot. On August 11, the *Planter* claimed that “this riot was a god-send to them [the radicals] – they concocted the whole scheme at home – sent their agents South to carry it into effect – succeeded most admirably at the expense of human life – and covered with the blood of their slaughtered friends, proclaim them martyrs in a holy cause.”⁸⁴ The northern Republicans had engineered the riot, at the expense of the Conventionists, to promote the cause of black suffrage and equality in the South.

⁸² *Sugar Planter*, August 4, 1866.

⁸³ Summers, *A Dangerous Stir*, 122-123.

⁸⁴ *Sugar Planter*, August 11, 1866.

The editors at the *Planter* were not the only ones to purport the conspiracy that Radicals in the North were ultimately responsible for the riot. Other papers, such as the *Louisiana Democrat*, insinuated that Northern radicals had instigated the New Orleans Massacre for their own political gain. On August 22, the *Democrat* published an article with the headline, “The New Orleans Riot – The Radical Game, the Impeachment of President Johnson.” The piece stated, “The baffled radicals have evidently resolved upon a system of bold and desperate expedients for the instigation of mobs and riots in the South, whereby to maintain their ascendancy among the Union war elements of the North. Southern rebel mobs and riots against Yankees, Southern white Unionists and negroes are the very things now most urgently required and desired by Northern radicals for their electioneering purposes.”⁸⁵ Just like the *Sugar Planter*, the *Democrat* twisted the story of the New Orleans Massacre into a denunciation of the Radical Republicans who supposedly sought to use it as political fodder.

Aside from postulating that Northern Republicans had sparked the New Orleans Massacre, the *Democrat* also surmised what would happen to the South if the Radicals gained political leadership of the country. On September 26, the *Democrat* warned its readers that if the Radicals won the elections, “The intense hate which the Radicals have been treasuring up against the Southern people for the last five years, would then burst out in all its fury... We have recently had an example of what the people of Louisiana may expect, and our State will afford a fair specimen of the condition of the rest of her sisters.” The *Democrat* insisted that if the Radicals took charge of the government, Governor Wells and his co-conspirators would be able to accomplish what the New

⁸⁵ *Louisiana Democrat*, August 22, 1866.

Orleans Riot had supposedly intended, which was to “adopt the Constitutional amendment disfranchising nineteenth twentieths of the people of the State” and provide for black enfranchisement.⁸⁶

The Shreveport *South-western* reported extensively on the “radical conspiracy” and took a particular interest in criticizing Governor Wells’s role in the New Orleans Riot. In an August 15 issue, the *South-western* printed the article, “Governor Wells Defines His Position.” The piece condemned Wells for defending “the revolutionary schemers who attempted to overturn the State government and set up in its place a rampant radical cabal composed of fanatics and incendiaries.”⁸⁷ Not only this, the report featured a dispatch from the *New Orleans Times*, another conservative paper, that criticized the actions of Governor Wells, Convention leader R. King Cutler, and the other radicals involved in the New Orleans Riot. According to the *Times*, “R. King Cutler is anxious to disfranchise the white citizens of the state, and enfranchise the negroes. Filled with the prejudice of party, the governor sees in the efforts of our municipal authorities to preserve the peace only a desire to bring on a collision and redden our streets with blood!”⁸⁸

On August 22, the *South-western* attempted to defend President Andrew Johnson, who had faced political attacks from Republicans after stating that the New Orleans Riot originated in the radical Congress.⁸⁹ In addition to defending Johnson, the *South-western* published an excerpt from the *Washington Intelligencer* that aligns with Johnson’s view on the radical conspiracy. The *Intelligencer* claimed, “It appears, conclusively, that this

⁸⁶ *Louisiana Democrat*, September 26, 1866.

⁸⁷ *South-western*, August 15, 1866.

⁸⁸ *South-western*, August 15, 1866.

⁸⁹ Summers, *A Dangerous Stir*, 130.

riot was, with full knowledge of the consequences, originally planned under the supervision, and with the cognizance and connivance, if not at the instigation, of the radical leaders in congress; that it was an open and flagrant attempt, in violation of all law, and in defiance of an overwhelming adverse public opinion, to inaugurate a political revolution, and a premeditated and deliberately planned effort to execute an unlawful purpose...”⁹⁰ Despite these allegations, the official investigation into the riot later dispelled the notion that the riot originated with Republican leaders in Congress.⁹¹

In reporting the rumor of a grand radical plot, Democratic papers attempted to maintain hold of political power in their communities. Desperate to defend the South’s conservatives against northern Republican backlash in the wake of the massacre, southern editors depicted the New Orleans Riot as part of a premeditated Radical Republican conspiracy to subvert the state and federal governments. The conservatives, instructed to “act with harmony, and act with vigor” in the impending revolution, stood in stark contrast to the volatile Republicans.⁹² Despite conservatives’ best efforts to accrue political capital in favor of the Democratic Party after the riot, the New Orleans Massacre played a crucial role in undermining Johnsonian Reconstruction and aiding the Republican cause.⁹³

⁹⁰ *South-western*, August 22, 1866.

⁹¹ The Select Committee on the New Orleans Riots stated of Johnson’s charge, “Congress was not in session at the time of the massacre. Its members were at their respective homes, and the committee fail to discover any grounds upon which so grave a charge should be made. It was an unwarranted and unjust expression of hostile feeling, without pretext or foundation in fact.” Select Committee, *Report of the Select Committee on the New Orleans Riots*, 25.

⁹² *Semi-Weekly Natchitoches Times*, August 4, 1866.

⁹³ Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 107.

V. Conclusion

In the weeks after the New Orleans Massacre, reports of insurrections and rumors of violence persisted across Louisiana, from Shreveport to Alexandria and Opelousas. Newspapers offered stories of mob activity, chaotic insurrections, and senseless violence, occurring within the state and in other regions of the South. As depicted in the headlines of Louisiana papers, the social atmosphere of the South was unstable, and the future of the region was clouded by the fear that Radical Republicans intended to ignite a political revolution across the South.

Though the rise of telegraphic news aided the rapid spread of information, it also enabled the pervasive circulation of misinformation. Such misinformation, in the form of rumors, gossip, and paranoia, contributed to the social volatility of Louisiana in the wake of the riot. Newspapers were capable of shaping public sentiment about the New Orleans Massacre and the reconvened constitutional convention, and readers were unable to definitively separate fact from fiction.

In the aftermath of the New Orleans Riot, conservative newspapers spread paranoia to maintain some semblance of authority in light of the looming threat of Republican leadership. The conservative papers did not serve as “hidden” transcripts for contending for power; rather, they were blatant, overt ways of distorting public perception in order to uphold Democratic power in the face of a radicalized political environment. The menace of Radical Republicanism appeared real to conservative editors, and publishing elaborate radical conspiracies, distorting the number of fatalities, and spreading rumors of instability seemed viable outlets for changing public opinion in favor of the Democratic Party.

Despite conservative editors' numerous attempts, these efforts failed at increasing Democratic popularity and provided fuel for northern Republicans, who accused southern whites of committing countless atrocities against the black freedmen of Louisiana. The New Orleans Massacre ultimately undermined Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction policy, and in 1868, the Radical Republicans gained enough political momentum to mandate universal male suffrage as a condition for readmission to the Union.⁹⁴ When Louisiana adopted a new constitution in April 1868, the members of the convention finally gained what they had sacrificed their lives to achieve: the right to vote and hold office.

⁹⁴ Hollandsworth, 148-149.

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