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**To Suppress Riots and Insurrections: Development and
Transformation in Mississippi's State Militia, 1865-1890**

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To Suppress Riots and Insurrections: Development and Transformation in Mississippi's
State Militia, 1865-1890

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Mississippi's state militia after the American Civil War developed into a functional arm of the state to supplant extralegal paramilitary groups. However, that militia transformed between 1865 and 1890 from an organization devoted to protecting African-American political and civil rights into a mechanism for the enforcement of white supremacy. Mississippi's Constitution of 1868 made the governor Commander-in-Chief of the state militia and designated that one of the militia's responsibilities was "to suppress riots and insurrections." While the law provided other reasons for using the militia, this thesis argues that Mississippi's governors only used the militia to put down alleged riots and insurrections, while contemporary newspapers used the terms "riot" and "insurrection" to associate criminality with African-American political activism. This thesis also narrates the life of an African-American man named Oliver Cromwell and his presence at two representative "race riots" in the Clinton Riot of 1875 and the Leflore County Massacre of 1889 to highlight how the militia impacted individual citizens. Ultimately, this work concludes that the transformation of Mississippi's state militia between 1865 and 1890 reveals how civilian access to the militia's ranks and how the governor chose to deploy that militia impactfully reduced African-American rights in late-nineteenth century Mississippi and contributed to the disenfranchisement found in the state's Constitution of 1890.

Keywords: Mississippi, Reconstruction, race, riots, militia, New South

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Introduction

In 1843, Julia Cromwell gave birth to a mixed-race son in Wilkinson County, Mississippi and prophetically named him Oliver. Like his European namesake who sparked England's Civil War in the seventeenth century, Mississippi's Oliver Cromwell grew up to fan the flames of racial politics in his native state for decades after the American Civil War. By the time he was twenty years old, Cromwell served in the 5th United States Colored Heavy Artillery regiment in the American Civil War. In his early thirties, he paraded the streets of Clinton, Mississippi in full military regalia as a leader of an African-American militia before participating in one of the most notorious race riots in the state's history. Fourteen years later, the state militia of which he was once a member ran him out of Mississippi. Finally, the illustrious troublemaker died in a hail of gunfire while taking out five Ku Klux Klan members as a parting gift. Cromwell lived up to his name and remained at the center of political and racial turmoil in Mississippi throughout his life, coming to represent the broader societal changes occurring therein.

Cromwell's life illustrates significant historical shifts in Mississippi. From the Civil War to the formation of Jim Crow in the 1890s, Mississippi saw racial and political uncertainty on an unprecedented scale, and civilian militias became a prominent mediating force. This work will explore how Mississippi's state militia, as developed after emancipation in 1865, shaped the way that political parties fought for and projected their power in Mississippi through the ratification of the state's next, and current, constitution written in 1890. The period between the end of the Civil War and the establishment of Jim Crow control in the South often reads as a history of unique Democratic Party, and consequently white, patterns of violence bent on establishing

white supremacy and political hegemony. However, this research will complicate that narrative by exploring how the Democratic Party of the late 1870s and 1880s utilized the state militia in the same fundamental way that the Republican Party did in the 1860s. Namely, both parties employed the state militia to reassert control when challenges confronted their political hold on the state government. The difference, then, was the Republican Party's use of the militia to protect African American rights, whereas the Democratic Party sought to solidify white supremacy.

Oliver Cromwell's life represents how the state's politics changed from the Civil War to 1890, and how the militia took an active role in that change. After tumultuous extralegal militia skirmishes during Presidential Reconstruction (1865-1868), the Constitution of 1868 clarified the distinction between legal and illegal militias, and placed state militia operations in the governor's hands. The militia then became an inescapably political tool. As Republican Party power waned in the mid-to-late 1870s, Republican governor Adelbert Ames mustered the militia in a vain attempt to retain control of the capital and to remind citizens of his party's continued hold on power. By 1890, the Democratic party once again dominated Mississippi politics, yet rising Republican sentiment both in the state and in the rest of the country pushed an uneasy Democratic governor Robert Lowry to raise the state's militia once again.

Two specific instances reveal the overarching purpose of Mississippi's state militia. The first is the Clinton Riot of 1875, where African-American militia units played important roles both during and after the riot to protect their lives and Republican political interest. The other example is the Leflore County Massacre of 1889 in Leflore County, Mississippi where, conversely, white militia units were called upon to represent

the Democratic Party. Both events saw a political party employing militia units to defend their interests, yet both militias failed to ensure peace or put down hostilities. Militia deployment, then, built on the idea that force could be used if necessary, though troops were almost never sent to areas where violence had been threatened or performed.

Both the Clinton Riot and the Leflore County Massacre also reveal the central controversy of Mississippi's late nineteenth century politics: race. Long before W. E. B. Du Bois famously stated that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line," one Mississippi writer assigned the same problem to the nineteenth century, arguing that "the issue in this State is one of race."¹ The militia walked hand in hand with politics; political parties, however, were also tied directly to race. Though exceptions certainly existed, one may safely generalize that the Democratic Party represented white citizens, while the Republican Party represented black citizens. The militia's political roots then tied it heavily to race relations. The militia thereby simultaneously embodied both political and racial division in Mississippi.

The racial component of Mississippi's state militia reveals one of its most important contributions in the late nineteenth century. An examination of the state's militia is necessarily an examination of the position of African Americans in the state. The presence of African American militia units, let alone their actions, symbolizes the empowerment of black people in Mississippi during Reconstruction and under a Republican government. The use of white militias to suppress black political organization

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003), 16.; "The Mississippi Troubles: A Truthful Statement of the Situation: Number 1," *The Weekly Mississippi Pilot*, September 25, 1875, 2.

in Leflore County in 1889 conversely embodies the diminishment of civil rights brought on by Democratic political majority in the development of an oppressive Jim Crow regime. The language of legislation concerning the militia in both the 1868 and 1890 state constitutions offers insight on both how the militia was used and why. By including the phrase “to suppress riots and insurrections” into the list of reasons for militia deployment, the governor could either represent any racial conflict (which in Mississippi could be counted on at the time) as a “riot” to deploy militia and reinforce control, or engineer a racial conflict for the expressed purpose of inciting violence and militia use, as the Democratic Party often did.²

This thesis will argue that between 1865 and 1890, both the Democratic and Republican parties in Mississippi utilized the state militia to enforce and symbolize party control; however, the militia transformed during that period from an organization to protect and empower African Americans to an organization bent on their suppression and disenfranchisement. The militia thereby operated in the same way, but for stark opposite purposes. Chapter One will closely examine how the Clinton Riot of 1875 represented Republican and African-American attempts to sustain the rights won in emancipation by using legal state militia units. Chapter Two will track the militia’s status under Democratic governor Robert Lowry, exploring the ways fusion politics and Democratic Party insecurity produced the militia’s resurrection at the Leflore County Massacre of 1889. By focusing on those two events, this work will track the militia’s changes over

² Constitution of the State of Mississippi, Adopted May 15, 1868, Article IX, Sec. 5; Constitution of the State of Mississippi, Adopted November 1, 1890, Article IX, Sec. 217.

time while highlighting the functional continuities between political parties that exercised the right to wield the militia's power.

Historiographical Contribution

Though technically a military organization, the state militia's scope extended to all spheres of civilian life when mobilized. Consequently, this examination of Mississippi's state militia in the contentious period between 1865 and 1890 will contribute to the economic, military, political, racial, and social history of the state. Furthermore, citizen-soldiering and the suppression of "race riots" real or imagined remains a highly prevalent and debated issue in the United States today, so studying the way that everyday citizens of different races interacted with their respective governments to militarize civilian life may offer insight on historically persistent racial, social, and political issues. While much has been written on Mississippi, its laws, racial division, and politics, little material exists incorporating the state militia into that history, and an even smaller amount has been written with the militia at the center.

Though several works reference Mississippi's state militia as a passing contributor in a much larger historical narrative, this work will expand the lens on the militia as a much more important agent. The militia's centrality to the period is twofold: first, the militia actively contributed to events, such as riots, when they happened, and second, the militia offers a symbol of the overarching societal changes in the state. Citizens who formed the militia and the governor who controlled it shaped the racial, political, and social future of the state by either their participation in or exclusion from the militia. Both the active and

symbolic nature of the organization thereby warrant close, specific study that has seldom been done.

The Clinton Riot of 1875 and the Leflore County Massacre of 1889 fall neatly into this study as two representative examples of militia activity over time. Both events have been studied thoroughly in isolation, yet this study seeks to examine them in conjunction. By placing the events side-by-side, similarities and differences may be drawn which reveal larger historical truths about the militia's importance to Mississippi in an age of racially motivated violence. Specifically studying the militia's standing across both riots at the same time further informs the history of each separate event. By looking at the riots together, one may see not only why the events happened, but how one aspect of Mississippian life, the state militia, could contribute to and perpetuate political systems which catalyzed violence over the span of twenty years.

Another important, yet less tangible, way that this work will contribute to the existing literature is by examining contemporary ideas about civilian-based military organizations. While it is impossible to know how each individual thought, one blanket ideology occurs frequently in contemporary newspapers and letters. Both during and after the Civil War, southern whites developed a patent distaste for peacetime militia organization, associating organized forces with despotic standing armies. This paranoia spiked greatly with the inception of black militia units during Reconstruction, yet as will be shown, arguments over the constitutionality of peacetime militias, regardless of race, continued into the state constitutional debates of 1890.

State Militia

This study will most directly contribute to the historiography of the state militia in Mississippi by centering its narrative around that organization. Little direct research has been done specifically on Mississippi's state militia or state militias otherwise, yet a few valuable studies exist. Otis A. Singletary's *Negro Militia and Reconstruction* offers the most specific, targeted examination of state militias, particularly African American units, in Reconstruction. Published in 1957, Singletary's book is dated, yet in many cases the book fairly divides the blame for the violence of the period on both white and black forces. Singletary argues that black militia units, though empowering to black people in the South, also heightened antagonism from whites solely by their existence. The book provides a useful analysis of the Clinton Riot of 1875 and specific details on the militia's role during and after the riot. Despite its age, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction* remains one of the most thorough accounts of its subject. This study will build on Singletary's by providing greater context for Reconstruction militias and by more closely examining their ramifications into the post-Reconstruction era.³

Andrew F. Lang's *In the Wake of War: Military Occupation, Emancipation, and Civil War America* provides a more recent examination of militia usage in the South after the Civil War. Lang's book studies the process of military occupation by the United States as it developed through the Mexican American and Civil wars. Lang closely examines how citizen-soldiering, at first viewed by whites as a valorous enterprise, became a nuisance in the minds of whites after the extensive occupations of the Civil

³ Otis A. Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1957).

War. However, African Americans, after achieving freedom from slavery in that war, embraced militia participation to protect their newly won rights and to exercise autonomy. This research gives insight particularly into the ideologies concerning militia usage and peacetime occupation and provides a thorough account of African American militia involvement during Reconstruction. This thesis will rely on Lang's arguments connecting Civil War experiences, concepts of citizenship, and armed militia participation. However, this work will also extend those ideas further into Reconstruction and New South era to explore how citizen-soldiering as a fundamental part of Mississippians' experience extended well beyond Lang's timeline. ⁴

Civil Conflicts in Mississippi

While the primary focus of this work will be the state militia, that militia's history cannot be separated from the individual histories of civil conflicts in Mississippi. The state of Mississippi experienced frequent bloody conflicts in the late nineteenth century. While many of these instances have been researched to varied degrees, this thesis contributes to their historiography by adding further details about each respective conflict and by linking those conflicts together in one purposeful framework.

No previous literature pairs the Clinton Riot of 1875 and the Leflore County Massacre of 1889 together, yet researchers have written on both separately. Nicholas Lemann's *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* offers a detailed narrative of the overthrow of Mississippi's Reconstruction government. Lemann specifically addresses

⁴ Andrew F. Lang, *In the Wake of War: Military Occupation, Emancipation, and Civil War America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017).

the Clinton Riot of 1875, events leading up to the riot, the aftermath, and where black militia units fit into each of the events. Lemann relies heavily on the drama of the period to engage a popular audience; however, his usage of specific names, dates, and primary sources from the period, particularly from Republican Governor Adelbert Ames, offers a broad portrait of how and why the Reconstruction government of Mississippi was forced out of the state. This thesis adds further context to Lemann's by placing it within a greater conceptual and historical framework. While Lemann primarily focuses on the narrative of events, this work places those events within the context of broad historical change and uses a far longer timeline by which to track the ramifications of the Redemption movement and the state militia's role therein.⁵

Melissa Jones's article "The Clinton Riot of 1875: From Riot to Massacre" offers another detailed exploration of the event and its legacy. More specifically, she draws upon personal accounts of how White Line paramilitaries murdered Black Mississippians. Jones also provides an excellent discussion of the Clinton Riot in historical memory, examining narratives taught through local historical markers and in scholarship. The article also discusses the subtle linguistic impacts of a conflict being described as either a "riot" or a "massacre," supporting this work's claims that such subtle differences affected the deployment of state militia units. Jones's article gives a brief overview of the events at Clinton and their importance, yet this thesis will build on her work by expanding the timeline to show how paramilitary developments from the time of emancipation produced the Clinton Riot. Furthermore, this work will place the

⁵ Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

Clinton Riot in conversation with other race riots of the period to reveal broader historical change occurring in late nineteenth century Mississippi with the militia at the forefront.⁶

William F. Holmes wrote the definitive account of the Leflore County Massacre to date with his article “The Leflore County Massacre and the Demise of the Colored Farmers’ Alliance.” Holmes offers a descriptive narrative of the Massacre’s root causes and consequences. Holmes, however, narrows his focus to the context of its influence on the Colored Farmers’ Alliance, a Black Populist organization in the state led by none other than Oliver Cromwell. While he recognizes the limits of researching such a disputed event, Holmes offers a thorough study of the Massacre which utilizes facts from contemporary newspapers both from Mississippi and across the country to piece together a reliable account. Like the Jones’s article on the Clinton Riot, this thesis will build on Holmes’s work by drawing from unused primary resources to contribute detail and by examining the greater context within which the Leflore County Massacre occurred. This study also places the state militia, rather than the Colored Farmers’ Alliance, squarely at the center of the event to produce a new historical lens for that event’s importance.⁷

Two doctoral dissertations provide unique lenses by which to view the events discussed in this work. Melinda Meek Hennessy’s “To Live and Die in Dixie: Reconstruction Race Riots in the South” chronicles and examines every race riot, within a certain mold, which took place during Reconstruction. Her work includes a lengthy

⁶ Melissa Janczewski Jones, “The Clinton Riot of 1875: From Riot to Massacre” (Jackson: *Mississippi History Now*, The Mississippi Historical Society, 2015).

⁷ William F. Holmes, “The Leflore County Massacre and the Demise of the Colored Farmers’ Alliance,” *Phylon*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Atlanta: Clark Atlanta University Press, 1973), 267-274.

examination of the Clinton Riot of 1875 in Mississippi, which includes extraordinary detail, research, and contextualization. While her treatment of the Clinton Riot only exists as a small portion of a much larger study, it nevertheless offers a thorough account and useful commentary on the Clinton Riot as one of many other race riots in the south. By connecting the Clinton Riot to the Leflore County Massacre, this thesis consequently expands on Hennessy's work by revealing how certain elements of Reconstruction race riots carried over into racial politics of the New South.⁸

William Bland Whitley's "Precious Memories: Narrative of the Democracy in Mississippi 1865-1915" traces the Democratic Party's political and social tactics as it developed from the end of the Civil War, through Reconstruction, and ultimately to the Jim Crow Era. Whitley's study on the Democratic Party's successful Redemption campaign of 1875-1876 discusses in specific detail the Clinton Riot of 1875 and the racial conflicts leading up to and stemming from the event. While Whitley's study focuses on larger themes, his examination of the Democratic Party's rhetoric in the period and its method of appealing to external issues (such as religion) to establish white supremacy offers a unique insight into the conflicts of the mid-1870s. His work explores the ways that race riots, specifically the Clinton Riot, were depicted by Democratic newspapers to demonize African Americans, making the dissertation useful in establishing a holistic picture of the event. This thesis then draws on Whitley's readings

⁸ Melinda Meek Hennessy, *To Live and Die in Dixie: Reconstruction Race Riots in the South* (Ohio: Doctoral Dissertation at Kent State University, 1978).

and offers further evidence to prove how newspaper accounts manipulated rhetoric to criminalize and undermine black political organization.⁹

Race in Mississippi

A central historiographical contribution of this work will be race as tied to both the state militia and civil conflict in Mississippi. Fortunately, a wealth of important research exists on the subject, specifically within the timeline of this study. Stephen Cresswell's *Rednecks, Redeemers, and Race: Mississippi After Reconstruction 1877-1917* offers a broad portrait of Mississippi's politics, social life, and especially race in the contentious period after Reconstruction. Cresswell's book builds on existing New South literature by examining the specific ways that Mississippi could undergo economic, political, and racial change affecting the entire south while remaining fundamentally untouched in making true advancement. Cresswell excels in examining "race riots" and exploring contradictions between the events and their narratives as written by newspapers. The book also touches on the militia's use in the state, specifically in the Leflore County Massacre and in the later Jim Crow Era. This thesis will then build on Cresswell's book by closely examining how the state militia influenced and was influenced by Mississippi's New South prospects.¹⁰

Another major work uncovering racial history in late nineteenth century Mississippi is Omar Ali's *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South 1886-*

⁹ William Bland Whitley, *Precious Memories: Narratives of the Democracy in Mississippi 1865-1915* (Florida: Doctoral Dissertation at the University of Florida, 2003).

¹⁰ Stephen Edward Cresswell, *Rednecks, Redeemers, and Race: Mississippi After Reconstruction 1877-1917* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006).

1900. Ali closely examines the rise, prosperity, and fall of the Black Populist Movement in the South, arguing that the Black Populists were an autonomous political entity without reliance on the larger white Populist movement. Ali's book sheds light on an otherwise little studied movement, and his attention to detail and scrupulous mining of sources presents unique information that would otherwise be hard to find. His research on the Leflore County Massacre, an incident which gravitated around the Colored Farmers' Alliance (a Black Populist organization) and the life of Oliver Cromwell offers extensive detail on the Massacre, its causes, its effects, and how the racial politics of the age intermingled therein.¹¹

A premier work on racial history in Mississippi is Neil R. McMillen's *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow*, which offers one of the most broad, extensive examinations of the African American experience in Mississippi in the Jim Crow Era. McMillen's work looks at race history uniquely from the bottom-up, black perspective, focusing on the efforts of African Americans to secure their rights, strengthen their communities, and fight racism in Jim Crow Mississippi. Though this study precedes the Jim Crow Era, McMillen's study incorporates the legacies of Reconstruction and Redemption, and his work also contributes general information on black life in Mississippi that is crucial to any research on racial history in the state. This thesis will then build on McMillen's already extensive work by placing the state militia in a more central role in shaping the Jim Crow's development than does *Dark Journey*.¹²

¹¹ Omar H. Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South 1886-1900* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

¹² Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (University of Illinois Press, 1990).

New South

Though less directly, this thesis will also build on studies of the New South. Two important works on the history of the New South offer crucial insight into understanding both the world created by Redemption and the overarching historical narratives that produced the Leflore County Massacre. First, C. Vann Woodward's landmark *Origins of the New South: 1877-1913* surveys the development and perpetuation of the New South from Reconstruction through the early years of the Jim Crow Era. Woodward offers critical insights on the Democratic Party's role in southern states, especially in Mississippi, revealing insecurities within the party that lead to events like the Leflore County Massacre. Woodward also traces important continuities between the first and second "Mississippi Plans" as they were called in the period, both of which bolstered white Democratic influence in Mississippi. This work uses Woodward's narrative but contributes a unique reading in its specificity to Mississippi and its focus on the state militia therein.¹³

The second work on the New South pivotal to understanding the world of the Leflore County Massacre is Edward L. Ayers's *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction*. Ayers, like Woodward, traces continuities from Reconstruction through the Jim Crow Era, examining the promises southern governments made and how those promises manifested. Ayers's work provides useful insights on the divisions between

¹³C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South: 1877-1913. A History of the South*, Vol. IX, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, The Littlefield Fund for Southern History at The University of Texas, 1951).

citizens and their representatives in government, highlighting the failure of many New South governments to fulfill their promises of prosperity. As the state militia in Mississippi and elsewhere was composed of citizens rather than professional soldiers, understanding how such citizens of any race lived and experienced change on a day-to-day basis offers an extra layer of understanding about motivations and experiences in the New South. This thesis will contribute to both Ayers' and Woodward's works by examining how the modernizing influences of the New South era produced direct interest in a more organized and professional state militia in Mississippi.¹⁴

Mississippi History

Since this work focuses solely on militias in Mississippi, it necessarily contributes to the state's historiography. For many years, textbooks and monographs on Mississippi's history documented events like the Civil War and Reconstruction through blatantly Lost Cause lenses. Such scholarship painted the Confederate cause as a virtuous fight for states' rights while neglecting slavery's influence in producing the Civil War. Lost Cause ideologues furthermore depicted the Reconstruction era as a total failure, blaming both Republican and African-American officials for corrupting governments and incurring massive debts for southern states. However, more modern research has sought to correct those ills and provide a truthful and largely accurate narrative. One recent general study of Mississippi consulted for this work is Dennis J. Mitchell's *A New History of Mississippi*. Mitchell's book studies Mississippi but moves beyond Lost Cause narratives

¹⁴ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction*. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

which so tainted earlier works. Mitchell's book discusses Reconstruction in a broad but informative way, offering a basic understanding of a complex period in state history. However, Mitchell's work is necessarily broad, so this thesis will provide specific details and a greater study of the state militia's role in events that Mitchell covers only for their broader historical significance.¹⁵

Though not a general history, Dorothy Overstreet Pratt's *Sowing the Wind: The Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890* minutely examines one of the state's most important historical events. The Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890 and the legislation it produced would dramatically alter the state's future and create a legacy that persists today. Scrupulously studying each aspect of the constitution which changed from its predecessors, Pratt incorporates into her work details such as the state militia as a provision in the constitution while tracing how events such as the Leflore County Massacre influenced the legislators of the convention. The state militia, as this study will show, played a pivotal role in pushing the state toward that new constitution, and this thesis consequently provides further context for Pratt's work.¹⁶

A crucial work on Mississippi's history, specifically during Reconstruction, is William C. Harris's *The Day of the Carpetbagger: Republican Reconstruction in Mississippi* (1979). Harris's work is dated and highly influenced by the period in which it was written; however, though some of the interpretations are clearly biased, the book offers a wealth of factual evidence. Studying militia movements all the way through

¹⁵ Dennis J. Mitchell, *A New History of Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

¹⁶ Dorothy Overstreet Pratt, *Sowing the Wind: The Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018).

Reconstruction will thereby provide a new, necessary update to some of Harris's arguments.¹⁷

Methodology

This study draws heavily upon the partisan political press in Mississippi during the 1870s and 1880s. Newspapers of the period abound, offering in many cases some of the only primary accounts of local incidents. Any attempt to recreate an account of either the Clinton Riot or the Leflore County Massacre requires one to draw heavily from contemporary newspapers. While an excellent source for first-hand opinions and accounts, the newspapers in Mississippi describing both events are somewhat problematic. Newspapers of the period, as noted by Nicholas Lemann, "were, unapologetically, political party organs."¹⁸ While ample evidence can be drawn from newspapers to reconstruct basic events, the bitter partisanship of the day carried over into those papers. For example, newspapers covering an instance of racially motivated violence would narrate how the violence started in different ways depending on whether the paper's editor was a Republican or Democrat. However, though highly partisan papers can often be unreliable when searching for overt truth, they are incredibly useful for gauging both public and party opinions. Newspapers, particularly out of Jackson, Mississippi, will be drawn from heavily, but in a way that attempts to locate concrete facts and to appropriately label opinion masquerading as fact. A useful source for checking unsubstantiated newspaper claims will be the Congressional investigations that

¹⁷ William C. Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbagger: Republican Reconstruction in Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

¹⁸ Lemann, *Redemption*, 36.

occurred in Mississippi following both the Vicksburg and Clinton Riots, providing eyewitness testimony from those involved and conclusions from third-party congressional investigators.¹⁹

Legislation will also play a crucial role in this or any study of the state militia in the period. Mississippi's last two constitutions (1868 and 1890) provide an overarching framework for this study. As an arm of the state, the militia must be studied first in terms of its legislated purposes, even if used differently in reality. While both constitutions provide the overarching legislation regarding the militia, smaller laws and executive orders also greatly influenced the way that the militia operated, who could join, how the militia was funded, and why a person would have wanted to join. For example, while the Constitution of 1868 provided a general framework for the militia, a much more descriptive law (to be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter) was passed in 1870 to offer the governor a heavier hand in wielding its power. Smaller executive orders and laws passed by the legislature crop up in both the 1870s and 1880s dictating the minutiae of the militia. Newspapers often listed such laws along with highly opinionated commentaries, and this work will continue to draw heavily from newspapers to find the exact wording of minor laws.

Personal correspondence will also play a major role in this study. The primary mode of interpersonal communication in the era, personal letters between two citizens and especially from citizens to the governor place a finger on the pulse of public opinion.

¹⁹ George S. Boutwell, *Mississippi in 1875 Report of the Select Committee to Inquire into the Mississippi Election of 1875* (Washington D. C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1876).

The personal accounts of angry and scared citizens making desperate pleas to the governor or to investigators furnish a personal lens through which to reconstruct narratives of Reconstruction and its aftermath. Personal letters also offer insider access to public opinion on such controversial issues as race riots and militia service (particularly African American militia service). The Adelbert Ames Collection at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History is therefore a crucial source base for this project by providing Governor Ames's personal letters and government documents. Ames and his wife, Blanche Butler Ames, also carried on near daily correspondence that has been published in two volumes, offering crucial insight into the motivations of Governor Ames, one of the key characters in this study.²⁰

An important functional designation on the term "militia" must be made before moving forward in this study. Chapter One examines the early stages of militia activity after emancipation in 1865 and thus necessarily discusses paramilitary organization at some length. However, that discussion occurs to provide necessary contextual information for how the state militia operated after 1868. The entirety of this work after the implementation of the 1868 constitution refers to and studies the legal state militia under the governor's constitutional authority. The distinction between state and paramilitary militias was important in that Black Mississippians relied on a clear distinction between the two. After 1868, black Mississippians sought to enroll in the state militia for armed protection and often refused to fight otherwise. Their white neighbors,

²⁰ *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century: Family Letters of Blanche Butler and Adelbert Ames, Married July 21st, 1870*, Vols 1-2, (Clinton, Massachusetts: The Colonial Press Inc., 1957).

however, armed themselves regardless of state sanction. Both communities thereby saw that the differences between state and paramilitary militias and their choices of which to use produced real consequences. While many “militias” existed in the state, both black and white, extralegal or informal militia units such as the White Line groups of the 1870s or the ever-popular “posses” of the later Jim Crow Era will be identified as such and are not to be interpreted within this work’s argument on how the state militia impacted society and transformed over time.

This project incorporates several different types of history (social, military, economic, legislative, etc.), as the state militia impacted numerous arenas in Mississippians’ daily lives. The militia could ~~only~~ be deployed only by the governor, making it a governmental and legislative issue, yet ordinary citizens enlisted in and paid for the militia with their taxes, creating a social and economic issue. Furthermore, given the highly contentious climate of the period, race and political party were directly bound to militia movements, making a history of the militia a racial, military, and political history. Rather than examine each individual element separately, this project will portray the militia broadly and treat such topics as economics, race, and military involvement as their prominence in the militia’s activity increased. Using this wide historical lens will provide an overall picture of both how and why the militia transformed between 1868 and 1890 while addressing the far-reaching impacts on the state of Mississippi which resulted from that transformation.

Chapter I

On July 27, 1863, twenty-year-old Oliver Cromwell from Wilkinson County, Mississippi enlisted in the 5th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery.²¹ Cromwell's experience fighting for his own freedom against the Confederacy represents a much wider experience shared by many African Americans in the South during the latter half of the Civil War. Holding a weapon and fighting against oppressors produced a newfound sense of independence in formerly enslaved African Americans and radically affected the ways that they would view the administration of post-Civil War justice.²² In the mid-1870s, Cromwell would personally see an African American state militia, devastating race riots, and the Republican Party's last grasp at political control in Mississippi.

As Andrew Lang notes in his study of Civil War occupations, the Union Army's occupation of the South shattered many white citizens' beliefs about the nobility of the citizen-soldier while convincing their Black neighbors that citizenship and military service were inextricably linked. Lang argues that "while white Union soldiers debated the ideological implications of peacetime occupation, African-American troops, as they had during the war, continued to believe that the army could and should be used to reshape the racial and social landscapes of the postwar South."²³ Thus, the military experience of Civil War service both philosophically and practically altered African

²¹ The National Archives at Washington, D.C.; Washington, D.C., *Compiled Military Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served with the United States Colored Troops: Artillery Organizations*, Microfilm Serial: M1818, Microfilm Roll: 83.

²² William A. Dobak, *Freedom by the Sword: The U. S. Colored Troops 1862-1867* (Washington, D. C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2011); Douglas R. Egerton, *Thunder at the Gates: Black Civil War Regiments That Redeemed America* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Lang, *In the Wake of War*.

²³ Lang, *In the Wake of War*, 199.

American militia activity in the postwar period. Philosophically, black people in the South came to see the army and state militia as viable sources to enforce the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Practically, many African Americans acquired knowledge and often possession of weapons, owned military uniforms, and fought in racially segregated military formations. The African Americans who would form post-war militias did so with heightened senses of independence and desires to fight for their rights. As early as 1865, former United States Army general Carl Schurz noted that “There is nothing that will make [African American freedom] more evident than the bodily presence of a negro with a musket on his shoulder.”²⁴ Many whites in both the North and South recognized the same correlation between freedom and military participation and consequently grew anxious about such enforcement.

After losing the Civil War and experiencing the occupation of their cities, southern whites profoundly feared the new independence of African Americans, particularly in states like Mississippi with predominantly black populations. Nicholas Lemann aptly notes that “the idea of an organized, authoritative, and potentially violent Negro force touched upon every ancient white fear...about what might happen if Negroes were able to do to whites what whites had done to them.”²⁵ Thus, a racialized fear of any form of African American power, particularly militarized power, petrified white southerners in the helplessness felt after the Civil War. Those white southerners would then unjustifiably see black militia units, or any state-sanctioned militia, as a threat to

²⁴ Carl Schurz to Andrew Johnson, 29 August 1865, *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, edited by Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, Vol. 8, 671-2. Quoted in Lang, *In the Wake of War*, 204.

²⁵ Lemann, *Redemption*, 126.

their independence, summoning time-honored American fears of a standing army in peacetime.

White fears of black uprisings reached a fever pitch almost immediately after emancipation. In December of 1865, debates over land distribution revealed how, for black Mississippians, political rights could not be separated from armed enforcement. Historian Steven Hahn notes that in late 1865, “among freedpeople, rumors had been spreading” of “a federal plan to confiscate and redistribute the property of ex-Confederate landowners.”²⁶ This rumor then sparked white rumors “of a coming race war in which armed ex-slaves...would rise up murderously against their old masters and seize the property they had expected so receive.”²⁷ These binary rumors reveal two important aspects of emancipation. The first is that citizenship, here evinced in land ownership, for newly freedpeople existed directly in the context of armed enforcement. The second and more unfortunate point is that white Mississippians reacted to any armed enforcement of African-American rights (whether by state militia units or paramilitary companies) with hysteria and paranoia.

In Mississippi, debates over the alleged Christmas insurrections of 1865 specifically targeted the concept of black militias. As early as October, Mississippi’s provisional governor William L. Sharkey wrote to the state’s Freedman’s Bureau

²⁶ Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O’Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867: Series 3, Volume 1: Land and Labor, 1865*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 796. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.lynx.lib.usm.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=641232&site=ehost-live>.

²⁷ Hahn, et al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*, 796.

commissioner to inform him of the rumored uprising, stressing that “the black troops are relied on to carry out this measure” and that consequently “it is hoped the black troops will be speedily removed from the country.”²⁸ Sharkey’s response reveals that the fears of insurrection in 1865 revolved around the increased military capability of black Mississippians – a direct product of the Civil War. Thus, a pattern arose wherein whites internalized unsubstantiated rumors of black uprisings, always in the context of armed resistance, and produced violent backlash.

In late 1865, for the first time in what would become a notorious habit, the specter of an African-American insurrection caused the mustering of state militia units. Governor Sharkey, with the approval of President Andrew Johnson, called for militia units “composed, as before the war, solely of white men...to guard against the threat of insurrection.”²⁹ This white state militia, as those that would follow it later in the century, proved far more effective at disrupting than ensuring peace in the state. Federal investigations into several state militias’ conduct in the South revealed that “militia companies and armed regulators targeted freedpeople’s property as well as their persons – breaking into cabins, rifling through trunks, and stealing arms, money, and other belongings.”³⁰ Under Presidential Reconstruction, then, the state militia became an aggressive arm of the state bent on the suppression of political and social rights for African Americans in Mississippi.

²⁸ Provisional Governor William L. Sharkey to Major General O. O. Howard, 10 October 1865. Quoted in Hahn, et al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*, 814-15.

²⁹ Hahn, et al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*, 805.

³⁰ Hahn, et al., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*, 806.

Like many aspects of Reconstruction, however, militias (both the state militia and paramilitary organizations) transformed under Congressional Reconstruction. Between 1868 and 1875, the legality of the state militia both appealed to black Mississippians and drove white Mississippians to increased paramilitarism. The Union League stands at the head of this transition. According to historian Michael W. Fitzgerald, the Union League witnessed “explosive growth” in 1867 “as soon as Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts.”³¹ What began as an organization to drum up Northern support for the war became a secret one through which African Americans gathered to discuss and often practice politics. Unfortunately, during Reconstruction, armed resistance became a necessary part of such conversations. Fitzgerald argues that even before the uprising of the Ku Klux Klan in 1868, “Leaguers drilled in unofficial militias.”³² The Union League consequently embodied the pairing of politics and arms inseparable from the political activism of freedpeople.

However, as Radicals in Congress made violence riskier for whites in Mississippi, they abandoned the official state militia for an unofficial one: the Ku Klux Klan. Fitzgerald argues that “the Klan's growth in early 1868 had complex causes, but counteracting the Union League was one of its major political goals.”³³ The Klan’s methods reveal a distinct desire to avoid federal detection and intervention. By enacting terror at night and covering themselves in regalia, its members could avoid identification,

³¹ Michael W. Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change during Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 9.

³² Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South*, 218.

³³ Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South*, 200.

detection, and, most importantly, retribution. Beginning such covert tactics in 1868, “the Klan rapidly destroyed the Union League as an effective political organization.”³⁴ By the time the state legislature convened to work on the state’s new Reconstruction constitution in 1868, both black and white Mississippians considered armed enforcement a practical mechanism for enforcing the laws, and opposing paramilitary organizations stood in that role. However, Republican legislators soon opened new, legal avenues for African Americans to defend their lives and their rights.

While Republicans controlled the both the Presidency and Mississippi’s governorship, to state that Republicans or African Americans exercised complete control, or even majority control, over Reconstruction politics would be fallacious. Despite Mississippians fear of uprising in 1865, Neil R. McMillen notes that during Reconstruction, “There were a few black county supervisors, perhaps eight black sheriffs, and a small number of black chancery and circuit clerks; but no freedman held a judicial post above the level of justice of the peace.” Rather than an image of near-total black political dominance which Democrats would present to the public, “blacks never controlled either chamber of the state legislature.”³⁵ Democratic fears stemmed more from the fact that Republicans and African Americans had increasing power (or power at all) rather than total power. However, Republicans made the most of their elected offices, beginning with the rewriting of the state’s constitution.

Mississippi’s Constitution of 1868 gave rise to increased public outrage rooted in “standing army” rhetoric. The Constitution of 1868 made the governor “Commander in

³⁴ Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South*, 213.

³⁵ McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 37.

Chief” of the militia and gave him the exclusive “power to call forth the militia to execute the laws, repel invasion, and to suppress riots and insurrections.”³⁶ White Democrats feared such concentrated power in the hands of a state escaping their control. To make matters worse, “in November [1868], Grant won the presidency and on his first day in office sent General Adelbert Ames to Mississippi to take over the administration of state government.”³⁷ With a staunchly Republican president, a new carpetbagger governor, and an overwhelmingly black population, Mississippi’s Democrats saw their political hegemony slipping away.

The Constitution of 1868, named for when it was originally written, did not, however, get ratified until December of 1869 after Ames took control, paving the way for Mississippi’s reentry into the Union in February 1870. While Republicans held many state offices, the opposition to the new constitution and the difficulty in getting it ratified by voters revealed an early pattern of Republican political effort grating against an undercurrent of popular Democratic sentiment. Often such Democratic opposition revealed only a fear of African American political activity rather than any justified legal complaint. John Hope Franklin notes that arguments against Reconstruction Constitutions across the south “were the tirades of a people less concerned with the quality of government than with who exercised the powers of government.”³⁸

³⁶ Constitution of the State of Mississippi, Adopted May 15, 1868, Article IX, Section 5.

³⁷ Mitchell, *A New History of Mississippi*, 196.

³⁸ John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War*, 3rd ed., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 105.

Despite opposition, the new constitution passed, and the centrality of the state militia soon arose with the passage of a new Militia Law on July 21, 1870, further incensing Mississippi's white Democrats. The Militia Law listed in minute detail every contingency related to the militia, including who could enlist, who was in charge, what duties were reserved for whom, how the militia would be funded, and how much men would be paid for their service. This strict description and layout of the militia, viewed in context of the paramilitary battles of the late 1860s, reveals a deep desire to strictly define legal and extralegal violence in the state, a line that had grown ever blurrier since emancipation. The increased power of the governor under the new constitution underscores the move toward clarifying what forces counted as state militia. Section 37 gave the governor "full power to order into active service the Militia force of the State...to suppress riot, insurrection or to aid the civil officers in the execution of the laws or on account of any sudden emergency not embraced in this clause."³⁹ This reworded statement of the governor's sole power over the militia particularly alarmed Democrats. However, the clauses of both the Constitution of 1868 and the Militia Law of 1870 which permitted militia use "to suppress riot and insurrection" would come to define the next two decades.

The open wording of the law ("any sudden emergency not embraced in this clause") and its direct implication that the Republican governor of the day, James Alcorn (elected following Mississippi's readmission to the Union and removal of Ames as military governor), could legally employ the militia for any purpose outraged white

³⁹ "Laws of the State of Mississippi," *The Semi-Weekly Clarion*, Jackson, Mississippi, August 5, 1870, 1.

Mississippians. Many saw it as an affront to their liberty. In willful ignorance of both the recent Civil War and the perpetual violence in Mississippi, the *Weekly Commercial Herald* of Vicksburg responded by calling the militia a “sedentary militia,” claiming that “There is no state in the Union in which militia is required,” and finally that there was “less necessity for it in the Southern states than in any other in the Union.”⁴⁰ The use of the term “sedentary militia” invokes the fear of a standing army ingrained in the American experience, particularly that of the south after the occupation of the Civil War. Andrew F. Lang notes that southerners were not the only ones distrustful of peacetime militias, claiming that “African American soldiers, white northern moderates claimed, embodied the alarming chaotic nature of a standing army.”⁴¹ However, while Republicans in Mississippi by 1870 held control of the state capitol and a legislated militia to reinforce it, white Democrats harbored resentment bent on violence, while white northerners grew increasingly apathetic.

Mississippians in 1871 nonetheless clung to their extralegal paramilitary groups for defense, but a riot in Meridian soon proved to the state’s Republicans that an organized force would be required to ensure peace. By 1871, hostilities remained between former Union League members and the Ku Klux Klan. In March of 1871, white activist Daniel Price arrived in Meridian “and wrote back to his former League comrades that conditions were better across the Mississippi line. Several hundred freedmen joined him, deserting labor contracts in the process.”⁴² After a massive fire struck the city, racial

⁴⁰ *Weekly Commercial Herald*, Vicksburg, Mississippi, July 30, 1870, 2.

⁴¹ Lang, *In the Wake of War*, 185.

⁴² Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South*, 197.

animosities flared over who to blame. At the trial of suspected arsonists (all prominent black leaders in the community) shooting broke out in the courthouse, soon devolving into a large skirmish between local Union Leaguers and Ku Klux Klan members. The outbreak killed an estimated thirty black Mississippians and the white judge of the trial.⁴³ Union League members applied to Governor Alcorn for assistance specifically so “that they might put a stop to Ku Klux outrages,” yet the governor “gave them no satisfaction.”⁴⁴ Despite the new constitution, paramilitary militias rather than state units prevailed. Republican officeholders such as Alcorn, however, felt no immediate insecurity and thus no need to formalize the relationship between violence and state law in practice; however, as the 1870s wore on, the need became strikingly apparent.

Though Adelbert Ames originally came to Mississippi on President Grant’s orders, he won Mississippi’s gubernatorial election in 1873 with strong Republican and African American support, and he would need the full power of the law to wield the state militia. Otis A. Singletary notes that immediately after Ames’s election in 1873, “The tempo of violence increased throughout the state, and Negro militia forces were called upon to play a more dominant role in political affairs.”⁴⁵ Violent outbreaks occurred throughout the state (always tied to politics), the most violent of which were in Vicksburg and Clinton, while Yazoo City trailed close behind. While each of these instances affected the political and social temper of the state, a state-sponsored militia only

⁴³ “The Meridian Riot,” *The Weekly Clarion*, 16 March 1871, 1; Sheren Sanders, “The Meridian Race Riot (1871),” BlackPast.org, 2018. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/meridian-race-riot-1871/>

⁴⁴ “The Meridian Riot,” *The Weekly Clarion*, 16 March 1871, 1.

⁴⁵ Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, 83.

appeared at Clinton. Thus, a minute description of each instance is not here warranted, yet some important details on the development of the black militia as a means of preservation for the Republican Party may be drawn from each instance.⁴⁶

On July 4, 1863, General Ulysses S. Grant captured the city of Vicksburg in one of his most illustrious achievements of the Civil War. On July 4, 1874, President of the United States Ulysses S. Grant faced the decision to send federal troops back to Vicksburg, where bloodshed yet again occurred. Lemann succinctly summarizes the situation: “At a July 4 celebration held by Negro Republicans...a group of whites with guns turned up and started shooting.”⁴⁷ Rampant violence followed, driving many African Americans from their homes to Jackson, where they implored Governor Ames for assistance. Ames, however, “tried to get troops, but the President [refused].”⁴⁸ The election on August 5 consequently “brought a sweeping Democratic victory in Vicksburg.”⁴⁹

By petitioning Grant, Governor Ames revealed a deep uneasiness with wielding the state militia and displayed a reservation contrary to Democratic newspapers’ portrayal of him as a dangerous demagogue. Future Democratic violence and caricatures of Ames would regularly ignore such obvious distaste for organizing a military force. Ames’s reluctance consequently plagued both himself and Mississippi’s African Americans

⁴⁶ For detailed accounts of the Vicksburg and Yazoo City “riots,” see Lemann, *Redemption* and Hennessy, “To Live and Die in Dixie.”

⁴⁷ Lemann, *Redemption*, 71.

⁴⁸ Letter from Adelbert Ames to Blanche Butler Ames, July 31, 1875, *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century: Family Letters of Blanche Butler and Adelbert Ames*, Vol. 1 (1864-1871), 1957, 693.

⁴⁹ Lemann, *Redemption*, 74.

throughout his term, while still failing to prevent the violence he feared. Furthermore, Grant's refusal to intervene in Mississippi's violent politics did not bode well for Ames and the Republican Party, shifting the burden of providing militarized protection for African Americans solely to the governor. Ames, with clear constitutional and presidential authority, still refused to deploy African American militia. However, when violence in Vicksburg only increased, militarized force became a much more attractive option for keeping order.

In November 1874, members of Vicksburg's municipal government, including circuit clerk C.W. Cordoza, his successor A.W. Dorsey, chancery clerk George W. Davenport, and sheriff Peter Crosby (also in charge of collecting taxes) faced charges of financial and political corruption. As the *New York Times* put it, the officials were "defying the laws of the State and prostituting their offices to their private ends."⁵⁰ Local whites then violently removed them (physically and metaphorically) from office, causing the former officeholders to flee to Jackson for sanctuary. White Democrats in Vicksburg thereby rerouted their attack on the Republicans in the city by changing their rhetoric. They established "Taxpayers' Leagues" to imply that Republicans "had failed to take the measures required by law for the protection of the people" and "grossly misused taxpayers' money."⁵¹ The changing of titles, however, stemmed not from a true grievance over taxes, but out of a carefully planned avoidance of the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 that might spark federal intervention. Years after, Ames highlighted the absence of true financial grievance by reflecting that "there was no 'corruption' as the statistics

⁵⁰ "The Vicksburg Troubles," *The New York Times*, December 13, 1874, 1.

⁵¹ "The Vicksburg Troubles," *The New York Times*, December 13, 1874, 1.

prove,” but that “even corruption could not justify the taking of human life.”⁵² As Democratic violence became more complicated, Ames’s sense of control diminished further, and his methods became more desperate.

By the time Vicksburg’s Republicans fell under siege in 1874, Ames had already expressed his fear of mustering an African American militia, yet he also realized that as “the state government commanded the respect of the colored race only, it must depend for military support on colored troops.”⁵³ However, control slipping, Ames decided that a show of force might reduce the growing Democratic threat. Thus, Ames sent Peter Crosby, who had fled Vicksburg to seek protection from the governor in Jackson, “back to Vicksburg with instructions to assemble a posse comitatus – a temporary militia” which “would surely be made up entirely of Negroes.”⁵⁴ Though this does not constitute the deployment of the state militia, it indicates the willingness, first evinced after emancipation, of black Mississippians to protect themselves in militia units. The Vicksburg militia further reveals that by late 1874 Ames began to see a civilian militarized force as the only way to maintain Republican officeholders, believing that an African American force would be the only one willing to sustain his party. Governor Ames then struggled with the conundrum which would haunt the rest of his administration: which citizens to call upon? Lemann asks, “if they were white troops, would they agree to carry out his orders, and if they were black troops, would they do

⁵² Letter from Adelbert Ames to Benjamin E. Andrews, May 24, 1895, Mississippi Department of Archives and History Adelbert Ames Papers, Folder 17f, Jackson, Mississippi.

⁵³ Quoted in Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, 23.

⁵⁴ Lemann, *Redemption*, 84.

more harm than good in the aggregate if they wound up killing whites?”⁵⁵ Vicksburg’s results proved far from encouraging.

From the outset, “the blacks were poorly armed” and “seem to have intended no more than a show of force and not, as whites would claim, an attack on the city.”⁵⁶ The importance of the black militia as a “show of force” summarizes what happened in Vicksburg, and what would happen later in other regions of the state. The black “posse comitatus” at Vicksburg intended to display Republican and African American political courage and a resolve not to back down to white intimidation. When Crosby’s militia arrived at Vicksburg, they decided not to fight, yet on their peaceful retreat a group of armed whites from Vicksburg and the surrounding areas opened fire. *The New York Times* “estimated that from fifty to one hundred Negroes were killed, and about thirty more captured.”⁵⁷ This quote accurately captures the irony of white paramilitarism. While Democratic newspapers hurled insults at the unconstitutionality of a state militia in “peacetime,” they simultaneously practiced the “capturing” of prisoners of war. Thus, the first effort at organizing African American citizens to, symbolically or physically, combat white Democratic violence failed. Ames did not, however, give up on the militia as an viable show of force.

While indiscriminate violence against African Americans in Mississippi never stopped in the immediate aftermath of Vicksburg, federal involvement momentarily slowed it. A desperate Governor Ames convened an emergency legislature in December

⁵⁵ Lemann, *Redemption*, 84.

⁵⁶ Whitley, “Precious Memories”, 72.

⁵⁷ “The Vicksburg Troubles,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1874.

to once again petition President Grant for troops. This time, he was more successful. Grant authorized the use of federal troops in Mississippi and Louisiana (where violence against blacks and Republicans had also increased) while a committee investigated the Vicksburg troubles.⁵⁸ During this period of federal intervention, the paramilitary White League and White Line organizations were far less active, particularly in the public eye. William C. Harris has noted that “white-line sentiment emerged in inverse relationship to the potential for federal intervention.”⁵⁹ Democrats wanted to pour on as much pressure through violence as possible, yet they realized that if the federal government examined the situation too closely, then a much larger, more organized, and better funded military force would reenter the state. The state militia was a far more manageable threat to the Democratic mind than the United States Army. Though white paramilitary groups claimed to be bravely and courageously fighting for their honor and rights, there is a stark lack of confrontation when an equally well-equipped armed force arose to meet them.

Throughout 1875, political tensions in Mississippi only heightened. However, in the months leading up to the November 5 election, Democratic political violence increased to the point of leaving the state militia as the only preservative option left to Republicans. On September 4, 1875, black Republicans scheduled a barbecue to boost morale for the upcoming election and to allow politicians to speak in front of a crowd estimated between 1,500 to 2,500 people.⁶⁰ Lemann notes that “To see, or even to think

⁵⁸ The committee’s findings, in favor of the African American community, can be found in Stephen Augustus Hurlbut, *Vicksburgh Troubles*, Report to the 43rd Congress, 2nd Session, House of Representatives, No. 265, 1875.

⁵⁹ Harris, *The Day of the Carpetbagger*, 642-644; William Bland Whitley, “Precious Memories,” 75.

⁶⁰ Jones, “The Clinton Riot of 1875: From Riot to Massacre.”

about a Negro militia sent whites into a frenzy of anticipatory violence,” so one can imagine the effect of seeing none other than “Oliver Cromwell,” who paraded at the head of an all-black militia unit while he “wore a plumed hat and cavalry saber and sat astride a horse trimmed in red, white, and blue ribbons.”⁶¹ The memory of Vicksburg, the increasing proximity to the election, the presence of a militarized African American force, and the weakening of federal intervention created an atmosphere at Clinton poised for violence.

After the barbecue and parade, speakers took the stage. While such barbecues and political rallies happened regularly, in an unusual move for a political rally of any kind in Reconstruction Mississippi, it is clear by all accounts that “an invitation was extended to all persons to attend” so that there could then “be a joint discussion.”⁶² Though there were many times more African Americans and Republicans at Clinton on September 4, there were, by invitation, a small group of white Democrats who would be allowed to speak. However, the *Raymond Gazette* proposed in early August that:

whenever a Radical pow-wow is to be held, *the nearest anti-Radical club appoint a committee of ten discreet, intelligent, and reputable citizens...to attend as representatives of the taxpayers of the neighborhood and the county and true friends of the Negroes assembled; and that whenever the Radical speakers proceed to mislead the negroes...that the committee stop them right then and there and compel them to tell the truth or quit the stand.*⁶³

⁶¹Lemann, *Redemption*, 126; Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, 103; Pratt, *Sowing the Wind*, 39; Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth*, 68.

⁶²“The Clinton Riot,” *The Weekly Clarion*, September 29, 1875, 1.

⁶³*The Raymond Gazette*, August 4, 1875. Quoted in *The Weekly Mississippi Pilot* (Jackson, Mississippi), September 11, 1875. Italics in the original.

The Democrats of Clinton who attended the rally complied. To make matters worse, many in the crowd, both black and white, observed what Melinda Meek Hennessy describes as “the customary Southern male habit of always carrying a pistol.”⁶⁴

The first speaker, Democratic Judge Frank Johnston spoke for roughly an hour without incident, yet when Republican speaker H. T. Fisher, a stand-in for Adelbert Ames, began speaking, he was interrupted when within “about five minutes someone called the speaker a liar.”⁶⁵ The *Raymond Gazette*'s orders had been followed. Though no one afterward could specifically identify who shouted at Fisher, tempers flared in the crowd. Later accounts point to a group of white men on the outer edge of the crowd sharing a bottle of whiskey (which was prohibited at the event) as the source of the violence. Charles Caldwell, a former slave, blacksmith, senator, and well-respected citizen in both the white and black communities, confronted the group of white men, begging them not to disturb the gathering. Soon after, however, Caldwell claimed to have personally seen Frank Thompson, a white man, fire the first shot.⁶⁶ Chaos ensued. Shots rang out from both sides, while both whites and blacks fled the scene in fear. When the smoke cleared on the day of the riot, “fatalities that day numbered three white men and at least five blacks, two of whom were children.”⁶⁷ The African Americans fled to the countryside, while the whites sent for reinforcements from surrounding towns to continue the fight.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Melinda Meek Hennessy, “To Live and Die in Dixie,” 286.

⁶⁵ *The Weekly Mississippi Pilot*, September 11, 1875, 3.

⁶⁶ Taken from Charles Caldwell's personal account of the riot, *The Weekly Mississippi Pilot*, September 11, 1875, 3.

⁶⁷ Jones, “The Clinton Riot of 1875: From Riot to Massacre.”

⁶⁸ Lemann, *Redemption*, 112.

While the violence at the barbecue was bad, incendiary newspaper coverage made the fallout far worse. White Line paramilitary groups both from Mississippi and from nearby Louisiana flooded into Hinds County and began indiscriminately terrorizing and killing numerous African Americans, who fled *en masse* to Jackson to beg for Governor Ames's help.⁶⁹ Fearing the political consequences of a display of force this close to the election, Ames petitioned President Grant for military support. This time, Grant refused. The president infamously stated to Attorney General Edwards Pierrepont that "the whole public are tired out with these annual, autumnal outbreaks in the South" and that "the great majority are ready now to condemn any interference on the part of the government."⁷⁰ Grant's statement embodies the near total indifference of both the federal government and white northerners to Mississippi's increasingly frequent atrocities. Grant thereby placed the power to preserve Mississippi's Republicans and African Americans once again in the sole hands of Governor Ames, who finally saw the militia as his last hope.

Ames again encountered the problem that "no white Republicans could be found who would form a militia to oppose members of their own race, and forming a black militia was perilous in the extreme, calling forth the centuries-old and never entirely absent fear of and uprising by the majority race."⁷¹ However, left with few other options,

⁶⁹ Personal testimonies from the post-Clinton Riot violence can be found in abundance in *Mississippi in 1875 Report of the Select Committee to Inquire into the Mississippi Election of 1875*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1876. For a select few, see Jones, "The Clinton Riot of 1875."

⁷⁰ Ulysses S. Grant, letter to Edwards Pierrepont, September 13, 1875, Edwards Pierrepont Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library; Grant Papers, 26: 312-313.

⁷¹ Lemann, *Redemption*, 120.

Ames mustered units from those African Americans who had fled to Jackson from Clinton. By late September, Ames revived a bill, passed the year before in the wake of Vicksburg, that appropriated \$60,000 for the organization of the state militia, making \$5,000 immediately available to outfit two regiments. However, Democrats in the legislature immediately passed a motion to prevent Ames from capitalizing on the funds.⁷² Despite this, Ames wrote to his wife Blanche Butler Ames on September 23 that he had “begun to organize colored militia” and, on September 27, that he “had a thousand muskets arrive.”⁷³ Abandoned by the federal government and distrustful of his own state legislature, Ames finally asserted his right as governor to wield the militia.

African American attitudes toward the militia should have reassured Ames in his actions. Many African Americans expressed far fewer apprehensions to joining the militia than Governor Ames had in enlisting them. Abraham Burriss, a young African American man, expressed a willingness to join the militia, asking Ames only for weapons. Burriss noted that “we are all have sign our name to the malitia role, and only o wante arnes...give us guns and we will show the scondrels that the colored people *will fight*.”⁷⁴ Black Mississippians proved in the immediate aftermath of emancipation and within the Union League that they were willing to bear arms to protect themselves and

⁷² Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, 87. For a contemporary account, see “The Militia Appropriation Enjoined,” *The Daily Mississippi Pilot*, September 24, 1875, 4.

⁷³ Letter from Adelbert Ames to Blanche Butler Ames, September 23, 1875, *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century: Family Letters of Blanche Butler and Adelbert Ames*, Vol. 2 (1874-1899), 1957, 192; Letter from Adelbert Ames to Blanche Butler Ames, September 27, 1875, *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century: Family Letters of Blanche Butler and Adelbert Ames*, Vol. 2 (1874-1899), 1957, 200.

⁷⁴ Abraham B. Burriss, letter to Adlebert Ames, October 13, 1875, *Mississippi in 1875*, Vol. 2, 86.

their rights within extralegal militia companies, so the attraction to a legal militia is unsurprising. However, participating in the state-sanctioned militia required the hard to win permission of Governor Ames.

After Ames's militia appropriations bill, African American militia units became "all the talk" in the state, while exaggerated white fears of a militant, overwhelming black force grew worse than ever.⁷⁵ However, despite the reassurance of men like Abraham Burriss that African Americans would fight, Ames wrote his wife Blanche Butler Ames on October 4 that he was "convinced that my Negro militia has not the courage or nerve - whatever it may be called - to act the part of soldiers."⁷⁶ Regardless, Governor Ames finally mobilized a militia unit on October 9. Charles Caldwell, a leading figure of the Clinton Riot, marched thirty-two miles to nearby Edwards Station leading two companies of 190 men to deliver guns. The militia units, in full military dress, marched to Edwards Station and back to Jackson undisturbed.⁷⁷ Though it delivered arms, the militia that traveled to Edwards Station predictably served a largely symbolic purpose. By mustering and then using the militia, Ames proved that he was willing to manifest whites' worst fear, the African American militia, to preserve peace, political equality, and his own office. Furthermore, the militia's symbolism extended in that, while prepared to, it did no fighting. Whenever an armed African American militia prepared for a fair fight, paramilitary White Line groups again stood down. As Blanche Ames aptly predicted

⁷⁵ "The Militia," *The Weekly Mississippi Pilot*, October 9, 1875, 1.

⁷⁶ Letter from Adelbert Ames to Blanche Butler Ames, October 4, 1875, *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century*, 205-6.

⁷⁷ "Arrival of Capt. Caldwell's Militia," *The Weekly Mississippi Pilot*, October 16, 1875, 3.

earlier in September, “Bullies are always cowards when approached with courage and determination.”⁷⁸

Though White Line groups did not attack Caldwell’s militia, the symbol of armed black men in military uniform outraged Democrats, who took to the papers to vent their fears and stoke public anger toward the black companies. One prevalent aspect of the coverage was the portrayal of Charles Caldwell, who, though lauded in many earlier papers from both parties as the one trying to quell the unrest at Clinton, had by October 16 become, according to the *Canton Mail*, “one of the instigators of the riot.”⁷⁹ Caldwell’s portrayal as an instigator rather than peacekeeper in the riot highlights both the untrustworthiness of some Democratic newspaper coverage as well as an effort, to be repeated in other riots, of undermining African American political organization by highlighting criminality and riotousness amongst African American leaders.

Adelbert Ames also predictably came under fire. *The Daily Mississippi Pilot* included an October 14 article entitled “Notes on and of the Sounding Preparations for War” arguing that Ames’s actions were “violating the Constitution of the State and the United States in raising, equipping and maintaining a standing army in time of peace.”⁸⁰ Democrats again attempted to undercut Ames by making him appear incompetent, although Ames’s mustering of the militia was within the realms of his power as granted by Mississippi’s Constitution of 1868. Furthermore, Ames was “ordered to assemble it by

⁷⁸ Letter from Blanche Butler Ames to Adelbert Ames, September 17, 1875, *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century*, 182.

⁷⁹ “Departure of Militia,” *The Canton Mail*, October 16, 1875, 3.

⁸⁰ “Notes on and of the Sounding Preparations for War,” *The Daily Mississippi Pilot*, October 13, 1875, 4.

the president of the United States.”⁸¹ If anything, the decision to utilize the militia in 1875, when he had permission since the previous year, could be read as charitable rather than dictatorial.

The successful march to Edwards Station signaled one of the only active movements the militia made under Governor Ames. However, after the success of the Edwards Station march, rumors abounded that Ames would use the militia again to reinstate the displaced sheriff of Yazoo City, A. T. Morgan, who had been deposed by a white mob a few weeks prior. However, on October 13, 1875, a peace conference was held between Ames and leading Democrats, arbitrated by a New Yorker named George K. Chase. Both parties agreed that “Ames would promise not to send Charles Caldwell, Albert Morgan, and the Negro militia to Yazoo City...and the white citizens would promise to ensure that the quickly approaching election be free and fair.”⁸² Ames, hoping to avoid more bloodshed, possibly thought that his show of force succeeded and would no longer be needed for African Americans to politically sustain the Republican Party in Jackson. However, a later congressional report aptly concluded that “The stipulation on the part of the governor was faithfully kept, but the promise made by General George was systematically disregarded by the democrats in the larger portion of the State.”⁸³

As soon as word of the conference got out, *The Clarion Ledger* on October 20 stated that Morgan “has declined to avail himself of the escort of negro militia into Yazoo County,” but that if the militia had been mustered, “The invasion of Yazoo county by a

⁸¹ Lemann, *Redemption*, 130.

⁸² Lemann, *Redemption*, 130.

⁸³ Boutwell, *Mississippi in 1875*, XIII.

lawless pretended militia, armed to the teeth, would be such a trespass as will justify the citizens of the county in repelling for the protection of their lives, their property, and their sacred altars.”⁸⁴ The Edwards Station and Yazoo incidents display a tendency of the Democratic and White Line organizations to only commit violence when an organized oppositional force cannot be found. Consequently, when Ames agreed to disband the militia, that paved the way for the loosely veiled threat of violence underpinning the *Clarion Ledger's* statement.

Violence by no means ceased after the peace conference, and whites no longer feared the armed opposition. Eruptions of particularly bad violence occurred in places like Friars Point, Mississippi and Port Gibson, Mississippi, or as Lemann generalizes “in the parts of Mississippi that had the heaviest black population majorities.”⁸⁵ Therefore, Democratic suppression of Republican, and therefore black, votes continued unabated, while Ames’s state militia, up to that point the only instrument left by which the Republicans could attempt to maintain power, was nowhere to be seen.

With the threats of both federal intervention and the state militia out of the way, the Democrats swept the elections of November 5. Eric Foner explains, however, that “blacks remained steadfast; indeed, in some plantation counties, the Republican vote actually increased. But where violence had devastated the [Republican] party’s infrastructure and blacks ‘feared for their lives’ if they presented themselves at the polls,

⁸⁴ “The Last Phase of the Threatened Yazoo Invasion,” *The Clarion Ledger*, October 20, 1875, 2.

⁸⁵ Lemann, *Redemption*, 148.

the returns constituted a political revolution.”⁸⁶ Consequently, as Singletary puts it, “The election of 1875, which marked the return to power of the Democrats in Mississippi, marked the end of Negro militia in that state.”⁸⁷ The new Democratic Governor John Stone would not need to employ militia units.

While Adelbert Ames sought to preserve the ever-tenuous Republican hold on politics in Reconstruction Mississippi with state militia, his efforts at organizing and utilizing those predominantly black militia units failed to prevent Democratic takeover. In discussing federal occupation of the South during Reconstruction, William H. Emory noted in 1877 that “the presence of troops has not preserved the Republican party.”⁸⁸ State militias likewise failed. However, the militia and the decision on whether or not to use it was certainly not the only reason for the Republicans’ losses at the polls, as William Bland Whitley notes that there was much division, conflicting interests, and infighting within the party.⁸⁹ However, the use of militia by Ames and the attitudes of citizens toward it reveal important characteristics of and changes to the state of Mississippi as it progressed into the late nineteenth century.

First, the militia’s importance to the governor increased. During Reconstruction, Mississippi’s Constitution of 1868 and its later Militia Law of 1870 gave the governor authority to use the militia at his bidding. Though Ames failed to sustain Republican politics in the state by using the militia, the very attempt created a shift in how the

⁸⁶ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution: 1863-1877*, Francis Parkman Prize Ed., HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1988, 561.

⁸⁷ Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, 99.

⁸⁸ William H. Emory, *Harper’s Weekly*, “The Army and the States,” April 7, 1877, 262. Quoted in Lang, *In the Wake of War*, 231.

⁸⁹ Whitley, “Precious Memories,” 103.

governor could operate in the future and expanded both the executive and military arms of the state. While white citizens of Mississippi came to view the militia unfavorably, in the next decade the Democratic Party would manipulate the powers given to Governor Ames, but for the oppression rather than protection of African Americans. In another irony of Mississippi's Reconstruction, later Democrats owed the Republican engineered Constitution of 1868 for the militia power they would eventually wield.

At the citizen level, white and black Mississippians alike focused heavily on the militia in the turmoil of the mid-1870s. White Mississippians, still reeling from the occupation of the Civil War, grew to hate the state militia even more when Governor Ames mustered predominantly African American units in 1875. White citizens thought of black militias as "a presence galling during the war, and even more infuriating during peace."⁹⁰ After the creation of black militia units following the Vicksburg and Clinton riots, the newly reinstated Democratic majority would shy away from citizen soldiering in the future, associating the state militia, white or black, with an unconstitutional standing army.

To further complicate the narrative, several white Mississippi natives also joined Ames's state militia. By September 25, 1875, after the legislature approved the Militia Appropriations Bill, the staunchly Republican *Weekly Mississippi Pilot* noted that "seventy-one white citizens were enrolled, and sixty-three of that number were at once mustered into service with the usual forms."⁹¹ These whites could potentially have been Democrats enrolling to thwart the creation of a black-dominated militia force, but it is

⁹⁰ Lang, *In the Wake of War*, 204.

⁹¹ "The Militia," *The Weekly Mississippi Pilot*, September 25, 1875, 2.

unlikely, as whites had military forces of their own. Furthermore, John Hope Franklin, in his seminal work on Reconstruction, notes that “whites were used...not merely as officers but as enlisted men when they could be trusted and could be induced to join in the task of supporting and protecting the Radical governments.”⁹² Thus, a portion of Mississippi’s whites opposed Democratic violence enough to enlist in the state militia, though they would in practice serve little purpose.

African Americans in Reconstruction viewed both state and informal militias as legitimate means to protect themselves and enforce their newly won rights. The political nature of the state militia here is important. As the militia attempted to maintain Republican Party control in the state capitol, it also provided a driving force for political activism within the African American community. The African American militia movement in Reconstruction, particularly in Mississippi, was a way that African Americans could legally protect their rights and “fill critical voids left by an increasingly ambivalent and hamstrung United States Army in the wake of Military Reconstruction.”⁹³ As Republicans in the North and in the federal government grew jaded with the violence of the south, black southerners turned to the militia as the only legitimate way to protect themselves against lawless white violence. When the Democratic Party swept the 1875 elections, African Americans’ dreams of ensuring their rights through the state militia were likewise swept away.

The events in Mississippi in 1875 show that had black militiamen been able to perform the duties they so desired, they might have successfully warded off much of the

⁹² Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War*, 122.

⁹³ Lang, *In the Wake of War*, 212.

political intimidation they faced. Wherever armed and ready militia units appeared, white paramilitary groups disappeared. African Americans, as shown above in Abraham Burriss's letter, were willing and ready to fight. Singletary blames Ames for his reticence, asserting that "No one can say what the results might have been if Ames had been willing to use, rather than merely organize, his Negro troops...The governor should never have organized them unless he intended to put them to use, because from the moment mobilization began, they became targets for a well-armed enemy."⁹⁴ Black people in Mississippi stood ready to defend themselves, yet in contrast to white paramilitary groups, they relied on the legal sanction of the governor as well as the arms the state could provide.

Governor Ames's position cannot be taken lightly. While it is easy to blame him, one must also consider the precariousness of his position. The threat of a race war, or even a second civil war, never quite left the south. Ames noted only three days after the Clinton Riot that "in '60 and '61 there were not such unity and such preparation against the government of the U. S. as now exist against the colored men and the government their votes have established."⁹⁵ However, Ames had the backing of the federal government in using the militia. A congressional committee, led by Senator George Boutwell, later investigated the violence concerning the Mississippi election of 1875 and whether a fair election was conducted. In the report, the committee noted that "it was the duty of the governor to use the militia for the suppression of such riots as those of

⁹⁴ Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, 99.

⁹⁵ Adelbert Ames to Blanche Butler Ames, *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 2, 167.

Vicksburgh and Clinton, and this without regard to the question whether the white or the black race was most responsible therefor."⁹⁶ Though Ames had full permission from the federal government to employ the state militia, he chose timid displays to avoid further violence which could have easily reached the governor's mansion. Interestingly, Ames's conduct also mimicked that of other Reconstruction Governors in the south. John Hope Franklin notes that "In Florida a militia was organized and armed in June 1868, although it was never used. Governor Brownlow of Tennessee also organized a militia that served more as a warning to his enemies than as an actual fighting force."⁹⁷ Ames's application of the state militia as a threat rather than a fighting force thereby ignored the failures of other governors who tried the same tactics years before. However, the threat of reigniting the Civil War alone cannot explain Ames's failure to learn from his contemporaries.

Governor Ames's failure to effectively utilize the state militia also stemmed from a less studied cause. Aside from his reluctance to start a race war, Ames gradually shifted toward personal racism as violence increased and the election approached. Ames's letters to Blanche reveal the shift toward blatant, unjustified racism. While on September 23, he noted that he would "continue till the last man of our side is in the ranks," by October 4 he was "convinced that my Negro militia has not the courage or nerve - whatever it may be called - to act the part of soldiers."⁹⁸ In eleven days, and without having tested a single unit, pressure caused Ames to turn against the African Americans who were ready

⁹⁶ Boutwell, *Mississippi in 1875*, XIII.

⁹⁷ Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War*, 122.

⁹⁸ Adelbert Ames to Blanche Butler Ames, September 23, 1875, *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 2,192; Adelbert Ames to Blanche Butler Ames, October 4, 1875, *Ibid*, 216.

to fight for themselves. Less than two weeks later, Ames shifted further toward blaming the African Americans for being killed without being allowed, by Ames himself, to legally defend themselves. The governor noted on October 12 *after* the successful march to Edwards Station that “it is [African Americans’] fault (not mine, personally) that this fate is before them. They refused to prepare for war when in time of peace, when they could have done so. Now it is too late.”⁹⁹ Therefore, a growing racism and resentment toward the African Americans looking for protection hindered the mobilization of the state militia as much as Ames’s own apprehension to use force.

His subtle shift toward racism made the decision to resign even easier when “in February [1876], a legislative committee produced a thirteen-count bill of impeachment against Ames.”¹⁰⁰ Ames had fought constantly against violence and suppression in Mississippi, yet he was left with only impeachment to show for it. In one last bid to preserve his reputation for a potential future in the Senate, “on March 28, he made a deal with the Mississippi legislature: he would resign as governor if the impeachment charges against him were dropped.”¹⁰¹ Ames tired of fighting for a cause which both wearied him and produced little meaningful impact, finally gave up. While political maneuvering offers one explanation for his resignation, his frustration with the affairs of Mississippi and his failing faith in the African Americans therein can hardly be discounted as influential to his decision.

⁹⁹ Adelbert Ames to Blanche Butler Ames, October 12, 1875, *Ibid*, 216.

¹⁰⁰ Lemann, *Redemption*, 162.

¹⁰¹ Lemann, *Redemption*, 164.

While in office, though, Ames established a pattern of state militia usage which would endure. During Reconstruction, legislation and necessity placed the state militia at the center of focus in Mississippi. Ames's use of the militia, particularly in mustering all-black units, created an apprehension toward the militia as the Democrats retook power. As a new decade approached, however, the militia would again be used as a symbol in Mississippi to "suppress riots and insurrections" for which events at Meridian, Vicksburg, and Clinton proved a need. Similarly, white militias would, in practice, almost never do any real fighting. As Ames had attempted to use the militia to preserve Republican political power in Mississippi, Democratic Governor Robert Lowry would do the same when challenges to his control arose. As the state moved forward into the 1880s, the state militia's constituency and goals reversed, while its core practices remained the same.

Chapter II

In 1880, a census enumerator listed thirty-five-year-old Oliver Cromwell as an illiterate farmer in Wilkinson County, Mississippi, married to Tennessee Cromwell.¹⁰² Despite his illiteracy, by the late 1880s Cromwell politically organized other African American farmers in the Mississippi Delta, achieving enough success to spark a bloodbath known as the Leflore County Massacre. While Cromwell was not the primary instigator of the Clinton Riot of 1875, he stood at the forefront of the Leflore County Massacre of 1889, pitting him against Mississippi's state militia (of which he was once a part) and leading ultimately to his exile. Cromwell's experience, as explored in the last chapter, continued to embody the changing racial, economic, and political status of African Americans in Mississippi while highlighting the reinvented goals of the state militia.

After the violent so-called "Redemption" of Mississippi in 1875, the state militia dwindled in importance compared to its primary role in Reconstruction. Beginning January 26, 1876, the state legislature repealed Adelbert Ames's amendments to the Militia Law of 1870 that had appropriated funds to the militia and mustered it into companies.¹⁰³ The Constitution of 1868 maintained the state militia as an organization, yet this new act stripped it of the resources that would make it useful. To further prevent a militia revival, on February 24, 1876, the legislature amended the Militia Law of 1870

¹⁰² Tenth Census of the United States, 1880. (NARA microfilm publication T9, 1,454 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰³ Recorded in the "Laws of the State of Mississippi," *The Daily Clarion* (Jackson, Mississippi), March 4, 1876, 4.

to reduce “The pay of the militia when in active service” to “five cents per day, for officers and soldiers.”¹⁰⁴ These acts dramatically underfunded the state militia to make it unappealing to citizens who might join, deplete its resources if mustered, and limit a form of political patronage to keep the poorest Mississippians from exercising leadership in the militia.

Democratic Governor John M. Stone publicly upheld Mississippi’s abandonment of the state militia only a year later. In Kemper County, Mississippi in 1877, Democratic leader John Gully was murdered. While a black man was arrested for the crime, Republican rival W. W. Chisolm was imprisoned for alleged conspiracy. After Chisolm’s arrest, a mob of armed men arrived at the jail seeking vigilante justice. Chisolm’s supporters soon arrived with arms of their own, and the ensuing battle left six dead.¹⁰⁵ As historian Stephen Cresswell explains, Chisolm’s widow applied to Governor Stone for militia assistance to quell the violence, but Stone, recognizing that sending in the militia might reveal insecurity in the Democratic Party, refused.¹⁰⁶ The importance of this bloody incident lies in Governor Stone’s direct refusal to mobilize the state militia. Sending in the militia would have revealed that political tension in Mississippi remained strong enough to justify force. By ignoring the incident, Stone minimized the Republican sentiment that led to the bloodshed, and reassured Mississippians that the state militia of Reconstruction would no longer be a threat. If any white Democrats

¹⁰⁴ “Laws of the State of Mississippi,” *The Daily Clarion*, March 11, 1876, 4.

¹⁰⁵ Cresswell, *Rednecks, Redeemers, and Race*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁶ Cresswell, *Rednecks, Redeemers, and Race*, 7.

needed further reassurance, they would receive it from the federal government the next year.

In 1878, the federal government revealed its own growing apprehension toward military involvement in individual states by passing the Posse Comitatus Act. Historian Andrew Lang explains that “the act prohibited the army from enforcing the law and regulating civil affairs unless approved by the US Constitution or prescribed by an act of Congress. State militias...would instead assume these responsibilities.”¹⁰⁷ Mississippi thereby received the permission to handle its affairs as it pleased, unbothered by the threat of federal intervention. The weight of peacekeeping rested on the state militia, but the legislature had already successfully dismantled it.

Although the Posse Comitatus Act on the federal level made the state militia the sole body of enforcement for all the states, Mississippi’s legislators chose to keep theirs weak. There are a few reasons explain the decision to effectively dismantle the state militia. The first explanation is financial. Historian Dorothy Pratt notes that following Reconstruction, Mississippi’s state officials focused primarily on the state’s finances.¹⁰⁸ Indebtedness plagued Mississippi for a variety of reasons after the Civil War and Reconstruction, so the militia, a subliminal, as-needed force to begin with, was an easy target for slashed funding. However, racial power dynamics and the experience of Reconstruction contributed to the ease with which state leaders could dispense with the militia.

¹⁰⁷ Lang, *In the Wake of War*, 235.

¹⁰⁸ Pratt, *Sowing the Wind*, 26.

Furthermore, in the middle and late 1860s, whites created their own paramilitary militias. Cresswell notes that “white military or paramilitary action to put down so-called race riots...served notice on the black community that proud and independent behavior would not be tolerated.”¹⁰⁹ White Mississippians recognized their ability to form paramilitary groups without fear of legal ramifications. They therefore preferred those organizations to the state militia because they could reserve them exclusively to whites, whereas the law prevented direct exclusion of African Americans from the state militia. For example, one Mississippian captured the common nineteenth-century portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan as “organized for the protection of the defenseless, the preservation of law and order, and the traditions of the South,” a characterization that continued into the late-twentieth century.¹¹⁰ Beginning in the 1870s, then, paramilitary groups circumvented the state militia, performing the same duties without fear of black participation. The weakening of the state militia in the middle and late 1870s thereby reinforced the strength of groups like the KKK and the white supremacy they were founded upon.

Though confident enough to neglect the state militia, the Democratic Party could never be entirely comfortable with their success. As in Reconstruction, Redemption politics were not black and white. While the Democratic Party wielded large influence in state politics, the Redemption era was “a contentious time when Republicans continued to share power and a variety of political parties challenged the Bourbons...for control of

¹⁰⁹ Cresswell, *Rednecks, Redeemers, and Race*, 61.

¹¹⁰ Florence Warfield Sillers, *Bolivar County, Mississippi: Its Creation, Pioneer Days and Progress in the Heart of Mississippi Delta*, (Spartanburg, South Carolina, Reprint Company, 1976), 168. Quoted in Pratt, *Sowing the Wind*, 15.

state and local government.”¹¹¹ The Democratic Party, though entirely white, failed to monopolize the white vote in the 1880s. Historian C. Vann Woodward notes that despite its name, “the organization and control of the party was anything but democratic...everything was the private business of a few politicians known by the discontented as the ‘ring’ or the ‘courthouse clique.’”¹¹² Discontentment produced by the hierarchical and elitist Democratic Party pushed marginal whites, particularly low-income farmers, to cooperate with African Americans in Mississippi in a process known as fusion or fusionism. Historian Edward Ayers notes that “The early 1880s witnessed many attempts at cooperation and fusion among Republicans and independents.”¹¹³ While white Democrats mistrusted cooperation between Mississippi’s politically disempowered in the late 1870s and early 1880s, such cooperation would spark a renewed interest in the state militia by the middle of the decade.

Growing demographic changes produced further insecurities for the Democratic Party. The African American population in Mississippi skyrocketed in the 1880s, giving the Democratic Party further cause for concern. Ayers notes that “communities in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia watched as huge crowds of local blacks gathered at railroad stations to await transportation to [jobs in] the Mississippi Delta, the Louisiana rice or sugar fields, or the turpentine camps of the piney woods.”¹¹⁴ As the planter class declined in the 1880s, and as the South industrialized, African Americans flooded to the fertile soil of the Mississippi Delta and the burgeoning lumber industries of the Piney

¹¹¹ Mitchell, *A New History of Mississippi*, 217.

¹¹² C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 52.

¹¹³ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 46.

¹¹⁴ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 22.

Woods to seek economic opportunities. This influx of African Americans into Mississippi coincided with a loss of native whites. Though race might have contributed to some whites' departure, economic opportunities and the decreasing availability of land in the south led many whites, who had the financial means to do so, to seek better fortunes in the west. Ayers also notes that "while the thirteen Southern states saw a net loss of 537,000 blacks between 1880 and 1910, the loss of whites totaled 1,243,000 in those same decades."¹¹⁵ Specifically, counties in Mississippi experienced an average black population growth of 91 percent in that same date range.¹¹⁶ Whites in Mississippi never boasted a population majority, yet they were being even further outstripped in the 1880s. Strict democratic process, then, did not favor the Democratic Party.

Many of the African Americans moving either to the south or to different regions of the south did so for economic reasons, but they would not be politically silent when they got there. Historian Omar H. Ali explains that in the mid-1880s, "African Americans born in the decade before the Civil War who were old enough to have experienced the promise of Emancipation and the collapse of Reconstruction began to create local organizations in order to foster solidarity and economic cooperation within their communities."¹¹⁷ These men, like Oliver Cromwell, rose to prominence by emphasizing the benefits of unity among rural African Americans in the south. These men openly challenged the Democratic Party, despite the violence they faced. Ali states that "southern African Americans in the post-Reconstruction era were not only actively

¹¹⁵ Ayers *The Promise of the New South*, 24.

¹¹⁶ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 156.

¹¹⁷ Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth*, 26.

organizing against (not simply victims of) Democratic rule but developed their own lines of independent black political organizing.”¹¹⁸ Consequently, even if the Republican Party in Mississippi lost much of its functionality with the Election of 1875, a trend toward independent, third party organizing developed in its wake. In an ironic turn, then, African Americans became more politically unified and autonomous after the antagonistic Democratic Party recaptured the state capitol. Unfortunately, this autonomy predictably sparked violent backlash from white Democrats.

The Election of 1881 in Mississippi offered the first resuscitation of a familiar pattern of violence, politics, and race, starting the process by which the militia would again rise to prominence. Ali notes that “the specter of 'Black Republicanism' had loomed large in the consciousness of Mississippi Democrats throughout the summer and fall of 1881,” which manifested violently in the state election that November.¹¹⁹ Black and white citizens of Meridian unified under fusion candidates in the months leading up to the election, sowing seeds of anxiety within the Democratic community. Consequently, “a sheriff’s posse in Meridian...gathered as a show of force to intimidate fusion voters,” but they were “soon matched by the same number of African Americans who came to protect fusion voters.”¹²⁰ To white Democrats, this display of black solidarity and white political support for it created an explosive atmosphere.

The Marion voting precinct, just north of Meridian, saw the bloodiest violence. The *Salt Lake Daily Herald* from Salt Lake City, Utah, maintained that at the Marion voting

¹¹⁸ Ali, *In the Lion’s Mouth*, 6.

¹¹⁹ Ali, *In the Lion’s Mouth*, 14.

¹²⁰ Ali, *In the Lion’s Mouth*, 14.

precinct on November 8, 1881, a white man named Joseph Barrett was insulted by an African American man. Barrett then turned to strike him with a cane, but “before he could strike, another negro, Frank Johnson, shot him in the neck.”¹²¹ Violence erupted at the precinct, leaving five white men dead. The sheriff then assembled and mobilized “a posse of seventy-five” men to the area, an alleged twenty of whom were dispatched to the home of Edward Vance, who was “said to have given the order to the negroes to begin firing.”¹²² Accounts differ sharply on what happened next, but regardless, when the smoke cleared five white men lay dead, several of the posse, including the sheriff, were injured along with “four or five” African Americans. According to his wife Julia, Edward Vance escaped, yet one of his sons, John Vance, was killed and another, William Vance, was arrested.¹²³ Ali notes that “the number of African American casualties went unreported.”¹²⁴

The Marion Riot, though largely debated and contradictory in narrative, revealed some overarching changes and insecurities in Mississippi. First, the number of African Americans who, according to any account, participated in the shooting at Marion was significantly lower than the band of between 75 and 100 men who constituted the

¹²¹ “The Mississippi Riot,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald* (Salt Lake City, Utah), November 12, 1881, 7.

¹²² “The Marion Fight: Between Negroes and Whites on Election Day in Mississippi: Detailed Account of a Bloody Affray Given by Many Witnesses,” *The Daily Memphis Avalanche* (Memphis, Tennessee), November 11, 1881, 1.; “The Mississippi Riot,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald* (Salt Lake City, Utah), November 12, 1881, 7.

¹²³ “Mrs. Julia Vance: A Sad Narrative of Life in Mississippi-The Lates Bourbon Crime.: Some Details of the Recent So-Called Election Riot at Marion: Killed for Being Republican – The Experience of Edward Vance’s Wife,” *The Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, Illinois), January 29, 1882.

¹²⁴ Ali, *In the Lion’s Mouth*, 14.

sheriff's posse. However, contemporary accounts persistently called the event a "race riot" with connotations that a collective force, rather than a handful of men, intentionally provoked the disturbance. This revived the white Democratic habit of labelling any black political or physical resistance as a "riot" to justify overcompensated violent opposition. *The Chicago Tribune* noted with bitter sarcasm that African Americans' only guilt rested in the fact that they "forgot their constitutional timidity and had the manhood to resent [whites'] insults."¹²⁵ While this instance did not invoke the "to suppress riots and insurrections" clause of Mississippi's Constitution of 1868, it served as a reminder to the Democracy that riots, as they imagined them, could and would still occur. As the Meridian Riot of a decade before had proven, binary extralegal militias again ruled state politics in Mississippi.

Another important feature of the Marion Riot of 1881 was its emphasis on and denunciation of fusion politics. *The Salt Lake Daily Herald* concluded its coverage of the event by explaining that "the fusionists' doctrine for negroes to carry pistols to the polls was the cause of the disturbance."¹²⁶ *The Daily Memphis Avalanche* made a similar statement, mentioning furthermore that "three kegs of powder and a large supply of buckshot was found in Vance's house" after the riot.¹²⁷ By highlighting the fusionist aspect of the riot, these newspapers undergirded already present fears about rising African American political power in the state and discouraged other potential fusionists

¹²⁵ "Mrs. Julia Vance," *The Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, Illinois), January 29, 1882.

¹²⁶ "The Mississippi Riot," *Salt Lake Daily Herald* (Salt Lake City, Utah), November 12, 1881, 7.

¹²⁷ "The Marion Fight," *The Daily Memphis Avalanche* (Memphis, Tennessee), November 11, 1881, 1.

from participating in what was labeled an underhanded practice. The idea that Redemption had secured political hegemony for white Democrats faltered before the sheer numbers from which coalitions between African Americans and independent whites could draw. Early in the 1880s, then, the Marion Riot both revealed the presence of fusionists and offered an opportunity to quell cooperative sentiment among whites on the fence.

By mid-decade, the state militia began to restrengthen itself in correlation to growing black political organization. In 1885, *The Clarion* out of Jackson, Mississippi published a report by the Adjutant General of Mississippi with a full listing of the state's twenty known militia units, their officers, and the realization that "many of these companies are not in active state of organization" and that "there may be other new ones that are not included in the list."¹²⁸ The militia, dormant since 1876, began the journey back to prominence. *The Clarion's* listing signified a renewed interest in the state of the militia and its capabilities if needed, along with an implicit call for any unofficial militias or white paramilitary groups ("new ones") to become official. However, while the militia regained its footing, further turmoil in the state revealed that Democrats were not yet ready to deploy it.

Violations of the delicate, poorly defined or understood intersections of race, labor, and politics continued to produce bloodshed in Mississippi, and black political organizing coincided with another so-called "riot" on March 16, 1886. The affair began with spilled molasses and ended with over ten dead. Ed and Charley Brown, two African

¹²⁸ "The State Militia," *The Clarion*, September 23, 1885, 3.

American brothers, spilled molasses on a white man named Robert Moore. Moore's friend, a white lawyer named James Liddell, sought retribution. What started as a verbal argument ended when "gunfire erupted which left both Liddell and both Browns injured."¹²⁹ The Browns took Liddell to trial for attempted murder, an act of legal participation which shocked the white community. The day of the trial, March 16, "a group of 40 or 50 white men, armed with carbines and revolvers, rode up to the Court House" and "opened fire on the negroes...Ten negroes were killed and three others mortally wounded."¹³⁰ While this senseless violence even outraged many whites, Mississippi Governor Robert Lowry stated that "The riot was provoked and perpetrated by the outrage and conduct of the Negroes."¹³¹ Thus another outbreak of violence occurred when African Americans asserted their rights, here the right to charge a white man in court. Importantly, Governor Lowry's proximity to the event caused him to grapple with the issue of violent race relations and the way that the state should deal with such instances. His response unsurprisingly places full blame on the African American men, as it unfailingly would in the future. While the militia was not called out in this case, the Carroll County Massacre pushed Lowry to organize a force capable of suppressing riots and insurrections in an increasingly turbulent state.

Two months after the Carroll County Massacre, Governor Lowry established "Camp Lowry" in Vicksburg, where militia training occurred over five days.¹³² Less than

¹²⁹ Rick Ward, "The Carroll County Courthouse Massacre, 1886: A Cold Case File," (Jackson: *Mississippi History Now*, The Mississippi Historical Society, May 2012).

¹³⁰ "Ten Negroes Murdered," *The New York Times*, March 18, 1888, 1.

¹³¹ Ward, "The Carroll County Courthouse Massacre."

¹³² "Camp Lowry," *The Drill Team* (Vicksburg, Mississippi), May 11, 1886, 1.

one month after that, Mississippi Adjutant General William Henry issued General Order Number 4, which “ordered that all military Companies, now organized, shall be enlisted and mustered into the service of the State at as early a date as practicable,” while listing several more measures for the Adjutant General to keep a record of the state militia’s manpower and consequent capability.¹³³ The Carroll County Massacre thereby accelerated the process of reforming the state militia into a functional force, as the need to suppress riots and insurrections became increasingly obvious to governor Lowry.

Mississippi’s renewed interest in the state militia occurred in the context of developments throughout the entire New South. As the works of Ayers and Woodward have noted, the New South experienced some economic growth and modernization in the late nineteenth century through the combined efforts of southern politicians and northern investors.¹³⁴ However, industrial growth and labor often contradicted the deeply ingrained agrarianism and labor relationships of southern states. Ayers furthermore argues that southerners had cheap and easy access to weapons, and “when politics and economic turmoil constantly threw people into conflict, such weaponry and violence could easily spark interracial bloodshed.”¹³⁵ While Democratic interest in the state militia reflected growing party insecurity, it also underscored the trend of modernization and industry in the late nineteenth century to upset social codes and produce widespread interest in state-sanctioned enforcement.

¹³³ Published in “Military Matters,” *The New Mississippian* (Jackson, Mississippi), June 1, 1886.

¹³⁴ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*; Woodward, *Origins of the New South*.

¹³⁵ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 155.

Local and national political events only increased Democratic Party paranoia as the 1880s wore on. As the Carroll County Massacre ended, the Black Populist Movement “took organizational form in 1886 with the creation of various mutual-aid societies and labor unions.”¹³⁶ Though not yet a political organization, the growth of Black Populism united disadvantaged farmers in the Mississippi Delta of both races. On a federal level, McMillen summarizes that “in 1888, for the first time since 1872, the Republican party won control of the presidency and both houses of Congress.”¹³⁷ The Republicans utterly defeated the Democrats on the federal level, and southern states like Mississippi continued to face fusion between African Americans and poor white farmers at home. By 1889, then, Governor Lowry, no longer inundated with the idea of Democratic hegemony, sought a way to destroy the Republican Party in Mississippi, end fusionist political activity, and secure the Democratic Party against federal threats. The Black Populist Movement, headed by Oliver Cromwell, offered a perfect scapegoat.

The stage for the state militia’s resurrection became Leflore County. Events in late August placed citizens of Leflore County on high alert and caught Governor Lowry’s attention. On August 23, “Capt. S. H. Whitworth...was waylaid and murdered by a party of unknown men near his home in Leflore County.”¹³⁸ Governor Lowry personally offered a \$500 reward for the capture of the assassins, and, more importantly, urged “all officers of this State to be diligent in their efforts to arrest said fugitive.”¹³⁹ This incident

¹³⁶ Ali, *In the Lion’s Mouth*, xiv.

¹³⁷ McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 41.

¹³⁸ “Proclamation: \$500 Reward,” *The Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), September 5, 1889, 5.

¹³⁹ “Proclamation: \$500 Reward,” *The Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), September 5, 1889, 5.

reveals the tension in Leflore County on the heels of a publicized murder, giving citizens a reason to be uneasy. By calling on the “officers of this State,” Lowry’s language also shifted toward organized force as a means of restoring control which, with the right spark, would translate easily into deploying state militia units.

Meanwhile, Oliver Cromwell promoted political and economic solidarity among black and white farmers in the same area. By September of 1889, he was actively “encouraging black farmers in the county to trade with a white Alliance cooperative store some thirty miles away in Durant, Holmes County, instead of with local white shop owners who were price gouging.”¹⁴⁰ Cromwell not only organized black farmers into the Colored Farmers’ Alliance, but he mobilized those farmers in fusionist solidarity with white farmers of the similar, though all white, Southern Farmers’ Alliance. Democrats reeled at the successful cooperation between the poor black and whites of Leflore County, and Cromwell became an easy target for attempts to destroy the farmers’ traction.

While the Colored Farmers’ Alliance under Cromwell pursued primarily economic goals, his methods resembled those of a politician. Cromwell not only organized black economic independence, “he also gave a strong example of personal independence by occasionally delivering bold speeches to rally support for his cause.”¹⁴¹ Cromwell consequently embodied the fears of white planters in the Mississippi Delta economically and ideologically. Cromwell’s speeches spelled danger if they bridged the

¹⁴⁰ Ali, *In the Lion’s Mouth*, 67.

¹⁴¹ William F. Holmes, “The Leflore County Massacre and the Demise of the Colored Farmers’ Alliance,” *Phylon*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (3rd Qtr. 1973), pp. 267-274, Clark Atlanta University Press.

short gap between the economic and political. The planters responded swiftly. In late August, Cromwell received, “a letter signed anonymously with crossbones, skeleton, etc. ordering him to quit his work and leave the country, giving him ten days.”¹⁴² Cromwell, an experienced soldier, stood his ground, as did the African Americans who organized under him. The Colored Farmers’ Alliance members of Leflore County met and that “same evening the whites at Shell Mound [Mississippi] received a threatening letter from parties of negroes who signed themselves ‘Three Thousand Armed Men.’”¹⁴³

The ancient fears of an armed Black uprising dovetailed with exaggerated – almost hysterical – rumors about the size of the Black force to color white perceptions of events in Leflore County. Though the letter implied a force of three thousand men, *The Daily Commercial Herald* ironically estimated the next day that “there has never by actual count been more than two hundred negroes at Minter City [Leflore County], and they were not disposed to be aggressive” continuing that even if more people had been gathered, it was likely “more for the purpose of self-protection than anything else.”¹⁴⁴ Regardless of the actual number, the idea of a large body of armed African Americans, whether 200 or 3,000, terrified the white community and brought Governor Robert Lowry personally to Leflore County accompanied by three units of the state militia.

Lowry’s involvement in Leflore County highlights the political nature of calling out the state militia. Rather than order out militia units that were already close to the site

¹⁴² “The Leflore Trouble: The Facts of the Case So Far as Developed,” *The Times Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana), September 2, 1889, 16.

¹⁴³ “The Leflore Trouble: The Facts of the Case So Far as Developed,” *The Times Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana), September 2, 1889, 16.

¹⁴⁴ “No Bloodshed,” *The Daily Commercial Herald* (Vicksburg, Mississippi), September 3, 1889, 1.

of the alleged uprising, Lowry personally caught a train and “went up Sunday to Greenwood, ordered out the Capitol Light Guards and other troops belonging to the militia,” including three companies “organized at Yazoo City, Grenada, Carrollton, and Greenwood.”¹⁴⁵ Lowry’s march alongside the militia proposed to show bravery and courage in meeting a riotous force. The politics of the event may also be seen in that Lowry and two other public officials “made speeches from the hotel veranda, in which moderation was counselled, and the advice given to arrest the ring leaders and let the law take its course.” The speeches were reported to have “had a fine effect and served to quiet the people in some measure.”¹⁴⁶ Mobilizing the militia and giving speeches upon its arrival served a symbolic purpose by reassuring whites that the state militia still existed to “suppress riots and insurrections,” though for opposite purposes than the Reconstruction militia. Lowry successfully made his point, and the brief scare of insurrection seemed to be effectively suppressed. However, when Lowry left Leflore County, the militia stayed.

After Lowry’s departure, “part of the men were detailed to go in different directions and make a thorough search of the entire surrounding country in order to discover [the African Americans’] whereabouts.”¹⁴⁷ Here, accounts become hazy, yet many records indicate that horrible violence occurred to different degrees after the governor returned to Jackson. While newspapers recorded violence from ambiguous foes,

¹⁴⁵ “The Trouble in Leflore County,” *The Yazoo Herald* (Yazoo City, Mississippi), September 6, 1889, pp. 2; “No Bloodshed,” *The Daily Commercial Herald* (Vicksburg, Mississippi), September 3, 1889, 1.

¹⁴⁶ “No Bloodshed,” *The Daily Commercial Herald* (Vicksburg, Mississippi), September 3, 1889, 1.

¹⁴⁷ “The Trouble in Leflore County,” *The Yazoo Herald* (Yazoo City, Mississippi), September 6, 1889, 2.

one reporter specifically noted that “African Americans were hunted down like dogs,” and that “one sixteen-year-old guardsman beat a child to death while his older brother held the parents at bay with a gun.”¹⁴⁸ This account contradicts other newspapers which signified the militia’s removal alongside Governor Lowry, inculcating the state militia as an instigator of, rather than means to prevent, unrest.

Newspapers around the country estimated the total dead anywhere from zero to over one hundred people.¹⁴⁹ However, historian William F. Holmes concludes that “it seems – based on the sources consulted – that the whites killed about twenty-five blacks.”¹⁵⁰ Ten specific deaths can be determined by newspaper reports. One newspaper as far away as Lancaster, Pennsylvania, reported specific names for eight of the dead: “John Boyker, Dol Wharton, Monroe Jones, Scott Marsh, Warren Snell, Theyton Lock, Ben. Lock, and Warren Beckworth.”¹⁵¹ By September 28, one of the chief organizers in Leflore County, George Allen, reportedly “was hung in Leflore County for his participation in the late disturbance there.”¹⁵² Specific references to those murdered reveal that the combination of the state militia and volunteer paramilitary groups in Leflore County did not stay in Leflore County “to suppress riots and insurrections.” Instead, it used the language of a race riot to hunt down and murder African Americans

¹⁴⁸ Holmes, “The Leflore County Massacre and the Death of the Colored Farmers’ Alliance,” pp. 272; Pratt, *Sowing the Wind*, 58.

¹⁴⁹ *The Vicksburg Evening Post* (Vicksburg, Mississippi), September 6, 1889; *The Morristown Gazette* (Morristown, Tennessee), September 25, 1889; *The Weekly New Era* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), September 21, 1889.

¹⁵⁰ Holmes, “The Leflore County Massacre,” 273; *The Washington Bee*, September 21, 1889.

¹⁵¹ “Mississippi’s Bloody Warfare,” *The Weekly New Era* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), September 21, 1889.

¹⁵² *The Greenville Times* (Greenville, Mississippi), September 28, 1889.

and to assert Democratic hegemony where it seemed to be wavering. Finally, Wiley Anderson, who lived through the spike of bloodshed in Leflore County, committed suicide on September 28 for reasons that are not made clear but are implied stem from the recent events there.¹⁵³

Despite begin driven from Leflore County, Cromwell's legend only grew in the coming weeks. *The Daily Commercial Herald* stated that Cromwell passed through Vicksburg as early as the night of September 2.¹⁵⁴ Whether true or not, Cromwell was never captured in Leflore County while the militia combed the area. As of September 6, *The Yazoo Herald* reported that his "whereabouts at present are unknown, but there are about 75 or 100 men searching the woods ..."¹⁵⁵ Regardless of exactly where Cromwell disappeared to, the militia had accomplished the white planters' and Democrats' goal of driving him from Leflore County, and breaking black political power. Cromwell's portrayal in newspaper accounts also indicates a trend in the overall construction of race riots in the period. Cromwell was repeatedly referred to in newspaper renderings as an "ex-convict," to both undermine his political actions and imply lawlessness in African American political groups. Though no paper specifically referenced what criminal activity Cromwell held that title for, *The Vicksburg Herald* from August 7, 1875 stated that "Oliver Cromwell was arrested for drunkenness in Houston, Texas," and that "they fined the old Ironsides, too."¹⁵⁶ This description not only provides an explanation for the

¹⁵³ *The Weekly Democrat* (Natchez, Mississippi), October 2, 1889.

¹⁵⁴ "No Bloodshed," *The Daily Commercial Herald* (Vicksburg, Mississippi), September 3, 1889, 1.

¹⁵⁵ "The Trouble in Leflore County," *The Yazoo Herald* (Yazoo City, Mississippi), September 6, 1889, 2.

¹⁵⁶ "Pot Pourri," *The Vicksburg Daily Herald*, August 7, 1875.

repeated references to Cromwell as an ex-convict, it reveals that he was a notably public figure, designated “old Ironsides,” even before the Clinton Riot.

The Clinton Riot of 1875 did, however, add to his budding renown, contributing another layer to the descriptions of his presence in Leflore County in 1889. At least two newspapers described Cromwell as both an ex-convict and a principle leader of the Clinton Riot of 1875.¹⁵⁷ The emphasis on Cromwell’s criminality couples with his presence at Clinton to portray him as a repeatedly militant rioter, ignoring the far greater number of African Americans who were murdered at both Clinton and Leflore County.

While certain papers described the events at Leflore County as a riot, and two used the word insurrection, the event became known as the Leflore County Massacre.¹⁵⁸ As opposed to Meridian, Clinton, Marion, and Carroll County, African Americans in Leflore County never fired a shot. A threatened force of African Americans existed only on paper as far as anyone could prove, yet Lowry chose this instance as the one befitting state militia. By labeling the events at Leflore County an insurrection, the governor could then mobilize the state militia with impunity under the Constitution of 1868 at a time when a public, militant show of Democratic Party strength could resecure its hegemony. Lowry’s act succeeded. White planters in the area who operated the Durant Commercial Store, also members of the Southern Farmers’ Alliance, publicly denounced and abandoned the Colored Farmers’ Alliance in the aftermath of Leflore County.¹⁵⁹ Holmes

¹⁵⁷ “Mississippi’s Bloody Warfare,” *The Weekly New Era* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), September 21, 1889. “The Leflore Troubles,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, September 5, 1889.

¹⁵⁸ *The Buffalo Courier* (Buffalo, New York), September 6, 1889; *The Yazoo Herald* (Yazoo City, Mississippi), September 6, 1889.

¹⁵⁹ *The Washington Bee*, September 21, 1889.

notes that “with so many of the Colored Alliance leaders killed and driven away and with so many of the remaining blacks terrorized, the Colored Alliance movement in Leflore County collapsed.”¹⁶⁰ The fusionism Democrats so feared was abandoned. If any rural white farmers had begun to sympathize with black farmers through shared plight, Lowry effectively redirected their attention back to racialized Democratic Party loyalty.

One of the most important results of the Leflore County Massacre was its influence in pushing the state to its next, and current, constitution. *The Clarion-Ledger* of November 21, 1889 printed verbatim the Constitution of 1868 under the title “The Constitution of the State of Mississippi as it now Stands – Read it and Judge for Yourself of its Shortcomings.” The Leflore County Massacre’s influence on this call to action appears in that the piece begins with Article IX, the militia article.¹⁶¹ An effort to rewrite the state constitution briefly arose in 1886, notably the same year as the Carroll County Massacre, but it was shot down on the grounds that “an effort to limit negro suffrage would bring evils upon the state in the way of adverse congressional legislation and Federal administrative proceedings.”¹⁶² Here again one may see the pattern where any form of African American resistance, even self-defense, sparks an overcompensation of white backlash. After the Leflore County Massacre, though, Mississippi’s Democrats would be sufficiently concerned about their political future to legalize black disenfranchisement.

¹⁶⁰ Holmes, “The Leflore County Massacre,” 274.

¹⁶¹ “State Constitution: Adopted May 15, 1868, Ratified Dec. 1, 1869: The Constitution of the State of Mississippi as it now Stands – Read it and Judge for Yourself of its Shortcomings,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, November 21, 1889.

¹⁶² Pratt, *Sowing the Wind*, 59.

The state militia arose as an important point of contention between the delegates. Some of the arguments over whether to keep the state militia stemmed from economic, rather than racial, lines, yet those determined to keep the militia did so with the assumption that it would be all white.¹⁶³ However, arguments extended beyond a purely racial sphere. While some argued that a state militia would be an effective use of state funds, “McLaurin of Rankin County...opposed the idea of a ‘standing army’ and indicated that ‘we only have the newspaper reports about the Greenwood affair cited by gentlemen.’”¹⁶⁴ The ideological aversion to organized troops which developed after the Civil War evidently still haunted some of Mississippi’s delegates, as did the much more recent Leflore County Massacre. Others, such as J. Z. George, favored a state militia from personal experience with its usefulness. George was a ringleader in the Redemption movement of 1875 and favored an organized militia because ““in his own experience he had known the necessity of suppressing racial disturbances.”¹⁶⁵ All agreed that the militia should be a white-only arm of the government. The debate around the militia then revolved more specifically around the phrase “to suppress riots and insurrections” which had inspired every instance of militia use since the phrase’s conception in 1868.

The delegates continued to argue for and against a specific militia clause based on the racial component of a militia, how to fund it, and whether mob violence would not serve as an apt substitute.¹⁶⁶ In the end, the militia remained as a direct descendant of the Constitution of 1868. The phrase “to suppress riots and insurrections,” lived on,

¹⁶³ Pratt, *Sowing the Wind*, 139.

¹⁶⁴ Pratt, *Sowing the Wind*, 139.

¹⁶⁵ Pratt, *Sowing the Wind*, 140.

¹⁶⁶ Pratt, *Sowing the Wind*, 140.

sustaining the governor's racial and political control mechanism.¹⁶⁷ Though the wording of the law does not prohibit African American participation, the disenfranchisement brought on by the new constitution coupled with the violence of the preceding years effectively excluded blacks in practice. The tie between securing white supremacy in the south and the state militia appeared immediately after the Constitution of 1890. In a wave of Confederate commemoration throughout the south, the Adjutant General of Mississippi's yearly report places the state militia in Richmond, Virginia at "the unveiling of the statue of General Robert E. Lee, on May 29, 1890."¹⁶⁸

Governor Robert Lowry, then, resurrected the state militia to combat local Republican and fusionist challenges and to preserve Mississippi as a place of white, Democratic power. Lowry borrowed the formula directly from Adelbert Ames in 1875, but two factors differentiate the two. First, Ames was reticent at Clinton, while Lowry was decisive at Leflore County. The second distinguishing factor explains the first. Ames necessarily composed his militia largely, though not entirely, of African American troops, while Lowry commanded white ones. While race did not reflect the potential quality of the troops, the racial component in both cases mediated the actions of each respective governor. For example, Ames's reticence can be understood as an effort to prevent a race war or further violence, and he also had far fewer voluntary troops at his disposal and lacked the support of his own legislature and the federal government. Boldness aside,

¹⁶⁷ Constitution of the State of Mississippi, Adopted November 1, 1890, Article IX, Sec. 217.

¹⁶⁸ *Biennial Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Mississippi for the Term Ending January 1st, 1892*, (Jackson: Power and McNeily, State Printers, 1892). University of California, 2018, 14.

Ames stood in an untenable and isolated position. Lowry, on the other hand, employed white troops bent on going to Leflore County whether in the militia or independently, easing the burden of recruitment. Lowry's swift action and availability of zealous troops in Leflore County then allowed him to make the state militia an arm of the state for protecting white Democratic interests, manipulating the phrase "to suppress riots and insurrections" exactly as Adelbert Ames had fourteen years before. The state militia thereby stood at the nexus of change and continuity in Mississippi as Reconstruction died and the Jim Crow era was born

Conclusion

Oliver Cromwell's experiences with the state militia offer a lens through which to study the development of white supremacy in late nineteenth century Mississippi. The Constitution of 1868 opened militia service to Black Mississippians and, in turn, allowed them to defend their civil and political rights. Republican Governor Adelbert Ames realized the usefulness of the state militia in preserving his and his party's power in the state, yet his mishandling of that militia "to suppress riots and insurrections" led to his ruin. Though numerous Black Mississippians expressed a desire to fill the militia's ranks, the threat of a full-fledged race war, the growing precariousness of his own political power, and a depleting personal belief in the militia's effectiveness prevented Ames from substantially deploying units. When Ames finally allowed the militia to muster, white violence decreased, if only for a moment, revealing a pattern wherein legal, state-backed military force intimidated paramilitary groups nearly every time they came in contact. Nevertheless, Ames's tentative commitment to the militia created a political and social climate that diminished political opportunity for black Mississippians.

The fall of Reconstruction in Mississippi signaled the fall of the state militia for a brief time. Paramilitary mob violence ruled as the primary body of enforcement in the state until the mid-1880s, when fusion tickets threatened the Democratic Party's stranglehold on state politics. The combination of those trends sparked renewed interest in the state militia as a functional arm of the state. By 1889, when Democratic Governor Robert Lowry perceived a need to reinforce his party's hegemony in Mississippi, he, like Ames, chose the state militia to perform a symbolic show of force in Leflore County,

Mississippi. However, though Democratic newspapers portrayed the militia as having arrived at Leflore County and made their point quietly, they remained after the governor left the county, becoming an active threat and resulting in the bloodshed of the Leflore County Massacre of 1889. The Democratic Party's militia-based success stifled black and fusionist political activity in the state, causing the state's legislators to preserve it in the new Constitution of 1890. The state militia then, while its written and unwritten purposes remained the same, transformed between 1865 and 1890 from a Republican tool for preserving African-American rights to a Democratic weapon for ensuring black disenfranchisement.

While many studies of the period and, more specifically, of the Clinton Riot of 1875 and Leflore County Massacre of 1889 diminish the militia's role, the extensive coverage that military companies received in newspapers suggest that they may have had an outsized role in shaping popular perceptions of these events. The Meridian, Vicksburg, and Clinton Riots of the 1870s sparked the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of Redemption, and the state militia stood at the center of both events. Throughout the 1880s, as the underrepresented in Mississippi challenged the Democratic Party, the state militia again became the primary response for meeting that challenge. Coverage of the Leflore County Massacre likewise stressed first the need for, then the presence of, the state militia, but with a very different make-up from the militia of the 1870s. Such accounts prove that the state militia was central to Mississippian's understanding of the turmoil surrounding them.

The phrase "to suppress riots and insurrections," found in both the 1868 and 1890 constitutions, remained the keystone for militia organization and deployment. The

Clinton Riot of 1875 and the Leflore County Massacre of 1889 offer two key instances when alleged rioting necessitated the militia. Both instances saw ex post facto militia involvement. While Oliver Cromwell's militia parade technically meant that militiamen were present at Clinton, their presence was not state ordered. Governor Ames's decision to muster the militia after the riot was not only ineffective in suppressing violence, it exacerbated racial tensions. Similarly, Governor Lowry sent the militia to Leflore County after an alleged black uprising, but when Lowry arrived with the militia in tow, no violence was to be found. Both parties then, deployed the militia under the "to suppress riots and insurrections" clause as a response to political pressure instead of a proactive arm of enforcement. The difference remained that the Democrat-heavy militia of 1889 perpetuated violence without (recorded) state sanction. Both parties keyed in on the same phrase and manipulated the militia in the same general way.

While examining the state militia offers crucial insight into late-nineteenth-century Mississippi, the narratives of both riots as written by contemporary sources speak to modern issues of race, representation, and civilian force. Composed of ordinary citizens, the state militia became an important institution for carving out individual rights among Mississippians. After 1865, both Republicans and Democrats in Mississippi sought paramilitary protection for their opposing political and social agendas through the Union League and Ku Klux Klan. However, the fate of the state militia in the late nineteenth century ultimately excluded African Americans from legal armed protection while providing sanction to white paramilitarism. The importance of citizen soldiering and citizen-based public enforcement may be seen in Mississippi's state militia., highlighting how state institutions allegedly for the protection of all citizens can be

manipulated to exclude and disarm certain populations. Regardless of the legislated purpose of the militia, African Americans were first protected, then attacked by that institution based on access to participation within it. For everyday citizens of both races, then, Mississippi's state militia in the late-nineteenth century became a present and important method for determining who would have rights and how those rights would be enforced.

The terms "riot" and "insurrection" used to muster the militia were almost entirely exaggerated based on the facts of each instance to which they were applied. At Clinton, Marion, Carroll County, and Leflore County, each respective white mob or militia far outnumbered those of African Americans. Furthermore, only at Marion did an African American incite violence by shooting (though accounts for Clinton and Carroll County were contentious). While black Mississippians faced nearly constant threats from extralegal mobs, Ayers notes that throughout the south, "when blacks did turn against whites, they risked terrible retribution from other whites."¹⁶⁹ The relatively small numbers of African Americans involved in the disputes could not justify the mass murders of innocent civilians who were often nowhere near the scene of the incident. In comparison, there are no recorded instances within this period of Mississippi's history where white mob violence, arguably more prevalent, was deemed insurrectionary or riotous. These instances, then, offer comparisons to modern ones where media representations depict African American protests as "riots" and stress criminality therein.

¹⁶⁹ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 155.

Individual representation also influenced the events of this study. Not only did the phrase “riot” connote lawlessness broadly for African American political organizing, individual descriptions of the events’ black participants augmented criminal rhetoric. For example, Charles Caldwell at the Clinton Riot was originally described as a peacekeeper, yet as black power grew through use of the state militia, newspapers retrospectively called him an instigator.¹⁷⁰ Ironically, in the aftermath of the Clinton Riot, it was African Americans’ insistence on lawfulness by waiting for the legal state militia rather than mimicking the lawless mob violence of many white contemporaries that ultimately contributed to their loss of political power. Oliver Cromwell’s descriptions likewise referred to him as an “ex-convict” on numerous occasions. To circumvent the political activity of two men fighting for their newfound rights, popular accounts discredited their character. These depictions created an association between African American political activity and criminality which haunts the United States even today.

The transformation of Mississippi’s state militia consequently coincided with the degradation of African-American opportunity in Mississippi, and one man’s extraordinary, though scarcely documented, life offers a prime illustration of how black Mississippians experienced this transformation. Oliver Cromwell embodies the transformation of Mississippi’s state militia as a member of that militia in 1868 and a victim of it in 1890. His legacy exists now only in oral family histories, and his death personified the determined, if failed, efforts of African Americans to protect their rights and their postwar gains. Cromwell’s escape from the horrors of Leflore County only

¹⁷⁰ “Departure of Militia,” *The Canton Mail*, October 16, 1875, 3.

bought him a week. Tracked down by white supremacists, his life ended in a gunfight where he took five of his attackers with him.¹⁷¹ From the Civil War, through the Clinton Riot of 1875, to the Leflore County Massacre of 1889, Cromwell fought literally and metaphorically until his final breath to secure rights for himself and all African Americans in Mississippi. Though newspapers of the period often presented him in an unfavorable light, they unknowingly preserved his myth and legacy, capturing a voice that still deserves to be heard

¹⁷¹ Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth*, 68.

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