

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CULTIVATING POLITICS: THE  
FORMATION OF A BLACK BODY POLITIC  
IN THE POSTEMANCIPATION LOUISIANA  
SUGAR PARISHES

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The capture of New Orleans by Union forces in 1862 led to the emancipation of thousands of slaves across Louisiana's sugar parishes. This early emancipation preceded the abolition of slavery elsewhere in the South, and it held far-reaching implications for the freedpeople of the sugar parishes. In this thesis, I argue that early emancipation fostered the rise of a powerful black body politic in the sugar parishes that would endure throughout Reconstruction and beyond. This body politic aimed to protect black people's unique conception of freedom as both white Southerners and white Northerners endeavored to circumscribe that freedom for their own purposes. In pursuit of this goal, the mobilized sugar workers employed a broad range of political tools, ranging from extralegal violence to labor organization. These methods proved effective and safeguarded the freedom of black sugar workers for decades after the Civil War despite attempts by both Democrats and Radical Republicans to dissolve and demarcate that freedom respectively.

CULTIVATING POLITICS: THE FORMATION OF A BLACK BODY POLITIC IN  
THE POSTEMANCIPATION LOUISIANA SUGAR PARISHES

By

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## Introduction

Reconstruction politics was inextricably linked to the widespread emancipation of black Americans during and after the Civil War. Not only were four million African Americans freed in the conflict's aftermath, but the debates that raged in congressional halls across the southern states also explicitly dealt with the question of these emancipated Americans' new status and role in society. In Louisiana, these legislative disputes pervaded the realm of high politics just as they did elsewhere across the South, but in the sugar-producing region of the state, contests over the meaning of freedom emerged not only within local government but also in the cane fields. Black sugar workers in Louisiana proved capable political actors, and throughout the postemancipation period, they would directly shape the history of the sugar parishes as well as the entire state. The region's unique history of emancipation made possible a cohesive, powerful political body composed of freedpeople in the sugar parishes.

John C. Rodrigue has cast Reconstruction in the sugar parishes as substantially different from the process that took place across the cotton South following the end of the Civil War, and this conclusion holds weight.<sup>1</sup> Whereas most historians neatly bookend Reconstruction with the departure of federal troops from the southern states in 1877, the sugar parishes saw an extended epoch of black labor organization and action.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, during Reconstruction landowners and governments implemented exploitative systems of labor such as sharecropping or scrip payments, yet these practices

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001): 2.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014): xxv.

failed to take hold in the sugar parishes. Instead, white plantation owners throughout this period were forced to negotiate with newly-emancipated black laborers in order to continue sugar cultivation. Rodrigue contextualizes this anomalous story of Reconstruction by arguing that the peculiarities of sugar cultivation limited the exploitative practices available to southern planters, and the nuances of sugar work certainly explain much of the region's history. But Rodrigue and other historians of Reconstruction in general have not fully explored the significance early emancipation had upon the region.

Emancipation began earlier in the sugar parishes than it did in the rest of the state and in much of the South. The fall of New Orleans to Union forces in 1862 eroded planters' control over their slaves as black sugar workers abandoned plantations and rebelled against their enslavers, forcibly claiming freedom. Legally, these individuals remained slaves, but with southern Louisiana firmly in the grasp of the Union Army under the command of General Butler, the old auspices of enslavement had diminished. Though the Union Army entreated black workers to return to their plantations, many refused and those that returned often did so determined to undermine the vile institution of slavery. This period of constrained and qualified freedom witnessed the emergence of a new political coalition. Early emancipation across Louisiana's sugar parishes fostered the growth of an African American body politic, composed of people who seized and defended their ideas of freedom against the machinations and political maneuverings of both white Southerners and white Northerners, broadly speaking. This body politic remained active throughout the period of Reconstruction, and its consistent presence

within the sugar parishes demands consideration when analyzing the history of the region.

Freedpeople in the sugar parishes emerged from the Civil War not as an inert labor force or a simple arm of the larger Republican Party but as a cohesive, yet multifaceted, political faction actively defining and defending their own interests, many of which revolved around notions of freedom. Black sugar workers held a specific notion of freedom, and this ideal differed markedly from the definition held by both southern planters as well as the Union Army. Historian Amy Dru Stanley has illustrated how contract emerged as a worldview in the postbellum world, and she argues that wages came to embody the antithesis of slavery for the vast majority of Americans during this era.<sup>3</sup> Yet, wages did not hold the same importance for the freedpeople of the sugar parishes as for white Northerners and the Republican Party. To the black emancipated laborer, freedom hinged on things such as one's ability to travel uninhibited between geographical locations or the opportunity to labor without the threat of corporal punishment.<sup>4</sup> For some freedpeople, the option to refuse work stood as a clear symbol of freedom and was one that directly conflicted with white republican perceptions of the concept. The Union Army and Republicans understood freedom as having the option to work for wages whereas black sugar workers often defined it as retaining the option to refuse to labor in general. Identifying the ways in which former slaves' ideas of freedom

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage, Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): x.

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 35-59.



differed from those of white Southerners and white Northerners helps to explain the tensions and violence that pervaded the sugar parishes during Reconstruction.

Hannah Rosen and other historians have written extensively on the brutal methods employed by white terrorists and nightriders, and scholars have identified not only the racial, but also political, implications of such actions. Some scholars have endeavored to understand the ways freedpeople adopted the tools of violence in their politics in the wake of emancipation.<sup>5</sup> Nightrider violence pervaded the American South after emancipation, but this period also witnessed burgeoning martial action on the part of freedpeople. As a result of wartime recruitment, thousands of black soldiers returned to their homes bearing military training and firearms, and many readily employed physical force to defend their rights as well as those of their friends and families as can be seen in Rosen's descriptions of the 1866 Memphis riots.<sup>6</sup> In Louisiana, the numbers of armed African Americans were massive, surpassing the majority of the cotton South with one in three adult black men in the state having been recruited into the Union Army in the years following early emancipation in 1862.<sup>7</sup> As a result, black demonstrations, congregations, and organizations in the sugar parishes during Reconstruction retained the support of an armed black soldiery. Furthermore, freedpeople utilized violence and the threat of violence to act politically when they were denied the vote and excluded from traditional political channels. Contests over firearms, violent retribution for corporal punishments,

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009): 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South*, ed. Ira Berlin, Thavolia Glymph, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, & Julie Saville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 40-41.

and the outright killing of individuals associated with the institution of slavery collectively demonstrated how black people in the sugar parishes martially defended their ideals of freedom in the face of racial violence and political exclusion. Still, violence proved to be only one tool in the impressive arsenal crafted by black sugar workers following their emancipation.

Though freedpeople demonstrated a willingness to employ violent methods to defend themselves and their rights, countless more found that organization and mobilization offered an effective route to forms of political power. Myriad historians have documented how black Southerners quickly permeated high politics during Reconstruction thanks to Republican support and the passage of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, but much of freedpeople's political strength stemmed from grassroots mobilization and action outside of governmental spheres.<sup>8</sup> The sugar parishes witnessed numerous marches, demonstrations, and processions organized by freedpeople during the postemancipation period, and these instances of mobilization deeply frightened not only Democrats and former enslavers, but also the Union Army and white Republicans. Such actions aided black sugar workers in exerting tangible power over the politics of the sugar parishes, but local black organization also retained symbolic meaning as it broadcast to white Louisianans that emancipated workers could and would effectively mobilize without white leadership.

Beyond targeted grassroots mobilization, black sugar workers found that one of their most efficient means of realizing their ideal of freedom was by capitalizing on their

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<sup>8</sup> Michael D. Cobb, "Race and Representation of Blacks' Interests During Reconstruction," *Political Research Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2001): 181-204; Foner, 251-260; Charles Vincent, "Negro Leadership and Programs in the Louisiana Constitutional Convention of 1868," *Louisiana History* 10, no. 4 (1969): 339-351.

status as laborers. Sugar production remained a constant concern for white Democrats and Republicans, but the black citizenry often did not share this preoccupation. Freedpeople understood the significance of the sugar crop even if they did not value it in the same capacity as white Louisianans, and these differing values permitted freedpeople to demarcate their freedom and defend it against incursions. Time and again, black laborers of the sugar parishes found ways to threaten the sugar crop, granting them a bargaining chip in labor relations with both white Southerners and white Northerners. For the recently enslaved, labor organizing and collective bargaining held inescapable political connotations, and freedpeople were keenly aware of this connection. To combat efforts by planters or the Union Army and Republicans to circumscribe black political action, freedpeople effectively utilized their economic significance to the state as a labor force.

This thesis will show how black sugar workers created and employed a vast arsenal of political tools, ranging from violence to labor organization, to claim and defend their freedom in the postemancipation period. Additionally, it argues that the various degrees of success black sugar workers found in their defense of freedom largely resulted from the benefits of early emancipation in 1862. The first chapter of this work focuses on black political organization during wartime and illustrates how freedpeople's experiences with both sugar planters and the Union Army led to the formation of an independent body politic composed of black sugar workers. The subsequent chapter centers on this body politic and its actions throughout Presidential and Radical Reconstruction, highlighting the variety of ways in which black people acted politically in the sugar parishes. The third chapter delves into how the freedpeople of Louisiana's

sugar parishes continued to politically mobilize in the face of burgeoning white terrorism, the fracturing of the state's Republican Party, and state efforts to quash black labor organization. Finally, the epilogue contextualizes freedpeople's struggle throughout the Reconstruction period by highlighting the elongated epoch of black political mobility following the official end of Reconstruction, as well as why this mobility eventually dissolved in 1887. Themes such as the political utility of violence, the significance of firearms to freedpeople, and the inextricability of the connections between black labor and black politics pervade this thesis. Yet, the central argument revolves around how black laborers of the sugar parishes defined freedom and the methods they used to both seize and safeguard it.

Freedpeople did not rely on the Union Army or Republicans to defend their rights following early emancipation, and instead they used varied political tools ranging from labor organization to outright violence in an effort to undermine their former enslavers. They ousted overseers, seized and stockpiled weaponry, organized demonstrations, and in some cases, responded to extralegal violence with their own brand of martial action. This mobilization often directly conflicted with Republican desires for political supremacy and the enshrinement of contract and free labor in the sugar parishes of Louisiana.<sup>9</sup> These schisms gave rise to a tripartite political system in Louisiana's sugar parishes that consisted of white Republicans and the Union Army, Democrats and former enslavers, and the emancipated black sugar workers. This political body of black laborers emerged in the sugar parishes because freedpeople's experiences following early emancipation led them to realize extensively that they held their own ideas of freedom distinct from those

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<sup>9</sup> Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970): xxii.

of white Northerners and white Southerners. During and after the Civil War, black sugar workers used this knowledge and their experiences as soldiers, voters, politicians, and laborers to mobilize in pursuit of their conception of freedom, a mission that lasted throughout Reconstruction and beyond.

## Chapter 1: Defining Freedom After Early Emancipation, 1862-1865

A few months after the fall of southern Louisiana to Union forces in 1862, in the midst of the sugarcane harvest season, four slaves stood trial before a military commission in New Orleans. The four men all stood accused of murdering their overseer, William P.D. McKay, and the evidence arrayed against them boded ill. Local police reported they found the body in a cart on the Estrella plantation just outside the city, along with a stockpile of weapons, firearms, and gunpowder. Although this evidence would have proved wholly damning not even a year prior and likely would not have culminated in a trial, the fact that this case came before Union army officers promised the potential for a different outcome. After just a few testimonies, the officials reached a verdict, acquitting three of the accused while sentencing one, Freeman Washington, to be “hung by the neck until dead.”<sup>10</sup>

The military commission’s verdict appears perplexing when not contextualized by the testimonies of the witnesses called during the trial, and no witness proved more significant or more problematic for the accused than Henry Clement Millandon. As the son of the plantation’s owner, Millandon took it upon himself to visit the Estrella plantation and respond to overseer McKay’s complaints that the slaves had grown too rebellious and unruly to control. Upon his arrival, Millandon summoned one of the plantation’s alleged troublemakers, a slave by the name of George Windberry, and inquired as to why Windberry had refused to obey the overseer, yet Windberry aggressively denied the charges. Millandon then ordered Windberry to cease his “rough

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<sup>10</sup>Excerpts from proceedings of a military commission in the case of George Windberry et al., 21 & 24 Nov. 1862, MM-499, Court Martial Case Files, ser. 15, RG 153 {Freedmen and Southern Society Project, H-5}.

manner,” and when he refused, Millandon attempted to corporally punish him.<sup>11</sup>

Unwilling to submit to such punishment, Windberry resisted the violence, and the two men brawled. The fighting ceased when Millandon drew his gun on Windberry which in turn prompted Windberry to fetch his axe. Both parties walked away from the scrap unscathed, but Millandon, fearing he had lost his control over his father’s slaves, hurried to gather a police force that would allow him to reestablish order on the plantation. When he returned, police force in tow, Millandon came upon McKay’s corpse and the four defendants standing over the body, one of whom was George Windberry.

Had this case appeared before a Louisiana court earlier that year, if it even made it that far, likely all four slaves would have been executed. At the very least George Windberry could have expected execution after physically assaulting the son of his enslaver and subsequently being implicated in the murder of an overseer. Unlike the Louisiana courts, however, the Union military commissions allowed for slaves to testify as witnesses, and the testimonies of these enslaved witnesses paint a very different picture of the events described by Millandon. According to the testimony of an enslaved carpenter on the plantation, after Millandon fought with Windberry and left the plantation, overseer McKay announced to the slaves, “Master came down here to correct his boys, but he didn’t correct them yet- for I will correct them or shoot them.”<sup>12</sup> A few hours after making this statement, McKay opened fire on the slaves at the Estrella plantation. One of those slaves, Freeman Washington, was merely walking home past McKay’s hut when he realized he was being targeted. The gunfire persisted, and in response, Washington hurried home and retrieved his own musket he had secretly

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

purchased years prior. Washington returned to McKay's house and issued himself an ultimatum. "...if he shoots at me again I will shoot him."<sup>13</sup> Following this promise, McKay shot and injured another nearby slave before turning his gun on Washington once more and firing. McKay missed. Washington did not. After killing him, Washington moved McKay's body to a nearby cart and waited for the police force to arrive. .

The most revealing aspect of this case stems from the fact that the military commission only condemned Washington and not any of his compatriots. Overall, the slaves' testimonies align fairly well, and the recorded injuries give credence to the claim that McKay had indeed opened fire upon the plantation's slaves. Why did the commission condemn Washington's actions, done in self-defense and in defense of his fellow slaves, yet absolve George Windberry who physically assaulted the son of his white master? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that only Windberry's behavior adhered to the Union Army's republican vision for Louisiana.

The Union Army and Republicans desired free labor in the sugar parishes, and Windberry's actions, despite their violence, demonstrated resistance against the concept of corporal punishment, the cornerstone of un-free labor. The commissioners could support such resistance, particularly when no party ended up seriously injured or dead, but they could not extend that support to a black man using a firearm to kill a white man. Both Windberry's and Washington's actions held deep political implications in the context of Union occupied lower Louisiana. Windberry undoubtedly recognized the dangers involved in defying a white enslaver when he defended himself against Millandon, and Washington's self-issued ultimatum, in conjunction with the fact that he

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



refused to flee the scene after the shooting, suggests he too comprehended the significance of his actions. The decision to execute Washington not only reveals the military commission's possible fears of racial upheaval, but also their opposition to particular brands of black political action.

Early emancipation upended the social order of lower Louisiana, and the southern planters, Union Army, and freed slaves all held their own respective vision for the region's future. With the majority of the cotton South still firmly under confederate control, the Louisiana sugar parishes witnessed myriad political and labor contests as these three factions sought to exert their power. The desire of the remaining southern planters was clear enough; to preserve as many elements of the slave system as possible in order to both retain their capital and guard the region's racial hierarchy. The Union Army, on the other hand yearned to establish a lasting system of free labor, but they also faced a harsh reality. For their military efforts to succeed, sugar production needed to continue, and they required black labor to cultivate the cane. Caught between the agendas of these two forces, the emancipated slaves aspired to freedom, but they quickly discovered the need to clearly define and demarcate that freedom. Some perceived the system of wage labor constructed by the Union Army as the clear antithesis of slavery, but countless more labeled corporal punishment and sugar work itself, under any auspices, as stamps of enslavement. The tensions between these three powers shaped the politics of the sugar parishes during wartime, but more importantly, freedpeoples' experience organizing and acting politically following early emancipation in Louisiana fostered the rise of a body politic composed of mobilized black sugar workers. This

newly formed political entity, supported by armed black soldiers, actively resisted the machinations of both white southern planters and the Union Army.

The tensions between the Union Army and the black population of the sugar parishes arose immediately after the capture of New Orleans in April of 1862, and these tensions would come to radically affect how emancipated sugar workers viewed the Union Army, and later the Republican Party. Flag Officer David Farragut, Major General Benjamin Butler, and other leaders of the assault undoubtedly felt a surge of accomplishment and pride at denying the Confederacy their greatest port, but now they faced the daunting task of administering the city and the surrounding parishes. Complicating matters further, the city witnessed a massive influx of slaves from nearby parishes such as Lafourche and Terrebonne who sought refuge and protection from the occupying Union Army. Some of these women and men had seen an opportunity for freedom and fled the slave labor camps on which they had been imprisoned while others had been left behind by their fleeing enslavers and were driven to New Orleans out of desperation. This dramatic migration of black people to New Orleans presented a unique situation to General Butler, who then held the title of Commander of the Department of the Gulf.

To General Butler, the slaves arriving to New Orleans were many things; refugees that required care, a labor force, and most importantly, a potential army. Over the course of 1862, Butler incorporated hundreds of black men into the Union Ranks, providing them with training, uniforms, and firearms.<sup>14</sup> By the fall of 1862, Butler had established

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<sup>14</sup> *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South*, ed. Ira Berlin, Thavolia Glymph,

the First Louisiana Native Guard, composed entirely of African Americans, the majority of whom had just recently been emancipated. The arming and training of black slaves realized every white planter's worst fear, and perhaps even worsened Butler's reputation among the Confederacy's supporters in New Orleans, if that was possible. Nonetheless, Butler found that many of the slaves arriving in New Orleans required little persuasion to join the Union ranks. Despite their recent escape from bondage, African American men clamored for the chance to take up arms against those who had enslaved them. Yet, Butler had to temper his desire to recruit as many soldiers as possible to support his military endeavors with the very real fact that the sugarcane harvest season was fast approaching.

Faced with the desperate need to not waste the massive quantities of raw sugarcane sitting un-harvested on the plantations of nearby parishes Butler directed much of his energies to finding ways of convincing, or compelling, many of the black refugees to return to their labors. This challenge presented a number of problems, particularly for someone like Butler, who ardently despised the system of slavery. Although many of the arrivals to New Orleans thought themselves free, and indeed in many respects were, legally they remained enslaved. In response to this quandary, Butler entreated the slaves to return to their plantations, yet provided strict instructions to those plantation owners that remained that they would need to provide their workers with wages. He also leased many of the abandoned plantations to northern capitalists, giving them the same instructions to provide wages to their laborers.<sup>15</sup>

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Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, & Julie Saville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 347-377.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

The success of Butler's experiment in free labor yielded mixed results in regards to the efficient continuation of sugar production, but Butler nonetheless expressed pride at having reshaped the sugar parishes into something more befitting of his Republican vision.<sup>16</sup> In a letter he sent to President Lincoln, just a few days after he signed off on Freeman Washington's execution, Butler touted that his implementation of free labor in the sugar parishes had resulted in increased sugar production, surpassing even that produced by slave labor.<sup>17</sup> Along with the letter he included a barrel of processed sugar, claiming that it was the first to be produced by "*free black labor* in Louisiana and the fact that it will have no flavor of the degrading whip will not, I know render it less sweet to your taste."<sup>18</sup> Butler may have been correct in stating that traditional corporal punishment had been abolished in the sugar parishes, but in that same letter he directly states that he reserved the right to imprison uncooperative black workers "in darkness and on bread and water." As much as he wished to cast himself in the role of a true emancipator, in the end, someone had to harvest the cane. Still, many of the workers willingly returned to the plantations where they had once been imprisoned, many bearing the legal status of slave, hoping that the Union Army would fulfill its promise to protect them from the brutality of the white planters.

After the capture of New Orleans, white sugar planters correctly predicted that they would start to lose control over their slaves, and they responded to this possibility in

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<sup>16</sup> Maj. Genl Benj. F. Butler to The President, 28 Nov. 1862 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc 70.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.; Jas. H. Bradford to U.S. Sequestrian Commission, 3 Feb. 1863, *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc. 83. Butler's claims of increased sugar production have little supporting evidence, bar the slight increased production on select plantations in nearby Lafourche Parish.

<sup>18</sup> Maj. Genl Benj. F. Butler to The President, 28 Nov. 1862 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc 70.

multiple ways. For those who refused to either submit to Union rule or simply valued their slaves too highly to lose them, fleeing the region seemed the safest course of action. Those who fled often took with them only those slaves they considered valuable, often abandoning the old, sickly, or crippled.<sup>19</sup> The slave owners who remained, either out of inability to travel or simple unwillingness to abandon their plantations, found that the presence of the Union Army indeed had eroded much of their mastery over their slaves.<sup>20</sup> Once news of the Union's success reached the nearby parishes, tens of thousands of slaves abandoned their plantations for New Orleans, and those that stayed often outright refused to work.<sup>21</sup> Planters' horror at the actions of their slaves was only compounded by the regiments of armed, black soldiers that Butler had amassed and by the end of 1862 sent into the sugar parishes to protect the cane and those who harvested it. The mobilization of workers and the might of the Union Army ensured the partial destruction of planter's traditional means of control and so these former masters would have to find other means of compelling their workers to labor.

For white planters in the sugar parishes, wages proved an ill-suited substitute for the "degrading whip."<sup>22</sup> Corporal punishment had simultaneously ensured labor efficiency and reified planters' notions of white supremacy, and both the planters and slaves considered the practice one of the primary signifiers of enslavement. With its

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<sup>19</sup> H. Styles, "Report Dick Robinsons Plantation," 18 Aug. 1863 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc 97.

<sup>20</sup> John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001): 178. Rodrigue argues that these former enslavers desire for mastery quickly eroded as well, at least among those that experienced economic success.

<sup>21</sup> *Wartime Genesis of Free Labor, The Lower South*, 347-377.

<sup>22</sup> Maj. Genl Benj. F. Butler to The President, 28 Nov. 1862 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc 70.

disappearance, slave owners could incentivize their workers only through the promise of wages, but planters found that wages often were not enough to compel black women and men to labor as they had prior to emancipation. Some freedpeople associated the cultivation of sugar under any circumstances with their enslavement and so refused to toil in the same fields that they had worked as slaves.<sup>23</sup> Others considered wages a defining element of freedom and once again began working the sugar plantations, but such a labor system did little to maintain planters' now fragile conception of superiority. Whippings and other forms of punishment may have proved highly effective in extracting labor under slavery, but for many planters, the practice's true utility stemmed from its ability to maintain the constructed racial hierarchy of the sugar parishes. Following emancipation, planters certainly feared a drop in their workers' efficiency, but they absolutely dreaded the fact that they could no longer physically exert their dominance. Henry Clement Millandon, for example, did not try to "rake George over the head with his whip" because George refused to work. He did so because George had been speaking to white men in a "rough manner," and just like George, large numbers of emancipated sugar workers refused to submit themselves to the unsanctioned cruelty of the planter class.<sup>24</sup>

Newly freed slaves shared the white planters' understanding of corporal punishment as a defining aspect of slavery, and therefore actively sought to eliminate the practice within the sugar parishes. General Butler may have technically abolished the practice in 1862, but with the Union Army struggling to maintain control over the hostile

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<sup>23</sup> John C. P. Wederstrandt to Brig. Genl. Shepley, 19 Sept. 1862 in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867*, Ser. 1, Vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery*, ed. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): doc. 66B.

<sup>24</sup> Excerpt from the case of George Windberry.

city of New Orleans, let alone the nearby parishes of Lafourche, Terrebonne, and Jefferson, curbing the brutality of white planters fell to the workers themselves. Some freedpeople accomplished this goal by simply refusing to submit to corporal punishment, as George Windberry did, and relying on the shadow cast by the Union Army's presence. Other emancipated workers took to the offensive and staged strikes, insurrections, and in some instances, took part in violent assaults on plantation owners and their white employees. For example, during a strike on a plantation just outside New Orleans in September of 1862, a worker by the name of Auguste physically attacked an overseer in an effort to commandeer his gun.<sup>25</sup> The gun, in Auguste's eyes, was the means by which the overseer maintained control over the plantation. Appropriating a white man's weapon by force not only provided tangible benefits for a black worker, it also held a powerful symbolic significance. Overseers and slave drivers, as the violent instruments of plantation owners, embodied the brutality of the slave system, and as a result, became a primary focus of black worker resistance. On a personal level, workers undoubtedly felt deep animosity towards overseers who had executed punishments prior to emancipation, but workers also recognized the position of overseer as a signifier of slavery. Some freedpeople refused to allow overseers to even step foot on the plantation, and others simply aimed to strip from them their power.<sup>26</sup>

Multiple instances exist of workers confronting or ousting the overseers on their respective sugar plantations, but there are also a few fascinating examples of workers from separate plantations cooperating in order to effectively banish overseers from entire

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<sup>25</sup> John C. P. Wederstrandt to Brig. Genl. Shepley, 19 Sept. 1862 in *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 1: doc. 66B.

<sup>26</sup> Fannie to My dearest Ma, 12 Jan. 1864 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc 106C.

regions of the sugar parishes. Even prior to emancipation, black slaves formed complex social networks that linked plantations to one another, and these networks allowed for sugar workers to more effectively secure and defend their rights after emancipation. While enslaved, black women and men regularly met with fellow slaves from nearby plantations in secret, and many established modes of communication.<sup>27</sup> Freedpeople used these types of connections to coordinate their efforts in resisting the white planters, much to those planters' chagrin. Former enslavers could manage isolated acts of labor organization or resistance, but concerted efforts on the part of black sugar workers from multiple plantations across the sugar parishes grew difficult to contain as can be seen on the plantation of Aragon in Lafourche Parish. A northern lessee had operated the plantation since emancipation, but in 1864 the original owner of Aragon, Fannie, returned and secured a one-year lease on the land. Immediately, she hired an overseer for the plantation, an action that did not go unnoticed by her workers. In a letter to her mother, Fannie recounted the overseer's ordeal during his arrival.

“He says, when he came in sight of the plantation, the bell commenced ringing furiously, and by the time he crossed the bridge every man, woman, and child on the plantation had collected around the overseer's house. Before he reached the house, one of the men seized the bridle and told him he should not set foot in that house, that the quarter belonged to them and no d----- white man should live there.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 60.

<sup>28</sup> Fannie to My dearest Ma, 12 Jan. 1864 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc 106C.



According to Fannie, similar events had taken place on nearby plantations, including that of her brother-in-law's, and many workers had declared that "no overseer or white man shall come on the places."<sup>29</sup>

The coordination between Aragon Plantation and Hope Farm, Fannie's brother-in-law's plantation, frightened her, particularly because it appeared as though the actions of both groups of workers constituted "a concerted movement between the two places."<sup>30</sup>

Such a cooperative effort demonstrates how sugar workers could and did move as a singular, cohesive political body when they perceived threats to their freedom.

Furthermore, the speed and efficiency with which residents of these plantations militarized, using the bell as a form of alarm system, exemplifies how sugar workers acted politically even when they lacked the support of armed soldiers and were denied the vote. This form of synchronized action demonstrated precisely what white Democrats feared would happen after emancipation, the coalescence of a body politic of emancipated black workers that threatened the structure of white superiority in the sugar parishes.<sup>31</sup>

For the most part, Northerners in Louisiana did not share white Southerners' profound dread at the degradation of the antebellum racial hierarchy, but both groups recognized the clear economic value of sugarcane. The same black labor that had fostered wealth and prosperity for the sugar parishes and white Southerners held comparable value for the Union army. Sugar production needed to continue, and although many officers abhorred the institution of slavery, they needed to tap into the economic potential of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Fannie stated in her letter, "The entire parish is interested in putting this down."

black bodies in the sugar parishes, forcibly if necessary. The Union Army's aim to profit from sugar production compelled them to circumscribe black workers' power at the behest of both southern planters and northern capitalists. With so many plantations abandoned in the sugar parishes, the Union Army began leasing the lands to northern entrepreneurs who sought to profit from the social and economic upheaval.<sup>32</sup> The lessees had access to both the sugarcane and the labor force capable of harvesting it, but they were only able to fully make use of both with the aid of Union soldiers ensuring worker efficiency. According to the Chaplain of a Union regiment stationed in Lafourche Parish, "On plantations managed by energetic men who desired free labor to succeed, the negroes worked well, especially where a soldier or two had been stationed to preserve order."<sup>33</sup> The chaplain, however, argued that these soldiers needed to be white as he saw that black soldiers "incited those at work faithfully to spend their time in idleness telling them not to work as they were free."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it appears as though white Union soldiers had begun to fill the newly vacated positions of overseer. Black soldiers, on the other hand, often used their martial power to disrupt the machinations of the southern planters and northern lessees since both parties attempted to use and exploit black labor for their own financial gains.

Northern lessees, just like southern planters, took advantage of the tenuous position of freedpeople during wartime, but black soldiers fought against such manipulation just as they did against white planters. Northern capitalists certainly

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<sup>32</sup> Capt. T. K. Filler to Maj. Gen. Butler, 19 Nov. 1862 in *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3: doc. 68.

<sup>33</sup> Jas. H. Bradford to U.S. Sequestrian Commission, 3 Feb. 1863, *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3: doc. 83.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

professed a desire to see wage labor reign supreme in the sugar parishes, but like their southern neighbors, they also sought to utilize force as a means of coercion. As J.A. Pickens, a northern lessee in the sugar parishes stated in a letter to Major General Nathaniel Banks, Butler's successor, "I cannot go ahead with the work on this place unless I can control the labor I pay for."<sup>35</sup> Pickens had apparently physically assaulted a number of his female workers, but he soon found that such violence would not go without a response.<sup>36</sup> After hearing of the violence, a nearby band of black soldiers made their way to Pickens' plantation and abducted him. "I was arrested taken to the Camp where they threatened to shoot me and then with no punishment nor did they charge me with any crime; and I do not know what the arrest was made for." Regardless of whether or not Pickens was feigning ignorance of his crime, the meaning of the retaliation had certainly not been lost on him. "I suppose it was to show the hands that they the Soldiers were masters and, that obedience was due to them, and not me."<sup>37</sup> Pickens likely was correct in his assumption that the workers took note of such a spectacle, and in fact this demonstration should be understood as black soldiers utilizing their status to act politically. The soldiers clearly understood the implications of their actions, and the entire ordeal broadcast two things to the spectators of the incident. First, white Northerners did not always show themselves allies to black workers, and second, black folks could use their martial power to undercut attempts by both northern and southern plantation owners to coerce them through violence.

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<sup>35</sup> J. A. Pickens to Major General Banks, 5 Jan. 1863 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc. 77.

<sup>36</sup> Lieut. Charles L. Stevens to Lieut. J. H. Metcalf, 27 Jan. 1863 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc. 83; Col. F. S. Nickerson to Capt. W. Hoffman, 29 Jan. 1863 in *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3: doc. 83.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

African American soldiers' presence on sugar plantations emboldened and supported resistive actions taken by sugar workers, and the substantial number of black Louisianans recruited into the Union ranks further bolstered such support. The contributions of freedpeople to the war effort were extensive as the large numbers of black men recruited into the Union Army became integral to efforts on both the national front and within Louisiana. Countless black Louisianans ended up serving in the military over the course of the Civil War. In fact, nearly a third of all male freedmen in the state ended up joining the war effort, one of the largest contributions of black soldiers from any state.<sup>38</sup> The African American regiments of lower Louisiana proved particularly significant as the responsibility of ensuring the success of the free labor experiment in the sugar parishes fell largely on them. Butler tasked the Louisiana Native Guards, the black military units he commissioned, with ensuring that the fair cultivation of cane in the sugar parishes proceeded uninhibited. Black soldiers fulfilled this directive and others given by Union officers, but they also utilized their training and weaponry to pursue their own goals, most notably defending the rights and bodies of their fellow freedpeople.

The guns and training the Union army provided black soldiers became formidable tools of liberation in the sugar parishes, as soldiers used their power to forcibly emancipate those who remained in bondage. Black soldiers, sometimes with the consent of their superior officers and sometimes without it, commonly returned to the plantations where they had been enslaved, wearing Union colors and bearing muskets, and freed their wives, families, and friends. Plantation owners often could do remarkably little to stop them, as Mr. E. Villerie of St. Bernard Parish discovered when the 1<sup>st</sup> Louisiana Native

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<sup>38</sup> *Wartime Genesis of Free Labor, The Lower South*, 40-41.

Guards arrived on his plantation in August of 1863. Bearing a signed pass from their commanding officers, five black soldiers arrived at Villerie's front door, loaded their muskets, and demanded that he release "some colored women they called their wives."<sup>39</sup> Faced with the military might of armed black regiments, Villerie and his peers often had no choice but to acquiesce to the demands of the soldiers. Those demands, however, sometimes extended beyond the simple emancipation of slaves, and could often impede sugar production.

By emancipating other slaves, commandeering goods, and encouraging workers to cease laboring, black soldiers effectively obstructed sugar cultivation. Planters regularly complained to Union officers that the arrival of black soldiers on their property meant a marked decrease in productivity.<sup>40</sup> Obviously, freeing slaves from bondage denied the plantation owners access to their labor, but soldiers would also seize goods such as carts or mules for themselves or for the Union Army.<sup>41</sup> Even the very presence of black soldiers proved detrimental to worker efficiency as many laborers refused to work, opting instead to spend their time with soldiers at their encampments.<sup>42</sup> Some soldiers seem to have encouraged such behavior among workers and had few qualms about denying planters access to the African American labor that had been exploited by white

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<sup>39</sup> Capt. Geo. G. Davis to Brig. Gen. James Bowen, 21 Aug. 1863 in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867*, Ser. 2, *The Black Military Experience*, ed. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982): doc. 55.

<sup>40</sup> W. J. Minor et al. to Maj. Genl. Banks, 14 Jan. 1862 in *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3: doc. 79.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> J. A. Pickens to Major General Banks, 5 Jan. 1863 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc. 77.

plantation owners for generations. Yet, denying that same labor to the Union Army, black soldiers' employers and self-proclaimed emancipators, posed a far greater challenge.

Emancipation, and the body of unemployed black workers it produced, presented concerns for a number of Union officers, and they took steps both to exert control over black bodies in the sugar parishes as well as profit from their labor. White southern planters, northern capitalists, and Union officials all shared the belief that, as one northern lessee put it, "The negroes must have immediate employment to prevent their necessities from forcing them into acts of robbery."<sup>43</sup> Though many sought to employ black workers out of a desire for free labor, many more simply feared the prospect of an unemployed, independent coalition of black workers. Southern planters, northern businessmen, and the Union Army, collectively felt, "It would be prejudicial to every interest to turn them [black workers] loose upon the coast."<sup>44</sup> Major General Nathaniel Banks, Butler's successor and an officer that proved far less sympathetic to the plight of freed slaves, presented a solution to the problem as one of his first acts as Commander of the Department of the Gulf. He issued an order in late January of 1863, explicitly stating that the sugar workers remained slaves due to their exemption from the Emancipation Proclamation despite the fact that so many had already rebelled and fled from their masters. The Order goes on to proclaim

"The public interest peremptorily demands that all persons without means of support be required to maintain themselves by labor. Negroes are not exempt from this law. Those who leave their employers will be compelled to support

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<sup>43</sup> Geo M. Chapman to Major Gen. N. P. Banks, 3 Jan. 1863 in *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3: doc.76.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

themselves and families by labor upon the public works. Under no circumstances whatever can they be maintained in idleness, or allowed to wander through the parish and cities of the State without employment. Vagrancy and crime will be suppressed by an enforced and constant occupation of employment.”<sup>45</sup>

This edict reveals Banks’ clear desire to capitalize on the potential labor of emancipated families, but it also illustrates his anxiety at the prospect of a free and mobile alliance of black sugar workers. By declaring that all freedpeople must remain in service to their former masters, northern capitalists, or the Union Army, Banks endeavored to limit black organization and collective action in the sugar parishes.

Being forced to labor on behalf of the Union army presented as great a challenge, if not greater, than the arduous process of sugar cultivation, and the similarities between the life of an antebellum slave and the life of a laborer for the Union Army were by no means lost on black Louisianans. The Union Army tasked black workers with difficult jobs such as building up levees, maintaining forts, or even cultivating crops on the plantations they had escaped, with many required to live in former slave quarters. The military compelled black workers to labor from sun up to sun down, yet few saw any recompense from such labors and most found themselves living in squalor.<sup>46</sup> Illness, along with starvation, grew rampant in such settings, and it disproportionately affected some groups worse than others. Black women, in particular, endured a disproportionate amount of suffering as they regularly received less supplies, clothing, and provisions

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<sup>45</sup> Excerpt from General Orders No. 12, Headquarters, Department of the Gulf, 20 Jan. 1863 in *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3: doc. 81.

<sup>46</sup> Lieut. Charles L. Stevens to Lieut. J. H. Metcalf, 27 Jan. 1863 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc. 83; Col. F. S. Nickerson to Capt. W. Hoffman, 29 Jan. 1863 in *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3: doc. 83.

from the Army than their male counterparts.<sup>47</sup> Such horrid conditions persisted throughout the war effort and eventually drew the attention of black freedmen in New Orleans.

Following a meeting on March 17<sup>th</sup> in 1865, a group of free black residents of New Orleans sent a letter to Major General Hurlbut decrying “the labor system established by Maj. General Banks- which does not practically differ from slavery, except by the interdiction from selling and whipping to death, the laborers...”<sup>48</sup> Despite the powerful language of the letter, the response from Hurlbut was less than encouraging. He vehemently rejected the proposals and resolutions the freedmen had outlined such as their hope for the dissolution of the Bureau of Free-Labor that had been established by Banks, and even more striking, he rejected the notion that black freedmen in New Orleans in any way spoke on behalf of the recently emancipated sugar workers. “As it is you do not in any respect represent the “Emancipated Freedmen of Louisiana,” nor are you doing your cause any good.”<sup>49</sup> Though there may have been a ring of truth in Hurlbut’s words, that free black men in New Orleans could not necessarily fully comprehend the struggle of the newly freed sugar worker, this point appears as an endeavor on the part of Hurlbut to fragment and suppress black political action. Like Banks, the northern capitalists, and even southern planters, Hurlbut did not wish to see an *active* black body politic in the sugar parishes effecting change. He, like so many others, intended for black Louisianans to remain divided and inert, a tool for the Union Army and later, the Republican Party.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.; Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>48</sup> James H. Ingraham and Dr. A. W. Lewis to Major General S. A. Hurlburt, 21 Mar. 1865 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc. 139.

<sup>49</sup> M. G. Comd’g S. A. Hurlbut to James H. Ingraham and Dr. A. W. Lewis, 23 Mar. 1865 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc. 139.



This hidden sentiment can be seen in the conclusion of Hurlbut's response in which he urges black freedman not to make claims or take actions, but instead wait for society to adapt to their presence. "It is more than probable that an entire generation must grow up under new auspices before all this ill effect can be done away."<sup>50</sup> To his dismay, in the years following the Civil War's conclusion, black Louisianans would not passively await the materialization of these "new auspices" and outright refused to simply "wait and work" as Hurlbut had urged.<sup>51</sup>

A veritable revolution took place in the sugar parishes during the process of emancipation, and three distinct political factions emerged in its wake, each with their own respective conceptualization of freedom. For black Louisianans, particular rights demarcated freedom, and these rights went far beyond the simple granting of wages. To the emancipated worker, the freedom to labor without the threat of corporal punishment, the ability to move through and between plantations unhindered, and the right to bear arms against those who sought to re-enslave them collectively stood as the signifying elements of freedom.<sup>52</sup> Neither the plantation owners nor the leaders of the Union Army shared this exact same perception of freedom, and both groups would work to prevent its realization in the aftermath of the war, though in different ways. The southern planters would strive to directly bind and re-imprison their former property, and the Union Army along with the Republicans who succeeded their rule, would endeavor to defend free labor in the sugar parishes while also circumscribing and limiting black political action. Yet, emancipated sugar workers, armed with the military training and experience of the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Statements of A Colored man and one of the union Colored friends, {Sept. ? 1863} in *Freedom*, Ser. 2: doc. 54D.

wartime years, entered into the period of Reconstruction keenly aware that they would need to both work alongside Republicans to ensure the defense of their aforementioned rights from southern Democrats as well as pursue those goals that diverged from the Republican agenda. As one freedman succinctly expressed, “there are three things to fight for and two races of people divided into three Classes one wants negro slaves the other the union the other liberty.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 2: Postbellum Political Arsenals, 1865- 1868

In the Spring of 1865 just before the Civil War's conclusion, Nathaniel P. Banks, former head of the Department of the Gulf, published a letter directed towards Senator James Henry Lane of Kansas in an effort to assure the legislature of what he believed to be the promising state of affairs in Louisiana. Having been placed in charge of Reconstruction efforts by President Lincoln, Banks felt it was his duty to keep Congress informed, and he undoubtedly feared that a negative impression of Louisiana's current state would reflect poorly on his own reputation. In his letter, Banks defended against circulating suspicions that the recent election of Military Governor Michael Hahn had been subject to fraud, and he provided statistics to prove the trustworthiness of the election's results. Furthermore, Banks endeavored to refute notions that northern parts of Louisiana remained outside of Union control despite the recent Red River Campaign.<sup>54</sup> In his response, Banks made the case that "Occupation and control are essentially different things. Occupation is the work of the people; control is the work of the army."<sup>55</sup> In the years following the war's end, three distinct groups occupying the sugar parishes would vie for precisely such control, calling on support from their respective armies. Though freedpeople received the right to vote during this postbellum period, the body politic composed of black sugar workers continued to utilize a broad range of political tools as they guarded their freedom against efforts by these rival factions to either limit or dissolve that freedom.

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<sup>54</sup> Ludwell H. Johnson, *Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1999): 277-289.

<sup>55</sup> Nathaniel P. Banks, *The Reconstruction of the States: Letter of Major-General Banks to Senator Lane* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1865).

Black sugar workers, Democrats, and white Republicans each sought to exert their collective wills over the sugar parishes, and in doing so, each faction retained a different arsenal of political weapons. Democrats, comprised largely of planters and ex-confederates, quickly grasped the utility of extralegal violence during the early years of federal Reconstruction, relying on nightrider violence in an effort to limit Republican power and force African Americans once again into bondage. Louisiana Republicans, on the other hand, endeavored to seize and maintain their power over the state by operating within the realm of high politics and relying on federal support for their actions, an approach that would prove particularly effective during the period of Radical Reconstruction beginning in 1867. Black sugar workers proved incredibly varied in their tools. They mobilized as laborers, attempted to martially defend themselves as soldiers, and eventually permeated the spheres of high politics at multiple levels following the passage of the Reconstruction Acts. These three groups grappled for power during the postwar years, and though white Republicans and black sugar workers often allied themselves with one another, they also regularly undermined each other.

Faster than their rival factions, freedpeople of the sugar parishes mobilized after the war's end and deftly employed those political tools and skills honed during wartime emancipation. John Rodrigue and others scholars may emphasize the ways that sugar production proved conducive to political action during this period, but sugar workers' experience acting politically in the years prior to official Reconstruction efforts in Louisiana allowed them to make full use of their legal freedom and find unique ways to defend it. Throughout this period, black women and men in the sugar parishes grappled with the meaning of freedom and foiled attempts by both white Southerners and white

Northerners to circumscribe that freedom. Some utilized their status as veterans to carve out a life for themselves and their families while others persistently mobilized on their plantations to prevent a return to enslavement, and some relied on the extensive kinship networks that had been fashioned during slavery and strengthened after emancipation. Such varying forms of political action remained ubiquitous throughout the sugar parishes after the war and proved particularly effective during Presidential Reconstruction.

As one of the earliest southern regions to fall to the Union Army during the Civil War, military governance and Reconstruction efforts in Louisiana began well before the conflict's conclusion at Appomattox, and this head start on the process produced a number of results. Early emancipation provided a number of tangible advantages for black sugar workers as the fact that the Reconstruction process began early and under military authority held substantial implications.<sup>56</sup> The Constitutional Convention in 1864 faced a number of major questions, but the most pressing and controversial revolved around the legal status of black Louisianans. White Unionists comprised much of the legislature, and they quickly agreed to abolish slavery throughout Louisiana, an act that, despite its significance, in some ways proved redundant. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 may have exempted the sugar parishes, but most black workers in those parishes had already declared themselves free in 1862 with the fall of New Orleans to Union forces and had been operating in various forms of wage labor since. As a result, abolition of slavery proved a relatively easy decision for the convention, but the legal status of freedpeople presented a far greater conundrum. The white Unionists may have agreed to the destruction of slavery, but many bristled at the

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<sup>56</sup> On traditional periodization of Reconstruction; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014): xxv.

prospect of legal equality for African Americans. In the end, the Constitution of 1864 refused to grant equal political rights to black residents of the state, only granting the vote to those African Americans that had fought for the Union, owned property, or were literate.<sup>57</sup> It is worth noting that a substantial number of black men had fought for the Union during the war, approaching nearly a third of all adult black men in Louisiana, but the vast majority still were excluded from the political processes of the state under the constitution.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the Constitution allowed for the inclusion of a number of “Black Codes” specifically intended to circumscribe the rights of black Louisianans. These Black Codes clearly facilitated black exploitation as it denied black Louisianans basic rights granted to white citizens such as the right to post bail.<sup>59</sup> Though the most radically conservative factions were absent from the wartime convention of 1864, white Unionists demonstrated that their opposition to secession did not equate to a desire for racial equality. This constitution, and the Black Codes that accompanied it, would reign in the sugar parishes throughout Presidential Reconstruction.

Andrew Johnson’s succession to the presidency following Lincoln’s assassination directly impacted the sugar parishes, particularly in regards to the means of resistance available to black sugar workers. As multiple historians have shown, President Johnson’s plan for Reconstruction was highly lenient for returning southern rebels and surprised many Republicans in Congress, particularly the Radicals. Furthermore, Johnson directly

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<sup>57</sup> Germaine A. Reed, “Race Legislation in Louisiana, 1864-1920,” *Louisiana History* 6, no. 4 (1965): 379-392.

<sup>58</sup> *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South*, ed. Ira Berlin, Thavolia Glymph, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, & Julie Saville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 40-41.

<sup>59</sup> Reed, 379-392.

opposed the extension of black suffrage, and the constitutional conventions held across the southern states produced systems that largely mirrored the ones put in place by Louisiana in 1864. The president's continued resistance to black civil rights would also contribute to the widespread disarming of black veterans and white Unionists across the South in 1866.<sup>60</sup> Despite these severe impediments, black laborers continued to organize and exercise what power they could within the cane fields of Louisiana.

In 1865, the landscape of the sugar parishes had been irrevocably altered from what it had been less than five years before. Although Butler, Banks, and other Union officers had endeavored to perpetuate sugar cultivation, by the war's end, only about a tenth of plantations seemed to remain in active use.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the sugar cane harvest from 1864 to 1865 was notoriously disappointing, but beyond an undesirable season, most planters predictably cited the emancipated status of their laborers as the principal cause of their diminished yields. As William J. Minor, one of the largest planters in Terrebonne, put it, "The negroes were just emancipated & you could not make them work & they would not work."<sup>62</sup> Beginning with Butler, the Union Army had maintained confidence that once introduced into the parishes, wage labor would render the region even more productive than during the antebellum period, but that hope had not yet materialized into reality.<sup>63</sup> Banks had even created an early form of sharecropping,

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<sup>60</sup> Douglas Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014): 184; Carole Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013): 150.

<sup>61</sup> Excerpts from testimony of Wm J. Minor, 25 Apr. 1865, in *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3: doc. 140.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Excerpts from testimony of Thomas W. Conway, 28 Jan. 1865, in *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3: doc. 135.

hoping it would prove incentivizing, but what Banks, along with virtually all Union officers, had failed to realize was that some black workers refused to perform the same labors they had done as slaves, regardless of the auspices. According to Minor, when Banks emphasized to black workers that, because of the sharecropping system, failing to bring in the harvest for the planter would result in a loss for the worker as well, some laborers asserted that they “could afford to lose it.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps these laborers refused to labor out of a distaste for the specific type of work that had dominated so much of their lives up to that point, or it could be that many laborers desired to see their former enslavers financially hemorrhage. Regardless, this anecdote reveals that black workers in the sugar parishes often did not venerate contract or wages in the manner of both the Union Army and the planters. They saw themselves as less dependent upon the crop yields or the plantation’s profit margins than those attempting to extract their labor. This deep division in prioritized values permitted black workers to act politically within their status as laborers. Sugar cultivation depended on the cooperation of freedpeople, and that need for cooperation granted black sugar workers political power. Unfortunately, planters were at times able to circumvent such power through terrorism, particularly during the early years of Reconstruction.

Although the Union Army had demonstrated its willingness to coerce black Louisianans to labor during the Civil War, they had consistently maintained their stance against corporal punishment as they shared freedpeople’s conception of the practice as an unmistakable hallmark of enslavement.<sup>65</sup> Yet, planters quickly came to view the state and

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> W. J. Minor et al. to Maj. Genl. Banks, 14 Jan. 1862 in *Freedom*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3: doc. 79.



local police as semi-suitable replacements for the “degrading whip.”<sup>66</sup> One of the most common responses of planters in the face of worker resistance and organization was to threaten eviction, and they would often rely on military personnel, such as Provost Marshals to carry out the deed. According to Minor, threatening to bring down the local police or the Marshall was one of the few effective means of compelling their laborers to work. Beyond this local appeal, white planters also turned to the government to aid them as they reestablished control over their domains. For example, ever since the arrival of the Union Army in 1862, Minor had made a habit of entreating federal officers like Banks to aid in supporting their control over labor, and by 1865, planters were petitioning the Governor to disarm and decommission black military personnel.<sup>67</sup> Though many of these petitions and entreaties proved unsuccessful, their prevalence demonstrates a growing understanding among planters that official martial forces, whether they be the local police, the state militia, or the Union Army, held the key to controlling labor in the sugar fields.

The reliance on this new means of coercion allowed planters to further subjugate and exploit black laborers though in different ways than they had under slavery. Some planters actually utilized black workers’ new status as wage laborers in an effort to further compel freedpeople to work. For example, rebel planter John Humphries returned to his farm, the Roseland Plantation, following the war’s conclusion and immediately demanded rent from all of former slaves remaining on the plantation, threatening eviction

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<sup>66</sup> Maj. Genl Benj. F. Butler to The President, 28 Nov. 1862 in *Freedom*, Ser.1, Vol. 3: doc 70.

<sup>67</sup> Petition of the Citizens [White] of Lafourche & Terrebonne Parishes to Gov. Wells, July 1865, B-57, Letters Received, ser. 1757, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pr. 1 {Freedmen and Southern Society Project, C-621}.

should they decline. Such ultimatums were not uncommon, and though they presented problems for all black workers, the threat was particularly dangerous for women on the plantation. With nearly a third of the black male population in Louisiana recruited into the Union Army, many black women such as Emily Waters of the Roseland Plantation struggled to earn enough to maintain a livelihood. Waters explained her precarious position in a letter to her husband in the Union Army. “I got all the work I can and am doing the best I can to get along, but if they turn me out I don’t know what I shall do.”<sup>68</sup> In this letter Waters demonstrates that despite her new emancipated status, her financial and social conditions rendered her livelihood dependent upon the whims of her former enslaver. Freedwomen were by no means the only workers that struggled to secure rent for returning plantation owners, but one must acknowledge the additional difficulties placed upon female black laborers in the sugar parishes.

Most sugar planters’ actions stemmed from a clear desire to exert control over black workers and to define labor relations in the sugar parishes, but many white Louisianans across the sugar parishes sought to suppress black social, political, and physical mobility. The vagrancy laws in effect across the state and the Black Codes established by the Louisiana Constitution of 1864 demarcated spatial limitations for black Louisianans. Early forms of segregation, such as the Star Car system of New Orleans, were commonplace in Louisiana throughout Presidential Reconstruction, but beyond these physical confines, white Louisianans subjected black sugar workers to extralegal

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<sup>68</sup> Emily Waters to My Dear Husband, 16 July 1865, and Alsie Thomas to My Dear Brother, 30 July 1865, in *Freedom*, Ser. 2: doc. 305.

force in order to suppress their political mobility.<sup>69</sup> Black schools quickly grew into one of the primary targets for white terrorist attacks as they embodied the potential for black advancement in the postemancipation world.<sup>70</sup> Those freedpeople who attended newly-formed schools risked being subjected to all manner of violence at the hands of angry whites, and some white terrorists endeavored to physically destroy schools that popped up across the parishes, at times succeeding. A witness to such violence, William Wright, reported that in his town animosity toward Freedmen's schools was so great that a local man by the name of Robert Moore had burned down the actual schoolhouse.<sup>71</sup> Even in the face of such violence, however, black sugar workers attended schools in droves, and in fact, the brutality of white violence seems to have done little to quell black people's attempts benefit from their new freedom.<sup>72</sup>

Black sugar workers consistently utilized their status as laborers as tools of political action, impeding or even halting production to accomplish specific goals, but they also organized political rallies, even before Congress granted them the right to vote. Ties of kinship that existed between sugar workers and that spanned multiple plantations had facilitated labor organizing under slavery, and those ties grew even stronger following emancipation. In the sugar parishes, labor organization and political organization had become inextricable for freedpeople. For generations the majority of black Louisianans had held the status of laborer, which rendered any political

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<sup>69</sup> "The Star Car Question, *New Orleans Republican* (New Orleans, LA): May 01, 1867.

<sup>70</sup> Giles Vandal, "Black Violence in Post-Civil War Louisiana," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 25, no. 1 (1994): 45-64.

<sup>71</sup> William Wright to Capt H. R. Pease, New Orleans, LA, 21 Oct. 1865, M-14 1865, Letters Received, ser. 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1 {Freedmen and Southern Society Project, C-621}.

<sup>72</sup> Foner, 35-37, 65.

organization tantamount to labor organization. This indissoluble association between labor and politics for black sugar workers resulted in their ability to quickly and efficiently mobilize during the early years of Reconstruction even without direction from the Republican Party.<sup>73</sup>

In Houma, Louisiana, as the sugar harvest approached in 1865, a large group of freedmen held a meeting within the city “convened as some of them understood, for the purpose of voting for a president.” Although this meeting upset a number of local white residents, a Union captain who witnessed the event described the group as “very orderly throughout the meeting.” He also attested in his report that “...they had nothing definite in view, but a vague impression that something of vital importance to them was about to be accomplished.”<sup>74</sup> Though such organizations at the time may have lacked specifically defined political goals, both the participants and onlookers recognized the significance of such demonstrations. Often times these meetings would be scheduled during working hours, much to the dismay of both white planters and the Union Army. The aforementioned meeting in Houma and the lack of labor that resulted from it cost the parish an estimated \$20,000. White Louisianans despised such monetary losses, but the idea that black workers displayed their ability to congregate and organize proved even more harrowing for them. Indeed, because congregation and organization in and of itself held political and financial implications for white Louisianans, sugar workers could act politically without direction or leadership from white leaders of the Republican Party.

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<sup>73</sup> John C. Rodrigue, “Labor Militancy and Black Grassroots Political Mobilization in the Louisiana Sugar Region, 1865-1868,” *The Journal of Southern History* 67, no.1 (2001): 115-142.

<sup>74</sup> J. Rhodes, Capt. & Provost Marshal to Capt. B. B. Campbell, Houma, LA, 21 Oct. 1865, L-516 1865, Letters Received, ser. 1757, Dep. of Gulf, RG 393 Pt. 1 {Freedmen and Southern Society Project, C-653}.

Within Houma as well as throughout Terrebonne Parish, black workers mobilized and organized, but their formation into an interconnected political body of workers terrified white residents. In response to this political action, planters looked to Governor Wells to intervene. White citizens of Terrebonne once again wrote to the Governor, imploring the state to intervene and break up these politicized groups. They complained of the “demoralized condition of affairs – in the parish of Terrebonne,” highlighted the sugar workers’ brandishing of weapons, and promised “incalculable mischief” would ensure if they did not intervene. Interestingly, one petitioner tied military intervention to success of the sugar crop. As he put it, “...I feel that the next six weeks will decide whether we are to have any agricultural prosperity the coming year, & I fear a far greater calamity awaits, in that time.”<sup>75</sup> This language not only illustrates that the sugar planter perceived black mobilization as irreconcilable with economic prosperity, but it also reveals that this particular sugar planter felt that this connection would resonate with the Republican Governor. Following these reports, the state sent an investigator to examine the veracity of these claims, and his report reveals much about the actions of black workers in the sugar parishes at this time.

Captain Kanady, the investigator assigned to the case, arrived in Terrebonne in late 1865 and endeavored to determine “whether there were any grounds for the reports made, that the blacks of that locality intended rising against the white, during the coming

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<sup>75</sup> Duncan S. Gage et al. to his Excellency J. Madison Wells, 15 Dec. 1865, enclosing J. G. Gayden to Hon- G. W. Monday, 1 Dec. 1865, and Robert N. Ogden to The Hon. D. S. Cage, Duncan F. Kenner, and Tobais Gibson, 4 Dec. 1865, in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867*, Ser. 3, Vol. 1, *Land and Labor, 1865*, ed. Steve Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O’ Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, Leslie S. Rowland (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008): doc. 255A.

holidays.”<sup>76</sup> Keeping his mission a secret Kanady interrogated a number of white townsfolk, planters, as well as black workers. He quickly discovered that the rumors of insurrection were unfounded, but he did believe violence would erupt in the parishes soon, namely due to instigations made by white residents. White citizens of Terrebonne had organized a militia and had begun patrolling armed through the parish. Kanady explained in his report that the sugar workers believed this armed body of white men, most of whom still openly wore confederate uniforms, designed to “crush out what freedom they now enjoy and reduce them once more to slavery.” Kanady seems to dismiss this prospect in his report, almost characterizing black workers’ fears as indicative of paranoia, and he stresses that black residents will resort to violence if they deem it necessary. According to Kanady’s report, “...the blacks unhesitatingly avowed their determination, to me, to resist and if necessary, meet force with force.”<sup>77</sup> This example aptly demonstrates that even during Presidential Reconstruction, without substantial protection from the Union Army or Radical Republicans in Congress, black Louisianans politically mobilized and displayed a willingness to defend themselves and their interests. A coordinated martial response to planter violence, however, became considerably more difficult following the widespread disarmament of African Americans in Louisiana.

Just as many black veterans had returned to their homes with their weapons, countless rebels also returned trained and armed, and following the seizure of many African Americans’ guns in the sugar parishes, violence quickly engulfed the region. For

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<sup>76</sup> Capt. Thomas Kanady to 1st Lt. Z. K. Wood, 23 Dec. 1865, and Capt Thomas Kanady to Lt. Z. K. Wood, 28 Dec. 1865, in *Freedom*, Ser. 3, Vol. 1: doc. 255B.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

the most part, the violence was relatively one sided with some statistics showing black Louisianans comprised nearly three-fourths of all homicide victims in the state. Historian Giles Vandal's statistical analyses also indicate that despite making up approximately sixty percent of the state's population, only one-fourth of all homicides had been committed by African Americans.<sup>78</sup> Although these statistics apply to the state as a whole, not specifically the sugar parishes, regions such as Lafourche and Terrebonne witnessed a comparable degree of violence to that of the rest of the state, though the numbers do not seem to have matched northern regions such as Caddo Parish, nicknamed "Bloody Caddo" during this period.<sup>79</sup> Beyond maintaining closely-knit ties of kinship, African Americans had little means of defending themselves against the nightriders and lynch mobs without firearms to match those of the white terrorists hunting them.<sup>80</sup> Without the means of martially resisting these attacks and lacking the protection of the local police, those suffering at the hands of white terrorism turned to the Union Military to intervene. One white Unionist who witnessed the brutality transpiring in the sugar parishes implored General Sherman to intervene in Terrebonne. "We think if you knew the many threats nay actual violence that Union men + freedmen are subjected to you would cause some change to be made." In making his case he cited the fact that "law does not allow us to carry a pistol for self-defense yet the returned Rebel Officers +

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<sup>78</sup> Giles Vandal, "Black Violence in Post-Civil War Louisiana," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 25, no.1 (1994): 45-64.

<sup>79</sup> Giles Vandal, "'Bloody Caddo': White Violence Against Blacks in a Louisiana Parish, 1865-1876," *Journal of Social History* 25, no. 2 (1991): 373-388.

<sup>80</sup> Michael J. Pfeifer, "The Origins of Postbellum Lynching: Collective Violence in Reconstruction Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 50, no. 2 (2009): 189-201.

soldiers here nearly all carry revolvers + their right to do so is never questioned.”<sup>81</sup> Still, the lack of firearms failed to stymie resistance and political coalescence on the part of black Louisianans, and in July of 1866, organized black Union veterans opposed armed Confederate veterans in the city of New Orleans, leading to a bloody massacre that would contribute to the reshaping of the United States Constitution.

Radical Republicans in Louisiana, dissatisfied with the Constitution of 1864 reconvened the Constitutional Convention hoping to enfranchise black Louisianans and abolish the black codes, and though the convention failed to do so, the Republicans indirectly accomplished their goal. Hoping for the convention’s success, black Louisianans had mobilized, marching outside of the Mechanics Institute in New Orleans. In response white Confederate veterans convened and attacked the black demonstrators resulting in dozens of deaths and numerous injuries, the vast majority of which had been sustained by black marchers. This incidence attracted a great deal of public attention, and reverberated across the nation. The viciousness of the attack and reported gore of the whole scene rendered the event a popular news topic, and descriptions of the bloody massacre would continue to be reprinted in newspapers for years to come. For example, one alleged Confederate participant in the murders published a story describing various gruesome scenes such as “... a man on his knees and praying for his life with clasped hands was, while in the attitude, killed by a shot in the bowels at the hands of the man he was imploring to spare him...”<sup>82</sup> Such accounts often contained suspect scenes and

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<sup>81</sup> Robert W. Bennie, A. A. Gaidry et al to Maj. Gen’l T. W. Sherman, Houma, 14 Jan. 1866, Letters Received, ser. 1860, Southern Division of LA, RG 393 Pt. 2 No. 95 {Freedom and Southern Society Project, C-1009}.

<sup>82</sup> “A Washington Chronicle Sensation: Chapters of History, Narrative of a “Louisiana Tiger,” *New Orleans Republican* (New Orleans, LA), October 31, 1868.



inconsistencies, but the injuries and deaths connected to the Riot were indeed horrific and implanted themselves in public memory.<sup>83</sup>

The convention ended in absolute disaster and tragedy, but the eventual results of the incident permitted the passing of legislation that dramatically altered the course of Reconstruction in the sugar parishes as well as the nation. Coupled with the Memphis riots similar in nature, public opinion shifted regarding President Johnson and Reconstruction.<sup>84</sup> By the summer of 1866 Congress had already demonstrated its power when it overturned the President's veto in order to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1866, effectively removing the black codes that had filled state constitutions across the South. Just months after the riots in New Orleans and Memphis, Republican strength in Congress received additional bolstering as Republicans, many of whom identified as Radical, flooded the Senate and House of Representatives. The Congressional elections of 1866 allowed Republicans to dominate the legislature, which in turn allowed the passing of the Reconstruction Acts and eventually, the Fourteenth Amendment. Radical Reconstruction redefined labor and political relations in the sugar parishes, and though the black marchers of the New Orleans Riot certainly did not all originate from the sugar parishes, they demonstrated the same skill at mobilization and organization that sugar workers had demonstrated since emancipation. Furthermore, the sugar parishes surround the city of New Orleans, and countless numbers of sugar workers poured into the city following the city's capture by the Union in 1862. Indeed, New Orleans undoubtedly

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. The New Orleans Republican itself expressed doubt about the narrative's veracity.

<sup>84</sup> Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009): 54-60.

stood as the political nerve center of Louisiana, and that fact was surely not lost on sugar workers. Black political organization and action in the sugar parishes would burgeon during Radical Reconstruction, in part due to Federal support, but also due to sugar workers' accumulated experience mobilizing as free, politicized laborers.

Throughout Radical Reconstruction, black Louisianans exercised considerable power within the realm of the state's high politics, and though their actions often aligned with the designs of the national Republican Party, differences in visions for the future arose. Over the course of this period, one hundred and twenty three black men served on the state legislature, and these politicians, though often hailing from the upper echelons of free black society regularly acted in the interests of their recently emancipated constituents.<sup>85</sup> With a few exceptions, black legislators consistently identified and voted Republican, but one should also note that black politicians also seemed to have emphasized different issues than the standard white Republican. For example, black state legislators regularly argued for greater social programs, and some would operate outside of party lines to ensure legislation passed that facilitated black advancement across Louisiana.<sup>86</sup> Although these diverging interests may have caused some frustration for white Republicans in Louisiana, the actions of black legislators caused them far less concern than the grassroots political mobilization in the surrounding sugar parishes.

Radical Republicans certainly desired black Louisianans to go out to the polls and vote in large numbers, but many clearly felt uncomfortable at any unsanctioned labor or political organization and the prospect of an uncontrolled, independent black body politic

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<sup>85</sup> Charles Vincent, "Negro Leadership and Programs in the Louisiana Constitutional Convention of 1868," *Louisiana History* 10, no. 4 (1969): 339-351.

<sup>86</sup> Michael D. Cobb, "Race and Representation of Blacks' Interests During Reconstruction," *Political Research Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2001): 181-204.

operating in lower Louisiana. The majority of Republicans certainly sought to maintain black enfranchisement, but Republicans had to balance their support for black civil rights with their desire to see sugar production continue. In their minds, black women and men needed to remain inert as laborers, but active as voters. Sugar cultivation needed to continue and grow to promote the prosperity of the state, and labor organization or political action outside of voting impeded that process. The language of a speech made by Colonel J. P. Boyd at a meeting of Republicans at Carrollton in New Orleans betrays the Republican conception of an ideal black population of Louisiana. Boyd spoke to a multiracial crowd, but his words are quite clearly directed at black attendees. He pronounced that Democrats feared “that huge black elephant” as they believed it would lead to an upheaval of civilization, but according to Boyd, “Radical Republicans say “let him come”- he behaved in the late war.” In this excerpt, Boyd reveals he sees African American men as deserving of the vote because they “behaved,” essentially claiming that black enfranchisement should be dependent upon black docility. He goes on to claim that Democrats wished to “provoke you to acts of mad rashness,” and he urges the largely African American crowd to “...disappoint them by continuing calm, peaceable, industrious, and becoming educated.”<sup>87</sup> From this quote, one can see what Boyd envisions as an ideal black community in Louisiana, one that labors passively and looks to white Republicans for political guidance. The black communities of the sugar parishes, however, stood in sharp contrast to Colonel Boyd’s vision.

Labor organization and action on the sugar plantations persisted during Radical Reconstruction, and although black workers had greater support from the federal

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<sup>87</sup> “Republican Mass Meeting at Carrollton,” *New Orleans Republican*, (New Orleans, LA), August 31, 1867.

government, officials of that government often hindered black labor movements as opposed to aiding them. The Freedmen's Bureau, though responsible for the well-being of emancipated workers and defending against exploitation, at times instead facilitated white planters' exploitation of freedpeople. A labor conflict on the Orange Grove Plantation in Plaquemines Parish demonstrates both how emancipated workers collectively advocated for their interests as well as how their efforts could be undercut by agents of the Federal Government. In 1867, approximately eighty sugar workers ceased all labors and demanded that the plantation owner grant them higher wages, amounting to a difference of three dollars per month. The owner then sent for a representative from the local Freedmen's Bureau who later arrived and discovered that the owner threatened to evict the workers if they continued to refuse to labor. "The Freedman said they would not sign unless for Eighteen Dollars per month and Rations, and in a body they informed me that they were born and raised on the plantation and would fight before they would leave."<sup>88</sup> Though the Freedmen's Bureau agent, Ira McClary, professed to defend the rights of emancipated workers, he sided completely with the local planter, issuing the workers an ultimatum that they would be forced out of their homes if they did not sign the planter's desired contract. With the Bureau seemingly arrayed them, the workers had little recourse left, and therefore signed the contract. After the conflict's conclusion, McClary reported "seeing them (the workers) go quietly to work" and included in his report a personal desire to see those responsible for organizing the strike "severely

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<sup>88</sup> 2nd Lt. Ira D. McClary to Capt. William H. Sterling, 10 March 1867, in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867*, Ser. 3, Vol. 2, *Land and Labor, 1866-1867*, ed. René Hayden, Anthony E. Kaye, Kate Masur, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, Leslie S. Rowland, Stephen A. West (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008): doc. 143.

punished.”<sup>89</sup> Despite the fact that McClary served as an arm of the Federal Government during Radical Reconstruction, he directly impeded black labor organizing, and his language again reveals a common sentiment amongst Republicans in Louisiana, namely a desire for the black population to labor “quietly” and refrain from mobilization.

Instances of Freedmen’s Bureau agents misusing their authority or failing to adequately defend black laborers from their former enslavers were not uncommon, but black residents of the sugar parishes nonetheless continued to organize. Some groups of African Americans amassed considerable power in their respective rural communities, and they often used their acquired political or social clout to defend their interests and their own physical well-being. Events in Thibodaux, Louisiana, during the summer of 1867 illustrate just how formidable organized black women and men were in the sugar parishes during Radical Reconstruction as well as how disconcerting black political movement could be for Democrats and Republicans alike. A violent assault acted as the catalyst for the unrest in Thibodaux as an intoxicated Confederate veteran by the name of Niles physically attacked Charles Daniels, a black Union veteran, and slashed at him with a knife. In response, Daniels fled to the local coffee house owned by Albert J. Brooks, another Union veteran. Coffee houses in Louisiana simultaneously operated as local businesses, meeting places, as well as community nerve centers, and as the owner, Brooks held a significant position within African American community in Thibodaux. After informing Brooks of the events, Daniels asked for “a pistol to defend himself,” but

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Brooks urged caution and proposed an alternative plan, hoping to resolve the conflict without violence.<sup>90</sup>

Albert J. Brooks elected to meet directly with the white mayor of the town and demanded the arrest of the former Confederate Niles, a decision that resulted in an unexpected turn of events. Pressured by Brooks, the mayor of Thibodaux conceded and issues an arrest warrant for Niles. Once he had been arrested, an assembly of black residents of Thibodaux surrounded him and followed him to the local jail to ensure that the perpetrator of the crime was indeed incarcerated. At the same time, another group of black women and men surrounded Charles Daniels to provide support and protect him in the event that white citizens sought retaliation. Despite the commotion, once Niles had been successfully jailed, and the black community felt confident that there would be no immediate violent retaliation, the assemblages dispersed and returned home. These events demonstrate the degree of power organized black folks of the sugar parishes potentially wielded. Even during Reconstruction, few southern black communities held the police clout or martial strength to effectively compel a white mayor to accede to such a request. Unfortunately, Brooks and Daniels' victory proved short-lived, due in part to the racism of Lafourche officials, but in an even larger capacity, due to the prejudices and actions of a Freedmen's Bureau agent.<sup>91</sup>

Following the conclusion of the days events and the black community's' return to their daily activities, the mayor alerted local Freedman's Bureau Agent J. W. Rich about the earlier events. Upon hearing the story Rich produced an affidavit that led to the arrest

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<sup>90</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Nathaniel Burbank to Col. G. A. Forsyth, New Orleans, La, 19 June 1867, B-32 1867, Letters Received, ser. 4498, 5th Military Dist., RG 393 Pt. 1 {Freedom and Southern Society Project, SS-2014}.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

of Albert J. Brooks, Charles Daniels, and one other black Union veteran who had simply accompanied Brooks during his trek to the mayor's office. Rich's affidavit claimed that Brooks had organized a riot and upset the peace in Thibodaux, and the document contained eyewitness accounts despite the fact that Rich did not witness the account himself. By the authority of this falsified affidavit, the three veterans were arrested and were brought before a local ex-Confederate judge. Placed in jail at the behest of the judge and with the support of Rich, the three men languished in a cell, denied the chance to pay their bail. Luckily, the Union Army had been alerted to the situation and sent an investigator to uncover the nature of the incident. Despite being fed the narrative presented in the affidavit, the investigator uncovered the actual events of the case, ordered the judge to release the three men after pointing out that the black codes that allowed for the judge to deny them bail had been struck down by the Civil Rights Act of 1866, and succeeded in ousting J.W. Rich from the Freedmen's Bureau. Although this particular anecdote ends well (considering the alternatives), it also clearly demonstrates that some representatives of the Federal Government, similarly to southern planters, felt threatened by black mobilization in the sugar parishes.<sup>92</sup>

On the whole, the general scholarly consensus on Radical Reconstruction in Louisiana holds up well.<sup>93</sup> Republicans and the Union Army during this period indeed promoted and defended black rights in the sugar parishes and beyond, but one should never identify these forces as the primary casual motor behind black political elevation across lower Louisiana. Black citizens of the sugar parishes seized upon the chance to organize and exert political power just as they had done a few short years prior during the

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Foner, 228-271.

Civil War. Even throughout Presidential Reconstruction, when black women and men had little to no practical governmental resources to defend themselves against planter exploitation and brutality, sugar workers persisted in their mobilization and regularly sought to participate in the political processes of Louisiana. In short, the ways in which black laborers in the sugar parishes wielded political power during Radical Reconstruction mirrored those methods they employed and refined after their practical emancipation in 1862. Radical Reconstruction did indeed bring with it systems of defense against such vicious behavior, but the arbiters of these systems often failed to aid sugar workers and at times, directly endeavored to facilitate their subjugation. Nonetheless, the Reconstruction Acts offered African Americans across the South the support they needed to break into the high politics of the states, and predictably, white Democrats and planters responded to their entrance into the political theaters with murder, mayhem, and terrorism. Indeed, persistent violence and politicized, but multifaceted, responses on the part of freed people to that violence remained constants of wartime emancipation, Presidential Reconstruction, and Radical Reconstruction in the cane fields of Louisiana.



### Chapter 3: Defending Freedom in the Cane Fields, 1868-1874

The Reconstruction Acts of 1867 enfranchised African Americans across Louisiana's sugar parishes, solidifying black sugar workers' status as a political entity, but this new body of black voters struggled against increased levels of violence orchestrated by white terrorist organizations. Although white Southerners had consistently employed extralegal violence as a means of subjugating black Louisianans since emancipation, this new brand of systematized, yet unsanctioned brutality demonstrated a clear purpose, curbing black political participation. These concerted efforts, however, largely failed due predominantly to the efforts of black Louisianans themselves who utilized their newly-granted political rights, their strained alliances with the Republican Party and Federal forces, and grassroots political mobilization to defend their persons and interests. Political schisms and party rifts complicated the high politics of this period with the clear lines between white Democrats and white Republicans blurred, but for the most part, in the face of this turmoil black Louisianans in the sugar parishes remained a politically cohesive whole. This cohesiveness stemmed from black sugar workers' keen understanding of the political power they retained as an organized faction. Indeed, black sugar workers had accumulated extensive experience organizing over the years and had been politically mobilizing successfully since early emancipation in 1862. Throughout Radical Reconstruction and beyond, black sugar workers continued to shape the political topography of the sugar parishes as the laborers that comprised it ferociously defended their tenuous status of freedom.

In the Spring of 1868, black Louisianans exercised their power in the realm of high politics as they fought to restructure the very constitution of the state. During

Radical Reconstruction, the Federal Government divided the southern states into five military districts and ordered that each state call a constitutional convention, but unlike in 1864, this convention would hear the voices of black delegates.<sup>94</sup> African Americans delegates from the various Louisiana parishes comprised half of all participants at the convention, and as a result, they had substantial influence over the new Constitution.<sup>95</sup> Of these 49 black delegates, many were military veterans, a status that garnered them respect from their black constituents as well as a number of white Republicans at the convention. Through organization, argument, and sheer numbers, these black delegates fashioned a constitution that supported universal male suffrage, established state-funded schools that outlawed segregation, and labeled discrimination based on race “upon any conveyance of a public character” unconstitutional.<sup>96</sup> This new constitution, brought about by the concerted efforts of black Louisiana politicians, provided an of weapons for black sugar workers and created new theaters for political conflicts throughout Radical Reconstruction. Although black women and men had pushed for integrated education and transportation before the convention of 1868, Louisiana’s state constitution now explicitly outlined and enshrined those rights.<sup>97</sup>

Following the conclusion of the State Constitutional Convention, Louisiana’s gubernatorial election commenced, and African American citizens turned out in large

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<sup>94</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014): 316.

<sup>95</sup> Charles Vincent, “Negro Leadership and Programs in the Louisiana Constitutional Convention of 1868,” *Louisiana History* 10, no. 4 (1969): 339-351.

<sup>96</sup> “Constitution Adopted by the State Constitutional Convention of the State of Louisiana, March 7, 1868.” Internet Archive. Accessed March 25, 2018. <https://archive.org/details/constitutionadop1868loui>.

<sup>97</sup> “The Star Car Question,” *New Orleans Republican* (New Orleans, LA): May 01, 1867.

numbers to participate in the political processes they had been barred from for centuries. The vast majority of black Louisianans aligned themselves with the Republican party and their proposed candidate, Henry Clay Warmoth. Originally from Illinois, Warmoth had worked as an attorney and served as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Union Army at one point serving on the provost court at the Department of the Gulf. At 26, he was considerably younger than his Democratic opponent James G. Taliaferro, but despite his age, Warmoth won a substantial victory, finishing with over 20,000 more votes.<sup>98</sup> Through this election, black Louisianans demonstrated their collective capacity to shape the state's politics. Furthermore, the number of black representatives permeating the state legislature and the position of black political leader Oscar J. Dunn as Warmoth's Lieutenant Governor, broadcast to the state, and the nation, how politically conscious and formidable freedpeople had become in Louisiana. Yet, this visibility in politics also spurred terrible acts of violence perpetrated by southern planters and Democrats, particularly those in the sugar parishes.

White terrorism grew rapidly in 1868 across the southern states, and in Louisiana these groups proved particularly effective at employing torture, murder, and terror as political tools. After witnessing the rise of Henry Clay Warmoth and the power of black Louisianans to influence elections, many white Democrats in Louisiana turned to extralegal means in the hopes of preventing a similar outcome for the Presidential election later that year. Membership in terrorist groups such as The Knights of the White Camelia, a group that originated in St. Mary's Parish just adjacent to Terrebonne, surged during this period, and their brutality took the form of a broad range of crimes ranging

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<sup>98</sup>Glenn Conrad, *Louisiana Biographical Dictionary*, (St. Clair Shores, MI: Somerset Publishers, 1999): 223–224.

from assault and arson to murder. Although such violence pervaded the entire state leading up to November of 1868 and beyond, the Knights of the White Camelia were more active in particular parishes of Louisiana and often deployed different means depending on the region. For example, most riverside parishes saw lesser instances of White terrorism, or at least received fewer reports of such incidents, but those parishes surrounding New Orleans, such as Jefferson, Terrebonne and Lafourche saw increased rates. Furthermore, nightriders in these locales seem to have refrained from using disguises. Historian James Dauphine suggests that this limited use of disguises resulted from the rural nature of these parishes, but the fact that terrorists in southern Louisiana saw little reason to mask their identity possibly holds greater significance.<sup>99</sup> If these terrorists saw no reason to disguise themselves, they likely felt that the state government would be unwilling or unable to intervene on behalf of the black citizens of the sugar parishes. With limited action taken to protect the persons of African American men in these rural regions, planter violence proved effective at limiting, but by no means halting, black political participation in the November elections of 1868.

Black political action persisted just as it had prior to 1868, but the Republican dominated state government, the presence of black politicians in the legislature, and the spikes of white terrorism collectively altered the nature of those political struggles. Mobilization on sugar plantations continued, but that mobilization now often centered on elections as white Democrats and black sugar workers brawled, often literally, over the ballot box. Despite the viciousness displayed by white planters and Democrats in their

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<sup>99</sup> James G. Dauphine, "The Knights of the White Camelia and the Election of 1868: Louisiana's White Terrorists; A Benighting Legacy," *Louisiana History* 30, no. 2 (1989): 173-190.

attempt to once again disenfranchise the black laborers of the sugar parishes, the Republican Governor Warmoth and the new President maintained a vested interest in securing black civil rights. Though Ulysses Grant failed to carry Louisiana as a result of white planter violence, he still managed to win the presidential election of 1868, in part due to black enfranchisement. Governor Warmoth also took a serious interest in the elections held in the sugar parishes as incidents such as the 1868 riot in St. Landry Parish demonstrated that if unchecked, white terrorism could sway entire parishes.

“The St. Landry Riot” as it came to be known exemplified the brutality of Democrats during the election of 1868, but it holds particular significance because it demonstrated that even without state or federal support, black Louisianans were willing to respond to this heightened political violence through political and martial organization. A brutal assault on the editor of a Radical Republican newspaper in St. Landry catalyzed the events that shook the town of Opelousas and the entirety of the parish in the fall of 1868.<sup>100</sup> On September 28<sup>th</sup>, several Democrats, led by a local judge, beat and caned Emerson Bentley, the northern editor of the Radical *St. Landry Progress* and a local educator at several black schools.<sup>101</sup> Word of the assault quickly spread, with some rumors alleging Bentley’s death, and in response, the local black community quickly mobilized. The speed and efficiency with which black residents of the surrounding parish converged in Opelousas is significant. As historian Carolyn DeLatte puts it, “No thought was given to organization; supporters were simply told to assemble in Opelousas.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Henry C. Warmoth, *War, Politics, and Reconstruction: Stormy Days in Louisiana* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006): 67.

<sup>102</sup> Carolyn E. DeLatte, “The St. Landry Riot: A Forgotten Incident of Reconstruction Violence,” *Louisiana History* 17, no. 1 (1976): 41-49.

Many scholars of postbellum Louisiana highlight the era of Warmoth's administration as a period characterized by localized Republican infighting, and this analysis certainly holds merit. Yet, one must also take into account the racial and political solidarity ubiquitous among sugar workers. When black residents, along with a number of white Republicans, arrived in Opelousas many were allegedly armed.<sup>103</sup> Despite their speedy organization and armament, however, this militarized force dispersed after a few shots were exchanged with the armed white citizenry in Opelousas. Word spread of this brief armed conflict, and thousands of armed, white men convened before spreading out into St. Landry parish hunting down those African Americans and Republicans suspected of participating in the earlier demonstration as well as any the nightriders came across. Two hundred or more black citizens and Republicans died at the hands of the massive paramilitary force that tore through St. Landry.

The St. Landry Riot and its bloody aftermath not only conveyed to Republican leaders like Governor Warmoth the need for black voter protection, it also exemplified how difficult it was to distinguish political violence from labor violence in the sugar parishes. The November elections that took place in the months after the riot witnessed a stark drop off in black voter turn out. In fact, Grant received no votes whatsoever despite the fact that the parish had witnessed a reasonable Republican turnout earlier that spring with 2,200 votes going to Warmoth himself.<sup>104</sup> This decline in voter turnout following such brutality is understandable, and the terrorizing effect was compounded by the fact that St. Landry Parish had a smaller black population than that of places like Terrebonne

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<sup>103</sup> DeLatte, 41-49. The major evidence for the black residents having been armed stems from the reports of white residents, rendering them possibly suspect. Still, the inclusion of this detail in the accounts holds significance regardless of its accuracy.

<sup>104</sup> *Warmoth*, 67.

and Lafourche.<sup>105</sup> Yet, the local Democratic newspaper, *The Planter's Banner*, produced a number of articles following the massacre that focused less on the political situation of black citizens of St. Landry and more on their status of employment. For example, one issue of *The Planter's Banner* printed after the riot stated "We hear nothing from St. Landry. The negroes all over the Parish have been disarmed, and have gone to work briskly... St. Landry is quiet for the first time since the War."<sup>106</sup> This quote reveals southern Democrats' understanding of sugar work as the clear antithesis of organization and collective action.

Another excerpt, printed in *The Planter's Banner* just a few weeks after the massacre further illustrates the conceived dichotomy of black political action and labor. "We have reports that the colored people are settling down quietly to business and labor, and becoming thoroughly disgusted with the men who have been humbugging them with lying promises and deceitful words."<sup>107</sup> For planters and white Democrats, the hallmarks of victory were not centered necessarily around the success of the Democratic ticket in St. Landry, but in the "quiet" labor of sugar workers. Although they opposed the political disenfranchisement of black laborers, Warmoth and other Republicans would also express desire for a quiet, profitable population of black sugar laborers.

Henry Clay Warmoth's tenure as the Governor of Louisiana had profound effects for the sugar parishes as he made concerted efforts to monitor elections and facilitate black political participation in government, but his goals also fundamentally differed from those of black laborers. Like many other Republicans in Louisiana, Warmoth

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<sup>105</sup> DeLatte, 41-49.

<sup>106</sup> *Planter's Banner*, (Franklin, LA), October 10, 1868.

<sup>107</sup> *Planter's Banner*, (Franklin, LA), October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1868.

wanted sugar production to proceed unhindered. A future sugar planter himself, he understood the importance desirable crop yields held for Louisiana as well as for his reputation.<sup>108</sup> In his autobiography, Warmoth expressed support for General Banks' actions during the Civil War designed to coerce black sugar workers to continue their labors despite their emancipation. "He(General Banks) organized the colored labor and induced them to remain at their homes and cultivate their fields.... He put everybody to work who wanted work, and he fed the poor and helpless men, women and children out of the supplies of his Army."<sup>109</sup> Throughout his time in office, Warmoth endeavored to balance his desire for the state's economic prosperity and his protective attitude toward black enfranchisement, something many historians argue stemmed from his pragmatism as a politician. In order to accomplish this goal he adopted a "centrist" approach in which he endeavored to garner Democratic support for his cause while also aiming to retain his Republican base. This approach is apparent in Warmoth's inaugural address, one that adopts a conciliatory tone that would grow in popularity across the nation throughout the postbellum years.<sup>110</sup> "We have met here not to speculate upon the past, or to brood and quarrel over its ashes, but rather to meet the great living issues of the present, and the duties which it imposes on us."<sup>111</sup> Despite these grand claims, Warmoth's attempts to deal with the "issues of the present" proved incompatible with the goals of Democrats and in some ways alienated him from his black constituency.

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<sup>108</sup> Warmoth stated in his memoir, "There was probably nothing in Louisiana more alluring and charming than lie on a sugar plantation."; Warmoth, 260.

<sup>109</sup> Warmoth, 34.

<sup>110</sup> See David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>111</sup> Warmoth, 60.



Upon his ascension to the governorship, Henry Warmoth set about building his new political support base, but his efforts yielded mixed results. He certainly recast some of the dividing political lines in Louisiana, yet his desire to maintain ties with Republicans, white Unionists, and black Louisianans proved ineffective. After witnessing the success of nightrider violence at curbing black voting during the November elections of 1868, Warmoth felt that he needed a powerful, loyal military force capable of stopping, or at least circumscribing, such violence. In order to keep hold over the city of New Orleans he commissioned the formation of the Metropolitan Police Force. Comprised of both black and white officers, Warmoth intended these armed forces to limit Democratic violence, but it largely failed in that mission, mostly only succeeding in drawing the ire of white Democrats. This force also could do little to protect black voter interests in the outlying sugar parishes where much of nightrider violence was centered. In response to these problems, Warmoth added a further five thousand soldiers to Louisiana's militia, but although he intended this force to, in part, defend the rights of freedpeople, he purposefully sought former Confederates to join its ranks. He also appointed former Confederate General James Longstreet to lead this segregated force.<sup>112</sup> This action nonetheless garnered little sympathy from Democrats and instead alienated, or at least perplexed, many Republicans and black voters. Warmoth further strained his Republican ties by appointing numerous ex-confederates to various offices across Louisiana.<sup>113</sup> Over the course of his administration, he made almost 2,000 appointments, granting a substantial number of those seats to Democrats much to the chagrin of black Louisianans

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<sup>112</sup> Justin Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010): 91.

<sup>113</sup> Lawrence Powell, "Centralization and its Discontents in Reconstruction Louisiana," *Studies in American Political Development* 20, no. 2 (2006): 105-131.

and Radical Republicans. In fact, numerous historians attribute much of the blame surrounding Republican infighting and the party's fracturing during this period specifically to Warmoth and his actions.<sup>114</sup> Warmoth's conciliatory behavior conveyed to both white Republicans and freedpeople that he was willing to explicitly ally himself with ex-confederates and former slave owners in order to maintain political supremacy and to promote stability across the state. Black political mobilization persisted throughout Warmoth's reign, but such movement often went against both Democratic and Republican interests.

The Donaldsonville Incident in Ascension Parish exemplified black sugar workers' will to obstruct any interests they perceived as detrimental to their own well-being, whether those interests were Democratic or Republican. The events that transpired in Donaldsonville, Louisiana, during the sugar harvest of 1870 mirrored those of the St. Landry Riot in multiple respects. Both incidents involved black political mobilization near the time of an election, and both ended in violence though the scope and brands of that violence differed markedly. The complexity of the events in Donaldsonville, however, hinders easy distillation. The catalyst for the "Incident" was the decision of a local election supervisor to remove a number of ballot boxes from the Donaldsonville courthouse after local elections were held and take them across the Mississippi River to a nearby plantation. The supervisor did so allegedly to prevent tampering with the votes, and he had been granted the authority to do so by laws recently proposed by Warmoth. After being passed by the legislature, these new laws granted the governor increased

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<sup>114</sup> Foner, 347-350; Nystrom, 94; Lawrence Powell, 105-131.

capabilities to oversee the election processes of the state.<sup>115</sup> Yet, at the end of election day, a group of local conservatives, comprised of both Democrats and non-radical Republicans, seized the majority of the ballot boxes and refused to allow them to be removed from the courthouse. After receiving news of this event, the election supervisor ordered Chief Constable Fisher, a black man, to secure the aforementioned boxes and deliver them safely to the plantation across the river. Fisher deputized around forty to fifty men and proceeded down the river towards Donaldsonville.<sup>116</sup>

Events escalated quickly as Fisher and his men marched toward Donaldsonville. To begin with, a small group of militiamen actually arrived on the banks near the town before Fisher had arrived. As they made landfall a local conservative judge fired and shot one of the approaching African American militiamen in the leg, and a force of conservatives, once again composed of both Democrats and “Regular Republicans,” then jailed the remaining members of the military company. Fisher witnessed the events from afar and retreated to inform the election supervisor who once again ordered him to assemble a militia and forcibly seize the ballot boxes. Fisher did so, but this time, he went into the surrounding parishes and plantations and recruited hundreds of black locals and sugar workers. With this new force, Fisher commandeered a steamboat and led what the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* called a “Negro Mob” toward Donaldsonville.<sup>117</sup> Fearing what this militia might do, the Mayor of Donaldsonville and a local Judge obtained an official order from Fisher’s superiors to dispel the unit, and attempted to intercept the

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<sup>115</sup> James D. Wilson, Jr., “The Donaldsonville Incident of 1870: A Study of Local Party Dissension and Republican Infighting in Reconstruction,” *Louisiana History* 38, no. 3 (1997): 329-345.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, (New Orleans, LA), December 5, 1870.

army on their march to Donaldsonville. The encounter did not end well for the two men, and though no one knows precisely what transpired between the officials and Fisher, the meeting ended in the judge's and mayor's death. Fisher later contended that the judge had accidentally shot the mayor and that he had responded by attempting to detain the judge. According to Fisher, somehow during the struggle to apprehend him, the judge sustained multiple gunshot wounds and deep cuts from a sugar cane knife.<sup>118</sup>

Interpreting the significance of these events and their aftermath is difficult considering their complexity, but careful analysis suggests that these reasons behind the Donaldsonville Incident extended beyond the high politics of Louisiana. For example, the killing of the mayor and judge of Donaldsonville was reportedly followed by a procession of black men numbering in the thousands marching into the town and forcibly securing the ballot boxes. After failing to discover those conservatives responsible for detaining the ballots, the crowd apparently spent the day celebrating before peacefully dispersing. During all the revelry, no one ever actually secured the boxes and delivered them to the election supervisor instead leaving them in the courthouse. This fact illustrates that the victory enjoyed by this body composed largely of black sugar workers had little to do with the outcome of the election itself, but instead stemmed from their success in overpowering both the Democrats and white Republicans of Ascension Parish. Indeed, the raucous celebration suggests that for black sugar workers, acting as an independent political body during a critical election held far greater significance than the actual outcome of such an election. The nature of the killings also illustrates this point as the Mayor and the Judge were a Democrat and a Republican respectively, but regardless

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<sup>118</sup> Wilson, 329-345.

of their party affiliation, in this instance, both individuals had opposed black political mobilization.

If one surmises that the killing of the two men was not “accidental” in nature as Fisher maintained but was actually purposefully perpetrated by some of the sugar workers, the event takes on new meaning. These killings, despite their brutality, or perhaps because of it, broadcasted a message throughout Donaldsonville and southern Louisiana that black laborers would not always distinguish between Democrat and Republican if they perceived their political rights being threatened or their efforts to mobilize being undermined. In this context, the use of a cane knife to kill the Republican judges takes on a new connotation regardless of whether or not this symbolism was intended. Following the event, a few individuals involved saw charges leveled against them, but nearly all were dismissed through Warmoth’s efforts with the Fisher actually ascending to political office the very next year.<sup>119</sup> Though some historians may point to the Donaldsonville Incident as a direct result of Warmoth’s involvement in parish elections, it is even better understood as the effect of black sugar workers exerting political agency in the face of Democratic and Republican attempts to circumscribe and constrain that agency.<sup>120</sup> To the black residents of Ascension Parish, efforts to politically demobilize sugar workers undermined their freedom because their claims to freedom largely depended upon their ability to act politically, and in this context, homicide stood as an effective means of preserving that freedom.

Despite the incident in Donaldsonville, Warmoth touted the 1870 elections as the “quietest and fairest election held in the State of Louisiana up to that time,” but by that

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<sup>119</sup> Wilson, 343.

<sup>120</sup> Wilson, 329-345.

time the machinations for his downfall were well underway.<sup>121</sup> Warmoth's attempts to appease loyal Democrats alienated him from the more Radical Republicans of the Custom House Ring. These divisions went so deep as to lead to Oscar J. Dunn, his Lieutenant Governor, to abandon Warmoth for this more Radical faction.<sup>122</sup> Feeling his grip over New Orleans and Louisiana as a whole slipping, Warmoth came to rely on his new bolstered militia and the Metropolitan Police Force to protect his position. His attempts to outmaneuver his political rivals through use of the military backfired, however, and led to Republicans and Democrats working together to pursue his impeachment. Vilified by Republicans frustrated with his attempts at crafting a bipartisan support base and loathed by the vast majority of Democrats for his policies, Warmoth stood with few political allies. With fissures throughout Louisiana's Republican party and a strong, growing conservative base in the state, the gubernatorial election of 1872 held particular significance for the future of both parties as well as the state.

William Pitt Kellogg and John McEnery ran against each other in the 1872 Louisiana election, and both parties held high hopes for victory. Factional disputes plagued Republicans, and several Republican leaders such as Warmoth and his new Lieutenant Governor Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback, disliked seeing Kellogg receive the party's nomination. Still, Kellogg held the clear support of the Grant administration, something Warmoth did not retain. McEnery, on the other hand, effectively capitalized on Democratic rage and racism pervading the state during his campaign as previous Democratic nominees had done, but a number of conservative Republicans had also been turned to the Democratic cause by their hatred of Henry

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<sup>121</sup> Warmoth, 101.

<sup>122</sup> Nystrom, 106-108.

Warmoth rendering McEnery's bid more menacing for Radical Republicans. The election itself proved to be one of the most complicated, fraudulent, and generally chaotic in Louisiana's history. Multiple historians have documented the sheer bedlam of the election as numerous factions unofficially secured ballot boxes, accused one another of tampering, and illegally inflated or deflated the numbers of votes. Determining who actually won became all but impossible leading to both McEnery and Kellogg both announcing victory.<sup>123</sup> Following the election, Warmoth was officially removed from office granting Pinchback the governor's seat for a few months. A Republican politician and an African American community leader, Pinchback often strained to foster ties with both groups, and he had showed measured support for Warmoth.<sup>124</sup> Though he only governed for a short time, having a black governor held a great deal of significance both for black Louisianans in the sugar parishes and for Democrats frustrated with this turn of events. Unfortunately, Pinchback had little means of preventing the violent disputes over the contested election that took place in 1873.

Neither Kellogg nor McEnery had conceded the election in the Spring of 1873, and the contest quickly turned violent. Both self-described governors held respective inaugurations and actually created competing legislatures within the state of Louisiana. Recognizing his need to establish authority before federal intervention, McEnery promptly called on his constituents to take up arms and forcibly seize the Cabildo and a number of other significant government buildings in New Orleans in order to exert control over the city. Yet, the military forces mustered by McEnery proved undisciplined

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<sup>123</sup> See Nystrom, 134; Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974).

<sup>124</sup> "The Colored Convention," *Weekly Louisianan*, (New Orleans, LA), Nov. 2, 1871.

instead diverting from their mission and carousing around downtown New Orleans. After making several displays with their superior weaponry such as a howitzer, the Metropolitan Police Force effectively disbanded McEnery's forces and eventually succeeded in arresting some of the Democratic leaders behind the assaults.<sup>125</sup> This limited violence paled in comparison to the brutal events of other parts of Louisiana, the Colfax Massacre standing as one of the bloodiest examples of the conflicts that surrounded this contested election.<sup>126</sup>

A fair amount of scholarly attention has been granted to the Colfax Massacre in recent years, and much of that focus has centered on the implications the event held for the national history of Reconstruction.<sup>127</sup> A singularly brutal event, the violence in Colfax, Louisiana, on Easter of 1873 resulted directly from the disputed gubernatorial election of 1872. Southern white Democrats martially seized control of the town's courthouse killing over a hundred black republicans and members of the militia. The killings garnered national attention, and the violent incident also led to the prominent Supreme Court case *United States v. Cruikshank*. Following the successful prosecution of the Democrat participants in the massacre within local courts, the appeals process of the defendants led to the case going all the way to the Supreme Court. The prosecution argued that the white Democrats on trial had conspired to infringe upon the First and Second Amendment rights of the black residents of Colfax, but the Supreme Court overturned the conviction stating that the Fourteenth Amendment did not impose the Bill

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<sup>125</sup> Nystrom, 137.

<sup>126</sup> Foner, 530.

<sup>127</sup> LeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): xvii.; Chuck Lane, *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2009): 251-264.



of Rights at the state level. Not until the twentieth century would this ruling witness any measure of legitimate challenge, and with Federal forces unable to legally defend black rights from state infringement, white terrorism burgeoned in the following years.<sup>128</sup>

Despite this widespread violence, Kellogg emerged victorious in his political and military contest for the governorship of Louisiana. The defeat of McEnery, however, did not mean that black sugar workers were now safe from the nightrider violence of the sugar parishes nor did it provide black laborers with the support of the state's militia.

1874 proved a seminal year for Reconstruction in Louisiana, and it began with a labor strike stretching across multiple sugar parishes in Louisiana.<sup>129</sup> Black sugar workers had organized the strike after a number of sugar planters collectively cut their wages by two dollars following the economic troubles of 1873. A black Republican legislator named Hamp Keys actively encouraged residents of Terrebonne parish to refuse to work for these diminished wages and urged the sugar works to bar others from working as well.<sup>130</sup> Predictably, the planters responded to black organization by assembling a paramilitary group intended to violently break up the strike, but this white militia found themselves vastly outnumbered, forcing them to disband. Following these events, one planter, Henry Minor, contacted Governor Kellogg's office imploring him to send the state militia to break the strike and reestablish planter control. Although Kellogg sat in the governor's office in no small part due to the efforts of black Louisianans in the rural parishes who viewed him as an ally, Kellogg acquiesced to Minor's request dispatching the Metropolitan Police Force as well as the state militia to Terrebonne. The two forces

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>129</sup> John DeSantis, *The Thibodaux Massacre: Racial Violence and the 1887 Sugar Cane Labor Strike* (Stroud: History Press, 2016): 99.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

arrived in the city of Houma within Terrebonne on January 14<sup>th</sup> with the state militia being led by ex-confederate General James Longstreet who had been appointed to his command by Warmoth a few years prior.<sup>131</sup>

The events of what came to be known as the Terrebonne War ended rather peacefully, considering many possible outcomes, but its implications were manifold. The black strikers confronted the military, but the army had brought with them superior, and likely purposefully intimidating, weaponry including but not limited to a cannon.<sup>132</sup> Although both units agreed to disband peacefully, the message of the encounter was clear. By sending the military to quell the strikers, Kellogg demonstrated that he directly opposed black political organization as none can deny the inextricable link between the collective labor actions of black sugar workers and their politics. William Kellogg, just like Henry Warmoth and General Nathaniel Banks before him, sanctioned particular brands of black political participation such as voting, but he did not approve of black mobilization when it undermined the economic prosperity of the state. In this respect, Kellogg proved his interested interests actually paralleled the white Democrats in multiple respects as he understood the need for sugar production to continue, just as all northern and Republican leaders had since General Butler. In fact the conservative Times-Picayune even granted measured praise to Kellogg in the aftermath of the Terrebonne War, or at least temporarily refrained from condemning him.

“Condemnation, and of the strongest kind, pertains to the Radical administration; but on

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<sup>131</sup> Richard Follett, Eric Foner, and Walter Johnson, *Slavery's Ghost: The Problem of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011): 80.

<sup>132</sup> DeSantis, 61.

this occasion we do not hold Gov. Kellogg as the head and front of the offending.”<sup>133</sup>

Yet, Kellogg quickly discovered that he would never be able to curry enough favor amongst conservative Democrats to bridge the political gap the divided the two parties, nor would he even be able to maintain the peace.

In April of 1874 within the town of Opelousas, the focal point of the St. Landry Riot that had occurred a few years prior, white Democrats and planters formed the first White League, a paramilitary organization devoted to the overthrow of “carpetbag” rule. The organization spread quickly throughout the state garnering support and eventually leading to one of the most infamous events in Louisiana history, the Battle of Liberty Place. On September 14<sup>th</sup>, thousands of members of the White League led an assault on New Orleans and decimated the Metropolitan Police Force, seizing control of the town for a number of days before Grant sent federal troops to end the uprising. This event has received substantial scholarly attention, and although the event itself holds unrivaled significance for Louisiana historians, Kellogg’s official published response following this violence offers fascinating insight as well.<sup>134</sup>

Less than two weeks after the catastrophic battle, Kellogg published and distributed a public Address in which he railed against the actions of the White League, but in this work he also fashions himself as a representative for black interests. He devotes much of the document to pointing out the false promises made by those

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<sup>133</sup> “Terrebonne War. Concerning the Delay in Sending Troops,” *The Daily Picayune*, (New Orleans, LA), January 16, 1874.

<sup>134</sup> Foner, 551; Nystrom, 305-306.

Democrats that attempted to curry favor with black Louisianans.<sup>135</sup> At one point, however, he reveals how he perceives the laborers of the sugar parishes.

“The sole purpose of the leaders of the insurrection was to obtain possession of the offices of the State; and while they were so engaged, to the manifest injury of the commerce of the city and the credit of the state the great bulk of my supporters, who form the producing element of the country, were quietly engaged in picking cotton, cultivating sugar and harvesting the rice crop of the State.”<sup>136</sup>

In this passage Kellogg attempts to portray sugar workers, the vast majority of which are black, as loyal, docile, and generally “quiet” laborers despite the fact that he martially repressed a worker uprising just months prior to this address. Obviously, this document acts as political propaganda so, of course, it would not reference such events, but it is worth noting that Kellogg, Warmoth, and the Democrats of St. Landry, all expressed a desire for the sugar parishes to remain “quiet.” Yet, events like the Donaldsonville Incident and the Terrebonne War disrupted that silence and appear remarkably similar to the actions taken by freedpeople in the wake of early emancipation. Through a wide array of techniques black sugar workers accrued a great deal of political power over the course of Reconstruction and a measure of that power would persist after 1874. Unfortunately, the Terrebonne War revealed that the power freedpeople collectively wielded as soldiers, voters, and laborers could not withstand the combined efforts of southern planters and the state militia to constrain their freedom.

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<sup>135</sup> William P. Kellogg, *Address of Governor Kellogg to the People of the United States on the Condition of Affairs in Louisiana; With Official Facts and Figures* (New Orleans: Published by the Executive Department of the State of Louisiana, 1874), Rare Books, 80-579-RL {The Historic New Orleans Collection}, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

## Epilogue

The Terrebonne War did not dissolve the body politic composed of black sugar workers crafted after emancipation in 1862, but the event did set a precedent. By sending the state militia, armed with excessive weaponry, into the cane fields, Governor William Kellogg made clear that the sugar planters of Louisiana now retained the power of the state at their back. Instances of direct labor resistance would henceforth be met with military action as the state endeavored to limit worker mobilization, thereby ensuring sugar production proceeded unabated. Still, that same need for persistent, profitable sugar production, in conjunction with the peculiarities of the harvest methods, allowed black laborers to retain an impressive degree of bargaining power.<sup>137</sup> This bargaining power lasted beyond the Terrebonne War, and seems to have extended well beyond 1877, the traditional end of Radical Reconstruction marked by the retreat of federal troops from the South.

Sugar's economic significance does not alone explain how freedpeople were able to organize and retain much of their freedom in the years following the Terrebonne War. Even with the explosion of nightrider violence in the south following the decision of *United States v. Cruikshank*, black sugar workers continued to argue for higher wages, moved from plantation to plantation relatively unhindered, and often set the terms of their work.<sup>138</sup> Though the nuances of sugar cultivation, with its short harvest season, allowed for such conditions, the effects of early emancipation should not be understated. By the

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<sup>137</sup> John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001): 2.

<sup>138</sup> LeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): xvii.

late 1870s and 1880s, sugar workers had accumulated extensive experience utilizing labor organization as a political tool in defense of freedom. The lack of federal support did not stymie such mobilization as it had elsewhere in Louisiana and the cotton South, in part, because black sugar workers retained extensive experience safeguarding their freedom without such support. In the early years of emancipation, black workers often contended with their former enslavers and the Union Army simultaneously as they struggled to seize and demarcate their freedom. Only in the late 1880s, through excessive brutality and bloodshed were white Louisianans finally able to quash this political body of emancipated sugar workers.

In November of 1887, the events of the Terrebonne War repeated themselves in Thibodaux, Louisiana, as black sugar workers once again organized a strike demanding higher wages as the sugar harvest approached. In response, the local parishes turned to Louisiana Governor Samuel McEnery to come to their aid and defend their interests. Governor McEnery, a Democrat, was the brother of John McEnery, the Democratic candidate for governor during the 1872 election who lost to William Kellogg. Samuel McEnery may have been wholly different from William Kellogg in terms of political leanings, but both men recognized the importance of the sugar crop. Like Kellogg, Governor McEnery sent in the state militia to suppress the strike, once again providing them with excessive weaponry. As the black owned newspaper the *Weekly Pelican* reported, “Gov. McEnery ordered troops with a Gatling gun to the “Teche” country, and there men have been forced, at the point of the bayonet and the muzzle of a Gatling gun, to return to work at the wages dictated by the sugar planters, behind whom is the power

of the State of Louisiana.”<sup>139</sup> Unable to successfully mobilize against a well-armed state militia wielding heavy weaponry, the strikers disbanded, but unlike the Terrebonne War, Thibodaux’s story did not end with the strike’s conclusion.

Violence wracked the black community of Lafourche Parish in 1887 as Judge Taylor Beattie of Thibodaux, an old appointee of Governor Warmoth and former member of the Knights of the White Camelia, organized a terrorist attack following the strike’s failure. White terrorists poured into Thibodaux and the surrounding communities, breaking into the homes of black sugar workers as well as members of the Knights of Labor who helped to organize the strike. Horrid reports exist of individuals being gunned down in front of their families, and victims recounted recognizing their assailants as their white neighbors or employers.<sup>140</sup> The total number of dead from what came to be known as the Thibodaux Massacre is impossible to determine as numbers range from eight into the hundreds. This instance of brutality may have occurred over a decade after the events of the Terrebonne War, but the events share significant similarities that merit brief analysis.

The actions of Governor Kellogg and Governor McEnery in the Terrebonne War and the Thibodaux Massacre respectively were nearly identical in nature and reveal much about how scholars should interpret the political and labor struggles of the postemancipation sugar parishes. The camps supporting William Kellogg and Samuel McEnery were politically polarized, violently so as can be seen in John McEnery’s endeavors to seize the governorship in 1873 and 1874, but in specific ways, the

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<sup>139</sup> “Bayonets and Gatling Guns,” *Weekly Pelican* (New Orleans, LA), Nov. 19, 1887.

<sup>140</sup> John DeSantis, *The Thibodaux Massacre: Racial Violence and the 1887 Sugar Cane Labor Strike* (Stroud: History Press, 2016): 134.

overarching goals of the two men aligned. Both Kellogg and Samuel McEnery sought to ensure the economic prosperity of the state, and both understood black mobilization in the sugar parishes as damaging to that prosperity. Furthermore, they both demonstrated a willingness to employ excessive force in an effort to undermine black labor organization, something absolutely integral to black politics across the postemancipation United States. Although Kellogg's intervention did not lead to the massive bloodshed as McEnery's had done, both effectively used the power of the state to augment Louisiana sugar planters' efforts to constrain black people's freedom in the sugar parishes.

Early emancipation in the sugar parishes following the fall of New Orleans in 1862 allowed for black sugar workers to experience aspects of freedom earlier than those African Americans freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, but it also resulted in their quick realization that their former enslavers would not be their only obstacle toward freedom. The exploitative actions of the Union Army broadcast to black Louisianans that they could not rely on Northerners nor white Republicans if they wished to successfully define and defend their freedom. Black sugar workers recognized that their aspirations and goals lied outside the purview of both the Democratic and Republican Parties, and as a result, Reconstruction in the sugar parishes was characterized by political tensions between these three factions. Events like the trial of George Windberry in 1862, the arrest of Alfred J. Brooks in Thibodaux in 1868, the Donaldsonville Incident of 1870, and the Terrebonne War of 1874 all exemplify how black sugar workers refused to submit to planter ideas of enslavement as well as Republican notions of freedom. Each of these events, along with the countless others that resemble them, exhibit how the black political body formulated during wartime emancipation exerted power throughout the



postemancipation period. Through elections, labor relations, and violence this faction attempted to safeguard freedom in the face of a two-pronged attack by one group that wished to establish themselves once again as enslavers and another that sought to cast themselves as emancipators.

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