

“A Musket on His Shoulder and Bullets in his Pocket”:
Armed Resistance to White Supremacy in Reconstruction
Rutherford County, Tennessee

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Abstract:

For decades Reconstruction Historiography has ignored the existence of widespread firearms ownership and usage in the South. Following a Civil War that destroyed the institution of Slavery and sent almost 200,000 African American men to the field in arms, Reconstruction saw the first chance for blacks to make a life for themselves, and prompted a violent backlash from whites bent on maintaining their antebellum racial structure. In response to this violence, many blacks took up arms to defend themselves. This thesis traces out that history within Rutherford County, TN. The area saw considerable violence during the Civil War, from one of the largest battles of the war to dozens of smaller conflicts and skirmishes. It also saw a significant presence of African American troops, a heavy Union occupation, and had heavily depended on enslaved labor prior to the war, all of which bred resentment in the populace that turned to violence after the conflict. In response to this violence, some African Americans in the county took to arming themselves and defending their lives from white supremacists. This action saw mixed success, while it would often allow them to survive the immediate attack, it did not appear to dissuade continued violence through the county. Many took actions ranging from accommodation to flight rather than fighting, and the failure of state and federal policy makers ultimately led to the defeat of any move toward equal rights in the county and may have convinced many of the futility of continued resistance.

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Chapter 1: African Americans and Violence in Reconstruction

Historiography

Academia, the popular press, and even Hollywood have extensively covered the story of white supremacist violence during Reconstruction. For example, Allen W. Trelease's *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* offered an academically rigorous and deeply researched overview of the original Ku Klux organization and its many mimics during the period of Reconstruction. Books about violence in the Reconstruction South saw popular sales even during the period, such as Albion W. Tourgee's novel, based largely on his personal experiences, *A Fool's Errand: Written by One of the Fools*. Hollywood has covered the subject from its earliest days, starting with the D.W. Griffith's infamous *Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915. A technical masterpiece of its era and incredibly popular upon its release, the film presents a horrifically racist portrayal of the period in which blacks are presented as animalistic predators and where the Klan is depicted as heroic. More recent portrayals have been less morally bankrupt, with a notable specimen being the film *Free State of Jones*, which offers a far more sympathetic view of life in Reconstruction Mississippi for former slaves and their handful of white compatriots.

This discussion rarely focuses on how African Americans, white Republicans, and southern Unionists armed and defended themselves in response to white terrorism. Without a dedicated study of how white supremacist violence was met with armed resistance in the period, the subject will only ever be incompletely understood in the overarching literature of Reconstruction. Analyzing the existing literature, three

prevailing philosophies on armed resistance to white supremacist violence emerge, 1.) a pro-terror, Lost Cause defense of White Supremacy, and by extension the violence that upheld it, 2.) a series of revisionist interpretations focusing on the political aspects of white violence, and 3.) the research and presentation of in-depth studies of specific, large-scale instances of racially motivated violence.

The first school of thought, a “Heroic Klan” interpretation, was rooted in “Lost Cause” mythology of the Civil War and maintained a conspicuous visibility from the 1890s until the 1950s. Headed by William A. Dunning and mass marketed by D.W. Griffith, this view claimed armed white terrorism was a positive good, a justified and even necessary counter to “corrupt” whites who favored Union and emancipation, and by extension, the legal equality of blacks. Northern whites who worked to secure black civil rights were ridiculed as “carpetbaggers” and white Southerners who worked with Reconstructions were labeled “scalawags”, who used ignorant African Americans for political and personal gain. Dunning, a conservative white northerner, and his cadre of southern students often ignored any evidence that did not present the South as oppressed by “carpetbaggers”, “scalawags”, and freedmen. Dunning routinely downplayed white terrorist violence, and said that the March 8, 1867, passage of the Reconstruction Act was based entirely off the Memphis and New Orleans Riots, where whites had killed dozens of Black people and their white allies. He denies that there was more widespread daily violence perpetrated across the South., stating “these occasional and widely scattered disturbances were in fact a wholly insufficient basis for the sweeping generalization that

was made as to conditions in the South.”¹ He goes on to claim, without evidence, that “In most part of that section life and property were... as well protected as had ever been the case.”² Even if this were so, it was hardly a ringing endorsement since blacks had earlier been without any legal right to either, being considered property themselves.

Furthermore, while claiming to deplore Klan and Klan-inspired violence, Dunning still supported their intention to “preserve the social and economic ascendancy of the white race.”³ Dunning also supported southern black codes, including the disarming of blacks, as “a conscientious and straightforward attempt to bring some sort of order out of the social and economic chaos”⁴ wrought by emancipation. Dunning rarely discusses armed African Americans, and when he does it is to applaud the disarming of them, to blame black soldiers for the violence in the south, or to claim that black militias were the cause of most of the disorder in certain states, like South Carolina.⁵

As influential as Dunning was in the academy, pioneering Hollywood director D.W. Griffith brought his viewpoints to far wider audiences in his viciously racist film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film adaptation of the Thomas Dixon Jr.’s novel *The Clansman*. Griffith’s film presents black people, and especially black soldiers, as violent, rapacious, and stupid. The film’s climax shows the Klan lynching a would-be rapist and then with the victorious Klan disarming blacks and then-fully disguised and openly armed- dissuading any African Americans from going to the polls. The climax and

¹ William A. Dunning. *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1907, Harper Torchbook editions printed 1962) 92-93.

² Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic*, 93-94.

³ Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic*,

⁴ Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic*, 58.

⁵ Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic*, 57-58, 30, 183.

resolution emphasize one thing very clearly, southern whites feared armed African Americans⁶. This speaks volumes about the value of arms to the Black community and to individuals, as well as about how whites, even sixty years later, viewed any armed African American with suspicion and fear.

W.E.B. DuBois spearheaded the first major attack on this school and argued that Reconstruction governments were not as corrupt as claimed and that Black people were not ignorant or misled, but were conscientious and honest participants in government, acting for the good of their communities. This school, never widely read, saw a massive white conspiracy victimize Black people with little to no resistance. DuBois' 1935 volume, *Black Reconstruction in America*, reconsidered Reconstruction from a black, egalitarian, and Marxist point of view, arguing that blacks sought, with the help of white allies and the federal government, to reshape a South that would allow for their inclusion and equal status, fighting against a rising tide of conservative white resistance. Unfortunately, the book never sold well, due to its author's race, its sophisticated writing style, focus on politics, and its clear Marxist slant (which can sometimes distract from its efficacy by trying to tie Reconstruction to class rather than racial conflict). DuBois's discussion of violence notes that across much of the South laws were passed to keep blacks from owning or carrying arms.⁷ This tacitly acknowledges DuBois's understanding that white conservatives feared the idea of blacks being armed.⁸ However,

⁶ *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith, (D.W. Griffith Corporation, 1915, Triangle film Corporation sound accompaniment) <https://www.kanopy.com/en/mtsu/video/114595>.

⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois. *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1935) 153-154.

⁸ DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*, 497, 604-605, 615.

DuBois' pays far too little attention to the actions individual black civilians and communities took to arm themselves against white terror and aggression.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a more mainstream revisionist literature emerged and used a critical examination of secondary writings of Reconstruction, and later a critical examination of a wider swath of primary evidence, to discredit Dunning-school orthodoxy; but spent little time discussing violence. Works from this period focus on the role of official forces that countered white terrorism and on case studies of specific acts of violence which show community-level armed responses to white terrorism as admirable but atypical.

Kenneth M. Stampp's *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (1965) was exemplary of this school. Following DuBois' lead in dismantling Dunning's arguments point-by-point, Stampp's book appealed to a much broader audience, due largely to the timing of his publication, writing in the mid-1960s amidst the major ground shift toward social history and amidst the Civil Rights movement. Using mainly secondary sources and an approachable writing style, Stampp simply but effectively countered Dunning school orthodoxy. However, Stampp devoted no more than 6 of his over 250-page book to violence, and these still focused on how violence shaped politics.⁹ This early revisionist writing served as a much-needed counter to earlier white-supremacist writings but did little to uncover the role of grass-roots armed resistance in the black community.

Revisionist histories of Reconstruction culminated in Eric Foner's celebrated *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (1988). Key to this work's focus was

⁹ Kenneth M. Stampp. *The Era of Reconstruction. 1865-1877*. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1965) 199-205.

his assertion that “rather than passive victims of the actions of others or simply a ‘problem’ confronting white society, blacks were active agents in the making of Reconstruction.”¹⁰ However, his discussion of violence still dismissed blacks arming for defense, focusing instead on violence perpetrated by whites on blacks. He noted that “it is remarkable in how few instances blacks attacked whites... violence or even threats against individual whites were all but unknown.”¹¹ He spends several pages discussing why armed resistance was uncommon, blaming it largely on what he termed “practical obstacles” in the way of resistance. These included the general disparity in quality of armament between Black people and whites and in the training deficit. While thousands of United States Colored Troops (USCT) combat veterans settled throughout the south, the number of white southerners trained in the use of arms, many of them Confederate veterans, dwarfed their numbers. Finally, the fear white southerners held of black insurrection made retribution for groups of trained and armed blacks swift and devastating.¹² Similarly, he claimed that the Freedman’s Bureau agents, while fighting for the right to keep and bear arms for blacks, “strongly discountenanced any talk of self-defense or retaliation by blacks against violence.”¹³ Finally, Foner pointedly claims that “the responsibility for suppressing crime rests not with the victim but with the state” and the state failed to suppress white terrorism in the South.

Foner does make some excellent points, but he misses a few crucial points. The lack of deadly armed clashes between whites and Black people does not necessarily mean

¹⁰ Eric Foner. *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. (New York, Harper & Row, 1988.) xxiv.

¹¹ Foner, *America’s Unfinished Revolution*, 121.

¹² Foner, *America’s Unfinished Revolution*, 435-437.

¹³ Foner, *America’s Unfinished Revolution*, 148.

that Black people were not armed and prepared to act in self-defense. The Klan and other organizations like them operated disguised, in the dead of night, and in great numbers not from a position of security, but from fear. The much-discussed fear of black insurrection is visible in instances where whites met unexpected resistance from a target they believed was unarmed. Further, Foner seems to equate self-defense and retaliation at times. The two are vastly different, one is undertaken in way of defense against an active threat, and one is done in the name of revenge. Further, while the state is responsible for the suppression and punishment of crime and the defense of their citizens, the unfortunate fact is it does not always do so. During Reconstruction, the federal government rarely proved able to suppress violence everywhere in the South, and local governments often proved unwilling. At this point it becomes a matter of grim necessity to choose either to fight or surrender, and that choice did in fact fall to black communities in the South all too often during Reconstruction, especially since those representatives of “The State” at the local level were often complicit with or themselves involved in the violence against African Americans. While Foner rightly notes a lack of serious violent confrontation between whites and Black people in the South, and he also notes accurately the many hurdles placed in the way of Black people seeking self-defense, he fails to realize that retaliation and conflict are not the only forms self-defense can take. The mere fact Black people were arming themselves and were prepared to use those weapons if necessary was an act of resistance, and while they were infrequently fired in defense, it is likely that at times the mere presence of guns among a community deterred white violence. Further, it seems his focus on bloody clashes leads Foner to underestimate the number of instances where shots were fired, and no death or significant injury occurred.

Reconstruction research has come a long way since Dunning in acknowledging and presenting the view of the events from a black perspective, but there remains much work to be done. Scholars still typically study how and why white supremacists utilized violence in Reconstruction, but rarely observe that violence from the perspective of the African American community, to see how they experienced and reacted to it. Even when scholars have observed the black perspective, it has typically been through the lens of “major” clashes. This focus on the extraordinary events of the period disregards the everyday lived experience of Black people from across the South. Conversely, general research of violence regionwide run the significant risk of oversimplifying a complex issue and leading to simplistic answers. The Black community, when faced with overwhelming violence, reacted in a variety of ways. Some armed themselves for defense, others fled, and some attempted to stay out of trouble, understandably fearing the reprisals that were all too common. Some reacted with a mix of these strategies, and how communities reacted varied across the south, often responding to local circumstances.

Chapter 2: Slavery and the Civil War in Rutherford County

Rutherford county provides an instructive example to view the issue of racial conflict in Reconstruction through, largely due to the situation in the county following the Civil War. Major battles occurred in the county throughout the Civil War, and it saw extensive Union occupation from 1862 until well after the Civil War. The county also saw massive use of enslaved labor prior to and during the Civil War, the loss of which engendered significant bitterness and anger following the Civil War amongst white residents. Rutherford County saw the construction of Fortress Rosecrans, the largest inland fortification built during the war, constructed partially with the labor of formerly enslaved local men. This gave the county a distinct pattern throughout Reconstruction, as Murfreesboro maintained a significant Union garrison throughout the Civil War and into the start of Reconstruction. The proximity of Rutherford County to other war-torn areas, Davidson County to the Northwest, home to the state capitol of Nashville, Williamson County to the West, home to the much fought-over city of Franklin, and Maury County to the Southwest, home to Columbia and Spring Hill, which saw much fighting and Confederate cavalry action, further emphasizes its role as being at the heart of much of the fiercest fighting in Middle Tennessee.

Slavery was a major part of Middle Tennessee society prior to the Civil War, and this held true in Rutherford County. The county had just over 10,000 residents in 1810, 2,700 of whom were enslaved. In 1860, Rutherford County held 28,000 inhabitants, with nearly 13,000 of them enslaved. On the outbreak of the Civil War, Rutherford County

had nearly as many inhabitants enslaved as free.¹⁴ A key part of the slave system was an appeal to poor whites that the existence of unfree persons made their own freedom, guaranteed by the color of their skin, a mark of distinction and social standing. Sometimes referred to as “herrenvolk democracy”, this appeal to the prestige of color rather than more tangible measures like economic power, served to keep poor whites invested in the institution of slavery and to keep them from feeling alienated by their low economic status.¹⁵ Slavery would play a key part in the county during the secession crisis and in the Civil War.

The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 caused a crisis in the South. No Southern state had voted for Lincoln, in fact he had not been on the ballots of many states during the election, so Southern states suddenly felt much less confident in its ability to control, or at least threaten and cajole, politics into their own wishes. Lincoln, while not an abolitionist, was a staunch and long-time opponent of slavery. Many southern newspapers had exaggerated Lincoln’s viewpoints, making him appear to many to be the most dogmatic of all abolitionists, and stoking fears in many Southerners about his presidency. Lincoln himself tried to allay these fears by acknowledging his opposition to slavery’s spread but denouncing any intention to restrict it in the territory it already existed. Still, after South Carolina declared its secession from the Union, events spiraled quickly and irrevocably to war. Tennessee Governor Isham G. Harris desired nothing

¹⁴ *Census data: Slavery in Rutherford County, TN 1810*. Social Explorer. Accessed 3/11/2023. <https://www.socialexplorer.com/a9676d974c/explor>, *Census Data: Slavery in Rutherford County, TN 1860*. Social Explorer. Accessed 3/11/2023. <https://www.socialexplorer.com/a9676d974c/explore>.

¹⁵ Kenneth P. Vickery. “‘Herrenvolk’ Democracy and Egalitarianism in South Africa and the U.S. South.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16, no. 3 (1974): 309–28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/178268>.

more than to see his state secede from the Union. Many Middle Tennesseans remained unconvinced of the desirability of Secession and voted down the first call for a secession convention in February of 1861.¹⁶ However, following the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for volunteers to suppress the rebellion, many in Middle Tennessee shifted their opinions. On June 8 the statewide referendum on Secession passed decisively, with only a small minority voting for Union in Middle Tennessee, while West Tennessee stood firmly behind secession and East Tennessee voted overwhelmingly for Union.¹⁷

Even before the vote to secede was finalized, counties began organizing militias, inventorying and fixing arms, and putting in place the organization for the Confederate Army and government. Remaining Unionists were also threatened and cajoled into silence, acquiescence, or flight. The state prepared for war, but this preparation rarely caused any great disturbance among daily lives. Industries began producing for the military rather than civilians, but this only constituted a change of material, rather than of pattern. Farmers continued their labors, and the enslaved remained in a condition of bondage, regarded as property by those who claimed to own them. As the Confederate Army began to form and concentrate, the patterns of life began seeing greater disruptions. Thousands of new soldiers, with little training or discipline, proved a poor companion to urban centers. In the Nashville area, Confederate soldiers began consuming farmers' eatables, including livestock, causing the populace to become increasingly unhappy.¹⁸ Still, by the end of 1861 many Confederate sympathizers in Middle Tennessee felt

¹⁶ Stephen V Ash. *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed: 1860-1870*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988) 192-193. 71-72.

¹⁷ Ash, *Middle Tennessee Transformed*, 72.

¹⁸ Ash, *Middle Tennessee Transformed*, 72-80.

confident of the outcome of the coming struggle.¹⁹ This confidence would soon prove to be misplaced.

Tennessee was, by the nature of its geography as well as by the flawed thinking of its political and military leaders, in a tenuous military position. East Tennessee was staunchly Unionist and would prove to be a constant source of trouble for the Confederacy. Governor Harris, noting Kentucky's declared neutrality in the war, believed that neutrality all but assured a safe northern border and focused his defensive efforts on the far western edge of the state, along the Mississippi River.²⁰ This proved a disastrous decision when Confederate General Leonidas Polk, a West Point graduate who had joined the Episcopal ministry rather than the military, led his Confederate troops in an invasion of Kentucky in September, 1861, pushing the state into the Union's outstretched arms. Kentucky would not vote for secession, would furnish troops for both armies, and experience several significant military campaigns and constant raids and guerrilla violence. The breaking of neutrality opened the state for Union military operations, and for an invasion of Tennessee along its Northern border, along the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers.²¹

Union troops would not wait long to move. Hearing of Polk's breaking Kentucky's neutrality, Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant quickly sent troops to take Paducah, at the mouth of the Tennessee River, and Smithland at the head of the

¹⁹ Ash, *Middle Tennessee Transformed*, 81-82.

²⁰ Timothy B. Smith. *Grant Invades Tennessee: The 1862 Battles for Forts Henry and Donelson*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016) 6-9.

²¹ Smith, *Grant Invades Tennessee*, 10-11.

Cumberland.²² In February of 1862 Union troops under General Grant, in cooperation with a naval flotilla under Flag Officer Andrew Foote, captured Forts Henry and Donelson on the Cumberland River, capturing more than 13,000 Confederate troops and freeing navigation of the Cumberland right into the heart of Tennessee.²³ Following the fall of Donelson, Grant also passed an order forbidding secessionists from entering Union lines to search for and reclaim runaway slaves, one of the earliest steps toward emancipation in Tennessee.²⁴

The Confederate commander of the theatre, Albert Sidney Johnston, assessing his position, realized he did not have the men on hand to successfully stop a Federal movement against Nashville, and fell back without a fight. Within weeks of the fall of Fort Donelson, Union troops entered Nashville,²⁵ beginning a near decade long occupation of the city and marking the fall of the first capital of any Confederate State. From then on, the war would be an omnipresent fact of life for those living in the urban centers of Middle Tennessee, with periods of fighting, occupation, skirmishing, and maneuvering throughout the region. The capture of Nashville had an immediate impact on local citizens. The fall of Henry and Donelson, and Johnston's abandoning of Nashville, left some Middle Tennesseans despondent about the cause. One Murfreesboro resident, a young Alice Ready, wrote in her diary of the surrender, "true and firm hearts are fast giving way under this current of adversity".²⁶ Lincoln soon appointed Andrew

²² Smith, *Grant Invades Tennessee*, 38.

²³ Earl J Hess. *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012) 34-37.

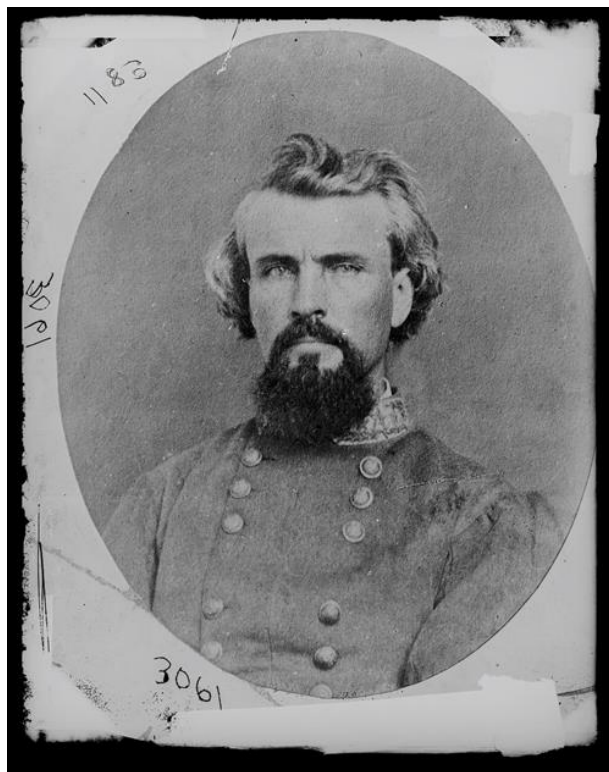
²⁴ Hess, *Civil War in the West*, 38.

²⁵ Hess, *Civil War in the West*, 41.

²⁶ Alice Ready, *Diary of Alice Ready Transcript*, in possession of Dr. Brenden Martin, 22.

Johnson as military governor of the state, giving him the rank of Brigadier General to back up his civilian title. Johnson, a Unionist Democrat who refused to leave his Senate seat in Congress when Tennessee seceded, would prove a controversial choice.²⁷

The Union would push through the state, fighting a major battle at Pittsburgh Landing, near a small country church called “Shiloh” in Western Tennessee in April, and placing small forces of troops at cities and towns across the region to maintain control. One such force would be placed in Murfreesboro as a garrison. In June of 1862 Brigadier General Thomas T. Crittenden was sent to command the garrison, which was riven by



rivalries between the regiments from different states. This caused the commanders of the regiments to camp them on opposite ends of town. Crittenden had done nothing to rectify this ill feeling when, on July 13, 1862, this force was attacked by Confederate cavalry under the command of then Brigadier General Nathan Bedford Forrest.²⁸ Taking advantage of the split

Figure 1: Nathan Bedford Forrest. Source: Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017897890/>.

defensive stance of the Union garrison, Forrest simultaneously attacked the separate encampments with portions of his force. The different camps capitulated, individually

²⁷ Hess, *Civil War in the West*, 42.

²⁸ Hess, *Civil War in the West*, 92-93.

and the victorious Confederates would rush to reinforce another part of the attack. By the end of the day nearly 150 Union troops would be killed or wounded, and 1200 would be captured, while the Confederates would lose between 65 and 85 killed and wounded. The action was successful as a raid, but Forrest had neither the means nor the desire to hold the town and left shortly after. Murfreesboro would be quickly reoccupied, and the greater strategic importance of this action can be questioned.²⁹ However, the effect on Forrest's reputation and on the psyche of the citizens of Murfreesboro cannot be overstated. It would also prove to be a precursor the racial violence in the county in the coming years, as there is evidence that Forrest, a man who grew rich selling black men, women and children as property and by using their labor to grow cash crops like cotton, killed at least one black man personally in the raid, a paid servant in one of the Union camps who fired at the Confederates. There are also accounts that he killed or threatened others.³⁰ The Murfreesboro Raid presaged not only a long and bloody history of military combat in the county, but also the kind of racial violence that would continue well after the war and which Forrest himself would play such a key part in.

With Forrest's attack on Murfreesboro, and similar cavalry raids and growing guerrilla attacks throughout the South, Union authorities began construction of a ring of fortifications around Nashville. This construction project, producing several forts, most notably Fort Negley, required extensive labor to construct. Much of this was done by African Americans, either free men in the city pressed into the work for little pay and in

²⁹ Gerald J. Prokopowicz. "Disunion Equals Disaster." *America's Civil War* 15, no. 1 (March 2002): 30-36, 72. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=5900716&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

³⁰ Brian Steel Wills, *A Battle From the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992) 72-78.

poor sanitation, or from enslaved laborers, either contracted from those who claimed ownership of them, or impressed by Union forces away from their so-called masters. In late 1862 these fledgling fortifications were tested in a two-month siege of Nashville by Confederate infantry under General John C. Breckenridge, former Vice President of the United States, and cavalry under John Hunt Morgan and Nathan Bedford Forrest. Supporting the Confederate effort were many partisans, who managed to cut off the Union from forage and supplies for part of this time. The siege was ultimately a failure, due partially to the large number of Union soldiers garrisoning the city, the small number of besiegers, and the commanding position of the city's forts and artillery emplacements.³¹

While Breckenridge and his small force besieged Nashville, the Confederate commander of the Army of Tennessee at the time, Braxton Bragg, took his army out of Chattanooga and cut off the supply lines of Union Major General Don Carlos Buell's army, necessitating Buell's withdrawal from Chattanooga northward. Bragg would then invade Kentucky simultaneously with a force from East Tennessee under Major General Edmund Kirby Smith.³² After a confused and inconclusive battle at Perryville, Kentucky, Bragg retreated into Tennessee, eventually settling into winter quarters in Murfreesboro. While here, the Army of Tennessee would be visited personally by Jefferson Davis, investigating complaints against Bragg, which he ultimately ignored. Meanwhile, Abraham Lincoln, disappointed at what he perceived as Buell's lackluster performance,

³¹ Benjamin Franklin Cooling. *To the Battles of Franklin and Nashville and Beyond: Stabilization and Reconstruction in Tennessee and Kentucky, 1864–1866*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011) 10-11.

³² Hess, *Civil War in the West*, 95-98.



Figure 2 William Starke Rosecrans, Courtesy of the Library of Congress

removed him in favor of another general, the West Point educated Ohioan, William Starke Rosecrans.³³ Rosecrans had a significant record as a subordinate of both George B. McClellan, who offered Rosecrans scant credit for the man's leading role in early victories against Robert E. Lee in West Virginia, and under General Ulysses S. Grant, a general who would develop a dislike for Rosecrans and would spend much of his

career trying to discredit him.³⁴ Rosecrans reorganized his new army and began to retrain

and refit it, moving the force to Nashville.³⁵ The stage was set for the largest violent encounter Rutherford County would ever see.

As Rosecrans settled into Nashville and took his new army in hand, fighting continued a small scale throughout the region. Union parties continuously foraged for supplies or guarded strategic points in distant places, and Confederate cavalry was continuously raiding and harassing them. Perhaps the largest clash in the early weeks of December 1862 was between Confederate cavalryman Colonel John Hunt Morgan and a Union infantry brigade stationed at Hartsville, in Trousdale County. Morgan's cavalry

³³ Hess, *Civil War in the West*, 102-105.

³⁴ Frank P. Varney. *General Grant and the Rewriting of History: How the Destruction of General William S. Rosecrans Influenced Our Understanding of the Civil War*. (El Dorado Hills, California: Savas Beatie, 2013) and David G. Moore. *William S. Rosecrans and the Union Victory: A Civil War Biography*. (Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014) pg. 3.

³⁵ Larry J. Daniel. *Battle of Stones River: The Forgotten Conflict between the Confederate Army of Tennessee and the Union Army of the Cumberland*. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 2012) 20-24.

managed to capture most of the Union brigade under Colonel A.M. Moore, more than 2,100 men. These Union prisoners were marched back into Murfreesboro. This capture caused significant concern for Rosecrans, and highlighted the fact that the Confederate cavalry far outmatched his. However, this would not hold true for long. Bragg, expecting Rosecrans to stay in Nashville for the winter, sent off two detachments of cavalry. More than two thousand men under John Hunt Morgan, who, a week after his victory at Hartsville, married Murfreesboro socialite Maddie Ready, headed into Kentucky, and another detachment, under Forrest, had departed for West Tennessee. Both raids were meant to disrupt Union supplies, Morgan to cut off Rosecrans' army and Forrest to attack Grant's supply lines in West Tennessee and Mississippi. While these raids were concerns in and of themselves, Rosecrans recognized they left Bragg vulnerable, even more so when he detached a division of infantry west.³⁶

On December 26, 1862, responding to calls for action from General Henry Wager Halleck and President Lincoln, Rosecrans marched his army out of Nashville, split into 3 columns, intending them to converge outside of Murfreesboro. Facing sporadic fighting with elements of Bragg's cavalry under Joseph Wheeler, the forces would make their way to the outskirts of the city, and on December 30th, Rosecrans' and Bragg's armies found themselves face to face, just a few hundred yards separated. Both generals intended to attack in the morning, devising similar battle plans, attacking the enemy's right flank to

³⁶ Larry J. Daniel. *Days of Glory: The Army of the Cumberland, 1861-1865*. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 2004) 196-200, James Lee McDonough, *Stones River: Bloody Winter in Tennessee*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1980) 46-66.

envelop and capture the opposing force. The results of the morning's fight, which both sides new was coming, came down entirely to who struck first.³⁷

The Army of Tennessee attacked at first light and began a general rout of the Union right. Poor terrain and communication between officers, combined with a few cases of determined resistance, namely by the divisions of Union Brigadier Generals Philip Sheridan and James Negley, slowed the Confederate troops enough for Rosecrans to organize a new defensive position along the Nashville Pike, and the federal artillery and massed infantry fire stopped the Confederate onslaught along the pike that afternoon. Both sides settled into an uneasy peace and on January 1st Bragg, who had wired Jefferson Davis in Richmond of a grand victory, was surprised to find the Union Army still in position. Neither army stirred, waiting for the other to make the first move. The day passed with only minor skirmishing, as both sides assessed their options. On January 2nd, learning that Union Artillery occupied high ground on the McFadden Farm and were crossing troops to the east bank of the Stone's River, Bragg ordered Major General John C. Breckinridge to attack and drive the Union troops back across the river. Breckinridge, aware that Union artillery was poised to tear into an attack, protested the order vehemently. Bragg was unmoved and Breckenridge reluctantly ordered the attack. The assault succeeded in driving the Union forces back, but the Confederate troops, ecstatic with their success, regrouped and continued their attack, intending to cross the river in pursuit of their foe. As they made their attack, however, 57 artillery pieces across the river opened a galling fire and left more than 1800 Confederate men dead and dying on

³⁷ Jim Lewis. "The Battle of Stones River: A Hard-Earned Victory for Lincoln" in *Blue & Gray Magazine*, Vol. XXVIII, #6. (Columbus, OH: Blue & Gray Enterprises, 2012.) 19-21, McDonough, *Bloody Winter in Tennessee*, 68-78.

the banks of the Stone's River. The next day Bragg, realizing he had no chance to defeat the Union army in its new position and acknowledging his own heavy losses, retreated to a line along the Elk and Duck River. Bragg set up headquarters at Shelbyville, Tennessee, where he would await developments while his cavalry harassed Union patrols and outposts.³⁸

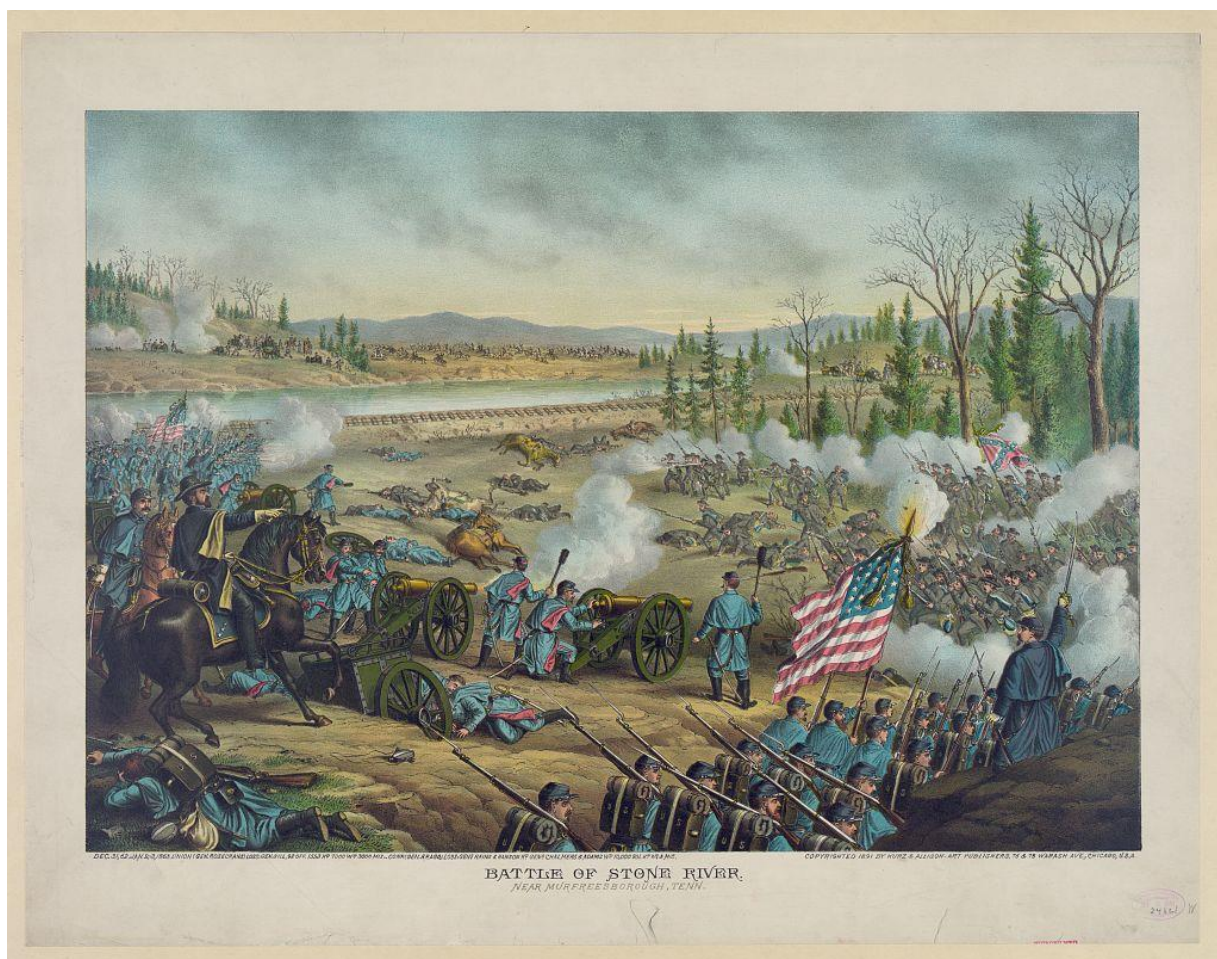


Figure 3: Fanciful Depiction of the Battle of Stones River. Source: Library of Congress
<https://www.loc.gov/item/91482049/>.

Both commanders claimed victory in the Battle of Stones River, though Rosecrans probably had a better right to claim the battle as a strategic victory. The battle

³⁸ Lewis, *Lincoln's Hard-Earned Victory*, 21-26, 43-50, Daniel, *Days of Glory*, 208-222,

was one of the bloodiest of the war, with a casualty list between 30 and 35% of the forces engaged from both sides. More than 24,000 men had been killed, wounded, captured, or were reported missing at the end of those three days. The Union army occupied Murfreesboro, and held the vital Nashville and Chattanooga railroad, which would be a necessary transportation line in later campaigns. Rosecrans would settle into a lengthy occupation of Murfreesboro, building a massive earthwork supply depot named Fortress Rosecrans. Around this depot formed a large contraband camp, with slaves from the surrounding area seeking freedom with the Union soldiers. Fortress Rosecrans would also serve as the training ground for the 13th USCT and would be occupied by soldiers from other black regiments in the latter part of the war.³⁹

The Battle, a hard-fought victory, raged as the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1st. This marked a turn in the war's prosecution, and the victory at Stones River helped buoy northern morale and back the Proclamation on the heels of high-profile defeats at Fredericksburg, Virginia and Holly Springs and Chickasaw Bayou, Mississippi. Tennessee was technically exempted from the Emancipation Proclamation, as the state was occupied by Federal forces, but this did not mean that enslaved people would always be returned to bondage.⁴⁰ From the start of the occupation of Nashville, before any concrete statement of intention for emancipation from the Federal Government, the institution of slavery began to crumble in the surrounding area. Thousands of rural enslaved fled the sites of their bondage for freedom in the anonymity of the growing city, aided by Union forces unsympathetic to slaveholders who likely held

³⁹ Lewis, *Lincoln's Hard-Earned Victory*, 49-50, Powell and Wittenberg, *Tullahoma*, 21-22.

⁴⁰ Cooling, *Franklin and Nashville and Beyond*, 12.

secessionist views.⁴¹ Partly this was done from a hardening of Union attitudes in response to prolonged contact with Confederate civilians and partisans. As Union Major James Connelly wrote his wife of his time in Murfreesboro, “While in the field I am an abolitionist; my government has decided to wipe out slavery, and I am for the government and its policy whether right or wrong, so long as its flag is confronted by the hostile guns of slavery.”⁴² This soldier identified himself as a conservative Democrat but also professed that “while in the field I am an abolitionist”, showing that regardless of feeling toward slavery as an institution, as a cause of the rebellion and a prop for Confederate military and civilian effort, he would attempt to destroy it.

The victory at Murfreesboro would prove pivotal to the next year of the war in Middle Tennessee. Rosecrans would remain encamped in the city, training and reorganizing his newly named Army of the Cumberland. This did not mean that fighting stopped, however. Raids, scouts, skirmishes, and even small-scale battles were nearly constant as Rosecrans planned his next major movement. In Rutherford County a small battle would be fought between a Union Infantry division and a cavalry force under Colonel John Hunt Morgan, resulting in a bloody repulse of the Confederates from a hilltop position near the town of Milton, resulting in over 150 Confederate casualties and, according to the Union commander Col. Hall, Union losses of 6 dead, 42 wounded, and 8 captured.⁴³ Perhaps the most significant of the many small fights was the Battle of Thompson’s Station in neighboring Williamson County on March 4th and 5th where

⁴¹ Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed*, 90.

⁴² Major James A. Connelly. *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, edited by Paul M. Angle. (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1959) 58.

⁴³ David A. Powell and Eric J. Wittenberg. *Tullahoma: The Forgotten Campaign that Changed the Course of the Civil War, June 23-July 4, 1863*. (El Dorado Hills, California: Savas Beatie, 2020) 90.

Confederate cavalry under the command of Earl Van Dorn and Nathan Bedford Forrest surrounded and captured most of a Union infantry brigade, more than 1,500 men, at a cost of 350 of their own cavalymen killed wounded or captured. This disaster convinced Rosecrans of the ability and strength of rebel cavalry and reiterated the need for careful planning before attempting a forward movement.⁴⁴ This detailed planning came to fruition on June 23, 1863. On that day Rosecrans' Army left Murfreesboro to attack Bragg's scattered army at various posts throughout southern Middle Tennessee. In a brilliantly conducted 12-day campaign, Rosecrans' army, aided by the weather and some brilliant actions by subordinate commanders, Rosecrans drove Bragg entirely from Middle Tennessee. What became known as the "Tullahoma Campaign" largely consisted of Rosecrans' well trained, organized, and supplied army feinting, flanking, and generally outmaneuvering Bragg and forcing him to retreat, with only a few small battles occurring, most of which the Union forces decisively won.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Powell and Wittenberg, *Tullahoma*, 68-74.

⁴⁵ Wittenberg and Powell. *Tullahoma*, x-xi.

This campaign also saw some of the first widespread use of the Spencer Repeating Rifle, which proved itself pivotal in a few of these battles. In the hands of a brigade of newly mounted infantry under Colonel John T. Wilder, these 7-shot, lever-action rifles could fire much more rapidly than the standard muzzleloading rifles of most units. This attribute made the weapons, in the hands of competent and trained soldiers, a force multiplier in smaller-scale engagements. They were pivotal to the victory at

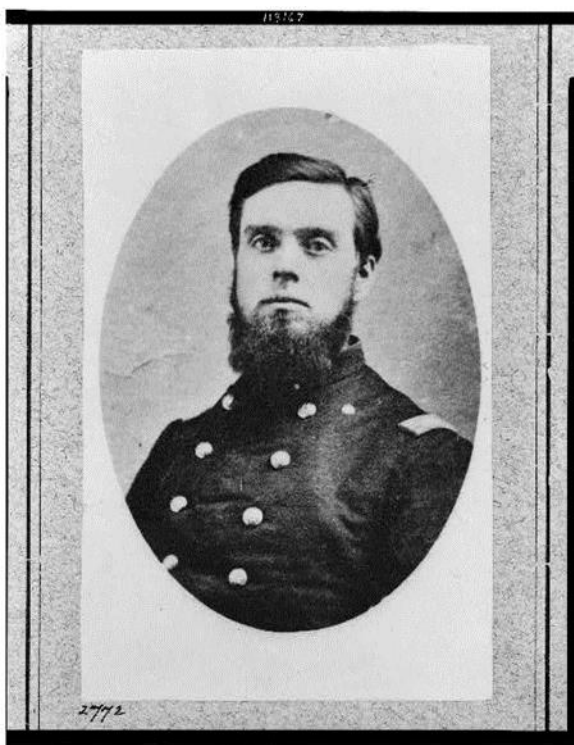


Figure 4 Colonel John T. Wilder Source: Library of Congress

Hoover's Gap, where Wilder's mounted infantry rode ahead of the main column, dismounted, and drove off Confederate forces, holding off counterattacks from numerically superior enemies until the main body of infantry arrived.⁴⁶ Hoover's Gap, in the southeast corner of Rutherford County, was vital to the campaign's success, a narrow pass through which the Corps of General George Thomas would

march to flank Bragg's defensive position and establish communication with and

prepare to reinforce the corps of General Thomas L. Crittenden.⁴⁷ Wilder's stand in the gap was fully appreciated by his superiors, as one of his officers recalled Thomas coming up to Wilder, taking his hand, and saying "You have saved the lives of a thousand men

⁴⁶ Wittenberg and Powell, *Tullahoma*, 162-163.

⁴⁷ Wittenberg and Powell, *Tullahoma*, 124.

by your conduct here today. I didn't expect to get this gap for three days'''.⁴⁸ The Battle of Hoover's Gap cost Wilder's brigade and their supporting artillery and early infantry reinforcements 2 officers killed or mortally wounded, 12 enlisted men killed and 47 wounded, totaling 61 casualties. The Confederate commander, Brigadier General William B. Bate, reported nearly 150 casualties, a figure which David A. Powell and Eric J. Wittenberg believe to be low.⁴⁹ Rosecrans and Wilder were far more enthusiastic for the new technology of repeating arms than most commanders and sought to implement this form of Mounted Infantry armed with repeaters more broadly, but were stymied by a War Department who were reluctant to send Rosecrans the advanced rifles, protesting a greater need in other departments.⁵⁰

Murfreesboro served not only as a launch-pad for Rosecrans' campaign, but also as a major supply hub, with Fortress Rosecrans serving as the major logistical nerve-center for the movement.⁵¹ The city would continue to serve as a logistics base during the Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and Atlanta Campaigns. There were consistent raids and small skirmishes from Confederate cavalry against the railroads and other logistical key points, but garrisons like that at Fortress Rosecrans, backed with cavalry, were usually able to hold their own and limit the damage done to Union logistics. Fortress Rosecrans also reduced Rosecrans' dependence upon the railroad, only one major line connecting Nashville to Chattanooga on the direct line his campaign would follow. This left his supply line incredibly vulnerable to enemy cavalry raids, while facing some of the most

⁴⁸ Connolly, *Three Years in the Army of the Cumberland*, 94.

⁴⁹ Wittenberg and Powell, *Tullahoma*, 176-180.

⁵⁰ Wittenberg and Powell, *Tullahoma*, 34-35.

⁵¹ Wittenberg and Powell, *Tullahoma*, 21-22.

celebrated Confederate raiders of the war. Furthermore, the land over which much of the Tullahoma campaign was fought offered little in the way of forage or provisions, and so living off the land was not realistic, as it was for other campaigns.⁵²

Nashville was the first Confederate capital to fall to the Union Army and became the seat of the Union military government of the state. This military government was headed by Andrew Johnson, the Unionist Tennessee Senator who had refused to leave the United State Senate when the state seceded. Johnson, a lifelong democrat, was far from an abolitionist in thought or feeling. However, Johnson was also a man who grew up poor with little access to education and would gleefully take any action he could to reduce the power of the wealthy plantation owners in his native state. Johnson would ensure that freed slaves remained free in the states, even if such actions ignored the fact that the Emancipation Proclamation excluded Tennessee. His term as military governor of Tennessee would be heavily resented by many pro-Confederate citizens in the state.⁵³

The occupation of Murfreesboro, with a large garrison, fortifications, and logistical bearings, would further excite the indignation of locals to the Union occupation forces. Garrisons required vast amounts of food, forage for horses, space for housing, and often brought disease, and in the case of nearby Nashville, prostitution.⁵⁴ Citizens would have crops, livestock, and occasionally land seized for use by the occupying army, much like they would have experienced had the Confederate army outstayed the period when the citizens gladly supported ‘their troops’. The necessary results of occupation (as well

⁵² Wittenberg and Powell, *Tullahoma*, 132-133.

⁵³ Cooling, *To the Battles of Franklin and Nashville*, 13-19.

⁵⁴ Jeannine Cole. “‘Upon the Stage of Disorder:’ Legalized Prostitution in Memphis and Nashville, 1863-1865.” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2009): 40–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42628111>.

as the frequency of violence from guerrilla and cavalry attacks) caused a growing disaffection for Union occupation and unionists in general. Many began to feel that Union forces were purposefully damaging their livelihoods, which, as the war continued, was increasingly the case⁵⁵. This resentment steadily turned to hatred, which was primed to turn to violence as the war ended.

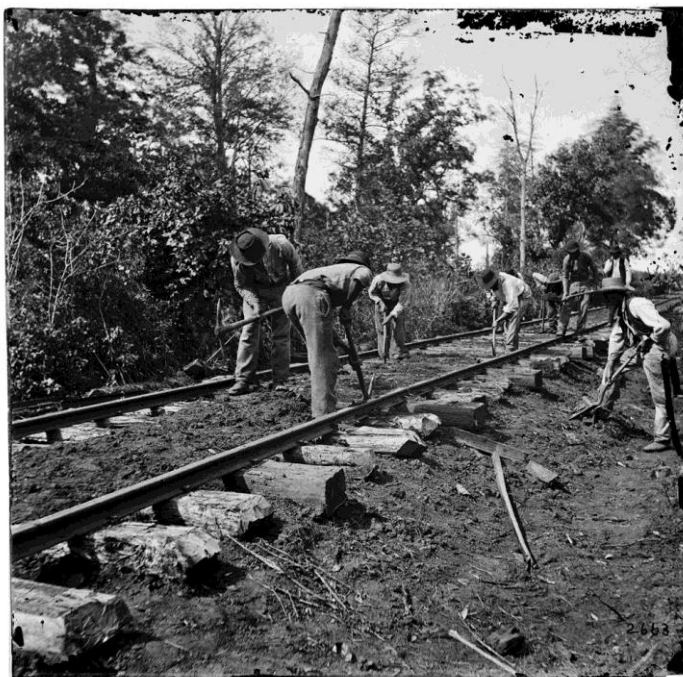


Figure 5 Black men working to fix Railroad Track near Murfreesboro during the Civil War Source: Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018666951/>.

This indignation and hatred did not ultimately confine itself to white Unionists, but predictably began to be turned toward the growing number of black troops, commonly referred to as the United States Colored Troops, or USCT, and freed people in the area. The south had long been primed with hatred for blacks, especially blacks

carrying guns. Most of these African American troops saw little combat and were more often used for garrison or fatigue duty. The sight of African Americans, formerly held in bondage and regarded as property, now in uniform with a musket on their shoulder, and receiving payment for their service (albeit less than their white comrades) incensed many

⁵⁵ Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed*, 87-90.

white southerners whose paternalistic attitudes could not conceive of blacks making good soldiers.

The Tullahoma Campaign did not end large scale fighting in Rutherford County. After the fall of Atlanta in 1864, Confederate general John Bell Hood took the Confederate Army into Tennessee hoping the Union army under Sherman would follow him out of Georgia. Instead, Hood fought a series of disastrous battles against a detachment from Sherman under John Schofield at Franklin, and then against an ad-hoc army gathered at Nashville under General George Thomas, who had earlier replaced Rosecrans as commander of the Army of the Cumberland. USCT soldiers played a significant role in the campaign as both front line and support soldiers. This campaign saw another battle in Rutherford County as Hood had sent a detachment of cavalry under Nathan Bedford Forrest and infantry under William S. Bate to Murfreesboro after the Battle of Franklin and before his army was crushed at Nashville.

Hood's decision on December 2nd to dispatch Forrest's and Bate's division from his already undersized besieging army not only weakened him, it cost him the use of competent subordinates and a necessary mounted arm.⁵⁶ As poor of a tactical decision as weakening his army in the face of an already numerically superior enemy was, it does show the importance of Murfreesboro and the Nashville and Chattanooga railroad in Hood's mind. Hood also may have hoped that the attack would draw Thomas out of the heavily fortified Nashville, where Hood could either attack him in the open, or at least

⁵⁶ Stanley F. Horn, *The Decisive Battle of Nashville*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957) 36-38.

attack a heavily depleted Nashville. Instead, Thomas stayed put, not deeming the threat to Murfreesboro seriousness enough to leave his stronghold.⁵⁷

Thomas' faith in the Murfreesboro garrison was well placed. More than 8,000 Union troops were garrisoned in Fortress Rosecrans under the command of Lovell H. Rousseau. Forrest, who had attacked several fortified positions throughout the war, recognized instantly that Fortress Rosecrans was unassailable. He set his men on a line out of range of the Fortress' guns, hoping the Confederate presence would draw out a Union party to attack him. It did. More than 3,000 men, under a disgraced Major General named Robert H. Milroy, were sent out to find and engage the rebels. Milroy was best known for having personally escaped, some said through cowardice, a disaster that consumed most of his command in Winchester, Virginia, in the early stages of the Gettysburg Campaign. Tried and acquitted by a military court, Milroy likely felt a need to prove himself in the field, and a victory against a famous, not to mention notorious, rebel like Forrest would do it. Ultimately, Milroy managed to defeat Forrest in a confused fight, where Milroy's outnumbered troops were aided by Confederate mistakes, including a possible friendly fire incident, and the seeming dissolution of morale amongst the battle-weary Confederates. Forrest reportedly proved his comfort with personal violence again by shooting down one of his own men, a color bearer fleeing the battle. Nothing the former slave-trader could do would make these men listen, and Forrest ultimately retired, contenting himself with continuing to damage the railroad between Nashville and Murfreesboro. The Battle of the Cedars, as the fight came to be known,

⁵⁷ James Lee McDonough, *Nashville: The Western Confederacy's Final Gamble*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004) 143.

was fought on the same ground as the great Battle of Stones River nearly two years earlier.⁵⁸ It kept Hood from having his cavalry available to slow the Union attack at Nashville and to gather intelligence on enemy movements in that city. The garrison of Fortress Rosecrans was too large to have realistically been captured, and Thomas demonstrated conclusively he did not need them to defeat Hood decisively. In all, the attack was a costly sideshow which gained nothing and in fact may have aided significantly in Hood's defeat.

The garrisons in Rutherford and Davidson Counties would continue in place throughout the rest of the war and even following the end of the fighting. General Thomas would be placed in charge of the military occupation of Nashville during the end of the war and through Reconstruction. Guerrilla fighting would steadily decline, then rise again as violence perpetrated against freedmen and their white, unionist allies following the Civil War. Many of the USCT units would remain in the area for months following the war at least, if not longer. Some of the soldiers, following the end of their enlistments, would settle in the region. A fair number of USCT troopers would settle near Murfreesboro, in a community that would later come to be known as Cemetery, a majority African American community of farmers working the rocky, poor soil around the Stones River National Cemetery, on the same ground where so many men had met their deaths during the Battle of Stones River.

Rutherford County contains significant factors in its Civil War history that makes it an intriguing study for post-war violence. The frequency of major engagements in the

⁵⁸ McDonough, *Nashville*, 143-148.

county, as well as the less noted but more frequent raids and guerrilla actions, inured the citizens to an atmosphere of violence which must have affected their psyches. The county saw a significant presence of USCT soldiers toward the end of the war. These African Americans, often former slaves, were armed and trained to fight against rebellious white southerners, stoking fears long held by slaveholders throughout the south. Some of these soldiers saw action and proved they could fight the men who had so often claimed them to be property. Further, the county saw early action proving the effect of new weapons technology in unequal combat, specifically the repeating rifle using metallic cartridges. With the presence of paroled ex-Confederates, former partisans, local Unionists, immigrants from the north, and former USCT soldiers in the region, it is unsurprising that violence and threats of violence would emerge post war.

Chapter 3: Armed Resistance to White Supremacy in Rutherford County, 1865-1870

The end of the Civil War brought a mass of challenges to the counties of Middle Tennessee. From 1861-1865 daily life in the region had always revolved around the war. The war left the massive Fortress Rosecrans standing on the outskirts of Murfreesboro.



Figure 6 Stones River National Cemetery Source: Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010645722/>.

The army would quickly develop the Stones River National Cemetery for the Union soldiers who had met their ends in the region, either in combat or in camp. This cemetery would become a focal point of Union

memorialization following the war⁵⁹. Thousands of

paroled Confederate soldiers returned to homes that had been in occupied territory for almost 4 years, despite their best efforts. Those who had been enslaved in 1861 were now emancipated and were left with an unclear future, especially following the assassination of President Lincoln in April 1865. With the rise of Andrew Johnson to the Presidency, the stage was set for a tumultuous and ultimately violent period where an alliance of

⁵⁹ Miranda L. Fraley. "The Legacies of Freedom and Victory Besieged: Stones River National Cemetery, 1865-1920." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2005): 135. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42631255>.

white and black unionists supported Republican efforts at Reconstruction and the defense of civil rights, while a largely white conservative block opposed them and fought to maintain white supremacy in a region, they had always considered it their birthright to rule. African American communities would soon find themselves the target of much of this backlash, and it would quickly become evident that it was necessary to maintain an armed presence to assert their newly won rights, although it would prove not to be enough as white Republicanism crumbled in Tennessee toward the end of the decade.

After the Tennessee Constitutional Convention of January 1865, William G. “Parson” Brownlow was elected the new civilian governor of Tennessee. When the new legislature met in April 1865 it ratified the Thirteenth Amendment and barred anyone who had taken part in the Rebellion from voting, although it did not immediately extend the vote to African Americans in the state.⁶⁰ Stephen V. Ash notes that “by the war’s end, virtually all white Middle Tennesseans bowed to the reality of black freedom, but that was the only concession most wished to grant.”⁶¹ White southerners would do all they could to insult and oppress the newly freed African American population. This included physical, verbal, and sexual assault. This violence extended to whites who identified themselves as allies to black freedom and equality.⁶² Finally, whites continued to hold many of the same attitudes toward freed people as they had towards the enslaved population prior to the war. They still considered blacks as meek and feeble, and routinely blamed any sign of self-assertion among African Americans on northern whites

⁶⁰Sam Davis Elliott. *Isham G. Harris of Tennessee: Confederate Governor and United States Senator*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010) 177-178.

⁶¹ Stephen V. Ash. *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed: 1860-1870*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988) 192-193.

⁶² Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society*, 194.

acting as agitators. Despite this perception they also frequently saw black men as voracious sexual predators and driven to theft, arson, and conspiracy.⁶³ These two hard to reconcile viewpoints were often held simultaneously, and this discordant perspective often meant southern whites were unable to understand the individualistic actions of African Americans in their midst.

African Americans in the post war South were a broad and varied class, but they nearly uniformly felt the heavy hand of threats, insinuation, and resentment held by the forces of white supremacy throughout the South. Many African Americans began to arm themselves, ready to defend with force their newfound rights and freedoms. As white-supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan began to spread throughout the South, the need for African Americans to arm themselves became more apparent, even to the government. First, the Tennessee State government and then the Federal government began creating and tasking military units with putting down a de facto state of guerrilla warfare across the South. Rutherford County especially began to see considerable armed black presence and saw many small-scale instances of violence or intimidation, as well as seeing several large conflicts be threatened and narrowly avoided. Violence especially bloomed around any election at the time, state or federal.⁶⁴ Accounts of African Americans going about their lives armed following the war are common, and especially of them organizing and going armed to the polls.

Gun ownership itself was a new feature for African Americans in the post-Civil War era. From the Colonial through the Antebellum Era, numerous laws had been

⁶³ Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society*, 194-195.

⁶⁴ Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society*, 203-206.

emplaced barring the owning or carrying of arms by blacks without express permission of their so-called “masters”. The earliest law barring blacks from gun ownership was passed in Virginia in 1640, just 21 years following the arrival of enslaved African Americans in the new world. These laws proliferated throughout the South, in various forms, in the Antebellum decades. Following the end of the war, a number of “Black Codes” in various states would be passed which would restrict black civil rights, including the right to bear arms. Perhaps the most egregious of these was passed in Mississippi.⁶⁵ In Tennessee, however, no laws passed immediately after the war would ban blacks from Gun ownership, as the state government was in the hands of “Radicals”, who, if not dedicated to black civil rights in principle, were at least dedicated from self-interest, knowing themselves to be unpopular with the former Confederates in the state. There were not practical legal barriers to blacks owning guns immediately following the Civil War, although there would be significant financial and social ones.

By the end of 1865, an emerging armed and active black population in Murfreesboro already began to make itself felt. According to one newspaper account, an African American man was arrested and jailed for inebriation on Christmas day of 1865 in Murfreesboro. A group of local African Americans gathered around the site with “much talking and display of firearms.” The group, supposedly headed by the Quartermaster of the 111th USCT, stationed in Murfreesboro, charged on the jail and managed to force the door open, freeing the arrested man. Members of the USCT were sent out to prevent more unrest and patrolled the streets. It was also noted that a group of

⁶⁵ Stefan B. Tahmassebi, "Gun Control and Racism," *George Mason University Civil Rights Law Journal* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1991): 67-100. <https://heinonline-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/gmcvr2&div=9&collection=journals>

white citizens formed two companies of volunteers to patrol the streets during celebrations from then on.⁶⁶ This shows that by December of 1865, just a few months after the end of the war, many African Americans had armed themselves and were willing to use those arms, if only as a deterrent, in order to redress actions they perceived as unjust. It also demonstrates that the USCT were still active in Murfreesboro. The organization of the white civilian volunteers also demonstrates that the white citizens felt unnerved by armed African Americans in the town, not only the group that had freed the supposedly inebriated man but also by the presence of armed USCT in the town as peacekeepers afterward. Further evidence of the willingness to brandish arms in their own cause can be seen by an account of a black man named Tom Tellis going armed with a musket and a pistol to a white man and threatening him, although the threat was never carried out and Tellis was jailed shortly afterward.⁶⁷

Despite the evident fear of the whites of Rutherford County, however, it appears that the first few years after the war were promising, if tense, in terms of interracial relations. For example, in mid-1866 two members of the 111th USCT were put on trial for murder after the shooting and killing of an 8-year-old white boy. The two men were arrested by their commanding officer and sent to Nashville for trial by Court-Martial but were later sent back to Murfreesboro to face a trial in criminal court. The court took two full days to find a jury. On Tuesday, September 4, 1866, the court appointed Horace P.

⁶⁶ "Riotous Conduct of Negroes" *Republican Banner*. December, 31, 1865, <https://ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/murfreesboro/docview/939365456/se-2?accountid=4886>.

⁶⁷ . "MURFREESBORO: WHO VOTES--AN EXTERMINATING ETHIOPS IN LIMB--A DEFENSELESS FEMALE BADLY BEATEN--ARREST OF A PRETENDER--SAD NEWS." *Republican Banner*. Oct. 13, 1866, <https://ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/murfreesboro/docview/939593993/se-2?accountid=4886>.

Keeble, a former Confederate Colonel,⁶⁸ for their defense. That same day “a panel of fifty-eight jurors were exhausted, without obtaining a juror.”⁶⁹ The next day three more panels of fifty-eight jurors were screened resulting in 11 men selected as jurors.⁷⁰ The day following forty more potential jurors were brought in and a twelfth man chosen.⁷¹ The trial began on Saturday, September 8th. One of the defendants, Moses Tucker, was found not guilty and the other, Alfred Ellis, was found guilty of manslaughter rather than murder and sentenced to seven years in the penitentiary.⁷² A Nashville newspaper claimed that the child had fallen in with the two soldiers while they were in town, and they agreed to take him to the camp. It appeared the child had spent considerable time with the regiment and was known to them. While they were walking back, Tucker holding him by the hand, Ellis was handling his revolver. The journalist believed removing a spent cap, and was doing so clumsily, wearing gloves. The gun discharged and struck the boy, who died.⁷³

The clearing of Tucker and the reduction of murder to manslaughter for Ellis shows that it was still possible for a semblance of a fair trial to be had by African Americans at this time in the county courts. However, it should be noted that the defendants were both members of the United States Army, and any irregularities in the

⁶⁸ "THE MURDER TRIAL AT MURFREESBORO: SOUTHERN JUSTICE TO THE FREEDMEN." *Republican Banner*, Sep 11, 1866. 1, <https://ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/murder-trial-at-murfreesboro/docview/939259387/se-2?accountid=4886>.

⁶⁹ Rutherford County Criminal Court Minutes. *Indct. for Murder, Moses Tucker, (Col'd) + Alfred Ellis (Col'd)*. Tuesday, Sept. 4, 1866, p. 82. Rutherford County Archives, Murfreesboro, TN.

⁷⁰ Criminal Court Minutes. *Indct. for Murder, Moses Tucker, (Col'd) + Alfred Ellis (Col'd)*. Tuesday, Sept. 5, 1866, p. 83-84.

⁷¹ Criminal Court Minutes. *Indct. for Murder, Moses Tucker, (Col'd) + Alfred Ellis (Col'd)*. Tuesday, Sept. 6, 1866, p. 89.

⁷² Criminal Court Minutes. *Indct. for Murder, Moses Tucker, (Col'd) + Alfred Ellis (Col'd)*. Tuesday, Sept. 8, 1866, p. 93.

⁷³ "THE MURDER TRIAL AT MURFREESBORO" *Republican Banner*, Sep 11, 1866.

trial ending in a guilty verdict or harsh punishments would likely have resulted in a federal investigation and potential reprisal. However, the fact that the court took its time finding a jury that could be impartial, when the before mentioned journalist had noted that he “could find but one or two citizens who did not believe they ought to be hanged”, speaks a good deal about the court’s desire for at least the appearance of justice. It was also noted that most of the jury appeared to have been made up of former Confederate soldiers.⁷⁴ The report of a Freedmen’s Bureau official for June 1866, also mentions that he was satisfied with the work of the Civil Court in respect of its treatment of African Americans, and that they had been fair and impartial to his knowledge.⁷⁵

Regardless of the seeming willingness to do justice in late 1866, in early 1867 feelings began to turn. The Tennessee Legislature, controlled by Radical Republicans, debated a Franchise Bill and a Militia Bill, both of which passed. The year had started with the assassination of a radical Congressman in Obion county, so other radical congressmen felt the need for a military force to counteract white supremacist violence.⁷⁶ As Ben H. Severance claimed, Governor Brownlow’s heavy-handed policies, in the absence of physical force to back it, had spawned hatred and resentment throughout 1865 and 1866, and the perceived lack of force emboldened many conservative forces to begin pushing back and using violence of their own to intimidate and usurp power from the Reconstruction Government. The state government could request but could not order

⁷⁴ “THE MURDER TRIAL AT MURFREESBORO” *Republican Banner*, Sep 11, 1866.

⁷⁵ J.M. Tracy, “Monthly Report of Operations and Conditions for June 1866,” July 2nd, 1866. Freedman’s Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/400/rec/1>.

⁷⁶ Ben H. Severance. *Tennessee’s Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005) 1-3.

federal troops to interfere in parts of the state to keep order and enforce the law, and federal interference was rarely forthcoming. Even if they could, the troops in Tennessee were shrinking quickly, during 1866 the number of United States soldiers in the state fell from over 7,000 soldiers spread through the state, to just over 2,000, concentrated around Nashville.⁷⁷ In early 1867 then, facing growing violence and decreasing federal support, the Radicals in the Tennessee Legislature drew up a militia bill to establish the Tennessee State Guard. A delegation of citizens of Rutherford County sent a protest against the Bill while it was under consideration, to no effect.⁷⁸ In all the State Guard, when recruited, would consist of at least 1,875 men in 1867, mixed between black and white men, organized into 22 companies. Notably, four African American men served as company commanders at one point or another in the Guard, at a time when black men serving as military officers was nearly unheard of at the federal level.⁷⁹

The new franchise law allowed Tennessee's African American citizens to vote but continued to bar former Confederates. An article in the *Murfreesboro Monitor* repeated a Cincinnati author concerning the law, "The size and unanimity of the negro vote must overbear all opposition. It is universally believed that Brownlow will be a second time Governor, if his life is spared... *But it is not expected that success will be reached without bloodshed.* Liberty and civilization seem always to have marched to their greatest victories through a crimson flood. *Violence*, now as in days past, *must do its appointed*

⁷⁷ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 6-10.

⁷⁸ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 19-20.

⁷⁹ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 52-56.

work. Many victims may fall, but out of their graves will rise the olive branch of peace."⁸⁰

The Murfreesboro Monitor, a staunchly democratic organ opposed to black enfranchisement and to the Force Bill, presented the entire article without comment.

The article continues to cite the same author discussing the new Militia law, which would establish the Tennessee State Guard. As the unnamed author states "These troops are intended to hunt down and arrest, for trial by the civil courts, those desperadoes who have been shielded from pursuit, after the commission of high crimes or atrocious outrages, or who, either through fear or favor, have not been arrested by the proper authorities. *They will also be used as a police force, to see that the ballot box is protected from scenes of violence and intimidation.*"⁸¹ The printer of The Monitor seemed to be publishing the articles, with the italics added, to excite indignation in its readers. This is evidenced by an article on the next page of the same edition, evidently giving the thoughts of the editor. After claiming the state was induced to pass the 13th Amendment by "foul means", the author continues on to claim that the radicals had made unreasonable demands, to wit, "The negro must be enfranchised, and made the political superior of nine-tenths of the whites of Tennessee, and is this moment the controlling power in the State... 'loyal militia' are to be organized, one of whose objects is to overawe and drive from the polls all who may be opposed to the present radical dynasty... It would be well for the Southern States to profit by the example of Tennessee

⁸⁰ "The Radical Hope Under the New Franchise Law." *Murfreesboro Monitor*, March 9, 1867. Microfilm collection, MTSU Walker Library Maker Space. MFM 84 Box 1, Miscellaneous Newspapers Murfreesboro & Rutherford Co. 1820-1850.

⁸¹ "The Radical Hope Under the New Franchise Law." *Murfreesboro Monitor*, March 9, 1867. Microfilm collection, MTSU Walker Library Maker Space. MFM 84 Box 1, Miscellaneous Newspapers Murfreesboro & Rutherford Co. 1820-1850.

ere they attempt by any compromise whatever to conciliate the radicals.”⁸² Aside from nearly directly calling for continued rebellion against the government, the article makes clear the white supremacist beliefs of the author. His objections against radical rule focus on the passage of an amendment barring the institution of slavery, African American enfranchisement, and protecting those new African American voters from violence and intimidation. He makes it clear he not only sees these efforts as undesirable, but as “despotism”.

If there were any doubt of the feelings of the editor, they are dispelled by a short announcement later “The recruiting of colored sustainers to uphold the Brownlow dynasty has begun... as it is an easy situation with no labor attached, there will be no difficulty in getting negroes to go it with a looseness. It is the greatest upholder of laziness and producer of depredations that could be started.”⁸³ This reflects the mood not only against the state government, but a decided bent toward violence which would soon explode as the Ku Klux Klan would begin to act against the newly enfranchised African Americans and their white allies. Included on the page with the last item is an advertisement for “Remington’s Firearms”. The editor of the “Monitor”, H.C. McLaughlin, appears to have been not only an inveterate racist and enemy of Reconstruction, but to have not been above personal acts of violence. In August of 1867

⁸² “The ‘March of Progress’.” *Murfreesboro Monitor*, March 9, 1867. Microfilm collection, MTSU Walker Library Maker Space. MFM 84 Box 1, Miscellaneous Newspapers Murfreesboro & Rutherford Co. 1820-1850.

⁸³ “The recruiting of Colored maintainers” *Murfreesboro Monitor*, March 9, 1867. Microfilm collection, MTSU Walker Library Maker Space. MFM 84 Box 1, Miscellaneous Newspapers Murfreesboro & Rutherford Co. 1820-1850.

he was reported in the New York Times to have assaulted the Rutherford County Registration Commissioner.⁸⁴

The rising tide of violence the state legislature seemed to expect could already be seen in Murfreesboro. For example, in February 1867, a Nashville Newspaper printed an account of the actions of 4 white men from Wilson County. The men were drunk in Murfreesboro and shot at one African American, then went two miles outside the city on the Liberty Pike and broke into a house, threatening the black occupants with pistols, and stabbing two of them. They then apparently stabbed the men's employer who had come to see what was happening. The Freedmen's Bureau Agent at Murfreesboro put out warrants for their arrest, but no move was initially made to apprehend them.⁸⁵ This attack, apparently unprovoked, would only prove to be the harbinger of things to come. It was not only the government that began arming itself against intransigent white supremacist violence, but blacks increasingly found that arming themselves could deter whites from interfering with their newly won voting rights, and at times may serve to save themselves or their neighbors. At the very least, it becomes evident that from 1867 until the end of the decade, blacks increasingly went about armed and came into conflict with white supremacists, both organized and singular.

As the State Guard mustered and deployed, tension and violence began to escalate at an alarming rate. Part of this was fueled by a coming state election in 1867. Whereas at

⁸⁴ "TENNESSEE: NEGROES DISCHARGED BY THEIR EMPLOYERS FOR VOTING AT THE POLLS. THE GOVERNMENT FINDING WORK FOR UNEMPLOYED COLORED VOTERS--ELECTION RETURNS." *New York Times*, Aug 03, 1867. 5, <https://ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/tennessee/docview/92364076/se-2?accountid=4886>.

⁸⁵ "Proceedings of the Supreme Court." *Republican Banner*, Feb 21, 1867. 4, <https://ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/proceedings-supreme-court/docview/959619120/se-2?accountid=4886>.

the end of 1866 Rutherford County seemed to have settled into an uneasy peace, by August 1867, J.K. Nelson, Freedmen's Bureau Agent at Murfreesboro, claimed that "were it not for a company of the State Guards at this place on that day (the election) we have every reason to believe that trouble would have resulted."⁸⁶ Twenty-four of the thirty-five counties of Middle Tennessee saw some level of State Guard presence during the election.⁸⁷ The Rutherford County detachment, headed by a Capt. Robert L. Hall, arrived only two days before the election. The detachment was split between Murfreesboro, LaVergne, and Sand Spring precincts, and after consulting with the mayor, Charles Ready, and the Registrar, the captain agreed to keep his men in camp provided no disturbance occurred. The troops seem not to have left camp throughout the day, and the Radicals carried the county handsomely.⁸⁸ The choice to remain in camp was likely made to avoid needless antagonism or charges of intimidation against Democratic voters. Regardless, their proximity likely did much to ensure order and peace through the proceedings.

The threat of violence necessitating the presence of the militia would only be the start. In August, a black man named W. Nelson was murdered by a white neighbor, Cicero Layherd, six miles outside of Murfreesboro along the Liberty Pike.⁸⁹ In December, the new county Freedmen's Bureau Agent, J.K. Nelson, advised two African American men who had been shot at in Smyrna to go to the district attorney to try it in

⁸⁶ J.K. Nelson. "Monthly Report, August 1867." Sept. 1, 1867. Freedman's Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/225/rec/1>.

⁸⁷ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 116.

⁸⁸ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 116.

⁸⁹ Thomas J. Rice. "Monthly Report, October 1867." Nov. 4, 1867. Freedman's Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/245/rec/4>.

front of a Jury.⁹⁰ The advice highlights one of the great failings of the Freedman's Bureau, a lack of clear judicial authority and the need to work with often hostile local authorities. This violence closing out the year of 1867 would be a prelude to 1868. In February 1868, facing budgetary issues and with no great emergency during 1867 to justify its existence, Brownlow and the State Legislature disbanded the State Guard. With the disbanding of the group, "Rebel paramilitarism intensified, with the infamous Ku Klux Klan taking the lead."⁹¹ 1868 was also a presidential election year, the first since the Civil War. The Klan would focus its efforts on eroding Radical support prior to the election, through violence, intimidation, and fraud. Severance gives figures of Klan members in Murfreesboro at around 300, with close to 1,000 throughout the county.⁹² Allen Trelease states that, in 1868 the "county was almost completely in the grip of the Klan"⁹³ It was in the face of this campaign of terror that African Americans in Rutherford County really began to arm themselves, seeing that the government would often be unwilling or unable to protect them and that it was very likely they would need to defend themselves at some time.

Already in January 1868 J.K. Nelson was reporting on "outrages committed by the illegal body known as the 'Ku Klux Klan'".⁹⁴ In February he notes as well that "Henry Kix, a drinking, worthless, reckless rebel has made it a practice of disarming colored men

⁹⁰ J.K. Nelson. "Monthly Report, December 1867." Jan 8, 1868. Freedman's Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.

<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/428/rec/1>

⁹¹ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 175.

⁹² Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 177.

⁹³ Trelease, *White Terror*, 35.

⁹⁴ J.K. Nelson. "Monthly Report, January 1868." February 1868. Freedman's Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.

<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/429/rec/3>.

when meeting them.” This man apparently disarmed one freedman, then took the gun and knocked another man off his mule, then threatened his life if the man were to report the incident.⁹⁵ The mere fact that this man is noted as having made a habit of disarming African Americans meant that they routinely went armed in the first place. Nelson noted later in that report that the Klan had established a presence in Rutherford County but had not yet perpetrated depredations in their disguises. He noted also that the Klan had posted flyers threatening freedmen as well as white unionists. Further, a public meeting for the Republican party in Rutherford County, including speakers, had happened the day he wrote his report. According to Nelson, the Republican speakers had gone, then a group of “seventy-five or one hundred rebels” sent a “half-crazy drunken” black man to the stand and had him speak in favor of President Andrew Johnson. After this, he claimed one of the troublemakers struck a member of the audience, and then another fired a shot with a pistol, followed by “fifteen or twenty shots” fired in among them. Several black men were seriously wounded, as well as two white men, in the ensuing stampede.⁹⁶ White Murfreesboro resident John Spence also wrote about the event. His memoir, written long after the fact, describes it as a “Riot” and has it taking place on a “clear and pleasant spring day”. His account, of a political meeting being interrupted by, in his own words, a first shot followed by “fifteen or twenty in quick succession”, treats the whole affair as a joke. Spence, an unapologetic white supremacist who is extremely dismissive throughout his book of black intelligence and of racial equality, says the square smelled “musky”

⁹⁵ J.K. Nelson. “Monthly Report, February 1868.” February 28, 1868. Freedman’s Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/430/rec/4>.

⁹⁶ J.K. Nelson. *Monthly Report, February 1868*. February 28, 1868. Freedman’s Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/430/rec/4>.

from the black crowd and speaks jocularly of the panic following the shots, which he admits resulted in the injury of several persons.⁹⁷ Nelson ended his report saying he feared this violence was only a foreshadowing of what was to come and that a company of soldiers should be sent as soon as possible.⁹⁸

Nelson's fear of increased violence proved prescient. His report for March 1868 began "During this month the Freedmen have been feeling perhaps more severely than ever since their emancipation, the heavy hand of oppression."⁹⁹ He notes the expansion of the Ku Klux Klan to all parts of his agency and that they were patrolling at night in bands of ten to fifteen. He feels each neighborhood may have been contributing their own group. He also notes "a freedman named Oakley, who took an active part in the late political canvas in this county, honored their threats early this month by leaving his home at Murfreesboro for parts unknown." Nelson goes on to note that Oakley had been threatened by the men unmasked, and when Oakley sought help Nelson told him to bring his friends into his home and, "if they should attempt to break into his house to kill as many of them as they could." Implausibly, Nelson lists several other instances and threats, but concludes that the threats "don't scare anybody".¹⁰⁰ The threats certainly seem to have scared Oakley, and with justification.

⁹⁷ John Spence. *Annals of Rutherford County, Vol. II.* (Murfreesboro, TN, Rutherford County Historical Commission, 1991) 273-275.

⁹⁸ Nelson. "Monthly Report, February 1868."

⁹⁹ J.K. Nelson. "Monthly Report, March 1868." April 1868. Freedman's Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/431/rec/1>.

¹⁰⁰ Nelson. Monthly Report, March 1868.

In May the Klan grew bolder. On the 9th of that month, about 75 Klan members paraded the streets and called for a John McKnabb, a former white Union cavalryman

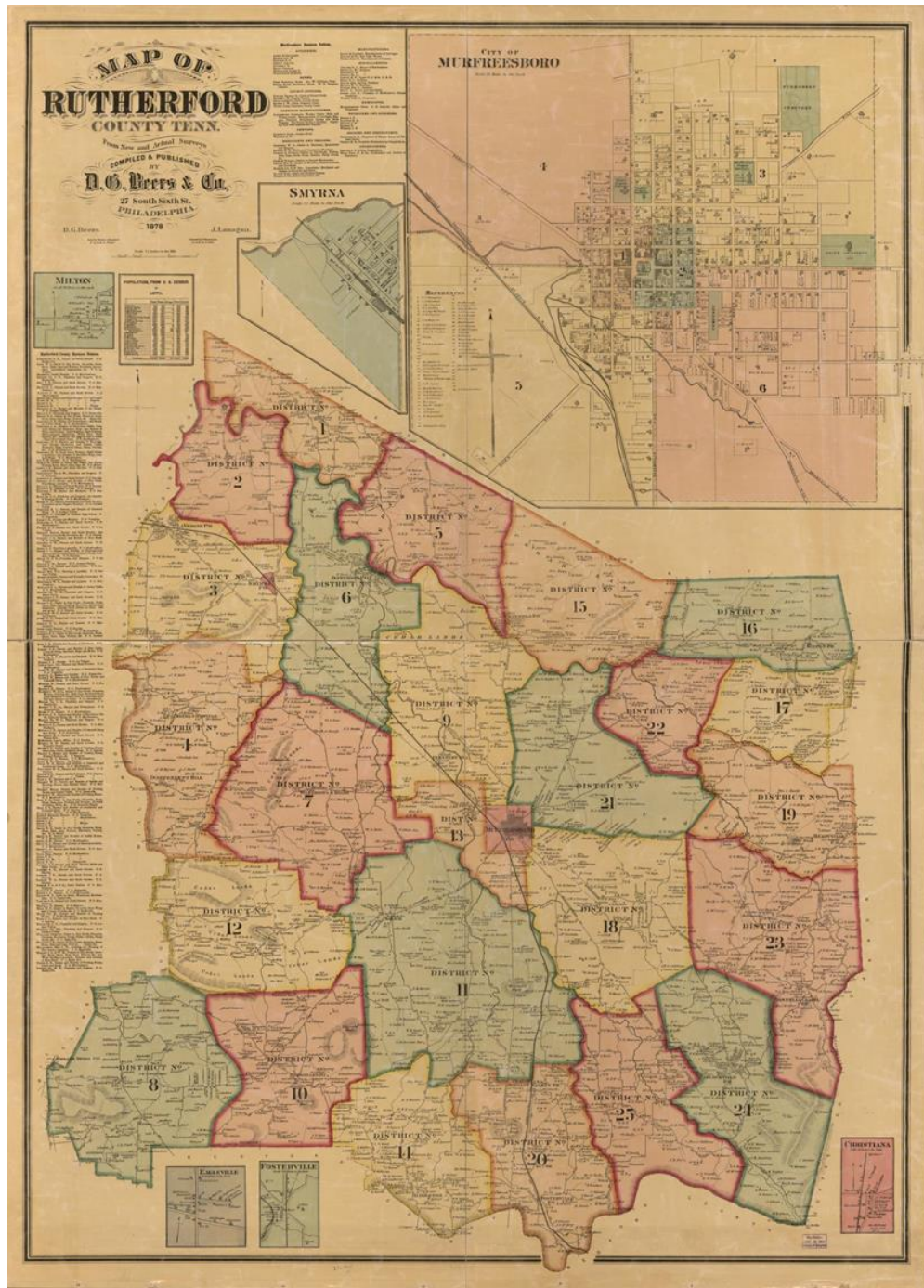


Figure 7 Beers Map of Rutherford County. Source: Library of Congress
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2012586255/>.

from Alabama, and threatened him, telling him to leave the area. McKnabb acquiesced and left two days later for Nashville. They also took from his home and whipped Harry Lytle, an African American, ostensibly for having a white mistress.¹⁰¹

In June the Klan continued its campaign of violence, threats and terror in the county, taking one black man from his home and giving, according to the man, 150 lashes on his back. The man had been convicted of stealing bacon but had been granted a new trial which had not yet started. The Klan later went riding into the country, threatening one man 8 miles out of town on the Shelbyville Pike, before riding on. Another man, the brother of the sheriff, was called to come out of his home, eventually agreed and was beaten in front of his ill wife for being a Unionist. Nelson bitterly noted that most outrages were no longer reported from fear of reprisal and belief that the Bureau could do nothing to redress the wrongs. After admitting he is unable to comprehend the full extent of the problem, he stated that “This I do know, that I have been sleeping for months with a revolver under my pillow, a double barreled shotgun heavily charged with buckshot at one hand, and a hatchet at the other, with inclination to sell what little piece of mortality with which I am entrusted as dearly as possible.” A husband and wife, white teachers in the freedmen schools, had left for the West, despite having intended to remain a year and being dedicated to the work. Another teacher said no amount of money could make him stay. Nelson then claimed that “all the Northern men and Unionists would be glad to

¹⁰¹ J.K. Nelson. “Monthly Report, May 1868.” June 9, 1868. Freedman’s Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/433/rec/1>.

leave if they could do so without making a sacrifice.”¹⁰² The Klan’s violence in Rutherford was driving both African Americans and white unionists to the edge, causing many to either arm themselves and prepare to die fighting, or to flee the region and its violence altogether. Even Nelson, despite his protestation about selling his mortality dearly, had already tendered his resignation and was on his way out as he recorded this report.

June proved to be one of the most dramatic months of the entire era of Reconstruction for Rutherford County, with a Klan attack in nearby Chapel Hill starting what very easily could have become an open conflict between a group of armed blacks and a larger body of armed whites. Reports of the incident vary significantly, but a few points are generally agreed upon by the period sources. It appears the Ku Klux Klan took a black man from his home and whipped him. They were fired upon by a group of local blacks with shotguns and fled. A group of armed blacks organized themselves for a reason unknown, either for the defense of those who had fired on the Klan, or according to other sources to “hunt” the Ku Klux Klan. The group, numbered between twenty-five and thirty men, was noted as having been armed with guns and pistols, likely indicating a significant variety of arms, probably of poor quality. They began to wander, and eventually headed toward Murfreesboro, over 20 miles away. Upon hearing a group of armed blacks was heading to the town, the white citizens grew frenzied and created an armed mob to intercept the group. The Mayor and Sheriff, seeking to avoid bloodshed,

¹⁰² J.K. Nelson. “Monthly Report, June 1868.” July 1868. Freedman’s Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/400/rec/1>.

went out to find the group of African Americans but could not find them, and was told they were at the National Cemetery. Finding them there, apparently waiting for the train at the station behind the cemetery, the mayor promised to defend them if they lay down their arms and disperse, which they appear to have done. Four of the men were later captured and jailed. After their jailing, a group of the Ku Klux Klan, estimated to be around 100 strong, demanded to be given the prisoners, but were refused and eventually dispersed.¹⁰³

Whatever the origins or purposes of the group of armed African American citizens, a few things are clear. First, they all had arms that they could access in short order, indicating the perceived need to be armed. Second, the men



Figure 8: Engraving entitled "Visit of the Ku-Klux" Source: Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/item/2001695506/>.

¹⁰³ "THE KUKLUX HUNTERS: AFTER FIGHTING NOBLY THEY FALL BACK ON THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU, RADICAL RUMOR OF BROWNLOW'S INTENTION TO CALL OUT THE MILLTIA." *Republican Banner* (1837-1875), Jun 20, 1868, 4, <https://ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/kuklux-hunters/docview/940336004/se-2?accountid=4886>.
 "THE MARSHALL COUNTY AFFAIR: HOW AN ARMED BODY OF NEGROES HUNTED FOR THE KUKLUX AND HOW THEY WERE HUNTED IN TURN RETREAT OF THE AFRICANS TO MURFREESBORO." *Republican Banner* (1837-1875), Jun 19, 1868, 4, <https://ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/marshall-county-affair/docview/940335682/se-2?accountid=4886>.
 Lt. Col. Michael Walsh. "Inspection Report, June 1868. Monthly Report, June 1868". June 25, 1868. Freedman's Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN. <https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/411/rec/1>.

were in a mindset where they quickly took to arms as a means of either defense or possibly offense against their oppressors in the form of the Ku Klux Klan and were unafraid to use those weapons if the occasion called for it. Finally, nearly every account acknowledges that the group behaved in an orderly manner and damaged no property nor took anything by force. By now it was becoming apparent that the state, the army, and the Bureau either could not or would not protect African American communities, so some began to arm for their own defense. Unfortunately, as is seen in this instance, that often would not be enough either, as whites were more than willing to perpetrate violence on armed blacks, and were often more numerous, better armed, and with the backing of local officials and courts by the late 1860s.

On the 4th of July, the Ku Klux paraded the streets of Murfreesboro, roughly three hundred in number according to the acting superintendent of the Freedmen's Bureau. He reported three African American men taken from their homes, whipped, and threatened if they did not leave the county.¹⁰⁴ In August he noted that outrages had been considerably lessened. He astutely noted this was likely politically motivated, as the Klan did not want to give Governor Brownlow cause to reactivate the State Guard prior to the election of 1868.¹⁰⁵ Until November little is reported, but in the November report the new Agent for Rutherford County, George E. Judd, reported that prior to the election on the 3rd of November the Ku Klux Klan was active. They threatened blacks not to vote the

¹⁰⁴ John Dean. "Monthly Report, July 1868." August 6, 1868. Freedman's Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/401/rec/1>.

¹⁰⁵ John Dean. "Monthly Report, August 1868." September 1868. Freedman's Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/375/rec/2>.

Republican ticket, and on election day took control of the polls, only allowing those in who were voting Democrat. He also claimed that the Democrats had a man recording the names of everyone who voted Republican and threatened them as they left the polls.¹⁰⁶ The absence of State Guard, federal troops, or sympathetic law enforcement turned the election of 1868 into a circus in Rutherford County. A resort to arms at this juncture would have been little better than suicide.

In 1869 little can be drawn from the Freedmen's Bureau papers, and most newspapers did not report on Klan outrages. In 1869 and 1870 a closer inspection of County court records and census data will be needed to draw any greater insight into the specifics of Rutherford County's state of being at the time. Still, an outline of state political developments can offer glimpses of Rutherford County's plight. On February 10, Governor Brownlow resigned to take a seat as a U.S. Representative, and DeWitt C. Senter took his place. Though Senter had been a dedicated radical, his assent to the governor's chair would prove disastrous for the cause of Civil Rights and equality in Tennessee. However, Brownlow had in early 1869 remobilized the State Guard, and the new General-in-Chief of the organization began to respond to delegations from each county protesting the new mobilization. In his response to the Rutherford County delegation he said, "We have had enough preambles and resolutions, we want action".¹⁰⁷ Severance credits this order with convincing Forrest to issue his "disbandment order" which told dens of the Klan to go dormant to avoid provoking a conflict with an

¹⁰⁶George Judd. "Monthly Report, November 1868." December 1868. Freedman's Bureau Collection, Middle Tennessee State University Library, Murfreesboro, TN.
<https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll1/id/406/rec/3>.

¹⁰⁷ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 193-197.

organized military force duly backed by government authority. Unfortunately, the Guard was mobilized only shortly before Senter drastically changed their orders, telling them to cooperate with Civil authorities.¹⁰⁸ In March Senter began demobilizing the militia. By the end of July, the militia had been disbanded, and Senter was courting conservative votes by promoting the re-enfranchisement of former Confederates.¹⁰⁹ With the measure passed, the cause of equality and freedom in the state was largely destroyed for the time being, and acts of resistance to the now firmly entrenched white supremacist government would become increasingly rare, even as Reconstruction limped along in other parts of the country.

Reconstruction in Tennessee was brief and bloody. While the immediate post war years proved tense, there was little actual violence. As the immediate memory of the war faded, and with it Confederate fears of repercussion, a counterinsurgency against Reconstruction began to coalesce. Governor Brownlow proved heavy handed in his policies, breeding anger and hatred of his government in these former rebels. However, his policies failed to combat the growing power of white supremacist forces in the state. As the Union Army was withdrawn and the limits of the State Guard as drawn up in 1867 became clear, those working toward Reconstruction, both white and black, took up arms to defend themselves against the increasingly present and active white-supremacist threat. In Rutherford County this can be seen by the increasing references to African Americans going about armed in their daily lives, and by white unionists like the Freedmen's Bureau Agent J.K. Nelson arming himself and advising freedmen to arm themselves against

¹⁰⁸ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 197-210.

¹⁰⁹ Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, 216-226.

white supremacist forces, especially the swelling ranks of the Ku Klux Klan and similar groups. At times this armed resistance worked, such as the time when armed African Americans shot at and drove off Ku Klux Klan members in the process of whipping a black man in Chapel Hill. However, as white supremacy gained ascendancy and in Rutherford County the Klan became nearly ubiquitous, the usefulness of armed resistance was drawn increasingly into question. As the State Guard was finally put aside and former Confederates were re-enfranchised, hopes seems to have been mostly abandoned and African Americans either left or bided their time, waiting for a new opportunity, although many would continue to carry arms personally for self-defense.

Chapter 4: Losing Hope, 1870-1880

Setting a date for the end of Reconstruction in any state can often be difficult.

Does it end when any chance of securing civil rights for the formerly enslaved population ends, or does it end when the last vestiges of Federal occupation are removed? Does it end when blacks are effectively removed from the voting pool, or when the last African Americans leave elected office? Does it particularly matter? Regardless of how individual scholars have attempted to limit Reconstruction, the popular consensus remains that the period continued until 1876 or 1877, with the election of Rutherford B. Hayes as a Republican president, following a period of negotiations which seem to have included the removal of all federal troops from the south in exchange for votes. Given that Reconstruction was effectually ended in Tennessee by 1870, however, this chapter will cover the period from 1870 until 1880, to see just how conditions for African Americans and their white allies changed in Rutherford County as the “redemptionists” in Tennessee took firmer hold. Governor Senter, by giving the franchise back to formerly disenfranchised former Confederates, all but assured the failure of reform and civil rights in the state for decades to come. The state once again became a democratic stronghold where the sizeable black population became a veritable political nonentity.

This begs the question of how prominent interracial violence became following 1870. On the one hand, there were fewer people in positions of authority to challenge white supremacy and prosecute racial violence. On the other, white supremacist groups may have felt that they had obtained their object and the need for continued violence on a widespread basis had abated. The Klan is well known to have, if not dissolved altogether,

at least have become less active and visible in these years, likely reflecting an understanding by their leaders that white supremacy was in the political ascendency and continued open defiance of law and civil rights would only result in stronger measures to enforce them.

It should be noted that the re-enfranchisement of former Confederates and the subsequent suppression of black participation in the political sphere did not always signal a downturn in the standard of living for African Americans across the state, and in Rutherford County certain black communities began to show signs of resilience and growing strength. On the ground so heavily bloodied in the Civil War Battle of Stones River and later Battle of the Cedars, a community of African Americans including former members of the 111th USCT and many formerly enslaved people from the area, built a community that became known locally as Cemetery. The land was rocky and often less than ideal for farming, but it was cheap. Additionally, in 1865 General Thomas had ordered a National Cemetery built on the site of the battlefield, on a small rise of ground that had seen the culmination of the first day's fighting, and this new cemetery offered a rallying point for the freedmen. It served as a very visible reminder of the price of their new won freedom, paid in the lives of hundreds of thousands of men in blue, both black and white, "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash" was "paid by another drawn with the sword". This area saw a slowly growing group of African American landowners in the 1870s, along with the emergence of black churches and a cemetery, Evergreen Graveyard, which remains standing to this day between the Nashville and Chattanooga

Railroad and the New Nashville Highway.¹¹⁰ The emergence of Cemetery and other black communities like it, often with leaders and members who had served, in some capacity, in the USCT, would seem like tempting targets for white supremacist violence, but there are few clear instances of intimidation or violence being perpetrated in the community.

The Klan may have been disbanded officially, however there were still many accounts of nightriding throughout the county. Allen W. Trelease notes that, in the governor's election of 1870, counties east of Nashville saw a deterioration of conditions. Murfreesboro and Manchester were both singled out as having seen lynchings and murders by Ku-Klux riders. According to Trelease: "with the blessing and in some cases the active help of the Ku Klux Klan" state democrats suppressed the black and unionist vote enough to elect a democratic governor, former Confederate General John C. Brown from Pulaski, a former leader of the Klan.¹¹¹ The election of not only a former Confederate but a one-time Klan leader marked the end of any serious attempt to enforce civil rights in Tennessee in the 19th century.

Although Brown himself no longer backed the Klan, not out of a newfound consciousness of their essential immorality, but rather casting the organization off as a political tool that had outlived its usefulness, the group would not so easily disappear. Just because its leadership had forsaken it, did not mean that many members and even groups did not continue to actively participate in the violence and intimidation that was

¹¹⁰ John Riley George, "Stones River: Creating a Battlefield Park, 1863-1932" (PhD diss., Middle Tennessee State University, 2013) 28-40.

¹¹¹ Trelease, *White Terror*, 279.

their hallmark. In this fact lies the difficulty of researching and writing about the Klan; while it had clearly defined leaders, its status as a secret society and its clandestine operations made it incredibly difficult to control in an age where instantaneous communication was limited. Many members acted on their own initiative and some individuals acted in the name of the Klan without being members at all. This difficulty in controlling the actions of racist white southerners, even by their purported leaders, shows the precarious position of African Americans in Tennessee at the time.

Adding to this problem were two events in 1870 which served to limit access to firearms for African Americans, and indeed for all Tennesseans of low income. One of these events limited this access by design, the other by coincidence. The first was the passage of one of the first gun control laws in Tennessee. The act was entitled “An Act to Preserve the Peace and Prevent Homicide”, an innocent and innocuous enough title. How did the bill intend to do this? By preventing the carrying of any concealable weapons, specifically dirks, swordcanes, stilettos, belt or pocket pistols or revolvers. Given the only firearms this clearly left out were shotguns and rifles, any African American intending to go about armed would need to be very conspicuous about being armed, a very dangerous thing in the South, especially when the threat of violence against them was constant, and aid from the police was dubious at best. The prescribed punishment for carrying one of the listed weapons was a fine of between ten and fifty dollars, imprisonment for 30 days to six months, and a \$1,000 bond for keeping peace for six months.¹¹² Those sums were steep at the time and well beyond the means of many Tennesseans, especially blacks. It is

¹¹²“1869-1870 Tenn. Pub. Acts, 2d. Sess., An Act to Preserve the Peace and Prevent Homicide, Ch. 13, § 1”, Duke Center for Firearms Law. Accessed 10/14/2022. <https://firearmslaw.duke.edu/laws/1869-1870-tenn-pub-acts-2d-sess-an-act-to-preserve-the-peace-and-prevent-homicide-ch-13-%C2%A7-1/>.

hard to escape the idea that such a law, passed almost immediately after conservatives had retaken the state, was not partially an attempt to keep blacks from being armed and prepared for self-defense in their daily lives.

The second factor hindering access to arms for blacks in the south was a sudden decrease in the supply of arms available on the secondary market. In 1870 power politics shifted dramatically in Europe when Prussia declared war on and swiftly defeated the Second French Empire in the Franco-Prussian War. After French Emperor Napoleon III was captured at Sedan in September, the Second Empire quickly gave way to the Provisional Government. This Government found itself in need of arms to remake a military to replace that captured during the war. For a 4-month period they would send agents throughout the world to purchase serviceable arms of any description. In the United States, they found a wide selection. The end of the Civil War had washed the United States in cheap surplus weapons and the years following the war also saw widespread development of new weapons. Agents set to work and purchased more than 750,000 weapons from the United States market, many of these being cheap, outdated surplus weapons.¹¹³ These cheap, obsolescent weapons were precisely the kind of guns blacks in the South would have been most able to afford. Exactly what role this played in gun ownership in Rutherford County is unclear, but it is almost certain that a rise in the cost of firearms would make it much harder to obtain them for African Americans in the county, many of whom were struggling to make ends meet.

¹¹³ Herbert G Houze. *Arming the West: Schuyler, Hartley & Graham's Arms Shipments to the American Frontier, 1868-1886*. (Woonsocket, Rhode Island: Mowbray Publishing, 2008) ix.

Regardless of the hurdles, there were clearly still armed African Americans in the county by 1871, and it was equally clear that the violence they faced remained in full force and was being abetted and even perpetrated by county and city officials. On March 4, 1871, a group of Klan members rode through the 8th District of Rutherford County, in its southwest corner, firing their guns in the air. They went to the home of Wiley and William Kimbro, ordering the two black men to come out, which they refused to do. The Klansmen broke the windows, attempting to break into the building, and the two accosted men shot and killed one of the attackers. The man proved to be Pat Hinman, the county constable for the district. The rest of the attackers fled, firing back at the house as they left. Both the defenders were arrested but were released shortly afterward. On the 8th, a Deputy U.S. Marshal arrested two men on suspicion of taking part in the attack. They were Ed Arnold and J.F. Berong. Arnold was county sheriff and paid bail.¹¹⁴ The exact results of the trial is unclear, but Arnold would be the Sheriff of the county as late as 1878, so it is unlikely he was found guilty, an unsurprising verdict given the attitudes among whites in the county.

The fact that as late as 1871 the Kimbros were armed and ready to protect their homes from armed Klan members demonstrates that at least some of the black community was still ready to defend themselves by armed force if necessary. Arnold and Hinman's participation in the raid demonstrate that the Klan may have officially been ordered to lie dormant, but some high-ranking local officials throughout Tennessee were still active in it. This served to give the organization at least the veneer of legitimacy and

¹¹⁴ "Masked Outrages" *The Courier-Journal*, (Louisville) Mar. 10, 1871.
https://www.newspapers.com/image/35009028/?clipping_id=111325247.

a newspaper would write a satirical article about proposed “updates” to the jail, all of which would essentially cater to lynch mobs.¹¹⁷

The first lynching to gain public notice was that of Joe Woods, on June 17, 1873. Woods was accused of raping Elizabeth Hampton, a white widow, and then fracturing her skull with an axe in the last few days of May, the exact date not given. It was widely reported in newspapers across the county, and the articles invariably expressed that he would be lynched if she died. A few days after the attack she succumbed to her injuries and shortly afterwards a mob dragged Joe Woods from the jail and lynched him. No newspaper account offers serious doubt that Woods was the murderer, and one even notes testimony from his wife saying he was away from home on the night of the murder and supposed testimony of friends saying he had spoken about assaulting the woman.¹¹⁸ Guilty or innocent, however, Woods was only the first victim of a string of lynchings in the 1870s showing that many of Rutherford County’s white residents were unwilling to patiently wait through the long process of legal punishment. This willingness to use extra-legal murder was not new of course, but unlike earlier Klan actions, they tended to

¹¹⁷ “Murfreeboro”. *The Daily American*. (Nashville, TN) Sept. 12, 1878.

https://www.newspapers.com/image/604000637/?fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJwNDAwMDYzNywiaWF0IjoxNjY2ODE5NjczLCJleHAiOiE2NjY5MDYwNzN9.dIbPANWzUbTJdNJ_3dBiCRJB-8QZkaGAQ1q8sVgbcaM.

¹¹⁸ “Outraged and Murdered: Horrible Crime in Rutherford County- A Respectable Widow Lady the Victim.” *Republican Banner*. (Nashville, TN) May 31, 1873.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/121900884/?fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJyMTkwMDg4NCwiaWF0IjoxNjY2OTg3NTQ0LCJleHAiOiE2NjcwNzM5NDR9.YdGaAn-YYMBplc84-wJ6gNRDkBuTZsoifJPzDFLbm-E>.

“Lynch Law.” *Star Tribune*. (Minneapolis, MN) June 17, 1873.

https://www.newspapers.com/image/178963845/?clipping_id=112068888&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiE3ODk2Mzg0NSwiaWF0IjoxNjY2OTg3NzI1LCJleHAiOiE2NjcwNzQxMjY5.xos3UvmzjCECvVjrDoUnYG7XIXxYM-UXXC0roRdAnCQ.

be undisguised and in open defiance of local judicial authority, regardless of how little effort those authorities put forth to stop them.

Some contemporaries noted the violence in Rutherford County and decried it, noting it as symptomatic of wider violence spreading throughout the South in the early 1870s, especially in Louisiana and South Carolina. On September 2, 1874, the *Knoxville Weekly Chronicle* claimed that Rutherford County had had 12 murders since “last January”. Assuming that “last January” refers to January 1874, that’s 12 murders in one county in 8 months, a superbly high ratio. Even if it refers instead to January 1873, that’s an average of more than a murder every two months. Their only source referenced is an unnamed correspondent, and the article does not enumerate the specific crimes, but it serves to further illustrate the commonness of violence in the county during this time. The article ends by noting that, as bad as events in South Carolina and Louisiana are proving, there is significant need to address the violence endemic in Tennessee itself. The same paper noted that that same week 16 black residents of Gibson County had been arrested on suspicion of planning a riot and had been dragged from jail. Six of them were killed or mortally wounded within town limits, and the mob had left with the other ten and likely killed them.¹¹⁹ The rates of violence against African Americans not only within the county but across the state and the whole South appears to have been skyrocketing.

The next well documented lynching in the county occurred in June of 1875. On June 10, 1875, Gertrude W. Jarrett was murdered in her home near Murfreesboro on the

¹¹⁹ “16 Colored Men Killed by a Mob in Gibson County”, *Knoxville Weekly Chronicle*. (Knoxville, TN) Sept. 02, 1874.
https://www.newspapers.com/image/586365948/?fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJ14NjM2NTk0OCwiaWF0IjoxNjY2OTg4MTQ0LCJleHAiOiE2NjcwNzQ1NDR9.PoxAx0DQngNpgsZIPzi_S-OPkztHas9pl7pOAHQHJpg.

Salem Pike. Jarrett was apparently strangled to death with a twisted piece of rope, and money and jewels stolen from the home. Suspicion soon landed on Jesse Woodson, whom most papers described as a mulatto. Interestingly, the charges against Woodson never seem to have included rape, the most common accusation against lynching victims. The threat of lynching against Woodson was immediate, and he was initially sent to Nashville to avoid that fate. There he waved a preliminary examination in criminal court and was returned to the Davidson County jail until the next meeting of Rutherford County's criminal court. The threat was taken seriously enough that on June 15, 1875, the *Chicago Tribune* wrote that there was fear of a group of upwards of 100 armed men from Murfreesboro riding on Nashville to take Woodson, and that a militia company was ordered to guard the jail and picket the Murfreesboro Pike, and "orders given to deal promptly and with bullets with the mobbers, should they arrive".¹²⁰ Two representatives of Murfreesboro's citizens went to Nashville and protested keeping Woodson in Nashville, claiming it was an insult to Murfreesboro's citizens. The judge did not immediately send Woodson back however, asking for assurance that he would not meet violence from the towns people, which the representatives were seemingly hesitant to give. On Aug 16, Woodson was taken by train to Murfreesboro in the morning to stand his trial. That night, at "about half-past 9", Woodson was taken from the jail and lynched. The crowd was noted as being "between seventy-five and a hundred, were mounted and

¹²⁰ "Special Dispatch to *The Chicago Tribune*" *The Chicago Tribune*. (Chicago, IL) June 15, 1875. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/349282226/?terms=%22Jesse%20Woodson%22%20%22Rutherford%20County%22&match=1>.

undisguised.”¹²¹ According to some sources, Woodson was hung from a tree which had been used to hang Joe Woods earlier, and a supposed horse-thief named Joe Copeland even earlier. These accounts also claim that Woodson’s body had been shot 17 separate times. Woodson had several times protested his innocence and the only evidence ever explicitly mentioned tying him to the murder, was that he had been feeding pigs on Jarrett’s farm and that there was grease on Mrs. Jarrett’s throat that slightly resembled the slop. Some papers covering his murder claim he confessed, but one account stated that the confession was extracted by the mob while in the perpetration of the hanging. In all, the case against Woodson was far from decisive, but his fate was sealed the moment he was accused.¹²²

In September 1878, another lynching gained widespread press coverage. James Russell was charged with an attempted rape of a white woman, and was dragged from the jail by 30 men, apparently entering town by the Salem Pike, and was murdered by the mob. There seems to have been a consensus in the press that there was little substance in

¹²¹ “Terrible Retribution.” *Republican Banner*. (Nashville, TN) August 13, 1875.

https://www.newspapers.com/image/604841209/?terms=%22Jesse%20Woodson%22%20%22Rutherford%20County%22&match=1&clipping_id=112281129.

¹²² “A Revolting Murder.” *Nashville Union and American*. (Nashville, TN) June 12, 1875.

<https://www.newspapers.com/clip/112192006/murder-of-mrs-jarrett-jesse-woodson/>. “The Salem Horror.” *Republican Banner*. (Nashville, TN) June 13, 1875.

https://www.newspapers.com/image/604837748/?clipping_id=112192231&fclToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlZXpZcXctaWQiOiYwNDgzNzc0OCwiaWF0IjoxNjY3MTcxMTA3LCJleHAiOiE2NjcyNTc1MDd9.hYnPt_sUPfi71rfSuAeMjzwpqTPozZVmDIJileS4k. “Jesse Woodson”. *Republican Banner*. (Nashville, TN) June 15, 1875.

https://www.newspapers.com/image/604837844/?clipping_id=112009656&fclToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlZXpZcXctaWQiOiYwNDgzNzc0OCwiaWF0IjoxNjY3MTcxMjc1LCJleHAiOiE2NjcyNTc2NzV9.pQ0oEj-lpjWXOMbW942VqbzgPE80TkfvSyn1fz0mTGI. “Lynching in Tennessee.” *The San Francisco Examiner*. (San Francisco, CA) August 16, 1875.

<https://www.newspapers.com/clip/112068398/lynching-of-jesse-woodson/>. “They Got Him at Last” *Nashville Union and American*. (Nashville, TN) Aug. 14, 1875.

https://www.newspapers.com/image/80793851/?clipping_id=112286758&fclToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlZXpZcXctaWQiOiJwNDgzNzc0ODUxLCJpYXQiOiE2NjcxNzlxMjc1MjY4cC16MTY2Nz11ODUyN30.bgWopFTHjTztOcV6pF2_n3FLSgccTM3aXh5cSq2StNw.

the charges. Even the accusations against him only state he had grabbed her hand and throat and made a threat, before being scared off by a dog. Another article, written in Buffalo, NY, mentions that many believe Russell was entirely innocent, and claim the accuser was known to have a “low character”. Whether this means she had a reputation for sexual laxity or for dishonesty is unclear. The woman was almost 60 years old as well. Russell, after the alleged assault, was not immediately arrested, but left alone for nearly a week before being detained. When he was arrested it at first seemed like he would be tried in the normal course of law, but when a mob from Salem arrived the jailer offered no physical resistance, and even opened the doors to the jail himself after the mob threatened him. Once again, accounts refer to him being hung from the same tree as Jesse Woodson, Joe Woods, and others. They identify this tree as “at the edge of the Salem Bridge.” When his body was found, he had also been shot through the head. One account claims a letter in his clothes, intended for his wife, asked her to gather a group of armed black residents and come and rescue him. That same account claims the lynching was the third in the county in a month, but it makes no clear mention of the other two.¹²³

It appears one of those referenced lynchings was of a white man, named Pickney Bell, who shot and killed a county constable attempting to arrest him. Bell was widely noted to be of poor character; however, his lynching also received much greater press

¹²³ “Another Disgraceful Act of Mob Violence.” *The Daily American*. Sept. 27, 1878.
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/603896823/?fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJYwMzg5NjgyMywiaWF0IjoxNjY3MTg3OTE3LCJleHAiOiE2NjcyNzQzMTd9.kE2J-uSuzOGTvQBfjcc6H6HKEf84wpOXAh3VMnw3eVo>. *Buffalo Morning Express*. September 28, 1878.
https://www.newspapers.com/image/343847139/?fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJOMzg0NzEzOSwiaWF0IjoxNjY3MTg4MTU3LCJleHAiOiE2NjcyNzQ1NTd9.tuZtSCJkeL7zF9KVwcjRXQqYbrxGmZCpcErYu_1wW7I. “Hastily Hanged.” *Fayetteville Observer*. October 3, 1878.
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/70842263/?fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJwODQyMjYzLCJpYXQiOiE2NjcyODgyNDAsImV4cCI6MTY2NzI3NDY0MH0.hck6XkeAYBY909UmPGwCn55WuJV5xcr8MoVRliP6c9Y>.

condemnation than that of any of the black residents of the county who had been killed. Of Bell's lynching, a Cheyenne, Wyoming paper, the *Democratic Leader*, sardonically noted "As well expect a Southerner not to pride himself on being one of the chivalry as to give up his peculiar pleasure in lynching.... Monday night a white man was led from the Murfreesboro, Tenn. jail and left dangling to a tree, and no questions asked." The notice ends by noting that lynching had two points in favor of it, sic., that it was cheaper and surer than the judicial system. It is possible the third event they discuss was mistakenly identified as a lynching but was instead a jail break. Dick Arnold, a white man charged with cutting a black man in Rutherford County, was freed on Sept. 10, 1878, by a mob wielding shotguns and threatening the jailer.¹²⁴

In December of 1878, the prevalence of violence against blacks in Rutherford County again surfaced when two white men, West Smittey and John Jerrolds, murdered Dennis Edwards and mortally wounded his wife and son, and injured another resident of

¹²⁴ "Lynched". *The Inter-Ocean*. (Chicago, IL) September 10, 1878.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/32560143/?fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiMyNTYwMTQzLCJpYXQiOiE2NjcxODg0MDQsImV4cCI6MTY2NzI3NDgwNH0.E96ILWEYcABxKRkHPb3RttjdmeYmMUHdWXjgweysV1k>. "Mob Violence in Murfreesboro." *The Cincinnati Enquirer*. September 11, 1878.

https://www.newspapers.com/image/31366248/?clipping_id=112300028&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiMxMzY2MjQ4LCJpYXQiOiE2NjcxODk3NzksImV4cCI6MTY2NzI3NjE3OX0.L30i4W0hbERqJomF_Yrq56lDwp3bpgsHR1F8ybsKzFM. *The Democratic Leader*. (Cheyenne, WY) September 11, 1878.

https://www.newspapers.com/image/867339009/?clipping_id=112298914&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJg2NzNmZOTAwOSwiaWF0IjoxNjY3MTkwMDYzLCJleHAiOiE2NjcyNzY0NjN9.OlykSYy6DDIttHlenao61l6VfyNdVqkfQcvLJC3v9dc. "Further Particulars of Monday Night's Lynching." *The Daily American*. (Nashville, TN) September 11, 1878.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/604000633/?fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiYwNDAwMDYzMywiaWF0IjoxNjY3MTkwMjA0LCJleHAiOiE2NjcyNzY2MDR9.ZPjCWqYgpoNQhRcBUajsOrUtb-xOa8177ENiahdRUQ>. "A Tennessee Lynching." *Harrisburg Daily Independent*. (Harrisburg, PA) September 14, 1878.

https://www.newspapers.com/image/71335196/?clipping_id=112299230&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJxMzY2MjQ4LCJpYXQiOiE2NjcxOTA0MDUsImV4cCI6MTY2NzI3NjgwNX0.rT_9Y_xJcyD5tanKhycK2ROyIP7Z6CUUjZatQFKkXoc.

Pistols”, which made it “a misdemeanor for any person to sell, or offer to sell, or to bring into the State for the purpose of selling, giving away, or otherwise disposing of belt or pocket pistols, or revolvers, or any other kind of pistols, except army or navy pistol; Provided that this act shall not be enforced against any persons now having license to sell such articles until the expiration of such present license.” The Army and Navy pistols refers to holster revolvers of caliber .36-.38 for Navy revolvers and .44-.45 for Army revolvers, the size of guns commonly in use by the United States military during the Civil War and afterward. These guns were quite large and expensive, and this act was almost certainly passed to continue discrimination against blacks in the state, many of whom could not afford such expensive weapons. Furthermore, the law was unclear enough, the terms “Army” and “Navy” having no clearly defined legal definition, that it could be used to prosecute nearly any black man who owned and carried a gun.¹²⁷

Finally in 1880, two black men were hanged legally in Murfreesboro. John Hall and Burrell Smith were accused of murdering Major Henry S. Pugh on May 16, 1879. The sheriff who had read their death warrant was the same Sheriff Ed Arnold that was arrested for participating in the Klan raid on the Kimbro cabin in 1871. Supposedly the two men confessed not only to the murder of Pugh, but also to a list of robberies perpetrated within the county. According to the newspaper accounts of the murder, the two were attempting to rob Pugh’s grocery when he entered, and Smith fired a shot at him, which hit him in the chest. Pugh died the next morning. Supposedly, the murder weapon was a pistol Smith had found in a field. What a pistol would be doing in a field in

¹²⁷ 1879 Tenn. Pub. Acts 135-36, *An Act to Prevent the Sale of Pistols*, chap. 96, § 1.
<https://firearmslaw.duke.edu/laws/1879-tenn-pub-acts-135-36-an-act-to-prevent-the-sale-of-pistols-chap-96-%C2%A7-1/>.

Rutherford County is hard to answer and suggests that it may have been somewhere on the battlefield, although the idea that a steel pistol may have been left unprotected to the elements for almost sixteen years and still be operational seems almost fantastical. However, a Colt Navy revolver on display in the Tennessee State Museum was found wrapped in oil cloth in a stone wall on the Stones River Battlefield in the 1850s, so it is not outside of the realm of possibility. Another possible explanation could be that he had purchased it but claimed he had found it to avoid prosecution under the 1879 law preventing sale of pistols other than the Army and Navy.



Figure 9: Colt Navy found in fence near Stones River Battlefield in 1950s. Source: Tennessee State Museum

https://portal.museum.tn.gov/TSM_ARGUS/Portal/TSM_Portal.aspx?lang=en-US.

However, this is further complicated by the fact that Pugh was carrying a small pistol when he was shot, and this gave rise to a rumor that he had shot himself by accident. To lay the rumor to rest, Pugh was exhumed and a postmortem investigation of the wound was conducted. The pistol he carried was identified as a “little seven-shooter”. This most likely refers to a pocket-sized revolver with 7 chambers, several which were manufactured in the 1860s and 1870s, the most famous and successful of which were made by Smith and Wesson. These typically fired a .22 caliber projectile from a copper or brass case. The round was small and underpowered, and a view of the wound in Major Pugh’s body showed that the ball, still in the body, was “7 times the size” of that fired by

Pugh's pistol. It claims it was likely made by "a large army pistol". A typical Army pistol was .44 or .45 caliber, so what exactly is meant by the term "7 times the size" is unclear.

Caliber refers to the diameter of the projectile fired, .22 caliber being .22 inches in



Figure 10: Smith and Wesson No. 1 7-shot revolver. Source: Tennessee State Museum

diameter, so an Army

revolver ball is between .44

and .45 inches in diameter.

This means that it would be

twice as wide as a .22, but

the ball would be much

larger in area (the area of a

circle being equal to $A =$

πr^2) and it would certainly have been much heavier. It seems, then, that Smith shot Pugh

with an Army Revolver, a large and rather expensive handgun and legal to carry under

both laws passed to prevent the carrying of concealed weapons.¹²⁸

The two men were tried and found guilty of first-degree murder on the 27th of June, 1879 and sentenced to death. An appeal to the Supreme Court of Tennessee was unavailing, and their sentences were upheld. The public hanging took place just off the square in Murfreesboro and became a public spectacle, with reserved seating, a barbecue, and a large crowd of spectators. The celebratory atmosphere is perhaps unsurprising in a county which had seen at least 5 lynchings and several threatened lynchings, numerous

¹²⁸ "Murfreesboro: The Cause of Major Pugh's Death- A Disinterment, Inquest, and Postmortem Necessary to Settle the Doubts About It" *The Daily American*, May 21, 1879.

https://www.newspapers.com/image/603960247/?clipping_id=112405002&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlZXpZcXctaWQiOiYwMzk2MDI0NywiaWF0IjoxNjY3NDEExNjg0LCJleHAiOiE2Njc0OTgwODR9.WZSk4kuiesz5_HFQpFtO-3xE9jgSY_MD0FT8FzsGY30.

Klan attacks, and reportedly many other murders in the previous decade. Violence and killing, especially against blacks, seemed to be a regular pastime for many of the white residents of Rutherford County. Indeed, the *Nashville Weekly Banner* remarked on the county's propensity for extra-legal murder. However, the paper seemingly holds some sympathy with the mobs of the county, crediting the hanging with "vindicating the majesty of justice, whose lax administration during the past few years has resulted, especially in Rutherford county(*sic*), in the people visiting vengeance, swift and dire, upon those who transgressed the law." It further notes that Rutherford County "has been noted for the rapid retribution which has been visited on evil-doers" but goes on to justify these mob murders by claiming that "every person lynched within her borders was accused of a heinous offense".¹²⁹ The fact that two accused murderers should be allowed to have a trial and be legally executed within the county if found guilty attracts comment is all the indictment of conditions in the county that is needed.

Throughout the 1870s, the number of instances in which local blacks used arms to defend themselves from aggression seems to have fallen significantly, but by no means did it cease. The Kimbros in 1871 showed that at the start of the decade some blacks were not only well armed, but willing and able to use deadly force in self-defense. The case of the letter found in James Russell's clothing, if it is to be believed, further shows that at the very least there were arms within the black community, and that he himself at least believed there were those willing to use them to free him from jail. Finally, the murder of

¹²⁹ "Hall-Smith: A Hanging in Murfreesboro Today." *The Nashville Banner*, February 26, 1880. https://www.newspapers.com/image/603914621/?clipping_id=112068055&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlZXpZcXctaWQiOiJYwMzKxNDYyMSwiaWF0IjoxNjY3MzYwNTUzLCJleHAiOiJlNjc0NDY5NTN9.NC1bxyJ6JxSMCCxuxKAbIA0H7a-cx09i1xTYRwwNytA.

Major Pugh by Burrell Smith shows that Smith was armed while committing his crimes, although this case was complicated by the claim that Smith had found the pistol, not purchased it. If that is true, it is unclear if Smith's being armed was a case of policy or of opportunity.

Finally, just because this treatment will not discuss events beyond 1880, does not mean that armed resistance to racial violence ended. For example, in January of 1881, a party of four masked men rode to the home of Henry Miller, asked him to come out, which he refused, and when they attempted to force entry, he fired. They returned fire and fled. One of the riders was found dead at Miller's home, shot through the head. Whether he was killed by Miller's shot or by his compatriots when they returned fire was unclear.¹³⁰

Even given the limited amount of direct evidence for the period between 1870 and 1880, it seems clear that armed self-defense was still seen as an option for some blacks in Rutherford County. However, as violence against blacks became more and more open throughout the county, no longer being done masked and in the middle of the night, this option may have become less and less attractive through the years. As the decade neared its end, many seem to have chosen other methods for self-defense, either by trying to avoid provoking the wrath of a white mob, fleeing the county for some new home, or through a host of other methods. The state legislature had attempted to curtail the ownership and carrying of cheap weapons, likely intending to disarm blacks across the

¹³⁰ "Retribution: A Sensational Killing in Rutherford County." *The Daily American*. January 6, 1881. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/603966828/?terms=%22Henry%20Miller%22%20%22Rutherford%20County%22&match=1>.

state. With the practical difficulty of procuring cheap weapons at the start of the decade, the prohibition on carrying anything but a large navy or army revolver in the hand, and then the prohibition on purchasing any cheaper weapon, it would not be surprising if it seemed to many blacks that being armed was very likely to cause legal trouble regardless of their intentions.

Conclusion: Methodology and Future Research

Researching any minority group, especially one that was largely illiterate like southern freed people after the Civil War, presents serious and unique difficulties. Very few written sources exist from the population itself, and those that do are unlikely to explicitly discuss a topic as dangerous as arming themselves to defend against a dominant social group. In a county run largely by whites who feared armed blacks and met any rumor of armed black militias with violence, threats, and arrests, discussing such a topic openly and in written form would be perilous. This being the case, I had to rely heavily on sources written by whites and sort out information from editorialization.

The most useful source, and the most sympathetic to the black population, was the Freedmen's Bureau reports from the Murfreesboro field office, especially those written by J.K. Nelson. Nelson and his successors wrote detailed reports about complaints in the county, both of an economic and of a social nature, and Nelson showed himself well-disposed toward freedmen and white unionists in the county. His reports, well detailed and dated, formed the basis for much of the narrative and timeline of the paper through the mid-1860s. However, one should never make assumptions that a source that has been reliable in some instances will always remain so, and so any time it was possible his accounts were cross-referenced with newspapers or court documents discussing the same events. Some instances were serious enough that the bureau sent out agents to report on and investigate them independently, and these reports were also of great use in establishing timelines and checking events against often one-sided newspaper accounts.

The court records came in the form of the county circuit court minute books. These are good sources for general information on crime and punishment in an area, although they rarely give enough specific information on their own to fully understand any particular event. Their greatest use is as a source to begin research. By noting instances of violence involving whites on one side and blacks on another in these books, instances can be identified for further research. This is very helpful if a newspaper story offers a vague description of an event, as the court records will give at least specific names and dates that the paper may not give. For higher profile events, the court minutes can offer a better timeline. By tracing all entrances for the defendants, their arraignment, appointment of a jury, and sentencing can all be followed, which newspapers will very rarely trace through to their conclusion.

Very few newspapers from Murfreesboro and Rutherford County remain extant, and those few were violently partisan. Outside of the county line, county affairs are usually only discussed in a few extreme cases. These also tend to start as short articles based more on rumor than fact. If there is an identifiable second article, that one will usually be more detailed and even-handed than the first, but still likely to be violently skewed. Checking these stories against the minute books and any available references in either other newspapers, the handful of published monographs, or the Freedman's Bureau papers can yield helpful results.

Unfortunately, the lack of detailed written information on African American communities in Rutherford County means that the loss of even one friendly source greatly reduces the amount of information available. With the departure of the

Freedman's Bureau, sources friendly to blacks nearly disappear in Rutherford County. Most of the population was illiterate and their writings were also unlikely to have survived through the past century and more. WPA researchers in the 1930s would not likely have discussed Klan violence and certainly those interviewed would not be likely to openly discuss the use of arms to defend themselves against racist violence. The Circuit Court Minute books for Rutherford County from 1870-1880 also tend to record very few criminal cases, all surviving books focusing instead on chancery court cases.

Despite the many barriers to researching this topic it is important that the research continue and be expanded. The United States has a long and fraught history when it comes to blacks and guns, and the topic must be better researched to be more fully understood and, hopefully, addressed in the modern day. Many avenues remain open for future research in this field, and many more will be found as new information is uncovered and leads to new questions.

It is likely that similar investigations into the topic in counties throughout the south will uncover much wider patterns of black gun ownership than has usually been acknowledged. Some writers have already begun to reassess black gun ownership, such as law professor Nicholas Johnson, whose book, *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Traditions of Arms* (2014), traces black armed self-defense back into the early 19th century, with accounts of enslaved African Americans using firearms, stolen, given, or otherwise obtained, to fight enslavers and slave hunters throughout the country, and follows that tradition into the modern day.¹³¹ Other recent books have come out studying

¹³¹ Nicholas Johnson. *Negroes and the Gun*. (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014).

black militancy, many focused on the Black Panthers and other 20th century organizations.

Further, expanding the scope of research outwards will be rather fruitful. Several African American activists from the late 19th century and through the 20th century would become more open about discussing the place of firearms in self-defense and Civil Rights activism. Most famous among these would be Ida B. Wells in her pamphlet, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases*. She claimed that, in 1892, “Of the many inhuman outrages of this present year, the only case where the proposed lynching did *not* occur, was where the men armed themselves in Jacksonville, Fla., and Paducah, Ky., and prevented it. The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense.” She further drove forward the point noting that, “The lesson this teaches and which every Afro American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life.”¹³² A further look into her claims, with the benefit of hindsight given by temporal distance from events as well as a greater access to sources, can help substantiate, modify, or challenge her position that blacks who were armed would be far more likely to survive than those who were unarmed.

¹³² Ida B. Wells. *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases*. (New York: New York Age, 1892) 21. https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4402564#page/21/mode/1/chapter/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4402575.

In 1962 Robert F. Williams discussed the use of arms by his chapter of the NAACP in Monroe, North Carolina, to counter Klan and other white supremacist violence. His use was not uncontroversial and saw him briefly removed from the head of his chapter. He would eventually be a fugitive from justice, residing in Cuba, fleeing a bogus charge of kidnapping. Throughout the pamphlet, Williams made it clear that he advocated arming and training in the black community specifically for the purpose of self-defense, and not for reprisal. This position placed him at odds with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who would speak against Williams' position in the late 1950s. Williams' position further exemplifies the fact that the use of arms for self-defense and political action has a much deeper history than is typically acknowledged.¹³³ These examples show that there is likely a very fruitful field for the research of the use of arms by blacks for self-defense well after the period of Reconstruction.

The field needs to be further researched, and there is plenty of room to do that. On the most basic level, the scope of this research should be expanded. Every county throughout the South is likely to have its own stories, and if not, the lack of incidents, or evidence of incidents, seems likely to yield its own information. I would encourage others to follow in my footsteps, adapting their research to local conditions, and research through their local areas to identify the extent of violence and of resistance experienced there.

Another avenue of future research would be to research the role of USCT veterans in armed resistance across the south. This would yield more biographically styled stories

¹³³ Robert F. Williams. *Negroes With Guns*. (New York: Marzani and Munsell Inc., 1962).

than my own research, tracing men from their birth through their early lives, if possible, and through the Official Records to trace their service during the Civil War, then through Census and Pension records as well as Freedman's Bureau records, newspaper accounts, and, where the individual was literate and has known correspondence left, through their own words. Doing so would allow us to ascertain to what extent military training correlated to individual and community level self-defense, and if a correlation existed between military service and self-defense following the Civil War. It would also allow for an increased understanding of the experiences of individual USCT soldiers following the Civil War.

Another interesting avenue for further research would be in attempting to identify how African Americans procured arms throughout different time periods and identify what types of arms were commonly seen. While the armament for black soldiers in military service is relatively easy to discern from photographs and official documentation (although these descriptions are not always correct or useful), the armament for civilians is usually much harder to distinguish. Barring an extant provenanced example in a museum or private collection, or paperwork describing a particular gun, the type of weapon being used or carried is typically perfunctory. Throughout the research for this paper, in no instance was a particular model of weapon identified, beyond "shotgun", "rifle", or "pistol". The closest to a specific model being identified is when descriptors like "Army pistol" or "small seven-shooter" are used. The only actors whose armament is explicitly noted is the Tennessee State Guard, whom Severance notes were armed with surplus Enfield rifled muskets (a muzzleloading, percussion cap firing musket which had been the standard arm of the British Army starting in 1853 but was sold in large

quantities to both North and South during the Civil War). During Reconstruction, it can be inferred that many of the guns identified simply as “rifles” would be old models, either shop made percussion hunting rifles, or surplus sold off from the Civil War. Pistols are harder to identify. Many single shot pistols from the Antebellum era would still be in common use, but there were also many revolvers of various makes in circulation. A few people throughout the country would have had repeating rifles, such as the Spencer Rifles carried by Wilder’s Lightning Brigade during the Tullahoma campaign as well as by many other Union cavalry regiments. One instance is documented of William Rickman, a white unionist, later an officer in the State Guard, using a Henry rifle to protect his home from former Confederates.¹³⁴ The Henry, a 16-shot lever-action repeating rifle, was manufactured by the New Haven Arms Company of New Haven, Connecticut (which in 1866 would be rebranded as Winchester Repeating Arms) was an exceptionally uncommon and technologically advanced weapon. While many orders had been placed for them during the war, New Haven Arms was unable to produce enough of the guns to



Figure 11 Henry Rifle on Display at Tennessee State Museum with Rickman's story. Source: Tennessee State Museum https://portal.museum.tn.gov/TSM_ARGUS/Portal/TSM_Portal.aspx?lang=en-US.

meet demand, and the gun would cease to be produced with the introduction of an improved gun, the Winchester Model of 1866, leaving around 13,000 total guns ever to

¹³⁴ Tennessee State Museum Exhibit plaque. *Henry Repeating Rifle: New Haven Arms Co. 1864*. Civil War and Reconstruction Gallery, Tennessee State Museum, Nashville, TN. Visited 2/15/2023.

have been manufactured.¹³⁵ Such advanced arms would have been both rare and expensive and likely far beyond the means of nearly all southern blacks. Most guns used by blacks would almost certainly have been cheaply obtainable, and often of poor quality. Still, the assumption should not be allowed to stand if it is possible to find evidence in numbers to either corroborate or dismiss it.

It is also important to note that a topic like this is going to be affected by the political viewpoints of the researcher attempting to right about the subject. This being the case, I believe it important to admit my own biases. I am white and pro-2nd Amendment in my personal political leanings. I did not grow up in a black culture nor do I claim to speak for any part of the African American community. I have merely followed my own observations of the sources and done my best to interpret them in as unbiased a manner as possible. While I do not flatter myself that my findings are entirely free from a certain amount of confirmation bias, I do believe I have produced solid scholarship with my available resources. I welcome future scholars, of all backgrounds and political persuasions to contribute to this discussion, asking only that the research be conducted with the goal of finding the historical truth rather than pushing a modern agenda or narrative.

This field is not for the faint of heart. No subject is ever apolitical, nor is any piece of scholarship. The choice of what to include and exclude, where to focus, and how to frame events, people, or motives, are always informed by our personal beliefs. The subject of armed self-defense against White supremacy is particularly political. Mixing

¹³⁵ Herbert G. Houze. *Winchester Repeating Arms Company: Its History and Development From 1865 to 1981*. (Iola, Wisconsin, Krause Publications, 1994, reprinted 2004) 13-25.

some of the most explosive political topics of our day, race, guns, police, state autonomy, and lack of governmental protection for the lives of citizens, treatments of the issue are unlikely to be widely accepted. When the facts do not align comfortably for either end of the political spectrum, the push back is likely to be even more virulent. However, ignoring uncomfortable stories does little more than delay a reckoning with them, as a long history of ignoring the centrality and cruelty of slavery did in the academy.

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