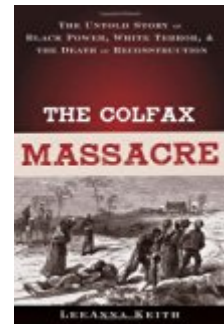


LeeAnna Keith. *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror and the Death of Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. xv + 219 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-531026-9.

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The Colfax Massacre and Reconstruction

So much has been written on the complicated and highly charged subject of Reconstruction that it is rare that one work stands out to the extent that this book by LeeAnna Keith on the Colfax Massacre does. From the beginning, Keith argues that, despite the fact that the whites had labeled the fight a riot, it was essentially a massacre that took the lives of 70 to 165 blacks, of which at least 48 were executed several hours after the fight had ended. The author not only measures the human dimension of the bloody events that occurred at the courthouse of Colfax on Easter day, April 13, 1873, but she also re-works old ground to provide seminal insight into how this tragic event was rooted in the social and political conditions prevailing in Grant Parish after the Civil War.

Keith divides her book into ten chapters that explore the compelling story behind this massacre. To achieve this goal, the study starts with the development of a plantation economy based on slavery during the 1830s in the Red River area. A local elite was formed around Meredith Calhoun. With the Civil War, the whole plantation system was disrupted as thousands of slaves joined the ranks of the Union army. The adjustment of whites in the Red River to the new social, economic, and political conditions that prevailed after the Civil War was at the least uneasy. The situation was worsened by the fact that William C. Calhoun, the son of Meredith, motivated by political ambition, became the local “public enemy number one” as he supported the Reconstruction policy; the development of freedmen’s education; and the creation

of a parish, named in honor of President Ulysses S. Grant, where blacks formed a large majority of voters and held a majority of local offices.

In such a context, Keith demonstrates how violence became rampant in Grant Parish from 1868 to 1873. Local emotional tensions were exacerbated by the determination of William Ward, a former black sergeant in the Union army and the commanding officer of the local militia unit, to enforce the law. In the process, Ward showed little regard for white sensibility. In retaliation, several Republican leaders were killed by members of local white supremacist groups. Following the controversial election of 1872 in Grant Parish, local whites contested the election of two blacks as parish judge and sheriff in the spring of 1873. As a result, tension developed for weeks in Grant Parish. A week before the massacre, William Calhoun was kidnapped by a band of forty whites and saved almost by a miracle. Meanwhile, anxiety was building up on both sides as the contest slowly degenerated into a fight for control of the Colfax courthouse that ended with the massacre.

Keith describes vividly how local whites, determined to fight for white supremacy and led by veterans of the Confederate army, formed companies, with rank and file, and received significant support from whites in surrounding parishes. Meanwhile, militia officers assisted by veterans of black troops organized the defense of the courthouse. Yet a small cannon provided whites with the

necessary fire power. As the fight began, white women and children supported white fighters by supplying them with food, medical supplies, and ammunition. The black force proved no match for the white paramilitary organization. Sixty-five blacks took refuge in the courthouse, while others attempted to run into the woods only to be captured or shot. Hours after the fight had ended, white leaders decided to kill some forty-eight blacks they were holding as prisoners. Depending on the account, between 70 and 165 blacks were killed during the fight, while the whites lost only 3. The Colfax Massacre became one of the worst events of racial violence in American history.

Keith convincingly shows how whites, proud of the success of their fight for white supremacy, did not seek to diminish the number of black victims. Federal troops, arriving six days after the massacre, proceeded to reestablish public order. In the process, ninety-seven coconspirators were arrested and charged for the massacre. But the authorities chose to prosecute only a handful of ringleaders on thirty-two criminal charges. Even then, the trial proved very expensive as federal authorities were compelled to protect black witnesses. Black women who had witnessed the massacre delivered poignant testimonies, but to no avail. Indeed, as the trial was taking place, whites had organized all over Louisiana in a White League that challenged the authority of state and local governments. The case was largely dismissed by Justice Joseph Bradley. Finally the case of William J.

Cruikshank, one of the main ringleaders, was brought before the U.S. Supreme Court, which dismissed the case on technical grounds. The court narrowly defined the power of the federal government in enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment in the South. As a result, whites in Louisiana and in the whole South would be able to control the black vote after 1876. This brief but detailed history of the events leading to the Colfax Massacre is a welcome addition to recent studies. Louisiana distinguished itself as being one of the most difficult states to reconstruct.

Keith's book is attractively designed and delivers a genuine history of this dramatic event supported by particularly vivid examples. In a closely argued text supported by an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, this book provides a penetrating description, thick with details, of some hidden aspects of violence in Reconstruction Louisiana. The writing style is refreshingly lively and thoughtful. Keith's book is a fine achievement that provides an exciting account of a dramatic event and fills an important gap. This book shows that it is still possible to draw general conclusions on Reconstruction history from the analysis of one single event. The author avoids the pitfall of too much generalization on Reconstruction history with skill, subtlety, and insight in fixing the larger implications of the event under study. This fine monograph represents an important contribution to Reconstruction history.

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