

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Ku Klux Klan

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The Ku Klux Klan ¹ has been the subject of hundreds of scholarly and popular works since its inception in 1866 to the current day. Its every action has been analyzed, discussed, and interpreted almost endlessly. But all that study has not produced much agreement on the group's history, motivation, nature, and meaning. A number of interpretations have been offered about almost all aspects of the group. The original Klan, confined to former Confederate states, was formed in early 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee, by a group of Confederate veterans to: play pranks on African Americans by pretending to represent the ghosts of Confederate soldiers; terrorize African Americans by violently preventing them from exercising their civil rights—or some combination of the two that changed over time. It included many other similar groups, was well organized, and deliberately employed costumes to humiliate African Americans in the area—or none of the above. Its influence and violence has been greatly overstated—or it was one of America's original and successful terrorist groups.

Because the majority of the early information about the founding of the Ku Klux Klan was provided by the founders themselves or their close associates, early discussions of the organization reinforced the narrative of the group as a social organization devoted to helping the area's Confederate veterans adapt to civilian life. Most probably in the spring of 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee Captain John C. Lester, Major James R. Crowe, John B. Kennedy, Calvin Jones, Richard R. Reed, and Frank O. McCord met in the law office of Judge M. Thomas Jones and began the Ku Klux Klan. With the name taken from the Greek word for circle, the original group created strange rituals and titles to mark it as a typical secret society of the time. ² It was Lester who provided the most immediate description of the first group in his 1884 work. ³ Lester is insistent the original group was merely interested in "pranks," although modern scholars overwhelmingly disagree. ⁴ Sometime after its founding (estimates range from 6 weeks

¹ The author wishes to thank Cretia Welborn and Jan Walmsley for their assistance.

² Allen Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 3-4. Trelease's work remains the most comprehensive study of the Reconstruction Klan.

³ John C. Lester and Daniel L. Wilson, *Ku Klux Klan: Its Origin, Growth, and Disbandment* (Nashville, TN: Wheeler, Osborn & Duckworth Manufacturing Co., 1884).

⁴ An outlier in the scholarly discussion is Nancy Bishop Dessomess in her 1999 article "Hollywood in Hoods: The Portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan in Popular Film," *Journal of Popular Culture* 32, no. 4 (Spring 1999): 13-22. She claims on page 15 that "The original Klan, led by noble members of the community,

to a year) the pranks were replaced by violence aimed at retaining white supremacy and resisting what many white Southerners viewed as a hostile occupation by northern troops.

Similar organizations also spread throughout the former Confederacy at the same time as the Klan. The number of groups engaged in similar activities in the same area at the same time makes it even more difficult to be sure what the Klan itself was responsible for. Not far from Pulaski, the Pale Faces “were judged by contemporaries to be one of those white-power orders that fell under the generic term ‘Ku Klux.’” Congressional hearings on Klan activity also included testimony on other groups such as the Constitutional Union Guards and the better-known Knights of the White Camelia.⁵ However even with the many disagreements about the first Klan, there are still some points of general agreement about its activities. Its primary targets were African Americans who challenged white supremacy in any way: attempting to vote, get an education, demand that whites pay them for their services, or socialize with whites in any but the most subservient of ways.

A new Klan den could announce its arrival with a notice, in language emphasizing the mystical nature of the new group and tinged with enough of a threat to make its ultimate purpose clear. A South Carolina Klan issued a call for attendance at its first meeting in the local newspaper.

K.K.K. DEAD-MAN’S HOLLOW SOUTHERN DIV. Midnight, March 30, *General Order No. 1*. REMEMBER the hour appointed by our Most Excellent Grand Captain-General. The dismal hour draws nigh for the meeting our mystic Circle. The Shrouded-King will come with pick and spade; the Grand Chaplain will come with the ritual of the dead. The grave yawneeth, the lightnings flash athwart the heavens, the thunders roll, but the Past Grand Knight of the Sepulcher will recoil not.

By order of the Great Grand Centaur SULEYMAN, C.G.S.⁶

Published announcements merely notified the area the organization had moved in, it required more direct action for it to get a foothold.

Once the action moved beyond notes, the attempts at intimidation continued with disguises worn by groups of the night riders. Some of these “disguises” were quite elaborate. “Klan costumes ranged from lavish gowns and headpiece with matching disguises for horses to pieces of cheap cloth worn over the face. Some members of a South Carolina group donned masks made of squirrel skins.” Elaine Parsons also notes

was considered a protectionist society for war widows and orphans.” Dessommes is most interested in discussing the ways Hollywood has mistreated Southerners and their history over the years but her reliance on Lester’s work leads her to a radically different view of the Reconstruction Klan than that held by most scholars.

⁵ Edward John Harcourt, “Who Were the Pale Faces? New Perspectives on the Tennessee Ku Klux Klan,” *Civil War History* 51, no. 1 (2005): 35.

⁶ Trelease, *White Terror*, 71.

the group often resembled minstrel shows or circuses in their behaviors during their outings. Their costumes and performances were intended for viewing not only by their immediate victims but also by Northerners (who could not be sure if this was all just a show) and white Southerners who recognized the cultural performance as their own. But intimidation was more often in the manner of physical violence ranging from beatings to murders. While some Klansmen believed “superstitious” blacks were frightened by their disguises, their victims most often reported it was the weapons that frightened them.⁷

The organization did have a formal structure. Although the Klan’s secretive nature makes conclusive evidence elusive, former Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest was likely its first overall leader (Grand Wizard). There were state, district, and county leaders designated as well. The state leaders included a number of former Confederate generals and future Senators (Alabama’s Brigadier General John Tyler Morgan, Georgia’s Lieutenant General John Brown Gordon, North Carolina’s Colonel Zebulon Baird Vance, and South Carolina’s Lieutenant General Wade Hampton III were all believed to be Grand Dragons). Individual dens were geographically based (often by county) and led by Grand Cyclopes.⁸ The general membership included white male southerners from all walks of life including professionals of all kinds, representatives of the newly powerful merchant class, and poor whites.

Part of the Klan’s structure was a formal charter specifically laying out its official goals and purposes. Created in 1867, it was revised a year later and helped contribute to the early positive impressions of the Klan.

This is an institution of Chivalry, Humanity, Mercy, and Patriotism; embodying in its genius and its principles all that is chivalric in conduct, noble in sentiment, generous in manhood, and patriotic in purpose; its peculiar objects being,

First: To protect the weak, the innocent, and the defenceless, from the indignities, wrongs, and outrages of the lawless, the violent and the brutal; to relieve the injured and oppressed; to succor the suffering and unfortunate, and especially the widows and orphans of Confederate soldiers.⁹

However, reports quickly trickled back to the group’s leadership that there was a backlash brewing against some actions of the Klan that did not seem to fit with its stated noble purposes. The same structure that allowed the group to issue its own statements of purpose allowed Forrest to publicly disband the group in 1869, although the order he issued to that effect was much like the organization itself, hard to decipher. It was also

⁷ Elaine Frantz Parsons, “Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan,” *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 3 (December 2005): 811-36. Quote is from page 819.

⁸ Michael Newton, *White Robes and Burning Crosses: A History of the Ku Klux Klan from 1866* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 8-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*

written in such a way as to allow Forrest and the leadership to claim no knowledge of actions after his order. Part of his General Order No. 1 “ordered and decreed that the masks and costumes of this Order be entirely abolished and destroyed” since it had strayed from its stated purpose. However, the order also said “This is not to be understood to dissolve the Order of the Ku Klux Klan, but it is hereby held more firmly together and more faithfully to each other in any emergency that may arise.” In other words, the group was to be more secretive and more focused on its original goals. Klansmen of the time clearly understood the intent of Forrest’s order. The year after the order, North Carolina Klansmen assassinated a state senator and lynched a town commissioner, when the state tried to fight back with a militia. Even though Klansmen were arrested, they were released quickly and the Governor who had ordered the crackdown was removed from office. During October 1870 at least twelve South Carolina Republican state legislators were murdered by Klansmen.¹⁰

Even with a national leader and organizing documents, individual dens were motivated by specific local conditions. Michael Fitzgerald found the Alabama Klan was most active in areas where property crime became an issue of concern to the area’s planter elites and when the Klan became more of a problem than help to those elites, they helped shut it down.¹¹ In South Carolina, the Klan was much more a political than economic organization. In the northwest part of the state, the black and white populations were roughly equal in number, making it possible that Republicans could hold political power. The Klan there acted basically as an arm of the Democratic Party, intimidating white Republicans as well as African Americans.¹²

There were events that unified the disparate groups throughout Reconstruction with elections leading the list. The 1868 elections led to widespread Klan violence throughout the South. Forrest claimed membership hit 550,000 that year. Despite their violence, the Klan was unable to turn that year’s elections to their favor, at least on the national level.¹³

Because Klan activity was driven by such local concerns, one way to discuss it is to look at the Klan in more detail in one area. Walton County, Georgia is just outside Atlanta and was home to a relatively active Klan during Reconstruction.¹⁴ In 1870 there were three dens of Klansmen operating in the county, each with approximately seventy-five to one hundred members. The congressional hearings of 1871 are full of Klan-related incidents in the county and at least eleven different black citizens testified before the committee concerning incidents that either happened directly to them or they witnessed. The incidents discussed took place between the end of the war right up until the weeks

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹¹ Michael Fitzgerald, “The Ku Klux Klan: Property Crime and the Plantation System in Reconstruction Alabama” *Agricultural History* 71, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 186-206.

¹² Trelease, *White Terror*, 115.

¹³ Newton, *White Robes*, 14-15.

¹⁴ Much of the information on Walton County is from my earlier article, “This Man Felker Is a Man of Pretty Good Standing’: Portrait of a Reconstruction Klansman in Walton County, Georgia.” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81(Winter 1997): 897-914.

immediately before the hearings. A general description of Klan activity in Walton County was provided by Alfred Richardson, a black Republican. "I have heard of several whipping spells out there by the Ku-Klux. A colored man came to Atlanta a day or two before I left there, and said that he came in because he was afraid." Richardson's words were echoed by the U.S. Attorney for Georgia, John D. Pope, who included Walton among the counties he considered unsafe for both life and property.¹⁵

The Walton Klan did not hesitate to murder freedmen who threatened Walton's social structure. After Jake Daniels, a blacksmith, refused to fix a white man's buggy until the man settled his overdue bills, fifteen to twenty disguised men, attacked and murdered Daniels. A witness described the attack to the Joint Committee:

They came and told him to come to the door. He told them to hang on till he got his pants on. They told him, "Never mind about your pants; come to the door." He came and opened the door, and saw these men all standing in the yard disguised. He turned his back on them, and ran into the house. As he turned back they shot him right in the back of the head. I think the first ball struck him. He fell. They ran in and shot some five or six more shots into him; and then they all went away.¹⁶

One of the witnesses, Lewis Anderson, had good reason to be able to recognize the Klansmen: he lived with two of them and supplied one with meal for his illegal still.¹⁷ And ultimately it was the desire to protect that illegal activity that drove much of the Klan activity in that county, certainly making it a possibility that such personal motivation drove other Reconstruction Klans in other areas.

Most often, however, the Walton Klan did not murder freedmen. It was much more common for them to beat their victims. On a cold and rainy night in March 1871, unwelcome visitors pounded on Charles and Caroline Smith's door. They demanded that Charles, a thirty-nine-year-old native of Walton County, open their door and let them in. Because he knew the message that his visitors were to deliver, Charles quickly hid under the house, hoping they would not find him. However, his wife, thirty-five-year-old Caroline, opened the door and the mob was in. They searched all the house and tore up the floorboards until they found Charles. Once discovered he fled for his life. The visitors fired about ten shots at him, but he escaped and spent the next several days with a friend. While Charles escaped unharmed, his wife and sister were not so lucky. As she recounted to the committee, Caroline was struck twelve times with a hickory stick.

¹⁵ Trelease, *White Terror*, 320. Alfred Richardson quote from Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, *Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*. 13 vols. S. Rep. No. 42-41, at 6:13 (1872). John D. Pope is from *Joint Select Committee*, 6:371.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6:371.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6:864-6 (Lewis Anderson), and 6:7-8 (Alexander Richardson). Anderson himself was later visited by the Klan and forced to give up his weapon.

Mr. Felker is the man who told them the first time when they came there. Every one ran but me and three little children; I staid in the house, and all the rest got away. Felker was the man who told them how many licks to put on me. When it came his time he struck me but three licks, and struck me very light. Mr. Rich then took the sticks and struck me; and Mr. Felker then said, "Don 't strike her hard."

Sarah Ann Sturtevant, Charles's sister, was also struck with the stick before the visitors finally left. The three adults recognized a few of their attackers, including the group's leader, William Felker. Charles returned home several days later but was uneasy for months after his return.¹⁸ Unfortunately for him his uneasiness was well founded. Six months later a larger group returned to the Smith home to reiterate their previous message. This time the twenty-five to thirty Klansmen were disguised with masks and pants "put on their body like they make children's clothes" and again were led by William Felker. Caroline was hit by ten different men, each striking her ten times with a hickory stick. Felker forced the three adults in the house to expose themselves to the waist for the beating. Sarah Ann was also struck in the head with a pistol, causing permanent physical injuries. Charles did not escape punishment and was repeatedly struck with fists, sticks, and pistols. After this second attack, the entire family left the county, fleeing to Atlanta where within a week they testified before the Joint Committee about their experiences.¹⁹

All these experiences happened after the federal government had turned its attention to controlling the violence in the South. The Republican-controlled Congress became increasingly agitated by the success the Klan was having stopping African Americans and their supporters from voting. In May 1870 the Enforcement Act of 1870 was passed and signed into law. It made it a federal crime to stop or attempt to stop eligible voters from voting. There was no equivocation in the language in the very first section: "all citizens of the United States who are or shall be otherwise qualified by law to vote at any election by the people in any State, Territory, district, county, city, parish, township, school district, municipality, or other territorial subdivision, shall be entitled and allowed to vote at all such elections, without distinction of race, color, or previous condition of servitude; any constitution, law, custom, usage, or regulation of any State or Territory, or by or under its authority, to the contrary notwithstanding." But this act did not stop the violence or even the voter intimidation and President Grant and other Republican leaders believed a stronger law was necessary. The apparent failure of the law also revealed the need for more accurate and current information about what was happening in the South.

Much of the information we have about Klan activity (including the description of specific incidents) is from the thirteen volumes of documents and testimony given to the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States. The report, issued in 1872, included testimony from Forrest, other suspected Klan leaders, and politicians as well as witnesses and victims of Klan violence.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6:597-601 (Charles Smith), 6:400-3 (Caroline Smith), and 6:462-5 (Sarah Sturtevant).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Subcommittee members traveled to Southern states to hold hearings and ultimately issued a majority report decrying the widespread nature of Klan violence and calling for stronger federal action. The minority report questioned the validity of the witness testimony and concluded Klan activity had been greatly exaggerated. These volumes provide a wealth of detail about life in the Reconstruction South and witnesses often identified their attackers, allowing a close look at who exactly joined the local Klans and suggesting the Klan's disguises were not exactly successful. Because of its focus on "Late Insurrectionary States," Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Virginia were only minimally discussed and Kentucky completely excluded. In South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama the committee deliberately held hearings in areas believed to be the home to especially active Klans.²⁰

The creation of the Joint Select Committee came very shortly after Congress passed a series of acts designed largely to protect the voting rights of African Americans. When the first two such acts (the Enforcement Act of 1870 and the first Enforcement Act of 1871) did not accomplish as much as the Republican-controlled Congress hoped, a third act, the second Enforcement Act of 1871 (also known as the Ku Klux Klan Act) was passed.²¹ The act made it a federal crime (with fines and/or prison time as the punishment) to "go in disguise...for the purpose, either directly or indirectly, of depriving any person or any class of persons of the equal protection of the laws." Using powers granted under this act, President Grant attempted to crack down on Klan violence most notably in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Mississippi. Michael Newton estimates the result was 1,849 arrests in South Carolina, 1,180 in North Carolina, and another 930 in Mississippi. But he also notes very few Klansmen actually were convicted and sent to jail. Even those who confessed were sometimes quickly released if they promised to stop their Klan activities.²²

As with so much discussion of the Reconstruction Klan, there is disagreement on the overall effectiveness of the second Enforcement Act including how long after the act the original Klan survived. Trelease winds down his work in 1872 noting just a few arrests and prosecutions occurred after that. Michael Newton posits Klan activity lasted years longer and even had a role in the Compromise of 1877 and the end of Reconstruction.

There is much more agreement on when the Ku Klux Klan was revived, publicly at least. William Simmons led a cross-burning group in 1915 at Stone Mountain, Georgia. Aided by the publicity around the lynching of Leo Frank and the pro-Klan depiction of Reconstruction in "Birth of a Nation," the second incarnation of the Klan became a political power in the 1920s, extending its reach outside the South and

²⁰ Trelease, *White Terror*, 392.

²¹ For the full text of the Enforcement Act of 1870 and the Second Enforcement Act of 1871 (the Ku Klux Klan Act) see <https://sovereignthink.wordpress.com/2010/08/17/enforcement-act-of-1870/> accessed June 10, 2016. For a summary of the main provisions of the first Enforcement Act of 1870 see http://www.fjc.gov/history/home.nsf/page/tu_anthony_doc_8.html accessed June 10, 2016.

²² Newton, *White Robes*, 18-19.

expanding its targets to anyone not fitting their model of the Protestant native-born white American. Its far-reaching tentacles showed surprising power in such states as Colorado and Oregon. This Klan was undone by its own excesses and scandals surrounding its leadership and was largely silent nationally through the 1930s and 1940s.

Although the organization did not completely disappear this time, it did not become real news again until the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s prompted strong opposition and resistance. Klansmen openly walked the streets in Southern cities, proclaiming their opposition to anything resembling equality and murdering Civil Rights leaders. Federal prosecutions and changing attitudes sent most of the Klan back into the shadows although it continues to exist. Much like in its first period, the current Klan is fragmented into different groups, all with the rallying cry of white supremacy.

But that first Klan has not faded quietly away. Disputes over marking its milestones continue to the present day. In 1917 the United Daughters of the Confederacy gave the town of Pulaski a plaque to mark the birthplace of the group. Starting in 1985 Ku Klux Klan members marched in the Klan's home to commemorate their group's birthplace. Townspeople began to distance themselves from their town's past, some business owners even closing down on the days the parades were held. And in 1989 the UDC's plaque was turned around by the owner of the building as a symbolic way for the town to turn its back on its past.²³

Modern scholarship on the Reconstruction Klan focuses on examining specific geographic areas in detail and analyzing specific topics such as language and dress. Using the Congressional hearings, historians have been able to provide a more detailed demographic analysis of both Klansmen and their victims. Perhaps these continued detailed analyses combined with earlier, broader works will lead to more agreement on just what and who the first Ku Klux Klan was and even provide a reliable estimate of just how many victims it had.²⁴

²³ Michael Lewis and Jacqueline Serbu "Kommemorating the Ku Klux Klan" *The Sociological Quarterly* 40, No. 1 (January 1999): 139-57 provides a detailed discussion of the changing relationship between the town and the Klan. However, not everyone agrees that turning one's back on even a disconcerting past is the best way to deal with it. In the United States today there are continuing discussions over the display of any flag connected to the Confederacy and about the future of Stone Mountain Park in Georgia with no clear consensus on how past to mark our own past.

²⁴ There is no consensus on the number of murders committed by the Reconstruction Klan. Michael Newton indicates more than 3,000 just from the Congressional investigators while David Chalmers earlier estimate had been much lower (about 1,000). From Newton, *White Robes*, 20.