

**“Dust and Ashes”  
The Meridian Mississippi Race Riot  
of 1871**

**An Abstract of  
A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Department of History  
Western Illinois University**

**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts**

**by  
Cecil Garland Compton III  
May 2003**

## Abstract

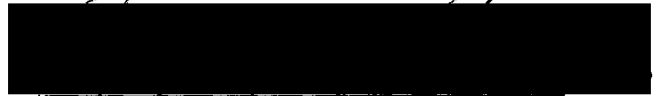
The subject of this thesis is the Meridian Mississippi Race Riot of 1871. This study's purpose was to investigate the factors and conditions of Reconstruction era Eastern Mississippi and Western Alabama that provided the catalyst for the riot, provide the first lengthy narrative of the Meridian Riot, challenge long held assumptions about who was responsible for the fire that destroyed part of the downtown business district, challenge long held notions regarding who was responsible for the gunshots that began the riot and describe the effects of the riot on the citizens of Meridian. The sources used to complete this study included Testimony taken by the Congressional Committee formed to Investigate the Affairs of the Late Insurrectionary States, records created by the Freedmen's Bureau, Local and State bodies that investigated the riot, private manuscripts, and local and national newspapers. The findings of this study concluded that although freedmen were traditionally held responsible for the business district fire, it is highly likely that the Republican Mayor of Meridian, William Sturgis, and a member of his police force, Thomas Pelton, may have played a significant role in planning and executing the blaze. Following the examination of all available sources this study also produced considerable doubt that Warren Tyler, who was credited for firing the gun shots that started the riot in the courtroom and killing justice Elkner Bramlette was entirely responsible for starting the Meridian Riot of 1871.

Approval Page

This thesis by Cecil Garland Compton III is accepted in its present form by the  
Department of History of Western Illinois University as satisfying the thesis requirement  
for the degree Master of Arts.



Chairperson, Examining Committee



Member, Examining Committee



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## Acknowledgments

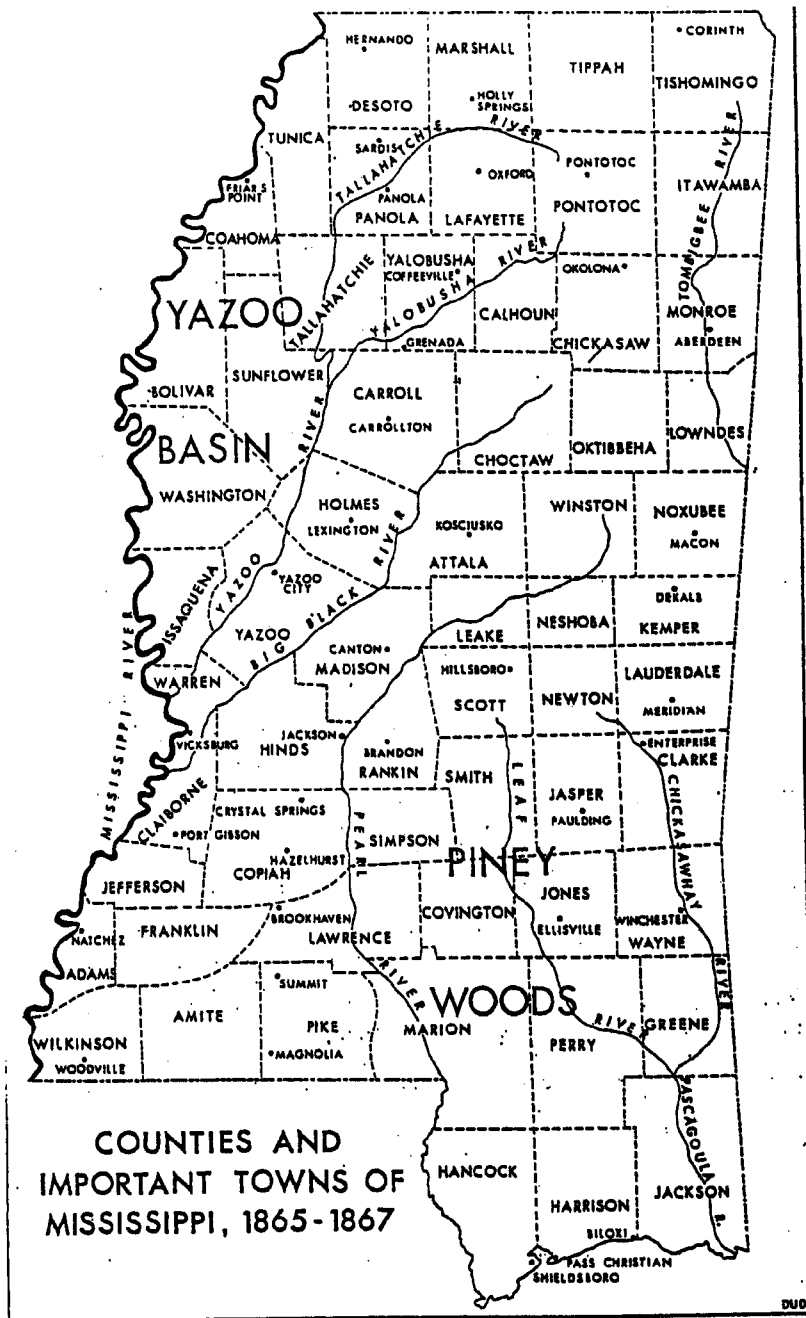
I am indebted to my family and most of all my wife Erin, who has watched this work evolve from its beginnings as an idea, to its present form, who acted as a willing assistant on two separate research trips, and who provided the necessary encouragement in this project's final phases.

Grateful acknowledgment is also extended to my examining committee for their valuable guidance and suggestions. Financial assistance was provided by The Department of History at Western Illinois University.

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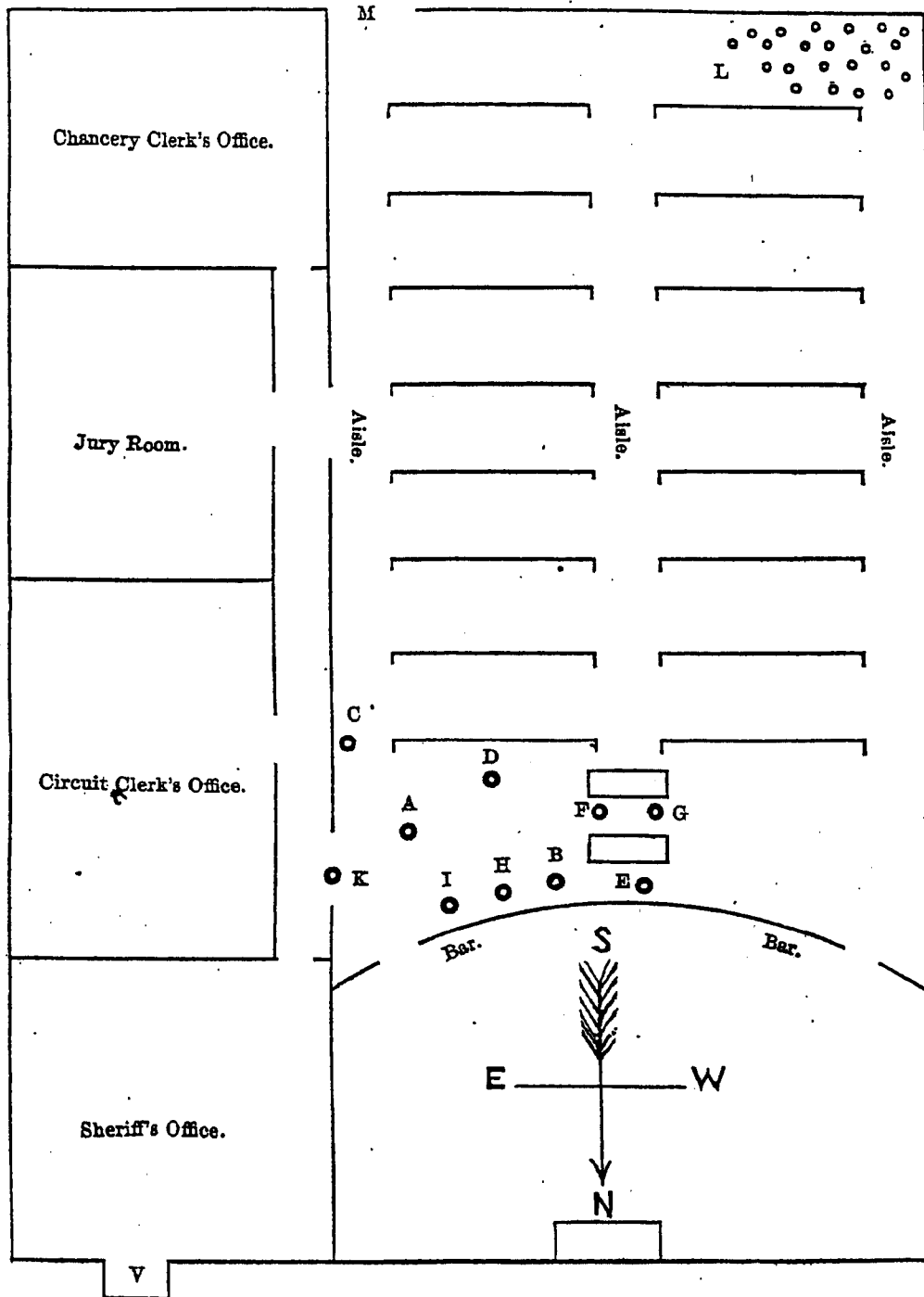
Harris, William C. Presidential Reconstruction in Mississippi. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967, 5.

## Regions of Alabama



Bailey, Richard. Neither Carpetbaggers Nor Scalawags: Black Officeholders During the Reconstruction of Alabama, 1867-1878. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Montgomery, AL: Richard Bailey Publishers, 1997, 31.

Plan of court-room floor at Meridian.



- A—Tyler's seat before he left the court-room.
- B—Tyler's seat after his return to court-room.
- C—Seat of M. H. Whitaker before Tyler left court-room.
- D—Seat of M. H. Whitaker after Tyler's return.
- E—Seat of Magistrate Bramlette.
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Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, (Washington D.C.: GPO) 1872, Mississippi, 174.

## Chapter 1

### Lauderdale and Sumter Counties: Origins

Following the surrender of General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Courthouse, Confederate forces began to lay down their arms and return home. After the war defeated Confederate veterans soon began a campaign to maintain white supremacy. They reacted quickly to the sweeping changes to their way of life brought by emancipation. Returning Mississippi veterans found their state in chaos. The Union Army had destroyed property; fields, roads, and railroad tracks. Local governments were suspended and, as a result, bands of outlaws pillaged the countryside and infrastructure suffered from neglect. These veterans found the institution of slavery, with all the restrictions it had placed on the enslaved, abolished.<sup>1</sup>

The former slaves no longer had to live under the slave codes as mere chattel. They could enjoy many of the liberties whites enjoyed. Blacks now had the option of choosing their own names and could obtain material possessions that were outlawed to them under slavery, including weapons and alcohol. Families separated by slavery reunited. They wore colorful clothes and stopped yielding to whites when they met them on the street. They held public meetings and religious services free from white supervision and interference. Many southern whites found this behavior intolerable.<sup>2</sup>

White's desire for the restoration of white supremacy turned to action in Meridian, Mississippi. Tensions exploded in early March 1871, capturing the nation's attention with a race riot. The riot was the end result of racial, labor, and political conflicts that

developed in Lauderdale County, Mississippi, and neighboring Sumter County, Alabama, in early 1871.<sup>3</sup>

The factors that contributed to the Meridian riot were never completely examined by historians. Primary sources about the riot consist of testimony taken by the U.S. Congressional Joint Select Committee to Inquire Into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurectory States, newspaper reports, and documents located in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Each of these sources has inherent flaws and offers conflicting reports of the riot. After a close inspection of available primary sources, errors in the secondary sources become apparent. Some secondary accounts offer lopsided views of the event either because of the author's bias or his or her failure to utilize all available primary sources. Works by Eric Foner, Allen Trelease and others mention the riot in just a few pages, or less. They fail to grasp many of the underlying causes of the event. They do not reveal that the roots of the March 1871 disturbance originated in Lauderdale County's eastern neighbor, Sumter County, Alabama. In addition to failing to cover the riot's connections to Sumter County there appears to be a controversy in the primary sources over who, in a courtroom melee, fired the shots that sparked the riot. This thesis will attempt to bring together all relevant primary sources to form a complete narrative of the origins, events, and results of the Meridian Race Riot.

This study's purpose is to investigate the factors and conditions of Reconstruction era Eastern Mississippi and Western Alabama that provided the catalyst for the riot, provide the first lengthy narrative of the Meridian Riot, challenge long held assumptions about who was responsible for the fire that destroyed part of the downtown business

district, challenge long held notions regarding who was responsible for the gunshots that began the riot and describe the effects of the riot on the citizens of Meridian. The findings of this study concluded that although freedmen were traditionally held responsible for the business district fire, it is highly likely that the Republican Mayor of Meridian, William Sturgis, and a member of his police force, Thomas Pelton, may have played a significant role in planning and executing the blaze. Following the examination of all available sources this study also produced considerable doubt that Warren Tyler, who was credited for firing the gun shots that started the riot in the courtroom and killing justice Elkner Bramlette was entirely responsible for starting the Meridian Riot of 1871.

Lauderdale County was officially organized on December 23, 1833 and named after Colonel James Lauderdale who was killed in the Battle of New Orleans. Prior to 1830, the area was originally a part of the Choctaw Native American tribe's homeland. Following the signing of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, the Choctaw Nation ceded land and moved to new ground west of the Mississippi River. Their former holdings became a part of the Mississippi Territory. The Choctaw legacy was evident in the early years of Lauderdale County. White settlements sprang up on the sites of villages formerly occupied by the Choctaws. Stage coaches traveled on trails originally blazed by Native Americans. Richard McLemore was one of the first white settlers to purchase large amounts of property in what became present day Meridian. He laid claim to 700 acres in central Lauderdale County, about sixteen miles from the Alabama state line, and built a log cabin. After founding early churches and assisting with the opening of some of the county's first schools he sold his land and moved to nearby Marion. McLemore

had hoped that Marion, the county seat, would reap the benefits of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad (M&O) which many citizens predicted would lay track through the village. He sold his holdings in present-day Meridian to Lewis A. Ragsdale, an Alabama lawyer, and to John T. Ball, a businessman from neighboring Kemper County, Mississippi. Ball and Ragsdale aggressively promoted their holdings and the M&O laid tracks through their property. By October 3, 1855 trains arrived at a flag stop named Sowashee Station, that Ball had personally financed. In time Ball and Ragsdale became bitter rivals. Both men attempted to lay out their holdings as they imagined the town would grow along the railroad tracks. The legacy of this rivalry is still evident today in Meridian's jigsaw pattern of streets.<sup>4</sup>

By the mid-1850's the M&O Railroad reached Lauderdale County. Present-day Meridian was still largely forested when the M&O Railroad laid tracks through the site in October, 1855. Meridian remained quite small until 1859, when an east west line, the Vicksburg, Jackson, and Brandon Railroad, agreed to connect with the M&O at Meridian. The owners of the Vicksburg line had originally planned to intersect with the M&O a few miles south of Meridian at Enterprise. The city fathers of Enterprise wanted nothing to do with the rail line, thus the connection was made at Meridian. In 1860 the village of Meridian received its charter from the Mississippi Legislature. The M&O railroad lacked only nine miles of track to reach Meridian. The line was connected with Jackson and Vicksburg after the Confederate government took over construction of the rail line in 1861. The connection between the M&O and the Vicksburg, Jackson, and Brandon line made Meridian the most important rail center in eastern Mississippi. Meridian's

population in 1860 was still small, although the town had a number of businesses, which included three or four small stores, a cotton gin, a saw mill, a grist mill, two churches, an academy, and an inn. Lauderdale County's population in 1860 totaled 13,313 with a free population of 8,225 and a slave population of 5,088. <sup>5</sup>

Sumter County, Alabama, Lauderdale County's eastern neighbor, was founded on December 18, 1832. Sumter was formed from ceded Choctaw lands. The county's namesake, Thomas Sumter, a Revolutionary War general from South Carolina was recognized for having led a successful campaign against the British in the Carolinas. Livingston was selected as the county seat in 1833. Sumter's western border was the Mississippi state line while its eastern border followed the Tombigbee River. The Tombigbee, smaller rivers, and three railroads provided the means necessary to transport goods. Sumter County's terrain was a mix of hills and prairies with alluvial soil. A "black belt" county, Sumter's major crop was cotton. Since the county's first federal census in 1840 blacks had out numbered whites by 16,036 to 13,901. For the next thirty years the black population continued to grow until it reached 18,907 in 1870, while the number of whites had shrunk to 5,202 by that year.<sup>6</sup>

The Civil War brought death and destruction to the state of Mississippi. Lauderdale County was no exception. The intersection of two rail lines in Meridian made the small village an important transportation center for the Confederacy. Meridian was recognized by Union forces as an important gateway to the West and East. In 1864, General William T. Sherman began his expedition from Vicksburg to Meridian where his men destroyed much of the public property in towns along their march. Private

residences did not escape destruction at the hands of Union forces. Sherman ordered all of Meridian's business district, except two hotels, to be burned.<sup>7</sup> Sherman and General Ulysses S. Grant dismantled the rail line that ran between Vicksburg and Meridian and along the way they burned warehouses, stations and machine shops. They burned or damaged locomotives and rail cars, and destroyed eighty-five bridges and trestles. By the end of the war this railroad only operated on twelve miles of track in western Mississippi. This small segment started at Vicksburg and ran east to the Big Black River.<sup>8</sup>

Reconstruction under President Andrew Johnson followed Abraham Lincoln's plans to rebuild the southern states and readmit them into the Union. Radical Republicans argued that presidential failed to adequately punish and restructure southern society. They also argued that should be utilized to provide the Republican party with a strong foothold in the region. As early as 1864 the Radicals attempted to pass the Wade-Davis Bill. This bill called for a majority of the number of men who had been registered to vote in 1860 to take an "ironclad" oath stating that they were loyal to the Union and had never been disloyal. If the set number of men took the ironclad oath, Congress would allow the seceded states to have control of their own state governments. The Radicals desperately wanted blacks to have suffrage. They knew that no former Confederate state could ever meet this requirement unless freedmen were given the right to vote. They believed freedmen would vote Republican and give the party control of the former Confederate state governments. Lincoln vetoed the Wade-Davis bill. When Johnson assumed the presidency the Radicals hoped that he would be less forgiving to the South. Indeed, Johnson at first appeared to agree that those who had rebelled should be

punished. He, believed that only individuals had rebelled, and caused the war, but not the states. He thought that individuals should be punished but the states should retain their rights under the Constitution. Johnson argued that states could not legally secede from the Union, thus the rights of the states to govern their own affairs remained intact. He wanted to interfere as little as possible with the State's right to govern themselves.<sup>9</sup>

On May 29, 1865 he signed two proclamations regarding the former Confederate states. In the first, he offered amnesty and the restoration of all property, excluding slaves, to all who would take an oath of allegiance to the United States. Exempt from this offer of amnesty were Confederate civil and diplomatic officials, army officers above the rank of colonel, and navel officers above the rank of lieutenant. Other individuals ineligible for amnesty were public officials and military officers who had resigned their positions to join the Confederacy, those who were under arrest for military crimes, and anyone who owned property in excess of \$20,000 did not receive amnesty. Johnson allowed those who were exempt from this proclamation to appeal to him for individual pardons, which he granted on a limited basis. Johnson's second proclamation designated a provisional governor for North Carolina and instructed him to hold elections to select delegates in order to draw up a new state constitution. Only white men who had received amnesty and taken an oath of allegiance could participate in the framing of state constitutions. Johnson issued similar proclamations for provisional governors in other southern states, allowing them to begin the process of rebuilding their state governments. He also required that the southern states repudiate Confederate debts, renounce secession, and abolish slavery. He urged the southern states to give blacks the right to vote on a few

occasions. Contrary to the Radical Republicans, Johnson believed that each state must decide within its own borders who would be allowed to vote. Southerners were reluctant to bow to these conditions. They imposed restrictions on the lives of freedmen by passing Black Codes and elected many former Confederates to office. Former high ranking Confederate officers were elected to Congress and to top positions in state governments. At first many Republicans supported Johnson. They wished to see blacks receive the right to vote and participate in the constitutional conventions, but they were willing to wait and see how the president's plan worked and to modify it if necessary. Johnson was unwilling to go any further than recommend suffrage for blacks. He believed that the Federal Government lacked the authority to impose enfranchisement for blacks on the Southern states.<sup>10</sup>

The southern states balked at Johnson's suggestion of black enfranchisement. They clearly wanted to maintain white supremacy and did not want blacks involved in government. Johnson made no more attempts to persuade the southern states to enfranchise blacks. In Johnson's mind, voting qualifications were determined by state governments and he did not interfere further on behalf of the freedmen. In addition, some states repealed rather than renounced their article of secession; other states failed to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment (which abolished slavery), while still other states refused to repudiate Confederate debt. The Radical Republicans accused the South of refusing to accept the outcome of the war. Congress excluded the representatives from the southern states. Congress passed a Civil Rights Act and gave the Freedmen's Bureau both quasi-judicial and quasi-executive powers. President Johnson tried to block these efforts. He

did not want the issue of voting rights for freedmen to be an obstacle to a speedy . The Radicals had ample support to override his vetoes and were able to further their agenda for black suffrage. The 1866 elections further strengthened the Radicals and they continued to push for enfranchisement of freedmen. They forced the southern states to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment and produce state constitutions that guaranteed blacks the right to vote before they could be readmitted into the Union.<sup>11</sup>

Slavery had been an integral part of Mississippi's society and abolition threatened the conventions that white Missippians had known all their lives. The loss of slave labor greatly aggravated an existing labor shortage. The majority blacks who were part of the enslaved workforce were available for work after the war but planters lacked the means to effectively coerce this workforce as they had under the system of slavery.

One study of the workforce stated that 30 percent of the white Missippians who had fought for the Confederacy had died either from wounds or disease. In other words, of the 78,000 men who fought in the Confederate and State units, 12,000 died in battle or succumbed to battle wounds, and 15,500 men died of disease. Human losses equaled about one-fourth of the white males who lived in the state in 1860. These statistics did not include the thousands who returned home physically disabled. Such men were unable to perform the labor intensive work required to raise crops during the 1865 growing season.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the men who returned from the war had lost either an arm or a leg which prohibited them from returning to farm labor. In order to support their families disabled men spent their daylight hours in towns or cities looking for work that they could

perform. Newspapers such as the Natchez Courier called on citizens to employ disabled veterans in tasks ranging from sign painting to bricklaying. The years following the war were marked with crop failures which made many healthy veterans disenchanted with agricultural work. Conditions were extremely hard in eastern Mississippi where many farmers lacked the equipment to plant corn. Their horses and mules had been appropriated by the Union Army during the last few weeks of the war. In addition, many veterans returned home too late to participate in the 1865 spring planting season.<sup>13</sup> By 1866, Meridian's Board of Police began purchasing corn and salt to distribute to poor and displaced families.<sup>14</sup>

Conditions for the freedmen were worse than for the whites. Many former slaves traveled to nearby towns and cities that they had only heard about but had never seen. Life in these towns and cities for the first time. Many had to rely on the sparse allotments of government rations distributed by the Freedmen's Bureau. In Meridian, freedmen inhabited forty flimsy huts that had formerly housed black soldiers. Smallpox and cholera swept through the quarters causing an extremely high death rate among the occupants. In April 1866 these families were forced to leave. Their huts were burned to the ground, an act that the authorities hoped would stop the spread of smallpox. Most freedmen stayed near the homes of their former owners and sought employment from whites.<sup>15</sup>

By 1870, Meridian was on its way to recovery. Meridian's population had reached 2,709, making it the largest community in Lauderdale County. As the railroads were rebuilt Meridian prospered with the addition of many new businesses. In 1870 the

following businesses and industries were operating in Meridian: several dry goods stores, saloons, hotels, restaurants, grist mills, cotton and saw mills, bakeries, confectionaries, three newspapers, and banks. It had grown considerably from its humble beginnings in 1860. In 1870 the county seat was moved from Marion Station to Meridian, where county offices operated from the second floor of Con Sheehan Hall. According to the 1870 census Lauderdale County's total population had grown slightly from 13,313 in 1860 to 13,462 in 1870. The Black population had grown to 6,411 compared to 5,088 in 1860. The white population had decreased from 8,225 in 1860 to 7,051 in 1870.<sup>16</sup>

Three organizations existed in Mississippi and Alabama during Reconstruction: the Freedmen's Bureau, the Union League, and the Ku Klux Klan. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands was created in 1865 by Congress. The Bureau was to assist former slaves in adjusting to their new freedom. It was originally intended to facilitate the molding of blacks into self sufficient members of society. It was charged with the distribution of food, clothing, and fuel, and by order of Congress the Bureau was given the power to distribute these items to destitute blacks and whites and to redistribute abandoned and confiscated land into forty-acre lots, and rent the land to freedmen and loyal refugees.<sup>17</sup>

The Union League began in the North as a patriotic organization that endorsed and supported President Lincoln. The League was very similar to the Masons in the sense that members of both organizations took secret oaths and had secret rites and rituals. It was highly political in nature. After the war the League naturally appealed to yeoman farmers and other individuals who had opposed the Confederacy. It replaced existing

Unionist organizations. The Radical Republicans recognized that the League could be a very powerful political tool for the party. They utilized the League's existing structure to give the Republicans a foothold in the southern states. Congressional Republicans sent paid organizers into the South to initiate the club among the newly enfranchised freedmen. As freedmen signed on by the thousands, the League established itself as the political arm of the Republican party in the South. The League also served as a labor organization that attempted to resist the plantation owner's desire to dominate the black workforce. Although organized by whites, freedmen held local leadership offices in the League. The democratic structure of the organization, and the increasing self confidence of the freedmen, made it possible for them to hold the positions of power in the organization. Freedmen on the local level were very concerned about protecting themselves, thus militias grew out of League meetings, especially in the wake of Ku Klux Klan violence. Many of these militias drilled on a regular basis. When the freedmen felt they were in danger the militia would rush to the scene. The militia also acted as a police force, apprehending those accused of wrongdoing. The militias rarely provoked violence with whites, rather they were an available means of self-defense. The national leadership of the League discouraged the formation of militias because they correctly feared that armed military displays would provoke confrontations with whites.<sup>18</sup>

The final organization that played a role in the Meridian Riot was the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was first formed in 1867 at Pulaski, Tennessee and was intended to be a social club. All of the Klan's early members were acquainted with the Greek fraternities, they incorporated similar secret rituals into Klan initiations and meetings. By 1868 the

Klan had evolved from a secret social club to a group of vigilantes. As the Klan spread across the South it soon became a political arm of the Democratic Party. The Klan and similar organizations sought to maintain white supremacy by terrorizing freedmen and white Republicans. It attempted to break Republican control of local governments by intimidating freedmen away from the polls and physically abusing and killing black and white Republicans.<sup>19</sup>

The Ku Klux Klan spread to Lauderdale and Sumter County. It maintained a sustained vigilance in Sumter and surrounding black belt counties, beginning in 1868 and continuing well after the presidential election into 1871. Following the 1868 campaign, Republican Governor William Smith recommended that a committee be formed to investigate the Klan. The state legislature formed a committee and its findings supported what was previously known about the Klan in Alabama. The state committee's findings stated that organized groups of men were terrorizing freedmen and Republicans across the state. State laws were ineffective against the Klan and five Alabama counties in the state were placed under Federal martial law to stop the violence. The state also passed laws that forbade wearing masks or disguises. Local officials who failed to prosecute lawbreakers in disguise were subject to fines or removal from their post. Victims of Klan violence or their next of kin were encouraged to seek damages from the county in which the violent act had occurred. The courts failed to function in the majority of Ku Klux Klan cases. Juries would not convict whites that were accused of harming blacks. Thus, enforcement of anti Klan legislation was ineffectual.<sup>20</sup>

Klan activity in Mississippi was not as extensive nor widespread as that

experienced in Alabama. Klan violence was concentrated in twelve counties located in the northern and eastern portions of the state. Lauderdale County was the host of a similar organization called the “Association of the Seventy-Six,” which engaged in similar extra-legal activities. Prior to 1871, the “Seventy-Six”, or armed white outlaws, executed two black members of the Lauderdale County board of supervisors. The two targeted men had mobilized the freedmen to resist the Seventy-Six. In an attempt to break down Republican leadership blacks were intimidated and Republican officeholders were run out of the county.<sup>21</sup>

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5. Laura Nan Fairley and James T. Dawson, Paths to the Past: An Overview History of Lauderdale County Mississippi, (Meridian, Mississippi: Quail Ridge Press, 1988) 24, 28 50-53.
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10. McPherson, Ordeal By Fire, 497-499, Foner, Reconstruction 179,180.
11. McPherson, Ordeal By Fire, 498-501, Foner, Reconstruction 180.
12. Harris, Presidential Reconstruction, 26-27.
13. Harris, Presidential Reconstruction, 27-29.
14. Jim Dawson History: Board of Police 1832-1870, Board of Supervisors 1870-1992, (Meridian: Lauderdale County Department of Archives and History, 1992) 24. It is unclear whether foodstuffs were distributed to freedmen or if the Board's actions benefitted whites only.
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17. Foner, Reconstruction, 68-70.
18. Michael W. Fitzgerald, The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change During Reconstruction, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 1-3, 19-21, 67-69.
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20. Allen W. Trelease, White Terror, 246-247.
21. Lauderdale County WPA files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson Mississippi., Allen W. Trelease, White Terror, 274-275, 290-291.

## Chapter 2

### A School Teacher and the “White Man’s Fire”

The origins of the Meridian Riot were rooted in the activities of Daniel Price, a teacher for the Freedmen’s Bureau. Price was a native of Wetumpka, Alabama, a small town situated a few miles north of Montgomery. Price is listed in the 1860 Federal Census as seventeen years old and a medical student. He spent 1861 and 1862 enrolled at the Southern Military Academy and the State Military Institute at Greenville. Following a stint as a mathematics tutor in Greenville, Price lied about his age and enlisted for three years in the Confederate Army on April 17, 1862. He participated in the Battle of Seven Pines, was wounded, and was captured by Union forces. Price’s military record ends on April 8, 1864 with a note that he had transferred to the Confederate Navy. No further records of his military service exist. Some secondary sources state he deserted the Confederate Army and fought for the Union none of these assertions can be verified. Following the war, he spent two years in the Alabama State Penitentiary before being pardoned and released. Unfortunately, records of his crime, imprisonment, or pardon could not be located in the public record. Price was employed as a teacher in a school operated by the Freedmen’s Bureau office headquartered in Demopolis, Alabama. He lived and worked in Livingston, bringing his mother and sister from Wetumpka to live with him. His sister, Sarah Bowman, was also a teacher in the Livingston Freedman’s school. Price became involved with the Union League in 1867 when it was first established in Livingston. His influence among the black population became well known

to his enemies, white Democrats.<sup>1</sup>

Price played an extensive role in Livingston politics. He held both elected and appointed offices at various times including: Registrar of Voters, Census Taker, Superintendent of Education, and Postmaster.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these jobs the 1870 census lists his occupation as Circuit Clerk. John Gillespie was clerk of the probate court and worked with Price in the Sumter County Courthouse. He described Price as “very ultra in his opposition to the Democratic party.” Livingston freedmen viewed him as the head of the Republican party. He called Price a “very daring” and a “bold man” in taking stands against the Democrats. Price had confided in Gillespie that although he was a Unionist he felt he had no choice but to join the Confederate Army. During the war, Price said that he grew “violently” opposed to the war and “got very tired of it.” Gillespie said that white Democrats disliked Price for a number of reasons. They thought he had taught freedmen to resist white supremacy and had advised them to work for themselves, not for white planters. Furthermore, he was disliked for living with a light-skinned black woman.<sup>3</sup>

Price’s unpopularity can also be attributed to his role as leader of, and chief advisor to, freedmen. John Gillespie related a story to the Congressional sub-committee about the 1870 elections that showed Price’s influence among the Republicans. In August 1870 Price called a meeting in Livingston to nominate Republican delegates to the state convention in Selma, Alabama. This announcement brought more than 100 freedmen to the outskirts of town. The meeting frightened whites and they raised a large group of armed white men to respond to any problems. When a black man came into

Livingston and bought a bag of buckshot whites thought violence was imminent. Infuriated whites raced to the outskirts of town, where the freedmen had gathered. The convention was never held and some blacks were shot as they were driven away. It was later learned that Price was not going to attend the convention, instead he fled for his life. Gillespie stated that his fear was justified. If the group of whites had discovered him at this meeting he would have been killed.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Cobbs, a Livingston attorney, testified to the Congressional subcommittee that after Price's arrival the Union League was formed in Meridian. Cobbs recalled that freedmen soon became increasingly "suspicious of whites." Cobbs believed Price was responsible for the freedmen's growing distrust of whites. Under Price's supervision, its membership carried arms and marching through Livingston on a regular basis. Before the 1870 election, a group of black Democrats were nearly attacked by members of the Union League. They answered the Union League's refrain of "Hurrah for Grant" by shouting "Hurrah for Seymour and Blair." A group of white men tried to keep League members from assaulting the small group of Democrats. Only Daniel Price was able to soothe the freedmen's anger, and at his word they dispersed.<sup>5</sup>

Former Livingston mayor, Edward Smith, testified about the activities of Price and his confidants at the Freedmen's Bureau. During his term freedmen often came to town, "armed and with music." They frequently appeared with flags and drums and fired their guns. He said that the men who participated in these military parades "seemed excited" and "were defiant . . . they frequently menaced the town and the citizens." Smith repeatedly asked why they were doing these things. Freedmen always replied that Price

had ordered them to march through town. Smith's response was to issue a proclamation that outlawed "armed organizations, whether white or black." <sup>6</sup>

Mayor Smith had frequent conversations with Price about working towards peace between the races. Price told him that he did not really care about the freedmen but he used them for his own purposes, mainly to gain political office. Smith stated that Price had told him that he and other white leaders of the Union League found it necessary to keep the organization going, for their own benefit. Smith alleged that Price and his Freedmen's Bureau colleagues had cheated blacks on various occasions, including swindling them out of \$1,000 worth of cotton. Smith had first-hand knowledge of one incident that involved Grant's first campaign for president. Price's subordinates had obtained Grant campaign badges at no cost and planned to sell them to the freedmen. They told the freedmen that General Grant had ordered these badges sold and that "it was absolutely necessary for them to buy them." Thus the freedmen thought they were contributing to Grant's campaign while in reality Price's men planned to keep the money for themselves. Smith said that they "didn't care a damn about the niggers, but they wanted to make money out of them." This story indicates that there may have been a darker side to Price; however, this story was told by a white Democrat who had no love for Price. It may be a prime example of what whites commonly believed about Price's integrity.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, the citizens of Livingston who discussed Price in their testimony disliked him. They disapproved of his activities and the men who worked with him. However, the testimony regarding Price in Livingston is one-sided. The committee did not question

any black citizen who had any first hand knowledge of his actions. Therefore, we are left with only the perspectives of white citizens, and with no insight into how the black community perceived Price. Price's unpopularity among whites stemmed from his role as an advocate for freedmen. He defended the freeman's right to rent land. This was contrary to what plantation owners desired. They wanted blacks to work directly for them making it possible for them to exploit the freedmen in the same way as they had controlled them as slaves. Price complained that county tax collectors treated any freedmen who was an independent small farmer unfairly. He argued that this official was under the control of white Democrats. Price felt that the freedman who worked for white planters were not harassed nearly as much as those who tried to make a living independent of white planters.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Price was an active advocate for the freedmen. Not only was he a teacher in a freedman's school and an elected official he was involved in the county's agricultural affairs. Price advised the Freedmen's Bureau officials about grievances regarding unjust crop settlements and harassment by tax collectors that were brought to his attention. He tried to bolster the freedmen's independence from white planters. Price intervened when freedmen had been wronged and law enforcement officials failed to bring charges against whites. Regardless of what freedmen thought of Price, he fled Livingston in fear for his safety in late 1870. Apparently the political climate around Livingston had grown too hostile for Price. Democrats carried the county elections in 1870 and pushed him out of office.<sup>9</sup>

Price appeared in Meridian, and began to maneuver among the freedmen in that

city much as he had done in Livingston. He became a teacher in a freedman's school. He began to gain influence among the black population much like he had in Livingston. He advised his former constituency in Alabama that they could earn higher wages in Mississippi and that repression was less rampant. He convinced a large number of freedmen from Sumter County, Alabama, to follow him to Meridian and was instrumental in finding work for them. Some whites indicated that he may have planned to run for political office. Thus their support at the ballot box would have been essential if Price as an outsider planned to run for office.<sup>10</sup>

In 1870, black landownership and the attempts of freedmen to advance their social standing contradicted the beliefs of white supremacists. In counties such as Sumter and Lauderdale, which had a large black population, the Ku Klux Klan or similar groups activity attempted to maintain white supremacy. Although unorganized on a state level groups such as the Klan operated with deadly efficiency on the local level. The Klan represented the interests of plantation owners in their desire to retain a docile and easily manipulated labor force. The Klan also represented white yeomen farmers who feared competition from blacks, by driving successful black farmers off their lands.<sup>11</sup>

Events leading up to the Meridian Riot began with an attack against Adam Kennard, a black deputy sheriff from Sumter County, Alabama. His arrival in Meridian ignited already rising tensions. Kennard was sent by Livingston planters to search for freedmen who had broken labor contracts. Many freedmen had left Sumter County after the 1870 elections. This election turned the Carpetbaggers and Scalawags out of county offices. At the time of their departure, Sumter was suffering from a labor shortage.

Deputy Kennard, a black Democrat, did not have any credentials that proved he was a deputy sheriff. Neither white nor black Meridianites thought Kennard had any authority to make arrests. Although Kennard's intent appeared similar to kidnaping, the Livingston Journal, a conservative newspaper in Sumter County, did identify him as a sheriff's deputy in their coverage of his trip to Meridian. Kennard had authority and approval from Sumter County officials to act as a law-enforcement agent.<sup>12</sup>

On the evening of Friday, February 3, 1871, Kennard stayed with a friend who lived near the Meridian city limits. Under the cover of darkness a group of men wearing disguises entered the home where he slept. They took Kennard outside and led him away from the city, removed his clothing, and gave him a severe beating. Two men were left behind to guard him while the rest examined a pile of his clothing, Kennard seized the opportunity to flee. The two men fired at him as he ran, their shots missed and he escaped.<sup>13</sup>

Kennard recognized the leader of the party of men who beat him as being a Daniel Price, a white, Republican, school teacher whom he had known in Sumter County, Alabama. The next day he filed a complaint against. He stated that the remainder of the men were black, but he could not identify them. Kennard described to his attorneys how he was able to recognize Price. When Price entered the cabin, Kennard could see through the thin black cloth that covered his face and saw the leader had white wrists. Furthermore, Kennard saw Price's face in the moon-lit woods when a branch ripped off his mask. He also recognized Price's voice and physical features. Kennard and Price had been active together in Livingston's Union League. Kennard had often heard Price

address meetings and had worked closely with him. After making the affidavit against Price, Kennard returned to Livingston, Alabama. Daniel Price was arrested shortly afterwards. He appeared before a magistrate and his bond was set at \$200.00.<sup>14</sup>

Saturday, February 11, 1871 was the date Price was scheduled to answer Kennard's charges. The day before the trial, Kennard, three black men, and fifteen to twenty armed whites arrived in Meridian to see that Kennard was allowed to testify in court. His supporters consisted of Livingston planters whom he had represented on his previous trip to Meridian. When they got off the train at Meridian station they were met by a large number of freedmen. By accident, the planters spotted three of the former residents of Livingston that they had sent Kennard to locate and bring back to Alabama.<sup>15</sup>

The freedmen were arrested, tied up, and ordered to follow the railroad tracks east towards Livingston. Guards escorted them while arrangements were made for the 2:30 A.M. train to stop for them. They were taken to Alabama without any attempt at extradition. Two of these men allegedly had departed before their contracts had expired, and one was accused of stealing from his landlord when he left his plantation. When the crowds later learned that the three men were missing tensions exploded in Meridian. Later that night, Meridian freedmen attempted to rescue the abducted men. They lined up near the tracks and waited as the train departed. They fired a volley into the passenger car but injured no one. They were unaware that arrangements had been made for the train to stop further down the line and pick up the three captured men and their guards. At the point the mob tried to halt the train the men they sought to liberate were not yet on board. On their return to Livingston the man accused of theft was placed in the county jail. The

other two men were released under bond and went back to work on the farms they had vacated. <sup>16</sup>

The Republican Sheriff, Robert Mosely, consulted with Meridian's leading citizens regarding what should be done about the Alabamians. They collectively decided to do nothing. It seemed that the Alabamians were after Daniel Price and otherwise not looking for trouble. White Democrats did not mind having the Alabamians in town, as they had no love for Price, and had a genuine interest in seeing him punished. Up to that time none of the men had committed any crimes, thus they could not be detained. At approximately two in the morning, Republican Mayor William Sturgis woke Mosely and presented him with a warrant for the arrest of the Alabamians. Mosely refused to arrest any of them since he did not know their numbers and he feared that who ever tried to arrest them would be killed. Conceivably, white Democrats wanted to have Price punished or forced to leave. They knew that having the Alabamians in town would make it harder for Price's Republican allies to wrest him from the grip of the law. <sup>17</sup>

The next morning, under Mosely's orders, the crowd of Alabamians piled their guns outside the Meridian post office. The Alabamians feared that Kennard would be run out of town by black Republicans if he tried to testify against Price. In the courtroom, Kennard's supporters put away their weapons and no problems occurred. In an attempt to avoid trouble, the defense and the prosecution requested a continuance. Meridian officials did not want a trial with so many armed Alabamians present. In addition, the black community was very irritated about Price's arrest. Kennard's attorney, M.H. Whitaker, described their state of mind as being "excited and mad." Both the prosecution

and the defense thought it best to try to have the trial another day without the Alabamians being present. Price's bond was raised from \$200 to \$800 and his trial was postponed for one week.<sup>18</sup>

On the next trial date, Kennard was sick and could not attend. The trial was again postponed. As the third trial date approached, the prosecuting attorney, M. H. Whitaker, and the defense attorney, Joshua Smith, held a conference. Smith informed Whitaker that he had advised his client to forfeit bail and leave the county. Surprised, Whitaker wanted to know his reasoning. Smith feared there would be "serious trouble between the whites and the blacks." Price had told his attorney that if he was forced to go to jail instead of being allowed to post bond he would shoot his way out of the courtroom. He planned to have thirty armed men present during this court appearance. They would see to it that he escaped from the courtroom. Smith informed Whitaker of Price's plans because he feared that Whitaker, as prosecuting attorney, might be a target for violence. Price had instructed Smith to get far away from him the moment he was instructed to go to jail, because that was when he and his allies would start shooting. Price did not want his friend and fellow Republican to be injured when he fled the courtroom. Smith then questioned Whitaker as to what he thought about the situation. Whitaker testified that he believed that Price would indeed carry out his plans. He perceived Price to be a courageous, desperate man who would follow through on his threats. After considering the possible danger of the situation Whitaker agreed that Price should leave Meridian.<sup>19</sup>

Smith presented Price with a letter that encouraged him to leave town. The letter stated that it would be best for the community for him to leave and forfeit his bond.

Furthermore, Smith urged Price to stay away since “he had rendered himself very obnoxious to the community, had gotten up a bad feeling between the whites and blacks there.” Smith offered this advice to Price as his “political and personal friend, and as a friend of peace.”<sup>20</sup>

On the third date set for Price’s trial, Friday, February 24, 1871 the court was called into session. Kennard was present and was accompanied by his former owner and two friends. The court remained in session while waiting for Price to arrive. When he did not appear, the court was adjourned, bringing an end to the proceedings against Price. Price fled Meridian and never returned. As Whittaker left the courtroom he met one of Price’s close friends, a freedman named Warren Tyler, on the courthouse steps. Tyler was Price’s teaching assistant, a Republican, and a close friend. He had been extremely interested in the charges against Price and had attended all three of his court dates. On this occasion Whittaker noticed that Tyler was carrying a firearm and a club ax into the courthouse. Why he was going back into the courtroom a second time is unknown, but it seemed that he was prepared to defend Price, if necessary. Meridian’s black community was very annoyed with, and disappointed, in Price. They felt that he should have stood firm and appeared in court. Meridian’s white Republican Mayor William Sturgis was also irritated that Price had fled. Sturgis had just received a squad of Federal troops from the governor and he planned to use Price’s trial to accuse prominent Democrats of inviting the Alabamians into town. He clearly wanted the troops present to maintain order and to back up his authority. The mayor planned to use Price’s trial to set the stage for an investigation into discovering who had called the people from Sumter County,

Alabama, to Meridian.<sup>21</sup>

Sturgis was appointed mayor of Meridian on July 3, 1869 by Mississippi Governor Adelbert Ames. He replaced William Cathey, who although a Republican, had been a citizen of Meridian before the Civil War and was accepted by conservatives. He was replaced by Sturgis, a Carpetbagger from Connecticut. In contrast, the Democrats of Meridian had no confidence in Sturgis. Whites believed that Cathey was replaced because the freedmen were opposed to him. Sturgis was soon perceived as a champion of the blacks appointed freedmen to the police force and to the position of aldermen. Many whites thought Sturgis was responsible for arming the black population. He was rumored to have kept a large inventory of arms at his brother's store. Theodore Sturgis employed his brother William as a clerk. Many white Democrats believed that Sturgis administered his office to the advantage of the freedmen. He was disliked by white Democrats because he allowed freedmen to have an active role in city affairs. One complaint that Democrats had against him was his failure to enforce the ordinance that prohibited the indiscriminate firing of weapons on the streets. Democrats alleged that freedmen were responsible for randomly firing their guns at night. They blamed the mayor for not stopping the freedmen's rowdy behavior and accused him of preferential treatment.<sup>22</sup>

The mayor alleged that prominent Meridianites had invited the Ku Klux Klan from Alabama into Lauderdale County to punish freedmen. Sturgis' allegations angered Democrats. They petitioned the governor to have Sturgis removed from his position. Price's defense lawyer Joshua Smith approached Sturgis about the matter and asked for his resignation. Smith feared that violence would result if Sturgis did not step down, but

Sturgis refused. Smith and other leading citizens then contacted the governor and requested Sturgis' removal, "not because he was not a good officer, but in the interest of peace." Smith testified that leading Democrats were also willing to preserve peace. Sturgis reacted by sending a committee to Jackson, Mississippi, to protest the petition to have him removed from office. He sent a committee of three men, including Warren Tyler, Price's twenty-three-year-old teaching assistant, and Lauderdale County's black Republican State Representative J. Aaron Moore, as his advocates. The governor took no action against Sturgis since his job performance showed that he was competent.<sup>23</sup> White Democrats disliked him largely because he was a Republican appointee.

The committee returned to Meridian on Friday, March 3, 1871. The next morning Tyler and Meridian's black militia leader, William Clopton, asked Sheriff Mosely for permission to use the courthouse, Con-Sheehan Hall, to hold a meeting. Tyler said that he wanted to make a speech regarding the retention of Republican office holders. Mosely granted them permission, provided that the meeting remained orderly. They called a meeting for that Saturday afternoon.<sup>24</sup>

The crowd was addressed by Republican freedmen Clopton, Tyler, and Moore. The speakers urged the freedmen to protect themselves from the Alabama Ku Klux Klan. The Chancery Clerk's office was next door to the courtroom where the meeting was held. Smith, the white Republican who was Price's defense lawyer, was able to overhear some of the proceedings while in his office. What he heard struck him as "nothing objectionable," except that the words spoken encouraged freedmen to take matters into their own hands. He was convinced that the speeches would annoy Democrats and

“cause some trouble.”<sup>25</sup>

Clopton, a leader of the black militia, often appeared on horseback to lead his men through the streets of town. “General Clopton,” as he was sometimes called, was originally from Aberdeen, a city in the northeastern part of the state. He had been in Meridian for four or five years. Between 1869 and 1871 Clopton had been convicted of theft. A jury, which had at least six black men on it, found him guilty of stealing a circular saw. He was sentenced to one year in the Mississippi State Penitentiary. However, in an action that angered whites, Governor Adlebert Ames pardoned him. Clopton’s words were meant to inspire blacks to stand up for themselves when the town’s officials failed them. He encouraged the people to stop the Alabamians from invading. J.W. McMullen, a white deputy clerk employed in the chancery clerk’s office, was present for part of the meeting. He reported there were 200 people in attendance, six or eight of them were white. He described Clopton’s speech as a thinly veiled call for peace, which was designed to cause resentment against whites. Other people said that Clopton’s speech inflamed prejudices against whites. He demanded that the Ku Klux Klan be stopped.<sup>26</sup>

Hiram Berry, a white man from nearby Toomsaba, was present at the Saturday afternoon meeting, and testified that Clopton called for the freedmen to organize so that they could replace county and town officials who were not doing their duty. Clopton’s major criticism of local officials was that they had failed to arrest the men who arrived on the train from Alabama. He argued that if city officials would not act in the freedmen’s best interests, the black population should take matters into their own hands. He warned

whites to be cautious, or Meridian would be “in ashes in less than three weeks.” Clopton welcomed violence between the races. He announced that now was the time for it and to “let it come.” Clopton spoke about numerous occasions when groups of white men hid near his home, waiting for him. White Republicans warned Clopton to beware, and he enlisted ten freedmen to help protect him. The presence of these men kept him from being attacked. Clopton said if these men came again or if he found any white men prowling near his house after dark, they would be killed. He called for Union League members to band together so that they could keep the county safe for freedmen, allowing people to sleep at night without the fear of being killed.<sup>27</sup>

Listening to Clopton’s words and observing the audience’s reaction made such an impression on the McMullen that he retreated into his office and told Clerk Joshua Smith about what he had heard. McMullen was alarmed and told Smith that Clopton had the large crowd agitated and under his control. Even though he was a Republican, McMullen feared that Clopton might say to the crowd: “there were white men in the room, go for them.” McMullen was afraid that he might be killed. After McMullen told Smith what Clopton had said Smith left the courthouse to find the sheriff and request that he break up the meeting. When Clopton was finished the audience was laughing and applauding. According to his testimony, J. Aaron Moore was riding past the courthouse between four and five o’clock. On the street he could hear some noise in one of the courtrooms. He went inside the courthouse and found Clopton giving a speech. Moore decided to sit in on the meeting.<sup>28</sup>

The next speaker was Tyler, Price’s assistant at Meridian’s freedmen’s school. As

Tyler stepped up to the podium to address the crowd he lifted his coat, unbuckled his belt, and laid a pistol on top of the podium. McMullen left the building when he saw Tyler take out his weapon. Tyler urged Union League members to stay together. Tyler used as an illustration an event that had occurred in Meridian a number of years before. A Native American was killed in a drunken brawl in town. When his tribe learned what happened, they killed one of Meridian's citizens. "When one of their number was killed in town they came and took revenge, whether they got the right man or not," said Tyler. He urged his audience to seek an "eye for an eye." Tyler asked for a show of hands of those who would stick together and defend themselves against the Alabamians. Most of the people in the room raised their hands. Tyler said that they had waited long enough for the authorities to stop the Alabamians from coming over and nothing had been done. They felt it was time for them to start protecting themselves. Tyler told the audience that "every white man was a Ku Klux." He said that a white man "would cheat a negro when he could," especially in business transactions. Tyler argued that Lauderdale County was "black man's country." He stated that they, as slaves and now as free men, had built the houses, railroads, and cleared the forests for the whites. He reasoned that now that the hard work was done, the whites no longer had any use for them and were "figuring them to hell."<sup>29</sup>

Although McMullen feared that harm might be done to any whites present in the courthouse he reentered the building in time to hear the close of Tyler's speech. By this time Tyler used humor to criticize whites, Democrats, and the Ku Klux Klan and he had the audience laughing. Other accounts reported that Tyler was opposed to white

supremacy and he “abused the whites tremendously,” to the audience’s applause. Tyler said he had been insulted by whites several times and if anyone did it again “he would slap them in the face.” He advised his audience to do the same if they were insulted by whites.<sup>30</sup>

Representative J. Aaron Moore, formerly a blacksmith and Methodist preacher, was the final speaker. McMullen caught Moore by the arm as he stepped up to the podium and asked him to make a “peaceable speech.” McMullen hoped that he would soothe the anger aroused by the previous speeches. Moore sympathized with his constituency and was partially conciliatory. The portion of his speech that was remembered by those present, was when he likened Meridian to Sodom and Gomorrah. He said that the biblical cities had been destroyed as punishment for rampant vice and corruption. He warned the audience that it was possible that within a few days Meridian would be leveled to dust and ashes. In Moore’s testimony he did not mention the comment he made comparing Meridian to Sodom and Gomorrah. His analogy appeared in many newspaper accounts and many people who attended the meeting remembered that Moore had said it. Surprisingly, no investigating body questioned him about this remark. Moore’s memory may have been somewhat selective during his testimony, since he may have feared he would have additional charges brought against him for inciting the riot. Newspapers were suspicious regarding Moore’s claiming to be unaware of the meeting. Contrary to his statements, some reports assert that he did not just happen upon the meeting, but that he had helped plan it.<sup>31</sup>

Moore testified that he called for peace between whites and blacks. He wanted

them to unite, “as a band of brothers” and devise a plan to stop outsiders from interfering in Meridian’s affairs. Moore told the audience that he believed that the whites should stop outsiders from meddling with the black population. He said:

If any colored men come from anywhere to disturb the white people in this town, if I saw them before they did come in, I should go quietly and ask them to stop, and if they did not stop, then I should make some other attempt... suppose they should tell me they would shoot me down if I did not let them alone; I would keep still until I got away from them; and that I would get some colored men to help me stop them, and if we could not do it, then I would call upon the white people . . . .<sup>32</sup>

Moore believed that the whites should have been opposed to people coming into town and harassing blacks and they should do what they could to prevent this type of trouble. After making these remarks Moore was asked by McMullen to introduce a resolution that would proclaim that freedmen would stop firing their guns at night. This suggestion was never introduced to those in attendance. The main objective of this meeting seemed to be discussing ways to stop the Alabamians from terrorizing freedmen.<sup>33</sup>

Tyler introduced a resolution “for the self protection of their race against the white people and the Ku Klux.” There is no record if this resolution was passed or struck down. Observers of the meeting noted from the spectator’s response that this resolution

would have received the support of the majority present. Tyler read a list of Ku Klux outrages, including the beating of black deputy Adam Kennard, the murder of black Republican office holder Joe Williams, and the maiming of black policeman J.W. Kizer being mentioned. After reading the list, Tyler reported that his own life had been threatened and promised that he would kill the next man who threatened him.<sup>34</sup>

Tyler's mention of Williams' murder was an example of the unrest that existed in Lauderdale County during the early part of 1871. Forty-six-year-old freedman Joe Williams resided in Toomsaba, Mississippi, about twelve miles east of Meridian. He shared his household with his wife Martha and two young daughters, Louise and Lona. Williams' lawyer, William C. Ford, was unsure of his official capacity; he thought Williams was Justice of the Peace and a member of the Board of Police. Whatever his occupation, both men described Williams as offensive to both blacks and whites. He had two indictments for overstepping his authority, pending against him at the time he was murdered.<sup>35</sup>

One indictment against Williams was for shooting a freedman, while the other was for an illegal search. Williams was accused of ordering a black man to search the houses of freedmen, for evidence of a missing swine, without a warrant. Allegedly, Williams had earned the contempt of whites because he took out contracts to build bridges in Lauderdale County. These contracts brought Williams a high profit. He had angered whites by acting as a magistrate between parties involved in disputes. He was also in charge of drilling a group of black militia, an activity unpopular with whites.<sup>36</sup>

Details regarding Williams' death are sketchy. Various accounts say that he was

killed in January, 1871. According to testimony given by Mack H. Whitaker, a group of men came to Williams' house in the night, killed him, and injured another man. Many believed that the men who killed Williams were from Alabama, since they forced a freedman to guide them to Williams' home and call him outdoors. People believed that the killers were outsiders, since they did not know where to find him. A young white man was arrested for killing Williams, but the prosecution was unable to produce any witnesses who could show that he was involved in Williams' death and he was released. This was one instance where people believed to be from Alabama traveled to Lauderdale County and terrorized or killed freedmen. Likewise, when blacks were abused in Sumter County, Alabama, Mississippians were accused of committing the outrage. Williams' death would be mentioned in various speeches, calling for revenge against Alabamians.

Another name mentioned by Tyler was that of black policeman J.W. Kizer. Kizer was severely injured when a group of men came to his home in March 1870 shot him and left him for dead. Kizer said he was struck by at least thirty bullets and lead shot. Kizer's right arm was broken during the attack and was later amputated. Shortly after the incident he moved to Meridian and was employed by the sheriff's office as a policeman.<sup>37</sup>

The repercussions of the Saturday afternoon meeting echoed through the streets of Meridian for the next few days, both freedmen and whites recognized that the speakers had issued a call to arms. The freedmen were justified in their desire to maintain order in their community. The Ku Klux Klan, whether or not they were from Alabama, had injured and killed black citizens. The freedmen were understandably upset about the

abduction of the three farm workers from Alabama. These men may or may not have been guilty of theft or breaking contracts. The fact that Meridian law enforcement officials allowed these men to be taken back without any hint of going through the legal channels of extradition, showed a dereliction of duty. Perhaps if they had challenged this abduction some of the tension between blacks and whites could have been averted.

After the Saturday evening meeting was adjourned, Clopton and a black policeman named Aleck Joseph, made preparations to drill a band of black militia. Joseph had been elected captain of the company of militia, but had never been commissioned. When Dred Finley, Tyler's stepfather, heard that Joseph and Clopton planned to march in the street, he advised Joseph not to do it. Finley's warning fell on deaf ears. Likewise when William S. Patton, the city marshal, heard drums near Joseph's home, he assumed that Joseph was planning to make a show of force in the streets. Patton, who was Joseph's superior officer, approached him and advised him not to march, Joseph promised him that he would not. Regardless of his promise, the armed militia marched with Clopton and Joseph leading the procession through the streets of Meridian.<sup>38</sup>

The Jackson Weekly Clarion reported the most detailed account of the military parade. It took on a violent tone when its leader, Clopton, began to shout at bystanders: "with one hundred men he could annihilate one thousand white men." Clopton also announced that the whites were afraid of him and he would "have his way with Meridian." No one did anything to stop Clopton, nor did anyone take up his challenge. The parade eventually dispersed on its own without incident. Both newspaper accounts

and eyewitness testimony indicate that Clopton's aggressive insults aimed at whites during the meeting and while leading the black militia contributed to the deadly friction that gripped the city.<sup>39</sup>

Shortly after dark a fifty-six-year-old French immigrant, Felix Levy, was standing on a downtown corner when he saw smoke rising from Theodore Sturgis & Co.'s dry goods store, one block away. He was the first to spread the alarm. He saw William Sturgis walking in the opposite direction of the fire. Levy ran to within twenty yards of the mayor, yelled out his name, and shouted that his store was burning. The mayor did not turn around or acknowledge Levy but he kept walking and did not quicken his pace after Levy yelled to him. The next day Levy saw Sturgis and asked him if he had heard his shout of alarm. Sturgis acknowledged that he had, but was going home to get the key to the store. The mayor's behavior was suspicious. He appeared to be aware that Theodore Sturgis & Co. was on fire, but he did not act concerned about the fate of the business. According to Levy, Sturgis did not spread the alarm either before or after Levy informed him of the fire. In ten minutes flames were shooting through the roof of the store. Levy "saw one armed negro coming to the fire, it was Billy Clopton."<sup>40</sup>

Harriet Barbour saw Tyler shortly before the fire. He left the fire while it was burning, went home, and went to bed. The next day, when people asked about where he was during the fire, he replied that he was at home, asleep. Moore's whereabouts during the fire are unknown. Neither his name nor Tyler's appeared in any of the testimony that described the fire. Apparently, they were not present. The fact that these two men were not close to the fire is in sharp contrast to Clopton's behavior.<sup>41</sup>

Mary Culty lived in the business district beside Theodore Sturgis & Co. She looked out her back door and saw three men lock the building for the evening. They worked for Sturgis and lived in the store. She went back into her house and about twenty minutes later she heard people spreading the word that the store was on fire. She went to her back door, saw flames jumping up through the store's roof, and heard people walking inside Sturgis' store. A woman who lived with her, Hattie Scott, heard the fire alarm and looked at her clock, it read 7:15. She began to take things out of her house and put them in the street. She went into her kitchen to remove a rug and found that it was wet with coal oil. Her kitchen was directly beside the Sturgis property. She also noted that the back door to their home could not be locked; anyone could enter if they desired. These circumstances seem to indicate that an arsonist had started the fire.<sup>42</sup>

Another witness, V.E. Rush, saw William Sturgis and four other men walking away from the fire carrying what appeared to be account books and tin boxes. Rush thought it peculiar that Sturgis was not walking home the way he usually did. On a normal evening he almost always went a more direct route. The men, walked away quickly and did not turn around to look at the fire which was visible from their location and they did not react to the fire alarm. As the fire bell rang out people began to run towards the fire. Simultaneously, gunshots rang out in the black section of town. One citizen who headed to this fire was James L. Duck. Rushing down the street he saw William Sturgis with Marshall Weir, a black police officer, walking in a leisurely fashion towards the fire. Duck reported that from their position they could see the burning building and he was surprised that Sturgis did not seem more alarmed. Sturgis appeared

to be talking to Weir about something else. He asked the mayor how the fire started. He said he had “no idea—none in the world.” Sturgis said that his brother was upset about \$200 in cash that was kept on the second floor of the store, but was afraid to go after it.<sup>43</sup>

One of the first men to arrive to fight the fire was freedman Alexander Mitchell. He ran up to the front door of Theodore Sturgis & Co. and found it wide open. When he looked inside he spied two men he did not recognize. The two men ordered Mitchell out of the store and he went outside the building and headed for home. While on the corner he met a white man who told him to go to Hurlbutt & Sons, the store next to Theodore Sturgis & Co., and break down the front door. When Mitchell began to pummel Hurlbutt’s door he saw the two men run out of Sturgis’ store and disappear; he did not know if they were white or black. As Prussian immigrant Augustus Freideritce and others arrived at the scene they discovered Theodore Sturgis & Co.’s front door was locked. Freideritce helped batter down the door and noticed that Thomas Pelton, a white policeman and ally of the mayor, was one of the first people to leave the store. Freideritce did not see Pelton enter the store through the front door; nonetheless, he believed if he had entered that way, he would have seen him. He believed the fire started in the second story of the building near the front of the store.<sup>44</sup>

One of the men who appeared shortly after the alarm was Clopton, who immediately started pulling merchandise out of Sturgis store. He began to curse at the people around him saying that he would haul Sturgis’ goods away from the fire whether or not he was paid for his work. Clopton would soon change his mind about helping the burning businesses.<sup>45</sup>

As other people arrived at the fire they saw Clopton in front of Sturgis' store saying: "it was a white man's fire, let it burn." Clopton also accused Alabamians of setting the fire by saying: "the Alabamians have come over here to burn us up, and it had as well begin now as at any time." Shortly, Theodore and William Sturgis walked up to Clopton and tried to quiet him down. They took him by each arm and the mayor told Clopton that "he was talking too much and must go home." One of the crowd asked Sturgis why someone had not arrested Clopton, Sturgis did not answer. A large crowd of freedmen surrounded an unknown white man. The white man was calling for Clopton to be arrested, claiming that Clopton had shot at him five or six times. Clopton called him a liar and denied shooting at all. Police officer T. J. Pelton took Clopton by the arm and tried to talk to him. At that moment another officer Ike Adams came up to Clopton and asked him if there was a problem. Clopton thumped Adams on the chest and said, "damn you, don't ask me what's the matter." The freedmen then cocked their guns and many stated that they would stand by Clopton. The two officers did not arrest Clopton and the crowd dissipated.<sup>46</sup> "Everybody seemed to be armed that night," said policeman L.B. Evenman who spent two hours trying to keep a large group of freedmen peaceful as Sturgis' store burned. He commented that Clopton had the crowd's full attention. Clopton blamed the "rebels" for the fire because Mayor Sturgis was a friend of the freedmen. He wanted to get even with the whites and let the whole town burn.<sup>47</sup>

Numerous witnesses observed that during previous blazes freedmen were more than willing to help extinguish the fires. However, this time many blacks stood by, reluctant to get involved. This no doubt was due to the tense relationship between the

races. The situation was aggravated by Clopton's imploring the freedmen to let the town burn, and by the fact that numerous people were shot at as they ran to and from the fire. The constant gunfire heard throughout the city deterred both whites and blacks from showing up to fight the fire. Circuit Clerk Joshua Smith estimated that less than one-fifth of available whites nearby worked to put out the flames. Smith admitted that before this incident, Meridian did not have a fire department, usually blacks did most of the work. On this occasion, an equal number from each race worked to put out the fire.<sup>48</sup>

The fire was extinguished by midnight. The Jackson Weekly Clarion, March 9, 1871 reported that the entire block along Front Street, burned. The places of business that were lost included these stores: Hurlbutt & Sons, Theodore Sturgis & Co, Rosenbaun & Gully, W.A. Schimp, M.E. Cadwick, M. Boos, J.W. Harvy, John Hand, and Dr. Broach. Most of the contents of these stores and houses were destroyed, with losses estimated at \$75,000 with only \$28,000 being insured. Sturgis' merchandise was the only one that was adequately insured to cover the loss. The black Methodist church's bell began to ring, a customary signal to assemble, shortly after the fire was extinguished. Witnesses saw armed black men running to the church.<sup>49</sup>

Chief deputy sheriff Lorenzo Belk was discussing the fire with bystanders when he heard shouting. He turned around and saw Clopton screaming at a porter on duty at the Phoenix Hotel. Clopton demanded that the porter join the gathering crowd of freedmen on the streets. Clopton shouted: "you damned paper-collar hotel boy, why are you not at your post or place?" The porter did not answer him. When Clopton ordered the man to get his gun, he left the hotel and walked off with Clopton. Belk called after

the porter. He turned and Clopton grabbed his arm to lead him off. The second time Belk called him the porter answered and left Clopton's side. Clopton begged him not to go saying, "they are no friends of yours," then turned and went over to a crowd of freedmen assembling twenty yards away. The freedmen began shouting and firing their guns. Belk recognized that the situation was becoming dangerous. He decided it was time to talk to Meridian's leading citizens and put the police on alert for trouble. By ten o'clock that evening, twenty-five or more freedmen had gathered at the Jones Hotel, about eighty yards from where the fire started. When one white man asked what they were doing, they hesitated with their answer, then one replied that they had gathered to "give the white people a fight, if they wanted one."<sup>50</sup>

Clopton grew more unruly and numerous witnesses recalled that he appeared intoxicated. Deputy Belk rushed to Sheriff Mosely's home to inform him of Clopton's behavior and to seek guidance. Mosely failed to recognize the gravity of the situation and did not take action. He merely sent Belk away, telling him to do what he could to keep things from getting out of control and to come when the situation appeared serious. Shortly thereafter Clopton was silenced after being surrounded by blacks and whites an unknown person hit him over the head with a shotgun, and knocked him unconscious. His allies feared he was dead and carried him to safety. Rumors abounded that Clopton had been killed. Later that night, when whites learned that Clopton was alive, a group of them woke white Republican judge Elkner L. Bramlette and had an affidavit filed against him. Deputy Belk was ordered to arrest Clopton. He was accompanied by 200 men while he searched for Clopton. Clopton was found uninjured and was arrested sometime

between 2 and 4A.M..<sup>51</sup>

Insurance agent P.S. Layton, who handled the insurance policies of some of the businesses that burned, was appointed Special Deputy Sheriff. He was present at Clopton's arrest, remained on duty through the night, and was in charge of the detail that guarded Clopton. Layton feared that "some indiscreet young persons, under the influence of stimulants" might attempt a raid on the courthouse and kill Clopton. Layton's fears for Clopton's safety were warranted. Deputy Kizer overheard some white men discussing plans to kill Tyler and Moore. They rang the bell at the black Presbyterian church in hopes that Tyler and Moore would think the bell was a signal of trouble, or of a meeting. When they rang the bell Kizer saw a mob of fifty to 100 white men waiting between the church and Moore's house. Tyler and Moore did not fall for the trick and were not seen until Sunday morning.<sup>52</sup>

Dred Finley, Tyler's step-father, was working in his barber shop around 10A.M. Sunday when two white men walked in for a shave and they informed Finley that a meeting would be called on Monday. At the meeting it would be decided that Tyler and Clopton would be forced to leave town. Hugh Wilson warned Finley that he "was deeper in it than he thought" and if Finley did not try to control Tyler "he would be one that would have to leave." Wilson wanted to know why he did not stop Tyler from causing hard feelings between the whites and blacks. Wilson urged Dred to "take a stand for order here... that the white people supported him." Finley went home later that day and told Tyler about the threats.<sup>53</sup>

Finley tried to convince Tyler to be cautious. He said that there would be a

meeting on Monday and that he would be told to leave town. Finley warned Tyler that “they had Old Bill, (Clopton) and that he would never get away.” He advised Tyler to leave because there was “too much prejudice against him.” Tyler replied that he had not broken any laws and “if he couldn’t live here he could die here.” Tyler then went downtown and was informed by various people that he and Clopton would have to leave town. Sheriff Mosely told him to “stand square.” Finley said that Tyler had gotten jumpy and might act without thinking. Later that evening, a group of armed men walked down the street past Finley’s house. Tyler grabbed his pistol and started to run out of the door when Finley stopped him, pleading with him not to leave the house. He thought the men were probably looking for someone in particular. Finley knew that Tyler was frightened and he thought the men were coming to get him.<sup>54</sup>

On Sunday there was great concern among law enforcement personnel and the black community for Clopton’s safety. One man was surprised to see Clopton still under guard and said “he did not expect to see him alive.” He had heard a judge and the editor of Meridian’s Democratic newspaper plotting to kill Clopton. On Sunday, Deputy Kizer heard people curse Clopton and tell him that he “ought to be killed.” Clopton begged Kizer to find some black men to guard him. He believed that he would have been killed the night before had his guards not stood up for him. He was unsure that he would be protected by white guards if a white mob came after him. Kizer had heard about a meeting held at the Democratic newspaper’s office, which at least thirty-six whites attended. Kizer went to the Methodist Church that evening and told Moore and Tyler about what had been happening in town. He told them that he thought Clopton would be

killed that night unless something was done to protect him.<sup>55</sup>

Moore and Tyler went over to Sheriff Mosely's house and discussed the situation for half an hour. The sheriff thought Clopton was safe. He had confidence in the men in charge with protecting Clopton. Moore was afraid that Clopton would be harmed and suggested that both freedmen and whites be put in charge of him. Moore thought the mixed group would help keep suspicion down if someone did try to kill Clopton. Mosely did not think having both black and white guards was necessary, but he agreed to order it if the three men insisted it be done. Mosely asked the deputy in charge, Lorenzo Belk, if he thought it was necessary. Belk said he had guards on duty for the night and did not want to change them. Mosely said that he would prefer to have some black men guarding Clopton. Belk said again that he was unwilling to change his guards and that he "did not want any colored men around here tonight at all." Belk alluded that there would be a large number of men in Meridian that night "from a distance."<sup>56</sup>

Moore asked Belk if the Alabamians were coming to town and if he expected trouble. Belk denied that any men from Alabama would be in town that night, only men "from a distance." Belk took Moore aside and informed him about the meeting that Democrats had held in the office of Meridian's Democratic newspaper the Mercury. He said that the men at the meeting had decided that Sturgis, Tyler, and Clopton would be forced to leave town. Belk told Moore that his name had been brought up but he would not be asked to leave. After the two men rejoined the group the sheriff decided to get some black men to guard Clopton. He sent Tyler and Isaac Radford to find some good, reliable people.<sup>57</sup>

Kizer then went to the jail where Clopton was under arrest. Clopton asked him what Tyler and Moore planned to do. Kizer responded that he would have black men guarding him that night. One of Clopton's guards told Kizer that if any freedmen were sent to guard Clopton there would be problems and that the whites would not stay. Sheriff Robert Mosely appeared indecisive when he was asked about Clopton's safety. He devised a plan concerning how he was going to avoid trouble Sunday night. He had ordered, 300 whites to patrol the streets and twenty-five men were stationed in the vicinity of Moore's church. They were to disarm any freedmen they found. After dark, Sheriff Mosely called for Kizer and told him to inform Moore and Tyler not to send any men into town. He also instructed Kizer to tell them to keep the blacks in their part of town that night and not allow any to go past Moore's church.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, Tyler, unaware of the sheriff's decision, had sent a group of men to the courthouse to guard Clopton. On their way they ran into fifteen white men who disarmed them, under the sheriff's orders. Only one of these men was armed. He said that one of the sheriff's special deputies had three caps burst in his face after they took the freedman's gun away. Kizer met this group of men just before he arrived at Moore's church. He met Tyler at the door of the church. When Tyler learned that his guards had been disarmed he did not believe that Mosely had ordered it. Tyler asked Kizer to interrupt Moore's sermon and inform him of the changing situation and warn him that the church was surrounded by whites. Tyler recommended that the service be canceled and those in attendance sent home. Moore refused and finished the service without incident. Kizer went with the man who had been disarmed to see the sheriff. Mosely told him that

he could have his gun back on Monday morning. The streets of Meridian were quiet on the night of Sunday, March 5, 1871. Clopton was held safely in the jail awaiting arraignment, set for Monday afternoon.<sup>59</sup>

1. William Warren Rogers and Ruth Pruitt Stephen S. Renfroe, Alabama's Outlaw Sheriff Sentry Press, Tallahassee, Florida, 1972, 18.
2. Rogers and Pruitt, 18.
3. Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, Alabama, (Washington D.C.: GPO) 1872, 1615-1616. Hereafter referred to as Ku Klux Klan Report.
4. Ku Klux Klan Report, Alabama, 1615.
5. Ku Klux Klan Report, Alabama, 1623.
6. Ku Klux Klan Report, Alabama, 1955.

7. Ku Klux Klan Report, Alabama, 1956.
8. Michael W. Fitzgerald, The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change During Reconstruction, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 152.
9. Fitzgerald, The Union League Movement in the Deep South, 106-107.
10. Fitzgerald, The Union League Movement in the Deep South, 107., Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 111.
11. George C. Rable, But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984) 97.
12. Livingston Journal, 10 February, 1871, Louis R. Smith, A History of Sumter County Alabama, Through 1886 (Ph.D. Diss., University of Alabama, 1988) 186-187.
13. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 168.
14. Ku Klux Klan Report, Alabama, 1589, Mississippi, 64, 168.
15. It is unclear if Price organized the Union League in Livingston or if it was in existence prior to his arrival. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 64-65, 169-171, Livingston Journal Friday, February 17, 1871.
16. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 64-65, 169-171, Livingston Journal Friday, February 17, 1871.
17. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 25.
18. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 65, 169, Livingston Journal Friday, February 17, 1871.
19. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 65, 169.
20. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 65, 169.
21. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 66, 170-171.
22. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 97, 111.
23. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 66, 67.
24. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 134.

25. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 66.
26. Jackson Weekly Clarion, Jackson Mississippi, Thursday March 16, 1871. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 152.
27. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 48, 157.
28. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 49, 152.
29. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 48, 137, 152, 157.
30. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 152.
31. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 49, 137, 152 The Jackson Weekly Clarion March 23, 1871.
32. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 49, 50.
33. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 137, 152.
34. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 153.
35. Check the microfilm for more information. 1870 census page 105, Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 114, 165.
36. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 114.
37. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 46.
38. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 52, 136 - 137.
39. Weekly Clarion, Jackson, Mississippi, March 16, 1871.
40. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 154 - 155.
41. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 140.
42. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 155.
43. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 153, 157.
44. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 155, 159-160
45. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 97.
46. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 132, 157.

47. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 155.
48. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 67, 68.
49. Jackson Weekly Clarion, March 9, 1871, Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 153.
50. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 32, 161.
51. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 32.
52. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 43, 46.
53. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 135, 141.
54. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 135
55. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 46.
56. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 46-47, 50.
57. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 46-47, 50.
58. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 46-47, 50.
59. To avoid confusion, the sheriff's office and the jail are located in the same county building, the courthouse. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 46-47, 50.

## Chapter 3

### “Never Mind, You Will not be Hurt”

Monday morning began early for black sheriff deputy J.W. Kizer. Sheriff Mosely asked him to start a fire in the sheriff's office. When he came back with the coal two of Clopton's white guards drew their guns and ordered him to turn over his pistol. Kizer protested and said that he needed the gun to protect himself. They demanded that he hand over the pistol or they would shoot him. He relented and gave them his gun. When white deputy sheriff Lorenzo Belk arrived and Kizer immediately asked if he would allow these men to disarm him. Belk replied that Kizer had no business with a gun. Kizer protested, replying that he had paid for it, did not disturb anyone with it, and needed it for protection. Kizer did not get his pistol back. This incident showed the tension and uneasiness that gripped whites. Kizer was employed as a policeman by the city and he had not done anything to warrant the confiscation of his weapon. Clearly the only explanation for this act was that the whites did not want blacks to have guns. If they remained unarmed they were easier to control.<sup>1</sup>

A public meeting was held at Con Sheehan Hall Monday morning. The meeting's purpose was for citizens to discuss the events of the weekend and to determine if the law was being upheld. Those in attendance would be encouraged to make suggestions regarding how to assist Sheriff Mosely in keeping the peace. A committee of five Democrats was instructed to draw up resolutions that reflected the opinions of those in attendance. The people who attended the meeting were primarily white Democrats, with

the exception of black state representative J. Aaron Moore and black school teacher Warren Tyler's stepfather Dred Finley.<sup>2</sup>

The committee returned after deliberating in private, delivered a report, and submitted resolutions for approval. It blamed freedmen for Saturday night's fire and for other infractions of the peace. The committee did not give their opinion of Clopton's role in the fire, since he would be arraigned that afternoon. The first resolution requested that there be no violence used to maintain the peace. Violence was only justified in a case of self defense. A committee of safety was appointed. This committee would be available to assist the sheriff. If requested they were responsible for raising posses and making arrests. Their second resolution stated that the white citizens had not intended to persecute anyone on account of their race or their political affiliation. They had not sought to interfere with anyone's right to freedom or private property. They denied accusations that they had targeted freedmen and Republicans.<sup>3</sup>

The committee denied allegations that "ill disposed" citizens of Alabama were present in Meridian on Saturday night. They denounced the rumor that the Alabamians were responsible for the fire and that this allegation was intended to distract officials from finding the true arsonist. They were convinced that freedmen had started the fire. Three additional resolutions were adopted which stated that the law was not impartially enforced and failed to protect the rights of the Meridian's citizens. They declared that the mayor of Meridian, William Sturgis, was either incompetent or an unjust officer. The mayor did not enforce the laws except "as a means of oppression to one class and of licentiousness to another." Clearly stating that white citizens had no confidence in him.

The committee then agreed to have their resolutions printed in the newspapers and to appoint a group of men to deliver their resolutions to Governor James Lusk Alcorn. A committee charged with investigation of the causes of Saturday night's fire was appointed.<sup>4</sup>

Some people disagreed. One white man spoke up, Thomas W. Coleman, and opposed a resolution that called for the governor to remove Sturgis from office. This resolution further stated that if the governor would not remove Sturgis the citizens would take it upon themselves to remove the mayor. He also fought a resolution that stated that blacks were responsible for disturbing the peace. Coleman argued that there were "just as many white people here as there is colored." The fact that these resolutions did not pass showed that some people did not blame the black community for everything that happened. However, many of the speeches called for vigilance against freedmen. They urged the citizens to take measures to control, disarm, and break up the Union League. They blamed most of Meridian's problems on the mayor and demanded that he promptly resign and leave the city.<sup>5</sup>

Warren Tyler along with three other freedmen strolled by the courthouse shortly after the meeting had begun. One of the men asked Tyler if he knew anything about the meeting in the courthouse. Tyler replied that the whites were "getting scared." James Brantley stepped out of a bar located on the ground floor of Con Sheehan Hall when he overheard this remark. He asked Tyler to repeat what he had said. Brantley denied that the whites were afraid and started an argument with Tyler. Later that morning Tyler sent a note to Sheriff Mosely describing the incident. The note said: "Mr. James Brantley took

occasion to insult me in the street, and called me a damned lying son-of-a-bitch, without any provocation whatever. Such treatment I will not and cannot stand." A vendetta between Brantley and Tyler had been started.<sup>6</sup>

Tyler addressed his class that Monday morning. He told his students that this was the last lesson that he expected to teach them; and that he would be killed that day. He told the class that he would not leave town unless someone could prove to him that he had broken the law. When Tyler finished his lesson, he left the classroom and met J. Aaron Moore in the Circuit Clerk's office. While he and Moore were discussing Saturday night's events, Sheriff Mosely walked into the office and announced that Tyler and Moore were under arrest. They had been charged with giving incendiary speeches at the meeting Saturday night. Moore protested and Mosely told him, "never mind, you will not be hurt." Mosely did not take either of them into custody, and told them to go about their business and return to the courthouse at two o'clock. Mosely checked Tyler for weapons and found none. He advised Moore to go into the courtroom and listen to the speeches at the meeting. When he sat down someone shouted "here is our representative, I would like to hear from him." Others shouted "no! no! we do not want to hear anything from him." Many believed he had already made his views public on Saturday and there was no need for him to address the crowd.<sup>7</sup>

Tyler left the courthouse and went home for the noon meal. Before he arrived Dred Finley, Tyler's step-father, had discussed the situation with his wife. Finley had been at the meeting that morning. He told her that one speaker had said that there were certain people whom the white community resented. If they did not leave town they

would be forced to go. Although the speaker did not mention any names, Finley knew he was referring to Clopton, Tyler, Moore, and Sturgis. Tyler's mother was upset, begged Finley to make Tyler leave town, and began packing her son's belongings. The two men had already discussed the situation and Finley refused to say anything more about it to Tyler. He testified that Tyler stubbornly defended his opinions and sometimes acted without weighing the consequences of his actions. Both he and his mother had repeatedly asked him to "desist from his course he was pursuing or it would result in his death." Tyler did not heed their warnings and as two o'clock grew closer he strapped on his pistol and left the house. According to Dred Finley, Tyler always carried a pistol.<sup>8</sup>

Prior to his court appearance, Tyler had his hair trimmed. He told Jack Williams, his barber, that if he were killed that evening, he wanted to look like a gentleman. Neatly groomed, Tyler went directly to the courtroom. Williams noticed that he was wearing a "Navy six" revolver. Sheriff Mosely disarmed Tyler. Tyler handed the sheriff a note urging him to get the trial underway as soon as possible so that he could return to his school. Around two o'clock Tyler, Clopton, and Moore appeared before white Republican justice of the peace Elkner Bramlette. William C. Ford, a white attorney, was the counsel for the prosecution. The affidavits charged that the three men were guilty of presiding over a meeting Saturday afternoon which resulted in a fire that destroyed a block of the business district. The prosecution argued that they were guilty of incendiary acts and speeches, and had threatened to burn the town. The defendants did not have any legal representation. Moore believed that he had done nothing wrong and had no need for a lawyer. Tyler had decided to act as his own attorney.<sup>9</sup>

Over 200 spectators packed the courtroom as the trial began. William C. Ford, representing the state, read the affidavit and asked each man how they answered the charges. Clopton stated that he was drunk on Saturday night and did not know what he had said or done. Moore said that he did not know that he had done anything wrong. Tyler simply replied "not guilty." Ford spent an hour questioning four or five witnesses. Sitting next to Tyler, Mayor Sturgis scribbled notes into a small notebook and passed it back and fourth to Tyler. When it was Tyler's turn to examine a witness, he used Sturgis' notes as a guide.<sup>10</sup>

Moore and Tyler left the courtroom several times during the questioning. The second time they proceeded into the hallway that led to the courthouse offices. As they left the courtroom Sturgis stood up and walked down the courtroom's center aisle, and exited the building. Their departure caused a delay in the trial and the prosecution demanded that Judge Bramlette order the defendants to stay in the courtroom. When Moore and Tyler returned Tyler sat in a different seat, next to the bench. One spectator, Mack Whitaker, noticed that he was now wearing a pistol. Whitaker had not seen a gun on Tyler until the moment he returned to the courtroom. The trial had progressed about one hour when Ford called James Brantley to the stand.<sup>11</sup>

Ford questioned Brantley about his conversation with Tyler earlier that day. Brantley said he heard Tyler say to another freedman that the whites were holding a meeting because they were afraid. Brantley admitted that he called Tyler a "damn liar" three times. He then said: "Tyler said something about my calling him a damn liar, and I said I had called him a damn liar... and had a notion to shoot him on the spot." Tyler then

asked Brantley a few questions. Ford told Brantley to leave the stand. Tyler told Brantley and the court that he wanted three freedmen “summoned to impeach your testimony.” Brantley furiously demanded that he repeat what he had said. Tyler repeated his words as he backed towards the door leading into the hallway. Brantley reached for a walking cane that was lying on a table in front of Justice Bramlette and stepped towards Tyler. Brantley walked about two feet when Patton, the City Marshal, grabbed him and ordered him to stop. Brantley paused and did not struggle with Marshal Patton. Tyler stood in the doorframe and shouted: “don’t you hit me with that stick, Mr. Brantley.” Tyler shouted at the city marshal that he must “stop him or let him go, and he would stop him.” A shot rang out and a bullet struck Justice Bramlette in the left temple. Bramlette slumped in his chair and the courtroom erupted in gunfire. Observers in the gallery scurried to leave the room.<sup>12</sup>

Tyler walked past Moore just before the first shot was fired. Moore said someone shouted “Shoot him! Shoot him!” just as Tyler made it to the doorway, while others cried “arrest him; don’t kill him.” Moore heard someone fire a pistol from the middle of the courtroom but did not see who had fired. The doorway in which Tyler stood was to the left of where Moore was sitting. Moore was between the doorway and Justice Bramlette. Moore said that he was “confident that Tyler had nothing whatever in his hand; if he had anything in his hands I could have seen it.” If Tyler had fired, Moore said, the bullet would have passed right by his face.<sup>13</sup>

J.D. Kline, a physician, saw Tyler draw a pistol three or four feet in front of the doorway. He saw Tyler step into the opening, rest the pistol on the facing of the doorway,

and fire. Kline did not say where he was standing in the courtroom only that he could see Tyler, until Tyler retreated into the sheriff's office. Kline believed that Tyler did not appear to fire his gun sporadically, but took careful aim. There was not doubt in Kline's mind that Tyler shot Bramlette. If Tyler fired, there is some question as to whether he was aiming at Brantley or Bramlette. Some argued that Tyler meant to shoot Brantley, missed, and hit the judge by mistake. He observed: "I marked the special coolness of Tyler. He steadied himself at the door before he fired. Some people shoot wide of their mark, but I don't think Tyler did." Many others agreed with Dr. Kline's assessment that Tyler fired the shot that killed Justice Bramlette.<sup>14</sup>

White Democrats generally believed that Tyler killed Justice Bramlette, even if they did not actually witness it. However, freedmen thought the opposite, that Tyler did not kill Bramlette. They believed that he was hit by one of the many indiscriminate shots that erupted in the courtroom. The testimony was clearly divided. Some white witnesses saw Tyler draw a pistol and fire, while black witnesses said he had no pistol.<sup>15</sup>

When Justice Bramlette slumped down in his chair Tyler turned and ran through the doorway, then a short distance down the hallway into the sheriff's office. He ran across the room, and stepped out a window onto a balcony overlooking the street. He climbed over the railing, grasped the bottom of it, and lowered himself toward the street. He hung in the air for a moment before letting go of the railing and dropping twelve feet to the ground. Tyler was shot in the hip as he landed on the sidewalk. Peggy Johnson, a black witness, was standing at the other side of the street from the courthouse and had seen Tyler jump. When Tyler landed he cried out "O Lord!" and clutched his back. He

ran across the street and through a barber shop. Johnson was one of the only people who was willing to identify the person who shot Tyler. She said Hugh Wilson had shot him from the balcony. When Tyler jumped his coat flew up in the back and she saw he was wearing a pistol.<sup>16</sup>

City Marshal, William Patton, examined Justice Bramlette as chaos reigned in the courtroom. Patton shouted that the “shooting must cease” and that a good man had been killed. He noticed that Moore was lying on the floor and appeared to be dead. Gus Ford, a black policeman had been wounded and was lying face down in the doorway that led to the sheriff’s office. He may have tried to stop Tyler and been shot by people who fired in Tyler’s direction. Clopton limped across the courtroom in a futile effort to escape, having been wounded in the knee, chest, and mouth. During the gunfire Moore had crawled out of his chair to Justice Bramlette and pulled the judge’s body over him. Those who witnessed the shooting thought Moore had fallen dead to the floor. He slipped out of the courtroom, made his way down the stairs, and escaped into the woods. Only later did people realize that his body was missing from the courtroom. Only one white was wounded in the courtroom. He was shot in the wrist.<sup>17</sup>

Whites immediately began to gather arms and an estimated 200 people gathered in the street in front of the courthouse. Sheriff Robert Mosely was riding down the street when he was informed that Bramlette had been killed he immediately deputized the entire crowd and ordered them to arrest Tyler. He later admitted that he did not recognize most of the people in the crowd. It appeared to him that the whole town was on the streets. The mob spread out on both sides of the street and began to search for him. Freedman

Joe Sharp was near the courthouse as the riot erupted. He was sick that day and had stepped out behind a shop to “attend a call of nature.” He saw Tyler lying in a ditch. Tyler pleaded: “for goodness sake help me; I am shot.” Sharp saw blood running down his hip, but he was too weak to help him. He found two freedmen Bill Peterson and Nelson Hodges to help Tyler. They tried to convince Harry Mason, a freedman driving a wagon, to haul Tyler to safety. Mason, who was J. Aaron Moore’s next door neighbor, refused and the two men carried Tyler inside a house.<sup>18</sup> Once inside, Tyler exclaimed that he had been shot twice and begged Harris to protect him. Harris quickly secured the doors to his dwelling. The mob made its way to Harris’ house and demanded that he open the doors. With the mob almost on top of him, Tyler exited through the rear of the house and stumbled two doors down to freedman Sam Parker’s shoe shop. Peterson and Hodges threw him inside and fled. Sam Parker was not in his shop and was unaware that Tyler had hidden inside.<sup>19</sup>

The mob searched the courthouse block under the sheriff’s orders. One of the men deputized was Hugh Wilson, the man that Peggy Johnson identified as shooting Tyler from the courthouse veranda. Sam Parker had stepped outside when he heard shooting in the courthouse. He had seen Tyler hanging between two men’s shoulders about a minute before Hugh Wilson walked down the sidewalk. Parker returned to his shop just as a group of men overtook him. George Brantley demanded to know if Tyler was hiding inside, Parker denied it.<sup>20</sup> One of the men pointed a gun in Parker’s face while Brantley dragged him inside and ordered him to help search for Tyler. Brantley found Tyler, and shouted, “here he is boys, under the bed.” Sam Parker ran out of the shop, as a

throng of men surged through the door. Some people in the crowd tried to shoot Parker, but he escaped through the middle of the crowd insuring that no one had a clear shot at him. Parker testified that the shooting began almost as soon as people were inside.

Deputy L. D. Belk arrested him and took him to the courthouse. When it was determined that he was unaware that Tyler had entered his shop Belk released him from custody.<sup>21</sup>

The mob found Tyler hiding under a bed in Parker's shop and riddled his body with bullets. When Parker returned to his shop, he found Tyler's body lying near the fireplace. His head was pointed towards the back door and his feet on the hearth. Later that day Parker helped carry Tyler's body outside. Tyler had been shot in the face and in the chest. Parker and others placed Tyler's body in a wagon and Dred Finley took it away to be buried. The next morning Parker found a pistol, with all the cylinders still loaded, under his bed. The large repeater had three caps burst, with the hammer resting on the third exploded cap. Tyler had attempted to shoot his way out of the room but his gun misfired. Parker gave the pistol to one of the men who shot Tyler, George Brantley. Brantley thought it belonged to Sheriff Mosely. Mosely had reported that a gun was missing from his office. Brantley brought the pistol back and said that it was not Mosely's pistol and asked Parker if he had "a better right to it than he did." Parker told him that he had no right to it at all and Brantley kept it as a souvenir. Parker later heard that the pistol belonged to an unknown man named Dan McDonald. He and Tyler had exchanged guns. It is unclear if this meant that Tyler was given the gun before or after he escaped the courthouse. Unfortunately, no primary sources yielded any information about McDonald.<sup>22</sup>

After the crowd returned and announced that Tyler was dead Mosely went back to his office. He walked through the courtroom and saw Judge Bramlette lying dead on the floor. Clopton and Gus Ford had been moved into his office; Clopton was seriously wounded and Ford, a black policeman, had received a mortal wound. Mosely faced a crisis. Some citizens wanted him to arrest the Alabamians, who many believed were the cause of the trouble. Mosely refused to do anything without an affidavit. When he was presented with one he still refused to arrest them. Mosely who felt the Democrats were trying to endanger him rebuffed them saying that ““They always put me in everything; I know what they want; I won’t go... and get my head shot off, and a few niggers killed.”” Instead, Mosely sent two men who knew many of the Alabamians who were in Meridian to talk to them. Clearly, Mosely thought that the situation was too dangerous and did not want to get deeply involved. He may have believed that the only way to get the Alabamians out of town before they were ready would be to form a posse to run them out. He did not want to attempt this because he knew that it would provoke a fight, especially if he had freedmen along with him to back him up.<sup>23</sup>

As he was dividing the men into squads M.H. Whitaker happened to look up at the courthouse balcony he saw a body fall and land on the street below. Whitaker was enraged someone had thrown a man off the balcony. He latter learned that Clopton had been rolled under the balcony railing to the sidewalk. Shortly after she heard shots in the direction of Sam Parker’s shop, Peggy Johnson was standing on the street watching as people began to search for Moore. She looked up and saw a group of men push a body off the courthouse balcony. Clopton, conscious when he was pushed, tried to grab the

bottom of the railing as he went under it.<sup>24</sup>

A doctor examined Clopton as he lay on the sidewalk. He was still alive. Peggy Johnson went to get Clopton's wife so that she could take him home. On her way she saw a squad of men on foot and on horseback moving up the street already searching for Moore. One of them shouted that Moore had "ruined our country and we are going to have him." Johnson told Clopton's wife about what had happened. They went over to where he lay on the street "struggling in his own blood." Mrs. Clopton asked Sheriff Mosely for her husband. He replied "go home and stay there; you can't have him; these men won't let you have him." Clopton was carried off the street and placed under guard in the sheriff's office: Rumors circulated that Clopton had been tossed off the balcony and killed. As the men who killed Tyler began to return from Parker's shop one man, Isaac Adams, bragged that he had fired at least twenty-six buckshot into Tyler. When they learned that Clopton was believed dead they formed a line in the street, cheered "the damned old rascals are dead," and tossed their hats in the air.<sup>25</sup>

Numerous people saw Clopton pushed off the veranda and fall to the street below but, none of them could recall who was responsible. Some witnesses said that they recognized the men who were on the balcony but none could recall who they were. Others stated that they did not see anyone on the balcony but did see people in the window of the sheriff's office. It is highly unlikely that Clopton, who had been shot five times, would have tried to escape from the sheriff's office. One might assume that he would have been more secure in the custody of the sheriff than with the crowd on the streets. Someone must have carried him through the window and rolled him off the

balcony. The fact that witnesses do not remember who was on the balcony, is evidence that their memories had become selective to protect themselves from reprisals. With such a large number of witnesses on hand, at least 200 people were estimated to be in the streets, some should have been able to identify the persons who committed this act.

As chairman of the Committee of Safety, M.H. Whitaker stood outside the courthouse conferring with the city marshal regarding what steps needed to be taken to restore order. He followed the crowd as it rushed in the direction Tyler had fled. He quickly heard gunfire and went over to Parker's shop but did not go inside. He and the deputy sheriff tried to keep the crowd calm but he soon went back to the courthouse and learned that Tyler had been murdered. Whitaker was unsure of the situation; he had heard shots fired, and knew that Judge Bramlette was dead. He saw Gus Ford lying wounded in the sheriff's office. He knew that several men had been shot but he did not know how many. The deputy sheriff asked him to raise a special police force. Whitaker raced to Parker's shop where they found a large group of men milling around in the street. Whitaker organized these men and marched them down to the courthouse. Bystanders reported that many of the freedmen had bolted from the courthouse and had run to the church where they held Union League meetings. Many men believed that the freedmen went to the church to arm themselves and come back to town. Spectators were deputized and divided into small groups and ordered to patrol. They were to disarm any men regardless of color that they came across, unless they were acting under orders from the sheriff as special deputies. There were no freedmen to be found on the streets.<sup>26</sup>

The crowd caught one escaping freedman, fifty-seven-year-old Isaac Lee,

climbing over a fence located behind the courthouse. The crowd shot him as he tried to escape and surrounded him and brought him in front of the courthouse. Lee recognized his former master, Frederick Bass, in the crowd and pleaded for his help. Bass went over to him and began to examine the gunshot wounds in his arm and thigh. Bass then implored the crowd to let Lee go, stating that he had known Lee and his family for a long time. They had worked on Bass' farm for years and he believed that he was a good, hardworking man. He stated that Lee was trustworthy and law-abiding and that he had nothing to do with the riot. The crowd relented and let Isaac Lee go.<sup>27</sup>

Bass told Lee to proceed to Threefoot's shop and he would examine his bullet wounds and try to help him. The instant Lee turned to escape, someone shouted "stop; what have you here?" Onlookers patted down Lee's coat and pulled two large pistols from his pockets. After seeing that he was carrying weapons Bass concluded that Lee had come to town intending to participate in the riot. Apparently, he did not consider the possibility that Lee was armed for self-defense. Bass testified that he could do nothing else assist him. Some members of the crowd were angry at Bass for defending Lee, while others thought he was justified. The crowd wanted to kill Lee, but he cried out to the town marshal for help. Patton escorted Lee into the courthouse and locked him in the sheriff's office. Patton called for a doctor to dress his wounds. Bass noted in his testimony that he did not recognize anyone in the crowd besides Lee and that he never saw Isaac Lee again.<sup>28</sup>

Lee was released from custody later that day. Wesley Lee, Isaac's nineteen-year-old son testified that near sundown following the riot two white men appeared at Lee's

home and demanded that Isaac Lee come outside. One of the men was identified as Isaac Adams, one of Tyler's murderers, a policeman and owner of a soda-water factory. Lee approached the door of his home, saw the men were armed, and fled. Adams ordered Lee to halt and then shot at him, wounding Lee in the wrist. He then ran over a hill and crawled under a house. The two men found his hiding place and although Lee had already been released from custody they delivered Lee back to the courthouse. Wesley Lee, unaware of the reason for his father's arrest, fled town Tuesday morning and never saw his father again.<sup>29</sup>

Policeman Thomas Pelton, a white Republican from Maryland, headed towards the courthouse when he heard of the shooting. On his way, he met Democrat Colonel A. G. Horne, editor of the Meridian Mercury. Horne asked if Pelton was armed. Pelton replied that he was and that Horne warned him not to stay away from the courthouse. Pelton waited inside of a shop until he saw Sheriff Mosely ride by on a horse. He was ordered by Mosely to go to the black Methodist church and to freedmen's homes and confiscate firearms. Mosely stated that if he could disarm the freedmen, peace would return to the town. Before he was able to carry out these instructions he was met by a squad of eight to ten armed white men. They informed Pelton that he should leave town before daybreak the next morning. He talked to Patton, the town marshal, about what had been said to him. Patton advised him to go directly home and make plans to leave town within a few days. Pelton had been a resident of Meridian since 1865. His affiliation with the Republican party and his service on the police force had angered whites. His testimony offers the clues to additional reasons why he was disliked. He stated that he

knew he “ was obnoxious to the community. . . by seeing my name in the Mercury,” and from hearing talk about him around town. Pelton stayed in his house until 11P.M., when a mob of 150 men came looking for him. They were informed that he was not there and as they departed Pelton slipped out the back door of his house and hid two-and-a-half miles south of town. Throughout the night a watchman on the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad updated him on what was happening in Meridian.<sup>30</sup>

With Tyler murdered and Clopton housed in the jail those in the streets began the task of searching for J. Aaron Moore. Inside the courtroom Moore had hidden under the body of Judge Bramlette and waited for the courtroom to clear. While most people searched for Tyler, Moore slipped out of the courtroom and escaped from the building. He went home, probably informed his family of what happened, and then disappeared into the woods. A number of search parties set out looking for him. P. S. Layton was recommended by two men on the Committee of Safety to command one squad of men who would attempt to locate Moore and arrest him. He was reported to be in the vicinity of Golden Grove, about ten or eleven miles from Meridian. Mosely gave Layton a written appointment as special deputy. With the authority to take Moore into custody.<sup>31</sup>

Layton and twelve men on horseback set out to find Moore. His intent was to arrest Moore and bring him into custody that afternoon. At least four additional posses spread out across the county searching for the escaped Moore. Layton believed that Moore was on his way to Jackson. Layton believed it was necessary to take rigorous steps to apprehend him so that he could answer the charges brought against him earlier in the day.

Deputy Sheriff Lorenzo Belk searched for Moore along the railroad tracks. He had received a telegraph from Hickory Station, a stop further down the line, that reported Moore had been seen sighted headed west along the tracks. Moore had attempted to board the morning train but failed. Belk telegraphed railroad officials and received consent for he and thirty men to use a locomotive to search for Moore. Belk had with him the same warrant that was issued for Moore's arrest earlier that day. Belk took the train to Golden Grove, near the western border of Lauderdale County. Since he could not locate Moore he turned around at the county line. A few days later Moore arrived in Jackson.

Back in Meridian, some citizens called for the removal of Mayor Sturgis from office. His political enemies saw an opportunity to run him out of office. Thomas Pelton saw Sheriff Mosely who tried to contain the anger of a mob of 250 men who were chanting Sturgis' name and discussing what should be done to him. Mosely was trying to persuade the mob not to march on Sturgis' home. The crowd rejoiced at the news of Tyler's death. The only freedman that was seen on the streets by late afternoon was Dred Finley. He had come to remove his stepson's body from the scene of his murder. Throughout the day men arrived in Meridian from all parts of Lauderdale County and Alabama. By nightfall, another twenty to twenty-five armed white men arrived in town on the train. They were armed and unruly, witnesses recall that they began shouting as soon as they got off the train.<sup>32</sup>

Mayor Sturgis later recounted that he left the courtroom while the trial was in progress because he sensed that violence was about to occur. This may be an accurate

assessment on his part because he or someone known to him may have provided Tyler with a weapon during one of their conferences outside the courtroom. Upon leaving the courtroom Sturgis went to his brother's house where firearms were stored. He barricaded himself in the garret of the house. In short order he heard gunfire erupt in the courtroom. He remained in hiding to keep watch for the mob that he expected would kill him. Sturgis reported that 500 men, whom he described as "Ku Klux cavalry," passed by his hiding place. He heard one of the leading Democrats, A.G. Horn the editor of the Meridian Mercury, shout "we must get that dammed rascal!" Sturgis remained awaiting the inevitable.<sup>33</sup>

A small search party arrived at Theodore Sturgis' home later that afternoon, looking for Moore. Sturgis allowed two men to search his house and out buildings. They did not find Moore but they did see William Sturgis. Around five or six o'clock that evening, 200 men armed with pistols and shotguns appeared outside Theodore Sturgis' home and asked for the mayor. Theodore went outside and told the crowd that the mayor was not there. The crowd did not believe him and shouted that the house would be set on fire if the mayor did not appear.<sup>34</sup>

Theodore's wife appeared outside and told the crowd that the mayor was indeed in the house and promised he would not try to escape. A committee emerged from the mob, approached the house, and told Theodore that Meridian's citizens wanted the mayor to leave town. The committee said that their next step would be to discuss the situation with Governor Alcorn, in Jackson. William Sturgis agreed to go to Jackson with the committee because he felt he would be in safe hands with one of its members, Waldo

Shearer. Why Sturgis trusted Shearer, a sixty-two-year-old white man, is unknown.

Sturgis may have wanted to go to Jackson because he thought that the governor would be sympathetic towards him and would offer protection. Shearer informed the crowd that the mayor had agreed to accompany the committee to Jackson. The crowd did not accept this solution. They demanded that Sturgis get on the next train, leave the state, and never return to Meridian. William Sturgis was in no position to refuse.<sup>35</sup>

Theodore Sturgis met with Sheriff Mosely, Shearer and others, regarding his brother's safety. Theodore requested that a guard be provided to ensure that William Sturgis made it safely to the train station. The three men agreed to make sure he received protection. At 12:30 A.M. 300 men arrived at Theodore Sturgis' house to take William Sturgis to the train station. Theodore had two friends, W. D. Hurlburt and Willie Snow ride in the train with William Sturgis to ensure he escaped the county unharmed.<sup>36</sup>

Isaac Lee was one of three freedmen arrested Monday and held overnight in the jail. Why Lee was being held is unclear. Earlier in the day he had been shot, and taken into custody for carrying firearms, released only to be arrested a second time. Less is known about Henry Johnson and Marion White, the two other freedmen arrested. Republican Joshua Smith described them as being "wholly inoffensive" with no charges pending against them. He said there were "no better men living." They may have been caught with weapons or arrested or because they were prominent leaders of the freedmen and were disliked by white Democrats. They had been left in charge of one of the Sheriff's special deputies thirty-two-year-old Aleck Wilson.<sup>37</sup>

It is unknown for certain who lynched Lee, Johnson, and White. State

representative O. C. French made some of these details known when he was questioned about the investigation conducted by the Mississippi state legislature. French was a member of the house committee and was elected chairman of the joint committee that investigated the riot. French reported that none of the people who were questioned during the investigation were willing to state under oath who was responsible for killing the three men. However, some of those questioned stated off the record that they were confident that they knew who was responsible for the murders. City Marshal Patton also stated off the record that he believed a man named Joe Reynolds was responsible for the break-in at the jail and for murdering the three men. He believed that Reynolds had approached him on the street Tuesday morning and informed him of the murders.<sup>38</sup>

Joe Reynolds was originally from Georgia, but by 1871 declared his residence as Eutaw, Alabama. Reynolds was locally well known for being a troublemaker. One freedman stated that Reynolds was “a mighty man for killing niggers when he got a chance; I have seen him shoot three.” Reynolds was also identified as being one of the parties involved in the torching of J. Aaron Moore’s house and the black Baptist church. Stephen Renfroe, also from Sumter County, Alabama may have been involved with the killings. Secondary sources credit him with organizing envoys to accompany Adam Kennard to Meridian for Daniel Price’s trial dates. Renfroe is also credited with being active in driving Daniel Price and other Republicans out of Sumter County. It is unknown what role Renfroe played in the riot, but he was seen in Meridian. Reynolds and Renfroe had worked together in the past against freedmen and Republicans. Renfroe would later become notorious as a sheriff of Sumter County. Fifteen years following the

Meridian riot he was lynched by the citizens of Livingston.<sup>39</sup>

Monday evening William Clopton, Gus Ford, Marion White, Henry Jonhson, and Isaac Lee were held in the sheriff's office. Sheriff Mosely had just authorized the changing of the two men's guards. Alexander Wilson, an "authorized deputy," was put in charge of the prisoners. Mosely warned him to be vigilant because Clopton was in danger of being killed. It is unknown who else was in the sheriff's office at the time, besides Mosely and Wilson. Mosely stated that sometime that evening Wilson left his post and allowed someone to enter the jail. Wilson's recollection of this event differs some what with Mosely's statements. Wilson testified that L.D. Belk turned over the prisoners to him and instructed him to obtain a sufficient number of men to guard them. Wilson took the prisoners into the Circuit Clerk's office and recruited two or three men off the street to guard them. Wilson stated that these men were strangers to him and he did not know their names. Wilson waited until the sheriff left his office to get supper. Wilson advised the sheriff that he was leaving the volunteers in charge of the prisoners. Mosely did not object to his departure.<sup>40</sup>

Wilson took the train to his home in Toomsaba and did not return. The guards left in charge of the prisoners either left their posts or were over taken by a group of men. The next morning there were signs of a forced entry into the clerk's office. Clopton's throat was cut and his head nearly severed from his body. Mosely testified that he was in his office at the time Clopton was murdered but was unaware of what had occurred. He believed that Wilson was derelict in his duty by leaving Clopton under the supervision of irresponsible men. He also stated that he believed that Wilson was a man of good

character and Mosely did not suspect him of slashing Clopton's throat. Ford, the black police officer, died from his wounds that evening. He was most likely unconscious or dead when Clopton was killed. Mosely's reckless decision to allow Clopton to be guarded by Wilson and for a prisoner to be murdered while in his presence are examples of Mosely's ineffective handling of the riot. For him to have a prisoner murdered while he was in the room and for him not to know who committed the crime indicates incompetence. On the other hand, Mosely may have indeed been aware of who killed Clopton but afraid to reveal the assailant's name.<sup>41</sup>

Early in the evening Aaron Moore's wife Mary, child, and Bell Akin, a teacher who lived with the Moore family, went to the house of their neighbor John Cole. Both Mary Moore and Akin must have expected trouble to follow with nightfall. Akin asked if she could remain at the Cole's home overnight. She brought along a trunk filled with her belongings. Shortly after the Coles had eaten their evening meal Mrs. Moore decided to leave. Cole did not believe that it was necessary for her to leave because he did not fear trouble since he worked all day and had no part in the riot. Mrs. Moore left anyway. Where she spent the next few hours is unknown. She may have spent time removing belongings from her house. Witnesses reported that the blinds, curtains, and rugs had been removed. One person noted that there was a pile of bedding and other items in the street near Moore's house. Moore himself may have suspected someone might harm his property. On February 13, 1871 he took out an insurance policy with the Phoenix Insurance Company of Hartford, against loss or damage as a result of fire to his home. The policy was issued in his wife's name and his home was insured up to \$500. Moore

paid a visit to his insurance agent, E.V. Early's office to pick up the policy on March 6th.<sup>42</sup>

One of Moore's neighbors, Harry Mason, testified that a group of armed white men entered Moore's house at around seven p.m. and smashed the furniture. Approximately one hour later he heard the men return. By 10 p.m., Mason awoke to the sound of flames. He ran outside and saw Moore's house burning. Mason's house was only about fifteen yards away from the fire. He climbed on top of his roof and began dousing his roof with water. Two white men arrived and ordered freedmen to help prevent Mason's house from catching fire. It is unknown who burned Moore's house. It is also unclear who assisted Mason soak his home to keep the fire from spreading.<sup>43</sup> Mason remained on his roof until Moore's home had burned to the ground. Mason remained awake for the rest of the night, watchful that his house did not catch fire.<sup>44</sup>

Mason and his wife, Louise, saw two white men go up to Moore's house. Each man pulled a burning board out of the fire and walked a few hundred yards to a Methodist church. They entered the building from the rear and placed the board against the back wall of the church. Louise Mason stated that the fire erupted suddenly indicating the presence of a combustible liquid. The two men exited the church and waited while the building caught fire. When the church was ablaze they walked west to the top of a hill and whistled. They were then joined by a large crowd 100 men. They stood about 150 yards from the Mason's home. They talked and looked as the church burned. The men left after the burning building collapsed. Mason recognized some of the men as being citizens of Meridian while others he knew were from Alabama. Mason was acquainted

with them because many had sold cotton in Meridian and he had hauled their cotton from the scales at the railroad depot. Mason was unable to give any of their names.<sup>45</sup>

The men who burned the black Baptist church were most likely strangers in Meridian. They mistook the Baptist church to be the one where Moore preached, where the Union League met, and where whites assumed firearms were stockpiled. However, Moore preached at the Methodist church about a block way from the Baptist church. The arsonists may have assumed that church closest to his home was the one where he preached. Whites wanted to silence Moore's voice in the community by burning the church where they thought he preached. One white pointed out that everyone who lived in Meridian knew the Baptist church from the Methodist, indicating the arsonists were indeed outsiders. According to numerous secondary sources white citizens realized the mistake, and took up a collection to fund the rebuilding of the church. No primary sources mention this "legendary" act of benevolence.<sup>46</sup>

No one was ever brought to justice for the burning of Moore's house or the Baptist church. One man was arrested, Joe Reynolds who has been mentioned earlier, and charged with the crime. Reynolds was a "bird of passage" and part-time resident of Eutaw and Livingston, Alabama. The charges against him were dropped and he was released shortly after his arrest. The only evidence against him was that on the night of the fire he had visited a drugstore and attempted to purchase coal oil. In the eyes of the local authorities this act alone was not enough to connect Reynolds to these fires. One may wish to inquire why an Alabamian with Reynolds' reputation would want to purchase flammable liquids on the night of the riot? What plans may he have had for the

coal oil? Was he planning to take coal oil back to Euwtaw on the train later that night or did he have a more immediate use in mind?<sup>47</sup>

1. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 47.
2. Jackson Weekly Clarion, Jackson Mississippi, Thursday March 16, 1871, Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 50.
3. Jackson Weekly Clarion, Jackson Mississippi, Thursday March 16, 1871.
4. Jackson Weekly Clarion, Jackson Mississippi, Thursday March 16, 1871.
5. Jackson Weekly Clarion, Jackson Mississippi, Thursday March 16, 1871, Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 48, 50, 68.
6. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 48- 49, 134.
7. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 34, 50-51, 135-136, 162h.
8. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 135-136.
9. Jackson Weekly Clarion, Jackson Mississippi, Thursday March 16, 1871 Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 51, 71, 135, 160.
10. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 45, 71, 113.
11. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 45, 71, 161, 163 173 176.
12. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 71, 48, 149, 161, 163 174-175.
13. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 51 137.
14. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 156.
15. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 70-71.
16. Jackson Weekly Clarion Jackson Mississippi, Thursday march 16, 1871, Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 36-37.
17. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 99, 115, 127, 131.
18. Two men by that surname Mason appear in the testimony. One, Harry, testified before Judge Leachman during his examination of the State vs. James A. Brantley and others. Another, Henry, testified before the Mississippi state legislature's investigation. It seems apparent that these are the same men, both of their testimonies have many similarities, including that both were next door neighbors to J. Aaron Moore, both appear to be draymen, and both seem to have the same experience during the fires on the night of March 6, 1871. Henry Mason's wife Louise refers to her husband Henry as Harry in her testimony on page 145 and 146. Finally, there is only one Mason who has the

first initial listed as H in the 1870 census of Lauderdale County, Mississippi.

19. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 28, 36, 40, 51, 142.
20. There were two men by the name of Brantley involved. This is George W. Brantley James A. Brantley testified against Warren Tyler.
21. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 40-41, 128, 129.
22. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 40-41.
23. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 48, 134.
24. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 36-37, 162, 177.
25. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 37, 53.
26. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 37, 177.
27. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 127, 130-131.
28. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 127, 130-131.
29. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 49, 147.
30. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 27, 29.
31. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 42, 51.
32. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 150.
33. New York Tribune, March 16, 1871
34. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 39-41, New York Tribune, Thursday, March 16, 1871
35. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 39-41, New York Tribune, Thursday, March 16, 1871, Nettie Henry, An Autobiography Compiled by Marjorie Wood's Austin, Federal Writer's Project, Meridian Mississippi Public Library Vertical File.
36. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 40, New York Tribune Thursday, March 16, 1871.
37. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 72.
38. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 7, 179.
39. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 7, Rodgers and Pruiit 36-37.

40. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 151.
41. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 27.
42. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 143, 145, 150, 160, 164.
43. Mason does not identify who the two white men who arrived at the fire. His testimony seems to indicated that the white men ordered freedmen to save Mason's house. He said the white men merely watched and did not help contain the fire.
44. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 28, 141-142.
45. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 141-142, 145-146.
46. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 179., W.H. Hardy, Recollections of Reconstruction In East and Southeast Mississippi, (Oxford, Mississippi: Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society Vol. VII) 1903, 206.
47. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 179.

## Chapter 4

### Three Dead in the Pine Straw

By 4 am on March 7, 1871 the streets were quiet. The fires that leveled J. Aaron Moore's home and a nearby freedmen's Baptist church had been extinguished. Many of the those who participated in the riot had left town on the train. City Marshall William Patton patrolled the quiet predawn streets on horseback. Suddenly a stranger stepped out of the shadows and called out to him. He said:

“You don't know me, but I know you. I am from Georgia, but am now living in Alabama. I will leave here on the train in about half an hour. If you will go across the railroad, back of a little store-house in a pine thicket, you will find three dead negroes.”<sup>1</sup>

The thicket was located about a quarter mile away from the courthouse at the foot of Lee Avenue. As Patton strolled into the thicket he encountered the bodies of Isaac Lee, Henry Johnson, and Marion White. All three had been shot and were lying face down. Patton called an inquest to determine their cause of death. Sixty jurors were present along with numerous observers, including the wives of the deceased. The jury concluded that Isaac Lee and Henry Johnson died of gunshot wounds to the head. Marion White died of chest wounds caused by buckshot. The bodies had not been mutilated. The jury was unable to conclude who had murdered the three men. On Monday night Sheriff Mosely had appointed twenty men to remain in his office overnight to guard the

prisoners. Sometime during the night the guards went home leaving the three prisoners unprotected. When Mosely returned to his office on Tuesday morning he found that the doors to the courtroom and the sheriff's office had been forced open and the jail empty. Mosely would not see his prisoners again until the inquest.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the riot Democrats held a public meeting on Tuesday. Those in attendance passed resolutions proclaiming their desire for order and their willingness to assist officers of the law in preventing further violence. They appointed three committees. A second committee of safety was assembled. If called upon they would be prepared to assist law enforcement officials in preserving the peace. Newspaper accounts of the meeting do not mention who headed this committee. The committee assured sheriff Mosely that a posse would be ready to assist him at all times.<sup>3</sup> A second committee was formed to advise Governor James Lusk Alcorn of the "grievances of the citizens and, the causes thereof." The Livingston Journal did not give details of this committee's activities, but one can only assume that they would call upon the governor to discuss the riot. They also made recommendations for appointments of a new mayor and candidates for the replacement of other public officials. A third committee was appointed to discover the causes of the Saturday night fire.<sup>4</sup>

The Livingston Journal listed the names of the men who composed the investigative committee. The first member listed was Eugene V. Early, was an insurance agent for the Phoenix Insurance Company. Other members included Robert F. Houston, Horace Wheeler S.A.D. Steele, and Isaac B. Payne. None of these individuals had participated in the riot. According to the 1870 census each of these men were white

native-born southerners.<sup>5</sup>

After examining the events of the Saturday night fire and talking to witnesses the committee concluded that the fire started on the second floor of Theodore Sturgis' warehouse. It began about twenty feet from the front of the building near the partition between Sturgis' and Hurlbutt's stores. Three employees had closed the back door to the store about fifteen to twenty minutes before the fire was discovered burning through the roof. When the fire was discovered one or more persons were in Sturgis' store. They concluded that the cause of the fire was pre-arranged arson. However, they were not able to find enough evidence to identify the culprit who set the fire. They did state that there had been "much disorderly, riotous and incendiary conduct" on the part of the freedmen. Clopton was named as being one of the primary persons guilty of disorderly conduct.<sup>6</sup> The committee seemed unable or unwilling to accuse any specific individual with starting the fire.<sup>7</sup>

Safety Committee chairman M. H. Whitaker telegraphed Governor Alcorn's office on March 9. He informed the governor "as chairman of a citizen's safety committee you are respectfully requested to authorize Capt. J.W. Smith by telegraph to take charge of city govt at once today it is considered a necessary step". On the same day judge Robert Leachman, J. P. Walker, and Sheriff Robert Mosely sent another telegram regarding John Smith's appointment. It read: "May J.W. Smith mayor qualify & proceed at once to discharge his duties it is important answer". The safety committee had worked quickly to choose a new mayor. A state official wrote on the second telegram: "I sent Smith's commission by todays (illegible)". Alcorn approved the selection of Smith and

had responded in the affirmative. The Livingston Journal stated that Smith, a moderate Republican, was acceptable because his past reputation revealed that he would “discharge his duties with impartiality and fearlessly.” A new board of Aldermen was selected and changes were made to the city’s police force. The Livingston Journal quoted the Meridian Mercury saying that city government had begun to function and that life was returning to normal. According to the Mercury, Meridian was returning to a sense of security. The gunfire that was a nightly occurrence in the freedmen’s section of town had stopped and “the law is building up a wall of protection around us.”<sup>8</sup>

Mayor John W. Smith’s tenure in office was short. He resigned and Grafton Baker replaced him. Baker resigned in October 1871 and was replaced by B.T. Rush. Rush resigned and was replaced by Republican J.W. McMullan who was commissioned in December. McMullan had served as Deputy Chancery Clerk during 1871 and he had listened in on the freedmen’s meeting the night of the fire that destroyed Sturgis’ store. Theodore Sturgis, the former mayor’s brother, was removed from his position as a member of the Board of Supervisors and Meridian Board of Alderman. Sturgis was removed from office on March 7, the day after the riot. Two other members of the board of supervisors, at least one of these men may have been freedmen, were removed immediately following the riot.<sup>9</sup>

It is difficult to estimate how long the violence lasted after the riot and fires that occurred on Monday, March 6. There is some indication that the unrest lasted a few days. It is also hard to pin down an exact number of those murdered. Some primary and secondary sources place the death toll between twenty-five and thirty. Other reports

highly exaggerate the number killed, some newspapers erroneously reported 100 and even up to 500 fatalities. Reliable primary sources present hard evidence of only seven men confirmed dead: Warren Tyler, William Clopton, Gus Ford, Elkner Bramlette, Isaac Lee, Henry Johnson and Marion White. There is some indication that the violence was spread over a few days. An example of this extended violence was the rape of Ellen Parton.<sup>10</sup>

Following the riot, groups of men continued to search for freedmen who were active in the Republican party or were law enforcement officials. Ellen Parton, a thirty-four year-old mullato, boarded in the home of a black policeman Marshal Ware. She reported that armed men had come into Ware's home on three different nights, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. On Monday night a party of men arrived looking for Ware. The next night, Tuesday, a group of men reappeared and asked that Parton turn over any firearms in the house. She said that they had none and the men took her word for it. On the first two occasions Ware was not at home. On Wednesday night Ware had hidden himself in a pantry when eight men appeared.<sup>11</sup>

The men used hammers to tear open trunks and wardrobes while searching for Ware. One of the men split open the pantry where he was hiding but did not see him. Ware had covered himself with bedding. Upon finding his hat, one of them asked Parton "here is Marshal's hat, where is Marshal?" Parton replied that she did know where he was. This infuriated the men and they continued to search the home. One of the men, who was referred to as Captain Jinks grabbed hold of Parton. Parton knew one of the men in the room, Mike Slamon, an Irishman who lived nearby. She grew frightened and called out to Slamon, to protect her, saying he had known her a long time. Slamon pulled

an oil cloth across his face and tried to conceal himself and Jinks ordered Parton to stop calling out Slamon's name.<sup>12</sup> Jinks pulled a pistol, trained it on Parton and told her to "do just what he said." Parton tried to resist, but was dragged into the dining room and raped. Afterwards, Jinks went throughout the house again looking for Ware saying that he was "after the Union Leagues."<sup>13</sup>

Who was responsible for the Saturday night fire? Most accounts purport that the fire was the work of a black arsonist, but there is little evidence that supports this assertion. Freedmen were blamed because they were easy scapegoats. Clearly, the fire was a result of arson. The fact that coal oil had seeped through a wall shared with the store and the house soaking a rug was evidence of arson. Furthermore, Theodore Sturgis testified that the only flammable items he kept in the store were matches, and he had no stock of coal oil. Democratic newspapers wrote the majority of the surviving accounts of the fire and therefore, it would be logical for them to assume that freedmen were responsible. However, when one looks at motives, it is difficult to see why freedmen would want to burn Sturgis' store. The mayor did not own the store he merely lived there and was employed as a clerk. Burning the store would really only punish the owner Theodore Sturgis. He had been a citizen of Meridian since 1862 and was well respected by the white community. He did not always support his brother's activities. Attacking Theodore's place of business was an indirect and ineffective attempt to punish the Mayor.

On the other hand, there is the image of an intoxicated Clopton declaring that it was a white man's fire and urging blacks to let the town burn. Why would Clopton want to see the mayor's financial interests destroyed? In fact, he did not since his first reaction

to the fire was to help remove stock from the store. Partly due to his efforts \$4,000 worth of merchandise was saved from the fire. After he had done what he could to remove the merchandise his second reaction was to urge the freedmen to let the town burn. This does not make sense when one considers that earlier that day he had publicly supported the mayor and had served on the committee that requested the governor to retain Sturgis as mayor. Clopton may have thought that he could blame whites for the fire and gain more power. There is no clear evidence that William Clopton, a militia leader, outspoken advocate of the freedmen and ally of the mayor, was responsible for setting the fire.

Circumstantial evidence points to the strong possibility that Mayor William Sturgis played a role in the fire that destroyed his brother's store and one block of Meridian's business district. William Sturgis is a prime suspect. Judging from Sturgis' lack of concern or surprise he may have been responsible for planning the fire. Once the fire started eyewitnesses noticed he behaved in a peculiar way. He exhibited very little concern when people pointed out that the store was on fire. Theodore stated that the account books from the store had been saved, but he did not state who saved them. One eyewitness stated that he saw William Sturgis and other men quickly walking away from the fire carrying account books and tin boxes. They did not look back at the fire. Shortly afterwards, another man saw Sturgis and policeman Marshall Weir slowly walking towards the burning building. They did not appear concerned about the fire. In fact it was noted that they appeared to be calmly discussing other matters. Sturgis' lack of concern is highly suspicious.<sup>14</sup>

As people began to gather at the fire, they found the front door of Theodore

Sturgis & Co. wide open and two unidentified men inside the store. They ordered those who had come to assist in putting out the fire to leave. The front door was found to be locked. As the fire began to spread some citizens broke down the front door. Thomas Pelton, a white policeman, was one of the people who rushed out of the store shortly after the door was broken down. It is highly suspicious that people would be found inside a burning building, lock the front door, only to flee the scene after the door was battered down. Thomas Pelton is a prime suspect in starting the fire. In his testimony Pelton, stated that he was disliked by Democrats in Meridian. He fled Meridian shortly after the riot. His alibi on the night of the fire was that he had gone home for supper and then went directly to a bar. He was in the bar about seven minutes before the alarm for the fire. He claimed to know nothing about it. His testimony did not address the accusations that he had been seen running from Theodore Sturgis & Co. after the fire had been set. It is highly possible that William Sturgis and his allies hoped to blame Democrats for the fire and use the event to oust political rivals.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most controversial topics of debate about the riot remains: who was responsible for firing the shot that killed Judge Bramlette while Clopton, Moore, and Tyler's trial was in progress. Some primary sources and most secondary sources state that Warren Tyler fired the first shot and accidentally killed Bramlette. Eyewitness after eyewitness testified that whoever fired the first shot was the person who killed Justice Bramlette. While most people who testified seemed to believe that Bramlette was shot by accident, much of the testimony disagrees on who fired the first shot. Some witnesses recalled that Warren Tyler was responsible. Five eyewitnesses said that he stepped

between a doorway, drew a pistol, and fired it in the general direction of Justice Bramlette and the prosecution's witness, James Brantley. However, other eyewitnesses did not see Tyler holding a gun and saw only a small notebook and pencil in his hand.

Indeed, Tyler did have such a note book Mayor Sturgis and Tyler passed a small notebook between them while the trial was in progress. J. Aaron Moore, one of the people nearest to Tyler at the time of the first shot, testified that Tyler was unarmed and the shot that killed Bramlette was fired from the back of the courtroom. Witnesses' recollections of which direction the first shot came from varies. Their recollection of the sound made by the gunshot was affected by their location in the courtroom. There is sufficient eyewitness testimony to cast doubt on the longstanding tradition that Warren Tyler fired the shot that killed Bramlette. Five witnesses, mostly freedmen, stated that Tyler was unarmed and that the shot fired came from the gallery, not from Tyler. Tyler was latter found to be armed, but his pistol had misfired, none of the balls in the chamber had left the barrel. There was enough conflicting evidence presented by witnesses that none of the investigations held about the riot could state who fired the shot that killed Justice Bramlette. It may never be possible to know for sure who killed him but enough eyewitness testimony exists to allow the possibility that an observer fired the shot that started the Meridian Race Riot.<sup>16</sup>

The Meridian Race riot was investigated by three governmental bodies. The local investigation was held Judge Robert Leachman and ended on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1871. Leachman took testimony from over ninety individuals during the investigation of the charges against James A. Brantley and others. Both men and women, freedmen and

whites, Republicans and Democrats were all questioned. After hearing the testimony Leachman issued the following order:

I, Robert Leachman, judge of the sixth judicial district of the State of Mississippi, and acting as committing magistrate in the above-stated case, after hearing the testimony, do hereby order that G.W. Brantley, Hugh Wilson, and Robert E. Coleman be held to answer before the grand jury at the next term of the circuit court, on the 3d Monday in April, 1871, to answer the State of Mississippi on a charge of unlawful assembly, or any charge the grand jury may see fit to prefer against them, in a bond of two hundred dollars each, with good and sufficient security. That J.F. Sanford and Isaac Adams be likewise held in the sum of five hundred dollars each, to answer a charge of assault with intent to kill, or any charge the grand jury may see fit to prefer against them: and that A.G. Horne be likewise held in the sum of one hundred dollars, to answer a charge of assault, or any other charge that grand jury may see fit to prefer against him.

It is necessary to restate a few details about each of the men mentioned in this order. All were white and all were members of the Democratic party. George W.

Brantley was a twenty-eight year-old horse trader by occupation. He was described as a

man of leisure who spent time playing billiards and drinking whiskey. He was part of the group of men that found Tyler in hiding and murdered him. Brantley kept the pistol that was found on Tyler's body. Hugh Wilson was a twenty-eight year-old brick manufacturer. He was described as being clever and a dangerous man when provoked. He was identified by Peggy Johnson as being the man who shot Tyler after he jumped off the courthouse balcony. Robert Coleman was a fifty-three year-old planter. He was also a member of the group of men who murdered Tyler. J. F. Sanford was an unemployed Kentuckian. It is unclear what his role in the riot was and he was not mentioned in either the testimony or newspaper reports. Isaac Adams, a carpenter and police officer, bragged that he helped find Tyler and fired at least twenty-six buck shot into Tyler's body. A.G.Horne was the fifty-three year-old publisher of the Meridian Mercury and one of the city's most influential Democrats. The grand jury met, but did not see fit to bring any of these individuals to trial, thus ending the local investigation.<sup>17</sup>

A joint select committee of the Mississippi state legislature also held an inquiry into the riot. O. C. French, a Mississippi state house member from Natchez was selected to chair the committee. This committee took additional testimony. They also examined the testimony taken by Judge Leachman's investigation. The state investigation gathered additional information regarding the circumstances that led up to the riot. The state legislature had little power to do anything but gather information and to publish their findings.<sup>18</sup>

The 1872 Congressional investigation into the "Affairs of the Late Insurrectionary States" was the single largest investigation mounted by Congress until that time.

Testimony was taken in Washington D.C. and in cities where the Ku Klux Klan had been active. Republicans used the investigation in part to justify the Ku Klux Acts by making Klan “outrages” part of the written record. Democrats attempted to use the investigation to trivialize Klan violence and expose corruption and malfeasance among Republican led governments. Sub Committees traveled to North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. Their hearings produced twelve volumes of testimony, with each volume containing over 500 pages. Besides chronicling nearly every aspect of life in the South. It provided Klan “outrage” stories for the 1872 election. Both Republicans and Democrats used these stories to their respective advantage. The investigation failed to produce a major change for freedmen. By the time the results were published the Klan was dying out and the Republican party was losing their foothold in the South.<sup>19</sup>

The Meridian Race Riot was a defining moment in Reconstruction era Mississippi. It showed, on the local level, what would eventually happen statewide as Mississippi was “redeemed” from Republican control. March 6, 1871 could well have been a defining moment in the lives of those involved in the riot. Confederate veteran, Republican political appointee, and freedman’s school teacher, Daniel Price fled Meridian under the advice of Meridian’s leading Democrats and Republicans. He never returned to Meridian. He reappeared in western Arkansas in the 1880 census, but then disappeared from the public record. Preacher, blacksmith, and State Representative J. Aaron Moore successfully eluded the mob. He escaped to Jackson, where he served out his term in the state legislature. His family joined him in Jackson where he opened a blacksmith shop. Mayor William Sturgis was escorted out of Mississippi the day of the

riot. He returned to his native Connecticut where he became a local superintendent of schools. Mayor Sturgis' brother Theodore was removed from the Board of Supervisors the day of the riot. He continued to make his home in Meridian where he had resided since 1862. Sheriff Robert J. Mosely remained in office. Although he was ineffective during the Meridian Riot, the citizens of Meridian wanted to retain him as sheriff. A petition was circulated on March 30, 1871 and sent to Governor Alcorn requesting that he remain sheriff. Mosely died in office seven years later. While others fled the city during the yellow fever epidemic of 1878 Mosely remained to keep order. He died within a week of coming down with the disease.<sup>20</sup>

The Meridian Race Riot captured the attention of state and national newspapers. The violence that took place in Meridian helped push the Grant administration one step closer to passing the Ku Klux Acts. Three enforcement acts had been passed by Congress in 1870 and 1871. The Ku Klux Act of April 1871 named crimes that could be prosecuted under federal law if state and local authorities failed to prosecute the perpetrators. These crimes included conspiracies to deprive citizens of the right of equal protection under the law, the right to vote, hold political office, and sit on juries. These were the crimes that were typically committed by the Ku Klux Klan and white conservatives. The Ku Klux Act allowed the president to suspend the writ of habeas corpus and use the army to suppress individuals or groups that were using violence to infringe on civil rights. Conservatives called these acts unconstitutional since they were aimed at individuals rather than states.

George Rable pointed out these acts "ran head-on into a long tradition of southern

lawlessness.” Rable argues that southerners may have believed that laws preserved society from outbreaks of violence, but in practice they did not have confidence in the due process of law. Many believed that defects in the system and corruption permitted many criminals to escape justice. These imperfections in the system allowed justice to be skirted, thus partly explaining Southerners’ tendency to resort to extra legal action so that in their eyes, accused perpetrators received justice. Southerners did not always respect their own laws and they were very hostile towards federal laws brought to bear by a Radical congress. In reality, the Ku Klux acts provided Republicans with some security for a short time. However, many of those who committed violence against Republicans fled the law, intimidated marshals, and assassinated witnesses. There was never enough funding to carry out extensive investigations into crimes or to fund lengthy trials. Federal enforcement was limited. Many prosecutors went after the leaders of groups involved in violence, but due to limited resources those who were involved to a lesser degrees were released on bail and not prosecuted. Dwindling resources, ebbing interest in the North, and the removal of the army to the West brought an end to Federal enforcement. White conservatives eventually regained control of state and local Governments in the South.<sup>21</sup>

Between 1870 and 1890 Lauderdale County’s total population expanded from 13,462 in 1870 to 29,661 in 1890, led by Meridian where the population nearly quadrupled. The growth in these numbers is largely due to the growth of both the black population and the native white population, which by 1890 had reached equal numbers. It soon became one of the most populous counties in the state. Three major industries contributed to this growth-the railroads, timber, and cotton. Meridian grew to be one of

the South's most important rail centers. Timber became an important industry as lumber companies began to exploit the resources of the piney woods. Small sawmills also became prominent as the railroads provided convenient shipment and farmers began to cut trees after they had put their crops in the fields. Cotton remained an important agricultural product. Meridian's merchants founded a Cotton Exchange and Board of Trade. With twenty-five firms actively buying, selling, and shipping cotton, other cotton related industries sprang up. By 1888 fifty businesses were engaged in the storage of cotton. Many were employed in the cotton industry as packers, compressors, and dealers. Cotton mills opened in Meridian to consume the surplus cotton that was not shipped to markets in the East.

During these times of growth Lauderdale County faced its share of setbacks. In 1878 Lauderdale experienced a yellow fever epidemic that sickened 388 and killed 88. Meridian's downtown suffered major fires in 1873, 1875, and 1882. In 1881 a riot broke out over voting rights. This event ended Lauderdale County's last Reconstruction era's struggle over voting rights and was one of the last riots of the era in Mississippi. It is notable because of its rare outcome, more whites were killed than freedmen. This riot settled Lauderdale County's political struggles. Through this victory the Democrats gained practically unopposed power. The Marion riot closed the era of Republican rule.<sup>22</sup>

The Meridian Race Riot was an early example of how white Democrats were able to regain control of local government from the Republican Party in Mississippi. Through the deaths of seven men and the injuries and rapes of other individuals, Meridian's Democratic party successfully broke the back of the local Republican party. Republican

leaders had either been driven out of town or killed during the “bloodiest day Meridian ever saw.”

1. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 128.
2. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 131, 138.
3. Livingston Journal, March 10, 1871.
4. Livingston Journal, March 10, 1871.
5. Livingston Journal, March 10, 1871.
6. The committee also named Dick Smith who, according to his testimony before the legislature was employed as a clerk in Theodore Sturgis' store. Smith testified that he had locked up the store around dark and headed home. He returned during the fire and had heard Clopton shouting behind the store after he had begun to remove some of Sturgis' inventory. Smith asked Clopton to leave, saying "that we did not want his noise there." Why Smith is mentioned by the committee as being unruly is unknown. Perhaps some individuals witnessed him arguing with Clopton and assumed he was party to the disturbance.
7. Livingston Journal, March 10, 1871, Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 138.
8. RG27 Governor's telegrams 1870, 1871, undated, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Livingston Journal March 17, 1871.
9. Fairley and Dawson, 177-178.
10. W.H. Hardy, Recollections of Reconstruction In East and Southeast Mississippi, (Oxford, Mississippi: Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society Vol. VII) 1903, 206.
11. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 38.
12. Ku Klux Reports Mississippi, 38
13. George C. Rable, But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984) 108.
14. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 140, 154, 155, 159, 160.
15. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 153, 157.
16. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 46, 48, 51, 52, 98, 126,132,133, 136, 149, 151, 155, 157, 158, 162.

17. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 73, 80-83.
18. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, 6-8.
19. Trealease 392-398.
20. Ku Klux Klan Report, Mississippi, RG27 Governor's Correspondence and Petitions 1870, 1871, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Clarke, 230.
21. Clarke, 230, 252.
22. Fairly and Dawson 70, 71, 81, 82, 88, 90, Clarke 252.

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