'Stubborn and Disposed to Stand Their Ground': Sugar Workers and the Dynamics of Collective Action in the Louisiana Sugar Bowl, 1863-87

Rebecca J. Scott
University of Michigan Law School

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A few hours’ ride on the railroad southwest from New Orleans, or on horseback along the Mississippi River to Donaldsonville and then down Bayou Lafourche, there occurred in 1887 a most remarkable set of events. The formal end of Reconstruction was already a decade in the past, and the electoral disfranchisement of African Americans in Louisiana would be completed over the next 11 years. A white-supremacist Democratic governor was entrenched in the statehouse, and the state militia had become almost a branch of the White Leagues. But somehow into this unpromising environment there erupted a tenacious expression of militancy by thousands of plantation workers, the great majority of whom were either former slaves themselves or the direct descendants of former slaves.

In late October and early November 1887, on the eve of the harvest, black, mulatto, and white sugar workers on estates in St. Mary, Terrebonne, and Lafourche Parishes took the remarkable step of declaring allegiance to the Knights of Labor and insisting on the right to bargain with their employers. After being rebuffed by the planters’ association they downed tools and refused to cut cane until employers would negotiate with them. They sought regular payment of better wages, in cash not scrip, and extra compensation for night work.

Planters brought in strike-breakers from out of state, but the replacement workers were met with hostile crowds at the railway depot and, on occasion, with birdshot as they tried to get the equipment going. Local authorities asked the governor to send in the militia. Those deployed to the estates met defiant strikers: “the negroes hooted and used violent language, the women waving their skirts on poles, and jeering.”

The region remained in turmoil through the month of November, as the militia evicted strikers to enable planters to house the strike-breakers and resume production. For reasons that are still not entirely clear, by 20 November most of the militia withdrew, leaving planters to enforce security on their own. Shortly after the formal withdrawal of the militia, a Peace and Order committee of white citizens tried to hem in strikers evicted from the estates who had taken refuge in the town of Thibodaux. An unexplained shooting triggered an attack by the white vigilante forces on strikers. Going from house to house and street to street, vigilantes killed dozens of strikers and injured perhaps a hundred more. The viciousness of the repression broke what remained of the strike, sowing fear through the region.

There are several ways to fit these events into narratives of southern history in this period. The presence of black and white Knights of Labor organizers encourages one to view the strike as an unusually bold instance of the cautious policy of cross-racial alliance followed by the Knights in this period. The failure of the strike, and the inability of the Knights to protect their members from repression, might be seen to illuminate the limits of that policy.

Alternatively, one can situate this conflict in the story of modernization and consolidation of industry, a Sugar Bowl variant on the Gilded Age pattern of large-scale capital investment and large-scale labor repression. On this view, the breaking of the strike eliminated an obstacle to the hegemony of a particular elite vision of the organization of production and of labor relations.

Finally, one can understand the Thibodaux Massacre alongside the 1873 Colfax Massacre and the 1874 Battle of Canal Street in New Orleans, Louisiana’s macabre and outsized contributions to the violent imposition of white supremacy through a combination of local white mobilization and what Lawrence Powell calls “silk-stocking vigilantism.”

This chapter is somewhat less ambitious. Rather than situate the events of November 1887 in one or another story about where Louisiana was headed, it will ask a different pair of questions: How could a strike of this magnitude ever get off the ground in a setting as hostile to African-American mobilization as the Louisiana sugar parishes in the 1880s; and what might we learn about the politics of freedom by looking at the decades that separated the end of slavery from the events of 1887? These questions are addressed on three levels: the structure of production
on sugar estates; patterns of mobilization for African Americans in these parishes in the 1870s; and the social geography of the bayou country, with its implications for networks of support and points of vulnerability.

**The Structure of Production**

Union occupation of the sugar parishes of Louisiana during the Civil War had triggered the breakdown of slavery but did not immediately replace it with a thoroughgoing system of wage labor. On plantations abandoned by Confederate owners, former slaves sought in some cases to cultivate the land in collective "labor companies," with an emphasis on locally consumable crops. Some planters remained in place and continued cultivation under Union auspices, but they were reluctant to plant new cane, and sugar output fell abruptly due to the disruption occasioned by war and conscription of laborers, as well as the reliance on labor that had been lost. This place is rented for three years to the Freedmen. 1

By the time of the Bureau agent's report for Terrebonne Parish in April of 1868, the new system of free labor was largely in place. Laborers worked for rations, quarters, fuel, and wages, without a government-supervised contract. The average monthly wage on the seven major plantations that the agent inspected was said to be $15 paid at the end of each month, and one half reserved until the end of the year. A portion of land on each estate was given rent-free to the freedpeople, presumably for the cultivation of gardens. Male field hands outnumbered female. Many freed women and children had diminished their regular labor in the cane fields, turning to household tasks and to attendance at the newly established school. 2

Gradually the lines of a new free labor system were emerging in the sugar sector, to become dominant over the next years. Planters were generally "averse to leasing land to the freedmen," as one Freedmen's Bureau agent in Lafourche Parish put it, and their insistence on controlling labor often made for unhappy relationships. Both planters and agents of the Freedmen's Bureau encouraged annual wage labor contracts, but former slaves were quick to see the disadvantages of arrangements that deferred their compensation to a year-end settlement in which they could easily be short-changed. 3

When blocked from establishing themselves as tenants or smallholders, freedpeople used the occasion of the signing of a New Year's contract as a moment of bargaining. One agent near New Orleans reported in January of 1866, "the freedmen are delaying to make a permanent contract in expectation of orders from the Bureau compelling the planters to hire labor and pay for it at the rate of fifty cents per hour, this idea originated probably among freedmen working on the levee in the city who have recently been "striking" for the aforesaid wages." 4 In Terrebonne Parish during the same month the local agent apologized that he could file no monthly report on the number of freedmen on each plantation: having recently received their final pay from the previous year's contract, workers showed a disposition "to look around and see where they can get the best wages before entering into new ones." 5 This kind of negotiation put an upward pressure on wages, which climbed some 40 percent by July. 6

The portrait of the first years after emancipation, then, is one of halting gains for freedmen and continuing frustration for planters, in the realm of production as in the realm of Reconstruction politics. But soon the financial crisis of 1873 brought sharp downward pressure on wages, as prices fell and planters sought to reduce their expenses. The monthly wages offered on sugar plantations fell abruptly from $18 to $13. These wage cuts were met by strikes in Terrebonne Parish, where workers combined demands for higher pay with an appeal for the right to form "sub-associations" and later an association of the Daily Plantation Laborers. On January 16 that "the negroes have been marching around the parish, preventing the field hands from working." 7

The results of the 1873-74 struggles were inconclusive. Laborers could block some concerted efforts to drive down wages, but few planters would reconsider renting their land to former slaves. On those estates where planters, faced with mounting losses, did choose to subdivide the land, white immigrants seem to have had priority. The newly installed tenants on the Rienzi Plantation outside of Thibodaux, in Lafourche Parish, were said to be "Portuguese, English, Spaniards and colored," in that order. 8 Though planters were unable to hold themselves together in stable combinations to reduce wages over more than a narrow area, they could generally keep harvest wages well below 20 dollars a month, with rations. 9

By 1880, certain basic patterns had been set. The majority of labor in the cane would be performed by groups of wage workers of African descent, under direct supervision, largely continuing patterns of gang labor that harked back to slavery. But these patterns also meant that landless workers had potential seasonal income in the fields as well. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of permanent workers were still African Americans born in Louisiana. 10 The overall recovery of production in the sugar sector was painfully slow. Louisiana's 1861 crop had weighed in at 264,000 tons. In 1866 and 1867 the crop barely broke 20,000 tons, less than one tenth of the earlier total. A decade later it had still not reached one half of the 1861 record. Labor was in flux; working capital was not easy to find; Louisiana's location outside the Boulevard area meant that disadvantages of frost and flood were hard to overcome. 11

The presence of demobilized soldiers among the workers on sugar estates was frequently commented on by officials of the Freedmen's Bureau, who made varying estimates of their impact. Some emphasized their orderly and disciplined habits as a good example to other workers, though a Bureau agent in Jefferson and Orleans Parish thought they had "erroneous and incongruous notions of liberty" and were thus a bad influence. 12

Union veterans, along with other supporters of Republican rule in the state, joined various associations designed to mobilize Republican voters and consolidate newly won rights. In rural areas, in particular, considerable mobilization was required,
as African-American mobilization and Republican politics were equally unwelcome to many whites. But radical or Republican clubs were said to be thick on the ground in St. Mary parish, organized on every third or fourth plantation by John J. Moore, a former slave. 28

Initiatives in electoral politics accompanied other forms of popular mobilization. Voters in Terrebonne, Lafourche, and St. Mary Parishes elected numerous African-American officials during Reconstruction, including more than a half-dozen representatives to the state legislature. Although some came from a pre-war group of property-owning free men of color, others were former slaves who lived and worked for wages in the countryside. Among them were John J. Moore and Isaac Sutton, both rural laborers who represented St. Mary Parish. Oscar Crezier, a mulatto sugar planter, served as a member of the police jury (town council) and as president of the school board in Thibodaux. Thomas A. Cage, born a slave in Terrebonne Parish, became sheriff and chair of the Republican state central committee. William Murrell, Sr., a minister and editor, served in the legislature from Lafourche Parish. 23

The possibility of open political organization among African Americans depended, of course, on Republican rule backed up by the presence of Federal troops in the state. As white resistance to radical Reconstruction gained in strength, white supremacist leagues, clubs, and "rifle companies" proliferated, portraying themselves as the legitimate representatives of the people. The Republican leadership scrambled to assemble a countervailing force by building on the Federal authorization for the state militia in 1870 and commissioned brigadier-general in the North, was named adjutant-general of the force by building on the Federal authorization. The legitimacy of the militia was "warriors" able to rally the support of their wives and sisters, whom he described as "colored Amazons." He reported that this company of "Negro Militia armed with state arms" had been drilling every Saturday evening on the commons in the town of Thibodaux. 30

The militia led by Benjamin Lewis seems to have served as a kind of counterpoint force to the civil authorities in matters of day-to-day administration of justice. One white local official, Major I.D. Moore, fumed that "The mere arrest by a civil officer of a drunken negro in the town of Thibodaux is the tocsin from "bulldozers" who might invade the parish. Then came Taylor and Mary Nelson—he a black farm laborer born in Mississippi and she a black woman born in Louisiana, now occupied in "keeping house." Last was Benjamin Lewis himself, age 31, mulatto, a schoolteacher born in the state of Maine. With a little time to envision the links to different segments of the community that each member of this household may have provided. Teneh Goodly would have traveled by boat up and down the bayou in the course of his work. Taylor Nelson may have labored on several nearby plantations and seems later to have become a member of the Republican Party executive committee in Thibodaux. Mary Nelson probably kept in touch with neighbors in the Third Ward and traveled to Thibodaux for events of various kinds. William Kerr, meanwhile, remains a mysterious figure. "Retired U.S. soldier" was not a conventional occupational description; perhaps he was injured in the war and no longer worked. Perhaps, but the evidence is silent on this question, he and Benjamin Lewis had both served in the invading Union forces. 34

Benjamin Lewis taught school a little further...
along the bayou in the Second Ward of Terrebonne Parish. In 1872, he shared responsibility for 116 schoolchildren with Mary Ann Clay and earned about $55 a month. His supervisor in 1875 judged him a "faithful, hard working teacher" and termed his school (the Nichols School) "among the best in the parish." It is not certain whether Captain Benjamin Lewis actively collaborated with the white-revered William Murrell, the young carrier of the Enfield rifle who still held the office of tax collector, intervened with Governor Nicholls and temporarily stalled the disbanding. Those connected with the militia held on to a certain public presence. And so, who had served with Benjamin Lewis, remained on the school board in April 1877, and in May the militia were said to be vocally involved in a court case bearing on the election for police jurors. Angry Democrats recalled that the militia's weapons were never turned in, and they believed that the militia members, with their guns, eventually "scattered over the state." 40

Benjamin Lewis seems to have moved easily from the formal public spaces of town. In July 1887, for example, the Vigilance Fire Company and Pride of Iberia Hook and Ladder Company arrived in Thibodaux from New Iberia with "over five hundred excursionists." The firemen formed in line at the depot, marched through the principal streets and then "repaired to Eureka Hall, where dancing was indulged into a late hour." It was reported that before leaving the firemen "proceeded in a body to serenade the mayor, but the gentleman was either absent or did not want to receive negro serenaders." 39

The white elite did not soon forget what they sometimes termed "Benjamin's militia." An article in the Thibodaux papers in 1887 recalled the way in which the men and women who followed Benjamin Lewis had come to town from out in the country to drive the Democrats from the polling box in 1876. 41 Although in the intervening years African-Americans marched in town as members of fire companies rather than militia, activists continued to move back and forth between the plantations and the parish seat. Though they had to contend with an increasingly conservative leadership in the Republican Party and with the renewed power of the Democrats, it seems likely that they too carried a memory — albeit a different one — of the sight of the "Negro militia" drilling in front of the courthouse. Junius Bailey, for example, was a teenager at the time that the Lewis and Peney militias were active in Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes. Born a slave in Assumption Parish in 1857, he was part of a generation of African-Americans who had come to town from out in the country. 42

Benjamin Lewis's militia was a visible public presence in Lafourche Parish over the next two years. During the local elections of 1876, they intervened at one polling place as rival groups struggled for physical possession of the ballot box. A great deal was at stake in that election, and destroying the "Negro militia" would be a high priority of local Democrats if they won. Indeed, the Democratic leader of Terrebonne Parish seat of Honma just in time to help designate the polling places for the November election. (He who still held the office of tax collector, intervened with Governor Nicholls to the statewide total rather than of district judge. The swamps were a buffer and a resource, a point of intersection between the laboring world of the plantation and the levee to the farthest reach of the plantation, was usually limited by ecological constraints: as the land slopes back from the levee, it eventually becomes too low to be drained and planted in sugar. The layout of the Laurel Valley Plantation in Lafourche Parish provides a good example. Still a working plantation, it has narrow frontage along Bayou Lafourche, and then a deep rectangle of land extending back along a sandy ridge as far as the swamps. 43

Attempts to help shape social life. The levees along the river and the bayou constituted thoroughfares that joined estates to each other and of them to the nearby towns, permitting workers to travel by boat or on foot to and from the plantations. Already in the early fall of 1876, the Louisiana Almanac had called for a sugar strike. 44

The characteristic shape of a Louisiana sugar plantation is significantly different from the sugar estates of Cuba or Brazil. Louisiana's sugar plantations extended like ribbons along the rivers and bayous of the southern part of the state, each stretching back from a specified number of arpents of land along the waterfront. The depth of sugar property, from the levee to the farthest reach of the plantation, was usually limited by ecological constraints: as the land slopes back from the levee, it eventually becomes too low to be drained and planted in sugar. The layout of the Laurel Valley Plantation in Lafourche Parish provides a good example. Still a working plantation, it has narrow frontage along Bayou Lafourche, and then a deep rectangle of land extending back along a sandy ridge as far as the swamps. 43

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At the back of most plantations lay the swamplands. The swamps were a buffer and a resource, a point of intersection between the laboring world of the plantation and the world of moss-gatherers and woodcutters, often Acadian, who had long inhabited the land unsuitable for cane. Within these swamps lay the brûlées, burned-over ridges that were the characteristic refugio of poorer Acadians and Canary
Islanders. Octave Johnson, the cooper from St. James Parish, recalled that during the war he and a group of 30 runaway slaves had survived for months in the swamps four miles to the rear of the plantation house, relying on a fragile set of exchanges with those still enslaved.

The built environment of the plantation itself had a characteristic form. The "quarters" were generally facing rows of cabins, sometimes double cabins with central chimneys, each with a gallery in front. Life on those front porches has been memorably portrayed in the fiction of Ernest Gaines, and is revealed as well in the court records of the Parish of Lafourche. On the galleries took place everything from a dispute between neighbors over the loan of a frying pan to tense discussions about debts and wages paid. However, impoverished, sugar workers' dwellings had little of the isolation of a single sharecropper's or tenant's cabin in the cotton parishes, and the already lively world of the quarters became even busier with the arrival of migrant workers for the harvest.

Beyond the quarters were the canefields themselves, reached on foot or on horseback, at times through a sea of mud. In the 1870s and 1880s one could still, on some estates, find provision grounds and kitchen gardens where the workers grew potatoes, corn, and vegetables. On others, barracks-like dwellings for migrant workers and a company store, surrounded by rows of cabins, sometimes double cabins with central chimneys, each with a gallery in front. Life on those front porches has been memorably portrayed in the fiction of Ernest Gaines, and is revealed as well in the court records of the Parish of Lafourche. In the case of Adam Elles, the charge of trespassing on the Upper Ten Plantation, was charged with trespassing on the plantation of Delphin Binan. In the case of Adam Elles, the charge was more specific: he was said to have prevented one Negro from working on the plantation.

In the adjacent parish of Lafourche, court records show that already on 19 January 1877, black men were apparently trying to halt work on the Mary Plantation. Jordan Brannos, Briscoe Wheeler, John Phillips, William Pearson, Peter Young and James Lagarde were charged with unlawful disturbance and riotous assembly. In that same month, Clay Williams, Adam Elles and Israel Lucast were charged with tresspassing on the Upper Ten Plantation, and Numa Gautreaux was charged with trespassing on the plantation of Delphin Binan. In the case of Adam Elles, the charge was more specific: he was said to have prevented one Negro from working on the plantation.

Testimony in the cases of Peter Young and Amos Johnson casts a bit more light on these events. Mary Plantation covered 1800 acres of land valued at $20,000. The owner, Richard Foret, recalled that on 19 January 1887 he had come up from his estate to the town of Raceland to take "the cars" to Thibodaux to do some business: "On my way I met a crowd of colored men going down the bayou on the levee ... When I got to the depot Mr. Sevin told me the crowd were going down to stop my hands from working ... as a matter of fact my hands stopped working at 12 M [sic] that day." The clerk from Raceland whom Foret sent down to warn the overseer of the impending arrival of "strikers" recalled, "I told the boys on Mary Plantation to keep on working but they said "no"—the men who had been there had said if they didn't stop they would come back and run them out of the field." A resident of Mary Plantation, Lewis Anderson, recalled that the crowd of strikers had specified that they would not work for 60 cents a day and that "the Foret hands agreed at once to stop. They didn't make any threats they didn't have time to make any threats because the others were willing to stop." The testimony of William Jackson in the case of Peter Young conveys something of the atmosphere on the levee at Raceland that morning, as folks milled around and waited to see what would happen: "All I know when the crowd went down Peter Young was on the levee and when they came back Peter Young was there yet. He didn't go down. I stayed around there, on the levee at the store, sometimes at the depot and down at the little boat." One has a sense here of the levee as the site of a tense political promenade with participants, spectators, surrogates, and bystanders involved in it and aware of the question of whether a man or a woman should work in the fields for 60 cents a day. (Indeed, even those 60 cents often came in the form of a credit slip at the company store.) Although individual workers may have had prior contact with Knights of Labor organizers, their strike actions seem to have been formally called by the Knights.

By late October 1887, much of the sense of improvisation was gone. District Assembly 194 of the Knights of Labor met in Morgan City in St. Mary Parish on 19 October to try to set a rate of wages for sugar workers in St. Mary, Terrebonne, Lafourche, Berin, and St. Martin parishes, together accounting for a large percentage of the state's sugar output. The demands were by now familiar: better wages, no payment in scrip, extra pay for night watch. The call from Morgan City was followed in Lafourche by a letter to sugar planters, reiterating the demands, signed by J.H. Bailey, president of the joint local executive board, Knights of Labor, and several others. An experienced schoolteacher, Junius Bailey took a courteous but forceful tone: "should this demand be considered exorbitant by the sugar planters... we ask them to submit such information with reason therei... to this board not later than Saturday, Oct. 29 inst [sic] or appoint a special committee to confer with this board on said date."

Plainters refused to negotiate, one noting smugly that "it is impossible for the negroes to succeed in a strike for the reason that they are dependent on the planters for their living." Work stopped on 1 November, and on 2 November the press in New Orleans estimated the number of strikers at 10,000. Militia were promptly deployed to the region. The Daily Picayune noted uneasily that "the negroes generally are stubborn and disposed to stand their ground."

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of penitents and ragged negroes. All day long a long
strangest of black humanity crept in... bringing all
their earthly possessions, which never amounted
to more than a frontyard full of babies, dogs,
and ragged bedclothing.\textsuperscript{49} Conflict flared on plantations in
Lafourche Parish, and Richard Foret was said to have
been wounded on 4 November by a "Negro striker"
named Moses Pugh. According to press reports, when
a deputy sheriff attempted to arrest Pugh, "about
150 negroes surrounded the murder and defied
authorities."\textsuperscript{50} The deputy sheriff returned with a detail
of militia and completed the arrest. Foret turned out
to be only slightly injured.\textsuperscript{51}

Although the plantations were the scenes
of scattered violence during the strike, it was in
Thibodaux that the danger momentarily took shape.\textsuperscript{52}
In the days of the 1874 drills by Benjamin Lewis's
militia, black men and women had come to Thibodaux
from the surrounding countryside, but this time they
came as evicted strikers. A Gatling gun now stood on
the steps of the courthouse, deployed by the all-white
militia under the command of a brigadier general from
New Orleans. It was never fired, however. Instead,
Brigadier General Pierce declared on November 20
that the militia no longer needed. He withdrew all but one
militia, black men and women had come to Thibodaux
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militia and completed the arrest. Foret turned out
to be only slightly injured.\textsuperscript{51}

That Sunday, 20 November, a meeting of
Thibodaux's "best citizens irrespective of trade"
formed a Peace and Order committee and, with the
assistance of local townspeople and perhaps the
Shreveport militia, established pickets around the
town of Thibodaux to prevent the entry or departure
of any black men or women. Mary Pugh, the widow of
an wealthy Democratic planter, later recounted events
from her vantage point in town. Her sons, back at
home, had been devoting themselves to pouring lead
into moulds to make bullets. Early Wednesday morning
someone fired at one of the pickets, she reported, and
"the ball began." The scene was stark: "they began
then hunting up the [strike] leaders and every one
that was found or any suspicious character was shot.
Before Allen got back the rifles on St. Charles Street
sounded like a battle."\textsuperscript{53} She witnessed the capture of
one hidden striker: "they brought them by our side
gate. I thought [they] were going to hang them to jail instead
they walked with one over to the lumber yard where
they told him to 'run for his life' [and] gave the order
to fire. All raised their rifles and shot him dead. This
was the worst sight I saw but I tell you we have had a
horrible three days [and] Wednesday excelled any
thing I ever saw even during the war."\textsuperscript{54}

Shooting seemed to have gone on for hours. There
is no way to estimate accurately the number of deads.
Officially, eight or nine people were killed. Mary
Pugh herself dismissed the newspaper reports and
guessed that fifty black people had died. Many more
may have been injured.\textsuperscript{55} Covington Hall, whose
uncle lived nearby, recalled that "Newly made graves
were reported found in the woods around Thibodaux
weeks afterward," and the body of a dead man
appeared in the yard of his uncle's place two miles
south of Thibodaux.\textsuperscript{56} The strike ended; many Knights
of Labor organizers fled the region; and the harvest
brought in. Mary Pugh reflected on the events she
saw, and framed them not in terms of wages or labor,
or in a language of race and class domination:
"I am sick with the horror of it. But I know
it had to be else we would all have been murdered
before a great while. I think this will settle the
trouble is ended. The [Negroes] are as humble as
I have ever seen even during the war."\textsuperscript{57}

In retrospect, the risks taken by the strikers seem
immense, and the weight of the repression that fell
upon them seems foreseeable. At the time, however,
the prior experiences of public mobilization of black
men and women in conjunction with Lewis's and
Pemey's militia were still relatively near at hand. The
power of collective work stoppages in an industry
entirely dependent on wage labor had been tested in
wildcat strikes and might have been expected to
exact concessions from the planters and the eve of
the harvest, as deadly frosts approached. It was just
barely possible to imagine collective action that
would challenge both the hegemony of planters and the
suffocating consequences of the White Line strategy
of intimidation in electoral politics.\textsuperscript{58}

The elite of Lafourche Parish were taken aback by
the militancy and the inability of the militia to bring it to an end. The
Thibodaux Sentinel had in the past amused its readers with stories
of streetcorner quarrels in which "the colored people took to flight at the sight of a drawn pistol."\textsuperscript{59} Now the
newspaper had to acknowledge a situation in which
intimidation seemed to be working. William
Marrell, Sr., an Afro-American legislator from the
more northerly cotton parish of Madison, had some
years earlier recounted to a Congressional Committee
the antecedents of the arrival in his parish of vigilante
groups of white "bullfighters": Whenever these men
got ready to come you can always tell—they put out word we call a 'gong' to talk this way; they say 'The negroes are going to
burn the white folks' gin-houses; a massacre will
come; the negroes are getting ready to burn our
gin-houses.' And wherever you hear that kind of talk, our
people understand and know very well that they are
ready to fire the town."\textsuperscript{60}
workers and labor organizers an attitude of "humility," by which they hoped to stop further mobilization, while creating the illusion that former slaves and their descendants were willing to accept a definition of freedom that declared them subordinate wage laborers, not citizens entitled to engage in collective action. But this exceptional violence was so stark, and contained so much of what Mary Pugh herself called "terror" that it could in the end be spoken of only in private.

Just a few days after the killings, a letter to the French-language pages of the Thibodaux Sentinel reflected on the events and remarked that "mieux vaut pour tous déchirer cette page de notre histoire que de chercher à l'échapper." ("Better for all concerned that this page be torn out of our history rather than try to explain it.") White citizens in Louisiana nearly succeeded in silencing the events that could easily have been called the "Thibodaux Massacre." Evidence that would permit an accurate reconstruction of the circumstances of the killings does seem now to be beyond reach. But the events that preceded this may be that page torn out of our history rather than try to explain it."

The predominance of black and mulatto workers among plantation laborers in Terrebonne Parish can be seen in the manuscript schedule of the 1870 census.


END NOTES


5. Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest, Ch. 8. The Louisiana experience can also be examined in the context of other post-emancipation societies. For some thoughts in this direction, see Frederick Cooper, Thomas Rutt and Rebekah Scott, Beyond Slavery: Explorations on Race, Labor and Citizenship (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).


7. See George S. Dennis in H.P. Chase, 23 Oct. 1863, 5. Hair, (French section), 31 May 1873.

8. euisation on the Rampage!!!," Weekly Thibodaux Sentinel, 14 February 1874.


24. On black militia in Louisiana, which dated back to 1870, see Otis Singletary, Negro Militia and Reconstruction (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1957), pp.13-46. Singletary is mistaken when he identifies militia activity in Louisiana was confined to New Orleans "and never spread to the provinces." (p.80).


27. See James Longstreet and his Place in Southern History (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.151-72; Dawson, army Generals, Ch.7; and Joe Gray Taylor, Louisiana Reconstructed, 1865-1877 (Boston: Roxton, Louisiana University Press, 1976).


32. Ibid.
33. Singletary, Negro Militias, p.15.
36. William Marrrell was President of the School Board in Thibodaux, commissioned in April 1873, and Nelson Taylor was a member of the Board. See Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education, William G. Brown, to the General Assembly of Louisiana for the Year 1873 (New Orleans, The Republican, 1874).
37. See the W.P.A. transcriptions of the Policy Jury Minutes for Terrebonne Parish, 1868-1882 and 1882-1894, Box 183, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge (hereafter LLMV). On the role of Keys and Kennedy in the sugar strike, see Daily Picayune (New Orleans), 16 January 1874 and 20 January 1874.
40. Letten, Mary W. Pugh to Edward P. Fugh, Nov. 25, Folder 1, Mary W. Pugh Papers, LLMV.
41. Ibid.
42. For a vivid day-by-day description of events, see Gould, “The Strike of 1881.”
44. Letten, Mary W. Pugh to Edward P. Fugh, Nov. 25, Folder 1, Mary W. Pugh Papers, LLMV.
45. See Weekly Thibodaux Sentinel, 11 November 1887, and Report of the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections in the Case of Moore vs. Cage to the Senate, State of Louisiana, Session 1878 (New Orleans: The Democrat, 1878), pp. 34, 39. One cannot, of course, be certain of the details of this account, since portions of the evidence were generated by a dispute over alleged election fraud. As George Rable has noted, such testimony often "reeks of perjury." (George C. Rable, That Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction [Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1994], p.141.) Checking the various Democratic charges against each other, however, helps to fill in the story. It is the contemporary Democratic newspaper account, for example, that inadvertently discloses the later Democratic implication that the Poll #17 had been originally announced as the warehouse on the public road.
46. See The Times Democrat (New Orleans), 17 July 1887.
47. See The Times Democrat (New Orleans), 17 July 1887.
48. The second is found among the loose documents and the identification of the officers of the Special Military Division of the Second Military District, see Annual Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Louisiana, for the Year Ending December 31, 1884 (New Orleans: The Democrat).
49. See The Times Democrat (New Orleans), 17 July 1887.
50. See Berlin et al., Distraction, p. 217. 51. See in particular Ernest J. Gaines, Bloodline (New York, W.W. Norton, 1976), and the criminal records in the office of the Clerk of the Court, Lafourche Parish. See also Richard C. Plavac Jr., "Asiatic Plantation around 1900," Miss-O, Item 17, Allen Eidsen Archives, Ellender Library, Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, Louisiana.
53. It may also be well to recall an observation made by Albert Hirschmann, who suggests that sometimes men and women make commitments in part because, even if the goal turns out to be unattainable, they want to have been part of a principled and collective effort to achieve it. Albert O. Hirschman, Shifting Imperfections: Private Interest and Public Action (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977), Ch.9.
54. See Weekly Thibodaux Sentinel, 1 January 1888.
55. See weekly reports in the office of the Clerk of the Court, Lafourche Parish, in the annex to the Parish Office, Thibodaux, Louisiana (abbreviated hereafter as CCLP). I thank Barbara Lee and other staff members of the Clerk of the Court of Lafourche Parish, in the annex to the Parish Office, Thibodaux, Louisiana for their assistance in locating these materials.
56. See in particular Ernest J. Gaines, Bloodline (New York, W.W. Norton, 1976), and the criminal records in the office of the Clerk of the Court, Lafourche Parish. See also Richard C. Plavac Jr., "Asiatic Plantation around 1900," Miss-O, Item 17, Allen Eidsen Archives, Ellender Library, Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, Louisiana.
57. See in particular Ernest J. Gaines, Bloodline (New York, W.W. Norton, 1976), and the criminal records in the office of the Clerk of the Court, Lafourche Parish. See also Richard C. Plavac Jr., "Asiatic Plantation around 1900," Miss-O, Item 17, Allen Eidsen Archives, Ellender Library, Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, Louisiana.
58. See in particular Ernest J. Gaines, Bloodline (New York, W.W. Norton, 1976), and the criminal records in the office of the Clerk of the Court, Lafourche Parish. See also Richard C. Plavac Jr., "Asiatic Plantation around 1900," Miss-O, Item 17, Allen Eidsen Archives, Ellender Library, Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, Louisiana.
60. Pierce, Report, p. 21. For a vivid day-by-day description of events, see Gould, “The Strike of 1881.”
61. Letten, Mary W. Pugh to Edward P. Fugh, Nov. 25, Folder 1, Mary W. Pugh Papers, LLMV.
62. See The Times Democrat (New Orleans), 17 July 1887.
63. See The Times Democrat (New Orleans), 17 July 1887.
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76. See The Times Democrat (New Orleans), 17 July 1887.