

December 2018

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Recommended Citation

Sullivan, Claire (2018) "Reconstruction in the Big Easy: The Changing Interpretations of the Role of Race during Reconstruction in New Orleans," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol5/iss1/7>

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Writing Process

This historiography essay was the final assignment of my ASI 120 (Core Program) course at the University of Dayton. In preparation for the paper, I read *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* by Eric Foner. After reading and reflecting on Foner's book, I decided I wanted to focus my topic on Reconstruction in New Orleans, with specific emphasis on racial issues and the New Orleans Riot. I chose this topic because it allowed me to further research a topic relating to social justice with respect to race relations, something I am very passionate about. I spent a great deal of time finding appropriate sources for my paper at the UD Library. Once my sources were approved by my professor, I created my annotated bibliography and devised a rough draft for my final paper. In class, we did peer reviews of each other's rough drafts. I also visited the Write Place and the Core Fellows for additional feedback. With the suggestions of all these people in mind, I read, revised, and re-read my rough draft many times until I achieved the final draft of my historiography paper.

Course

ASI120

Semester

Spring

Instructor

Bill Trollinger

Year

2018

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Claire Sullivan

New Orleans, Louisiana provided a unique lens from which to study the Reconstruction era. Specifically, the New Orleans Riot of 1866 was a revolutionary turning point in the Reconstruction era. The ensuing massacre in 1866 began at the start of the Reconstruction period and shifted Northern public opinion away from the administration of President Andrew Johnson and paved the way for Radical Reconstruction.

The tension began when Radical Republicans made the decision to reconvene the Constitutional Convention of 1864 in Louisiana, a move many argued to be of questionable legality since the original convention gave an ambiguous suggestion that reconvening was permissible. In the convention, Radicals aimed to grant suffrage to blacks and take it away from ex-rebels while preserving Republican politicians' futures and protecting rights for freedmen. Prior to the riot, a rally was held where Radical speakers such as A. P. Dostie gave motivational speeches that heightened blacks' excitement for the convention and their political rights. Interpretations vary on the origins of the massacre on the day of the convention. However, a commonality among interpretations is the recognition that more blacks were targeted, killed, and injured than any other group. Police and ex-rebels assailed blacks, who took refuge in the Mechanics Institute, where the convention was to be held. But blacks were no safer there from brutal police action than they were on the streets. Regardless of the differing opinions on the

origins of the riot, historians have followed the general trend toward the interpretation that the riot was an unnecessary massacre of blacks on behalf of ex-rebels and conservatives.

A few general groups emerge when reading interpretations on Reconstruction in New Orleans. In the first group, the books *History of Reconstruction in Louisiana (through 1868)* by John Rose Ficklen and *Reconstruction in Louisiana After 1868* by Ella Lonn portrayed New Orleans blacks in a degrading sense and clearly favor rebels and conservatives. They suggested that the convention was unquestionably illegal and argued that the speeches prior to the convention created an extremely adverse environment. They also argued that blacks and Radicals caused just as much violence as the rebels and police officers.

The second group of historical accounts consisted of *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* by James K. Hogue; *The Louisiana Scalawags: Politics, Race, and Terrorism during the Civil War and Reconstruction* by Frank Wetta; and *Louisiana* by Joe Gray Taylor. These historians argued that race was not central to Reconstruction in New Orleans and provided alternative arguments. These arguments generally fell along the general consensus that Reconstruction's controversies were precipitated by political tensions rather than racial ones.

The third group of writers includes *Black New Orleans* by John Blassingame; "The New Orleans Riot of 1866, Reconsidered" by Donald Reynolds; *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* by Ted Tunnell; and "Violence, Police and Riots in New Orleans Political Culture: 1854-1874" by Stacy McGoldrick and Paul Simpson. They argued that blacks were racially targeted during Reconstruction especially by police and ex-rebels during the riot. They asserted that the speeches prior to the convention were not incendiary and that the sources of the violence during the riot were those actions taken by police and ex-rebel whites. The interpretations of the Reconstruction in New Orleans have shifted away from viewing blacks in a racist and derogatory sense to a compelling and successful argument that the tensions in Reconstruction were a direct result of racial conflicts and racist mindsets of conservative and ex-rebel groups.

In the early 1900s, historians often viewed Reconstruction from a perspective favoring ex-rebel and conservative Democrats while offering interpretations that were offensive to blacks. John Rose Ficklen argued that the riot was the result of an illegitimate convention called by Radicals, as well as their incendiary speeches

prior to the convention. He viewed the conventionists' decision to reconvene the convention as more revolutionary than the Fourteenth Amendment itself, but he was not saying this in a favorable light.¹ Ficklen argued that the reconvened convention was formed with no valid basis except for the inconclusive wording in the 1864 convention, possibly suggesting that it could be reconvened. He believed that the riot was instigated by speeches from Dostie and others, whose ideas Ficklen described as "negro supremacy."² Ficklen wrote that after Dostie's speech, not much more was needed to start a conflict. In describing the riot itself, he noted that the first shot was fired by a black man at a policeman, which caused the policeman to charge at the blacks. He argued that violence came from both sides, as blacks threw bricks at their opponents, and police fired indiscriminately at the crowd of blacks.³

In 1918, Lonn published *Reconstruction in Louisiana After 1868*, making arguments similar to those of Ficklen, including her racist statement that Louisiana needs to free itself from colored people and carpetbaggers.⁴ Lonn saw the riot resulting from the convention's proposed policies granting suffrage to blacks (and taking it away from ex-rebels). She implied her lack of support for the convention by addressing the 1864 Constitution's brief mention that a convention could be reconvened, which was never drafted into the final Constitution. She saw that the convention was called with the purpose of "evicting"⁵ the ex-rebels from their positions. With regard to the riot, Lonn discussed how the crowd of blacks became involved in a serious fight with police and whites, implying blacks were the perpetrators of violence. Even though Lonn took the side of ex-rebels and conservatives in her argument, she noted that it is suspicious how blacks suffered disproportionately higher injuries and deaths than whites.⁶

Together, Lonn's and Ficklen's interpretations form the basis for the group of historians who viewed New Orleans blacks in a derogatory sense while siding with ex-rebels and conservatives. They argued that the convention was illegal

¹ John Rose Ficklen, *History of Reconstruction in Louisiana; through 1868* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1910), 160.

² *Ibid.*, 162.

³ *Ibid.*, 160-168.

⁴ Ella Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana After 1868* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1918), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-4.

because of the previous constitution's ambiguity. This stance was evidence that they looked down upon blacks and believed that blacks did not deserve civil rights. Even historians who argued that blacks were racially targeted recognized the questionability of the convention but felt that the issue of civil rights justified its reconvening. Ficklen and Lonn saw blacks as the perpetrators of the riot, which is false. The fact that blacks, in disproportionately large numbers, were injured and killed was compelling evidence of racial targeting. Ficklen and Lonn failed to emphasize the crucial event of police firing indiscriminately into a crowd of blacks with no other motive than to stir trouble, cause injuries, and kill. They made no assertion that race was the cause of targeting on blacks. However, one difference is that Ficklen pointed to the speeches prior to the riot as causing great tension, and Lonn made no mention of them, suggesting that she did not see the police as pivotal to the riot. This is an interesting difference because no matter their stance on the origins of the riot, most historians point to the importance of these speeches. Together, Ficklen and Lonn's interpretations demonstrated how historians in the early twentieth century tended to favor sides of rebels and conservatives while degrading blacks in their Reconstruction interpretations.

Another interpretation group argued that race was not the central component of Reconstruction and provides alternative arguments. Taylor argued that Reconstruction was an outright failure because everything that was attempted to advance the rights of blacks either failed or was overturned. Taylor provided an extensive list proposing the reasons for the failure of Reconstruction in Louisiana. For one, he believed the freedmen were not prepared or intelligent enough to participate in politics. In addition, Taylor argued that blacks were incapable of defending themselves against whites, citing the example of how they fled rather than fought in the New Orleans Riot. He wrote that this was not due to racial reasons but was possibly because blacks accepted the assumption of white supremacy and its physical power and were psychologically burdened by their enslaved past. He also discussed that the racism of white Republicans, the group supposedly on the side of blacks, prevented the advancement of blacks in Reconstruction. This is an interesting argument because Taylor was the only historian to suggest that most Republicans were not really trying to advance the rights of blacks. Additionally, he discussed how many actions and plans were devised, but their implementation failed. For example, he believed the Civil Rights Act and the 14th Amendment had great ideas, but never resulted in any

genuine reform for blacks' civil rights.⁷ While Taylor saw race as a component to the failure of Reconstruction, he proposed copious other factors to consider as well.⁸

Hogue argued that the supremacist pride and enmity manifested in the New Orleans "Street Battle" of 1866 did not originate in Reconstruction's political struggles over black suffrage.⁹ Instead, he suggested political conflicts between Confederate and black veterans were the main cause of violence. Hogue discussed how on the morning of the convention, a large crowd of blacks, who knew that there would be a massive resistance against them, decided to assemble anyway in support of the convention. In the process, a spectator insulted the marchers, and a black man knocked the spectator to the ground. The battle escalated into a carnage; police were ordered to attack marchers, and some protesters were killed on the spot. Hogue cites both President Johnson and W. E. B. DuBois. He discussed how Johnson and many of his supporters argued that the riot was a result of the Radicals and their incendiary speeches, while DuBois suggested that white New Orleans elite planned the massacre. Hogue however, took no side in the debate, arguing instead that both have extreme views on the situation and that the riot was a visible manifestation of much more violence occurring under the surface.¹⁰

Frank J. Wetta told of Reconstruction in Louisiana through a unique lens: the experience of scalawags. He argued that the riot resulted from a plan between white Radicals and Louisiana leaders in Congress to establish Republican rule and that political tensions were the main causes of the riot. Wetta argued that though possibly unintended, speeches prior to the riot created a hostile political (but not necessarily racial) environment. On the day of the riot, Wetta reported that the incident that precipitated the whole massacre was a single shot fired by a policeman into the crowd of blacks. He argued that whether the Radical's speeches intended to incite violence, there was absolutely no justification for the actions of the police officers in their slaughter of blacks during the riot. He

⁷ Joe Gray Taylor, "Louisiana." In *Reconstruction and Redemption in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 207.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 200-229.

⁹ James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954), 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-52.

concluded by arguing that the riot turned Northerners against Johnson's Reconstruction plan and introduced the beginning of more radical measures in Reconstruction. Wetta's argument demonstrates how he saw political tensions as the greatest source of the riot. Yet, he does recognize the issues of race, indicating the historiographical shift towards more modern interpretations.¹¹

Together, this second group of historians suggested other causes than race to be the main sources of the violence and/or failure of Reconstruction in New Orleans. They generally viewed that race as a component in Reconstruction, but political tensions were stronger in shaping the violence. While they provided strong alternatives to the issue of race as the cause for tensions such as political issues and poor economic climate, these interpretations still underestimate the role of race. The political tensions existing at the time were results of divisions between party lines on the issue of whether freed slaves should be given the same rights as white men. This is clearly an issue of race and not simple political ties. In addition, the poor economic climate Taylor discussed was a result of the aftermath of the war, and parties were divided in terms of how they wanted to recover from the loss of the major economic system of slavery, demonstrating that race was again at the heart of the economic struggle. Within the second group, Hogue and Wetta provided the most accurate arguments, differing from Taylor because they better acknowledged the role of race as the driving force of Reconstruction. While these interpretations provided a much more accurate depiction of Reconstruction than that of the first group of historians, they still underestimated the issue of race, which was where the final group of interpretations made the strongest and most accurate argument.

The final group of historical interpretations, and the ones with the most accurate and compelling argument, asserted that blacks were racially profiled during Reconstruction. In the riot, police officers aligned with white ex-rebels and conservatives to carry out the massacre on the New Orleans blacks. Donald Reynolds argued that the Riot of 1866 was a massacre of blacks by citizens and police. He prefaced his discussion by writing that historians have been completely biased towards whites and sometimes wrong in their presentation of the events.¹²

¹¹ Frank J. Wetta, *The Louisiana Scalawags: Politics, Race, and Terrorism During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1942), 90-115.

¹² Donald E. Reynolds, "The New Orleans riot of 1866, Reconsidered," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 5, no.1 (1964), JSTOR. 5.

He discussed how Radical leaders wanted to preserve their future in politics as well as protect the freedoms of blacks, so they proposed a convention with the purpose of denying the vote to ex-rebels and giving it to blacks. He viewed the rally held before the convention as a meeting where excitement and advocacy for black civil rights occurred. The day of the convention, after a white newsboy taunted a black man, the black man shot a gun in the boy's direction. The police reacted not by arresting the one guilty man but by firing many shots aimed at the crowd of blacks, driving the single event to a sweeping massacre of blacks by whites and police. After presenting his story, Reynolds discussed how Reconstruction-era Democrats and conservative historians blamed the riot on the speeches and Radicals, rather than the police who escalated the riot into a massacre.¹³

Ted Tunnell provided a similar argument to that of Reynolds, arguing that the New Orleans Riot must have been prearranged because of the scale of slaughter against blacks. Before the massacre, state officials warned citizens of anarchy and revolution. However, the tone they spoke with was a tone of anticipation because they saw the chance to punish Unionists and to get even with blacks for securing their freedom in Louisiana. Since 1861, blacks had become the scapegoat for the rage of white Southerners. He discussed how the police came to the scene heavily armed with weapons that were loaned to them by local gun shops and how the city fire bell ringing would signal the police to start the riot. He also discussed the eerie air of excitement that spread through New Orleans prior to the riot, including children at school discussing how the ex-rebels and police were going to kill all the blacks in the city. The conventionists, on the other hand, had decided that they were going to arrive unarmed and submit to arrest if violence broke out. Tunnell wrote that the day of the convention, the riot was set off by policemen shooting many rounds into the crowd of blacks and occurred as a massacre by ex-rebels, whites, and policemen targeting blacks with no specific plan except for slaughter. Tunnell's interpretation on the riot showed his argument that the riot was well-thought out as an opportunity to attack blacks.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 1-20.

¹⁴ Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism and Race in Louisiana; 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 103-116.

McGoldrick and Simpson argued that the riots that occurred in New Orleans during Reconstruction were inevitably about race. They called the New Orleans Riot the “1866 Police Race Riot,” discussing how it was the most organized police effort to violently attack blacks that New Orleans had ever had.¹⁵ They focused on the building of the police force in New Orleans and how it was constructed from confederate veterans who were racially motivated and “chronically violent.”¹⁶ It was common knowledge that obtaining a police force position in New Orleans required one to be able to prove that he had fought with the Confederacy. These writers provided the most radical approach to the riot, arguing that the police organized a strike during the Republican meeting to reconvene the convention at the Mechanics Institute while the blacks gathered to support their suffrage rights. McGoldrick and Simpson argued that the attack on blacks during the massacre was planned by the police and organized systematically. The police assaulted blacks outside the Mechanics Institute and were the sole group who started the riot.¹⁷

Together, the third group of interpretations took the side of Radicals and blacks in arguing that blacks were specifically targeted racially in the New Orleans Riot and Reconstruction. They cited sources that earlier and more conservative historians failed to mention by showing how ex-rebels and police planned for the riot and that rumors had spread around New Orleans that blacks were going to be murdered. These historians argued that the reconvening of the convention was the most legal way to help grant suffrage and rights to blacks while protecting their own political freedom. They asserted that there is no question that police brutality played a key role in instigating the riot’s slaughter.

One key difference among the third group of writers was that McGoldrick and Simpson placed more emphasis on the violence of police than any other group during the massacre. While police were the largest instigators of violence during the New Orleans Riot, it is important to note, as Reynolds and Tunnell discussed, the large involvement of conservative Democrats and ex-rebels.

¹⁵ Stacy K. McGoldrick and Paul Simpson, “Violence, Police and Riots in New Orleans Political Culture: 1854-1874,” *Journal of Historical Society* 20, no. 1 (2007), JSTOR. 87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87-90.

The first group of writers provided an inaccurate interpretation of events, arguing that blacks were the perpetrators of the riot when in reality, they were the ones being targeted. The second group provided strong, alternate arguments including political tensions as the reasons for the riot. However, they underestimated the role that race played in Reconstruction. McGoldrick and Simpson's argument that blamed police violence for the unnecessary brutality in the riot is highly compelling. On the side of the police were rebels and conservatives, who instigated violence against blacks and conventionists for no apparent reason other than to assert supremacy. The third group of interpretations, which took the side of Radical Republicans and blacks and argued that blacks were racially profiled during Reconstruction in New Orleans, provided the most accurate argument. Analysis of these various interpretations over time indicates that interpretations of historians have changed to favor the argument in favor of Radicals and blacks, while recognizing the accuracy of arguments that say that conservatives, rebels, and police instigated much of the violence during Reconstruction.

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