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## The Making of an American Imperialist: Major Edward Austin Burke, Reconstruction New Orleans and the Road to Central America

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The Making of an American Imperialist:  
Major Edward Austin Burke, Reconstruction New Orleans,  
and the Road to Central America

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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By

Kathryn Keenan Conley

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	v
Chapter 1: The Making of An American Imperialist.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Major Edward Austin Burke: An American Imperialist.....	6
American Reconstruction as a Precursor to American Imperialism .....	8
Chapter 2: The History of Major Edward Austin Burke in Reconstruction New Orleans.....	10
Historiography.....	10
Arrival and Early Years in New Orleans .....	16
Participation in the Battle of Liberty Place.....	24
City Administrator Burke .....	30
Participation in the Compromise of 1877.....	31
Chapter 3: Major Edward Austin Burke During the Period of the New South	
Role as a Newspaper Editor.....	36
American Imperialism in Central America .....	38
Director General Burke and the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition.....	40
Chapter 4: Scandalous Burke and His Move to Honduras.....	45
Conclusion: Imperialist Burke .....	50
Bibliography.....	52
Appendices .....	55
Appendix A: Image of Edward Austin Burke .....	55
Appendix B: Timeline of Burke’s Career.....	56
Appendix C: Image of Baby Bonds at the Center of the Treasury Scandal .....	57
Vita.....	58

## Abstract

The period of Reconstruction following the American Civil War, and its legacy, have been the subjects of long debate among historians. Scholars, though, have yet to fully explore important connections between American Reconstruction, the New South that followed, and the period of U.S. imperialism in Central America in the late nineteenth century. The storied career of Major Edward Austin Burke—a Kentucky-born Louisiana Democrat who went on to become a proponent of expansionism and imperialism in Honduras—illuminates the transnational implications of Reconstruction and its aftermath. Through careful examination of personal papers, news accounts, promotional materials, Congressional testimonies and other government records, this thesis finds the roots of Burke’s involvement in Central America in postbellum New Orleans. It demonstrates the importance of participation in Reconstruction and New South politics to the long political career of one of the most prominent U.S. imperialists in Central America in the late nineteenth century.

Reconstruction, New South, Edward Austin Burke, New Orleans, Battle of Liberty Place, Compromise of 1877, World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, Imperialism, Honduras

## Chapter 1: The Making of An American Imperialist

### Introduction

[Reconstruction] is undoubtedly a period full of rich and tragic and meaningful history, a period that should be studiously searched for its meanings, a period that has many meanings yet to yield.

— C. Vann Woodward, “The Political Legacy of Reconstruction”<sup>1</sup>

The causes surrounding the American Civil War have long been debated and although it is difficult to agree upon any one specific cause, historians agree that Reconstruction in the years following was also a period of conflict, filled with possibilities, both positive and negative. Reconstruction underwent several different routes, first under the leadership of President Abraham Lincoln, then President Andrew Johnson, then Radical Republicans. Each of these Reconstruction policies was subjected to scrutiny and the rapid pace in which they were carried out resulted in none of them gaining a solid ground. Although these policies had different focuses, they all maintained the ultimate goal of reuniting the nation that had been so distinctly divided.<sup>2</sup> Some politicians seized upon the opportunities provided by the ever-evolving political environment of the former Confederate

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<sup>1</sup> C. Vann Woodward, “The Political Legacy of Reconstruction,” in *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings*, ed. Kenneth M. Stampp, et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 531.

<sup>2</sup> President Abraham Lincoln began practicing Reconstruction policies in New Orleans in 1862, during the Civil War. After his assassination, President Andrew Johnson began Presidential Reconstruction with a different policy and goal than Lincoln. Following Presidential Reconstruction, Radical Reconstruction began with yet more policy changes. The instabilities and discontinuities of Reconstruction policies resulted in a convoluted and contestable period of questionable policies that would not officially end until 1877.

South, including those who came to be known as “carpetbaggers” and “scalawags.”<sup>3</sup> Although those considered carpetbaggers were Northern in origin and scalawags from the South, both groups, according to these stereotypes, joined the Republicans and sought to capitalize on the policies of Reconstruction for personal gain. According to Richard N. Current, the stereotype that the carpetbagger was “attracted southward by the chance for power and plunder that he [saw] when the vote [was] given to Southern Negroes and taken from some of the Southern white” was preeminent in the study of the Reconstruction South.<sup>4</sup> These characters were vilified in Southern culture and became indelible caricatures in the history and public memory of Reconstruction.

Allen W. Trelease stated that Reconstruction era Southerners believed “native white Republicans [that were deemed scalawags] were traitors to race and section alike, and thus deserving of the deepest contempt.”<sup>5</sup> Trelease acknowledged that as time passed, “the caricature of the scalawag as a traitor... gained more and more currency.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, those politicians from the North who travelled to the South and sought out political gain were viewed in just as contemptible a manner as scalawags. Louisiana politician Henry Clay Warmoth, for instance, originally from Illinois, was considered a carpetbagger. Warmoth (who is discussed as an ally of Major Burke later in this thesis) gained immense political power

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<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth M. Stampp’s *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings* (especially Stanley Coben’s “Northeastern Business and Radical Reconstruction: A Re-examination) and Justin Nystrom’s *New Orleans After the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* for individual examples of politicians who seized upon opportunities for growth in the Reconstruction South.

<sup>4</sup> Richard N. Current, “Carpetbaggers Reconsidered” in *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings*, ed. Kenneth M. Stampp, et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 223.

<sup>5</sup> Allen W. Trelease, “Who Were the Scalawags?” in *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings*, ed. Kenneth M. Stampp, et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 299.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.



through the support of African Americans during Reconstruction. Richard N. Current presents a study of Warmoth in this context. Current states that in contemporary views of Warmoth, he was presented as “a monster of wickedness, a kind of carrier of moral contagion, who brought with him to Louisiana the germs of a political plague which spread through that otherwise healthy and happy land.”<sup>7</sup> This being stated, C. Vann Woodward suggested “it is quite possible that the carpetbagger and the scalawag have been allotted by the historians a share of attention out of all proportion to their true importance in the revolutionary process.”<sup>8</sup>

Carpetbaggers and scalawags have been researched and studied extensively, but through these studies, the larger context has been ignored. The presence of the stereotypes that surrounded these politicians has dominated their assumed significance to an extent that disallowed their long-term importance in the study of American political and transnational history. One degree of the Southern political environment in the Reconstruction years that has received too little attention is the immediate legacy of Reconstruction in terms of the later careers of Democratic Reconstruction politicians. Tracing the careers of Redeemer politicians, we can find evidence of persistent ideologies regarding white supremacy and political order, which became the building blocks for both the New South and (less well explored) U.S. imperialism in Latin America.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard N. Current, “The Carpetbagger as Corruptionist: Henry Clay Warmoth,” in *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings*, ed. Kenneth M. Stampp, et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 244.

<sup>8</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 22.

American Reconstruction provided ample opportunities for political progression for those who sought to capitalize on its policies, but it did more than provide for immediate political engagements. Historians have long regarded Reconstruction and the rise of the New South as a time period significant to the history of the United States, but it has only just recently been studied in a transnational context. This time period held the capacity to produce politicians who would become part of U.S. imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century. This paper will aim to present the case of Major Edward Austin Burke, a Kentucky-born politician who ascended to great political stature in Louisiana but used his knowledge and experiences not only in the United States, but also in Honduras, where he lived following his indictment for state treasury fraud. Major Burke's political career illustrates that Reconstruction and the "Redemption" that followed it in the South served as more than just a method to return the South to the Union; the Reconstruction South and the New South together served as a training ground for American imperialists with interests in Latin America.

Burke accrued a vision of what it took to control a nation through methods he learned and perfected while serving as a politician in Reconstruction era Louisiana. Through Burke's roles as a newspaper editor, railroad manager, State Treasurer and Director-General of the 1885 World's Fair, he developed skills that were, up to that point, unique to this period. He took these ideas and applied them in Honduras where he would fulfill the imperialist aims of gaining and maintaining superiority over non-white populations. American imperialism in Central America was a political movement that extended the dictates of the Monroe Doctrine and

resulted in decades of American involvement in Central American politics. White supremacy and the belief that civilization should be introduced in non-white populations were prevalent throughout Reconstruction, the consequent New South era and the age of Imperialism. Politicians who were able to profit from these expeditions were those who had the capabilities to control portions of those societies, as Burke did through his powers in the railroad industry, state treasury and press. Reconstruction and the New South had implications beyond the national conflict over the recreation of the Union; they represent a period that not only had transnational results but also spanned two annals of history, as it reached into American imperialism in Central America.

In James F. Vivian's article "Major E. A. Burke: The Honduran Exile 1889-1928," the author offers an account of Major Burke's rise to power in Honduras. In this work, Vivian expounds on Major Burke's character and delves into a study of Burke's participation in the politics and mining industry of Honduras in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although Vivian's work is a valuable representation of American imperialism in Central America, told through the late career of Major Burke, he does not fully explore Burke's earlier career in Louisiana. In order to better understand Burke's activity in Honduras and his usefulness as a case study in the history of American imperialism, we must consider his formative years in the political life of New Orleans during Reconstruction and in the New South period that followed.

## **Major Edward Austin Burke: An American Imperialist**

Major Edward Austin Burke attained his first role of political import in New Orleans during his position as railroad agent for the New Orleans, St. Louis and Chicago Railroad Company in 1870 and throughout the next decade served as agent or manager for this company and the New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern Railroad Company and the local agent for the Illinois Central Railroad Company. Shortly thereafter he staked his claim as a Redeemer Democrat when he played a role in the 1874 uprising against the Reconstruction government in New Orleans that came to be known as the infamous Battle of Liberty Place. In 1876, Major E.A. Burke played a more visible role in the result of yet another election surrounded by political strife, debates, confusion and turmoil. Burke served as Louisiana Governor-elect Francis T. Nicholls's representative to the electoral convention, where he would help develop what would become the Compromise of 1877, the compromise that officially ended the period of Reconstruction. Twelve years later, Burke fled to Honduras, where he would spend the rest of his years applying what he had learned in Reconstruction Louisiana politics with imperialistic aims in improving the small Central American nation.<sup>9</sup>

The case of Major Edward Austin Burke is one that has not been studied in depth in the recent past and has never been studied with this transnational focus in

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<sup>9</sup> The information listed in this paragraph can be found in numerous sources. Basic biographical information can be found in William I. Hair, *A Dictionary of Louisiana Biography*, Vol. I (The Louisiana Historical Association, Southwestern Louisiana University, 1988), 130. Information on Burke's railroad ventures can be found in James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 133. For information on Burke's newspaper acquisition and his role in the Wormley Conference, see C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951).

regards to the effects of Reconstruction policies. Historians have often passed him by for more prominent and easily researchable politicians. Other Reconstruction-era Louisiana politicians spent their entire lives in the state, which makes researching them in depth both easier and more succinct. It was 1889 when Burke fled to Honduras, where he spent the remainder of his life; therefore the majority of papers detailing his later life are either in Spanish, in Honduras or elsewhere outside of Louisiana, making researching his later life and career more elusive.

Though Burke was not solely responsible for any major political breakthroughs, his influence should not be overlooked as he provides a telling example of an opportunist who was able to gain powers during Reconstruction and the years that followed that would enable him to gain extensive experience in influencing (if not outright controlling) a government, experience that he would one day use in Central America. Historians have often cast his life prior to his arrival in Louisiana with an uncertainty that makes understanding his true character more difficult. However, this does nothing more than to invite speculation as to why history has failed to remember him and his career. Historians have studied both Reconstruction and American imperialism from many perspectives, but have yet to bridge, fully, the gap between the two. The years immediately following the end of Reconstruction, known as the era of the New South, witnessed the dominance of white supremacist ideologies and the desire, among many white Americans, to “civilize” non-white people in other regions of the globe. The career of Major Burke, therefore, demonstrates the transnational implications of Reconstruction and its extended legacy at the turn of the twentieth century.

In his testimony before a committee of the House of Representatives in 1875, Major Burke said that the problems that were prevalent during the years following the American Civil War should be associated with men he called “white adventurers,” or those who were “corrupt” and failed to “engage in business and live in the community,” referring to Northern carpetbaggers.<sup>10</sup> Major Burke publicly chastised those who sought personal gain from Reconstruction politics and yet the term “white adventurer,” in hindsight, could be assigned to him throughout his political career and subsequent expansionist and supremacist adventure in Honduras in 1889. Burke covered himself, though, through his statement that if one engaged and integrated oneself into the community, he should not be qualified as adventurers. Burke did just that; upon his arrival to New Orleans in 1869, he immersed himself into its society and politics and quickly became one of the most respected and sought-after politicians in the city. The nature of Burke’s political career typifies him as a prime example of a freebooter who seized opportunities to elevate his political power. A careful study of his career, as will be presented here, will demonstrate how Burke, although not technically a “white adventurer,” became an American imperialist in Honduras through his use of the political lessons he learned while in New Orleans during Reconstruction.

### **American Reconstruction as a Precursor to American Imperialism**

In the immediate antebellum years in the United States, two distinct nations had theoretically developed. The North and the South developed different

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<sup>10</sup> House of Representatives, *Index to the Reports of the Committees of the House of Representatives*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2d. sess., 1874-1875, 656.

cultures, with a manufacturing-based economy in the North and a more agrarian economy in the South. These divided regions clashed in what would be the bloodiest war in American history. In the years following, the defeated South was in effect re-colonized by the North in an attempt to reunite the country. According to C. Vann Woodward, Southerners did not believe Reconstruction was over until they had ousted “foreign control,” or the control of Northerners.<sup>11</sup>

If we define imperialism as the process of empire building, with the aim of conquering territories for political and commercial gain, then it is clear that, for white Democrats seeking to regain control of state and local government—for reasons political, racial, and economic—Reconstruction and its aftermath afforded them the skills that would be necessary to intervene in the affairs of other nations, skills that would one day be used in U.S. expansionism. The study of New Orleans during Reconstruction arguably provides more evidence of this than the similar studies of other Southern cities. Although the city was only a member of the Confederacy for two years, it witnessed fifteen years of Northern intervention in its state and local government, from 1862-1877.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, “The Tragic Legend of Reconstruction,” in *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings*, ed. Kenneth M. Stampp et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 10.

## Chapter 2: The History of Major Edward Austin Burke in Reconstruction New Orleans

### Historiography

Major Burke is an example of someone who seized upon the confusion, distrust and tension of the Reconstruction era by presenting himself to the public as a well-meaning, hard-fighting, community-minded politician. From the time Burke arrived in New Orleans in 1869, he quickly elevated his status and power by aligning himself both with the mindset of his fellow Democratic citizens and with influential politicians such as former carpetbagger Governor Henry Clay Warmoth and future mayor Louis A. Wiltz. Once in New Orleans, Major Burke married Susan Gaines, the daughter of A. L. Gaines, an influential merchant of the city. Upon the death of Mrs. Burke's father, she was left Gaines's estate which included "nine or ten plantations and a large amount of cash and stocks."<sup>13</sup> This marriage potentially enabled Burke to be more easily accepted into the society of New Orleans, or at least with the financial means to enter the city's elite circles.<sup>14</sup>

Who was Edward Austin Burke? Where did he come from and how did he gain such political influence in Reconstruction Era New Orleans? Burke's past has long been a difficult one to verify, and historians have conveyed conflicting stories about him. Historian William I. Hair presented information on Major Burke in *A Dictionary of Louisiana Biography*, a reference book that features a compilation of characters thought to be noteworthy in the study of Louisiana history. Although Burke's inclusion in this compendium suggests historians believe him to have been a

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<sup>13</sup> *Daily Picayune*, April 20, 1877. America's Historical Newspapers (accessed 14 April 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Major and Mrs. Burke had one son, Lindsey Gaines, who died in the Congo in 1909.



significant figure in Louisiana history, the entry provides little verifiable information on Burke and leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Hair titles his entry "BURKE, Edward A., politician, publisher,"<sup>15</sup> but everything written from this line onward raises uncertainties regarding Burke's true identity. Hair states that Burke claimed to be from Kentucky, but that he was more likely from Ohio or Illinois. He then states that Burke's "entire life prior to 1865 [was a] mystery, compounded by fabrications: pretending to be a Confederate major, he may also have served in the Union Army- or in neither."<sup>16</sup> A perusal of this record provides the researcher with a brief synopsis of each significant role Burke played throughout his life in Louisiana, thereby making it a logical introduction to the career of Major Edward Austin Burke, but not providing enough information to allow the researcher to draw any conclusions about Burke's significance.

According to Hair's entry, Burke served in several political positions in New Orleans including Administrator of City Improvements, Democratic representative and Treasurer of Louisiana, in addition to his roles in the white supremacist coup known as the Battle of Liberty Place and later in the Compromise of 1877. In 1884 he also served as the Director General of the World's Exposition and Cotton Centennial hosted in New Orleans. In 1889, Burke's political powers were theoretically revoked as he was indicted for treasury fraud and the embezzlement of one million dollars. He fled to Honduras where he was welcomed

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<sup>15</sup> William I. Hair, *A Dictionary of Louisiana Biography*, Vol. I (The Louisiana Historical Association, Southwestern Louisiana University, 1988), 130.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

by President Luis Bográn and given gold and silver mines.<sup>17</sup> This is the extent of information provided in Hair's version of the biography. Everything listed in Hair's entry provides a stellar resume of a one-day imperialist.

Although historians of the postbellum period including Eric Foner, Justin Nystrom and C. Vann Woodward have mentioned Burke intermittently, they seldom agree on the facts surrounding his disreputable career, as is evidenced by the continually differing roles he is assigned in historical studies. An examination of Burke's personal papers, as well as census rolls, passport applications, and shipping manifests, however, resolves some of the questions about his early life. In 1869, Burke applied for a passport and stated

I, Edward Austin Burk do swear that I was born in Kentucky, U.S.A. on or about the 15<sup>th</sup> day of September, 1841 and that I am a native born and loyal citizen of the United States.<sup>18</sup>

This entry provides primary evidence that Burke was born in Kentucky in 1841, and not Ohio or another Northern state in 1843. Although the entry helps solve the dilemma of Burke's birth, it presents another example of the confusion surrounding him. Throughout the years Burke's name is intermittently written as "Burk" or "Burke," resulting either from a simple misspelling of his name, or a clever ploy by the politician. Reconstruction politician, J. Madison Wells, claimed that Major Burke's name was changed when he was a young man when he "fled from

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Department of State, Passport Bureau. Passport Application: Edward Austin Burk, May 22, 1869. Accessed by Molly Mitchell, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

justice in Illinois to hide out in the South under a changed identity.”<sup>19</sup> Wells did not explain Burke’s alleged flight from justice; rather, his comment seems to have been an effort to discount Burke’s character at a time during which Burke was highly regarded by his compatriots. The opinion of Burke held by his contemporaries differs from the opinion of twentieth and twenty-first century historians of Reconstruction politics.

Few historians have featured Major Burke as the main focus of their work, but those who have, failed to make connections between his Reconstruction years and his later careers as a journalist and as a railroad magnate in Honduras. Thomas Watson composed two journal articles featuring Major Burke, but his research focused solely on the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, of which Burke was the Director General in 1884. In his article, titled “‘Staging the Crowning Achievement of the Age’: Major Edward Austin Burke, New Orleans and the Cotton Centennial Exposition,” Watson introduces his subject as an “indefatigable ‘Man of Iron,’” then proceeds to share a quote by federal commissioners of the Cotton Centennial Exposition that described the honor, integrity and importance of Major Burke. These commissioners speculated about what future historians would write in regards to Burke’s character and place in history, stating that these historians would “place his name by the side of the greatest industrial leaders and educators of the nineteenth century.”<sup>20</sup> Burke was

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<sup>19</sup> William Ivy Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest: Louisiana Politics 1877-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 33. See also Letter from J. Madison Wells, *New York Times*, February 19, 1878.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas D. Watson, “‘Staging the Crowning Achievement of the Age’: Major Edward A. Burke, New Orleans and the Cotton Centennial Exposition,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Summer 1984): 229.

able to maintain favorable opinion in his own time, yet when historians studied him, his name became synonymous with malevolence.

James F. Vivian, another Burke biographer, conducted his research on Burke's life following Burke's indictment of embezzlement during his stint as treasurer of Louisiana. Vivian's article "Major E.A. Burke: The Honduras Exile, 1889-1928," discusses Burke's political roles in Honduras as an exile and gives little attention to the premiere years of Burke's political career in New Orleans and their effect on his career in Honduras. Vivian claims that Burke's role in the Redeemer South aligned him with the development and progress of New Orleans and the future trade with Central American countries.<sup>21</sup> According to Vivian, Burke's contemporaries called him "one of the foremost men in all of the South," a man of "unassailable charm" and with the "breadth of mind... only equaled by Horace Greeley."<sup>22</sup> Vivian discusses the 1889 lottery scandal, during which Burke allegedly stole money from the Louisiana State Treasury by illegally signing and selling bonds that were supposed to be destroyed. Vivian's work provides the most valuable introduction into Burke's career in Honduras, but does little to draw connections between his time in New Orleans and Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

Justin Nystrom, a recent historian of Reconstruction in New Orleans, details the importance of understanding the life stories of individuals and how these contributed to the politics of the period.<sup>23</sup> In *New Orleans After the Civil War: Race,*

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<sup>21</sup> James F. Vivian, "Major E.A. Burke: The Honduras Exile 1889-1928." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, vol. XV, no. 2 (Spring 1974): 176.

<sup>22</sup> Vivian, 177.

<sup>23</sup> Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

*Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* he concludes that an atmosphere of “moral ambiguity” defined the period of Reconstruction, suggesting that the era was confounded by conflicting attitudes and experiences. Only by focusing on individual motivations and experiences, according to Nystrom, can we begin to understand the “ambiguity” at the heart of Reconstruction. Despite this view, which may help to explain the many conflicting character studies of Edward A. Burke, Nystrom barely mentions Burke in this study. Nonetheless, Nystrom has paved the way of analyzing the Reconstruction era through the lives of individuals, which is one of the goals of this thesis.

As opposed to Justin Nystrom, C. Vann Woodward discusses Burke and his supposed characteristics in detail. In his work *Origins of the New South*, Woodward describes E. A. Burke as the “pivotal figure in the Redemption of Louisiana and the regime it inaugurated.”<sup>24</sup> Although Woodward states that the importance of Burke’s role in the Compromise of 1877 was exaggerated, he claims that Burke was “Redeemer extraordinair[e].”<sup>25</sup> Woodward mentions Burke’s activities throughout Reconstruction and the onset of the New South and details his time as an editor, state treasurer and the Director General of the World’s Fair. In light of Burke’s inclusion in Woodward’s classic treatment of this period in Southern history—inclusion that suggests the importance of studying Major Burke and his participation in Louisiana politics—it is surprising that more recent historians seem to have paid Burke little attention.

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<sup>24</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

## Arrival and Early Careers in New Orleans

The years prior to Major Burke's arrival in New Orleans have long been considered mysterious, although several things can be stated with some certainty. After the Civil War, Burke lived in Galveston, Texas, where he served in the roles of telegraph officer for the United States Military Telegraph Company and as the man in charge of the "Collector's Office" of the local Treasury Department branch.<sup>26</sup> Upon his arrival in New Orleans, Burke was referred to as "Major," a title that he claimed to have earned while fighting for the Confederacy during the American Civil War.<sup>27</sup> No verifiable information has been found that can prove Burke ever made it to the military status of major in the Civil War, but a Muster Roll states his rank as Second Lieutenant and a member of the 26<sup>th</sup> Cavalry in Texas.<sup>28</sup> The only evidence available to prove Burke's military rank is his word and that he was almost always publicly referred to as a major. Yet, the *New York Times* and the *New Orleans Democrat* presented rumors that in 1864 Burke had been a Union spy who had given Admiral Farragut of the Union army "a great deal of valuable information" at Mobile.<sup>29</sup> This suggests Burke was not the admirable "Major" he impersonated, but in fact a traitor to the Confederate cause.<sup>30</sup> Even amongst these rumors, Burke was able to present

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<sup>26</sup> *U.S. Military Telegraph*, August 16, 1867, D. P. Sheppard to Maj. E. A. Burke, and "Treasury Department, Office of Internal Revenue, Washington," September 3, 1867, "E.A. Burke Papers," Special Collections, Tulane University.

<sup>27</sup> Evidence for his participation in the Civil War is difficult to find. There are theories that he fought in Galveston, under the Texas cavalry, while there is also a chart stating Burke as having fought for the Louisiana cavalry, Company 1. (James K. Hogue) His participation in the Louisiana company is unlikely, though, as numerous other sources state (including Burke himself) he arrived in Louisiana for the first time in 1869.

<sup>28</sup> *Index to Compiled Confederate Military Service Records*

<sup>29</sup> Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 28. See also *New York Times*, November 19, 1879, *Democrat*, December 13, 1879, and C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction*, 192.

<sup>30</sup> See *NY Times*, November 19, 1879.

himself as a Confederate major and to rise in popularity and significance as he settled into New Orleans post-Civil War life.

No matter what his life prior to New Orleans entailed, upon his arrival in New Orleans, he began a new life and started work at a stone-yard.<sup>31</sup> Burke served in this position for less than a year and in late 1869 began work as a railroad administrator, his first position of political importance in New Orleans. It is uncertain how Burke managed to attain this new position so quickly, but it may have related to his assumed military rank.

Historian Justin Nystrom argues that Southern politicians of the Reconstruction era used their Confederate rank to gain power. Those who had attained officer status during the Civil War were held in higher regard than those who solely had political experience. As a result, these battle tested officers were given more opportunities and authorities. Major E.A. Burke exemplifies this theory. According to Nystrom, “old generals and statesmen would no longer run the postwar Louisiana government. Having paid their dues, the young officers, of both North and South, who had led the men of their generation during the war now claimed their place.”<sup>32</sup> Burke took full advantage of this societal situation and used the citizens’ admiration for ranked military veterans as a ploy to attain political success. As a Southern Democrat, Burke touted the end of Reconstruction as a selling point for favors of the Democratic citizens of New Orleans in his political endeavors.

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<sup>31</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), 192.

<sup>32</sup> Nystrom, 50.

Major E.A. Burke was involved in both telegraph and railroad ventures during his years in Texas, two careers that seem to have served him well upon his arrival in New Orleans and knowledge of which would prove valuable in regards to communication skills once he began his career in Honduras.<sup>33</sup> Burke's participation in the railroad industry is one that adds another dynamic to his political career. The mid- to late nineteenth century was a time of constant growth for the railroad system in the United States as the country was both in the midst of recovering from division and in the process of westward expansion. At this time, Southern railways began to shift "from local to through traffic" which resulted in the "development of large integrated systems," and in turn provided the opportunity for national political power.<sup>34</sup> Burke's role as a railroad manager in a city as crucial to transportation as New Orleans granted him a new sense of power on a more national scale. According to railroad historian Maury Klein, the rail system in the 1870s was "conceived primarily as a potent weapon in the growing commercial rivalry between leading Southern ports and interior distributing centers, the roads became servants to local economic aspirations."<sup>35</sup> Burke used his authority in a different way. Instead of immediately using it for national power, he sought favors in the local arena of New Orleans politics. He used his power numerous times to gain the trust and approval of prominent Louisiana politicians. It was not until two decades later that Burke

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<sup>33</sup> At the time when Burke arrived in Honduras, the railroad industry was in the process of becoming overwhelmingly important. In the late 1800s, the banana trade was becoming one of the most influential and economically critical aspects of Central American trade and without the use of an extensive commercial railroad system, the trade would suffer.

<sup>34</sup> Maury Klein, "The Strategy of Southern Railroads," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4, (April 1968): 1056.

<sup>35</sup> Maury Klein, "The Growth Strategies of Southern Railroads, 1865-1893," *The Business History Review*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Winter, 1967): 370.



began to seek power on a more national and international scale, again through control of a railroad system.

In 1872, Burke had attained authority as the Manager of the Illinois Central Railroad Company at New Orleans and immediately used his position to gain the favor of Henry Warmoth, a Reconstruction carpetbagger turned unpopular Louisiana governor. In Warmoth's memoir *War, Politics and Reconstruction: Stormy Days in Louisiana*, published in 1930, he states that while in New York City, he ran across his rival P.B.S. Pinchback, the black governor of Louisiana who succeeded Warmoth after Warmoth was deposed. Pinchback needed to return to New Orleans to sign a bill.<sup>36</sup> Because of their political rivalry, Warmoth wanted to be back in New Orleans before Pinchback, so he telegraphed Major Burke and asked if Burke could use his authority in the rail system to delay Pinchback's return to New Orleans as a favor. According to Warmoth, "Major Burk[e] appreciated the situation and went to work at once. He first found out by telegraph that Pinchback was on the New York-to-New Orleans train and he put a car and engine at the proper place for [him.]"<sup>37</sup> When the train carrying Warmoth arrived in Canton, Mississippi, Burke arranged for a telegram messenger to call out for Governor Pinchback, luring him off the train. At the moment the governor left the train, it pulled away and left him stranded. Warmoth arrived in Canton the next morning and taunted Pinchback.

It seems Major Burke was not averse to using both his railroad influence and telegraph expertise to gain the favor of politically powerful men in New Orleans,

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<sup>36</sup> This book is a memoir and was printed a year before Warmoth's death.

<sup>37</sup> Henry Clay Warmoth, *War, Politics and Reconstruction: Stormy Days in Louisiana* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1930), 202-203.

even if it meant embarrassing the governor.<sup>38</sup> Not only did he perform this action to glean favor from Warmoth, but his participation in this incident was in line with white supremacist efforts to restore white leaders to power in the South. Whenever possible, no matter how often he claimed to seek empowerment for African Americans, he stayed true to the beliefs of his peers and sabotaged African American political advancement.

As of 1872, Burke was also railroad agent for the New Orleans, Chicago and St. Louis Railroad Company, the New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern Railroad Company and the local manager of the Illinois Central Railroad. As Burke's political influence rose, he assumed political jobs in addition to his career in the railroad system. In 1872, Burke served as the chairman to investigate fraud on the Registration and Election Committee in New Orleans.<sup>39</sup> In this position, Burke conducted a rigorous series of investigations and interviews in an attempt to recognize illegal voting methods. Burke's committee found that over 5,200 "colored" voters were registered fraudulently in Orleans Parish alone.<sup>40</sup> In his testimony to the House of Representatives in 1875, Burke claimed that the names of the black voters were registered in multiple parishes and wards, many were found to be non-residents and some were even registered under pseudonyms.<sup>41</sup> His committee only investigated the actions of the Republicans, as he claimed only the Republicans had acted unjustly, and likely wanted to protect the interests of his own

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> House of Representatives, *Index to the Reports of the Committees of the House of Representatives*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2d. sess., 1874-1875, 654.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

party. This raises doubts as to whether the Democratic voter registration policies were accurate, as they were not under scrutiny and therefore not monitored to the same extent. He claimed, though, that while in this position, he spoke to African Americans individually, in their homes, and listened to their stories and political requests.

I had frequent interviews with the most intelligent colored residents of this city, and held several caucuses with colored people, at which every ward but two was represented by active colored workingmen. During these conferences, repeated assurances were given by the colored people that they were dissatisfied with the administration of public affairs and wished to co-operate with the white people and bring about better government. They professed loyalty to the national Republican Party, but opposed the corruption and venality that characterized the administration in this State.<sup>42</sup>

To this extent, Burke attempts to portray himself as different from other Southern Redeemers. Throughout the years of American Reconstruction, a new group of people developed throughout the South. Redeemers were white Southern Democrats who sought to “redeem” their region from what they viewed as Northern control. According to C. Vann Woodward, “the Redeemers... laid the lasting foundations in matters of race, politics, economics and law for the modern South.”<sup>43</sup> These men, through whatever means necessary, attempted to proclaim their superiority in the South and to wrest control back into their hands. Many new groups were created within this larger group, including numerous white supremacist groups. The Crescent City White League, one of the most prominent such groups in New Orleans, was made up of those who had controlled the city in the antebellum years. Major Burke, although a newcomer to New Orleans, was

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 22. Here Woodward refers to the South of the 1960s.

affiliated with the White League, as is evident through his participation in the Battle of Liberty Place, an illegal coup that will be studied further below. With Burke's aforementioned testimony to Congress, he aimed to convey his sympathy for African Americans primarily to separate himself from these redeemers and supremacists whose illegal actions were on trial.

Since Major Burke was entrusted with such a politically prominent role in investigating election results, one may assume his influence in both the public and private political spheres was rising. In 1872, Major Burke ran against P.G.T. Beauregard, Confederate General and Southern hero, for the office of Administrator of City Improvements. On October 16, 1872, an article in the *New Orleans Times* claimed that Burke was nominated due to "his own popularity and the high opinion entertained of his intelligence and energy."<sup>44</sup> According to this article, Burke's loyalties had come into question as his position as freight agent of the Jackson Railroad seems to have suggested ulterior motives. This article seems to be a plea for his vote, in essence a response to negative press. In addition, in the *Daily Picayune* newspaper on November 4, 1872, columnist Hugh McCloskey urged his readers not to vote for Burke, but that if they voted for General Beauregard, they would be "certain to have an honest Administrator," a man whom did not seek the office for himself, but was urged to run.<sup>45</sup> McCloskey states that the "forked tongue of slander dare not utter a word against [Beauregard's] integrity or his purity of

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<sup>44</sup> *New Orleans Times*, October 16, 1872, Vol. X, Issue 5730, America's Historical Newspapers (accessed August 23, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Hugh McCloskey, *Daily Picayune*, November 4, 1872, America's Historical Newspapers (accessed August 23, 2011).

character.”<sup>46</sup> McCloskey presents one of the few early negative reports of Burke’s character, stating that it would not surprise him if Burke purchased votes and used his position to attain support through ill means.<sup>47</sup>

This campaign represents the first time information on Burke’s character became readily accessible to the public as the Democratic New Orleans press repeatedly presented positive information on his behalf. The *Daily Picayune* on October 7, 1872, printed an article relaying Burke’s character as defined by his military record, stating that “he volunteered as a private in one of the first Texas regiments for the Confederate service, and by merit won his way, step by step, to the position of major.”<sup>48</sup> Although this lacks any specific information other than later stating Burke was a favorite of General Kirby Smith, this is the only contemporary instance where Burke’s Confederate record is stated. Burke is then called a “genial and talented gentlemen [who was] quite popular in [New Orleans].”<sup>49</sup> Although this was a political advertisement, he was frequently characterized in the media as genial, popular, noble and a Confederate major.

Despite his marketing, Burke was unsuccessful in this campaign for City Administrator, potentially due to the bad press that alleged ulterior motives and questionable means, and because of the immense popularity of his war hero opponent, Beauregard. This bad press did not affect Burke’s popularity for long, though, and was outshined by positive press. Burke was an entrepreneur who succeeded in immersing himself in the society and local politics of New Orleans to

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> *Daily Picayune*, October 7, 1872, America’s Historical Newspapers (accessed August 23, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

the extent that many regarded him as an admirable, genial community member. Burke strove to ensure he was not publicly seen as a “white adventurer,” especially since he sought to be such an outstanding member of the community.

### **Participation in the Battle of Liberty Place**

On September 14, 1874, many citizens of New Orleans, led by a gathering of Southern Democrats who were opposed to the federally supported Reconstruction policies, revolted against the legally elected Republican government of William Pitt Kellogg in what became known as the Battle of Liberty Place. This battle, led by the Crescent City White League, erupted in response to the election of 1872 in which Kellogg was elected governor of the state of Louisiana. After a buildup of two years, the Southern Democrats urged those New Orleans citizens sympathetic to their cause to participate in a coup on Monday, September 14<sup>th</sup>, during which they forced the abdication of Kellogg. Major Burke, who at that time was the freight agent for the New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern Railroad Company<sup>50</sup> and the administrator of the New Orleans, Chicago and St. Louis Railroad,<sup>51</sup> aligned with influential Democrats to play a role in this event and was appointed to a position in the newly, though illegitimate, appointed state government that replaced Kellogg's.

In response to the rumors of the potential insurrection planned by the Crescent City White League, the United States government arranged to send federal reinforcements to the city in order to aid the Metropolitan Police, should a problem

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<sup>50</sup> *Daily Picayune*, June 14, 1874. America's Historical Newspapers (Accessed October 22, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 133.

arise. According to a *New Orleans Times* article from September 14, 1874, General Emory, the officer in charge of federal reinforcements, telegraphed that his troops were to leave their summer camp at Holly Springs, Mississippi, at 9:00 pm on the night of the thirteenth and would arrive in New Orleans the following morning.<sup>52</sup> Their train trip would prove to be longer than anticipated, and in an article from the *New Orleans States* printed on the fiftieth anniversary of the battle, Burke is stated to have yet again used his role as a railroad administrator and experience garnered from his former post as a telegrapher to delay the train carrying federal troops.<sup>53</sup> According to the article, Burke carried out an “ingenious plan” in which he telegraphed the engineer of that train and requested that he halt the locomotive as soon as possible.<sup>54</sup> Because this article was written at a time when white supremacists held control of the South, this article may contain the most reliable portrayal of Burke’s participation as there was little likelihood of consequence for stating the truth. One version of the story states that the engineer then loosened a pin on the train so they had to stop at a location that was ill equipped to repair it. If the train carrying General Emory and his troops had been able to arrive on schedule, it would have been more difficult for the White League’s minimal forces to hold the city. Burke’s participation was beneficial to the, albeit temporary, success of the insurrection.

Historians who have studied the Battle of Liberty Place offer varied interpretations of Burke’s role. In W.O. Hart’s account of the battle, he claims Burke

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<sup>52</sup> *The New Orleans Times*, September 14, 1874, Louisiana Historical Center, New Orleans, Louisiana.

<sup>53</sup> The White League hosted memorial ceremonies for several years after the Battle of Liberty Place with the last service held on September 14, 1924, fifty years later.

<sup>54</sup> *New Orleans States*, September 14, 1924, Louisiana Historical Center.

sent a telegraph to tell the engineer in charge of the locomotive pulling the troops that were to be sent to combat the White Leaguers, to delay their arrival. According to James K. Hogue, though, Burke arranged for the “train to move slowly and spend hours stopped on sidings awaiting fuel and water.”<sup>55</sup> Hogue claims Burke intended for the soldiers to be stranded and unable to continue their journey until after the McEnery government had been installed.<sup>56</sup> No matter what story is told, Burke’s plan helped secure the victory of White League troops in the Battle of September 14, 1874. Although there are several different accounts of Burke’s role in the Battle of Liberty Place, in his testimony with the House of Representatives he denies any foreknowledge of the events of September 14, 1874.<sup>57</sup> Though he refuted knowledge of the plans for the day, he said nothing in regards to the role he may have played, suggesting that he may have meant to cover up his role in this unsuccessful political venture.

Following the success of the battle, Colonel D.B. Penn was appointed to the position of Acting Governor, because *de facto* governor John McEnery was out of the city at the time.<sup>58</sup> Upon McEnery’s accession, Penn organized the new cabinet and appointed Burke as Registrar of Voters. This political position, which had existed in the Kellogg administration as well, was critical to the illegally enacted state

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<sup>55</sup> Hogue, 133.

<sup>56</sup> Hogue does not list any sources for this story, but its inclusion demonstrates the presence of a sense of folklore in regards to Major Burke’s history.

<sup>57</sup> House of Representatives, *Index to the Reports of the Committees of the House of Representatives*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2d. sess., 1874-1875, 48.

<sup>58</sup> At the time of the gubernatorial election of 1872, both the Democratic and republican factions claimed victory. From that point on, Democrat John McEnery was popularly known as the “*de facto*” governor, meaning he was “truly the governor.” Republican William Kellogg was referred to as the “*de jure*” governor, or the one that was given power by the law.



government.<sup>59</sup> According to the *Daily Picayune*, Burke was appointed to this role by Acting Governor Penn to ensure that citizens would still register to vote.<sup>60</sup> Contemporary newspaper articles stated that during this time white voters continued to register and Burke stayed in constant contact with the registration offices.<sup>61</sup>

At this point Major Burke was also appointed the Commissary of Subsistence, a position in which he ensured the soldiers of the Battle of Liberty Place were well fed and nourished. Although few historians dwell on the social aspects of the few days the new regime was in power, evidence of the actions of New Orleanians is available in the form of newspaper advertisements. During the next few days the new regime placed several advertisements in the local papers regarding their new policies. One such stated: "Acting Governor Penn requests the citizens to send cooked food to the office No. 162 Julia Street, care Major E.A. Burke, Commissary of Subsistence."<sup>62</sup> These food donations would then be distributed to the White League soldiers who were guarding the Customs House where Kellogg and his men had barricaded themselves. Historian George Rable states that "conservatives jubilantly celebrated the demise of their archenemy" and that the new government had "captured the police stations, the arsenal, and all other state buildings."<sup>63</sup> This suggests that Burke was viewed as an important political force during the short-

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<sup>59</sup> "The Louisiana Outrages: The Nature of the Calm in New Orleans." September 17, 1874. *New York Times*. <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)>, (accessed October 24, 2010).

<sup>60</sup> *Daily Picayune*, September 18, 1874. America's Historical Newspapers (accessed October 22, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> *Daily Picayune*, September 15, 1874. America's Historical Newspapers (accessed October 22, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press), 139.

lived reign of the Democratic government enacted by the temporarily successful Battle of Liberty Place.

General Ogden, commander of the White League troops who led the charge in the battle, gave special thanks to Major Burke by saying “there is no man in the community to whom more of the honor and thanks of the people are due.”<sup>64</sup> Ogden also stated it was “by [Burke’s] untiring efforts on behalf of the citizen soldiers, [that these soldiers were] supplied with rations during the days of their arduous duties.”<sup>65</sup> Major Burke attentively monitored the rations of the White Leaguers, and, according to Ogden, demonstrated “unselfish and patriotic devotion” to the citizens of New Orleans and was worthy of great honor and gratitude.<sup>66</sup> According to his White League and Democratic supporters, Burke was a hard-working politician and someone they could trust to pursue their ideals.

Although they claimed not to fight against the furthering of African American rights, the White League was undeniably a white supremacist organization. The ideals of supremacy and the goal of maintaining white superiority was the underlying message of the Crescent City White League, an organization that could be compared to the Ku Klux Klan. Historian George Rable stated that “several Northern Louisiana editors asserted that blacks had drawn the color line against whites and that the superior race would retaliate by mustering its strength to defeat these forces of barbarism.”<sup>67</sup> According to Rable, reliable information regarding actual

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<sup>64</sup> House of Representatives, *Index to the Reports of the Committees of the House of Representatives*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2d. sess., 1874-1875, 659.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Rable, 131.

membership of the White League is difficult to find, which is likely why there are no actual records of Major Burke's membership and yet there is information regarding his behind-the-scenes participation in the battle.

A mere two days after the Battle of September 14, federal troops under the guidance of General Emory finally arrived in the city, wrested power from the White League and returned Governor Kellogg to power. This transitory revolution, though viewed as heroic by the Democratic citizens, was illegal and not recognized by the federal government. Although Burke had played a critical role in the illegal coup, his political career was bolstered in the years to come.

The study of newspapers from the time provides glimpses of the information that helped build the opinions of Burke and the credence that was given him by the citizens of New Orleans. On September 19, 1874, five days after the coup, *The New Orleans Times* notified the public that Major Burke was in charge of reclaiming the arms that had been distributed throughout the public.<sup>68</sup> Burke's orders "were that all such arms and material except such as were strictly private property, must be turned over to proper military authority."<sup>69</sup> Burke appears to be working for the federal government here, even though five days prior he was involved in overthrowing it. How did the legal government pardon a man who was so allied with the citizen's government so quickly retain his honor and trust with his fellow citizens? Burke's ability to retain public and governmental favor would prove beneficial when he moved to Honduras and sought political power there and yet somehow managed to retain a working relationship with American financiers.

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<sup>68</sup> *The New Orleans Times*, September 19, 1874, Vol. XI, No. 6416, Louisiana Historical Center.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

## **City Administrator Burke**

During Louis Wiltz's term as mayor of New Orleans in 1872-1874, Burke was appointed to the position of Administrator of Public Improvements, the position he ran for unsuccessfully in 1872. Wiltz was an influential banker and close friend of Major Burke's. As Burke had recently played a pivotal role in a failed political uprising, it is possible that the primary way he gained this new political appointment was through his friendship with Wiltz himself. According to Burke, in his testimony with a committee from the House of Representatives, the role of the Administrator of Improvements was to maintain order in money-handling and supervise "forty miles of streets... fifteen miles of wharves and landings and to supervise the draining of the city of New Orleans."<sup>70</sup> Burke claimed he was able to serve this position to the full capacity and was responsible for lowering expenses to \$365,000 a year, down from \$1,400,000. Burke attempted to garner positive responses from the government through his claims that he was able to take a struggling city economy and help reform it in a way that bolstered its capacity for future success. Here Burke was able to gain experience that he felt would benefit his ability to succeed in struggling economies, such as what his contemporaries viewed as the politically unstable Honduras.

According to Latin American scholar Walter LaFeber, Honduras "traditionally served as a base for revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries"; its instability

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<sup>70</sup> House of Representatives, *Index to the Reports of the Committees of the House of Representatives*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2d. sess., 1874-1875, 662.

made it easily susceptible to conquests.<sup>71</sup> In the views of New South politicians, Central America had long been a region of political and societal contention, which negatively impacted its economy. As Burke had gained experience working in recuperating economies, it is likely that upon his arrival to Honduras, he immediately attempted to solve problems. It was through his efforts in achieving such savings in New Orleans that he began to garner political opposition, resulting in his defeat for that position in the election of 1876.<sup>72</sup>

When Burke gave his testimony to the House of Representatives in 1875, he claimed to have been a third-term Republican, though since he had moved to Louisiana he never voted for the Republican ticket.<sup>73</sup> He considered himself a liberal Republican, but claimed he would never associate as such so long as the “fraudulent government” continued.<sup>74</sup> In this interview, he claimed to have never belonged to the Democratic Party, though by 1876, a year after this interview, he was the Democratic representative for Governor Nicholls in Louisiana.<sup>75</sup>

### **Participation in the Compromise of 1877**

The Compromise of 1877 led to the official end of the Reconstruction period of American history, but attaining this compromise was a complex and controversial process during which Burke was able to demonstrate his political power and adeptness at back-room dealing. The presidential race of 1876 elicited confusion

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<sup>71</sup> Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 9.

<sup>72</sup> E.A. Burke Papers 1837-1919, Special Collections, Tulane University.

<sup>73</sup> House of Representatives, *Index to the Reports of the Committees of the House of Representatives*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2d. sess., 1874-1875, 662.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 653.

and contention as Democrat Samuel Tilden and Republican Rutherford B. Hayes ran a tight race. Following the November election, it was difficult to clearly and accurately deem a winner, not only in the presidential race, but also in several Southern gubernatorial races. As such, the federal government was unable to legally declare a winner, so an Electoral Convention was called to look into the multiple disputed elections.

In his work, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction*, C. Vann Woodward makes compelling arguments regarding why this election was so crucial to the history of the United States. Woodward opens his study by describing the five main compromises the United States had attempted in the years since its foundation through the Compromise of 1877. He raises the point that throughout the nineteenth century, Americans became adjusted to the necessity of compromise and that they were successful in keeping the peace each time but one, with the failed Compromise of 1861.<sup>76</sup> Compromise had become an integral part of the country, and following the American Civil War, the need for a peaceful election was evident. Woodward argues that with the election of 1876, the United States government was faced with the challenge to conduct an election without the use of military force for the first time since the war, in essence a “return to the traditional ways of expedience and concession.”<sup>77</sup> This potential for compromise would also prove that the politicians of the South were once again ready to fully participate in the United States government.

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<sup>76</sup> Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction*, 3.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

In 1876, Burke served in New Orleans as the “Chairman of the Conservative and Democratic Party” in a role designed to investigate voter registration.<sup>78</sup> While in this position, Burke appointed William Whitaker to “take charge of complaints and suits arising out of the conduct of the registration and election.”<sup>79</sup> There was political strife from the beginning of the electoral process, as is evidenced by Burke’s appointment of Whitaker. It is also apparent that Burke was involved in the entire election in both an administrative and authoritative role. In 1876, Burke was unanimously selected by his fellow citizens to serve as the Democratic representative to the Electoral Convention for Francis Nicholls, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate.<sup>80</sup> Major Burke made his political prowess evident to Louisianans in his efforts during this convention. Not only did Burke travel to Washington, DC, to speak on behalf of Nicholls, he was also one of several politicians that met with two of Tilden’s and Hayes’s representatives in a secret conference in the Wormley House Hotel in an attempt to reach a compromise.

The intricacies of the politics of the time period approaching the end of Reconstruction provide valuable insights into why the ensuing Compromise of 1877 was such a convoluted yet defining political movement. It also presents a deeper explanation of the attitudes and actions of Southern politicians during this period of deep political strife.

One aspect of the Compromise of 1877 that is seldom discussed in detail is that of the Wormley Conference and Major Burke’s role in its results. This meeting,

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<sup>78</sup> William R. Whitaker to Maj. E.A. Burke, November 25, 1876, Folder 1 “E.A. Burke Papers,” Special Collections, Tulane University.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> *The New York Times*, February 3, 1878, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed October 10, 2010).

in the Wormley House Hotel in Washington, D.C., consisted of four Southern Democrats, several Republicans, allies of Rutherford B. Hayes and those of Samuel Tilden. The conference was led by Major E. A. Burke and resulted in the agreement on the circumstances of compromise.<sup>81</sup> It was at this conference that the Southern Democrats agreed to let Hayes be inaugurated as President in return for the inauguration of Democratic governors in South Carolina and Louisiana, in effect freeing these states from so-called “carpetbag rule.” This agreement led to the completion of the compromise and the ensuing end of Reconstruction. According to E. John Ellis, another powerful politician of the time, Burke was “the factotum of that whole series of conferences from beginning to end.”<sup>82</sup> It was during this event that Major Burke demonstrated his true capabilities of political back-room deal making, a theme that ran rampant during U.S. involvement in the political economy of Central America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The *New York Times* featured numerous articles regarding Burke that respond to the allegations brought forward that Major Burke was involved in illegal and subversive bargains that resulted in the Compromise of 1877. William Chandler, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, raised questions as to the legality of the Wormley Hotel Conference and the validity of the participants’ claims. The press seized on this debate by printing information that both heralded Burke’s innocence and accused him of being a crooked politician. On February 11, 1878, *The New York Times* printed an article that began by calling him “the shrewdest

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<sup>81</sup> “Butler Says Burke Lies,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 1878, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed October 10, 2010).

<sup>82</sup> Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction*, 192.



politician in Louisiana,” one of the first times his skills are portrayed in a negative connotation.<sup>83</sup> On August 27, 1878, Major Burke sent a Western Union telegram to Governor Nicholls that informed him that Burke had just interviewed Tilden for an hour and a half in regards to the presidential race. Burke said that during their interview, Tilden told Burke that he “held no unkind recollections because of [Louisianans] seeking to save [their] state government from wreck.”<sup>84</sup> Tilden, along with Burke and the other Louisiana Democrats, believed that conceding the presidency for the right to have a Democratic governor would help reclaim their state from Northern rule.

In 1878, Burke was appointed Treasurer of the State of Louisiana. Burke was appointed to this position and served for a decade, from 1878-1888. Major Burke served as treasurer under Governor Francis T. Nicholls and Governor Louis A. Wiltz. Nicholls and Burke were the first Democrats in their positions since the beginning of Reconstruction. During Burke’s term, he was highly involved in the Louisiana Lottery and was responsible for a new bond procedure. As far as the public knew, Burke led a fairly uneventful term, and it was not until 1889 that news of a potential scandal erupted.

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<sup>83</sup> “The Electoral Count,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 1878, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed August 20, 2011).

<sup>84</sup> Maj. E.A. Burke to F.T. Nicholls, Western Union Telegram, August 27, 1878, Folder 2, “E.A. Burke Papers,” Special Collections, Tulane University.

## Chapter 3: Major Burke During the Period of the New South

### Role as a Newspaper Editor

Throughout his early years in New Orleans, Major Burke was able to accumulate a wealth great enough to make significant purchases, the most significant of which being his purchase of both the *Times* and the *Democrat* newspapers in 1881. These local dailies were successful papers that circulated throughout the city of New Orleans. Once Burke purchased them, he combined them to create the *Times-Democrat*, a much larger, more prominent Democratic newspaper that gave him “unsurpassed power in Louisiana.”<sup>85</sup> Newspapers came to be a significant power in the New South, giving the owners and editors the power to control the flow of information throughout the region.<sup>86</sup> Woodward states that through Burke’s ownership and editorship of the newly developed *Times-Democrat*, he received “direction of the [Democrats’] most powerful organ.”<sup>87</sup>

According to Woodward, the most significant creation of the politics of the New South was the idea of the “Old South.”<sup>88</sup> It was the press, in large part, which allowed white Southerners to romanticize their Antebellum way of life, particularly through popular reminiscences and commemorations. Through newspapers, politicians were able to rally support for their causes under the guise that they promoted the return of the “Old South.” Not only were newspapers responsible for the re-popularization of old ideals, but according to historian Edward Ayers, “the

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<sup>85</sup> Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's A Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Exposition, 1876-1916* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 78.

<sup>86</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 145.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

newspapers did more than their share to publicize and exaggerate black crime and white retaliation.”<sup>89</sup> Newspapers took “every opportunity to trumpet” racial challenges and “increased racial tension in the late 1880s and early 1890s.”<sup>90</sup>

Burke used his role as editor of his newspaper to ensure he had the capabilities to control the media. Media has long been one of the quickest methods used to convey political thought to mass quantities of people. Control of the media enables one to ensure the public is told what to believe and although there are many who do not believe the media, it was (and is) a guaranteed way to sway many. There are countless instances in which Burke convinced the public to view certain events in ways that aligned with his thoughts and objectives. According to Thomas Watson, “the new daily, aside from serving the political interests of its publisher... [was] an oracle of the doctrines of economic development commonly associated with the mystique of the New South.”<sup>91</sup> This power is one that garnered importance in the New South and later on in United States expansionism. The ability to control the press was critical to raise support for the policies of Imperialism and expansionism in Central America. During Burke’s time in Honduras, he remained the correspondent for the *Times-Democrat* and ensured articles beneficial to his cause in the country were printed in the American newspaper.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 155.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Thomas D. Watson. “‘Staging the Crowning Achievement of the Age’: Major Edward A. Burke, New Orleans and the Cotton Centennial Exposition,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 25, No. 3, (Summer 1984): 233.

<sup>92</sup> E.A. Burke Papers, Tulane University.

## American Imperialism in Central America

According to David Healy, the prevailing attitude of the Victorian age was that “western civilizations, already the custodian of Christianity and the opportunity for eternal life, had become the dispenser of earthly salvation as well.”<sup>93</sup> This mindset was apparent both in the periods of Reconstruction and American imperialism. One could argue that the federal government believed Reconstruction provided the opportunity for the South to be rectified. The North sought to assist the South and often treated it as a conquered nation, which in a sense, it was. In his anthology of revisionist Reconstruction essays, Kenneth Stampp quotes historian Claude Bowers who portrayed Reconstruction as a time of “unrelieved sordidness in public and private life.”<sup>94</sup> Writing largely in sympathy with white Southerners, Bowers claimed that “scheming Northern carpetbaggers... invaded the South after the war for political and economic plunder.”<sup>95</sup> This same sense of capitalizing on another society for political and economic plunder was one that would continue on in U.S. expansionism.

Prior to the Civil War, slaveholders in the American South began to seek ways to extend slavery.<sup>96</sup> They began to argue in favor of expansionism, and stated that expansion Southward was the “natural” next step following the Mexican War.<sup>97</sup> Southerners sought to extend slavery to other regions and believed the land in

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<sup>93</sup> David Healy, *US Expansionism: The Imperialist Urge in the 1890s* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 13.

<sup>94</sup> Kenneth Stampp, *Reconstruction Anthology*, 4.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Robert May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 11.

<sup>97</sup> May, 4.

Central America would benefit the Gulf Coast economy.<sup>98</sup> In the 1850s, “Central America became the target for ‘filibusters’- private adventurers who moved out of New Orleans, New York and Baltimore to conquer the small countries for personal gain.”<sup>99</sup> These filibusters led the charge for American supremacist ideologies and adventurous efforts. The most noteworthy and successful filibuster was William Walker, an American who sought and attained personal political and financial gain in Nicaragua for a time in the late 1850s, before his defeat and execution in Honduras.<sup>100</sup> Burke, who repeatedly decried the “white adventurers” of Reconstruction, would, in fact, become a direct descendant of the antebellum filibusters.

At the time of American imperialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Central American country of Honduras had a population slightly less than the State of Louisiana. In the late nineteenth century, it was Britain’s attempts at attaining a stronghold in Central America that gave the United States justification for entering the scene. Britain’s “commerce and naval power had been pivotal in helping Latin Americans gain and hold their freedom from Spain. The British quickly moved to take advantage by investing heavily in securities and transportation.”<sup>101</sup> Many in the United States believed the Monroe Doctrine must be upheld and sought to intervene in Central American politics in order to ensure no other countries could conquer their neighbors to the South. The 1890s marked the “high point of modern

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 4-6.

<sup>99</sup> Walter LaFeber. *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 30.

<sup>100</sup> See William O. Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers: The Story of William Walker and His Associates* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1916).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 28.

Imperialism in the rest of the world,” not just in the United States.<sup>102</sup> Burke, along with other imperialists, thought he had a duty to assist the nation of Honduras in learning how to govern itself. Charles H. Pearson, a contemporary of Burke’s, believed that it was their duty to “familiarize other nations with a self-government which will one day make them independent of [the United States].”<sup>103</sup>

### **Director General Burke and the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition**

In 1884, New Orleans was given the opportunity to host the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition. The group in charge of planning for the fair, National Cotton Planter’s Association, appointed Major Burke the superintendent, or Director General, of the exposition.<sup>104</sup> His appointment was potentially due to his position as editor of one of the most successful newspapers in the city and his role in railroad management, a role of incredible import for the World’s Fair.<sup>105</sup>

Director-generals of world’s fairs had extensive amounts of power and were able to organize the fairs however they pleased.<sup>106</sup> One purpose of the American World’s Fairs was to enable Americans to witness the peoples and cultural practices of other nations, yet this was done through the lens of white supremacy. “Fairs therefore were to serve as reminders of the belief that in America, the people were

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<sup>102</sup> Healy, *U.S. Expansionism*, 4.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>104</sup> Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 77.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

sovereign.”<sup>107</sup> The World’s Fairs of the late nineteenth century showcased many international cultures, but it was their treatment of non-white populations that further garnered U.S. imperialist practices abroad. Each American World’s Fair had a “Colored Department” at which African Americans from the various regions would come together and demonstrate their culture, just as people from Mexico would demonstrate theirs at their booth.<sup>108</sup> Burke said that the Colored Department in the New Orleans fair aimed to “shed upon that unfortunate race the sunlight of science and invention and implant in him the desire to come out of the slough of ignorance.”<sup>109</sup>

Not only did the fair have a “Colored Department,” but it also had an “Indian Department.” G. W. Grayson, the Creek Delegate for the New Orleans Exposition presented Burke the “address for each of the Executive of each of the five civilized Indian nations of the Indian Territory” so that Burke would be able to communicate with them in regards to their “participation in the Indian Territory in the World’s Fair.”<sup>110</sup> Burke and Grayson held the viewpoint that Native Americans, like African Americans, were inferior people in need of civilization.

Major Burke was dedicated to ensuring the 1884 World’s Fair was held in the city of New Orleans. From the announcement of the possibility of hosting the fair in New Orleans, Burke staked a personal interest in assisting in whatever method

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>108</sup> Consult John Mangipano’s Master’s Thesis for further information on the booths featured in the New Orleans World’s Fair, specifically the Mexican exhibit. Mangipano, John, “Remolding Mexican Identity: The Wax Art of Francisco Vargas in 19th Century New Orleans” (2011). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 1327.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>110</sup> Correspondence, G. W. Grayson to Maj. E.A. Burke, May 1, 1884, Folder 2 “E. A. Burke Papers,” Special Collections, Tulane University.

possible to make the New Orleans World Fair a reality. In 1883, as the preparations for the fair were being made, Burke's "power and prestige were at its zenith."<sup>111</sup> With the ability to more efficiently publicize his agenda through the usage of his newly purchased newspaper, Burke was able to gain the support of even more citizens of New Orleans and was able to help raise enough money to win the right to host the fair in their city. Roughly one and a half million people attended the New Orleans fair, during which they were "introduced to a vision of the New South as reflecting and contributing to the national ideology of progress."<sup>112</sup>

The 1884 World's Fair consisted of a fairgrounds built specifically for the event and at great expense to the citizens of New Orleans.<sup>113</sup> Following the funding campaign, Burke was nominated as Director General of the fair, and accepted the offer under the condition that his salary be donated to Louisiana State University.<sup>114</sup> According to Burke, the exposition became so popular that more buildings had to be built to accommodate their needs.<sup>115</sup> Burke insisted that no expense be spared in the structures built for the fair, resulting in exorbitant buildings. Later on, when Burke was met with disapproval for the extravagant \$2,000,000 spent to construct the fairgrounds, he reported that it was the "largest constructive work that had ever

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<sup>111</sup> Watson, "Staging the Crowning Achievement of the Age," 230.

<sup>112</sup> Rydell, 102.

<sup>113</sup> See Miki Pfeffer's Master's Thesis for further information on the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition. Pfeffer, Miki, "An Enlarging Influence: Women of New Orleans, Julia Ward Howe, and the Woman's Department at the Cotton Centennial Exposition, 1884-1885" (2011). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 1339.

<sup>114</sup> Watson, "Staging the Crowning Achievement of the Age," 244.

<sup>115</sup> "Report of the Board of Management of the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition to the President of the United States," February 2, 1885, Folder 2, "E. A. Burke Papers, 1837-1919," Tulane Special Collections, Tulane University.



been achieved on” that expenditure.<sup>116</sup> In this same report, Burke states that the main building contained a

... wondrous collection of America’s resources. Clustering around the United States Government exhibits are the States and Territories, interspersed with displays of great railroad systems and surrounded in the galleries by the first efforts of the colored race in the display of their progress.<sup>117</sup>

The championing of “inferior” races in their efforts to attain civility was a practice Burke took with him to Honduras. This necessity to defend the cost of the fair seems to have foreshadowed the failure of the entire event. Burke left his position as Director General after the exposition started to lose money rapidly several months after opening, although he claimed he was leaving solely due to “pressing public duties” in his job as State Treasurer.<sup>118</sup> Burke sent in his resignation to the Board of Management on May 12, 1884, and was asked “to remain at the head of affairs of the Exposition.”<sup>119</sup> Even after leading the fair into financial ruin, Burke was still viewed positively.

Burke stayed involved with the fair long enough to make acquaintances with high-ranking officials of numerous countries including Britain and Honduras. Burke was able to develop transnational relations through his influential role in the 1884 World’s Fair, especially since the *Times-Democrat* held bureaus in “Washington and New York as well as ... Mexico and Central America.”<sup>120</sup> Burke’s social dealings always had a political connotation, as is evidenced in the years following the

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<sup>116</sup> E.A. Burke, “Report to the President of the State of the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition,” Folder 2 “E.A. Burke Papers, 1837-1919,” Tulane Special Collections, Tulane University.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Watson, “Staging the Crowning Achievement of the Age,” 229.

<sup>119</sup> “Director General Burke Resigns,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 1885.

<sup>120</sup> Watson, “Staging the Crowning Achievement of the Age,” 245.

exposition. Not every New Orleanian was blind to Burke's political leanings, though. George Nicholson, the editor of the *Daily Picayune*, the rival paper of the *Times-Democrat*, saw Burke as a "machine politician of the most profound type," an opinion which Nicholson openly shared through his newspaper.<sup>121</sup> Although it is likely Nicholson simply sought to defame Burke because he was a rival newspaper editor, this presentation of negative press presents a view of Burke that was, at the time, less well publicized.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 244.

## Chapter 4: Scandalous Burke and His Move to Honduras

It was not until September 1889 that popular opinion of Major Burke shifted from Redeemer hero to schemer. It was at this time, during his last year in office as State Treasurer, that it came to light he had absconded with hundreds of thousands of dollars of the state's money. Burke was accused of, and later indicted for, stealing "baby bonds" from the Louisiana treasury in 1885.<sup>122</sup> These bonds were supposed to be destroyed, but Burke had them sent to New Orleans from Baton Rouge and proceeded to sell them to innocent investors. Word of this did not surface until September 1889, when newspapers nationwide began to report the story.<sup>123</sup> *The New York Times* descended on the story and followed its progression from the first accusation to Burke's indictment. The initial newspaper articles convey the disbelief of New Orleanians and present Burke's assurances that he would rectify the issue.

At the time of Burke's accusation, he was in London on business, likely visiting politicians and businessmen he had met during the World's Fair.<sup>124</sup> At this point, Burke took his transnationalism to a new level. He assured the people he would return immediately, but was somehow sidetracked into going to Honduras instead of returning to New Orleans. *The New York Times* printed articles that provide the most informative descriptions of this eventful period. Shortly after, the paper provided an interview with Burke during which he stated he would return to New Orleans to "meet all the issues at home" as soon as his business in London was

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<sup>122</sup> See Appendix C for an image of these baby bonds.

<sup>123</sup> See *The New York Times*, September 25, 1889.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

completed.<sup>125</sup> The next article printed shared Burke's next story, from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, a revelation that shocked the citizens of New Orleans. It is difficult to ascertain what happened between the time he said he would leave London and his arrival in Honduras, but it may be assumed that he never intended to return to the United States.

Upon his arrival in Honduras, *The New York Times* reports that he said his business in Honduras with British capitalists "required his close attention there, and he did not intend to abandon their interests."<sup>126</sup> His loyalties seem to have switched from New Orleans to Honduras overnight. In response to his accusations, though, Burke stated that he was "disinclined to speak... [as it could be] only explained and refuted in Louisiana."<sup>127</sup> Burke never did return to Louisiana to refute these claims, though. Instead, his partner, Maurice J. Hart, was subjected to criminal trial and found guilty on three indictments of forgery and embellishment.<sup>128</sup> Hart was arrested, but Burke remained safe in Honduras, protected by the people and government there, amongst whom he was very popular.<sup>129</sup>

According to Kenneth V. Finney, "after 1876, Honduras attracted a small, vitalizing stream of foreign entrepreneurs and capital seeking to exploit the country's natural resources."<sup>130</sup> Burke was one such entrepreneur. After seeking as much political empowerment as he could in New Orleans and the United States, Burke turned his attention to the global sphere. Burke made contacts throughout

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<sup>125</sup> See *The New York Times*, October 13, 1889, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed October 24, 2010).

<sup>126</sup> *The New York Times*, January 4, 1890, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed October 24, 2010).

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> *The New York Times*, October 19, 1889, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed October 24, 2010).

<sup>129</sup> *The New York Times*, July 20, 1890, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed October 24, 2010).

<sup>130</sup> Kenneth V. Finney, "Rosario and the Election of 1887: The Political Economy of Mining in Honduras," *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 59, No. 1, (Feb. 1979): 82.

the world and settled on yet another struggling economic political environment. In 1886, Burke was extended an invitation by President Bograu, of Honduras to visit for several months. Bograu granted Burke “a concession of a tract of land 20 miles square, on a part of which is a promising gold mine, while the rest of the land is heavily timbered with mahogany and other valuable woods.”<sup>131</sup> Following Burke’s indictment for fraud, he moved from the newly reconstructed South to Honduras, what was to become a newly developing Central American country. Shortly after arriving, Burke was given the position of Superintendent of the Retiro Honduras Gold Mining Company, a company that was “considered to be engaged in one of the most serious and considerable undertakings that [had been] established in the country.”<sup>132</sup>

While in Honduras, Major Burke retained his relationship with the *Times-Democrat* and served in the role of international correspondent. He also maintained a close relationship with the American government. How he was able to remain in Honduras and be a consultant for the American government when he was wanted in the United States for embezzlement is a mystery. Yet, in a letter from the Senate of the US Committee on the Census on August 23, 1911, Robert LaFollette graciously thanked Burke for “the information [he had] taken the trouble to furnish [LaFollette] with the regard to the financial relations of certain American financiers with the government of Honduras.”<sup>133</sup> At this time, United States foreign policy “substituted

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<sup>131</sup> See *The New York Times*, September 14, 1886, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed October 24, 2010).

<sup>132</sup> See *The New York Times*, April 27, 1890, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (accessed 24 October 2010).

<sup>133</sup> Correspondence, Robert M. LaFollette to E. A. Burke, August 23, 1911, Folder 4, E.A. Burke Papers, Special Collections, Tulane University.

dollars for bullets by using private bankers as instruments of public policy.”<sup>134</sup> In accordance with this policy, a group of investment bankers involved with J. P. Morgan in New York City, decided they wanted to assist the country of Honduras in the payment of the country’s expansive debt to England. This controversy, known as the Morgan Loan & Agreement, was one in which Burke held an extensive interest. It is likely Burke expressed opposition to this policy because it proved unfavorable to his financial interests in Honduras.

In 1911, Burke wrote a letter to Don Policarpo Bonilla, the president of Honduras, in which he commended Bonilla for fighting the Morgan Loan & Agreement. Burke claimed he “was representative of the Associated Press [in Honduras] in 1909... [but] they shut [him] off and when [he] persisted later, they dismissed” him in December 1909.<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, Burke continued to write articles for his paper, the *Times Democrat*, which decried the Morgan Loan.<sup>136</sup> Major Burke, it seems, viewed the Morgan Loan as a mistake:

In my humble opinion, the people of Honduras would prefer to see the ports declared free, import and export duties abolished and Customs Houses delivered to municipality for school houses and let your Congress make Tariff laws for your officials to administer, sooner than sign over their independence to Morgan & Wall Street and bind their children to monopoly... but I have no right to speak for them.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 61.

<sup>135</sup> Correspondence, E. A. Burke to Don Policarpo Bonilla, June 7, 1911, Folder 4, E.A. Burke Papers, Special Collections, Tulane University.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Correspondence, E. A. Burke to Senator Williams, January 3, 1912, E.A. Burke Papers, Special Collections, Tulane University, Folder 4.

It is possible that Burke hoped to maintain influence in Honduras without the entrance of foreign investors with whom he was not involved. It is also possible that Burke desired to curry favor with his Honduran associates.

## **Conclusion: Imperialist Burke**

I began my work for Central American Union some 20 years ago, not only in Journalism, but in the effective way of earnest public men. In my journalistic work I was helpful in putting these countries fairly before the world... To keep alive the doctrine of Monroe safeguarded these countries against European aggression.

...to educate the US and commit its people against territorial acquisition or political entanglements as the only road to commercial or trade relations and firm friendly intercourse was my public work. In an humble but perhaps effective way, I did good work with both the great political parties.

- Letter to President P. Bonilla, Tegucigalpa, from E.A. Burke, Puerto Cortes, Dec. 10, 1897<sup>138</sup>

This letter, stated in Edward Austin Burke's own words, represents Burke's belief that his political career had sought to aid the country of Honduras and in America to promote the ideas of expansionism. Burke seems to have made important contacts in Honduras before his arrival there, likely during his tenure as Director-General of the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition. He had such a high status that he was close enough to the Honduran president to have a regular correspondence with him. In a letter to Honduran President P. Bonilla in Tegucigalpa, dated December 10, 1897, Burke wrote that during his career in America, he "humbly aided in shaping the policies of [his] country, the lines were laid down on a commercial and fraternal basis."<sup>139</sup> Through this letter, Burke demonstrated the same characteristics he had during his tenure in New Orleans. He appealed to the mindsets of the popular society and claimed he was working on their behalf. Burke claimed to be assisting the country of Honduras during his time

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<sup>138</sup> E.A. Burke, letter to President P. Bonilla, December 10, 1897, Burke (EA) Papers, Special Collections Department, Louisiana State University.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.



there so the citizens likely believed his story just as New Orleanians had in years previous. Major Burke lived in Honduras for the remainder of his life and died in Tegucigalpa, a member of the “upper-class social life.”<sup>140</sup>

Major E. A. Burke’s contemporaries thought highly of him, as is evident by his rapid escalation in political power and his efforts to “redeem” the South and end Reconstruction. In the late 1880s, the *New York Times* featured dozens of articles relating to Burke’s role in the treasury and lottery scandal in Louisiana. The first several articles proclaim his certain innocence, as the people of Louisiana had such a high opinion of his character. It is not until Burke fled to Central America that the newspaper articles begin to portray him in a negative light.

Major Burke represents the complexities of an era encompassed with political strife and contention but riddled with possibilities. He was a clever adventurer and freebooter who sought both political power and economic gain at key moments in the history of the United States. Burke was able to exploit the political contention of the postbellum South to his advantage and in so doing, gain political and commercial experience—not to mention illegal funds—that would serve him well in his life in Central America.

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<sup>140</sup> Finney, 99.

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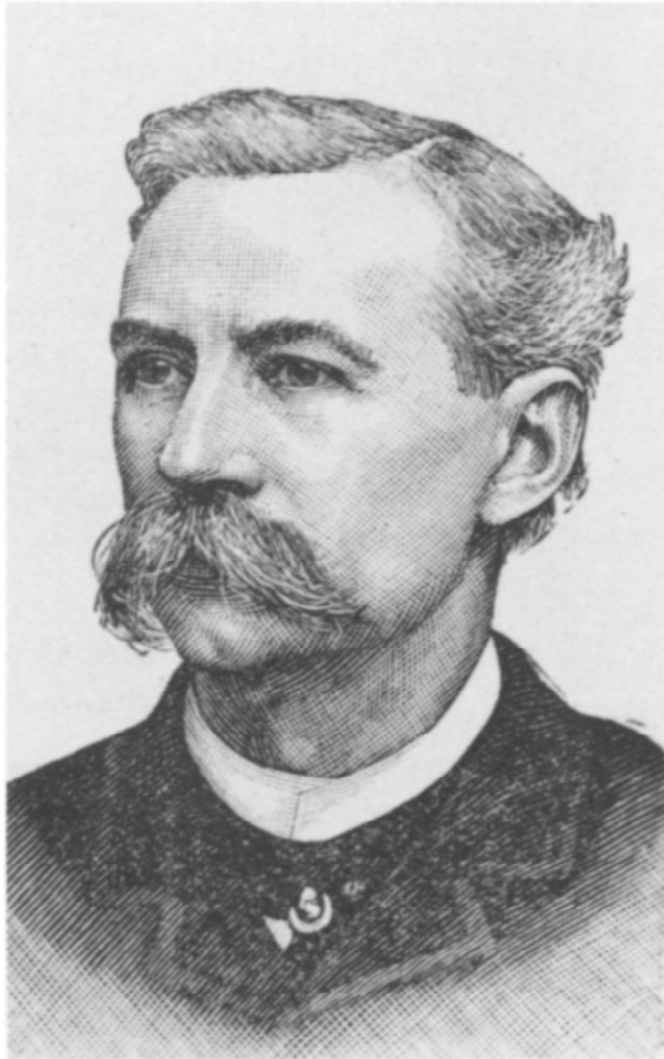
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**Appendix A**  
**Edward Austin Burke**



141

Vivian, James F. "Major E.A. Burke: The Honduras Exile 1889-1928."  
*Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, vol. XV, no. 2  
[Spring 1974]: 176.

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<sup>141</sup> Although Vivian claims this image can be found in the Library of Congress, archivists there have been unable to locate it. This lack of verifiability and the difficulty in locating the original add to the mysterious character of Major Burke. The only known image of him seems to have disappeared.

## **Appendix B**

### **Timeline of Edward Austin Burke's Life**

Ca. 1861-65: Burke serves in the Confederate Army and earns the rank of Second Lieutenant and supposedly Major, DeBray's Regiment (26<sup>th</sup>), Texas Cavalry

Ca. 1865-1869: Serves as freight agent in Galveston, Texas

Ca. 1870-1874: Freight Agent of New Orleans, Chicago and St. Louis Railroad Company (according to the Condition of the South interview, p. 659)

1874: Chief State Register of Voters (September, during the Revolution)

January 1874: Chairman of the committee appointed by the state central committee of the Democratic-conservative party to confer with the legislative caucus of the conservative members (affair of Jan. 4<sup>th</sup> as described by Burke to the Condition of the South, 662)

1874: Administrator of City Improvements

1876- March 1877: Governor-elect Francis Nicholls' Democratic Representative at the Electoral Commission

1878-1888: Serves as Treasurer of Louisiana

1881: Purchases the *Times* and merges it to create the *Times-Democrat* newspaper.

1884: Serves as Director General of World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, hosted in New Orleans

1889: Burke is indicted for embezzling funds from the Louisiana Treasury/ Lottery

1889-1928: Burke serves as railroad magnate in Honduras and owns several silver mines

1928: Burke dies in Tegucigalpa, Honduras

**Appendix C**  
**Bonds similar to those Burke was indicted for illegally signing (1889 treasury scandal):**

Obverse:



142

Reverse:



143

<sup>142</sup> One can note Louis Wiltz's signature as governor to the right of Burke's signature on this bond. Wiltz remained a powerful political ally for Burke throughout his tenure in New Orleans.

<sup>143</sup> These bonds are currently being sold at auction on the website E-bay. There are numerous versions available for purchase.

## Vita

The author was born in Columbia, South Carolina. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in History from Clemson University in 2009.