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RECONSTRUCTION EMBATTLED: THE MEMPHIS MASSACRE OF 1866 IN THE  
PRESS AND TENNESSEE'S FIRST YEAR OF INTERRACIAL DEMOCRACY

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty in the Department of History  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

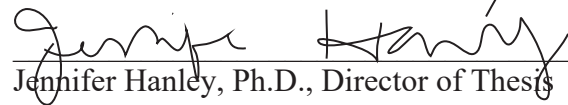
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for Degree  
Master of Arts

By  
Morgan Nicole Baxter

August 2020

RECONSTRUCTION EMBATTLED: THE MEMPHIS MASSACRE OF 1866 IN THE PRESS AND TENNESSEE'S FIRST YEAR OF INTERRACIAL DEMOCRACY

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RECONSTRUCTION EMBATTLED: THE MEMPHIS MASSACRE OF 1866 IN THE  
PRESS AND TENNESSEE'S FIRST YEAR OF INTERRACIAL DEMOCRACY

Morgan Baxter

August 2020

31 Pages

Directed by: Jennifer Hanley, Tamara Van Dyken, Dorothea Browder

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The racial violence that occurred in Memphis, Tennessee on the first three days of May 1866 was no sudden accident. Following the abolition of slavery and the fall of the Confederacy, race riots and racial violence in general intensified as a result of fluctuating race relations in southern states whose social hierarchies were built upon the degradation and supposed inferiority of blacks. The Memphis Massacre of 1866 was one such expression of white anger and bitterness over the disenfranchisement of former Confederates, the increasing numbers of educated, wealthy blacks coming into Memphis, and the disturbance of the old status quo in Tennessee. The violence that erupted through the streets of Memphis resulted in the brutal deaths of dozens of African American men, women, and children. The massacre itself, as well as the shattered state of race relations in Tennessee, grabbed the attention of the entire country and ushered in legislation that would, for the first time, act as a stepping stone for later movements toward full equality and freedom for blacks in the southern United States. Memphis, a city divided and broken after the war, became the center of the most sensational event since the surrender of the Confederacy one year prior. By analyzing reactions to the Memphis Massacre through the use of newspapers from 1866 from different regions of Tennessee, this act of racial violence can be used as a window through which to view post-Civil War race relations in the state of Tennessee.



On the night of April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1866, members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Colored Heavy Artillery walked down the streets of South Memphis, boisterously celebrating being mustered out of service. The former soldiers remained in the city for several days while waiting to receive their discharge pay; the Army having already taken their weapons. During the celebrations, they encountered a group of policemen when an exchange of taunts and curses began. The policemen are James Finn, David Carroll, John O’Neill, and John Stephens—all Irishmen.<sup>1</sup> One of the black soldiers taunts the officers, shouting “Hurrah for Abe Lincoln,” when an officer orders them to disperse. “Your old father, Abe Lincoln, is dead and damned,” replies one of the officers in return.<sup>2</sup> When it seemed as though the situation quieted, a policeman brandishing his firearm pistol-whipped one of the soldiers, sending both sides into a frenzy. The city’s policemen and a few white ex-rebels stormed the Memphis arsenal, leaving no firearms available for black use or protection. In an attempt to scare the officers into retreating, one black soldier fired a shot in the air and in doing so, triggered a chain reaction among the city’s Irish police and fire brigades. For the next seventy-two hours, black citizens were targeted for a free-rein killing-spree.

During the massacre, city recorder John Creighton (an Irishman) encouraged much of the murder and mayhem.<sup>3</sup> A witness recalled Creighton urging the men to attack black freedmen: “Boys, I want you to go ahead and kill the last damned one of the nigger race, and burn up the cradle, God damn them. They are very free, indeed, but God damn

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang Publishers, 2013), 96.

<sup>2</sup> United States Congress Select Committee on the Memphis Riots, *Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots, 1866*, 182.

<sup>3</sup> Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*, 95-7.

them, we will kill and drive the last one of them out of the city.”<sup>4</sup> Only two whites die in the bloody episode; policeman John Stephens by a self-inflicted gunshot wound, and fireman H. L. Dunn, when accidentally shot by a fellow insurgent. No killing of a white person by a black person occurred during the three days of violence.

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1866, Memphis city officials finally regained control, and forty-six members of Memphis’ black community lay dead on the city’s streets. Over the course of three days and nights, Memphis’ Irish-Americans viciously and violently destroyed the city’s freedmen’s churches, homes, and businesses. The Thirteenth Amendment first ended the system of exploitation and abuse which characterized the black experience in America for more than two centuries. Though no longer legally the chattel property of southern elite landowners, freedom from bondage did not equate the assurance of unhindered economic independence, freedom of uninhibited political representation, nor freedom from fears of white revenge against them for their loss of property. What began as an isolated skirmish between a few dozen black Union soldiers and four Memphis police officers escalated into a city-wide rampage driven by racial hatred. The Memphis Massacre of 1866, as it became known, revealed not only the brutal effects of racial malice, but also the rigid racial tensions between Tennessee’s white Democrats and Republicans in a new era of the post-slavery South.

In the year between the war’s end and the massacre, social tensions in Tennessee escalated as the threat of racial equality loomed, amplifying white animosity toward black freedom. For example, in West Tennessee white Conservatives viewed

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<sup>4</sup> T.W. Gilbreth, “The Freedmen’s Bureau Report on the Memphis Race Riots of 1866,” May 22, 1866, *The Freedmen’s Bureau Online, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands*, <http://freedmensbureau.com/tennessee/outrages/memphisriot.htm>

emancipated blacks and Republican rule as the bane of all that white supremacists held dear: the complete social, political, and economic hegemony that cemented whites at the top of the South's hierarchy and lowly African Americans permanently at the bottom. Political discord spread within the state, as Confederate disenfranchisement heightened fears of electoral outmaneuvering, potentially leaving them at the whims of formerly enslaved African Americans should they gain the vote. Additionally, the South's crushing defeat in the war left most white southerners financially destitute, forcing them to compete with freed blacks for menial laboring jobs. The Memphis Massacre was the result of a buildup of tensions created by Presidential Reconstruction, which resulted in the murder, rape, robbery, and arson—among other brutalizations—of American Americans and their community. The level of violence attained in the massacre was an expression of unbridled anger over societal equality, potential political outmaneuvering, and economic competition, but it was also an expression of fear, on the part of the Irishmen and ex-Rebels who aggressed, over what the future held for southern ideals of democracy.

The disastrous Confederate loss in the Civil War acted very much as a cultural reset for the southern United States, specifically set into motion by the end of slavery. The colossal impact of black emancipation on white southern life changed the trajectory of southern U.S. history in all facets— social, political, and economic. In a letter to Abraham Lincoln regarding Confederate reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation, General Ulysses S. Grant wrote, "I have given the subject of arming the negro my hearty support. This, with the emancipation of the negro, is the heaviest blow yet given the

Confederacy. The South care a great deal about it and profess to be very angry.”<sup>5</sup> In eastern Tennessee, pro-Unionist Republicans viewed their counterparts in the West as selfish preservers of an archaic slave system and treasonous curators of civil war leading to the upending of the Union. Elihu Washburne, leader of Radical Republicans and supporter of black civil rights, referred to returned Confederates as: “Men who have involved this country in this terrible war, costing three hundred thousand lives, and three billions of dollars, and that has clothed the whole country in mourning.”<sup>6</sup> Tensions catalyzed by changing racial demographics often led to violence, as the 1866 episode in Memphis proved, and white Democrats and Republicans often used the episode as an opportunity to react to transforming ideals of democracy in America. As one of the testing grounds for the new post-war racial order, the massacre portrayed Memphis as the state’s epicenter of racial unrest caught in the maelstrom of a changing society. Despite the abundance of primary source evidence available on the massacre, and its influence on the course of American history, the event is largely forgotten about as it becomes lost in the sea of Civil War and Reconstruction scholarship. However, questions about the post-Civil War period and its impacts have brought the massacre back into historical study, becoming the subject of projects and scholarship on this crucial era in U.S. history.

Of the historiography on the Memphis Massacre, Stephen V. Ash’s 2013 book *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot that Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War*, is the only book-length study on the massacre, which details the days before, during, and after the massacre in the city of Memphis. Ash argues that this race massacre,

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<sup>5</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, “Letter to Abraham Lincoln,” August 23, 1863, *Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress*. <https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/abraham-lincoln-papers/history6.html>

<sup>6</sup> *Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots*, 289.

a continuation of older forms of racial brutality, also acted as a portent of a new kind of violence: the systematic terror that southern whites would exact against black Americans well into the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Ash relies heavily on first-hand accounts of the massacre from the federal investigations, as well as on the national reactions to the violence. This paper differentiates itself from Ash's work, as the massacre is used as the centerpiece in evaluating white Tennessean's reactions to the social, political, and economic Reconstruction of their state, and the internal divisions over the future of democracy in Tennessee.

Using newspapers from across the state of Tennessee following the Memphis Massacre of 1866—both Republican and Democrat, pro-Union and pro-Confederate—it is possible to gauge how white, Reconstruction-era Tennesseans reacted to transforming ideals of democracy through the lens of racial violence. Of the main disadvantages in using journalistic coverage on the massacre, is the prevalence of the obvious political and personal biases possessed by 19<sup>th</sup> century southerners still reeling from years of war, the fact that newspapers acted as a vehicle for inciting sensationalism among the masses, and that cities profited off the popularity of journalism as the fastest avenue for spreading news. Without the availability of substantial personal correspondence of Tennesseans concerning the massacre, such as letters or memoirs, newspaper coverage is the best-available source for glimpsing the real and deep-seated animosities Tennesseans still possessed of one another a year after the war. Despite the drawbacks of 19<sup>th</sup> century sensational journalism, without it, it would be nearly impossible to understand Tennessean's reactions, anxieties, and opinions surrounding the

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<sup>7</sup> Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*, xiv.

massacre and the implications it held for the future of social, political, and economic Reconstruction in the state.

The historiographic redefining of race riots as race massacres marks a shift in the understanding of hierarchical racial violence in history. The specific definitions of a riot and a massacre are, respectively: a tumultuous disturbance of the public peace by three or more persons assembled together and acting with a common intent; and, the act or an instance of killing a number of usually helpless or unresisting human beings under circumstances of atrocity or cruelty.<sup>8</sup> In an era before the advent of Civil Rights Movements, it was common for large-scale clashes between different ethnic groups to receive categorization as “race riots” rather than as race massacres. The usage of “riot” implies that both parties share an equal part in violence committed, while “massacre” connotes the complete brutalization of one party by the other. White employment of the term “race riot” in coverage on the Memphis Massacre not only forced a biased narrative onto the people involved in the violence, but played into the white supremacists’ ploy of shifting blame onto victims. The chronicle on the violence, *The Report on the Memphis Riots and Massacres*, uses both terms to describe the events. The massacre investigation committee, aware of the incorrectness in calling it a “riot,” addresses the report title as such:

The proportions of what is called the “riot,” but in reality the massacre, proved to be far more extended, and the circumstances surrounding it of much greater significance, than the committee had any conception of before they entered upon their investigation... It was called in derision the “nigger riot,” while, in fact, in the language of General Stoneman, the negroes had nothing to do with it after the first day, except to be killed and abused.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

<sup>9</sup> *Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 5.

In order to accurately reflect the changes made in historical scholarship, and reveal the realities of racial hatred resulting in the slaughter of a disadvantaged minority by a more powerful majority, this project adopts the use of characterizing such an act of racial violence as a “massacre.”

The three regions of Tennessee—east, middle, and west— have geographically, culturally, and economically distinct roles in the state’s history. East Tennessee, encompassing the Southern Appalachian Mountains and a portion of the Cumberland Plateau, has soils less-suited for the heavy commercial agriculture of Middle and West Tennessee. Middle Tennessee includes the low-lying area called the Nashville basin, which is dominated by fertile valleys and rolling hills. West Tennessee, a part of the Mississippi River basin, boasts the richest soil in Tennessee throughout the state’s history. These rich soils allowed agriculture to flourish in the region, and in the antebellum period, cotton was king in West Tennessee. This large-scale cotton farming made West Tennessee distinct from the other two regions in that dependence on slave labor quickly became an ingrained way of life in order to support the economic systems of the state’s western counties. The image displays the obvious differences in slave populations from East to West Tennessee, becoming particularly prominent in the central counties of Williamson and Maury.



Fig. 1. Map showing the distribution of the slave population of Tennessee. Compiled from the census of 1860. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3861e.cw0013200/?clip=4565,2284,3089,1223&ciw=539&rot=0>

These discrepancies among Tennessee’s three regions became evident on the eve of the Civil War, when West and East Tennessee stood on opposite ends of the spectrum concerning the topics of slavery and separation from the Union. Regional attitudes toward secession stemmed predominantly from the prominence or absence of plantation agriculture in each divisions’ counties. West Tennessee, with its counties scattered with slave plantations, maintained pro-secessionist sentiments throughout the duration of the Civil War. East Tennessee’s near-absence of plantation agriculture lead to strong feelings of unity toward the Union and contempt for the Confederacy.<sup>10</sup> With a history of abolitionist activity, most of East Tennessee counties made up a cluster of anti-slavery sentiment in a state that was otherwise vehemently pro-slavery.

The fall of the Confederacy and the system that underpinned its cause in the Civil War made the United States a nation anew, while also redefining the next century of white and black southern life. For many Tennesseans, abolition was a portent that signified the possibility of a future where the grounds of citizenship between the races

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<sup>10</sup> R. Scott Fosler, *The New Economic Role of American States: Strategies in a Competitive World Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 143.



could, for the first time, be equal. However, without citizenship legislation to guarantee equal protection for their race, blacks' worthiness as Americans began being called into question by bitter white southerners who wished the restoration of the pre-Civil War power structure and to a democracy upheld by the societal, political, and economic systems that functioned with blacks as slaves and *not* equal citizens under the law. This bitterness combusted into the Memphis Massacre, displaying the consequences of white rage at its most violent.

The end of the war and with it newfound freedoms brought an even larger influx of freedmen into Memphis, with the number of blacks in the city reaching 20,000 in 1865. Five years prior, only 4,000 African Americans lived in Memphis when its total population was 23,000, with nearly 95% of the black population enslaved.<sup>11</sup> West Tennessee's dependence on slave labor and historically Democratic leanings across the region made Memphis a conglomeration of racial tension, building up in the year following the war and before the massacre. While freedmen fled plantations for the state's largest cities, at the same time, white Republicans arrived from the North to capitalize on the rebuilding of Tennessee's shattered economy and assist former slaves in navigating life as a free people. With fresh wounds leftover by the war, Republicans and Democrats strongly resented each other for each's attempt in tearing down the forms of government that defined their own opposing ideas of American democracy.

Upon arriving in Memphis after leaving a Mississippi plantation in July 1865, freedman Louis Hughes declared: "The city was filled with former slaves, from all over the south, who cheered and gave us a welcome. I could scarcely recognize Memphis,

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<sup>11</sup> Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 7.

things were so changed.” Hughes also noted that, “aside from the citizens of Memphis, hundreds of colored refugees thronged the streets. Such a day I don’t believe Memphis will ever see again— when so large and so motley a crowd will come together.”<sup>12</sup>

Refugees such as Hughes sought the egalitarian changes implicit in the abolition of slavery, such as access to education, family security, and suffrage. These freedoms again became distant dreams as white southerners scrambled to change the meaning of freedom. The fundamental changes to Memphian society in the year after the war caused racial tensions to fester, resulting in the spasm of racial violence.

The negative implications of social Reconstruction revealed themselves even during the melee of the massacre, as the episode acted as an opportunity for Irish officials and ex-Rebels to assert power over freedmen. For the Irish-American police and fire officers who wished to restore the power balance to its former glory, the issue rested with the black Union officers who patrolled the city after the war. One black Union soldier, named Allen Summers, experienced some of the brutality exacted by Irish policemen, who said:

The big policeman snapped his pistol once before it went off, and then fired right through my shoulder. The great big red Irishman knocked me down; a policeman came and struck me with a stick. The Irishman then stabbed me, put his hand in my pocket and got my \$25. They allowed they, ‘were going to kill the God damned nigger soldiers who were fighting here against their rights—the black sons of bitches.’<sup>13</sup>

The caliber of physical and verbal abuse hurled at freedmen like Summers, and so many others, were expressions of the belief that blacks had no place in a free, white society.

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<sup>12</sup> Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave, From Bondage to Freedom: The Institution of Slavery as Seen on the Plantation and in the Home of the Planter* (Milwaukee, WI: South Side Printing Company, 1897), 176, 187.

<sup>13</sup> *Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 171.

The primary instigator in the uproar, city recorder John Creighton, declared that he would pardon any white man found carrying a weapon when he brandished his own to a crowd: “Gentleman, I am a brave man, by God, and this is the best piece of metal in the state of Tennessee. We are not now prepared but let us prepare to clean every nigger son of a bitch out of town.”<sup>14</sup> Clear signs of resistance to the claiming of new rights by blacks reveals the instability in the new racial system of the South, resulting in actual anarchy within the Memphis city government. The horrifying instances of violence continuing throughout the next three days and nights reflect a major breakdown in Memphian society, causing the anniversary of the South’s first year of interracial democracy to coincide with an episode of brutality with implications that would continue to morph social Reconstruction in Tennessee in its aftermath.

As Tennesseans across the state heard news of the massacre, reactions to the circumstances of relations in Memphis revealed conflicting outlooks toward the nature of Tennessee society going forward. White southerners who upheld traditional beliefs on the races imagined themselves as a hard-working, religious and moral people, while picturing African Americans as lazy, morally lax, and uncivilized: a backwards image of what it meant to be “American.” In the antebellum period, white fears of slave insurrections and rebellions led to the prohibiting of black gatherings. These fears, exacerbated by ex-slave’s potential access to weapons, led to black gatherings continuing on as sources of white fear and disdain after emancipation. The arson of the black community by the Irish included infrastructure, meeting and club houses, schools, and churches; all of such places useful for black socializing and community mobilization. In the minds of massacre

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<sup>14</sup> *Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 24.

instigators, without black meeting places, African Americans would return to a level of enslaved subordination.

Only days after the massacre, Democratic newspaper, the *Fayetteville Observer*, used the violence of the massacre as a scapegoat to reflect the belief that blacks, conniving in their plans to instigate a riot, were too violent for free, American democracy. The newspaper report read that the massacre, “had been for some days the intention of the negroes, at the instigation of some white men, to sack and burn the city as soon as they were mustered out of service,” and continued on that, “The negroes seemed to be desperate and determined to carry the contest to the bitter end, and the white citizens were willing it should be so. The blacks raised the *black flag*.”<sup>15</sup> The mention of the “black flag” is a reference to a flag flown by certain Confederate Army units to represent the *opposite* of the white flag of surrender. As the majority of massacre victims were innocent men, women, and children from Memphis’s black community, the newspaper’s accusation of freedmen threatening anarchy in the face of the city’s authorities was a means of promulgating the idea that African Americans could never be upstanding citizens of American government. Thus, Tennessee’s white Democrats often used the violence of the massacre to portray the innocent freedmen as lawless and uncontrollable, and therefore incompetent in behaving in American democracy and undeserving of freedom.

William G. Brownlow, die-hard East Tennessee Republican and governor of the state after the Civil War, founded a newspaper titled *Brownlow’s Knoxville Whig* through

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<sup>15</sup> “Great Riot in Memphis! War of the Races,” *Fayetteville Observer*, May 10, 1866, [https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping\\_id=35367475&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlXzZpZXctaWQiOjcwNzg4NjczLCJpYXQiOiE1NzI2MzAzNDksImV4cCI6MTU3MjcXNjc0OX0.n1TvuvcwfH0-D7B5cbbqLWjpw4MtogQ60Q5YYoHwKxIU](https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=35367475&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlXzZpZXctaWQiOjcwNzg4NjczLCJpYXQiOiE1NzI2MzAzNDksImV4cCI6MTU3MjcXNjc0OX0.n1TvuvcwfH0-D7B5cbbqLWjpw4MtogQ60Q5YYoHwKxIU)

which coverage of the massacre flowed. Also flowing from the newspaper was fervent anti-Confederate rhetoric, which increased significantly in coverage on the massacre. Of the Confederates, the paper reported in August 1866: “Treason is daily becoming more odious; there is no doubt about it. It was more odious on the day of the Memphis riots than it was before,” and continues to state that, “Not only is the spirit of treason becoming odious by the lawless and defiant course of the men who lately were engaged in an attempt to overthrow the government and Union.”<sup>16</sup> For Tennessee’s white Unionists in the east, the last five years were characterized by Rebel threats to bring down the democratic ideals the Union sought to preserve. Clearly, the Confederate defense of slavery over the stability of American democracy was in the mind of every Unionist in Tennessee, even a year after the war concluded. The *Whig’s* depiction of those involved in the massacre as treasonous outlaws disloyal to the government reveals the still very stark regional divisions in Tennessee during Reconstruction. Memphis’s progressive newspaper, *The Memphis Daily Post*, reported on the lives and activities of freedmen in the city. Regularly advertising for civil rights and equality for freedmen, and particularly after the massacre, the *Post* declared:

Some of these men, who were foremost in the commission of acts which would disgrace a Comanche Indian, are morbidly sensitive to any intimation that a negro should have the right to own property, or serve as a juror, because thereby he is in some degree placed on an equality with them—as if any law, framed by human hands, could place an honest and faithful negro man, such as were many of their victims, on the same level with themselves.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “Making Treason Odious,” *Brownlow’s Knoxville Whig*, August 15, 1866  
[https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping\\_id=35387777&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZlXctaWQiOjczNjUyNzMiLCJpYXQiOiE1ODIwNzYzNDQsImV4cCI6MTU4MjE2Mjc0NH0.MJPNf7Jqhkju2I8-9dX\\_0Krq7xhbM0LtRfXW2mG3w](https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=35387777&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZlXctaWQiOjczNjUyNzMiLCJpYXQiOiE1ODIwNzYzNDQsImV4cCI6MTU4MjE2Mjc0NH0.MJPNf7Jqhkju2I8-9dX_0Krq7xhbM0LtRfXW2mG3w)

<sup>17</sup> “The Memphis Press on the Riots,” *Memphis Daily Post*, May 6, 1866.

As much as the massacre triggered realizations as to some of the impacts of social Reconstruction, albeit devastating, the implications of the massacre on political Reconstruction cannot be downplayed, as it marked the beginnings of black civil rights in the southern United States.

In February and March of 1866, President Andrew Johnson vetoed two civil rights bills put forth by Republicans in Congress crafted with the intent of granting citizenship to the South's freedmen and rights inherent in naturalization. Johnson, though pro-Union throughout the war, had desires to appeal to the wealthy planter class— clearly reflected in his weak plans for Reconstruction of the southern states which included no real protections for African Americans. Revealed in his veto of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 is Johnson's hesitancy to allow freedmen integration into American democracy:

Can it be reasonably supposed that they possess the requisite qualifications to exercise all the privileges and immunities of citizenship of the United States?... The bill in effect proposes a discrimination against large numbers of intelligent, worthy and patriotic foreigners, and in favor of the negro, to whom, after long years of bondage, the avenues to freedom and intelligence have just now been opened. He must of necessity, from his previous unfortunate condition of servitude, be less informed as to the nature and character of our institutions than he who, coming from abroad, has to some extent at least, familiarized himself with the principles of a Government to which he voluntarily trusts life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, with no federal laws to guarantee their safety against racial retribution, and as non-citizens with no political voice or mobility, Memphis's black citizens tread on shaky ground in the months leading up to the massacre. Dire need of protection for freedmen in Memphis increased after the war, as extreme apathy toward black security and welfare among the Irish voting population set the stage for racial violence in the city.

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Johnson, *Veto of the Civil Rights Bill*, March 27, 1866.

Animosity toward Memphis's freedmen emanated not only from a community of bitter ex-rebels, but also just as strongly from Memphis's large population of Irish immigrants, whose fierce strain of racism anchored in concerns over new job competition for the white working-class. Irish-Americans, having had their own experiences with Anglo-Protestant based racism in American history, viewed freed slaves as a further impediment to full social, political, and economic integration in the United States. In Memphis however, Irish immigrants found reception from the city's Democratic Party and eagerly embraced the politics that embodied white supremacist teachings after the Civil War.<sup>19</sup> The role of the Irish in Memphis became unique with the loss of the southern cause, as the disenfranchisement of those who aided the Rebel effort led to the heavily-Irish voter turnout in the June 1865 general election. The election installed many Irishmen into positions of power: the mayor, John Park, was Irish, along with nearly all of the city's fire and police brigades, in addition to the majority of Irish aldermen and the city's executive officers.

With timing of the election directly coinciding with the influx of freed slaves into the city, Irish Memphians began to exploit their new positions to abuse African Americans in an effort to protect the city's predominantly Irish working class and claim an equal position in white America.<sup>20</sup> During the massacre's investigation, the deputy sheriff of Shelby County, James H. Swann, described the rampage to investigators. Specifically noting that: "The whole thing grew out of a feeling of spite between the police and negroes...It has been gradually growing up. I have heard it remarked that it

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<sup>19</sup> Ash, 52.

<sup>20</sup> *Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 23

would ultimately come to a riot, the way the thing was going on. They would meet every few days and have a fuss.”<sup>21</sup> Eager to become American citizens and embrace the benefits of naturalization, Irish-Americans found that the opportunity to participate in politics allowed them to garner the justice and respect long-sought by immigrants to the United States. Irish and ex-rebel attempts at staving out black freedom through a violent massacre created an inverse effect, ironically altering and sealing the future of political Reconstruction in the state for the next decade.

With nearly fifty African Americans brutally murdered, the Memphis Massacre is important because it highlights the weaknesses within Andrew Johnson’s too-lenient Presidential Reconstruction program, and makes glaringly obvious the lack of civil liberties for the South’s freed slaves. The racism and ineptitude of Memphis police and government officials shown in the massacre denoted a need for federal policy that ensured African Americans the same citizenship rights and standards of governmental protection that their white counterparts inherently possessed at birth. As the need to redefine the means by which blacks and whites coexisted in a non-slave society became apparent, the massacre acted as a catalyst for the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in Tennessee and Radical Reconstruction, giving special attention to the welfare of freedmen where it severely lacked. The Civil War seeped the United States in blood for four years before the massacre; the last thing Republicans in Congress desired was a continuance of bloody skirmishes that resulted in the deaths of innocent and recently freed blacks.

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<sup>21</sup> *Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 178.



Political debates over how to handle the South's freedmen began immediately after the Civil War. Some prominent Republicans, such as William Dickson, judge and informal advisor to Abraham Lincoln, publicly professed social, political, and economic equality for blacks:

My friends, every consideration which ought to influence human conduct, requires that the ballot should be given to the black man. The protection of the black man himself requires it; gratitude for his devoted loyalty requires it; the protection of our civilization from the influence of a degraded and barbarous element requires it; the protection of ourselves from the insidious rebel ballot requires it; the speedy restoration of the rebel states to their proper relation to the General Government requires it; the fundamental principles of our Government require it...<sup>22</sup>

Public political addresses such as this is an example of the national debate surrounding the central questions of the early Reconstruction period. The question vexing many Republicans like Dixon revolved around the safety of freedmen in the presence of their former masters and pro-slavery ex-rebels. The massacre called into question the very foundation upon which every classically liberal government rests its legitimacy: its guarantee to protect its citizens from being murdered. Five months after William Dickson's address, the massacre claimed immediate prominence in already-charged political debate, causing concern among Republicans in Washington as they considered the reality of black struggle in the South.

The magnitude and brutality of the violence, creating both the need for a federal investigation and the opportunity for Radicals to implement massive governmental reform in Tennessee, Radicals like Thaddeus Stevens beckoned Congress to address the government's failure to Tennessee's freedmen: "Let not these friends of secession sing to

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<sup>22</sup> William Dickson, "The Absolute Equality of all before the law, the only true basis of Reconstruction," December 1865, *The Lost Museum Archive*. <https://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/the-absolute-equality-of-all-before-the-law>

me their siren song of peace and good will until they can stop my ears to the screams and groans of the dying victims at Memphis.”<sup>23</sup> A Democratic newspaper in Nashville, the *Nashville Union and American*, bitterly announced the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment in Tennessee:

By a fiction of the constructive presence of these gentlemen, the Radical leaders assumed the existence of a quorum and consummated the unholy work of formally committing the people of Tennessee to the endorsement of a measure to which nineteen-twentieths of them are known to be opposed, and known too, to be so by the very men who have used this disreputable legislative legerdemain to give it semblance of legality. Irregular, illegal, and monstrous as it is, however, the act seemed to thrill and intoxicate the Radical perpetrators and abettors with furious and insane joy.<sup>24</sup>

Tennessee’s readmission to the Union preceded a number of new laws to outline the future of political Reconstruction in the state. The introduction to the First Reconstruction Act read: “Whereas no legal State governments or adequate protection for life or property now exists in the rebel states...and whereas it is necessary that peace and good order should be enforced in said States until loyal republican State governments can be legally established.”<sup>25</sup> By passing these kinds of acts, Republicans catered to numerous Tennesseans, particularly those loyal to the Union during wartime in the eastern region of the state.

However, for white supremacist Democrats, the concept of a new form of government brought on by a massacre— one that ex-Confederates argued was instigated by black soldiers— emboldened Democrats to attempt to wrest back control in the area of

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<sup>23</sup>Thaddeus Stevens, *The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens, Volume 2: April 1865-August 1868*, ed. Beverly Wilson Palmer (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 138.

<sup>24</sup> “The House Concur in the Senate’s Ratification of the Amendment,” *Nashville Union and American*, July 20, 1866. [https://www.newspapers.com/image/70798216/?clipping\\_id=34799638](https://www.newspapers.com/image/70798216/?clipping_id=34799638)

<sup>25</sup> “First Reconstruction Act.” *An Act to provide for the more efficient Government of the Rebel States*, March 2, 1867.

society most crucial to the sustenance of white supremacy in the South— politics. Conservative Democratic newspapers angrily rejected the presence of northern Radicals in Tennessee, such as the West Tennessee newspaper the *Clarksville Chronicle*, by naming Radicals as:

Villainous agents in the shape of letter writers, school teachers, and secret emissaries and spies—whose business it is to invent lies, pervert facts, foment discord between whites and blacks, and get up bloody riots— all which are skillfully used to blacken the character of the South, and to blacken the hearts and passions of the mob, over which Radical leaders exert an unbounded sway.<sup>26</sup>

Not only were there extreme racial tensions like those that catalyzed the massacre, but there also existed obvious tensions between these two sides there were still very much divided. By blaming violent race massacres on the incapable freedmen and villainous Radicals, white Tennesseans not only freed themselves from any responsibility in the violence, but validated their claims that emancipation would be the ruin of civilized southern society and rob southerners of freedom, and in turn their supremacy.

Under considerations of the violence in Memphis, both Radicals and Democrats used the massacre as a warning to heed in order to prevent similar events in the future. Radicals, using it to push forward stringent legislation in Tennessee, determined that, “The riots and massacres of Memphis are only a specimen of what would take place throughout the entire South, should the government fail to afford adequate military protection.”<sup>27</sup> White southern Democrats characterized the Memphis Massacre as but a foreshadow of what would come with northern military patrol of the state. The Conservative newspaper, the *Bolivar Bulletin* reported:

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<sup>26</sup> “Not Guilty,” *Clarksville Chronicle*. September 21, 1866.

<sup>27</sup> The Reports of the Select Committee, 33.

The bloody riots which have occurred at Norfolk, New Orleans, and at Memphis are the natural consequences of the teachings of such men as Sumner, Trumbull, and Stevens, and deplorable as they are, are only forerunners of what is to come; and just so fast as they are privileged to enjoy the rights of white men, just so fast they will show their utter unworthiness to be trusted. The summersault they have made from a state of servitude to one of freedom has been altogether too sudden; and being utterly void of the requisite intelligence to comprehend the situation that they have been placed in, naturally enough are easily led astray by white men who are a thousand times their inferiors.<sup>28</sup>

The vindictiveness of white Democrats materialized, most famously, into the Ku Klux Klan and other white terrorist organizations bent on the stamping out of black equality in Tennessee. As much as the massacre acted as a catalyst for political Reconstruction in the state, at the same time, it somewhat sounded its death knell. Despite the effort of Radicals in Congress to prevent white-on-black violence, white supremacist Tennesseans followed through on threats made against Radicalism. As political violence grew so tortuous for freedmen and white Republicans in Tennessee, the Reconstruction meant to benefit freedmen eventually grew so weakened to the point of its dissolution.

After the advent of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in Tennessee, the Ku Klux Klan began its underground campaign of violence and sprang up in chapters around West and Middle Tennessee. Initiation into the Klan depended on its candidates answers to questions such as: “Are you opposed to Negro equality both social and political?,” “Are you in favor of a white man’s government in this country?,” and “Are you in favor of a constitutional liberty, and a government of equitable laws instead of a

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<sup>28</sup> “How It Works,” *Bolivar Bulletin*, May 5, 1866.

[https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping\\_id=35367848&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJQ2MzEzMDU4LCJpYXQiOiE1ODU2ODI2NTEsImV4cCI6MTU4NTc2OTA1MjU0LW4wZ8-3rdify4qo7pRVrrkHjdn4D-8CeNyJVkrA](https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=35367848&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJQ2MzEzMDU4LCJpYXQiOiE1ODU2ODI2NTEsImV4cCI6MTU4NTc2OTA1MjU0LW4wZ8-3rdify4qo7pRVrrkHjdn4D-8CeNyJVkrA)

government of violence and oppression?”<sup>29</sup> Viewing black suffrage and black participation in formal political offices as a travesty to democracy, Ku Klux Klan members and their supporters took an inordinate amount of pride in conspiring against political Reconstruction in the state. In 1867 in Maury County, Tennessee, directly north of Giles County, the *Nashville Union and American* reported of Klan activity in the area:

...Dread among the negroes of a secret order that has recently made its appearance, known as “Ku klux Klan.” No one, as yet, states publicly who compose the Klan or what are its purposes. One singular feature in it is the unbroken silence maintained by them while on parade. They dress in long red gowns, red pants and red caps, with black face-cloths covering their features. They have extended themselves all over Maury and Giles counties. Some of the negroes are wonderfully exercised over them, and some of the white Radicals have been heard to express the opinion that they were “Rebel bush-whackers,” but as yet no one can say who or what they are.<sup>30</sup>

The justification of political intervention in the name of southern democracy reveals the use of violence as a system to restore white supremacy disrupted by the onset of Reconstruction.

The massacre catalyzed completely unprecedented political Reconstruction in Tennessee, for the first time including African Americans in consideration for future legislation as a free people. Placing Tennesseans at odds with one another, each side quarreled with the other over the future of democracy in the state. However, the rights that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments claimed to guarantee, that of equal protection and suffrage, failed African Americans at private levels as anger among white

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<sup>29</sup> Organization and Principles of the Ku Klux Klan, 1868.

<https://www.albany.edu/history/history316/kkk.html>

<sup>30</sup> “Letter from Colombia-Lively Times-Cotton Played Out-Employment of the Negroes-The Kuklux, etc,” *The Nashville Union and American*, December 18, 1867.

[https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping\\_id=49930094&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJgZmZlI4NTcwLCJpYXQiOiE1ODgyODYyOTcslmV4cCI6MTU4ODM3MjY5N3O.YuX-pNPwjbRdqwt0wulbb\\_np\\_fhVC-cE6gZgZxecFss](https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=49930094&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJgZmZlI4NTcwLCJpYXQiOiE1ODgyODYyOTcslmV4cCI6MTU4ODM3MjY5N3O.YuX-pNPwjbRdqwt0wulbb_np_fhVC-cE6gZgZxecFss)

supremacists prevented Radical Reconstruction from functioning sufficiently enough to protect freedmen to the fullest extent. The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment prohibited *state* actions from infringing upon individual rights—such as white law enforcement abuse of blacks in a race massacre— but the clause did not impose duty upon the state to defend individuals from violations of their rights by private citizens. Therefore, this allowed the Ku Klux Klan to adopt terror tactics to prevent the political equality of blacks in southern states. Though the positive intentions Radicals may have had in acting on behalf of the freedmen should not be disregarded, the Memphis Massacre was but one early instance of hatred plaguing southern blacks from the 1870s-1960s. As political relations became violent in Tennessee with the dawn of black rights following the massacre, the labor and economic relations between former slaves and whites implicated racial discrimination before the massacre, and violence during it.

Memphis's implementation of strict vagrancy laws was one such way of keeping African Americans in a perpetual state of enslavement to prevent not only black embracement of freedom, but also as a way to supply laborers for West Tennessee's empty plantations. Tennessee's vagrancy laws, enforced in much of the same fashion as Black Codes, created what author Douglas A. Blackmon refers to as "neoslavery," in his book *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*.<sup>31</sup> A few months after the war's end, *The Memphis Argus* reported that: "Many lazy negroes found lounging through the city have been taken up as vagrants, and when, upon a hearing of their cases, were adjudged guilty, and as a punishment for

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<sup>31</sup> Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2008).

such idle conduct, have been sentenced to hard labor on the streets. The sentence is faithfully executed and the city is receiving some little benefit from their labor.”<sup>32</sup> The sentencing of freedmen to hard labor acted as a way not only to limit the number of free blacks in the city, but also as a legal avenue to enact neoslavery in Tennessee by once again placing black Americans in ball and chain.

More maliciously, the Tennessee legislature passed a law directly following emancipation disproportionately effecting and though, not explicitly, targeting blacks, meant to “Punish all Armed Prowlers, Guerilla, Brigands, and Highway Robbers.” The act read that those people, “hereby declared guerillas or highway robbers or brigands, and upon his or their conviction shall suffer death by hanging.”<sup>33</sup> Laws such as these prepared Tennessee for the perceived inundation of blacks into its cities after emancipation. The act gave cities such as Memphis the excuse to dispose of blacks at will, if not by forced return to plantations, then by execution. The higher the proportion of freed blacks in cities, the more it served as a reminder of the loss of white hegemony and a precursor leading to the racial violence of the massacre.

Even organizations created to safeguard black liberties, most notably the Freedmen’s Bureau, sometimes passed laws that actually ensured black oppression and

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<sup>32</sup> “Set To Work,” *The Memphis Argus*, July 22, 1865.

[https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping\\_id=47624953&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJlYmZlMzIwMiwiaWF0IjoxNTg1NzE3NTY4LCJleHAiOiJlODU4MjM5MjY5LmFsS\\_pL1Plefhp707y5\\_m-SkqzWV1g76QkCdpimX-Y6w](https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=47624953&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJlYmZlMzIwMiwiaWF0IjoxNTg1NzE3NTY4LCJleHAiOiJlODU4MjM5MjY5LmFsS_pL1Plefhp707y5_m-SkqzWV1g76QkCdpimX-Y6w)

<sup>33</sup> William Pitt Fessenden and Stevens, Thaddeus, *Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, at the First Session, Thirty-ninth Congress*, “An Act to punish all armed prowlers, guerillas, brigands, and highway robbers and for other purposes,” passed May 17, 1865 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1866), 24. [https://books.google.com/books?id=dUgWAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA2&lpg=PA2&dq=tennessee+law+to+Punish+all+Armed+Prowlers,+Guerilla,+Brigands,+and+Highway+Robbers%22&source=bl&ots=u527Tazk6V&sig=ACfU3U22kDPYyzHW\\_ugHy-KmxzdBZ9Ystw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjvpKfz4p3pAhWSWM0KHts8AvsQ6AEwCXoECAyQAQ#v=onepage&q=tennessee%20law%20to%20Punish%20all%20Armed%20Prowlers%2C%20Guerilla%2C%20Brigands%2C%20and%20Highway%20Robbers%22&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=dUgWAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA2&lpg=PA2&dq=tennessee+law+to+Punish+all+Armed+Prowlers,+Guerilla,+Brigands,+and+Highway+Robbers%22&source=bl&ots=u527Tazk6V&sig=ACfU3U22kDPYyzHW_ugHy-KmxzdBZ9Ystw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjvpKfz4p3pAhWSWM0KHts8AvsQ6AEwCXoECAyQAQ#v=onepage&q=tennessee%20law%20to%20Punish%20all%20Armed%20Prowlers%2C%20Guerilla%2C%20Brigands%2C%20and%20Highway%20Robbers%22&f=false)

helped to perpetuate the association of black Americans with criminality during Reconstruction. Often simply assumed unemployed and therefore guilty of vagrancy, freedmen found themselves impressed on the plantations from which they previously fled.<sup>34</sup> Months later, *The Memphis Argus* continued to report on the action taken by the city to address the issue of black vagabondage, revealing that under the directions of the Freedmen's Bureau's first leader Oliver Howard: "negro children shall be apprenticed, and freedmen vagrants left to the State laws, which shall punish vagrancy, whether white or black, alike. Should not this punishment be inflicted by the State Courts, or not sufficient to stop vagrancy, the Freedmen's Bureau will then take charge and put them to work."<sup>35</sup> While vagrancy statutes and similar laws conspired to rid Memphis of as many freedmen as possible, the formerly enslaved continued deserting plantations for cities.

No longer valued simply for their forced labor, black refugees in Memphis had an economic advantage both because of *and* despite the South's destitution. Economic Reconstruction of Tennessee allowed blacks to work freely, make contracts, and collect money for their willing labor. In some cases, ex-slaves took action when whites failed to pay them for work, as freedmen James Donahue reported, "Some of those [blacks] who complain [of being cheated of wages by white employers] are industrious and prudent, and some are of the other sort, but a colored man has to be humble to get along."<sup>36</sup> Even if they were black, Memphis businesses needed employees, and a small few freedmen developed marketable skills as barbers or draymen, but most could work only menial jobs

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<sup>34</sup> Ash, 23.

<sup>35</sup> "Noon Dispatches," *The Memphis Argus*, November 3, 1865.  
[https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping\\_id=47623578&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJlU4NjIyNjQzMCwiaWF0IjoxNTg1Njc5NjA3LCJleHAiOiJlODU3NjYwMDd9.enDZ-l4\\_3o63mmlVGHV1-MVhtbKGMeLtOTQfCgrGGYU](https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=47623578&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVILXZpZXctaWQiOiJlU4NjIyNjQzMCwiaWF0IjoxNTg1Njc5NjA3LCJleHAiOiJlODU3NjYwMDd9.enDZ-l4_3o63mmlVGHV1-MVhtbKGMeLtOTQfCgrGGYU)

<sup>36</sup> Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres, 199.



for meager wages. However, laboring for their own benefit, and from their own free-will, many made livings as coachmen, food peddlers, deckhands, engine tenders, cooks, laundresses, and maids.<sup>37</sup> However, the positions filled by African Americans that made white Memphians the most jittery was that of the armed Union soldier, proven both by the verbal expressions of hatred toward the soldiers during the massacre and their storming of the armory to prevent black resistance.

Among the magnitude of ways Memphis's Irish law enforcement violated the black community, robberies accounted for the highest-number of the assaults committed during the massacre. The immense number of black robberies, of which there numbered at least one-hundred, is an implication of economic Reconstruction in Tennessee. Peter Bloom, a freedman, reported: "They stole from me fifty dollars and fifty cents in money, a gold watch worth seventy dollars, and other articles to the amount of thirty-five dollars." Two black shoe shop owners Peter Jones and Gabriel Cummins also reported theft of money and property by policemen and white men who, "came to our shop and stole boots, money and other articles to the amount of \$109; said if we spoke a word they would kill us." Matt Wardlaw owned three drays before being destroyed at the cost of about 1,600 to 1,700 dollars.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, violence surrounded wage work in Tennessee as whites struggled to cope with an interracial job market, exacerbated by the fact that some skilled blacks were of higher commodity than Irishmen or ex-Rebels. Previous attempts to rid Memphis of potential black workers in the year leading up to the massacre after emancipation were not wholly successful. The white-on-black robberies during the

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<sup>37</sup> Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres, 96, 100, 233-34.

<sup>38</sup> Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres, 36, 233, 348, 357.

massacre, of considerably large value for ex-slaves, prove the benefits of economic Reconstruction, at least for some freedmen, in Tennessee and stoked the fire of hatred for resentful Irishmen.

Estimates of the damage sustained by Memphis's black community reached at least \$100,000, though with the number of robberies and arsons the value of property lost was likely much higher. With black homes, churches, and schools totally razed, talk concerning the rebuilding of the community sprang up in newspapers. The Conservative newspaper *The Memphis Bulletin* lamented on who was to pay for the damages suffered during the massacre: "Not only must Memphis suffer abroad; not only is her political condition rendered more insufferable; not only may military supplant civil law, but all losses sustained, damage done to houses destroyed, must be paid for by corporate authorities. Tax payers foot all bills incurred by this folly and madness."<sup>39</sup> In Memphis, of course, the majority of corporate authorities were Irishmen. The city's monetary responsibility for the massacre was yet another aspect of white adjustment to black freedom in the state.

Before emancipation, governments in the South held no responsibility in the maintenance or preservation of slaves. Masters funded not only the buying of slaves, but also the transporting, clothing, feeding, and medical care to prevent the loss of profit that resided with the slave himself *and* the labor he provided. As a free people, the Memphis city government held responsibility for the restitution of black property. These ramifications drastically altered southern perceptions of retribution and justice, as the fate of African Americans previously depended completely on the whim of those above them

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<sup>39</sup> *The Memphis Bulletin*, May 4, 1866.

in the racial hierarchy of southern society. This was one of the earliest of changes that came in the year after the war, as southerners learned that Reconstruction had implications altering not just political and social life, but the functions of economy in a South without slavery.

These racial injustices called for the implementation of the principles found in the Fourteenth Amendment— principles so badly lacking in previous legislation. Radical Republicans in Congress, such as Thaddeus Stevens, sought to provide freed blacks in Tennessee equal protection of the laws owed to them as new citizens of the United States. The passing of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in Tennessee, along with Radical supervision of the state, angered white Democrats as it portrayed them as inept and unable to govern themselves as responsible citizens of American democracy. The reports from Conservative newspapers such as the *Clarksville Chronicle*, the *Bolivar Bulletin*, and the *Fayetteville Observer*, reveal reactions—though biased— from those whites who viewed the massacre as a passionate defense of southern pride against Radical Republicans, such as Tennessee Governor William Brownlow, and their perceived manipulation of freedmen to infiltrate all facets of southern society, politics, and economy. The socio-political and socio-economic landscapes in Tennessee after the massacre flooded with violence, even with the supposed protection of the Fourteenth Amendment, as the Ku Klux Klan adopted terror tactics to prevent black inclusion in the state.

During America’s “unfinished Revolution,” Tennessee was still very much a battleground upon which white Democrats and Republicans fought to preserve and replace certain aspects of what the other considered American democracy. Revealed in

newspaper coverage before, during, and after the massacre are the reactions of Tennesseans to the unprecedented altering of legislation virtually before their eyes. Only two months spanned the time between the termination of Andrew Johnson's lax Presidential Reconstruction and the beginnings of Radical Reconstruction to benefit the South's former chattel. Also revealed in journalism from the era is the vastness of differences between ex-Confederates and ex-Unionists as they grappled with a transforming society. April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1866 marked the beginnings of civil rights legislation for blacks in the South, and mapped out the future for African Americans for the next century.

Unfortunately, the U.S. government's failure to protect Tennessee's freedmen from violence during the massacre mirrored its failure to secure justice for them after it. With no arrests made of any Irish policemen, firemen, or ex-rebels, black survivors of the massacre had little choice but to attempt to salvage their community in the presence of those who destroyed it. Aside from recorder John Creighton, mayor John Park, and a handful of others, the difficulty in identifying specific perpetrators became validation for the inability to obtain reparations for the victims and survivors. However, only two weeks after the massacre, the Tennessee General Assembly passed the Metropolitan Police Act to reassert control over the Memphis city government and reform the police department. Aimed at correcting the abuses within Memphis law enforcement, the act included the abolishment of city recorder's office of John Creighton and stricter qualifications for policemen, effectively removing the officials contributing to the massacre of black Memphians.<sup>40</sup> This act, though preemptive on the part of the state's general assembly to

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<sup>40</sup> Reports of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres, 34.

prevent further outrages by unchecked members of the law, was of little consolation to the victims of rape, robbery, arson, and murder during the massacre.

Though Radical Reconstruction and the Reconstruction Amendments were stepping stones for larger movements toward racial equality, that equality would not be fully achieved for another hundred years. The form of American democracy Republicans hoped to indefinitely instill in the South faded away by 1877, as white supremacist Democrats united against Reconstruction to root out Radicalism and the strides made by African Americans in the ten years after emancipation. However, considering that the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments occurred only five years after the termination of an ingrained and centuries-long system, something was undoubtedly better than nothing.

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