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## 'The Truth Only Dies When True Stories Are Untold': The Story of Reconstruction in New Orleans

### Writing Process

For my ASI 120 historiography, I chose to research the city of New Orleans during Reconstruction, focusing on how interpretations of this topic have evolved over the past century. I began my project by conducting several weeks of research, gathering credible sources written by historians throughout the years, and writing a topic proposal. Afterwards, I started working on an annotated bibliography; I finalized my choice of sources, read them closely, took detailed notes, and summarized them. This also involved grouping each source into one of three interpretive categories, which were determined based on how each historian frames and interprets Reconstruction's impact on New Orleans. I then transformed my annotated bibliography into a draft of my final paper, adding an introduction and conclusive paragraphs which argue which category of interpretation is most compelling. Lastly, I participated in a peer review, visited the Write Place, revised based on my feedback, and finalized the historiography.

Course

ASI120

Semester

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Instructor

David Darrow

Year

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# 'The Truth Only Dies When True Stories Are Untold'<sup>1</sup>: The Story of Reconstruction in New Orleans

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*Alexandra Amrhein*

While Reconstruction brought tremendous change for all of the U.S., hardly any city experienced its influence more than New Orleans, Louisiana. Its distinctive diversity placed it in a unique position, and it was the one of the first to undergo Reconstruction, transforming it into a testing ground for new policies and racial dynamics. The changes which transpired there—both during and at the conclusion of Reconstruction—have deeply impacted the city and the nation. Historians have shared an interest in this topic for many of these reasons; however, as I have discovered through extensive research, it has been greatly contested. This historiography examines nine sources written by historians researching Reconstruction in New Orleans, between 1922 and 2019, which reflect how its interpretations have changed over time. All sources explore the unfolding of Reconstruction, yet with radically different perspectives, supporting my argument that interpretations of New Orleans Reconstruction evolved from viewing it negatively, to positively, to negatively once again but for different reasons. Three categories of interpretation emerge from this chronological evolution. The first category, pre-1960, includes sources claiming that New Orleans Reconstruction failed due to incompetent leadership and misconceptions regarding equality. The second category, comprising 1960 to 1979, optimistically attempts to correct the former perspective and recognizes the black experience. The last category, spanning 1980 to present, investigates specific ways that black people impacted Reconstruction but also regrets the reversion to New Orleans' former racial oppression. I argue this last category of interpretation is the most

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<sup>1</sup>Ken Liu, *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* (Montgomery: WSFA, 2017), 164.

accurate and reflective of the Reconstruction experience for New Orleans citizens. Unlike prior works, its research thoroughly explores this experience but in an objective manner, recognizing both the successes and failures of Reconstruction-era progress.

### **The Failure of New Orleans Radical Reconstruction**

The first interpretive category consists of two sources written before 1960, which well-represent the era when they were written. Emerging at this time was the Dunning School of thought, a widely-accepted interpretation of Reconstruction as having ruined the South. The perspectives of both Dr. John Kendall and Thomas Harris align with the Dunning School as they consider, with difference yet significant similarities, the impact of Reconstruction on New Orleans. Overall, they convey that Reconstruction failed due to multiple reasons and devastated the city. This category is the least convincing out of the three, largely due to the lack of substantial evidence used to support its claims, as well as the bias against Republicanism and African Americans which permeates the works.

Such bias appears in the writing of John Kendall, rendering his research ineffective. In a chapter titled “The Riot of 1866” from his 1922 book *History of New Orleans*, Kendall covers the political and social climate of New Orleans surrounding the 1866 riot.<sup>2</sup> In his view, the riot embodied a larger truth about Reconstruction in New Orleans: it resulted in unnecessary violence rather than progress. He argues that it was a result of manipulative political moves by the Radicals and repeated instances of black violence. Leading up to the riot, he claims, African Americans often instigated violence towards white people; he cites examples of incidents in which blacks assaulted white women and men. He also claims that white Radicals were misled in wishing to aid colored people, who immediately began perpetrating violence as soon as they embraced the deluded idea that they were equal to whites. His arguments embody disappointment towards Reconstruction; he presents the riot with language expressing resentment towards the Radicals’ administration and opposition to black suffrage, starkly contrasting lat historians’ views. His blatantly racist tone, however, is chiefly what makes his writing appear to be an unreliable account of New Orleans Reconstruction.

Thomas Harris, a Louisiana educator, also explores this subject in a way which makes his work unconvincing. Chapters three and four of his 1924 book

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<sup>2</sup> John Smith Kendall, “The Riot of 1866,” in *History of New Orleans*, ed. John Smith Kendall (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1922), 303-314.

*The Story of Public Education in Louisiana* grapple with public education in Reconstruction-era New Orleans.<sup>3,4</sup> He argues that under the Republican administration, the education system was corrupt, without adequate funding, and an overall failure. He blames its failure on the Radical politicians in command, who he claims were incompetent, unscrupulous, and willing to count Republican votes as their own to win election. In this way, his analysis is not only a history of education during this time but also a critique of Reconstruction as a whole. Another claim he makes is that public schools in New Orleans, unlike many people believed, were never successfully integrated. His evidence lies in the testimony of New Orleans residents who lived through Reconstruction; significantly, though, no specific quotations are provided. In contrast to Kendall's racist attitudes, Harris adopts a mildly sympathetic, or at least tolerant, tone towards black people. Unlike later historians, however, he places little emphasis on them. In light of this, as well as the absence of concrete evidence and his conservative bias, his work appears unconvincing. Harris' attitudes towards Reconstruction follows the overall attitudes of his day, as do Kendall's. Yet despite their flaws, their work should be noted, because they paved the way for future research on this topic, opening the conversation on a subject which would evolve tremendously within the next forty years.

### **Recognition of the Black Community**

Post-1960, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, a new light was cast upon this topic. Scholars began to purge racist attitudes from research on Reconstruction, and for the first time, they recognized black people's importance to the Reconstruction narrative. Dr. Louis Harlan, Professor Donald Reynolds, and Professor Joe Taylor embody this newly-emerged perspective. Distinctively yet similarly, they attempt to remedy the previous historians' story by flipping their interpretation: now African Americans were viewed as victims, Republicans as heroes, and Democrats as oppressors. This category greatly improves upon the former and appears to draw closer to an objective truth. However, many of these works fail to move beyond foundational information, and some gloss over the reversal of progress which concluded Reconstruction, making them less convincing than most recent research.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas H. Harris, "Part III: Public Education in Louisiana Under the Congressional Plan of Reconstruction, 1868-1876," in *The Story of Public Education in Louisiana*, ed. Thomas H. Harris (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 1924), 25-36.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas H. Harris, "Part IV: The Administration of Superintendent G. W. Brown, 1872-1876," in *The Story of Public Education in Louisiana*, ed. Thomas H. Harris (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 1924), 37-50.

In 1962, Louis Harlan completed a study of public education which stood in direct opposition to that of Thomas Harris. In “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools During Reconstruction,” he argues that many New Orleans public schools were indeed desegregated during Radical Reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> In his introduction, he highlights that previously, historians overlooked evidence that desegregation occurred successfully and without significant racial conflict. Unlike Harris, Harlan utilizes quotes from legislators who witnessed desegregation, as well as enrollment statistics, to support this: for example, there was only a slight drop in white enrollment in public schools post-desegregation, indicating that whites gradually came to accept desegregation. He then argues that mixed schools were successful due to several factors: black suffrage; the elite black population’s influence; and the coalition of freedmen, wealthy colored people, and Republicans. In doing so, he frames New Orleans as a diverse cosmopolitan community, pointing to this as the ultimate reason for desegregation’s success. Harlan provides an interpretation of this subject that clearly contrasts Harris’. The two pose arguments which challenge each other, illustrating the distinctions between their respective categories. Overall, Harlan appears optimistic about the success of one Reconstruction goal, even if it was short-lived. However, his optimism may be in excess. As demonstrated by later research, white people were not calmly accepting of integration. Moreover, though desegregation succeeded, it *was* short-lived. Though his interpretation seems more accurate than Harris’, for these reasons it is not entirely convincing.

As Harlan worked to correct the story of public education, Donald Reynolds offered a new perspective on the 1866 riot in “The New Orleans Riot of 1866, Reconsidered” from 1964.<sup>6</sup> As his title indicates, he encourages historians to reconsider the riot in light of previous historians’ prejudices. His argument, stated in his introduction, is that the riot not only called attention to black oppression, but it also turned the tide in favor of Radical Republicans. Therefore, it was a major reason why Congressional Reconstruction became possible, thus impacting the entire South. Utilizing court testimony, diary entries, and legislation, he makes clear that a drunk, racist mob of white Democrats instigated the violence and attacked peaceful black marchers. He presents the African Americans as terrified victims of unwarranted violence, and he highlights that though multiple were killed, no whites were arrested and no police came to their aid. Reynolds’ analysis stands in contrast to Kendall’s account, which qualifies as

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<sup>5</sup> Louis R. Harlan, “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools During Reconstruction,” *The American Historical Review* 67, no. 3 (1962): 663–75.

<sup>6</sup> Donald E. Reynolds, “The New Orleans Riot of 1866, Reconsidered,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 5, no. 1 (1964): 5–27.

the biased work which Reynolds criticizes. In this way, his article demonstrates how interpretations of this riot, as well as New Orleans Reconstruction as a whole, evolved. In ways, it arguably reflects the true Reconstruction story. However, Reynolds' article conveys foundational information compared with later works, which go into much more depth.

Four years later, Joe Taylor published "New Orleans and Reconstruction."<sup>7</sup> His research examines New Orleans' unique diversity during Reconstruction in comparison to Louisiana's rural regions. He argues, however, that though the rural areas lacked the city's unique racial dynamics, there were few differences between their attitudes. This, he claims, is because whites in New Orleans were equally racist as those in rural Louisiana. Citing first-hand accounts and news articles, he demonstrates the violent sentiments of white people towards blacks, as well as Radicals or anyone in favor of black rights. He also reveals that opposition to Reconstruction was not due to unfair political moves by Radicals (like Harris claims) but to racism. One significant detail pertains to elections: he acknowledges that some elections may not have been entirely fair, but he points out that this was the case in New Orleans before the Civil War. Taylor's interpretation epitomizes this category's emphasis on blacks' oppression. His research appears accurate; however, it does not seem reflective of the entire New Orleans Reconstruction experience. Taylor enlightens the public about the racism which permeated the South, but his work does not move beyond this. As with Reynolds, this is not necessarily a fault, but it does lend increased effectiveness to later research which goes into more depth.

### **The Failure of New Orleans Radical Reconstruction, in a New Light**

After 1980, research on Reconstruction shifted away from the enthusiasm with which Civil Rights-era historians approached the topic. Studies focused on New Orleans followed this pattern, demonstrated by the works of Professor William Connor, Dr. Dennis Rousey, Professor Gilles Vandal, and historian Daniel Brook. Embracing objectivity and detail, historians within this category of interpretation frame Reconstruction policies as progress. They look closely into specific ways that African Americans participated, and simultaneously they mourn the failure of these efforts and the city's reversion to racial oppression. Though they argue that Reconstruction failed like historians pre-1960, they point to racial tensions and racism as the cause. Each of these classifications ultimately make this interpretive category the most effective.

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<sup>7</sup> Joe Gray Taylor, "New Orleans and Reconstruction," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 9, no. 3 (1968): 189–208.

William Connor is the first to embody this approach to researching New Orleans Reconstruction. In his 1980 article “Reconstruction Rebels: The New Orleans Tribune in Post-War Louisiana,” he explores the role of the New Orleans *Tribune* in Reconstruction.<sup>8</sup> Connor argues that the newspaper was extremely influential because it formed a bi-racial coalition fighting for political equality. Using direct quotations from the newspaper, he demonstrates that the *Tribune* encompassed the goals of New Orleans’ black community: it advocated for suffrage, political leadership, and improved educational, economic, and labor regulations. It was significant, he argues, because it focused public attention on these issues, and it even worked with Radical legislators to attempt to address them. Connor’s work excellently represents the time it was written: though he recognizes the significance of black leadership, he concludes without the optimism of previous historians, claiming that the newspaper’s plan for economic and political equality failed because of the closed-mindedness of white supremacists. Amongst other factors, it is his recognition of this failure which makes his work convincing. In doing so, he does not ignore the unfortunate backpedaling of progress at the end of the 1870s.

Another in-depth look at the African American experience emerges from Dennis C. Rousey’s 1987 article, “Black Policemen in New Orleans During Reconstruction.”<sup>9</sup> Exploring statistics, arrest reports, and articles from the *Tribune*, he examines a previously unexplored form of black involvement during Reconstruction. His interpretation of black policemen reveals his overall attitude towards Reconstruction: celebrating progress towards achieving equality, while simultaneously regretting that the progress did not last. Rousey explores not only the positives of the desegregation of the police force but also the internal struggles which black policemen faced. For example, he delves into the tensions between black and white officers, including Irish policemen. He emphasizes that it was a dangerous line of work, infiltrated with racism: those recruiting new officers preferred not to even refer to black people as black, but rather “mulatto,” as to avoid shedding a negative light on the police force. Rousey’s work connects in meaningful ways with others from this category, as he frames whites and Democrats as oppressors and black people as victims, with a fundamental emphasis on blacks’ efforts to participate. Like Connor, he blames the desegregated police force’s ultimate failure on the city’s racial tensions. Similarly to Connor’s, his article is effective because it recognizes both the successes and failures that black people faced in their participation, making it appear realistic. It

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<sup>8</sup> William P. Connor, “Reconstruction Rebels: The New Orleans Tribune in Post-War Louisiana,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 21, no. 2 (1980): 159–81.

<sup>9</sup> Dennis C. Rousey, “Black Policemen in New Orleans During Reconstruction,” *The Historian* 49, no. 2 (1987): 223–43.



also dives into incredible depth on a very specific subject, contributing to its merit.

Some research dares to reveal aspects of black participation which may be considered controversial. A study performed by Gilles Vandal, articulated in his 1997 article “Black Utopia in Early Reconstruction New Orleans: The People’s Bakery as a Case-Study,” centers around a particular group of African Americans, known as the People’s Bakery, fighting for a black utopia.<sup>10</sup> He interprets these Radicals as trailblazers with noble ideals: they envisioned a southern economy bordering on socialism, where blacks were economically empowered. Utilizing statistics and quotes from the *Tribune*, Vandal explains how the group emerged, its intellectual foundations, and the way its ambitions unfolded. In his conclusion, similar to other historians from this time, he acknowledges that their utopia never came to fruition and that the group failed due to lack of popular support and funding. Vandal’s article is effective because it captures the high aspirations of the city’s black community which was often overlooked by earlier historians. He also explores the city’s diverse climate with great detail, noting the language barrier between creoles and non-French speakers, as well as the underlying tensions between elites and freedmen. Most significantly, he brings to light the intellectual and socialist undertones of black rebellion, an obscure detail which makes this work notable and believable.

Most recently, Daniel Brook contributed to the objective analyses of Reconstruction in his 2019 book, *The Accident of Color: A Story of Race in Reconstruction*. In a chapter titled “Browns Versus Board of Education,” he participates in the historiographic conversation regarding New Orleans’ integrated public education.<sup>11</sup> His argument is that desegregation of schools was a noble aspiration but was rarely achieved in reality. His book revolves around the claim that Radical Reconstruction was a vision of a better society in which people saw beyond skin color, but this vision only lasted a moment in time. Likewise, he argues, desegregation of New Orleans schools represented the beginnings of a bright biracial future, but this was interrupted, and hopes for a color-blind education system—and society—were dashed. He provides evidence from newspapers, first-hand testimony, and school board minutes to demonstrate that acceptance of desegregation was reluctant, and even after schools were desegregated by law, black children were still excluded by racist principals. Its failure, Brook believes, was due to the wavering commitment of Radical leaders,

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<sup>10</sup> Gilles Vandal, “Black Utopia in Early Reconstruction New Orleans: The People’s Bakery as a Case-Study,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 38, no. 4 (1997): 437–52.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Brook, “Browns Versus Board of Education,” in *The Accident of Color: A Story of Race in Reconstruction*, ed. Daniel Brook (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 123-150.

as well as their being outnumbered by those determined to keep the city non-blended. In contrast to Harris, Brook proves that some schools were desegregated, and in contrast to Harlan, he argues that desegregation was not readily welcomed. His chapter manages to find an interpretive middle ground between the two extreme positions held by the earlier historians, and in doing so, it presents an extremely rational and realistic interpretation.

### **An Interpretation Evaluation**

When evaluating the claims of these categories and sources within them, certain criteria were applied. The most effective sources are seen as those with solid evidence—specific quotes or statistics from reputable sources—and an objective, non-racist tone. Chiefly, though, the most convincing research recognizes the progress made for colored people and also acknowledges how this progress was reversed post-Reconstruction. The backpedaling in New Orleans and throughout the South is extremely important to understanding how Reconstruction ended. Additionally, it is crucial to understanding Reconstruction's ending held implications for the course of history, including the present.

The first interpretive category fails to fulfill most of these criteria. Its main issues are the sources' lack of substantial evidence and their indiscreet bias. For example, Harris references firsthand testimony but does not cite direct quotes.<sup>12</sup> He also begins chapter three with a vehement disapprobation against the Radicals, exhibiting strong Democratic bias.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Kendall's tone towards African Americans implies white superiority and maintains a focus on blacks' defamation, suggesting racist attitudes.<sup>14</sup> For these reasons, these sources cannot be considered reflective of how New Orleans Reconstruction really happened.

Though the second category greatly improves upon the first in meeting the criteria, it too is problematic for overlooking the backpedaling of progress. It expels racist perspectives and focuses more on African Americans' point of view; this is shown, for example, by Reynolds' sympathetic tone towards black riot victims.<sup>15</sup> However, several sources end on an optimistic note, particularly Harlan, who concludes by discussing the successes of desegregation and barely touching on its reversal.<sup>16</sup> Not focusing on the reversion to pre-Reconstruction oppression removes an important part of the story that continues to impact the nation today. Overall, this category was a step in the right direction, but its

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<sup>12</sup> Harris, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Kendall, 307-308.

<sup>15</sup> Reynolds, 11-13.

<sup>16</sup> Harlan, 675.

research needed to be fleshed out to be more effective, which the final category achieves.

The last interpretive category, therefore, is the most convincing. Its sources go thoroughly in-depth, touching upon details which were previously unexplored, and it acknowledges both Reconstruction's righteous goals and failures. This can be seen in Rousey's exploration of black policemen and Vandal's study of colored people's philosophical ideals, which manage to delve into complex details.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned, Brook's discussion of desegregation exemplifies how this category seeks a middle ground between the extremes of the previous categories.<sup>18</sup> Because they attempt to maintain objectivity and investigate the topic intricately, these studies come closest to accurately portraying the story of New Orleans Reconstruction.

The study of Reconstruction in New Orleans holds great significance. This focused topic, in many ways, tells the larger historiographic story of American Reconstruction. Research on New Orleans' Reconstruction period exemplifies the views of the Dunning School, Civil Rights-era scholars, and recent historians. By studying this topic, as with the study of Reconstruction as a whole, we may also be able to understand the current state of our country. Tracing how interpretations have evolved is not just important to understanding the past; the Reconstruction of New Orleans, and the South, is incredibly relevant to the present. Amidst a social climate where injustice still reigns, it is crucial to be able to see America's past mistakes, particularly the undoing of Reconstruction's progress. To move forward, we must first look back not only at the mistakes themselves, but at the way in which interpretations were once racially biased; this in itself was a mistake. We must look back, understand the truth of our past, so that our country will not repeat its errors. Then, and only then, can we look to the future.

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<sup>17</sup> Rousey, 223-243; Vandal, 437-452.

<sup>18</sup> Brook, 123-150.

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