

Civil War Treasures: Party Planning: St. Landry Parish, Radical Republicans, And The Vote For The 1867 Constitutional Convention

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Feature Essay

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Laver, Tara *Civil War Treasures: Party Planning: St. Landry Parish, Radical Republicans, and the Vote for the 1867 Constitutional Convention.*

With recent Congressional primaries in the news and the mid-term elections heating up, this issue's "Treasures" column focuses on a document of a political nature discovered as we digitized and cataloged materials as part of the digital project "Free People of Color in Louisiana: Revealing an Unknown Past."

In April 2013, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a grant to the LSU Libraries Special Collections to create a collaborative digital collection that would bring together archival collections related to free people of color in Louisiana and the lower Mississippi Valley held by LSU, the Historical Center at the Louisiana State Museum, The Historic New Orleans Collection, the Louisiana Research Collection at Tulane University, and the Louisiana Division of the New Orleans Public Library.

Now well into its second year, the project has brought to light a letter from Michel Vidal to Antoine "Donat" Meullion and dated September 27, 1867, that provides evidence of the political engagement of those formerly classified as free men of color, their alliances with white Radical Republicans, and efforts to organize black voters in St. Landry Parish. That parish would witness one of the most violent episodes of Reconstruction just over a year after the letter was written, an episode that would all but end Republican organization in the parish until 1872.

A native of France, Michel Vidal came to Louisiana via Texas, settling in Opelousas, Saint Landry Parish, La., in 1867. An experienced newspaperman from his stints at French-Canadian newspapers, the *New York Messenger*, and the *New Orleans Tribune*, he established the *St. Landry Progress* in August of that year. Owned by black stockholders, the *Progress* became the organ of Republicans in the parish, even providing space in its offices for party meetings.¹

The recipient of Vidal's letter was Antoine Donato "Donot" Meullion (1801-1890). A planter before and after the war, he was the son of free people of color Jean Baptiste Meullion and Marie Suzanne Donato (Bello). Donato Meullion and his son Antoine Alphonse Meullion were active in the Republican Party, as were several other members of the Meullion, Donato, and allied families. Among these was Meullion's kinsman Auguste Donato, who narrowly lost election to the state senate in 1868 to Thomas C. Anderson, a white Democrat.

With the passage of the Reconstruction Act of 1867, General Philip Sheridan, Commander of the Fifth Military District (which included Louisiana) called for a vote on whether to hold a convention to write a new constitution for Louisiana; the canvas was held September 27 and 28, 1867. At the same time, voters decided whom the delegates to the convention would be if it were approved, and Vidal was among those running from St. Landry Parish. Writing from his sick-bed and likely ill with yellow fever, which had been raging in Opelousas since August, Vidal feared his political enemies would circulate false news of his death and cost him the election. Further, he suggests the organization of several more Republican clubs in certain areas, taking into account the number of black voters in each precinct.

The text of the letter, translated from French, reads:²

Opelousas 27 Sept. 1867

Mr. Donato Meuillon, Prairie du Gros Chevreuil Dear Sir,

Daydreaming in my bed, (for what can a sick person do if not daydream) the idea came to me that our friend T. Castille who pretends to be such a fine fox, could well have the idea of sending couriers to all the precincts, to announce my death, which would make no one vote for me anymore. I am sending you this word for you to be on guard against this trick, and ask you to give the enclosed letter to Mr. Prejean, who is after the same end.

I am seizing this occasion to ask you if it would not be fitting to establish two clubs in your area one for Gros Chevreuil and the other for Grand Coteau? These two precincts contain: 1st Gros Chevreuil; 2nd Arnaudville, (318 voters of color;) 3rd Grand Coteau, 4th Coule Croche, (244 voters of color,)

The total for the four localities of these two precincts: 562 voters of color. There are only two clubs for all these people and, believe me, this is not enough. Our party will be really strong only when there will be a club for each group of 125 voters at the most. Also, after the election, we will have to work to organize it on that footing.

What I'm telling you about it, is, of course, only under the form of advice, and what is more it is the advice of a sick person. Understand you have Mr. Prejean for this subject.

But here I no longer have the strength to write. Thus I'm stopping and ask you to accept the assurance of my consideration.

Very respectfully

Michel Vidal

Vidal need not have worried; the convention was approved statewide. St. Landry Parish voters passed it with the lopsided margin of 2,351 to 33, and sent Vidal, Auguste Donato, George Jackson (freedman), and J.G. Drinkard (white) to represent them at the convention. The majority of the 98 delegates were Republican, and 50 were black, of whom at least 85% had been free people of color. The resulting constitution asserted the equality of all men, guaranteed equal rights in public spaces to all citizens, regardless of race or color, provided the vote to all males over 21 years of age (except for former Confederates the document disenfranchised to varying effect), and required the state to establish public schools that would be open equally to black and white children.³ Louisiana ratified the constitution in April 1868, largely along racial lines, but many of its promises remained unfulfilled in practice. In St. Landry Parish, the constitution fell 315 votes short of approval, with 358 African Americans voting against it.⁴ The gubernatorial election was held at the same time as the constitution vote, and Republicans in the parish had split over two candidates. The majority of the former free men of color and their allies supported James Taliaferro while freedmen and their white allies went for Henry Clay Warmoth, who ultimately won.

White Democrats widely viewed the Republican state government as being based on black suffrage. In response to their sense of disenfranchisement, they organized secret societies such as the Knights of the White Camelia and the

Seymour Guards, ostensibly to prevent "Negro uprisings." Such groups carried out acts of violence and intimidation against African Americans, especially during the summer of 1868 in St. Landry Parish.⁵ In late September, the beating and rumored death of Emerson Bentley, a white schoolteacher from Ohio, Warmoth supporter, and writer for the *Progress*, led freedmen to take up arms and rush to Opelousas, where they encountered a contingent of the Knights of the White Camelia. Shots were fired, and a massacre ensued as over three days whites pursued the African Americans across the countryside, killing at least 150 black Republicans. Similar violence was occurring in other parts of the state, and Republican party leaders, including as many as 200 from St. Landry Parish, fled to the relative safety of New Orleans.⁶ Similarly, Donato Meullion (abbreviated "Dte.") and his son Alphonse were among some former free men of color who renounced their participation in the Republican Party, as evidenced in this announcement in the October 10, 1868, issue of the *Opelousas Courier*, the Democratic paper in the parish.

The Republican Party in St. Landry Parish was largely moribund from that incident until 1872 when they again put up candidates for office.⁷ Though there is no evidence of Meullion's continued involvement, some allied family members appear to have continued in Republican politics. Michel Vidal was elected to represent Louisiana's 4th Congressional District as a Republican; he served 1868-1869. He then left state politics behind, receiving a diplomatic service appointment to Tripoli from President Ulysses S. Grant.

¹Christensen, Matthew, "The 1868 St. Landry Massacre: Reconstruction's Deadliest Episode of Violence" (Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2012), 37. (<http://dc.uwm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1193&context=etd>, accessed 20 July 2014.)

²Translated by Germain Bienvenu, PhD, LSU Libraries Special Collections.

³*Opelousas Courier* (English edition), 5 October 1867, p. 1; Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge, La.: LSU Press, 1992), 115, 117-118.

⁴Christensen, 33-35.

⁵Ibid, 41.

⁶Tunnell, 153-157.

⁷"That Political Retrospect," *Opelousas Courier* (English edition) 6 June, 1874, p. 1.