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Feature Essay

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James Harrison and the Tensas Troubles of 1878

Archival research is ostensibly about the quest for answers, but as any long-time researcher knows, significant time in the archives often raises as many questions as it furnishes answers. Such is the case with a handwritten document titled “The Uprising in Tensas Parish (1878)” attributed to James P. Harrison (1852-1943).¹ Scrawled in seeming haste across crumbling sheets of ledger paper, Harrison gives his first-hand account of the fatal events preceding the election of 1878 in and around the town of Waterproof, in Tensas Parish, Louisiana. Harrison’s text is reflecting back at some remove – possibly over fifty years – and his framing narrative pitches his thoughts toward his twentieth-century present. He also seems cognizant of the oblivion that threatening to swallow the events of 1878 in Tensas Parish, something prevented at the time only by contemporaneous newspaper accounts and the records of the government inquiry that followed.

The broad outlines of the events in October and November of 1878 in and around Tensas Parish follow the familiar shape of the post-Reconstruction backlash against African-American enfranchisement: fearing the continued rule by the largely African-American Republican party, white Democrats organized formally and informally to intimidate potential Republican voters through physical threats and actual violence. Parties clashed with ambiguous immediate impetus, and though both sides sustained casualties, some lethal, African Americans were disproportionately affected. The Democrats’ intimidation tactics were largely successful, thus beginning the disenfranchisement of African Americans that was codified in the Louisiana constitution of 1898.²

¹ James P. Harrison Papers, Mss. 5138, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. This small collection is made up of this account, a typescript thereof, a tintype of Harrison, as well as a published letter regarding the interaction of labor shortages and cotton prices.

² For more information about this radical post-Reconstruction rewriting of the Louisiana, see *Constitution of the State of Louisiana: Adopted in convention at the city of New Orleans, May 12, 1898* (New Orleans: H.J. Hearsey,

In Tensas Parish however, while these broad sketches hold, the details are a bit harder to fill in, as there has been relatively little historical work done on this particular region of the state during the late 19th century. There are a few exceptions, such as the short account of what Mary Alice Fontenot and Edith Ziegler term “The Uprising” in their history of the parish, *The Tensas Story*.³ Their version identifies key figures as Alfred Fairfax, “a black man [...] who objected to several white candidates on the Republican ticket,” and Captain John Peck, a Confederate veteran who hailed from nearby Catahoula Parish.⁴ Peck was summoned to disperse a group of African Americans gathered at Fairfax’s house north of Waterproof, LA, a town of a few thousand in the southeast of Tensas Parish on the banks of the Mississippi River. Against the advice of those counseling patience, Peck confronted Fairfax late on Saturday night, the 12th of October. Gunfire erupted and Peck was killed in the exchange.

Following Peck’s death, a fact about which neither Fontenot and Ziegler nor contemporaneous newspaper accounts disagree, the story becomes harder to follow. Fontenot and Ziegler mention the “Battle of Bass Lane,” in which a white family at the Burn Plantation avoided murder by an African-American mob only through the intercession of “several hundred men,” resulting in the hanging of an unspecified numbers of “leaders of the uprising.” Fontenot and Ziegler cite another contemporaneous account by John Smyth of Wavertree Plantation, north of Waterproof and just outside of the town of Saint Joseph. Smyth’s story, contained in a letter to S. E. Rumble of Natchez, Mississippi, gestures to greater African American casualties, though with a similar vagueness, mentioning “a few colored men killed” at Bass Lane, one Dick Miller hanged the next day at the Burn Plantation, and “quite a number, who made bad threats, [...] hanged through the parish.” Perhaps more disturbingly, Smyth opines, “Some think that there have been a few innocent negroes killed in the riot, whilst others insist that there are yet a few

1898). Also of interest is more dramatic *The convention of '98: A complete work on the greatest political event in Louisiana's history, and a sketch of the men who composed it* (New Orleans: W. E. Myers, 1898); as well as the contextual essay by Amasa Eaton, *The suffrage clause of the new constitution of Louisiana* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Law Review, 1899).

³ Fontenot, Mary Alice, and Edith Ziegler, *The Tensas Story* (Newellton, LA: Possum Run Antiques, 1987), 139-147.

⁴ The Republic party in Tensas prior to 1878 was joined by a number of local and immigrant whites. See below for more.

colored men who need hanging.”⁵ This unspecified and ominous threat seems a gesture toward the uncertain casualty number that haunts our understanding today.

The immediate fallout of the troubles is easier to trace through contemporaneous newspaper accounts and the Congressional investigation that the events provoked, but the numbers killed remain elusive, with reports ranging from thirty-five to between seventy-five and eighty.⁶ Perhaps some of this vagueness was not simply a product of the Democrats’ success, but a tool of it, as the lack of any hard numbers for those African Americans killed must have increased the fear within that population, fear that could then be exploited in the future suppression of Republican votes and the reassertion of white Democratic rule. There were pushbacks against this political suppression, including a wide-ranging look into election irregularities in 1878 launched in December of that year by the US Senate and headed by Senator H. M. Teller of Colorado. Completed in February of 1879, this investigation paid particular attention to Tensas Parish, eventually interviewing Alfred Fairfax himself, the African American man alleged to be at the center of the “uprising.”⁷ While ten white parish residents were ultimately taken to New Orleans under Federal indictment, they were never prosecuted, and as Fontenot and Ziegler say “the ten men accused went home, the carpetbaggers took their carpetbags in hand and caught the next boat out, and strife-weary Tensas began to pick up its figurative pieces.”⁸ Those pieces were reassembled by white Democratic hands, who succeed in breaking Republican rule and eventually utterly disenfranchising African Americans in the Parish until the Civil Rights Era.

James Harrison’s account of what happened in Tensas Parish in 1878 largely coincides with the facts outlined above and betrays a similar lack of concern for identifying how many African Americans were killed. Born in 1852, Harrison was twenty-six in 1878. He wrote his account sometime in the second quarter of the twentieth century, when he would have been in his

⁵ *The Tensas Story*, 142. Frustratingly, the authors do not provide an individual citation for this letter and it is not listed by either name or author in their bibliography. It remains elusive, but as they do cite a number of unpublished essays and remembrances, it is possible that they were themselves in possession of the manuscript.

⁶ *Chicago daily tribune*, 25 December 1878. p. 1. *Library of Congress: Chronicling America; New York times*, 9 January, 1879. p. 1. *New York Times: Times Machine*.

⁷ United States Senate, *Louisiana in 1878: Report of the United States Senate Committee to inquire into alleged frauds and violence in the elections of 1878*, vols. 1 and 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879). Fairfax himself was unwounded in either Peck’s raid or the events that followed, though he fled Tensas Parish, never to return.

⁸ *The Tensas Story*, 145.

seventies or eighties. (He died in 1943 at the age of 90.) Harrison was not among the men summoned to New Orleans by the grand jury, though in his prefatory note explaining the genesis of his narrative he lays claim to firsthand and intimate knowledge of the events: “I guess that Jeff Snider [Jefferson Snyder] and myself are the only participants in the beginning of the events of ’78 who are still living.”⁹ The paucity of other such records bears out this mild boast. His account is most useful in elucidating some of the machinations before the violence of October, and the repercussions within Democratic politics in the subsequent years.

Harrison’s preface indicates that the impetus for his recording his memories is at least partially out of pique:

[George Carneal Goldman] came out to Delta Plantation and asked me to join him in opposing the St. Joseph “ring.” He did not except anyone, Cordell, Will Young, Joe Curry or Davidson; included all. I have never liked the way he [Goldman] acted in the Peck-Fairfax affair – he staying at home and sending me into trouble. And Cordell too was asleep in bed when we took the risks.¹⁰

Harrison seems as much out to settle old scores as he is ferreting out the truth of a long-past incident, opening his tale with both his engagement in 1878 immediately followed by a jump into a retrospective reflection on the events that he is about to describe. As hinted at in this quotation, the story that he unspools is preoccupied with identifying who deserved credit for the actions of 1878, actions of which he fully approves. His is not a story encumbered by guilt over youthful indiscretions, but instead that of an adult jealous over who had most risen on the events surrounding the elections of 1878. As such, while Harrison’s manuscript can offer no more clarity as to the number of African Americans who died in October and November of 1878, he does afford us a better understanding of how whites were organized and prepared to carry out such crimes.

⁹ “1878 in Tensas Parish, La.,” 1. Jefferson “Jeff” Snyder (1858-1951) was a native of St. Joseph in Tensas Parish. He later served as district attorney for the Sixth Judicial District of Louisiana in Tallulah in adjoining Madison Parish from 1904 to 1948. See Jeff B. Snyder Correspondence, Mss. 1160, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

¹⁰ “1878 in Tensas Parish, La.,” 1. The collection contains both the handwritten version of Harrison’s account as well as a typescript. Due to the fragility of the manuscript, page numbers refer to the typescript.

Harrison is careful to recreate the sequence of events that led to Peck's death as he stormed Fairfax's home, singling out individuals from in and around Waterproof whom he enlisted to join Peck and his men from Catahoula Parish, along with the anticipated supplementary forces from Saint Joseph, situated just up the Mississippi River from Waterproof. Harrison points out that the recruitment process was not haphazard, but rather that it was undertaken by the local Rifle Club who had been preparing for some such eventuality: "We had a Rifle Club of some 40 members that met for practice once a month, and though I had no Winchester, I was a member."¹¹ That the club's purpose was more political than sporting is borne out by the fact that Harrison owned no firearm, and is further underscored by his ambiguous next sentence, "Now as young men thought it the only chance to get out from under negro rule, anything was better than that."¹² Harrison does not identify later which of the men he recruited were members of the rifle club, but at the least he must have used those members of the starting point for his search for people and weapons:

So I rode all night and enlisted four men; Jeff B. Snider (then a boy 16 to 18 years old), James Vickers, Ed Baker and Mr. Lenore. Jeff had a "stove pistol," Lenore an old loud double barrel muzzle loader, and I the borrowed revolver [from Frank Adams]. Baker borrowed an old Henry rifle from John Smythe as we passed Wavertree.¹³

The incongruity here is notable, as Harrison seems able to roll up ready recruits with some speed, though that organization doesn't extend to the men's weapons, which are a decidedly mixed lot. Regardless, the men needed little persuasion, however ill-provisioned they may have been.

Harrison describes how the different groups of men united, as in the case of the men from Waterproof and Catahoula Parish, or failed to do so, as in the hoped-for addition of men from Saint Joseph. Harrison's work continued throughout the night Friday, his sleeplessness evidence

¹¹ "1878 in Tensas Parish, La.," 2-3.

¹² "1878 in Tensas Parish, La.," 3.

¹³ "1878 in Tensas Parish, La.," 3. Interestingly, this is the same John Smythe's whose letter Fontenot and Ziegler cite in their account.

of his mission's urgency. His story's detail then becomes sharper as he describes Peck's death, drawing upon memories that one suspects are as clear as they are well-worn:

I climbed to the top of the levee and ran forward to catch Capt. Peck, who, without giving further orders that I could hear, went over the levee, [Horace] Penniston following across barrow pits on board walk and on to the river bank in front of Fairfax cabin. I caught up with the as Peck went up the steps about 4 feet high; as his foot touched the top step, guns blazed out the door and he fell back on Penniston and myself and we all fell to the ground. The men began firing at the house, and Ed Baker and Jack Johnson sprang over us and on into the house and others followed. I had caught Peck as he fell back but he was dead when we laid him out at the foot of the steps, 3 buck shot near the heart; guns popping, negroes in the house screaming and pouring out doors and windows; shouts and others and begging for life. My borrowed pistol had been [?] loaded so long that I got but 2 shots to fire at men jumping out windows.¹⁴

Beyond the riveting nature of Harrison's firsthand account, it is interesting for how it frames two other aspects of his story that will grow as he continues: a nonchalance about African Americans' deaths – and lives for the matter – as well as his pivot to more clearly implicate what he sees as treachery among the white confederates. There are no results to Harrison's two shots recorded, nor are there any such mention of the results of the rest of the men's gunplay, absences that will largely continue for the remaining pages. And interestingly, while Harrison seems ambivalent about Peck's actions, questioning his decision to fly to Fairfax's house without proper military staging, the anger immediately following the raid is directed not at Peck's rashness, but at the town to the north: "It was soon over and Peck's men were furious that St. Joe men did not meet them. [...] They were mad and blamed St. Joe for Peck's death."¹⁵ The whites' failure of solidarity, or perhaps their rhetorical solidarity without uniformly supported actions, is particularly galling to the men, above and beyond the death itself.

After the events at Fairfax's house the African Americans in Tensas Parish prepared for retribution. Harrison sketches their vaguely, more rumored than real, such as when he says:

¹⁴ "1878 in Tensas Parish, La.," 4.

¹⁵ "1878 in Tensas Parish, La.," 5.

“Word had come from Waterproof begging for help, that Armed negroes filled the town; white people threatened if seen on streets, etc.”¹⁶ Here, Harrison’s casual “etc.” evokes a list of descriptions understood between him and his reader, a place holder for the generic and assumed catalog of other such depravities, alleged or imagined. His remaining description of action between the parties lacks the specificity of the raid on Fairfax’s house, due in part to Harrison himself being more peripheral to the action, but also due his inability or unwillingness to describe African Americans in any detail, instead referring to them as an undifferentiated mass whose mass movements alone are his concern. As before, the actions of the white men are described in some detail, and their tactics seem increasingly organized and disciplined as former Confederate officers assert control over the younger Rifle Club members. Still, the results of their actions are decidedly confusing, and no deaths or even injuries are recorded, despite the white men firing into a large crowd of African Americans with what seems to be regular military order.

Suddenly, mid-paragraph, the narrative stops, just at the point when it would seem that a description of the harrowing of Tensas Parish should begin. Harrison moves quickly to close his memory of the action: “I was aroused to go with Capt. Cann and his men to arrest negro leaders—Newellton, Buck, Ridge, Bayon, Vidall, etc. All I remember doing after this was dodging U. S. Marshals and listening to Franklinites cuss St. Joe!”¹⁷ Beginning in the passive voice – “was aroused” – Harrison again invokes the vague “etc.,” then entirely omits whether he did arrest the African Americans he names, before skipping in the next sentence to his loss of memory – “All I remember...” – and closing with his observations of internecine squabbles within the white community. Were the men he and Captain Cann pursued arrested? If arrested, what happened to them? Were these the “leaders of the uprising” who Smythe mentions were hung? Or were they hung (or otherwise executed) without having been arrested? Harrison is either unwilling or unable to say. His foreboding silence on this matter is met with relative loquacity when he turns to what is for him a more rancorous topic: the ability for the white Democrats-turned-Republicans to escape punishment for their disloyalty and even receive credit for orchestrating the return of whites to political power in the parish.

¹⁶ “1878 in Tensas Parish, La.,” 6.

¹⁷ “1878 in Tensas Parish, La.,” 7.

Harrison's references to African Americans are mostly anonymous – Fairfax is the primary exception – and entirely negative, but they are more dismissive than vitriolic. On the other hand, those whites deemed “Carpet-baggers and Scalawags” come under sharp attack.¹⁸ He singles out C. C. Cordill, Hiram R. Steele, and John Register for particular disdain, for during Reconstruction these white men had allied themselves with African Americans and the Republican Party, allowing them to enjoy some level of power and influence over both African Americans and (more vexingly to Harrison) whites. For Harrison, Cordill's willingness to work with the Democrats was doubly galling: once for the initial disloyalty he believed it showed to the white community, but then again as Cordill was to use the events of 1878 to regain white favor in the parish and parlay that into a long and powerful political career. Cordill would eventually serve as Tensas Parish Judge, member of the first the state House of Representatives and later the State Senate, president of the Police Jury of Tensas Parish, as well as a member of the powerful Fifth Louisiana Levee Board, “of which body he was the recognized leader, with almost dictatorial power,” according to his obituary.¹⁹

Cordill's career trajectory seems most on Harrison's mind when he continues the passage cited above:

Cordell and St. Joe seem to be getting all the credit for '78. Cordell was a true renegade to his country and his people and his family. He soldiered with the men he betrayed. He gambled in camp and had money at the end of the war to open a store in the old Bob Snyder store; and had best business in the parish when the carpet baggers came. Hiram R. Steele (a Canadian) tempted him to desert his people and join in robbing the state.²⁰

Harrison reaches back to the Civil War, pointing to his misconduct then, then tracing similar actions down to the shift in political power, and then on down into the final decades of the nineteenth century:

As a senator, he promoted a bill to sell off Levee Board lands at 15¢ an acre, and accounting for his millions as constant winning on the cotton market. [...] He was

¹⁸ “1878 in Tensas Parish, La.,” 2.

¹⁹ *The Tensas Gazette*, 24 November 1916. p. 4. *Newspapers.com*.

²⁰ “1878 in Tensas Parish, La.,” 7.

cool and ruthless and brainy, and he did plan the '78 turn over from black to white, but only when the negroes kicked the carpet baggers out. Yes, he planned, but it was the people put it through.²¹

Seemingly able to easily elide his part in the terrorizing of Tensas Parish – or at the very least that such a thing happened – Harrison begins and ends his narrative with an ample attack on a man he calls a renegade for his willingness to side with African Americans. Judge Hiram Steele, a former Union soldier and editor of the *North Louisiana Journal*, who was active in Louisiana Republican politics for a couple decades following the War before returning to New York to become a prominent lawyer, might be a more obvious choice for Harrison's disdain, but it is Cordill and the town of Saint Joseph who draw the most ire.²² Certainly a feelings of resentment and betrayal must be part of the genesis for this, but so to simple jealousy fueled by familiarity must have been the cause, as Cordill grew to be a wealthy man and powerful politician, while by all accounts Harrison's influence was primarily local in nature.²³ Undergirding all was a clear belief that partisan politics and personal gain should always be subordinate to the needs of white supremacy.

Harrison's account of his actions in October of 1878 offer a revealing if brief look into the fall of the Reconstruction government in Louisiana and the solidification of Democratic rule under threats of violence. His story betrays a desire to disclose more about how racial solidarity coalesced around the elections of 1878, as well as how he resents that its enforcement was not more pure in the subsequent years. He remains frustratingly mute on the effects of any of this upon the African American community, and his revelations about Cordill do not find any parallel admissions about the violence that later drew the US Senate Investigation. Despite that, it seems history should be thankful that we get what disclosures we do from Harrison, as something – guilt, perversity, anger, fear – seems to have almost driven him to almost destroy the manuscript: “Burn it” is scrawled heavily and sideways down its final page. What or who stayed the flame deserves commendation, for despite the fact that Harrison frustratingly raises as many questions

²¹ “1878 in Tensas Parish, La.,” 7.

²² For more on Steele see: *Tensas Gazette*, 7 February 1930, p. 2, and 25 March 1932, p. 4. *Newspapers.com*.

²³ Harrison bought Delta Plantation in Tensas parish, restoring it to some grandeur, before retiring to Mississippi. He seems to have been well respected, but nowhere near as widely known and powerful as was Cordill. See his obituary: *Tensas Gazette*, 23 July 1943, p. 3, and further reminiscences, 6 August, 1943, p. 2.

as he answers, that frustration itself is a gift on a subject about which the archives are otherwise largely silent.

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