

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Jews, Reconstruction, and White Supremacy in Louisiana, 1866–1898

by

Jay Silverberg *

A full moon illuminated the Greek Revival courthouse in the town square of Clinton, Louisiana, on October 14, 1875. Catherine “Babe” Mathews, an eighteen-year-old Black servant to one of the town’s doctors, hung from a thick branch on one of the sprawling oak trees that surrounded the iconic building’s two stories. White men had charged into the courthouse about mid-evening with no resistance from the jailers and took her from her cell, hung her, then left her body hanging into the early morning.

The next day, locals went about their daily routines without acknowledging the courthouse scene, including customers to the store that Jewish brothers Henry and Emanuel Meyer owned across the street from the lynching. The brothers’ store was open, business as usual for a Friday. Most Blacks were too fearful to approach the courthouse lawn and quickly moved along the main street. Word had passed. Blacks and Whites knew that Mathews’s brother-in-law, John Gair, a noted Black Republican state legislator despised by influential White Democrats, also was dead, his body left in a wooded area about ten miles outside of the town. About one hundred well-armed men on horses intercepted a sheriff’s posse returning Gair to Clinton, then threatened the lives of the lawmen before allowing them to depart without Gair in their custody. According to official accounts, a fusillade from the horsemen pummeled Gair with more than 150

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gunshots that the deputies heard from the woods as they fled on horseback to Clinton. Henry Meyer was one of the gunmen.¹

The violence that marked the Feliciana Parishes and much of Louisiana in October 1875 had begun years earlier, fouled numerous elections, and prompted nearly a dozen congressional and state investigations. From 1865 to 1876, at least five thousand Blacks and Whites were murdered in Louisiana. Jewish men in families like the Meyers, and from more influential families such as those of Hyams, Jonas, Kursheedt, Kruttschnitt, and Seixas, appear in thousands of pages of congressional testimony, newspaper reports, and other primary and secondary sources. Jews joined paramilitary organizations responsible for the killings or used public podiums to espouse a clear purpose — preservation of White dominance. They took active roles in major white supremacist or insurrectionist incidents in New Orleans in 1866 and 1874, Coushatta and Colfax in 1873 and 1874, East Feliciana Parish in 1875, and West Feliciana Parish in 1876. After much of the day-to-day violence had dissipated, a Jewish man led the final, legal assault on Black rights in Louisiana in 1898 that reverberated for generations.²

Historical accounts essentially have restated the same incidents involving only a handful of Jews who were part of the rampant violence that came to define the political, social, and economic landscape of the period. Going beyond these accounts, this examination, focusing on Louisiana,

¹ The full moon was confirmed through Moongiant.com, which has historical data about moon phases. Meyer Brothers' Store Records, Mss. 2909, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, Special Collections, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge (hereafter referred to as MBSR and LLMVC); "East Feliciana," *Recent Election in Louisiana*, Forty-Fourth Congress, Mis. Doc. 34 (Washington, D.C., 1877), 3:241–499. A man named Taber is also listed as one of the gunmen. The same name appears on a membership roll for the International Order of B'nai B'rith (IOBB), Feliciana Lodge No. 239, Minute Book, 1877–87, MBSR.

² The author is related to the Meyer family through his maternal grandmother. See Jay Silverberg, "Louisiana Letters, 1855–1871: The Story of an Immigrant Jewish Family," *Southern Jewish History* 18 (2018), 101–69. Numerous other incidents involving white supremacist groups are noteworthy and require further research to determine whether Jews were involved. See Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, 1971), xlv. Trelease lists Camilla, Georgia; Laurens and Hamburg, South Carolina; Eutaw, Alabama; Vicksburg, Meridian, and Clinton, Mississippi; and Memphis, Tennessee as scenes of White attacks on returning Black Union soldiers and their homes. See also Stephen J. Whitfield, "American Jews Face the Ku Klux Klan, 1865–2025," *Jewish History* 38 (2024): 156.

demonstrates that Jews willingly participated in white supremacist organizations and supported supremacist doctrine far more frequently than previously known, while also providing additional details into the divisions among individuals and within families who were drawn into the social, economic, and political upheaval during the postbellum period.³

Historians may muse about Jews within the panorama of Southern history, but Jews' active and repeated support of white supremacy challenges many generalizations about Jewish Southerners who found safety at times in keeping a low profile and suggests a larger reconsideration of their efforts to assimilate into the broader, more contentious elements of Southern society. During this period, some Jews accepted the construct of the Southern race-based society, the Confederacy, and white supremacy to maintain their "whiteness" and acceptance among their predominantly Christian neighbors. Others acknowledged Southern racism but sought to stay away from the violence associated with Reconstruction, and some publicly resisted in support of Black equality. By illustrating the active

³ This article focuses solely on Jewish involvement with the Reconstruction-era violence that followed the Civil War. The author acknowledges the numerous scholarly analyses about Jewish ownership of enslaved Blacks and Jewish participation in the Confederate Army. Scholarly works referencing specific Jewish involvement with Reconstruction-era white supremacy include Eric L. Goldstein, "Jewish Merchants and Former Slaves: The Economic Relationship in the Post Civil War South," Sylvia and Irving Margolis Lecture on the Jewish Experience in the American South, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, February 4, 2008, copy provided to the author; Stuart Rockoff, "Carpetbaggers, Jacklegs, and Bolting Republicans: Jews in Reconstruction Politics in Ascension Parish, Louisiana," *American Jewish History* 97 (January 2013), 39–64; Anton Hieke, *Jewish Identity in the Reconstruction South: Ambivalence and Adaptation* (Berlin and Boston, 2013), 111; Jacob Morrow-Spitzer, "Worthy Citizens: Jewish Citizenship Politics in the Age of American State Transformation, 1850–1933," (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2026). The following articles provide detailed examinations of Jews, Reconstruction politics, and violence between the end of the Civil War and the early twentieth century: Clive Webb, "Jewish Merchants and Black Customers in the Age of Jim Crow," *Southern Jewish History* 2 (1999): 55–80; Daniel R. Weinfeld, "Samuel Fleishman: Tragedy in Reconstruction-Era Florida," *Southern Jewish History* 8 (2005): 31–76; Patrick Q. Mason, "Anti-Jewish Violence in the New South," *Southern Jewish History* 8 (2005): 77–119; Leonard Rogoff, "A Tale of Two Cities: Race, Riots, and Religion in New Bern and Wilmington, North Carolina, 1898," *Southern Jewish History* 14 (2011): 37–75; Jacob Morrow-Spitzer, "'Free from Proscription and Prejudice': Politics and Race in the Election of One Jewish Mayor in Late Reconstruction Louisiana," *Southern Jewish History* 22 (2019): 5–41; and Jay Silverberg, "Houses Divided that Remained Standing: Conflicting Loyalties within an Extended Southern Jewish Family," *Southern Jewish History* 27 (2024): 11–58.

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involvement of Jews on both sides of the violent divide, these findings exemplify the dictum that, rather than a unified entity, there were many Jewish Souths.⁴

"Jewel of Liberty"

One year before his assassination in April 1865, Abraham Lincoln offered insight into his hopes for reuniting the fractured republic. He wrote a letter congratulating Michael Hahn, a German immigrant, abolitionist, and supporter of Reconstruction, on his election as Louisiana's first "free-state governor." Lincoln offered his dream of a reunited nation, acknowledging that a tempered embrace of Blacks "would probably help, in some trying time to come, to keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom." Until his assassination, Lincoln held to his hopes, culminating in a speech given from a White House window to a modest gathering including John Wilkes Booth on the lawn. He beseeched Congress and the country to acknowledge Louisiana's efforts at reconciliation. A new state constitution granted voting rights to Blacks, and the government had taken steps to punish previous state office holders who supported secession.⁵

Three days later, Lincoln was dead and with him whatever chance Louisiana had for a peaceful postwar reconciliation with the Union. Historian Eric Foner writes that "Lincoln invested the greatest hopes" in

⁴ Gilles Vandal, *Rethinking Southern Violence: Homicides in Post-Civil War Louisiana, 1866–1884* (Columbus, OH, 2000), 3. In *Jewish Identity in the Reconstruction South* (111), Hieke suggests that White Christians could not turn against slave-owning Jews because that "would have invalidated the entire foundation of the race-based system." See also, Trelease, *White Terror*, xi; Webb, "Jewish Merchants," 55–80.

⁵ Abraham Lincoln to Michael Hahn, March 13, 1864, St. Charles Parish Virtual Museum, accessed May 11, 2026, <https://scphistory.org/georg-michael-hahn/>. The Lincoln speech is known as the "egg and fowl" speech, in which he said, "Concede that the new government of Louisiana is only to what it should be as the egg is to the fowl, we shall sooner have the fowl by hatching the egg than by smashing it." "The President's Last Public Address," The American Presidency Project, accessed May 11, 2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-last-public-address>. Erich Laux, *The History of the Jews of Klingenmünster* (Klingenmünster, 2019); Laux email and photo to author, August 28, 2025. Michael Hahn was born in 1830 in Klingenmünster, his home one block from the homes and businesses of the Henry and Emanuel Meyer family. Laux provided his book written in German to the author, who shared his English translation with Laux. Laux told the author that Hahn is the most prominent of Klingenmünster's nineteenth-century immigrants.

Louisiana as a guidepost for Reconstruction. Yet, the president's aspirations were misguided. In his examination of failed Republican strategy in Louisiana, historian George Rable observes, "of all the Southern states, Louisiana was the least appropriate for attempting a thorough reformation of political, social, and economic institutions. The state had long been divided along economic, cultural, and racial lines, and its politics had been faction-ridden, corrupt, and occasionally violent."⁶

The summer of 1866 marked the beginning of Louisiana's descent into postwar chaos. Nineteen Louisiana parishes had chafed under federal military control for nearly four years. Weather added to the state's collective dread. The war left the Mississippi River's earthen levee system significantly weakened and unable to contain torrential spring rains. Parishes lining the Mississippi and Red Rivers and their tributaries remained under water for weeks, destroying millions of dollars worth of crops. For many Louisiana farmers, 1866 marked the second consecutive year without a financially viable cotton crop, and for merchants like Henry and Emanuel Meyer, it meant mounting debts from unpaid loans to farmers to plant their crops. The tinderbox mixture of economic and political woes exploded in New Orleans on July 30, 1866, with Jews involved.⁷

The "New Orleans Massacre" began about noon that day. Emotions had been cascading for weeks. President Andrew Johnson, who favored leniency toward most former Confederates, ordered previous political office holders, including the former pro-Confederate mayor, to be restored

⁶ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution: 1863–1877* (New York, 2014), 99; George Rable, "Republican Albatross: The Louisiana Question, National Politics, and the Failure of Reconstruction," *Louisiana History* 23 (Spring 1982), 109–30. See also, Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840–1875* (Baton Rouge, 1966), 211.

⁷ Thomas Conway, assistant commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau who served three years in Louisiana, warned Congress that removal of federal troops would lead to murder and ongoing abuse of Blacks, with Whites believing they could act with impunity. *Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction*, Thirty-Ninth Congress, House Report 30, Part 4 (Washington, DC, 1866), 78; Elliott Ashkenazi, *The Business of Jews in Louisiana, 1840–1875* (Tuscaloosa, 1988), 77. Michael R. Cohen writes that farmers planted a cotton crop in June 1866, but by July, caterpillars had eaten much of the crop. That year, farmers planted more than one million acres but harvested only 131,000 bales of cotton. Floods in 1867 caused similar crop damage. Michael R. Cohen, *Cotton Capitalists: American Jewish Entrepreneurship in the Reconstruction Era* (New York, 2017), 94.

*Theodore R. Davis, "The Riot in New Orleans – Murdering Negroes
in the Rear of Mechanics' Institute," from "Four Scenes of the
Riot in New Orleans," Harper's Weekly, August 25, 1866.
(Courtesy of the Historic New Orleans Collection,
1974.25.9.309 i-iv.)*

to their prewar positions. In response, Republican leaders reconvened the 1864 constitutional convention determined to extend Black suffrage and end efforts to disenfranchise freedmen. On July 30, ninety Black and White constitutional convention delegates gathered inside the Mechanics Institute just off Canal Street as a parade of about two hundred unarmed Black men marched toward the building. Police were waiting, dressed in summer outfits of straw hats, white pantaloons, and blue coats with black ribbons affixed, designed to set them apart from others in the event of street fighting. Armed white supremacists lined the streets, mixing with the police. Chaos reigned as the Black marchers approached the institute. The generally accepted version of events is that armed ex-Confederates

jostled some of the Black marchers, then joined with police shooting at the marchers despite little provocation.⁸

The Mechanics Institute and surrounding streets became a killing zone with police and white supremacists preying upon the marchers and delegates, shooting people inside the building and chasing them through the building and into the streets where the killing continued. In two hours, thirty-four Black marchers were dead and about one hundred wounded; three delegates were dead and seventeen wounded, including Michael Hahn, specifically targeted for his public statements supporting Reconstruction. Hundreds involved in the riot were arrested. Federal troops kept from the rioting—some believed intentionally—finally restored order and declared martial law.

At least four Jewish men were involved, according to congressional testimony. Sokoloski, identified as a “Polish Jew, armed with a pistol,” was one of the police officers leading the charge up the main interior staircase to the delegates’ meeting room. A father and son named Gullman, the older man identified as a Jew and baker for a synagogue, stood accused of shooting at and being present when a police officer was killed in the streets during the rioting. Bernard Williams, who presented himself to the committee as a Jewish coffeehouse owner, identified these men. He told a rambling tale of being offered six hundred dollars by the older Gullman and another man to leave the city to keep him from testifying, then being jailed three times before “Union” men freed him after each arrest. Williams also accused a man named Lazarus of yelling “You Yankee bastard” before firing a pistol shot into the fallen policeman the Gullmans allegedly murdered.⁹

⁸ *Report of the Select Committee on the New Orleans Riots*, Thirty-Ninth Congress, House Report 16 (Washington, DC, 1867). Congress used the term “riots” in reference to the attack on the convention delegates and subsequent street killings. Newspaper reports and historical analyses have used the term “massacre” to describe the events in 1866. The committee document is a 668-page report published in February 1867 containing graphic detail from witnesses about the scene along Canal Boulevard and Burgundy, Dryades, and Baronne Streets. The protocol was for the majority and minority committee members to offer separate conclusions. Thus witness testimony is often construed based on the Republican (pro-Reconstruction) or Democratic Party viewpoint.

⁹ The men listed as taking part in Reconstruction-era incidents are identified as Jews through various sources including witness testimony during the cited congressional investigations; the Shappell Roster of Jewish Service in the American Civil War, accessed May 11,

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Congress also learned about ex-Confederates stepping back into battle in some of the earliest evidence of the soldiers' paramilitary response to Reconstruction. Witnesses told of a secret society, the Southern Cross Association No. 9, part of "the Central Association." The organization's membership opened only to ex-Confederates, who paid dues of

*Theodore R. Davis, "The New Orleans Riot – The Military Commission
Examining Witnesses," Harper's Weekly, September 1, 1866.
(Courtesy of the Historic New Orleans Collection, 1974.25.9.198.)*

2026, www.shapell.org/roster; newspaper reports; Find-a-Grave, accessed May 11, 2026, <https://www.findagrave.com>; and *New Orleans Riots*. Records show a Marks Sokolowsky, born in Poland, as New Orleans "city police" in 1868. He is buried in a Jewish cemetery. Generally accessible census records show no Gullman or Gallman in New Orleans during the time of the riot, thus the identification of the two men involved in the police officer's shooting as Jewish is based solely on witness testimony. Williams identified himself as an Orthodox Jew during his testimony in 1879. He refused to be sworn in with the Christian Bible. Instead, he removed his hat, used it to place his hand and to take the oath, then put the hat back on his head. Two Jewish men were in New Orleans during this period named Lazarus, one identified in his obituary as a member of several "secret societies." *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, February 25, 1884.

twenty-five cents a month, swore they would not divulge their business or passwords to the “uninitiated,” and would favor other ex-Confederates in matters of employment “or advantage that may be in my control to gift.” A membership list of thirty-four men provided to the committee included “Louis Kolski, Jew; Isaac Henriques, Jew.” Only Kolski and Henriques were identified by religion, and their names were listed consecutively; others were identified, for example, as “gambler,” “thug,” “cotton sampler,” “conductor,” “son of the old man.” An Isaac L. Henriques served in a Louisiana infantry unit, was captured, paroled, and returned to New Orleans; and a Louis Kolsky served in the Fourth Louisiana Regiment, European Brigade, composed of immigrants. A few of the men in the association had been wartime officers, but most were privates and corporals serving in the same Confederate units. Within a week after local newspapers published the details and names linked to the Southern Cross Association, the papers published what were called “cards” — advertisements — from seven men denying their involvement. “In addition to the other denials which have appeared in our columns, Mr. Louis Kolski, now comes forward and denies having been a member, or having any knowledge whatsoever of any such society.” Thus, whether he was a member is left unclear.¹⁰

¹⁰ *New Orleans Riots*, 524, 599; *New Orleans Times*, February 23, 1877; *Arkansas Democrat*, November 11, 1916; *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, June 7, 1909; “Isaac L. Henriques,” Shapell Roster, accessed May 11, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/13966>. It is unclear whether the identification is Isaac L. Henriques or Isaac H. Henriques. Both were Jewish but unrelated. The brother of Isaac H. Henriques, Albert, was involved with the White League, and while there is no evidence Isaac H. served during the Civil War, he may have been involved in the incident. Soldier names were frequently incorrect or incomplete, thus with several names, there is not a letter-for-letter match of names in the committee report. A “Louis Kolsky” is buried in New Orleans’s Hebrew Rest Cemetery. *Report of the Joint Committee to Inquire into The Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*, Forty-Second Congress, House Report 22 (Washington, DC, 1872), 22, 449; The report is the first in-depth congressional investigation into white supremacist activities, with one section titled “Ku Klux Klan.” The report states that KKK-styled organizations were prevalent throughout the South beginning in the late 1860s. The groups had the same violent tendencies but different names: the White Brotherhoods, Constitutional Union Guards, Invisible Empires in North Carolina, the Invisible Circle in South Carolina, the Pale Faces in Tennessee, and Knights of the White Camelia in Louisiana.

"We are fighting the Philistines"

After two months of testimony and the subsequent committee report about New Orleans, irate congressmen and senators, stirred to punish the Southern states for their intransigence, approved the Reconstruction Act. This legislation outlined a process for Louisiana and nine other Southern states to rejoin the Union that focused on ensuring formerly enslaved Blacks would gain civil and political rights, including the right to vote. In his review of Louisiana's economy and social structure from 1840 to 1875, Robert W. Shugg writes, "The long struggle was a political contest between White and colored people for the exclusive right to rule . . . but it should not be forgotten that at first neither race was solidly united against the other, nor were the spoils of office their only concern. Political turmoil obscured but did not conceal the deeper social and economic problems of the period." Jews were caught up in the maelstrom.¹¹

The Reconstruction Act's framework for states to rejoin the Union catapulted Louisiana into "Radical Reconstruction" — a strategy promoting Black equality that was at the core of the Republican Party, as opposed to the Democrats, who followed a theme of "redemption," or restoring rights they believed the federal government had removed from the states. In July 1867, Black voters in Louisiana outnumbered Whites 82,407 to 44,732. That September, the state, in a vote of 75,038 to 4,906, approved calling for another constitutional convention intending to extend voting rights for all males. In April 1868, Louisiana voters elected a new Republican governor, White northerner Henry C. Warmoth; a Black Republican lieutenant governor, Oscar J. Dunn; approved a new constitution; and ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, ensuring that all people born or naturalized in the United States were citizens entitled to equal treatment

¹¹ Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 197. Most of this article includes Jews from three areas in Louisiana: New Orleans and surrounding parishes, the Feliciana Parishes neighboring Mississippi, and the Red River area of Shreveport and Natchitoches in the northern part of the state. Based on the author's research, Jews were not found to be as publicly identified with Reconstruction-era activity in the Sugar Belt, the parishes in the southern part of the state nearer the Mississippi River delta. In his detailed examination of the region, John C. Rodrigue points out, "The Sugar country did not suffer the ferocity that tore apart other sections of the state, but fear, punctuated by sporadic violence, was rife." John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge, 2001), 100.

under the law. The election, "held in the presence of the military, [was] the last of fair elections held in Louisiana," wrote a commissioner to the federal court for Louisiana. However, the April 1868 elections were not without issue. A congressional committee estimated that one thousand "murders, maimings and whippings" occurred throughout the state before the election. Republicans counted nearly forty-eight thousand Black Louisianians on their voting rolls in twenty-eight parishes, but only five thousand voted in the election. A Jew in New Orleans, Nathan Schwab, who had been an active constitutional convention delegate the previous year, ran successfully as a Republican for sheriff in New Orleans. Within a year, embroiled in controversy and despised by the Democratic white supremacists, Schwab's party turned on him.¹²

Election Day in 1868 put Schwab prominently in the newspaper headlines. Typical of the era, news reports about him vary depending on the publication's political leanings. Schwab showed up at a New Orleans polling place, where soldiers arrested and held him for his involvement in a skirmish involving Blacks trying to vote and White polling supervisors trying to stop them. In an affidavit provided to a local court, Schwab denied that he was an agitator, but rather had attempted to quell Black voters' anger over their inability to vote and to learn more about the situation from an official inside the polling place. He continued, "Having received this morning under sealed envelope the herein inclosed anonymous threat . . . it contains a kitten's tail, with the word written in red on the top 'beware.'" A year later, Warmoth's henchmen jailed Schwab in what was generally accepted as bogus allegations involving his refusal to arrest a local government official. Warmoth apparently wanted Schwab out of the way in a convoluted money-making deal involving a local slaughterhouse that the governor's hand-picked replacement for sheriff

¹² Fanny Lovell Bone, "Louisiana in the Disputed Election of 1876," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 15 (January 1932), 413. Specific provisions of the Reconstruction Act were the formation of five military districts in the ten former Confederate states, each district commanded by a former Union general with federal troops restoring government to the states; requirements for new state constitutions guaranteeing voting rights for all males, regardless of race, excluding ex-Confederates; ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment granting equal protection to anyone born or naturalized in the United States; and prohibitions against ex-Confederates holding office or voting. See *Report and Testimony of the Select Committee of the United States Senate to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes from the Southern States to the Northern States*, Forty-Sixth Congress, Senate Report 693 (Washington, DC, 1880), xix.

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controlled. The latter arrested Schwab and jailed him overnight. Schwab sued, yet after nearly two years of litigation, including a court ruling that Warmoth had acted illegally, he failed to regain office.

Schwab is noteworthy because he lived through his ordeal and was able to leave New Orleans, unlike numerous other White, Republican officeholders across the state with enemies bent on doing them harm. Louisiana's roll of assassinated Republican officeholders during Reconstruction numbers at least two dozen. Schwab's experiences also reflect divisions during Reconstruction where the lines sometimes overlapped, with some seeking power and profit hoping to maintain the prewar status quo or, like Schwab, seeking alliances to protect or enhance their social, economic, and political standing.¹³

In August 1868, Warmoth hoped for federal intervention to help his administration regain control over the paramilitary organizations—the Ku Klux Klan, Knights of the White Camelia, the Seymour Knights, and Hancock Guards—terrorizing every parish. Fewer than one thousand federal troops patrolled Louisiana, less than half of the prior year's number. "The transfer of power to the Radicals and the contest over the impending November presidential election precipitated a widescale 'Counter Reconstruction' across the state as conservative White Louisianians mobilized against the Radical Republicans," writes historian Michael J. Pfeifer about events in 1868. The white supremacists avowed to dominate from the barrel of a gun and intimidate anyone who dared to vote Republican.¹⁴

¹³ *Use of the Army in Certain of the Southern States*, Forty-fourth Congress, House Ex. Doc. 30, 313–14; *New Orleans Crescent*, November 23, 1867 and April 17, 1868; *New Orleans Republican*, April 18, 1868; *New Orleans Times*, July 23, 1869 and July 24, 1869; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, April 18, 1868, July 24, 1869, July 25, 1869, and February 11, 1870. One news report alleged Schwab either had one gun or several guns, and used a gun to threaten authorities for refusing to allow Black voting. Another report indicated that when soldiers arrested him, Black protesters surged toward the polling place and a man was shot and wounded. Schwab eventually left New Orleans and resettled in Birmingham, where he died in 1893 and was buried in the Knesset Israel cemetery. *Birmingham News*, December 26, 1893.

¹⁴ Michael J. Pfeifer, "The Origins of Postbellum Lynching: Collective Violence in Reconstruction Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 50 (Spring 2009): 197. Gilles Vandal maintains that the military's role changed from protection to policing once Louisiana was readmitted into the Union in 1868, with limited ability to intercede quickly. Thus "Blacks were compelled after 1867 to look out for themselves and were left with no military protection in the rural parishes." Vandal, *Rethinking Southern Violence*, 183.

Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, *Forty-second Congress, House Report 22*.
(Library of Congress.)

In a congressional report about Reconstruction violence throughout the former Confederate states from 1865 to 1876, two-thirds of its 546 pages focus on Louisiana. A parish-by-parish listing of names of the dead, the wounded, those responsible, and occasional details of the attacks required nearly 150 pages. The Caddo Parish sheriff, an ex-Union soldier trying to keep peace in a notoriously violent section of the state, wrote to Warmoth in August 1868, "There is no safety for life and property of any or class of men who claim to disagree politically with the democracy of Caddo. . . . [M]y life is openly threatened on the streets, and one attempt has already been made. . . . I keep a strong guard of colored men at my house each night." He concluded: "we are fighting the 'Philistines.'" Jewish men joined the fight on both sides.¹⁵

¹⁵ Between 1865 and 1876, Caddo Parish accounted for 16 percent of all murders in Louisiana, with most of the victims Black. Vandal, *Rethinking Southern Violence*, 7; *Use of the Army*, 78, 280, 381–83, 400–546; Pfeifer, "The Origins of Postbellum Lynching," 89–201; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, August 6, 1868; H. Oscar Lestage Jr., "The White League in Louisiana and its

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"Wash his hands in blood"

In the Feliciana Parishes, Jewish men were among the white supremacists who targeted Joseph Parkinson Newsham, a lawyer and Union veteran from Illinois who had moved south and was elected to Congress in July 1868. By August 1868, the state was taut. Republican leaders like Newsham took every opportunity to talk about the new political and social order as he stumped for Ulysses S. Grant's presidential election the following November. Before a July Fourth celebration in St. Francisville, Newsham reminded a partisan crowd of the Democratic Party's opposition to Black progress and a potential return to prewar conditions. A month later, he and his family fell victim to the violence, with two Jewish merchants—one from the Meyer family—directly involved. On a late August day, Republican and Democratic Party adherents turned out for rallies in the late afternoon. A sworn statement from E. L. Weber, Newsham's brother-in-law and sheriff of West Feliciana Parish, alleged that after sunset, a procession of Republicans marched two miles inland from the riverside town of Bayou Sara to St. Francisville to a platform where their leaders waited to make speeches. At 11 P.M., about three hundred Democrats, armed with rifles, pistols, and swords, set out from Bayou Sara after their rally ended and stopped in front of the Republican platform. Weber warned the Democratic Party leader that any violence would be his responsibility, temporarily deferring a confrontation. As the Democrats retreated through St. Francisville, they stopped in front of Newsham's home.¹⁶

Someone threw a burning oil can onto the gallery, then five men barged onto the porch where Newsham's wife and mother-in-law sat and pointed guns at the women. One of them demanded Newsham, declaring

Participation in Reconstruction Riots," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 18 (July 1935): 619–93. A report to the Senate from the secretary of war focuses solely on the depravity in St. Landry Parish during 1868 when a nineteen-year-old newspaper editor was beaten while teaching his Sunday school class for an article he published about a Republican political meeting that White Democrats disliked. Estimates were that at least two hundred Black residents were hunted and killed in response to the article. *Letter of the Secretary of War, communicating, in compliance with a resolution of the Senate, of December 14, 1868, reports in relation to recent disturbances in Louisiana*, Fortieth Congress, Senate Ex. Doc. 15, (Washington, DC, 1868), 1–8; *New Orleans Republican*, July 14, 1868.

¹⁶ *New Orleans Republican*, July 14, 1868.

he wanted his heart and to wash his hands in the congressman's blood. Newsham was away at the political rally, and Sheriff Weber quelled the threats. Newsham's family was left unharmed, and the fire was quashed without significant damage or injury. According to an affidavit from Weber's brother, Don, two of the five home invaders were Jewish—a man named Hirsch, likely Alphonse Hirsch, and Leon Adler, a cousin to the Meyer brothers and stepson to the family's patriarch, Abraham Levy. Levy and Adler operated a store in Bayou Sara, one of four stores the family owned in the Feliciana region during this period. The Bayou Sara and Clinton stores barely sustained the family during the Civil War, yet the family persevered. Abraham Levy eventually established himself as one of the wealthiest men in West Feliciana Parish, and the extended family's lifestyle placed it well within the upper tier. The extended family's activities intertwined with the economic and political exigencies of the period.¹⁷

"The election was simply a sham, a nullity."

The 1868 November presidential election was notable for two reasons: it was the first in which Blacks could vote and the first that paramilitary groups materially affected with their murderous rampage throughout Louisiana. Ulysses S. Grant, the Republican nominee for president, received thirty-three thousand votes, while his Democratic opponent, Horatio Seymour, received eighty thousand votes statewide. In twenty-six of the fifty parishes, "the election was simply a sham, a nullity. No single essential of an election . . . was complied with," concluded state legislators. The state investigators estimated that only 10 percent of registered Blacks actually voted in the twenty-six questionable parishes. State investigators heard from witnesses that a man named Meyer—no first name was given—was an Election Day supervisor in Jackson and Clinton when Black voters were intimidated at polling places in those two communities. A witness said the supervisors decided Black voters did not have proper forms to lawfully register to vote. When the Black men

¹⁷ *Use of the Army*, 331–33; This report includes affidavits and testimony about election intimidation targeting Black Republican voters and other violent incidents involving anti-Reconstruction Democrats and/or the organizations formed to stymie electoral and social progress in the South. IOBB Feliciana Lodge No. 239 records, MBSR, include the most complete listing of Jewish men in the Clinton area during the 1870s and 1880s. Leon Adler and Alphonse Hirsch are listed as members. See also, Silverberg, "Louisiana Letters."

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complained, the supervisors told them to “clear off.” A state-appointed election overseer arrived at the Clinton courthouse after it opened on Election Day and was soon told that no Republican tally sheets would be distributed and to depart if he wanted to live. A Black man in Clinton was stopped as he tried entering a polling place and was ordered to produce any guns he held. He said he had none but was searched. When he resisted, a White man brandished his revolver and declared, “There is my authority.”¹⁸

*James A. Wales, “Everything Points to a Democratic Victory,”
Harper’s Weekly, October 31, 1874. (Library of Congress.)*

¹⁸ *Report of the Joint Committee of the General Assembly of Louisiana on the Conduct of the Late Elections and the Condition of Peace and Order in the State* (New Orleans, 1869), 79–81. The state report said that 1,150 Republicans in East Feliciana were illegally excluded from voting. Only one family was named “Meyer” in East Feliciana at the time.

Black voter intimidation was but one tactic of the white supremacists. White merchants like the Meyers in East Feliciana and across the state also were directly targeted in efforts to sway the election for the Democratic Party. In October 1868, planters distributed a resolution after a meeting in Clinton proclaiming that local businesses would not employ, rent to, sell to, or help any Black man who voted Republican; that any Black man had to show in writing he voted Democratic; and, importantly for understanding influences on Jewish merchants, businessmen would not patronize or trade with other merchants who refused to comply.¹⁹

This type of economic coercion is consistent with Foner's observation that merchants, planters, and professionals, although divided on some economic issues, were generally united in their support for white supremacy. The Meyer family offers insights into the conflicts Jewish country merchants faced supporting the Democrats, with or without violence. The family store in downtown Clinton supported the brothers' extended families, a livelihood dependent on relationships with White, anti-Reconstruction planters and Black freedmen. After the war, the Meyers entered into agreements with numerous local cotton growers and a major cotton factor in New Orleans, buying, selling, and trading cotton with pressure to collect on their debts as bills came due, thus adding to their financial risk if they opposed White order. The brothers' juggling of debt was a perennial problem, one that exacerbated already fraught relationships with creditors from whom they borrowed and with freedmen seething over a future of repaying loans to merchants like the Meyers. A letter that Emmanuel Meyer wrote in 1876 to his main financier about delinquent debt payments provides some insight into his mindset during the period: "We have . . . come to the conclusion that you take us for a [set] of Negroes; that's just about the way they have to do; sign their names whenever it is told them to do so."²⁰

¹⁹ "Intolerance," *New Orleans Republican*, October 20, 1868.

²⁰ Emanuel Meyer to Abraham Levi, September 12, 1876, vol. 33, 1876–1877, MBSR; Richard Holcombe Kilbourne Jr., *Debt, Investment, Slaves: Credit Relations in East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana 1825–1885* (Tuscaloosa, 2014), 165; Jacob Morrow-Spitzer, "The 'Theoretical Jew' Versus the 'Southern Jew': Black Perceptions of Jewish Whiteness in the Nineteenth-Century American South," *American Jewish History* 106 (January 2022): 31–54; Webb, "Jewish Merchants," 55–80; Eric Goldstein, "'Now is the Time to Show Your True Colors': Southern Jews, Whiteness, and the Rise of Jim Crow," in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History*, ed.

"A White Man's Government or No Government!"

In the month preceding the presidential election on November 3, 1868, chaos reigned in New Orleans and in the backwoods of Louisiana parishes. Official reports describe the carnage—paramilitary groups patrolling streets and country roads, killing or intimidating Blacks and Whites supporting the Republicans, threatening elected officials, attacking processions supporting the Republican nominees Ulysses S. Grant and Schuyler Colfax. Much of the violence likely came from the Knights of the White Camelia that two men, an ex-Confederate and a newspaper editor, started a year earlier in central Louisiana. KWC, as it was known to the media and congressional investigators, organized councils in the parishes and required members to follow rituals promoting the dominance of White society. At times, KWC and the Ku Klux Klan were mingled in media reports, although the historical record suggests the KWC's violence dominated Louisiana in 1868, whereas the KKK was more prevalent in Tennessee, where it was founded in 1866, and other Southern states before dominating throughout the South.²¹

Three days before Election Day, fifteen White men armed with guns, spades, and axes chased a twenty-year-old Black male through the streets of Gretna, on the outskirts of New Orleans. They yelled "head him off" and "kill him" before the young man was shot in the back. "[Witnesses] also saw a son of John Linton, a [keeper] of a coffee-house, in Gretna, and a Jew named Albert Lamben, both shoot him in the back." New Orleans newspapers filled columns in the days leading up to the election with charges and countercharges about a flier distributed citywide by an alleged group calling itself the Council of Seven, declaring "A White Man's Government or No Government. . . . [T]he hand of the oppressor bears

Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg (Waltham, MA, 2006), 138; Cohen, *Cotton Capitalists*, 112.

²¹ James G. Dauphine, "The Knights of the White Camelia and the Election of 1868: Louisiana's White Terrorists; a Benighting Legacy," *Louisiana History* 30 (Spring 1989), 173–90. Dauphine provides one of the more detailed analyses of the organization's impact on the 1868 election. See also, Samuel C. Hyde Jr., *Pistols and Politics: Feuds, Factions, and the Struggle for Order in Louisiana's Florida Parishes, 1810–1935*, (Baton Rouge, 2018), 164–66, which examines the Feliciana region and suggests that the White Camelia groups focused more on economic intimidation while the KKK used violence as its primary strategy. *New Orleans Republican*, December 2, 1868; Trelease, *White Terror*, xivi, 127–36.

heavily upon us. . . . [L]et the Caucasian arise in his strength." In Claiborne Parish, as notorious as any for white supremacist violence, a judge who had switched parties from Democratic to Republican described to state investigators how he barely escaped an attack while riding home on his horse after voting for Grant. The judge declared in his written statement that he witnessed another Grant voter attacked: "The poor Jew was pulled from his horse before reaching home, and whipped to death with whips." No identification was given for the Jew who was killed nor did the judge indicate whether the attackers targeted the man because he was Jewish. The Republican press blamed the Democrats for the inflamed language. Democrats described it as a devious scare tactic by Radical Republicans. Rural Blacks and Whites told investigators they were able to vote Republican only by carrying shotguns to the polling place.²²

The final five years of the 1860s provided only a prelude. During the 1870s, Louisiana proved to be such a cesspool of societal, economic, and political misdeeds that Congress sent investigative committees every year through 1879. The report concluded that the depredation was widespread; Congress could do little to intervene; and, when the federal government tried, matters only worsened. The U.S. House and Senate investigated fifty-six cases of election fraud in the states between 1866 and 1880. Five of those cases were based in Louisiana; no other state had more than two. A contemporary history characterized Louisiana's 1872 election as the most violent in American history. Ongoing atrocities marked the elections in 1874 and 1876 and the intervening periods. Shugg writes that class stood at the center of the violence, whether Black people would ascend the social and economic network toward equality: "Carpetbaggers fought planters and merchants for the possession of rich natural resources and the control of Black and White labor. The carpetbaggers were defeated because they turned from economic to political exploitation, preyed upon Whites more than Blacks, and arrayed all classes of the former race against

²² *Conduct of the Late Elections*, 14; *Papers in the Case of J. H. Sypher vs. Louis St. Martin, from the First Congressional District of Louisiana*, Forty-First Congress, House Mis. Doc. 13, 47-48; *Use of the Army*, 38. Republican newspapers in Alexandria, Homer, and Opelousas were put out of business between October and December 1868. *Ouachita Telegraph*, May 3, 1868.

the latter.” The ruling Whites ultimately prevailed, with violence as their weapon. Jews participated actively in the mayhem.²³

“Your fate is sealed ... nothing but your blood will appease us.”

During the 1870s, organizations engaged in murderous incidents as in previous years, but with a different name: the White League. This was a postwar unsanctioned militia with ex-Confederate officers commanding former soldiers to wreak havoc, mostly directed at Black Republicans. These men replaced the battlefields of Shiloh, Gettysburg, and Chattanooga with the streets of New Orleans or the Louisiana countryside to maintain their White status. “The White League of New Orleans itself was and is a menace to the republicans of the whole state . . . [and] doubtless contains many persons of very different character.”²⁴

Some of the White League’s success likely resulted from a failed effort in 1873 directed by a Jewish New Orleanian to broker peace between the Democrats and Republicans. The Unification Movement was one of two notable Jewish-led strategies in Louisiana to blunt the opponents of Reconstruction and demonstrated how Jews stood on both sides of Reconstruction. The plan joined White and Black business and political leaders who wanted to grant Blacks economic and political equality and hoped to end the ongoing statewide economic and political chaos. Isaac M. Marks, born to Jewish parents in Charleston, South Carolina, and a prominent local businessman, provided critical leadership. The plan failed miserably, largely as the result of a disastrous kickoff event followed by an onslaught of negative media that quickly stalled progress toward unification. Historian T. Harry Williams observes that although Marks and his counterparts hoped unification would help restore financial equilibrium, the movement fizzled because of Whites’ fear that concessions would lead to racial equality. Always ready to seize any opportunity, the white supremacists in New Orleans used the businessmen’s aborted unification attempt as a

²³ Fanny Lovell Bone wrote that congressional oversight was “a habit which was to become so fixed a custom . . . that the appointment of a Louisiana Investigation Committee or the report from said committee might also have been included in the regular order of business of either national house.” Bone, “Louisiana in the Disputed Election of 1876,” 415. See also, Dana Bash with David Fisher, *America’s Deadliest Election: The Cautionary Tale of the Most Violent Election in American History* (Toronto, 2024); Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 197.

²⁴ *Condition of the South*, Forty-Third Congress, House Report 261 (Washington, D.C., 1875), 18–19.

rallying point to transform the local Democratic Club into one of the state's most active White League units. Although many members were mainstream businessmen, the club was quickly absorbed into the white supremacy manifesto, with Jews as active participants. The same scenario played out in town after town.²⁵

*Benjamin F. Jonas, New Orleans Times
Picayune, September 15, 1891.
(Newspapers.com.)*

In August 1874, a planned Democratic Party convention in Opelousas served as the official beginning of Louisiana's White League. At least five Jewish men — three of them ex-Confederates — participated with about fifty other men at the convention. The four were Leopold Godchaux and Samuel Cerf Haas, Opelousas merchants who would become two of the wealthiest men in the region; Benjamin Franklin Jonas, a New Orleans attorney and eventual statewide political leader; and Julius Levin and Jonas Rosenthal, both leading Alexandria merchants. The platform was simple: white dominance. Whereas secrecy may have prevailed for the White Camelias or the KKK, not so for the White Leaguers. Public meetings espoused white supremacy, but the more violent side of the organization was predominant, with attacks carried out by men in hoods

²⁵ Joe Gray Taylor, "New Orleans and Reconstruction," *Louisiana History* 9 (Summer 1968): 189–208; T. Harry Williams, "The Louisiana Unification Movement of 1873," *Journal of Southern History* 11 (August 1945): 349–69.

or with faces painted black. "It is impossible to estimate the strength or to exaggerate the importance of an organization like the White League," concludes Shugg. The White League established outposts in every Louisiana parish, with Jewish men as members. Whites, outnumbered in many parishes, were fearful of Black Louisianians voting in overwhelming numbers. Newspaper support statewide and White residents' collective military experiences were used as the cudgel to intimidate Blacks from active economic and political participation. From 1873 to 1876 White League violence, political assassination, and intimidation of Black voters in Louisiana influenced multiple elections such that results could not be relied on and were nullified, ultimately shaping the future of the United States.²⁶

Natchitoches, established in 1714 as a trading post, is the oldest permanent settlement within the Louisiana Purchase. After the Civil War, the region known as the Red River Valley became a hotbed of racial violence, including one of the most horrific white supremacist killings in American history. Jewish men participated continually in the sordid events on both sides, none more prominent than lawyer Henry Clay (known as H. C.) Myers. An 1868 news story shows Myers and two other Jews—S. M.

²⁶ *Condition of the South*, House Report 261, 92; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 230, nn. 189, 190, 191; Carin Peller-Semmens, "Unreconstructed: Slavery and Emancipation in Louisiana's Red River; 1820-1880," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sussex, 2016), 151; *The Caucasian*, August 15, 1874, August 29, 1874, and October 24, 1874; "Samuel Cerf Haas," Shapell Roster, accessed May 17, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/3075>; "Benjamin Franklin Jonas," Shapell Roster, accessed May 17, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/9144>; "Julius Levin," Shapell Roster, accessed May 17, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/13190>. James K. Hogue lists twenty parishes with White League organizations that formed between May and August 1874. James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, 1954), Appendix 2. The White League advertised its meetings and officers in newspapers, and the main newspapers in Shreveport and Opelousas were known particularly for their allegiance to the White League. See, for example, *Opelousas Courier*, May 25, 1874 and *New Orleans Bulletin*, October 2, 1874. The August 22, 1874, *Opelousas Courier* had five front-page columns describing the White League and Democratic Party convention held in Opelousas. Julius Levin joined two other Alexandria Jews, Edouard Weil and Marx Heyman, as delegates to the April 1872 Louisiana Democratic Party convention. Martin I. Hinchey, *Fourscore and Eleven: A History of the Jews of Rapides Parish, 1828-1919* (Alexandria, LA, 1984), 16; *Opelousas Journal*, October 16, 1874; Carol Mills-Nichol, *Louisiana's Jewish Immigrants from Bas-Rhin, Alsace, France*, (Santa Maria, CA, 2014), 139, 145.

Hyams and Leopold Caspari—as part of a conservative Democratic Party club. Although Myers professed he was in favor of secession and supported the Confederates while at home during the war, his allegiances and those of his merchant father, Philip, switched by 1870, when Republican Governor Warmoth appointed the younger to a judgeship and the older as mayor of Natchitoches. By mid-decade, H. C. Myers became one of the most despised men in the region. The White League went after him in 1874, with Jewish compatriots and the local newspaper's assistance, in a convoluted series of charges and countercharges of fraud and deceit contrary to lawful office-holding.²⁷

According to his nearly twenty pages of testimony, H. C. Myers was empowered to manage various aspects of local government. He told members of Congress that he lawfully dispatched his duties while acknowledging the opposition to some of his decisions. The White League and its mouthpiece, the Natchitoches newspaper *People's Vindicator*, wanted him gone, along with the Republican police jury and state senator. In a particularly nasty attack during the summer of 1874, an anonymous flier depicted Myers thusly: "Our Judge, H. C. Myers, the hawking Jew and a disgrace not only to the judicial bench but to that race who have been kings and rulers from the beginning of time . . ." That missive followed one from a Committee of 70—essentially members of the White League—that proclaimed to Myers and other Republican leaders:

Your fate is sealed. . . . Nothing but your blood will appease us. The people of Natchitoches, Sabine, Winn, De Soto, Rapides, Red River, Bienville, Claiborne, Jackson and Caddo [Parishes] are ready at a moment's notice, and will exterminate all radicals.

Myers and another Republican officeholder were warned in August 1874 to either leave the region or suffer the consequences. Three members of the Committee of 70 were Jewish, two of whom were founders of B'nai Israel in Natchitoches: Isaac Kahn and Henry Levy. The third was a

²⁷ *Condition of the South*, 279–91. H. C. Myers is buried in the Dispersed of Judah cemetery in New Orleans. His father is shown as treasurer of the Hebrew Benevolent Society in Charleston. The father apparently left South Carolina after his wife died of fever in 1842. *Charleston Daily Courier*, December 5, 1828; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, May 12, 1870; *New Orleans Times*, May 13, 1870; *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 14, 1827 and September 22, 1842; *Charleston Mercury*, April 14, 1842; *Natchitoches Spectator*, May 14, 1868; Mills-Nichol, *Louisiana's Jewish Immigrants*, 94–95, 152.

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member of the Hyams family, who were Democrats beginning with Henry M. Hyams Sr., Louisiana's pre-Civil War lieutenant governor. Philip Myers also is listed as a synagogue founder, illustrating how the ebbs and flows of life continually offered alliances for Jewish men that could change dramatically, perhaps with dire consequences, within days, weeks, months or years.²⁸

H. C. Myers and another Republican officeholder took the threat seriously. Myers testified about getting out of his sick bed one late August day and departing about 5 P.M. in a friend's carriage, eventually reaching Memphis and then New Orleans. Myers told committee members that his infant child was sick, as were his wife and aging father. According to Myers, the baby died the day after he left home and his father not long after. Typical of the era, a White League organ in New Orleans told a different tale. The headline read:

Myers, the Martyr.

The Persecuted Magistrate of Natchitoches.

They Wouldn't Let Him Watch his Father's Dying Pillow.

Another Version of the Story.

The first three paragraphs sarcastically outline H. C. Myers's alleged misdeeds, his hoped-for resurgence as a man of virtue, and a brief recap of the events preceding his rapid departure from Natchitoches. The article failed to mention White League threats. The newspaper then published sworn statements from three nurses alleging that Myers barely visited his dying father and left without paying them. Henry Levy's affidavit identified him as a member of B'nai Israel (spelled "Benai"). Levy alleged that the Jewish organization and local Masonic lodges paid all of Philip

²⁸ Myers provided a list of the seventy White Leaguers in his testimony, published in the *People's Vindicator* on July 25, 1874, the same date he was described as a "hawking Jew." In addition to Henry Levy and Isaac Kahn, Solomon M. Hyams was listed. The *Vindicator* published the list almost weekly into 1875. *Condition of the South*, 290. On July 20, 1871, the *Weekly Louisianian* published a legislative act signed by Governor Warmoth acknowledging B'nai Israel and twenty-one Jewish men. See also, Mills-Nichol, *Louisiana's Jewish Immigrants*, 177.

From the testimony of Henry C. Myers, Condition of the South, Forty-third Congress, House Report 261, p. 279. (Library of Congress.)

Myers's medical expenses and those of H. C. Myers's infant. Levy was joined in the statement by the synagogue's secretary, H. Simon.²⁹

"Bloodiest single instance of racial carnage ..."

Election Day on November 8, 1868, was "terrifying and exhilarating" for many thousands of Black men throughout the South who were allowed to vote for the first time. Most were inclined to cast a ballot for the Civil War general who helped win their freedom, Republican nominee Ulysses S. Grant. The day Grant and his vice president, Schuyler Colfax, took office, March 4, 1869, became noteworthy for another reason. On that day, Grant Parish and its parish seat, Colfax, became legally recognized because a wealthy local Republican plantation owner pushed a law through the Louisiana legislature. His goal was to disenfranchise those he despised, mostly white supremacist, ex-Confederate Democrats. He knew the parish name and parish seat would long be reminders of the man and political party at the root of the ex-Confederates' daily humiliation. This began a bloody three-year-long battle over who would rule Grant Parish—a mirror for the rest of Louisiana. By 1872, the state was in chaos, and Colfax soon became the scene of what is considered the bloodiest massacre

²⁹ *Daily Picayune*, February 3, 1875. In 1878, Myers was arrested for malfeasance, jailed, and released. The charges never were proven. He returned to Natchitoches, served as a judge, and died in 1886.

during Reconstruction, an event that affected Black civil rights through the 1960s.³⁰

President Grant won reelection in 1872, defeating newspaper editor Horace Greeley. Still, as had become the norm, voting in Louisiana was as fraudulent as it was contentious, the result casting Louisiana into a governmental circus with Governor Warmoth as ringmaster. The Meyer family continued its involvement in anti-Reconstruction activity, at least according to the West Feliciana Parish Democratic Party's nemesis, D. A. Weber. He told a congressional committee that Leon Adler and one other man were members of the White League supporting an allegedly corrupt sheriff. That accusation was trifling compared to what transpired elsewhere. Not eager to relinquish power, and with his gubernatorial term ending, Warmoth essentially commandeered the election and tilted the count in favor of his gubernatorial choice, despite a clear victory for the other nominee. Both candidates—Warmoth's choice, John McEnery, and his opponent, William Pitt Kellogg—claimed victory. The state was thrown into dysfunction, the voting results legally contested even as McEnery and Kellogg took separate oaths, along with two separate, politically skewed legislative bodies meeting blocks from each other in downtown New Orleans.³¹

Every parish also seated two separate governing bodies, each supporting its favored governor. The coup de grâce came from President Grant, who detested Warmoth. Grant recognized William Pitt Kellogg and ordered a military presence to help ensure his transition to power.

³⁰ See Charles Lane, *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction* (New York, 2008), 24; David T. Ballantyne, *Fractured Freedoms: Reconstructing Central Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 2025). Lane's *The Day Freedom Died* is more detailed about the Colfax massacre; Ballantyne takes a broader view of Reconstruction in the central part of the state, with Colfax as one incident.

³¹ *Mississippi in 1875*, Forty-fourth Congress, Senate Report 527 (Washington, D.C., 1875), 1544–45. Although his residence was St. Francisville, Louisiana, D.A. Weber testified about activities that crossed Louisiana and Mississippi state boundaries. He also accused Adler and his cohorts of commandeering the West Feliciana Parish government, raising taxes, and then mispending the money. He provided a list of merchants in arrears on their taxes that included Levy & Adler—a Meyer family store—owing nine dollars. While D. A. Weber's motives can certainly be challenged, his position gave him access to official county records that supported his allegations. Baton Rouge served as the official state capital, but Reconstruction governments met in New Orleans through 1882.

Henry C. Warmoth, 1875.
(Wikimedia Commons.)

William Pitt Kellogg, c. 1850.
(Library of Congress.)

Historians generally concede that Grant faced an intolerable set of circumstances, and his decision was viewed as yet more indignity foisted upon Louisiana. The white supremacists prepared for a fight. "To most White people in Grant Parish, the Republicans' little domain was a confused, sickening place, in which all the most sacred values of the South were being mocked and trampled," concludes historian Charles Lane. Grant's decision came to bear on Colfax. At least one Jewish merchant from Alexandria in neighboring Rapides Parish was prepared to join in the paramilitary chaos descending on the community.³²

Not long after election day, hundreds of armed Black Louisianians, some with families, encamped in Colfax, surrounding and guarding a makeshift courthouse and the few buildings that made up the town. They were ready to protect what they had voted for and believed was rightfully theirs—a local government with courts and law enforcement based on law, not hate. They knew local White men who had terrorized the region

³² Lane, *The Day Freedom Died*, 45. See also, Bone, "Louisiana in the Disputed Election of 1876," 408–40. A U.S. Senate committee concluded in February 1873 that "there is no state government at present existing in the state of Louisiana." The voting in 1872 was nullified, and another election held in May 1873.

would come for them, and, with limited military experience and few guns, they prepared for a military-style assault. W. S. Calhoun, the landowner and former state legislator who named Grant Parish and Colfax, departed for New Orleans, but his boat was forced to land. He was arrested, and a letter seeking aid for his Republican comrades was taken from him, ending any hope that state or federal troops would intervene.³³

On Easter Sunday, April 13, 1873, Colfax became a killing ground. Eric Foner writes that Colfax was “the bloodiest single instance of racial carnage in the Reconstruction Era.” The massacre, he observes, “taught many lessons, including the lengths to which some opponents of Reconstruction would go to regain their accustomed authority.” Dozens of Blacks and two White people died during the courthouse attack led by dozens of White men, many of them ex-Confederates who employed wartime maneuvers to converge on the building seeking to reclaim the parish and to restore white supremacist rule. Jonas Rosenthal, a Jewish merchant from Alexandria, told an interviewer that although he did not participate in the courthouse rampage, he arrived just after the hour-long attack. Rosenthal estimated that four hundred were killed. He told about W. S. Calhoun’s return to Colfax with New Orleans police aboard a boat.³⁴ Historian Manie White Johnson documented the scene in 1930:

While anchored at Alexandria some White men, among whom were Dave Paul, Jake Geiger, Henry Lockett and Jonas Rosenthal, went on board with intention of throwing him overboard. Mr. Rosenthal related: “Well, we

³³ Lane, *The Day Freedom Died*, 45. Congressional investigators estimated that between 250 and three hundred Black men in the area were deprived of their voting rights in November 1872. On Election Day, a ballot box in Colfax was surreptitiously taken from the polling place when Republicans complained about its safety. Kept in a private home, it appeared the next morning with a crude hole punched into its side, ballots stuffed inside, and the box “blunderingly repaired.”

³⁴ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 437, 607; *Condition of the South*. Numerous sources describe the carnage. Official reports stated that federal troops counted 372 bodies. Families took an unknown number of the dead and buried them before troops arrived, thus the number killed likely was closer to four hundred. *Condition of the South*. The report focuses much of its 1,144 pages on Louisiana incidents, including Colfax and Coushatta, New Orleans and the White League.

commenced drinking. . . . He [Calhoun] got the best of us. We got tight and he got sober. Consequently, Calhoun's life was spared."³⁵

Rosenthal was part of a vibrant Jewish merchant community typical of numerous such entities across the state. Alexandria, in Rapides Parish (one of the most volatile across the state), elected Edouard Weil, a Jew, as mayor. He served from 1875 to 1876, in support of the dominant White League Democrats. Amid one of the ugliest incidents of the period when the offices of a local Republican newspaper were raided and destroyed, the *Weekly Louisianian* pointed out the dichotomy of Jews on both sides of Reconstruction while also criticizing Weil for his apathetic view of the newspaper raid: "Four-fifths of the business citizens of Alexandria are opposed to these lawless acts," the paper stated. "The Israelites, who are a majority of the business men of the town, although Democrats in politics, abhor such lawlessness, and unhesitatingly condemn it." Historian Joel Sipress suggests the Colfax massacre was less about extremism and more indicative of the choices men such as Rosenthal made to retain their power. He argues that moderates during Reconstruction thought the reemergence of White plantation authority eventually would overtake Black suffrage and enfranchisement.³⁶

³⁵ Manie White Johnson, "The Colfax Riot of April, 1873," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 13 (1930): 391-427; Mills-Nichol, *Louisiana's Jewish Merchants*, 317-19. Johnson's citations indicate that Rosenthal was interviewed in 1928 when he was eighty-six years old. Johnson also interviewed several others who are listed as having "actually participated in the riot." She notes that Rosenthal "appeared upon the scene immediately thereafter." Johnson wrote about the Colfax massacre for her master's thesis in 1930. In addition to her *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* article, her master's thesis (Southern Methodist University, April 1929) was published in Alexandria's daily newspaper. Johnson's account offered details not included in the investigations and contemporary depictions of the Colfax massacre. Her account is largely from the White League perspective, including a letter from a participant who said he and others were initiated into the Knights of the White Camelia by a former Confederate officer, then merged into the KKK while engaged in "warfare" against those who were trying to overrule "the White Citizen for Power and Equality." The Committee of 70 that opposed H. C. Myers published a decidedly slanted pamphlet titled, "History of the Riot at Colfax, with a brief sketch of the trial of the Grant Parish Prisoners," that portrays the Whites as defending themselves from unrepentant, rapacious Blacks. The author thanks the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for the pamphlet. See also, *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, May 23, 1930.

³⁶ "Peculiarity of the Cotton Kingdom," *Weekly Louisianian*, September 25, 1875; Joel M. Sipress, "From the Barrel of a Gun: The Politics of Murder in Grant Parish," *Louisiana History* 42 (Summer 2001), 303-21. In the *New Orleans Times* of September 27, 1865, a story headlined

*Notice of the election of Edouard
Weil as mayor of Alexandria, LA.
The Moses Rosenthal mentioned was
the brother of Jonas Rosenthal.
Louisiana Democrat, January 6,
1875. (Newspapers.com.)*

Henry M. Hyams Sr., a Jewish lawyer living in New Orleans, worried about his son's family living near Colfax. The Hyams were among the most prominent Jewish families in Louisiana. Henry had traveled from Charleston to New Orleans with his cousin Judah P. Benjamin in 1828. He had a long history of anti-Black activism including as part of a vigilante committee to stifle antislavery activities and publications in 1835. Hyams invested in plantations and slaveholding, eventually living a life of relative privilege after relocating to New Orleans in 1853. He served as Louisiana's anti-abolitionist lieutenant governor from 1860 to 1864, the first Jew to serve in that office in any state. He became active in Louisiana's Democratic Party beginning in 1855 with his election to the state senate.

"Red River Correspondence" references residents "vainly endeavoring to find some place to do a little trading" because the numerous Jewish businesses in Alexandria are closed for Yom Kippur. See Morrow-Spitzer, "Free from Proscription and Prejudice" for a more detailed discussion of Weil, his politics, and the newspaper raid.

Nine days before the Colfax attack, Hyams wrote to his son, enclosing a pistol and cartridges. Given his stature, Hyams was probably privy to conversation about the evolving discontent in Grant Parish, 240 miles from New Orleans, though likely from partisan news stories. He wrote, using letterhead from a Jewish-owned New Orleans cotton brokerage, Meyer, Weis & Co.: "I am much distressed at the situation of affairs in your parish and I am glad you have resolved to stay at home and attend exclusively to your business. It cannot be expected that you take part isolated as you are and surrounded entirely by a Negro community. It may be different were there a White community." In a second letter, Hyams inquired about his son's safety. He had not heard from his son but was nonetheless hopeful the family was untouched by the events in downtown Colfax. "We naturally feel anxious, notwithstanding our confidence that by a strict attention to your business on the plantation that you have been as little mixed up in this unfortunate business as possible." Faithful to the anti-Republican cause, Hyams concluded: "[T]he testimony clearly preponderates that the conflict was brought about by the lawless violence . . . which preceded the general conflict."³⁷

Five months after Colfax, a collapse of financial markets worldwide threw the nation into economic chaos, an event devastating for Louisiana and its businessmen, whose credit lifelines shriveled while their debts increased. In the Feliciana Parishes, where the Meyer family made its living, a poor harvest and low crop prices added to the overall pall cast by the national and worldwide economic malaise. The Colfax uprising, the Supreme Court *Slaughterhouse* rulings, which limited federal protections for

³⁷ Hyams to his son Henry Jr., April 2 and April 4, 1873, Henry M. Hyams Family Papers, Mss. 1392, LLMVC; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, June 26, 1875. One day after the Colfax massacre, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a ruling known as the *Slaughterhouse Cases*, which challenged the Warmoth administration's attempts to stop butchers from dumping animal detritus into New Orleans waterways. The Louisiana Supreme Court had ruled against the butchers' arguments that their Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendment rights were being impeded. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Louisiana to regulate the butchers using an overly broad analysis of the two amendments, thus weakening the federal protection Blacks had relied upon from laws Congress enacted at the beginning of Reconstruction. Legal experts suggest that the setback to Black enfranchisement were not addressed until Supreme Court rulings in civil rights cases during the 1950s and 1960s. See also, Joel William Friedman, "The Legal, Political and Religious Legacy of an Extended Jewish Family," *Southern Jewish History* 18 (2015), 63–99.

Black residents, and a poor economy provided the catalysts for additional frenzy among White League leaders blaming the federal government, Warmoth and carpetbaggers, and Black and White Republicans for their woes.³⁸

Although many of the violent incidents preceding the Colfax massacre had been largely at the hands of individuals or roving bands of racists with little organization or leadership, the courthouse incident involved ex-Confederates who planned and carried out the attack aimed at political gain. "The battle of Colfax became a blueprint for the future of white supremacy across Louisiana because it pointed the way toward a successful strategy of paramilitary action narrowly aimed at seizing local political power and destroying the Louisiana Republican Party from the bottom up," according to historian James K. Hogue. By mid-1874, one-third of Louisiana parishes housed officially recognized White League organizations. Some estimates place membership at nearly twenty thousand armed, drilled White men, many ex-Confederates following former officers prepared to usurp Republican governance statewide. Red River Parish was one of the first to organize a White League. The parish seat, Coushatta, became, like Colfax, a symbol for white supremacist hate. Again, Jewish men participated in the violence.³⁹

*"You will have to be a White Leaguer or they will drive you
out of the country."*

Jewish brothers Julius, Marks, and Sam Lisso were well established as merchants in Coushatta when Marshall Harvey Twitchell arrived in Louisiana in 1865. For eleven years, he and Julius Lisso maintained a strong bond that served their mutual interests until it all unraveled. Their friendship, discussed unsparingly in congressional testimony, provides rare insight into how Jewish merchants accepted a white supremacist path that, for Julius Lisso, contributed to his friend's demise. Twitchell, a Freedmen's Bureau officer after nearly four years as a decorated Union soldier from Vermont, was the quintessential carpetbagger, a White Northern Republican who moved to the South during or after the Civil War seeking opportunities for personal and business success. Born into a life of privilege and with a confident swagger, Twitchell moved comfortably among

³⁸ Kilbourne, *Debt, Investment, Slaves*, 9.

³⁹ Hogue, *Uncivil War*.

Black and White residents in the Red River region who strained under the deprivation following the war. His stature rose quickly, attracting notice from the White Camelias, who tried killing him twice in 1868 when he cast the only vote in Bienville Parish for Ulysses S. Grant. He parlayed his access and influence into a seat as constitutional convention delegate, then a state senate seat he used to push through legislation in 1868, with Warmoth in full support, forming Red River Parish, which would be Twitchell's home until 1874. No one in the parish held more influence or wealth than Twitchell, with the help of the Lisso brothers.⁴⁰

The Lissos had settled in the Red River area during the 1840s as part of the early wave of German Jewish immigrants into Louisiana. Like so many other Jewish immigrants, they peddled then opened a store, fought for the Confederacy, returned from the war, and were thriving by the time Twitchell arrived. He turned to the brothers for help with his vision for the community. Historian Ted Tunnell observes that while all of the Coushatta merchants contributed to a fund created when the town incorporated, Marks and Julius Lisso gave Twitchell access to "draw on them" for whatever he needed. Julius Lisso, who became Twitchell's closest confidant for a period, acted as parish treasurer. All of Twitchell's business dealings involved the Lisso brothers, including the construction of the parish courthouse.⁴¹

By June 1874, with the Colfax massacre still resonating, the sentiment for Twitchell among his neighbors began to tilt. Some of the merchants whom he had relied upon for economic and social support viewed him as a wealthy, opportunistic, Northern Republican while they were faced with ruin after years of poor crops and mounting debt. Yellow fever added to their dread, killing several local businessmen including Marks Lisso. By

⁴⁰ Ted Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword: The Ordeal of Carpetbagger Marshall H. Twitchell in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, 2001). Twitchell served as president of the Red River Parish police jury, and his brother, Homer, was the first parish recorder and tax collector. Their brother-in-law, George Hill, was Coushatta mayor. *New Orleans Republican*, April 18, 1868.

⁴¹ Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword*, 131–55; *Federal Offices in Louisiana*, Forty-Fourth Congress, House Report 816, (Washington, D.C., 1876), 672. Marks and Julius Lisso served with the First Louisiana Infantry. Each was wounded, and Julius was taken as a prisoner of war. "Julius Lisso," Shapell Roster, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://www.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/8824>; "Marks Lisso," Shapell Roster, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/8825>.

summer, the once-vibrant Lisso Bros. store closed, as did a store operated by their nephews. Other merchants in downtown Coushatta closed their shops as well. The White League became a haven for some of the merchants. In June, Twitchell and Lisso concluded that people who joined the White League to close ranks on the "basis of race and color did not meet with the approval of the better disposed classes of White people." The following month, they spoke again when Lisso was in New Orleans to make final arrangements for his marriage to a Crescent City Jewish woman. "They are getting to be very hot up there," Twitchell told his friend. "You will have to come out and be a White-Leaguer right straight through or they will drive you out of the country." Unmoved, Lisso replied, "I am my own man, and I intend to be independent." Nonetheless, by August, Julius and Sam Lisso had joined the White League.⁴²

The first-person accounts in congressional testimony from Julius Lisso and Marshall Twitchell about their decade-long friendship and its abrupt end provide a unique, personal glimpse into the external pressures pushing Jewish men to adapt to beliefs contrary to their own. Like other White men in parishes throughout the state, Coushatta's business leaders seamlessly made the transition from the Democratic Party to the White League, and no doubt brought with them family and longtime associates who may have required a nudge. Historians Allan Trelease, Ted Tunnell, and Stuart Rockoff converge in their assessments about the businessmen's acceptance of White supremacist dogma, their fear of retaliation and of being accused of treason to the South and the White race. Rockoff specifically points out the "sometimes ambiguous position of southern Jews during Reconstruction," concluding that political alliances and not religion provided the locus of their troubles.⁴³

Julius Lisso's testimony draws from each of those themes, guiding his choice to abandon Twitchell and become a White Leaguer just as his friend had predicted. Twitchell described Lisso to the committee as having been one of his "warm personal friends." Lisso told the committee when asked if he had financial confidence in his one-time friend, "I have the utmost." About his confidence in Twitchell as a politician, he replied,

⁴² Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword*, 192–93; *Federal Offices in Louisiana*, 654.

⁴³ Rockoff, "Carpetbaggers," 1; Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword*, 192; Trelease, *White Terror*, xi. See also, Leonard Rogoff, "Is the Jew White: The Racial Place of the Southern Jew," *American Jewish History* 85 (September 1997): 195–230.

"Not at all." Newspapers added to the pressure on the Lisso brothers and others. The *People's Vindicator* in Natchitoches suggested publishing a "black list" of those who supported Republicans so that retribution could be exacted. Those who joined organizations like the White League certainly were aware of the nefarious nature of their activities, regardless of whether the individual chose to participate in the violence. While no record shows Julius Lisso's involvement in White League violence, clearly his hope to support his friend crumbled under the severe pressure of being cast as an outsider against a network of merchants determined to stand for white superiority.⁴⁴

By late August 1874, the White League throughout the Red River area—Coushatta, Natchitoches, Alexandria, and Shreveport—wanted Twitchell and his associates out of the way. Well-armed supremacists from the region and neighboring states looked for a fight. Downtown Coushatta was abuzz with rumors of a Black revolt, a common theme to churn sentiment before a violent incident, followed by reports that a Black man shot and wounded a White Leaguer on patrol. That incident gave White League leaders the impetus to seize Twitchell's brother, Homer, the sheriff, a deputy sheriff, and twenty-seven Black and four White men, including Twitchell's two brothers-in-law. The prisoners were put in the basement of a downtown store, then forced into a sham trial with White Leaguers presiding before they signed a statement surrendering their public offices, asking for safe passage out of the state, and acknowledging that the "leading citizens of the political organization of the white people" was attempting to protect them.⁴⁵

The White League followed with a statement, which contended, in part: "Some of the bad White men have been for years inculcating vicious ideas into the minds of the colored people of Red River, and arraying them against the true interest of the country, the White people and their own." Julius Lisso, J. P. Hyams, grandson of Henry H. Hyams Sr., twenty other White Leaguers, and "five hundred more" released the statement printed in the *People's Vindicator*. The next day, Homer Twitchell, two of his brothers-in-law, and five of his Coushatta neighbors were put on horses with a cadre of guards. Before he departed, one of the men wrote to his wife,

⁴⁴ The comments from Twitchell and Lisso are taken from their testimony in 1876. *Federal Offices in Louisiana*, 654, 721–22. See also, *People's Vindicator*, September 12, 1874.

⁴⁵ *People's Vindicator*, September 5, 1874.

instructing her to give money he had left to support their family to Julius Lisso. In Tunnell's detailed analysis of the Coushatta violence, he noted that Lisso and his White League cohorts hoped to depose the Twitchell machine and exile its leaders nonviolently. White League marauders ended those hopes. The Republican hostages were attacked and killed as they rode toward Texas within hours of their departure from Coushatta. The White League chose twenty-five men to guard the hostages on their exile outside of Louisiana; one guard was J. P. Hyams. During the attack, White Leaguers on horseback told young Hyams and other guards to move aside or be killed. Jewish involvement in the volatility of the Red River region during fall 1874 stretched to Shreveport, as well. Nearly one hundred merchants, of which approximately twelve were Jewish, twice printed statements in the *Shreveport Times*, a newspaper sympathetic to the White League, threatening to withhold business from anyone voting Republican. They agreed to implore employees to vote Democrat and to deny employment or conduct business with Republicans.⁴⁶

Like Colfax, the Coushatta massacre prompted a congressional investigation that provided insight into the helplessness the federal legislators felt in parsing over the details of cold-blooded political murders in Louisiana. The White League had successfully wiped out the dreams of two leaders of neighboring parishes: W. C. Calhoun in Grant Parish and Marshall H. Twitchell in Red River Parish. The former sought revenge on his detractors; the latter wanted prestige and legacy. Calhoun eventually was forced to sell his land, some to his enemies, to pay debts and died quietly years later. Twitchell tried unsuccessfully to use legal means to exact retribution for the deaths of his relatives and friends and retain what remained of his investments in Red River Parish. He remained in New Orleans during and after the violence, not daring to return for the funeral of a sister who died in 1875 of yellow fever. He was chosen as the Republican legislative leader in 1876, when only Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida tried to maintain some semblance of Reconstruction government.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *People's Vindicator*, September 5, 1874; Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword*, 203; *Shreveport Times*, October 16, 1874. The names listed were Dreyfus, Florsheim, Hirsch, Kahn, Kaufmann, Levy, Roos, Sour, Utz, and Weil.

⁴⁷ After a sarcastic review of White League testimony of events leading to the killings (Black people were unruly, the Republicans unable to rule, and the White Leaguers were not

When attempts were made to impeach Governor Kellogg, Twitchell played a critical role in defending him and ending the Senate trial, efforts that hardened the hatred against him. He returned to his plantation, Starlight, in late April 1876 for a few days of business before planning a return to Vermont. A gunman ambushed him and his brother-in-law, George Hill, who was the sheriff, as they rode in a skiff crossing the Red River. Hill was killed and Twitchell wounded in both arms, which were amputated. He left Louisiana on a stretcher, never to return. No one was charged with crimes relating to the murders of the men exiled from Coushatta or for Twitchell's attempted assassination. Ted Tunnell doubts a popular theme of the period that Twitchell was targeted as part of a larger political conspiracy, instead concluding the men were murdered by a White League-associated gang.⁴⁸

A Jewish man, Ben Wolfson, witnessed the Twitchell shootings from the river bank. Wolfson belonged to one of the first Jewish families in the region. The Wolfson and Lisso families were connected through marriage. Wolfson testified about fortuitously arriving in downtown Coushatta on the day of the assassination attempt, walking into the post office to get his mail, hearing the shots, then commandeering the mailman's horse to make the ride toward the shooter. Twitchell had Wolfson arrested in 1874 after the White League murders. He told the U.S. Marshal to detain him after Wolfson loudly protested the presence of the military in the town. When Wolfson's sister asked him about her brother's arrest, Twitchell reportedly said, "He talks too much." In his congressional testimony, Twitchell mentions Wolfson's answer to a question about whether he thought the assassination attempt was politically motivated. "I have been told that Mr. Wolfson in town, for one, and quite a number of others said, 'Well, if they

culpable in the resignations, imprisonment, and deaths), the report notes: "There was certainly no evidence . . . where the responsibility of this great crime rests. . . . [I]t was a most dastardly murder condemned by the entire people of Louisiana, as it must always be in the civilized world." *Condition of the South*, 10.

⁴⁸ Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword*, 259. A congressional committee was skeptical of the entire investigation, and town leaders, particularly Thoms Abney, whom they suspected of involving White Leaguers in the planned attack and warning a friend to remain in Coushatta rather than join the guards assigned to protect the men who were murdered. *Condition of the South*, 17-18.

ask us that question, we will have to tell them, of course, it was. The only objection to the man was his politics."⁴⁹

Parish insurrection would be insufficient for the White Leaguers. By the end of summer 1874, their focus turned to full-scale war against the state with New Orleans as their battleground. Jewish men yet again participated in the violence.

"The White League of New Orleans . . . is a constant menace."

The Crescent City White League was the largest and most menacing in the region, boasting as many armed men as regiments in the Confederate and Union forces. Some accounts place the number at between 2,500 and three thousand, led by ex-Confederates who utilized their military leadership, training, and wartime expertise to prepare to take by force what they could not take by the ballot. At least nine were Jewish. "The White League of New Orleans itself was and is a constant menace to the republicans of the whole state," wrote congressional investigators in a one-thousand-page report published in February 1875. Five months prior, the congressmen and rest of the country had learned about the Battle of Liberty Place on September 14, 1874, the apex of white supremacist mayhem that temporarily overthrew Louisiana's state government.⁵⁰

Just as Generals Lee and Grant had prepared for battle, so did the leaders of the New Orleans White League and its enemy, Louisiana's militia, both representing about 2,500 men with the same hardened wartime experience. New Orleans businessmen including Jews entered the fray, sending Grant an appeal to stand down. "Perfect confidence restored . . .

⁴⁹ *Condition of the South*, 17–18; Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword*, 238–42. Twitchell became a special U.S. ambassador in Canada, a position he held for twenty-seven years before his death. The Twitchell family's dominance was matched in neighboring Lincoln Parish, created in 1873 and controlled for about a decade by the Greene family, whose influence gradually waned. White League activity was as prevalent in Lincoln Parish, but without a visible Jewish presence. David Rabb Cargill, "Reconstruction and the White League Movement in Lincoln Parish," (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1993).

⁵⁰ *Condition of the South*, 18. James Hogue points out that at least 10 percent of the Confederates who served in Louisiana's Washington Artillery were White Leaguers who took part in the Liberty Place battle, suggesting that their willingness to take part "supports the unsurprising but nevertheless telling conclusion that Confederate soldiers tended to follow the lead of their officers in joining the violent campaign against Reconstruction." Hogue, *Uncivil War*.

not a single case of lawlessness," read the overly optimistic message. For days before the coup, White Leaguers brazenly drilled unarmed in the New Orleans streets while their leaders tried to secure additional weaponry, their actions prompting the less-well-armed local police to scour the city for guns and ammunition before the White Leaguers could find them. Word passed quickly on Saturday, September 12 that a ship bearing weapons had arrived and was waiting to be unloaded at the New Orleans docks, prompting the police chief to guard access to the levee and ship's cargo. The White Leaguers knew they had to move with urgency lest they be outgunned and outmaneuvered. They selected Monday, September 14 as the day for their coup d'état and the end to Republican rule. At noon, the Democrats declared themselves in charge, called upon Louisianians to arm in support of their new government and told Black people that the White League had no intention of harming them. League headquarters was set up in the downtown hardware store owned by Edwin I. Kursheedt, one of the city's most prominent Jewish leaders and a veteran of the renowned Confederate Washington Artillery.⁵¹

A crowd estimated at between 2,500 to five thousand mostly White men had gathered on Canal Street. R. H. Marr, a New Orleans defense attorney, led a committee of four in an unsuccessful attempt to meet with Governor Kellogg to pressure him into recognizing Democrats who claimed victory in recent elections. Among the members of Marr's committee was James Madison Seixas, an ex-Confederate and member of one of the most prominent Jewish families in America. Marriage also linked the Seixas and Kursheedt families. When police tried dispersing the crowd, they were fired upon and the Battle of Liberty Place ensued. Not since the Civil War had more men faced off in battle, with at least seven Jewish men engaged in the street fighting. Two sets of brothers were part of the battle, Albert M. and Alex Binel Levy and Washington and Marion H. Marks, all ex-Confederates in Louisiana units. Richard K. Hyams, son of former Lieutenant Governor Henry M. Hyams Sr., participated, as did future law partners Benjamin Franklin Jonas and Ernest Benjamin

⁵¹ *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, February 22, 1906. The Jewish businessmen and/or businesses who signed the appeal to Grant were from Janney & Hyams, Isaacson, Seixas & Co., Isaac N. Marks and George Jonas. *Condition of the South*, 835; "Edwin Kursheedt," Shapell Roster, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/8800>.

Kruttschnitt. Jonas's political fortunes eventually took him to the U.S. Senate, where he represented Louisiana from 1879 to 1885 as the third Jew to serve in that body, while Kruttschnitt oversaw the dismantling of Black equality in Louisiana.

The Jonas family provides additional context for the conflicting behavior evident among the Jews of this period. Of six Jonas brothers, four fought for the Confederacy and two for the Union. Benjamin, an ex-Confederate, and brother George, an ex-Union soldier and New Orleans banker, were solidly opposed to Reconstruction and part of the overt efforts to stop President Grant from interceding in state politics. A third brother, Edward, also an ex-Union soldier, testified in 1874 that he was on the opposing side from his brothers. He worked for the Jewish-owned cotton factorage firm Meyer, Weis & Co., voted twice for Grant, and

Aaron B. Thompson, "The Metropolitan Police Attacking Citizens On The Levee Near the Custom House," from "Revolution in New Orleans – Overthrow of the Kellogg State Government of Louisiana," Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 3, 1874. (Courtesy of the Historic New Orleans Collection, gift of Mr. George Denègre, 2002.32.6 i-viii.)

believed the 1874 election was fairly contested. He said that he lived without any fear of repercussions.⁵²

As the insurrection unfolded, the White Leaguers let out a screeching rebel yell. The fighting through downtown New Orleans lasted about an hour before the White Leaguers triumphed. By nightfall, the leaguers controlled the city streets. A deft bit of White League strategy had kept federal troops from arriving to help police and the state militia. While the White League knew that their hold on the city was tentative because of the anticipated federal intervention, on September 15 their four leaders, including Seixas, nonetheless issued a statement urging residents to welcome their new state officers.⁵³

President Grant responded swiftly and overwhelmingly. He dispatched troops and Navy ships to New Orleans, which functioned once more as an occupied city, while the Kellogg government sought to regain authority. Liberty Place was "possibly the largest military insurrection that has ever occurred against the government of a state of the United States," argues historian Joe Gray Taylor. The Crescent City White

⁵² "Albert M. Levy," Shapell Roster, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/8842>; "Jacob Washington Marks," Shapell Roster, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/8873>; "James Madison Seixas," Shapell Roster, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/8902>; "Benjamin Franklin Jonas," Shapell Roster, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/9144>. The Shapell Roster provides detailed information about the Jonas brothers' Confederate and Union Civil War service.

⁵³ *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, November 9, 1896; *New Orleans Times*, September 15, 1874. Next to the White League statement appeared a news story datelined St. Louis, reporting that a mass meeting of Missouri residents had cheered the assault on Radical Republican governance in Louisiana, indicative of the growing disenchantment in the North with Reconstruction. Several lists of New Orleans White League members are included in the historiography of Liberty Place and in media, which in later years celebrated those who fought the battle. Stuart Omer Landry, *The Battle of Liberty Place: The Overthrow of Carpet-bag Rule in New Orleans: September 14th, 1874* (Baton Rouge, 1999), 234–40; Hogue, *Uncivil War*, Table 2.2. The list of names in the Hogue and Landry books are essentially the same, while Hogue's examination is a more historical account than Landry's pro-White League description of events. Albert Levy and Alex Levy are members of the author's maternal grandfather's family—the Rieses who settled in New Orleans and Mayers who settled in Natchez. Silverberg, "Houses Divided that Remained Standing," 11–58.

League's boldness stood as a beacon of violence that terrorized Louisiana for several more years, with ongoing Jewish involvement.⁵⁴

The Saga of John Gair

John Gair was a Black leader who seized the opportunity for social and economic prosperity, only to be struck down by the evil of white supremacy. Like the H. C. Myer story, the life and death of John Gair demonstrate how Jewish men stood on both sides of Reconstruction. Some Jews supported Gair politically, while others were present when he was murdered in a pine forest a few miles from Clinton in East Feliciana Parish. Historian William Horne asserts that Gair's success emerged from his ability to capitalize on his followers' desire, if not desperation, to "alter the social and political landscape of the plantation region." A carpenter by trade, contemporary accounts describe Gair as educated and as charismatic as he was polarizing. He could captivate his Black Republican brethren with political stump speeches, challenge legislative leadership with his intimate knowledge of procedure and adeptness at floor debate, and infuriate White Democrats with his intransigence, such as when he refused to abide by a yellow fever quarantine requiring him to temporarily refrain from entering Clinton.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Taylor, "New Orleans and Reconstruction," 203.

⁵⁵ William Horne, "Landscapes of Emancipation: Plantations and African American Liberation," in *Charting the Plantation Landscape from Natchez to New Orleans*, ed. Laura Kilser VanHuss (Baton Rouge, 2021), 139. Newspapers and scholarly publications have described Gair as an ex-slave. In an email to the author, a descendant wrote that the Gair family genealogy preceding 1860 includes free people of color. They have no clear evidence Gair was enslaved or lived his entire life in East Feliciana Parish. Donald F. Jones, email to author, November 18, 2025. The 1870 U.S. Census for Clinton, LA, shows John Gair, twenty-five, born about 1845, with his wife, Josephine, twenty-one, and daughter Anna, two. He is described as "mulatto" and listed as a carpenter. In testimony after Gair was killed, a prominent Clinton attorney said he knew Gair well, had employed him as a carpenter, and that Gair learned to read in 1867, thus the possibility that Gair had moved from Jefferson to East Feliciana Parish when he was in his twenties. "East Feliciana," 457–58. The 1850 U.S. Census for Jefferson Parish shows a Gair couple, the husband a carpenter, with a son named John, born about 1841. A James Gair, carpenter, is enumerated in Clinton in 1850 with an unidentified eighteen-year-old male slave, thus leaving an age discrepancy between the 1850 and 1870 census records. Gair represented East Feliciana Parish at the 1867 constitutional convention then won election to the state House of Representatives the next year. Ninth Census of the

By August 1874, Gair began campaigning for a state senate seat. Some of his support came from a Jewish merchant in Clinton, Joseph Israel, who worked locally and statewide supporting the Republican Party. He was one of only two Whites at a political event for Gair. Israel also was the founding president of the Clinton lodge of the International Order of B'nai B'rith and served the organization for years, exchanging leadership roles with other local Jews including brothers Henry and Emanuel Meyer. Israel had been appointed Clinton's postmaster in 1871, a visible and lucrative patronage position within the community still attempting to recover from the war, floods, and bad crops. By this point in the arc of Reconstruction-era politics, Israel stood outside the Jewish mainstream, as several historians point out. In his detailed examination of North Carolina communities, Leonard Rogoff states that Jews were largely dismissive of what they termed "radical Republicanism" as they embraced the White-dominated Democratic Party.⁵⁶

The Senate nominating process pitted Gair against E. L. Weber's candidate, continuing a long-running feud. No man in the Feliciana Parishes, White or Black, was as reviled as Weber. He and his brother, D. A., were contentious opportunists who provided duplicitous cooperation with congressional investigative committees for years. Senators and representatives called on them for their insights into regional mayhem about which the brothers seemed well-versed—except for their own involvement, about which they feigned innocence. In September 1874, E. L. Weber and Gair exchanged accusations concerning a vote bribery scheme. One month before the November election, an assassin failed in an attempt to kill Gair. E. L. Weber was in the middle of the plot that left Gair slightly wounded.⁵⁷

United States, 1870, East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana; Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Jefferson Parish, Louisiana.

⁵⁶ Rogoff, "Tale of Two Cities," 42.

⁵⁷ *Louisiana in 1876: Report of the Sub-Committee of the Committee on Privileges and Elections*, Forty-Fourth Congress, Senate Report 701 (Washington, DC, 1877), cxxx, cxxxi, cxxxvii; *New Orleans Republican*, February 22, 1874 and May 15, 1874; *The Semi-Weekly Republican*, October 8, 1872. Feliciana Lodge #239, IOBB, was founded in June 1875. The founding officers included Israel, D. T. Weil, T. L. Heyman, B. A. Meyer, Emanuel Meyer, Albert Mayer, Solomon Adler, Henry Meyer, T. Sachs, and Charles Wolf. Emanuel, Henry Meyer and Solomon Adler are members of the author's extended family, as was the master of ceremonies for the inaugural meeting, Louis Michaelis of New Orleans. *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, June 14, 1875; *Daily Picayune*, October 5, 1874. Between 1867 and 1870, Louisiana was ranked eighth in

By summer 1875, the Weber faction forced Gair and Black political officeholders to leave East Feliciana Parish. The threats came primarily from Dr. James W. Sanders and J. A. Norwood, identified in congressional testimony as White Leaguers. They factored critically in ongoing events. According to congressional committee testimony, a Jewish man, Max Lehman, was one of several White men riding throughout the parish organizing other White men to gather in downtown Clinton as protection against reported Black uprisings and to intimidate Black voters, an activity the supremacists referred to as “bulldozing.” Gair and a compatriot met late summer in New Orleans with the acting governor in a public meeting to quell the heightened unease rippling through the community. Abe Mayer, a Jewish businessman from Clinton, part of the panel with the acting governor, surmised that the citizenry lacked respect for the deposed Black sheriff, a Gair friend. Not long after, Gair’s adversaries began plotting his downfall.⁵⁸

In early October planters and merchants felt hope about the initial cotton harvest. The Meyers prospered. Younger brother Henry had returned from New Orleans to manage the downtown Clinton store while

value of its farm products when compared to ten other Southern states. *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 20, 1874, October 23, 1874, and October 24, 1874. Gair angered his supporters and enemies when he reportedly threatened to burn Clinton rather than accede to White authority. He lost the tightly contested race against Weber’s candidate, and their antagonism lingered into 1875, paralleling the general political disorder in the parish. Henry Marston, prominent Clinton attorney, landowner and diarist, noted the Gair assassination attempt in his diary and mentioned the same name of a young Clinton man who said E. L. Weber paid to kill Gair. Henry Marston and Family Papers, 1818–1938, Mss. 624, LLMVC. A news report summarizing congressional testimony noted that E. L. Weber orchestrated John Gair’s killing. *Weekly Times-Picayune*, December 30, 1876; *The New Orleans Bulletin*, October 24, 1874.

⁵⁸ *New Orleans Bulletin*, August 13, 1875. The report of the meeting with acting governor Antoine uses the name “Abe Meyer,” but it was likely Abe Mayer, a member of a Clinton family with business interests in New Orleans. *New Orleans Bulletin*, October 21, 1874 and October 22, 1874; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 19, 1874, October 20, 1874, and October 22, 1874; *New Orleans Republican*, October 16, 1875. Lehman served as an officer in Bayou Sara’s B’nai B’rith Lodge. *Feliciana Sentinel*, July 20, 1878 and January 11, 1879. A report published in 1901 by noted activist Ida B. Wells said Sanders was an officer in the first of East Feliciana Parish’s White Leagues. Ida B. Wells, *Reconstruction Review: The Voice of the Carpetbagger* (Chicago, 1901), 23. See also, Philip H. Jones, “Reminiscences of days before and after the Civil War”, 1951, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

older brother Emanuel ventured to the countryside where he began peddling for his uncle's Bayou Sara store after emigrating in 1859. He resumed selling and meeting with those who owed the brothers money. At this point, the Meyer Brothers store was one of the most stable in the Feliciana Parishes. Then came the rains. One account estimated that more than half of the parish's cotton crop was wiped out in less than a day of rain during October's first weekend, exacerbating tensions over reports of unrest among Blacks and Whites. With Gair and the top elected Black leaders from East Feliciana Parish living in either Baton Rouge or New Orleans for their safety, the White Leaguers struck. Although the body count was only two people, the resulting influence on local Black voting in East Feliciana and in the following presidential election year was profound.⁵⁹

The Clinton courthouse on October 7 witnessed the first in a sequence of violent events over two weeks in a twisted plot to kill Gair. Most scholarly accounts of Reconstruction violence barely mention Gair's death, but it was investigated in such detail and engendered a level of debate and hatred in the partisan media unlike any other single death in the state during this era. Henry and Emmanuel Meyer—indeed most of Clinton—witnessed it all. In the courthouse across the street from the Meyers' store, dozens of men “who were persons not to be trifled with” gathered when the sheriff and district court judge opened proceedings at 10 A.M. on the seventh. Chaos quickly ensued. The Black sheriff, who had returned despite threats to his life, was accosted, fled outside, and returned to New Orleans. Shots were heard, and the judge saw the sheriff limping. The

⁵⁹ *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 5, 1875; Kilbourne, *Debt, Investment and Slaves*, 9, 150. The sale of cottonseed was at the root of much of the White League violence. The poorest farmers in the region, after a day of picking, would haul small bags of cottonseed to country stores for sale or trade. The planters viewed this as thievery, and the White Leaguers used it as another reason to harm those involved by burning out merchants suspected of buying seed. Gair had tried addressing the problem of illicit cottonseed sales for nearly a year, yet his legislation to tax and limit its distribution never gained traction in the legislature. His nemesis, E. L. Weber, repeatedly opposed his efforts to regulate cottonseed sales. Black farmers also were upset, believing Gair's legislation would unfairly compensate White planters for the loss of their seed. At least one news report suggests that Weber's involvement in cottonseed sales was for his own benefit, that he and his cohort, Frank Powers, were involved in its theft, storage and black-market sales for at least a decade through the mid-1870s, using whatever means necessary to keep others from gaining access to the seed. *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, August 24, 1876.

East Feliciana Parish Court House in Clinton, LA.
(Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Mss. 893, 1254, Louisiana and Lower
Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA.)

judge, his life in danger, adjourned proceedings, left for his hotel, and departed the next day. The White Leaguers took control, an ex-Confederate and Weber supporter named Frank Powers in charge of the town. The weekend passed without further incident, while East Feliciana simmered under White League dominance.⁶⁰

Six days after the courthouse incident, Sanders returned to his home following a morning of work and paused at his back door to drink from a ladle resting atop a water pail. Within minutes, the doctor later testified, he was stricken with cramps, vomiting, and sweats. Three doctors who were summoned to care for him concluded Sanders was poisoned, possibly from arsenic. Sanders's Black maid, Catherine "Babe" Mathews, left the home just after the doctor was sickened, but within hours was arrested and jailed. A sheriff's posse of six men departed about midnight for Baton Rouge to arrest Gair and an accomplice. They caught Gair on October 13 and began the thirty-two-mile ride to Clinton. After sundown, when the riders crossed from East Baton Rouge into East Feliciana Parish, they were

⁶⁰ *New Orleans Republican*, October 16, 1875.

*John Gair in 1867, as a member of the Louisiana Constitutional Convention, from
 "Delegates and Officers of the Louisiana constitutional convention, 1867–1868."
 (Courtesy of the Historic New Orleans Collection, 2023.0002.)*

met by an estimated one hundred armed men. Minutes later, the mob executed Gair, who was on his knees in prayer. Mathews hung from a tree at the Clinton courthouse into the early morning, when a Black man took her down and buried her.⁶¹

⁶¹ Details about John Gair, Babe Mathews, and the events before, during, and after the incident involving Sanders are taken from congressional testimony and news media reports. The deputy in charge refused to surrender his weapons to the horsemen until a man he identified as J. A. Norwood threatened to blow his head off. The lawmen heard the shooting from a quarter mile away as they returned to Clinton. A Black man who was a committee witness testified that he saw and heard the posse after it passed his home on the parish border, then followed it from a distance until it was hijacked. He watched the deputies depart, then heard two of the horsemen he could not identify say they would not fire on Gair. Another horseman fired and missed, prompting Norwood to shoot, followed by the volley. The man left after the shooters rode back to Clinton. He returned the next morning and found Gair's body

Gair was either guilty of masterminding a convoluted plan to kill one of the men who ordered his removal from East Feliciana Parish, or he and his sister-in-law were framed by vengeful White Leaguers. A congressional committee, noting Gair's support among local White voters, dispelled any thought that politics were the impetus to the murderous plot. Life in Clinton carried on as usual. Emanuel Mayer wrote to a vendor that he had been delayed in paying bills because of "negro riots," a reference to Gair and likely the White League burning Black-owned stores. *The Louisianian*, a pro-Republican newspaper, wrote that the White League wanted Gair removed permanently from governance and that Mathews was hanged as part of the cover-up. In January 1877, when congressional investigators returned a second time to probe Louisiana atrocities, including the Gair murder, thirty-one men were subpoenaed to appear in Clinton. Henry Meyer was the only person on the list of thirty-one who also was one of the horsemen accused of killing Gair. None of those implicated testified, nor was anyone ever charged in Gair or Mathew's deaths. Horne points out that by 1875, white supremacy had been so overwhelming, "the negro stood no chance." The end to Reconstruction neared, but not without additional violence with Jews involved.⁶²

"Let's go up and kill this damned Jew."

In the aftermath of the Gair and Mathews murders, attempts were made to seek justice on one side and power on the other. The governor

alongside the road. He and several other Black men made a wooden coffin and buried Gair under a pine tree, where the witness said he carved "John Gair." Gair's alleged accomplice, reportedly a nineteen-year-old Black man, never was apprehended. *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 15, 1875, October 19, 1875, and January 29, 1876; *New Orleans Republican*, October 15, 1875 and January 3 and 23, 1877; *New Orleans Bulletin*, October 15, 1875; "East Feliciana," 240-497.

⁶² "Clinton's Culture of Violence," Trueheart Feliciana Clinton Collection, folder 17, Center for Southeast Louisiana Studies, Southeastern Louisiana University, Hammond, LA; Horne, "Landscapes of Emancipation," 149. Some witnesses told congressional investigators that Sanders's symptoms were inconsistent with poisoning, especially arsenic, and committee members were skeptical of his tale. Mathews's written confession given to a White Leaguer curiously included the pronoun "her" instead of "I," as though the scribe wrote it as he wished rather than as she dictated. No witnesses testified about hearing her alleged confession, and people testified that she vacillated between recanting and confessing. Meyer to a St. Louis company, October 16, 1875, Letter Book 1873-1875, box 32, MBSR; "East Feliciana," 132-497.

offered a reward with statements of outrage. E. L. Weber sought the governor's support for his henchman Frank Powers to become sheriff. Chaos ensued for more than a month with Powers and other White Leaguers intimidating public officials unfriendly to their cause. A story in the *New Orleans Republican* headlined, "The Flagitious Felicianas. . . . Reign of Terror, Armed and Mounted Ruffians," reported more White League murders of Blacks and store burnings. White Leaguers were accused of murdering one of the men who helped to bury Gair because he had "walked in the shoes of John Gair." In December 1875, congressional investigating committees met in Clinton and Bayou Sara in another attempt to gather evidence of Reconstruction atrocities, resulting in a one-thousand-plus page report with witnesses who generally fell into two camps: those who provided details of the depredation with names of those responsible and those who obfuscated the facts. In growing frustration, a group of prominent businessmen organized the Property Holders Protective Union, their target E. L. Weber and his cohorts in the Feliciana Parishes. Their efforts were the second time — the first being the failed Unification Movement in New Orleans in 1873 — that businessmen publicly sought to restore some semblance of law and order. A key organizer was Jewish businessman Julius Freyhan, who owned a mercantile business that dominated downtown St. Francisville. White Leaguers had robbed him even though his benevolence was known throughout the region. The businessmen tried forcing Weber out of office for months. Nonetheless, Weber continued to hold sway with the White League when a German Jew, Max Aronson, sought his counsel about whether he should befriend the White leaguers.⁶³

⁶³ *New Orleans Republican*, December 14, 1875; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 19, 1875; *Mississippi in 1875*, 1535–1647. Powers's knack for wrongdoing dated to the Civil War, when he and his raiders assaulted and brutalized Union troops carrying cotton and other goods and massacred about two dozen Black Union soldiers they had captured. The night after the Gair and Mathews killings, Powers showed up at a local plantation to quell a disturbance. Drunks had accosted some Black men, shot one of them, and tried hanging a "Hebrew clerk" named Teutsch before Powers's men interceded. The Teutsch family was prominent in the region during the period. A news report days after a congressional committee investigating the Gair/Mathews deaths states that one of the members upset Sanders sufficiently during testimony that afterward, the physician threatened the congressman's life. Two other committee members were made aware of the threat and ensured their colleague's safe passage

About the time of the Clinton mayhem, eight German immigrants including Aronson settled along the Louisiana-Mississippi border separating West Feliciana Parish from Wilkinson County, Mississippi. Aronson purchased a few acres of land and a store about twenty miles from Clinton, investments that brought the White League to his door and motivated his outreach to E. L. Weber. Aronson's story demonstrates how Jews sought to live freely and conduct business among white supremacists and Black customers. Like others, Aronson made choices that directly led to his death and prompted one of the last military-styled, White League killing sprees in Louisiana and Mississippi aimed at restoring White dominance.⁶⁴

By most accounts, Aronson was proud, defiant, and naïve. E. L. and D. A. Weber told congressmen that Aronson ignored their warnings to be careful defying the White Leaguers and their accusations of the merchant's alleged cottonseed sales. His story, however, turned in spring 1876 when he embraced White League violence. Aronson took part in mock trials of Black people hauled before White Leaguers imposing punishments for made-up crimes. In one incident, Aronson and a White League cohort captured a Black man, took him across the state line into Wilkinson County, pronounced him guilty of stealing a cow, returned the man to a plantation across the line in Louisiana, and nearly beat him to death. They murdered another Black man who failed to tip his hat and defer to Aronson and his fellow White Leaguer.⁶⁵

out of New Orleans. *New Orleans Republican*, January 24, 1877; *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, January 18, 1876; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, January 2, 1876.

⁶⁴ Eli Phillips Weiss, "Redeeming Wilkinson: The End of Reconstruction in a Mississippi River County" (senior essay, Yale College, 2002); Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York, 2006). Lemann's book is a comprehensive review of the Reconstruction years in Mississippi. The state was the focus of one of the many Reconstruction-era congressional hearings that collected volumes of testimony, with little result. *Mississippi in 1875*, known as the the Boutwell Report.

⁶⁵ *Louisiana in 1876*, 2585-86. Aronson was murdered on May 13, 1876. D. A. Weber knew the precariousness of publicly confronting the White League. He was shot and killed in March 1877 near the St. Francisville courthouse walking home for lunch. Weber had written to a U.S. senator three days before he was killed that he would not depart St. Francisville even if it cost him his life. *New Orleans Republican*, March 16, 1877. Charles Barrow, writing to a historian in 1927, offered rare insight into supremacist thought from someone who took an active role with the Feliciana White League: "Occasionally there were a few necks broken and straps used among the worst." He referenced the 1876 election, a sweeping victory for

Days later, Aronson was shot dead when he opened the door to his store during the early evening. In the forty-eight hours that followed, Frank Powers and his Louisiana White Leaguers joined with White Leaguers in Mississippi and killed more than sixty Blacks, according to testimony and media reports. The White Leaguers may have used Aronson's death as the impetus for their killing spree, but more likely they relied on rumors that Blacks on both sides of the Louisiana-Mississippi state line were arming for a fight against expected White League raids in retaliation for the Jewish merchant's death.

Who killed Aronson? Some witnesses told a congressional committee they were certain it was a posse of Blacks seeking vengeance for Aronson's actions. A coroner's report concluded that forty Blacks comprised the mob that killed him. A Black witness's testimony to congressional investigators reads:

"Did you kill him?" "I reckon so; we shot at him; I reckon he is dead." "I thought you were going to kill Howell." "We did . . . but we got on the road and [a friend] said 'Let's go up and kill this damned Jew.'"⁶⁶

Other witnesses including E. L. Weber said that marauding bands of White Leaguers, some dressed in capes with their faces blacked, killed Aronson for his spitefulness toward efforts to control his cottonseed sales and business. Aronson's actions and demise and the conflicting stories concerning his murder illustrate divergent pressures on Jewish merchants to conform to racist mores while also challenging other mores for economic gain.⁶⁷

The publicly recorded comments about Aronson also touch on the dismissive if not antisemitic attitudes evident throughout volumes of congressional testimony. Congressmen, senators, and witnesses used the word "Jew" indiscriminately, either as an ethnic slur or as a descriptor of someone they were referencing. No other group of people is mentioned as

the Democratic Party in West Feliciana. "The White Republicans moved elsewhere," he wrote, then added a few paragraphs later, "One of the White Republican leaders, failing to get away in time, one day while walking up the streets in St. Francisville, must have stepped on a torpedo, judging from the holes in his body, but no one knows to this day how they got there." The reference is likely to D. A. Weber's death. Bone, "Louisiana in the Disputed Election of 1876," 415.

⁶⁶ *Mississippi in 1875*, 1604-05.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

*Testimony of W.H. Noble concerning the murder of Max Aronson, Louisiana
in 1876, Forty-fourth Congress, Senate Report 701, p. 1604.*

(Library of Congress.)

much in the pejorative. Aronson is described as “a German,” “a Jew,” or a “Jew storekeeper,” and in one instance, a witness said, “I believe he was considered White, a Jew, a German.” Ethnic descriptions such as “German,” “Irish,” or “Italian” are evident but without the same frequency. Witnesses were routinely asked if Jewish men were trustworthy.

When questioning a witness about December 1874 riots in Vicksburg, a witness answered when asked about men assigned to count ballots, “He is a Jew, but a man of good character.” A congressman replied, “Do not you suppose a Jew can be honest as well as any other man?” The witness said, “They ain’t always considered so, and I was going to say that he was one of the exceptions.” When discussing the Aronson murder, a senator commented: “They said that some men up there killed a storekeeper, a peddler, or something of that kind—a Jew.” One witness responded when asked if someone was related to a Black man: “No sir, he was a white man, a Jew.” This differs little from the volumes of merchant credit reports from throughout the South in which agents continually noted whether a storeowner was Jewish, focusing on Jews as “others” rather than mainstream. This helps explain Jews’ desire to assimilate into broader society even if it meant choices as abhorrent as white supremacy.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Rockoff, “Carpetbaggers,” 26. Morrow-Spitzer, “Free from Proscription and Prejudice,” (7-8) details the largely negative portrayals of Jews in Louisiana media. Hieke, *Jewish identity in the Reconstruction South*, 2, 108, 155; *New Orleans Riots*, 186, 211, 366, 492; *Letter of the Secretary*

"By God, we will carry it or s--t all over the parish."

Election Day, November 7, 1876, began the end of Reconstruction. Federal troops helped maintain relative peace at most polling places, but the familiar White League pattern prevailed. Economic pressure remained a tactic to suppress Republican voters: Support the Democrats or risk business prospects. A Democratic Party vote ensured a man's safety, and violence was a cudgel. The White League would burn a store, a home, or chase a man out of the parish if he voted Republican. Bayou Sara in West Feliciana Parish typified the White League strategy.⁶⁹

One of the parish's election commissioners told congressional investigators that his concern about the safety of the Bayou Sara courthouse convinced him to seek federal troop protection. The Weber brothers had told him that polling places throughout the parish were unsafe. He withdrew his request when a White Leaguer suggested troops were unnecessary, that protection for the town and polling location was nearby. He testified that when commissioners arrived the night before to prepare for voting, a group of loitering men was asked to leave. He identified the men, including Ben Ellinger, a twenty-six-year-old Jewish grocery store clerk. The election commissioner recounted a discussion with Ellinger before the election: "I was coming down the street, and he met me, and entered into conversation with me, and asked me my opinion as to the election. I told him I thought the Republicans would carry the election. Said he, 'By God, we will either carry it or s--t all over the parish.'" On Election Day, Ellinger and a half-dozen men were present, according to testimony. Despite being told to leave voters alone, the men continually

of War, 20; *Mississippi in 1875*, 527, 1452, 1535, 1539, 1540, 1541, 1604, 2445, 2448. The detail about Vicksburg is in the same investigative report as Aronson, *Mississippi in 1875*, 1604-05; *Louisiana in 1876*, 368, 2383, R.G. Dun & Co., Credit Reports, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard University; Stephen G. Mostov, "Dun and Bradstreet Reports as a Source of Jewish Economic History: Cincinnati, 1840-1875," *American Jewish History* 72 (March 1983): 333-53.

⁶⁹ *Report on the Removal of the Negroes*, xix. The White League was emboldened by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on March 27, 1876, in *U.S. v Cruikshank* that determined the Colfax massacre was not racially motivated and Reconstruction laws meant to protect Blacks were unconstitutional if not unenforceable, leaving Blacks essentially unprotected from White League violence. Peller-Semmens, "Unreconstructed," 170-71.

reminded Blacks and some Whites that if they voted Republican, “we’ll call to see you in a few nights.”⁷⁰

Joe Gray Taylor notes that Black voter intimidation focused on five parishes in 1876: East Feliciana, West Feliciana, East Baton Rouge, Morehouse, and Ouachita. The White League obtained its intended result. Election fraud during the November presidential election nullified the twenty combined electoral votes from Louisiana, South Carolina, Florida, and Oregon, leading to a congressional compromise that gave Republican Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency and ex-Confederate colonel Francis Tillou Nicholls the Louisiana governorship. The Republicans got the presidency whereas the Democrats regained control of state and local governments. On April 24, 1877, the withdrawal of the last federal troops symbolized the unofficial end to Reconstruction in Louisiana.⁷¹

The collapse of Louisiana’s electoral process after the 1876 election left the state with unfinished business. Departing governor William Pitt Kellogg schemed as much as his predecessor, Henry C. Warmoth, and sought to further his political career by bribing, cajoling, and maneuvering into the U.S. Senate. Two of his henchmen were Jews: Bernie Williams, who first appeared on the scene in 1866, and Morris Marks, a Kellogg-appointed state revenue collector. Marks confirmed congressional testimony implicating him in Kellogg’s schemes: “I cannot take care of any of my friends now while this fight is going on about Kellogg. I have to appoint a set of G-d d--d curs and hounds to keep them from squealing on Kellogg.” Numerous witnesses told congressional investigators about meetings with Kellogg, Marks, and others to hatch the plan denying Democrats their seats, certifying Republicans who had not been elected, and plotting how to force the state legislature to give Kellogg a U.S. Senate seat. Williams described a clandestine trip to Washington, D.C., with

⁷⁰ *Louisiana in 1876*, 2383-84.

⁷¹ Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge, 1974), 486-88, 531. In fifteen Louisiana parishes where 17,726 Republicans were registered in 1876 only 5,758 votes were cast for the Republican nominees, Rutherford B. Hayes and William A. Wheeler. East Feliciana had 2,127 registered Republican voters, yet only one Republican vote was recorded. So fraudulent was the voting that congressional reports simply printed a dotted line through East Feliciana voting results. The Returning Board, Louisiana’s equivalent to the Electoral College, refused to count the votes from East Feliciana and Grant parishes. *Report on the Removal of the Negroes*, xix; *Report: The Committee on Privileges and Elections, to whom was referred the memorial of Henry M. Spofford*, Forty-Sixth Congress, Senate Report 388, March 22, 1880, v.

A.J. Bennett, "Louisiana – The Withdrawal of the Federal Troops from the State House in New Orleans, at noon, on April 24th," Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, May 19, 1877. (Library of Congress.)

orders to pay bribes to ensure Kellogg's ascent to Congress and of similar meetings in New Orleans, including one with Marks. Marks denied the meeting took place or even seeing Williams. Other Jews from New Orleans testified about Williams's character, which they said was about as bad as any man they had ever encountered. The U.S. Senate refused to seat Henry M. Spofford, Democratic nominee against Kellogg, because of voting irregularities. The controversy eventually led to Democrat and former Confederate Benjamin F. Jonas's election as Louisiana's second Jewish U.S. senator, the first being Judah P. Benjamin.⁷²

⁷² *Report: The Committee on Privileges and Elections*, vii, viii, 726, 746. The committee identified Marks as of the "Israelitish faith." *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, August 24, 1897, references Marks's political career as a long-time Republican and his association with various Jewish organizations. Stuart Rockoff identifies three Jewish political leaders in Ascension Parish, including Marks. Rockoff, "Carpentbaggers," 41.

"A Reign of Terror"

Eric Foner concludes, "No single generalization can fully describe the social origins or political purposes of the South's Redeemers. . . . [T]hey shared, however, a commitment to dismantling the Reconstruction state, reducing the political power of Blacks, and reshaping the South's legal system in the interests of labor control and racial subordination." In 1878, the redeemers took full advantage, with Democratic governor Nicholls surrounded by sycophants doing his bidding and the Black-dominated Republicans reeling from the virtual absence of federal support. When Congress returned in January 1879 seeking to unravel Louisiana's 1878 election, the members focused on six parishes, lacking the time to investigate others. The committee's summation reads: "In brief, a literal reign of terror existed, and in fact, still exists, over a considerable portion of Louisiana, as the result of the policy adopted by the [Democrats] for perpetuating its rule in that State." Jewish men, again, factored prominently in two events.⁷³

In Natchitoches, election intimidation prompted outrage among Black Republicans as the Redeemer Democrats forced a church leader to flee the parish. Sam Lisso led a group of White men who responded to a tense gathering of Blacks and Whites with the church leader at the center. As noted in the local White League newspaper: "The people of Red River Parish have indeed acted nobly in our behalf, and we should be more than grateful to them for their gallant, heroic conduct. Messrs. Lisso & Scheen gave us the use of their telegraph-line free of charge. Mr. Sam Lisso and Captain James Pearson came in with the first party." Weeks later Democrats controlled the election.⁷⁴

Politics in New Orleans that year focused on the city election and a fracture in the Democratic Party for control. Or as U.S. senators described it: "A large and respectable association of citizens, chiefly merchants, endeavored to overthrow the controlling Democratic faction, which they regarded as 'a ring of men who were not honest in their political opinions and actions.' These Democrats organized as the Citizens' Conservative Association." Jewish lawyer Lionel C. Levy, an ex-Confederate, served as

⁷³ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 801; *Louisiana in 1878*, Forty-fifth Congress, Senate Report 855 (Washington, DC, 1879), xxiv.

⁷⁴ *People's Vindicator*, September 28, 1878.

chairman with several other notable Jews among the 650 listed as supporting the organization. Levy's group was unable to overcome the misdeeds of other Democrats controlling city politics. Senators mused that while both groups avoided using guns, whips, and other methods of election intimidation, "there was the same conspicuous absence of honest and manly dealings, the same unscrupulous adoption of fraudulent methods of evading the laws and corrupting the ballot-box. The Citizens' Conservative Association was denied adequate representation."⁷⁵

*Post-Reconstruction Jewish Lives and
Memorializing White Supremacy*

While Louisiana continued to stumble to the end of the 1870s, the Jewish men who were part of the chaos on both sides moved into post-Reconstruction life. Historians Stuart Rockoff and Jacob Morrow-Spitzer point out that by this point, with hopes for an interracial democracy all but gone, the Democratic Party – the "Redeemers" – was the only choice for upwardly mobile Jews. The lives of several of them exemplify how they stepped from one decade to the next, seamlessly setting aside any conflict with their involvements in Reconstruction-era Black disenfranchisement.⁷⁶

Emanuel and Henry Meyer kept their store on the main Clinton street into the 1880s before selling to their first cousin. A boll weevil infestation ravaged the regional cotton crop beginning in 1908, with the resultant economic downtown bankrupting the store, the last one the family held in the Feliciana Parishes. The descendants settled in Baton Rouge,

⁷⁵ *Louisiana in 1878*, xxiv; "Lionel C. Levy," Shapell Roster, accessed May 19, 2026, <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/8821>. The list of nearly 650 names published in a New Orleans newspaper includes James M. Seixas, Edwin Kursheedt, and Leon Godchaux. In his biography of Leon Godchaux, Peter Wolf writes, "[D]uring Reconstruction he exempted himself from the insidious strains of white supremacy sentiment and from the violent fury in memory of the Lost Cause." Other signers had the same last names as Jewish families in New Orleans at the time. Peter M. Wolf, *The Sugar King: Leon Godchaux, A New Orleans Legend, His Creole Slave, and his Jewish Roots* (New York, 2022), 17; *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, August 18, 1878 and October 7, 1897.

⁷⁶ Rockoff, "Carpetbaggers," 64; Morrow-Spitzer, "Worthy Citizens," 196–281. Spitzer examines Jewish Redeemer politics in detail, establishing how efforts that had begun in the decade of the 1860s were part of broader initiatives at Black disenfranchisement into the later decades of the nineteenth century.

helped organize its Jewish community, and began what is now the fifth generation living in the capital city. Emanuel Meyer's family, however, composed one more chapter in the family's conflicted history with civil rights.⁷⁷

Jonas Rosenthal of Alexandria moved past his experiences in Colfax and assumed the nickname of "Uncle Jonas" while serving on the local school board for thirty-three years. During his tenure, he served with a cousin of William J. Cruikshank, the named defendant in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case that essentially stripped Blacks of federal civil rights protection for almost ninety years. A school was named after Rosenthal, and when he died in 1930, a Confederate flag draped his coffin.⁷⁸

Jewish Alexandrian Julius Levin, a prominent lumber yard owner, served on the executive committee of the "White Man's Party" in Rapides Parish in 1874. His post-Reconstruction life included donations to the African American Shiloh Baptist Church, among other benefactions to the local Black community. When he died in 1910, local Black leaders published resolutions in the local newspaper honoring him. In a church publication, Levin was called "a true friend of our race as well as to humanity."⁷⁹

Julius Lisso, continuing as a Democratic party leader, wrote in the *People's Vindicator* that a Democratic victory in 1878 would "take the Rads off the knee, and strikes a blow for Democracy from which the Radicals will never recover." The *Vindicator*, which years before described H. C. Myers as a "hawking Jew," printed a letter about the same time under the headline "A Slander." The letter was from an unidentified Jew responding to someone who claimed local Jews supported Republicans. It read: "[T]here exists no truer class, to the interest of this section than the Jews. When our race, of which they are ancient and honored members, was at its darkest hour the 'Jews of Natchitoches' to a man stood to their colors

⁷⁷ Henry and Emanuel Meyer sold their store to Jonie Levy, the son of Abraham Levy, the family patriarch who essentially guided the family's affairs throughout the region before his death in 1899. Jonie Levy became Clinton's mayor in 1909 before the bankruptcy. He is one of four Southern Jewish mayors in the extended family. *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, June 22, 1909; Silverberg, "Louisiana Letters."

⁷⁸ "Funeral of Jonas Rosenthal," *Weekly Town Talk* (Alexandria, LA), January 25, 1930.

⁷⁹ *Louisiana Democrat*, September 15, 1880; *St. Francisville Democrat*, November 13, 1909; *Weekly Town Talk*, April 30, 1921; *Colfax Patriot*, January 24, 1930; *Louisiana Caucasian*, August 15, 1874; Hinchey, *Fourscore and Eleven*, A-108.

and fought the good fight.” Julius Lisso moved to Natchez in 1882, joined his brother-in-law’s business, and drowned after falling from a skiff in 1891. His nephew Sam continued managing the mercantile business in Coushatta while nephew Paul moved to Alexandria, where he served as a bank president and community leader.⁸⁰

Edwin Kursheedt led a distinguished life as Jewish leader in New Orleans. He served as an officer of the Jewish Home for Widows and Orphans for sixteen years including five years as president, as treasurer for Touro Infirmary, and as officiant for a year at Temple Sinai after Rabbi James Gutheim died. Kursheedt also served as the city’s postmaster and lobbied for passage of an order allowing mail carriers to travel on street cars without charge to the government. He remained active in his Civil War unit’s activities until his death in 1906. James Madison Seixas, and brothers Albert and Alex Levy, each attaining success in business, lived prosperously after Reconstruction.⁸¹

By the late 1870s, Reconstruction had crumbled. “[T]he whole South—every state in the South—had got into the hands of the very men that held us slaves,” stated Black Louisianian Henry Adams. And if the memory of murder, intimidation, and disenfranchisement was not a sufficient burden, Louisianians would be reminded in their community squares about those who forged the terror.⁸²

Louisiana was one of the first Southern states to memorialize its Civil War dead and remember the white supremacists, with Jewish men and women in leadership roles. By 1870, the Ladies Benevolent Association raised money and moved ex-Confederates buried around New Orleans to

⁸⁰ *People’s Vindicator*, July 25, 1874, September 28, 1878, October 26, 1878 and November 16, 1878; *Town Talk*, May 19, 1898 and August 25, 1902; “Julius Lisso,” Findagrave, accessed May 19, 2026, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/103119522/julius-lisso>.

⁸¹ *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, February 22, 1906; *New Orleans States Item*, June 27, 1889 and June 28, 1889; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, November 9, 1896 and August 19, 1889. Edwin Kursheedt’s tenure at the Jewish Home for Widows and Orphans is documented in Marlene Trestman, *Most Fortunate Unfortunates: The Jewish Orphans’ Home of New Orleans* (Baton Rouge, 2023), 76–80. James Walker Sanders continued his medical practice in Clinton and lived until 1886. E. L. Weber left the Feliciana Parishes after his brother’s murder, settling in Donaldsonville. He died in 1915.

⁸² Adams is quoted in a section titled, “Negro Exodus from Southern States,” detailing failed efforts to relocate Blacks from Southern states to Kansas. *Report on the Removal of the Negroes*, xi.

a six-thousand-dollar war memorial in Greenwood Cemetery dedicated in 1874. The first board of directors included Mrs. Edwin Kursheedt, Mrs. J. K. Gutheim, wife of the renowned anti-Unionist Rabbi James Gutheim, and Mrs. Carl Kohn, wife of a prominent Jewish businessman. West Feliciana began planning its monument to its Confederate dead in 1874, completing the project in 1903 with a grand celebration that included several Jewish men and women on the planning committee. By 1900, Louisiana boasted ten United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) chapters, with five hundred members one year after the statewide organization was founded. Florence Klotz Bodenheimer, Jewish daughter of an ex-Confederate, prominent landowner, and namesake of a Louisiana town, served as a Louisiana UDC leader, as did Leon Godchaux's sister, Mrs. Paul Israel.⁸³

Caroline Janney explores Jewish women's lives postbellum in relation to the postwar memorial societies throughout the South. "Southern white women were equally, if not more, complicit in Confederate nationalism as the men of their race and class. This loyalty to an independent Confederate nation came from a variety of sources, including military service of a loved one, the experience of war on the homefront, a desire for revenge, powerful symbols such as flags, and a deep-seated belief that White Southerners shared little in the way of cultural values with northerners," Janney writes. The men stood beside their wives who were focused on the organizational aspects of memorialization, including white supremacist events after the war. In New Orleans, that included the insurrection. The Jonases and Kursheedts attended the 1891 dedication of an obelisk honoring White Leaguers who fought and died during the 1874 uprising to unseat Louisiana's state leaders. The front-page news story recognized the White League and the military units marching in memory of events seventeen years earlier. Ex-Confederate Jonas, the next Jew to serve in the U.S. Senate, was "orator of the day," his remarks occupying four columns in the local newspaper, his message a foretelling of the Lost Cause narrative. He said the

⁸³ *New Orleans Republican*, May 5, 1872; *New Orleans Times*, April 5, 1874; *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, October 9, 1903; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, March 2, 1900 and November 13, 1900; *Assumption Pioneer*, August 5, 1893. Louisiana has approximately 130 dedicated public spaces to the Confederacy, with the New Orleans monument the first.

*Ernest B. Kruttschnitt,
 president of the Louisiana
 constitutional convention of 1898.
 (Courtesy of the State Library of
 Louisiana.)*

South did not regret its past, criticized Congress for meddling in Louisiana's government, and accused the Republican Party of stealing the presidency.⁸⁴

Before the decade ended, Louisiana became the third Southern state to wipe away much of the Reconstruction-era progress Blacks had achieved, with a Jewish attorney, Ernest Benjamin Kruttschnitt, in charge. He presided over the 1898 state constitutional convention, telling his fellow delegates they were entrusted with "the purification of the electorate." Kruttschnitt, Jonas's law partner and also a participant in the Liberty Place riot, said in his opening that Blacks "first entered upon the unequal contest for supremacy, and which has been reddened with his blood, now witness the evolution of an organic law which will establish the relations between the races upon an everlasting foundation of right and justice." Poll taxes and a literacy test became part of Louisiana governance under the new constitution with the anticipated results. In two

⁸⁴ Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill, 2008), 29; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, September 15, 1891. Colfax dedicated a monument in 1921 to honor those who fought and died in the 1873 massacre; Jonas Rosenthal was not listed among the attendees. *Colfax Chronicle*, April 16, 1921.

years, registered voters among the 650,000 Blacks in Louisiana declined from 130,000 to about five thousand. Part of a front-page headline on Kruttschnitt's obituary in 1906 read: "Was President of Constitutional Convention Which Secured White Supremacy in the State."⁸⁵

An Echo of Reconstruction

Leonard Dinnerstein noted in 1970, "A better understanding of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jewish experiences in the South will come only after scholars critically examine contemporary manuscripts and periodicals and make some attempt to generalize on the basis of well-documented fact. Such an undertaking would enhance our understanding of the Jew's role and position in southern society in the past as well as suggest the basis for southern Jewish attitudes in contemporary society." His assessment of published Southern Jewish history up to 1970 showed him "no villains, no traitors, no dissenters, no abolitionists, and no scoundrels. This, of course, may have been true; Jews might have been too frightened to consider engaging in deviant activities." Since Dinnerstein's urging, additional scholarship has shown otherwise.⁸⁶

Whereas previous academic studies disclosed a handful of Jewish men on either side of Reconstruction turmoil, this article adds at least fifty additional names solely in Louisiana, a significant number even if it represents a very small percentage of adult Jewish men in the state, the majority of whom did not get involved on either side. Some acted in the pursuit of White dominance, others opposed White supremacy. Numerous historians have delved into the conflicts of Southern Jewish struggle for acceptance through challenging personal and professional alliances. Clive Webb writes of Jews accepting secession and supporting the Lost

⁸⁵ *Times-Picayune*, February 9, 1898 and April 17, 1906; Landry, *The Battle of Liberty Place*, 237; Friedman, "The Legal, Political and Religious Legacy," 79–80. Mississippi and South Carolina preceded Louisiana in making constitutional changes to Black rights achieved during Reconstruction. Black registered voter numbers come from the Equal Justice Institute, "Louisiana Officially Disenfranchises Black Voters and Jurors," accessed May 31, 2026, <https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/may/12>.

⁸⁶ Leonard Dinnerstein, "A Note on Southern Attitudes toward Jews," *Jewish Social Studies* 32 (January 1970): 49, 48. Dinnerstein commented six years before the reorganization of the Southern Jewish Historical Society (SJHS), now into its fiftieth year. See Mark Bauman, "Genesis: The Origins of the Modern Southern Jewish Historical Society," *Southern Jewish History* 29A (2026), 1–28.

Cause despite both being morally wrong. By the 1950s, Jews knew that acceptance from White gentiles could only be guaranteed by their acceptance of the Southern caste system. "Although most southern Jews sympathized with the incipient civil rights movement, political realities compelled their silence," Webb concludes, despite the paradox in which recognizing segregation was tantamount to "upholding the same caste system that led to their own marginalization."⁸⁷

Two generations after Henry Meyer's involvement in the white supremacist murder of John Gair, Meyer's descendants pushed well past Webb's conundrum of interracial conflict to leave a decidedly different family legacy. Melvin Meyer, Henry Meyer's great-great nephew, was editor of the *Crimson White*, the University of Alabama student newspaper, in 1962 when it published an editorial titled "A Bell Rang," recognizing the U.S. Supreme Court's decision allowing James Meredith to enroll as the University of Mississippi's first Black student. The editorial chastised segregationist Mississippi governor Ross Barnett for "standing in the schoolhouse door" to block Meredith's entry—a veiled comment about Governor George Wallace's promise to do likewise to prevent integration in Alabama. Response from the university, the local community, and nationally was swift and damning. Meyer's life was threatened; antisemitic comments were published about him; and he required guards to protect him while he attended school. The university trustees wanted to suspend him.⁸⁸

Meyer's father, Henry, published a newspaper in Starkville, Mississippi, in Oktibbeha County. He refused county commissioner demands to disown his son, and consequently lost sizable government advertising contracts to the dismay of his brother, the newspaper's advertising manager, who never forgave his brother for refusing to concede. The Meyers'

⁸⁷ Clive Webb, *Fight Against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* (Athens, GA, 2003), 44; See also, Mark K. Bauman and Berkeley Kalin, eds., *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* (Tuscaloosa, 1997) for insights into how Jewish leaders in the South navigated racial conflicts; Nikole Hannah-Jones, "What It Means to Be a White 'Race Traitor,'" *New York Times*, February 13, 2026, offers a more contemporary discussion of white supremacy and activism spanning decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

⁸⁸ Dina Weinstein, "Melvin Wali Ali Feiler Meyer: A Student's Struggle with Insider/Outsider Status in Civil Rights-Era Alabama," *Southern Jewish History* 16 (2013): 5–33; Wendy Ferguson Soltz, "Unheard Voices and Unseen Fights: Jews, Segregation, and Higher Education in the South, 1910–1964" (Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 2016), 160–79.

home was vandalized. The synagogue board refused Meyer's offer to resign as president. In an oral interview thirty years later, Henry Meyer said that his father died when he was eight years old. He grew up with his mother's Mississippi family, and memories of her ancestors, but none about the Meyers of Louisiana. As she ended an oral interview about her family's experience, Mildred Meyer said about that period in their lives, "Henry can talk about it. I get too wrapped up in it because I still resent it." For a time, Melvin Meyer spoke to various groups about his experiences, which affected him deeply, such that he decided to move away from journalism and into theological studies. Neither Melvin, his parents nor his sister Marjorie were aware of their Meyer relatives who two generations prior were in the middle of Reconstruction-era white supremacy.⁸⁹

Throughout Southern history, Jews spoke out on behalf of controversial issues. In the same fashion that there was no one South, neither was there one Jewish South. This complicates the issue of attempting to fit in to gain acceptance. During Reconstruction and into the civil rights era of the last half of the twentieth century, Jews actually fit in by joining the diverse sides of issues. Yet, as this study explicates, they typically espoused one side or another because of self-interest and beliefs rather than a conscious effort for acceptance.

⁸⁹ Meyer's parents, Henry and Mildred, were interviewed separately in their Starkville home on September 1 and September 2, 1999. The forty-five-minute-long interviews were part of an oral history project with the Institute for Southern Jewish Life (ISJL). The tapes have been transferred to the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience and digitized. Meyer sold his publishing interests three years after the turmoil and joined the journalism department at Mississippi State University, where he worked for twenty-seven years. The author spoke with Melvin Meyer's daughter and sister in 2015. Oral interviews, Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, New Orleans.