

His Truth is Marching On:

Capt. James Williams and the Ku Klux Crisis in Reconstruction York County

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The Reconstruction Era is a period of rebuilding the United States socially, politically, and economically. It is typically defined as occurring between 1865 and 1877. Plans to admit the former Confederate States back into the Union were developed and promoted by President Abraham Lincoln, President Andrew Johnson, and the Republican controlled congress of the United States. Lincoln's plan for Reconstruction, which he started developing before the end of the war, was designed to easily integrate the former Confederate States back into the Union. Lincoln's ten percent policy required a meager ten percent of a state's voting population to swear allegiance to the Union before they could reconstitute their state government and send representatives to Congress.¹ However, Lincoln's plan for reconstruction died with him on April 14, 1865. President Johnson's plan for Reconstruction was similar to Lincoln's plan. Under Johnson's plan, former Confederate States were still required to adhere to the ten percent policy as well as ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. In addition, Johnson required southern elite, anyone with \$20,000 worth of property or more, to individually request a presidential pardon in order to retain their property.²

Andrew Johnson's plan for Reconstruction would remain in effect until his impeachment in 1867. Though Johnson was not removed from office, his power as President was significantly curtailed. The Radical Republicans in Congress took this opportunity to institute their own Reconstruction policy. Congress' plan for Reconstruction split the South into five military districts. South Carolina was in the second military district. Each district was occupied by United States troops with the hope that they would keep order and enforce the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments.³

The South would be forever changed as a result of Reconstruction. The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution freed four million people when it outlawed the institution of slavery. Slavery, which had dominated southern economics since the colonial era, was replaced with a different form of labor known as sharecropping. Faced with few other options for making a living, sharecropping gave Freedmen the means to live on separate tracts of land and raise crops. In exchange for working the land, a share of the crop was owed to the landowner each

¹ Foner, Eric. *A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), 16-17.

² *Ibid*, 82-85.

³ Foner, Eric. *A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990) 122-123.

year. Generally, sharecroppers kept between one-third to one-half of the year's crop depending on whether the landowner provided the tools, fertilizer, and seed.⁴

However, if the land failed to yield a good harvest, a sharecropper might not earn enough to pay his debts to the landowner. Sharecropping often created a cycle of debt that kept African American families economically dependent on the South's old planter class. Many African Americans could not read or write, making them targets for unscrupulous business dealings, being charged exorbitant prices for goods, and higher interest rates. A few sharecroppers were eventually able to purchase land of their own, such as Greene and Malinda Bratton who were formerly enslaved on the Bratton Plantation.⁵

Many Whites saw sharecropping as an opportunity to reestablish dominance. Led by Mississippi and South Carolina, Southern states passed laws, called Black Codes, which limited the rights of Freedmen and prevented them from achieving political and economic autonomy. One law required every black adult to sign a yearly labor contract with a white person. Those who refused risked prosecution under state law. Black Codes and widespread violence against Freedmen provoked a flurry of protest from Radical Republicans who championed legislation that repealed nearly every Black Code by 1868. Despite their efforts, racial discrimination and violence persisted.⁶

The Thirteenth Amendment was followed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) granted citizenship to African Americans while the Reconstruction Acts (1867) and the Fifteenth Amendment (1869), provided the right to vote to African American men. Whites, who had long held power over African Americans, saw their power diminish. This loss of power coupled with their "dissociation from the emerging society" led to anger that manifested itself in racial violence perpetrated by vigilante groups like the Ku Klux.⁷

This secret organization originated in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1866. They came to York County in 1868. The Ku Klux was supported by Whites sympathetic to white supremacy in the South. Wearing masks to hide their identities, Ku Klux members waged an underground campaign of terror and violence directed at anyone (white or black) in Republican leadership and those who

⁴ Foner, Eric. *A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990) 79.

⁵ Ayers, Edward L., et al., *American Passages: A History of the United States* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt, 2000), 1:518-21; Green Bratton sharecropping agreement. Bratton Family Paper Collection, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

⁶ *Reconstruction: America After the Civil War*, Tony Rossi/Henry Louis Gates, Jr (Washington, DC: McGee Media & Inkwell Films, 2019); Foner, Eric. *A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990) 93-95

⁷ West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2002), 3.

defended civil rights for African Americans.⁸ South Carolina's Governor, Robert Kingston Scott, elected in 1868, publicly condemned the violent actions of the Ku Klux. He pressured Wade Hampton III, former Confederate general and leader of the Democratic State Committee, to do the same. In October 1868, Hampton addressed the state's Democrats calling for an end to violence.⁹

Though violence had been temporarily suppressed, intimidation by the Klan still had a disastrous impact on the local African American community, particularly when it came to African American suffrage. Because ballots of the time were visibly marked, it was obvious as to which party a voter supported. Anyone supporting the Republican Party was a potential target of the Ku Klux. At one polling station in York County, several men "having no official capacity" recorded the names of every person that voted Republican. Members of the African American community were so fearful of reprisal from the Klan that some refused to leave their homes on Election Day.¹⁰

In an attempt to embolden African American voters in South Carolina, Governor Scott signed a bill into law on March 16, 1869 that made all men (black or white) between the ages of 18 and 45 eligible for paid militia service. Three militia units were raised in York County as a result of the Governor's legislation: one in the Cherokee Township, one in Rock Hill, and the third near Forest Hall, the home of John S. Bratton, Jr. and his wife Harriet Jane Rainey Bratton. James Williams, a freedman formerly enslaved on the Bratton Plantation, enlisted in the Forest Hall militia and was eventually appointed captain.¹¹

Initially, the militias were integrated but white militiamen resigned. The absence of Whites left holes that were filled by African Americans. When the Governor's office refused to raise exclusively-white militias, anger amongst Whites flared. The exclusively-black militias triggered an "arms race" as fearful Whites acquired weapons with which to "protect themselves" from black militiamen.¹²

When Governor Scott realized that the militias formed with his legislation were exacerbating tensions in the community, he disbanded them at the end of January 1871. Despite these

⁸ Foner, Eric. *A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990) 146.

⁹ Hampton, Wade, et al. "To the People of South Carolina," *Edgefield Advertiser*, (Edgefield, SC: Nov 4, 1868); West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2002) 47.

¹⁰ West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2002) 48

¹¹ West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877*. McFarland & Company Inc. Jefferson, North Carolina. 2002. 47; Trelease, Allen W. *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971) 365.

¹² West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877*. McFarland & Company Inc. Jefferson, North Carolina. 2002. 47-48

efforts, violence in York County continued to grow. Attacks peaked during the state elections in the fall of 1870 and continued into 1871 with a reported 11 murders and 600 beatings in York County alone. Capt. James Williams understood that the state-established militias were the only protection freedmen truly had from the nightly raids perpetrated by the Ku Klux. Therefore, he refused to disarm and disband and, in doing so, attracted the attention of the local Ku Klux.¹³

James Williams was well known to York County Ku Klux. He regularly spoke openly against Ku Klux atrocities and was accused by local whites of making threats to “kill from cradle to grave” should attacks on African Americans not cease. Others accused Williams and his militia of arson.¹⁴ James Williams was brought further into the public eye when he used his authority as militia captain to arrest a white man named Robert Mendenhall who had started an altercation with one of Williams’s militiamen.¹⁵

In an attempt to reduce the growing tension, local African American leader and preacher, Elias Hill, organized a public meeting near his home in Clay Hill on February 11, 1871. Both white and African American leaders were present, including James Williams. According to a report of the meeting published in the *Yorkville Enquirer* on February 16, 1871 “all acts of violence were heartily condemned.”¹⁶ Despite this condemnation, Ku Klux violence continued. On the afternoon of March 6, Williams gave an impassioned speech on the steps of the Rose Hotel in which he once again openly condemned the actions of the Ku Klux. This public condemnation coupled with Williams’ refusal to disband and disarm enraged the Ku Klux. The following morning, on March 7, 1871, Ku Klux raided Williams’s home and lynched him in retaliation. Miles S. Carroll, a Ku Klux present the night of James Williams’ murder, recounted that,

“We proceeded on foot to the house [of James Williams] and knocked on the door... when we asked where Jim was his wife said she did not know... We made a thorough search of the house but did not find him. Dr. Bratton told someone to pull up some of the plank flooring... and sure enough, there was Jim crouched down under the floor. We hauled him out and placed a rope around his neck... when someone spied a large tree with a limb running out 10 or 12 feet from the ground... We left Captain Williams dangling from that limb.”¹⁷

¹³ Farris, Scott. *Freedom on Trial: The Defeat and Demise of the Post Civil War Ku Klux Klan* (Guilford, Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2020) 33.

¹⁴ West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877*. McFarland & Company Inc. Jefferson, North Carolina. 2002. 70-71.

¹⁵ “The Trial of the Ku Klux,” *Yorkville Enquirer* (York, SC: December 21, 1871) 3

¹⁶ “Public Meeting at Clay Hill.” *Yorkville Enquirer*. York, South Carolina. February 16, 1871

¹⁷ Carroll, M.S. The Journal of M.S. Carroll (unpublished, 1924) 6-7; West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc. 2002) 123-125.

Later that day, the York County Coroner conducted an inquest into Williams's murder at the Brattonville Store located in the Brick House.¹⁸ The Brick House is a two-story, I-house laid by the masons John L. Owen, Robert Owen, and John Powers for John S. Bratton, Sr. Construction of the house started in 1841 and was completed shortly after the death of John S. Bratton, Sr.'s death in 1843. This late example of Early Classical Revival, or Jeffersonian Classicism, served an atypical public mercantile function, in addition to having a private family use. The largest room of the first floor housed the Brattonville Store. Prior to the American Civil War, the store also served as a post office and voting place. It is supposed that the coroner brought James Williams' body to the Brick House because the Brattonville Store was the only quasi-civic location in the area.¹⁹

Fearing reprisal towards his family, John S. Bratton, Jr. asked James Avery, reputed leader of the Ku Klux in York County, to send reinforcements. At least 15 to 20 men responded and kept watch with the Brattons, who had gathered together into one house for the night. In order to avert any further violence, Andy Tims, a lieutenant in Williams' militia company, turned over the company's weapons and the night passed without further incident.²⁰

Violence towards African Americans across the South prompted the United States Congress to pass three pieces of legislation collectively known as the Enforcement Acts. The final act, known as the "Civil Rights Act of 1871", or the "Ku Klux Klan Act," passed only six weeks after Williams' lynching. President Grant signed the bill into law on April 20, 1871. President Grant used the power granted in the Civil Rights Act to suspend the writ of Habeas Corpus and impose martial law over a 9-county area in the South Carolina upstate, including York County.²¹

¹⁸ United States Congress, *Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the late Insurrectionary States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1872) 709-710.

<https://archive.org/details/reportofjointsele04unit/page/710/mode/2up>; *Columbia Daily Phoenix* (Columbia, SC: March 14, 1871) 2; Farris, Scott. *Freedom on Trial: The Defeat and Demise of the Post Civil War Ku Klux Klan* (Guilford, Connecticut: Lyons Press, 2020) 157. Martinez, Michael J. *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan: Exposing the Invisible Empire During Reconstruction* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007) 2; West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc. 2002) 71

¹⁹ Owen, John L. contract, May 6, 1843, Folder 33, Box 1, Bratton Family Paper Collection, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia; Mester, Joseph C., ed., "Homestead House Historic Structure Report" (Culture & Heritage Commission of York County, SC, 2021).

²⁰ United States Congress, *Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the late Insurrectionary States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1872) 709-710; *Columbia Daily Phoenix* (Columbia, SC: March 14, 1871) 2.

²¹ West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc. 2002) 85; Pearl, Matthew, "K Troop: The Untold Story of the Eradication of the Original Ku Klux Klan," *Slate Online Magazine*, March 4, 2016. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/03/how_a_detachment_of_u_s_army_soldiers_s_moked_out_the_original_ku_klux_klan.html

President Grant also sent four companies of the 7th US Cavalry to York County in mid-March of 1871 to reinforce five companies of the 18th US Infantry who had arrived in late February. The cavalry commander, Lewis Merrill, conducted investigations into Ku Klux activity in the area. His notes became the basis for the Great South Carolina Ku Klux Trials, held in Columbia and Charleston in November of 1871 and April, 1872, respectively. Williams' murder trial was ultimately deferred to the Supreme Court of the United States making it the first trial born of the Enforcement Acts to make it to the Supreme Court.²²

Ultimately, the Supreme Court declined to rule on Williams' case, deciding instead to send it back to a lower court. Of the 29 people initially indicted for their alleged involvement in Williams' lynching, only one, Robert Hayes Mitchell, stood trial. Eight others confessed. All nine were found guilty of the much lesser charge of conspiracy to violate Williams' civil rights and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment and a \$100 fine. The remaining 20, including the alleged leaders, were never prosecuted in conjunction with Williams' murder.²³

Both James Rufus Bratton and his older brother John Simpson Bratton, Jr. fled York County for their known association with the Ku Klux. James Rufus Bratton fled to London, Ontario seeking asylum. On June 10, 1872 Bratton was apprehended by federal authorities who sent him back to the United States to stand trial. The "kidnapping" of James Rufus Bratton excited widespread interest in Canada. The incident was brought to the House of Commons at Ottawa on June 11, 1872 and the Canadian Prime Minister, Sir John McDonald, opened a dialogue with the British ambassador at Washington. After two days in the York County jail, James Rufus Bratton posted bond and again fled to Ontario to escape prosecution for his alleged involvement in Williams' death. John S. Bratton, Jr. also fled York County and found exile in Memphis Tennessee.²⁴

Reconstruction ended with the Compromise of 1877, an informal agreement among Congressmen to resolve the intensely disputed 1876 presidential election. Southern Democrats agreed to recognize the victory of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes in return for removal of federal troops from the South. As a result of the agreement, federal troops were withdrawn.

²²"The Supreme Court and the KKK Act." *Yorkville Enquirer*. (York, SC: March 28, 1872); Zuczek, Richard. "The Federal Government's Attack on the Ku Klux Klan: A Reassessment," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (Jan. 1996); Pearl, Matthew, "K Troop: The Untold Story of the Eradication of the Original Ku Klux Klan," *Slate Online Magazine*, March 4, 2016.

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/03/how_a_detachment_of_u_s_army_soldiers_s_moked_out_the_original_ku_klux_klan.html

²³ Corbin, D.T. *South Carolina United States Circuit Court Vs. James Rufus Bratton et al.* December 9, 1871, Case # 168 (Atlanta, GA: National Archives)

²⁴ Landon, Fred. "The Kidnapping of Dr. Rufus Bratton," *Journal of Negro History* 10 (July 1925): 330-333; Landon, Fred. "Kidnapping on London Street in 1872 Developed Into International Incident," *The London Free Press* (London, Ontario: April 25, 1964); West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877*. McFarland & Company Inc. Jefferson, North Carolina. 2002.

To many Republicans and Freedmen, the action was called “The Great Betrayal.” Efforts to enforce civil rights laws were widely abandoned, leaving southern Blacks subject to growing racial inequities, oppression, and violence.²⁵

By the time Hayes became president in 1877, the Grant administration had pardoned every convicted Ku Klux and prosecutions had ceased for violations of the Enforcement Acts. Even so, the Enforcement Acts and the subsequent trials led to the eventual disbandment of the first iteration of the Ku Klux. The Ku Klux would be reborn over forty years later following the romanticized depiction of the Ku Klux Klan in D.W. Griffith’s film, *Birth of a Nation*.²⁶

In South Carolina, Democrats were poised to regain control of the state’s government. Their efforts were led by gubernatorial hopeful Wade Hampton III, who promised to “redeem” South Carolina from Reconstruction Era reforms. Aided by a vigilante group known as the “Red Shirts,” Hampton coordinated a campaign of violence and intimidation to suppress black voters and win the governorship in 1876.²⁷

In June 1878, South Carolina Governor Wade Hampton III brokered an agreement with President Hayes to have all charges against James Rufus Bratton dropped. He returned home to York County in November 1878. John S. Bratton, Jr., who fled to Memphis, Tennessee, returned to York County prior to his brother. On June 9, 1878, South Carolina Secretary of State, Robert M. Sims, conveyed Gov. Hampton’s sentiments in a letter to John S. Bratton, Jr. stating, “...that all parties, like your brother...considered as Ku Klux, should come home...and rest assured on his word that they would not be disturbed ...that he had every assurance of good faith in this matter from the President...”²⁸

Though Capt. James Williams never received justice, his actions, and the actions of other brave African Americans, planted seeds of resistance that prompted decades of resistance in the 20th Century that eventually grew into the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Williams’ legacy was best epitomized by South Carolina Attorney General Daniel H. Chamberlain during closing remarks at the South Carolina Ku Klux trials. Chamberlain marveled at Williams’ “determination to protect the lives and liberties of his fellow-citizens...” and boldly declared that, “when the names of these conspirators, who murdered him, shall have rotted from the

²⁵ Foner, Eric. *A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990) 244-47.

²⁶ West, Jerry L. *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County South Carolina 1865-1877* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc. 2002) 116.

²⁷ Foner, Eric. *A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990) 239-241

²⁸ "Return of Dr. Bratton," *Yorkville Enquirer* (York, SC: November 21, 1878); Wade Hampton to John S. Bratton, June 14, 1878, Bratton Paper Collection, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, Box 2, Folder 252; R.M. Sims to John S. Bratton, June 9, 1878, Bratton Paper Collection, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, Box 2, Folder 252; John S. Bratton to James R. Bratton, June 15, 1878, Bratton Paper Collection, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, Box 2, Folder 252

memory of men, some generation will seek for marble white enough to bear the name of that brave negro captain.”²⁹

On January 4, 1872 (Emancipation Day) African Americans celebrated the contributions that Jim Williams made to the African American community by singing a song that was once reserved for the controversial abolitionist John Brown. After Brown’s conviction and execution for the failed raid on the National Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, his supporters memorialized his actions in lyrics meant to be sung to the tune of *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. The lyrics written for Williams are as follows:

*Old Jim Williams’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
While weeps the sons of bondage whom he ventured all to save;
But though he lost his life in struggling for the slave,
His truth is marching on.
Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
His truth is marching on!*³⁰

²⁹ Proceedings in the Ku Klux Trials at Columbia, S.C. in The United States Circuit Court, November Term, 1871 (New York, NY: Negro Universities Press, 1969) 394.

³⁰ “Emancipation Day.” *The Chester Reporter*. Chester, South Carolina. January 4, 1872.