

The Thibodaux Massacre: Racial Violence and the 1887 Sugar Cane Labor Strike

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Review

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It sometimes comes as a surprise to casual students of Louisiana history that the development of its fabled sugar industry is so deeply intertwined with spectacular if sometimes forgotten history of racial violence.

John DeSantis traces out some of those connections in his book on the brutal breaking of the Knights of Labor sugar workers' strike of 1887, the largest of its kind in nineteenth century America. The seeds for this violent episode were sown centuries ago. Massive importation of African slaves to sugar plantations in the New World was integral to the wealth of French colonies in the Caribbean. The improbably successful slave rebellion that rose from the sugar fields of Haiti in the 1790s triggered successive waves of Creole immigration to southern Louisiana and laid the foundation for a wealthy plantation society devoted to growing sugarcane along the lower Mississippi River and its meandering bayous.

Sugar proved to be a highly profitable crop, but it was always—and has remained down to the present-- a risky business venture in Louisiana. Unlike short staple cotton that came to dominate a sprawling geographical swath of the American South from Virginia to Texas, sugarcane is a tropical plant that thrives only within a constrained ecological niche. The end of every growing season in Louisiana's subtropical climate was hedged with fears of an early freeze that might wipe out a standing crop in the field before it could be harvested by a veritable army of slaves wielding razor-sharp cutting knives and working around the clock in a race against time and weather. The limited availability of prime alluvial land and the cost of complicated mechanized mills used to extract juice from the cane erected high economic barriers to entry for would be sugar planters. To top it off, Louisiana sugar planters' greatest expenditure came in the form of their slave labor force, which they owned in greater numbers than upland cotton planters. As economic historian Gavin Wright reminded us, antebellum planters were always labor lords before they were land lords.

Thus, conditions were ripe in the sugar plantations above New Orleans for a slave rebellion in 1811 that bore a menacing resemblance to the convulsions of the Haitian Revolution. In Saint Charles Parish, black slaves turned their harvest tools into deadly weapons of racial liberation and marched toward the city, attacking plantations, killing

their white masters, and exhorting their brethren in bondage to rise up and overthrow the planters. In the end, DeSantis reminds us that this slave rebellion was put down with brute force. Federal troops, mobilized state militia, and local slave patrollers killed at least sixty of the insurgent slaves before they could reach New Orleans. Dozens more were captured alive and delivered to courts that summarily convicted them of that unique Southern crime of “inciting servile insurrection.” Punishment was meted in particularly grisly form: those convicted were sentenced to public execution, their heads cut off and mounted on pikes like trophies along the river road. The message of this gruesome display could not have been clearer, for intended audiences of both black slaves and white masters.

Union victory in the Civil War came perilously close to wiping out the sugar industry in Louisiana. New Orleans, sugar’s principal port city and chief financial center, fell to a combined naval and army task force in early 1862, which subsequently launched expeditionary raids deep into sugar country. President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 may have exempted Louisiana sugar parishes under Union military occupation, but its practical effect was to foster widespread chaos that upended the planters’ disciplinary regime over their slaves. Shortages of military manpower compelled Union General Benjamin Butler and his successors—reluctantly—to accept recruits of African and mixed ancestry into their ranks. Even those few planters willing to take the loyalty oath to the Yankees discovered their slaves had eagerly embraced Yankee notions of free soil, free labor, and free men. Absent the active support of the state, Louisiana sugar production fell by an astounding ninety five percent between 1861 and 1865. The future of Louisiana sugar looked pretty dim, especially given that sugar planters in Cuba and Brazil continued to grow their sugarcane in tropical weather and with an intact slave labor force well into the 1880s.

The era of Reconstruction brought a formal end to the nationwide civil war but not to the local turmoil between former masters and former slaves. DeSantis reminds his readers that in 1866, the New Orleans police force—composed of white Confederate veterans—attacked and slaughtered dozens of black Republicans in a desperate attempt to prevent the meeting of a convention to consider a new state constitution that might have enfranchised black voters. In 1873 a black militia company commanded by a veteran of the U.S. Colored Troops occupied Colfax, the parish seat of Grant Parish on the Red River, which had formerly comprised sugar country’s northern frontier. In response, local companies of white paramilitaries organized an assault to retake the courthouse and then conducted a massacre of black prisoners that left an estimated ninety dead—the deadliest single instance of racial violence in Reconstruction anywhere in the United States. Failure of the federal government to successfully prosecute the perpetrators stimulated the mobilization of White League paramilitary companies across Louisiana. A street battle involving thousands and an attempted coup d’état against the Republican state government in New Orleans in September of 1874 left still more dead and brought about a re-occupation of the state capitol by U.S. Army units commanded by General Phil Sheridan. Louisiana had taken on the appearance of a slow motion race war.

DeSantis devotes most of his narrative to post-Reconstruction events. The demise of the shaky political alliance between black Republicans and Yankee “carpetbaggers” and the departure of federal forces formed a critical turning point in the outlook of Louisiana sugar planters. Years of perennial labor unrest in the sugar fields culminated in a climactic showdown in 1887 with the Knights of Labor and their supporters. DeSantis takes care to recount the rise of this first nationwide labor union, led by Terence Powderly. The national railroad strike of 1877 fueled the rise of labor organizing across the entire United States, and the first local chapters of the Knights were established in Louisiana by railroad workers. Plantations sugar workers, deeply affected by the political organizing of the Republican party during Reconstruction, proved to be ripe targets for the Knights’ proposals to negotiate higher wage rates and end the issuance of payment in paper scrip, which could only be redeemed in the planters’ company stores.

The outcome of this conflict was tragic, even if it was foreseeable. Sugar planters, who had led the struggle to overthrow Reconstruction in Louisiana, combined to form a powerfully and influential lobbying group, the Louisiana Sugar Producers Association (LSPA). Throughout the 1880s, they acted in concert to quell a rising tide of labor unrest and reassert their command over their labor force. When more than 10,000 sugar workers went out on strike during the peak harvest season in the fall of 1887, the LSPA pressed Louisiana’s governor to send in the state militia to break the strike. Governor Samuel McEnery responded at once and without hesitation. Over the next several weeks, units of the Louisiana National Guard crushed the strike across southern Louisiana by defending imported strikebreakers and forcibly evicting recalcitrant black sugar workers who then streamed into the parish seat of Thibodaux, where they Knights of Labor had established their strike headquarters. When the militia commander declared his intention to leave Thibodaux, local whites raised paramilitary companies and established control over all roads leading into town. Sentries were fired upon by unknown parties on the night of November 23, 1887, and the paramilitaries responded at daylight by invading the black section of the town and indiscriminately gunning down anyone known to be connected with the strike and many who were not. An estimated sixty people died in the massacre.

A journalist rather than historian by trade, DeSantis interviewed many local residents, including descendants of victims of the massacre, and photographed the old town of Thibodaux, which looks largely unchanged over the last century. His notes reveal that he has carefully researched Civil War pension records in the National Archives in Washington, DC that have never before been used to verify key details of this mass slaughter that has remained largely hidden from historical memory. DeSantis is at times less in command of some of the dense historical events that he recounts: His narrative of the byzantine alliances behind the much-disputed Louisiana governor’s election of 1872 is inaccurate (57-59). He confuses the street battles of 1866 and 1874 in the caption for a drawing depicting the former (62). He mistakenly attributes fraud in the presidential election of 1876 primarily to national Republicans, rather than to local Democrats in the disputed states of South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana (66). All of these points of detail are, however, exactly that: points of detail, rather than the broader narrative of a long history of racialized violence that DeSantis has very successfully brought back to life as a very unhappy and largely forgotten chapter in Louisiana’s checkered past.

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