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"WE CALLED IT 'THE BAND OF BROTHERS'"

Black Independent Militia Formation and the Johnson County Insurrection of 1875

Black Georgians in Burke, Jefferson, Johnson, Laurens, Richmond, Washington, and Wilkinson Counties resisted planters' and local officials' desires to re-create bondage-like labor on the public roads in 1875 by declaring that "it was not right to work the road under a white overseer—[because] that was played out since Civil Rights." Blacks took this position in the wake of the spring passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1875. Operating under the assumption that their claim to autonomy stood under the protective umbrella of federal power, African Americans endeavored to redefine who controlled their labor after the Civil War. Black rural Georgians pursued this idea by mapping out the boundaries of equality arguing, "If a white man came around for you to work the road you musn't do it. If a white man would not work with a colored overseer then he must work his end of the road & let the colored people work theirs."[1]

African Americans objected to what they thought was an unfair selection process in assigning citizens to perform legislated labor duties on county construction projects. The politicization of labor in Georgia dated back to the restoration of local governance following the end of the racially transformative Civil War. Ironically, Georgia's first Reconstruction government passed the *Code of Georgia* of 1866 with the sanction of President Andrew Johnson under Presidential Reconstruction, which allowed state power to control black labor. The Georgia Legislature created a local official armed with post–Civil War powers equivalent to those of a judge. This official's mandate was to restore order and authority at the politically significant county level of governance. The Georgia Legislature's aim,

according to Numan V. Bartley, was "to restore order to labor relations." This act of the General Assembly of 1865–1866 was one of many that Bartley describes as "the reestablishment of social services for whites while generally ignoring blacks." The legislatively created official, the Ordinary, was empowered by the Reconstructed Legislature to carry out an array of responsibilities that included calling grand juries for the purpose of investigating local issues and reviewing this official's work. The General Assembly additionally endowed the Ordinary with local authority to define, regulate, and control labor for public construction projects. Georgia legislators further conveyed to the Ordinary supervisory power over local governance, taxation, and planning. Operating in the realm of labor mobilization, this official would be charged with channeling, regulating, and distributing labor for the construction and maintenance of public roads: "The several managers and employers of male [persons of color] shall whenever required, furnish the overseers [Ordinary and Road Commissioners] of the road district with a list (in writing) of those [local citizens] who are liable to work on the public roads."[2]

Radical Congressional Reconstruction, which took place from 1867 through the early 1870s, introduced African American citizens to the political process in Georgia. Who dominated and controlled county government revolved around black people redefining their societal role from slave and second-class free person to full citizenship in the wake of the Civil War. African American access to public power challenged white definitions of which race possessed the right to rule. The resulting contest for power between blacks and whites occurred within such institutions as the county, the independent militia, and the appointment and election of officials between 1865 and 1875.

These Reconstruction and immediate post-Reconstruction years marked the climax of the independent militia company's presence in rural Georgia politics. The independent black militia companies in Georgia's central and eastern counties allegedly involved in what became known as the Johnson County Insurrection came into being at the moment of transition from Republican rule to the newly empowered Democratic Party's conservative triumph over Congressional Reconstruction in Georgia. Blacks in Burke, Jefferson, Johnson, Laurens, Richmond, Washington, and Wilkinson Counties during these years looked to the independent militia companies to protect them as they pursued land acquisition. They utilized the independent militia company to confront local white repression. How did the black men who organized the local independent militia

companies mobilize black people generally to implement the values of freedom, independent labor, and masculinity as they created a political and economic organization to secure black autonomy? Was their defense of black labor a tax revolt? Why was the independent militia company the institution blacks used to organize black people and politically and economically? The independent militia company was also a tool whites utilized to counter black political and economic action. In this context, the Johnson County Insurrection captures both races' vision of freedom, the militia being the central institution for turning that vision into reality.[3]

Black Militias in Georgia

Georgia's late nineteenth-century African Americans participated in the formation of two types of militia companies. Independent companies generally operated outside of Georgia's state government, with some seeking official state recognition as an acknowledgement of black citizenship within both the state and the nation. State and federal officials denied blacks such recognition and refused African American independent militiamen state-supplied weaponry, accoutrements, and funding, whether from state or federal sources. The independent company was more intimately involved with black self-defense and political initiatives and was an extension of the independent company that emerged during the antebellum era. Black men organized and joined antebellum independent militia companies to defend African descendant communities and individuals against slavery. Black independent militiamen continued defending African Americans and pursuing citizenship in the post–Civil War world of the United States South. The postwar African American independent militia company remained a political institution that would be utilized to defend black labor, rights, and property, especially the right to acquire land. The independent postwar militia also functioned as a political organizing institution for unifying the black community for political action and mobilization. It would further be part of the black effort to acquire economic and political autonomy. This would be the independent militia company's role in rural Georgia after the Civil War.

Federal and state funding were the principle sources for a second type of black militia-company: the state-sponsored unit. State authorities during the late nineteenth century officially recognized this African American urban-based company as a legitimate governmental agency. Official

state-recognized militia companies operated with the approval and regulation of state government, commanded by the adjutant general and governor, who allocated money, arms, and officer's commissions. These units not only served as an arm of state government but also represented the civic and community pride of the sponsoring urban communities. The African American men who marched in these units were central to the civic activities planned and organized by black residents. The companies existed to demonstrate the black community's public declarations of freedom, civic belonging, manhood, and state and national citizenship. In the case of both independent and state-sponsored militia companies, local citizens collectively created, founded, and organized these companies to serve the aims and desires of African Americans. Georgia's black independent companies operated in the late 1860s and early to mid-1870s, while state-sponsored units were active within Georgia from 1872 into the twentieth century.

Militias: "Contests for Power"

Independent and state-sponsored black militiamen engaged in "contests for power" with local whites, especially the planter class, over labor control and political autonomy across the South. These contests were especially evident in Georgia and Louisiana after the Civil War. Black independent militia companies in Georgia and Louisiana were "closely linked to electoral politics" and "functioned as a means of self-defense for African American voters." Rural Louisiana blacks, like Georgia's rural African Americans, mobilized to act collectively to form local militias "as on-the-ground counter weights" to whites' independent companies, paramilitary forces, and antiblack violence. Louisiana's rural so-called negro militia, however, had a closer official relationship to state government than did the independent black companies in Georgia, where such relations were distant and often nonexistent. The black Georgia independent companies during the late 1860s and into the 1870s appeared at times to be parallel institutions that may have cooperated with the politically focused Union and Loyalty Leagues associated with the Republican Party that educated the black populace about political power and attempted to counter white paramilitary groups organized by the Democratic Party and conservatives. At the same time black independent militias seemed to be autonomous operators that could work with Republican Party efforts to defend the black

community and its efforts to exercise political power. Some members of the black independent militia companies did petition Georgia's governors between the late 1860s and the mid-1870s for permission to become part of the official state militia forces. The governors denied their applications while approving some white applications. Yet the independent black militia unit also served a distinctly political function that would be different from Georgia's state-sponsored urban black militia companies, whose longevity and continuous service to blacks and Georgia's state government exceeded thirty years.[4]

Throughout those thirty-plus years, from 1872 to 1905, Georgia's governors and its adjutant generals commanding the militia did approve black requests to organize a state-sponsored urban militia company. Admission to what would, for most of the post–Civil War and post-Reconstruction eras, come to be known as the Georgia Volunteers required a petition of at least sixty locally based community men. These local men came together to form a militia company, hoping to join the State of Georgia's military upon the adjutant general's recommendation and the governor's approval. Black units that received official permission to organize elected officers and then received officer's commissions. They also obtained state-supplied firearms and accoutrements, along with the license to function as the state's formal military institution, making them members of the Georgia Volunteers. Yet racial separation required that the units operate solely within the Georgia Volunteers, Colored. These were the late nineteenth-century state-sponsored black militia companies in Georgia.[5]

Reconstruction: Black Self-Defense

It is within the context of the turmoil, transformations, and at times continuities of post–Civil War America that Georgia's African Americans came together to create independent and state-sponsored volunteer militia companies between the late 1860s and 1880. While the Civil War confirmed the personhood of the African Americans who lived and died to set the race free and earn U.S. citizenship, Reconstruction opened the door for a reconsideration of black people possessing a collective right to protection as an essential component of American freedom and citizenship. In Georgia specifically, Reconstruction was a bloody process, despite the presence of federal troops, the Freedmen's Bureau, Congressional Reconstruction, and an active black political presence in state politics. Yet, as

Howard Rabinowitz argues, crucial to our understanding of Reconstruction under Republican rule is its length.[6] In Georgia, Republican rule was very short owing to a weak and fractured Republican Party that was unable to implement Reconstruction with any degree of consistency, stability, or permanence. More importantly, however, integration and equality had been the goal of neither the Presidential nor the Radical Congressional Reconstruction. Republicans "constantly reminded Negroes that they [the Republican Party] were responsible for removing restrictions on black legal rights, instituting universal black male suffrage, organizing Negro militia units, inaugurating Negro public education, opening state and local welfare institutions to them, and pressing for their admittance to public conveyances and accommodations."[7]

White Republicans in Georgia took credit for many Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction initiatives, but black self-defense and militia-unit creation appear not to have been white Republican initiatives or priorities. In the mid- to late 1860s African American self-defense efforts invoked white Republican political opposition and provoked general white antiblack violence. Each white group—Republican, Democrat, and conservative—rebuked black economic, social, and political initiatives that included the restoration of family, self-employment, social and political equality, and an autonomy that would have allowed black Georgians to live without fear and white supervision. With African American freedom goals in conflict with southern white attempts to restore the antebellum South and with white Republican objectives focused on preventing black exclusion from a Reconstructed Georgia, violence against blacks loomed large.[8]

During the summer of 1865, Confederate veterans, fresh from their defeat by Union forces at the close of the Civil War, organized themselves to attack and terrorize freedmen seeking wages and exercising their newly acquired freedom. Southern whites, especially those outside the Unionist centers in the northern Georgia hill country and marshy Wiregrass region in South Georgia, came together out of fear that white and black Union Leaguers, and African Americans in general, would unite politically and militarily to overwhelm white post–Civil War aspirations. For rural freedmen, landownership was the key to black freedom, because it secured blacks a chance to develop self-sufficiency and autonomy. Freedmen, however, did not experience land as a resource willingly shared with them by ex-Confederates and planters as they created a New South built