I Wanted Someone to Carry me Away: Sexual Violence and Manhood in North Carolina 1868-1871

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“I Wanted Someone to Carry Me Away”: Sexual Violence and Manhood in North Carolina 1868-1871

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Introduction

Near midnight on January 29, 1870, five Klansmen, clad “as if a man was shrouded and laid out to be put away” in white gowns with red flannel over their mouths, attacked Alamance Republican and Loyal League member Donaldson Worth. As they dragged him out of his house wearing only his “shirt and drawers” he pled with them, “please gentlemen, do not hang me ..I am not fitted to die.” The Klansmen, however, refused the assignation. They were not “gentlemen,” they insisted, they were Klansmen. His attackers, Worth said, “gave me their law” and took the few weapons he had, explaining that “it was in their constitution” to do so.

The Klan both mirrored and disrupted the political rituals of the Republicans they terrorized. In particular, they used sexual violence to physically and psychologically brutalize Republican men, resulting in a weakening of political community. The Loyal League and the Klan, though radically different organizations, bound their members in the same way: through the performance of the verbal oath. For Klansmen, the oath was the supreme contract; obligation to it might oblige a member to perjure himself in court. The League oath bound members to each other, and, in contrast to the Klan oath, to a duty to the Union

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1 Worth lived in Cane Creek, on the border between Alamance and Chatham counties, but worked in Alamance County. Though there was some dispute about the relevance of his testimony to Holden’s trial, it was ultimately admitted, see North Carolina General Assembly and William
2 Ibid., 1205–1215.
and the constitution. For both groups, verbal pledges connected men politically and created a sense of duty toward the organization. The Loyal League first organized in the North by supporters of President Lincoln during the Civil War. The primary purpose of the organization was to establish support for Republican politicians. In the South the League took on a defensive character, with one North Carolina league charter stating that it was, “against atrocious attempts to put down free speech and substitute for reason the sharp arguments of force.” The League obviously differed from the Klan in privileging reason over force. The Klan did its best to disrupt fraternal political bonds precisely by appealing to them.

The Klan used sexualized violence as an efficient means of physical and psychological intimidation in order to politically and socially isolate Republican men. Klan members forced League members to “confess” themselves and promise to act as the Klan instructed. These acts weakened the power of the Leagues by diluting their bonds: in organizations that were created by verbal bonds, breaking those bonds, even in physical duress, was a meaningful trespass. Language had substantive power. The sexual violence the Klan wielded against Republican men was not necessarily penetrative and did not usually rise to the level of abject sexual horror of the attack on Nathan Trollinger, who was forced to “take out his penis and stab it with a knife.” The acts they did regularly engage in, stripping men of their clothes, shaving their beards, binding their bodies, and

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3 Gregory Allen, “The Union League Movement in North Carolina, 1865-1870” (Wake Forest University, 1994), 12.

ritually beating them -- were both physically intimidating and deeply humiliating. If coercion of the individual were the goal, physical violence without humiliation would easily have sufficed. But the Klan’s violence was politically inspired, and therefore violence was aimed not only at the victim, but the victim’s political association. Sexual degradation was not an accidental element of Klan violence but structural to it.

Between 1868 and 1870, in violent sexualized attacks on Republicans, Klan members performed their “constitution:” that is, they performed a narrative of dominance that, in turn, contracted Republicans’ worlds. Physical and psychological attacks on Republican men caused the larger Republican community to change their behavior: they spoke guardedly, slept apart from their wives in order to protect them, and kept faithful watchdogs. The Klan terrorized counties such as Alamance and Rutherford, where Unionist sentiment ran high during the war and Democrats had only a fragile hold on power. Rutherfordton, in the southwest corner of the state, was wedged between South Carolina and the less racially diverse, more heavily Unionist mountain counties. Alamance, in central North Carolina, also known as the Piedmont, combined high concentrations of Unionist voters with newly freed black men to form a powerful Republican stronghold. In both Alamance and Rutherford, the fragility of Democratic power resulted in a desperate bid for political control that the Klan

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escalated into ritual sexual violence. If Democrats could break the bi-racial Republican coalition represented by the Union leagues, then the Democratic party might gain power in the state as a whole. If it is relatively clear why the North Carolina Klan engaged in more intensive violence in Unionist areas of Alamance and Rutherford, it is less clear what was gained by the humiliating, often male-directed sexualized violence that typified their attacks. However, by examining the performative role of the oath within both the Klan and Union League, we can begin to understand how the Klan’s peculiar violence served to solidify their claims to sovereignty.

The Klan’s claims to sovereignty were aided by their similarity to those they sought to undermine. Both the Klan and the Union League initiated members through ritual: the contract was verbal. Despite their common fealty to oaths, the two organizations could not have differed more. League members could be assured their pledge would “not conflict with duties you owe to yourself.” Members swore to “defend the Constitution and Government of the United States of America… against all enemies foreign and domestic … vote only for, and none but those, who advocate and support the great principles set forth by this League … And further, that I will protect and defend all worthy members of the Union League of America.” Members swore allegiance to the organization by “placing their right hand on the Holy Bible, Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America.”

In contrast to the League’s defense of the Constitution and the union, the Klan’s stated purpose was destructive rebellion. As Klansmen informed one of their most prominent Alamance victims, school teacher Alonzo Corliss, if they could not become elected leaders, they intended to “rule” nonetheless. For the Klan, the power of oaths was such that a member might not only hold the Klan oath superior to his duty to provide accurate court testimony, but would barter his life on his fidelity to the oath, promising, “that was the law. We could not resist it.” The Klan, through its oaths and organization, created a form of vigilante “law” that derived its meaning from its contestation with positive law. James Boyd was a member of the White Brotherhood, an organization that “differed little” from the Klan in structure or ideology. The idea, Boyd said, “was almost any means that were necessary to secure the supremacy of the party opposed to the recent amendments to the Constitution; if it was necessary to whip a man to break down his influence against us, they would do it; if necessary to kill him, they would do that.” The rigid power of the Klan’s oaths was proven to Boyd when, after testifying, his law practice fell to shambles and he found himself an outcast.

The “shadow government,” as Paul Escott termed the Klan’s rule by political violence, never obtained any recognized, stable power. Sexualized violence, ritualized by oath, allowed the Klan to hover between banditry and

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organized rebellion. In addition, what made these rituals so powerful was that they mirrored and devalued the verbal oaths of the Union League.

Sexual violence accomplished political isolation of Republican men in three ways. First, it inverted the oath that men took: if bonds connected likeminded men, in situations of sexual violence they were radically separated from one another; if association helped men protect their families, sexual violence attempted to demonstrate that they could not protect themselves; if association provided men a private space to shape opinion and share strategy, sexual violence nearly always occurred in a public setting, and was rarely without a forced confession or interrogation. Sexual violence against men was the reverse process of oath-taking; where oaths were performative elaborations of political association, sexual violence performed, if it could not accomplish, the political death of its victim. Second, sexual violence, in the literal threat that it posed, limited power of Republican men to act. The Klan’s justification of their acts of violence created a standard of behavior, and an expectation of punishment for stepping outside of that standard. In order to avoid humiliation and pain, Republicans sharply contracted their worlds. Finally, pain itself resulted in isolation but the humiliation of sexual attack also set men apart from their peers. Fear of retaliation silenced many victims but speaking about physical pain proved challenging.¹² While pain’s ability to distort language had the power to isolate victims, the emotional incommunicability of male sexual humiliation made the experience nearly as wordless as pain. Sexual violence isolated by forcing the

victim to contend with bodily dishonor at the same time that he was confronted by a forced renunciation of political association.

These were the methods by which sexual violence functioned, but we must also question how successful the methods were. On the most basic level, these means accomplished their ends: the Republican party in North Carolina was brought to crisis. In North Carolina, the 1868 Constitutional Convention was brought about largely by Union League successes. It guaranteed manhood suffrage and provided for the election, rather than appointment, of judges. It was, as Paul Escott noted, “a political revolution” that threatened to destroy elite power in North Carolina.  

But it was not simply that men, regardless of class, were, in contrast to women, politically potent. Political activity defined male identity, particularly in places like Alamance and Rutherford, where political difference had the power to estrange neighbors and family members. Male political bonds defined community, making brothers strangers, and strangers brothers. After declaring a state of emergency and ordering militias into Klan-dominated Alamance, that “beehive of mischief,” Governor Holden succeeded in tamping down violence only to be impeached for his trouble. The Union League was, in

13 Escott, Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900, 139–145. See also Bernstein, The Participation of Negro Delegates in the Constitutional Convention in North Carolina of 1868. James Harris, a delegate to the convention, spoke to that body on the subject of eligibility for political office: “It has been the custom for thirty years for men to arrogate to themselves the right to control the destiny of the State. They ignored poor whites and Negroes. Let us bury such old and tyrannical ideas and form a constitution that will shelter the people…of North Carolina.” (397)


15 North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, Holden Trial, 1210.

16 Holden’s trial took place from December 23, 1870, to March 22, 1871. Holden was charged with eight articles of impeachment, the first two being general charges and the other six elaborating the first. He was charged with using a militia to put down an imaginary insurrection.
Henry Holt’s words, thoroughly “broke up” by 1870 as Klan outrages swept through North Carolina, leaving Republicans of the state numerically superior but politically impotent. At the same time, the Klan was organizationally weakened in North Carolina by an 1871 Senate investigation, which produced a body of testimony known as the “outrage” report, and by federal prosecutions that occurred around the same time. But there were few strict penalties and a high number of pardons. In 1876, the Supreme Court severely limited the protection afforded by recently adopted congressional legislation, ruling that the federal government could only enforce of civil rights abridged by states, not individuals. In the short term, the Klan’s strategy had been effective. In the long term, however, the Klan had broadcast their deepest fears, and then realized them. The “personal” violence that the Klan employed to assert their claims to sovereignty were under the authority of state and local government, and would have remained such, had the Klan not so thoroughly infiltrated state and local bodies. The growth of the Klan called for the expansion of federal authority, seen symptomatically in a massive congressional investigation in 1871.

The Klan might have referred to itself as a “brotherhood,” but this formulation was not particular to them: ‘brotherhood’ and political activity were

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He was acquitted on the first two charges, by virtue of a Republican majority in the State Senate, but found guilty on specific charges, as members of his own party believed he had technically exceeded his authority. Information brought by Holden’s defense is the broadest source of information about the Alamance Klan. (Trelease, 224)

17 North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, Holden Trial, 1198.
18 Ibid., 383.
19 The full name of the congressional committee was “Joint Select Committee to Inquire Into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States”
linked concepts. Stripped of the privileges of association, men were less men than, as one witness described a Klan victim, “flesh.”
The Klan employed sexualized violence against men to strip them of their political power, to render their world insular and ineffective. Sexual violence rode the line between political and personal violence, an ambiguity that would come to be exploited by congressional Democrats, and soundly rejected by Republicans.

In their attacks on Republicans, Klan members ritually punished victims physically, but this was usually accompanied by psychological intimidation. Sexual violence against Republicans was certainly coercion, but it was more complicated than that. Physical coercion, employed against an equally ideologically determined opposition, might have only strengthened resolve. Persuasion could offer little; in areas such as Alamance and Rutherford, Republicans, without the added ingredient of Klan terrorism, would have remained the politically dominant power. Sexualized violence took physical coercion and moved it into the realm of performance; it created a fictionalized consensus. The elaborate rituals, in both speech and physical act, that Klan members carried out were motivated by a desire to eliminate functional political independence in their victims while maintaining the veneer of consent such that they might “swear” allegiance to the Klan’s own goals. Non-sexualized force did not permit this range of psychological coercion. The Klan humiliated, confused,

and inflicted pain on their victims with the aim of making their victim less “man,” a political agent and actor, and more “flesh,” a subject whose agency was bounded by the scope of his body and his pain. Further, sexual violence mimicked the oath-taking process. Oaths, because they were given verbally in the presence of others, had a physical immediacy that other contracts lacked. The performativity of oaths gave them their power: men promised, in the witness of men they trusted, to act according to the boundaries of the oath. The performativity of sexualized violence mimicked the process it intended to destabilize: it forced men to suborn their oaths, confessing themselves bound to the opposition. Sexual violence, and the psychological coercion that accompanied it, aimed to isolate Republican men and weaken their political bonds.

No subjugation can ever be total, and that was hardly the case in Alamance. Wyatt Outlaw, a bi-racial political leader and president of the Union League, advised Loyal League members to remain “quiet and industrious” and “depend for their protection upon the law and not retaliate.” That Outlaw discouraged violent retaliation does not mean that he did not advocate resistance. By simply remaining “quiet and industrious”; working for their own interests rather than white Democrats’, league members were fundamentally challenging the Klan’s narrative. By their actions, members demonstrated that they valued their oaths, and hence their political association, as much as they valued their own lives.

Less than a month after Klansmen “gave their law” to Donaldson Worth they hung Wyatt Outlaw from a tree in front of the courthouse in Graham, the

county seat of Alamance, prompting Governor Holden to declare the county in a state of insurrection. Outlaw’s murder did not prove that his faith in the law was ill-placed. Rather, it proved the strength of his conviction. Outlaw’s advice was consistent with the Union League oath, which castigated secessionists but condoned only legal responses to violence. Klan members might give “law,” but league members had determined to depend on each other and vindicate federal law.\(^{23}\) In the face of Klan violence, Loyal League members evinced a determined fatalism that was toxic to the Klan’s sexualized torture.

**Historiography**

Despite the political importance of the male victim to the North Carolina Klan, recent historiography has focused primarily on the Klan’s sexual attack on women. In the context of a historiographical debate over the “public” or “private” space of sexual violence in Reconstruction, it has been important that sexual violence against women be made visible and its political impact understood. However, there is a danger that we too frequently associate violence that is “sexual” with victims that are female. Doing so implies a gendered political power that is static, not flexible. By threading the needle between “politics” and “sexual violence” we have been able to consider sexual violence as a political trope, one that can alternately make a hero or villain of the victim.\(^{24}\) We miss, however, a politics of sexual violence that takes direct aim at political association,

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\(^{23}\) Ibid., 1270.

not character. We miss it because we are looking for female victims. However, the large majority of the Klan’s victims were male, and many of them were victims of sexualized violence that targeted their political bonds. The broad intent of the Klan’s use of sexual violence was to shift political power in the region; to destroy Republican bi-racial coalition centered in the Union League.

The literature that addresses political violence most directly is most oblique on the subject of sexual violence. For Allen Trelease, the first to write an authoritative, scholarly study of the Klan, there was no question but that the Klan’s violence was an outgrowth Democratic politics. The title of his work, White Terror sets the tone: the Klan “conspiracy” was a violent conservative reaction historically aligned with French counterrevolutionary terror. Trelease rejects the traditional position that glamorized Klan violence as “self-defense” while simultaneously tracing one of the traditionalists well-worn arguments: that the organization “lost control” because of its “rank-and-file.” Trelease’s ambivalence ultimately subordinates class concerns to high politics. Trelease demonstrates conclusively that Klan violence was a Democratic reaction; their victims largely Republicans. Importantly, however, Trelease’s ambivalent position on the class status of Klan leadership leads him to find some attacks less

25 The Select Committee of the Senate, “Outrage Report,” xix–xx, xxi. breaks out violence by county, showing 51 whippings from 1868-1870 in Alamance and 4 murders. Of these attacks, 48 victims were male. In Rutherford County, the Outrage report reflects no deaths, and 4 whippings, three of which were of male victims. This, as is demonstrated by witness testimony, is inaccurate. Aaron Biggerstaff and his family, among others, are not included in this total. J.B. Eaves estimated the total at near “30 or 40” (“Klan Report,” 166)

26 Trelease, White Terror.

27 Paul Escott, in his excellent study Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina 1850-1900 would later reverse this view.
“political” than others. If “excesses” were renounced by the Klan’s “leaders,” then any analysis of sexual violence must necessarily conclude that sexual violence was external, not structural, to Klan “conspiracy.”

Bringing intimate violations of the body into the realm of politics, making the “personal” “political” was the work of Hannah Rosen’s Terror in the Heart of Freedom. 28 Rosen adapted Stephanie McCurry’s portrayal of the household as the central location of mastery, inseparable from “high” politics to the study of sexual violence. 29 Rosen argues that sexual victimization of women constituted an attack on patriarchal Republicanism; it brought about the destruction of the home and hence of citizenship. If the ideological heart of Republican citizenship was dependent on the capacity to provide and protect then sexual violence against female dependents struck a blow to male Republicans. Rosen sees the Klan’s ritualized performances as an enforcement of racial and gender based hierarchy. She is entirely correct, but her focus on the female victim of sexual violence blocks from her view the centrality of the male victim of sexual assault. Her triangular model: male attacker, violation of the female body, resulting in male political debility, does not account for the Klan’s frequent deployment of sexual humiliation as a weapon across gender lines.

29 Stephanie McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (Oxford University Press, USA, 1997). McCurry’s influential work, Masters of Small Worlds, allows her reader a view “inside the house” of the yeoman. McCurry finds that yeoman “independence” was dependent on female labor; political economy within the household drove political culture without. She argues that the household was the central location of mastery, inseparable from “high” politics. Southern hierarchies, defined by the power the householder, were defined less by class than by color and, most importantly, male status. McCurry concludes that white yeoman householders felt more tightly bound by their duties to manhood than to class.
Scott Nelson, in his treatment of Klan violence in Alamance, does place his emphasis on the male victims of Klan violence. He, along with other historians such as Paul Escott, argues that violence took place amid an economic shift. Nelson positions Klan violence, including sexual violence, as a reactive struggle to eliminate the emerging economic and political power that the Republican Loyal League presented to elite Democrats. For Nelson, sexual violence is a weapon, and its use reveals deep economic antipathies in Alamance. Speaking of the power of violence to break political bonds, Nelson writes, “The public renunciation of principles has always been an important part of violent torture. It gives torturers an excuse for committing violence, but it also dishonors the persons attacked.” It is valuable to ground Klan violence within a larger framework of torture, but to speak about torture is to speak about a strategy in which language, the body, and politics are intimately related. Renunciation of political principles, I would propose, would not serve merely to “excuse” acts of violence; rather, sexually humiliating acts of violence enacted the Klan’s opposition to the Union League by forcing men to renounce the oaths that bound them. Violence and oath taking were performative and contractual. Sexualized

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30 Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1999). See Chapter 5, “Alamance: A Trenchant Blade” I owe a debt to Nelson’s work, and am hesitant to find fault. There are, however, small details in his analysis of sexual violence in Alamance that are of, perhaps minor, concern. For instance, he writes, “Nathan Trollinger was made to cut gashes into his penis with a knife, for the crime of telling a white woman to keep her pigs out of his corn.” (Nelson, 112). Trollinger was attacked in the manner described, but the Klan’s justification given above belongs to Klan victim Sandy Sellars. Trollinger was, more prosaically, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Further, Nelson writes that Caswell Holt was “castrated for exposing himself to a white woman.” I could find no evidence of Holt’s castration in the source Nelson cites. (See Holden, Third Annual Message, 157, 179, 198-200 and Testimony of Sandy Sellars, 201-206 and Escott, 155)
violence and psychological manipulation destroyed the bonds of one organization while strengthening the other.

**Sexual Violence as a Political Weapon**

The hallmarks of Klan violence, though not the Klan, were present in the Piedmont by 1865. The Union League had been present in the Piedmont since 1865, pre-dating the appearance of the Klan by three years. With the presence of Republican political association came, predictably, Democratic opposition. The absence of the Klan did not mean an absence of political violence. Violence had beset the state after the Civil War, including the vigilante violence for which the Klan had become known. By the time the Klan first organized in Alamance County in 1868, there had been three intervening years for Democrats to posit the need for an organization that responded to the League, and resembled their most negative images of it. Violence against the Leagues was not new. However, the scattered vigilante violence of the post-War era, now organized and ritualized, produced a much different, and far more toxic, conservative violence post-1868, when the Klan first organized in North Carolina. The Klan was most active, and most violent, in areas such as Alamance and Rutherford where Union League presence was strong and Democrats had only a fragile hold on power. It was Republican bonds that their violence aimed to break. In Alamance, after Ulysses

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31 For early Union League organization in Spartanburg, S.C., see Ibid., 122.
33 Select Committee of the Senate, “Outrage Report,” 147.
S. Grant gained a 47-vote majority in 1868, a terror so complete followed that
many men either took to the woods for months at a time or left the county
altogether. In Rutherford, as in Alamance, the Klan broke apart a bi-racial
political alliance.\textsuperscript{35}

In late December of 1865, James Dean, Orpheus McAdoo, and Alex Beane
were talking by the tracks of the North Carolina Railroad when Stan Hope
approached, cursing the League, calling them “rogues and rascals” and alleging
corruption on the part of the League’s officers.\textsuperscript{36} Despite the polite deferrals he
was offered, Hope became violent, attempting to beat, shoot, and stab Dean.
Multiple interventions from community and law enforcement did little to deter
him. Stan Hope’s final threatening salvo to Dean and McAdoo warned, “take care
of your damned heads, or I will blow you damned heads off.” Dean told
Freedman’s Bureau Assistant Superintendent Asa Teal that he “paid him no mind,
but come on to town.” Dean’s association, both with the League and by simply
“talking” with a group of friends outside of town, threatened Stan Hope’s sense
that the only legitimate political association was one that included him. Any other
was composed of “rogues and rascals.” Stan Hope was dangerously vitriolic, yet
he was largely alone.

That men like Stan Hope did not yet have a politically organized outlet for
their outraged sense of victimhood did not mean, of course, that Klan-like raids
on African American homes did not take place. That same fall, Mr. Balanger

\textsuperscript{35} Escott, \textit{Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900}, 156.
\textsuperscript{36} “Record of Complaints, Graham, 1865-1878.”
came to James Stuart’ door demanding “government property.”37 Finding an “old gun” Balanger left, carrying Stuart’s crippled father on the back of a mule. Stuart testified that “he heard some one hollow and could hear the licks.” Balanger himself swore that the elder Stuart had been bound hand foot and whipped an unknown number of times by multiple parties. This attack on the elder Stuart took place in 1865, but it bore the hallmarks of later sexual violence against men: Balanger and the “crowd” selected a victim who was physically helpless and, through their violence, highlighted his dependence. Balanger and the “crowd” purportedly sought government property, but it was not property, but the political association that linked Stuart to federal protection they meant to weaken. In 1868, as the Klan was organizing in Alamance, Caswell Holt, a black Republican and victim of Klan attack was present when Josiah Turner made an infamous speech advocating economic repression of black Republicans. Holt saw a direct link between Turner’s speech and attack on his life. Holt reported hearing Turner say, “They talk about the Ku-Klux; the niggers have secret leagues, and why not we have secret Ku-Klux?”38 The mythology of a dangerous and secret Union League drove members to the Klan, but what made them powerful was the lure, and the threat, their organization held as a destructive twin brotherhood.

By 1868, the “crowd” that attacked Balanger had become the Klan. Joseph Harvey, a member of the Union League in Alamance, was well aware of the Klan’s violent power to define community. He testified to Governor Holden’s

37 Ibid.
impeachment committee that he “didn’t pester [white Democrats] more than I could possibly help.” White Democrats and blacks, Harvey said, “didn’t care about each other.” White neighbors gave “promises to pay” in return for Harvey’s work as a sharecropper, but would never lend anything without payment. The Klan had attacked his home on the pretense, commonly given, of “striking a white man and saucing a white woman.” 39 Klan members tortured Harvey, following a script that cut at League member’s oaths and strengthened their own.

Harvey was “carried” a mile from his home, dressed only in his nightshirt and whipped on his bare back. Klansmen partially hanged Harvey several times in an effort to “make [him] tell it” until he lost consciousness. Coming back to himself, Harvey felt his attackers’ “hands on my breast, feeling of me.” As it became clear he was not dead, Klansmen accused him of “playing possum” and severely punished him for his “game” of false death. Alamance Klansmen varied their torture, but remained relatively consistent with the script they used in overwhelming league members: a “confession” process that simultaneously demanded and refused subjectivity, sexualized beating and humiliation, and an insistence on the Klan’s control up to and beyond the point of death.

The Klan projected an idea of corrupt impurity onto the body of the victim himself: the body was a map for marking political difference, and intense psychological drama often accompanied sexualized physical attack. 40 The attack on cobbler William Long best exemplifies this process. Long described his

39 Joseph Harvey testimony, North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, Holden Trial, 1427–1441. In addition, Harvey testified that the Klan struck his five-month old child across the face with a club, resulting in the child’s death.

attackers as laughing, “as though they were telling a little story” though to Long, the entire process “felt like a dream.” The trauma of Long’s experience was due as much to his physical abuse as it was to being made a passive character in the performance of the Klan’s political narrative. These “stories” narrated the power of the Klan’s political association and, as Long demonstrated, violently weakened the ties of Republican political association through trauma.

The attack on Alonzo Corliss, a white Republican schoolteacher and Union League member, a “very intelligent man of extensive reading” demonstrated the Klan’s effective union of sexualized violence and psychological manipulation.\(^{42}\) Corliss, like the elder Mr. Balanger, was a physically weakened man. Due to a “callous joint” he walked with the aid of crutches. On November 26, 1869, the Klan stripped, whipped and humiliated Corliss, telling him that they “meant to make him understand that they meant to rule this country.”\(^{43}\) From the beginning of the attack, Klan members established their purpose: the control and humiliation of Corliss’ body was intended to serve as a performance of the Klan’s broader sovereignty. His disability was a unique marker, symbolic of Corliss’s political distance from the Klan: his Union League membership, his position as a teacher of black scholars, his Northern geographical identity, and his role as an informal economic advisor to black men.

Corliss was dragged from his home for a mile and a half into the woods. Before reaching the woods, Corliss’ attackers “straightened” his “callous” leg,


\(^{42}\) Ibid., 1781.

\(^{43}\) Select Committee of the Senate, “Outrage Report.”
causing him to cry in pain. By pulling Corliss’ leg “straight” they sought to remove from his body a politics that refused to equate success with whiteness.  

Corliss screamed when his attackers pulled his leg “straight.” His screams brought a reiteration of the threat Hope had hurled at Dean: they would “blow his brains out.” Corliss, had pain not kept him from thinking the matter over clearly, was left with two options: to renounce his political choices, or be made incapable of choice.

Corliss may have been a Northerner, but his position as teacher made him integral to Republican political community in Alamance and an attractive target to the Klan. In 1866, he moved to Edenton, North Carolina from New Jersey. From there, he relocated to Mebanesville to teach at a freedman’s school supported, in part, by Philadelphia Quakers. He had been a member of the Union League in New Jersey and Virginia, and became president of his local Union League at Mebanesville. He had advocated among “leading men” for the creation of a free school system in the county for both white and black pupils. In 1868, a politically charged case between David Mebane, chief of a Klan “camp” in Alamance County and Stephen McAdams, a black sharecropper, originating from the Freedman’s Bureau, was “referred to A.B. Corless, a schoolteacher, for reference

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44 See Mark Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, regarding the importance Freemason ritual placed on the integrity of the body.
46 Corliss stated that he had not been a member of the Union League at Company Shops, but had been a member up to the current year, and President while in Mebanesville. See Outrage Report, 146
to a magistrate.”

Corliss advised men who came to him for advice not to advance money for land they had not been given title to. He advised “colored men...not to pay part and have a promise” because doing so meant risking the little capital they had.

Corliss’ whipping was a sexualized act, but it was not only the fact of stripping him “nearly naked” that made it so. Corliss was stripped of his clothes and whipped until he lost consciousness, thus becoming, quite literally, not man but flesh. When he regained his senses, his face and beard were being shaved, and half of his face had been blackened. The sexual symbolism inherent in shaving a man’s beard was made clear when Klan members repeated the act on John Overman. Overman, who was a white Republican living on the Alamance/Chatham county line, was accused by the Klan of “pitching,” or flirting, with women not his wife.

As with the case of Alphonso Gerringer, a League member who was forced to pray for the well-being of his attackers, or Donaldson Worth who addressed the armed men who had forced him to his knees as “gentlemen,” Alonzo Corliss was induced to mimic a convivial, intimate bond with men who were his political enemy. Like Gerringer, he called them “friends,” though they were obviously not. This forced intimacy not only betrayed Corliss’s body; it compelled Corliss

50 Select Committee of the Senate, “Outrage Report,” 145.
51 Ibid.
52 North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, Holden Trial, 1485.
53 Ibid., 1468, 1214.
to abjure his oath to “be true to the American Union and support it in all cases whatsoever.” The Loyal League oath to be “frown down the spirit of secession” was, after his attack, incompatible with the promise he was compelled to make to “leave town within ten days.” Violence had forced Corliss to name men who would banish him as his “friends,” thus forming a superficial, but damning association. For the Klan, however, banishing Corliss was as important as “befriending” him.

“Befriending” Corliss while beating and banishing him psychologically manipulated reliable political categories of “belonging” and “rejection.” In so doing, Klan members scrambled the meaning of the Loyal League oath and disrupted political loyalty. Corliss, according Alamance Democrats who testified before the Senate “Outrage” committee in 1871, was an “interference.” By interrupting conversations he “rendered himself objectionable by going up and joining in conversation.” Interruption, of course, is a subjective matter, dependent on group identity. In the opinion of Democrats, Corliss did not belong; before this manifested in banishment, it was present in social rejection.

In their attempt to force Corliss to comply with the racial identity the Klan had, by virtue of their symbolic face blackening, assigned him, Klan members took the political manipulation of identity to a bizarre, and effective, new level. One of Corliss’ attackers carried him, and reassured him, “I am a negro myself,

55 Ibid., 305.
and that is the reason I like you so well. I will not see you harmed.”  

This attempt at identification was apparently not unique. Mr. Allred, another victim from Alamance County, overheard a Klan member say to his wife, “he liked a woman who would tell the truth, for he was woman himself.” During this same conversation, the recitation of which shocked the examining attorney into incredulity, the Klansman insisted to Mrs. Allred that Alamance Creek was “in New York, where I am from.” Alamance Creek is an eleven-mile long tributary of the Haw River that flows from Guilford County through Alamance. Just as Corliss’ attackers attempted to assign him a racial identity through sheer force, Allred’s attackers attempted to enforce, through a logic that assumed a subject could only be the mirror of its object, the couple’s geographical identity. In this attempt to disorient and control the most basic elements of self, the Klan created a tool that was an effective mirror image of sexual violence. Sexual violence and humiliation cut to the core of the subject’s being: effectively being in and creating their world.  

That this violence had a lasting effect seems to be evident in Corliss’ testimony. Corliss testified to the Klan’s assignment of racial identity only in response to a question regarding vigilante acts committed by black men. He seemed to have forgotten, at least for the moment, that both he and his attacker were, in reality, white men.

56 Ibid., 119.
58 Elaine Parsons, in “Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction Era Ku Klux Klan” finds that this “twinning” logic was an outgrowth of vaudeville culture. See Journal of American History 92, no. 3 (Dec. 2005): 811-836
Social Isolation of Republican Men

Sexual violence and intimidation destroyed a victim’s sense of subjectivity, and hence the ability to partake in political action. The Klan’s attacks did not need to thoroughly psychologically disorient, or even fully isolate their victims in order to achieve this. A different, indirect kind of sexual attack on victims could serve as a “school” to demonstrate that Republicans, though they held popular support in Alamance, were “triflin’ people” “of no account” not entitled to a full range of worldly experience. This type of attack, though it did not as literally force its subjects to break political bonds, tore at the fabric of male, and therefore political, identity.

Involvement in party politics was central in defining, though certainly not solely responsible for, male identity. When Klan members dragged Andrew Shoffner out of his bed, they told him that they would “show him how to be a man.” They pulled down his pants in front of his wife, and beat his bare skin. Shoffner’s assailants, he testified, were “boys” he knew well because they had been “raised near him.” One aim of the Klan’s sexual violence was to limit the range of expression available to Republican men. This meant that the “boys” Shoffner had long known arrogated to themselves the right to male authority, and the right to deny that to Shoffner. That Shoffner chose to call these men “boys,” who probably thought of Shoffner as a “boy,” despite his status as their elder, speaks to the interrelation of politics and gender in Alamance. As Klan

sympathizer William McVey said in referring to the Klan’s “visit” to his home, “they used me like a man…treated me like a gentleman.”\textsuperscript{61} Association and manhood were linked; dissociation and emasculation equally so. In speaking of his attackers as “boys,” Shoffner acted on his Loyal League oath. Shoffner, like Alonzo Corliss, would have taken an oath to “frown down” Democratic politics: by calling his attackers “boys” he “frowned down” the “spirit of secession” in the most cutting way possible. He denied the manhood of his attackers in a public forum, repeating the act that they had performed.

Klan members’ attempts to limit Republicans’ power was not restricted to high politics. Many attacks also purported to punish sexual and moral affronts. The line between personal humiliation and political violence in these attacks was blurred, but that blurring served an important function. By justifying violence against sexual “crimes” Klan members effectively tightened the limits of Republican male authority. The Klan attacked male privilege as a way of attacking political right; they defined for Republicans whom they should marry, how they should discipline those they did marry, and the boundaries of their sexuality outside of marriage. In short, the Klan’s “moral” justifications for violence on Republicans wove a counter-narrative to the independent Republican male head of household and established a kind of sexual violence that existed not in what was done, but what was forbidden.

John Overman had purportedly been attacked for “pitching” a woman not his wife. Such sexualized charges were made, as Corliss explained, “when the

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 1520.
person was not guilty” of a provable offense. Sexualized charges covered or “screened” the Klan’s primarily political motivations for attack.62 The superficiality of these justifications did not diminish their power to serve as vicious form of sexual control in their own right. “Screen” was a word frequently used by congressional “outrage” committee chairman John Scott to describe the manner in which Klansmen shielded information with false information. The image was apt, as it called to mind a division, a border. Klansmen’s justification of violence as “personal” interpreted the attack as corrective of moral fault. These justifications allowed those “internal” to shun those “external” on moral grounds, but the logic of the division was political. The inner workings of the violence revealed that moral fault was rarely found in Democrats, and that the moral justification itself served a political purpose. That this “personal” attack was deeply political was demonstrated by Overman’s attempted retaliation. At Governor Holden’s impeachment hearing, Overman was goaded by Mr. Augustus Merrimon, a Democrat, to renounce his extramarital activity. This he steadfastly refused to do, saying he thought “[the Klan] probably think like she [Overman’s wife] does.”63 The Klan had attempted to define the boundaries of Overman’s sexual agency. Overman, in turn, defined the Klan’s imagined moral authority as womanly. Overman was certainly not the sole victim of this kind of attack. James Cole was whipped and threatened by men he said “looked like little boys.” The attack was justified by Cole’s habit of “keeping” Martha Parish.64 An attack on

63 North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, Holden Trial, 1486.
64 Ibid., 1491.
Alfred White, a married freeborn black miller, was justified because White was purportedly “guilty of white women.” As White pointed out, Klansmen’s objection was likely founded in his social position: “all kinds and colors came to the mill, women and men.” White facilitated, through his mill, a public association that the Klan found threatening. Similarly, an attack on Sandy Sellars was outwardly justified by the sexual threat of Sellars “wanting to do with” Margaret Hardin but more substantively motivated by Sellars’ request, on behalf of his employer, that Hardin should “keep her hogs off his wheat.” Outward or “screen” justifications of violence mimicked the Klan’s own sexualized humiliation of the victim and were thus political though they superficially functioned as a moral corrective, the “real” justifications aimed directly at association.

The operational purpose of political association was that heads of household might collaboratively provide protection and support for their families. Therefore, to undermine the “head of household” status of members was to weaken political power. John Guy, a self-described member of “the radical party,” testified that the Klan’s attacks on his family had ended his marriage. “They parted her and me,” he said. The Klan had whipped Guy, stripping him of his clothing and leaving him tied to a tree, justifying the act by the fact of Guy’s marriage to Martha Dill, a white woman. For Nathaniel Boyden, a Republican and

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65 Ibid., 1488.
66 Holden, Third Annual Message of W. W. Holden, Governor of North Carolina, 203. Sellars’ name is spelled as “Sellers” and “Sellars” in both Holden’s Third Annual Message and the “Outrage” report. I have chosen to use “Sellars.”
67 McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds.
68 North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, Holden Trial, 1694.
defense counsel to Governor William Woods Holden, this set of facts was baffling. Guy was “beyond the limit.” It was “very apparent that he is a white man.” William Graham, once North Carolina’s governor and representing the prosecution, helpfully explained that the Guy family, “have always been regarded as colored people” in Alamance. In the same way that the idea of “interruption” was defined by political identity, Guy, like Corliss, was sheltered, and rejected, by drastically differing political associations.

In attacking Guy for his bi-racial marriage, the Klan assigned Guy, as they had assigned Corliss, a racial identity. In doing so, Klansmen attempted to assume for themselves the power to define race. It may have been patently clear to Nathaniel Boyden that Guy was “white.” To the Klansmen who bore him a political grudge, it was not. Based upon this imposed identity, they “parted” Guy from Dill and placed him beyond the benefit of white male status. To undermine Guy’s choice in marital partner challenged his status as a head of household, his sexual authority, and his power to act independently. Guy’s attackers invoked the same masculine authority that Shoffner’s attackers had when they claimed that they would “show him how to be a man.”

Like Guy and Shoffner, William Ward was the victim of a particularly ferocious attack that targeted his masculine authority. The attack on Ward, which left bruises such that he “could [not] have put my three fingers down on a place but what was bruised black” was justified by the allegation that Ward had beaten

69 Ibid., 1695.
his wife.\textsuperscript{70} Ward testified at Governor Holden’s impeachment trial that he suspected his own sons had put the Klan up to the attack. Like the “boys” of the Shoffner attack, Ward’s sons, if they were in fact culpable, were claimants to manly power. By attacking Ward for wife-abuse, they denied him head of household status. It was not violence against women per se the Klan scorned, but rather the exercise of that disciplinary power by Republicans. By limiting the scope of Republican masculine authority: whom he might marry, and his authority within that marriage the Klan performed another, more subtle form of sexual violence that was equally powerful in the breakup of the Union League.

Woven throughout the strategy of sexualized violence was a diminishment of agency. As we saw, the Klan’s violence caused a contraction of personal power for Ward, White and Shoffner. When the Klan justified their violence, they often did so by identifying victims as moral outliers. This served as a yet another form of sexual attack. As victims described their attacks in court, reliving their trauma, there was a third stage of sexual and political victimization. Victims were held up as injured persons, yet denigrated for their victimhood. Humor in court was a dividing line: the difference manifest in the cliché “laughing with, not laughing at.”

When Klan victim John Overman testified at Holden’s impeachment trial, he was shamed as a philanderer. When he rejected this characterization, insisting on his right to act as “ever one else does” he was met with the court’s laughter. At the end of his short interrogation, he was asked, “do you think you deserved

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 1876.
everything you got?” He replied, “Yes, sir.”71 This operation was repeated.

Lankford’s interrogation became confrontational when Mr. Merrimon accused Lankford of maltreating his wife. His outrage was rendered impotent as the court laughed when Lankford leveled an otherwise deadly serious accusation at his interrogator: “maybe you was one of them [Klan members].”72 Conversely, Alphonso Gerringer, also testifying at Governor Holden’s impeachment trial, cleverly used humor to his advantage. Mimicking and undermining the Klan’s strategy, Gerringer made a self-deprecating performance of his testimony, much to the irritation of Chief Justice Richmond Pearson, who reprimanded, “don’t try to be funny.” Gerringer had the court in hysterics when he related how he had first prayed for his life at the Klan’s demand, and then, following the same orders, “told my legs to save my body if they could.”73 Gerringer’s strategy allowed him to distance himself from his trauma, but it also allowed the court to cordon Gerringer off as one of the “triflin’ people.” The testimony of Mary Gappins, whom the Klan accused of operating an “immoral house,” was so pockmarked by giggles that she reprimanded observers, “you may laugh if you want to but I have come here to speak the truth and I will if I am killed the next minute for it.”74 Laughter, as Gappins correctly observed, was a corrective; it marked and covered social fissures. Humor could draw a line: as victims told their harrowing stories, humor distracted, disrupted, and marginalized. Humor claimed that victims were

71 Ibid., 1487.
72 Lankford testimony, Ibid., 1510–1513.
73 Ibid., 1468.
74 Ibid., 1400.
not equal to the laughers. Gappins and Lankford pushed back against that line; Gerringer deftly used it in an attempt to secure a place within.

Pain, emotional and physical, also created borders, but these lines were more sharply drawn, harder to negotiate. When Lankford was asked to describe whether and how he was injured in his attack he became frustrated, replying that he had been whipped on his “naked skin” and that they might “judge for themselves.” The inquiry pressed on but Lankford insisted, “I cannot tell you anymore. You know how whipping hurts, I reckon.” In a similar exchange, William Long told the court he had been “bucked” and, by way of avoiding an explanation, said, “you all know what that means, I suppose.” Victims resorted to assuming a shared knowledge on the part of their audience, finding themselves unable to communicate what they had experienced. The wordlessness Lankford exhibited is a demonstration of the power of the Klan’s violence to break Republican bonds. Lankford could not communicate his experience; in order to continue testimony he had to imagine a sympathetic audience. Lankford, like others, felt a need to fabricate a sympathetic audience because pain left him, and language, bereft of the power to associate. Lankford’s imagined audience did not mesh with the one he faced: refusing to “know” Lankford’s pain, Judge J.M. McCorkle asked him to “state whether painful?” Frustrated and ultimately alone, Lankford replied, “Of course it was.”

Political belief and bonds of loyalty united individual men into a

75 Ibid., 1511.
76 Ibid., 1350.
community, but the isolation of sexual violence fractured that community.

Physical pain isolated, but the wordlessness and humiliation of sexual violence could do so equally effectively. Even in criminal proceedings, there was marked social discomfort with the topic of sexual violence against men. Governor Holden’s impeachment commission refused to hear evidence on the subject. John Long, affiliated with the Klan, offered details to the commission about a sexual act forced upon another member, Mr. Boone. His testimony was cut off sharply by Mr. Graham, who insisted, “You need not name it.”

Peter Mebane, a black man who was stripped “stark naked” and whipped in a public road was asked to repeat his testimony six times before it was fully accepted, thus not only demonstrating deep discomfort, but creating a double humiliation for Mebane. In his “Third Annual Message” Holden invoked a litany of outrages, among them that “others, of both sexes, were subjected to indignities not merely to civilization, but to humanity itself” though leaving to the imagination what such terrorism might entail. The key to the political effectiveness of sexual violence lay in language: community was impossible to build without communication.

The Union League and Resistance

The Union League and its supporting community had multiple strategies for contesting the Klan’s violence. At the center of this community was Wyatt Outlaw, a bi-racial county commissioner and leader “of the colored people.”

Outlaw was a carriage-maker, who, as was not uncommon, also ran a bar out of one of the rooms in his store. Like Alfred White’s mill, the bar brought white and black citizens together, and invited controversy. Though the county courts tried to close the bar, Outlaw refused.\textsuperscript{80} It was Outlaw’s leadership as President of the League that anchored the League in Alamance. Under Outlaw’s direction, the League devoted its capital to build “a schoolhouse and … a church.” Following Outlaw’s advice to be “quiet and industrious” and trust in the law rather than violence, members would demonstrate the importance of the bonds that would have them “be true, to stand up to [league bonds] and stand to it like men.”\textsuperscript{81} Historians have been oddly critical of Outlaw’s disavowal of violence.\textsuperscript{82} But this criticism fails to take into account that Outlaw’s nonviolent stance was politically consistent with the stated principles of the League. Furthermore, Outlaw did, in 1869, set up small police. Its size was insufficient to guard against the Klan, but as Klan chief Jacob Long attested, “it was irregular in this that it never was there before or after.”\textsuperscript{83} Outlaw, as commissioner, created a legally organized defense that had never before existed. When members of the League suggested illegal defense, he objected. For Outlaw to have acted otherwise would have not only weakened his political network, but it would have played to the Klan’s hand: if League principles failed, and lawlessness prevailed, it would have served only to

\textsuperscript{80} Nelson, \textit{Iron Confederacies}, 102. It is important to note that court documents in Alamance from this period may reflect Klan infiltration of local government. Magistrate Peter Hardin testified to the Select Committee of the Senate “Outrage” Committee “I never heard anything charged against Outlaw until after he was hung.” (Outrage, 35) See also “Red Strings and Half Brothers” in \textit{Enemies of the Country}, 52

\textsuperscript{81} North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, \textit{Holden Trial}, 1199.

\textsuperscript{82} Trelease, \textit{White Terror}; Nelson, \textit{Iron Confederacies}.

\textsuperscript{83} North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, \textit{Holden Trial}, 2246.
strengthen Klan bonds and thus the Klan’s sovereignty.

Outlaw’s leadership in an embattled community made his death hard to bear. Despite the Klan’s demonstrated capacity for violence, John Fonvielle, Outlaw’s fellow commissioner, could not believe that Outlaw had been hung. “That is impossible,” he said, and refused to accept Outlaw’s death until he had shaken his body and seen that he was void of life.84 “I was sick and like to die and I did not want to stay there. I wanted someone to carry me away,” said Caswell Holt, speaking of Wyatt Outlaw’s murder.85 In speaking these words, Holt demonstrated not only his deep grief at Outlaw’s murder, but also resistance. “Carry me away” implied death, and Holt’s emphatic refusal to accept the political conditions that had taken Outlaw’s life.

Regardless of overwhelming numbers, and Klan cries to “watch your prisoner,” Outlaw said and did little as he was taken from his home in the middle of the night. As he tried to maintain a dignified end, his child wept and his mother tried in vain to battle one of his attackers. The dignity Outlaw won with his silence was scarcely allowed him: he was not able to finish dressing, or put on his hat.86 Members’ solemn refusal to engage in violent acts was consistent with the principles of the Loyal League and Outlaw’s advice that members adhere to the law, despite extreme adversity.

As a resistance strategy, public outcry could force recognition of the Klan’s

84 Ibid., 1186.
violence and placed emphasis on the personal or legal right of the individual harmed. This strategy, however, was only minimally effective in a public so thoroughly terrorized as Alamance. For example, when Alonzo Corliss was attacked, Mrs. Corliss unmasked one of his attackers and “hallooed” so loudly that multiple witnesses attested that she could be heard throughout town. She implored help from several neighbors, including a man named Meder, who, like Corliss, was a teacher a Republican, and a victim of Klan terrorism.\(^87\) No one felt able to risk their own security to help her.

Similarly, William Puryear, a father of three who was drowned by the Klan soon after the death of Wyatt Outlaw, demonstrated his deep resentment of the Klan. “I am a free man,” Puryear’s wife Matilda recalled her husband shouting while supposedly ‘distracted.’ “I am a free man and no one should touch me.”\(^88\) Puryear is most often remembered in historical record as the “intermittently insane” figure who had the temerity to report the Klansmen he had witnessed taking Wyatt Outlaw from his home.\(^89\) Puryear had been sent to jail when he “first went distracted” two years before his death, sent there by his mother. More important than the specifics of his condition are chronology and relationships. Puryear, or “Prayer” as he appears in the record, was attacked in 1868 by Jasper Woods, one of Alamance’s Klan “chiefs.” The blow was found to have “caused insanity.” Stephen Rippy, for reasons not clear in the record, “was to wait on Prayer” while he was confined in the poorhouse, but instead “assault and battered

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 1523.
\(^{88}\) Ibid., 1810.
\(^{89}\) Trelease, *White Terror*, 205.
him on multiple occasions.”

When Puryear turned up missing, those “disposed to apologize” for Klan crimes, insisted that he had gone of his own accord, but, according to Magistrate Peter Harden, Matilda Puryear felt she had “cause to believe” Puryear “had been made away with.” The Klan, or at least Jasper Woods with the help of Stephen Rippy, did not suddenly turn on Puryear when he threatened to expose their involvement in Outlaw’s murder. They had been beating and torturing him for years before they drowned him. In Puryear, as with Outlaw, we see a determined effort to humiliate and ‘scourge’ the male body for political power invested in it. Puryear’s “distracted” episodes are consistent with the message of the Loyal League if not with Outlaw’s admonition to be “quiet and industrious” and offer violence solely in self-defense. Puryear demonstrated by his words that he believed emancipation created “free men,” and by his actions that he understood the law to be the only true arbiter of dispute. It was not his resistance that made him appear “distracted,” it was the means he used to deliver his message. “[One] could hear him for half a mile…at any rate the neighbors heard him” testified Mrs. Puryear. If the night audioscape of Alamance was one in which one heard, or thought one heard, “strange” noises “like pea fowl and guinea hen,” then it is understandable that William Puryear, like Mrs. Corliss, was outcast for “loud talking.” The Klan dominated bold public speech and terrified the people of Alamance with the eerie nocturnal calls. Interruption posed too great

90 “Record of Complaints, Graham, 1865-1878.”
93 Ibid., 1856.
a risk.

By contrast, silence could work as an effective tool of resistance. Loyal league members and their families refused to be intimidated, and refused to accept the pretended authority of Klansmen. To do so required a bitter but determined faith in the political principles of the league. Victims, when forced, yielded their bodies, but refused to engage in any other way with Klan members. As Henry Holt reminded Governor’s Holden’s impeachment commission, “It was not called a debating society; it was called a league.” It was not abstractions, but concrete political bonds that the League dealt in. Mary Holt, Henry’s wife, demonstrated this when she told Klan members who burst into her house “they would have to shoot, for I couldn't tell them where he was.” Engagement with each other, and disengagement with the Klan, defined the boundaries of the League. As the “installing officer” of the League in nearby Caswell county Samuel Allen said, “If anybody belonged to the league, and went according to the rules and regulations and requirements of the league, they were bound to be good citizens. … If any man was a true member of the league he was bound to be a gentleman in principle.”

Both Wyatt Outlaw and Caswell Holt represented distinct challenges for the Klan’s claims to local authority. Refusal to actively engage in battle with the Klan was grounded in the very Republican politics that the Klan resented. Holt, like Outlaw, frustrated the Klan’s designs by refusing either to return their violence or accept their authority. As they had done to Outlaw, the Klan brutalized and

\[94 \text{ Select Committee of the Senate, “Outrage Report,” 52.}\]
humiliated Holt in an effort to either subvert the public meaning of his Republican politics, or to make clear the cost of expressing those politics publicly. The Klan whipped and tortured Caswell Holt for the same purported reason they attacked Wyatt Outlaw: that he had shot at members of the Klan.\textsuperscript{95} Holt was attacked twice. In the first attack, Klan members interrogated Holt, supposedly about a theft, threatening his life and attempting to force a confession. The point of the interrogation, obviously, had little to do with theft. Holt’s torturers announced, when Holt refused to confess, that he had come to his “last moment,” and thus claimed a power to define the contours of Holt’s life. Holt denied his attackers this power. He asserted that his end might come, but he “can’t help it.” His attackers “bucked” Holt: they tied him in a bent position over a log and took turns flogging him. The sadistic and sexual content of this attack hardly needs additional comment. Suffice it to say, that the “feminization” of men like Holt and Outlaw, who had resisted the Klan’s claims to power, was fundamental to the violence in Alamance, not incidental. Holt’s fatalism deflected these claims. It rendered his attackers merely instrumental, and confession pointless. Deflated, Holt’s attackers “damned” him, and contented themselves with forcing him to swear to silence. In this too, they were dissatisfied. “I don’t know that I shall tell any person,” replied Holt, retaining agency to the bitter end. Frustrated, his attackers finally dismissed the brutalized Holt, charging him, “Damn you, run!” Holt walked away.

After Holt’s attack, neighbors brought him “leaves with blood on them” as

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 341–349.
evidence of the attack.\textsuperscript{96} Exacting revenge was outside the boundaries of the Loyal League oath, but extracting legally incriminating evidence from the scene was a neighborly duty. This practice was not limited to Alamance. In Georgia in Wilkinson County, where Henry Lowther was given a choice between death or castration, local women followed Lowther’s “pool” of blood which incriminated the town’s doctor and vindicated the traumatized memory of the victim.\textsuperscript{97} While Mrs. Corliss, who “screamed like a maniac” unsuccessfully sought refuse in Republican homes, for quieter victims neighbors might volunteer aid and shelter.

Caswell Holt’s refusal to engage in the ritual of intimidation showed the weakness of the Klan’s imposed authority, but was not limited to the attack itself. In his testimony at Governor Holden’s impeachment trial, Holt was asked about the political party membership of his attackers. Before he could answer, Mr. Graham, a Democrat, asked, “What does he know about it?” implying that Holt, an ex-slave, could not possibly know the political concerns of the men of Alamance, much less have any of his own. He could not have been more wrong.\textsuperscript{98} Holt explained, “I know that they belong to that party, from the course they have taken.”\textsuperscript{99} Holt was “political” not only in the sense that he voted the “radical” ticket in 1868, but his testimony at Holden’s trial was careful, jocular yet exact.

\textsuperscript{96} North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, \textit{Holden Trial}, 1323.
\textsuperscript{97} Lisa Cardyn, “Sexualized Racism/Gendered Violence: Outraging the Body Politic in the Reconstruction South”; Albion Tourgee, \textit{The Invisible Empire: Part I. A New Illustrated, and Enlarged Edition of A Fool’s Errand, by One of the Fools; the Famous Historical Romance of Life in the South Since the War. Part II. A Concise Review of Recent Events, Showing the Elements on Which the Tale Is Based ... and Deeds of the Mysterious Ku-Klux Klan ; All Fully Authenticated}. (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1880), 483–485.
\textsuperscript{98} Steven Hahn, \textit{A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration} (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).
\textsuperscript{99} North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, \textit{Holden Trial}, 1321.
Holt’s employer, Jerry Holt, had ordered the raid on Holt and his family, a fact was revealed in later testimony. Holt never implicated Jerry Holt directly, but recounted his employer’s paternalistic advice to “say nothing about it” because “men of the country would not understand [the Klan].” Though still never directly implicating Jerry Holt, Caswell Holt was much more thorough, and much more damning, in his description of Jerry Holt’s advice in his testimony to the Senate “Outrage” committee. According to Caswell Holt, Jerry Holt described Klan attacks as “a sort of resurrection” but Caswell Holt could not agree. “Do you suppose the Almighty has given the dead the power to rise now and go about beating people?” Caswell Holt asked Jerry Holt, casting doubt, and ridicule, on the myth that the Klan were resurrected Confederate soldiers. Holt, of course, if he had not already found the myth condescending and untrue, had seen its falsity proved when he was able to identify his attackers as living men. Yet Jerry Holt advised him, “It’s something we can’t understand, Cas, something that has been existing for some time.” Caswell Holt did not need to reveal Jerry Holt as a Klan member, because as he recounted his ex-master’s paternalistic “advice,” it became clear that the man who had “raised [Caswell Holt] from a child” had also tried to kill him.

The stubborn fatalism that Holt showed during his attack, and the indirect exposure of Jerry Holt through his testimony, was the safest form of resistance

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100 Ibid., 1998.
101 Select Committee of the Senate, “Outrage Report,” 343. Caswell Holt also reported pretending, in conversation with Jerry Holt, ignorance as to his own vote in the 1868 election. Jerry Holt, who wanted to coerce Caswell Holt’s vote, had to acknowledge Caswell Holt’s political intelligence in order to do so. Caswell Holt reported Jerry Holt’s reply: “You can’t make me believe that; you are no fool.”
that most Republicans in Alamance could mount. The Klan achieved what control they had by turning the bodies of their Republican opposition into a “school” that encouraged conformity. Holt constituted an immense frustration to the Klan, because while he “could not help” but surrender to them bodily, fatalism withheld his person. Control of the body meant little if the soul would not follow. Caswell Holt’s refusal to perform was itself a performance, and the Klan recognized it as such, charging Holt, as they broke into his house and shot him, with insufficient fear of the Klan.

This fatalism was not limited to Holt, but was characteristic of a wider League response to Klan violence in Alamance. William Long refused, though threatened with violence, to acknowledge allegations of theft. “I have nothing to tell you.” Long said several times. Finally, frustrating the assembled Klansmen, Long agreed that he would “say anything you want me to say, I don’t care what it is.” He would admit only that he was being coerced. His attackers, on the other hand, insisted, “It has got to come out whether or not you did.” Force was secondary to narrative, and they insisted that Long act as though their power were not based on coercion.

Henry Holt, a 33 year-old ex-slave and father of two, refused to let Klansmen in his home before he had fully dressed himself. ¹⁰² They told him to “never mind … clothes” Holt’s refusal to be less than dignified prompted the Klan to threaten to “put 500 balls through” his body. Holt was consistent.

¹⁰² This is not the same Henry Holt that supplied information about the Union League. He is referred to in the Holden Trial document as “Henry Holt #2”
“Gentlemen,” he said, “if I have done anything to put 500 balls through the door, put them right through.” Just as they had with William Long, Klansmen began a battle for control over narrative. They insisted that Holt had been “cursing white folks.” Holt, maintaining a dignified self-control, explained, “it was not my habit to curse at all” but that if white folks would swear untruthfully, he “could not help denying.” As they had with Caswell Holt, Klansmen then threatened to shoot Henry Holt, insisting that he “must not dispute white folks” and then sent a bullet whizzing past his ear.  

“Personal” Politics: Aaron Biggerstaff and the Congressional Klan Investigations

The Klan used ritualized sexual violence to wedge apart the bonds of the Loyal League, transforming personal humiliation into broken political ties. While Holt’s and Outlaw’s resistance demonstrated the weakness of the Klan’s method, the League had split by 1870. The increased organization of the Klan meant that North Carolina Leagues were prey to violence, economic intimidation, and the failure of its own leadership. Moreover, the political dynamic of sexual violence had, by 1871, influenced national politics. In January of that year, the Senate appointed a committee, headed by Republican Senator John Scott of Pennsylvania, to investigate Klan outrages. The extent of this investigation, which produced a body of testimony referred to as the “outrage” report, was limited to North Carolina. As a result of this investigation, Congress passed the second Enforcement Act, which tightened federal control over elections, but had little

direct effect on Klan violence. On April 20, 1871, Congress passed the Klan Act, which made it a federal offense to “conspire together...for the purpose of depriving any person or class of persons of the equal protection of the laws.” In March, as the Klan act was in the process of becoming law, Congress conducted the largest investigation in its history at that time, convening a body headed again by Senator Scott to take testimony regarding Klan violence throughout the former Confederacy. Because the Klan act was about to become a matter of law, the investigation, and the body of testimony that issued from it, were intended as an authentication of the act and a justification of the politically dangerous work of enforcement. If necessary, Congress would buttress the Klan act with the bodies of thousands of Republican men. Muscular enforcement, of course, was never brought about.

The investigation had many causes: committee members heard testimony concerning economic intimidation, political assassination, vote tampering, and cruelty that seemed to have no political or economic rationale. For Democrats, framing violence as “personal” and focusing on intra-community dynamics was a way to contain problems created by the Klan. In testimony taken in North Carolina, investigation was pivoted around attacks on one man: Aaron Biggerstaff. He became a focal point in this politically divisive investigation because it was in the interest of Democrats to see Klan violence defined as “personal” rather than political and therefore beyond the reach of the federal government. Biggerstaff’s story seemed to prove the Democratic case: he had

allegedly shot at his own brother’s house and been attacked in return. How could that be political? If it was simply a family quarrel, perhaps other attacks were similarly benign?

For Democratic Senator Francis Blair, attacks in Rutherford County on Aaron Biggerstaff were personal and non-political. In a pitch of frustration he lambasted a witness during congressional investigations of Klan violence: “I see that you are all very incredible that any other motive could operate except a political one; that is the great point made by all of you people down there; that it was a political feud, instead of being, as the matter appears on its face, simply a personal matter.”

The string of violence in the Biggerstaff case was triggered by an attack on a woman: Mrs. McGahey. After Klansmen attacked her, Mr. McGahey and fellow league members, including Aaron Biggerstaff, retaliated. This resulted in two subsequent attacks on Aaron Biggerstaff. It was, in this sense, a classic transaction between differing parties of men over the body of a woman. Mrs. McGahey was “ill-treated,” “abused,” “outraged,” and “shoved back against the fireplace.” The most serious aspect of the attack, however, was that her attackers told her “that they had come there to kill her husband and boy.” Mrs. McGahey’s violated body, then, was an indication of a greater loss of control. As the attacks turned to Biggerstaff, the narrative flipped. Biggerstaff, who was dragged from his home wearing nothing “but his shirt” and brutally beaten

106 U.S., Klan Report, 151. Biggerstaff was alleged, by Mr. Blair, to have shot into his brother Sam’s home. By most witness accounts, he did not, but Mr. McGahey did.
107 Ibid., 105.
testified that his “flesh was numbed and flew off sometimes with the blows.”

After the first attack, he was not expected to live. While Aaron Biggerstaff was beaten for being a “damned radical,” it was his daughter’s affidavit against the Klan members who had initially come to their home seeking Mr. McGahey that motivated the first attack. It was therefore Aaron Biggerstaff’s body that served as the medium of exchange in the political standoff between his daughter, Mrs. Norville, and Klan members, just as it would later mediate a standoff between Democrats who defined Klan violence as a local matter, and Republicans who did not.

Blair’s strategy, to deny the “political” valence of any violence not explicitly tied to political activity, was designed to limit federal interference in Southern affairs. If violence only reached the threshold of “personal quarrels” then federal interference was far too blunt a tool with which to remedy the situation. However, As J.B. Eaves, North Carolina State Senator and U.S. Assessor, testified, to insist on the “personal” interpretation was to “confine yourself and not connect it with what is going on in this country.”

Republicans met Blair’s strategy in two ways. The first and most obvious solution was, of course, to reemphasize the politics of seemingly private affairs. For example, when Aaron Biggerstaff was attacked, his estranged brother was a member of the Klan raiding party. However, members of the party also repeatedly threatened him for his politics, calling Biggerstaff a “damned Rad.”

108 Ibid., 484.
109 Ibid., 453.
110 North Carolina General Assembly and Holden, Holden Trial, 1497.
Republicans fought fire with fire, creating a public debate over the injured body of a white male citizen.

Though Klan violence in North Carolina was endemic, focus in the North Carolina testimony consistently returned to Aaron Biggerstaff. Senator Blair’s goal, as a Democratic representative of the congressional committee, was to use the attacks on the Biggerstaff family as a lever by which to force apart “political” from “personal” violence. If violence was “personal” there was little justification for federal intervention. This wedge, therefore, constructed a legally shielded space. In this sense, the Biggerstaff case acted as synecdoche for the larger question of local versus national control.

Plato Durham, a Captain of the local Klan, explained that there was a “feud kept up since the war.” Mr. Blair asked “Between the two brothers?” Durham corrected, “between them and their friends.” Marcus Wells, also a member of the Klan, explained “people took sides in the matter, the quarrel extended and grew.” Unlike Mr. Blair, Durham and Wells did not see merely a family squabble in the scuffles between Sam and Aaron. The quarrel had its roots in national politics, and the Klan would seek to anchor their claims against Biggerstaff in these roots. Senator Blair could frame the attack as “personal” however, because there was, nested within the political dispute, a family dispute. Aaron Biggerstaff, a Unionist, Republican and member of the Union organization the Red Strings, had clashed with his brother Sam since before the end of the Civil War. Through the end of the war, Aaron Biggerstaff, a member of the Union

organization the Red Strings, had helped prisoners escape from prison camps in Columbia, South Carolina. After the War, when his neighbors’ stock and supplies were confiscated by the Union army, he was sheltered by General Palmer. Aaron Biggerstaff was a dedicated Republican, his brother Sam a Democrat. They were also offended family members, competing for scarce supplies. The quarrel was thus at once deeply personal and highly political.

Republicans of Rutherfordton largely understood the violence against Aaron Biggerstaff as a political matter. When asked if the attack on Aaron Biggerstaff was a personal matter, J.B. Eaves testified, “If Mr. Sam Biggerstaff had taken his boys and two or three or four neighbors, and gone over there and whipped Aaron Biggerstaff, it would have looked like it; but for forty or fifty men to go there...” when asked by Blair if it was not possible to have “personal friends” in seeking vengeance, the witness responded, “I do not think you could rally that many personal friends to pursue such a course.” For Eaves, at least, there was a threshold at which friendly ties became political bonds. Democrats defined political community negatively where Biggerstaff was concerned. Just as with Corliss, Democratic witnesses identified Aaron Biggerstaff as “talkative.” He was “loud talking” and, like Caswell Holt, too likely to “shoot [the Klan].” One purpose of beating him was to “make him hush his talking.” As Klan member H.W. Guion testified (on three separate occasions), “I say that all parties [who

112 Ibid., 112.
113 Ibid., 21,170,146.
114 Ibid., 194.
115 Ibid., 112,170,211,223.
116 Ibid., 112.
retaliated against Mrs. McGahey’s attack] are equally guilty. I do not recollect the facts; I do not treasure them up, or try to recollect them.”

Guion did not need the “facts” to tell him that Biggerstaff and other League members were guilty: they were guilty because they were external to his own political network.

However, all violence in Rutherford, Blair argued, was connected with the Biggerstaff incident. In total, it was a personal, local concern, not a political matter warranting national intervention. Mr. Blair asked Eaves, “Would not anybody draw the conclusion that when a man was implicated in the murder of one of their friends, and in firing into the house of another, that was the most probable cause of such a punishment to be inflicted upon him, rather than his political sentiments?”

This question, of course, obscured the partisan nature of the dispute and implied that Aaron Biggerstaff was at fault in the shootings of his brother and the local Klan chief, Decatur DePriest, an implication not at all supported by the majority of the testimony. More interesting, however, was the power to punish that it assigned to those who attacked Aaron Biggerstaff. Punishment, and the ability to mete it out, is a political power. During attacks on Biggerstaff, Klansmen place the limit of their attacks on Biggerstaff at how much his body could “bear,” not on a punishment that would presumably measure his “crime.”

Blair’s vision of “private” violence was rebuffed, in part, by Republicans’ use of Biggerstaff’s lacerated body. His wounds answered the question

117 Ibid., 268, 211.
118 Ibid., 192.
formulated by the *New York Times*:

What are the prevailing characteristics of the outrages that abound in many parts of the South? Is their origin political, or are they products of a lawlessness indicative of social demoralization? Is the failure to arrest and punish due to a disaffected local opinion, to the weakness and incapacity of local authority, or the connivance of jurors and officials? 119

Eliciting graphic detail from witness testimony undermined Blair’s claims. For example, when Republican Senator John Pool, chair of the congressional investigating subcommittee for North Carolina, gently prodded J.B. Eaves, “I want to ask you a question or two about this matter, to see if I can get into it so as to understand it. You say there have been in the neighborhood of from one to two hundred outrages there during the last year?” it set in motion a line of inquiry that allowed Eaves to outline every outrage that had occurred within Rutherford County since the Klan had organized. 120 Senator Pool interjected only to call for more detail, saying, “Tell us about that,” or, “What did they do to him?” The litany of outrage clearly frustrated Democratic Senator Philadelph Van Trump, who attempted to prevent Eaves by questioning his sources. Eaves continued undaunted, including in his testimony details of the whipping of a veteran of the War of 1812. Senator Pool directed Eaves testimony, asking open-ended questions when his narrative lighted on relevant information. Eaves therefore

revealed that Biggerstaff had been brutally beaten. He “was whipped with hoop-poles and sticks and withes until he could neither sit, stand, nor lie.” Eaves reiterated what Jim Justice had indicated: Biggerstaff had been transformed from political man to inert flesh. Eaves continued, “He said you could not lay your hand on him, from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet, without putting it upon some bruise or gash.¹²¹

Conclusion

Understanding Klan violence as a political strategy, as Allen Trelease does, is essential to retrieving this aspect of Reconstruction from Democrats’ framing of Klan violence as a “personal” matter, not worthy of federal investigation. Yet the violence was deeply personal. Klan members degraded Republican men’s bodies and shattered the political bonds that held political community together. It was “personal” in this sense, as well as political. The intimacy of Klan violence was the key to its painful effectiveness. What made Klan violence truly chilling was the relationship between the victim and the attacker, the proximity of familiarity and brutality. In attacks on League members, sexualized violence capitalized on this psychological factor as the attacks themselves replicated and shattered bonds that made men “gentlemen” and anchored them to a political network.

After the death of Nathaniel Boyden, who had been Governor Holden’s defense lawyer and later a judge of the North Carolina Supreme Court, a

¹²¹ Ibid., 28.
University of North Carolina professor offered the court a short biography of the man they had known as their colleague. Revelatory of Boyden’s persuasive genius at Holden’s trial, the professor wrote, was a scrap of paper in an “unknown hand” that read, “But Boyden, the pliant/ Who will follow, defiant/ All minor themes scorns/If all else would fail him/ Why, then, he’ll impale him/On horns, horns, horns.”

The note was intended to amuse, but it also reveals a vital detail: “horns” and the ritualized sexual violence that accompanied them, were not minor themes. The key to a good defense was the revelation of the destruction of the male body: Boyden would demonstrate what horror “horns” could work. From sexual violence, the Klan’s destruction of the Union League had followed. By terrorizing, humiliating, and forcing League members to suborn their oaths they had voided the organization.

The Klan had used pain and sexual humiliation to force Republicans to suborn their oaths. The “pliant” Boyden would eviscerate Graham’s prosecution of Governor Holden by making Graham’s “personal” violence argument untenable. He would do this by “using” pain. Boyden demonstrated the extent and the severity of Klan violence. He held out victims’ wounded bodies as a referendum on Holden’s attempts to bring order to North Carolina. As Congress investigated this dynamic in North Carolina their investigation intensified and focused on one man. Aaron Biggerstaff’s body was proof of “lawlessness indicative of social demoralization.” In this, if nothing else, lay justification for

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122 North Carolina Reports: Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of North Carolina (Raleigh: Mitchell Printing, 1918), 824. The professor was mathematician and George Bernard Shaw scholar Archibald Henderson
the intervention of the federal government. Political virtue, in the South, was clearly laid to waste. It was demonstrable in the physical destruction of the Republican citizenry.
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