

## Black Laborers, the Republican Party, and the Crisis of Reconstruction in Lowcountry South Carolina\*

BRIAN KELLY

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**SUMMARY:** The wave of strikes that swept across the South Carolina rice fields in late 1876 offer rich material for revisiting the most compelling issues in the postwar Reconstruction of the US's former slave states. They expose sharp tensions between the Republican Party's black, working-class constituency and its mostly white, bourgeois leadership. Recent studies, based almost entirely on Northern published opinion, have made the case that Northern Republican elites were driven to "abandon the mid-century vision of an egalitarian free labor society" by assertive ex-slaves oblivious to the "mutual interests" that ostensibly bound them and their employers. This article, based on extensive archival research, asserts that similar fissures opened up between freedpeople and southern Republican officials. In a series of highly effective mobilizations against local planters and determined attempts to block party officials from betraying their interests, rice fieldhands demonstrated a clear understanding of the critical issues at stake during the months leading up to the collapse of Reconstruction. Their intervention contrasted not only with the feeble holding operation pursued by moderates in the upper levels of the Republican party, but also with the timidity of many locally rooted black officials nearer to the grassroots.

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Tensions hung thick in the air as the summer of 1876 descended on the coastal rice plantations of Lowcountry South Carolina. In an area that had been synonymous, before the American Civil War, with the state's confident, ostentatious planter aristocracy, and whose staples of rice and

\* I completed the early research for this article during my tenure as Walter Hines Page Fellow at the National Humanities Center in 2003–2004 and wish to acknowledge the generous support of the NHC and its staff. Thanks are also due to the British Academy, which funded the archival research required for this work, and to Stephen Tuck, who arranged an opportunity to present a preliminary draft to the American History Research Seminar at Oxford University. I am especially grateful to Jennifer Kelly and Dave Brannigan, who chased down some of the loose research threads from across the Atlantic, and to those scholars who offered critical comments on an earlier draft: Bruce Baker, William McKee Evans, Harold S. Forsythe, Suzanne Cameron Linder Hurley, Susan O'Donovan, Stephen Kantrowitz, Nancy MacLean, David Montgomery, James Tuten and the anonymous readers at *IRSH*.

long-staple cotton had been transformed into the colossal wealth upon which the slave-power citadel of Charleston had been built, destitution was on the march. From Colleton County, nestled along the Atlantic between the Edisto and Combahee rivers, reports emerged that more than 700 people were literally “without bread”. “[T]he wolf is at the door”, one distressed resident proclaimed in an appeal for relief. “There are [...] a large number of [people] who [...] will absolutely *starve* if help cannot be obtained.”<sup>1</sup> Further south in Beaufort County, the New York *Sun* noted, the “wan, haggard faces of those who know not where the next meal will be procured greet the stranger at every turn”, with many able to keep starvation at bay only by “subsisting on wild fruits, the only food free to the utterly destitute”. Across the Savannah River, where the Lowcountry extended into Georgia and where similar conditions would, in coming months, produce a lethal yellow-fever epidemic among the “poorer classes”, journalists warned about the “famine-bred disposition to plunder” evident in a recent surge in murder and theft.<sup>2</sup>

Conflicting reports emerged about the extent of such misery among local whites, but there can be little doubt that deprivation was most acutely concentrated among the Lowcountry’s black rice-plantation workforce, whose wages, one observer admitted, were “barely sufficient for support”. Some local planters took umbrage at the insinuation that hunger was making inroads among whites, boycotting the relief campaign out of resentment that a disproportionate share of their charity would be disbursed among the ex-slave population. “As for starving”, a piqued Adams Run correspondent asserted, “there is no danger of any thing of that kind”. While acknowledging that “colored people” on “some [...] plantations may be hard up on account of the planters not hiring as much day labor as heretofore”, the writer insisted – in a sneering “hint for the colored folk” – that it was not the white, conservative readership of the Charleston *News and Courier*, but instead the “colored people of Charleston” who should be busy organizing meetings to “[help] their brethren”.<sup>3</sup>

A deepening local crisis rooted in the enduring material devastation of

1. “The Distress at Colleton”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 23 May 1876; “The Wolf at the Door”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 23 May 1876.

2. “Famine Breeding Crime”, *Savannah Morning News*, 7 July 1876, citing the [New York] *Sun*.

3. “The Hawaiian Rice Bill”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 27 May 1876; “The Appeal from Adams Run”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 2 June 1876. The assertion in this and subsequent correspondence that it was mainly African Americans who were suffering from hunger was rejected in a report published just over a month later. In response to a query about “whether the whites can crowd in among the negroes to get their share”, a correspondent familiar with the relief work assured readers that it was “the destitution among the whites [that] induced the action for relief”, and provided a striking affirmation that the work was being organized in such a way as to avoid tampering with the racial status quo. With the relief committee firmly in the hands of local planters, “colored people” seeking aid, who “generally occupy subordinate

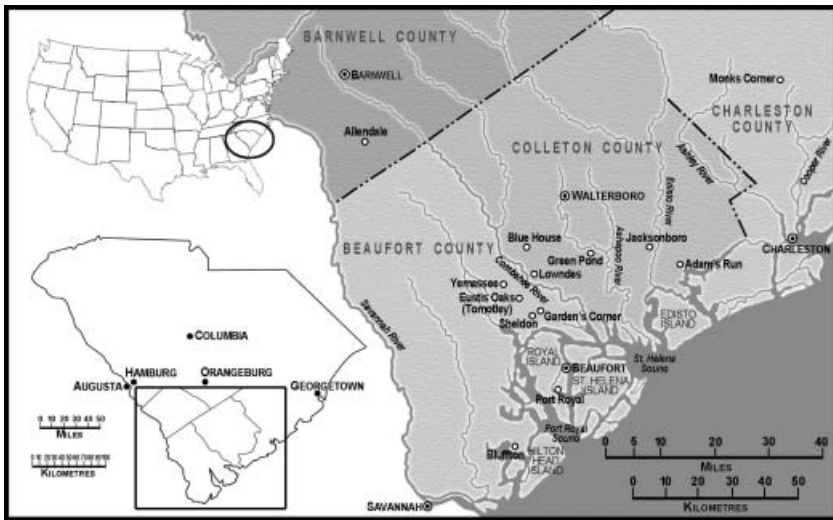


Figure 1. The strike district. The South Carolina Lowcountry below Charleston, in 1876, with prominent place names from the rice-strike records.

*Mapwork by Tim Belshaw*

the Civil War and exacerbated by a depressed rice market and a series of seasonal, weather-related calamities presented South Carolina rice planters with a challenge that would have proved daunting under the most favorable political climate.<sup>4</sup> But as the summer of 1876 commenced, Lowcountry elites faced a situation that was far from favorable, and many

positions on the plantations”, were required to obtain “a certificate from the proprietor, setting forth that the applicant is deserving”. The “preponderance of help is turned towards the whites”, readers were assured. See “The Destitution in the Low Country”, [*Charleston*] *News and Courier*, 6 July 1876.

This is one of the very few reports in which non-elite whites figure in accounts of the 1876 events, and it is difficult to determine how they viewed, or participated, in the confrontation between planters and freedpeople. It was “alleged” that “certain [white] storekeepers favor the strike as tending to abolish checks”, but otherwise non-elite whites seem absent from the main lines of the 1876 dispute. Stephanie McCurry suggests (pp. 54–55) that in numerical terms the “self-working farmers” of the low country comprised the “majority of rural proprietors” during the antebellum period, laying the basis for “an accentuated version of the characteristic black-belt pattern: a large black majority, a broad-based but highly unequal distribution of real wealth among free household heads, and a white population the majority of which was yeoman farmers”. On white storekeepers, see “The Rice Laborers’ Strike”, [*Charleston*] *News and Courier*, 25 May 1876. On white yeomanry generally, see Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York [etc.], 1995).

4. On the war’s devastation generally, see Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia, SC, 1981), p. 375. For evidence of the lingering effects of the war in the rice district, see Suzanne Cameron Linder, *Historical Atlas of the Rice Plantations of the ACE River Basin – 1860*

believed that a decisive confrontation with the region's black laborers was imminent. Mounting desperation among the plantation workforce, then just a decade removed from slavery, inflamed an already explosive local contest over the meaning of free labor – one that had not yet been decisively resolved. In the months ahead this escalating local conflict intersected with a state-wide – and indeed national – confrontation between the faltering, Republican-led experiment in bi-racial democracy, in which freedpeople had vested their hopes for deliverance, and white conservatives intent on carrying through a counter-revolution that would restore the authority they had enjoyed under the antebellum regime. When, in late May, fieldhands launched the first in a wave of strikes aimed at blocking planters' attempts to offload the costs of their difficulties, both sides were drawn into the vortex of an epic confrontation whose outcome would set the parameters of racial and class politics in the United States well into the twentieth century.

This season of black laborers' discontent has been subjected to examination by a number of exceptionally gifted historians. For Eric Foner, the strikes “epitomized in microcosm a host of issues central to the legacy of emancipation”. His definitive rendering of their significance in “The Emancipated Worker” remains, more than twenty years after publication, a seminal illumination of the transformative potential of the Second American Revolution and the devastating consequences of its collapse after 1876. John C. Strickland's extended reflection on moral economy and political culture among freedpeople in the Lowcountry, published just two years later, explored the “intense social and cultural solidarity rooted in large, stable plantation communities, in the intergenerational continuity of slave families, and in the long-established practice of [planter] absenteeism”. The rice strikes figure in the most frequently cited first-hand accounts of Redemption in South Carolina and in its reconstruction by professional

(Columbia, SC, 1995), pp. xx–xxii, and Duncan Clinch Heyward, *Seed from Madagascar* (Columbia, SC, 1993), p. 154. Louis Manigault recounted his return to the Gowrie plantation (Argyle Island, Georgia) in 1876 to find a “perfect wreck of what was once a flourishing plantation”; “Season of 1876 at Gowrie”, *Manigault Family Papers*, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter SHC). On the Hawaiian treaty and its effects on Lowcountry rice production, see “The Hawaiian Rice Bill”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 27 May 1876; “The Repeal of the Duty on Rice”, *Savannah Morning News*, 23 January 1873; and “The Combahee Strikers”, [Charleston] *Journal of Commerce*, 23 August 1876. The Lowcountry experienced an extended drought in the spring of 1876, followed by record tides in June, which caused “much destruction to the crops”. On drought, see “The Drought in the Rice Region”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 3 June 1876. Remarks about the June freshet are included in Louis Manigault's account of his experience at Gowrie cited above. Manigault lists four “serious difficulties” with which South Carolina rice planters “had to contend” in the summer of 1876, including (1) the Hawaiian Treaty; (2) the “ever to be remembered June freshet”; (3) “Politics in South Carolina”, which affected “every white man [...] in one way or another”; and (4) the “low state” of the rice market. See “Season of 1876 at Gowrie”, *Manigault Family Papers*, SHC.

historians, Francis Butler Simkins, Robert H. Woody, and George B. Tindall. They continue to figure, tangentially, in some of the most compelling scholarship produced over the past quarter century.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their prominence in the historical literature, however, the full dimensions of the strikes' significance have been obscured by the trajectory of Reconstruction historiography over the past century. While the once dominant interpretation pioneered by William A. Dunning (grounded in prevailing assumptions about black racial inferiority) has been thoroughly overturned, his fixation with race continues to shape the field, often in ways that can conceal the salience of class in white elites' determination to thwart the democratic transformation of the South. Revisionists whose scholarship exposed the shortcomings of the Dunning school from mid-century onwards reject the racist assumptions embedded in its work and, in countering the earlier bias, have devoted considerable attention to exonerating black southerners of the malicious charges of ignorance, corruption, and vice leveled against them. Where this revision has been integrated into a broader framework that situates race in a complex matrix of class, sectional, and national political and economic pressures – as W.E.B. DuBois did in his pioneering *Black Reconstruction*, or as Foner has more recently<sup>6</sup> – the result has been penetrating, illuminative social history. But elsewhere the reaction against Dunning has produced a literature with vulnerabilities of its own.<sup>7</sup>

Its distinctly celebratory tone can overstate the agency of an ex-slave community with few material or military resources at its disposal, locked into a fearsome contest with powerful, determined, and well-armed opponents and only conditionally supported by unsteady Northern allies.

5. Eric Foner, "The Emancipated Worker", in *idem*, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1983), pp. 74–135, 74; John C. Strickland, "Traditional Culture and Moral Economy: Social and Economic Change in the South Carolina Low Country, 1865–1910", in Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude (eds), *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985), pp. 141–178, 144. Contemporary accounts include Alfred B. Williams, *Hampton and His Red Shirts: South Carolina's Deliverance in 1876* (Charleston, SC, 1935), and Walter Allen, *Governor Chamberlain's Administration in South Carolina: A Chapter of Reconstruction in the Southern States* (New York, repr. 1969). Pre-civil-rights-era scholarship includes Francis Butler Simkins and Robert H. Woody, *South Carolina during Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1932), and George B. Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes, 1877–1900* (Columbia, SC, 1952). For more recent scholarship, see Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA [etc.], 2003).

6. W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York, 1935); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York, 1989).

7. In a penetrating summary of the "limits of current research" on the post-emancipation South published some twenty years ago, Armstead L. Robinson outlined an ambitious research agenda which scholars have only partially addressed in the years since. See his "The Difference Freedom Made: The Emancipation of Afro-Americans", in Darlene Clark Hine (ed.), *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1986), pp. 51–74.

Its inclination to project a unified black community, and to uphold the legislative accomplishments of black elected officials, conceals the substantial disparities – in literacy and educational background, wealth and previous status, gender, and even color – distinguishing the mass of propertyless ex-slaves from the “representative men of the race” elected to plead their cause. One of the primary aims of this article is to demonstrate the problems in foisting such an interpretive framework on the ex-slave community, but its deficiencies for analyzing their adversaries are equally debilitating. A narrow focus on the intense racial antipathy suffusing the rhetoric of counter-revolution in the South tends to reduce what was a profound social confrontation into a mere clash over competing racial identities, and to reduce the intensely class-conscious worldview animating propertied Southern conservatives to “white supremacy”, or plainly racial motivations. Such a restricted approach underestimates the stakes involved in Reconstruction and obscures the “complex interpenetration of racial, class, and social conflict” that characterized this tumultuous period.<sup>8</sup>

Like the rice swamps out of which they developed, the 1876 strikes offer fertile ground for revisiting the most compelling issues raised in Reconstruction historiography. They expose, as few events do, the sharp tensions between the African-American, working-class constituency that provided the Republican party with its only dependable Southern constituency and that party’s vacillating, mostly (but not exclusively) white, bourgeois leadership. In her important recent study, Heather Cox Richardson has made the case that Northern Republican elites were driven to “abandon the mid-century vision of an egalitarian free labor society” by assertive freedpeople oblivious to the “mutual interests” that ostensibly bound them and their employers. But her thesis rests almost entirely on Northern published opinion rather than the actual record of conflict in the South.<sup>9</sup>

Among those who have analyzed the relationship between southern Republican officials and their black constituency, the picture is more complicated: few would dispute that African-American laborers succeeded, to some extent, in adapting party institutions at the grassroots level to their own requirements,<sup>10</sup> but beyond that there exists a considerable

8. I am grateful to Bruce Baker for sharing his insights on the persistence of Dunning in modern Reconstruction historiography. Quote from Armstead L. Robinson, “Beyond the Realm of Social Consensus: New Meanings of Reconstruction for American History”, *Journal of American History*, 68 (1981), p. 277.

9. Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Cambridge, MA [etc.], 2001), p. xiv.

10. See, for example, the fine studies by Michael W. Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change during Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2000), and John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana’s Sugar Parishes, 1862–1880* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2001).

divergence of opinion. Some, invoking the “proletarian” characterization of Southern Republicanism pioneered by W.E.B. DuBois, have suggested that the party “in various times and places [...] function[ed] in effect as a labor party”, while others, notably Thomas Holt and William C. Hine, have emphasized the divisions that developed – not only between the party’s black base and its predominantly white leadership, but also between black laborers and “representative men” of the race who for the most part shared the bourgeois orientation of white Republican officials. The 1876 rice strikes illuminate these fracture lines clearly: in a series of highly effective mobilizations against local planters, Lowcountry fieldhands demonstrated a clear understanding of the critical issues at stake during that turbulent summer and fall. Their intervention contrasted not only with the feeble holding operation pursued by Republican moderates in the upper levels of the party, but also with the timidity of many locally rooted black officials nearer to the grassroots, who were either straightjacketed by their acceptance of the party’s attenuated free labor vision or complicit in black laborers’ defeat.<sup>11</sup>

In hindsight, it appears wholly predictable that a seemingly straightforward labor dispute between ex-slaves and their former masters would become thoroughly entangled with the political crisis that ushered in the overthrow of Reconstruction. White South Carolinian elites had provided the intellectual leadership for the secessionist vanguard in the run-up to Civil War and a disproportionate share of the Confederacy’s military cadre once battle was joined. They were constitutionally unreceptive to the notion of black political participation, let alone equality, and registered their unyielding opposition to the state’s Reconstruction government from the outset.<sup>12</sup> Close scrutiny of their attitudes to the new Republican-led

11. David R. Roediger, “What if Labor Were Not White and Male?”, in *idem*, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley, CA, 2002), pp. 200–201; Thomas Holt, *Black Over White: Negro Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (Urbana, IL, 1977); William C. Hine, “Black Organized Labor in Reconstruction Charleston”, *Labor History*, 25 (1984), pp. 504–517.

12. “Before Radical Reconstruction had even begun, before a single black person had announced his candidacy for any office”, Leon F. Litwack writes, “the white South rushed to pronounce the entire experiment in biracial democratic government a total failure”. See Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1980), p. 553. In his exhaustive survey of South Carolina history, Walter Edgar writes that “[e]xcept for halfhearted efforts” in the elections of 1870 and 1874, “whites simply took a walk” from state politics. With the “party of black Carolinians” in power at Columbia, “few whites thought it worth the effort to vote”, and some “gave up on South Carolina and immigrated westward”; Edgar, *South Carolina*, p. 393. In his penetrating study of the state’s conservative tradition, Charles J. Holden notes that prominent South Carolinian Edward McGrady, Jr “counseled patience” after Republicans gained the upper hand in shaping Reconstruction, and that as late as 1870 he “continued to advise a strategy of non-participation” in state politics. See Charles J. Holden, “‘The Public Business is Ours’: Edward McGrady Jr and the Challenge from Below, 1865–1900”, in *idem* (ed), *In the Great Maelstrom: Conservatives in Post-Civil War South Carolina* (Columbia, SC, 2002), p. 49.

government, however, suggests that elite hostility was based not merely on a perceived affront to white *racial* sensibilities, but on resentment over the disruption of their authority *as employers* that emancipation had introduced.<sup>13</sup> Mastery over their overwhelmingly black workforce seemed to white elites inextricably bound up with the maintenance, or restoration, of racial supremacy.<sup>14</sup>

Acutely nostalgic for the unambiguous social hierarchy that slavery had made possible, Southern planters were profoundly disoriented in their new free labor surroundings, vexed by the war of position they were now compelled to engage in with emancipated fieldhands. “The difficulties seem to thicken around us”, a disconsolate Ralph Middleton declared in 1870, “The fact is, there is a continuous struggle [underway] where the planter is all the time at a great disadvantage.” Blaming his woes in part on the distinctly post-emancipation phenomenon of labor scarcity, the Georgetown rice planter complained that “[t]he negroes do pretty much as they please[,] and laugh at threats of dismissal as there are any number of places where they can go”. His frustrations were echoed by the Georgia Agricultural Commissioner, who would later reflect that the war had left “labor [...] in a disorganized and chaotic state”, and the planters’ “power to compel the laborers to go into the rice-swamps utterly broken”.<sup>15</sup>

Like many of his peers,<sup>16</sup> Middleton attempted, through an exasperating process of trial and error, to come to terms with the new free labor arrangements. For several years he held out hope that the solution to his woes lay in the imposition of a wages system with strict deductions for time missed, but this his fieldhands resisted in favor of the relative

13. See Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction*, pp. x–xiv; Otto H. Olsen (ed.), *Reconstruction and Redemption in the South* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1980), p. 8; Robinson, “Beyond the Realm of Social Consensus”, pp. 291–297; James L. Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1977), pp. 191–195.

14. Holden observes that the mid-1870s witnessed a new convergence between “the traditionally antidemocratic views of South Carolina’s ruling elite”, and “growing national doubts about majoritarian rule”, a sensibility that included, but was not limited to, notions of black exclusion from the body politic on grounds of racial inferiority. Holden, “The Public Business is Ours”, p. 52. Wade Hampton’s strategy in the 1876 campaign suggested that some conservative white elites had reconciled themselves to limited black participation in government so long as that did not intrude on their class prerogatives. This racial accommodation was the source of divisions between straight-out militant Martin W. Gary and Hampton, and would later become an important flashpoint in the confrontation between the Tillman movement and traditional conservative elites in the 1880s.

15. Ralph I. Middleton to Henry A. Middleton, 8 February 1870; 16 April 1870; 29 December 1871; *Papers of Henry A. Middleton*, South Carolina Historical Society (hereafter SCHS); Frances Butler Leigh, *Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation since the War* (London, 1883), p. 264.

16. Like Middleton, whose plantation was located north of Charleston in Georgetown County, Louis Manigault recalled in reference to his experience at Gowrie that “All of this free-labor-system was perfectly new to me”, when he took charge there upon his return. See “Season of 1876 at Gowrie”, *Manigault Family Papers*, SHC.



independence they might secure through renting shares of land or working according to the established task system. When pressed to explain why he was unable to match “old-time” harvests on his uncle’s rice plantation, Middleton retorted that in order to do so he would require “the old-time facilities of labor”. Despairing that the “negroes are steadily more and more averse to hard work”, he inquired of his uncle whether he “would not like to import [...] 100 or so Chinamen” to replace blacks at Georgetown and Beaufort. Complaining later of the “incorrigible laziness of the negro”, Middleton noted that fieldhands refused outright to work in the rain or undertake the backbreaking “ditching work”, a dilemma that compelled his peers in Georgia to employ gangs of Irishmen in their place, among whom, they noted favorably, “there is no talking, as with negroes, no trifling, but the work goes on rapidly and in a serious manner”.<sup>17</sup>

Planters accurately discerned the decline of their authority in the proliferation of petty infractions like “trifling” and “talking”, but expressed their greatest resentment against the intensely *political* conversation that emancipation had touched off among black laborers. The proliferation of grassroots organizing by the Republican party (or perhaps the emergence of previously established, underground networks into above-ground, party institutions like the Union Leagues<sup>18</sup>) after the war had transformed black South Carolinians into “the most irrepressible democrats it is possible to conceive”, Florence planter Belton O’Neal Townsend grumbled in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly*, with deleterious consequences for whites’ ability to maintain discipline in the fields. Freedmen had proven themselves “totally unreliable” in the three growing seasons since emancipation, an up-country planter wrote in September 1867, “and since this political element has been introduced among them, they are utterly worthless”. Ralph Middleton complained, similarly, that the freedmen’s “heads are full of politics, and they have no idea of work

17. On Middleton’s attempts to devise and impose a viable wages system, see Ralph I. Middleton to Henry A. Middleton, 15 December 1868; 18 December 1868; 8 February 1870; 20 February 1870. On the need for “old-time facilities”, see Ralph I. Middleton to Henry A. Middleton, 20 March 1877. On black “aversion”, see Ralph I. Middleton to Henry A. Middleton, 28 August 1871, and on the possibility of introducing Chinese laborers, see Ralph I. Middleton to Henry A. Middleton, 24 August 1869. The “incorrigible laziness” of freed blacks is mentioned in Ralph I. Middleton to Henry A. Middleton, 13 November 1869. All of the above appear in *Henry A. Middleton Papers*, SCHS. Remarks on the superiority/passivity of Irish laborers appear in Manigault, “Season of 1876 at Gowrie”, *Manigault Family Papers*, SHC.

18. South Carolina’s Union Leagues seem to have developed in a more conservative direction than some of their counterparts elsewhere in the South. Holt writes that the state-wide Leagues, under the cautious direction of Francis L. Cardozo, “were never fully organized throughout the state, and [...] faded rather quickly after the first election”. See Holt, *Black Over White*, pp. 30–31. For evidence of a very different League dynamic, see Fitzgerald, *Union League Movement in the Deep South*.

until starvation forces them”, blaming his troubles at Georgetown on “two or three miserable Yankee negro politicians”.<sup>19</sup>

This excess of democracy was evident to low-country rice planters in the “extensive strike” their laborers inaugurated in late May, encompassing at the outset at least 10 plantations along the Combahee River and putting at risk more than 4,000 acres of rice.<sup>20</sup> The strike seems to have been initiated not by regular fieldhands, but by the “special day laborers”, casual workers – disproportionately female – who lived inland from the heavily cultivated riverbanks and hired themselves out at harvest time, and upon whom the planters first attempted to impose a reduction in wages from 50 to 40 cents a day.<sup>21</sup> Striking laborers dispatched a committee that offered to terminate their action if the reduction was withdrawn, but when planters rejected a settlement, they energetically set about extending the strike. Almost overnight, the conflict spread north to plantations along the Ashepoo River and expanded to take up grievances of the regular workforce, including their unwillingness to work for “cat’s wages” and resentment against payment in “checks” or “scrip” redeemable (up to two years’ distant) at plantation stores.<sup>22</sup> The strike would continue intermittently for nearly four months, defying resolution until by late October local planters – militant “states’-rights” Democrats almost to a man – were petitioning the Republican Governor with requests that he dispatch federal troops to suppress it.<sup>23</sup>

The rapid escalation of the May strikes attests to the polarization gripping the Lowcountry in the summer of 1876, but it also underscores the willingness of the freed community to rally behind its most vulnerable members – female casual laborers. Fieldhands organized under the plain but powerful designation of “the majority”<sup>24</sup> adopted the extremely

19. Belton O’Neal Townsend, “Political Condition of South Carolina”, *Atlantic Monthly* 39 (February 1877), p. 193; D.B.M. McLaurin to Henry A. Middleton, 26 September 1867; Ralph I. Middleton to Henry A. Middleton, 7 July 1869; *Henry A. Middleton Papers*, SCHS.

20. “The Strike along the Combahee”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 23 May 1876.

21. “RMD”, “The Rice Laborers’ Strike”, in [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 25 May 1876.

22. “The Black Labor Strike”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 24 May 1876. On the importance of scrip to the dispute, see Foner, “The Emancipated Worker”, pp. 91–92.

23. J.B. Bissell *et. al.* to Governor Chamberlain, 24 October 1876, letters received, box 15; folder 14, *Chamberlain Papers*, South Carolina Department of Archives and History [hereafter SCDAH].

24. The strikers’ adoption of the potent title of “the majority” is discussed in “No Bayonets Need Apply”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 3 June 1876, and in “The Scene of the Strike”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 28 May 1876. “The negroes either believe, or pretend to believe”, Beaufort Democrat and rifle-club commander William Elliott explained in a letter to Governor Daniel H. Chamberlain, “that they have perfect ‘right to do anything they choose with their own color’, and become beside themselves with fury at the sight of a white man undertaking to ‘interfere’”. See William Elliott to Governor Chamberlain, 12 September 1876, telegrams received, box 14; folder 29, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH. Colleton County Sheriff J.K. Terry later recalled that the strikers “said to me they had formed themselves into a society or made a



Figure 2. South Carolina rice workers, c.1895. Female ricehands, consigned to seasonal labor in the low country and designated “special day laborers” after emancipation, were especially hard hit by the planters’ attempts to reduce wages in the summer of 1876.

*Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC*

effective form of a “tramping” strike. “Negro bands of fifty to a hundred” marched “from place to place”, an eyewitness reported, “carry[ing] with them in their train all of the men who are [...] able to walk or ride”. At Green Pond a “passer-by” reported seeing “a band of twenty or thirty” strikers “with a flag, a drum, and one bayonet on a staff [...] tying up a colored man named Bacchus Moultrie”. These roving pickets, dubbed “licking bands” by the strikers, “moved on at the call of a long tin trumpet”, according to one observer, “with sticks and bayonets [...] apparently enjoying themselves as if on a holiday parade”. Those on the receiving end of the strikers’ enthusiasm were unlikely to consider the marches such frivolous affairs. Colleton planter Robert Fishburne, chair of the county Democratic organization and one of the striker’s principal adversaries, complained of “widespread terrorism among the laborers” in lower Colleton. Pompey Jones, a plantation foreman and one of a handful of blacks prominent in trying to win the Lowcountry workforce to an alliance with white conservatives, testified that the “striking party” would “go round on the plantation and catch every foreman”, whipping those who defied the strike order. A correspondent signing himself “Planter”

rule among themselves to not allow any man to work at the reduced wages on the rice-plantations; that a majority of them were in favor of that, and they thought a majority ought to rule. They seemed to be honest in it that a majority should rule.” See “Testimony of J.K. Terry”, *Papers in the Case of Tillman vs Smalls: US. House of Representatives, 45th Congress, 1st Session, Misc., Doc. No. 11* [hereafter *Tillman vs Smalls*], p. 440.

told the *News and Courier* that a band of fifty-three strikers visited his property in late May and had “quite a parade”. “After speaking and the like”, he reported, “every one of the men there joined them and went to a neighboring place, where they committed acts of violence such as has not been witnessed since the days of Sherman’s marches”. Ten were “severely flogged”, according to this suspect rendering, before the strikers crossed the Combahee and allegedly whipped another thirty.<sup>25</sup>

Planters and their sympathizers in the Democratic press attempted, from the outset of the strikes, to cast them as electioneering stunts, in which Republican operatives manipulated the ostensibly ignorant mass of fieldhands into striking over imaginary grievances. Local elites were convinced that, having been denied the civilizing influence of substantial contact with whites, Lowcountry blacks were exceptionally credulous and therefore susceptible to being used as pawns by scheming politicians.<sup>26</sup> With a critical election looming, conservatives suspected the strike was “a device of the radical leaders to create an excitement, and to cause dissensions between the races in order to wield the colored vote into a solid mass”. It had been a “part of the radical programme to assist their cause in the Autumnal elections”, one planter suggested, “to make [the Lowcountry laborers] believe they were not sufficiently paid for their

25. “Statement of an Eyewitness”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 26 May 1876; “Black Labor Strike”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 24 May 1876; “Testimony of Robert Fishburne”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 173; “Testimony of Pompey Jones”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 60; “Numerous Whippings Yesterday”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 27 May 1876.

26. Louis Manigault related in his diary the “well known fact that the negro along the coast is far more ignorant than the man of his color in the interior, and up-country; on account of the white, and black man, being more together upon the up-country farms, and the latter thus acquiring more of the habits of the white man”. Similarly ‘C. McK.’ advocated leniency toward the Combahee strikers “in consideration of their ignorance and the ease with which false ideas can be promulgated among them”. See “Combahee and Ashepoo”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 28 May 1876.

In testimony some months following the strike, verbal confrontation on this point developed between a local Republican official and a Democratic lawyer determined to prove the special ignorance of the “Combahee crowd”. “Of what class of people as to intelligence?” were the strikers, the lawyer inquired, to which the Colleton county auditor, W.A. Paul, responded, “about as intelligent as the people generally be in this section of the country”. The exchange continued:

Q. What is the character of the people of this section as to intelligence?

A. Very good for an uneducated people.

Q. They are then uneducated and ignorant?

A. I will say that they are uneducated, but cannot say that they are all ignorant.

Q. Why cannot you speak as well to the one as to the other?

A. Because I find that we meet with men every day of our lives that are men with sound judgments; therefore I cannot say a man is entirely ignorant that is deprived of an education.

Q. Is it not the general habit of uneducated crowds to be disorderly, and more especially the habit of what is known as the Combahee crowd?

A. Not generally. I have never heard of them being rough, only among their own party [...].

The above appears in “Testimony of W.A. Paul”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 397.

day's labor". Politics was "largely mixed with their harangues and proceedings", a *News and Courier* correspondent observed at the initiation of the strike, and the planter's vulnerability at harvest time "seized upon by a few bad, designing, factious leaders" who led the "discontented" on their "march" through the rice district. The *Savannah Morning News* went further, asserting that the strike had been the work of "but a few maliciously disposed negroes, who were [...] paid by radical leaders to create disturbances for the good of their party". One implausible report even suggested that the whippings had been carried "by outside parties and not those engaged in rice cultivation".<sup>27</sup>

Attempts to cast the disturbances in a conspiratorial mould may have helped to galvanize conservative resistance, but as a guide for defusing black Lowcountry discontent they were counterproductive. The conservative press, which only days before the May outbreak had acknowledged the intense hardship facing freedpeople, dramatically reversed itself as soon as the objects of their sympathy took matters into their own hands. Under the difficult circumstances facing planters, "the attempt on the part of the hands to advance the wages is without any ground of reason or justice", the *Journal of Commerce* now suggested. Ashepoo planter, David McPherson, informing Governor Daniel Chamberlain that his laborers were "abundantly supplied with the comforts of life", insisted that the situation required "an immediate stop [...] to any further raiding", and the arrest and punishment of "leaders [...] for offenses committed on harmless people". The otherwise astute Republican Attorney General, William Stone, who considered the disturbances on the Combahee "very serious", attempted to convince Chamberlain that by the "arrest of three or four ringleaders" the strike could be "broken up", a simplistic approach (later revised) which mirrored that of the propertied Lowcountry conservatives then in regular communication with Stone's office.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly there was something unfathomable for conservatives in the powerful mobilizations rolling out across the Lowcountry. One early commentator depicted the strikers as completely unaware of the wider

27. "Statement of an Eyewitness", [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 26 May 1876; Manigault, "Season of 1876 at Gowrie", in Manigault Family Papers, SHC; "Strike Along the Combahee", [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 23 May 1876; "One Effect of the Late South Carolina Riots", *Savannah Morning News*, 30 September 1876. White Colleton storekeeper, Smith Leach, dismissed (p. 406) the suggestion that the strike was either a radical plot or a manifestation of Republican in-fighting: "I do not think politics had anything to do with it", he told the court in *Tillman vs Smalls*, "for the reason there was Democrats, Driffle men and Terry men, in the strike". Driffle and Terry were the leaders of the rival Republican factions in the rice district.

28. "The Combahee Strikers: Wage Demands Exorbitant", [Charleston] *Journal of Commerce*, 23 August 1876; William Stone to Governor Chamberlain, 24 May 1876, telegrams received, box 18: folder 2, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDH; David McPherson to Governor Chamberlain, 27 May 1876, *Chamberlain Papers*, telegrams received, box 18: folder 3, SCDH.

import of their actions. “Distance lends enchantment”, “R.M.D.” suggested in the *News and courier* in late May, “and this matter creates more interest in Charleston than at the scene of the troubles. Here the blacks do not appreciate the trouble they are making.” Such a view may have acted as a corrective on the tendency of local whites to cast the most parochial affairs in epochal terms, but it suggests also that their complacency led whites to underestimate the strikers’ astute grasp of the drift of state and national politics.<sup>29</sup>

Given the low levels of literacy among black workers, the transmission of information about developments beyond the rice district relied on an overwhelmingly oral culture, which emanated from local churches, secret societies, and Republican-led mass meetings. Steven Hahn’s point about the crucial role that clandestine networks constructed under slavery played in black working-class politics during Reconstruction is clearly born out in the Lowcountry.<sup>30</sup> One sympathetic wartime journalist, struck by the familiarity he observed between two slaves who had never previously met (a teamster who had been assigned to transport him into the state’s interior, and another dispatched to retrieve him en route), was told, upon inquiring whether there was “some secret understanding between you [two]”, that “*all the bracks [sic] am freemasons*”. “I gabe Jim de grip; dat tole him”, his driver disclosed, but protested, when pressed further, that he “can’t say no more [as] I SHUD BREAK DE OATH EF I DID”. The traveler came away from the episode convinced that “there exists among the blacks a secret and widespread organization of a Masonic character, having its grip, pass-word, and oath”, with “competent and *earnest* men” as leaders<sup>31</sup> (emphasis, capitalization in original). Such networks, which predated formal organization under the Republican banner, could be remarkably effective in keeping fieldhands abreast of developments. A Freedmen’s Bureau agent observing an earlier confrontation over wages was struck by “how unanimous [the rice-district laborers] are, communicating like magic, and now holding out, knowing the importance of every day in regard to the welfare of the next crop”.<sup>32</sup>

A mass meeting organized at the outset of the 1876 strikes at Eustis Oaks on the Tomotley plantation illustrates both the power of this oral

29. “The Black Labor Strike”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 24 May 1876.

30. Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*.

31. James R. Gilmore (writing under the pseudonym Edmund Kirke), *Life in Dixie’s Land, or South in Secession Time* (London, 1863), pp. 36, 73–76. Writing in 1861, Gilmore concluded (p. 77) from this and a series of similar encounters with slaves over a six-week period that the “knowledge of the real state of political affairs which the negroes have acquired through this organization is astonishingly accurate; their leaders possess every essential of leadership – except, it may be, military skill – and they are fully able to cope with the whites”.

32. H.W. Smith to ‘Lieut.’, 21 January 1866, letters received, Series 4112, Departments of the South and South Carolina and the Second Military District, Record Group 393, part 1, National Archives, cited in Strickland, “Traditional Culture and Moral Economy”, p. 294 (n. 39).

tradition and the critical role played by such networks in galvanizing freedpeople. The meeting was launched with a “song composed in the rice fields, with the chorus ‘all that we want is the green backs’”, and “sung [with the] indescribable enthusiasm for which rice fieldhands have long been noted”. Strikers had been incited early on by their “excitement” over the menacing, white supremacist revision of the traditional religious hymn, “A Charge to Keep I Have”, that had appeared in the *News and Courier*, and which contained a pledge to “make [the black laborer] know his place”.<sup>33</sup> The strikers knew the song “by heart”, one reporter observed, and were aware too that it had been “sung by the Democrats of [Mississippi]”. One laborer remarked that he had been unable to “understand at all what the [strike] trouble was about” until he heard the song, “and then he knowed all about it”. It must be remembered, too, that the same networks that disseminated news from one plantation to another could also carry news out of the rice district. When Charleston blacks took command of the city’s main streets during rioting in early September, they reportedly chanted, “We lick the whites on Combahee/And teck the city on next day./D-o-w-n with the white man”. In that confrontation, conservatives commented on the “prompt appearance, full preparation, and apparently good organization of the negroes”, and the Charleston “mob” was reported to have held “boats [...] in readiness to notify the negroes on the islands and to obtain reinforcements”.<sup>34</sup>

Elitist assumptions about the absence of initiative or political capacity among the illiterate mass of freedmen and women blinded planters to the very deep resonance that the strikes elicited among their workforce. To be sure, labor militancy over the coming months was neither completely spontaneous nor leaderless. But such leaders as emerged derived their authority at the grassroots level, and seemed willing, at critical junctures, to act independently of the local Republican apparatus. This raises the intriguing question of the extent to which the public face of Lowcountry Republicanism overlapped with grassroots and underground freedpeople’s leadership, a question for which the sources provide no definitive answer. In any case, the strike leaders’ relationship to rank-and-file fieldhands had

33. “To serve the present age/Our pockets we must fill./We’ll make them work for wages now/And never pay the bill./Arm me with jealous care/To make him know his place,/And oh thy servant, Lord, prepare/To rule the Negro race.” See “The Rice Laborers’ Strike”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 25 May 1876.

34. “Sheldon Report”, *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 31 August 1876; “The Black Labor Strike”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 24 May 1876; “Terrible State of Affairs in South Carolina”, reprinted from the [New York] *Sun* in the [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 23 September 1876; “Wednesday’s Radical Republican Negro Riot”, [Charleston] *Journal of Commerce*, 8 September 1876. On the Charleston Riots, see Melinda Meek Hennessey, “Racial Violence during Reconstruction: The 1876 Riots in Charleston and Cainho”, *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 86 (1985), pp. 100–112.

been forged in “labor unions”,<sup>35</sup> clubs, and secret societies – “conclaves” as one hostile account referred to them – which were for the most part impermeable to white scrutiny. In a rare acknowledgment that reports of whipping had been exaggerated (strikers referred to it as “a little brushing off”<sup>36</sup>), one observer reported from Colleton that “the strikes seem to have been conducted with order and discipline, as if controlled by some skillful leaders as yet unknown”. “[T]he colored people”, he elaborated, “with the secretiveness which so largely exists [among them], profess to know nothing when questioned”, while the “white planters, being in direct antagonism with the laborers [...] are of course unable to give any authoritative facts concerning the motives and acts of their [employees]”. But the cause of the unrest was straightforward, a twenty-six year-old fieldhand asserted: the strike, brought on by “hunger”, had simply provided workers with a rare opportunity to “halloo out loud” their otherwise “secret groanings”.<sup>37</sup>

This initial confrontation in late May subsided fairly quickly, and planters comforted themselves, fleetingly, with the illusion that matters had been brought to a resolution. But the context in which the walkouts had erupted grew more polarized as the autumn elections approached, and the rice district would be convulsed by chronic, rolling strikes for much of the summer. The fusion of political concerns and economic grievances in Lowcountry militancy was evident from the outset, although not in the constricted, electioneering form conservatives depicted. Both white conservatives and black radicals had been aroused by events in Mississippi the previous year where, through a combination of orchestrated paramilitary violence and systematic fraud, Democrats had managed to overthrow Republican rule.<sup>38</sup> White Mississippians’ triumph “put new thought and heart” into their South Carolina counterparts, allowing conservatives to imagine a scenario where they might “by any and every means and at any cost of life and money” shake off Republican rule and re-establish control over the black laboring population. Freedpeople understood that these were the stakes in the looming election, and among them

35. See “Erroneous Reports”, *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 7 September 1876, and “The Strike on the Combahee”, [Charleston] *Journal of Commerce*, 18 September 1876.

36. Quoted by ‘C.McK.’ in “Colleton Troubles”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 2 June 1876.

37. John W. Ogilvie *et. al.* to Governor Chamberlain, 24 August 1876, *Chamberlain Papers*, telegrams received, box 14: folder 10, SCDAH; “Black Labor Strike”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 24 May 1876; “Rice Laborers’ Strike”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 25 May 1876; “Testimony of Thomas D. Richardson”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 411.

38. On the Mississippi Plan and its effect in South Carolina, see Edmund L. Drago, *Hurrah for Hampton: Black Red Shirts in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (Fayetteville, AR, 1998), pp. 7–9 and Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction, 1861–1877* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1965), pp. 406, 410.



apocalyptic fears about the possibility of conservative restoration fueled a desperate, uncompromising militancy.<sup>39</sup>

Although one or two planters seemed to have attempted a reasonable settlement early on, the rollcall of those engaged in confrontation with the strikers reads like a *Who's Who* of the Lowcountry Democratic establishment, among whom there existed little sentiment for compromise. One veteran of the 1876 campaign recalled Colleton as “probably the most fiercely determined county of the state”, which had a “large number of high spirited, hot blooded young men of old and once wealthy families” determined to resist “degradation in continuance of Republican and Negro rule”. The county was in “a blaze of excitement”, planter John Larescey later testified, recalling that he “did not know of a single white man in that whole county but what was a Democrat”. J. Bennett Bissell, upon whose Combahee property the dispute over payment in scrip first erupted, was certainly one of those who, “by the restless, reckless energy of desperation, the strong hand and reputations [...] of being very dangerous when pushed too far”, insisted on crushing the strike at all cost. The largest rice planter in the district, he was prominently linked to white paramilitaries and to the planters’ hard-line policy, making incessant demands upon Chamberlain and his Attorney General to break the strike forcefully. “Captain” Robert Fishburne had “suppressed” the strike on his plantation “*vi et armis*”, by taking the strikers’ “rifles and [...] by [running] them into the river”. Much of his extended family was involved, at the center of the strike and in the campaign to deliver a Democratic majority in Colleton,<sup>40</sup> as were “Colonel” Alan C. Izard and James B. Heyward. Their involvement in the strike was driven by a shared determination that a “straight-out” Democratic victory – the triumph of an undiluted conservative ticket – was not only desirable but eminently achievable.<sup>41</sup>

Previously, even the most stalwart conservatives recognized that the black electoral majority in South Carolina compelled them to seek fusion with the least objectionable Republican candidates, and as late as mid-June, staunch Democrats remained determined to avoid “the ruinous consequences of straight-outism”. Writing from Colleton, “Rusticus” reminded those who had “urged that it is best [...] to run a strictly Democratic ticket” that the “[c]olored vote in this county stands almost two to one as compared with the white”. Whatever merits the straight-out ticket might hold elsewhere in the state, he insisted, in Colleton “we would not ask any

39. Williams, *Hampton and His Red Shirts*, p. 31.

40. On Fishburne’s brother William’s agitation for the straight-out policy, see “The Colleton Democracy”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 10 June 1876.

41. Williams, *Hampton and His Red Shirts*, 331; “Testimony of John Larescey”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 191; Information on Bissell in Suzanne Cameron Linder, *Historical Atlas of the Rice Plantations of the ACE River Basin – 1860* (Columbia, SC, 1995), p. 86; Williams, *Hampton and his Red Shirts*, p. 331; “Testimony of Robert Fishburne”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 173.

man to even lose a day's work to go to the polls to vote [the] ticket if it is to be straight Democratic". The black voter "will not [...] desert his party [and] become a Democrat", Rusticus cautioned, "and to force that matter is to lose his cooperation altogether". Better to reach a pragmatic compromise, he suggested, than to throw all away on an unlikely straight-out breakthrough. This pragmatic position was endorsed by the voice of Democratic respectability, the *News and Courier*, which reasoned that "the fight is lost as soon as a straight-out ticket is nominated". The policy delivered victory only in those "counties which can [...] be carried by the Democrats without a 'straight-out' [...] ticket", but surrendered any possible gains "in counties where the negroes are in the majority, leaving those counties at the mercy of the extreme Radicals".<sup>42</sup>

Conservative opponents of the straight-out policy were buoyed in their optimism by the series of compromises and outright reversals of radical policy wrung from Republican Governor Daniel Chamberlain. From the beginning of his administration in 1874 Chamberlain had won the support of prominent conservatives, and of Charleston's commercial elite in particular,<sup>43</sup> by his campaign against the alleged "excesses" perpetrated by his own party. Responding to an outcry among propertied whites over the tax increases required to fund an expanded state role in the welfare of its most hard-pressed citizens, Chamberlain had embarked on a program of fiscal retrenchment that delighted moderate elements in the Democratic party but left "[n]egro leaders [...] struggling, sometimes unsuccessfully, to defeat the socially reactionary legislative initiatives of their own" elected Governor.<sup>44</sup> In late June the *News and Courier* offered its endorsement of

42. "Low-Country Politics: The Difficulties of Counties Having Negro Majorities", [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 19 June 1876; "Can a Straightout Fight be Successfully Fought this Year in South Carolina?", [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 30 May 1876.

43. "Particularly sympathetic to Chamberlain's reform efforts", Joel Williamson writes, "were the top echelon financiers and businessmen of Charleston. Their political cat's-paw was Francis Warrington Dawson [...]. By bitter experience, the business elite had found that political corruption was bad for their profession [but that] political violence was even worse. What they wanted was reform by orderly, legalistic processes, and Chamberlain showed himself to be much more able at this task than any native white conservative [...] then in view." See Williamson, *After Slavery*, pp. 401–402.

"It is sometimes thought", editors at the *News and Courier* acknowledged, "that Charleston is inclined to be over-cautious". The explanation for this lay in the city's role as a dispenser of Northern capital to the planting interests, they reasoned, and "when Charleston urges, as she does, that politics be treated as a matter of business, not as a sentiment, and that extreme policies and measures be rejected, the sole object is to maintain confidence in the stability of our industries [...]. Audacity suits those who have nothing to lose", they wrote, "better than it suits those who pay a fifth, at least, of the whole of the State taxes." See "Charleston Conservatism", [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 3 August 1876.

44. "Many of [Chamberlain's] reforms", Simkins and Woody note, "were accomplished in spite of the passive or active opposition of the radical majority in the legislature. Only by diligent effort had the legislature been persuaded to sustain vetoes." See Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina during Reconstruction*, p. 477.

the Republican Governor in the upcoming elections. "With the same sincerity" with which it had opposed him two years previously, the paper now endorsed Chamberlain, advising Democrats "to make no opposition to his re-election". White conservatives had made substantial gains over the previous two years, editors acknowledged, but "their strength would have availed us nothing had Governor Chamberlain been what we feared he would be, and what the Radical[s] expected him to be".<sup>45</sup>

This policy of cooperation seemed to some prominent Democrats vindicated during the May strike wave. Although he publicly expressed sympathy "with all who are struggling for a bare subsistence", Chamberlain admonished strikers to avoid interfering with strike-breakers, declaring that it was "wrong to trouble any man who is willing to work, no matter how low the wages". In response to a direct request from leading planter, J. Bennett Bissell, Chamberlain appointed R.H. Colcock as trial justice in Colleton, an appointment that the *News and Courier* heartily supported, but which outraged Republicans in the rice district, who charged that Colcock "had no interest in the laborers, and would do whatever the planters told him to do". He resisted appeals for the removal of a second trial justice identified by Beaufort's leading black Republican, Robert Smalls, as "a large planter [...] who issues checks to his laborers", but was less obliging to planter demands for "severe application of the law", hopeful for now that he could defuse the crisis without completely alienating a constituency whose support he would desperately require at election time, and who were already deeply skeptical about the course he had set for the Republican party. Overall, however, his efforts to "facilitate a settlement and to quiet the troubles" in the low country were "favorably spoken of" among prominent Democrats.<sup>46</sup>

45. Holt, *Black Over White*, p. 153; "Ourselves and Governor Chamberlain", [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 28 June 1876. Chamberlain had by this time "become the toast of upper-crust Democratic society", Eric Foner writes, "forging an open alliance with the [Charleston] *News and Courier*'s influential editor, Francis W. Dawson". See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York, 1988), pp. 543–544. "Chamberlain's attempt to create a new party alignment of whites and conservative Negroes", Thomas Holt argues, "contributed directly to the dismantling of South Carolina Republicanism"; Holt, *Black Over White*, p. 4. James S. Allen concurs, arguing that Chamberlain proved "extremely conciliatory under the pressure of the Right. He appointed a number of Conservatives as judges, disbanded the Negro militia in a county where it was most needed, alleviated taxes against the large planters and, in general, started the work which the counter-revolution finished in 1876"; James S. Allen, *Reconstruction: the Battle for Democracy* (New York, 1937), p. 204. See also Camejo, *Racism, Revolution and Reaction*, p. 159, and William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction: 1869–1879* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1979), p. 316.

46. Chamberlain's telegram to Colleton Sheriff Terry is quoted in "Troubles in Colleton", [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 27 May 1876. Planter Robert Fishburne discusses Colcock's appointment in his testimony in *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 197. See also William Stone to Governor Chamberlain, 24 May 76, telegrams received, box 18: folder 2, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAAH. Fuller's appointment is discussed in Robert Smalls to Governor Chamberlain, 24 August 76,

A second wave of strikes erupted in mid-August under completely altered circumstances. The massacre of scores of black militia men and civilians by white paramilitaries at Hamburg on 8 July polarized the state to such a degree that many considered civil war inevitable,<sup>47</sup> and in this charged context straight-outs gained the upper hand within Democratic ranks, effectively silencing the cooperationist wing of the party and nominating a ticket headed by former Confederate general, Wade Hampton, the state's wealthiest planter and the embodiment of its paternalist antebellum aristocracy. In the state's interior, where whites enjoyed a demographic advantage, conservatives were confident that by implementing the "Mississippi plan" and intimidating blacks into either voting the Democratic ticket or staying away from the polls, they could "redeem" the state, and their confidence began to infect the Lowcountry. In Charleston the *News and Courier* had endured the derision of its straight-out rivals<sup>48</sup> and fought Chamberlain's corner, endorsing his candidacy as late as 7 July, but Hamburg brought all of this to an end. Among leading Lowcountry planters, the straight-outs appear to have had the upper hand from the very beginning, and the new turn in state politics reinforced their determination to confront the radicals in their Lowcountry stronghold. Deeply offended at the challenge to their prerogative manifested in the strike and amenable, even eager for a repressive solution to their predicament, Lowcountry elites braced themselves for a campaign aimed at delivering labor peace and restoring the "natural ruling element" to power across the state.<sup>49</sup>

*Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH. Democratic approval of Chamberlain is expressed in "Latest News from the Combahee and Ashepoo Rice Fields", [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 27 May 1876.

47. The massacre followed an altercation between parading militia men and two white men in the mostly black township of Hamburg on 4 July 1876. When local authorities scheduled a hearing about the incident for 8 July, the whites arrived escorted by artillery-equipped rifle clubs, whose leaders ignored authorities and demanded that the militia turn in its weapons and apologize for the incident. When the militia commander refused, firing began, continuing for five hours and leaving scores dead – the vast majority of them African-American – including a half dozen prisoners executed after their capture. See Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, pp. 306–307, and Zuczek, *State of Rebellion*, pp. 163–165.

48. Their differences over Democratic strategy reportedly led Dawson and *Journal of Commerce* editor R.B. Rhett, Jr to the brink of a duel or, as one Republican newspaper put it, "pistols and coffee for two". See the *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 17 August 1876.

49. On Hamburg and the demise of the cooperationist strategy, see Holt, *Black Over White*, p. 202, and Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina during Reconstruction*, p. 485. On the "resurgence of the Straightout Democracy" (which he describes as a "return by the native whites to their true selves"), see Williamson, *After Slavery*, p. 406. In testimony after the restoration of conservative rule, low-country elites attempted to distance themselves from the "Edgefield policy" associated with paramilitary methods, but their disavowal is contradicted by their actual behavior in the strike. On divisions in the Beaufort and Colleton Democratic organizations, see "The Feeling in the State", [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 9 August 1876. On election day Colleton Democrats expressed themselves unconcerned about the election of Republican local officials but

Intransigence was not confined to conservatives in the wake of the Hamburg atrocity, however. The Lowcountry's highly politicized black Republican constituency, freshly confident in the wake of their success in the May strikes<sup>50</sup> and deeply stirred by the events at Hamburg, were in no mood to allow conservatives to recapture state power. Their growing disaffection with Chamberlain's strategy of compromise added to their anxious militancy: freedpeople across the state now blamed the Governor for allowing the conservatives to regain their footing. At the state Republican convention in Orangeburg, reporters found it "a matter of deep astonishment to see the deep-seated opposition to Chamberlain among the negroes of this county, as well as Barnwell, Colleton, and the upper part of Beaufort". Chamberlain was reported to have been "so persistently interrupted by his own party" that he stormed out of the convention "in a fit of disgust". Similarly, a meeting of Republicans at Barnwell turned down a resolution endorsing Chamberlain's candidacy, and observers noted that the attempt "did not take well with the negroes".<sup>51</sup>

With their large, assertive black majorities, Beaufort and Colleton counties constituted the epicenter of anti-Chamberlain sentiment in the 1876 campaign. The Republican constituency was internally divided, with hostility to the Governor most powerfully evident at the grassroots, among black laborers. At local level, the Governor's "anti-corruption" campaign had been perceived as an attack on black influence in the party,<sup>52</sup>

determined to secure a Hampton victory. "They did say just give us Hampton; it is all we want", black Walterboro Republican Thomas D. Richardson recalled. Colleton County Auditor W.A. Paul confirmed that "many colored men vote[d] the Republican ticket with Daniel H. Chamberlain scratched", a formula suggested by "leading Democrats"; "Testimony of Thomas D. Richardson", *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 409; "Testimony of W.A. Paul", *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 397. On the Democrats' willingness to sacrifice local offices for the greater prize of a Hampton victory, see also "Testimony of C.P. Brock", *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 401.

50. While the exact terms of the May strike settlement are difficult to uncover, planter Robert Fishburne conceded in testimony that the "planters did not succeed" in the "attempt [...] in the Combahee and Ashepoo sections to reduce the wages of laborers during the summer months". His assessment was supported by Charleston constable James P. Low, who reported in mid-September that the "laborers are at work again, but [...] upon terms which are very onerous to the planters. Wages have been largely increased, and payment in cash every night has been conceded at least by some planters. Such success having attended the strike the planters are full of alarm, for they have no guarantee that new demands will not be made any day." Foner writes that "most planters acceded to the strikers' demands"; "Testimony of Robert Fishburne", *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 174; James P. Low to Governor Chamberlain, 14 September 1876, letters received, box 14: folder 31, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH; Foner, "Emancipated Worker", p. 95.

51. "High Times at Orangeburg", [*Charleston*] *Journal of Commerce*, 23 August 1876.

52. "For Chamberlain", Foner writes, "reform offered a vehicle for strengthening white control of the Republican Party and wooing respectable members of the Democracy"; Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 543. While there can be no doubt that individual black Republican officials benefited from corruption, it might be argued that the party's black constituency suffered its effects more than any other element in the state. Otis A. Singletary contends, for example, that

and his posture in the May strikes – particularly the appointment of Colcock at their adversaries' behest – pushed many laborers into open opposition to his candidacy. Some measure of the anomaly this had introduced in party alignment can be gleaned in correspondence sent to the Governor in August, in which a Colleton conservative assured him that “amid some *seeming* opposition to yourself [here] among *Republicans* only; I want to assure you that [the] great majority of the Democrats will vote for you”, and that “*You will carry Colleton* most respectfully.” With white conservatives extending him their hearty support, however, Chamberlain was finding it increasingly difficult to get a hearing among Lowcountry blacks. He was forced to withdraw from a meeting in Walterboro, in the heart of the strike district, after “colored republicans [...] would not allow him to speak”.<sup>53</sup>

Freedpeople across South Carolina were dejected, often outraged by the behavior of their state leadership, but with an aggressive Democratic campaign underway they found themselves in a difficult predicament. The *Journal of Commerce* gloated, with an astute grasp of the dilemma confronting freedpeople, that the Republican “faithful are at a loss. They have thrown Chamberlain overboard”, editors noted, “and are now themselves adrift”. Blacks in the upcountry, far more vulnerable to Democratic intimidation, were profoundly disoriented by the paralysis in Republican ranks. But in Beaufort and Colleton, black laborers seemed to have determined to use their leverage at the height of the rice harvest to put some manners into the Lowcountry Democracy. In this sense, the strikes that re-emerged after mid-August were indeed political strikes, in which black workers attempted to wield their power to avert a conservative restoration.<sup>54</sup>

It is tempting, on one level, to characterize the schisms within the Republican party as racially driven, but developments in the Lowcountry during the summer of 1876 suggest that African Americans themselves were divided by the issues raised in the strikes. Although Republicans drew their southern constituency overwhelmingly from the black rural and urban working classes, the party's leadership at both state and national level was either indifferent towards or positively hostile to the emergence

the diversion of militia funds into individual hands left the militias poorly armed and unprepared for the conservative offensive. See Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction* (New York, 1963), p. 150.

53. The assurances offered to Chamberlain by this individual contradict a number of other accounts of the sentiment among Colleton Democrats. There were, across the state, some Democrats who favored gradualism and continued stability under Chamberlain to the prospects of race war seemingly contained in the white paramilitary campaign. See S.G. Welch to Governor Chamberlain, 23 August 76, letters received, box 14: folder 8, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH.

54. “High Times at Orangeburg”, [Charleston] *Journal of Commerce*, 23 August 1876.



Figure 3. The South Carolina rice harvest, c.1895. Freedpeople were aware that the planters were especially vulnerable to strike action at harvest time, when a week's delay in dispatching rice to market could jeopardize their entire annual earnings.

*Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC*

of a distinct labor interest among freedpeople. Faced in the South with an expectant and politically mobilized mass of former slaves anxious to realize the full promise of emancipation, and in the North with a growing and increasingly restive industrial working class, by late Reconstruction the party had ditched its prewar emphasis on the liberating aspects of free labor in favor of sermons about the mutual interests of employers and employed and admonishments against unruly workers.<sup>55</sup> Lack of support

55. Heather Cox Richardson contends that their “fear of a perceived black rejection of the free labor ideal, coupled with anxiety over labor unrest, made the self-styled ‘better classes’ abandon the mid-century vision of an egalitarian free labor society that included blacks as well as whites”. See Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction*, p. xiv.

and even “strong and forceful opposition” from Republican officials had derailed black longshoremen’s efforts to organize in early Reconstruction Charleston, and these anti-labor tendencies were powerfully reinforced under Chamberlain, whose revitalization of the Republican project rested explicitly on an alliance with the cream of Charleston’s powerful business-oriented conservatives.<sup>56</sup>

The upper ranks of the Lowcountry party apparatus proved only slightly more hospitable to rice laborers’ efforts in 1876 than their Charleston counterparts had been several years earlier. The embrace of a more coercive free-labor vision compatible with market imperatives was most evident in the record of the black Beaufort Republican, Thomas Hamilton. A state representative and a rice planter of some means, Hamilton was Chamberlain’s “champion” in the Lowcountry and at times his solitary supporter among local Republican officials, “dragging [the Governor’s case] before every meeting and pressing his claims for a re-nomination”. A forceful opponent of the strike from the outset, Hamilton reminded rice-workers gathered in a mass meeting at Crooked Hill that their interests were “identical with the owners of these plantations”, urging them to abandon the strike and steer clear of the “hellish politicians” urging them on, who were “paupers themselves [...] and too poor to tell the truth”.

Caught between the insurgency unleashed by the strike and the growing momentum of the conservative campaign, Hamilton moved ever closer to an alliance with the Lowcountry Democracy. Following the Hamburg atrocity, he submitted an open letter to the *News and Courier* denouncing the “indignation meetings” organized by party officials as “unnecessary” and “dangerous”. In September he accompanied black strike-breaker Tony Koger<sup>57</sup> to the offices of the straight-out *Journal of Commerce*, which subsequently carried a sensational account of his treatment at the hands of striking rice-workers under the headline, “Blacks Mobbing Blacks”. Hamilton’s posture led increasingly to clashes with the Republican rank-and-file, who charged him with “having sold out his race, and with trying to popularize himself with the Democrats and white folks to the disparagement of his [...] constituents”. By the end of the strike he had “crossed over”, abandoning the Republicans completely to join the campaign for conservative restoration.<sup>58</sup>

56. Hine, “Black Organized Labor in Reconstruction Charleston”, p. 512. Hine detects “a fairly distinct gap between the politicians and the post-war organized labor force which was largely unskilled and had only recently been freed from slavery.”

57. Koger’s name is sometimes spelled “Kroger” in newspaper and other accounts. I have elected to spell his name as it appears in *Tillman vs Smalls*.

58. Hamilton’s support for Chamberlain is discussed in “Sheldon Report”, *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 31 August 1876. See also “The Beaufort Radicals”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 17 July 1876, where Hamilton is described as a “formidable obstacle” to the “elements



Hamilton was not alone among Lowcountry Republicans in bolting from the party once the Democracy appeared to have gained the upper hand. Black Republican, Thomas E. Miller, later claimed to have been involved in negotiations with Wade Hampton to redraw Lowcountry electoral boundaries, slicing off the interior of Beaufort County to carve out a new district “with the objective of electing a Negro Democrat to the state Senate”. Nathaniel B. Myers, a “well-to-do freeborn mulatto”, stepped forward to stake his claim to the seat, abandoning the Republicans in an act that “destroyed his influence in Beaufort County”. After conservatives regained power, Hampton would attempt to make good his pledge, dividing interior Beaufort from the coast and renaming the new district Hampton County, but Myers’s desertion would go unrewarded. Having rid themselves of the Republican threat, “straight-outs” felt under no compulsion to allow even the much-attenuated back political representation that Miller and Myers had sought, making it “impossible for men of Myers’ stamp of the Negro race” to hold office on behalf of the Democrats.<sup>59</sup>

of probable opposition to [Chamberlain’s] renomination”, and Williams, *Hampton and his Red Shirts*, p. 44, where Hamilton is credited with carrying a Beaufort meeting for Chamberlain when “the real majority of the negroes seemed hostile”. The transcript of Hamilton’s speech at the Crooked Hill meeting appears in the [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 30 May 1876. Hamilton’s letter to the *News and Courier* appears under the heading “Indignation Meetings” on 25 July 1876. On Hamilton’s visit to the *Journal of Commerce*, see [New York] *World*, “Blacks Mobbing Blacks”, 27 September 1876. Republican denunciation of Hamilton’s role appears in “Firing the Negro Heart”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 1 August 1876.

Thomas Holt argues perceptively that Hamilton, whose outlook “prefigured the anti-labor, capitalistic, accommodationist philosophy of Booker T. Washington, abandoned the Republicans for Wade Hampton to complete the overthrow of Republican government, the last hope of justice – though perhaps a misplaced one – for those rice workers whom he addressed in the summer of 1876”; see Holt, *Black Over White*, p. 167. In Hamilton’s case, at least, the “disposition [evident among Lowcountry freedpeople] to be more influenced by the purely black representative than by the lighter colored politicians” offered no assurance that their interests would be protected; see “The Beaufort Radicals”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 17 July 1876. Similarly, “T.G.W.” reported from St Helena in early August that “a considerable degree of factions and party feeling is nurturing in opposition to the absorption of office by what are called ‘Yankee niggers’, and in favour of distributing some of the lucrative offices among the native blacks, who have become jealous as well as ambitious”. See “Firing the Negro Heart”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 1 August 1876.

59. A discussion of Miller’s role in the redistricting of Beaufort appears in Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes*, pp. 23–24. Eric Foner argues that Myers was “run off the Combahee by the strikers”, but if that is true it was probably because of his association with the Democrats and not with grassroots hostility to Chamberlain’s conciliation policy, which appears to have been widespread. Colleton representative, William F. Myers, appears to have been very enthusiastically supported by the strikers, for example, in his attempt to compel Chamberlain to dismiss trial justice Colcock. In early June Myers presented Chamberlain with a petition for Colcock’s removal signed by 300 Republicans, which the Governor “declined to regard”. See “The Colleton Troubles”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 2 June 1876.

The gulf between Republican officials and their black working-class constituents was most apparent in the upper ranks of the party, and Hamilton's derisive comments about the "paupers" at grassroots level suggests some relationship between strikers and the grassroots Republican cadre, but even at the local level officials sometimes exhibited an ambivalence about the field-hands' self-activity that could rankle their constituents. The problems that this created for grassroots morale, and the difficulties it introduced into the project of mounting an alternative to Chamberlain, can best be seen in the figure of Northern-born (but Beaufort-based) Republican, William J. Whipper. The Governor's refusal to sign the commission that would have allowed Whipper to take his seat as circuit court judge won the approval of Chamberlain's Democratic admirers but provoked serious disaffection within Republican ranks. Still, the Lowcountry Republican grassroots could be forgiven for their ambivalence about the outcome of this particular party crisis. Described by his biographer as one of the "wealthiest African Americans of the [antebellum] period", who had, like Hamilton, plowed some of his capital into rice planting, Whipper had been dragged into court by his own fieldhands for non-payment of wages.<sup>60</sup>

The conflict of interests embodied in the figures of Hamilton and Whipper is transparent, but similar incongruities appear to have shaped the intervention even of such a Republican stalwart as Robert Smalls, the former slave who had come to national prominence when he smuggled the Confederate steamship *Planter* out of Charleston harbor and into Union possession during the War. Smalls, whose name would be synonymous with black Lowcountry political power until his death in 1916, played a critical role at several junctures in countering Democratic slander against the strikers, in dissuading Chamberlain from resorting to military suppression, and in defending the basic right of laborers to strike for higher wages. But like Hamilton and Myers, Smalls was affected by the pressures of the moment, and seems to have been engaged in a complicated maneuver by which he aimed to salvage an enduring public role for himself out of the impending disaster of conservative restoration.<sup>61</sup>

Smalls informed the strikers early on that while he supported their right to seek higher wages, he endorsed Chamberlain's position that they had no

60. Holt, *Black Over White*, pp. 161–162, cited in David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 126. Before his journey south, David Zimmerman writes, Whipper had "amassed a sizable fortune" in his Columbia, Pennsylvania, business ventures, which included "land holdings in Pennsylvania and Canada, lumberyards, railroad cars, and a steam ship on Lake Erie"; see David Zimmerman, "William Whipper in the Black Abolitionist Tradition", <http://muweb.millersville.edu/~ugrr/resources/columbia/whipper.html>.

61. See Smalls to Chamberlain, 24 August 1876, letters received, box 18: folder 3, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDALH.

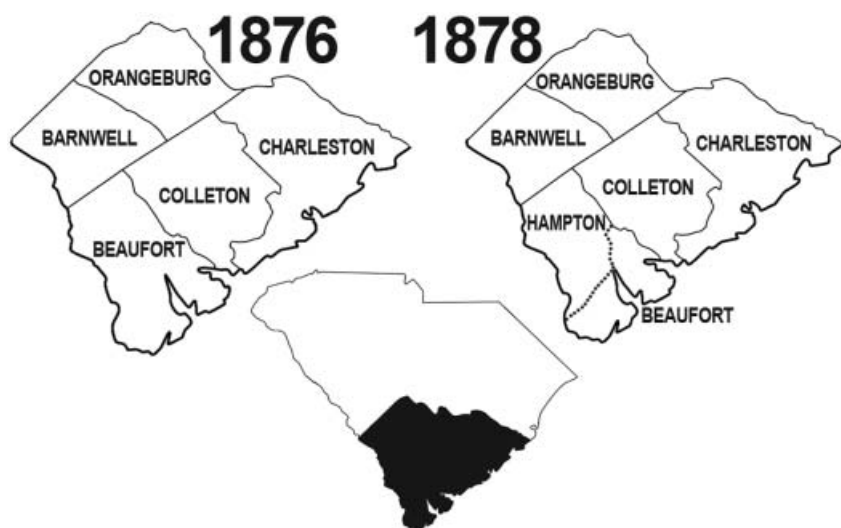


Figure 4. Re-districting of Beaufort County after the restoration of white supremacy in 1876. Beaufort County was carved up between the coastal district and the interior (renamed Hampton County) to dilute black workers' voting power.

Mapwork by Tim Belshaw

right to interfere with those inclined to work for less and that “if they persisted [...] the sheriff would come and arrest them and [...] he would assist in their arrest”. The perception grew among some strikers that “the sending of Smalls, in his capacity as Brigadier General of the State Militia [...] was designed primarily to help the white planters”, an explanation supported in correspondence to Chamberlain, in which planters and leading Democrats expressed their gratitude for Smalls’s help in calming tensions. “Too much praise cannot be given [Smalls] for his straight forward talk [to strikers], in condemning the wrong and upholding the right”, Beaufort planter, prominent conservative, and rifle club commander “Captain” William Elliott<sup>62</sup> wrote, after Smalls intervened to prevent a clash between strikers and a white posse they had cornered in the plantation commissary at Ballouville. “It is of no use to send anyone unknown to [the strikers] for they would not respect him but would say he

62. Elliott, who was selected as a Beaufort delegate to the Democratic state convention on 9 August, telegraphed Chamberlain in late August with a demand that federal troops be dispatched to the Combahee. His rifle club was credited with attempting to defend strike-breakers on the Lowndes plantation in early September. See “The Beaufort Democracy”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 9 August 1876; William Elliott to Governor Chamberlain, 22 August 1876, telegrams received, box 18: folder 4, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAAH; “The Rice Field Riots”, *Savannah Morning News*, 9 September 1876.

was sent there by the ‘rebels’ or ‘Democrats’”, two of Elliott’s associates explained to Attorney General, William Stone. “But the political leaders who are known can have great influence and can probably at once stop the troubles.” Both expressed themselves as “under great obligation” to Smalls for his role in dispersing the strikers at Ballouville. But the strikers were not so pleased: they were reported to have warned that “if the said Robert Smalls attempted to interfere with them [...] they would tie him up and give him 150 lashes on his big, fat ass”. Even Attorney General Stone acknowledged that while Smalls “seem[ed] to have accomplished much by his talks”, the strikers’ “operations have been resumed after he has gone”.<sup>63</sup>

Smalls’s conduct in the gathering electoral confrontation seems to have been marked by similar ambiguities. Secure in the large black majority that Beaufort guaranteed him and unamenable, at this point,<sup>64</sup> to “crossing over” or cutting a deal with the conservatives, Smalls engaged in a difficult balancing act for the duration of the strike. Outraged by Chamberlain’s feeble response to white aggression, he was capable of denouncing the Governor in the strongest terms when speaking before an audience of agitated rice workers. He had responded to Hamilton’s tribute to Chamberlain’s “reforms” at Eustis Oaks by insisting that he “did not want the republican party reformed by cleaning out every republican in it”. Contrasting the Governor’s pledge to planters that he would suppress the strike “if it took every man in the county to do it” with his inaction after Hamburg, Smalls found the Governor wanting. “When colored men are murdered”, he pointed out, “[Chamberlain] does

63. William Harrison Shirley, Jr, “A Black Republican Congressman during the Democratic Resurgence in South Carolina: Robert Smalls, 1876–1882” (MA thesis, University of South Carolina at Columbia, 1970), pp. 12–14, citing the *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 31 August 1876; William Elliott to Governor Chamberlain, 12 September 1876, telegrams received, box 14: folder 29, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH; William Stone to Governor Chamberlain, 12 September 1876, letters received, box 14: folder 30, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH; “Testimony of Robert Fishburne”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 175; William Stone to Governor Chamberlain, 14 September 1876, letters received, box 14: folder 31, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH.

Edward A. Miller, Jr contends that when the “rice field unrest was finally suppressed with ‘stringent measures’”, this was accomplished “with Smalls’s acquiescence, if not with his assistance”. Smalls’s position on strike-breaking was “the prevalent one at the time”, Miller asserts, “the early equivalent of a ‘right to work’ policy”. See Edward A. Miller, Jr, *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress, 1839–1915* (Columbia, SC, 1995), p. 106.

64. Arthur Lewis Gelston asserts that Smalls proved more open to such an arrangement a decade later when he engaged in local maneuvers “tantamount to a deal with Col. Elliott and the Democracy”. When the 1888 Republican county convention refused him a vote of confidence, Smalls and several others reportedly “plotted against the regulars and tried to get up an independent ticket. They went over to the Democrats and offered to divide the offices if the election ‘could be carried by the usual Democratic methods’.” See A. Gelston, “Radical Versus Straight-Out in Post-Reconstruction Beaufort County”, *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 75 (1974), p. 234.

nothing [...] but when colored men strike for wages he sends [for] the Sheriff.”<sup>65</sup>

Despite his resentment over the direction of the party and his incisive grasp of the disparities evident in the Governor’s posture, Smalls was in the end compelled to take to the stump on Chamberlain’s behalf. Of the white Charleston County Republican chair, C.C. Bowen, Democrats had written that he “would move heaven and earth to defeat [Chamberlain] within the party”, but would “support him if nominated”. That same predicament shaped Smalls’s attitude to the approaching election. “Although Chamberlain has done enough to make him a stench in the nostrils of every republican”, he had told an audience at Sheldon in late August, “yet they might have to take him as the nominee of the party.” The choreography by which he arrived at full support for Chamberlain is difficult to reconstruct. On 4 September, Smalls had declared at a mass meeting in Beaufort that Chamberlain was “totally unworthy” of Republican support, and under his influence a resolution endorsing the Governor’s administration went down in defeat. Curiously, however, when the state party convention commenced less than a week later, Smalls was nominated to the chair by none other than Chamberlain stalwart Thomas Hamilton, with whom he had clashed bitterly over both the strike and “reform” policy, and whose defection to the conservatives was imminent. The *Columbia Daily Register* noted wryly that while “this was regarded as a significant victory for the anti-Chamberlain party”, the “knowing ones [...] knew better, and said nothing”. Some clue to what was implied appeared in a separate piece concerning two other black radical delegates: “What a laughable thing it was to see [them] abusing Chamberlain to a delighted crowd of the faithful”, when they “both knew” they “would have to vote for [him]” in the “sham battle” underway at the convention.<sup>66</sup>

Ultimately, Smalls not only cast his vote for Chamberlain but applied himself to convincing the party’s disoriented black base that they should do the same. His most reliable biographer contends that the “King of Beaufort” had been subjected to intense pressure from the national party during the period between his remarks on 4 September and the nominating convention a week later, and that he muted his criticism of Chamberlain in return for a guarantee that he would be the Republican nominee for the Fifth Congressional District. Clearly, Republican officials at all levels made strategic decisions about their attitude to the party apparatus and its program against the backdrop of an increasingly

65. “Sheldon Report”, *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 31 August 1876.

66. “The Game in Charleston”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 2 August 1876; “Sheldon Report”, *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 31 August 1876; “The Big Radical Gathering” and “Playing ‘Possum””, *Columbia Daily Register*, 13 September 1876.

belligerent Democratic campaign,<sup>67</sup> and neither Smalls nor his contemporaries can be faulted for attempting to make the best of a bad situation. But the plantation laborers comprising the core of the Republican constituency, who had engaged the Lowcountry Democracy in a war of attrition, were denied the luxury of tactical retreat. Conservative restoration portended, for them, a tangible assault on their condition and status as free laborers, and that would be the case whether Smalls held onto his office or not. In spite of planters' assertions to the contrary, rice-district militancy was driven from below rather than above, and to the extent that Republican officials identified with the strikes, they were engaged more often in keeping pace with their constituents than in leading them.<sup>68</sup>

This seems to have been true even among minor officials with no power beyond their local communities. The conservative press insinuated repeatedly that the strikes were an outgrowth of a local Republican faction fight between the serving white Colleton sheriff, J.K. Terry, and his rival William A. Driffle, a "prosperous mulatto carpenter". Terry was publicly ridiculed by planters for being at the bottom of the strike, but the record suggests instead that despite his efforts to faithfully implement Chamberlain's middle-of-the-road policy, the strikers' militancy continually overwhelmed him. Complying with planter C.P. Fishburne's request that he assign a "colored deputy" to lead a posse that would suppress rioting and make arrests on the Ashepoo, Terry expressed frustration when a "crowd of strikers gathered, took [his] prisoners away [...] and ran [the posse] off". "I thought it would be useless to send [another] posse down there", he reported, "as the strikers said that if I sent [...] 50 they would raise a posse of 150". It was probably true, as one correspondent to the *Journal of Commerce* asserted, that Terry, being "a candidate for re-election [...] does not desire to antagonize the negroes" by prosecuting the strike vigorously, but there is no indication that he was any more involved in its execution than the planters themselves. Driffle was even less enthusiastic about the fieldhands' militancy, and in 1878 would urge Colleton blacks to vote the Democratic ticket.<sup>69</sup>

Faced with such ambivalence among Republican officials, Lowcountry fieldhands faced the full wrath of an escalating counter-revolution. The Democrats' election campaign was based on a combined strategy, in which

67. See in this respect Holt, *Black Over White*, pp. 214–215.

68. Shirley, *Black Republican Congressman*, pp. 14, 20–21. On Smalls's support for Chamberlain in the Republican nominating convention, see also Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina during Reconstruction*, p. 494.

69. Foner, "Emancipated Worker", pp. 94–95; "Testimony of J.K. Terry", *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 442; "The Strike on the Combahee", [*Charleston*] *Journal of Commerce*, 18 September 1876; Holt, *Black Over White*, p. 215.

the patrician gubernatorial candidate, Wade Hampton, projected a conciliatory aura and the race-baiting former Confederate general, Martin W. Gary, undertook the dirty work of intimidation. Cognizant of the depth of the crisis in the Republican ranks and of its disorienting effect among freedpeople, Hampton pronounced himself a “friend of the Negro”, amenable to black suffrage, while Gary orchestrated a merciless paramilitary campaign aimed at replicating the Mississippi success by suppressing the black vote. Their demographic strength offered Lowcountry blacks some protection against paramilitary atrocities, but even in the Republican strongholds of Beaufort and Colleton conservatives were committed to peeling away the radical plurality, and unsurprisingly, it was the planters at the center of the ongoing labor dispute who were most active in trying to intimidate blacks into voting the Democratic ticket. Thus, the paramilitary campaign being prosecuted by Democrats elsewhere in the state – led by mounted “Red Shirts” and rifle clubs – in the Lowcountry took the form of a combined operation aimed at suppressing the strike and neutralizing the district’s black electoral majority. The objects of that repression – rice-laborers – responded in kind, targeting the property of prominent Democrats and inflicting the most severe punishment on strike-breakers and blacks who defected from Republican ranks.

When renewed strike activity finally broke out on the Beaufort side of the Combahee in late August it immediately assumed a more threatening character than its prelude in May. As in the earlier strike, wage reductions and the check system remained the chief complaints, but the heightened political context in which this second wave of strikes was launched made them far more intractable, and almost impossible to resolve by strictly economic concessions. One planter, noting that by early September the strike had taken hold on plantations that had always paid cash, thus asserted that the “pretense” that the strike had been initiated “against the check system” had “now been openly abandoned”. More worryingly, reports began to filter in to the Governor’s office that the unrest was spreading to “disaffected” cotton fieldhands some forty miles inland who, after “holding meetings and forming conclaves”, had adopted tactics identical to those applied in the Lowcountry. The prominent Beaufort planter and Chamberlain-appointed trial justice, Henry M. Fuller, reported the outbreak of a “formidable strike” on 21 August, with an armed mob of 300 visiting every rice plantation. By the following day, planters had mobilized a Democratic rifle club from Green Pond and the Governor was deluged with requests to call in the navy (then stationed nearby at Port Royal) and to dispatch federal troops from Charleston. When Fuller assisted Sheriff B. B. Harris in making several arrests, their posse was set upon by a mob of strikers who

succeeded in rescuing the prisoners, tearing up bridges behind them as they made their escape.<sup>70</sup>

Planters responded immediately to this “reckless disregard for the majesty of the law” by demanding a meeting with Chamberlain and making clear their expectation that he would dispatch the military force necessary to suppress the strikes. But the situation confronted Low-country planters with a philosophical dilemma, and Chamberlain with a more practical one. As committed states’-rights advocates, Democrats had kept up an incessant complaint about federal interference in local affairs, and some were reluctant now to call up the “boys in blue”. The state militia provided an even less satisfactory solution: organized under the Republicans, it had been boycotted by whites “enraged” at “the very sight of the Negro in military uniform”, and was composed almost exclusively of blacks.<sup>71</sup> Beaufort County’s so-called “negro militia” was reported to be in possession of about 500 “muskets”, but neither the planters nor Chamberlain could guarantee that, if deployed, these arms would be turned against the strikers rather than their Democratic opponents. A *News and Courier* correspondent asserted, probably with accuracy, that the “militia [...] are composed mostly of the very same negroes who are foremost in the riot”. Charleston constable, James P. Low considered deploying “a posse of colored men, supported by a rifle club”, but thought it “most dangerous to set such a corps in motion against a body of the colored rioters. I doubt that it would be possible to control them”, he warned Chamberlain, “should an actual collision occur”.<sup>72</sup>

70. On the intractability of the autumn strikes, see “How It Works”, *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 26 October 1876. The check system as “pretense” is ridiculed in William Elliott to Governor Chamberlain, 12 September 1876, *Chamberlain Papers*, telegrams received, box 14: folder 29, SCDAH. On the strike’s spread to Allendale, see John W. Ogilvie *et. al.* to Governor Chamberlain, 24 August 1876, *Chamberlain Papers*, telegrams received, box 14: folder 10, SCDAH. Fuller’s account of the failed attempt to suppress the strikes appears in H.M. Fuller to Governor Chamberlain, 21 August 1876, telegrams received, box 18: folder 4, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH.

71. The most thorough history of the militias records that they were urgently reorganized under the authority and direction of the Reconstruction administrations to “avoid political annihilation of the Radical state governments at the hands of the enemy within”. South Carolina was, after Arkansas, “the most active of the Southern states in the Negro militia movemen”, Otis A. Singletary suggests. “Robert K. Scott, the first of the South Carolina Radical governors, armed the Negro troops just before the campaign that resulted in his re-election in 1870. For several years thereafter, the Ku Klux Klan and the militia engaged in [a series of confrontations] until the accession of [conservative] Wade Hampton in 1877.” See Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, pp. 7, 15.

72. The conservatives’ reluctance to call out federal troops is discussed in “Combahee and the Cure”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 24 August 1876. White attitudes to the Negro militias are discussed in Alruthus A. Taylor, *The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (Washington DC, 1926), p. 190. The estimate of the size of the militia arsenal is from “The Latest News – No Fear – The Militia”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 24 August 1876. The strikers’ involvement in the militia is discussed in “Good News from Combahee”, [Charleston] *News and*



In the absence of other options, the planters' penchant for taking the law into their own hands led them to embark on a coordinated deployment of white, Democratic-controlled rifle clubs. Complaints about the "dilatory reluctance of Governor Chamberlain to enforce the laws" began to emerge in the conservative press, and a group of planters wired the Governor in early September: "Can't you stop it?", they inquired. "If not say so and we will." Forty whites were reported to have reached the rice fields from Allendale, and Robert Smalls, dispatched to Garden's Corner, found "between forty and sixty white men mounted and armed with sixteen-shooters,<sup>73</sup> Spencer rifles, and double-barreled shot guns". Noting that there had been evident among whites "a disposition to get up a small war", Port Royal's Republican newspaper reported that telegrams dispatched as far as Augusta, Georgia, had beseeched white Democrats to "come with your companies immediately", but had been countermanded before their departure. The specter of military confrontation was brought even closer when the commanders of a number of prominent Charleston rifle clubs expressed their "readiness [...] to give assistance at a moment's notice", an offer received favorably by Chamberlain.<sup>74</sup> And an additional "thirty-five white men" were reported to be encamped at Ballouville, "waiting for the sheriff, the trial justice, the Governor, or some one else, to give orders as to what shall be done". Like their counterparts during Charleston street clashes just days later, the rice-district rifle clubs seemed "anxious to be called on [...] by the authorities [and placed] within legal sanction for their action".<sup>75</sup>

*Courier*, 24 August 1876, and in Allen, *Governor Chamberlain's Administration in South Carolina*, p. 341. Low's approach is outlined in James P. Low to Governor Chamberlain, 7 September 76, telegrams received, box 14: folder 25, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH.

Beaufort's local militia may very well have been entirely composed of African Americans, but Singletary makes the important point that "The militia was [...] considered a 'Negro militia', in keeping with the longstanding Southern indifference to logic when considering questions involving race", despite the fact that "[v]arying numbers of whites belonged to the militia units in every state". A "touch of Negro was sufficient to brand it all as Negro in the eyes of most Southern whites". See Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, pp. 15–16.

73. This is a reference to the Winchester "Henry Rifle", considered the most important firearm of the Civil War era, and known to Confederates as "that damned Yankee rifle that was loaded on Sunday and fired all week". See "The Historic Henry Rifle", <http://www.manatarmsbooks.com/wiley.html>.

74. "The assistance of [white] volunteers was offered from Charleston, and the Governor said he would accept it unless another effort on the part of the constituted authorities should be effectual." See Allen, *Governor Chamberlain's Administration*, p. 341.

75. H.D. Elliott, L. Bellinger, H.E. Bissell, and Jas. Campbell to Governor Chamberlain, 4 September 76, telegrams received, box 18: folder 5, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH; Letter from 'W.B.S.' in [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 25 August 1876; "The Combahee Strike", *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 24 August 1876; "Editorial", *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 31 August 1876; 'W.B.S.', [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 25 August 1876; James P. Low to Governor Chamberlain, 8 September 1876, telegrams received, box 14: folder 27, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH.

Incredibly, white reaction to the strike seems to have been so excessive that it drove those fieldhands who had previously defied the “majority” into the arms of the strikers. Noting that a fight had broken out between laborers and strikers on the Lowndes plantation on 5 September, the *Journal of Commerce* seemed perplexed that while the “whites [were] willing to protect the laborers”, strike-breakers themselves had asserted that they “did not wish to be protected by whites against their own color”. Two days later another white rifle company “were told by the negroes that no ‘buckra with guns’ were wanted; that [instead] they could and would defend themselves”. And an even more intriguing complication in relation to strike-breaking stands out in the evidence. In their frequent communications with Chamberlain, planters asserted that while there were “[p]lenty of hands willing to work”, they had been prevented from doing so by the “licking bands”. But in its reports on the outbreak of new strikes on the Ashepoo in mid-September, the *Journal of Commerce* suggested another possibility: while “negroes [...] make it appear that they are governed by the threat of the low country negroes” to whip them if they worked under the old rate, the *Journal* correspondent asserted, it was “known [...] that they held a meeting on the 9<sup>th</sup>, and agreed to demand certain wages” themselves.<sup>76</sup>

The Lowcountry was in near-constant upheaval between the renewal of the strike in late August and statewide elections in early November. Outgunned but not outnumbered by the planters and their rifle clubs, striking fieldhands responded by organizing into a solid phalanx, mobilizing all but a small minority of the workforce who cast their fortunes with the employers. One remarkable aspect of this mobilization was the prominent role assumed by freedwomen, a development that calls to mind Elsa Barkley Brown’s argument about the “collective possession” of the ballot in the black community during Reconstruction. “Unaccustomed at first to the political discrimination between the sexes that their countrymen practiced”, Thomas Holt has written, freedwomen had “attended the Republican meetings along with their menfolk” throughout Reconstruction. One account, noting that female ricehands were “set apart by the ‘pantelets’ and ‘breeches’ they wore in the fields”, suggested that black women had even voted surreptitiously. The “[c]olored preachers so ‘furiate de women’”, one observer recalled, “dat they would put on breeches and vote de ‘Publican radical ticket’”. This sense of inclusiveness

76. “The Combahee Strikers”, [Charleston] *Journal of Commerce*, 5 September 1876; “The Rice Field Riots”, [Charleston] *Journal of Commerce*, 7 September 1876; “Rice Field Troubles”, [Charleston] *Journal of Commerce*, 12 September 1876; H.D. Elliott, L. Bellinger, H.E. Bissell, and Jas. Campbell to Governor Chamberlain, 4 September 1876, telegrams received, box 18: folder 5, *Chamberlain Papers*, SCDAH; H.H. Green in “Rice Field Troubles”, [Charleston] *Journal of Commerce*, 12 September 1876.

evident at the Republican grassroots, along with freedwomen's disproportionate representation among the casual laborers targeted by the planters in May, helps to explain their central role in the summer upheaval.<sup>77</sup>

Although there is no evidence that women spoke from platforms at any of the numerous public mass meetings held throughout the rice district, they were certainly present – and vocal – in large numbers. Before being driven off by “cursing” and threats, a Charleston correspondent attending an August rally reported that of the “600 colored men and women collected under an avenue of massive oaks” at Sheldon, the “women were worse than the men”. The body of 500 strikers that held a group of planters and their posse captive for three days at Ballouville in early September included “many women [who were] especially violent, fairly howling in their rage”. Prominent in harassing strikebreakers, freedwomen played their most significant role in the effort to prevent defections of black men to the Democratic ticket. Much of their campaign was conducted within the confines of the home: Republican officials beseeched those planning to marry to wait until after their men had voted the Republican ticket in the upcoming elections, and implored those already married to Democrats to refuse to “service them in bed”. The policy seems to have been at least occasionally effective: one Democratic strikebreaker reported that his son, who “was to have been married in December”, found that “on the cause of his voting the Democratic ticket the woman refused to marry him”. And freedwomen were not averse to employing more direct coercion. Rice-cutter Tony Koger found himself set upon by a squad of 170 strikers, “consisting of boys, men, women, and girls”, with “30 whipping [him] at the same time”, denouncing him as a “damn [...] Democratic son of a bitch”. “[A]ll the women had clubs”, he reported, and “swore that if their husbands voted the Democratic ticket they intended to kill them”. Another witness reported that black women at the polls, with their “clothes tied up to their knees, and [...] clubs on their shoulders”, warned their husbands that “if they voted the Democratic ticket it would be the death of them before they got home”. At Blue House in Colleton a gang of

77. On “collective possession” of the ballot, see Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom”, *Public Culture*, 7 (1994), pp. 107–146. On the absence of political discrimination among freedpeople, see Holt, *Black Over White*, p. 34. On the distinctive attire of female rice-hands, see Drago, *Hurrah for Hampton*, p. 41. For another example of women voting, see Peggy Lamson, *The Glorious Failure: Black Congressman Robert Brown Elliott and the Reconstruction in South Carolina* (New York, 1973), p. 115: “Union Reform candidates and sympathizers appearing before the congressional committee charged that in some instances the polling places were actually in the homes of Reps. Furthermore, they charged that women and children voted by proxy for sick husbands and brothers who then regained their health in time to vote themselves, and that the ballots were tampered with by the election commissioners before being turned over to the state canvassers for verification.”

women with “hatchets and large sticks” threatened that “those who voted Hampton should be slaughtered that day”.<sup>78</sup>

Nowhere in the South did conservatives deploy the potent combination of economic coercion, physical intimidation, and material enticement against the party’s ex-slave constituency as aggressively as in the Palmetto state. And yet what has struck most historians is the relative ineffectiveness of Democratic efforts and the degree to which black suffrage remained impervious, at least while Reconstruction lasted, to white Democratic management.<sup>79</sup> An accurate estimate of Democratic strength among freedpeople is difficult to arrive at, in part because Martin Gary’s “Plan of the Campaign of 1876” explicitly committed conservatives to exaggerating their influence: aside from feeling “honor bound to control the vote of at least one Negro [through] intimidation, purchase [...] or as each individual may determine”, white Democrats were to “begin to organize Negro clubs, or pretend that we have organized them and write letters from different parts of the County giving the facts [*sic*] of organization”. The Democratic press is therefore extremely unreliable: their adversaries’ assertion that conservative accounts systematically inflated Democratic strength among freedmen is confirmed in recent scholarship.<sup>80</sup> “Half a score of hired negroes”, the *Columbia Daily Union-*

78. “The Powwow at Sheldon”, [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 28 August 1876; “The Rice Field Riots”, [Charleston] *Journal of Commerce*, 7 September 1876; “Testimony of John Mustifier”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, pp. 193, 195; “Testimony of Tony Koger”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 178; “Testimony of Richard Koger”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 184; “Testimony of Alfred Smith”, *Tillman vs Smalls*, p. 187.

79. “The masses of black voters”, Thomas Holt asserts, “remained staunchly Republican during [the 1870s] and for several [decades] to come.” Peter Camejo agrees that while conservatives “tried to create the impression that large numbers of Blacks were passing over to support of the Democrats”, the “policy was a conscious fraud aimed at demoralizing the Black community [...]. The open capitulation by the Republican Party to the counterrevolution led some Blacks to conclude that it was best to try and make peace with the Democrats so as to prevent bloodshed and the victimization of Black leaders [but] Blacks who crossed over to the Democrats were few in number. A significant percentage of Blacks, in spite of massive intimidation, continued to try and vote Republican even after that party’s defeat was definitive.” See Holt, *Black Over White*, p. 122, and Camejo, *Racism, Revolution and Reaction*, pp. 166–167. In attempting to make the case for a substantial conservative base among African Americans, Drago overstates voluntary black support for the Democrats. While acknowledging (p. 49) that “bribery, as well as economic and physical coercion, influenced a large percentage” of those who voted for the Democratic ticket, he derives his own estimate of Democratic strength among African Americans from the conservative press, which was explicitly committed to inflating such numbers.

80. See points 12 and 21 of Martin W. Gary’s “Plan of the Campaign of 1876”, in Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina during Reconstruction*, (Appendix), pp. 564–569. For an example of the discrepancy between conservative estimates and actual numbers, see Richard Zuczek, *State of Rebellion: Reconstruction in South Carolina* (Columbia, SC, 1996), p. 169. Like Holt and Camejo, Zuczek finds (p. 169) that “[w]hat is surprising, given the brutal choices facing Republicans – especially black Republicans – was the small number of voters who did change sides.”

*Herald* charged, were “multiplied into a hundred enthusiastic ‘respectable colored Democrats’”, and “the marvelous conversion of hundreds of colored men to the democratic faith [...] in nine cases out of ten [...] manufactured out of whole cloth”. The *Port Royal Standard and Commercial* viewed with derision the straight-out account of “an enthusiastic democratic meeting” held in Beaufort in August 1876. “Natives, northerners, and negroes were there en masse”, with “very spirited addresses” producing “great terror [among] radicals”, the report noted sarcastically, holding off until its closing line the revelation that “the room in which the meeting was held is a ten by twelve law office”.<sup>81</sup>

The reality is that despite the immense pressures on the radical ranks, black Democrats remained a rare phenomenon so long as Reconstruction continued to show some signs of life. “Dey says dey *will do dis and dat*”, an unmoved attendee of a “miserable small” Democratic meeting at Beaufort was overheard to have commented after hearing Hampton out. “I ain’t ax no man what him *will do* – I ax him what him *hab done*.” No amount of conservative maneuvering could have overcome the clear-minded opposition of freedpeople to restoring their former masters to state power. Even widespread murder and intimidation could not overcome this basic antipathy, or deliver a substantial black constituency: it was “easier to get a Negro to declare for Hampton”, Francis Butler Simkins concluded, perceptively, “than it was to get his vote”. “You may sift all that have come over to you”, a black Columbia tradesman chided white conservatives, “and you will find that you will have to bull pen them to obtain their votes.” Those who did go over knew very well that in doing so they were burning their bridges to the black community. “I was never popular wid’ my own color”, black Hampton supporter Andy Brice recalled. “They say behind my back, in ’76, dat I’s a white folks nigger.” Others who stood with Brice complained that they were “confronted by black women, who pull up their coats and told them to ‘kiss their arse’”.<sup>82</sup>

In the immediate context of the 1876 elections, the powerful and extremely effective mobilization of the Lowcountry’s black plantation labor force proved sufficient to repel planters’ attempts to overturn the rice district’s Republican majority, and in the process of the strike plantation laborers won tangible gains in their wages and working conditions. The “laborers are at work again”, Attorney General Low reported in mid-September, “but [...] upon terms which are very onerous to the planters”.

81. [Columbia] *Daily Union-Herald*, 13 September 1876, 17 October 1876, cited in Drago, *Hurrah for Hampton*, p. 27; (Editorial) *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 31 August 1876.

82. Laura Towne, *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne; Written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862–1884* (New York, 1969 repr.), pp. 253–254; Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina during Reconstruction*, p. 512; Williamson, *After Slavery*, p. 410; Drago, *Hurrah for Hampton*, pp. 4, 40–41.

“Such success having attended the strike”, he advised Chamberlain, “the planters are full of alarm, for they have no guarantee that new demands will not be made any day.” And in this respect, his remarks were prescient. On the same day Low penned these words, the Port Royal press reported a “renewed” strike in the rice fields, and four days later the *Savannah Morning News*, complaining that the “authorities appear to have permitted the ‘union men’ to have their own way”, fretted that the strikes were “coming to be chronic”.<sup>83</sup>

These hard-won local victories were a testament to the militancy and organizational capacity of Lowcountry fieldhands, but they paled in significance against the statewide triumph of the counter-revolution. In the most violent electoral campaign in American history, the terrorism unleashed by Democratic paramilitaries combined with massive electoral fraud to “redeem” the state for white supremacy and return power to conservative elites, with devastating consequences for the state’s black laboring majority. Hampton’s victory brought cheer to the Lowcountry aristocracy and despair to the freed men and women whose “brief moment in the sun” was coming to an end. With state power now firmly in their hands, planters felt assured that there would be no repeat of the massive insubordination they had witnessed in the difficult summer of 1876, when the “richest and most productive portion of [the] country” had been “governed by mob law”. The planter, Louis Manigault, would recall a short time later,

Hampton assumed the affairs of the State [...] and things have on every side taken a turn for the better. After these long years of trials through which we have passed, for the first time the entire State Government is in the hands of natives of our own soil, and a bright future would appear to be in store for us, quietude and happiness resting upon the countenance of many who before could see no end to our difficulties.

“The universal testimony of all employers”, noted the *Columbia Daily Register* in 1878, “is that they have never had so little trouble with their hands since the war as during the last year.”<sup>84</sup>

Concluding a penetrating survey of the trajectory of events in South Carolina in his magisterial *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. DuBois empha-

83. James P. Low to Governor Chamberlain, 14 September 1876, *Chamberlain Papers*, letters received, box 14: folder 31, SCDAH; “Labor Troubles”, *Port Royal Standard and Commercial*, 14 September 1876; “The Troubles at the South Carolina Rice Fields”, *Savannah Morning News*, 18 September 1876.

84. John W. Burbridge (Colleton) to Governor Chamberlain, 13 September 1876, *Chamberlain Papers*, letters received, box 14: folder 30, SCDAH; “Season of 1876 at Gowrie”, *Manigault Family Papers*, SHC; Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes*, p. 24, citing the *Columbia Daily Register*, 19 April 1878.

sized that “[b]eneath the race issue, and unconsciously of more fundamental weight [in the overthrow of Reconstruction], was the economic issue. Men were seeking again to reestablish the domination of property in Southern politics.” That “counter-revolution of property” placed the Republican party in a difficult position. North and South, it found itself challenged from the left. In the former Confederacy the threat emanated from a hopeful and highly politicized black working-class constituency increasingly impatient with the party’s temporizing. In the northern states, a resurrected labor movement that had sprung to life after the Civil War exposed the limitations of the Republican “free-labor” vision for broad swathes of the working poor.<sup>85</sup>

Faced with this challenge from below, the curious alliance that had drawn together men of wealth at the North and the most destitute segment of the population at the South under the banner of the Republican party began to disintegrate. The bourgeois radicals who had led it to triumph over the slave regime now began to recoil from association with the “laboring element” in the South. “The Republicans from the North are frightened by the storm they have raised”, an astute correspondent to the *News and Courier* gloated in a late September report from the strike district. “[I]t has got beyond their control, and they can only smother it.”<sup>86</sup>

A quarter of a century ago the pre-eminent labor historian David Montgomery asserted, in relation to developments in the northern United States, that “class conflict [...] was the submerged shoal on which Radical [Republican] dreams foundered”. It was the rise of a new “political force [...] from the ranks of the working class”, he wrote, that “drove the Republican party to repudiate its own handiwork”.<sup>87</sup> As Heather Cox Richardson’s important work has suggested, and as this account of the 1876 rice strikes attempts to demonstrate, precisely the same reversal occurred in the South. Presented with a choice between a working-class insurgency threatening to push beyond the boundaries of bourgeois order and their late adversaries’ demand for a return to rule by “[t]he most intelligent, the influential, the educated, the really useful men of the South”, the Republican party chose the latter, turning its back on those just recently emancipated from slavery. “[N]o other group of working people in the United States has ever linked its aspirations so tightly or with such unanimity to a political party”, as did freedpeople in the Reconstruction

85. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*, p. 428.

86. [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 23 September 1876.

87. David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (Urbana, IL, 1981), pp. x, 89. Richardson observes that “by 1867, it was increasingly clear to Northerners that a labor interest [...] was becoming much stronger [...]. Almost as soon as the war was over, organized labor challenged the Republican belief that the nation was distinguished by the harmony of its economy, arguing instead that there was an inherent struggle between labor and capital in America”; Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction*, p. 44.

South, Montgomery observes. “Nevertheless, the Republicans never became *their* party, in the sense of a party whose program and leadership were determined by black constituents”<sup>88</sup> (*italics in original*).

Reflecting on the 1876 strikes, Eric Foner has argued that “Republican political power helped create the context within which successful collective action was possible.”<sup>89</sup> While that is certainly true, the outcome of the Lowcountry upheaval suggests something further: that substantive freedom for black workers, including the freedom to organize collectively, could only endure if they succeeded in wresting control of the radical project from those Republican officials determined to forge a compromise with the old order. The rice strikes demonstrate that, aside from the planters who directed the Democratic operation in the Lowcountry, it was the destitute, mostly illiterate plantation fieldhands of the South Carolina rice district who most clearly understood the stakes involved in the critical historical juncture of 1876. Against the counterproductive attempts of the Republican leadership to win the acquiescence of white elites by a series of compromises that gutted the promise of emancipation, rice workers asserted another potential outcome which would deepen, and not forfeit, the revolutionary process detonated by Reconstruction. The real tragedy of that summer of discontent lay not in the attempt to do so, but in black laborers’ inability to extend that attempt beyond the boundaries of the low country.

88. *New York Daily Tribune*, 15 May 1871, cited in Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction*, p. 96; Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market During the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 118.

89. Foner, “Emancipated Worker”, p. 103.