"ALL IS NOT QUIET IN OUR HELLISH COUNTY": FACTS, FICTION, POLITICS, AND RACE — THE ELLENTON RIOT OF 1876

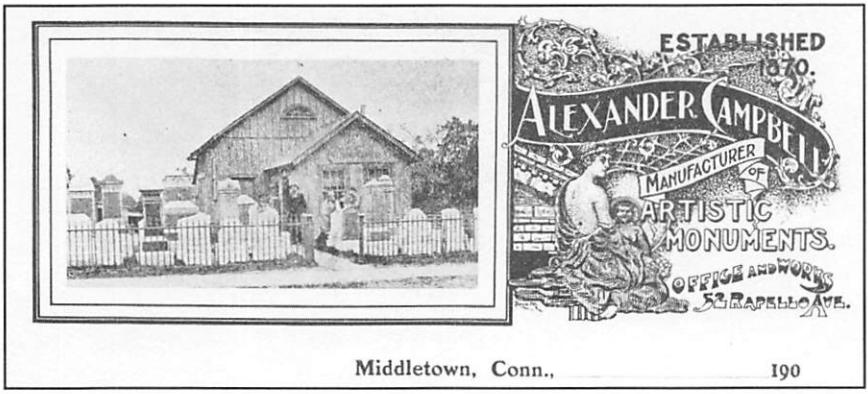
MARK M. SMITH*

INSOFAR AS IT SYNTHESIZES OVER A CENTURY'S WORTH OF writing on the Reconstruction period, reexamines numerous contemporary documents and letters, and makes obvious the relationship between racial violence and political campaigns, Eric Foner's 1988 book, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, may be described as truly magisterial.[1] Of the violence underpinning political campaigns generally in South Carolina, Foner tells us much. But of the particular, local political riots in the state, Foner is less catholic. And of one such riot, at Ellenton in southeastern Aiken County in September 1876, Foner tells us nothing. Yet the oversight is pardonable. As primarily a work of synthesis, Foner was dependent largely on the work of others not only to identify the most important political riots of the period but also to render an accurate historical account of them. But rarely is the riot at Ellenton even discussed in general works on the period. Moreover, not only are accurate factual descriptions of the riot conspicuously absent but no satisfactory interpretive analysis of the event exists.[2] The aim of this article, therefore, is modest

*Doctoral candidate in history, University of South Carolina, and lecturer in American economic and social history, University of Birmingham, England

[1]Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). A one-line reference to riots in Aiken County generally is on p. 574. Useful as an historiographical review of the literature is Foner's "Reconstruction Revisited," *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982), pp. 82-100.

[2]Examples of works that ignore the Ellenton riot altogether or, at best, pay it short shrift are: Alrutheus Ambush Taylor, *The Negro in South Carolina During the Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: Institution for the Study of Negro Life & History, 1924; repr. New York: Russell & Russell, 1969), p. 243; George Brown Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes 1877-1900* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952), p. 24, 159; Myrta Lockett Avary, *Dixie After the War* (New York: De Capo Press, 1970), pp. 349-350; Melinda Meek Hennessey, "Racial Violence During Reconstruction: The 1876 Riots in Charleston and Cainhoy," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* (hereafter *SCHM*) 86 (April 1985), pp. 100-112; Peggy Lamson, *The Glorious Failure: Black Congressman Robert Brown Elliott and the Reconstruction in South Carolina* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1973); Francis B. Simkins, "The Election of 1876 in South Carolina," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 21 (October 1922-January 1923), pp. 225-240; and, disappointingly, Joel Williamson's excellent *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).



By 1870 Sandy Campbell had moved to Middletown, Connecticut, where he established a business as "Manufacturer of Artistic Monuments. Letterhead courtesy of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

Sandy, written in October 1886. After describing the aftermath of the recent Charleston earthquake, James answered Sandy's questions about the prospects for work in Charleston. "You propose coming here this winter," he wrote, explaining, "I would be glad to see you, but if you come expecting stone-cutting, I fear you will be disappointed."[39] James, who never married, was an active member of the St. Andrew's Society, the United Confederate Veterans, and the Union Light Infantry Charitable Association in his later years. He was eulogized as a "sterling Scotchman ... and faithful and fearless Confederate soldier" when he died in 1907 at the age of seventy-four, and was buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Charleston.[40] Sandy Campbell survived his older brother by only two years and died in 1909 at the age of seventy-one.[41]

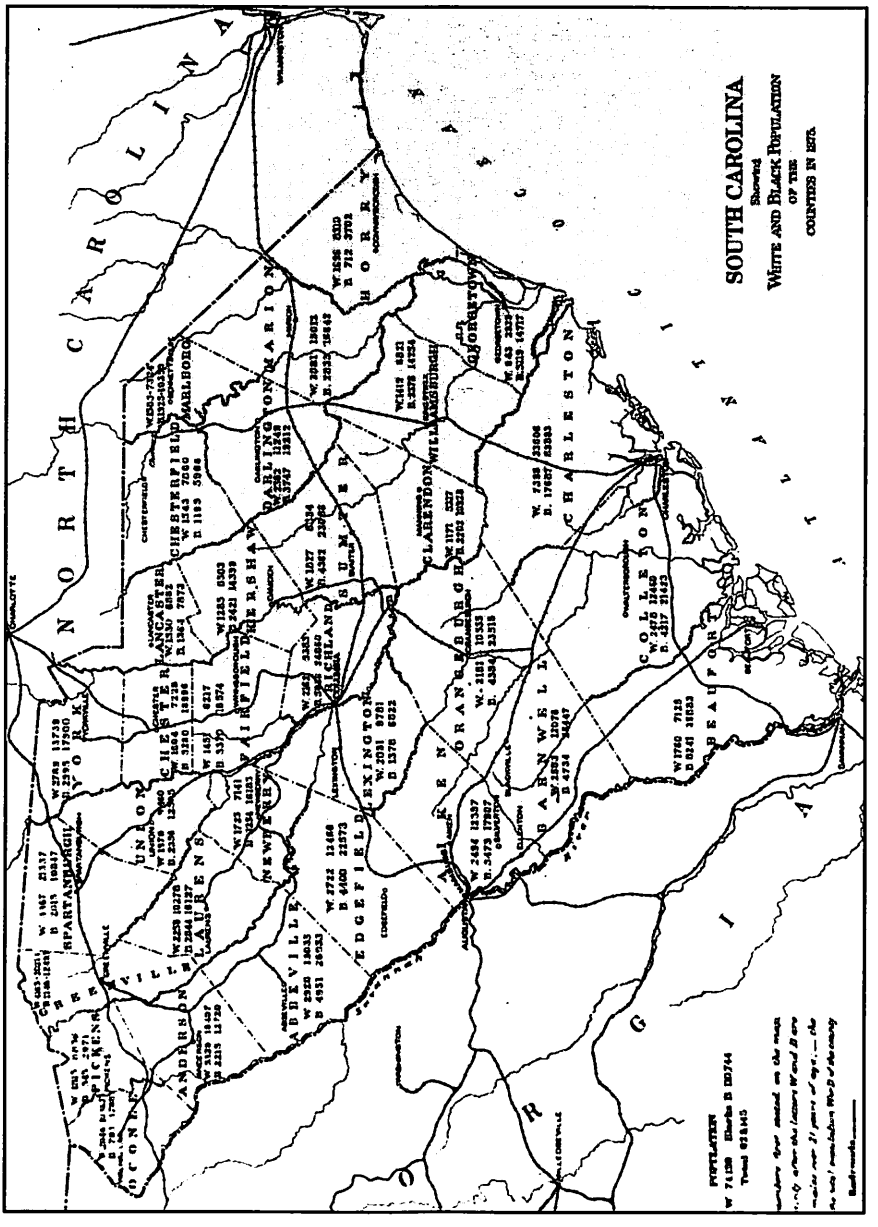
We do not know if the Campbells ever met face-to-face after 1865, swapping old soldiers' tales, but their remarkable letters survive, in a small collection at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History in Columbia. "Its rather to bad to think that we should be fighting him on the one side and me on the other," Sandy wrote a few days after Secessionville. "I hope to god that he and I will get safe through it all and he will have his story to tell about his side and I will have my story to tell about my side."[42] The Campbells' story reminds us that the familiar phrase "brother against brother" has a deeper and more human meaning than we usually recognize.

[39]James Campbell to his brother Alexander, October 20, 1886, Campbell Family Papers, SCDAH.

[40]Charleston *News*, March 4, 1907.

[41]Alexander Campbell to his wife, June 25, 1862, Campbell Family Papers, SCDAH.

[42]Ibid., June 25, 1862.



In 1875, the South Carolina population of white males over age 21 was 74,199; the adult black male population, 110,744. In Aiken County, where Ellenton was located, the adult white male population was 2,494, the adult black male population about 1,000 more; total white population was 12,397, total black population 17,907. This map appeared in the U.S. Senate volume, *South Carolina in 1876.* From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

and twofold: using hitherto unexamined sources, it attempts to provide an accurate factual and interpretive account of the riot and explores the political dynamics of what has traditionally been described as simply a "race" riot.[3]

From an analysis of those works that have surveyed the Ellenton riot emerges a veritable factual cacophony. This confusion is all the more puzzling given historians' rather fuller treatment of other riots in the state, riots which were virtually contemporaneous with the altercation at Ellenton.[4] There is, for example, a broad consensus on the dating of the Hamburg and Charleston riots, the numbers killed and wounded, an agreement that these riots were of "a political nature," and that they were a product of the tensions generated by the election of 1876.[5] As enduring as the consensus is on these riots, however, as disparate is the factual account of the Ellenton riot.

Take, for example, the dating of the riot. It is variously stated that the riot commenced on September 17, September 16 (lasting until September

[3]The main sources used in this paper are: a series of unpublished letters from F. E. Thomas to J. H. Aycock, September 14-November 13, 1876, in the Aycock Family Papers, Folders 17 and 18, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, S.C. (hereafter SCL); James Aldrich Papers, 2 ms. vols., bd., ledger containing newspaper clippings on the Ellenton riot, 1876-1877 (SCL); Gov. Daniel H. Chamberlain's correspondence, September-December 1876, Boxes 14 and 15, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C. (hereafter, SCDAH); Max Revelise, "Ellenton Riot," WPA Federal Writer's Project, Box 2, Folder D-2, 70-80 (n.p.: 1936) (SCL); Nancy Lane (?), "From Aiken to Allendale," WPA Federal Writer's Project, Box 5, Tour 19, C-3-T19-1 (n.p.: April 4, 1936) (SCL); Sara Anna Walker, "The Ellenton Riot," c.1936, WPA Federal Writer's Project (not in FWP files), folder p8402, pp. 1-2. Additional background material was gleaned from Federal Congressional and Senate reports. Most informative are *South Carolina in 1876:Testimony as to the Denial of the Election Franchise in South Carolina at the Election of 1875 and 1876*, Senate Misc. Docs., No. 48 (3 vols.), 44th Congress., 2nd Session, and *Recent Election in South Carolina, Testimony Taken by the Select Committee on the Recent Election in South Carolina*, House Misc. Docs., No. 31 (3 parts), 44th Congress, 2nd Session. All quotations are verbatim and have been edited only where clarification was deemed necessary.

[4]On these riots and the consensus historians have reached on them, see, for example, Melinda Meek Hennessey, "Racial Violence," pp. 100-112; Francis B. Simkins and Robert H. Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966): pp. 486-487, 504-505; John S. Reynolds, *Reconstruction in South Carolina, 1865-1877* (Columbia, S.C.: The State Co. Publishers, 1905), pp. 374-375; David D. Wallace, *South Carolina: A Short History, 1520-1948* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1961), p. 601; Gaspar L. Toole III, *Ninety Years in Aiken County: Memoirs of Aiken County and Its People* (N.p., n.d.), pp. 20-23.

[5]Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction*, pp. 484-486, 491-495, 504; Hennessey, "Racial Violence," p. 101.

19), September 15, and, incredibly, on May 15, 1876.[6] Neither has agreement been reached concerning the death toll from the altercation. Two historians put the figure at two whites killed, eight injured, with fifteen blacks dead and two wounded. Others count as many as between twenty-five and fifty blacks killed.[7]

Despite the ambiguity over such "facts," there is, rather surprisingly, a consensus on the interpretive significance of the riot. It is agreed, for example, that the Ellenton disturbance was a product of racial tension rather than political motivation. Such an interpretation is especially strange given that most accounts of the riot are prefaced with extensive analyses of the political tension resulting from the build-up to the 1876 gubernatorial campaign in the state between incumbent Republican Daniel Chamberlain and "Straightout" Democratic nominee, Wade Hampton III. Thus, an abridged account of conventional wisdom on the riot reads as follows: On either September 15, 16, 17 (or May 15), 1876, "the residence of a citizen of Aiken County [Mrs. Alonzo Harley] ... was entered by two negroes [Peter Williams and Fred Pope] with burglarious intent." Williams and Pope, it is alleged, "beat her severely," although it is not explained how Mrs. Harley, despite her beating, "managed to get her husband's gun ... and frightened off the plunderers by pointing the weapon at them."

With the cause of the riot couched in terms of race and a heavy accent on black criminality and sexuality, historians have felt comfortable with legitimizing the response of Ellenton's whites to the putative burglary. Peter Williams, it is explained, was shot and wounded for attempting to escape from the scene. Fred Pope was arrested by a posse of fourteen white men at Rouse's Bridge, just outside Ellenton, where they were fired upon by an "excited and defiant" band of blacks. Following an agreement to disperse, the "brace of black villains" apparently reneged on their promise, ambushed the whites, and killed an innocent white bystander. The following morning (again, the date varies), about two-hundred armed whites gathered in and around Ellenton, ready to suppress the "uprising of negroes." Ben Tillman, newly elected colonel of the numerous rifle companies in adjoining Edgefield County, was invited to join the affray by the leaders of Ellenton's white forces, A. P. Butler, George W. Croft, and Gen. Johnson Hagood. The supposed ambush of James Patterson, sheriff in

[6]Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction*, decline to date the event at all; Taylor, *The Negro in South Carolina*, says September 17; Wallace, *South Carolina*, September 16-19; Reynolds, *Reconstruction in South Carolina*, argues September 15; Revelise, "Ellenton Riot," contends May 15.

[7]Reynolds, *Reconstruction in South Carolina*, p. 378; Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction*, p. 506; Wallace, *South Carolina*, p. 601; Francis B. Simkins, *The Tillman Movement in South Carolina* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1926), p. 47.

Hagood's company, was the catalyst to a murderous spree in which various numbers of whites and larger numbers of blacks were killed or wounded. Further violence was avoided only with the intervention of federal troops sent by Governor Chamberlain.

This, then, is the "standard" account of the riot. It is an account which has allowed more than one historian to label the Ellenton troubles a "race riot," permitted another to asseverate: "this order was non-political and assumed major proportions because of the race-hatred engendered by the times," and facilitated the following accusation: "There is strong circumstantial evidence to show that there was a horrible plot of a general negro uprising organized by underground influence."[8]

A curious picture of factual disagreement coupled with interpretive consensus, then, presides over the Ellenton riot. In attempting to explain why, it is necessary to examine briefly the sources historians have used in coming to these conclusions.

Without exception, the above composite account of the Ellenton riot was garnered from historians who based their factual and interpretive representations on newspaper reports. Francis Simkins and Robert Woody's account, for example, rests almost exclusively on reports from the October 1876 editions of Charleston's *News and Courier*, as do the conclusions on the long-term effects of the riot proffered by George B. Tindall.[9] Yet, as Peggy Lamson has pointed out, albeit indirectly, while the *News and Courier* had often been a partisan supporter of the incumbent Gov. Daniel Chamberlain since his election in 1874, following the Hamburg riot in the summer of 1876, the newspaper's editor, Francis Dawson, adopted a decidedly anti-Chamberlain stance.[10] The full extent of the newspaper's bias is furthermore reflected in its reports on the trial of A. P. Butler and his accomplices for their role in the riot in May the following year. The reports persisted in denigrating black witnesses for the prosecution ("Jerry Weathersbee, the next witness, was a black impudent looking negro, who would probably like nothing better than to be employed swearing at $1.50 per day for the rest of his life"); charged all prosecution evidence with being "palpably bias";

[8]Compiled from ibid., quotations from Revelise, "Ellenton Riot," and Toole, *Ninety Years*, p. 26. Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction*, p.505, call the troubles a "race riot." To be sure, more recent works such as those by Foner, Hennessey, and Williamson, are more sensitive to the political nature of such disturbances generally, but they have not placed the Ellenton riot in particular in this context.

[9]See, for example, Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction*, p. 507, n.85 and n.86; Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes*, p. 24. Tindall's conclusion that the riot galvanized the races was based on his reading of the *News and Courier*, July 12, 16, 1877, and was articulated fully by Sara Anna Walker for the FWP in 1936, "Ellenton Riot," (SCL).

[10]Lamson, *Glorious Failure*, compare pp. 208, 237, for example.

and headed its May 20 edition, "Another batch of Dollar-and-a-half Witnesses."[11] Neither were northern newspapers, the other main source used by historians, any more reliable or consistent. Ellenton's white Democrats complained to Whitelaw Reid, editor of the New York *Tribune*, "'I can't stand the 'Tribune' any longer!'" and threatened, "'Stop that d—d paper!" Similar complaints about partial reporting of the Ellenton riot were levelled against the *Tribune*'s main rival, the pro-Republican New York *Herald*.[12] To a considerable extent, then, existing accounts of the Ellenton riot, because they have been based on contemporary partisan newspaper reports, have not only reflected these biases, but have wrongly translated them into historical "facts" and interpretations.

IN REALITY, THESE "FACTS" ARE BY NO MEANS AS PALPABLE AS they appear. And, by the same token, neither is the interpretation stressing "race" at the expense of "politics" as the cause of the riot so clear cut. Contemporaries, it seems, were far more sensitive to the indeterminate nature of the riot. Even the correspondent for the New York *Herald* prefaced his account with the caveat that reliable information regarding the dating and numbers killed in the riot was hard to come by.[13] Contemporary political observers were similarly skeptical of any "facts" concerning the riot, charging political leaders, Democrat and Republican, with "systematic deception."[14] Even Daniel Chamberlain, writing just about three months after the riot, was unsure as to exactly when the disturbance broke out and how long it lasted.[15] And one important source concerning the riot, hitherto unused by historians, presents a sobering account of why any stated "facts" should be viewed with caution. This particular source is a series of letters from the resident manager of a turpentine farm near Ellenton, F. E. Thomas, to the farm's absentee owner in North Carolina, J. H. Aycock. Thomas wrote Aycock a series of letters describing the unfolding of the riot and, moreover, his participation in it. This source, combined with a close analysis of another neglected pool of information (correspondence to Governor Chamberlain

[11]Charleston *News and Courier*, reports of May 1877 contained in James Aldrich bound ledger, SCL. Aldrich was the defense attorney for A. P. Butler et al. in the Ellenton riot trial held in May 1877. Quotations in editions of May 18, 19, and 20, 1877.

[12]Cited in Avary, *Dixie After the War*, pp. 349-350.

[13]New York *Herald* report reprinted in Charleston *Journal of Commerce*, October 14, 1876, in James Aldrich Papers, SCL.

[14]Belton O'Neall Townsend, "The Political Condition of South Carolina," *Atlantic Monthly* 39 (February 1877), pp. 184-185 esp.

[15]Gov. Chamberlain's address, December 10, 1876, cited in Walter Allen, *Governor Chamberlain's Administration in South Carolina: A Chapter of Reconstruction in the Southern States* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1888), p. 385.

from Ellenton residents in September and October 1876), provides a basis for not only setting the factual record straight on the riot but also gives profile to the political dynamics of a riot that has been perceived simply as racial.[16]

The reason why Chamberlain, contemporary political observers, and some journalists were unsure of the "facts" of the riot is made clear in a letter Thomas wrote Aycock on September 21. The first sentence is revealing enough:

> Dear Sir, Be careful with this letter.... I do not feel willing for what I write to you in regard to the riot to be known fully as none of the neighbors will make statements who know all about it.

He went on to say, "The Telegraph reports dont cover the ground, and many things can be told but not written."[17] But, as has been shown, many things were written by journalists who were not privy to the kind of information available to Thomas, a riot participant.

Thomas's letters do not, of course, provide all the answers. But where information is lacking, the governor's correspondence is a useful supplement. Of the dating of the riot, for example, Thomas had little to say, and it is here that constituents' letters to Chamberlain are more useful. What is most apparent from this latter source is that the troubles in Ellenton had been building up for some weeks prior to the actual outbreak of violence. As early as September 7, H. N. Boney, probate judge of Edgefield and parts of Aiken County, complained to Chamberlain, "All is not quiet in our hellish county.... The Democrats are seeking a fuss with us," and predicted, "You need not be supprise [sic] to hear an out break any time, for things are quite threatening."[18] The next day, Frank Arnim, trial justice in Hamburg, Aiken County, raised an issue with the governor that was to gain in gravity: the question of armed Democratic rifle clubs. Arnim implored Chamberlain to send someone to collect guns and ammunition which "are in the hands of persons who for many reasons have no business with [them]...."[19] For the moment, Chamberlain did nothing. And with his renomination for governor by the state Republican Party on September 9, the situation in Aiken deteriorated rapidly.[20]

[16]Thomas-Aycock letters, September 14-November 13, 1876, SCL. Gov. Daniel H. Chamberlain correspondence, September-December 1876, SCDAH.

[17]Thomas to Aycock, September 21, 1876, p. 1, 6, Aycock Family Papers, SCL.

[18]H. N. Boney to Chamberlain, September 7, 1876, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

[19]Frank Arnim to Chamberlain, September 8, 1876, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

[20]Lamson, *Glorious Failure*, pp. 243-249.

Republican Governor Daniel H. Chamberlain asked for U.S. troops to be sent to Ellenton to help calm the tension. Letters sent to him from his constituents help us understand what happened and when. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

Curiously, no constituents' letters to Chamberlain regarding the Ellenton riot appear in the governor's correspondence until September 18, which, according to most accounts of the riot, was toward the end of the disturbance. On September 18 Frank Arnim renewed his plea to Chamberlain for help with the rifle clubs: "five to six hundred men from Columbia County, Ga. have crossed the Savannah River and are reported to camp near Hamburg; what are we to do?"[21] With the rioters apparently tearing up the Port Royal Rail Road tracks that same day, Chamberlain forwarded a few men to Milletts, about thirty miles from Augusta, to prevent further damage. But Port Royal Rail Road officials wanted still more men sent for they believed that the "lives of the Citizens in the line of the road will be constantly placed in jeopardy by a renewal of these disturbances until after

[21]Frank Arnim to Chamberlain, September 18, 1876, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

the Election."[22] By September 20, however, the violence had shifted its location away from Ellenton and its immediate environs to Midway, Barnwell County, Republican citizens of which wrote to Chamberlain asking for protection against the marauding Democrats who "tell us in plain words that they mean to kill us out before this coming Election."[23] These sentiments were echoed in a letter from W. J. Mixins of Barnwell seven days later who implored the governor, "Cant you give a word of encouragement one word of hope?" And similar jeremiads from Barnwell and Edgefield counties continued to pour into the governor's office well into October.[24] As if by vicarious empathy Edgar J. Wells, secretary and treasurer of Connecticut's famous Gatling Gun Company, had sent a commercial flyer to Chamberlain a few days earlier suggesting that he purchase several of the weapons "For the purpose of quelling riots."[25]

TWO FACTS, THEN, EMERGE FROM AN EXAMINATION OF THE above correspondence. First, it appears that the riot in Ellenton lasted until September 20, 1876, when it shifted locus to Barnwell County. Second, Chamberlain was seemingly slow to send sufficient numbers of troops to Ellenton to help quell the disturbance and protect his Republican supporters. Indeed, it was not until October 7 that he issued his fiat disbanding Democratic rifle clubs in Aiken and Barnwell and, doubting that his order would be obeyed, the next day he wrote Ulysses S. Grant asking him to dispatch Federal troops to "aid me in suppressing said insurrection and domestic violence."[26] But what of the start of the riot and the number killed and injured? Before turning to the Thomas-Aycock letters, it is useful to examine three sources in the Chamberlain correspondence which help answer these questions.

The first of these is a "Report of the late riot in Aiken County," by T. H. Blackwell and James Canton, both deputy United States marshals who were solicited by Chamberlain to take affidavits from witnesses of the Ellenton

[22]R. G. Fleming, Senior Superintendent, Port Royal Rail Road, Augusta, Ga., to Chamberlain, September 19, 1876, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

[23]Republican citizens of Midway, Barnwell County, to Chamberlain, September 20, 1876, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

[24]For example, on September 28, 1876, the citizens of Barnwell County wrote Chamberlain asking for protection against Democratic rifle clubs, and James Richardson, sheriff of Edgefield reported to Chamberlain that all guns had been stolen from his jail by Democrats on October 11, 1876. Both letters in Box 15, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

[25]W. J. Mixins, Barnwell County, to Chamberlain, September 27, 1876; Edgar J. Wells, Secretary and Treasurer of Gatling Gun Company, Hartford, Conn., to Chamberlain, September 23, 1876, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

[26]Chamberlain's proclamation was issued on October 7, 1876; Chamberlain to Grant, October 8, 1876. Both in Governor's correspondence, Box 15, SCDAH.

riot. The men arrived in Aiken County on September 29 but, because of difficulty in procuring "a conveyance to carry us through the country," did not arrive in the Ellenton vicinity until October 3 where they remained for two days before returning to Columbia. During their two-day sojourn they interviewed a number of people, Democrat and Republican, and later issued a report on the riot. According to this account, the affray began on the morning of Friday, September 15, in Ellenton and shifted to Rouse's Bridge on Sunday, September 17, where A. P. Butler ("who claimed to be a special Constable of Trial Justice Griffin") "had a skirmish with the negroes." The events culminated in the derailment of a Port Royal train on September 18, another skirmish at Rouse's Bridge on the 19th, and the murder of Simon Coker, Barnwell's black Republican legislator, on September 20. They also sent Chamberlain a tally of numbers killed and wounded, ascertaining that a total of sixteen had lost their lives in the riot (two whites, fourteen blacks) and noted that five had been wounded. To their credit, the marshals were skeptical of these figures.[27]

Many of the marshals' claims are substantiated by two other accounts in the Chamberlain files. The first, an anonymous letter from a riot participant, reaffirms that the troubles started on September 15. And there is good reason to believe this particular source since he or she wrote, "The riot was commenced by the shooting of Peter Williams who was taken out of my house on Friday 15th inst." Unfortunately, further details from this source are missing because one of the Democratic rioters "told me ... that I must leave his place, as he would not allow a G.d. d.m. Radical to live in his place."[28] The other source, an account of the riot solicited by Chamberlain from D. Carlin, United States district attorney for South Carolina, of October 9, 1876, provides no date either of the start or end of the riot. Carlin, like the marshals, spent two or three days in Aiken collecting affidavits, and found that at least thirteen blacks were killed in the affray but suggested that as many as twenty-five to thirty blacks were killed in reality.[29]

Some of this information is corroborated by F. E. Thomas. Indeed, there is reason to attach greater credibility to Thomas's observations than to the above accounts, for, unlike the marshals and Carlin who wrote their reports two or three weeks after the riot, Thomas's letters were written to Aycock as the riot actually unfolded. Thomas's first letter to his employer was dated September 15, thus suggesting that the information procured by Carlin and the marshals regarding the beginning of the riot is probably correct. And the fact that Thomas ends his discussion of the riot proper in a letter dated

[27]T. H. Blackwell and James Canton, Deputy United States Marshals, to Chamberlain, October 7, 1876, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

[28]Anon. to Chamberlain, n.d., Governor's correspondence, SCDAH. Possibly from Addison Haltinwanger but unsigned.

[29]Carlin to Chamberlain, October 9, 1876, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

September 21 suggests that the parameters of the actual violence of the riot in Ellenton and its immediate vicinity were from September 15 to September 21. Of the numbers killed and wounded in the altercation, Thomas's letters shed new light. Whereas all other sources state that Peter Williams was merely wounded, Thomas told Aycock that Williams "is the only man it is certain was killed."[30] But, like the deputy U.S. marshals, Thomas was not certain of the total tally of killings, although for very different reasons. He told Aycock: "[I]t is hard to get at the number killed for the parties who did the work were determined to kill all the negroes they could find with arms and they did so without keeping any account."[31] Nevertheless, when Thomas did venture to conjecture, his numbers are significantly different from all other estimations, putting the number of blacks killed as high as one hundred. Of white deaths, his guess was nearer that of the marshals: "I cant hear of but two whites being killed (one of those is doubted), and but 5 or six whites wounded." And, like some of Aiken's constituents who worried about Democratic rifle clubs from outside Aiken, Thomas too acknowledged that "every club from Allendale ... to Augusta" was involved in the fracas.[32]

A composite factual account of the Ellenton riot gleaned from the Thomas and Chamberlain correspondence, then, reads thus: The riot lasted from September 15 to September 21, ranged over an area from Rouse's Bridge to parts of the Port Royal Rail Road, attracted Democratic rifle clubs from as far away as Augusta, and claimed the lives of up to one hundred blacks, one white, with five or six whites wounded. To be sure, some of the facts regarding the riot will always remain elusive. There is no way, for example, to ascertain the exact number of blacks killed in the riot. The best that can be said of this matter is that between twenty five and one hundred lost their lives.

OF THE CAUSES, NATURE, AND INTERPRETATION OF THE ELLENton riot, the Chamberlain files and Thomas correspondence suggests that the affray is best characterized as political rather than simply racial. Central to the argument stressing the racial nature of the riot is the role of Aiken's Democratic rifle clubs which, it has been assumed, were legal entities designed simply to enforce racial segregation in general and dispense arbitrary "justice" to Fred Pope and Peter Williams after their breach of "racial etiquette" with Mrs. Alonzo Harley. But were such clubs legal and were they used simply to enforce racial subordination?

Rifle clubs were not new to South Carolina. There had been a few

[30]Thomas to Aycock, September 21, 1876, p. 2., Aycock Family Papers, SCL.
[31]Ibid.
[32]Ibid., p. 3, 1.

companies during Scott's administration when their function was essentially a social one.[33] Questions about the legal status of these clubs arose as early as 1874 when it was pointed out that these independent organizations possessed state arms but were exempt from laws governing the militia. Concern heightened following the nomination of Wade Hampton for governor on the Democratic state ticket in August 1876, when the number of rifle clubs in South Carolina increased by two hundred. Yet, after December 1, 1874, no permission had been granted for the establishment of such clubs and, by revised statutes, they were plainly illegal.[34] Simkins and Woody estimate that the total number of rifle clubs in South Carolina by late 1876 reached 290 with 14,350 members. More importantly, the involvement of the clubs in the disorder gives it a political coloring.

To be sure, political alignments based in part on race existed throughout Reconstruction with a majority of blacks voting Republican and whites the Democratic ticket. But the racial-political alignment was not as hard and fast as historians have sometimes inferred, and especially not in the case of the Ellenton riot.[35] And because the cause of the Ellenton affray has been couched in terms of black criminality and sexuality, the riot as a whole has been characterized as a racial conflict. In short, the racial argument is, at best, a half truth, and, at worst, specious, for in addition to the persecution of blacks by whites in Ellenton lay a fundamental, and essentially political-racial struggle, between Democrats (most, but by no means all, of whom were white) and radical Republicans.

Such, at least, is the impression from letters written to Chamberlain from Ellenton's white constituents, many of them Republicans. Eight days prior to the riot, for example, H. N. Boney explained to Chamberlain that the brewing conflict was drawn along political as well as racial lines. He wrote, "There is hardly a Democratic negro in this county that has not given us some trouble up to this time. If a republican [even] looks at one of these democratic proselytes, he is arrested and tried before a Democratic Trial Justice, and convicted regardless of *law* and *facts*." Similarly, residents of Barnwell County, two weeks after the riot, identified white Democrats as the protagonists. And a day later, on September 28, the citizens of Blackville, Barnwell County, made clear the influence of race *and* politics in the violence of the period: "[W]hile we were on Sunday at divine worship a band of lawless men armed with duble [sic] barrel gun shot down in cold Blood one [of] our men Simply because his Skin was of a different hue and

[33]See Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction*, p. 500.

[34]Ibid., pp. 500-503.

[35]See Morgan J. Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 15.

because he was a Republican...."[36]

In the case of the Ellenton riot, it is undoubtedly true that white rifle clubs killed blacks on the assumption that they were also Republicans. As the report of the deputy United States marshals makes clear, such assumptions were not always correct but, as with the murder of Simon Coker, they often were. In short, the Democratic strategy during the riot was built around the assumption that if enough black, presumably Republican voters could be intimidated, usually violently, then Wade Hampton would win the impending gubernatorial race. This reasoning is explicit in Carlin's report on the riot to Chamberlain: "[T]he colored men are informed that their only safety from death or whipping lies in their singing [sic] an agreement pledging themselves to vote the democratic ticket in the coming election."[37]

Ultimately, however, the evidence presented by both Carlin and the marshals is evidence presented by outsiders, non-Ellenton men who took affidavits after the riot. But the argument that political as well as racial dynamics effected the nature of the riot is supported also by an insider: F. E. Thomas. In his second letter to Aycock on September 21, Thomas provides concrete evidence of the political nature of the riot. He explained how those blacks who had taken shelter in a swamp near Ellenton during the riot were "hunted up and, 'dealt with,' after the S.C. plan, thus suggesting that the Democratic rifle clubs in Aiken were pursuing a strategy of political intimidation similar to that advocated in other southern states, most notably the "Mississippi Plan."[38] In this same letter, Thomas also alludes to the desire of Ellenton's white Democrats to attain political hegemony over the black community. He disclosed to Aycock:

> [A]ll the Clubs have returned to their homes, and unless the negroes can raise another force and start this fuss again there will be no more of it [the riot] ... but there is no telling what will be done in this section before the election is over. If there should be an effort on the part of blacks to avenge their black prides, the whites will be on them again in short notice, and will not spare a man of them — They intend to rule or kill the negroes.[39]

[36]H. N. Boney to Chamberlain, September 7, 1876; W. J. Mixins to Chamberlain, September 27, 1876; Citizens of Blackville, Barnwell County, to Chamberlain, September 28, 1876, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

[37]Blackwell and Canton to Chamberlain, October 7, 1876; Carlin to Chamberlain, October 9, 1876, Governor's correspondence, SCDAH.

[38]Thomas to Aycock, September 21-22, 1876, p. 2, Aycock Family Papers, SCL. On the Mississippi Plan, see the Charleston *News and Courier*, August 9, 1876.

[39]Thomas to Aycock, September 21-22, 1876, p.4, Aycock Family Papers, SCL.

Less than a month later, following the county elections, Thomas again wrote to Aycock. It is a candid letter, rare for its outright testimony to the role politics played in the riot and its aftermath. Thomas told his employer how some of the hands on the farm attended the election and how, "by close watching and a 'bold front' we kept them all except 21 from voting." And when Thomas discovered that four black Republicans had managed to register their vote before he got to the polls, he delighted, "but I managed to get their votes Counted out."[40] He was no doubt relieved to find that "The Democratic ticket got a majority of 158 votes [and] the county goes Democratic by 1200 majority." And Thomas's concluding comment that the "The Negroes around this neighburhood [sic] seem greatly di[s]appointed & cowed down over the result of the election," surely testifies that political considerations played an important part for both races in the Ellenton riot.[41]

Admittedly, it is curious as to why the Ellenton riot has been portrayed as a racial rather than a political conflict. After all, most observers are willing to admit that the riots in other parts of the state were plainly political, not least because they occurred a year prior to the infamous compromise of 1877 and only a few months before the most intense gubernatorial campaign South Carolina witnessed in the immediate post-bellum period.[42] Indeed, simply because of the temporal and political context in which the riot occurred, common-sense should dictate that the riot was simply a local illustration of a national struggle for political power. As Thomas put it: "The victory here so nobly won against so great odds causes every man woman and child to rejoic[e] & Claim to be a free people again and will never submit to the rule of 'Carpet baggers & Scalawags' again."[43] Plainly, then, a fuller factual and interpretive understanding of the Ellenton riot in particular, and Reconstruction riots in general, must embrace the political as well as the racial nature of violence in a South still recovering from an equally violent deconstruction of an exclusively white male political arena.

[40]Thomas to Aycock, November 13, 1876, Aycock Family Papers, SCL.

[41]Ibid.

[42]The election was, according to Peggy Lamson's colorful account, a farce with both Chamberlain and Hampton claiming victory and two state legislatures assembling. Lamson, *The Glorious Failure*, pp. 250-261. As a result of the complex maneuvers behind the compromise of 1877 and for other reasons, Chamberlain stepped down in favor of Hampton. See C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1951). For an historian who sees clearly the political aspects of the troubles on the Ashepoo and Combahee in 1876, see Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), pp. 91-110.

[43]Thomas to Aycock, November 13, 1876, Aycock Family Papers, SCL.

"THE SITUATION HAS BEEN BADLY FUMBLED": SOUTH CAROLINA'S RESPONSE TO GAS RATIONING DURING WORLD WAR II

TOM DOWNEY*

A KIND OF NOSTALGIC VISION OF THE UNITED STATES HOME front during the Second World War exists in the minds of many Americans. It is remembered mainly as a time when the entire nation pulled together and gladly sacrificed for the war effort. Scrap drives, victory gardens, and leg painting remain fond reminders of the war in our collective memory. Popular histories, such as the seemingly limitless Time-Life volumes on World War II, only add to this sentimental vision. Surprisingly, considering the popularity of the subject matter, comparatively little scholarly research has been conducted on the American home front during the war. Likewise, few serious works on public reactions towards the federal government and its intrusions into the wartime economy, especially rationing, have been produced in the years following the conflict.

In particular, public reaction to gas rationing in the United States during World War II has been largely neglected by historians. While a handful of works have been written about the American home front and on the political justification for rationing America's supply of gasoline, most have looked at gas rationing as no more than a series of political decisions made in Washington, D.C., with historians seemingly content to write off public reaction as mere "grumbling." A detailed assessment of the public reaction to this unprecedented federal intrusion into the lives of the American public is yet to be written.[1]

Some of the earliest and most vocal "grumbling" against gas rationing came from South Carolina. Along with the rest of the East Coast, the Palmetto State felt the effects of gasoline rationing well before the rest of the nation. Prior to the war, 95 percent of the petroleum sent to the East Coast was transported by tanker. However after Pearl Harbor a diversion of tankers to the war effort and the alarming amount of losses to submarine activity led to a drastic reduction of petroleum supplies in the eastern United States. By March 1942 the first steps towards gasoline rationing were

*Curator of Collections, Studebaker National Museum, South Bend, Indiana

[1]Richard Polenberg, *War and Society: The United States, 1941-1945* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972), p. 32; Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II* (Arlington Heights, Il.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1986), p. 39; Eliot Janeway, *The Struggle For Survival: A Chronicle Of Economic Mobilization in World War II* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951), pp. 340-341.