

KKK IN YORK COUNTY, 1870-71

In early March 1870, some of the Ku Klux Klan members in York County circulated a report that the Chester Union League was planning to attack Fort Mill and butcher the white inhabitants.

The Union League was a state-wide Republican Party sponsored organization that intended to register former slaves as Republicans. The Republicans promoted the idea that any black who wanted to remain free should vote Republican. They also reminded the blacks that it was Republicans who gave the freedmen public education and the Homestead Act (promised 40 acres and a mule, but that never happened).

The KKK (i.e. Klan) was set up in a way that made the leadership practically invisible. The rank and file of the Klan usually had no idea where their orders came from.

Ulysses S. Grant was president at the time. Grant persuaded the U. S. Congress to establish a new cabinet position, the Justice Department. For his first attorney-general, Grant selected Amos T. Akerman (1821-1880), who was born in Bartow County, Georgia and educated at Dartmouth College. During the Civil War Akerman was an attorney for the Confederate government. The appointment angered the Republican Radicals, but Grant pardoned Akerman and prevailed.

Black men could vote; white men who had joined the Confederate forces could not. Gov. Robert K. Scott, called a "carpetbagger" since he was from Pennsylvania, armed black troops in order to protect blacks voting in the 1870 election. This led to a great increase in membership in the Ku Klux Klan.

Things were so tense in Yorkville in February 1870 that a brigadier general of the SC State Militia was barely able to avert a riot.

Attorney- General Akerman drew up a plan for the 7th Cavalry, then under Gen. George Custer, to be moved to South Carolina if needed.

In February of 1871 Governor Scott met with white leaders of Chester and York Counties and as a result disarmed the black militia. Maj. Lewis M. Merrill, age 37, headed the cavalry unit sent to Yorkville. Meantime, on their own, blacks were forming a separate militia under Jim Williams (aka Jim Rainey).

On March 6, 1871, Jim Williams was murdered by Klan members in western York County.

The next month, April 1871, the U. S. Congress passed a third Enforcement Act which quickly became known as the "Ku-Klux" Act. In effect, it implemented Attorney-General Akerman's plan. As a result federal troops occupied 9 counties in upper S. C.

In the summer of 1871 the U.S. Congress held hearings on the Klan's activities. Major Merrill went to Washington to testify. Merrill said, "I never conceived of such a state of social disorganization being possible in any civilized community." Some newspapers began to use the term "terrorist" to describe the Klan.

While in Washington, Major Merrill met with Attorney-General Akerman and gave him a list of known Klansmen in York County and in Spartanburg, the other "hot spot."

On October 12, 1871, President Grant ordered the SC Klan to disband. York and Spartanburg Counties were simultaneous targets of Federal troops.

By the end of November there were over 600 arrests of Klansmen. Five unreported murders were found. Two hundred white men were put in jail when they refused to give any information. In York County 160 white men "puked" (an old term for voluntary confessions, especially if the arrested man implicated others). The remainder fled West or to Canada with a handful going to Cuba or Mexico.

Amos T. Akerman resigned his post as head of the Justice Department because of corruption in Grant's executive branch that was unrelated to the Ku Klux Klan. His replacement, George H. Williams, wasn't interested in the KKK but those sentenced, who were numbered in the hundreds, served anywhere from 3 months to 8 years in New York state prisons.

By Louise Pettua