



Rhonda Jones

CONTENT WARNING

Teaching Lynching and
Racial Violence in North Carolina

Black Studies

Collection Editor

CHRISTOPHER MCAULEY

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Source: "Ku Klux Klan Mask," circa 1870, belonged to Colonel John Campbell Van Hook Jr., of Person County, North Carolina. North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Acknowledgment

Every book has its own story of becoming. *Content Warning* emerged from years of research, archival practice, and conversations with scholars, educators, archivists, students, and community practitioners committed to understanding how we engage difficult histories with integrity, compassion, and ethical responsibility. It is my hope that this reader serves as a resource that supports your efforts and encourages meaningful conversations about trauma, memory, and historical responsibility.

My deepest gratitude goes to Dr. Suzanne Godby Ingalsbe and Dr. Maria Hamilton Abegunde, whose vision, scholarship, and unwavering commitment to ethical engagement with difficult histories profoundly shaped this book. Through the *National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute*, "Content Warning: Engaging Trauma and Controversy in Research Collections," Indiana University Bloomington, the faculty's thoughtful engagement demonstrated that working with traumatic and controversial collections requires not only historical and archival expertise but also interdisciplinary collaboration, humility, and ethical imagination. I also thank my fellow institute participants, whose openness, curiosity, and generosity enriched every conversation.

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Dr. Deborah H. Barnes, whose mentorship encouraged me to ask more difficult questions and imagine more humane and trauma-informed approaches to archival practice.

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I also acknowledge, with profound respect and humility, the generations of African American descendants, families, and other communities of color whose sacrifices, perseverance, and steadfast commitment to preserving memory have made this work possible. Too often, the histories explored in these pages survived not because institutions recognized their value, but because families and communities refused to let the names, lives, and experiences disappear. Their acts of remembrance are themselves acts of resistance, love, and care. I hope this reader affirms that trauma-informed archival practice is not only about documenting the past but also about preserving histories and creating possibilities for remembrance, repair, and a more just future.

Finally, I thank my family, friends, colleagues, and mentors for their unwavering encouragement throughout this journey. You reminded me that I am aligned with my purpose and that good work is made possible through time, trust, generosity, and care.

Abstract

This course reader examines the history, legacy, and impact of lynching and racial violence in North Carolina from the post-Civil War era through to the late twentieth century, with attention to its enduring legacies today. Teaching about racial violence in North Carolina requires a thoughtful, trauma-informed approach that combines historical context with strategies for addressing contemporary issues. Through primary sources—including survivor testimonies, legislative documents, media accounts, and archival records—students analyze lynching, white supremacist political coups, discriminatory legal structures, and community responses, including resistance, self-defense, and civil rights activism. Students will engage with sources containing explicit descriptions, racist language, or troubling imagery to understand systemic oppression, discrimination, resistance movements, and the lasting effects of racial violence on the state's social and political landscape, which can be difficult to confront. Some documents are reproduced in original form, while most are excerpts from extended interviews, articles, or books. In editing these documents, I have aimed to stay true to the author's original intent by emphasizing portions of the text that directly address various aspects of racial violence. In most cases, I have preserved the wording of the original text. Each document is accompanied by a brief introduction that provides historical context, along with three questions designed to highlight key elements of the argument and help focus students' thinking on the issues raised that

deepen our understanding of past and ongoing injustices. The collection emphasizes trauma-informed engagement with sensitive historical materials and highlights how state institutions, media, and grassroots movements shaped the lived experiences of African Americans. The final sections center on reconciliation efforts and contemporary activism, encouraging students to connect historical injustices to ongoing struggles for racial justice in North Carolina's civic life and memory politics.

Key words

Lynching

Racial terror

Racial riot/massacre

White supremacy

Jim Crow legislation

Anti-lynching activism

Police violence

Community resistance

Commemoration

Restorative Justice

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Learning objectives

By the conclusion of this course reader, students will be able to:

- Identify major episodes of racial terror and state-sanctioned violence in North Carolina from the 1880s to the late twentieth century.
- Analyze primary sources that document racial violence and evaluate the role of media, law enforcement, and government institutions in supporting or challenging oppression.
- Interpret how African American communities organized resistance—from anti-lynching campaigns to youth protest and armed self-defense—as part of broader civil rights struggles.
- Assess the legacy of racial violence, including trauma, memory, political disenfranchisement, and contemporary movements for justice.
- Engage responsibly with trauma-centered materials using empathetic, ethical, and historically grounded inquiry practices.

Content warning

Teaching about racial violence in North Carolina requires a thoughtful, trauma-informed approach that combines historical context with strategies for addressing contemporary issues. This reader contains derogatory terms, descriptions, and discussions of racial violence, including lynching, police brutality, and white supremacist terror. Some content may be distressing or triggering for readers. We encourage engaging with these materials with care and utilizing available support resources as needed. Some documents are reproduced in original form, while most are excerpts from extended interviews, articles, or books. In editing these documents, I have aimed to stay true to the author's original intent by emphasizing portions of the text that directly address various aspects of racial violence. In most cases, I have preserved the wording of the original text. Each document is accompanied by an introduction that provides historical context, along with four questions designed to highlight key elements of the argument and help focus students' thinking on the issues raised to deepen their understanding of past and ongoing injustices.

The structure of this reader

This reader is divided into six chapters, each addressing a different period in North Carolina's history of racial violence, injustice, and resistance. Each chapter contains a mix of primary and secondary sources, encouraging students to engage critically with historical documents, witness testimonies, and scholarly interpretations. By examining the interplay of racial violence, retribution, and resistance, students will gain a deeper understanding of the enduring impact of racial terror in North Carolina and the resilience of African American communities in the face of oppression.

As we explore the history of racial violence and resistance in North Carolina, it is important to recognize that these struggles did not end in 1980. The patterns of racial terror—police violence, voter suppression, and systemic racism—continue in contemporary forms. By studying this history, we equip ourselves with the knowledge to confront these ongoing injustices. The book is not merely a historical examination but a call to understand the past to work toward a more just future. This reader invites students to engage with difficult truths, question historical narratives, and acknowledge the agency of those who resisted oppression. Through this engagement, we honor the legacies of those who fought against racial violence and continue their work in the present day.

Introduction

Throughout American history, racial violence has been both a means of oppression and a trigger for resistance. From 1870 to 1980, North Carolina experienced ongoing attempts to enforce racial subjugation through violent acts such as lynchings, racial massacres, police brutality, and terror from the Ku Klux Klan. Nevertheless, in the face of this long and painful history, African American North Carolinians and other marginalized communities resisted through a variety of means, including legal challenges, armed self-defense, organized activism, and political engagement. *Content Warning* explores the century-long struggle against racial violence in North Carolina, emphasizing both the retribution inflicted on these communities and the strategies of resistance they employed in response.

This course reader seeks to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of racial violence in North Carolina, tracing its historical roots from the collapse of Reconstruction to the late Civil Rights era. By engaging with primary and secondary sources, students will analyze how white supremacist violence functioned as a tool of social and political control and how communities of color mobilized to challenge, survive, and ultimately shape the course of history.

The legacy of racial violence in North Carolina

North Carolina holds a distinct position in the landscape of American racial violence.

Emboldened by “Lost Cause” sentiment and white supremacist rhetoric, white Southern Democrats and the planter aristocracy, seething from the defeat of authority and loss, enticed white lynch mobs to turn to ritualized lethal violence to uphold a destabilized racial hierarchy. Placing domestic terrorism alongside white Southerners’ political resurgence, they defiantly reclaimed their independence and reestablished the foundations of Southern order.

White political and economic elites wielded racial violence as a tool to maintain social order, ensuring that African American citizens and other marginalized groups remained politically disenfranchised, economically marginalized, and socially subjugated. In response to the increasing economic and political influence of African American Southerners, white Southern Democrats initiated widespread intimidation campaigns against African Americans and white Republicans, ultimately signaling the end of Reconstruction. Unlike other Deep South states, where racial terror was often blatant and legally sanctioned by Jim Crow laws, North Carolina earned a reputation as a “progressive” Southern state. This impression, however, concealed a deeply rooted system of paternalism and racial subjugation that often emerged through economic exploitation and both legal and extralegal means.

1

Reconstruction and retaliation (1870–1896)

Content warning

Graphic descriptions of physical and sexual violence, harassment, intimidation, torture, lynching, expulsion, arson, and the destruction of African American communities.

Themes

White supremacist backlash and political violence, state and federal intervention, African American and White Republican resistance, and the codifying of segregation.

The Civil War ended in 1865, marking the beginning of the Reconstruction era. From 1865 to 1877, this period was characterized by a wave of civil rights bills, constitutional amendments, and efforts to integrate four million formerly enslaved individuals into society, which faced significant opposition. Life in the South, specifically in North Carolina, was particularly hostile as states sought to reassert White dominance through racial terror and legal oppression. This chapter asserts how, from 1866,

1870, and beyond, white supremacist paramilitary groups, like the Red Shirts, the Invisible Brotherhood, and the Ku Klux Klan, maintained white dominance and undermined the rights of newly freed African Americans and their white Republican allies through fear, physical violence, and intimidation. On April 12, 1869, an act was approved that made being masked, disguised, or painted a felony. It aimed to punish the specified types of cases. The effectiveness of this act can be gauged from the testimony of victims, judges, prosecuting officers, and others.

In February 1869, members of the Ku Klux Klan broke into the home of Daniel Blue, an African American resident of Moore County, and murdered his children and pregnant wife. Blue was severely wounded in the attack but managed to escape. A USD 500 reward was offered for the arrest of the murderers, and civil and military authorities were urged to suppress the Klan violence. In 1868, Wyatt Outlaw, a former enslaved person, was appointed Graham's first African American town commissioner in Alamance County. Presumably a rising star in the Republican Party, Outlaw's establishment of a Union League chapter, encouragement of African American political participation and advocacy for self-defense placed him in the crosshairs of white supremacists. On February 26, 1870, he was kidnapped from his home and lynched from an elm tree in the town square. John W. Stephens, a white Republican senator in Caswell County, was assassinated for supporting African American political rights. In response to Klan violence, in 1870, Republican Governor William Woods Holden drafted mandates to punish the insurgents, protect citizens, and assert that all people should be allowed to exercise the rights they were born with. He declared martial law

in Alamance and Caswell counties and enlisted Union officer George W. Kirk to arrest over 100 suspected Klansmen. Holden and Kirk ignored court orders, prompting federal intervention. President Ulysses S. Grant withdrew support, leading to the prisoners' release. The conflict, known as the "Kirk-Holden War," weakened the Republican Party in North Carolina and led to Governor Holden's impeachment and conviction in 1871.

On March 10, 1871, the US Senate issued a "Report on the Alleged Outrages in the Southern States," which featured extensive testimonies about how the Ku Klux Klan relied heavily on using violent acts to terrorize local communities, disrupt African American male suffrage, reinstate Democratic authority, and restore white supremacy in the early 1870s. Witnesses described numerous instances of Klan terrorism in North Carolina, including night raids, whippings, lynchings, and assassinations targeted against African American individuals, communities, white Republicans, and anyone seen as supporting Reconstruction policies. The report features firsthand accounts from survivors of Klan violence who recounted being kidnapped, threatened, beaten, shot, and killed, robbed of money, horses, and property, forced to flee their homes, their guns taken away, and the brutal murders of family members and neighbors. White Republican leaders, including state legislators and local officials, testified about the attacks and coffins being placed at the front door.

As North Carolina's small counties and cities grew, the elite white gentry class prioritized reunification and reconciliation by embracing New South ideals and distancing themselves from racial exploitation to attract Northern investments. By the 1870s, the rise of textile and tobacco mills shifted the state's economy

from agriculture to urban industry. Nonetheless, mounting white supremacist political insurgency was coupled with economic instability. Money-scarce landowners established sharecropping contracts providing laborers with housing, provisions, mules, tools, and seeds for farming small plots. Planters claimed half to three-quarters of the harvest. Workers, bound by credit-based agreements, often found themselves trapped in debt due to fluctuating markets and exploitative landowners. The inability to escape the debt cycle of sharecropping left many African Americans subjected to peonage and vagrancy laws. Vagrancy laws have historically been used to control and criminalize individuals deemed idle or without visible means of support. Enacted in the post-Civil War era, these laws disproportionately targeted African Americans, compelling them into labor to avoid arrest. The state's vagrancy statutes, codified in G.S. 14-336, identified various classes of individuals as vagrants, including those without employment or permanent residence. These laws were part of the broader Black Codes designed to restrict the freedoms of formerly enslaved people. African Americans were arrested and sentenced to state prison. From there, the convicted prisoners were "leased" to private companies that used them to perform manual labor. It was no accident that a large majority of the state's prisoners were African Americans, who often ended up on the chain gang for years for minor crimes like vagrancy, loitering, and petty theft. Nor did the system have anything to do with criminality. State authorities and political leaders justified the convict labor used to build railroads and canals as a new way to maintain control over an African American labor force. Sharecropping, convict leasing, and segregation all served to

solidify African Americans' economic oppression, restricting access to public accommodations, and ensuring white landowners maintained dominance.

The return of white Democratic control ushered in an era of even greater racial oppression. These testimonies from North Carolina and other Southern states influenced Congress to pass the Enforcement Acts (1870–1871), which gave the federal government power to prosecute Klan members and protect African American voters. The committee's findings also helped justify President Ulysses S. Grant's use of federal troops to suppress the Klan. Klan hostility toward African Americans continued, bolstered by local law enforcement and elite landowners who oppressed and exploited African American sharecroppers and tenant farmers. In 1872, newspaper coverage reported how African American males were disenfranchised when white Democrats took control of the North Carolina General Assembly.

The Civil Rights Act of 1875, passed on March 1, was one of the last significant legislative efforts during the Reconstruction era aimed at protecting the rights of African Americans. It prohibited racial discrimination in public accommodations such as hotels, theaters, transportation, and jury service. However, its impact was limited due to weak enforcement and increasing white resistance in the South, particularly in states like North Carolina. On October 15, 1883, the US Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875, ruling that the federal government could not regulate private affairs. This decision emboldened Southern states to pass and enforce segregation laws without fear of federal intervention, laying the groundwork for the formal systems

of racial segregation that would prevail until the mid-twentieth century.

The conclusion of Reconstruction in 1877 and the Civil Rights Cases of 1883 marked a significant turning point by eliminating federal protections for African Americans, which allowed states like North Carolina to harass and discriminate more aggressively. Since the 1870s, North Carolina transitioned from Reconstruction to consolidated white Democratic rule. Racial discrimination had already been enforced through local ordinances and social customs. For instance, schools were primarily segregated by custom. A state constitutional amendment in 1875 formally established racial segregation that continued into the 1890s, leading to increasing funding disparities between African American and white schools. In 1891, North Carolina passed a law requiring separate railroad cars for African and white passengers. White newspapers and politicians increasingly employed racist rhetoric to justify segregation and disenfranchisement, thereby setting the stage for future laws. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 upheld racial segregation under the “separate but equal” doctrine, which provided legal justification for Jim Crow laws across the South, including North Carolina. The ruling emboldened state and local governments to expand segregation, limited African American male suffrage through literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses, and further entrenched white supremacy.

Despite growing restrictions, African American North Carolinians stayed politically engaged. They persisted in advocating for civil rights and educational access through their churches, fraternal organizations, newspapers, especially within Republican Party and Fusionist political circles.

Primary resources

An article published on June 3, 1865, by the employees of *Harper's Weekly*, a Republican newspaper, examined the plans of white Republicans, represented by Hon. W. W. Holden, and African Americans for the future of North Carolina. The author argued that since the only truly loyal citizens of North Carolina were African Americans, their opinions should be the primary consideration.

"Two Voices From North Carolina," June 3, 1865:

...The other plan is presented in a petition from the colored citizens of North Carolina to the president. They confess that they are poor and greatly despise by their fellow men, but they urge that they have tried to help those who uphold the old flag from all the rebellion and hundreds of Union escaped prisoners can say how effectively they did it. They declare that they cannot see the justice of denying the elective franchise to men who have been fighting for the country; wild is really given to men who have just returned from five years, fighting against it. As you were once, a citizen of North Carolina says the petition to the president we need not remind you that up to the year 1865 free colored men vote in the state, and never as we have heard with any detriment to its interest what we desire is that preliminary to elections, and the returning states you would order the enrollment of all loyal men without regard to color. Surely no plan would be more just, more simple, more constitutional and more effective this would bring the people of this state into a convention as Mr. Holden

wishes. And if this is not done if an arbitrary in French enfranchisement is made based upon complexion, or height, or age, or property, or weight, or size how can Congress acknowledge the government that may result as the Republican form of government which is constitutionally bound to secure to every State?

Source: "Two Voices From North Carolina," *Harpers Weekly*, June 3, 1865.

Memoirs of W. W. Holden (William Woods), 1818–1892:

The government of North Carolina is, therefore, as firmly established as that of any other State. It has the same control of the right of suffrage, and of its own internal affairs, as the other States have; and it possesses equal power with the other States to protect and perpetuate itself.

The right of the people to have arms in their houses, and to "bear" them under the authority of law, is not questioned. On the contrary, it is claimed as a constitutional right sacred to freemen. The use of arms by the male population, for peaceable and lawful purposes, should rather be encouraged than otherwise; but when, in time of peace, weapons of an extraordinary character are imported into the State by political organizations, and deposited and distributed in a secret manner among persons whose spokesmen deny the authority of the existing government, and who publicly declare that all government, to be authoritative and binding, must proceed alone from one race of our people, a state of affairs is at once constituted which renders it the duty of every officer and every citizen to be more than usually vigilant. It cannot be pretended that these arms are

intended for hunting or sporting purposes. It cannot be justly assumed that they are necessary for the protection of those who have them, since the whole power of the State and general governments is pledged to protect the peaceable and the law-abiding, whoever and wherever they may be.

If it be the purpose of any portion of the people in any event to resist the laws or to subvert the government, they should bear in mind that TREASON is the highest crime that can be committed; that they are liable to arrest and punishment under the "Act to punish conspiracy, sedition and rebellion," which will be enforced, if necessary, with a firm hand; and they should reflect that the magnanimity of the government, which spared the lives and estates of those who engaged in the late rebellion, may not be extended a second time to save them from the consequences of their crimes.

If it be the purpose of any portion of the people, by the use of arms, or by threats, or intimidation, to prevent the people from going to the polls and voting as they may choose to vote on the third day of next month, it is my duty to inform them that force will be met with force, and that every person who may thus violate the law will be punished. Every race of men in this State is free. The colored citizen is equally entitled with the white citizen to the right of suffrage. The poor and the humble must be protected in this right equally with the affluent and the exalted. The election must be absolutely free.

In view, therefore, of this condition of affairs, I have deemed it my duty to issue this Proclamation, admonishing the people to avoid undue excitement, to be

peaceable and orderly, and to exercise the right of suffrage firmly and calmly, without violence or force of any kind. Every good citizen is gratified that North Carolina is at present as quiet and peaceable as any State of the Union. Let us maintain this good name for our State. Let us frown indignantly on the use of brute force, or bribes, or threats, to control the election; and let every officer of the State, civil and military, be prepared to check instantly any incipient step to sedition, rebellion or treason.

The flag of the United States waves for the protection of all. Every star upon it shines down with vital fire into every spot, howsoever remote or solitary, to consume those who may resist the authority of the government, or who oppress the defenseless and the innocent. The State government will be maintained; the laws will be enforced; every citizen, whatever his political sentiments, will be protected in his rights; the unlawful use of arms will be prevented, if possible, and if not prevented, will be punished; and conspiracy, sedition and treason will raise their heads only to be immediately subdued by the strong hand of military power. The General commanding this department has instructed the district and post commanders to "act in aid and co-operation, and in subordination to the civil authorities," in maintaining the peace and in securing a free election. The power of both governments is thus pledged to peace, order and tranquility. It is specially enjoined on all officers of the Detailed Militia to observe the "act to organize a militia of North Carolina," and to act in strict subordination to the civil power. And all Magistrates, Sheriffs and other peace

officers are also specially enjoined to be vigilant, impartial, faithful and firm in the discharge of their duties, magnifying and enforcing the law, ferreting out offenders, protecting the weak against the strong who may attempt to deprive them of their rights; to the end that the wicked may be restrained, the peace of society preserved, the good name of the State maintained, and the government perpetuated on the basis of Freedom and Justice to all.

Done at our city of Raleigh, on the 12th [L. S.] day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-eight, and in the ninety-third year of our Independence.

W. W. HOLDEN, Governor.

By the Governor:

ROBERT M. DOUGLAS, Private Secretary.

In addition to this I issued four other proclamations down to June 6, 1870, urging and beseeching the people without respect to party or color, to respect and venerate the law, to protect and preserve human life and to demean themselves as good citizens.

Source: Memoirs of W. W. Holden, *Documenting the American South*.

The following documents were excerpted from the "Select Committee of the Senate to Investigate Alleged Outrages" report, which gathered extensive testimonies on racial violence and Klan activity in North Carolina during Reconstruction, in the early 1870s.

Ku Klux outrages in Wayne County, North Carolina:

In the month of January, 1870, a party of men, some seven or more, disguised, came in the house of

Andrew Peel, colored, in Indian Springs Township, and four of the party, viz, John Holmes, Robert Barks, and James Casey (a neighbor) and supposes Jovine Lewis, as the fourth, entered his house, and blindfolded him, carried him off about a mile and a quarter from home, and whipped him badly. This was Saturday, the 9th of January. They also robbed him of a double barrel gun, tore his hat to pieces, and cut the collar off his Sunday coat.

On the same night, viz, January 9 (and more than probably the same party), Joseph Green (colored) was taken out and whipped severely at Everettsville. Green knows none of the men that whipped him.

Harvey Warren fled from Sampson County into Wayne about twelve months ago, and states that he had been taken out by six or seven men carry to the woods, and taking by the arms and run against the trees, and by the legs and flung about like as he had been a log. The party was disguised; one of them had horns; made him feel of his horns; and said they were from hell; had a pistol for a Bible, which they swore him upon; made him kiss it and promise he would never tell what they had done to him.

A true copy of original on file in executive department of North Carolina.

J. B. Neathery,

Private Secretary

Washington DC, January 28, 1871.

James E. Byrd sworn and examined.