

The rise of the Ku Klux Klan

John Patterson Green, *Recollections of the Inhabitants, Localities, Superstitions, and Ku klux Outrages of the Carolinas. By a "Carpet-Bagger" Who Was Born and Lived There* (n.p., 1880), pp. 132–137.

As you read...

The Ku Klux Klan was organized in 1867 as a response to Reconstruction. It was composed of white men who wanted to re-establish white supremacy and to limit the rights of African Americans. Although the Klan was widespread across the South, it was not a national organization; rather the Klan was composed of local branches which acted independently.

Across the South, the Ku Klux Klan used violence and terror against free blacks and sympathetic whites. The goal of the Klan was to intimidate blacks and prevent them from voting, holding political office, or establishing successful businesses. The Klan used all types of violence, including murder, whipping, and the destruction of property.

Although only a small number of men joined the Klan, many white southerners were sympathetic to their cause and goals. As such, it was difficult for governors to stamp out the Klan in their states.

Many northerners were horrified by the actions of the Klan. In 1870, a Congressional investigation was launched and in 1872, Congress passed the "Klan Act," which gave the Federal government the authority to try Klansmen in federal court. Hundreds of Klansmen were tried and punished with fines or imprisonment.

Although the federal government succeeded in breaking up the Klan, violence against African Americans did not end. African Americans were still the victims of mob violence, and over one thousand African American men were lynched by white mobs during the late nineteenth century.

In 1915, the Klan was revived. Membership in the Klan increased during the 1920s and again in the 1960s, in response to social changes and the growing civil rights of African Americans.

JOHN PATTERSON GREEN

John Patterson Green was an African American attorney, legislator, and writer born to free parents in New Bern, North Carolina. In 1857, his father died, and his mother left North Carolina for Cleveland, Ohio. As an adult, Green became a lawyer and campaigned for the Republican Party. He lived in South Carolina for two years after the Civil War before returning to Ohio. He served as justice of the peace in Cleveland, was elected a representative in the lower house of the Ohio state legislature, and was the first black man to be elected to the Ohio State Senate.

In this excerpt from his book, *Recollections of the Inhabitants, Localities, Superstitions, and Ku klux Outrages of the Carolinas. By a "Carpet-Bagger" Who Was Born and Lived There*, Patterson described the violence he witnessed while living in South Carolina after the Civil War. In the book's title, he describes himself as a "carpetbagger," a Northerner who packed up his things in a suitcase made of old carpet and

headed south after the war. His use of the term suggests that he by the time he wrote the book, in 1880, no longer thought of himself as a southerner at all.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What types of Klan violence did Green witness?
2. According to Green, why did white men join the Klan? What were their grievances?
3. What were the goals of the Klan in North Carolina? What were the Klansmen trying to achieve?
4. Whom did the Klan target?
5. What words did Green use to describe the men who joined the Klan? How did he describe their actions?



Figure 1. Ku Klux Klan costumes in North Carolina, 1870.



Figure 2. This cartoon from Harper's Weekly shows an African American killed by the Ku Klux Klan. The caption reads "One Vote Less."

We had only proceeded a short distance further on our way, when we were confronted by the charred remains of what had been a dwelling house.

"What's that?" I asked for the hundredth time, addressing Jones.

"That" said he, "is the work of the Ku-Klux-Klan. The man who lived there was nominated for an office of inconsiderable importance; but being a "Yankee" and for that reason displeasing to his Democratic neighbors, he was warned to leave the country; and failing to heed the notice, he was taken from his house one night by a body of masked men, given a coat of tar and feathers,¹ and twenty-four hours in which to make his escape. After that treatment he hesitated no longer, but left for parts unknown, glad enough to be spared his life. On the following night his house, with all its contents, were burned to the ground, and left in the condition you now see it."

Further inquiry only tended to strengthen the truth of Jones' statement; not only this but the additional fact that throughout the region we were then traversing, there was a thoroughly organized association of men under the name given above. The Ku-Klux-Klan was an organization conceived in sin, and born in iniquity; based not so much upon any

wrongs or oppression that its members were actually suffering at the hands of the members of the newly organized government of the State, as upon an imagined violence done to “all their preconceived opinions and prejudices,” in the language of our Southern correspondent, whose letter we have given in a previous chapter. One of those opinions was that the South ought to have been left alone to secede from the Union of these States, and not restrained by the vigorous North; hence a violence had been done the South in restraining her. Another opinion was that, after having been scourged back into the line of States, South Carolina ought to have been given loose reins to reconstruct herself, and make her own laws; even though their tendency were such as to crush out every spark of civil life from the freedmen, deprive them of their newly acquired political privileges, and relegate them to the condition of “corn-field darkies,” with overseers to crack their whips over their heads, and not even a master to say them nay. Violence had been done to their “preconceived opinions” by denying them this privilege, and to cap the climax, their “preconceived prejudices” had been violated by permitting “corn-field darkies and army sutlers” to hold offices of emolument and trust, notwithstanding the fact they utterly refused to fraternize with them even politically, and reap a portion of the benefits accruing therefrom. There was no reasonable cause of complaint existing on the part of the people of that State that could not have been adjusted by lawful means entirely within their power and under their control; and that, in any one of our more considerate States of the North would have been modified without resort to violence and incendiarism². Not so with these impulsive people, however. “Their preconceived opinions and prejudices” had been violated, and now, just as when the Republican party of the North had violated them by electing Abraham Lincoln to the Presidential chair, nothing short of blood would wipe out the stain.

They regarded the “carpet-bagger” as the common foe, and, as a consequence, all arguments that could be lavished upon him, having in view his conversion to their doctrines, would be worse than wasted. Hence they let him severely alone, and in his state of ostracism he was left to fraternize with “corn-field darkies” or else live the life of a hermit. He chose the former.

But to the colored men they poured forth their souls in all the eloquence at their command, in the vain effort to lure them back again to all their former felicities. In this attempt as well they were doomed to disappointment, for their colored brethren had lived among them long enough to understand the difference between freedom and slavery, and took no heed of their prayers and entreaties. The colored men were then, as now, true to the cause of the Union. They had prayed for it; they had fought for it; and now they would vote for it, and not all the fair promises of their former masters, nor even the reputed wealth of the Indies could swerve them one inch from their recognized path of duty. I have known freedmen to walk twenty miles, in a thinly populated region, to the nearest voting precinct to cast their ballots, even when they knew that such action on their part widened the breach between them and their employers and jeopardized their dearest interests, so true were they to the principles which they had espoused. Being foiled in their efforts to coax or scare their former slaves into a support of their “preconceived opinions and prejudices,” and being fully determined to yield no jot or tittle to the policy pursued by the Republican party, as a last resort, and one more in consonance with their tastes, inclinations and early training, they adopted the policy now known as ku-klux-ism--a policy

of cowardice, perjury, rapine and murder; one ill-suited to any people other than such as are found in the South among her half civilized white population.

The “klan” was thoroughly organized, having a ritual, signs, grips and passwords. They wore masks to conceal their cowardly faces, and bound each other with a solemn oath not to reveal the name of any member, nor divulge any secret of the order.

Their name, “Ku-Klux-Klan,” is said to have been suggested to them by the sound made in the act of cocking and discharging the rifles and shot-guns carried by them--the first two syllables being repeated in a subdued tone of voice, as Ku Klux, represented the cocking of the piece; while the last syllable, Klan, being repeated with emphasis, betokened its discharge.

The objects of the Klan, as have been already hinted at, were to banish the so-called “carpet baggers” from the State, restore the freedmen to positions of serfdom under their former masters, and regain control of the government of the State. They carried a knife in one hand and a torch in the other, while in their belt they wore a revolver. The bull-whip and raw-hide were also instruments of their torture, and made to produce arguments which none dared refute. In their expeditions they spared neither age, sex nor color, and the reputation of being a “black republican” was all that was needed to place one under the ban of their condemnation.

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Notes

1. Tar and feathering was a common type of mob violence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A person was stripped of his clothing, and hot tar was poured over his body, followed by feathers. The tar cooled and stuck to the person’s skin. In order to remove the tar and feathers, a person had to pull the tar off in patches, and it often removed part of his skin. It was incredibly painful and left the person scarred and disfigured.
2. Incendiary words or actions — that is, words or actions designed to promote anger or violence.

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Engraving made from an 1870 photograph by U.S. Marshal J. G. Hester. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.

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Cartoon by Thomas Nast in Harper's Weekly, August 8, 1868, page 512. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.