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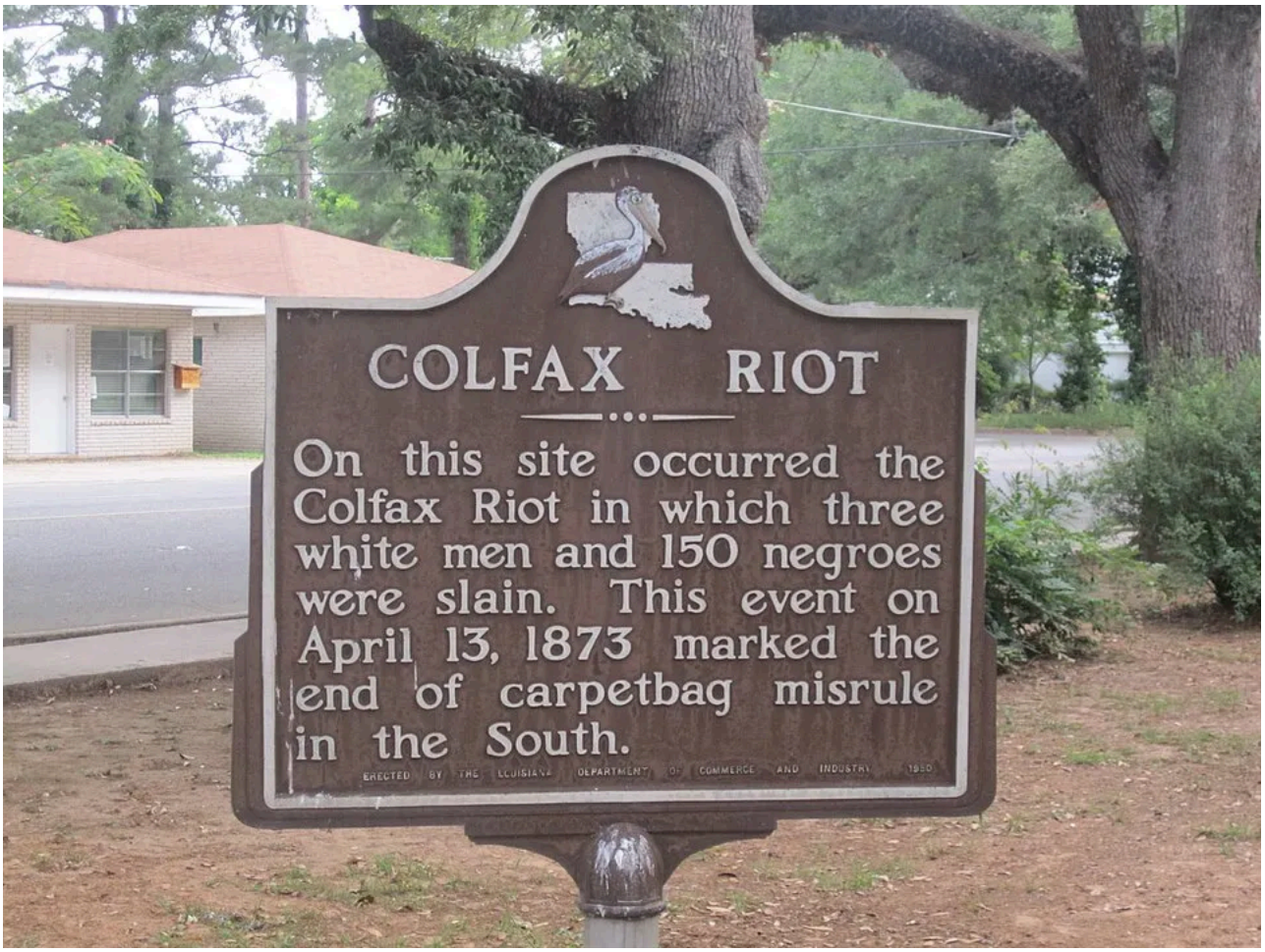
The Violence Leading Up to the Election of 1876

The Illusion of a Peaceful Transfer of Power: How White Supremacist Violence Helped Determine Who Became President



William Spivey Follow 5 min read · 2 days ago

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I've written about the election of 1876 dozens of times, especially about how the Compromise of 1877 settled the disputed election. The candidates were Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden. Donald Trump didn't invent fake slates of electors. In 1876, Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina submitted competing elector slates. Oregon also had a disputed elector. Both Republicans and Democrats claimed legitimate electoral votes from the contested states. The Democratic Party needed one more electoral vote to win the presidency and led the popular vote, with three states in dispute.

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I've also written about some of the events leading up to the 1876 election, but not giving the full perspective of what was happening in America. I hadn't linked the racial violence throughout the South to a growing resentment toward Reconstruction and the growing representation of Black people in federal and state government. 1875–1877 were the peak years of Black representation in Congress, with one U.S. Senator and seven members of the House of Representatives. State governments had increasingly Black elected officials, and Black militia groups were taking advantage of their Second Amendment Right to carry guns for self-defense against white supremacists. In South Carolina alone, multiple armed battles occurred. I'd written about the Hamburg Massacre, I didn'n know about the others.

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- Hamburg Massacre (July 8, 1876): Armed white Democrats attacked a predominantly Black community in South Carolina. Several Black militiamen were killed.
- Ellenton Riot (September 1876): The **Ellenton Riot** occurred in **September 1876** in **Aiken County, South Carolina**, near the hamlet of Ellenton. It was a violent clash between white "gun clubs" and African American militiamen and civilians, triggered by rumors of an assault on a white woman. The fighting lasted several days, with estimates of **30 to over 100 African Americans killed** and at least two whites dead.
- Cainhoy Riot (October 1876): The **Cainhoy Riot** happened on **October 16, 1876**, in **Charleston County, South Carolina**, near Cainhoy. It began at a Republican political meeting when Charleston County Democratic gun clubs arrived by steamer, leading to a confrontation. The fight ended with **seven dead — six whites and one African American** — and more than a dozen wounded. This incident prompted President Ulysses S. Grant to

order the disbanding of private armed groups and deploy more U.S. troops to the state.

In Charleston, between November 8 and 10, after the election. Federal Colonel Henry Hunt intervened when armed Black residents and white rifle clubs threatened to clash. According to the U.S. Army's historical account:

- Hunt recommended that the armed Black groups disband first.
- The Charleston mayor, a Republican, insisted that the white rifle clubs disarm first.
- Hunt prevailed in the disagreement.
- Both the Black militiamen and the white rifle clubs eventually disarmed under federal troop supervision.

Many white rifle clubs reportedly evaded Grant's October proclamation by reorganizing under different names while continuing to carry weapons and perform essentially the same functions.

The violence leading up to the presidential election of 1876 was not confined to South Carolina. Across the former Confederacy, white Democratic organizations and paramilitary groups were using intimidation, murder, and armed attacks to weaken Republican governments and prevent Black citizens from exercising their newly acquired political rights. Louisiana had experienced some of the bloodiest episodes. In April 1873, the Colfax Massacre left an estimated 60 to 150 Black men dead after an armed white mob attacked Black Republicans defending the Grant Parish courthouse. In September 1874, members of the White League attacked the Republican government in New Orleans during the Battle of Liberty Place. Approximately 5,000 White League members confronted a much smaller Metropolitan Police force, seized government buildings, and attempted to install a rival Democratic government. President Grant eventually sent

federal troops to restore Republican Governor William Kellogg. The violence continued into 1875 and 1876, particularly in Louisiana's East Feliciana and West Feliciana parishes, where armed groups attacked and terrorized Republican supporters.

Mississippi provided another example of how political violence could determine election outcomes. During the 1875 elections, white Democratic organizations, often operating as armed rifle clubs or under the banner of the White Line, organized attacks on Republican meetings, intimidated Black voters, and used threats of violence to discourage African Americans from going to the polls. The campaign became known as the Mississippi Plan. Democratic organizations used armed intimidation and organized violence to help regain control of the state government. Black Republican congressman John R. Lynch described Democratic clubs as having become armed military companies that raided Republican meetings. Mississippi Senator Blanche K. Bruce also denounced what he described as a violent effort by white Democrats to establish political supremacy.

In Alabama, the violence was also directed at Black political participation and Republican candidates. During the 1874 elections, James T. Rapier, a Black congressman seeking reelection, and his supporters encountered stolen and destroyed ballot boxes, bribery, fraudulent vote counting, armed intimidation, and physical violence in his southeastern Alabama district. These events prompted congressional investigations and renewed efforts to pass federal legislation protecting access to the polls.

Florida, one of the three states whose electoral votes would ultimately determine the presidential election, experienced its own pattern of intimidation and political violence. Armed Democratic rifle clubs operated in numerous counties, and Black Republican voters faced threats intended to discourage them from participating in elections. Historian Jerrell H. Shofner's research on Florida's 1876 election documents the combination of

intimidation, violence, and electoral fraud employed by both political parties. The most consequential allegations involved the suppression of Black Republican votes, which complicated the state's final electoral count.

Taken together, these events demonstrate that the disputed presidential election of 1876 did not emerge from an isolated disagreement over ballot counting. It came at the end of years of organized political violence throughout the South. In Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and South Carolina, the struggle was over who would control state governments and whether Black Americans could vote, hold office, and participate in the political system. By November 1876, when Americans went to the polls, Reconstruction was already under sustained attack. The election dispute and the eventual Compromise of 1877 would determine whether the federal government continued to defend the political rights established after the Civil War.

I'm always hearing about America's history of a peaceful transfer of power. In 1876, the transfer was anything but, with the election ultimately decided by a group of white men in a smoke-filled room that would decide the future of Black Americans. Ironically, the hotel where they met was owned by a Black man, James Wormley. Democratic supporters of Tilden coined the slogan, "Tilden or War," threatening violence if they didn't get their way. Stay tuned for a full description of the Compromise of 1877 and what came next.

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