



The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction

By LeeAnna Keith

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On Easter Sunday, 1873, in the tiny hamlet of Colfax, Louisiana, more than 150 members of an all-black Republican militia, defending the town's courthouse, were slain by an armed force of rampaging white supremacists. The most deadly incident of racial violence of the Reconstruction era, the Colfax Massacre unleashed a reign of terror that all but extinguished the campaign for racial equality.

LeeAnna Keith's *The Colfax Massacre* is the first full-length book to tell the history of this decisive event. Drawing on a huge body of documents, including eyewitness accounts of the massacre, as well as newly discovered evidence from the site itself, Keith explores the racial tensions that led to the fateful encounter, during which surrendering blacks were mercilessly slaughtered, and the reverberations this message of terror sent throughout the South. Keith also recounts the heroic attempts by U.S. Attorney J.R. Beckwith to bring the killers to justice and the many legal issues raised by the massacre. In 1875, disregarding the poignant testimony of 300 witnesses, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in *U.S. v. Cruikshank* to overturn a lower court conviction of eight conspirators. This decision virtually nullified the Ku Klux Klan Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871--which had made federal offenses of a variety of acts to intimidate voters and officeholders--and cleared the way for the Jim Crow era.

If there was a single historical moment that effectively killed Reconstruction and erased the gains blacks had made since the civil war, it was the day of the Colfax Massacre. LeeAnna Keith gives readers both a gripping narrative account of that portentous day and a nuanced historical analysis of its far-reaching repercussions.

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The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction By LeeAnna Keith Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #568133 in Books
- Published on: 2009-09-24
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 5.50" h x .50" w x 8.20" l, .63 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 219 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

It happened in Colfax, La., on Easter Sunday, 1873; when it ended, the the largest number of victims in the history of racial violence in the United States, more than one hundred and fifty African-Americans, were dead. Keith places the massacre at the center of her book, but her sharpest focus is upon white political figures and the slave-holding Calhoun family (the character Simon Legree in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was based upon a Calhoun forebear), most notably William, who witnessed the violence. Keith traces the fortunes of the Calhoun family to the events leading to the massacre, then turns to the Colfax Courthouse assault and judicial aftermath that deepened the complexity of this tragic event. Three white men were convicted, not for murders but for conspiracy in one murder. These convictions were then overturned, and Reconstruction effectively ended according to Keith. Louisiana's Governor Kellogg declared no white man could be punished for killing a negro. Later memorialized by the state with a plaque celebrating the demise of 'carpetbag misrule in the South,' the horrific massacre has received scant attention from American historians. Keith's aim is admirable, but the execution could be bolstered with more substantive research.

(Feb.)

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Review

"Keith has taken an important and complicated subject and given it a thoroughly researched, concise, readable treatment. She does an especially good job of placing the massacre in the context of the events that preceded it as well as those that followed. Her work reaffirms the conclusion that there was not one Reconstruction but hundreds of Reconstructions across the South, each with its own unique circumstances."--*American Historical Review*

"Well-researched and accessible."--*Library Journal*

"Vivid, compelling prose...serious scholarship accessible to a non-academic readership."--Eric Foner, *The Washington Post*

"[Keith's] engaging account of the Colfax massacre is compelling, and it furthers our understanding of Reconstruction while paving the way for more inquiries into the legacy of that violent era."--southern Historian

"In *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction*, LeeAnna Keith powerfully accomplishes what she set out to do, to shed new light on a tragically under-reported but significant chapter in America's past.... Meticulously researched, painstakingly recreated, and full of insight into the times, this book is a much needed and important addition to the permanent record of

American history."--Lalita Tademy, author of *Cane River* (an Oprah Choice) and *Red River*

"The Colfax Massacre brings to light one of the most notorious, yet forgotten, events of the 1870s--the object of Congressional Investigations, a historic Supreme Court case, and a special address by President Ulysses S. Grant. In the decades since, the town of Colfax, Louisiana--a bastion of racism and black poverty--has struggled with the massacre's legacy. The High Court's decision in *U.S. v Cruikshank* takes on new meaning as Keith traces its role in the rise of Jim Crow, chronicling this true Old South drama with striking characters, heroic acts, and chilling violence."--Morris Dees, founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center

"Keith's book is attractively designed and delivers a genuine history of this dramatic event supported by particularly vivid examples. In a closely argued text supported by an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, this book provides a penetrating description, thick with details, of some hidden aspects of violence in Reconstruction Louisiana. The writing style is refreshingly lively and thoughtful. Keith's book is a fine achievement that provides an exciting account of a dramatic event and fills an important gap. This book shows that it is still possible to draw general conclusions on Reconstruction history from the analysis of one single event. This fine monograph represents an important contribution to Reconstruction history."--
Gilles Vandal, *H-Net Reviews*

"With exhaustive research and flair for character-driven narrative, Keith recovers the lost history of this terrible tragedy...This is a riveting and insightful work of historical excavation." --*Journal of Southern History*

"An informative and important book." -- *Journal of African American History*

About the Author

LeeAnna Keith teaches history at Collegiate School in New York City. Her historical articles have appeared in *The Dictionary of American History* and *The Encyclopedia of American Foreign Relations*. She is co-author, with Sandra Fekete, of *Companies Are People, Too*.

Users Review

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