



Video Story Transcript

The Colfax Louisiana Massacre: The Story about Reconstruction

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://youtu.be/cqXZo-FQ0Nw>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, I'm Zahra Baker. And I spent the first three years of my life in Central Louisiana in a small rural area that was surrounded by pine trees and weeping willows, pecan trees and sat beside a place that was ironically called the Red River. Now my family is complex. And we had many difficulties in my early years. But... I was the youngest of seven and because of that, I got sent away to live with my Uncle Willy and Aunt Dot for a... for a year in Slidell. And then I was sent all the way to Lafayette, Indiana and was adopted by my Uncle Dave and Aunt Bessie.

Now this was far away from Colfax, Louisiana where I was born. And it wasn't until my young adult life that I was able to reconnect with my siblings. And the day that we met each other again, I was filled with joy and sadness and sorrow and frustration and anger and gratitude and fear. What if they didn't like me? What if we didn't have anything in common? We had so much time separated between us that I wasn't sure if there was anything I had to offer them. But when I met them, there was such a feeling for comfort and familiarity that all of the fear just washed away. And they liked to talk a lot so there was a lot of laughter and a lot of chatter. And I was determined that I was going to spend time with each one of them until I figured out what we had in common. But what I came to realize was the story that we had in common was the story from our hometown Colfax, Louisiana. So they had all moved West to California but every year we would decide to have a family reunion. And often times we had that reunion in Colfax so that we could reconnect with our family and friends there.

So that on one of those trips, we were walking on down memory walk, sharing stories, and we came upon the courthouse. And when we got there, we saw a sign and the sign said, "Colfax Riot. On this site, there was an event called the Colfax Riot where three white men and 150 negroes were slain. This event occurred April 13, 1873." And the sign said, "This brought an end to carpetbaggers misrule in the South." Well, the wording on that sign was kind of odd to me. First of all, Negroes was spelled with a little "n" and the word "misrule" and carpetbaggers"... All of that was strange to me, so I decided to do some research. And, I realized that 1873 was during a time called, "Reconstruction."

Now in Louisiana, they didn't teach us anything about that time period. It happened right after the Civil War from, say, 1865 to 1874. So I had to dig deep. I asked people questions. I went online to see what I could find and what I found was that most of the historians didn't really like to talk about Reconstruction. They felt that it was an experiment that failed. They felt that it was a time when there was a lot of corruption and carpetbaggers from the North and scallywags, which were Southern people who sided with the new government, had ruined the whole thing. And they also said that it was the worst period in American history.

Well, black people felt like the worst period in history was slavery and that radical reconstruction, well, that was something of a revolutionary idea that was going to help America come into its promise of equality through the idea of public schools and through the idea of civil rights legislation and financial gain. In 1873, there were probably 2,000 black people that were in office. And there were some amendments. Like the Thirteenth Amendment, we know was what enabled black people to be free. And the Fourteenth Amendment brought about civil rights for those enslaved people that were now free. But the Fifteenth Amendment gave black men the right to vote.

Well, that right to vote was a thorn in the side of the white league, which was a coalition of white men who were determined to maintain white supremacy. They actually called themselves "The Redeemers" because they were going to redeem the South back to itself. Well, in 1873, in Colfax, the black majority voted in a government that was going to support them and their needs. But... the day that the new sheriff was supposed to take office, the ousted sheriff decided that he wasn't going to give up his power. So he called all of his friends and told them to back him up. Well, the new sheriff called all of the black men and deputized them and told them to hold the courthouse so that he could go in and do his job. Well, they held that courthouse because they had visions of a life of equality. A vision for a future that their children could flourish.

For seven whole days, they tirelessly held that courthouse but on April 13th, Easter Sunday, the white league was not gonna have it anymore. So three hundred armed white men marched into Colfax and started shooting. And they shot off a cannon that set the courthouse on fire. Soon after, there was a white flag that was held in a window as surrender. And just as the black men started coming out the door, there was a shot and one of the white men was killed and in retaliation, The Redeemers started shooting. And down came the ideas of a better world, as one by one, those men fell to the ground as they were running out of that burning building. Over two hundred men were killed that day. About fifty were captured, then walked to the Red River where they were shot and drowned. And then another fifty were hanged on an oak tree. Clearly, this was not a riot. Those men laid down their lives so that we could have a better life. And *that* was a massacre.

Now in my research, I found over a hundred names listed of the wounded and the killed that day. And in that list there was some names that might have been part of my family line. But regardless, all of the men that day were fighting for the rights of all black people. And not just for black people, but for humanity. For the nation to rise to its fullest potential. I hope that we all will remember them and hold them up. Because it was their work that established the work of those who are moving us forward now.

And history books can ignore Colfax and Reconstruction if they want or write it from the perspective of the oppressor. But by us digging deep into that history, we were able to discover the amazing well of those freed men and fighting for our liberation. And as the Igbo people from Nigeria say, “The lions must create the historians of the tale of the hunter. The hunted will always be glorified by the hunter.” My siblings and I will continue to tell the Colfax story from our point of view. And more than that, we will take that legacy and live our lives in a way that we uplift humanity and make the world better for the next generation.