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**“To Wear the Livery of a State that Distrusts Us”  
African American Militias and Disenfranchisement in Memphis  
1878-1892.**

Roger Johnson

On October 30, 1878 in Memphis Tennessee, just thirteen years after the end of the Civil War and two years after the last Federal troops had left the South, Soldiers in blue and gray uniforms marched together down Main Street. Members of what would today constitute the National Guard, the marchers were militiamen, citizen-soldiers of Memphis who had been called up to public service to maintain order and man refugee camps - a day earlier, the Yellow Fever Epidemic that had ravaged Memphis was declared over by a defunct board of health.<sup>1</sup> The march into downtown was prompted by the final closing of the refugee camps that had been in operation outside the city limits – two units of the militia had been assigned to guard these camps and maintain order, a third unit that had assisted the police within the city met them and marched in. The *Memphis Daily Avalanche* covered the parade the next day:

The three companies, headed by a brass band marched up Main Street to Madison, thence to Second, down Second to Union, where Capt. John F. Cameron of the Greys, in a brief speech spoke of the service that had been rendered by the companies and of the harmony which had characterized all their efforts.<sup>2</sup>

At the conclusion of the parade, Colonel John Cameron gave a speech of congratulations, saying that they had the approval of every Memphis citizen and that they had done their duty to the community. The militia unit that wore confederate gray was known as the Bluff City Grays; the unit was made up of white youth from Memphis, many of whom were the sons of prominent white Memphians. The unit in federal blue was McClellan's Guards. The unit was made up completely of African Americans.

In Post-Reconstruction Memphis, the existence of African American militia units constituted an exception from the normal course of disenfranchisement that occurred in the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanette Keith, *Fever Season: The Story of a Terrifying Epidemic and the People who Saved a City*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), 181.

<sup>2</sup> *The Memphis Daily Avalanche*, Oct. 31, 1878, Memphis and Shelby County Room Archives, Benjamin L. Hooks Public Library, Memphis, TN.

former Confederacy leading up to the rise of Jim Crow Segregation in the South. In almost all other places, African American militias were wiped out through the use of systematic and individualized violence, but they continued to exist in Memphis and were instrumental not only in projecting the continuing presence of the African American community in municipal government but they were also normal men who became indispensable public servants during times of crisis. Memphis's identity as a segregationist southern city is rooted in this period – despite the brave service of African Americans in the Yellow Fever Epidemics, the ideology of white supremacy overcame the gratitude of white towards the African American community in Memphis within a matter of years. In times of crisis, when white Memphians needed the African American community for survival, the existence of African American militias, and a Black community with agency in the municipal government, was allowed. But as soon as desperation was no longer a factor, the white community implemented harsh measure towards disenfranchisement, which included disbanding the Black militias. African American militias represent a fitting microcosm for the African American community in Memphis as a whole during the post-reconstruction period; although the actions of Black militias during the Yellow Fever Epidemics allowed the Black community to continue to assert its rights, eventually white Memphis fell in line with the rest of the South and disbanded Black militias, alongside the disenfranchisement of the whole African American community.

This researched study proves the uniqueness of Memphis first through outlining the post-war situation of Memphis and the creation and destruction of African American militias elsewhere in the South by terrorist tactics during Reconstruction. Then, the effects of the Yellow Fever Epidemics of 1878 and 1879 are described to demonstrate how these events ensured the continued survival of African American militias in Memphis through the 1880's. Finally, the

disenfranchisement of the African American community in Memphis through both state-wide and local actions by whites demonstrates the delicate position of the African American community until the last African American militia was forcefully and violently disbanded by deputized whites as a result of the famous lynchings of March, 1892 – signaling the beginning of true Jim Crowe segregation. However, the fact that African American militias existed at all in Memphis by the time of the major Yellow Fever Epidemic itself is a testament to the unique history of race in Memphis

Memphis was one of few large southern cities to experience little to no structural damage during the civil war, as the Union military took the city early on in the war after a short naval battle on the Mississippi that resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Union. The city became an important supply depot for Union efforts down the river in 1863 and as such it had a comparatively large garrison in Fort Pickering – many of whom were local African American volunteers. Though the region saw some late war action, especially Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest’s raid on Memphis and his massacre of both African American and white Union troops at Fort Pillow, Memphis still saw little to no structural damage. The U.S.C.T. 11<sup>th</sup> regiment was based in Fort Pickering and honorably discharged many who would become permanent Memphis residents such as Milton Brown and John W. Brown, whose family papers confirm the presence of units of “colored” infantry in Fort Pickering in 1865 and 1866.<sup>3</sup> Around the Fort, a community composed primarily of African Americans grew to provide for the needs of the fort – the South Memphis area where the fort stood has since been one of the most historically African American communities in Memphis. As a result, South Memphis was also the site of the Memphis race riot of 1866, in which whites came into the neighborhood following a fight between discharged

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<sup>3</sup> Brown Family Papers, from The Arthur L. Webb Collection, Memphis and Shelby County Room Archives, Benjamin L. Hooks Public Library, Memphis, TN.

African American troops and white policemen – forty-six African Americans were killed over the next few days and the structural damage inflicted on the fledgling freedman community was considerable. The need for avenues for self-defense aside from the federal troops still stationed in Memphis was obvious and the community often had to take its defense into its own hands after the Memphis race riot. When the Ku Klux Klan tried to break up an African American Political meeting in November of 1868, the people present, including Shelby County Commissioner Edward Shaw, pulled out their own weapons and fought back.<sup>4</sup>

These episodes demonstrate several stark realities about southern life in the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction period. First, the late nineteenth century South was essentially a large armed camp, full of people armed to the teeth with guns. Many of these people had been trained to use them and had seen first-hand combat on both sides during the civil war. According to historian Otis A. Singletary, outside observers were stunned by the ubiquity of pistols and rifles in the South, “One of the innumerable Senate investigating committees which held hearings in the South was shocked to discover that carrying arms was an almost universal practice there.”<sup>5</sup> The arms available to the public ranged from revolvers and shotguns to civil war rifled-muskets and deadly new lever-action rifles. In such an armed environment, the racial violence exhibited in events such as the Memphis Massacre of 1866 was exacerbated by the proliferation of firearms that made such wide spread violence easier to plan and execute – and although the firearms possessed by African Americans were fewer and often less advanced, they made individual and organized protection a real possibility. In 1868, when a train conductor tried

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<sup>4</sup> Keith, *Fever Season*, 39-42.

<sup>5</sup> Otis A. Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, (University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas: 1963) 3.

to force influential Black businessman Robert R. Church's daughter off a first class car, he and the conductor faced each other down with their hands on their pistols.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, the Memphis Massacre of 1866 and the following episodes demonstrated how widespread racial violence was during Reconstruction – the Mid-South was the epicenter of the formation of the Ku Klux Klan. Formed in Giles County Tennessee in 1866, the racist paramilitary organization was soon extremely active in Western Tennessee, especially in rural areas.<sup>7</sup> However, they were very active in Memphis as well, working in conjunction with the local Democratic Party – the attack on Edward Shaw and his constituents essentially an attempted assassination.<sup>8</sup> As a result, across the state, militias were mobilized by Governor William G. Brownlow to counter the Ku Klux Klan, especially when it came to protecting election polls – twelve of these companies were composed primarily of African Americans<sup>9</sup> This would become a familiar pattern across the South as Reconstruction state governments scrambled to protect their newly freed citizens from racial terror and to ensure political rights – often with very mixed results.

African American militias were often formed in the South by Republican state governments after the withdrawal of federal troops – this varied state by state, but typically the involvement of federal troops would be scaled back once a state met the criteria for statehood under the Reconstruction acts. Directly after the end of the civil war, provisional governments had organized and armed state militias, but these units were exclusively white and made up of many ex-Confederates – in some places they even went so far as to wear gray uniforms. As a

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<sup>6</sup> Keith, *Fever Season*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Ben H. Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869*, (The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, Tennessee: 2005) 9.

<sup>8</sup> Keith, *Fever Season*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Tennessee National Guard, "Who we are", <http://www.tnmilitary.org/who-we-are.html>

result, the Republican congress outlawed militias in the southern states within the annual Appropriation Act for the Army on March 2, 1867. However, within the year the need for locally organized militias became apparent as groups like the Ku Klux Klan become bolder and more violent. Thus, in 1869 Congress repealed the ban and allowed reconstruction state governments, now mostly in the tenuous control of Republicans, to organize militias.<sup>10</sup>

However, Tennessee had already passed the criteria for statehood before these congressional battles arose. Since Eastern Tennessee was staunchly Unionist and ideologically isolated from the plantation interests of Western Tennessee, Governor William Brownlow and future president Andrew Johnson had moved quickly to establish Tennessee as a free state in early 1865 with its support based in Eastern Tennessee. Johnson recognized Tennessee as an existing state during the early actions of Reconstruction and thus the state did not receive as many occupying troops.<sup>11</sup> So, when pressed by the rise of terrorist groups in 1867, Governor Brownlow was dependent upon militias to fight them, but they were never truly effective on a statewide basis.<sup>12</sup>

In other areas of the South, African American militias often found themselves waging pitched battles against former confederates and white supremacists not only for political control of the state but for the very existence of fledgling freedman communities. Black militias never existed in Virginia and Georgia during Reconstruction and in Alabama and Florida conservative governors were unwilling to use African American militias despite the intense racial violence in those states because they feared more conflict as a result. In other states, such as Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina, African American militias

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<sup>10</sup> Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction*, 4-9.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, (Harper & Row Publishers, New York: 1988) 43-44, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Singletary, *Negro Militias and Reconstruction*, 13.



were used throughout the reconstruction period with varying degrees of success. African American militias were a matter of pride to the communities that provided their manpower – especially just after such units were formed, when parades and social events offered breaks from regular work and provided diversion that the entire community joined in. However, when mobilized, morale was often weak – this was often not due to the soldiers themselves but the conditions they had to endure and unfavorable odds they often had to face. In addition to this, when mobilized, pay and proper clothing was often not very forthcoming from reconstruction governments.<sup>13</sup> Despite these inherent limitations, it is apparent that in areas in which African American militias were recruited and maintained, there was a more competitive Republican party with a constituency of African American voters.

However, the sight of African Americans freely bearing arms in the name of the state and political freedom was often too much for white supremacists who sought to “redeem” the South by establishing Democratic state governments and disenfranchising the newly freed Blacks. In addition to this, there were obvious economic benefits to keeping African Americans unarmed and politically “docile”. Across the agrarian South, planters needed to tie sharecroppers to the land and rob them of any political wherewithal and southern ideals of masculinity were offended by the idea of African American autonomy, especially when the African Americans in question possessed the means to fight back. Sometimes this conservative reaction came in the forms of real battles waged between white “rifle clubs”, which essentially constituted illegal paramilitary organizations, and African American militias. The bloodiest of these engagements came on September 14, 1874 in New Orleans, when hundreds of “White Leaguers” forced a complement of State militia and police under the command of legendary Confederate general James

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 13-16, 100-112.

Longstreet to abandon the capitol in New Orleans so that they could depose the Republican government. The white leaguers, who numbered between 3,000 and 5,000, hopelessly outnumbered Longstreet and his racially mixed force of 500. Although federal troops were called in to disperse the white leaguers and reinstall the rightful governor, the damage was extreme.<sup>14</sup>

There were several other large battles that occurred between African American militias and white guerillas – especially in Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina, where engagements were particularly fierce.<sup>15</sup> However, far more common reactions came in the form of robbing the militias of their weaponry or White Line movements encouraging localized violence that targeted the lives and property of individual militia members, and these methods proved to be brutally efficient in forcing Black militias to disband. Robbing the personal arms of Black militia members and intercepting their arms shipments were common practice – and often involved complex and large-scale operations. For example, in 1868 when an Arkansas Governor attempted to have a shipment of 400 rifles with tons of ammunition and gunpowder shipped by rail from Detroit to Memphis then by steamer to Little Rock. No captains agreed to take the cargo on in Memphis, and so Governor Clayton chartered his own steamboat to sail upriver to Little Rock. 20 miles past Memphis, the steamer was attacked by a tug and fifty armed whites boarded the steamer and took all of the rifles and ammunition. Similar misfortunes fell upon Florida and South Carolina, both of whose militias lost 2,000 rifles to coordinated attacks on their shipments.<sup>16</sup> Such loss was accompanied by the sober realization that the rifles meant for African American militias usually fell into the hands of white rifle clubs by this method, who then used the arms bought with state funds to attack the African American militia.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 70-78.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 85, 41, 141.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 119-120.

White rifle clubs and other racist aggressors also used individualized violence and exhortation to deadly effect in forcing African American militias to disband towards the end of reconstruction. In terms of economic exhortation, conservative planters would not rent to Blacks who were active in the militia, forcing them to chose between putting food on the table and continuing their service in the militia. Personal violence was directed at individual militiamen and even whites that helped organize and supply African American militia units, but the militia captains were those most often singled out for execution. Arkansas militia captain A.J. Hayes was killed in broad daylight in Marion when a Ku Klux Klan member emptied both barrels of a shotgun into his chest then shot him in the head five times with a revolver. Charles Caldwell, a Mississippi state senator and militia captain, was invited into a cellar for a drink where he was summarily shot then taken outside and finished off by a firing squad. According to historian Otis Singletary, “The catalogue of crimes could be continued indefinitely.”<sup>17</sup>

The frequency of such personalized attacks would increase in tempo towards the end of Reconstruction – White Line movements waged a systematic terrorist campaign against any and all persons involved in African American militias. White Line rifle companies were the predecessors of later white official militia companies and waged bloody localized wars against militia companies that either destroyed them wholesale or forced their members to hunker down and cease involvement for fear of their lives and property. This campaign was extraordinarily effective and occurred alongside a larger political abandonment of the South by the Federal Government.<sup>18</sup> The lack of support from the Grant Administration had already left Reconstruction governments at the mercy of White Liners and Democratic efforts at disenfranchisement by the time Rutherford B. Hayes took office in 1877. In Tennessee, the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 125-127.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 141-148.

Democrats had already regained control of the state government by 1869.<sup>19</sup> In other areas, the violence and political maneuvers of the White Liners ousted reconstruction governments and replaced them with conservative Democratic administrations – the South was effectively “redeemed” by 1875, when Grant refused to send troops to assist the beleaguered government of Mississippi.

The interests of freedmen in the South, and by extension support for African American militias, had been left out to dry. Hayes’ decision to pull troops out of Louisiana and South Carolina constituted the final dismantling of Reconstruction – as the eloquent words of a Kansas Republican put it, “The policy of the new administration will be to conciliate the white men of the South. Carpet baggers to the rear, and niggers take care of yourselves.”<sup>20</sup> At this juncture, African American militias had essentially ceased to exist in the South in the same capacity they had during Reconstruction – the majority of African Americans had no stake in obeying the summons of the state and even less means of self defense. However, in Memphis the terrain was slightly different – in 1875, in the face of the increasing lack of federal support, a militia was founded and called the McClellan Guards.<sup>21</sup> The existence of such a unit in 1875 in Tennessee is a testament to the particular uniqueness of Memphis society in this period – specifically, the unit existed largely thanks to the dynamic nature of the African American community in Memphis.

Memphis had a considerable African American population and developed a flourishing community – Memphis’s urban Black Community was one of the first to form post-bellum.

Secret societies and churches helped advance the interests of the community and in 1870

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<sup>19</sup> Dennis C. Rousey, “Yellow Fever and Black Policemen in Memphis: A Post-Reconstruction Anomaly”, in *The Journal of Southern History*, 51, no.3 (Aug. 1985): 362.

<sup>20</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 563, 581-583.

<sup>21</sup> A.E. Sholes, *Sholes’ Memphis Directory and Guide to the Taxing District, Shelby Co., Tenn., Volume X*, (Roger’s and Co. Book and Job Printers and Publishers, Memphis, Tennessee, 1883): 21.

<https://books.google.com/books>

Lemoyne Normal Institute, a college for African Americans, was founded and functional within three years. All evidence points to a rather independent and self-sufficient community, as Historian Armistead L. Robinson suggests, “In Memphis the recently freed managed to survive the emancipation experience without relying either upon crime or upon agencies of public welfare.”<sup>22</sup> This essentially meant that the African American community was able to continue functioning as it had before when Reconstruction ended and organizations like the Freedman’s Bureau ceased to be helpful. In addition to this, Black Memphians maintained high involvement in municipal government throughout the 1870’s. In 1874, there were six African American councilmen on the legislative board of Memphis at the same time out of thirty available seats.<sup>23</sup> Several African Americans were appointed to executive municipal positions such as assistant attorney general, wharfmaster, and coal inspector.<sup>24</sup> Although this constituted rather low representation in comparison to the proportion of African American population in the city, this representation allowed the community to maintain some of its interests. The comparative strength of the community fostered the continued existence of the militia, which in turn ensured some semblance of official protection, since there were very few Black Policemen throughout the 1870’s.<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to say what might have happened to the African American militias without the outside influence of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878, when they proved their true worth to Memphis whites. The Epidemic of 1873, while the worst in Memphis’s history up until that point, had done little to advance the militias’ standing in Memphis or that of the community as a

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<sup>22</sup> Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith, “Duty of the Hour: African American Communities in Memphis, Tennessee, 1862-1923”, in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 55 (1996): 134.

<sup>23</sup> Joe Walk, *African Americans in Memphis Government*, 1996, from the Arthur L. Webb Collection, Memphis and Shelby County Room Archives, Benjamin L. Hooks Library, Memphis, TN.

<sup>24</sup> Goings & Smith, “Duty of the Hour”, 134.

<sup>25</sup> Rousey, “Yellow Fever and Black Policemen” 362.

whole. Although half of the population evacuated during the 1873 Epidemic, all but two of the white police force stayed – and as a result they experienced a terrible mortality rate. During the Epidemic, thirty of the fifty officers contracted Yellow Fever and ten died from the disease. In the aftermath of the fever, the legislative council briefly considered appointing Black policemen, based on the prevailing idea that African Americans were more resistant to Yellow Fever, but this idea was never acted on and the police force remained all white.<sup>26</sup> However, the results of the 1873 Epidemic also showed that the small municipal police force could not handle all the rigors of patrol during a large-scale Epidemic. At one point, the police force was at only half strength due to the amount of people that had the fever – without more manpower, the municipal government would not be able to maintain order. The 1873 fever, though destructive, was only a taste of the horror that would come in five years. In the meantime, records indicate that the municipal government did not consider using either white or Black militias for keeping order in the streets.

Records on the African American militias were very spotty before the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878 – as author Jeanette Keith wrote in describing Memphis on the verge of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1878, two units named the McClellan Guards and Brown’s Zouaves took part in the African American community’s Independence Day parade.<sup>27</sup> Although both units undoubtedly existed by 1878, neither was listed in the City directories of 1876, 1877, or 1878 – though both units are listed in the 1879 directory.<sup>28</sup> Based on the 1879 listing of the McClellan

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 363-364.

<sup>27</sup> Keith, *Fever Season*, 38.

<sup>28</sup> A.E. Sholes, *Boyle, Chapman, and Co.’s Directory of the City of Memphis for 1876*, (Boyle & Chapman Printers, Memphis, TN. 1876) 51; A.E. Sholes, *Sholes’ Directory of the City of Memphis for 1877*, (Southern Baptist Publication Society, Memphis, TN. 1877) 40; A.E. Sholes, *Sholes’ Directory of the City of Memphis for 1878*, (S.C. Toof & Co., Memphis, TN. 1878) 40; A.E. Sholes, *Sholes’ Directory of the Taxing District of Memphis for 1879*, (S.C. Toof & Co., Memphis, TN. 1879) 45-46. All accessed through Shelby County archives online database, <http://register.shelby.tn.us>

Guards at 40 members, it is likely that the unit's manpower was similar in 1878. According to the aforementioned directory, the McClellan Guards were armed with "Springfield rifles", which likely meant that they were issued 1861 Springfield .58 caliber rifled muskets, the muzzle-loading standard issue Union arm of the Civil War. The Zouave Guards are listed at 46 men and no issued rifle is mentioned in the directory, though an official returns document from 1886 lists them as being armed with fifty caliber .45 Springfields – this was likely the 1873 Springfield Trapdoor, which was a much more advanced breech loading weapon.<sup>29</sup> However, in 1878, it is difficult to say exactly how many Zouaves there were or what arms they carried – the presence of an armory listed in the 1879 directory indicates that they were at least armed, but based on the fact that the McClellan guard was still using the 1861, it is likely that the Zouave Guards carried the same weapon most of the time.

Both of the African American militias in Memphis were primarily drawn from working class backgrounds, even the captains and officers – this was in fitting with the common composition of Black militia units during reconstruction, which were primarily drawn from field hands and unskilled urban workers. For example, the Captain of the McClellan Guards, James E. Glass, worked as a hack driver in 1878 at the outset of the Yellow Fever Epidemic and he lived at 175 Adams.<sup>30</sup> Lorenzo Dow, the second lieutenant of the McClellan Guards, was a hack driver in 1878 – he lived at 190 Court Street.<sup>31</sup> By 1880 he had switched to working as a waiter at the Tennessee Club.<sup>32</sup> Raphael T. Brown, the Captain of the Zouaves, was better off – he

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<sup>29</sup> Document from *Tennessee National Guard Adjutant General's Office Military Records, 1812-1941*, in the Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

<sup>30</sup> A.E. Sholes, *Sholes' Directory, 1878*, 225.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>32</sup> A. E. Sholes, *Sholes' Directory, 1880*, 186.

worked as a Barber and lived at the corner of Spring and Walnut.<sup>33</sup> The lower officers and privates, when they are listed in city directories, also held similar jobs in the city. From this sample, it is clear that the vast majority of Black militiamen in Memphis were drawn from working class backgrounds, in contrast to the white militias, which were made up of the sons of prominent wealthy whites.

Thus, in 1878, on the eve of the Yellow Fever Epidemic, African American militias were off duty in the city. Between 70 and 80 middle and lower class African American men took active part in the militias and wore dark blue uniforms – a great majority were armed with outdated weapons. When Yellow Fever broke out in the city, more than 20,000 people left within three days; the majority of those who left were white, while the majority of the African American population stayed in Memphis.<sup>34</sup> Many believed that African Americans were immune to the fever, and others had to stay because they did not have the means to leave or the will. This meant that most of the African American militias stayed in town as the Yellow Fever outbreak started to reach Epidemic proportions. Meanwhile, one of the white militia units, the Chickasaw Guards, left the city early in the Epidemic – although they did so to raise funds for Yellow Fever relief, they did so at the detriment of available manpower in the city.

However, from an early point, the McClellan Guards made it known that they were available for any duty which the Citizens' Relief Committee, which had been formed by a common vote on August 16, only days after the general evacuation had occurred. The McClellan Guards and the Bluff City Greys were sent to man the refugee camps on the city's outskirts the next day. The Memphis *Daily Avalanche* provided an account of manpower at the camps, "The McClellan Guards have 33 men on duty and the Bluff City Greys have 28 at camp Jo

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<sup>33</sup> A. E. Sholes, *Sholes' Directory, 1878*, 139.

<sup>34</sup> Keith, *Fever Season*, 60-61.



Williams.”<sup>35</sup> However, the placement of a refugee camp for the sick caused some conflicts with local Black farmers, who did not want to get infected by people from Memphis. They drove the doctor out of the camp, which facilitated the CRC sending in the militias.<sup>36</sup> As of August 20, the *Avalanche* mentioned in its fever coverage,

The McClellan Guards (colored) have shown a desire to serve Memphis in any and every possible way...Lieut. Dow and a select squad of the McClellan Guards held the bridge at Camp Williams Sunday night, and were prepared to meet the promised attack of the misguided people of the vicinity.<sup>37</sup>

Although *The Daily Avalanche* was inclined to be biased against the farmers who resisted the placement of the refugee camp, it can be inferred from newspaper coverage that the Black militia members who were on duty at the camp were willing to defend both its white and Black residents from external threats - the individual soldiers were placing the priorities of the entire Memphis community over the priorities of race. The CRC also resolved to create a separate camp for the few African Americans who left the city – Camp Henderson was put under the sole charge of African American officers from the McClellan Guards. However, Yellow Fever broke out in the refugee camps in which the McClellan Guards were stationed – to their credit, there were no recorded desertions.<sup>38</sup> Although Yellow Fever is transmitted only by mosquito bite and not by human transmission, the militiamen had no way of knowing this. The decision to stay in the camps constituted extreme bravery.

The next problem that the white and Black Citizens’ Relief Committees would have to address was food. The headquarters of the CRC was on Court Square, nearby the Peabody Hotel, which provided lodging for the volunteer doctors and nurses brought in by the Howard

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<sup>35</sup> *The Daily Avalanche*, September 2, 1878, Memphis and Shelby County Room Archives, Benjamin L. Hooks Public Library, Memphis TN.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-81.

<sup>37</sup> *The Daily Avalanche*, Aug. 20, 1878.

<sup>38</sup> Keith, *Fever Season*, 96-97.

Association. In Court Square, the CRC stored the army rations it received from the Federal government to be handed out to those who did not have their own food – namely poor African Americans and Irish immigrants. The CRC was also responsible for making sure that a portion of the rations it received also went out to the refugee camps. The need was acute, even for those who were receiving the rations, with even white doctor William Armstrong complaining at one point in a letter to his wife, “Our market is shorter than you could even imagine it.”<sup>39</sup> However, according to Jeanette Keith, many on the white CRC thought they could use food as an encouragement to evacuate, a policy many had hoped the poor would pursue at the outset of the Epidemic. Thus they instituted rules that prohibited people from receiving rations unless they were sick or were caring for the sick, hoping it would encourage those still healthy to leave the city.<sup>40</sup>

The CRC underestimated the determination of the people who remained to ensure the safety of their property and miscalculated how chaotic the situation was outside the city. In many smaller towns, men set up “Shotgun Quarantines” that were aimed at preventing Memphians from entering towns to gain provisions or shelter. And, many of those left behind were too poor to buy their own food during the Epidemic, let alone pay for transport out of the city.<sup>41</sup> Thus, of the 20,000 or more who remained in the city, only 4,042 received rations.<sup>42</sup> As starvation started to set in among the general populace, the atmosphere in the city grew tense. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, the *Appeal* printed a warning letter from an anonymous source in its editorials:

We, the poor class of Memphis, are well aware of the fact that the government has sent provisions for us... If we could get employment, we wouldn't ask it of you.

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<sup>39</sup> William Armstrong, *Armstrong Collection*, Memphis and Shelby County Room Archives, Benjamin L. Hooks Library. Memphis TN. 103.

<sup>40</sup> Keith, *Fever Season*, 91-93.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 61 & 68.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Give us something to subsist upon, and Memphis shall be at peace; and if not, we will turn her up side down, if possible. IRISH AND NEGROES.<sup>43</sup>

Though it is unconfirmed whether this anonymous letter was actually written by a member of the starving working class, it did speak to an overwhelming feeling among those who were prohibited from receiving rations from the CRC. The letter, regardless of its source, effectively laid down a warning that the remaining Memphians were not content to starve, and would take action to obtain food. From this warning, it was obvious to members of the CRC in Court Square that some other means of security would be needed. And since the majority of the whites available were either busy caring for the sick or dying themselves, the help would have to come from Blacks.

On August 20, Memphis city police had hired thirteen African Americans to supplement their decimated police force, since many officers had fled the city in the early stages of the Epidemic – all were uniformed and assigned to street duty, which included helping to guard the food stores at the CRC.<sup>44</sup> However, even with this boost in manpower, the police force had its hands full discouraging looters from raiding the homes of evacuees and the sick. The CRC turned to the last militia unit remaining in town, Brown's Zouaves – under the command of Captain Rafael T. Brown. According to Keith, the militiamen set up an encampment in Court Square and guarded the CRC commissary closely. Every day, about 500 people gathered in Court Square to wait for food and the majority of them were African American. Members of the CRC wondered if the Zouaves would take their side if it came down to fighting – and rightfully so.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 78. Joe Walk, *African Americans in Memphis Government*, 20-21.

The men who made up the Zouaves were largely drawn from working class backgrounds and the prospect of defending whites from starving Blacks was unattractive. Their peers might brand them accommodationists and they risked bodily harm if the situation in Court Square became violent. Given how widespread firearms were, the likelihood of gunfire was actually very high. According to the *Daily Avalanche*, there were some who were inclined to take the food by force,

It is stated that a number of riotously inclined darkies have gathered in Fort Pickering with shot guns and other weapons for several nights past, and that on one or two occasions their conduct has been anything but of a peaceable nature.<sup>45</sup>

If the Zouaves sided with the CRC and not the larger community, they might be forced to fire on their own neighbors. And if the CRC fell, not only did it mean that bodily harm might come to those holed up inside, but also that there would be no system of giving out rations to the sick, and that the shipments of rations would likely discontinue.

Less than a month had passed since the Epidemic had begun and a Black militia was all that stood between the organization best suited to levy outside support for Memphis and a possible mob of hungry people, both Black and white. But the white CRC placed very little faith in the Zouaves in the event that the situation came to a head. A hundred white men planned to retreat to the Southern Express office to hold off the riot. A train was prepared to bring in The Bluff City Grays from Camp Jo Williams to break up the riot, and they even telegraphed the Chickasaw Guards at Grand Junction Tennessee to await orders. Two neighboring towns pledged their white militias to come into town if a riot broke out. The McClellan Guards, deployed at both the white and Black refugee camps, were purposefully left out of the plan.<sup>46</sup> If the CRC had carried through with their plan and brought in solely white military support, the results could

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<sup>45</sup> *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, September 2, 1878.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

have been catastrophic – save for the actions of one unnamed Zouave and an African American police officer, a full-blown riot and bloody reprisal might have occurred.

On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, an African American man named Alf Watson came to Court Square armed with a pistol with the intention of killing someone. He got into an argument with one of the militiamen guarding the Commissary and slapped him. When Black police officer Jesse Woods came to restore order, Watson cursed at him and Woods called over the Guard to help him. Alf Watson started to run, but then stopped and pulled his pistol and the unnamed Zouave Guard, showing a great deal of decisiveness and accuracy, shot him through the leg. The crowd reacted but the Zouaves reinforced their line while CRC member Luke Wright came out to calm them. The situation was resolved peacefully and a riot was averted. The CRC continued to give out food.<sup>47</sup>

Immediately after, the white newspapers began praising the actions of the African American police and Zouaves, and used the example as a deterrent of further aggressive action against the CRC – although these praises and exhortations came along with racist language and barbs.

A desperate character named Alf Watson, a darkey, who lives at Fort Pickering with his mother, and who some time ago shot a policeman, came to grief yesterday in a way he little expected. One of his legs was perforated by a bullet from a needle gun in the hands of one of the colored Zouaves... The prompt action of the policeman Jesse Wood, and the summary manner with which the Zouave dealt with the desperado Watson deserves commendation, and will serve as a salutary lesson for those who are inclined to behave in a turbulent or riotous manner.<sup>48</sup>

From this account, it is apparent that the editor of the *Avalanche* still feared that some violence might occur over the CRC's distribution of rations, and it seems that many in the CRC held this

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 102-106.

<sup>48</sup> *The Memphis Daily Avalanche*, September 2, 1878.

view, since the Zouaves were kept on guard duty at the Commissary until the end of the Epidemic.<sup>49</sup> An important detail to note in this passage is the armament of the Zouaves, which is listed as a “needle gun” – this moniker was usually applied to breech-loading weapons, meaning that during their duty at the Commissary, the Zouaves were armed with extremely modern weaponry – as opposed to the McClellan Guards, who still carried 1861 rifled muskets. However, the Zouaves, not only through shooting Alf Watson but also by reinforcing Luke Wright in his efforts to calm the crowd afterward, had demonstrated their worth.

The *Avalanche* had the highest praise for the Zouaves in their defense of the CRC, “The men who are today standing in the fore front of the battle have no capital but their manhood. God bless them.”<sup>50</sup> This praise came in spite of the dismissing tone of the editor of the *Avalanche*, who often only referred to African Americans as “darkies”. However, the editor of the *Avalanche* made an important distinction between the African Americans associated with the CRC and the rest of the working class, “There are a number of good and brave colored people who will squelch any violence that may be attempted in very short order.”<sup>51</sup> It is clear that the newspaper drew a clear line between those Blacks who were considered helpful and those who were not. This indicates an overall racist tone towards the community except when Blacks assisted white. However, the actions of Brown’s Zouaves had more lasting effects than simply assisting white Memphians; by preserving the CRC, the militia had ensured that the sick would still receive food.

Thus, at the end of the Epidemic, Brown’s Zouaves met the McClellan Guards and Bluff City Greys at the edge of town and marched in with them. The entire community of Memphis,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., October 31, 1878.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., September 2, 1878.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

despite the extensive losses it had sustained, honored them in what was then seen as a war against Yellow Fever – a war that had been very destructive, but one that had been won. Of the parade, the *Daily Appeal* suggested that McClellan’s guard was made up of promising young citizens and of Brown’s Zouaves, “Too much praise cannot be accorded to both officers and privates for the excellent and trusty manner in which they performed their duty.”<sup>52</sup> The *Daily Avalanche* took a similar tone, and listed off each member of the McClellan Guards, listing not only the officers, but also each private – the paper also honored those who had died from contracting Yellow Fever in the refugee camps.<sup>53</sup> However, at the numerous banquets hosted by the few white Memphian elites who had remained, they never toasted the efforts of African Americans; not even *Appeal* editor J.M. Keating, who had previously praised the actions of African American militias during the fever.<sup>54</sup>

Despite this lack of social recognition, in the aftermath of Yellow Fever positive media coverage may have constituted a genuine thankfulness towards the African American community for the sacrifices that had been made to keep Memphis afloat. However, the shifting demographics of Memphis after the Epidemic might also have had something to do with the improved tone in relations – since the majority of those who left and then opted to stay away from Memphis were white, the overall percentage of the African American population had increased.<sup>55</sup> The 1878 Census returns showed that of a total population of around 48,000, 32,000 were white and around 15,600 African American.<sup>56</sup> The 1879 returns showed an overall

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<sup>52</sup> Keith, *Fever Season*, 182.

<sup>53</sup> *The Memphis Daily Avalanche*, October 31, 1878.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-179.

<sup>55</sup> Keith, *Fever Season*, 182-183.

<sup>56</sup> A.E. Sholes, *Sholes’ Directory of Memphis, 1878*, 7.

population of about 43,500, with 27,000 being white and almost 16,000 African American.<sup>57</sup> In 1878, Memphis' municipal elections were based on wards – if a candidate wanted to win an election in a ward with large population of African Americans, they would have to make an effort to court their votes. Although this would change when Memphis lost its charter in January of 1879, at the time that the Yellow Fever Epidemic, white elites like *Appeal* editor J.M Keating knew that African American help would be required in rebuilding from the Epidemic. For a small window of time in Memphis, the African American community was seen as needed, if not crucial. And the militias, practically non-existent in other places, actually flourished – membership would actually rise to a high of sixty men in both companies in 1880 and 1881.<sup>58</sup>

In 1879, Yellow Fever struck Memphis again, and again the majority of those with the ability to evacuate did so. The Epidemic was much less intense than that of 1878, partly due to the experience that the municipal government had in dealing with Yellow Fever, but the danger of looting and disorder was still present. The McClellan Guards were put on active day patrol duty in the city starting on July 19, 1879 – According to the *Public Ledger*, “Capt. James Glass and his 33 McClellan Guards propose to go into camp on the bluff in front of the city and will be in readiness for police duty should their services be necessary.”<sup>59</sup> The Zouaves were also placed on active duty, though their role during the Epidemic is not well documented – it is likely that they preformed street patrols or that they were in charge of keeping order in refugee camps. During the 1879 Epidemic, there were very few cases of violence or looting and the government acted much more efficiently – since it had been reduced to eight appointed

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<sup>57</sup> A.E. Sholes, *Sholes' Directory of the Taxing District of Memphis, 1879*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> A.E. Sholes, *Sholes' Directory of the Taxing District of Memphis, 1880*, 43. A.E. Sholes, *Sholes' Directory of the Taxing District of Memphis, 1881*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Walk, *African Americans in Memphis Government*, 22.



positions since Memphis elected to give up its charter in January of 1879.<sup>60</sup> The McClellan Guards maintained day duty throughout the course of the 1879 Epidemic and were summarily thanked by the new Legislative Council at the end of the Epidemic,

The thanks of this council are due to Col...Cameron of Governor Mark's staff who acted as superintendent of Quarantine Camps and commander of Colored troops from whose ranks twenty men were detailed as a complete day Police Force thus enabling us place our entire regular force on night duty...[and] To the companies of Capt. Glass and Brown for efficient aide rendered by them.<sup>61</sup>

The gratitude that the Legislative Council showed to the African American militia units was undermined by their primary concern for the white Colonel placed over them – the decision to place the McClellan Guards' camp so close to the city was made by Captain Glass, the African American captain of the militia. The militia was at least paid relatively well for their time on active duty, with most of the privates receiving \$21 for their service at the end of the Epidemic – Captain Glass received a payment of \$162, a considerable amount of money for an African American hack driver.<sup>62</sup> Memphis had again been spared disorder due to the direct actions of African American militias – regardless of who received public credit. As the Epidemic of 1878 had altered Memphis' demographics, the 1879 Epidemic furthered the change. The overall population dropped to 40,000, and the white population was 25,000, whereas the African American population was around the same.<sup>63</sup> The African American community was as strong as it had been pre-Epidemic, where the whites had been weakened and now needed African American support. However, this position of relative strength would only last through the early 1880's. The combination of statewide disenfranchisement, local government structure, and

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Legislative Council Minutes, November 12, 1879, from the Shelby County Archives, Memphis TN.

<sup>62</sup> Document from *Tennessee National Guard Adjutant General's Office Military Records, 1812-1941*.

<sup>63</sup> A.E. Sholes,

demographic changes would eliminate the Memphis' reliance on the African American community and open up the way for full segregation.

State politics, local disenfranchisement, and economic growth would work against the community, and by extension the militia, throughout the 1880's – with the most crushing blows coming towards the end of the decade. For the militia themselves, the worst political change was that of the structure of the militia under Democratic state government. In 1887, Tennessee's 45<sup>th</sup> General assembly established the Tennessee National Guard from units of existing local militia.<sup>64</sup> By this point, the state executive branch was firmly in the control of the Redeemed Democratic party, and thus white units were primarily those selected. Although the McClellan Guard was disbanded by 1887, their place had been taken in 1889 by the Tennessee Rifles, an African American unit that maintained similar manpower – but this unit was placed under the direct control of a white superior officer, limiting the unit's autonomy.<sup>65</sup> Whereas before units been under the command of their own officers to accomplish directives, the Tennessee rifles were more closely monitored by the state. The Zouaves were still a mainstay throughout the 1880's with their armory maintained on Beale Street – close to the epicenter of an increasingly well-educated and economically prosperous African American community. But the Zouaves could not escape gubernatorial power, and they were disbanded by order of the Adjutant General on November 14, 1891.<sup>66</sup>

These government actions were indicators of a more disturbing overall shift – complete disenfranchisement on the statewide level and throughout the South. Throughout the early 1880's the Republican Party, the party that most often represented African American interests,

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<sup>64</sup> Tennessee National Guard, "Who we are".

<sup>65</sup> Document from *Adjutant General's Office Records, 1796-1900*, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

<sup>66</sup> Document from *Adjutant General's Office Records, 1796-1900*.

was much more competitive in Tennessee than it was in other parts of the South, and a few African Americans became Republican state legislators. White Democrats resorted to both legislative and extralegal measures to neutralize Republican votes in middle and western Tennessee in order to secure hegemonic control of the state government. In the 1886 state elections, whites in Shelby County forced African Americans to leave the polls and left 3,000 Black votes uncounted. In 1888, Memphis Democrats resorted to similar measures and used voting fraud to completely overwhelm Republican candidates in majority Black districts. Acting on the advantage they had gained in the 1888 election cycle, the Democratic majority congress passed a battery of voting rights acts that combined to completely disenfranchise African American voters, such as the secret ballot Dortch Law and a poll tax both passed in 1889. These measures essentially knocked out the African American Republican voting base – African American turnout for state elections declined rapidly from the 1888 to 1892 cycles and essentially ceased to exist by 1896.<sup>67</sup>

Disenfranchisement took on a local aspect starting in 1879 with the loss of Memphis' Charter. Legislative Council positions were no longer elected by ward but instead by large, meaning that the white population could steadily outvote the African American community. This problem was only exacerbated by migration to Memphis from the countryside throughout the 1880's. Although a great number of African American migrants came to Memphis in search of work, so did a huge number of native-born whites.<sup>68</sup> The writers of the City Directories seemed to revel in the fact that the influx of whites helped to lessen the demographic impact of the African American community,

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<sup>67</sup> J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics; Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910*, (Yale University Press: New Haven, Connecticut, 1974), 104-123.

<sup>68</sup> Goings & Smith, "Duty of the Hour", 135.

But the most gratifying feature of improvement, is that the increase has been almost entirely of white population...the better class of buildings have been erected, and consequent increase of rents, has driven out the drones to the cotton fields, where they have become producers instead of consumers.<sup>69</sup>

The increase in rent probably helped contribute to a general trend of movement out of the city limits by both whites and Blacks— an area just outside the city line, called the Curve, began to flourish during the 1880's and would come to be of critical importance in the brutal events of 1892.<sup>70</sup> The next year, the city directory showed no increase in the African American population from 1884 to 1888.<sup>71</sup>

The unbalanced city government and demographic switch brought along the practical effects of local disenfranchisement. Since the elected positions were now overwhelmingly white and had no need for Black voters, there was no need to reward African Americans with jobs in city government – with very few exceptions, the majority of those still left in city government were appointed before the loss of Memphis' charter. Lymus Wallace, one of the exceptions, was elected in 1882 and his term of office ended in 1890. The final Black police officer, Dallas Lee, finally retired in 1895.<sup>72</sup> In addition to this, the use of African American convicts was specifically allowed under new town ordinances. According to Legislative minutes from the switch to the new city charter, any people arrested could be used as free labor:

The workhouse convicts, when not confined in the Commissioners' prison, shall be under the management of a superintendent, who shall work the same under the direction of the District Engineer, upon the streets, alleys, etc. of the District.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Harlow Dow, *Dow's City Directory of Memphis for 1887*, (Gibson Printing Company, Memphis, Tennessee, 1887) 42-43.

<sup>70</sup> Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep Waters Troubled; The Life of Ida B. Wells*, (Oxford University Press, New York: 1998) 130. Accessed through Google books, <https://books.google.com/books>

<sup>71</sup> Harlow Dow, *Dow's City Directory of Memphis for 1888*, (Gibson Printing Company, Memphis, Tennessee, 1888) 46.

<sup>72</sup> Walk, *African Americans in Memphis Government*, 23 & 26.

<sup>73</sup> Legislative Council Minutes, February 14, 1879, from the Shelby County Archives, Memphis, TN.

Under this ordinance, Memphis' new streets and sanitation systems were build on the back of African American convict labor, which was proportionally higher once the police force became less proportionally Black towards the late 1880's.<sup>74</sup>

African Americans noticed these changes – especially legendary activist Ida B. Wells, who was a teacher and journalist in Memphis in the latter half of the 1880's. She wrote in her personal journal on January 13, 1886, that both African American candidates for the school board had been beaten out and that the board was now entirely white. Reverend Taylor Nightingale contested the election on the grounds of fraud, but nothing ever came of it.<sup>75</sup>

Without means of redress on either the state or local level, the African American community had no way of actively preventing its rights from being infringed upon. This was not good for the militias – now incorporated into a rigid state structure and personally disenfranchised, they had very little autonomy. The white community, so thankful in the aftermath of Yellow Fever, had no political reason to enable the African American militias to keep functioning. By 1892, only the Tennessee Rifles remained. However, the events and aftermath of the Memphis lynching of 1892, made infamous nationwide by the writing of Ida B. Wells, would result in the forcible disbandment of the Tennessee Rifles.

The lynching of Calvin McDowell, Tommie Moss, and Will Steward in March of 1892 signaled a turning point in the position of the What began as an argument between a white and Black youth over a game of marbles grew into small melee between crowds of both races because the white boy's father had come out and started beating the African American youth – during the fight, William Barnett, a white grocer was struck with a club. Recently he had been

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<sup>74</sup> Rousey, "Yellow Fever and African American Policemen", 372-374.

<sup>75</sup> Ida B. Wells, *The Memphis Journal of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Miriam DeCosta-Willis, (Beacon Press, Boston: 1995) 29.

giving the People's Grocery, a prosperous African American business, trouble because it had been stealing his customers. He arrived at the grocery store the next day with a police officer with the intention of accusing Will Stewart, one of the store's proprietors, of the crime. Calvin McDowell, the store manager and a private in the Tennessee Rifles, answered them saying that no one matching the description was in the store. Barrett struck McDowell with his pistol, and the African American youth got up and grabbed the pistol and shot, missing Barrett. He was arrested then released on bond that Friday, March 4.<sup>76</sup>

However, after further arrests and a meeting of the local African Americans, Barrett cited the meeting as evidence of plotting a race war and Judge Julius Dubose threatened that he would protect white interests. The night of Saturday March 5, six armed whites, one a sheriff and the others deputies, came to the People's Grocery with the stated intent to arrest Will Stewart – it is far more likely that they had more violent plans. When they entered, the Blacks inside – including McDowell, who was wearing his federal blue militia uniform, opened fire with shotguns and pistols and severely wounded several of the whites. In response, the whites returned with a larger posse and arrested thirteen African Americans - African American newspapers reported that the African Americans inside had been expecting mob violence and that they surrendered as soon as they found out that the sheriff was part of the group. Of course, white newspapers such as the *Appeal* and *Avalanche* took a much different view, decrying the incident of proof of a brewing insurrection.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Paula J. Giddings, *Ida, A Sword Among Lions; Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching*, (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2008) 177-178.

<sup>77</sup> Giddings, *Ida, A Sword Among Lions*, 178-181.

The next day groups of armed whites descended on the curve, no doubt encouraged by the media's biased coverage of the incident. The *Avalanche* the events of March 7<sup>th</sup> with a great amount of detail and relish:

Ordinarily on Sunday there is a crowd of Negroes at the Curve, and a white face is rarely seen about the corners; but yesterday was different. White men stood around in groups and discussed the outrage of the night before and plans to bring the turbulent negroes...to a proper sense of propriety...Some members of every group were carried Winchesters or shotguns, and their bloodshot eyes and haggard faces showed that they had been up all night.<sup>78</sup>

The *Nashville Daily American* effectively summed up the situation in writing, "Every white man in town is a walking arsenal." The deputized whites spread out through the Curve and arrested anyone who they regarded as even slightly suspicious, leading to mass arrests throughout the night and day – the arrested African Americans accused of planning the "conspiracy" were dumped in Shelby County Jail.<sup>79</sup> The white mob justified its actions through accusing the entire community of conspiring to riot against the whites – as summed up in the *Avalanche*, these accusations were centered around the events in the People's Grocery but held all Blacks in Memphis to be complicit,

The proofs that the negroes had deliberately planned a wholesale slaughter of white men were apparent to all who visited the People's Grocery store yesterday or night before last...There was a strong guard of white men at the Curve last night, and about 9 o'clock it was reported that negroes were organizing in a church some two miles out on the Hernando Road. It was a false, but if the Negroes had come they would have been warmly received.<sup>80</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest that there was a planned insurrection, which surely would have involved members of the Tennessee Rifles. The deputized whites instead used rumors of a race war to justify their actions. The Tennessee Rifles made moves to ensure that mob violence would

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<sup>78</sup> *The Memphis Daily Avalanche*, March 7, 1892.

<sup>79</sup> Giddings, *Ida, A Sword Among Lions*, 180-181.

<sup>80</sup> *The Memphis Daily Avalanche*, March 7, 1892.

not be visited on their friends and neighbors within the jail – they stood guard outside the jail on March 6 and March 7 – but when news came that the deputies that had been shot in the People’s Grocery were likely to survive, they left the jail.<sup>81</sup>

At this point it seems that despite all evidence suggesting otherwise, the militiamen of the Tennessee Rifles had an intrinsic belief in Memphis’s justice system not to allow for mob violence – or maybe they believed that they would only be mobilized if the situation really got out of control. Either way, they were not present when a mob arrived that night and took Tommie Moss, Will Stewart, and Calvin McDowell, who was still wearing his state-issued militia uniform, out of Shelby County Jail. The mob systematically fired at the men in the same places the white deputies had been shot days before, except this time with truly lethal intent. Many African Americans crowded into the coroners office the next day viewed the mutilated bodies – and the whites so feared their anger that Judge Dubose issued an order to disarm the Tennessee Rifles as well as the entire community and deputized men to disperse the crowds at the Curve.<sup>82</sup>

What followed was a forced disarmament similar to the White Liner movement that had occurred almost two decades earlier. Groups of white men attacked a gun store that sold weapons to African Americans. In addition to this, they were authorized to enter homes in search of weapons, particularly weapons in the position of militia members. A group of armed whites broke in to the Tennessee Armory and took every weapon, both rifles and officers’ swords. In the same manner in which White Liner movements had disarmed other Black communities, Judge Dubose’s orders constituted an essentially unlawful forced disarmament – and the officers of the Tennessee Rifles seemed to understand the significance of the robbery of their personal and

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<sup>81</sup> Giddings, *Ida, A Sword Among Lions*, 181-182.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.



state-issued weapons. The officers of the militia appealed to both the municipal government and to their state-appointed superior officer, but neither provided any help. After the lack of help, the Tennessee Rifles issued a statement to the press announcing their disbandment,

To wear the livery of a commonwealth that regards us with distrust and suspicion, a commonwealth that extracts an oath from us to defend its laws then fails to protect us in the rights it guarantees, is an insult to our intelligence and manhood.<sup>83</sup>

With the disbandment of the Tennessee Rifles, the final African American unit in Memphis, and one of the last in the South, was gone. The African American community watched helplessly as groups of white men shot randomly into crowds at the Curve and robbed the People's Grocery with abandon – for several days, there was no rest for African Americans who lived at the Curve, who were now in constant fear that deputized whites and police officers might come arrest them or harm them on the baseless idea that they were planning an insurrection.<sup>84</sup>

Ida B. Wells was correct to note that, “[The Memphis lynching] was our first lesson in white supremacy.”<sup>85</sup> Although the African American community had already experienced racial violence during the Riot of 1866, the lynching came as a stark reminder of their reduced position as citizens after a period of relative peace. As a result, Wells began to encourage emigration away from Memphis,

The City of Memphis has demonstrated that neither character nor standing avails the Negro if he dares to protect himself against the white man or become his rival. There is nothing we can do about lynching now, as we are outnumbered and without arms... There is therefore only one thing left that we can do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives nor our property.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> McMurry, *To Keep Waters Troubled*, 133-134.

<sup>84</sup> Giddings, *Ida, A Sword Among Lions*, 183-184.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

Thousands of Black Memphians would follow her advice and moved to Oklahoma in search of a better life.<sup>87</sup> The elite white community that had relied upon Brown's Zouaves and the McClellan guard to protect them and their property during the Yellow Fever Epidemics had proven without a doubt that it was unwilling to reciprocate the action. For people like Calvin McDowell, the expression of personal freedom to take part in the defense of the city and community came at the cost of life, where James Glass and Rafael Brown had been praised for their propensity to do the same.

Due to Yellow Fever, Memphis fell out of step with the rest of the South in its local efforts at disenfranchisement, due to the exemplary efforts of the African American militias and the demographic switch that allowed for African Americans to take a more substantial role in the community than other urban communities. Again, a great deal of the implicit trust that was placed in the African American community in the early 1880's was based off of the actions of African American militiamen, the majority of whom did not come from the fledgling Black educated class, made up of figures like Ida B. Wells, that has been associated with racial progress in the late nineteenth century. Added to this, the consistently competitive nature of state politics in Tennessee staved off the systematic disenfranchisement that would come to other states earlier, meaning that the community in Memphis had more time to enjoy political importance, despite the disenfranchisement that came with the commission government style of the taxing district once Memphis lost its charter. However, by the late 1880's, just a decade out from Yellow Fever, the white population seems to have forgotten the debt it owed to the African American militias and community.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 201.

The places where this switch were most apparent to the public eye were in government and media coverage – especially in comparing the *Avalanche*'s Yellow Fever coverage to its coverage of the Curve Riot. Although white and the white media in Memphis never at any point treated the African American community as socially equal, during and after the Yellow Fever Epidemics, the public consensus was much less overtly negative towards Blacks and could accept them as equal under the law, if not by virtue of character. By the 1890's it is obvious that this distinction had disappeared, and the perception of the African American militias is key in this. Whereas before they had been called on to serve the community, by the 1890's they were seen only as a threat to whites and their existence was unwanted and unneeded. In this regard, Memphis did end up having an anti-militia movement like the White Liner movements of the 1870's – it just took twenty years to happen.

Because of these events, Memphis' African American militias serve as a more than fitting microcosm for the disenfranchisement of the Black Community in Memphis as a whole. Their service during Yellow Fever, although efficient and courageous, was not enough to spare the African Americans in the city from political disenfranchisement and the racial violence that would accompany the rise of Jim Crow Segregation. On a broader basis, the history of the McClellan Guards, Brown's Zouaves, and the Tennessee Rifles offers a disturbing view into the pervasive nature of the ideals of white supremacy. African Americans had made themselves extremely useful to the white community during times of crisis and earned some small measure of respect from white – and when white politicians had needed African American votes to secure their positions - the existence of Black militias, Black police officers, and political patronage through appointed positions was maintained. But, as soon as the African American community was no longer viewed as needed, these things disappeared within a few years. This exposes a

stark truth about Memphis in the late nineteenth century: even though Memphis arguably owed its existence to Black Militias, racism took a primary place in the minds of white Memphians when the crisis had passed. Memphis fell in line with the rest of the country in this respect – and the results, as they were in all other places, were brutal and reflect poorly on Memphis.