

Ku Klux Klan Violence in Georgia, 1871

Following the Civil War, the federal government brought newly freed people into the political and economic sphere through a variety of efforts known as Radical Reconstruction. But planters, unwilling to lose control over African-American laborers, attempted to rule the South through violence and legal and economic intimidation. The secret terrorist organization the Ku Klux Klan was part of the violent white reaction to Reconstruction. Founded by Confederate veterans in Tennessee in 1866, Klan nightriders targeted black veterans and freedmen who had left their employers and those who had succeeded in breaking out of the plantation system. African Americans who transgressed local norms of white supremacy were in particular danger as the testimony from Maria Carter and others at these 1871 Congressional hearings about the Klan made clear. Klan leaders often were prominent planters and their family members while poorer men made up the rank and file.

Atlanta, Georgia, October 21, 1871

MARIA CARTER (colored) sworn and examined.

By the Chairman:

Question. How old are you, where were you born, and where do you now live?

Answer. I will be twenty-eight years old on the 4th day of next March: I was born in South Carolina; and I live in Haralson County now.

Question. Are you married or single?

Answer. I am married.

Question. What is your husband's name?

Answer. Jasper Carter.

Question. Where were you on the night that John Walthall was shot?

Answer. In my house, next to his house; not more than one hundred yards from his house.

Question. Did any persons come to your house that night?

Answer. Yes, sir, lots of them; I expect about forty or fifty of them.

Question. What did they do at your house?

Answer. They just came there and called; we did not get up when they first called. We heard them talking as they got over the fence. They came hollering and knocking at the door, and they scared my husband so bad he could not speak when they first came. I answered them. They hollered, "Open the door." I said, "Yes, sir." They were at the other door, and they said, "Kindle a light." My husband went to kindle a light, and they busted both doors open and ran in—two in one door and two in the other. I heard the others coming on behind them, jumping over the fence in the yard. One put his gun down to him and said, "Is this John Walthall?" They had been hunting him a long time. They had gone to my brother-in-law's hunting him, and had whipped one of my sisters-in-law powerfully and two more men on account of him. They said they were going to kill him when they got hold of him. They asked my husband if he was John Walthall. He was so scared he could not say anything. I said, "No." I never got up at all. They asked where he was, and we told them he was up to the next house, they jerked my husband up and said that he had to go up there. I heard them up there hollering "Open the door," and I heard them break the door down. While they were talking about our house, just before they broke open our door, I heard a chair fall over in John Walthall's house. He raised a plank then and tried to get under the house. A parcel of them ran ahead and broke the door down and jerked his wife out of the bed. I did not see them, for I was afraid to go out of doors. They knocked his wife about powerfully. I heard them cursing her. She commenced hollering, and I heard some of them say, "God damn her, shoot her." They struck her over the head with a pistol. The house looked next morning as if somebody had been killing hogs there. Some of them said "Fetch a light here, quick;" and some of them said to her, "Hold a light." They said she held it, and they put their guns down on him and shot him. I heard him holler, and some of them said, "Pull him out, pull him out." When they pulled him out the hole was too small, and I heard them jerk a plank part off the house and I heard it fly back. At that time four men came in my house and drew a gun on me; I was sitting in my bed and the baby was yelling. They asked, "Where is John Walthall?" I said, "Them folks have got him." They said, "What folks?" I said, "Them folks up there." They came in and out all the time. I heard John holler when they commenced whipping him. They said, "Don't holler, or we'll kill you in a minute." I undertook to try and count, but they scared me so bad that I stopped counting; but I think they hit him about three hundred licks after they shot him. I heard them clear down to our house ask him if he felt like sleeping with some more white women; and they said, "You steal, too, God damn you." John said, "No, sir," They said, "Hush your mouth, God damn your eyes, you do steal." I heard them talking, but that was all I heard plain. They beat him powerfully. She said they made her put her arms around his neck and then they whipped them both together. I saw where they struck her head with a pistol and bumped her head against the house, and the blood is there yet. They asked me where my husband's gun was; I said he had no gun, and they said I was a damned liar. One of them had a sort of gown on, and he put his gun in my face and I pushed it up. The other said, "Don't you shoot her." He then went and looked in a trunk among the things. I allowed they were hunting for a pistol. My husband had had one, but he sold it. Another said, "Let's go away from here." They brought in old Uncle Charlie and sat him down there. They had a light at the time, and I got to see some of them good. I knew two of them, but the others I could not tell. There was a very large light in the house, and they went to the fire and I saw them. They came there at about 12 o'clock and staid there until 1. They went on back to old Uncle Charley's then, to whip his girls and his wife. They did not whip her any to hurt her at all. They jabbed me on the head with a gun, and I heard the trigger pop. It scared me and I threwed my hand up. He put it back again, and I pushed it away again.

Question. How old was your baby?

Answer. Not quite three weeks old.

Question. You were still in bed?

Answer. Yes, sir; I never got up at all.

Question. Did they interrupt, your husband in any way?

Answer. Yes, sir; they whipped him mightily; I do not know how much. They took him away up the road, over a quarter, I expect. I saw the blood running down when he came back. Old Uncle Charley was in there. They did not carry him back home. They said, "Old man, you don't steal." He said, "No." They sat him down and said to him, "You just stay here." Just as my husband got back to one door and stepped in, three men came in the other door. They left a man at John's house white they were ripping around. As they came, back by the house they said, "By God, goodbye, hallelujah!" I was scared nearly to death, and my husband tried to keep it hid from me. I asked him if he had been whipped much. He said, "No." I saw his clothes were bloody, and the next morning they stuck to him, and his shoulder t almost like jelly.

Question. Did you know this man who drew his gun on you?

Answer. Yes, sir.

Question. Who was he?

Answer. Mr. Much.

Question. Where does he live?

Answer. I reckon about three miles off. I was satisfied I knew him and Mr. Hooker.

Question. Were they considered men of standing and property in that country?

Answer. Yes, sir; Mr. Finch is married into a pretty well-off family. He is a good liver, but he is not well off himself.

Question. How is it with Mr. Booker?

Answer. I do not know so much about him. He is not very well off.

Question. How with the Monroes?

Answer. They are pretty well-off folks, about as well off as there are in Haralson. They have a mill.

By Mr. BAYARD:

Question. You said they had been looking a long time for John Walthall ?

Answer. Yes, sir.

Question. Had they been charging John with sleeping with white women?

Answer. Yes, sir; and the people where he staid had charged him with it. He had been charged with it ever since the second year after I came to Haralson. I have been there four years this coming Christmas.

Question. That was the cause of their going after him and making this disturbance?

Answer. Yes, sir; that was it. We all knew he was warned to leave them long before he was married. His wife did not know anything about it. When he first came there he was staying among some white women down there.

Question. Do you mean living with them and sleeping with them?

Answer. He was staying in the house where they were.

Question. White women?

Answer. Yes, sir.

Question. Were they women of bad character?

Answer. Yes, sir; worst kind.

Question. What were their names?

Answer. They were named Keyes.

Question. How many were there?

Answer. There were four sisters of them, and one of them was old man Martin's wife.

Question. Were they low white people?

Answer. Yes, sir.

Question. Had John lived with them for a long while?

Answer. Yes, sir. They had threatened him and been there after him. They had got gone there several times to run them off. My house was not very far from them, and I heard them down there throwing rocks.

Question. Was it well known among you that John had been living with these low white women?

Answer. Yes, sir.

Question. Did he keep it up after he was married?

Answer. No, sir; he quit before he was married. I heard that a white woman said he came along there several times last year and said he could not get rid of them to save his life.

Question. Did John go with any other white women?

Answer: No, sir; not that I know of.

Question. Was he accused by the Ku-Klux of going with any of them?

Answer. They did not tell him right down their names. I heard them say, "Do you 'feel like sleeping with any more white women?" and I knew who they were.

By the CHAIRMAN:

Question. These women, you say, were a low-down class of persons?

Answer. Yes, sir; not counted at all.

Question. Did white men associate with them?

Answer. It was said they did.

Question. Did respectable white men go there?

Answer. Some of them did. Mr. Stokes did before he went to Texas, and several of the others around there. I do not know many men in Georgia any way; I have not been about much. I have heard a heap of names of those who used to go there. I came by there one night, and I saw three men there myself.

Question. You say John Walthall had been going there a good while?

Answer. Yes, sir; that is what they say. *Question.* How long had he quit before they killed him?

Answer. A year before last, a while before Christmas. He was still staying at old man Martin's. I staid last year close to Carroll, and when I came back he had quit.

Question. Did he go with them any more after he married?

Answer. No, sir; he staid with his wife all the time. He lived next to me.

Question. How long had he been married before he was killed?

Answer. They married six weeks before Christmas, and he was killed on the 22d of April.

Source: From *Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire Into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*. Georgia, vol. I. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872. 411–412.