

# Colfax 1873

Grant Parish, Louisiana

## In Sixty Seconds

**Before.** In April 1873, Grant Parish, Louisiana, was in the middle of a contested gubernatorial election. Both Republican and Democratic candidates claimed victory. In Colfax, the Republican slate, supported by local Black voters and Reconstruction officials, had been installed in the parish courthouse. Black militia occupied the courthouse to prevent a Democratic takeover.

**What happened.** On Easter Sunday, April 13, 1873, more than 300 armed white men, former Confederate soldiers, KKK members, and local Democrats, attacked the courthouse with rifles and a small cannon. After hours of siege, most of the roughly 60 Black defenders surrendered. They were executed. Nearly 50 more were killed that night after being held prisoner.

**Who did it.** An organized white paramilitary led by former Confederate officers. Many had been members of the White League, the Knights of the White Camelia, and the Ku Klux Klan. The operation was coordinated with the Louisiana Democratic Party's statewide campaign to overthrow Reconstruction by force.

**After.** The federal government indicted 97 of the white attackers under the Enforcement Acts. Only nine were charged; three were convicted. The Supreme Court then overturned those convictions in *United States v. Cruikshank* (1876), ruling that the Fourteenth Amendment did not apply to actions by individuals, only to actions by states. The decision effectively gutted federal power to prosecute racial violence for nearly a century.

## The Named

### William Ward

Black state senator from Grant Parish and captain of the Black militia that defended the Colfax courthouse. A Union Army veteran. Survived by being away from the courthouse during the attack. His political career ended with the massacre.

### Alexander Tillman

One of the Black officeholders installed in the Colfax courthouse by federal court order. Killed while surrendering on April 13. His name appears in the federal indictment.

### Levi Nelson

A Black defender of the courthouse who was shot and left for dead but survived. He testified at the trial of the Cruikshank defendants and became one of the named victims in the Supreme Court case that bears his attackers' names.

### Christopher Columbus Nash

Former Confederate officer who led the attack on the courthouse. Named in the federal indictment and convicted at trial. His conviction was overturned by the Supreme Court in *Cruikshank*. Died a free man.

## For Discussion

1. *United States v. Cruikshank* held that the Fourteenth Amendment reached only state action, not private individuals. What kinds of present-day violence fall into the space Cruikshank created, where state actors did not pull the trigger but also did not intervene?
2. Most of the Colfax defenders, many of them Black Civil War veterans, surrendered before they were killed. What patterns in the treatment of surrendered combatants does Colfax share with other moments in American military and policing history?
3. The Louisiana state marker called the event a riot for seventy-one years before being changed. What does the word riot accomplish as a historical frame, and what does the word massacre foreclose when it replaces riot?
4. Federal investigator James Beckwith, who indicted ninety-seven attackers, became unemployable in Louisiana after the Supreme Court overturned his convictions. What contemporary public-service roles carry a similar career-ending risk, and what institutional structures protect or fail to protect the people in them?
5. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were drafted in part to restore federal power stripped by Cruikshank. What does it say about American constitutional law that a single 1876 ruling required nearly ninety years of congressional work to partially reverse?

## Primary Sources

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3. *United States v. Cruikshank*, 92 U.S. 542 (1876).
4. Report of the Joint Select Committee on the Late Insurrectionary States. U.S. Congress, 1872.
5. Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. Harper & Row, 1988.

