The confessions, given freely after the arrests of dozens of conspirators, revealed horrific details of the planned insurrection.

Jake Mooreman, described as “the first lieutenant of a colored company” of insurrectionists, testified, “On last Friday or Saturday we received orders from Francis Murkerson and Cordy Harris that all our company and all the black men were to meet at No. 11, Central Railroad, to transact our business (this he explained to be the carrying out of the insurrection plans), and we were then to commence to kill all the white men and ugly white women, and take the pretty white women for ourselves. Then we were to take axes, hoes and brickbats, and take the guns and ammunition of the whites as we killed them, if the white men did not submit and give up. We were also to get all the money we could from the dead whites and divide. This movement was to commence on Friday, August 20th, 1875.”

The fantastic plot had been discovered and thwarted, thus averting a spree of mass murder whose end was to be the seizure of political and economic power in a 20-county area of east-central Georgia. Mostly forgotten in the years following its failure, the so-called Freedman’s Land Insurrection remains one of the most bizarre episodes in Georgia history.

The planned insurrection was the product of the unsettled era known as Radical Reconstruction. The prime conspirators were ex-slaves and members of the Union Leagues that served as organizational nuclei for politically active freedmen in the post-Civil War South. The plot seemed to center around Joe Morris,
a civil rights activist and self-styled “Messenger” from Burke County, “General” Prince R. Rivers, a South Carolina militia leader, and Cordy Harris, a “preacher” and Union League officer from Washington County, Georgia. Theirs was not the only alleged “insurrection” in Georgia in the years following the war, but it might have been the most destructive had it been carried out. In order to understand how such an event might unfold, it is necessary to understand the period and the dynamics of political power of that day.

The Civil War ended in the spring of 1865, and with it the hopes and dreams of an aspiring nation. The period between the end of the war and the final withdrawal of federal troops from the former states of the Confederacy in 1877 is referred to as the Reconstruction era. It is generally agreed that Abraham Lincoln had favored a rapid reintegration of the rebel states, with punishment and retribution on behalf of the victorious North kept to a minimum. After Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865, it was initially thought that his successor, Andrew Johnson, would pursue a harder line toward the South. This turned out not to be the case, as Johnson—despite his previous harsh rhetoric—moved closer to the position held by his predecessor in office. Congress was sharply divided between Democrats, who held more moderate views, and Republicans, especially the Radical wing, who demanded reparations, confiscation of the lands of former Confederates, and disenfranchisement of those who had participated on the side of the South during the war.

One especially thorny issue was the allotment of Congressional representation. The Thirteenth Amendment, which had freed the slaves, also effectively negated the so-called Three-Fifths Compromise as enumerated in Article I, Section 2, Paragraph 3 of the United States Constitution. Under this clause, slaves had counted as “three-fifths persons” for the purpose of congressional apportionment. Forty percent of the population in the eleven Confederate states—approximately 3.5 million persons—had been slaves. With freedom, the potential Congressional representation of these southern states, when readmitted to the Union, would increase nearly 20% at the time of the next reapportionment.

While freedmen might count in calculating Congressional representation they—like most blacks of the day in both northern and southern States—rarely had the right to vote. Elected representatives from the South—overwhelmingly white—would presumably vote Democrat, thus forcing the Republicans from power. To counter this threatened shift in power, Congress passed a law in March 1867 euphemistically titled “An Act to Provide for the More Efficient Government of the Rebel States.” This act and others that followed disenfranchised most white males and placed the South under martial law enforced by federal troops. Political power was effectively wrested from the hands of the former ruling class and given instead to a coalition of scalawags, carpetbaggers and former slaves voted into office by the newly enfranchised freedmen.

The Union Leagues (also referred to as Loyal Leagues) were organizations that arose in the North during the Civil War in support of the Union cause. There were several with varying degrees of central organization. During early Reconstruction, Union Leagues formed across the South, their members being Union soldiers, transplanted northerners, southern loyalists, missionaries, northern teachers and others. On a practical basis, the Leagues became “a sort of bureau of the Radical Republican party, [their] chief object being to control the negro vote.” In Georgia they were loosely organized under a Grand Council of the State headquartered in Atlanta.

Initially comprised of white membership, the Union League clubs opened to blacks early in the post-war period. Over a relatively short span of time, the League became a primarily black organization, though often controlled at a higher level by white Radical Republicans and their disciples. The League’s overt purpose was to make certain that blacks voted the Republican ticket. But with the return of Democrat political control in Georgia in 1870, the influence of the Union Leagues waned. Over the ensuing years, the groups devolved into loosely organized black secret societies, often with a military type structure despite their nominal political nature.

The political and social environment of the Reconstruction years gave birth to the Ku Klux Klan and other similar white groups. Consisting of scattered, independent and loosely organized bands, the Klan opposed the Union Leagues, established a way to preserve “order” that was friendly to white southerners, and endeavored to keep blacks “in their place.” The existence of antagonistic
secret organizations like the KKK on the one side, and the Union Leagues on the other, was symptomatic of the virulent animosity present in the South during Reconstruction.

Across the South there were a number of incidents and “insurrections,” some major and some minor, during the Reconstruction era. Many were simply due to the freedmen attempting to exercise their newfound civil rights and freedoms, while others took on a more sinister nature. In September 1868, a dozen or more blacks marching in a political rally were killed in the so-called Camilla Massacre in Mitchell County, Georgia. In the North this incident became a cause célèbre, seen as yet another sign of Southern insurrection and a clear justification for the rigors of Radical Reconstruction. In the South, the spectacle of a crowd of marching blacks, a few of whom were armed, raised fears of race-fueled rebellion. In December of that same year, a dispute over land ownership by armed blacks in an area of former rice plantations near Savannah became known as the Ogeechee Insurrection.

In August 1870, a Union League organizer named Cudjo Fye led an armed mob of blacks in an attempt to free a black prisoner from the Jefferson County jail in Louisville, about 35 miles southwest of Augusta. He told his followers that he was operating under direct orders of Georgia’s Republican governor, Rufus Bullock. Initially dissuaded in his efforts by local officials, Fye returned the next day with a band of “fifty or sixty armed followers,” “damning the white man promiscuously,” as well as threatening to burn the town “and kill every man, woman and child in it.” They broke into the jail and freed the prisoner.

In response, as many as a thousand armed whites from surrounding counties descended on Louisville, later assisted by federal troops. The affair ended fairly peacefully, with a number of the leaders of the mob later sentenced to prison.

By 1875, a decade after the end of the war, necessity had forced former slave and former master to peacefully coexist in a new normality. The violence, lawlessness and “outrages” of the Ku Klux Klan and others common during the years immediately following the conflict became infrequent. As observers would later note, the relationship between the races in Washington County and the east-central Georgia area in general appeared on the surface to be reasonably calm, with no single issue a cause for concern. But the seeming tranquility soon ended.

Joseph (“Joe”) Morris, who emerged as the prime ringleader of the group of insurrectionists in the 1875 affair, was born in Burke County on the plantation of Col. Robert Morrison. According to his former master, he was said to have been a “full-blooded African,” average in appearance and somewhat surly. As a youth he displayed no outstanding characteristics that might belie his future infamy. A young adult when he was set free, Morris worked for a short time on a nearby plantation before dropping out of sight. Over the next few years he was said to have traveled extensively in neighboring counties, and “frequently visited” in South Carolina. There he presumably met Prince Rivers, a prominent politician, leader of a local black militia, and mayor of Hamburg, South Carolina, a small town directly across the Savannah River from Augusta. In the early 1870s Morris returned to his old home in Burke County and “at once assumed a certain air of authority over and demanded obedience from the colored population.” Despite a minimal education and rudimentary literary skills, he opened a school for young blacks.

A contemporary newspaper article written after the abortive insurrection stated Morris’s “great ambition was to be a military hero, and to this end he devoted all his spare time. He frequently appeared in a flashy uniform, putting on the airs of a General, although without commission or command. He had a regular set of couriers who carried his orders and letters to distant negro settlements.”

In May 1875, a Burke County superior court judge received a crudely-worded missive citing state and federal laws and demanding that blacks be allowed to serve on local juries. It was signed by “the Hon. Joseph Morris Messenger.” Morris had become a strong advocate for the civil rights of the freedmen as black voting power waned. The return of rule in Georgia by the Democrat Party, controlled by the white population, had resulted in progressive disenfranchisement and political emasculation of the
ex-slaves despite the guarantees granted under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

A Burke County grand jury promptly indicted Morris for carrying a concealed weapon, as “some member of that body having seen a pistol protruding from under the ‘Hon’s’ coat tails.” The judge then issued a bench warrant for his arrest. Morris’s petition for blacks to serve on juries was ignored.

Morris was arrested and carried before a justice of the peace, where he was arraigned prior to posting bail and being released. His trial was scheduled for a few days hence, as rumors spread of “about a hundred and fifty armed negroes” lying in wait nearby to free him if convicted. On the day of court, several witnesses were unavailable, and the matter was continued to the next session, to be held several months later. The rumors of armed gangs were never confirmed.

Over the next couple of months there was uneasiness among the white population of Burke, Jefferson, Hancock, Washington and surrounding counties because of rumors that the blacks were “up to something.” Black militia companies were said to be drilling well into the night for reasons unknown. A note was discovered referring to some future activity in Glascock and Warren counties. It was signed by “General Morris.”

It was in this atmosphere of uncertainty that Ruben Mayo, sheriff of Washington County received the following note, reproduced here without editorial correction:

Rube Mayer Sheriff

You command to have court house swept and all cleaned for mass meeting on Saturday July 24, 1875 for Republican party for hon. Major General P. R. Rivers and his staff from Aiken, S. C. and chairman executive committee of 19 counties in Sandersville Washington County State of Georgia, and have you all the said roads keep opened from No. 13 Station [Tennille, Georgia] to the court house and the keys in your hand to put in my hands to the Mr. hon. General P. R. Rivers from S.C., and his staff and executive committees from 19 Counties and General Morris and his staff from S.C.

Your devoted frnds
Joseph Morris
Chairman of said company from Burke County

July 19, 1875

The note produced immediate alarm in Sandersville. In view of the blacks’ recent “mid-night drills, mysterious meetings and roll calls in the still of the night” it was feared that Morris and Rivers might try to take the courthouse by force. The county Ordinary determined that the courthouse could not be demanded for such purposes, leading the
sheriff and others set out to defend it. The local militia was enlisted. Capt. Peacock of the Washington Rifles telegraphed for an extra thousand cartridges to be sent from Macon. The Washington Dragoons were appointed as mounted police while others, both "white and colored," were deputized under the command of a Capt. Weddion.

The scene on the morning of July 24, 1875, was tense. As the local newspaper described it, "The stillness of the early dawn of Saturday was broken by the war-like sound of many drums coming from the direction of Tennille [the local train depot, some three miles distant]. Between six and seven o'clock the column hove into sight, led by Cordy Harris, mounted and looking as if he was going to a funeral." The column of several hundred blacks was smaller than had been expected. Many more from around the area had planned to arrive by train, but the word had been spread that the engineers were not to stop and pick up the waiting crowds, hence hundreds more were left stranded at stations along the several rail lines that converged at Tennille.

The commercial district of Sandersville, the county seat, centered on a large symmetrical courthouse square, laid out in 1856 after a fire the preceding year had destroyed most of the previous collection of buildings. A neat new brick courthouse, built to replace the one Sherman's forces had burned in 1864 on their March to the Sea, dominated the square. The only other major structures in the grassy central portion of the square were a large platform used to weigh cotton and a monument to Governor Jared Irwin, erected by the State in 1856 in honor of his role in exposing the Great Yazoo Fraud. The county jail, a wood-frame structure painted red, faced the square just to the north of the courthouse.

Militia and local police were present in force when the marchers arrived at the courthouse square. After the demonstrators marched back and forth for a while, Cordy Harris made a short speech on the lawn. The marchers then called for Joe Morris, their nominal leader, but he had remained at the station in Tennille. Prince Rivers was nowhere to be found, apparently having missed the train from Augusta or alternatively deciding to remain at the depot with Morris. Cordy Harris suggested a postponement of the meeting, which was agreed to, and the marchers soon dispersed.

Dispensing "a word of advice to the colored people of this county," the editor of the Sandersville Herald & Georgian wrote: "Do you desire prosperity, peace and happiness, and the good will and confidence of the white people upon whom you are dependent for homes and employment? If yea, avoid the appearance of evil intentions. Shun such monsters as Rivers, Morris and their crowd as you would a viper in your path. Ask them for bread and they have none to give, but can preach 'civil rights' until the sun goes down. Away with them! They are mis-chief-makers, lazy disturbers of the peace who would gladly embroil you in a disturbance, leave you to shift for yourself while they'd make off with the spoils. Bid them stay at home and attend to their own affairs and if Cordy Harris would go and live with them Washington County would not sustain any serious loss."

The editor's words, while well intentioned, echoed the viewpoint of white Democrats, who once again controlled political power in the state. He could little understand the despair experienced by many of the freedmen who had participated in the march. Their brief tastes of freedom and political clout after the war were quickly fading into an era that would be marked by tenant farming and the rule of Jim Crow, a dark epoch for southern blacks that would last far into the next century. For these freedmen, the ill-defined concept of civil rights and the encouragement of their leaders must have offered a last hope to salvage the new and brighter future that emancipation had once seemed to promise.

Over the days that followed, rumors of trouble continued to swirl about the region. The general consensus was that the last had not been heard of Morris, Rivers and their followers. A "faithful servant" warned a woman in Jefferson County to leave home on Friday, August 20, 1875, as she might otherwise come to some harm. Around August 17, a crudely handwritten note was found at a country store near the line between Washington and Johnson Counties, "where a party of negroes had been drinking." Its contents were chilling. As reproduced "in plain English" in the Herald & Georgian, it read:

To Jerry Waters: You and your Company must start killing the whites on August 20. Kill every one you can find, and tell Harrison Tucker to kill all the whites he can find and go towards No. 11 Station [Bartow, Georgia] and there will meet Gen. Morris and staff and Gen. Rivers and his staff. You do as I tell you and Capt. Tucker. This must be secret. You tell brother Jake to kill every white man and get every gun he can. Make out to the white men you are very sorry they think we want to hurt them. And if you know of any man that has got money make them give it to your Treasurer and we will divide it. Have all your community needs. Kill with axes, hoes, pitchforks, and get guns, powder and shot as you kill. So I close to depend on you.

Cordy Harris, Secretary
By order of Gen. Morris and from Gen. Rivers

A courier rushed to deliver the note to Sheriff Mayo in Sandersville. The reaction was immediate. Warrants were issued; Waters, Tucker and "Brother Jake" were arrested in short order. Cordy Harris, now a wanted man, escaped. Telegrams were dispatched to Governor James M. Smith in Atlanta and to the sheriffs of surrounding counties. The Governor authorized calling up the local militias to act as posses comitatus in Washington and Jefferson counties. Ex-Governor Herschel V. Johnson, the presiding judge of the Middle Judicial Circuit, was instructed by Governor Smith to lead the investigation and hold a preliminary Court of Inquiry on Monday, August 23, at which time the prisoners would be arraigned.

The arrests of accused insurrectionists continued in several counties, including...
Washington, Johnson, Burke, Laurens, Wilkinson and Greene. The exact number is difficult to ascertain, but judging from press reports between two and three hundred were taken into custody. Most were held in the Washington County jail, the offense of most simply that of being a member of one of the Union League militias. A number of prisoners readily confessed, implicating Prince Rivers as the “arch-conspirator,” with Joseph Morris under him. Cordy Harris and Francis Murkerson, both from Washington County, were local ringleaders. The killings were to begin simultaneously in Jefferson, Burke, Washington and a portion of Richmond counties, conducted by squads of fifteen to twenty men operating in multiple locations before linking up with their leaders.

Morris was nowhere to be found. He was rumored to be in Burke County protected by an armed group of some 500 to 1,000 men, but no such force was ever identified. There were a number of minor skirmishes with a smaller band of armed blacks resulting in more arrests, but Morris managed to make good his escape.

Feelings ran high as word of the brutal nature of the abortive insurrection spread. The Atlanta Constitution, with headlines screaming “War of Races!” and “Twenty Counties to be the Scene of Murder and Pillage,” suggested hanging the conspirators. Meanwhile, in Sandersville a group of seven prominent local citizens posted a public letter in the local paper urging calm and adherence to the rule of law, a clear attempt to forestall any thoughts of lynching. Press coverage took on a national and international scope, with detailed articles appearing in New York and New Orleans dailies, as well as at least one British newspaper.

As news accounts disclosed the detailed confessions, Prince Rivers—now safely ensconced in his hometown of Hamburg, South Carolina—wrote to the editor of an Augusta newspaper denying that he knew either Morris or Harris, that he had never been to a political gathering of any kind in Georgia, and that “it takes all my time to give attention to my corn and cotton.” Few who were familiar with the situation believed him.

On Friday, August 20, Cordy Harris surrendered to Sheriff Mayo in Sandersville. While he had been hiding amongst sympathizers, he received word that he would be safer in custody and that he might be killed if he tried to flee. As arrests continued, the local jail filled to overflowing, requiring that some prisoners be held under guard in the courthouse.

Meanwhile, major newspapers around the country dispatched correspondents to assess the situation firsthand. Some accounts reported the events as merely exercises in politics. The Portland (Maine) Daily Press, a decidedly Republican newspaper, printed the account under the headline “Silly Letters Made a Pretext for a Wholesale ARrest of Negroes.” The Daily Graphic, a New York paper, opined that the arrests were in retribution for the freedmen’s attempts at exercising their civil rights. But as confessions and corroboration about the extensive nature of the plot accumulated, the voices of naysayers quieted. There seemed little doubt that there had been some plan by insurrectionists to “kill from the cradle up.”

On Saturday, August 21, Governor Smith arrived in Tennille by train from Atlanta and was escorted to Sandersville in a procession of carriages accompanied by the Washington Dragoons, the mayor, aldermen and other prominent citizens. On arrival he was briefed on the situation and examined the evidence against the plotters.

The Governor personally interviewed Cordy Harris in the presence of a correspondent for the Atlanta Constitution. Harris spoke freely, admitting the plot was an “outgrowth of the old Negro Union League organization.” More recently, “Major General’s Clubs” had formed for the purpose of “placing the District under the control of the colored people even if it should require the death of every white man in the country to do so.” Harris claimed that “General” Morris, “General” Rivers and another man named Rev. Jerry Simmons were at the heart of the plot. Harris, described by the reporter as having a small build, thin features and glib tongue, stated he was simply a “Baptist preacher, so-called.”

Governor Smith spoke from the courthouse steps for about an hour, addressing a large mixed-race crowd. His words were calm, but “earnest and emphatic.” He said he had known of “Mr. Gen. Morris and his staff” prior to the recent events. Morris had tried to get arms for his private militia from the Governor, threatening that “the bones of the colored people would rise up and stare him in the face” if he did not. Smith complimented the white population on their restraint in the face of the threat, while warning the blacks “against such mischief-makers as Morris, Rivers and others.” To both races he said, “The law is supreme, and shall be maintained.”

On August 23, the Court of Inquiry convened briefly in Sandersville, deciding to hold the prisoners while referring the matter to the grand jury for consideration. According to newspaper reports, two more notes similar in tone to the one from Cordy Harris had been discovered, as well as evidence of some outside direction, giving further evidence of the broad nature of the plot. The Atlanta Constitution reported “it is positively established that the old Union League and the new secret negro military organizations are at the bottom of the fiendish and unparalleled plot. This fact is corroborated by an intercepted letter from a white radical in Atlanta cautioning Harris to be careful in his maneuvers, or his rash acts and movements would redound to the irreparable injury of the republican party and help defeat the re-election of President Grant!” The identity of the so-called “white radical” was not revealed.

The week passed peacefully, with some additional arrests being made. A sense of cautious calm prevailed, though as the editor of the Herald & Georgian noted, “It has indeed seemed like war time had returned.” The two companies of militia remained camped on the courthouse square, holding drills and dress parades, all dutifully watched over by
guard pickets. The people of Washington County were invited to a public meeting on August 27 to honor and express appreciation for the two militia companies.

The authorities discovered an escape plot by the insurrectionists on the day of the public meeting. In order to clean the county jail, which was packed to capacity, the sheriff temporarily moved the prisoners to the courthouse yard. This led to the discovery that some of the prisoners had managed to cut away a window casing and loosen the iron bars. They had torn up blankets and bed sheets and were apparently planning a mass escape that Friday night. Until repairs could be made they were confined in a makeshift stockade.

On August 30, the grand jury assembled to hear the evidence and—if appropriate—issue indictments against the prisoners. The trials were to start immediately thereafter. The proceedings were to take place under the direction of some of the leading legal minds of the day. Judge Herschel V. Johnson, while serving as the presiding judge of the Middle Judicial Circuit, had a distinguished background. Born in Burke County, he had served briefly as a U.S. Senator in the 1840s before serving two successive terms as governor in the 1850s. In 1860, he was the vice-presidential running mate with Stephen Douglas, becoming a nationally known political figure. During the war years, he served in the Confederate Senate. Nearly 63 years old in the summer of 1875, he was selected to preside over the insurrection trials for his experience and insight.

Governor Smith appointed Georgia’s Attorney General, Nathaniel J. Hammond, to serve as lead prosecutor. To assure a fair trial for the accused, Amos T. Akerman was tapped to lead the defense. A native of New Hampshire and a graduate of Dartmouth College, Akerman had moved to Georgia in the 1850s, practicing law and farming. He enlisted in the Confederate Army at the outbreak of the war, rising to the rank of colonel. In 1865, he joined the Republican Party in Georgia and was said to have become an outspoken advocate for the civil rights of the freed slaves. President Grant appointed him as U.S. Attorney General in 1870, in which position he led a vigorous legal attack against the Ku Klux Klan under the provisions of the Enforcement Acts. At the time of the trial, Akerman was in his mid 50s and quietly engaged in the practice of law in Cartersville.

Judge Johnson set the tone when he opened the proceedings with his charge to the grand jury. First citing and explaining the pertinent sections of the Georgia Code, he added a specific admonition to the jurymen, stating, “The circumstances which have brought us together are well calculated to excite the indignation of the most prudent and self-possessed. It is impossible to contemplate with complacency a plot of wholesale, indiscriminate and secret murder of one race by part of the other race, which two constitute the elements of our social organization. It is difficult to suppress a feeling of vindictive revenge against those persons thus charged with plotting bloodshed and slaughter. But you and I are here in a judicial capacity, to administer justice according to law, and not according to human passions. We must not permit ourselves to be swayed in our conduct by any impulses, however natural, nor let our judgments be warped by rumors which may have been circulated in reference to the alleged insurrection. We are sworn to impartiality. We are sworn to expel from our bosoms every feeling of hatred, or malice, or revenge. We are sworn to be guided by the light of truth, and to enforce the law just as it is.”

The Grand Jury initially issued indictments against Cordy Harris, Prince R. Rivers, Francis Murkerson, Joseph Morris and three others. More were to follow. Rivers, denying his guilt, remained in South Carolina. Murkerson and Morris remained at large. The Governor, acknowledging Morris’s status as a ringleader, posted a $500 reward for his capture. As the evidence against Cordy Harris was most abundant, the

Twelve jurors, all prominent white men, found Cordy Harris, a freed slave and Union League member, not guilty of “an attempt to incite insurrection.”
the presence of three or four little tallow dips placed before the judge and upon the table occupied by the reporters.” Cordy Harris was found not guilty.

Later in the month a second trial of insurrectionists was held in Wrightsville in Johnson County, once again resulting in the acquittal of the accused. By this time, the majority of those arrested had been released. With this second verdict of “not guilty,” the authorities abandoned plans for further prosecution of those implicated in the plot. A northern newspaper commented, “This trial has demonstrated the gratifying fact... that a negro can and will receive justice from the Georgia courts.”

The crisis seemed to be over, but the fundamental question of “Why?” had not been answered. Perhaps the best analysis came not locally or even from the South, but from the New York Tribune, which had followed the proceedings closely. Citing that even though “the negroes in Georgia were generally prosperous and contented,” the writer noted “they seem to have had a grievance, after all, which none of their white neighbors ever suspected. They believe they are kept out of their right because they have never received the ‘forty acres and a mule’ which every freedman was taught ten years ago to expect as his share of the confiscated estates of rebels.”

Perhaps those in a position to benefit from the black vote spread misinformation of this kind. Jake Mooreman, one of those implicated in the plot, told the Tribune, “We were all to vote for [President] Gen. Grant next year to make him king. When Grant became king, all the land would be his, and the colored people would get it on easy terms.”

The Tribune article continued, “After all it is no great wonder that the Southern negroes have got their heads stuffed full of such wild and mischievous notions. Carpet-bag politicians have been teaching them for ten years that the whites among whom they live are their natural enemies and oppressors, and that nothing stands between them and slavery but the power of the Federal Government. They have been threatened with all sorts of evils if they allowed the Republican party in the South to be overthrown, and promised all sorts of blessings if they supported Administration candidates. And they have seen abundant signs of the great ruler in Washington. They have seen his cavalry scouring the countryside at election time, and his officers arresting white politicians at pleasure for no other crime than opposing the Administration. In their eyes he has been an autocrat of almost unlimited power, and the carpetbagger has assured them that all this power would be exerted for their benefit.”

To the politically naïve freedmen, the concept of independent rule in a “Freedman’s Land,” as one local black man called it, might have seemed a possibility. But hope faded with the fortunes of the insurrectionists.

In mid September, this notice appeared in the local Washington County paper:

“We, the colored citizens of Washington County, call together the colored citizens of said county, on the 18th of September next, to meet at the Courthouse door in Sandersville for the purpose of choosing two upright and intelligent men to send to one or two states for the purpose of finding some suitable place for said people to emigrate to.”

While Cordy Harris and other insurrectionists had been freed, Joe Morris remained at large, the $500 bounty for his arrest still unclaimed. This amount represented a princely sum in 1875, especially in the agrarian South.

On September 20, news broke that Morris, the “leader of the late insurrection in Middle Georgia,” had been captured under most unusual circumstances in Atlanta. It was said that he had been in the city for three days, visiting U.S. District Attorney Henry P. Farrow at night to avoid detection. Allegedly, Morris was “demanding a Ku Klux prosecution against certain citizens of Burke County.”

The Superior Court records in the Washington County courthouse contain the details of an indictment issued August 1, 1875, against Joe Morris, Cordy Harris, Prince Rivers and four others for attempting to incite insurrection.
A northern newspaper: “This trial has demonstrated the gratifying fact… that a negro can and will receive justice from the Georgia courts.”

County.” He was spotted by a detective in Farrow’s office, but when he realized that he was about to be arrested, rushed into an inner office of the suite and locked the door. The detective was reluctant to arrest Morris in the court building without the permission of Farrow, which he declined to give. Farrow could not—or would not—produce a key to unlock the door.

The standoff continued. Everyone was reluctant to break down the door to capture the wanted man. The sheriff and chief of police were summoned and wrote a note to the federal judge requesting permission to arrest Morris. The judge replied that court had adjourned for the day, and he would rule on the matter later. After some consideration, an officer then climbed into the locked room through the open transom and arrested Morris without event. He was carried back to Burke County to be held for trial during the next term of court, scheduled for the spring of 1876.

News reports of the day found it strange that a federal district attorney would protect a wanted criminal, especially one accused of being one of the masterminds behind what might have been mass murder. A bit of research into Farrow’s background is revealing. Prior to his political appointment as U.S. District Attorney, Farrow had been the president of the Union Leagues in Georgia. He was an ally of Republican Governor Rufus Bullock, serving as his Attorney General and at one point going to Washington “to persuade officials to a more stringent reconstruction for Georgia.” Farrow was certainly aware of Morris’s status as a fugitive from the law. Whether or not he had been involved in the failed insurrection cannot be determined.

By early spring of 1876, most of the events of the preceding summer were fading from memory. In Burke County in late March, Joseph Morris, “the notorious colored agitator,” was tried and convicted on the somewhat dubious charge, dating from a year earlier, of carrying concealed weapons. He was fined $50 and sentenced to a year of hard labor on the chain gang. As was the custom of the day, he was leased out as a convict laborer to a Mr. Henry Stephens of Stephens Pottery in Baldwin County, an enterprise making fire-brick, sewer pipe and other terra cotta products from the local clay.

Within a few days of his arrival at the pottery, Morris was among a crew of several leased convicts, accompanied by one guard, assigned to cut wood used to fire the kilns. Between three and four in the afternoon, the group found themselves suddenly surrounded by a party of about 20 men, masked and armed. They demanded possession of the “General” and disappeared into the forest. It was the last that anyone ever saw or heard of the Hon. Joseph Morris, Messenger.

Reaction to Morris’s disappearance varied. Governor Smith promised to “find the guilty parties and bring them to their just punishment.” The question, however, seemed to be who were the guilty parties? The Eatonton Press and Messenger reported that the leader of the kidnappers “spoke with the brogue of an Irishman.” The Herald & Georgian was sure that Morris was abducted “by some of his own clan,” citing a rumor that he had boasted that he wouldn’t remain at Stephens Pottery long, as his followers were planning to free him. The Augusta Chronicle scoffed at the idea, as did most other papers, positing instead that masked men were members of the Ku Klux Klan or others bent on Morris’s permanent elimination.

Some five months later, after an exhaustive investigation, a Baldwin County grand jury admitted that Morris’s disappearance “remains a mystery.” The Milledgeville Union & Recorder, while publishing the grand jury’s finding, opined, “Gov. Smith and the Democratic party we hold responsible for the outrage. They have made no real effort to secure the kidnappers of Mr. Morris.”

The truth remains elusive more than a century later.

About the Author: William Rawlings lives in Sandersville. His most recent book is A Killing on Ring Jaw Bluff: The Great Recession and the Death of Small-Town Georgia, published in 2013 by Mercer University Press. He is currently working on his next book, a history of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia in the 1920s. Small portions of this current article have been excerpted from that work.

Author’s Acknowledgement and Sources:

I was unaware of this most interesting episode in Georgia history until Scott Thompson of Dublin, a fine attorney and excellent historian, pointed me to it. He deserves credit for the idea of this article. The vast majority of this tale was drawn from extensive coverage in contemporary newspapers, both regional and national. In addition, several scholarly articles consulted and/or quoted are listed below. All quoted items were from these newspapers and articles. I have tried to preserve the oftentimes confusing and stilted syntax and punctuation for quoted phrases and sections as appearing in this story.


