The Lowry Wars

attacking North Carolina's plantation society in the age of Reconstruction

NC Piece Corps

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Contents

FORWARD from the AUTHOR

I became excited about this story when a friend of mine heard about a book project myself and several others were tentatively undertaking, and suggested including a section about the "Lowry gang." I had never heard of them, but after he showed me a large, old-fashioned button with Henry Berry Lowry's face, appar-ently passed down from his family, I was intrigued.

Every text I read brought me deeper and deeper into the subject, which to my pleasant surprise involved not just the efforts of a few lone vigilantes but entire communities of exploited and oppressed North Carolinians at the end of the Civil War. Brought up on the usual anarchist tales of assassins, bank robbers, and the like from the European continent, I was thrilled to learn about the struggle of the Lumbees and their comrades, which were at least as brilliant, daring, and politically poignant as the deeds of any Bonnot or Durruti.

In particular I was excited to present the ways in which this history undermines what I was taught growing up about Re-construction, about the tragedy of Republicans' failed efforts at racial justice, the absence of multi-racial resistance, and the State's position toward former slaves and Indians. This view of the Republican Party, as a benevolent but impotent force, was what I learned in school; at home I learned a different narra-tive, one idolizing Democratic (and by extension KKK) efforts at White "self-preservation" in the face of "carpetbaggers" and the excesses of Northern Reconstruction. To this day I can hear my Alabama-born family reflect bitterly on Sherman's march, as if the poverty and hunger it brought was somehow unique to a newly humiliated White race.

One might argue that both these perspectives hold grains of truth, in that they reflect at least some participants' lived expe-rience. But both are inevitably imbued with the White supremacy and profit-seeking of Northern industrialism and Southern Plantation society, and neither offer much of substance to help us understand the actual role and function of early capitalism, party politics, and racialized exploitation in the emerging New South. Ultimately, the Northern and Southern economic modes were a false opposition—the South needed Northern-style capital-ism, and vice versa. It was, after all, Northern industrialists that employed forced, unpaid Black labor in their Southern mines and railroads long after the Civil War was over, thanks to the uniquely Southern invention of convict leasing. The Lowry con-flict ultimately brings this relationship to the fore, in a way that is less tragic and more heroic than many of the Reconstruction narratives we are used to reading.

In this sense the Lumbee and Black struggles in Robeson County at the end of the Civil War were characteristic of many Southern histories of revolt and insurrection, wherein the protagonists face not one enemy but several, against both existent State forces as well as a secondary ruling class in the process of replacing them. The southern rebellious slave, maroon guerilla fighter, prison rioter, striker, or indentured servant inevitably must choose a treacherous path between or in total rejection of these competing ruling class forces.

I should make a few notes about the writing of this text. The project would not have been possible without the help of specifi-cally two books: *The Only Land I Know*, by two Lumbee authors Adolph Dial and David Eliades, and *To Die Game*, by W. McKee Evans. Their excellent research and perspective was uniquely helpful. This history is also possible, to the extent of the specific details that it includes, by the long oral tradition of the Lumbee people, which has managed to preserve much of the anecdotal and legendary quality of the insurgents' actions.

This writing was undertaken as part of a larger collaborative project with several other authors, as we attempt to piece to-gether a much longer text that presents an in-depth history of a variety of rebellions and insurrectionary moments from across Southern history. That project is still under way, of course, but we hope that this ‘zine can function as a kind of first draft for the Lowry section, and catalyze some discussion and response from readers that will help guide the larger writing project over the next six months.

Long Live the Lowry Clan,
Long Live Revolt from the Swamps, the Streets, and Everywhere in Between,
NC Piece Corps-espondent Sweet Tea

> Henry Berry Lowrie where are you?
> Sleeping in an unknown grave.
> Does the grass grow above your breast,
> Or do dark waters flow
> With secret sounds through your bones
> That will confuse mankind
> Until the end of time.
> From ever lasting to everlasting
> You are the hero of a people.
> Keep your secrets as you sleep–
> That is part of your greatness.
>
> -Adolph L. Dial,
> “The Hero of a People”

INTRODUCTION

On December 21st, 1864, a wealthy slaveholder and minor official of the Confederacy named James P. Barnes was ambushed on his way to the Post Office in Robeson County, North Carolina. After being initially cut down by a shotgun blast, Barnes was shot at point blank range in the head. While the assassins fled into a swamp, two nearby White residents arrived on the scene just in time to hear the dying slaveowner accuse two Lumbee Indians, William and Henry Berry Lowry, of the murder.

As a slaveowner and official in the Confederacy, Barnes was hardly an innocent man. Specific to this murder, he had recently accused several Lowries of stealing his hogs, in an example of what many Lumbees still describe as “tied-mule” incidents. (Dial, 45) It was common practice for White men to tie up their own livestock on an Indian’s land, and return at a later time to accuse the family of stealing his animals. Knowing the family had little chance for justice in White courts, the White man would agree to not press charges if the Lumbees would cede over a portion of their land, or agree to work the white family’s land for free. Such incidents comprised only one of the many strategies by which plantation society succeeded in gradually reducing the size and quality of Lumbee lands, reducing native autonomy, and pressing Lumbee men into forced labor, either on White plantations or at the Confederate forts on the coast.[1] Barnes had

[1] Such methods bring to mind the same affect plea bargaining has today upon millions of Americans trapped in our judicial archipelago.

recently used this exact strategy to force several Lowry sons into working at fever-infested labor camps to help build the Confederate Fort Fisher in Wilmington, thus unintentionally arranging his own death at the hands of Henry Berry Lowry, a man whom he had seriously underestimated, and whose legend would continue to grow over the next decade.[2]

Such a revenge killing was not necessarily rare in the mid-1800s, when family feuds were common and vigilantism and the law often went hand in hand. But due to a number of factors, including the fact that thousands of other Black and Indian laborers were being forced into new conditions of servitude on the supposed eve of "emancipation," the imminent arrival of a victorious Union Army, the escape of large numbers of Yankee soldiers from Confederate prison camps, and the relative cultural and economic autonomy of North Carolina's Lumbees, what could have been isolated as a solitary act of vengeance came to be seen and experienced by Robeson County's people of color as a righteous act of political rebellion against forced labor and White supremacy.

Thus began the Lowry Wars, a period of roughly eight years of almost uninterrupted, multiracial attacks on Plantation society in southeastern North Carolina. Dozens of sheriffs and white supremacist militia were murdered, plantations and white-owned stores expropriated, and five different successful prison breaks carried out, in what to this day represents a period of marked pride and dignity for North Carolina's Lumbees. It was a time of drastic economic and racial transition, opening avenues to new kinds of solidarity and political alliances possible between poor White families, newly "freed" Black laborers, and Natives, but also to new forms of economic and social bondage. Above all the Lowry War illustrates the kinds of racial hypocrisy, betrayal, and recuperation which would come to be expected from Northern industrialists and their Radical Republican allies, and what their industrial vision would soon have in store for the race relations and economic servitude of poor people in the rural South.

ON the LUMBEES

To understand the constellation of cultural practices and economic conditions that surround the Lowry War requires a brief background on the Lumbees of southeastern North Carolina. Historians and anthropologists disagree as to the exact origins of the tribe, how the Lumbees came to be in the area around the Lumber river, and who exactly their ancestors are. The lands now occupied by the Lumbee Indians were once controlled by members of Eastern Sioux bands like the Catawba, Cheraw, and Waccamaw, and it is assumed that some members of these bands mixed with the Lumbees. (Dial, 16-17) Others have staked a claim on a Cherokee influence, which is supported primarily by the oral tradition of the Lumbees themselves, as well as by anecdotal evidence like the fact that one major Cherokee Chief was named George Lowrie. It is also documented that the more assimilated elements of Cherokee culture interacted with the Lumbees in the 18th century sporadically, prior to Cherokee's "removal" by White people.

Language studies are of little help in determining Lumbee origins, due to the fact that the earliest recorded observations of Lumbees all agree on their speaking English before European contact, specifically, a style of Old English unique to England in the 16th century. There is no "native" language of the Lumbees, though due to their own cultural and economic autonomy, they continued to speak an old style of English long into the 19th and even 20th centuries.

[2] It should be pointed out that two hogs' ears with Barnes' mark were indeed found on Lowry property, so it is possible the theft actually took place, to which we can only commend the Cowries even more.

The predominant historical explanation for this bizarre phenomenon, which has emerged alongside an array of other evidence, is that the Lumbees of North Carolina are the primary descendants of Lord Raleigh's famous "Lost Colony." These 117 men, women, and children, led by Governor John White, were sent from England to settle Roanoke Island in 1587. Governor White quickly left the colony to return to England for supplies in August 1587, and was unable to return for three years due to a naval war with Spain. Upon his return, he found no one, only some abandoned supplies that were too large to carry, and a strange marking on a gatepost that simply read, "CROATOAN."

For many years it was merely assumed by historians, all evidence to the contrary, that the colonists had perished. The idea that colonists voluntarily "went native," to live in peaceful relations with their "inferiors," was absurd, despite the reality of positive relations with the nearby Hatteras Tribe (the birthplace of one member being, in fact, named "Croatoan"). Despite initial White denial of this voluntary exodus, a legend and mythology of the Lost Colony grew anyway, and still to this day functions as a kind of "origin myth" of radical escape from civilization, dreamed about and built upon by the contemporary anarchist imagination.[3]

Strange, then, that for many historians and Lumbee authors, the mystery of the Lost Colony is now no real mystery at all. After understanding patterns of native migration at the time, the most simple explanation for the use of Old English among Lumbees who had supposedly never before interacted with a European, the strange absence of many shared cultural practices with near-by natives, the presence of many English agrarian and kinship customs, and the existence of phenotype characteristics like blonde hair and blue eyes, is that the Lumbees largely come from refugees of the original "Lost Colony." Oral traditions reinforce this interpretation. An excerpt from a speech given at the funeral of two Lumbee boys murdered by a member of the Confederate Home Guard serves as an example:

> We were a free people long before the White men came to our land. Our tribe lived in Roanoke in Virginia. When the English came to our land, we treated them kindly. We took the English to live with us. There is the White man's blood in these veins as well as that of the Indian. (Dial, 49)

One final piece of evidence: of the 95 different surnames found in the original Lost Colony, 41 of these were found among the early Lumbees.

Combined with a likely blood and cultural influence of other native tribes, this means that the Lumbees emerged as its own unique grouping fairly recently, as a kind of refugee tribe, built together from Anglo-Saxon escapists and those Indians who had left their native regions either due to choice or tribal rivalries of some kind. While fully self-identifying as Indian, they were culturally a bridge between Anglo-Saxon and Native cultures of the surrounding areas, traditionally practicing both small-scale subsistence agriculture and hunting, as well as mutual-aid based kinship networks.

Given the Anglo-Saxon cultural influence on the Lumbees, it's not surprising that for a time the tribe was able to live in relative peace with English settlers. Lumbees often sided with settlers in conflicts with other Natives, and mainly kept to themselves. They also traditionally occupied

[3] For a longer history of the Croatoan debate, and how this concept of escape and redemption plays out in the radical mind, check out *Gone to Croatan*.

the difficult lands in between acres and acres of swamp, leaving little immediate incentive for a large-scale White-orchestrated land theft, as long as greener pastures lay elsewhere.

> This is not to say that the Lumbees had not defended themselves before. In 1754, for example, when the State of North Carolina sent troops to Virginia to help in its war against Indians, a surveyor was sent to the area of Robeson County to inquire about men for military service. The Governor's Agent noted at the time, Drowning Creek [Lumbee River] on the head of Little Pee Dee, fifty families, a mixt crew, a lawless people, possessing the land without patent or paying any quit rents; shot a surveyor for coming to view vacant lands…(Dial, 31)

The Lumbees must have been well aware of the precarious nature of their existence for a long time, surrounded as they were by a hostile State form and an emerging economy that enslaved Indians, Africans, and even poor Whites at will. But it wasn't really until the age of "Jacksonian Democracy," a time of increasingly hostile racial caste systems, and the (related) uncertain future of the Plantation economy, that the Lumbees were forced en masse into the social conflicts of the day. Surrounded on all sides by Anglo-Saxon political and economic forms, there was suddenly no retreat.

Several legal developments reflect this change, though the everyday practices of White power structures were really the catalyzing force. In 1835, North Carolina revised its Constitution to officially disenfranchise all free non-Whites. In 1840, in a foreshadowing of the American use of gun control to disarm potentially insurgent populations, particularly people of color, the General Assembly passed a law prohibiting free non-Whites from owning or carrying weapons without getting a license from the Court. (Dial, 43-45) This legislation emerged in response to a growing swell of anti-slavery sentiment and slave rebellions nationally. Locally, these legal changes occurred alongside cultural and economic practices by Whites in Robeson County that gradually but forcefully functioned to steal land from the Lumbee community, and thus turn them into a landless people, forced to work on White plantations or industrial projects like railroads, either due to hunger, the point of a bayonet, or both. Attempted insurrections like those of Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry in 1859 offered hope to many and succeeding in destabilizing to a large degree this early capitalist system, heightening racial anxieties on behalf of White elites in the process. The need for unpaid, forced labor to kickstart the Confederate war machine intensified this process even further. By the end of the Civil War, despite a "victory" for emancipation, the Lumbee community was facing the destruction of its traditional cultural practices, the decline of its legal status to that of Black ex-slaves, and a future of landlessness and forced wage labor on industrial projects owned in part by Northern "liberators."

THE WAR BEGINS

The Lowry War began with a vengeful assassination visited upon a Confederate Sheriff responsible for forcing Indians (as well as still-enslaved Black men) into labor camps. Less than a month later, another Confederate figure was murdered by ambush. The man was James Brantly Harris, a known rapist, liquor dealer, and an officer in the Confederate Home Guard, a local policing body

that hunted down deserters, escaped slaves, and union prisoners.[4] One Lumbee author described him as a "230-pound, swaggering, cursing, redfaced bully…remembered in the folk stories of the Lumbees as a man 'mean as the devil, the meanest man in Robeson County.'" (Dial, 48)

Harris was charged with "keeping the peace" in Scuffletown, the center of social activity for the Lumbees in Robeson County. To this day it is unclear whether Scuffletown refers to a precise location or functioned as a name for any place where Lumbees gathered to share news or have a good time. Some believe it to be in the general area of Pembroke, others to be at Moss Neck, and still others argue that it was a "floating or moving community." When interviewed, the Lumbee Reverand D. F. Lowry said that Scuffletown "was similar to the end of a rainbow…You never could find the place." All that is known is that it referred to a gathering place of some kind, an either permanent or rotating and temporary zone, autonomous from surrounding White society, where news could be passed along, goods traded or shared, and festivities and decision-making could take place. (Evans, 29)

In any case, upon attempting to police Scuffletown, Harris ulti-mately paid a price for his bullying. His murder was catalyzed by his own, brutal bludgeoning to death of two boys of the large and respected Lowry clan, who had stood up to him when he had made earlier unwanted advances upon an Indian female relative. Both Whites and Indians sympathetic to the Lowries attended the boys' funeral, and despite a warrant being issued for Harris' arrest, he never made it to trial: while pleasure-riding in his buggy on Sunday, January 15th, 1865, Harris was ambushed and killed by a barrage of gunfire. One account says that his body was taken from the buggy and thrown into a well; another says that Harris was so hated by the Indian people that he was "buried in an unmarked grave, lying north and south, 'crossways of the world,' rather than east and west as the Lumbees traditionally bury their dead.'" (Dial, 49)

At this point, surely realizing that the assassination of both a civil and a military officer would not go unnoticed by the State, an informal but emerging band of multiracial rebels responsible for the assassinations sought to act proactively. In response to the ban on Indians and Blacks owning weapons, the next course of action they chose was a bold raid for arms and ammunition on the Robeson County courthouse in Lumberton, which also functioned as an armory for the local militia. (Wilmington North Carolinian, February 15th, 1865). The expropriation was successful, and the Lowry Band, as they came to be called, began a series of ambitious raids on prosperous planters in the area, distributing the plunder in the ever-mysterious Scuffletown. They avoided the property of Buckskins[5], Blacks, and Indians, which helped them maintain a broad base of support and is probably a large reason for the band's multi-racial character. The final notable raid in this period, which took place February 27th, 1865, was an attack on the Argyle Plantation, which turned into an intense gun battle. After gaining entry to the house, one of the band's members, a Yankee regular named Owen Wright, was injured, but the Confederate officers and

[4] Several writers have pointed out that institutions like these Home Guards transitioned seamlessly after the Civil War into the modern police forces we've all come to know and hate. One can draw a wavering but unbroken line from the fugitive slave bounty hunters of chattel slavery, to the Confederate Home Guards of the civil war, to the KKK and local sheriffs of Reconstruction and Jim Crowe periods, and then finally to the police departments of the modern era.

[5] Buckskins were poorer Scotch-Irish immigrants living in Robeson County. They occupied a place somewhere between Indians and full Whites in the racial hierarchy of the time, though there were also fully integrated, wealthy Scotch planters active in plantation society and Con-federate circles.

wealthy widow who owned the plantation soon gave up. While no one was killed, this incident prompted a retaliation by the Home Guard soon after.

Some notes should be given on the composition of this emerging band of insurgents. Most of the people who joined were Lumbee Indians, many of them related by marriage or blood to the extensive Lowry clan. This includes members like Henry Berry's brothers Stephen and Thomas Lowry, his first cousins Calvin and Henderson Oxendine, his brothers-in-law Andrew and Boss Strong, and many others. Some were simply friends who had an axe to grind with the White political and economic establishment, like John Dial, an Indian blacksmith apprentice whose father was harassed at bayonet point by the Home Guard. At least two Black former slaves joined as well, a skilled mason named George Applewhite and another man named "Shoemaker John." Another member was the White youth Zachariah McLaughlin, a Buckskin Scot who had developed an affinity for the Lumbees after attending many of their festive, all-night corn-shuckings. Betraying his Calvinist background or any yearning for White respectability, McLaughlin joined the band in 1870 after being denounced by a White girl.

All of the gang tended to carry large amounts of weapons on hand, typically two or three revolvers, a shotgun, a rifle, and a bowie knife apiece. Descriptions from journalists of the day tended to describe the gang's leader Henry Berry Lowry in particularly spectacular terms. A pamphlet printed in 1872, which admittedly sought to sensationalize the outlaws' band, reported that, "His forehead is good and his face and expression refined—remarkably so, considering his mixed race, want of education, and long career of lawlessness…The very relatives of White men killed by Henry Berry Lowry admitted to me that, 'He is one of the handsomest mulattoes you ever saw.'" Multiple reporters praised Lowry's skill with banjo and fiddle, and many observed that for a leader of men Lowry was remarkably quiet: "His voice is sweet and pleasant, and in his manner there is nothing self-important or swaggering. He is not talkative, listens quietly, and searches out whoever is speaking to him…" (Townsend, 12)

There were many, many other people involved directly or indirectly in the Lowry War, including in the beginning Yankee soldiers who had escaped from Confederate prison camps. The band was overwhelmingly young; in the beginning the majority were teenagers, with both Henry Berry's right hand man Boss Strong, as well as John Dial, being only fourteen. They were unique for a guerilla operation in that their numbers and participants changed regularly, ranging from a small handful to dozens to perhaps even hundreds. Initially, members lived their lives out in the open in the community for many months at a time, only returning to hide in the swamps when the militia came around or federal troops later occupied the area. The deep kinship networks of the Lumbee and emerging communities of sympathetic free Blacks made this possible, and the constant interaction with non-outlaw society allowed them to avoid their own political isolation, as well as vigilante posses and police informants. It was not unusual for Henry Berry Lowry himself to show up at church one day, singing hymns alongside a Confederate officer, only to miraculously disappear to the swamps before a militia could be mustered by the terrified soldier.

It's important to understand that, throughout the conflict of the Lowry War, the activities of this insurgent band would have been completely impossible without the active collusion of large segments of the Lumbee community, as well as the (at least) passive sympathy of much of the Black and Buckskin communities. Numerous escapes from jail and vigilante violence were directly made possible by Lumbee family members and kinship net-works, through not just the sharing of information but the active distribution of tools to jailed comrades, and even, at times, entire groups of Lumbee Indians volunteering for militia duty in order to directly obstruct

White efforts. By the time of the assassinations of Harris and Barnes in the winter of 1864-65, free Lumbees and Black slaves were already engaged in a kind passive resistance against the Plantation and Confederate regime, aiding es-caped fugitives and hiding in swamps en masse to avoid labor conscription.

THE HOME GUARD LASHES OUT

With the assassination of two officials and a series of expropriations against several prosperous plantations, the worst fears of Robeson County's White establishment were beginning to come true. While much of the slave community was still hedging its bets on the imminent arrival of the Union Army, the Lumbees had seized the initiative.

The White supremacist response materialized in March 1865, when, frustrated by the outcome of the war and by the recent attacks against planters and police, eighty men of the Home Guard captured a half dozen Lowry family members and put on a rushed "trial" for theft. Two of the men, Allen and William Lowry, were hastily executed by a firing squad. Then on April 1st, upon visiting the home of Sinclair Lowry to search for weapons, a firing squad separated Mary Lowry, an elderly matriarch of the Lumbees, and tied her to a stake and blindfolded her, just as they had done only a few weeks prior to her son and husband, Allen and William. A soldier's voice interrogated her as to the location of stolen arms, but she refused to answer, and another soldier cried out, "Fire!" The shots were aimed above her head, intending to terrify her into talking. She still refused to talk, and the men eventually untied her and returned her to the cabin. The woman's courageous silence forced the Guard to leave without obtaining any information as to the location of her guerilla sons, or where their arms were hidden. (Evans, 51)

The summer and fall of 1865 continued on relatively quietly, with no particularly notable robberies or attacks taking place. It almost seemed as if the end of the Civil War would come to pass with a return to normality. But then on December 7th, the situation exploded again. The teenage Henry Berry Lowry was to be married to Rhoda Strong, and the wedding was a massive event, celebrating the feats of the young Lowry as well as the incredible courage of his mother. Despite the Civil War years of poverty and hunger, the wedding feast remains legendary to this day, taking up a 75 foot long table on the yard of the old Allen Lowry Homestead.

Unfortunately, the festivities were broken up by a troop of the Home Guard, led by Lieutenant A.J. Mcnair. The officers leveled their guns at Henry Berry Lowry and attempted to place him under arrest for the murder of Barnes. Lowry refused, jumping behind one of the only two White men present, and yelling, "Men, are you going to see one man tie me here tonight?" After this appeal to the crowd, about half of the two hundred people present proceeded to march upon the Home Guard as they dragged Lowry away. Unarmed, they were beaten back by the butt ends of muskets, and ultimately forced to abandon their efforts. (Evans, 70-71)

Because General Sherman had burned the county jail in Lumberton, Lowry was instead taken to the Columbus County jail in Whiteville, and charged with the killing of James Barnes. According to court records, Lowry treated the proceedings with "proud contempt," refusing to answer questions or counter-examine witnesses. (Evans, 72)

It did not matter. As a local White reported, Lowry "filed his way through the iron bars of his cell and broke down the wall of the jail while the jailer and family occupied rooms beneath," and was thus able to "escape to the woods with handcuffs on, and make his way back to his wife

in Scuffleton. This was the first escape ever effected by a criminal confined in jail at Whiteville. How he came in possession of a file, no one in the confidence of the whites can tell." (Norment, 13). A Lumbee folk tradition states, however, that the file was brought to Lowry concealed in a cake by his new bride, Rhoda Strong. Along with fueling a cartoon cliché of outlawry that persists to this day, this was to be the first of five dramatic jail breaks to occur throughout the Lowry conflict.

In the year and a half after this spectacular escape, the Lowry band spent more and more time in the swamps of Robeson County, hiding from an increasingly frustrated and angry White supremacist establishment. Plantation expropriations continued intermittently as well. New members joined the gang periodically, adding numbers to replace the rogue Union soldiers who had rejoined with General Sherman when he passed through in early 1865, or gone back to their own homes at the end of the war.

None of the bandits or their many Lumbee community accomplices were caught in this time period, despite the Sheriff Reuben King issuing 35 separate writs for Henry Berry alone. The Lowry band was self-disciplined in its targets and affinities: in almost nine years of attacking Planter society, it did not once target the property of Blacks, Indians, or Buckskin poor.[6]

In the years between 1866 and 1868, President Johnson willingly turned a blind eye to both the return of ex-Confederate figures to power and to the racist KKK terror that accompanied this development. It comes as no surprise, then, that it was not to the courts or police that poor Robesonians turned to for justice, but to the Lowry gang. When one local Black woman was interviewed by a Northern newspaper reporter, she showed him her mouth. When she was a slave, her master had knocked out all but two of her teeth with an oak stick. She was quoted, "Oh dis was a hard country, and Henry Berry Lowry's jess a paying 'em back. He's only payin' 'em back! It's better days for the Black people now." (Evans, 77)

REPUBLICAN RULE and the LOWRIES

The Conservative Johnsonian state regimes were overturned in 1868, resulting in a power vacuum whereby, for a short time in some parts of the South, no specific State power existed with certainty. Some of the most exciting experiments in communization and self-determination the US has ever seen occurred in this short time period, whereby the idea of freedom would be radically reinterpreted by millions of poor people of color.

The brief rise of southern Republicanism, on the backs of masses of newly enfranchised Black voters, has often been interpreted by Left historians as a brief period of hope and possibility for those who suffered from White Supremacy in the Old South. While it's true that these regimes were initially greeted with enthusiasm by many, it's clear that the actual function of Republicanism, in both its moderate and Radical forms, was to subdue and constrain any possible expansion of the meaning or scope of "emancipation." From the minor social programs of the Freed-men's Bureau to the use of landless workers in new industrial enterprises, from the "law and order" rhetoric aimed meekly at the Ku Klux Klan to the outright repression of popular uprisings like the Lowry War or Georgia's Ogeechee Insurrection, the Re-publican Party built the foundation of its "new" exploitation and oppression firmly upon the old.

[6] The gang once robbed the presumably wealthy John McNair, only to find a mere fifteen dollars on his person, after which they returned the money and left quietly. (Evans, 137)

In Robeson County the Republican Party found itself in a peculiar bind. The Party was nationally committed to a law and order platform, in an ultimately vain attempt at isolating and discrediting the waves of KKK vigilante terror that were sweeping the South and keeping Black voters from the polls. Such terror had increased drastically when Republicans took over; as the Conservatives lost control of the legal means to inflict violence, they shifted easily into extralegal means. A law and order position meant that Republicans had positioned themselves to be equally opposed to any kinds of popular rebellion or direct action, or for that matter Black or Brown self-defense. Locally, however, the Party's base constituency was overwhelmingly supportive of the popular vengeance and collective theft represented by the Lowry gang, and so the Party was conflicted.

A second issue confronted the local Republican Party as well. Certain members of the old Home Guard were now active in the party organization, and any resurrection of concerns about the Lowry violence would bring this embarrassing fact to the forefront.

In the end, the national and Industrial concerns of the Party inevitably took priority. In October of 1868, a sheriff of New Hanover County asked Republican Governor Holden whether he intended to honor an earlier bounty put on Henry Berry Lowry's head. Soon after, thirty men raided a company store in McLaurin's Hill, South Carolina, followed by three large plantations in Robeson County. On November 30th, at the behest of a Conservative peti-tion, Governor Holden issued a proclamation of outlawry against Henry Berry Lowry and many of his companions. Less than a year after taking power, the party of the Union had turned its back on the communities it had claimed to "liberate."

Several days later, aware of the precarious position into which the local party apparatus had placed itself, an agent for the newly formed Freedmen's Bureau and the newly elected sheriff paid a cordial visit to the cabin of Henry Berry Lowry and Rhoda Strong. After a large meal and entertainment from Henry Berry Lowry's deft fiddle-playing, they begged him to turn himself in, promising fair treatment and an impartial trial in the new Republican courts. Strangely, he agreed, and allowed himself to be taken to a jail newly rebuilt by the Republican government in Lumberton.

Rumors of a possible lynch mob, however, reached Lowry's ears in jail, and after noticing that security was strangely lacking, he planned his escape. On December 12th, 1868, when the jailor brought Lowry his evening meal, he was confronted with a pistol and bowie knife. Lowry complained about his treatment, reportedly saying, "I'm tired of this," and walked out of the building. (TDG, 106)

Six weeks later, the gang reappeared. The wealthy landowner and former sheriff Reuben King, a man detested for his 18-year legacy of brutalizing Indians, catching escaped slaves, and evicting debtors, was shot in his own parlor by George Applewhite. The gang proceeded to ransack the plantation and escape to the swamp.

The Lowries, and by extension their vast community network of Lumbee and Black supporters, had unofficially declared war on Republican Robeson County. There was no going back.

RETALIATION and CAPTURE, ASSASSINATION and ESCAPE

As to be expected, there was a shortage of Republican officers with military experience in the post-Civil War South, and so the new regime fell to hiring old ex-Confederate officers to do their

work for them. The most competent man they found was Captain Owen Norment, a man who had made a name for himself hunting Indians in earlier years. Now, just three years after the Union's victory, he was being rehired to do the same for the Republican victors, this time in the name of property, law, and order.

Norment was more skilled than his predecessors in the Home Guard, and by September of 1869 managed to capture eight members of the Lowry gang. Two of these men, Shoemaker John and John Dial, initially gave corroborating testimony about the gang's involvement in the murders, but later repudiated their statements, saying they were made under torture. Foraging raids and expropriations against large landowners continued, however, seeming to imply that as soon as some men were caught, others from the community could easily take their place.[7] Many of these raids occurred even in areas where the militia was most actively in pursuit.

Then, on March 19th, 1870, just two weeks before the trials of the eight men were set to begin, the new regime experienced a major setback. Captain Norment was sitting at home with his wife when he heard a noise at the door. Norment walked out into the night and was quickly cut down by a shot in the dark. A doctor was called, but on his way there the mule pulling his buggy was shot, and the doctor consequently arrived too late to save the Confederate-turned-Republican Indian hunter.[8]

On April 1st, two of the captured men, George Applewhite and Stephen Lowry, were tried for the murder of ex-Sheriff Reuben King. Despite the repudiation of John Dial's earlier statements, and the assassination of Captain Norment, the men were convicted and sentenced to hanging. While these men sat in jail in Wilmington, three of the four other captured comrades managed a daring escape from their confinement in Lumberton. According to a local paper, a "low white woman," likely Rhoda Strong, managed to pass onto them an auger during visitation, with which they cut a hole in the wall and escaped.

Not to be outdone by their comrades, the remaining captured members of the gang set themselves to escaping from their own jail in Wilmington. On June 13th, at 2am, the night guard made his regular rounds to the cells, only to find the one holding the Lowry gang members completely empty. The mystery was eventually unraveled: while guards and prisoners alike were distract-ed by a beautiful female accomplice earlier in the day, a second accomplice outside the building helped Stephen Lowry haul up a hatchet, chisel, and file through a jail window. The innovative prisoners then used the tools to fashion a makeshift key from a tin spoon and open their cell door, and escaped through a hole they had cut through the wall on a different floor. George Apple-white, Stephen Lowry, and Henderson Oxendine all managed to escape, while Calvin Oxendine declined to leave, insisting that he was innocent and had a solid alibi.[9] (Evans, 120-123)

Failing miserably in their strategy of militia-based Lowry hunting, the regime chose a new strategy: an undercover police informant. For many months a Boston detective named John

[7] The racist and somewhat sensational Wilmington Journal suggested the gang had as many as 300 active members, though in all likelihood the paper greatly exaggerated. (Weekly Journal, Sept. 24, 1869)

[8] Outside of a brawl with a servant during an ill-chosen and drunken raid on a distillery, this murdered mule was the only known "collateral damage" of the Lowry's war against plantation society. The authors would like to express our deepest sympathy for this courageous creature, and hope that his or her sacrifice, in hastening the death of Captain Norment, in turn saved the lives of many other innocent creatures.

[9] As a matter of fact, he was correct. When Oxendine later stood trial, an employer vouched for him, he was acquitted of all charges, and went on to live a normal life in the community.

Saunders lived in the area, cynically pretending to be a compassionate reformer aimed at teaching Indian children how to read and write, while really under the direction of the State to find and capture the Lowry gang. The man had some success initially, ingratiating himself among the outlaws and viewing some of their swamp hideouts, but he was eventually caught talking to Conservatives about his work. After a heated debate, in which some of the men strongly opposed killing him, the outlaws decided that the only available course given his knowledge was execution. Following his death, the gang mailed Saunders' last letter and a photograph to his wife.

While the Republican authorities had enjoyed a certain initial success in stopping the Lowries the summer of 1870 proved how little they had actually achieved: nearly all of the bands' members who had been captured had escaped, the raids on plantations and the redistribution of planters' wealth had continued, and the most capable members of law enforcement in the county had all been assassinated. The Republican party had lost all credibility, both from the explicitly racist Conservatives and from the poor communities that comprised the party's own local base.

POSSES on the PROWL

In the aforementioned context, the fall of 1870 elections were a disaster for the Republican Party. The party was seen as impotent by White elites and Conservatives, and was (accurately) viewed as a betraying the hopes of the poor people of its own base. Combined with a major railroads scandal, which engulfed certain members of Robeson County's own Freedmen's Bureau, and the active intimidation of voters by KKK terror, the results were predictable.

In an effort to avoid impeachment by a newly elected Conservative legislature, the Republican Governor Holden actually re-quested federal forces to be pulled from Klan-terrorized areas and relocated to Robeson County to help hunt the insurgent Indians and former slaves of the Lowry gang. Though they were far more hesitant to attack the Lowries than was the local Conservative militia, the numbers of these federal forces made larger military operations possible.

The Lumbee's extensive knowledge of the swampland made surrounding and capturing the Lowry gang difficult, however, and the strategy failed a number of times. On more than one occasion the gang slipped through their net with ease, sometimes even with members of the gang donning militia uniforms and joining in the hunt for themselves. At other times entire troops of Lumbee men would volunteer for a militia unit, apparently with the sole intention of leading the search along a false trail. (Evans, 142, 189).

Nevertheless, the increase in militia numbers had some effect. On October 5th, 1870, a militia unit, frustrated with the hunt, went to the houses of several Lowry relatives, apparently con-tent to just murder them instead. The men they captured were Andrew Strong and Malcolm Sanderson, and, while Strong man-aged to escape by cutting his bonds and fleeing into the swamp, Sanderson was not so lucky. Revenge came quickly, though. On January 14th, 1871, the KKK leader John Taylor, who had executed Sanderson 3 months prior, was ambushed and shot in the head less than a hundred yards from the spot where Sanderson was murdered.

The White militia retaliated again in February. Targeted for be-ing a Black radical, a Lowry supporter, or both, Benjamin Bethea was beaten and then shot by a mob of angry Whites. His family alerted the Lowries to come and help stop the beating, but they arrived too late. Shortly thereafter, two more White anti-Lowry people were shot down in revenge.

The Conservative legislature at this time began to offer massive rewards, up to $12,000 dead or alive, for members of the Lowry gang. Remarkably, the gang themselves then offered a similar reward (albeit smaller) to anyone who could deliver to them spe-cific heads of state. Writes one historian,

> If the legislators and county commissioners were demonstrating a marked liberality in offering rewards, the members of the Lowry band showed themselves to be of comparable mind. They offered one thousand dollars for the head of Angus McLean, a county commissioner, in 1870 and two hundred dollars each for a list of individuals they had declared "outlaws" in 1872, their more modest rewards resulting from the limitations of their resources rather than from a more miserly spirit. (Evans, 155)

The rewards offered by the State certainly had an effect, as more and more posses of eager racists from around the region joined the hunt. On April 15th, 1871, one such group of men ambushed George Applewhite while he was walking up the path to his cab-in. He recognized the trap and ran, but not before being brought down by a bullet in the mouth, and then a second in the back. Fearing the rest of the gang was nearby, however, the posse left his body and returned the next day with the militia. The body had disappeared, and Mrs. Applewhite refused to answer questions. In frustration, the militia arrested her brother Forney Oxendine instead on trumped up charges of theft.

It took the militia nine days to find the body of George Apple-white, and it happened quite by accident. A small group led by the Conservative Sheriff McMillan was in the vicinity of Henry Berry's cabin when they heard banjo music. They crept up slowly, surprised to find Lowry family members hanging out on the porch, as well as Applewhite, who was resting in the sun. After being shot twice, he had miraculously crawled into the swamp, "spit the bullet out" of his mouth, and found his way to the cabin of Henry Berry Lowry and Rhoda Strong. Some of the militia opened fire on the men, who fled into the house and began re-turning fire, while other soldiers left to get help. The skirmish lasted several hours, but at some point the militia realized the outlaws had ceased firing. Upon slowly approaching the cabin, they found it to be empty. The soldiers discovered "a trap…concealed in the floor, the hinges hidden or mortised beneath. This trap afforded admission to a sort of mine or covered way, which ran under the surface about sixty yards to the swamp." (Evans, 170)

Not one to leave a family member behind bars, on May 10th a large band of armed men convened in Lumberton to stage a spectacular attack on the jail. With most of the force left surrounding the building to prevent a counter-attack by federal forces, Henry Berry Lowry, Steve Lowry, Boss Strong, and the now recovered George Applewhite forced the doors open with tools on hand, held up the guards, and released Tom Lowry (who had been captured earlier) and Forney Oxendine from their cells. They re-turned to Scuffletown in triumph. Writing to the Governor after this incident, local Reverend James Sinclair, pleaded"At this moment the outlaws rule the county." (Evans, 182-183)

WAR on SCUFFLETOWN

Around this time, the mood began to shift in Conservative circles towards the idea of targeting the entirety of the Lumbee community of Robeson County, rather than just the Lowry gang. It

was becoming increasingly clear that the Lowries had a massive support network and that there was a reason they always knew where the militia would be long before they got there. Wrote one officer in charge of the federal units, "The Lowrys have almost as many friends as enemies," who give them "information of any ex-pedition against them and resist the civil law themselves. Taxes cannot be collected…nor warrants served on any of the inhabit-ants of this settlement." This kind of solidarity was not limited to the Lumbee community; members of the Black community also sought to help the insurgents. One journalist wrote in 1872 how the Lowries were forewarned of federal troop movements by rail, observing that,

> "A movement among the negro train hands will be ob-served as the locomotive approaches the stations of Scuffletown…When the troops pursued the scoundrels they could hear a peculiar bark like that of a cur precede them, and die away in the distance…It was passed from shanty to shanty to put Lowery on qui vive." (Townsend, 55)

These acts of popular solidarity goaded the more aggressive elements of the white supremacist establishment into shifting to a strategy of general terror against the Lumbees. There was tension internal to the ruling class over this approach, with Re-publican moderates still attempting to isolate the band rather than punish the community as a whole. Nevertheless, July of 1871 saw this strategy attempted on the largest scale yet. Colonel Frank Wishart organized an anti-Lowry campaign with 117 men at arms. Rather than attempt to find the Lowry gang, the militia split into detachments to harass the community and capture the outlaws' unarmed wives at their homes.

Though the gang engaged the militia in several shootouts during these operations, the most notable tale from the operation occurred by accident. On July 10th, in the midst of their campaign and with the wives already in custody, a troop of eighteen men accidentally stumbled upon Henry Berry Lowry rowing by him-self down the Lumber River. The militia immediately recognized the leader and opened fire. He was too fast, however, and, after diving into the water and tipping up his boat to use as cover, began returning fire. Rather than retreat, Lowry actually swam towards the men, picking one off at at a time from the cover of his upturned boat. Eventually the militia captain ordered his men to retreat, giving Lowry one more story by which to become legend.

A few days later, several members of the gang sent a letter to the Sheriff of Robeson County, stating,

> "We make a request, that our wives who were arrested a few days ago, and placed in jail, be released to come home to their families by Monday Morning, and if not, the Bloodiest times will be here that ever was before—the life of every many will be in Jeopardy."

Three days later, civil authorities in the county held a meeting, at which they decided to release the men's wives. The following day, the westbound train arrived at the Lumbee village of Red Bank carrying the wives of the outlaws. They had left as prisoners, but they returned as heroes. (Dial, 74-75)

HENRY BERRY LOWRY DISAPPEARS

Though the federal troops proved consistently unwilling or unable to apprehend the insurgents, their presence in the area made large-scale expropriations of plantations increasingly difficult. Outside of a generalized insurrection against the Conservative-turned-Republican-turned Conservative regime, the gang could not simply survive in the same territory forever.

In late 1871, various peace treaty efforts were attempted, separate from any influence of the Lowry gang. Various Republican and Conservative moderates tried to propose petitions that might pardon the outlaws and allow for a return to normalcy, but the re-turn of a strictly Conservative state legislature made these efforts hopeless. The State was positioned well enough to isolate and contain any large-scale rebellion, but it remained committed to a repressive course of action with the Lowrys that it was incapable of actually carrying out.[10] Asked by one of the political moderates why Lowry did not just leave North Carolina, he replied, "Robeson County is the only land I know. I can hardly read, and do not know where to go if I leave these woods and swamps, where I was raised. If I can get safe conduct and pardon I will go anywhere…But these people will not let me live and I do not mean to enter any jail again." (Dial, 78)

On the night February 16th, 1872, after giving up on a series of fruitless talks among politicians as to the possibility of pardon, the insurgents drove a horse and buggy to the store of a prominent merchant in Lumberton and proceeded to steal a thousand dollars worth of merchandise, as well as an iron safe from the Sheriff's office containing about $22,000. This was by far the most costly expropriation the band had ever carried out. After the raid, Henry Berry Lowry and many of his conspirators disappeared. (Evans, 220-221)

THE MYSTERY and LEGEND of HENRY BERRY LOWRY

In the following two years, pursuit of the remaining known members of the gang by bounty hunters had some effect: Tom Lowry, Andrew Strong, and the young Zachariah McLaughlin were all ambushed and murdered by opportunistic bounty hunters driven by the most massive rewards the state had ever offered for an outlaw, and they generally left the area in a hurry after collecting their pay. But the mystery of what happened to Henry Berry Lowry, or the money stolen that night, has never been solved.

Over a hundred and forty years later, historians and members of the Lumbee community still disagree over the leader's disappearance. A variety of folktales, legends, and hypotheses exist, some supported by more evidence than others, but all inconclusive: that Lowry escaped the county undercover as an injured soldier with the help of a sympathetic General; that he faked his own death and funeral with a straw-stuffed "corpse," later escaping from the county in a stolen military uniform; that he escaped by train in his own coffin; that he survived his endeavors and emerged under a different name as a leader of native resistance in the Pacific Northwest a few years later; that he died on his brother Tom's land by accidental discharge of his rifle, secretly

[10] A brief anecdote from the Wilmington Star to highlight the utter incompetency of the government troops at this time: In September of 1871, "an officer received a message from Lowry, stating that he had visited their camp the night before and inspected their arms to see if they were in proper condition. As proof of this assertion he stated that he had left his 'card,' which would be found attached to one of their guns. Upon examining their weapons the name Henry Berry Lowrey was found inscribed upon the breach of one of them." (Wilimington Star, August 18, 1871)

buried by his comrades to continue the legend and rebellion of his symbolic status. Local newspapers tended to prefer the accidental death story, but their papers also had a political interest in undermining the legend of the man, in much the same way that both Fascist and Communist mouthpieces manipulated the mysterious death of Spanish anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti during the defense of Madrid. What's more, neither the body nor the grave site of Henry Berry Lowry have ever been found.

What remains clear is that, whether Lowry died young or old in his own homeland, or went on to continue his struggle else-where, the insurgent gang that bore his name lives on in infamy to this day. Lowry historian W. McKee Evans writes in his book To Die Game,

> The Lowrys clearly made an impact on the home territory of the Lumbee River Indians. They appeared on the scene at a particularly difficult period in the history of the Indians. At this time the armed resistance of the plains Indians was being smashed, their numbers decimated, while the Indians of the eastern seaboard had known little but defeat and increasing humiliation for a hundred years. With the triumph of a frankly racist party during Reconstruction, it appeared that nothing could stop the winners from putting the Lumbee River Indians into the same half-free place in which they generally succeeded in putting the Blacks. But this effort failed…to a great extent because of the bold deeds of the Lowrys, which filled the Lumbee River Indians with a new pride of race, and a new confidence that despite generations of defeat, revitalized their will to survive as a people. (Evans, 259)

A brief story may illustrate just how strongly the legend of the Lowry gang survived to inspire the Lumbee people. In January 1958, while attempting to resurrect a presence in Robeson County, the KKK burned a cross near the home of an Indian family who had moved into an all-white neighborhood. A similar attack was carried out the same night in nearby Saint Pauls in the driveway of a White woman allegedly having an affair with an Indian man. The Klan then announced an open-air rally to be held in the area on January 18th.

Unfortunately for the KKK, another clan attended the rally, too. Chavises, Hunts, Locklears, Lowrys, Oxendines, Sampsons, and many other descendants of the Lowry insurgents arrived in force, resulting in what one reporter called "the shortest Ku Klux Klan rally in history." (Lumberton Robesonian, January 20th, 1958) A *Newsweek* journalist wrote,

> The Indians let the Klansmen set up their microphone and a single electric-light bulb; they let about 100 Klansmen assemble around the truck. Then they began to move forward, roaring: "We want Cole!" (ed. Note: Cole was the grand wizard of the clan) Cole stayed precisely where he was—behind the truck. The Lumbees began firing their guns in the air; a sharpshooter shot out the light bulb.There was pandemonium in the darkness; the guns spat flame into the air; the amplifying system was torn apart; auto windows were shattered by bullets. The Klansmen, themselves well armed, decided to run for it; there was the roar of automobile engines. Then the sheriff's deputies fired the tear-gas bombs. When the gas cleared, the Lumbee raid at Maxton was over. The Indians had won. (Newsweek, LI, January 27, 1958, p. 27)

Four Klansmen were injured in the exchange, and as the Klan left the Lumbees burned their regalia in celebration. The incident became known as the Battle of Hayes Pond, and is still celebrated as a Lumbee holiday. The men and women who fought there were raised on stories of

similar battles that occurred al-most a hundred years earlier, stories that inspired an identity and culture of rebellion and dignity. Needless to say, the Klan did not return to Robeson County.

REFLECTIONS on RECONSTRUCTION and RESISTANCE

Like many others Native tribes, the Lumbee community had been struggling to maintain its own economic and cultural autonomy for centuries. The chief avenue for this had historically been a degree of "looking White" thanks to in part to the tribe's English ancestry, as well as living in territories unsuitable for large-scale plantation development. But flare-ups of violent rebellion had happened before, and when the Jacksonian and Confederate regimes began to further erode the Lumbees' autonomy, they had that history to turn to.

Like many other places in the South, the power vacuums created at the end of the Civil War in Robeson County allowed for renewed efforts at direct resistance and new experiments in expropriation and mutual aid. The tensions internal to the ruling class, as well the complete incompetency of Yankee efforts to understand and manage Southern social relations, made for an environment ripe for the community-wide passive resistance and violent guerilla tactics of the Lumbees.

Republicans were better at understanding how to incite industrial growth than how to appease racial strife. While incapable of pleasing both the White supremacist planter class as well as people of color, and while clearly preferring the former to the latter, the Republican Party did serve at least one crucial function for the State in the context of Southern race relations, of particular importance in rebellious Robeson County. The party played the vital role of political anchor to otherwise rebellious and violent tendencies in the Black community. The anchor was one of hope, keeping a majority of the Black community grounded in the idea that change and freedom could and would eventually be provided to them. While the Lowry conflict, which included some Black partisans as well as Lumbees, directly demonstrated the betrayal of the Republicans, most of the Black community remained content to wait and see what the Yankee liberators would do, preferring a passive support and sympathy for the rebels to active rebellion alongside them. While the Lowries and their Lumbee supporters were more than capable of terrorizing the White supremacist establishment of Robeson County, one can only dream of what would have happened had the much larger populations of former slaves set aside their lukewarm loyalty to the Republican Party and also joined in.

It cannot be emphasized enough, then, that resistance like that of the Lumbees was not an extension of Radical Republicanism into deeper waters, but rather something entirely different. Thou-sands of black and brown (and some poor white) people across the South continued to organize and rebel after Union victory, and this could be portrayed as a way to push the definition of emancipation further than the racist Lincoln ever intended. But the realigning of Southern political interests, with Republicans hiring Confederate Indian and fugitive slave hunters, rebuilding old jails, and securing easily exploitable, cheap labor to industrialize the South, demonstrates beyond a doubt that for the country's political elite, the Civil War was over. For them, it was time to put aside old rivalries and get back down to business.

Whatever the benevolent intentions of individual Radical Republicans may have been, Yankee-engineered Reconstruction was chiefly a step in forcefully re-integrating newly available populations of desperate and destitute former slaves into industrial and agrarian production. The

biopower of whipped slaves, landless Indians, and indentured servant Whites eventually became the biopower of starving workers, all (some more, some less) free to sell their labor to large landowners or planters-turned-industrialists, in many cases the same ones they had worked for previously. That the oppressed were now citizens, free to participate in civil society, to press grievances before the government, to invoke the almighty Law, was not a small step forward but a giant leap sideways, into a world where rebellion could be endlessly recycled through the legitimate channels of political spectacle. Bondage had not been abolished, it had been democratized.

The acts of those like the Lumbees in North Carolina represent then a continuation of a different kind of war, not the Civil War that ended on May 9th, 1865 at Appomattox Court House, but the social war that periodically reignited across the farmlands, swamps, and forests of the American South, that saw its hopes temporarily dashed on October 16th, 1859 at Harper's Ferry. Their struggle cannot be properly understood as an attempt to spread the effects of democratization further for those who benefited from Union victory. From the moment of Henry Berry Lowry's first jail break, after voluntarily giving himself up to Re-publicans and then changing his mind, vowing to never "enter any jail again," this struggle embodied a rejection rather than an acceptance of such democratic processes, preferring the direct expropriation of wealthy planters and the self-determination of an autonomous Lumbee community to a capitalist-driven and State-directed Reconstruction.

Nonetheless, many of these post-Civil War struggles have come to be understood by historians as an attempt to push further this process of so-called democratization, to secure more and more privileges within the framework of State and Capital. In some cases this historical interpretation is understandable and even accurate, because the movements being studied indeed under-stand and see themselves this way, or at least their most prominent members and ideologues do.

These narratives tend to fall back on various frameworks that emphasize progress in some way, pointing with a certain inevitability to some distant future, be it a Marxian dialectic that has every meaningful struggle pointing down the road to State Socialism[11], or the more subtle but equally false ideal of a liberalism that aims towards an end of history, a society of rational but atomized individuals, governed by a liberal and non-racist democratic State, a kind of equal opportunity exploiter. Despite their differences, these frameworks of understanding social movements hold in common a sort of progressivism, whereby the protagonists and their actions are seen to affirm dialectical patterns of social development that fit with the desired historical narrative.

How else can we understand a historian interpreting the revolt of slaves and maroons as blending "easily into the message of the Revolutionary War," selectively quoting Frederick Douglass to argue that "the Constitution is a glorious liberty document," and thus portraying the militant efforts of former slaves as well in line with the democratizing effects of capitalist-engineered Reconstruction?[12] The same historian of slave uprisings argues that these were a continuation of the Bourgeois revolutions of the age, rather than a violent challenge to them. (Genovese, 132-133) Whatever version of progress the Left historian chooses to see, whether it be radical or reformist, there seems to be no es-cape from the narrative of the State.

[11] We're dispensing with the nicety that authoritarian Marxists ever actually intended to see the State wither away into libertarian communism.

[12] Such claims appear particularly ridiculous in light of the fact that the vast majority of organized slaves and maroons who took part in the Revolutionary War fought on the British side. So much for abolitionism as the product of democracy and the Constitution.

Thus the Lowries are often seen as struggling for Lumbee rights,when rights discourse was a philosophical framework far more in line with the Republican Party of the time, a party whose sheriffs, officers, and wealthy elite the Lowries were in the habit of assassinating.

Expanding our focus, there are just too many radical counter-examples in Southern history to believe the lazy notion that "things get better," or that an even passing from one stage of development to the next will result in racial or economic justice or progress. The racial solidarity of striking miners in Eastern Tennessee in the 1890s, as they freed black prisoners and burnt prison stockades, outdoes in both courage and sincerity any kind of racial solidarity and diversity we've seen in the past forty years in the South. Race relations do not just "get better" gradually due to the harmonizing effects of a liberal democratic state or accessible consumer markets. Rubbing shoulders at the mall while looking at an overpriced gadget, before returning to one's own urban ghetto, decaying apartment complex, or gated community, does not qualify as racial harmony.

As objectionable as it may be to some, from our reading of much of Southern history, a more accurate matrix for determining the likelihood of *meaningful* racial solidarity has been the violence of the social movements in question. Since the hardening of White supremacist cultural norms in the 18th century, it has always required a level of violent rupture for White, Black, and Native rebels to actually find themselves side by side in true affinity.[13] This is true of the aforementioned stockade wars in Tennessee, of the long history of maroon rebellion along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, of early slave rebellions alongside Irish indentured servants, of those conflicts like the Lowry Wars, of early labor battles, and of later prison riots, just to name a few. Obviously this is not to say that the reverse is true, that violence of any kind automatically creates the conditions to break down racial hierarchies. Yet for actors of various racial privileges and disadvantages to find themselves in true affinity requires a rebellion whose content is somehow fundamental to the nature of our society, and such rebellion will always be violent. The progressive view tends to abhor this reality in favor of a perspective that freedom is something which comes over time, rather than an experience we immediately create for ourselves as we rebel together against those who would oppress and exploit us.

To return to the subject at hand, when historians reflexively fall back on this progressive way of understanding history, they often have to ignore much of what is right in front of them. How else could entire armies of Left academics and politicians sincerely portray the Republican Party in the South as a well-intentioned but tragic attempt at racial equality, or the mass theft of plantation property as aimed at securing "rights" for Indians rather than what it clearly (albeit temporarily) resulted in–immediately communist relationships of black and brown people? For a historian to use the political discourse of one who is at peace with State and Capital to explain away the motives of those who were at war with these systems, represents to us an extreme kind of intellectual dishonesty and theoretical laziness.

Anarchists can also be guilty of this. All too often our own struggles make the same mistake, using the discourse and frame-works provided to us by our enemies with little examination. Civil

[13] Some might object to this assertion, posing the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's as a counter-example. For a host of reasons that we may explore later, the White involvement in this movement can hardly be described as taking place on an equal footing. Meaningful racial affinity cannot include a situation where the most privileged actors withdraw their support as soon as the situation gets out of their control, a reality that unfortunately describes the vast majority of White liberal involvement at the time. A better example of affinity might be the actions of guerillas like Sam Melville, Thomas Manning, or David Gilbert, or of the multi-racial and politically diverse George Jackson Brigade.

and workers' "rights," "amnesty" for immigrants, economic and social "justice," an end to police "brutality" – the words we use about the problems we face say something about our position towards the society that gives us these problems in the first place. Rights discourse, this concept of "justice," the idea that police could be anything but brutal – framing solutions in this way only make conceptual sense if we plan to stay inside this world we currently inhabit. They both reflect and reinforce a con-strained imagination towards what is possible. Anarchist history should be about discovering or recovering those moments when something entirely different emerged on the scene, to help us expand our imagination and ability to describe such moments in their own terms rather than in those of our enemies. Such history should work to grow our sense of joy and wonder at the possibilities implied in rebellion, and our appreciation and sense of heritage for those who came before us.

Rejecting the White supremacy of the Conservatives and the false peace of the Republicans, the Lowry conflict is one such legacy. Traveling in southeastern North Carolina today, one can still occasionally find a large button with Henry Berry Lowry's handsome face for sale at small rural gas stations. Like many others, we imagine him with his comrades emerging from the swamps to raid the plantations and jails of 19th century Robeson County, or to assassinate a Klansmen or sheriff, and we smile.

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NC Piece Corps
The Lowry Wars
attacking North Carolina's plantation society in the age of Reconstruction
2017

https://itsgoingdown.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/the_lowry_wars_print.pdf

On December 21st, 1864, a wealthy slaveholder and minor official of the Confederacy named James P. Barnes was ambushed on his way to the Post Office in Robeson County, North Carolina. After being initially cut down by a shotgun blast, Barnes was shot at point blank range in the head…Thus began a period of roughly eight years of almost uninterrupted, multiracial attacks on plantation society in southeastern North Carolina. Dozens of sheriffs and White supremacist militia were murdered, plantations and White-owned stores expropriated, and five different successful prison breaks carried out, in what to this day represents a period of marked pride and dignity for North Carolina's Lumbees.