

Lost History

UCSC historian uncovers first statewide struggle for civil rights



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With one of the highest incarceration rates of prisoners and juveniles in the Deep South, Florida profited from convict labor. The state administered one of the most notorious penal systems in the world.

By **Jennifer McNulty**

Long before the election debacle of 2000, Florida was the scene of ugly racial politics. Indeed, African Americans in Florida have fought for the right to vote since the days of Reconstruction, when the “Sunshine State” had the highest lynching rate in the country.

In his new book, *Emancipation Betrayed*, UCSC historian Paul Ortiz tells the story of black resistance to white supremacy in Florida and documents the organizing and activism he believes set the stage for the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

“Decades before the Montgomery bus boycott, African Americans in Jacksonville, Florida, organized streetcar boycotts that forced the city to abandon efforts to segregate the system,” says Ortiz, an associate professor of community studies. “That little-known act of rebellion is part of a pattern of resistance I discovered through talking with the elders of the black community. Handed down within black families, their stories describe what really became the first statewide civil rights movement in U.S. history.”

Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920 focuses on the African American struggle for voting rights. The book documents networks of secret societies, fraternal organiza-

tions, labor unions, and churches that black Floridians relied on to organize and sustain themselves during an era of overt state-sanctioned violence against African Americans. “It’s really about what happens when people are faced with political terrorism—how they challenge that and find the courage and self-confidence needed to put together a social movement,” says Ortiz.

Through oral histories and subsequent archival research, Ortiz documents the courageous actions of African Americans who fought for their rights, often at enormous risk to themselves and their families. Sam Dixie, an octogenarian, shared his childhood memories of a shootout in his hometown of Quincy between blacks and the Ku Klux Klan. Members of the Colored Knights of Pythias, a black fraternal organization, had taken a secret oath to pay their poll taxes and register to vote. After learning of the pledge, armed posses of the Klan surrounded the lodge during a meeting of the Knights, and a major gun battle ensued; the lodge was burned to the ground, and several knights were killed during the shootout.

That memory was the catalyst that “completely changed my understanding of American history and social change,” Ortiz writes in the preface to *Emancipation Betrayed*. “We are not taught to see African Americans as protagonists fighting for their own rights, but that’s exactly what these people did.”

Ortiz went “back and back in time,” picking up threads of black resistance to racial oppression. He heard black Floridians speak with admiration of the activism of their parents and grandparents, and he documented boycotts organized in the early 1900s by black residents of Jacksonville to oppose the segregation of the city’s streetcars. (The system was ultimately segregated, however, with the intervention of the state legislature.)

The Colored Knights of Pythias,

which at one point claimed one in six African American men in Florida as members, was a vital avenue for organizing. After World War I, a resolution required members to register to vote before the 1920 election or face expulsion. Churches and other organizations promptly followed suit. Years of organizing culminated with the 1920 presidential election.



JIM MACKENZIE

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With African Americans united and poised to use the ballot to challenge the status quo, white Floridians sought to sabotage the election by intimidating black voters with threats of arrest at the voting booth and purging hundreds of African American names from voter-registration lists. As Election Day neared,

the state sanctioned white supremacists and the Ku Klux Klan to use violence to prevent blacks from voting.

The election on November 2, 1920, was ultimately the bloodiest presidential contest of the 20th century. Heavily armed white men patrolled polling places and deputies stood menacingly at the polls, suppressing black voter turnout across the state. But the violence was worst in Orange County in central Florida, where white mobs converged on the black community of northern Ocoee and paraded through the streets. Gunfights broke out and house-to-house fighting persisted through the night as hundreds of armed whites poured into the town. Homes were torched and scores were wounded as hundreds of African Americans fled into the night. Although many perished, the total number of victims will never be known because some human remains were carried away as souvenirs by members of the mob. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) cautiously estimated that 30 to 60 African Americans were killed across the state that day.

The violence shocked the country, and African Americans expected the nation to intervene. Despite vast evidence of discrimination against black voters that was presented during a congressional investigation, the election results were certified. With that act, the U.S. Congress dealt a deathblow to an era of vital African American activism.

Despite the tragic outcome, the legacy of early black activism in Florida is a powerful one, says Ortiz. “With roots in the days of slavery, black Floridians’ courageous struggle for emancipation established the grounds for our modern expectation that all adults in the United States have the right to vote,” he says. “This is a brutal part of our history, but we are the beneficiaries of their struggle and sacrifice.”