

FOREWORD BY ANGELA ONWUACHI-WILLIG

# UNPUNISHED MURDER

MASSACRE AT COLFAX  
AND THE  
QUEST FOR JUSTICE

**LAWRENCE GOLDSTONE**

**Grades 7 and up**

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The Common Core State  
Standards addressed by the  
discussion questions and  
activities in this guide are listed  
below. For more information  
on the Common Core, visit  
[corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.1–12.1;

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.3–12.3;

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.2–12.2;

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.7–12.7;

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1–12.1

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# ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS

- Gather present-day political cartoons that focus on race and racism and display them around the room. Attach paper below each cartoon and encourage students to write comments as they peruse the gallery. As a class, discuss what trends were noted.
- History can be more fully understood when all points of view are considered. Create a large chart on the white board or on butcher paper. List three groups in a vertical column: Radical Republicans, Freedmen, Democrats. Horizontally across the top of the chart, add three labels: Wanted, Because, But. Work as a class to add information to each box on the grid. Discuss what each group wanted during the Reconstruction and why they wanted it. In the “But” column, include what happened that may have blocked their goals and desires.
- *Unpunished Murder* states, “Morrison Waite’s Supreme Court had undone laws or amendments that Congress had passed, the president had signed, and the states had ratified. The justices, unelected and serving for life, had crafted a *new* law for the nation.” Research the case of *United States v. Reece*, where an African American man had been refused the right to vote. Have a mock appellate hearing about the case. Divide the class into three groups: 9 Supreme Court justices, lawyers for the state, and lawyers for the defendant. Have each group prepare questions and arguments for a mock hearing. The court should reach a decision. Debrief as a class and discuss the outcome of the mock hearing as well as the similarities, differences, and impact of the arguments.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The Colfax Massacre, in which more than one hundred African American men were killed by white supremacists, took place on Easter Sunday in 1873. Author Lawrence Goldstone states that the story of Colfax is the story of America. Discuss the ways in which the massacre in Colfax reveals the struggles in America after the Civil War and how these struggles continue in America today.
- Our founding fathers recognized that a major issue dividing the people of our new country was the institution of slavery. How did the Northerners’ views of slavery differ from those who lived in the Southern states?
- The Judiciary Act passed by Congress in 1789 declared that America’s judicial system would be divided into three layers: Supreme Court, circuit courts, and district courts. In 1803, the Supreme Court considered the case of *Marbury v. Madison*. What was significant about this case and the power it gave to the Supreme Court?
- Who was Dred Scott? How did his case reflect the politics around slavery?

- The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution states, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude . . . shall exist within the United States.” How did the Southern states react to this amendment? What were the Black Codes?
- In 1866, Senator Trumbull introduced “A Bill to Protect All Persons in the United States in Their Civil Rights and Liberties.” This was the first civil rights law enacted by the United States Congress. What did the bill aim to do to guarantee civil rights for all of America’s citizens?
- The issue of citizenship sparked the introduction and passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. What was this amendment about and how did it affect Southern states trying to rejoin the Union after the Civil War?
- Six Confederate war veterans formed a group in Tennessee called Kuklux whose mission was to dress up in disguises and play pranks on local black residents. How did the Kuklux evolve into a more sinister group? What role did General Nathan Bedford Forrest play in the Kuklux?
- Who was Willie Calhoun and how was he instrumental in creating Grant Parish and the parish seat of Colfax?
- Even though slavery had been abolished and amendments were passed to guarantee civil rights for all Americans, it remained difficult for black citizens to vote in the South. Congress sought to rectify this inequity with passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. What did the Fifteenth Amendment state? Why did some oppose it?
- Reconstruction after the Civil War was spearheaded by the Radical Republicans. How did the Redeemers differ from the Radical Republicans in their view of how the Constitution should be interpreted and how blacks should be treated in post-Civil War America?
- Who was Blanche Kelso Bruce and why was his life so remarkable?
- C. C. Nash, a known murderer and white supremacist, served as sheriff of Grant Parish. What events led to the conflict between Nash and the citizens of Colfax? What happened on Easter Sunday, 1873?
- Who was James Roswell Beckwith and how did he use the Enforcement Acts to help prove his case against the killers involved in the Colfax massacre?
- How did the issues of race and slavery affect the trial(s) of the Colfax defendants? How did Justice Joseph P. Bradley’s views of slavery affect his decision about which court could hear the case? What was the final verdict in the Colfax case? What effect did Justice Bradley’s decision have on the meaning and power of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments?
- What was the White Man’s League and what impact did the organization have on Louisiana?
- What was the connection between the election of Rutherford B. Hayes as president of the United States and the end of Reconstruction in the South?

# UNPUNISHED MURDER: Massacre at Colfax and the Quest for Justice

By Lawrence Goldstone

On Easter Sunday in 1873, a band of white supremacists marched into Grant Parish, Louisiana, and massacred over one hundred unarmed African Americans. The court case that followed reached the highest court in the land, but the opinion issued by the Supreme Court set in motion a process that would help create a society in which black Americans were legally denied basic human rights.

Lawrence Goldstone traces the history of the laws and actions of the figures involved to show how the Supreme Court allowed post-slavery discrimination to become institutionalized and entrenched in the US justice system.



**Lawrence Goldstone** has written more than a dozen books for adults, including three on Constitutional law. This is his first book on the subject for young readers. He lives in Sagaponack, New York, with his wife, medieval and Renaissance historian Nancy Goldstone. Learn more at [lawrencegoldstone.com](http://lawrencegoldstone.com).



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