

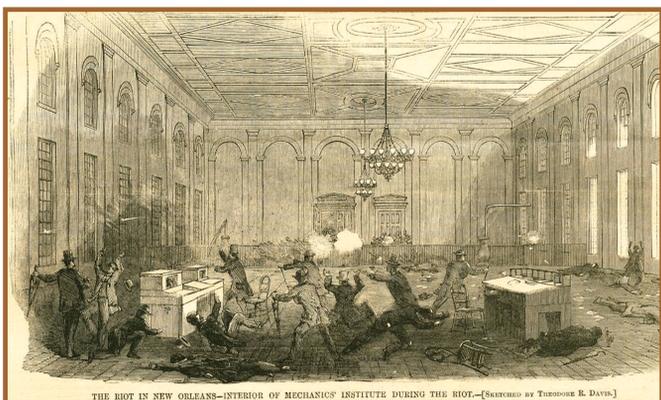
Mechanics' Institute 1866

Throughout the South, the spring and summer of 1865 were marked by mass meetings, rallies, parades and petitions led by recently freed blacks eager to secure legal and civil equality and ensure the right to vote.

A vast political mobilization was met by a wave of Black Codes rapidly enacted across southern states after President Johnson's blanket amnesty for former Confederates. The Black Codes would strip the newly freed black men and women of nearly every right, rendering them slaves again in everything but name. In New Orleans, however, black political mobilization for civil rights predated the Civil War and expanded under Union occupation. This, along with a population of northern and immigrant whites willing to make common cause, set the stage for a substantial challenge to these attacks on civil and political rights.

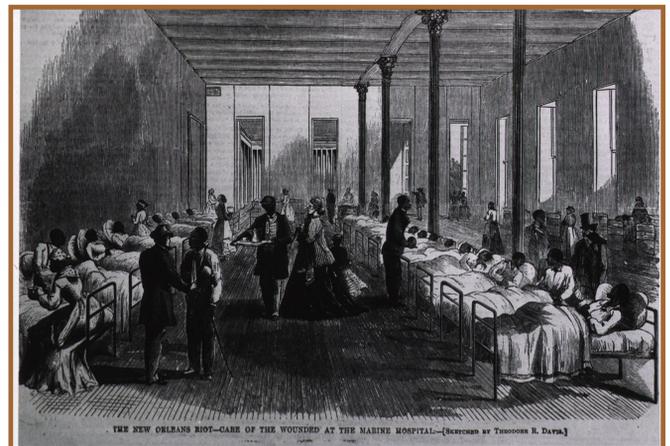
In September 1865, a convention of white southern Radicals, prominent members of the black creole elite, and Northern scalawags voted to affiliate with the national Republican party, demanding full legal and political equality for blacks. More moderate Republicans would organize interracial as well, forming the National Union Republican Club. National Union Republican Club president Henry Clay Warmoth would endorse a plan to reconvene Louisiana's 1864 constitutional convention, with an agenda of enfranchising blacks, prohibiting former Confederates from voting, and establishing a new state government. After attacks on blacks at polling places and in the streets, the Radicals warned Warmoth that his plan would only lead to more violence, but by spring 1866, Governor James M. Wells had embraced the idea in an effort to build an alliance with the Republicans against Louisiana's "Rebel legislature."

On July 30, 1866, as the convention was due to convene at the Mechanics' Institute, a large crowd gathered, awaiting the parade of delegates led by 200 black Union veterans, members of the Louisiana Native Guard. As the parade crossed Canal Street, a white mob descended on the procession, and by the time the parade reached the Institute, nearly 1500 white civilians and police had gathered in opposition. An organized effort sent a volley of bricks at the marchers, who promptly threw them back as the scene devolved into a riot. Delegates fled inside the Institute but their attackers followed, holding the building under siege. Black Radical Ludger Boguille described fending off invading gunmen from behind a barricade of tables; Reverend Horton, the white minister who had given the convention's invocation, was shot as he waved a white flag of surrender.



Engraving of the Interior of Mechanics' Institute During The Riot. Source: The Historic New Orleans Collection 1979.200 i-iv.

At least thirty-eight delegates and onlookers were murdered by the mob, and another 140 were wounded by police firing into the Institute and by violence from the police and white crowds outside. Testimony to the US House of Representatives' Select Committee of the New Orleans Riots recalled, "something had to be done about the bodies that littered the streets around the Mechanics' Institute. There were fifteen on Dryades between Common and Canal, five at the corner of Dryades and Canal, and another ten or twelve on the neutral ground in Canal. Nine bodies lay at the corner of Baronne and Common, six more at Common and Carondelet...White citizens of New Orleans, men and women, gathered to look and then walked away."



Engraving of Marine Hospital nurses attending to those wounded in the riot. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

In their investigation, the US House of Representatives would find that Mayor John T. Monroe had personally organized the riot; setting the stage among allies and giving the command that sent "the combined police, headed by officers and firemen, with their companies...toward the institute, [where] the work of butchery commenced." The massacre at the Mechanics' Institute, along with a similar riot in Memphis, prompted national outrage and helped elect a new Republican majority to Congress, which would implement their own plan of radical Reconstruction. For New Orleans, however, the massacre was only an opening salvo in a series of violent outbreaks that would convulse the city through 1877 as divergent visions of racial and economic politics repeatedly erupted into direct conflict and bloodshed.

Sources

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