Voices of the Clinton Riot

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Cast

Narrator
George Harper (white)
Calvin Wells (white)
George Swann (white)
Benjamin Sterling White (white)
Eugene Welbourne (African-American)
Charles Caldwell (African-American)
Hubbard Strange (African-American)
Margaret Ann Caldwell (African-American)
Sarah Dickey (white)
Preacher Nelson (African-American)

The above is the order in which they speak.

Please be advised that "Voices of the Clinton Riot" contains excerpts from various primary sources from the Reconstruction Era. The vernacular language and certain colloquialisms contained herein may seem harsh or even offensive to some readers and listeners. It is advised that teachers prepare their students for the type of language and terminology they will encounter when reading this resource.

Script

Voices of the Clinton Riot

Narrator: After the South's devastating loss in the Civil War, the former Confederate states had to reorganize and reform under a process known as Reconstruction. Mississippi was forced to submit to federal authority. Former slaves outnumbered whites by 60,000 in the state, and in Hinds County, their majority was more than two to one. Freedmen flocked to the Republican Party, which won control of state and county governments in 1870.

Republican domination continued until 1875 when legislative and county elections were scheduled. By this time, federal resolve to ensure equality for emancipated slaves had weakened. When whites in Mississippi moved to regain control of state government, Clinton became a battle ground in the struggle to end Reconstruction and eliminate African-American representation in Mississippi politics.

The Hinds County Democratic Party met in Raymond in August of 1875 to select candidates for the November election. These Democrats also adopted what would be later called the "Mississippi Plan," a strategy to justify the elimination of African-Americans from government by any means necessary.

The inevitable bloody results of the Mississippi Plan occurred during a Republican political rally near Clinton, Mississippi, on September 4, 1875. Historians call it "the Clinton Riot," and it was followed by "the Clinton Massacre."

Narrator: There were many witnesses to what happened in Clinton on that day over 140 years ago. Personal accounts were reported in local newspapers, in one historical journal, and in testimony before a US Senate investigating commission – the Boutwell Committee. Though the accounts differ, each gives us some understanding of what happened that day. These are…

All Speakers: "**The Voices of the Clinton Riot."**

Narrator: George Harper was a zealot for the Democratic Party. He described "The Mississippi Plan" in the *Hinds County Gazette,* a weekly newspaper he published in Raymond, Mississippi.

George Harper: "There are those who think that the leaders of the radical party have carried this system of fraud and falsehood just far enough in Hinds County, and that the time has come when it should be stopped – peacefully if possibly, forcibly if necessary, whenever the radical speakers proceed to mislead the negroes, and open with falsehoods, and deceptions, and misrepresentations, that the committee stop them right then and there and compel them to tell the truth."

"I can tell you the old hills in this part of Hinds [County] fairly echoed and re-echoed with the cries and shouts of a people determined to be free, determined to throw off, at whatever cost, an infamous government and corrupt officials."

Narrator: After the meeting of the Democratic Party in Raymond, Mississippi, Charles Caldwell, a state senator and chairman of the Republican Party in Hinds County, organized a political rally at Clinton on September 4, 1875, to identify Republican candidates for county and legislative offices. Caldwell invited the Democrats to send a representative to the Clinton rally, hoping his gesture of bi-partisanship would discourage the rowdier elements of the Democratic Party from interrupting the Republican gathering.

Narrator: The Republican rally was held on the grounds of the old Moss Hill plantation, which was just northwest of downtown Clinton. Senator Caldwell specified that no weapons or alcoholic beverages were allowed on the grounds, and he recruited a small cadre of Republican constables to enforce these rules.

Calvin Wells, head of the Hinds County Democratic Party, was at Moss Hill on the day of the rally, and he gave the following account:

Calvin Wells: "Judge Johnston spoke for about an hour for the Democrats and Mr. Fisher for the Republicans had replied for about fifteen minutes when the disturbance took place. Charles Caldwell was very near me, and as soon as he saw the disturbance begin, he went hurriedly and placed himself between the belligerents, a few white men on the west side facing east and an immense horde of negroes facing them and only a few feet apart."

"Caldwell had no arms as far as I saw but was going between the belligerents gesturing with his walking cane on the negroes, and seeming to be counseling with the whites."

"Hardly had Caldwell extricated himself from between the men when the negroes pressed on toward the white men in a belligerent and threatening manner. I saw Frank Thompson shoot as rapidly as he could fire his pistol until he emptied it, as did also his comrades I think, and then they were at the mercy of the negroes."

Narrator: George Swann also attended the rally and gave the following testimony:

George Swann: "Judge Johnston's speech was good, temperate, received with patient attention by the audience. Fisher begins to speak; he congratulates the audience at the calm, peaceful character of the meeting, expressed hope that the state of things might continue to the end of the canvass."

George Swann: "Then I heard a voice to my right…"

[Voice from the crowd]: "It would be so if you would stop telling your damned lies."

George Swann: "I asked Colonel Lake the identity of the person who made the remark and a man to his left turned on me and said…"

[Voice from the crowd]: "That remark was made by my brother. If you want to know, his name is Neal."

George Swann: "Just then another man approached, shaking his hand in an angry way and said…"

[Voice from the crowd]: "I made it; have you anything to say to me?"

George Swann: "Shortly thereafter, I noticed a general commotion in the crowd and a movement toward the direction of the bottom. Charles Caldwell made a considerable effort to get the crowd to stand still and hear the speaking. He got off the stand with the view to get the crowd to return."

"I hear the crack of a pistol shot, then cracks of good many more; then, an immense rush in the crowd and shrieks of women. The crowd pushed me along twenty to thirty yards and then the crowd surged along across the hill. The main firing took place where it commenced at the bottom."

Narrator: Benjamin Sterling White was a 38 year old former Texas Ranger who had settled in Raymond after the Civil War. He and George Harper were both Democrats, but each man gave a different account of what happened that day."

Benjamin Sterling White: "Some of the white boys had been drinking. I went to them and told them not to touch any more whiskey. I told them it was plain to them that the negroes meant trouble and would use any pretext to start it."

"I returned later and saw two of them going off down the hill. I asked them where they were going, and they replied, 'We have a bottle of whiskey down there.'"

George Harper: "There was no bottle of whiskey in the origins of the affair, as has been charged. No Raymond man knows any such thing. The young men charged with having one all deny [it]."

Benjamin Sterling White: "As soon as Fisher began to speak the group of Raymond men is surrounded by a crowd of negroes headed by Eugene Welbourne, Sam Caldwell, and Charles Caldwell, Junior."

"Fisher had been speaking about eight minutes when someone in the upper part of the crowd made a remark. I sought out that man, Neal and told him he must make no remarks in that crowd."

"Soon I noticed a rush of negroes to a bottom about a hundred yards north of the stand. I tell the Raymond men at the stand to remain. I leave Sivley and Thompson at the stand. I see a crowd of negroes pressing on the whites. Caldwell appeared and he was followed by about a hundred negroes."

Charles Caldwell: "Stop this damned fuss here. I am going to have it stopped. Get out of here you damned rascals and stop this noise!"

Benjamin Sterling White: "Then I hear a drum beat, then the firing started. I saw not less than three hundred negroes with pistols in their hands. They seemed to be especially after Martin Sivley and myself."

George Harper: "The affair was brought about like this: At some distance from the speaker's stand, there was an intoxicated young man. He had taken his drinks in Clinton and none on the ground. A colored man called Senator Caldwell's attention to the intoxicated man, and he, supposing that a row might ensue, or that the intoxicated man might interrupt the meeting, proceeded in great haste to the spot where the intoxicated man stood."

Narrator: According to George Harper, the white men with the intoxicated man assured Caldwell and others that they would take care of their companion and would remove him from the grounds.

George Harper: "The negroes, however, were greatly excited as they arrived and most of them came up with pistols drawn, and soon the shout was raised…"

[Voices from the crowd]: "Kill them, kill the damned Democrats."

George Harper: "The intoxicated man and his companions and the half dozen other whites who came up and joined them, endeavored to pacify the blacks, assuring them that nothing had occurred that should bring on any difficulty and they would take the intoxicated man away. But the assurances would not do."

"The blacks were for a fight, so the black crowd assumed tremendous proportions. It commenced pressing on the little party of whites, cursing and swearing bitterly, shaking fists, brandishing clubs and knives, and cocked pistols. At that time, not a pistol had been shown by the whites, while deadly weapons glistened all over the crowd of blacks."

"The drum beat. The firing commenced."

Narrator: Eugene Welbourne, a 27 year old former slave, gave this testimony:

Eugene Welbourne: "When Captain Fisher came to the stand, I was about twenty feet from him. There were a couple of young men standing in front of me – Sivley and Thompson of Raymond. These gentlemen, we understood, were a committee sent from Raymond in the event that the Republican speakers told anything there that was not so, they had a right to contradict them and make them stop."

"I went and saw Senator Caldwell, and called his attention to these fellows. Thompson had a bottle of whiskey in his hand. He was drinking and every now and then would say, 'Stop your damn lying.'"

Eugene Welbourne: "Aleck Wilson went up to Thompson and said, 'Mr. Thompson, you must not go on that way.' He told Thompson he was a peace officer and would have to arrest him if he did not stop. When Wilson said that, about twenty or thirty of the Raymond crowd got together around Thompson."

"Mr. Thompson told Mr. Wilson that he was going to do whatever he pleased. Then Wilson attempted to arrest him and instantly Thompson pulled out his pistol and shot him down, every man in that line pulled out their pistols and began to fire into the crowd."

Narrator: Charles Caldwell's eyewitness account of the Clinton Riot was printed in the *Weekly Mississippi Pilot,* a Republican newspaper, a week after the riot.

Charles Caldwell: "Judge Johnston had spoken for about an hour to an audience of over two thousand, all of whom listened attentively. Captain Fisher then ascended the stand and commenced speaking. In about five minutes someone called the speaker a liar."

Charles Caldwell: "I proceeded to the spot and asked what was the matter. A policeman said this man Thompson had drawn a pistol on one of the colored men who was marshalling the procession using certain offensive epithets."

Charles Caldwell: "I remarked, 'my young friend, for God's sake don't disturb this meeting.' I saw that the feelings were strong and so determined that I called on some other white men to assist me in preserving the peace. No one responded."

"I saw Neal, Wharton, and Thompson draw their pistols and I stepped up to Neal, telling him 'that would not do.' I did the same with Thompson and they put their weapons back in their pockets. In a few minutes they drew them out again; then the shooting began."

"I saw Thompson shoot the first shot that was fired, pouring some four or five shots into the crowd of which he formed a part. At this time the firing became general."

"The colored people soon concentrated at this point, when the white liners dispersed and the firing ceased; soon, however, I heard shooting at the east end of the speaker's stand, which continued for some time and seemed to be general, this is, in every direction each of where I was."

"I saw two colored men wounded – one shot very seriously and the other was almost dead. I saw several other colored men who were wounded more or less."

"I have since learned of the deaths of Charles Chilton, Martin Sivley, Frank Thompson, whites, and Alexander Wilson, Louis Hargrove, and the son of Samuel Anthony and another boy, whose name is not known to me [blacks]."

Narrator: Amid the chaos and bloodshed of the riot, there were individual acts of heroism, by both blacks and whites. Charles Chilton, a white Republican who lived near Moss Hill, was shot in the back by an unknown assailant while guiding black women and children to the safety of his front yard.

Hubbard Strange, a black Republican who lived in Raymond, knew several of the whites from Raymond who were at Moss Hill that day.

Hubbard Strange: "After the shooting started, I saw Frank Thompson run out of the crowd and mount a roan horse. Senator Caldwell called for him to stop with a motion of his hand, but Thompson paid no attention and road off. I saw a colored man hit the young white man Jesse Wharton over the head with a tree limb, knocking him down. I told that man I had raised Jesse myself and to not hurt him. The man turned away."

"I saw John Neal sitting wounded on a wagon close by. He said, 'Uncle, save my life too.'"

Hubbard Strange: "I said, 'I will, come with me.' My son Levi helped me put young Neal and Wharton in a buggy. Levi drove the buggy and I followed behind all the way to Mr. Neal's house."

Narrator: Within five minutes of the start of the riot, most people had fled Moss Hill. Many went to the Clinton Depot to await the 4 o'clock train from Vicksburg, on its way to Jackson.

Narrator: While many boarded the train to escape Clinton and the riot, a large number of armed whites departed the train and made their way toward the scene of the violence. These were "White Liners" from Bolton and Edwards Station, who had organized themselves hours before the riot started. Upon their arrival in Clinton, these vigilantes sent scouts to Moss Hill to determine what had happened.

Later that evening, another group of White Liners from Vicksburg arrived at the Clinton Depot. Calling themselves Modocs, after an Indian tribe in California noted for its vicious attacks on white settlers, these vigilantes began searching for black men. They went to Charles Caldwell's home and confronted his wife, Margaret Ann Caldwell, who was caring for two wounded men. Margaret Caldwell later testified:

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "They said to me: 'Tell your husband we are going to kill him if it is two years, or one year, or six; no difference; we are going to kill him anyhow. We have orders to kill him because he belongs to the Republican Party, and sticks up for these negroes, he has got to die.'"

Narrator: The immediate death toll of the Clinton Riot included three white men killed and approximately five blacks, two of whom were children. Over the days and weeks that followed dozens more African Americans lay dead – victims of a massacre.

When Governor Adelbert Ames learned of the rioting in Clinton that Saturday afternoon, he sent telegrams to President Ulysses S. Grant and to the United States Attorney General requesting federal assistance to restore order.

President Grant's advisors warned him that further use of federal troops in the South could cost the Republican Party key states in the upcoming presidential election. The national electorate had grown tired of the troubles in the South, and Radical Republicans no longer controlled the United States Congress.

Local educator Sarah Dickey was concerned about President Grant's refusal to act and wrote the following to him on September 23, 1875:

Sarah Dickey: "Allow a humble woman to address your Excellency in behalf of the poor oppressed colored people of the Southern states and especially this State. Seeing, as I do that thousands of them are just on the eve of being sacrificed at the hand of the assassin, I cannot hold my peace."

"I was at the republican meeting, held at Clinton on September 4th, myself. Was on the ground early and I saw enough with my own eyes to convince any honest person that the Republicans went there for nothing but peace, profit and pleasure, and that the Democrats, who were on the ground, went there for the express purpose of creating a disturbance and killing as many as they could. You hear a great deal about the massacre in Clinton, but you do not hear the worst. It cannot be told. Hoping God's blessing may attend these earnest thoughts."

Narrator: When Mississippi experienced civil disorders in Yazoo County and other areas after the Clinton Riot, Governor Ames sent two militia companies to secure weapons stored at Bolton and Edwards Station. Ames believed that White Liners would attempt to seize militia weapons stored there. Senator Charles Caldwell, a captain in the state militia, led one of these companies.

Caldwell's role greatly angered Democrats who accused the governor of trying to provoke a race war to disrupt the November elections. Both parties used the Clinton Riot to further their efforts to win in November.

Charles Caldwell: "We put ads in the newspapers and had our preachers encourage their church people to vote. We knew the Democrats would intimidate colored voters and stuff the ballot boxes. It was discouraging to our people."

"President Grant made it clear after the Clinton Riot that he would not send the United States Army to guarantee a fair election in Mississippi, as he had done before."

"There was intimidation in Hinds County, but colored people voted in large numbers at the Clinton precinct. Judge Amos Johnston and I were elected to the two senate seats representing Hinds and Rankin counties. Judge Johnston had the highest number of votes, but I out-polled him at the Clinton box."

"In spite of all our hard work and best efforts, the Democrats won the state in November, taking control of the state house and the senate with large majorities. I knew it would be difficult for my people when the legislature convened in January."

Narrator: Governor Ames, facing impeachment by the newly elected white Democratic legislature, resigned his office in March of 1876 and left the state. After the 1876 presidential election, all federal troops were removed from the South.

As cruel as fate had been to the hopes and political dreams of former slaves and their descendants, an even crueler blow would be dealt to Senator Charles Caldwell on Thursday, December 30, 1875. He had gone fox hunting north of Clinton that morning. His wife gave a detailed account of the events that led to Caldwell's murder when she testified before the Boutwell Committee.

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "The first trouble was an insult passed on his nephew, David Washington. So they picked a fuss: a white man Waddy Rice in a black smith shop in Clinton. My husband came home about four o'clock in the evening and someone had told him about the fuss picked with his nephew and he walked downtown to see about it. He was in town about a half hour, and came back and ate his dinner, and just between dark and sundown, he goes back down again."

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "I did not know what he was doing down there, until just after dusk, and a man, Madison Bell, a colored man, came and said, 'Mrs. Caldwell, you had better go down and see about Mr. Caldwell. I think the white folks will kill him.'"

"I did not go myself but went to Professor Bell and asked him to go and get him. Mr. Bell went and he never came back at all until he came back under arrest."

"I was in my room until just nearly dark. The moon was quite young and the chapel bell rang. I knew the minute the bell tolled what it all meant."

Narrator: After the riot in September, townsmen, college faculty, and college students stored pistols and rifles in the basement of the college chapel to be used if and when there was civil unrest in town.

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "The young men who lived across the street, when the bell tolled, they ran to the chapel and got their guns. There were 150 guns there."

"I went down town and then all got ahead of me everywhere I went; and some of them wanted to know who I was, but I hid my face as well as I could. As I got to town, I went to go into Mr. Chilton's store and every store was closed just that quick, for it was early, about 6 o'clock."

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "Chilton's was lit up by a big chandelier and as I went over the lumber yard I saw a dead man. I stumbled over him, and as I looked at him I did not know who it was, and I went into Chilton's, and as I put my feet upon the door steps, standing as close, many a few feet, there was Judge Cabaniss, a friend of my husband. And as I went to go in, they cussed me and threatened to hurt me and the judge among the balance; but he said he didn't know me."

"They all stood; nobody would let me go in; they all stood there with their guns. I knew there were two dead men there, but I did not think it was my husband at the time."

Narrator: The dead man that Margaret had stumbled over was Sam Caldwell, Charles Caldwell's brother. Sam had come by Chilton's store on his way home from the fields. He was killed by the mob out of fear that he would arouse African Americans in the neighborhood to violence when they discovered that Senator Caldwell had been murdered.

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "I stood right there and they said to me, 'If you didn't go away we will make it damned hot for you.' I didn't say anything and walked off, and walked right over the dead man. I stopped and tried to see who he was, but they were cursing at me to get out of town, to get out."

"I went on over to the house, and went upstairs and back to my room and laid down, a widow. After nearly an hour, Parson Nelson came up – Preacher Nelson. He called three or four times and said…"

Preacher Nelson: "Answer, Mrs. Caldwell. Don't be afraid, nobody will hurt you."

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "I asked him what do you want and he said…"

Preacher Nelson: "Mrs. Caldwell, I have come to tell you the news and it is sad news to you. Your husband is dead, he is killed, and Sam too."

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "After a length of time, Professor Hillman, of the Institute, brought the bodies to the house. Professor Hillman and Preacher Nelson carried them into the bedroom, both of them, and put them there; and seen to having them laid out, and fixed up."

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "Preacher Nelson said in my presence…"

Preacher Nelson: "a braver life never had died than Charles Caldwell. I never saw a man die with a manlier spirit in his life."

Narrator: Preacher Nelson told Margaret Caldwell that "Buck" Cabell, a white man and former friend, took her husband to the cellar at Chilton's store for a drink. Caldwell was looking for Waddy Rice, but Cabell insisted that he stay, and the two sat at a table in the cellar.

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "When they touched their glasses and were talking, somebody shot right through the back from outside the gate window, and my husband fell to the floor."

"When he was first shot, he called for Judge Cabaniss and for Mr. Chilton, they were all around, and nobody went to his relief, them men standing with their guns."

"He called for Preacher Nelson. Nelson went to the cellar door but was afraid to go in. Nelson called to him two or three times…"

Preacher Nelson: "Don't shoot me, Don't shoot me."

Margaret Ann Caldwell: "Charles said, he wouldn't hurt him, and asked him to take him out of the cellar, that he wanted to die in the open air."

Preacher Nelson: "I carried him to the middle of the street and the men all shouted, "We will deal with him while we've got him; dead men tell no tales."

"I asked them to let him see his wife, but they said no. He stood right there on the street while they riddled him with thirty or forty of their load, they shot all that many times. These were the senator's last words…"

Charles Caldwell: "Remember when you kill me, you kill a gentleman and a brave man. Never say you killed a coward. I want you to remember it when I am gone."

Narrator: The Clinton Riot signaled the beginning of the end of Reconstruction in Mississippi. After 1875, African American would be systematically excluded from the political process until passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Clinton Riot - like many other events in the struggle for Civil Rights - is marred by violence and bloodshed. Events of the recent past show us all too clearly that this struggle remains unfinished. According to President Harry Truman, "The only thing new is the history you don't know." By knowing our history, we know ourselves, and by knowing ourselves, we hope that we will be touched, as Abraham Lincoln said, by the better angels of our nature as we strive for decency, reconciliation, and hope.

Here is the roll call of the known dead, victims of the Clinton Riot and its aftermath. There are undoubtedly others whose names remain unknown at this time.

Frank Thompson

Martin H. Sivley

Charles N. Chilton

William Haffa

Bob Beasley

Simon Jackson

Wade Walker

Calvin Johnson

Louis Hargreaves

Square Hodge

Dolph Stevens

Isaac Stevens

Galilee Brown

Daniel Dabney

Alfred Hastings

Moses Hill

Albert Hudson

Ben Jackson

Robert Robinson

Lewis Russell

Alex Wilson

Harrison ‘Sam’ Caldwell

Charles Caldwell