

Dan Gediman: This is the Reckoning, I'm Dan Gediman. Like many African Americans, the ancestors of Russ Bowlds and Brigitt Johnson were on the move in the years after slavery. Some stayed behind in Kentucky but during the first two decades of the 20th century, the extended Sanders family left Henderson, Kentucky and began to migrate north, hoping for better jobs, better schools for their children, and better lives. Russ Bowlds' grandparents ended up in Marion, Indiana, about an hour north of Indianapolis.

And they did indeed find a better life there, with decent but still segregated schools for the kids, and reasonably well-paying factory jobs for the adults, which allowed them to save up for a modest home that they could own instead of rent. But one thing they couldn't escape was the racial violence that plagued not only the south, but the north as well.

Russ Bowlds:¹ The racial climate in Indiana was, was kind of, it was kind of intense.

Dan Gediman: Russ says there was a lynching there in 1930 that he grew up hearing about in the 1970s and 80s. It was infamous throughout the rest of the country because of a photograph taken of two young black men, hanging from a tree with a large crowd underneath them. The crowd looks festive, some smiling at the camera, a couple holding hands. The photo was published in newspapers around the country and inspired the song, "Strange Fruit," made famous by Billie Holiday.

Russ Bowlds: A lot of the family members still live there in Marion, and some of my cousins were cousins of the men that got lynched. So the family tells about it. The lady that babysat us as children, one of her sons was one of the gentlemen that got lynched there in Marion. It was a

¹ [Int Bowlds-Russ_20190329](#)

turbulent time in Marion. And the Klu Klux Klan was a very predominant part of that of that whole situation.

Dan Gediman: Was the Klan still a tangible visible presence in your youth?

Russ Bowlds: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes.

Russ Bowlds: In my youth, the Klan was still predominant in Marion. You know, there were situations where they set our mailbox on fire and, you know, trying to intimidate the people of color in Marion. So yes, up until the 60's, the 70's. Yes.

Dan Gediman: This is the sort of history that Black families might know, but is almost impossible to find in school curricula, and has only recently shown up in our history books. Yet the evidence has been there all along--in diaries and newspaper articles, letters and memoirs, even the Congressional Record. Hiding all along in archives, in libraries, and in the memories of those who lived it. This is The Reckoning.

Dan Gediman: In the decades following the Civil War, bands of armed men continued to torment Black Kentuckians. Homes, schools, and churches were burnt to the ground, and people were whipped, shot, raped, and killed. The mobs often targeted Blacks who had started to accumulate property or were establishing businesses. For the men, there might be accusations of sexual assault or rape. But what they were really being persecuted for, was not staying in their place. Historian George Wright is the author of *Racial Violence in Kentucky*.

George Wright: The consistency is, it's tied to economics. It's taking something away from them, their land, or a job, removing them as competitors. And always, the way that you do that, to then make sure few

people question you, is that you tie these things to Black people being troublesome, the most easy way is that there's always an example brought forward of some Black man trying to have an inappropriate relationship with a White woman that tends to be the trigger.

Dan Gediman: According to Anne Marshall, a history professor at Mississippi State University, sometimes it wasn't just individual Black Kentuckians who were targeted for racial violence, but rather entire communities.

Anne Marshall: There are numerous examples of racial cleansing in post war Kentucky, there was one in Henry County where I believe over 100 African Americans were driven out of the county, and this happened for various reasons, some was that, you know, once African Americans had the right to vote, they posed a threat to, results in local elections, they could become politically powerful. And so they react to it in various ways, sometimes, with these full scale expulsions.

Dan Gediman: Things reached the point that in March 1871, a group of six African American men from central Kentucky, sent testimony to a joint Congressional committee, about atrocities committed against Black Kentuckians in the previous years. The committee was charged with investigating allegations of Ku Klux Klan activity in the former Confederate states. Kentucky was included because of disturbing reports of violence against African Americans, received by officials of the Freedmen's Bureau. Among the signers of the testimony was educator Henry Marris, brother of Rev. Elijah Marris, whose memoirs we heard from earlier episodes.²

We the colored citizens of Frankfort and vicinity, do this day memorialize the condition of affairs now existing in the state of Kentucky.

² [1871 Testimony of Colored citizens of Frankfort, Ky.,](#)

We would respectfully state that life, liberty, and property are unprotected among the colored race of this State. Organized bands of desperate and lawless men, mainly composed of soldiers of the late rebel armies, armed, disciplined, and disguised, and bound by oath and secret obligations, have, by force, terror, and violence, subverted all civil society among colored people.

We would state that we have been law-abiding citizens, pay our taxes, and in many parts of the State our people have been driven from the polls, refused the right to vote; many have been slaughtered while attempting to vote. We ask, how long is this state of things to last?

Dan Gediman: After they read a formal statement, they began to list over 100 incidents of racial violence that had occurred in the state of Kentucky, including thirty-four lynchings, the murder of twenty-two men and women by mobs, and numerous beatings, whippings, and rapes over a four-year period.

Smith attacked and whipped by regulators in Nelson County, November 1867.

Colored schoolhouse burned by incendiaries in Breckinridge, December 24, 1867.

A negro, Tim Machlin, taken from jail in Frankfort and hung by mob, January 28, 1868.

Sam Davis hung by mob at Harrodsburg, May 23, 1868.

William Pierce hung by a mob in Christian, July 12, 1868.

George Rogers hung by a mob at Bradfordsville, Marion County, July 11, 1868.

Dan Gediman: Kidada Williams is a history professor at Wayne State University.

Kidada Williams: When we look closely what we can see is that most people are going to be attacked because they have made freedom work for

them. They are upstanding people in their community. A large number of the lynching victims are actually landowners, and so their very existence as free people outside of slavery who have acquired land, acquired property, establishing their own businesses, establishing schools, etc. All of those things represent a threat to White supremacy.

Dan Gediman: There was yet another method that White Kentuckians used to prevent African American progress, something historian George Wright calls “ legal lynchings”.

George Wright: There were instances of Kentucky White, prominent citizens pleading with the mob in their community, to not lynch a person but allow the system to take its course. And they promised that the system would execute the person. And there are instances of where the Black person pleaded guilty, knowing that the outcome would be death, because if they don't do this, they would then be turned over to the lynch mob. And at least the state would execute them by hanging, most often eventually electric chair, but the state would not cut off their fingers, would not burn and torture them as part of putting them to death.

Dan Gediman: Throughout this series you may have noticed a common thread--a mismatch between what really happened in Kentucky, and what generations of its citizens were told about it. This is especially true of the widespread racial violence we've been talking about in this episode. Until George Wright published his groundbreaking 1990 book, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, which documents 353 lynchings, you would be hard pressed to find mention of any of them in the state's history books. How did that happen?

It turns out, it's not an accident. It's evidence of a phenomenon known as the Lost Cause, which takes its name from an influential pair of books, published right after the

Civil War, by Southern journalist Edward Pollard. They were called *The Lost Cause*³ and *The Lost Cause Regained*⁴. The movement the books spawned celebrated the chivalrous culture of the south, downplayed the horrors of slavery, and explained the war as a battle over states' rights. It also promoted an alternate way of describing the conflict that just ended⁵. For example, you shouldn't call it the Civil War. Historian George Wright.

George Wright: Kentuckians would say it's a war between the states, i.e. the northern states and the southern states. Another aspect of the Lost Cause is that, while they could not deny that slavery was an important aspect of it, they would say that were fought fighting for states' rights, and they could always come up with something they disagreed, some laws by the federal government that Kentuckians would have an issue with. And so, even though slavery ended, it does not change the narrative about slavery having been a good thing, for the type of people who were enslaved. The Lost Cause was so effective, that not only did this exist among the people of the generation who were involved in slavery and the Civil War, but it would continue for many decades thereafter.

Dan Gediman: If one reads materials written in late 19th century Kentucky, it is hard to miss the evidence of the Lost Cause mythology. An example is the eulogy that Thomas Bullitt wrote on the occasion of his mother Mildred's death in 1879. He begins by talking about his grief over losing his mother, but then quickly turns to his grief over losing the way of life his family led, before the Civil War.

Thomas Bullitt: All this loyalty of slave to master is gone; all the protecting care of the mistress, all the authority of the master, are things of the past. We no longer hear the happy harvest song of the laborer in the

³ <https://rb.gy/b3xzwn>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_A._Pollard

⁵ https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/lost_cause_the#start_entry

evening; we no longer enjoy the unbounded hospitality of the Kentucky of old...We have accepted the results of the war, and we mean to go to the very best that we can attain, but when we look upon the breaking up of our beautiful homes, upon their desolation now, the iron enters our soul, and we feel in all its bitterness, solitudinem faciunt pacem appellat (they make a desert and call it peace).⁶

Dan Gediman: Over time, former Unionists and Confederate supporters in Kentucky found common cause -- in their shared commitment to White supremacy, and a nostalgia for a faded way of life. Historian Anne Marshall is the author of "Creating a Confederate Kentucky"

Anne Marshall: So this becomes not just a way of remembering the war effort, and life before the war, but it also becomes a way of structuring life afterwards. And of deciding what values White Kentuckians want to adhere to in the post war era. And so the Lost Cause...gets carried into the postwar era, not just as memory, but as a political statement, and it becomes a way of bolstering other kinds of White power. And so, because that appeals to most White Kentuckians, and not just those who fought for the Confederacy, that's the post war memory that most White Kentuckians adopt afterwards.

Dan Gediman: One of most visible remnants of the Lost Cause ideology are the hundreds of confederate monuments throughout the nation that now are the source of so much controversy. The group that spearheaded the drive to put up those monuments was the United Daughters of the Confederacy, commonly known as the UDC. The organization was founded in Nashville in 1894⁷, and had a particularly active chapter in Louisville, where it published a monthly magazine called *The Lost Cause*. Louisville

⁶ Written by Thomas Bullitt, according to Shirley Harmon, [Tom Bullitt's Eulogy for Mildred Fry Bullitt](#)

⁷ <https://hqudc.org/history-of-the-united-daughters-of-the-confederacy/>

played an important role in facilitating the creation of many of these confederate monuments. Patrick Lewis is a scholar in residence at the Filson Historical Society.

Patrick Lewis: There are national companies like the Muldoon Monument Company here in Louisville, which are mass producing soldier-on-pedestal monuments that can be had for a relatively low fee and can be put on an L&N train and shipped anywhere across the south.

Dan Gediman: According to Patrick Lewis, in addition to the Confederate monuments, one of the highest priorities for the UDC was education. They sought to educate young people with lessons about Southern heritage that were, in their minds, historically accurate, and in keeping with their racial and political beliefs.

Patrick Lewis: They recognize that they have to train the next generation of White Southerners who did not grow up experiencing slavery, who did not grow up and experience the war, who did not grow up and experience reconstruction, they have to tell them exactly what it was like, and they have to scare them sufficiently. So that they never let something like that happen again, right, like they have to reinforce to the next generation of White Southern children, why it is important to maintain white supremacy.

Dan Gediman: To accomplish this goal, the UDC launched a youth auxiliary organization called the Children of the Confederacy, which were organized by local UDC chapters. At their meetings, adult leaders would take the children through a pamphlet called “The UDC Catechism for Children”, which contained 64 facts that all members were required to learn by repetition, a practice they continue to this day.⁸ Here are just a few examples:

⁸ <https://hqudc.org/cofc-catechisms/>

Q: What causes led to the war between the states?

A: The disregard, on the part of states of the north, for the rights of the southern or slave-holding states.

Q: What were these rights?

A: The rights to regulate their own affairs and to hold slaves as property.

Q: How were the slaves treated?

A: With great kindness and care in nearly all cases

Q: What was the feeling of the slaves towards their masters?

A: They were faithful and devoted and were always ready and willing to serve them⁹

Dan Gediman: Another way that the UDC affected the way youth understood American history, was to make sure that American history textbooks reflected their beliefs. Professor Anne Marshall.

Anne Marshall: The Kentucky United Daughters of the Confederacy insisted on monitoring the textbooks that were used in state schools to make sure that they included what they called an impartial view of the conflict between the states, meaning they wanted to make sure that slavery wasn't seen as a bad thing—that states' rights, disconnected from the issue of slavery, was considered to be the cause of the war.

Dan Gediman: Not only did the UDC get involved in monitoring the existing textbooks, they also worked at developing new textbooks that were in line with their particular viewpoint. This has been perhaps the UDC's most lasting legacy. Over a dozen of these UDC-sponsored textbooks were published in the first decades of the

⁹https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Children_U_D_C_Catechism_for_1904

20th century and remained in use in many Southern states for decades.¹⁰ A new generation of Lost Cause-inspired history textbooks were published in the 1950s in response to the emerging civil rights movement, some of which were still in use well into the 1970s.¹¹ Historian Patrick Lewis.

Patrick Lewis: These ideas are baked into the way that that Southern Children, Black and White, quite frankly, were taught about their past, were taught about their capacities, were taught about what a good and just American Republic looked like. You think about when political leadership at certain points, say at the civil rights movement, you know, when those political leaders, mostly men at that time were educated and what textbooks had they grown up with as 8- and 10- and 12-year-olds, and how did that shape their response to African American demands for equality and justice and the vote In the mid 50's, or 60's.

Dan Gediman: It appears that the UDC succeeded wildly in promoting their Lost Cause ideology. In 2011, a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 48% of Americans thought the Civil War was mainly about states' rights, including 60% of those under 30, while only 38% thought it was primarily about slavery. Ricky Jones is the chair of the Pan-African Studies Department at the University of Louisville.

Ricky Jones¹²: And that's why I firmly believe that every state, at this point under some type of federal mandate and federal guidance with some of our best minds, need to go through curriculum reform --- really need to look at the K through 12 curriculum, every school system in this country, and figure out exactly what's being taught to our children. Because a lot of

¹⁰Bailey, "The Textbooks of the "Lost Cause": Censorship and the Creation of Southern State Histories," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, Fall 1991, Vol. 75, No. 3 (Fall 1991), pp. 507- 533 (<http://www.jstor.com/stable/40582363>)

¹¹https://richmond.com/discover-richmond/happy-slaves-the-peculiar-story-of-three-virginia-school-textbooks/article_47e79d49-eac8-575d-ac9d-1c6fce52328f.html

<https://www.facingsouth.org/2019/04/twisted-sources-how-confederate-propaganda-ended-souths-schoolbooks>

¹² [Int Jones-Ricky_20190906](#)

what's being taught to our children reinforces that fiction, even in the 21st century. And, you know, it has been disturbing to sit down and talk to a lot of American history teachers at that level, who are unknowingly in some cases, reinforcing that fiction, they can't fill in the gaps. They haven't been taught it and haven't learned it on their own. They've gone on about their lives, and they're creating yet another generation of students, darker kids with inferiority complexes, because they're being shot through that prism, and White, White lighter kids with superiority complexes, because they're learning this false narrative.

Dan Gediman: I travelled from Louisville to visit the SEEK Museum in Russellville, a small city in Southwestern Kentucky. This museum grew out of the vision and dedication of one man, Michael Morrow, who has been obsessed, since he was a child, with better understanding the history of his community.

The museum is made up of a series of small wooden houses spread out over a couple of blocks, in the historic African American neighborhood known as Black Bottom. In each house, there is a different exhibit.¹³ But I had come here to see one specific exhibit, dedicated to a single event which happened in Russellville in the early 20th century. In the middle of the room was a sculpture of a tree, and hanging from the tree were four nooses.

Michael Morrow: You're looking at a lynching tree that symbolizes the tree that the four men were lynched on in 1908¹⁴, and probably another six or seven men had been lynched on prior to that. I tell people it is not a pleasant subject, but it's a necessary subject. It's one that we as a nation are gonna have to start talking about. We got to talk about how it affected America then, and how it's still affecting America now.

¹³ [Morrow, SEEK Museum](#)

¹⁴ [Int Morrow-Michael_20190907](#), [Morrow, Lynching Tree](#)

Dan Gediman: Logan County, where Russellville is located, had a history of lynching African Americans. Between 1883 and 1908, there were a total of 17 people lynched in the county, which is the second highest number in any of Kentucky's 120 counties.¹⁵

This particular lynching was triggered by a labor dispute. A Black farm laborer named Rufus Browder got into an argument with his White employer James Cunningham. Cunningham took offense at Browder's behavior and shot him in the chest. Browder pulled out his own pistol, shot back, and killed Cunningham. A Black man killing a White man was not going to be tolerated by other White men in the county, so the jailer moved Browder out of town to avoid a mob taking him.

Several days later, police raided a Black lodge and arrested three men, John Boyer, and brothers John and Virgil Jones, after the lodge had passed a resolution defending Browder in the Cunningham shooting.¹⁶ Already in the jail was Joe Riley, a Black man who had been arrested on an unrelated matter. On the morning of August 1, 1908...

Michael Morrow: ...a mob descended on the jail, took all four men out and lynched them on the lynching tree. They stayed there a few hours; they eventually took the bodies off the tree, laid them in front of the courthouse, and put them in Potter's field.

Dan Gediman: And someone left a note around the neck of Virgil Jones.

¹⁵ Wright, George C.. Racial Violence In Kentucky . LSU Press. (see appendix A "Victims of Lynching")

¹⁶<https://apnews.com/a16e6acf543b43ee86c29d87c979a585/Hidden-history:-Effort-aims-to-memorialize-Logan-lynchings> Wright, George C.. Racial Violence In Kentucky . LSU Press. Kindle Edition (details differ slightly), also look at Michael Morrow interview transcript.

Michael Morrow: And the note said, “Let this be a warning to you N*****s to let White people alone or you’ll go the same damn way, your lodges and halls better shut up and quit.”

Dan Gediman: After we left the lynching exhibit, Morrow took me to his office. He began pulling out file after file of information about various lynchings that had happened in Western Kentucky. There were dozens of them.

Michael Morrow: It's hard to get anybody to understand what really went on, whether they be Black or White, unless you're a historian, a researcher, somebody that constantly deals with this kind of stuff. Man, it's hard, really heart wrenching...I found a newspaper article a couple of weeks ago, talking about here in 1867, there was a placard that's been put on the trees, here in Logan County to tell Blacks, they better not get together in groups, or they'd be killed. They better not speak out against nothing, they'd be killed. They better not say nothing bad to no White people, they'd be killed. You know, just what effect is that? You are quiet and you are hushed up. You can't say when you're angry, can't say when you feel bad.

Dan Gediman: The language on the signs was severe and threatened Black people with penalties of a hundred lashes or even death. This could happen for breaking rules such as being out at night, or simply being idle in the eyes of White people. The signs ended with the chilling words “I am everywhere. I have friends in every place. Do your duty and I will have but little to do.”¹⁷

Michael Morrow: It gets to me sometimes, but I keep the faith. My faith is that more information is better, is that you get it out there. If you see it for yourself, and you're honest with yourself, maybe we can see the same things. But I want you to see it for yourself.

¹⁷ [The Evansville Daily Journal Thu Feb 7 1867](#)

Dan Gediman: As Morrow and I walked through the neighborhood where the museum is located, he began to tell me about the push-back he received from some in Russellville, when he began to put this museum together.

Michael Morrow: A lot of White people don't want you to stir up old wounds. I guess you would say. They don't want to get these stories out there. And I was telling my nephew before you pulled up, it goes right against what a lot of Blacks want. A lot of Blacks want to know what happened, to open up, to understand why? Well, a lot of White people want this stuff shut down and closed up, it happened then. Who wants to think about their grandparents or their great grandparents being murderers and burning people up and doing things of that nature...So there's a lot of guilt. But for us to heal as a nation, we've got to get these truths out there. We have to.

Dan Gediman: Driving back from Russellville, I contemplated all I had learned about the state's history--the endless parade of outrages that White Kentuckians had perpetrated against Black Kentuckians, over the course of so many decades. The lynchings, the racial cleansing, using every means possible to keep African Americans down, keep them controlled, keep them from achieving the American Dream. Then I flash forward to today and wonder how much progress we have really made as a state, and as a country, when it comes to how White Americans treat Black Americans. Historian Kidada Williams.

Kidada Williams: The link between the past and the present in terms of African Americans experiences and responses to racist violence is very clear. And what we see is a steadfast commitment to White supremacy and White people continuing to enjoy all of the rights and privileges that come

with being an American or being in America. And so that line, that mindset is quite consistent, that shapes not only the violence that African Americans experienced then, but the physical and economic and cultural violence African Americans have experienced in the history after slavery. So chattel slavery ends but that commitment to subjugating them and to denying them access to all of the rights and privileges that come with being an American that continued, and we see that manifested in housing, education, employment, treatment by the police, access to health care, all of those things are interconnected, and they can be traced back to slavery.