

On December 9, 1867, Amos Akerman entered Atlanta's City Hall for the first day of Georgia's Constitutional Convention. A northern-born former-slave-owner with no political experience, Akerman had trodden a twisting path to the summit of Georgia politics. Yet he would prove to be one of the leading lights of the Convention. And over the next two years, in the face of conservative backlash, Akerman would devote himself to revitalizing Georgia and defending its new black citizens. His legal crusade would eventually lead Ulysses S. Grant to appoint him U.S. Attorney General, making him the only Southerner to serve in a Presidential cabinet during all of Reconstruction. In this role, Akerman used the resources of the Justice Department to torment and eventually neutralize the vicious Ku Klux Klan, leading Ron Chernow to label him "the greatest ornament of [Grant's] cabinet and one of the outstanding attorneys general in American history."¹ Evolving from a slaveholding Confederate soldier into a champion of civil rights, Akerman's is a story of redemption and rebirth.

Remarkably, this story has received scant scholarly attention. The few historians who have taken an interest in Akerman have focused on his time as Attorney General, and especially on his prosecutions of the KKK during the 1870s.² Yet his tenure as Attorney General was only the culmination of a distinguished career in state politics. Before appearing on the national stage, Akerman fought for black rights in Reconstruction-era Georgia and became one of the leading Republicans in the State. This period has been entirely neglected: *zero* books or academic articles

¹ Ron Chernow, *Grant*, (New York: Penguin, 2017), 711.

² Gretchen C. F. Shappert, "Fighting Domestic Terrorism and Creating the Department of Justice: The Extraordinary Leadership of Attorney General Amos T. Akerman," *Department of Justice Journal of Federal Law and Practice* 68, no. 1 (January 2020), 125-144; William S. McFeely, "Amos T. Akerman: The Lawyer and Racial Justice," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, eds. Morgan Kousser & James M. McPherson (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 395-415.

centered on Akerman's contributions to Georgia's Reconstruction have been published in at least a hundred years.

This lacuna may have its roots in the historical approach of the South's Lost Cause movement. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* recently suggested that Akerman's story has been lost to history because "the social order of this state and the rest of the South depended on your not believing that men like him existed."³ If so, it is high time that Akerman and other Southern Republicans receive the historical attention they deserve. This paper begins to fill that void by examining Akerman's role in Georgia's Reconstruction.

Akerman's Early Years

Amos Tappan Akerman was born in 1821 in New Hampshire. After graduating from Dartmouth, he moved south to Savannah, Georgia, where he agreed to tutor the children of a United States Senator named John Berrien in exchange for the use of his law library.⁴ Years before, Berrien had served as Andrew Jackson's Attorney General. In an ironic twist of fate, the young man he hired to teach his children would eventually fill the same post.

Akerman soon opened his own law practice.⁵ Having some initial difficulties—"Law is uncertain in practice, whatever the devotees of the science may say"—he decided to try his hand

³ Jim Galloway, "Re-discovering Amos Akerman, a lost GOP hero of the 19th century South," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 29, 2019.

⁴ Lois Neal Hamilton, "Amos T. Akerman and his Role in American Politics," (Master's thesis, Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University, 1939). Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, 9; Rebecca Felton, "Hon. Amos T. Akerman, A Biographical Sketch," *The Cartersville Courant*, March, 26, 1885, *Georgia Historic Newspapers, Digital Library of Georgia, University of Georgia Libraries*, <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/>.

⁵ Hamilton, "Amos T. Akerman," 14, 16.

at agriculture, and as time passed, his farm expanded.⁶ Adopting the mores of his new home, Akerman supplemented his own labor by buying enslaved workers; by 1864, he owned 11 human beings.⁷

Akerman had complex views about slavery, an issue that poisoned North-South relations throughout the 1850s. On the one hand, he owned several slaves and disapproved of abolitionism. Indeed, he thought that slavery might actually be beneficial to the enslaved. “Most of them are slaves in Africa,” he noted in 1846. “Perhaps...those who are brought to America will in the end become more elevated than their brethren in Africa by association with a superior race.”⁸ On the other hand, perhaps because of his upbringing in the North, he rejected secession. “The doctrines of the Nullifiers have been thoroughly refuted,” he journaled in 1847, “but they are flattering to the vanity of a state and will therefore continue to be received.”⁹ Corresponding with a Northern friend about Southern threats to secede from the Union, he wrote, “Some Southern politicians are ready for it, but the sober portion of the people are far below that pitch.”¹⁰

When the Civil War began in 1861, Akerman decided to stay in the South. Having just moved to Elberton, Georgia, to form a new law partnership, he focused on his career for most of

⁶ Amos Akerman, *Diary*, September 17, 1853, quoted in Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 16. Akerman kept several diaries; Hamilton had access to one diary in 1939 that I have not found. Amos T. Akerman, *Diary of Amos T. Akerman, 1846-1857*, June 25, 1855, Private collection of J. Mark Akerman.

⁷ Amos Akerman to Martha Akerman, June 7, 1864, quoted in Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 34.

⁸ Akerman, *Diary*, August 19, 1846, quoted in Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 34.

⁹ Akerman, *Diary*, March 9, 1847, quoted in Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 34.

¹⁰ Akerman to Cilley, Manchester, N. H., March 2, 1850, quoted in Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 34.

the war.¹¹ In the summer of 1863, however, he joined the State Guard, and was called into active duty in 1864 when Sherman invaded Georgia.¹² He served until the Confederacy collapsed, but, as an Assistant Quartermaster, he probably never saw combat.¹³

In 1874, Akerman tried to explain why he remained in the South and served in the Confederate Army. “Reluctantly I adhered to the Confederate cause. I was a Union man until the North seemed to have abandoned us...Not caring to stand up for a Government which would not stand up for itself, and viewing the Confederate Government as practically established in the South, I gave it my allegiance, though with great distrust of its peculiar principles.”¹⁴ This narrative probably exaggerates Akerman’s support for the Union. At the time, he repeatedly expressed sympathy for the Confederate cause. On July 4, 1861, for example, Akerman “addressed the volunteers and citizens” at Hartwell, arguing, “The South may consistently celebrate the Fourth of July, notwithstanding the secession. The first revolution was beneficial to her and also was a precedent for the second.”¹⁵ When he heard about the Confederate victory at Bull Run, he expressed hope that “this event will speedily end this miserable war.”¹⁶ And in

¹¹ Felton, “Hon. Amos T. Akerman,” *The Cartersville Courant*, March, 26, 1885, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

¹² Amos Akerman, *Diary*, February 23, 1874, quoted in Felton, “Hon. Amos T. Akerman,” *The Cartersville Courant*, March, 26, 1885, Georgia Historic Newspapers. Akerman kept several diaries; Felton had access to one diary in 1885 that I have not found.

¹³ Akerman, *Diary*, February 23, 1874, quoted in Felton, “Hon. Amos T. Akerman,” *The Cartersville Courant*, March, 26, 1885, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

¹⁴ Akerman, *Diary*, February 23, 1874, quoted in Felton, “Hon. Amos T. Akerman,” *The Cartersville Courant*, March, 26, 1885, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

¹⁵ Amos T. Akerman, *Diary*, July 4, 1861, JMA Private Collection.

¹⁶ Amos T. Akerman, *Diary*, July 24, 1861, JMA Private Collection.

December 1861, “At the request of Mr. Hull, who is trying to raise a company, I harangued the people on the war.”¹⁷

Regardless, Akerman was happy to return home at the war’s end. Military duty had interrupted his legal career, and emancipation had damaged his farm.¹⁸ So he “returned to Elberton and as soon as the courts were open, resumed the practice of law.”¹⁹

The Beginning of Reconstruction

When the final gunshots of the Civil War died out in April and May 1865, President Johnson decided to continue Lincoln’s strategy of swiftly bringing the Confederate states back into the Union.²⁰ He declared that the Southern states would be readmitted as soon as they ratified new state constitutions that rejected secession, abolished slavery, and repudiated their Confederate debts.²¹ Grateful for these lenient terms, Georgia quickly fulfilled these conditions. By early November 1865, the state had drafted a new constitution that met these requirements and in December its new legislature ratified the 13th Amendment.²² But Congress was wary of readmitting the Confederate states so quickly. Republicans resisted Johnson’s efforts to quickly restore self-governance, believing that Southerners had not been duly chastened.²³ This feeling

¹⁷ Amos T. Akerman, *Diary*, December 10, 1861, JMA Private Collection.

¹⁸ Amos Akerman to his sister, August 2, 1865, quoted in McFeely, “Amos T. Akerman,” 401.

¹⁹ Akerman, *Diary*, February 23, 1874, quoted in Felton, “Hon. Amos T. Akerman,” *The Cartersville Courant*, March, 26, 1885, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

²⁰ Edwin C. Woolley, *The Reconstruction of Georgia*, vol. 13, *Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law*, ed. the Faculty of Political Science of Columbia University (New York: Columbia University Press, 1901), 3-5.

²¹ Woolley, *Reconstruction of Georgia*, 5.

²² *Ibid*, 6-7.

²³ *Ibid*, 14.

was inflamed when, in 1866, Georgia and other Southern states passed racist laws that drastically curtailed freed slaves' civil and political rights and rejected the 14th Amendment.²⁴ Thus, in March 1867, over Johnson's veto, Congress passed the First Reconstruction Act, which divided the South into five districts under the control of the US military. To be readmitted into the Union, the Southern states would have to write new constitutions that enfranchised black people, disenfranchised prominent Confederates, and ratified the 14th Amendment.²⁵

Many Southerners were furious at the change in policy, decrying Yankee meddling in Southern race relations.²⁶ But Akerman was more sympathetic to the Northern view. "Some of us who had adhered to the Confederacy felt it to be our duty when we were to participate in the politics of the Union, to let Confederate ideas rule us no longer," he wrote years later. "In the great conflict, one party had contended for nationality and liberty, the other for state rights and slavery. We thought that our surrender implied the giving up of all that had been in controversy on our side, and had resolved to discard the doctrines of state rights and slavery. Regarding the subjugation of one race by the other as an appurtenance of slavery, we were content that it should go to the grave in which slavery had been buried."²⁷ In another letter he wrote that, "Our citizens, or those previously recognized as such, had it in their power by the exercise of some patience and of some judgment, to settle forever the domestic question of the relations between the races, and the more general question of the relation of the South to the general Government and the

²⁴ *Ibid*, 10, 11.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 16-17; *An Act to provide for the more efficient Government of the Rebel States*, 14 Stat. 428-430, c.153 (March 2, 1867).

²⁶ Woolley, *Reconstruction of Georgia*, 26.

²⁷ Amos T. Akerman to George Heidy, August 22, 1876, Amos Tappan Akerman Letterbooks, 1871-76, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

North.”²⁸ He thought that acceptance of Northern demands was the better part “of wisdom because it would soonest quiet the war, and whether we like it or not would bring us speedily to the shore on which we are bound ultimately to launch...”²⁹

On October 29, 1867, Georgians went to the polls to elect delegates for the new constitutional convention required by the Reconstruction Act. Many white conservatives boycotted this “bogus concern called an election.”³⁰ Among many grievances, they resented the inclusion of freed slaves. “We do not concede to Cuffee [a black delegate] and his race equal privileges with the white man in this Government,” wrote one angry Southerner.³¹ “The God of Nature has created different races of men, and has given this part of the globe to the white man for his inheritance.”³² Ultimately, 37 of the 172 elected delegates were Black, twelve others were white conservatives, and the remaining 133 were white Republicans.³³ The last category included Akerman, elected to represent Elbert County.³⁴

The Georgia Constitutional Convention of 1867-1868

Akerman arrived in Atlanta in early December 1867 for the opening of the Convention. One journalist described a “man of medium and spare stature, scrupulously neat in his personal

²⁸ Amos T. Akerman to James Jackson, Nov. 20, 1871, UVA Letterbooks.

²⁹ Amos T. Akerman to James Jackson, Nov. 20, 1871, UVA Letterbooks.

³⁰ Woolley, *Reconstruction of Georgia*, 26.

³¹ “The Negro Hard to Groom,” *The daily intelligencer*, December, 7, 1867, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 47.

³⁴ “Delegates Elect to the So-Called State Convention,” *The Weekly Atlanta Intelligencer*, November 20, 1867, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

appearance.”³⁵ The journalist noted his “affable manner, with a quiet self-possession, which makes him at the same time easy of approach and dignified of demeanor.”³⁶ Although this was “his first appearance in political life,” Akerman quickly became a leading figure.³⁷ The *New York Times* later called Akerman “the principal framer of the present State Constitution,”³⁸ and even Democratic papers labeled him “one of the ablest, if not *the* ablest man” in the “sword-and-bayonet Convention at Atlanta.”³⁹

One of Akerman’s primary contributions was his leadership of the Judiciary Committee. Bringing his legal talents to bear, Akerman crafted a new state judicial system that better-insulated judges from political pressure.⁴⁰ But Akerman won the most fame—and obloquy—for championing black civil rights.

The elephant in the Convention Hall was black suffrage, which Congress demanded the Southern states enshrine in their new constitutions. Unlike many Southerners and former slave-owners, Akerman had come to accept the virtue of giving black people the right to vote. “The extension of suffrage to colored men was at first an alarming imposition on account of the

³⁵ “Mr. Dawes’ Substitute for the Georgia Bill Passed in the House,” *New York Times*, June 25, 1870, 1, The Times Machine, The New York Times, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1870/06/25/issue.html>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ “Talk at the Capital About the Resignation of Mr. Hoar. Amos T. Akerman, of Georgia, Appointed as His Successor,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1870, TimesMachine.

³⁸ “Talk at the Capital About the Resignation of Mr. Hoar. Amos T. Akerman, of Georgia, Appointed as His Successor,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1870, TimesMachine.

³⁹ “An Antidote,” *Georgia Journal and Messenger*, December 18, 1867, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁴⁰ Georgia Constitution of 1865, art IV, § 1-2 (superseded by 1868); *Journal of the Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the People of Georgia, Held in the City of Atlanta in the Months of December 1867, and January, February, and March, 1868, and Ordinances and Resolutions Adopted* (Augusta, GA: E.H. Pughe Book and Job Printer, 1868), 106-109.

supposed ignorance of the class to be enfranchised,” he later recalled.⁴¹ “But on reflection we considered that if ignorance did not disqualify white men it should not disqualify black men. We considered that colored men were deeply interested in the country and had at least sense enough to know whether government worked well or not in its more palpable operations, and therefore would probably be safe voters.”⁴² Although he had formerly owned enslaved workers, Akerman now believed that black suffrage would allow Georgia to recover from economic disaster and move forward from the Civil War.

We saw that it was idle for the south to seek prosperity now by the old means of involuntary labor or anything akin to it and that if she would prosper it must be as other parts of the country prosper, by the industry of those who broke the soil and those who voluntarily labor for others, encouraged by fair wages, by the protection of the law, by the hope of advancement, by the respect of the community, and by the ennobling presence of an equal voice in public affairs. These views reconciled us to the suffrage of colored men and carried us into the Republican Party.⁴³

On January 14, the Committee on Franchise submitted its draft for a constitutional provision on suffrage. It stated, “In all elections by the people, the electors shall vote by ballot.”⁴⁴ Then, in the second section, it explained who could be an elector, significantly expanding the right to vote:

“Every male person born in the United States, and every male person who has been naturalized, or who has legally declared his intention to become a citizen of the United States, twenty-one years old or upward, who shall have resided in this State six months next preceding the election, and shall have resided three months in the County in which

⁴¹ Amos T. Akerman to George Heidy, August 22, 1876, UVA Letterbooks.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the People of Georgia*, 148.

he offers to vote, except as hereinafter provided, shall be deemed an elector; and every male inhabitant of the age aforesaid, who may be a resident of the State at the time of the adoption of this Constitution, shall be deemed an elector, and shall have all the rights of electors as aforesaid.”⁴⁵

To protect black voters from legal discrimination or mob action, the Committee also proposed that “Electors shall in all cases, except treason, felony, or breach of the peace, be privileged from arrest and civil process for five days before the first day of election, and two days subsequent to the last day of election.”⁴⁶ It would be “the duty of the General Assembly to enact adequate laws giving protection to electors, before, during, and subsequent to elections.”⁴⁷

Through his trial work and the speeches he had given during and after the Civil War, Akerman had become a skilled orator.⁴⁸ Now he threw his eloquence behind black suffrage. After one particularly notable speech, another delegate requested that “the Secretary of this Convention be authorized to have the able and eloquent speech of the Hon. Mr. Akerman, delivered in the Hall of the Georgia Constitutional Convention on the subject of suffrage, published in the official organs of this Convention, and that ten copies be furnished each member for their constituents.”⁴⁹

Akerman made one decision, however, that left an unfortunate stain on his civil rights record. On February 7, during the debate on suffrage, he proposed “to amend the second section by adding after the word ‘vote’” the requirement that an elector “shall have paid all taxes which

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁸ Amos T. Akerman, *Diary*, July 4, 1861, July 9, 1861, and December 10, 1861, JMA Private Collection.

⁴⁹ *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the People of Georgia*, 291.

may have been required of him, and which he may have had an opportunity of paying, agreeably to law, for the year next preceding the election.”⁵⁰ His amendment was adopted. Although Akerman probably had good intentions, white Democrats would exploit this provision to disenfranchise poor black people who had missed a tax payment or could not afford to pay a poll tax.⁵¹ In later years, Akerman regretted and attempted to nullify the amendment he had previously proposed. Writing in 1871 about the promotion of black voting, he asked, “But is not our most serious difficulty in the tax-paying requirement of the voter? Is it not true that the majority of the colored men failed to pay last year... We should bring out so distinctly as to justify congressional action, the abuse which is made of the clause in our constitution requiring voters to be taxpayers.”⁵²

In contrast to this short-sighted mistake, Akerman was very prescient on another issue that would also haunt Georgia in the future: the right of black Georgians to hold state office. In its original Majority Report, the Committee on Franchise clearly settled this issue: “All qualified electors, and none others, shall be eligible to any office in this State, unless disqualified by the Constitution of this State, or by the Constitution of the United States,” it provided in Section 10.⁵³ A month later, though, the Convention voted 126 to 12 to remove this section from the Constitution.⁵⁴ Lacking this section, the Constitution was unclear about whether or not black people could be excluded from state office, and the issue was eventually thrown to the courts.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 266.

⁵¹ Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 86-87.

⁵² Akerman to Atkins, November 13, 1871, quoted in Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 86-87.

⁵³ *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the People of Georgia*, 150.

⁵⁴ *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the People of Georgia*, 310-312.

Akerman was one of the twelve delegates who had voted against removing Section 10.⁵⁵ Years later, he still lamented that the Convention had “refused to deny the colored man the right to hold office by two formal votes, but also refused to establish distinctly, by a formal vote, their right to hold office.”⁵⁶ According to Akerman, “If that provision had been adopted, there would not have been the slightest doubt upon the subject [of black office-holding], and no ingenuity could have suggested a doubt as to the right of the colored members to seats in the legislature; but that clause was struck out of the report by the convention against my earnest protest, and by a vote of 120 ayes to 12 noes, only three colored members voting no, out of more than 30 in the convention.”⁵⁷ Akerman tried to explain why the majority of delegates had deleted the provision. “I think some who voted against it did so for the purpose of excluding colored men from holding office; I think the majority did so because they believed they had the right without it. I am bound also to say, in all candor, that one motive which led to striking out that provision was to enable the constitution to be differently interpreted upon that subject in different parts of the State.”⁵⁸ The Constitution’s vagueness on this important issue would come to haunt Georgia—and Akerman.

On March 7, toward the end of the Convention, Akerman moved to insert the following provision at the end of the Constitution: “This Constitution may be amended by a, vote of two-thirds of each branch of the General Assembly, at each of two successive regular sessions; but

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ U.S. Congress, House, *Condition of Affairs in Georgia, before The U.S. House of Representatives*, 40th Cong., 3d sess., February 12, 1869, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2022699666/> (statement of Amos T. Akerman), 18.

⁵⁷ U.S. Congress, House, *Condition of Affairs in Georgia*, 18.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the elective-franchise shall not be taken from any class entitled thereto under this Constitution, unless such alteration shall have been submitted to the people, and ratified at a general election.”⁵⁹ This would ensure that a Democratic legislature could not unilaterally revoke Black suffrage.

A version of this proposal was eventually adopted, but Akerman was not there for the final vote.⁶⁰ By that time, he had walked out of the Convention in protest over a radical debt relief measure. A majority of delegates had voted to include in the Constitution a provision prohibiting state courts from “render[ing] judgment against any citizen of this State upon any contract or agreement made or entered into, or for any tort or injury committed prior to the first day of June, 1865.”⁶¹ Akerman considered this to be “villainy under the name ‘relief’”—both economically disastrous and unconstitutional.⁶² So he left the Convention early and returned home.⁶³

The Presidential Election of 1868

After the Convention, Akerman traveled back to Elberton to resume his career and care for his family. But he couldn’t stay away from politics for long. In August 1868, his name was put forward in the Georgia Republican Convention as a possible Republican Presidential elector. Initially, the black delegates in the Convention distrusted Akerman because of his race and

⁵⁹ *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the People of Georgia*, 496.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 562.

⁶¹ *Ibid*.

⁶² Amos Akerman to Martha Akerman, February 6, 1868, quoted in Rebecca Felton, “Hon. Amos T. Akerman, A Biographical Sketch,” *The Cartersville Courant*, April 2, 1885, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁶³ *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the People of Georgia*, 499.

prominence. One black delegate proposed a Black alternative, saying that he “was for the black man” and “if there were any men in his county but black men who were for Grant and Colfax he did not know them.”⁶⁴ Another delegate, Hopkins of Chatham, stated “that Akerman was deadily opposed to the negro, and that he would not support him.”⁶⁵ But then other Black delegates stood up and defended Akerman. Two of them said Akerman “was the very best friend of the colored men, and would raise his voice for them at the risk of his life.”⁶⁶ Wallace, another black delegate, “said Akerman made the best suffrage speech in the Convention.”⁶⁷ In the end, “several negroes thus spoke up for Akerman, and he was unanimously elected for the State at large.”⁶⁸

As an elector for the 1868 Presidential Election, Akerman gave speeches around Georgia in support of Grant’s campaign. His general strategy was to highlight the choice between “the end of strife and discord by the election of Grant, or the renewal and continuance of strife and discord by the election of Seymour,” Grant’s opponent.⁶⁹ “Seymour is great in words—a man of passion and prejudice,” he conceded on one occasion, but “Grant is great in deeds—a man of judgment and reason.”⁷⁰ Akerman also used his position to argue for racial equality. In one speech, he proclaimed that, “The negroes should have equal rights with the whites” and, to soothe white fears of a race war, asked, “Why is there not a war of races when white and black

⁶⁴ “Nomination of Electors,” *The Daily News and Herald*, August 21, 1868, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ “Republican Meeting in Liberty,” *The Daily New Era*, October 21, 1868, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

horses work together.”⁷¹ He criticized those who would use violence to preserve white supremacy, lambasting “the ferocious spirits of [the Democratic] party who have disgraced the present campaign with more lawlessness than ever appeared before in American politics. Violent by nature, violent by training, violent by practice, they will persist in violence until they encounter the check of Grant’s firm hand, or, in the improbable event of their own triumph, replunge the country in blood.”⁷²

Akerman’s speeches met Republican acclaim. The *National Republican* called one “sound in logic, powerful in facts and argument, chaste in language, and eloquent in delivery,” and declared that even Democrats “would have agreed with us that the Colonel is a profound thinker, an honest man, and a fearless defender of THE RIGHT.”⁷³ Many Democrats, however, emphatically did not. Throughout 1868, Democratic newspapers denounced Akerman as a race traitor and enemy of the South. One Democratic paper declared that “we have had entirely too much of carpet-baggers and squatter sovereignty” and charged Akerman with wanting “to establish State inequality in order to inaugurate negro supremacy and a depraved military despotism at the South.”⁷⁴ Another newspaper later described its long-held perception of Akerman: “The speech was illustrative of the character the Sun has persistently given Akerman, as one, in whose veins there flows no drop of blood that is in sympathy with the South. Whose nature is so callous, selfish and restrained to admit of one kindly feeling toward those with whom

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² “Judge Cabiness Address Answered,” *The National Republican*, October 20, 1868, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁷³ “The Meeting Last Night,” *The National Republican*, October 25, 1868, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁷⁴ “Absurdities of a Georgia Radical Leader,” *The Weekly Constitutionalist*, September 23, 1868, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

he had lived for twenty years, and who have never treated him other than well.”⁷⁵ Akerman tried to brush off these vitriolic attacks. “Do not get cross or unhappy at seeing me abused in the papers,” he wrote his wife at one point. “It amounts to little, and on the whole, the criticisms have been less savage than I expected. . . Your husband is not as good as he should be, but he is not as bad as some of the papers make him out.”⁷⁶

But Democratic abuse was harder to ignore when it left the page and interfered with his daily life. On one occasion, Akerman traveled to a town in Lincoln County, Georgia to argue a case, but was unable to find lodging. As he informed the judge, “The keeper of the only hotel here, at which I have been in the habit of putting up for many years, informs me that he fears that he will be seriously injured if he receives me, because a large number of the citizens of the country have threatened to withdraw all patronage from him if I am entertained at his house.”⁷⁷ Akerman said that there “was no private family here whose hospitality I would ask or except (sic) in the present circumstances,” so declared that he was “unable to attend to my business in this Court” and requested “that the cases in which I am employed may stand continued for the term.”⁷⁸ The judge sympathized. “A non-resident attorney must stay somewhere in the place,” he recognized. He decided that “he would not require of him an impossibility” and “granted the application” for delay.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ “Mr. Akerman Makes a Speech,” *The Savannah Morning News*, September 5, 1870, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁷⁶ Amos Akerman to Martha Akerman, February 1, 1870, quoted in Felton, “Hon. Amos T. Akerman,” *The Cartersville Courant*, March, 26, 1885, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁷⁷ “Outrage in Lincoln County,” *The National Republican*, October 30, 1868, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

On another occasion shortly before the 1868 election, Akerman traveled to Wilkes County and received an even nastier welcome. This time, he successfully found a room at the local inn. But when he called for his horse on the night of his departure, he received a painful shock. When the animal was led out, he saw that some “mischievous boys” had shaved his horse’s mane and tail and painted its body so that it looked like a zebra.⁸⁰ A grinning crowd stood around to see how he would react to this affront.⁸¹ But Akerman just murmured that he didn’t recognize this animal and returned inside. This turned out to be a stroke of luck. He learned later that a group of Klansmen were waiting to ambush him as soon as left the town.⁸²

“It is certainly a thankless office to try to help those who are determined not to be helped,” he later told a friend. “Whether, if in 1867, I had foreseen the strength of the prejudices to be encountered, I should have had the courage to enter the field on the side, which I believed both expedient and right, I cannot say, but, having entered, I was not disposed to recede, though hard pressed by many adversaries...”⁸³ Though saddened by Democrats’ hostility to him, he was determined to do the right thing, even if it meant getting turned away from hotels. “For my politics, I am responsible to my conscience, and as long as my conscience approves them, I shall not change or modify them in the slightest degree to humor those citizens of Lincoln Country who have thus interfered between this landlord and his guests.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ “Convention,” *The Cartersville Express*, November 20, 1868, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁸¹ Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 47.

⁸² Alfred Akerman to Amos Akerman, quoted in Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 47-48.

⁸³ Amos T. Akerman to James Jackson, Nov. 20, 1871, UVA Letterbooks.

⁸⁴ “Outrage in Lincoln County,” *The National Republican*, October 30, 1868, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

The Presidential Election took place on November 5, 1868. That day, Akerman realized that “the controlling portion of the Democratic party can be moved to indignation by any thing, however base morally, done in furtherance of Democratic success.”⁸⁵ He experienced firsthand the Democratic effort to “recover by the ballot what they lost in arms.”⁸⁶

As a Grant elector, Akerman decided that he would escort black Georgians to the polls on Election Day to ensure they were treated fairly. He traveled to Ela, Georgia to help the black voters there. Akerman later testified to Congress about his experiences that day. “A greater part of the white citizens who were to vote at that place were democrats; a large portion of the colored citizens are republicans. I was known to be somewhat prominent in the republican party; and I had desired those colored men who were disposed to vote that ticket to meet at a certain place the morning of that day.”⁸⁷ The morning started peacefully. “I made them a short address... giving reasons why I thought they would act wisely to vote the republican ticket, ending by telling them they were entirely free to vote as they pleased. If they chose to vote the democratic ticket, they could find democratic ballots at the courthouse; but if they chose to vote the republican ticket, I would supply them with ballots.”⁸⁸ The situation quickly took a turn for the worse. “While I was speaking in this way a number of white people, who were democrats, came up and stood behind me, or near me, and begun to interrupt me and dispute my assertions. Some of them were civil and respectful in manner; others used very violent, profane, and threatening

⁸⁵ Amos T. Akerman to Mrs. Felton, December 21, 1878, Amos Tappan Akerman Letterbook, 1878-1880, Private collection of J. Mark Akerman.

⁸⁶ Amos T. Akerman to David Dimond, January 3, 1879, Letterbook, JMA Private Collection.

⁸⁷ U.S. Congress, House, *Condition of Affairs in Georgia*, 14.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

language against those who should vote...the radical ticket.”⁸⁹ These threats alarmed some of the black voters. Nevertheless, three hundred of them stayed and took Republican tickets from Akerman.

Akerman waited with the black voters for a couple of hours, realizing that “they had better not come up until there was a lull in the voting, as it might be considered an intrusion upon the white people to crowd upon them.”⁹⁰ But when such a lull occurred and he led the voters toward the courthouse, a crowd of people yelled “‘close up, close up,’ and there was a rush to the court-house, around the window, making it impossible for us to approach the window... Occasionally a person would approach the window and vote, but very few of the crowd about the window were voting; most of them were there merely blocking up the way.”⁹¹ The crowd yelled “‘profane, abusive, and threatening language...towards myself and to the colored people who were behind me.”⁹² Then the tense situation turned violent. Suddenly, “I heard confusion behind me, persons running and the report of a pistol; it was impossible for me to see by whom it was fired.”⁹³ Only later did he learn what had happened:

Two white men had gone into this crowd of colored men, the former master and employer of one of the colored men and his son, who denounced this colored man as one of the worst radicals in the country, the father pronouncing him a mean [n****r], and that he had been one ever since his freedom. Very threatening and abusive language was used toward him, and other white people gathered around, when one of them began to strike him under the chin; he begged them to let him alone; said he was not pestering them, and hoped they would not pester him. They persisted in beating him and he started to retreat;

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

one person struck him on the head with a stick; then he began to run and the colored people around him to run; a white man, endeavoring to intercept him in his retreat, raised in his hand a very large stone as if to throw at him, but the [n****r] caught the stone, threw it down, and then ran on. About that stage of proceedings a pistol was fired at him, but did not hit him; he ran and was caught by a white person, who struck him upon the forehead with a pistol, cutting a very deep gash in his forehead; he ran around to the soldiers, and when I found him, was bleeding very profusely from this gash. The colored people had generally retreated to the same place, where they felt safe under the protection of the soldiers.⁹⁴

After further harassment and intimidation, the majority of the black voters gave up.

According to Akerman, “Many of the colored people told me they feared to vote; that if not subjected to immediate injury, they would find it difficult to get employment and homes for another year.”⁹⁵ Ultimately, this voting place recorded 798 Democratic and 21 Republican voters. But Akerman believed that “several hundred voted reluctantly, through fear, and against their own preference in regard to the candidates... If there had not been any apprehension of violence, my opinion is there would have been about 1,800 votes cast in the county, there being above 2,000 voters in the county; and of these, my belief is that 1,000 or 1,050 would have been cast for the republican ticket, and 750 or 800 for the democratic ticket.”⁹⁶ He believed that these numbers were broadly representative of Georgia as a whole.

Nevertheless, Akerman had hope for the future. “I do not think, in the future, the colored voters will be subjected to the same violence as in the past,” he told Congress. “I think the effect of the late election, and of the efforts made by our democratic citizens to get the votes of the negroes, has habituated them to seeing the negroes vote and exercise these political privileges,

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

and that they will obtain greater freedom in their exercise hereafter.”⁹⁷ Akerman believed that Congress could encourage this progress, using its 14th Amendment power to ensure that states gave black citizens equal protection under the law. Later, as Attorney General, he would draw on his personal experience in Georgia to draft the Akerman Election Law of 1870, which helped to protect future black voters from the sorts of abuse he had experienced on that hot Georgia day.⁹⁸

White v. Clements and Black Officeholders in Georgia

After the Georgia Constitutional Convention concluded in March 1868, elections were held for the new State House and Senate. Unlike in the election of Convention delegates, which most white Georgians had boycotted, the Conservatives now voted en masse.⁹⁹ They won a resounding victory in the April elections, taking half the seats in the State Senate and a majority in the State House.¹⁰⁰ Triumphant, they quickly turned their attention to the 25 black State Representatives and 3 black State Senators, whose presence infuriated them.¹⁰¹ In September 1868, exploiting the Constitution’s ambiguity on the right of Black people to hold state office, the Conservatives expelled these black legislators and seated the white Democrats who had run against them in their stead.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ *Ibid* 19.

⁹⁸ *An Act to provide for an Election and to alter and amend the Laws in relation to the holding of Elections*, Public Law No. 6 - O. 41, *Public Laws passed by the General Assembly of the State of Georgia* (1870): 6-10; “The Election Bill,” *The Daily Sun*, September 24, 1870, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

⁹⁹ Woolley, *Reconstruction of Georgia*, 26, 31.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 26.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁰² *Ibid*.

Hearing of this expulsion, a white man named William Clements thought he saw a way to pull victory from the jaws of defeat. Clements had recently lost the election for Clerk of Chatham County Superior Court to a black man named Richard White. Clements thought the expulsion of the black legislators might be a precedent for overturning the voters' decision. Thus, in January 1869, he filed suit in the Superior Court of Chatham County, alleging that "Richard W. White is a person of color" and is "consequently ineligible to the office of Clerk" in a Georgia court.¹⁰³ When the Superior court ruled that White was indeed eligible, he appealed the case to Georgia's Supreme Court, arguing that the Superior Court was wrong to construe the Constitution as barring black individuals from office.¹⁰⁴ Recognizing the importance of this case, an interested third party enlisted the help of a prominent Republican attorney, Amos Akerman, to represent White in the Supreme Court.¹⁰⁵

Oral argument commenced on June 10, 1869, at 10 am.¹⁰⁶ Colonel Julian Hartridge, a former Representative in the Confederate Congress, represented Clements. Standing before the Justices, Hartridge argued that the delegates of the Georgia Constitutional Convention had only given black men certain enumerated rights: "They gave him the right to go into the courts, to sue and be sued; the right to testify in certain cases; the right to have his person and property protected; the right to pursue the path of knowledge, or of wealth, and the acquisition of the one

¹⁰³ Richard W. White v. Wm. J. Clements, 39 Ga. 232 (1869), quoted in *Can a Negro Hold Office in Georgia? Arguments of Counsel, with the Opinions of the Judges, and the Decision of the Court in the Case of Richard V. White versus Wm. J. Clements*, (Atlanta, GA: Daily Intelligencer Book and Job Office, 1869), 4.

¹⁰⁴ White v. Clements, 16.

¹⁰⁵ "Eligibility of Colored Persons to Office in Georgia," *The Daily New Era*, April 29, 1869, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

¹⁰⁶ White v. Clements, 28.

or the other just like a white man.”¹⁰⁷ But nowhere did the Constitution give black men the right to hold office, so Richard White was ineligible to do so.¹⁰⁸

When Akerman’s turn came to speak, he contended that the Georgia Constitution should be applied in exactly the opposite way. In his view, black men had the right to hold office unless there was an express *disqualification*. He charged first that Hartidge “ignores the revolutionary deluge which has swept over the land, and assumes that the ancient polity of the State is still our polity, that the present government is a continuation and not a new creation.” This was not true; the destruction of the Confederate governments at the end of the Civil War annulled all preceding laws and traditions. Hence, the only laws pertinent to this case were the ones that had been enacted since 1865.

Akerman then listed the Georgia Constitution’s requirements for holding office: “Looking at the Constitution, we find citizenship, and a certain age, residence and professional standing are required of those who shall fill a few specified offices; and for no other office is any qualification specially laid down... Neither European blood is made a qualification, nor African blood a disqualification.” As “all are qualified who are not expressly disqualified,” this meant that black men had the right to hold office.¹⁰⁹

Akerman conceded that some Americans were excluded from holding state office. “But it may be asked, ‘whom do I mean by all?’ for no one can mean so absurd a thing as that all persons on earth, or in the State, not of the classes expressly disqualified, are eligible to office. I

¹⁰⁷ White v. Clements, 54.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ White v. Clements, 66.

answer, all to whom political functions are given by the Constitution; all who act in matters pertaining to the government; all who in a strict political sense we denominate the people. And these are the voters. These constitute the political family.”¹¹⁰ According to Akerman, the right to vote carried with it the right to hold office. And to the arguments of opposing counsel that it is unlikely “that the makers of the Constitution would open office to men so ignorant as most colored men are,” Akerman replied, “Why is ignorance now, for the first time, so alarming? Is it not as dangerous under a white skin as under a black skin?”¹¹¹

Akerman then closed. “In the absence of positive disqualifications, the right to vote includes eligibility to office; the capacity to select includes capacity to be selected; a capacity to be a principal includes a capacity to be an agent; a capacity to depute includes a capacity to be Deputed.”¹¹² In sum, “the right to hold office not being given in the Constitution to the white man by name any more than to the black man by name, the black man, therefore, stands on the same footing as the white.”¹¹³

The Court took five days to mull over the case. On June 15, the Court reconvened and announced its decision.¹¹⁴ It ruled that the Superior Court had erred because “a person having one-eighth or more of African blood in his veins is not ineligible to office in this State.”¹¹⁵ Drawing on many of Akerman’s arguments, it stated that, because black Georgians had not been

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

expressly disqualified from holding office and no previous laws applied to this case, black people had just as much right to hold state office as whites.¹¹⁶ This ruling did not directly affect the exclusion of Georgia's black legislators—"I have no doubt that the opinion of the Supreme Court would recognize the right of negroes to hold office, but the opinion of that court would not be binding upon the legislature," Akerman had noted a few months before—but it did set an important precedent.¹¹⁷ Congress' Reorganization Act of 1869 declared the expulsion of elected legislators on the basis of race "illegal and revolutionary" and Georgia's black legislators were duly seated in January 1870.¹¹⁸

Akerman On the National Stage

Thus ended Akerman's participation in the nitty-gritty politics of Georgia's Reconstruction. In June 1870, President Grant nominated him to be the Attorney General of the United States. This appointment came as a surprise to the entire country: Akerman had never set foot on the national political stage. But those familiar with Akerman knew he could fill the role. Akerman "is today considered one of the leading lawyers of the State, and, in fact, in the South," wrote the *New York Times*. "He was one of the earliest and staunchest friends of equal and political rights to all men, and has been here several times before the President and Congressional Committees, as an earnest advocate for the admission of Georgia and its

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 106-108.

¹¹⁷ U.S. Congress, House, *Condition of Affairs in Georgia*, 20.

¹¹⁸ Woolley, *Reconstruction of Georgia*, 39.

representation in Congress.”¹¹⁹ Georgia’s Republican newspapers also applauded the appointment, declaring that it “meets the approbation of the Republican Party in this State and is a fitting tribute to the merits of that gentleman as a jurist and as a man. It is also a timely recognition of his services as a firm and undoubted Southern Republican who has given much of his time and talents to the cause of Reconstruction in Georgia.”¹²⁰ Even some Democratic newspapers conceded that Akerman was the right man for the job. “The appointment itself is one - a Republican having to fill it - to which we shall offer no objection,” wrote the Democratic *Atlanta Daily Intelligencer*. “The appointee himself is one of the leading Republicans in this State, and is perhaps the best qualified of any legal gentleman of that party in it for such a position.”¹²¹

Though now a national statesman, Akerman continued to battle for black rights. He spent much of his tenure as Attorney General overseeing prosecutions of the Ku Klux Klan, which he called “the most atrocious organization that the civilized part of the world has ever known.”¹²² Akerman was determined to stamp out this menace and was embarrassed by his countrymen’s sympathy for its misdeeds. “To persons who had not the strongest evidence of the facts, a history of the Ku Klux would be incredible,” he wrote in his diary. “That any large portion of our people should be so ensavaged as to perpetrate or to excuse such actions is the darkest blot on Southern

¹¹⁹ “Talk at the Capital About the Resignation of Mr. Hoar. Amos T. Akerman, of Georgia, Appointed as His Successor,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1870, TimesMachine.

¹²⁰ “Hon. Amos T. Akerman: The Georgia Republican,” *Atlanta Daily New Era*, June 17, 1870, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

¹²¹ “The Appointment of Mr. Akerman, as United States Attorney General,” *Daily Atlanta Intelligencer*, June 17, 1870, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

¹²² Amos T. Akerman to James Jackson, Nov. 20, 1871, UVA Letterbooks.

character in this age.”¹²³ Under Akerman’s leadership, the Department of Justice brought 3,384 indictments against Ku Klux Klan members.¹²⁴ He focused so much of his time and attention on the KKK that other members of Grant’s Cabinet grew bored with his frequent updates. As Secretary of State Alexander Fish heartlessly noted in his diary one day, “Akerman introduces Ku Klux. He has it on the brain. He tells a number of stories, one of a fellow being castrated, with terribly minute and tedious details of each case. It has got to be a bore to listen twice a week to this thing.”¹²⁵

As Attorney General, Akerman continued to put personal integrity above all. He counseled his son, “Understand public questions. Ask what is right, not what is popular, and when you have ascertained the right, try to make it popular, but cleave to it, popular or not.”¹²⁶ Unfortunately, other members of the Grant Administration were notoriously corrupt, and Akerman’s unique probity eventually cost him his job. In 1871, a railroad company asked for his permission to transfer their Congressional land grants to other railroads.¹²⁷ When Akerman ruled against them, the railroads first enlisted U.S. Senators to lobby him, then offered him a \$50,000 bribe.¹²⁸ Neither worked. “I will not subserve to certain selfish interests,” Akerman said of the

¹²³ Amos T. Akerman, *Diary*, April 9, 1847, JMA Private Collection.

¹²⁴ Shappert, "Fighting Domestic Terrorism," 126.

¹²⁵ Hamilton Fish, *Diary*, November 24, 1871, quoted in McFeely, “Amos T. Akerman,” 410.

¹²⁶ Amos T. Akerman to Benjamin Akerman, January 5, 1873, Amos T. Akerman Letters, Private collection of J. Mark Akerman.

¹²⁷ Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 99.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 102, 107.

matter.¹²⁹ Ultimately, to get their way, the railroads successfully pressured Grant into firing Akerman and replacing him with someone more amenable.¹³⁰

All of these traits—his commitment to black civil and political rights, his determination to do the right thing, and his utter incorruptibility—also characterized the start of Akerman’s political career during the Reconstruction of Georgia. Ignoring the hateful rhetoric of his Democratic neighbors, Akerman fought for the equal rights of freed slaves, knowing that open-minded tolerance was the best course for them and, in the long run, for Georgia. Through his evolution from a racist slave-owner into a fervent Republican and then into the scourge of the Ku Klux Klan, the arc of Akerman’s life bent toward justice. His personal story shows what might have been if more Southerners had been willing to change their minds and accept the outcome of the Civil War, instead of spending decades clinging to the departed past.

¹²⁹ Amos Akerman to Martha Akerman, August 30, 1871, quoted in Felton, “Hon. Amos T. Akerman,” *The Cartersville Courant*, April 2, 1885, Georgia Historic Newspapers.

¹³⁰ Hamilton, “Amos T. Akerman,” 107-108.

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