

READING

Election Day in Clinton, Mississippi (1875)

*Please note that this reading contains certain racial epithets.
We have chosen to include them in order to honestly communicate
the bigoted language of the time.*

State Senator Charles Caldwell was a former slave who had led a company of African American soldiers, earlier in 1875, in a state militia formed to protect freedpeople from the White Line. The militia was later disbanded by the governor as part of a “peace agreement” with the White Line, but attacks and intimidation continued, and Caldwell himself was assassinated later that year. Eugene Welborne, who served as Caldwell’s first lieutenant in the militia, gave this account of election day in November 1875 in Clinton, Mississippi, and Caldwell’s efforts to ensure a fair vote.

We could hear in the morning, the cannons commencing to shoot in every direction, just a firing. You could see men with their sixteen-shooters buckled on them charging all through the country. They went in squads.

One crowd would come in from Raymond and say, “One hundred and fifty niggers killed in Raymond; one white man slightly wounded.” The guns were firing continually. Word came from Jackson, “The white men have whipped the niggers and run them out.”

We did not know what in the world to do. Senator Caldwell was there and I said, “Senator, I think we might just as well give up. We can’t do anything here. These men are riding all about the county with their sixteen-shooters.” He says, “No. We are going to stay right here. I don’t care what they say to you, don’t you say a word.” We voted as rapidly as we could.

Our votes were pretty strong all day and we would have polled our usual vote, even with all the intimidation, if they would have let us. But our Republicans that were appointed by the board of registration were told that it would not be healthy for them to serve and they made the whole thing Democratic. So when a Republican would come in to vote this fellow looked

on the book and said, "I cannot find your name here. Stand aside." They turned off 80 Republicans, one after the other, that way.

I saw Senator Caldwell standing at the door. Said I, "What are you going to do about these registration papers?" "I think," says he, "we will go in and see these fellows." So we went in and spoke to one of the officers. When Mr. Caldwell said, "I know that this man's name was on that book," they said it didn't make any difference what he knew and that he was not going to vote.¹

¹ In Dorothy Sterling, ed., *The Trouble They Seen: The Story of Reconstruction in the Words of African Americans* (Da Capo Press, 1994), 452.