

Danville Riot

The so-called “Danville Riot” that occurred on November 3, 1883 was a pivotal event in the political life of Danville and the State of Virginia. It was a relatively small skirmish between a number of black and white citizens on Main Street in Danville in which “four blacks lay dead in the streets. As many as ten others were wounded including one white man who had been accidentally shot and severely wounded while he fired off a pistol in each hand. He eventually died too.” The incident was brought on as a result of fierce competition prior to the 1883 state election between largely white Democrats and members of the Coalition Party, an alliance of Readjusters and Republicans supported by many black citizens, and was blown out of proportion by the politics involved. It was widely reported in Northern newspapers often in ways which were not very complimentary to the citizens of Danville. The Democrats swept the election that followed and controlled politics in Virginia for many years with a policy of white supremacy and strict segregation of the races in all aspects of society. It was not until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that this policy would be changed. The details of the “Riot” and the circumstances surrounding it have been documented in a book, “Danville, Virginia and the Coming of the Modern South”, by Michael Swanson published in 2010.

In the aftermath of the “Riot” a Committee of Forty was set up in Danville to investigate the facts concerning the “Riot” and to submit a report. The concluding statement in the report stated, “Your committee has thus confined itself to the investigation of the facts and preparation of the statement required by your resolution, and herewith submit the evidence as a full and complete vindication of our town and people from ‘the gross misstatements which have been circulated through a portion of the press of the county.’”

The 47-page report of the Committee of Forty was published at Richmond in 1883 by Johns & Goolsby, Book and Job Printers and is in the public domain. It is available on the Internet at http://openlibrary.org/books/OL22865140m/Danville_riot , but since downloading and printing the entire document is rather tedious and time consuming and since it is not under copyright it has been downloaded and printed by the Virginia-North Carolina Piedmont Genealogical Society and a copy is available in the Search Room of the Society and copies will be made available for a nominal charge for anyone desiring a personal copy.

The Report names all of the members of the Committee of Forty and records the sworn testimony of all of the 37 witnesses who were called to testify before the Committee. The Report is a valuable source of information about people and places in Danville in 1883. Although the members of the Committee of Forty are listed in their Report we will list them here for those who may wish to know who they were without referring to the Report. As listed in the Report they were: “W. T. Sutherlin, Chairman, L. C. Berkeley, Jr., W. P. Bethell, Berryman Green, H. J. Miller, H. H. Hurt, T. L. Sydnor, W. H. White, J. T. Averett, R. W. Peatross, R. V. Barksdale, Abner Anderson, Jno. M. Johnston, E. H. Miller, S. I Roberts, Robert Brydon, Fletcher Turner, R. F. Jennings, Samuel S. Berger, E. B. Withers, J. Hirsh, W. S. Wilkinson, R. C. Herndon,

Thomas D. Stokes, Jonas Kaufman, Charles Orchard, J. R. Perkinson, T. B. Fitzgerald, Wm. C. Grasty, H. F. Vass, Jno. G. Friend, Jno R. Pace, P. W. Ferrell, J. L. Tyack, T. R. Sclater, George C. Ayres, J. M. Neal, Jno. F. Rison, W. H. Trowbridge, James Fricker.” Those familiar with the history of Danville may recognize many of the names on this list.

The witnesses who were called before the Committee as listed in the Report were: “W. J. Dance, Chas. D. Noell, P. Bouldin, J. C. Reagen, B. F. Williamson, T. E. Gregory, J. G. Miller, Sr., L. L. Bass, Chas. Friend, Jas. P. Harrison, James Wood (sergeant), Mason Arrington (colored), W. J. Moore, F. Keen, Jr., Dr. M. E. Douglass, Walter S. Withers (colored police), Geo. W. Swain, J. D. Blair, Capt. J. H. Oliver, Ro. Lipscomb, W. G. Lynn, W. P. Graves, J. E. Perkinson, Frank Corbett (colored), W. A. Meeks, J. T. Morton, S. F. Terry, N. F. Reid, R. M. Hubbard, H. A. Cobbs, P. B. Booth, Chas. G. Freeman (police), F. B. Fitzgerald, W. R. Taylor, Abram Wimbish, L. C. Berkley, Jr., and S. S. Kent.”