

From the front door of the Museum I can see the stately white house once occupied by General John B. Callis; hero of the Iron Brigade; the tough old man who led his soldiers at South Mountain, Gainesville, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Gettysburg. Who was injured at the Second Battle of Bull Run. Who was shot three times at Gettysburg and carried a bullet in his chest from July 1, 1863, the first day of the battle until September 28, 1898, the day he died. After lying on the battlefield for 43 hours with what should have been a mortal wound, he survived and returned to the Army to serve in Washington and in the South during reconstruction.



Callis House in Lancaster Wisconsin

General Callis Later in Life

Last week I found a photo of Callis online (above) that was taken in 1868 during a period of his life that was unlike anything he had previously experienced. He found that the "peace" following the war was terrifying for some who had expected freedom and opportunity after the chains had fallen away. Callis saw at first hand the birth of an American terrorist organization, the Ku Klux Klan.



Klan Regalia typical of Northern Alabama in the 1860's

When I look at the photo of Callis I notice the alert, determined blue eyes - then I see his hands. Those hands are thin and appear weak. The drape of his clothing reveals a very thin, almost emaciated body. It is obvious that the enemy bullet dwelling in his lung has not surrendered in its purpose of killing him. He is seemingly an invalid, but look again at those eyes, the jaw set, and you realize he is not willing to suffer his body to hold him back. He is a man looking forward. He is a man on a mission.

From July until October of 1863 Callis remained in Gettysburg, at the home of D.A. Buehler where he had been taken. Army doctors expected to him to die from his wounds. For months he was too weak to endure rail transportation to his home in Wisconsin. His wife, expecting that he would not survive, came to Gettysburg to care for him and stayed for all those months. Eventually he insisted on taking the train ride home, whether he lived or died. He lived.

After his return to Lancaster, he was discharged on December 28, 1863 as physically disabled, but as soon as he could, he returned to the Veteran Reserve Corps. The V.R.C. was formed in 1863. Initially called the Invalid Corps, it allowed men "unable to bear the march" to serve in more sedate duties, freeing the able bodied to serve in the field. From May 24, 1864 to July 1865 he served as Commander of the 7th Regiment, V.R.C., which served as part of Washington D. C.'s home guard and military police force. During a portion of that period he served as Superintendent of the War Department buildings in Washington, D.C. He said that during his superintendence he saw President Lincoln almost every day when he came in to read and reply to his telegraph messages.

Callis had not seen the end of battles. He participated in the desperate defense of Washington during the raid of Jubal Early on July 11th and 12th 1864. With very few regular army units in Washington it fell on the V.R.C. to man the forts encircling the city. He was taken to his post at Fort Brand by ambulance, and directed his hobbled veterans, many of whom carried rebel lead, in the fight against a hardened rebel army. Three weeks after the battle Judge Mills of Lancaster visited Washington and was given a tour of the battlefield by Callis. He wrote a letter home:

“MR. COVER: - Here I am at the Headquarters of Major Callis, 7th Regiment Reserve Corps. He has under his command five links of the iron chain that girds Washington. – This is the style of this system of forts on the north side of the Potomac...he was engaged in a desperate battle with rebels under Breckenridge and Early around these fortifications. “The rebels fought us three days,” says the Major. “It was a formidable invasion designed to devastate Maryland and Pennsylvania with fire and sword...Mount this horse, I will show you what war does.” On we dash on the ferocious cavalry horse, over the battle ground; there is a field as bare as Sahara; the best corn in Maryland grew there a few days ago; it is trodden down like a brick yard. There – stood President Lincoln cheering on his soldiers; a surgeon is shot down by his side, “Surely that means me,” said the President, “a sad mistake for my friend the doctor.”

He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel on May 18, 1863 and to Brevet Colonel in October of that year. After the end of the Civil War, he was made an officer of the regular army's 45th infantry, and stationed in Huntsville, Alabama. In 1865 he was made an assistant commissioner in the Freedman's Bureau under General Oliver O. Howard. The purpose of the Callis' work in the Freedmen's Bureau was to assist the 439,000 newly freed slaves of Alabama in obtaining employment, education, food and housing and to assure that their rights, including voting rights, were respected. On March 14, 1867 the Senate confirmed his appointment to Brigadier General by Brevet citing "Gallant and Meritorious Service in the Field." He had written letters seeking this higher ranking, citing fighting in eighteen battles; *“I...flatter myself that I have acquitted myself credibly. I ask for this Bvt. Because I see others who have it who I know have not done half the service, nor received half the punishment in the way of wounds that I have”*

As a commissioner of the bureau, he procured large amounts of food grains which were distributed to both black and white citizens in need. He worked with charitable northern groups to build schools for black children. He also helped organize a local "Union League" that for a while became a potent political force. Most white Alabamians boycotted elections and found free Negroes wandering about unsupervised unsettling, and black Federal occupation troops intolerable. Until the states of the defeated Confederacy adopted new constitutions guaranteeing equal rights, they could not be re-admitted to the Union.

To the southern whites Callis was just another carpetbagger, those northerners who, as they saw it had come to the south to enrich themselves by holding office at taxpayer expense and stealing as much land and money as the occupation forces backing them would allow.

One of the widely publicized events of Callis stay in Huntsville, Alabama occurred when a group of Negroes came to his office, and told him that a white man nearby had tied one of his former slaves to a post and was whipping her. Callis mounted his horse and hurried to the scene. What happened next was described by him to a reporter in an 1894 Janesville Gazette article:

"He found the man cow-hiding his victim most brutally.

"Stop that!" he cried.

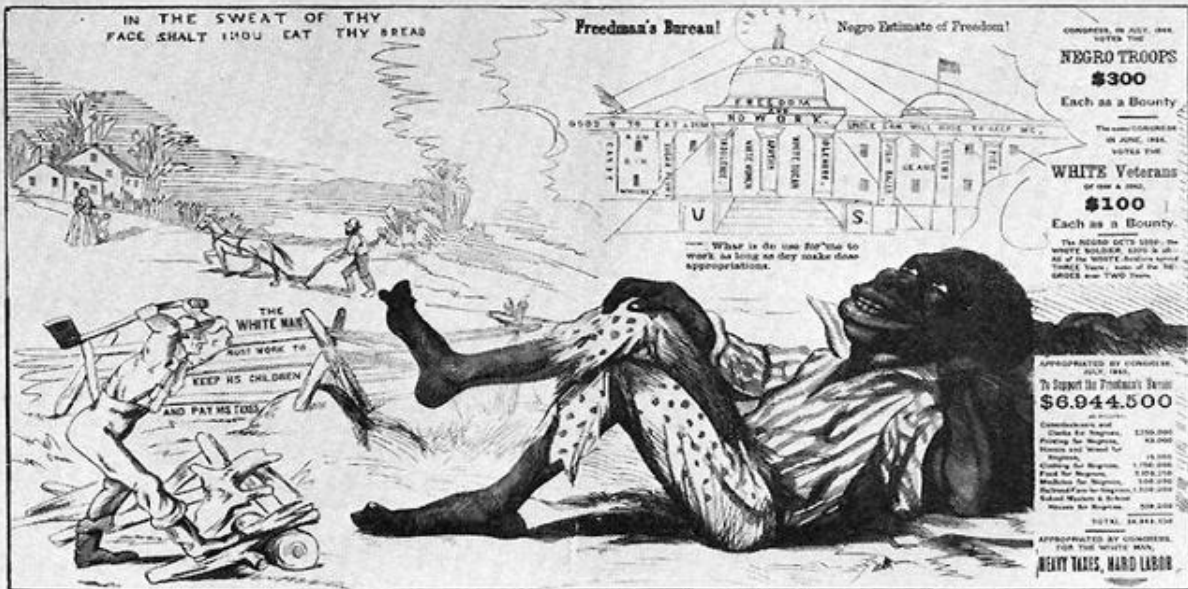
"I'll stop when I get ready." said the southerner defiantly.

General Callis dismounted and started into the yard. There was a movement of the other man's hand that told of a pistol, and the general's sword was out in an instant (he had no gun). The next moment the man-beater had been cut down and the woman was free."

His reputation as a man not to be fooled with spread as he dealt with ongoing incidents of abuse of freedmen, and challenges to duels by "fire-eaters" who sought excuses to kill him. Accepting one challenge, he chose the following as the means for the duel: Each man was to be nailed in leather trousers to a board facing the other at arms length. They would then use Bowie Knives to carve each other up. "I will cut your heart out," Callis snarled. His challenger beat a hasty retreat.

THE FREEDMAN'S BUREAU!

AN AGENCY TO KEEP THE **NEGRO** IN IDLENESS AT THE **EXPENSE** OF THE WHITE MAN.
 TWICE VETOED BY THE **PRESIDENT**, AND MADE A LAW BY **CONGRESS**.
SUPPORT CONGRESS & YOU SUPPORT THE NEGRO. SUSTAIN THE PRESIDENT & YOU PROTECT THE WHITE MAN



For 1864 and 1865, the FREEDMAN'S BUREAU cost the Tax-payers of the Nation, at least **GEAR!** TWENTY-FIVE MILLIONS OF DOLLARS. For 1866, THE SHARE of the Tax-payers of Pennsylvania will be about **ONE** 'ON OF DOLLARS. **CLYMER** is OPPOSED to it.

Racist Poster of Hiester Clymer, white supremacist candidate for Governor of Pennsylvania (1866). Without the overt racism, similar sentiments have been expressed in the current budget negotiations where some condemn "lifetime government dependency."

Poster source: Library of congress

Callis was angered as whites joined the newly organized Ku Klux Klan, and began terrorizing freedmen who were the leaders of their people. Murder, horse-whipping, arson, and other means were the modus operandi of the Klan which had the support of the majority of the native white residents. Determined to put the free Black citizen back "in his place," the Klan rode by night attacking individual black households, and making public shows of force. The Encyclopedia of Alabama puts the Klan in its true perspective: "The Klan targeted freedpeople, white Republicans, northern missionaries, and teachers working in black schools." The intention was to deny freed blacks the right to vote, hold public office, or participate in any way in the governance of the state. This terrorism also stopped freed slaves from leaving their former masters employment, and allowed their employers the power to beat, rape, or kill them at will. A few examples of the outrages committed are contained in the records of the Freedmen's Bureau for 1866:

- Colored man killed for refusing to sign contract,
- Freedman's wife beaten with club by her employer. Freedman objected - in the night was taken from his house and whipped nearly to death with a buggy trace by son of the employer & two others.
- Murderous assault upon returned black Union soldier
- Freed girl beaten to death by two white men
- Freedman brought to hospital in Montgomery, shot through the head by unknown parties - died in few hours,
- Freedman killed with an axe



Just before the presidential election in 1868, the Ku Klux Klan, in a body alleged to be 1,500 strong, rode into the city of Huntsville, Madison County, Alabama and paraded in the streets. Callis was there. The obvious intention of the Klan was to frighten freedmen so that they would not attempt to vote. Shots were fired, several Negroes were wounded, and Judge Thurlow, a “scalawag” (an indigenous white who cooperated with the federal government) was “accidentally shot and killed.” No one in Madison County was ever punished for participation in the activities of the Ku-Klux-Klan.

Callis, is regarded by most southern historians as being “an outspoken Radical and a League organizer.” He ran as an independent for Congress in February of 1868, securing “the nearly united black vote over the official Republican nominee”, and winning the House seat. He was helped by a boycott of the largest part of the white population. He was not seated until July 1868, after the House passed an Act of Admission allowing five states, including Alabama, back into the union. In Congress he remained an outspoken advocate for the freedmen of the south. He received many letters from people in Alabama about the Klan. He introduced into the Congressional Record the following correspondence, which was one of many similar letters sent to him:

40th CONGRESS, 3RD SESSION, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. MIS. DOC. NO. 23

**OUTRAGES BY KU KLUX KLAN.
(To accompany H. Res. No. 408.)**

JANUARY 18, 1869.—Ordered to be printed.

OFFICE CLERK CIRCUIT COURT, 'MADISON COUNTY, ALABAMA

Huntsville, January 4, 1869.

DEAR SIR: As our representative in the Congress of the United States, I would most respectfully urge upon you the importance of your honorable body taking some immediate action for the protection of the Union citizens of this portion of the State of Alabama against the organization of armed men called the Ku-Klux

Klan... Saturday last the organization known as the Ku-Klux Klan called on Mr. Biglow, a man who has never taken any part in politics, broke open the doors of his dwelling-house, knocked his wife down for pleading for the life of her husband, dragged him from his house and carried him several miles from the city to a grove, tied a rope around his neck and swung him to a branch of a tree; when life was about extinct, cut him down and said to him "You voted for General Grant, did you; this is the way we intend to treat all Grant men." After giving him a few swings, each time repeating the same as above, they turned him loose, warning him to leave the State, or the next time they would not spare his life; then turned him loose to find his way back to the city the best way he could... JAMES T. BONE

Callis was the first to put forth a bill, which was not passed, to investigate the Ku Klux Klan: ***"By Mr. Callis: A joint resolution (H. Res. 408) to provide for the appointment of a special Committee for the investigation of certain outrages committed on loyal Citizens of Alabama by the Ku-Klux Klan, to the Committee on Reconstruction and ordered to be printed."*** The 41st Congress however did pass the Enforcement Act, banning the methods used by the Klan. The Klan was investigated and hundreds of Klan members were arrested. Callis did not run for re-election, but returned to Lancaster, Wisconsin after his shortened term ended.

He was elected to the Wisconsin state Legislature in 1874 as a Democrat, and served one term. The balance of his life was spent in recurrent bouts of illness caused by the bullet in his lung and his other injuries. He was a favorite speaker at G.A.R. and Iron Brigade reunions. He was a complex man, both ambitious and adventurous, a man whose passions were tempered by his devotion to duty and love of justice. Of Lincoln he said: *"Of Mr. Lincoln I have to say that he was the hardest working man I ever saw up to his tragical death. Mr. Lincoln proved himself to be a problematical prodigy, as he could solve the knottiest problem at a glance. It was his brain that conceived the military necessity of the proclamation from which flowed the blessing of manumission to the hearts of four millions of bondsmen. He was the prototype of greatness and the friend of humanity."* John Benton Callis, born in the south was, like Lincoln, a champion of the freedom of all men regardless of race. He was one of the many we can be proud of whose greatness and character were molded in Grant County.