

NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST

&

THE KU KLUX KLAN

FREQUENTLY MADE ACCUSATIONS

Forrest founded the Klan

Forrest was the head of the Klan

FOUNDING THE KLAN

Founded in 1866 in Pulaski, TN, by six young men whose names are known. Forrest was in Memphis, had no contact with this group. No serious historian claims NBF was a founder of the Klan.

HEAD OF THE KLAN

What are the facts? What is the evidence?

KLAN IS NOT WHAT IS GENERALLY IMAGINED

There was no South-wide, monolithic organization called the Klan during the Reconstruction era. There were several non-connected night-riding groups with similar goals but they did not have a single leader.

Middle Tennessee, North Georgia, North Alabama, North Mississippi----Klan West Tennessee, Arkansas, North Louisiana---Palefaces; Gulf Coast from Texas to Georgia and Florida----Knights of the White Camellia; Carolinas and Virginia----Redshirts.

The idea of a single organization with a single leader is the creation of news reports which used the term Klan to refer to any and all of these groups. In short, the idea of a single group with a single leader is tradition, legend, myth.

WHY DID THE NIGHT-RIDERS EXIST?

During Reconstruction all those who had supported the Confederacy, even if that just meant voluntarily paying taxes, were barred from voting. The governments were made up of Unionists, freedmen, and recent migrants from the North.

These governments passed laws, called Confiscation Acts, which allowed them to seize the property of ex-Confederates and use that property to pay reparations to the freedmen.

This is one reason for night-riders.

A second reason is that these governments were trying to set up a society based on racial equality. That idea was shocking to people of the 19th Century. The idea was rejected in the North, where a number of states voted against the passage of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Votes from the South were needed to achieve what people in the North had turned down.

Southern ex-Confederates were told that if they would accept the 14th Amendment they could again become states. This is a problem, the Constitution says only states can ratify amendments but the South was being told to ratify the amendment before they were legally a state.

Non-inclusion of ex-Confederates, confusion over how to become legally a state again, and an attempt to create in the South a society based on racial equality (do as I say, not as I do) led to the formation of night-rider groups.

WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST?

There are three biographies of Forrest published in the last 50 years. I will limit my remarks about evidence of Forrest and the Klan to these three books.

Lonnie Maness, *An Untutored Genius*, deals with the military career of Forrest. There is little about the post-war years of Reconstruction. This book is a good military history but it does not help us with the issue we are considering.

Jack Hurst, *Bedford Forrest: A Life*, gives a lot of space to Forrest after the war. Hurst is a former newspaper reporter who is also an excellent researcher and has written a very good book. Hurst is descended from Tennessee Unionists so he cannot be considered to have any family or traditional bias in favor of Forrest.

Brian Steele Wills, *A Battle From the Start*, is another good book which deals some with the post-war years but not as much as Hurst does. Wills is an academic historian who currently is head of the Kennesaw Civil War Research Center, Kennesaw College, a part of the University of Georgia system.

Both Hurst and Wills cite John Morton, *The Artillery of Nathan Bedford Forrest*. John Morton was the young man who commanded Forrest's artillery for most of the war. He wrote his history of the artillery in 1909. In an appendix to the book he says he met Forrest in Nashville in the spring of 1867.

There are some problems with using Morton as evidence. First, Morton nowhere says Forrest was head of the Klan. Second, the appendix to Morton's book was not written by Morton but by Thomas Dixon.

Dixon was a Baptist minister from Boston who had great admiration for the Klan, as did many white Americans at the beginning of the 20th Century. Dixon is the author of the novel *The Clansman* which, in turn, is the basis for the movie *Birth of a Nation*.

So what we have is not what John Morton said but what Thomas Dixon said John Morton said. This kind of evidence is called “hearsay” and is to be treated with a great deal of caution.

Third, the documented evidence tells us that Forrest was not in Nashville in the spring of 1867. The records kept by hotels and printed in newspapers of the time shows that Forrest made his first post-war trip to Nashville in November of 1867.

Factually and in content, Morton's assertion about Forrest and the Klan is open to question.

Andrew Nelson Lytle, in his *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company*, is among the first writers to popularize the legend of Forrest as head of the Klan. Lytle tells the story of a meeting which was said to have taken place at the Maxwell House Hotel at which Forrest was chosen as Grand Wizard, but Lytle provides no documentation as to who was present, who selected Forrest, and does not even provide a date at which this was supposed to have happened. Lytle also recounts a story that the leadership of the Klan was first offered to Robert E. Lee, a story equally unsupported by a shred of historical evidence and one not believed by any reputable historian. [2]

Stanley F. Horn, in his *Invisible Empire: The Story of the Ku Klux Klan, 1866-1871*, follows the same interpretation used by Lytle. But Horn consistently uses such phrases as “There is a story to the effect”, “It has always been understood”, and “The story has always been told”, which means Horn is recounting anecdotes, not citing primary sources. The discrediting of Horn's claim concerning Forrest is made complete when Horn himself says that while he believes Forrest was the head of the Klan “there is no documentary evidence” to support his claim. [3]

Allen W. Trelease deals with the Klan in a much more scholarly fashion than either Lytle or Horn. In his *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction*, Trelease writes “There has never been any serious doubt that the first and only Grand Wizard was General Nathan Bedford Forrest.” Trelease cites Horn as one of his sources, thus damaging his argument, and the author then wrecks his argument by admitting “A good deal has been written about the Klan's further organization at the top levels, but most of it lacks substantiation and much of it is clearly fictitious.” [4]

Wills looks at the testimony Forrest gave before a Congressional Investigating Committee in 1872. Wills notes that Forrest gave “evasive” answers to some questions and then Wills says, *Forrest acted like a commander even if he denied knowledge of the Klan.*

I agree that Forrest “acted like a commander.” Forrest always acted like a commander. That

was his nature. He acted like a commander whether he was or not. At Fort Donelson, at Shiloh, at Chickamauga---Forrest was not the commander but he very much acted like one. By the way, the Congressional Committee concluded that Forrest had no knowledge of or association with the Klan. Forrest was exonerated by people who were hostile to him, so the testimony Forrest gave must have been pretty convincing even if Wills does call it “evasive.”

Wills also cites an article in *The Confederate Veteran* magazine from 1936. In this article George Libby says he once heard Forrest speak at a Klan gathering and that he was the head of the Klan.

This gathering took place more than 60 years earlier and Libby had never before mentioned it. Nor was there any substantiation to support what Libby said. Is a 60 year-old memory accurate? Or did an elderly man “remember” what he had heard many people say they thought was true?

Stories which cannot be checked for accuracy are called “anecdotes.” Historians can use anecdotes to make a book or talk more interesting but they cannot base their whole case on stories.

Jack Hurst is very careful with his evidence. He notes that there are several versions of stories about Forrest being involved with the Klan or being the head of the Klan, but, Hurst notes, all these stories lack documentation.

Historians are supposed to document what they say. That is why history books have footnotes. The writer has to show where he got his information.

Books written at a date after something happened are called “secondary sources.” Almost any history book you take off the shelf is likely to be a secondary source. An author does research about something which happened earlier and tries to reconstruct what happened; he tells a story about something he did not witness.

A letter or document written while something was happening, or just after it happened, and written by someone who was there is called a “primary source.” All good history is based on

primary sources. If there is no primary source to support what is said, then the historian cannot claim to have proved his point; he has presented a theory or had set out a possibility.

No historian, from the Reconstruction period until today, has been able to produce a single primary source showing that Forrest was head of the Klan or that he was even a member of the Klan. The best any writer has done or can do is to cite John Morton's book and, as we have seen, there are problems with that source.

The only primary document dealing with Forrest and the Klan is the report of the Committee of Investigation on the Klan, 1871-72. Forrest appeared before this congressional committee for a lengthy testimony. In its report this committee not only stated they did not think Forrest was linked with the Klan, they commended him for using his influence to suppress it!

In 2015, Dr. Elaine F. Parsons of Duquesne University in Pittsburg, PA, published a book titled *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction*. It is her conclusion, based on the most recent scholarship, that Forrest never exercised any leadership in the Klan.

Eric Foner is contemporarily among the most highly acclaimed and recognized scholars of the Civil War and Reconstruction period. His book, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, is the standard text in most university courses on the Reconstruction period. Foner discusses the KuKluxKlan at length but he does not mention Forrest at all. Foner does say *One should not think of the Klan, even in its heyday, as possessing a well-organized structure or clearly defined regional leadership. Acts of violence were generally committed by local groups on their own initiative.*[9] If there was no South-wide organization requiring “clearly defined regional leadership” the concept of Forrest as an all-powerful leader of a monolithic organization is folklore, not a fact of history.

If you sit on a jury you have the option of reaching one of two verdicts: guilty or not guilty. That choice is dictated by our legal code which follows the traditions of the English Common Law.

If you were on a jury in Scotland, where there is a different legal code, you would have a choice of three verdicts: guilty, not guilty, or not proven.

I think a fair and reasonable verdict about Forrest and the Klan has to be “not proven.”

Despite all the claims that Forrest was the head of the Ku Klux Klan no historian, from the end of the Civil War to the present day, has produced evidence which can withstand the scrutiny normally applied by academic historians. One may hold suspicions about Forrest, one may point to anecdotal or circumstantial evidence concerning him, but history requires verifiable proof, documentary evidence. Where is the evidence that Forrest was head of the Klan? It does not exist. No historian has produced such evidence, a Congressional Investigating Committee cleared Forrest of involvement, contemporary scholarship exonerates Forrest; only myth, legend, and folklore persist in making what is clearly an unsubstantiated claim.

A society has a moral obligation to uphold the highest standards in evaluating its past. The usual standards of historical proof should be applied to the claim that Forrest led the Klan. At the present time, no historian has produced proof that meets those standards. Media outlets have the same moral obligation to tell the truth, not repeat popular assumptions.

Throughout time, in the absence of facts, people have tried to explain the past by utilizing legends. The ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and Romans, the Native Americans all did this; we of the 21st Century do the same. But legends are not history. In the case of Bedford Forrest, as in all cases, let us speak the truth and state the facts. Myths are not a substitute for history.

So, when you hear people saying Forrest was the founder of the Klan you know that is false; when you hear people say Forrest was head of the Klan, ask them for the proof. They can't prove it.