

Abram Colby: An Unbreakable Spirit

When Abram Colby was born in 1820, he found himself in a unique position in the slave state of Georgia. His mother was Mary, a Black teenager enslaved on one of three plantations owned by John Colby, a wealthy white enslaver from Connecticut. The outside world and the laws of Georgia saw Abram no differently than the other Black people living in the slave cabins outside of John's plantation home near Greensboro, Georgia. But John Colby saw Abram as his son.

When John passed away in 1850, he willed his plantation home and almost 1,000 acres to Mary and her children instead of John's white children, who were themselves shocked not to take the whole inheritance for themselves. John also granted his mixed-race children their freedom. Due to the laws in Georgia at the time against freeing enslaved people, all of this took place more as an understanding than officially by law. John had legally given the land and people to his friend, William Strain, who was instructed to treat John's mixed-race descendants with "kindness & humanity" as freedpeople.

And so Abram entered adulthood while living in a plantation home and working for wages as a barber in Greensboro. He had a son, William, whom he put to work as a shoemaker. Abram too made sure William learned to read and write despite Abram's own illiteracy – Georgia laws forbade teaching enslaved people such things. In all, the Colbys had a taste of real freedom a full decade and a half before the country waged a great war to determine whether that freedom would be extended to millions of Black people struggling under the yoke of slavery in Greene County and beyond.

Still, even after that war had been decided, the extent to which this freedom would be realized remained unclear. When General Sherman's promise of *40 Acres and a Mule* turned up empty, poverty forced many freedpeople back into their old jobs and cabins, oftentimes even working for the same plantation owners. Abram watched as freedpeople who rejected paltry wage contracts found themselves jailed and carried back to the old plantations. Abram wrote to the Freedmen's Bureau, "I do most solemnly declare in the presence of God and man – that I do not see the most distant shadow of right or Equal justice – here in Greensboro."

That shadow would appear far over the horizon. The 1866 Southern Homestead Act offered 80 acres of public land to Americans who had not taken up arms against the United States (i.e., no Confederate veterans). On September 24, 1866, Colby and other freedmen wrote to the Freedmen's Bureau stating that they and between 1,000-1,200 freedpeople in Greene County were prepared to leave for Arkansas to take up their rightful lands. It was a place they did not know, hundreds of miles westward from the county where generations of their ancestors had lived and died. And yet, scores of freed families in Greene County added their names to Colby's list and placed their faith in the unknown.

Bureau documents show that Colby found work to sustain himself as he waited for the Clarksville Land Office to open in order to rightfully accept land for his colony. Months passed by as correspondence regarding the need to open the office trickled its way back to Washington, D.C. Still, even had the office opened, a section of the Homestead Act held that freedpeople had to swear the oaths necessary to accept their lands in-person. In practice, this meant that while Colby could claim his own homestead when the office opened, the rest of the colony would have to journey to Arkansas before achieving ownership.

Eight months after the freedpeople first wrote about the planned exodus, the Freedmen's Bureau granted a penniless Colby transportation back to Greensboro on May 17, 1867.

Colby did not retire to his estate home. If he could not lead his people out of Greene County, he would fight to change the region himself. In the spring of 1868, Colby campaigned to represent the county in the statehouse. Greene County's freed residents outnumbered the white population 2-1 and Colby won in a landslide. In order to compensate for his own illiteracy, Colby brought his son with him to the statehouse to read and write on his behalf. And the Colbys did not travel to Atlanta alone. Almost a century before the Voting Rights Bill passed, 29 of the representatives and 3 of the senators in the Georgia legislature were Black. But the political backlash to Colby and the others came nearly instantaneously. In September of 1868, white legislators immediately removed their Black colleagues from the statehouse in a whites-only vote.

The vigilante power of the old system also awakened as the Ku Klux Klan found a home throughout Georgia. In the presidential election later that same fall, the Republican vote fell from 1,144 to 116 in Oglethorpe County to the north of Greene County and 1,394 to 85 in Hancock County to the south. But in Greene County, sandwiched between the two, Colby and the other freedpeople marched in companies to the polls in defiance of the Klan and gave a majority to President Ulysses Grant in the 1868 election.

Colby represented a problem for white supremacists. Whether active in the statehouse or Greensboro, his charismatic leadership prevented the old plantation owners from freely ruling Greene County. According to Reconstruction Governor Rufus Bullock, the final straw for them came when Colby sought help from the northern troops that remained in Georgia. The Greene County Ku Klux Klan had scared away the teacher of the freedpeople and Colby wanted protection for the school.

Colby had long understood the importance of education in raising the condition of the freedpeople. Besides supporting William's education, he had helped to found Greensboro's First Colored School shortly after the end of the war. With the Klan suddenly threatening to destroy his school, Colby swiftly traveled to Atlanta and relayed the story to Reconstruction Governor Rufus Bullock, who ordered Wisconsin-native Lt. George S. Hoyt and his company to travel to Greensboro to protect the teacher.

One month after Lt. Hoyt received his orders, a Greensboro merchant offered Colby \$5,000 to join the Democratic Party or \$2,500 to resign his seat. Colby refused; "I told them that I would not do it if they would give me all the county was worth. Two nights later, about 65 Klansmen assembled outside Colby's plantation home. A doctor, a lawyer, and farmers stood beside men who were not "worth the bread they eat." They wore the garments of the Klan – white hoods and masks over their faces, and white gowns that fell below their knees.

The mob broke Colby's door open while he slept. Guns drawn, they seized him from his terrified mother, wife, and three-year-old daughter, who begged the men not to carry her father away. The men told Colby that he had voted for the Republicans and influenced other Black folks to do the same. The Klansmen carried Colby from his home into the cold night outside. A couple dozen brought sticks and straps with buckles on the end.

“Do you think you will ever vote another damned Radical ticket?” they asked, referring to the pro-freedmen wing of the Republican party. Colby believed they would kill him no matter what he said. “If there was an election to-morrow, I would vote the Radical ticket,” he responded.

The men demanded that Colby take off his clothes. When he refused, they tripped him over and ripped his shirt off over his head. Then the beating began as 25 men in the crowd took turns mercilessly attacking the former county representative over the course of over three hours. In such a small county, Colby recognized the voices under the masks and the boots on the men’s feet.

As time went by in the cold Georgia night, Colby appeared lifeless under the blows. John E. Walker, a Klansman and the town doctor, stepped out of the crowd to feel Colby’s bloodied wrist and couldn’t find a pulse. “He is dead,” Walker said. Still, one of the men approached Colby and began to whip him once more. Colby, by some miracle still alive and conscious, counted as 200 more strokes cut into him. At this point, he could barely feel them. He guessed the Klansmen had struck him 5,000 times before they left the woods and Colby behind. But Colby didn’t die.

After the Klansmen left, he managed to drag himself to a nearby cabin, where his brother found him a day later – back shredded, paralyzed in one arm, and in constant pain. When Lieutenant Hoyt visited him at the Colby’s plantation home, he saw that Colby’s skin had turned black and blue with cuts running from his neck down to his legs. “They broke something inside of me,” Colby later said.

Colby’s back was bloodied, but unbent. He publicly named names. Yet he never pressed charges against any of his assailants since the legal system of the day would offer no refuge to a man like him. “I knew it was no use for me to try to get Ku-Klux condemned by Ku-Klux,” he said. Reconstruction Governor Rufus Bullock offered a \$5,000 reward for the arrest of Colby’s assailants, but nothing came of it. Colby’s attackers freely walked the county. But still, even with his body broken and daughter dying from what he attributed to trauma from his assault, Colby refused to surrender. In January of 1870, three months after the attack, Georgia’s reconstruction general reinstated the Black legislators. Colby accepted his old seat.

In the spring of 1870, Colby and a group of Black legislators met with President Ulysses S. Grant and other politicians to explain their plight. Back in Georgia, the Black legislators tried to pass laws protecting Black civil rights and ensuring the safety of Black people by forming a militia of their own, but Colby said that white Republicans failed to support them at every turn.

During the 1870 election, which pitted Colby against the father of one of the Klansmen who had beaten him, the KKK continued their attacks. The Saturday before the election, Colby said that he came back from church to find his dogs barking in the house yard. A bullet whistled through the doorway of the Poplars just as one of his sons opened the front door. Colby grabbed his gun and ran upstairs to his window to return fire. The Klansmen fired round after round into the side of the house, but Colby again managed to survive the attack. He voted in the election and the freedmen carried him to victory once again.

In the fall of 1871, Colby described his attack and current situation to a US Congressional Joint Select Committee. In the interview, Colby stated that Governor Bullock was “the only source of protection we

have here.” But that same month, Bullock fled the state to avoid impeachment from the new Democratic legislature, as well as felony charges. A former Confederate colonel took his stead.

The same colonel looked to further solidify control in the governor’s election of 1872. Colby’s party offered one last gasp. Former Georgia Supreme Court Justice Dawson Walker decided to run as a Republican for the governorship and kicked off a speaking tour in the county where the Klan had thus far failed to intimidate freedmen voters: Greene County. Two days prior to the speech, Colby took the night train from Atlanta to Greensboro. For reasons that are unknown, Colby died that night onboard the train.

The following night at twilight, church bells rang out in Canaan, “now the hurried calls of the ‘assembly,’ and again the mournful tone of the funeral knell.” The small Greensboro neighborhood of freedpeople faced a dark and uncertain future. The small gains made under Reconstruction were already swiftly being swept away. And now, their resolute leader lay dead. Still, before they buried Abram Colby, 150 freedpeople appeared at the courthouse to hear from the Republican candidate.

Two months later, the former Confederate colonel annihilated Walker at the polls. Throughout the state, the Klan drove Black voters away from appearing to cast a ballot. In every county bordering Greene – Morgan, Putnam, Hancock, Taliaferro, Oglethorpe, and Clarke – Black political power splintered and Walker suffered defeats. But in Colby’s hometown, the Greensboro Herald reported, “The [Black voters] turned out in mass, and gave almost a solid vote for their party.” Walker received 753 votes in Greensboro alone, powered by the freedmen who decided to live in their own neighborhood there rather than remain on the old plantations. The final county-wide returns read – Walker: 984, Smith: 873.

President Ulysses Grant also won Greene County and a second term as president. He set his sights directly upon the Ku Klux Klan. Colby’s testimony had reached the halls of Congress along with other courageous testimony from victims throughout the South. With the wide-ranging powers granted to the president by Congress under the “Ku Klux Bill,” Grant would extinguish the KKK for half a century.

Abram Colby’s grave is still missing, lost somewhere at the heart of the county where he dedicated his life to justice for his people. His unbreakable spirit lives on.
