

# Ku Klux Klan in Tennessee

*Essential question: What factors led to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Tennessee?*

The Ku Klux Klan was formed in Pulaski, Tennessee between December 1865 and May 1866. Its founding members were six well educated former members of the Confederate army. They claimed that they originally intended the organization to be nothing more than a social club modeled on a popular fraternity. However, the organization quickly became something much more sinister: a **paramilitary** group that used violence and intimidation tactics on anyone who opposed their vision of a country ruled by white men.

The name Ku Klux was derived from the Greek word Kuklos meaning “circle” and “klan” was added for alliterative value. Following the fraternity tradition, the men developed secret signals and codes for passing messages. They created coded titles like Grand Cyclops (president) and Night Hawks (messengers) and rituals including **hazing** of new members. The original six then donned some sheets with holes cut out for the eyes and began riding around the countryside crashing parties and playing practical jokes. As others became aware of the group, membership grew and new clubs or dens were created in surrounding counties.

According to John Lester, one of the original Klansmen, the men only gradually realized that they could use their costumes and anonymity to frighten African-Americans. However, some historians find this story doubtful. They believe that the group had intimidation of African Americans as its main purpose from the beginning. The 1866 Civil Rights Act had declared African Americans to have the same rights as whites. As former Confederates and members of the upper class, the men must have found this frustrating. Racial tensions were rising all over the state. A buggy accident in Memphis involving one white and one African American driver led to a riot that killed 46 African Americans and two whites. The Memphis Race Riots of May 1866 may have been the real motivation for founding the organization.

The group began patrolling roads and whipping African Americans who travelled at night. They also began collecting information about white Republicans and African Americans who were politically active. As former Confederates, the men could not vote in Tennessee elections, but they could harass and intimidate anyone who dared to vote for policies they opposed. In 1867, Klan members from all around the state met in Nashville. They revised and refined their rules, wrote a constitution called the Prescript and devised an organizational system for spreading new dens throughout the south. The “Invisible Empire,” as they now called themselves selected Nathan Bedford Forrest as their new Grand Wizard or leader.

Nathan Bedford Forrest was a former slave trader and Confederate general. During the Civil War Forrest was known as the “Wizard of the Saddle”. It is likely that the title “Grand

Wizard” was derived from this nickname. Forrest was responsible for the 1864 Fort Pillow Massacre in which both Unionists and Black Federal Troops were slaughtered. Forrest’s name drew even more former Confederates to the organization. While the organization claimed to be selective, many poor white men claimed to have been forced to join. They were threatened with fines and beatings if they did not participate.

This “social club” quickly became an instrument of terror throughout the South. African Americans who defied social norms by looking white men in the eye, speaking to white women or doing anything that demonstrated pride were considered “uppity” and subject to abuse from the Klan. African Americans who enjoyed economic success were especially vulnerable to the **vigilante justice** handed out by the Klan. George Taylor had amassed 60 acres and two mules before the Klan broke into his home in the middle of the night. They dragged him outside where they whipped him until his backbone was visible through his wounds. Taylor and his family were forced to abandon their farm and possessions, a loss of about \$500.

In Tennessee, Klansmen increasingly targeted Radical Republicans as well as politically active African Americans. On August 12, 1868 a group of six masked men approached Lewis Powell’s home in Hickman County. Powell was a member of the Black Union League. Powell hid in the woods as the men advanced. The men asked Powell’s wife for food. When she told them that her family was poor and had none to spare, the men opened fire killing her. They rode off as Powell ran back to find his wife dead. Governor Brownlow tried to destroy the Klan by using the State Guard to catch klansmen. However, the attempt was unsuccessful. When the guard appeared, the klansmen simply ceased their activities until the guard was called elsewhere and then they promptly resumed.

Frustrated with the State Guard’s lack of success, Brownlow hired a private detective named Seymour Barmore to infiltrate the Klan. Barmore managed to get admitted to a den, but was later heard bragging about breaking up the Klan. A message was relayed to Klansmen in Maury County who boarded the train Barmore was on and kidnapped him. Barmore’s body was recovered six weeks later. The Klan had sent a message: anyone who crossed them would die.

As the organization grew, its ties with the Democratic Party grew as well. In Tennessee, Conservative Republicans and former Confederate Democrats were able to reclaim control of the legislature. When a new state constitution was put to a vote in 1870, Klansmen made sure that both African American and white voters voted for it or were too scared to vote at all. The ratification of the 1870 Constitution and the election of John C. Brown, a former Confederate general and Klansmen, meant that the Ku Klux Klan would continue to terrorize the state for many years to come.

**Paramilitary**- a group organized like an army, but not a part of the official armed forces

**Hazing**- activities involving harassment, abuse and/or humiliation as a way of initiating a person into a group

**Vigilante justice**- occurs when a group with no legal authority enforces their own rules on the local population. While the word justice is part of the term, the actions are rarely just or fair to the victims

Sources: Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. *They Called Themselves the K.K.K.: The Birth of An American Terrorist Group*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2010. Print.

Hardy, William Edward, "'Fare well to all Radicals': Redeeming Tennessee, 1869-1870. " Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 2013. [http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_graddiss/2432](http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/2432)

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*Using the text, answer the questions below.*

1. When was the Ku Klux Klan formed? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Where was the Ku Klux Klan formed? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Who formed the Ku Klux Klan? \_\_\_\_\_

4. What type of organization did the men base the Klan on? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Why do you think the klansmen wore robes and hoods? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. According to the klansmen, why was the organization formed? \_\_\_\_\_

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7. What law declared African-Americans to have the same rights as whites? \_\_\_\_\_

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8. Why do historians think the organization was formed? \_\_\_\_\_

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9. What actions did the Ku Klux Klan take towards African-Americans? (2 examples) \_\_\_\_\_

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10. What actions did the Ku Klux Klan take towards Republicans? \_\_\_\_\_

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