

The Officers Danced at a Black Lives Matter Rally. Then They Stormed the Capitol.

What appeared to be racial progress in rural Virginia turned into bitter conflict over a Confederate statue, the election and the Capitol riot. Now, people there foresee “a very dangerous time.”

By [Sabrina Tavernise](#)

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ROCKY MOUNT, Va. — One sunny day last spring, Bridgette Craighead was dancing the Electric Slide with three police officers in the grass next to the farmers’ market. It was the first Black Lives Matter protest this rural Virginia county had ever had, and Ms. Craighead, a 29-year-old hairdresser, had organized it.

She had not known what to expect. But when the officers arrived, they were friendly. They held her signs high, and stood next to her, smiling. Later an officer brought pizzas and McDonald’s Happy Meals. They even politely ignored her cousin’s expired license plate.

This, she thought, was the best of America. Police officers and Black Lives Matter activists laughing and dancing together. They were proving that, in some small way, their Southern county with its painful past was changing. They had gotten beyond the racist ways of older people. This made her feel proud. In a photograph from that day, Sgt. Thomas Robertson is smiling, and Ms. Craighead is standing behind him, her face tilted toward the sun and her fist held high.

She did not see the officers around Rocky Mount much after that. But in early January, someone sent her a photograph. It showed Officer Jacob Fracker and Sergeant Robertson posing inside the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, the day the building was stormed by Donald J. Trump’s most fervent supporters.

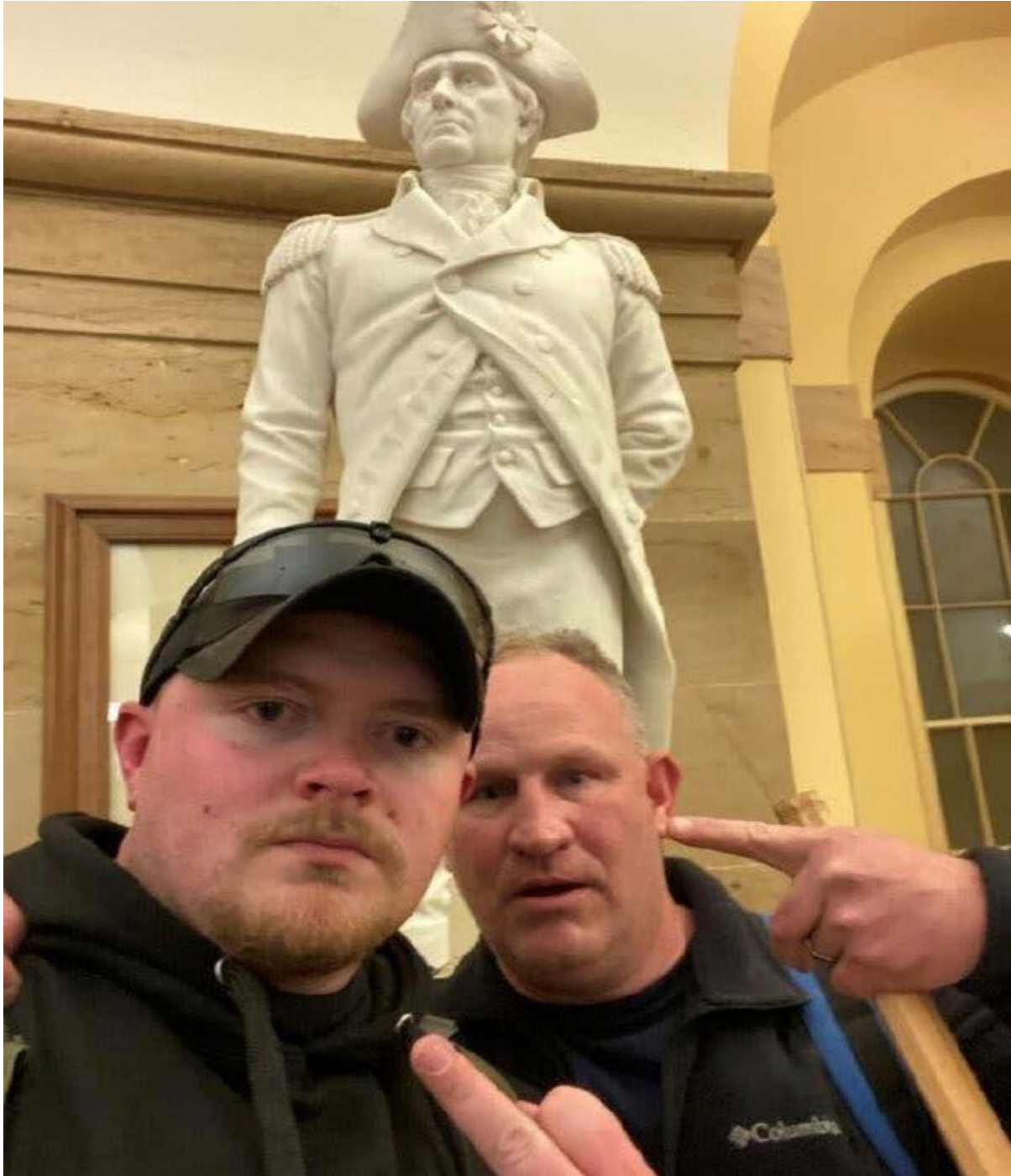
At first, she did not believe it. Not her officers. But there they were, Officer Fracker giving the camera his middle finger. She confronted them on Facebook and they did not deny it. On the contrary, they were proud.



Image

Sergeant Thomas Robertson, center, Officer Jacob Fracker, second from right, and Bridgette Craighead, right, at a Black Lives Matter rally in Rocky Mount last year. Credit...Bridgette Craighead

Image



Officer Fracker, left, and Sergeant Robertson inside the Capitol on Jan. 6. Ms. Craighead confronted them on Facebook afterward. Credit...U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia

What came next happened fast. The officers were arrested, their homes searched and their guns confiscated. Residents yelled at one another outside the municipal building while the Town Council was inside debating the officers' jobs. Ms. Craighead and her hair salon received

threatening emails and Facebook messages. The officers did too. Everybody, it seemed, was angry.

From the best of America to the worst of America. That was Franklin County over the past year. But what happens now? Mr. Fracker, 29, and Mr. Robertson, 48, both veterans, one who served in Afghanistan, the other in Iraq, say they did not participate in any of the violence that happened at the Capitol that day, when scores of people were hurt and five lost their lives. The charges they face — disorderly conduct and disrupting the proceedings of Congress — are nonviolent, and less serious than those facing people accused of assaulting police officers. They went to Washington to express their views, and they say they went to war so Ms. Craighead would be able to express hers too.

“I can protest for what I believe in and still support your protest for what you believe in,” Mr. Fracker wrote on Facebook after the riot, adding, “After all, I fought for your right to do it.”

The arrests of Mr. Fracker and Mr. Robertson, who both declined to speak for this article, have divided this county at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Their supporters say that the violence of the riot was wrong, but that the sentiment of the rally that day — protesting an election that many here believe, wrongly, was stolen — was honorable.

Image



The Rocky Mount Police Department has never had a Black chief.

Credit...Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

But others in the county say that the officers' participation looked a lot like history repeating itself: white people going out of their way to make sure that America was theirs, that it stayed the way they wanted it. In [Franklin County](#), a mountainous corner of southwest Virginia of about 56,000, this took the form of the Ku Klux Klan marching in the 1960s. Mr. Trump and the Capitol rioters, they argue, were merely the most recent iterations.

"People are not going to give up their power," said Penny Blue, an African-American woman who lives in Franklin County, and whose father was also a Franklin County native. "They're going to do whatever it takes to keep that power. And that is what is going on right now."

If you ask Black people in Franklin County, many will tell you that the current chapter really begins with the election of Barack Obama. The rise to power of the country's first Black president cracked the foundation of the way things had always been. David Finney, a retired police officer, remembers a sudden resentfulness.

"For years, I thought people hated Obama because of Obamacare, but at some point, I realized it didn't have a damned thing to do with no insurance," said Mr. Finney, who is Black. "White people hated Obama because he was a Black man who became president and elevated the Black race. Obama leveled the playing field. And that was a problem because before that, most white people truly felt that America belonged to them."

Larry Darnell Moore II, 42, a teacher in Franklin County, remembers being told by the superintendent that he could not show students a speech by Mr. Obama before the school system vetted it. He was more startled than angry.



“There had always been this veneer in the county that everything is OK,” Larry Darnell Moore II said, “and it slowly started to get peeled back.”

Credit...Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

The reaction to Mr. Obama was strong, and it made Mr. Moore curious. He went to several Tea Party meetings, where he saw fear — people who were genuinely afraid of losing things. Members once invited police officers and asked if they would help if the government came to seize guns.

“I wanted to be there to say, ‘Hey, I am here, and I don’t want your guns,’” Mr. Moore said. “Nobody I know wants your guns.”

‘Just stand up for yourself’

Around that time, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were still churning, and Franklin County was helping to bear the burden. Military service was in Mr. Fracker’s family: His father and a brother had also served, according to a classmate of the brother. A photograph in the Franklin County High School yearbook from 2008 shows Mr. Fracker, a sophomore, round-faced and serious, standing in a military uniform with other Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps students.

Aaron Hodges was in the military program too. He remembers Mr. Fracker as someone who smiled a lot and was “goofy most of the time,” but also focused. They performed marching drills, watched movies and, after school, would do running exercises wearing helmets. Both knew they were going to go into the military, Mr. Hodges said. In the fall of 2010, the year they graduated, Mr. Fracker joined the Marines. Mr. Hodges joined the Army a few months later.

Mr. Fracker went on to serve two tours in Afghanistan, according to the Marine Corps. He became a corporal and received several medals, including one for good conduct. He also received a combat ribbon, meaning he personally engaged with the enemy. Mr. Hodges, according to the Army, saw combat too.

Mr. Hodges now works in construction. Mr. Fracker joined the police. But in many ways, the men are the same, Mr. Hodges said.

“He was just like me,” Mr. Hodges said. Mr. Fracker, he added, should not be put in prison. “He wanted to serve the country and he did. And now he’s getting eaten up by our country.”

Image



“He wanted to serve the country and he did,” said Aaron Hodges, who was in the same high school military program as Mr. Fracker. “And now he’s getting eaten up by our country.”

Credit...Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

Mr. Hodges was disillusioned by the war. It seemed more about guarding property than getting bad guys. He remembers doing patrols in fields of marijuana and a bombing near a checkpoint that left forks scattered on the ground alongside chest compression kits and the body of a child. The American soldier on duty died, his skull knocked in from the force of the blast.

“What was the whole point of it?” asked Mr. Hodges, who is now 29.

He came back feeling much older, and like he did not belong. He had a hard time talking to school friends. But he also felt restless.

In 2019, news of proposed gun restrictions in the State Legislature caught his attention. Mr. Hodges was sick of people complaining about the government but never doing anything about it. So, he decided to hold a militia muster, a call for able-bodied men. Several hundred people showed up in a public park one day last March.

Gun rights were on everybody's mind. Two months before, on a frigid January morning, thousands of people converged on the grounds of Virginia's Statehouse in Richmond, to protest what they said were dangerous proposals by Democrats, who had recently taken control for the first time in decades. One of those protesters was Sergeant Robertson. A Facebook photograph that has since been deleted shows him wearing a flak-jacket and a helmet, and carrying a military-style gun.

Image



Mr. Hodges holding a flier for the Franklin County Militia that he started. Credit...Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

Mr. Robertson served as a soldier in Iraq and Kuwait starting in 2007, according to the Army, the bloodiest year of the war for American troops, though his military record does not indicate that he saw combat. Later, he worked as a contractor in Afghanistan. He was “the alpha male inside the department,” said Justin Smith, who previously worked under Mr. Robertson but has since left the Police Department.

Mr. Smith said Mr. Robertson was good to his officers. He sometimes bought them lunch. He was politically conservative, “but not in some big South-will-rise-again way,” Mr. Smith said.

“He’s more like, ‘I’m not going to be told what to do.’” He said Mr. Robertson refused to wear a body camera, contrary to department policy, and “was big into Second Amendment rights.”

Mr. Finney, the retired police officer who is Black, said he had always liked Mr. Robertson.

“Robertson was one of the nicest guys on the force,” he said. “He never came off to me as someone who wanted to suppress a Black person because he never treated me that way.”

Mr. Hodges does not know Mr. Robertson, nor has he kept up with Mr. Fracker. But he thinks he understands why they might have gone to Washington on Jan. 6. It was the same reason he started the militia.

“Just stand up for yourself,” he said. “Say no. Not just to the government taking your rights or property. But to anyone who tries to take advantage of you.”

Image



Rioters storming the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. Credit...Jason Andrew for The New York Times

Mr. Hodges also went to the Capitol on Jan. 6. But what was he standing up to?

He talked about a sense of loss. The old America “that is honor-bound and that had chivalry” is completely gone, he said. Families have fallen apart — white and Black. Now the country is just a lot of disconnected people who are bored and lonely and obsessed with being entertained, he said, and the political class, which he saw as one big scheming mass, is profiting from it. He found that depressing.

Was there election fraud? Yes, he said. Was the election stolen? At this point, he does not think so, but he is not sure. One thing is clear, he said: The conflict is not left versus right, or white versus Black, but of the political class versus ordinary Americans.

“Who keeps America together?” he said. “Lower-class Americans. We are trying to make a future and keep our home stuff together. The elites, they have nothing better to do. So, they want to rip it apart.”

‘They learn this from birth’

The killing of George Floyd, a Black man, by the police far away in Minnesota was something many people in Franklin County could agree should be protested. But when Black activists’ demands moved closer to home last summer, to a Confederate statue in Rocky Mount, the county seat, a hostility took hold among the county’s white residents.

First erected in the early 20th century, the monument to the Confederate dead looked over residents from its perch in front of the courthouse. The county was so attached to it that when a driver accidentally plowed into it in 2007, smashing its body to bits, the Jubal Early Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy scrambled to erect a new one. It was dedicated in 2010, with people [dressed as Confederate soldiers](#) and Southern belles.

Image



The dedication of Rocky Mount’s rebuilt Confederate soldier monument in 2010. Credit...The Roanoke Times

Mr. Early, whose name is on the statue, was a lawyer, a Civil War general and a Franklin County native who became one of the foremost proponents of the Lost Cause ideology that the war was not about slavery, but a noble fight for states' rights.

Ms. Blue watched in wonder as the fight unfolded. A history buff with a master's degree who had a career outside the state for 25 years, Ms. Blue returned and began volunteering at the [National Park Service monument](#) to the county's most famous son, Booker T. Washington. A Black woman who is 61, she has spent hours dressed as Mr. Washington's mother talking to people about the Civil War.

"If you ask the average white person in Franklin County what the Civil War was about, they would not tell you it's about slavery," she said.

Ms. Blue found history cleansing. Learning it was the only way to make America better. But few knew it. She remembers her colleagues objecting when a historian came to train them in how to portray slavery.

"They were upset because he had a whip," she said. "They said they didn't whip the slaves with whips, they whipped them with switches here."

When Ms. Blue hears people say that those who went to Washington on Jan. 6 had been radicalized, she scoffs.

"They learn this from birth," she said.

The way she sees it, the basic struggle has always been about power, and for generations, the majority-white county, helped by a twisted version of history, has been extremely successful in preserving it. Black people make up about 8 percent of the county and 20 percent of the town of Rocky Mount, yet very few Black residents have ever been elected to public office. The Rocky Mount Police Department has never had a Black chief.

"They all say, 'You know, Franklin County is different,'" she said. "'We got good families here, everybody likes everybody.' Well, the people in power are satisfied. The rest of us are not satisfied. They're just not used to anybody speaking up and saying anything."



“All of a sudden comes George Floyd. And he is the spark,” said Penny Blue of the Franklin County school board. “This is the moment. Some people call it the third Reconstruction.”Credit...Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

But after the killing of Mr. Floyd, they spoke up, and Ms. Blue, who had led her own fight, as the only Black member of the school board, against Confederate flag symbols in the schools, was no longer alone. People from all over the county began to ask for the Confederate statue to come down. The debate was heated. At meeting after meeting, residents on both sides lined up to speak before the county board of supervisors.

Some Black people could not understand why white people insisted on protecting a statue that represented such a painful part of their past. But Ms. Blue knew. She likes to point out that the two police officers were not the first from Franklin County to try to storm the Capitol: In July 1864, General Early [attacked Washington](#), rattling federal defenses at Fort Stevens, near modern-day Rock Creek Park. It was the closest any Confederate force ever came during the war and even drew Abraham Lincoln out to observe.

Ms. Blue does not see much difference between those soldiers and the officers on Jan. 6. They went. They scared people. They came back. And they did not see anything wrong with it. In fact, they believed they were doing their patriotic duty.

Mr. Hodges was among the people who testified in favor of the Confederate statue. The statue is part of the past, he argued, and giving in to demands to take it down will only lead to more demands. He simply did not see how Black people could be bothered by it.

“I mean, it’s just a statue,” he said. “Who cares?”

The board members could have voted to take the statue off the square. But they did not. Instead, they put it on the ballot in November, a move that all but doomed the measure. Five other rural Virginia counties with their own Confederate statues did the same. The [statues stayed up in all six](#).

‘Civility has left me’

In the weeks after the election, a quiet anger descended like snow. The county had overwhelmingly chosen Mr. Trump, and the fact that he was not the one about to be inaugurated put people in a bad mood. Cyrus Taylor, a logger and Baptist minister who is African-American and supported President Biden, said a grocery checkout clerk exploded at him when he remarked that it must be nice for Mr. Trump in Florida. Some of his neighbors turn their back when they see him in the yard.

“They are not speaking to us because Trump lost, and that’s just the way it is,” Mr. Taylor said.

One person who was angry was Sergeant Robertson. On Nov. 7, he stood by Mr. Trump’s false claims that the election had been stolen, writing on Facebook, according to a screenshot: “Being disenfranchised by fraud is my hard line. I’ve spent most of my adult life fighting a counterinsurgency. I’m about to become part of one, and a very effective one.”

By mid-December, he was posting about armed rebellion.

“Civility has left me,” he wrote on Facebook on Dec. 19, according to an F.B.I. document. “I’m tired of always taking the high road and being beat by those who cheat, lie, and steal to win and then allow their media to paint me as the bad guy. I won’t be disenfranchised. I’ll follow the path our founders gave us. Redress of grievances (already done) civil disobedience (here now) and then open armed rebellion.”

He added that he had spent years fighting insurgencies abroad, and that he now was “prepared to start one here and know a bunch of like-minded and trained individuals.”

On Jan. 4, he wrote: “I’ll be in DC Wednesday to peacefully protest, the day after ... we shall see.”

‘She doesn’t understand why I fight’

For days, Mr. Robertson and Mr. Fracker insisted on social media and to reporters that they had done nothing wrong. They said they saw no violence from where they had been in the Capitol, and had been ushered in by the police. Mr. Fracker even [gave an interview to a British television station](#).

When Ms. Craighead, the activist, confronted them on Facebook with the photograph showing them inside the Capitol, Mr. Robertson reposted it, writing that he was “proud of it. It shows 2 men willing to actually put skin in the game and stand up for their rights.”

When someone called Ms. Craighead an ugly name, Mr. Fracker pushed back. “She’s not,” he wrote, according to a screenshot of his now-deleted Facebook page. “She just doesn’t understand why I fight.”

“Tyranny,” he wrote, “is where my fight lies.”

Mr. Robertson wrote that he and Mr. Fracker were the same as Ms. Craighead because the government mistreated all of them.

“If you think for one second that congress cares about black Lives, you aren’t watching the news or paying attention to what they are doing for the black community,” he wrote. “Congress and government are BOTH of our enemies.”



He brought up the summer, too: “Both of the men in your post have stood with you when most people wanted to deal with you with tear gas and shields,” he wrote. “Both of them have shed more blood for you and sustained more wounds for you than the ENTIRE US CONGRESS.”

Ms. Craighead was done. Their protest, she thought, was fundamentally incompatible with her protest because it was forcing their version of America on her. What is more, they seemed to revel in the violence.

Mr. Fracker said to a friend on Facebook, according to the F.B.I. document, that he had been the eighth person inside the Capitol, and that he had not been “that hyped up” since Now Zad, an area in Afghanistan.

Mr. Robertson wrote on Jan. 8: “The picture of Senators cowering on the floor with genuine fear on their faces is the most American thing I have seen in my life. Once for real you people ACTUALLY realized who you work for.”



Flags supporting Mr. Trump and the Blue Lives Matter movement are across the street from the salon.Credit...Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

‘A very dangerous time’

A few days after the riot, flags appeared on the railing outside Jeff’s Car Care, the business across the parking lot from Ms. Craighead’s salon. There was a Trump flag, and a Blue Lives Matter flag, and two others that she did not understand. The owner wrote angry posts on Facebook, calling her a “troublemaker,” and saying “she’s wanting to hang police officers and military veterans.” (He declined to be interviewed.)

On a cold January afternoon, she sat, tear-streaked in a purple sweatshirt, in one of the hair dryer chairs in her salon. This was not how she thought things would turn out. She keeps looking back at the video in the sunshine of that spring day.

“I really felt that we were changing the world for real,” she said, crying. Her son, 4, threw his arms around her neck, trying to soothe her. “I feel like the world got it, but not Rocky Mount.”

Mr. Hodges does not agree that race was at the root of what happened in Washington on Jan. 6. He believes that the fight in Franklin County is about activists from other places trying to change his town. Ms. Craighead, for her part, kept trying to tell people that Black Lives Matter in Franklin County was her, the Rocky Mount hairdresser, not some strangers they saw on TV. But she did not think people were listening.

Mr. Hodges no longer leads the Franklin County Militia. Since the riot, its website has been deactivated, and along with it a calendar of events.

But beneath the quiet, Mr. Hodges believes that the country has moved to a new stage of division in which anything — even war — is possible. Americans “are really choosing sides now,” he said.

Mr. Fracker and Mr. Robertson have been fired. They were released on bail pending trial. On Feb. 25, they pleaded not guilty to federal charges of obstruction of an official proceeding, and violent entry and disorderly conduct on video before a federal judge. Mr. Fracker’s lawyer asked that his client get his guns back. The judge said he was “disinclined” to grant the request. If convicted, the men could face more than 10 years in prison.

In January, Ms. Blue bought a gun.

She believes that the country is at the beginning of something. The old order is starting to crack. Demographics are shifting. Young people are marching. Franklin County has made progress too: In December, it got its [first Black school superintendent](#). In February, a departing member of the Town Council was replaced by an African-American man. This month, Ms. Craighead, now 30, announced a run for a seat in Virginia’s Statehouse.

But many in the county fervently believe that the election was stolen. Ms. Blue sees that as another Lost Cause narrative. White people, she said, are mourning more than just an election. They believe they are losing the right to determine what version of America is out there in the world. And that, she said, has never gone well for Black people in Franklin County.

“History tells me we are in a very dangerous time,” she said.

Dave Philipps and Alan Feuer contributed reporting. Kitty Bennett, Alain Delaqu erie and Susan C. Beachy contributed research. then open armed rebellion.”