

arena in Jefferson, Henry Long and his colleagues filled the political void, including his assuming the position of local judge. In spite of the success of the Democrats taking political control, many in the community remained loyal to their Republican beliefs. Tensions between the political camps continued to rise until a sultry evening in July 1892. According to Judge Long, while walking to his home after returning on the evening train to Kenner from a visit with friends in Gretna, he was confronted, by "a negro [sic] [who] jumped from behind a tree and fired." Struck by two bullets which hit his arm and right breast near his collar bone and lung, the leader of the local Democrats was quickly given aid by several witnesses of the attack and was rushed by special train to New Orleans for medical care. The would-be assassin escaped into the night and in spite of the efforts of as many as twenty search parties to capture him, he avoided apprehension.<sup>33</sup>

The attack opened the door to a release of the political and racial frustrations that had been building for months in the Kenner community. Seemingly ignoring municipal authorities in Kenner, the investigation of the shooting was immediately taken over by Long's political allies in Jefferson Parish, including L.H. Marrero, now parish sheriff; Captain Landridge, the clerk of court; and Captain Fiesch of the Gretna police.<sup>34</sup> Within days of the attack the *Daily Picayune* reported that the shooting had "aroused considerable bitterness" and that the "vigilant officers of Jefferson parish" had learned that prior to the shooting several meetings had been held and that a plot was launched in Kenner by "several negroes [sic] and white men to force a number of white residents out of the place." According to the newspaper, the conspiracy called for the burning of the businesses of several of Long's Democratic allies, including that of his mother. Parish authorities began rounding up numerous suspects who were supposed to be members of the plot to set the fires and were thought to have been involved in the attack on Long. The paper noted that the arrested suspects "had given details of the plot, the names of the ringleaders and the name of the party who shot Judge Long."<sup>35</sup>

Racial tensions in Kenner now escalated dangerously. The 1890 census showed that whites now held the majority in Jefferson Parish, reinforcing their belief in racial dominance over their African American neighbors and their growing willingness to use violence to demonstrate to blacks the dangerous repercussions of defying the racial order.

When word circulated that “the negroes [*sic*] of the town had been holding secret meetings. . . [and] had agreed to first kill Judge Long . . . a leading citizen and politician, . . . [who was] feared by them, and then . . . [planned to] kill the other white citizens and burn their residencies and stores,” angry whites decided to act.<sup>36</sup>

Supposedly identified by co-conspirators as the shooter of Long, Henry Dixon was arrested for the crime and held in the Gretna jail. Upon being granted bail, Dixon was released. However, once he crossed the river, he was arrested again for burglary in New Orleans by Kenner police at the corner of St. Charles and Jackson avenues. He was immediately returned to Kenner where he was placed in the city’s old dilapidated jail alongside three other African American men being held for the plot to burn the town. Left without a guard, the prisoners were jarred awake around two o’clock in the morning by blows on the door by a gang of masked men. When the old door was breached, the men entered and took only the frightened Dixon. The mob re-nailed the door to the jail shut. The hapless prisoner was taken about four blocks from the jail and was quickly lynched from the branch of a large oak tree near the home of a member of the parish police jury. A volley of shots was fired to give warning to the community and then the masked murderers disappeared into the night. Demonstrative of the racial attitudes of many whites of the time, the *Daily Picayune* made little criticism of the killers by giving a more-or-less straightforward narrative of the lynching; however, when it came to the murdered victim, the paper focused on his reputation and practically vindicated the actions of the vigilantes by labeling the dead man as a person of “bad character” who was a “negro [*sic*] thief, desperado, and would-be assassin.”<sup>37</sup>

The tragedy of Dixon’s murder was compounded just a few days later when Dennis Richards confessed to the attack on Long. One of several individuals arrested by parish authorities in the wake of the assault, Richards told the sheriff that he was alone when he did the shooting, thus exonerating the lynched Dixon as a suspect. However, according to the sheriff, a close ally of the wounded Long, Richards confessed that he was given one thousand dollars by the Republican politician and former mayor J. C. Baumann to kill Long. Richards reportedly claimed that Baumann had explained that the reason he wanted Long killed was because “he has got to be put out of the way,

for I [Baumann] can do nothing in Kenner as long as he is there." The startling statement led quickly to Baumann's arrest at his new home in New Orleans. Within hours he found himself incarcerated in the jail in Gretna.<sup>38</sup>

The fraud and manipulation that permeated much of the political arena in late nineteenth-century Jefferson Parish all came to forefront in Baumann's arrest. Baumann was soon moved to New Orleans because it was feared by his supporters that he could be lynched in Gretna, where he had been in the custody of his political enemies. In December 1892 the grand jury in Jefferson Parish indicted Baumann as an accessory before the act and for conspiracy to kill. The grand jury report also revealed that there was more to the story than what had been reported concerning the case. Long and his allies, including law-enforcement officials in the parish, had spread the word that they had located witnesses who supported the charges against Baumann. The grand jury report also noted that supporters of Baumann had charged Long and several of his Democrat colleagues with the bribery of Wilbert Williams—the individual who gave testimony supporting the charges against Baumann. However, the jury disregarded Baumann's claim of being framed and failed to take action against the Democratic machine in Jefferson Parish. Nevertheless, the grand jury's report exposed that there were unanswered questions concerning the evidence against Baumann. His attorneys continued to vigorously challenge the evidence against their client as well as the venue of the case.<sup>39</sup>

As word spread to the general public that the case against Baumann was not as clear cut as had been reported, concern among the public and Democratic political leaders in the parish began to be voiced. Realizing that the outcome of the case could result in an acquittal, supporters of Long and the Democrats circulated talk that violence might be necessary for them to receive their desired outcome. So serious did the threat become that the press reported the potential for violence. The uniqueness of the story of the two Kenner politicians' public disdain for each other, with its racial overtones, and the growing threat of violence in the case even became news in other parts of the state. The *Daily Journal*, a local paper in Plaquemine, Louisiana, led off its remarks on the case with the headline "Will Lynch Him if Acquitted." The rural newspaper concluded its comments on the subject with

a statement which encapsulated what many anti-Baumann supporters believed: "It is an open secret among the white people in Jefferson parish that if Baumann is acquitted of the charge they will lynch him."<sup>40</sup>

The increasing vitriol and threats against Baumann in Jefferson played into the hands of the Republican politician's attorneys. Shortly before Christmas, on the date set for the trial, Baumann's attorneys filed motions for a change of venue before Judge Emile Rost. After hearing witnesses from both sides, Rost agreed with Baumann's attorneys that "the accused had established the existence of prejudice in the parish." He ordered the case transferred to Orleans Parish. With the transfer of the trial out of Jefferson Parish and away from its district attorney and sheriff, the case against Baumann and the accused shooter Dennis Richards promptly fell apart. At the very first court appearance before New Orleans Judge John Ferguson,<sup>41</sup> M.J. Cunningham Jr. of the office of the state attorney general, who was now handling prosecution of the case, claimed in court that there was not enough evidence to support moving forward and entered a motion of *nolle prosequi* for both Baumann and Richards. Out of the grip of Jefferson law enforcement officials, both Richards and the witness Wilbert Williams, claiming that they had been beaten and forced to confess, renounced their testimony that had implicated Baumann. In spite of the good news that they were soon to be freed, both men and their attorneys strenuously opposed the motion stating that they wanted a trial so that the record would show an acquittal for them from the "criminal and infamous conspiracy" of the prosecution. The judge, noting that he had to rule on the state's motion before him, granted the request and both walked out of the courthouse as free men.<sup>42</sup> In spite of Baumann's final courtroom victory, politics in Kenner were changed forever. The once Republican stronghold had shifted allegiance to the Democrats. As to Baumann himself, he later summed up his situation befittingly when he recorded in his reminisces that as,

a faithful, official and conscientious citizen . . . I have suffered more than any other man in the State of Louisiana from persecution, for no other reason than . . . I was a Republican by principle . . . . For devotion to the Republican principles and party, I was forced to lose all I had accumulated for years, with my life at stake on many occasions.<sup>43</sup>