

forces from the region. For example, in the elections of 1874, Charles Hodges, a white candidate for mayor of Kennerville and tenant of the old Belle Grove manor house at the time it was destroyed by fire, publicly attempted to intimidate African American voters by proclaiming in his campaign speech that “if the colored people in his employ did not vote the Conservative ticket they could, after the election, seek employment elsewhere.”¹⁷

The tactics proved successful. State Senator T.B. Stamps gave testimony before a Congressional investigating committee that between two and three-hundred African Americans in his district, which included Jefferson Parish, voted for the Democratic ticket because of the fear of discharge from their job. He added, “I don’t suppose there is one colored man in my district that will vote the Democratic ticket of his own volition.” Finally, he noted that “The people were afraid they would be murdered like their friends—shot down in the streets.”¹⁸ Similarly, whites who voted Republican in elections also faced intimidation. Such was the situation noted by the Associated Press at the time when it reported in one of its releases on the elections that “a white man could not vote the Republican ticket without being ostracized, called a nigger, and anything else but a responsible gentleman.”¹⁹

The bitter and personal nature of the struggle in the final years of the nineteenth century between the political factions in both Jefferson Parish and Kenner is demonstrated by the political career of James C. Baumann. The son of one of Kennerville’s first settlers, as a youth James focused on his formal education. After completing his schooling, in 1867 he established himself as a druggist in the town. Not satisfied with his new career, he decided to take advantage of the prosperity that truck farming offered in Kenner in the years that followed the end of the war. He opened a mercantile business and began truck farming and sugar cane production on his land. In addition to his business dealings, Baumann also had an interest in the changing political events of the time. In late 1868, he took part in the national election, supporting the Republican nominee Ulysses Grant for president. Serving as the clerk of the election at Kennerville, Baumann got an eye-opening introduction to the politics which would dominate events in Jefferson Parish for decades to come. In the 1868 election, Democrats ran several special trains to Kenner filled with men under orders to intimidate

voters going to the polls. So tense became the situation that by the end of the election a near riot took place when at the closing of the polls at 6 p.m. a group of the protesters broke down the doors of the polling place and proceeded to destroy ballots and threaten the election clerks with being shot.²⁰

After the election, Baumann received his first political job when he was appointed by the president of the State Board of Education to be the representative of the 6th Ward (left bank) on the Jefferson Parish School Board. Chosen as the treasurer of the board, he continued to serve until 1871 and was among the strong proponents for a viable public-school system in the parish. In 1873 Baumann was selected to serve as a member of the Jefferson Parish Police Jury where he served as chairman of the Finance Committee. Later in that same year, he was elected secretary and treasurer for the City of Kenner. In the same election, he successfully worked to replace incumbent mayor O.T. Connor, who, with his political ally Charles Hodges, had run the city into thousands of dollars of debt. Even with the end of Reconstruction in 1877, Republican Baumann continued to win the support of the voters of Kenner. In 1879, he won election to the office of Second Justice of the Peace for Jefferson Parish. Given a salary of fifty dollars per month, Baumann donated his pay to the hiring of two teachers at the monthly salary of twenty-five dollars each. The two teachers were hired to provide instruction for the African American children of the area. Claiming that they only had enough funds for the operation of the school for white children, the parish school board had denied funding to educate the area's black children. Thanks to Baumann's generosity 125 African American children of Kenner were provided with schooling.²¹

Remaining a loyal member of the Republican Party throughout his decades-long political career, Baumann served in both appointed and elected political positions. Included among his elected offices were four years (two, two-year terms from 1880 to 1884) as mayor of Kenner and several years as clerk of court for Jefferson Parish. Additionally, Baumann often served in non-elected political positions at the parish, state, and national levels, including serving as a local election commissioner and as a delegate to the national Republican nominating convention. During his years of political activity, he came to know firsthand the dangerous nature of Jefferson Parish politics in the latter

half of the nineteenth century. Even the relatively minor job of serving as an election commissioner brought with it threats of bodily harm as was discovered by Baumann during one of his first stints as an election official. When he attempted to enforce a new law that required all voters to have re-registered by denying Thomas McManan his vote because his registration papers were outdated, McManan, angered over his rejection, threatened Baumann with physical harm. So serious was the threat that for six months following the election—until McManan apologized for his threats—Baumann was forced to remain at home after dark for he feared coming into contact with his angry neighbor.²²

On another occasion while giving a speech at the Baptist Church in Kenner to a crowd he later estimated to have been around five hundred people, Baumann barely escaped injury once again. Things got out of hand when an individual, Emanuel King, under the influence of liquor, made offensive remarks to others in the crowd. The offended parties drew their guns and opened fire. Over one hundred shots were exchanged between the two groups. King was killed, and Baumann had to be pulled by his friends from the riot. At the time, he served as the justice of the peace, so he immediately swore in several deputy constables who restored order.²³

The individual who caused Baumann his greatest difficulties as a public servant and political activist was Henry Long, a leading Democrat in the Kenner area. Baumann's and Long's differences dated to two incidents in the 1880s when Baumann was called upon, because of his position as justice of the peace, to handle issues involving Long's behavior. The first incident took place in March 1880 when Leon Meyers of New Orleans, while he was on a visit to Kenner, filed a complaint for assault and harassment against Long, Paul Felix, Martin Donnelly, and a Mr. Ryan. Baumann accepted the complaint and issued warrants for the arrest of the accused men. The second incident came in 1886, when Long and several buddies entertained themselves one night by shooting up and down the streets of Kenner. One of the shots hit a young boy in the head. The victim was not mortally wounded, and he was able to identify Long as the shooter. Baumann issued a warrant for the arrest of Long and his friends. Finding them guilty of the municipal offense of shooting in town, Baumann fined each of them \$2.50 and referred the more serious charge of shooting the victim to the district court for

trial. In a trial by judge, the accused shooters were found not guilty because the judge doubted the eyewitness testimony due to the distance involved and the darkness of the night. The next day, Long met Baumann at his office in Kenner and had words. He questioned why Baumann had pressed the case and promised to see that the seventeen Democrats who had previously voted for Baumann would not do so in the future.²⁴

An influential Democrat, Long began to work tirelessly to undermine Baumann's political support in the parish. When Baumann stood for re-election as clerk of court in 1888, Long and his fellow Democrats organized a plan against him. On the morning of the election, word circulated among Democratic voters to get to the polls in Kenner as early as possible. As soon as the Democrats voted, the election commissioners, the majority of whom were Democrats and included Long, A. Felix, and H.A. Stahl, ordered the polls closed on the pretext that there was an imminent threat of a riot taking place. Over two hundred Republicans appeared at the closed polls and remained standing in the sun in protest. With the same tactics being used by Democrats at other voter precincts in the parish, Baumann supporters were unable to cast their ballots and he failed to win re-election. Shortly thereafter the Democrats made inroads with the African American population in Kenner by orchestrating a black political organization called the "Progressive League of Kenner." With the support of the new African American political group, the Democrats successfully put together a multi-racial political ticket for the municipal elections that were held later in the year. In the election the Democrats were successful in getting Philip Holliday, a black man, elected mayor along with a multi-racial council.²⁵

With the Democrats increasing their political presence in Kenner, Baumann turned to his Republican political contacts in Washington, D.C., and filed complaints against Henry Long's mother, who held the position of Postmistress of Kenner. Tying Mrs. Long to her son's vote manipulations in recent elections, Baumann urged that Mrs. Long be removed from her job. Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Long lost her position on orders of the U.S. Postmaster General. She was replaced with one of Baumann's allies, Dr. J.D. Faucett. The success of Baumann in having Mrs. Long replaced unleashed a fury and a desire for revenge

that brought to politics in Kenner a dark virulence that surpassed anything else to date. Soon after Dr. Faucett assumed his duties, he was assaulted by Long, who was arrested and later placed under bond by a Federal judge. In January 1890, Dr. Faucett was again assaulted, this time by a man named Tucker who worked in the railroad office with Long. Although the attack was merciless and was witnessed by Long, the mayor, and several policemen, no attempt was made by the officials to rescue the victim. No arrests were made and the attacker was able to leave town without consequence. The unfortunate victim was seriously injured and was confined to bed for months before passing away.²⁶

Tensions grew even worse in Kenner when the parish grand jury filed indictments in December 1889 for extortion, oppression, and malfeasance against several of the town's officials, including the mayor, who had been elected on the Democratic ticket. Baumann was soon approached by citizen groups in Kenner and urged to run for mayor in the November 1890 elections on an anti-corruption platform. When Long and the Democrats placed on the ballot the same ticket of officials who had been accused of corruption, Baumann made the decision to run. With the recent scandals fresh in voters' minds and with the history of Republican political support in Kenner, it looked increasingly apparent that the Republican candidates were heading for an election victory.²⁷

As Baumann later recalled, Long and his allies in the parish's Democratic party realized that if strong measures were not taken immediately, the Republicans would recapture control of the municipal government in Kenner. Hence, on the evening before the election, a committee of Democratic leaders from around the parish traveled by train to Kenner. The committee included L.H. Marrero,²⁸ police jury president and future sheriff; Dr. L. Lebeauf, coroner; Dr. C.W. Settoon, parish physician; J.W. McCunethe, notary public and school board member; H. Keilman, police jury member; William Strelle, deputy sheriff and jailer; and several others. They were all heavily armed. In Kenner they approached Baumann, with Marrero acting as spokesman. They informed the Republican candidate that he would simply have to take himself out of the race for mayor and that they were in Kenner to see that it would be done—even if there had to be some bloodshed to accomplish their goal. The group went on to explain that if Baumann

did not withdraw from the race, their committee would not be responsible for what might happen during the night. They suggested that his family and property would not be safe. Realizing the serious nature of the threat and the fact that he had no law enforcement official he could turn to for immediate help, Baumann gave in and the next day retired from active politics in Jefferson Parish—or so he thought.²⁹

Though he dropped out of active politics,³⁰ the fact that Baumann and his family continued as a respected member of the Kenner community remained a problem for his political and personal enemies. In November 1891, Baumann received the following anonymous letter:

J.C. Baumann,

Kenner, Jefferson Parish

The white people of Jefferson Parish consider your presence here perfectly obnoxious: still they do not believe in blood shed, unless they are forced to it. One thing they are decided to maintain: Their supremacy. You have had warning enough, we tell you now for the last time to leave, this parish, and if you do not do it immediately—BEWARE BEWARE

Executive Committee of the
White People of Jefferson Parish³¹

Baumann took the letter to the authorities but all mistakenly agreed, including Baumann, that the letter was only an idle threat. Several days later on the night of December 5, 1891, the Baumann home was visited by Thomas Ryan who asked for medical assistance to help his ill sister from Mrs. Baumann, who was well known for being a talented nurse. An attempt to call the nearest doctor who lived at Carrollton, ten miles away, failed when the Baumann's phone was found to be dead. So Mrs. Baumann departed to go give aid to the ill woman. Shortly after midnight, Mr. Baumann was awakened by someone attempting to open his front door. Thinking it was his wife, he went to the door to open it, but before he did he caught the sight of two suspicious looking men in heavy overcoats with hats pulled down over their faces. When he challenged the men's presence they informed him that they wanted to use the Baumann's phone. As he was explaining that his telephone was out of order (later to discover that the line had been

cut), a shot rang out, splattering glass into Baumann's face and nearly hitting his head. Not totally unprepared for such an event, Baumann managed to jump from the hall where he was standing into a bedroom and retrieved his gun. With that, shotgun blasts of ten to fifteen loads began to shatter rooms throughout his house. One load of buckshot even entered the room where his children slept, missing them by eighteen inches. With the house riddled, the attackers left after about five minutes of shooting. Mrs. Baumann, who was a short distance away, heard the shots and hurried home to find her family in a panic. Baumann met her and told her all were safe. The couple then agreed that they would not remain in the house or Kenner for another day. After decades of service to the community, Baumann and his family packed their belongings and abandoned their property and moved the next day to New Orleans. The Democrats now had full control of Kenner.³²

The change in political fortunes for the Democrats in Kenner did not end the enmity in the community between the supporters of each party. Although Baumann and his family figured that the change in address from his long-time Kenner home to a new residence in New Orleans would free them once and for all from the dangerous morass of the partisan politics of Kenner and Jefferson Parish, they soon discovered that they were wrong. With Baumann's exit from the political



James G. Baumann and his family. Baumann was the son of one of Kennerville's first residents. A loyal member of the Republican Party, he held multiple political positions, including mayor (1880-1884), during turbulent times in post-reconstruction Jefferson Parish and Kenner. He was also among the last owners of the Oakland Plantation estate.