



Dr. Dorian Newton, O&E Committee Chair

May 29, 2026

Welcome to our Outreach & Education Biweekly Series

The Center for African American History, Art, & Culture (CAAHAC), located at 120 York St. NE, Aiken, SC 29801, and housed in the historic Immanuel Institute, preserves and celebrates the creativity, resilience, and significant contributions of Aiken's African American community. Through exhibits, lectures, art shows, concerts, and educational programs, we aim to inspire, celebrate diversity, and highlight African Americans' vital role locally, statewide, and nationally.

This biweekly message marks the first installment of our new Community Outreach & Education series—a chapter-by-chapter exploration of books like Carolyn Click's *The Cost of the Vote: George Elmore and the Battle for the Ballot*. This inaugural work connects historical narratives to contemporary civic life, encouraging reflection and engagement across our community.



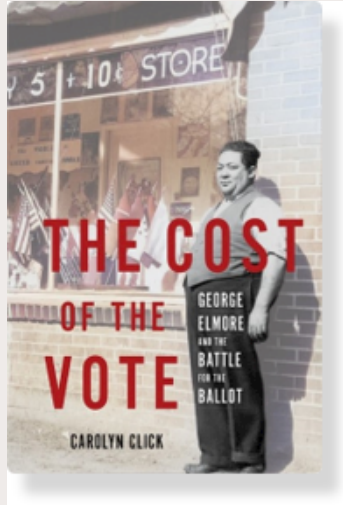
“The vote is precious. It is almost sacred. It is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have.”

– John Lewis

Spotlight:

The Cost of the Vote by Carolyn Click Introduction & Chapter 2 – *“Amid Rural Landscape, Spasms of Violence”*

As Carolyn Click's *The Cost of the Vote* was recently honored with the 2026 South Carolina African American Heritage Commission Book Prize, its message holds special significance for Aiken and beyond. With South Carolina's Democratic primary scheduled for June 9, 2026, this timely book reminds us of the cost of securing the fundamental right to vote and challenges us to engage deeply in the democratic process.



How did the spasms of violence in South Carolina's rural landscape turn the promise of Reconstruction into the terror of the Nadir—and what does that teach us about the true cost of democracy today?

Chapter 2, “Amid Rural Landscape, Spasms of Violence,” takes us from the city streets of Columbia into the Low Country fields of Orangeburg and Dorchester Counties, where young George Augustus Elmore was born in March 1905 near Holly Hill. Family lore tells us his biological father may have been Jewish, but he never knew him; shortly afterward his mother Sadie married George W. Elmore—nearly twice her age—and the boy took his stepfather's name. Across rural South Carolina, the economy was overwhelmingly agricultural: “share tenants of color” worked roughly 80 percent of the farmland, paying landlords a share of their crops in exchange for the right to till the soil. George's stepfather, born in 1856, had personally witnessed the end of the antebellum plantation world, the brief dawn of Reconstruction, and the long, brutal years that followed.

The chapter contrasts two landmark constitutions that defined South Carolina's path. The 1868 Constitution, written by a majority-Black convention in Charleston, was the most democratic in the state's history: it established universal male suffrage for every citizen twenty-one and older “without distinction of race, color, or former condition,” created South Carolina's first public school system open to all children regardless of race, abolished debtors' prison, removed property requirements for office-holding, granted women certain property and divorce rights, and ratified the Fourteenth Amendment. It represented genuine hope for a multiracial democracy.

Just twenty-seven years later, the 1895 Constitution—engineered by “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman and the Edgefield cabal—deliberately reversed those gains. Convened with the explicit purpose of disenfranchising as many Black voters as possible while skirting the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, it introduced a poll tax, literacy and “understanding” tests (administered at the discretion of white registrars), property requirements, and residency rules. It also established the white primary, mandated segregated schools, and outlawed interracial marriage. Where the 1868 document expanded rights and opportunity, the 1895 document contracted them, legally codifying white supremacy for generations.

Chapter 2 also draws a sharp distinction between the two architects of white supremacy who bookend this era. Confederate General Wade Hampton III (Redeemer governor 1876–1879) practiced a paternalistic racism rooted in the old planter aristocracy. He used Red Shirt rifle clubs and widespread intimidation to seize power in the violent “Redemption” election of 1876, but once in office he publicly opposed lynching, made token gestures toward limited Black participation under strict white supervision, and preferred economic control over outright extermination of Black political life. His approach, while still fundamentally racist, was relatively “moderate” and stabilizing compared to what followed. By contrast, “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman represented the new, populist, and far more virulent strain of racism that displaced Hampton’s generation. Tillman openly championed lynching as a necessary tool of white control, bragged in the U.S.

Senate about ballot-box stuffing and shooting Black voters, and personally engineered the 1895 Constitutional Convention to strip away the suffrage rights won in 1868. Where Hampton sought to manage Black citizens, Tillman sought to erase them from the political landscape entirely.

The chapter ends by grounding this history in the immediate world of young George Elmore. In the years surrounding his birth in March 1905, a series of brutal lynchings terrorized Dorchester County and nearby areas. General Lee was lynched near Reevesville on January 13, 1904; Willie Spain near St. George on August 23, 1906; Robert (or Dan) Etheridge in Saluda County on August 20, 1906; and Bob Davis in Greenwood County on August 16, 1906. In each case the men were not only hanged but shot so many times their bodies were no longer recognizable—vivid evidence of the unrelenting racial terror that defined the rural Low Country environment in which George grew up. For our community today, this chapter is a stark reminder that democracy is never guaranteed—it must be actively defended against the rural and political violence that once sought to silence an entire people.

The Spasms of Violence vs. The Steadfastness of Hope

The Spasms of Violence:

- Accepting the Black Codes, Red Shirt terror, and 1895 Constitution as the “natural order” of rural life.
- Allowing sharecropping debt and economic dependence to keep families silent and isolated.
- Forgetting that every lynching and every stolen ballot was meant to crush the very idea of Black citizenship.

The Steadfastness of Hope:

- Building public schools, families, and communities even while the Redeemers burned and intimidated.
- Teaching children—like young George Elmore on the Low Country farms—that dignity and education could outlast terror.
- Refusing to let rural violence define the future, choosing instead to plant seeds of resilience for generations yet unborn.

Reflection Questions

This period, consider how the book’s lessons apply to your life and our shared community. Use these questions to reflect on your role in civic engagement and historical awareness:

1. **In what ways does your own family’s rural or Low Country roots mirror the world young George Elmore knew, and how might those stories prepare you to stand against modern barriers to full participation? George’s stepfather lived through the end of slavery, Reconstruction, and the Nadir—ordinary lives carried extraordinary lessons.**
2. **When have you seen or heard “spasms of violence”—whether physical, economic, or political—that tried to silence voices in our community, and how did hope respond? Chapter 2 shows that violence was never random; it was a deliberate tool to erase the gains of 1868.**
3. **How can we preserve the stories of sharecropping families and the contrast between the 1868 and 1895 Constitutions so that younger generations understand the real price paid for the ballot we now hold? The chapter reminds us that public education itself was one of Reconstruction’s greatest victories.**
4. **What personal “costs” of speaking up or showing up might you be willing to accept so that history’s lessons are not repeated in our time?**
5. **In your daily circles—work, church, neighborhood—how might you translate the steadfastness of those rural families into practical acts of voter education and community uplift?**
6. **Looking ahead, what one small step can you take this period to honor the courage that turned rural terror into the foundation for the civil-rights victories still unfolding today?**

Suggested Activities for the Next Two Weeks

To move from reflection to action and support our shared goals of civic education and historical preservation, consider these steps:

1

Dive deeper into the book:

- Read or re-read Chapter 2 and note one detail about rural life, the Black Codes, or the contrasting 1868 and 1895 Constitutions that stays with you.
- Share that passage with a friend or family member to spark conversation about South Carolina's voting-rights journey.

2

Engage with the Book Club:

- Prepare one reflection question to contribute—your perspective enriches us all.

3

Support historical preservation locally:

- Visit or research Low Country sites tied to Reconstruction and the Nadir, or Aiken's own civil-rights landmarks.
- Document or share family stories of sharecropping, farming, or early voting struggles for our community archive.

4

Strengthen CAAHAC's work in our community:

- Join the Friends of CAAHAC to support outreach and educational initiatives across the region by visiting <https://caahac.org/membership/>.
- Every contribution helps expand outreach, education, and preservation across our region.

5

Get a copy of the book:

- Purchase from local independent bookstores: The Book Tavern in Augusta or All Good Books in Columbia.
 - Order directly from the publisher at USC Press.
- Borrow a copy from the Aiken County Public Library (ABBE Regional Library System) where you can also check for book-club discussion sets or join existing groups.
 - Check with the CAAHAC gift shop—limited copies may be available for community pickup.

Closing Thoughts

As Chapter 2 lays bare the spasms of violence that followed the brief promise of Reconstruction, we are reminded that the vote was never freely given—it was seized, defended, and paid for in courage, blood, and unwavering hope. The rural terror of the nadir of American race relations sought to erase the expansive 1868 Constitution and the dreams of newly freed families, yet ordinary people like the Elmore family refused to let fear have the final word. That same steadfastness calls every one of us today to honor their sacrifice through active participation in the work of civic education, historical preservation, and community empowerment that defines the CAAHAC mission. Together, we transform painful chapters of the past into powerful fuel for a future where every voice in our community is heard, every story preserved, and every right defended. The road ahead still asks much of us, yet the promise of a more perfect union has never been brighter—because we choose, like those rural families before us, to pay the cost and claim the prize.

Historical Spotlight

In the years surrounding George Elmore's birth in March 1905, rural Dorchester County was gripped by unrelenting terror. On January 13, 1904, General Lee was lynched near Reevesville; on August 16, 1906, Bob Davis in Greenwood County; on August 20, 1906, Robert (or Dan) Etheridge in Saluda County; and on August 23, 1906, Willie Spain near St. George. In each case the men were not only hanged but shot so many times their bodies were no longer recognizable. These "spasms of violence" formed the brutal backdrop of young George's Low Country childhood. (Source: Carolyn Click, *The Cost of the Vote*, Chapter 2)

Things to Look Forward To:

- **June 12, 2026 – Third Biweekly Message** In Chapter 3, "Hard Work, Racial Uplift, and Card Parties," we enter the early 1900s, where Black communities across South Carolina combined daily labor, self-improvement initiatives, and social gatherings like card parties to quietly build economic strength and political awareness—demonstrating how everyday resilience and collective uplift became powerful foundations for the voting-rights battles still ahead.
- **Summer Community Voter-Education Series**— The Aiken Center for African American History, Arts, and Culture (CAAHAC) will collaborate with the NAACP and/or the Women's League of Voters to support initiatives focused on voter education and community engagement.
- **June 20, 2026** – Juneteenth Celebration! Mark your calendars for a FREE community event hosted by the Center for African American History, Art & Culture at 120 York St NE, Aiken, SC 29801, 11AM–2PM. Celebrate our shared history, art, and culture together—see the attached official Juneteenth 2026 flyer for all the details.

JUNETEENTH CELEBRATION



CENTER FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN
HISTORY, ART & CULTURE



**VOLUNTEERS
NEEDED**



SCAN FOR VOLUNTEER SIGN UP

**FREE
ADMISSION**

CENTER FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN
HISTORY, ART & CULTURE

120 YORK ST NE, AIKEN, SC 29801

SAT . JUNE 20TH . 2026

WWW.CAAHAC.ORG

11AM-2PM

803-502-4858



NAACP

NAACP



Let us carry the spirit of Tree Street—and the honor of this recent book prize—into every conversation, every classroom, and every polling place. Together, we turn the ship—steadily, courageously—toward a future where every citizen's voice is both cherished and heard.

Warm Regards,

Dr. Dorian Newton

CAAHAC Outreach & Education Committee