When I decided in 1976 to pursue a degree in U.S. history, studying the American Civil War was the furthest thought from my mind. All that changed, however, during a long bus ride to my parents' home during Thanksgiving break as I passed the time reading an assigned Civil War text. In a section devoted to white Southerners who opposed the Confederacy, I noticed a curious footnote. Jones County, Mississippi, the authors noted, had allegedly seceded from the Confederacy in the midst of the war after declaring itself the "Free State of Jones."
A Deep South county that seceded from the Confederacy? What was this, and why had I not heard about it, especially given that my own father was born in Jones County? In this moment, I began dimly to perceive that the practice of history might as easily refute time-worn images of the South as reinforce them.

In the case of Jones County, located in the piney woods of southeastern Mississippi, history had first to be rescued from the realms of legend, myth and folklore. Thanks to novelists, moviemakers and a longstanding family feud, the Jones County uprising had remained a living story, but with pro- and anti-Confederate members of the family each presenting their “side.” Those who opposed the Confederacy were alternately presented as a gang of marauding outlaws, or as Unionist heroes protecting families from harm. What was the “true” story of this region?

I was not prepared in 1976 to tackle so formidable a task. A junior in college, I had neither academic training nor funding. Still, I never abandoned my goal of researching the history of my father’s place of birth. Sixteen years later, as my first book (Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South) was being published, I began to investigate the “legend” of Jones County’s secession from the Confederacy. What I discovered during eight years of summer research trips, and after endless writing and rewriting, was a story that utterly confounded popular notions about a “Solid (white) South” that had supported the “Lost Cause” of a separate southern nation.

By all accounts, “Captain” Newt Knight possessed a forceful, charismatic personality. Befitting the leader of a guerrilla band, he could be ruthless as well. “Kill or be killed” was necessarily the motto of anti-Confederate guerrillas, who faced execution for treason if captured.

In December 1860, Jones County voters expressed widespread opposition to southern secession by electing a pro-Union delegate, John Powell, to the Mississippi State Convention of January 1861. At that convention, delegate Powell caved in to pressure and changed his vote to favor secession, outraging many folks back home. Confederate conscript laws passed the following year dictated that Jones County’s young men join the Army. Most did so, but many did not remain there long. The northern Mississippi battles of Iuka and Corinth, coupled with passage of the so-called “20-Negro Law” in October 1862 (which provided military exemptions for the owners of 20 or more slaves), convinced many to leave the Army for good. Sometimes alone, sometimes in small groups, they straggled home.

Until the Confederacy organized troops to track down deserters, AWOL men merely resumed normal activities at home. But, as Confederate militia became active in the Jones County area, deserters from the region armed themselves and headed for the swamps. By late 1863, they had formally organized themselves, unanimously electing
Newton Knight, a non-slaveholding farmer, as their captain and naming their band the Knight Company. The Knight Company proceeded to wage war on the Confederacy.

By all accounts, “Captain” Newt Knight possessed a forceful, charismatic personality. Tall, eagle-eyed and remarkably self-possessed, he had extensive family ties in the community and quickly rose to prominence among fellow deserters. Befitting the leader of a guerrilla band, he could be ruthless as well as charismatic. “Kill or be killed” was necessarily the motto of anti-Confederate guerrillas, who faced execution for treason if captured.

The cold-blooded murder of Major Amos McLemore, Jones County’s most powerful Confederate officer, is universally attributed to Newt, although he was never charged in court. By 1864, the Knight Company had crippled the government of Jones County, contributing to news reports of the county’s secession from the Confederacy.

There were many guerrilla bands that roamed the South during the Civil War. They commonly came from solid non-slaveholding majorities and drew on strong kinship ties and assistance from the civilian populations of their communities. Such factors were fundamental to the formation and survival of the Knight Company. Slaveholders were few, with slaves comprising only 12 percent of the county’s population, while the importance of family networks was demonstrated by the fact that 26 of 55 core members of the band shared six surnames.

Women and slaves were vital participants in Jones County’s inner civil war. In April 1864, when Confederate Col. Robert Lowry and his forces raided Jones County in search of deserters, they encountered fierce resistance from civilians as well as dissident soldiers. The Knight band’s female kin, as well as Newt Knight’s slave accomplice, Rachel, not only hid and fed the men, but also sprinkled red pepper and ground glass along the paths frequented by militia hounds who tracked down deserters.

Rachel’s alliance with Newt Knight bound her to him for the rest of her life. Together, the couple created a mixed-race community that endures to this day.

Although few would have predicted that Newt Knight’s crossing of the color line would be permanent, by war’s end, he had rejected Southern racial mores altogether. Newt was active in Reconstruction politics until public knowledge of his interracial relationships made it impossible for him to win office. He also repeatedly petitioned the U.S. government for wartime compensation for his Knight Company soldiers until those claims were once and for all rejected in 1900.

Rachel died in 1889 at age 49, but Newt lived to a ripe old age, remaining in his community and achieving legendary status in the process. He never repudiated his wartime behavior and rejected the New South’s glorification of the Confederate “Lost Cause.” Shortly before his death in 1922, an unrepentant Newt told reporter Meigs Frost of the New Orleans Item that “I guess we’ll all die guerrillas.”

In 2001, my book, The Free State of Jones, was published by the University of North Carolina Press. In early 2007, Universal Studios purchased film rights to the book from the press. Producer Gary Ross (Seabiscuit, Pleasantville) is slated to produce, direct and write an original screenplay for the forthcoming movie of the same name. When that happens, Newton Knight and his band of anti-Confederate “soldiers,” many of them Unionists who steadfastly opposed secession and the creation of a separate Southern nation, will at long last become part our nation’s popular history.