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Who Were The Original Knights Of Labor

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795584285051217

Introduction: The Rise of a Secret Brotherhood

In the late 19th century, as America rapidly industrialized, a new kind of organization emerged to defend the rights of working people. While many know of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and its founder Samuel Gompers, fewer are familiar with the earlier, more ambitious labor body: the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor. To truly understand the struggle for workers' rights in the United States, one must ask: **who were the original Knights of Labor**? This question opens a window into a radical, inclusive, and ultimately transformative movement that sought not just better wages, but a complete reimagining of industrial society. The original Knights of Labor were not a single person but a collective of garment cutters in Philadelphia who, in 1869, founded a secret society dedicated to uniting all producers—skilled and unskilled, men and women, black and white—under one banner. This article explores the founders, their philosophy, the organization's meteoric rise, its dramatic fall, and the lasting legacy of the men and women who dared to dream of a cooperative commonwealth.

Founding and Early Leadership: The Secret Assembly

The Birth of an Idea in Philadelphia

The original Knights of Labor were formed in the seclusion of a garment cutter's workshop in Philadelphia in December 1869. The immediate context was the failure of the National Labor Union and the increasing power of industrial capitalists. Seven garment cutters, led by **Uriah Stephens**, decided to create a new kind of labor organization. Stephens, a former tailor with a theological background, was deeply influenced by the secrecy and rituals of fraternal societies like the Freemasons. The early Knights operated in total secrecy, using code names, passwords, and obscure rituals to protect members from employer blacklists. The original name was "Assembly No. 1," and its members were sworn to absolute confidentiality. Secrecy was not just for drama; it was a survival tactic in an era when union membership could mean immediate firing, eviction, or even violence from company thugs.

Uriah Stephens: The Grand Master Workman

Uriah Stephens(1821–1882) was the driving intellectual force behind the original Knights of Labor. A former clergyman and tailor, Stephens believed that labor had a moral and spiritual dimension. He saw the Knights as a "brotherhood of toil" that would elevate the working class through education, cooperation, and political action. Stephens served as the first Grand Master Workman (the title for the national leader) and crafted many of the organization's founding documents. His vision was expansive: he wanted to abolish the wage system altogether, replacing it with worker-owned cooperatives. This cooperative ideal separated the Knights from more pragmatic trade unions that focused only on immediate gains.

Terence V. Powderly: The Public Face of the Knights

While Stephens founded the order, it was **Terence V. Powderly**who led the Knights to national prominence.

Powderly, a machinist and mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, became Grand Master Workman in 1879. Under his leadership, the Knights abandoned strict secrecy (partly due to Catholic Church opposition) and began to open their membership to all workers. Powderly was a charismatic figure, a skilled orator, and a political pragmatist. He preferred arbitration over strikes and advocated for temperance, land reform, and currency reform. However, Powderly's cautious approach would later become a source of conflict with more militant members. When people ask "who were the original Knights of Labor," the answer includes both the idealistic Stephens and the practical Powderly.

Structure, Philosophy, and Governance

The Pyramid of Assemblies

The Knights of Labor built a unique organizational structure that mirrored a great pyramid. At the base were **Local Assemblies** (LAs), which could be either trade-specific (such as carpenters) or "mixed" (including all workers in a geographic area). Above these were **District Assemblies** (DAs), which coordinated multiple locals, and at the top was the **General Assembly**, the supreme governing body that met annually. This structure was designed to be both democratic and centralized. Local assemblies retained significant autonomy, but major policy decisions—including strikes—had to be approved by the General Assembly. The original Knights fiercely debated this balance between local initiative and national control, a tension that would haunt the organization.

The Cooperative Commonwealth: Their Ultimate Goal

The philosophy of the original Knights of Labor went far beyond collective bargaining. They called for a "cooperative commonwealth," a society where workers owned and managed the means of production. The preamble to the Knights' constitution declared that "the industrial system is a perpetual warfare" and that "the working people must unite to secure their rights." They advocated for the eight-hour workday, equal pay for equal work (including for women), the abolition of child labor, and the establishment of worker-owned factories and stores. Unlike later mainstream unions, the Knights were not content to simply negotiate within capitalism; they wanted to replace it with a more just system. This radical vision attracted idealists but also frightened conservative forces.

Membership and Inclusivity: Truly a "One Big Union"

Breaking Barriers: Women in the Knights

One of the most remarkable aspects of the original Knights of Labor was their openness to women. At a time when most labor unions excluded women entirely, the Knights actively recruited them. The order created a **Women's Department** and appointed **Mary O'Reilly** as its head. By the mid-1880s, some 50,000 women were members of the Knights, in mixed assemblies or separate female assemblies. Women like **Mary Kenney O'Sullivan** and **Leonora Barry**became prominent organizers. Barry, a widowed garment worker, toured the country advocating for working women and exposing the abuses of sweatshops. This inclusive approach was part of the Knights' belief that all productive labor, whether performed by men or women, deserved dignity and reward.

Race and the Knights: A Complicated Legacy

The original Knights of Labor also took a bold stand on racial inclusion. Uriah Stephens declared that the order should admit "all men of good character, regardless of color." This was a revolutionary stance in a segregated nation. African American workers joined the Knights in significant numbers, particularly in the South and in industrial cities like Richmond and Philadelphia. The Knights even organized a separate **Colored Division**to work around Jim Crow laws, though this segregated structure was criticized by some members. The organization faced intense opposition from white supremacists, but it remained one of the few national labor bodies that accepted Black members as equals. The legacy of this inclusion would echo in the civil rights

movement generations later.

Skilled and Unskilled, Immigrant and Native

Unlike the craft unions that dominated the AFL, the Knights welcomed immigrants, the unskilled, and even small farmers. This "big tent" approach was both a strength and a weakness. It gave the Knights immense mobilization capacity; at its peak in 1886, membership soared to over 700,000. But it also created internal divisions. Skilled workers sometimes resented the lack of craft identity, while unskilled laborers demanded more militant action. The original Knights struggled to hold together such a diverse coalition, especially when employers began to fight back.

Major Events and Milestones

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877

Though the Knights were still small in 1877, the national railroad strike that paralyzed the country galvanized their growth. Workers in Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and elsewhere fought federal troops and police in a desperate struggle against wage cuts. The strike failed, but it radicalized a generation of workers. Many who had never considered union membership flocked to the Knights in the following years. The strike also established the Knights' reputation as a militant, anti-corporate force.

The Haymarket Affair: A Turning Point

No event is more associated with the Knights of Labor than the **Haymarket Affair**of 1886. On May 4, a labor rally in Chicago's Haymarket Square turned violent when a bomb was thrown at police. Eight anarchists were arrested and four were executed. The Knights had been advocating for the eight-hour day, and the Haymarket incident was used by employers to smear all labor organizations. Terence Powderly quickly condemned the anarchists and distanced the Knights from the events, a move that disappointed many radical members. The backlash from Haymarket, combined with public fear of "foreign radicals," led to a sharp decline in Knights membership.

The Southwest Railroad Strike (1885–1886)

Before Haymarket, the Knights had achieved a stunning victory against the Jay Gould railroad empire. In 1885, a strike by Knights members against Gould's Missouri Pacific Railroad forced the powerful financier to negotiate and restore wage cuts. This victory brought thousands of new members, making the Knights the largest labor organization of the 19th century. But the triumph was short-lived. When the Knights tried to strike Gould again in 1886, they were crushed. Gould had learned from the first strike and hired strikebreakers, federal judges issued injunctions, and the Knights' decentralized structure could not coordinate an effective response.

Decline: The Fall of the Noble Order

Internal Conflicts and Fragmentation

By the late 1880s, the original vision of the Knights of Labor was fading. Internal fights between "progressives" (who wanted political action and socialism) and "conservatives" (led by Powderly, who favored arbitration) paralyzed decision-making. The Knights' open-door policy meant that many new members had little loyalty to the order's cooperative philosophy. Meanwhile, the newly formed American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded by Samuel Gompers, offered a more pragmatic approach: pure and simple unionism focused on skilled workers. The AFL's craft unions siphoned away many of the Knights' strongest members.

Employer Opposition and State Suppression

Employers used every tool to destroy the Knights. Blacklists, lockouts, and private detective agencies like the Pinkertons infiltrated assemblies. Courts issued sweeping injunctions against strikes, and local governments

used police and militia to break up meetings. The Knights' radical rhetoric—especially their calls for worker ownership—made them a prime target. The original Knights had hoped that secrecy would protect them, but once their membership became public, they were vulnerable.

The Fragmented Final Decades

By the mid-1890s, membership had plummeted to under 100,000. The Knights continued to exist into the early 20th century, but they had lost all influence. Some assemblies merged with the AFL; others became small cooperative societies. The last General Assembly was held in 1917. Many historians date the end of the Knights to 1886, but in truth, the organization lingered on, a ghost of its former self, until America's entry into World War I.

Legacy: What the Original Knights Built

Influencing the Modern Labor Movement

The original Knights of Labor left an indelible mark on American labor. Their insistence on inclusivity—uniting all workers regardless of skill, race, or gender—set a standard that later unions struggled to meet. The concept of "one big union" influenced the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or "Wobblies"), founded in 1905. The Knights' cooperative ventures, though often short-lived, inspired worker-owned businesses and credit unions. Even the modern AFL-CIO owes a debt to the Knights' vision of a centralized labor federation.

Lessons for Modern Organizers

When we ask "who were the original Knights of Labor," we also ask what we can learn from them. Their failures teach us about the dangers of a top-heavy bureaucracy (Powderly's autocratic style), the need for disciplined organizing (the open-door policy led to infiltration), and the importance of clear, achievable demands. Their successes remind us that a truly inclusive movement can achieve great victories, even if temporarily. In an era of rising inequality reminiscent of the Gilded Age, the Knights' fight for dignity, justice, and a cooperative economy resonates more than ever.

Conclusion: Remembering the Original Knights

The original Knights of Labor were not just a labor union; they were a bold experiment in democratic self-governance and social transformation. From the secret meetings of seven garment cutters in Philadelphia to the mass rallies of 700,000 members, the Knights embodied the hopes and contradictions of the late 19th-century working class. They fought for an eight-hour day and an end to child labor. They welcomed women and African

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