

J. Allen Kirk on the Wilmington Race Riot

Excerpt from J. Allen Kirk, *A Statement of Facts Concerning the Bloody Riot in Wilmington, N.C. Of Interest to Every Citizen of the United States* [n.p., n.d.], pp. 9–12.

As you read...

The Rev. Dr. J. Allen Kirk was pastor of the Central Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898, and a leading black citizen of that city. During the Wilmington Race Riot, he and his family hid in the graveyard, knowing that the mob was looking to kill him. Eventually, Kirk was forced to leave his family and flee North Carolina.

Kirk wrote this account of the Wilmington Race Riots in the third person, in an attempt to appear to be as unbiased as possible. He described a scene of chaos and violence. Historians do not know how many people died during the race riot, but most estimates range from 60 to 100.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How were white families treated in Wilmington during the race riot?
2. Who prevented African American men from helping their families?
3. Where did Kirk and his family stay during the rioting?
4. What types of violence did whites inflict on African Americans?
5. How did the white mob attempt to restrict the movement of African Americans?
6. What were the different ways African Americans respond to the violence?
7. How were African American women treated by the white mob?
8. What are the similarities between this account and the anonymous letter written to President McKinley?
How does Kirk's account differ from that of Alfred Waddell?

Wednesday [November 9, 1898] there was a great Jubilee march by the Democrats through the City, probably five hundred in number, and report after report could be heard from their guns. The cheers and loud hurrahs and shrieks in the streets were enough to intimidate and demoralize all peaceful citizens and to send fear and terror to the hearts of the Negroes inhabiting the City of Wilmington. But it cleared away and we thought all was over and Dr. Kirk being at Major Walker's, whose wife receiving a telephone that the whites were gathering around Castle Street in great numbers with guns and arms of various kinds

and advised her not to sleep that night, but to keep her eyes open. The Rev. started home to see about his family and as he got to Fanning Street the firing began; not knowing the nature of it he sends for his family and he and his family lodged in the suburbs of the City that night. Returning home the next morning he arose from the breakfast table and went to see what the signs of the times were. He saw a young man rushing by on his wheel¹ whom he called to and asked what the trouble was, he said they were all gathering at the Armory on Market Street, preparing to burn the Record. Rev. Kirk started for a carriage to remove his family but they were then coming and he took his family to the suburbs of the City, hiding in the Colored Cemetery until the disturbances of the day were quite over; having messengers to go back and forth to bring him the news of all that was done. This he kept up until the chief fighting was over. They marched down to the Love and Charity Hall, went in, threw out the press into the street and the building burned down. Then they marched to Rev. J. Allen Kirk's house, pastor of the Central Baptist Church, and the Regulators lined up in front of the parsonage, while two came to the door and knocked for entrance, but they were told that he and his family had gone. They went from there across the railroad into what is known as Darktown and Brooklyn; they had sent a committee to remove all the white women and their children down town, where they had prepared a guard to keep them secure. They marched through the streets protected by these military and citizen regulators, perfectly safe. It was a great sight to see them marching from death, and the colored women, colored men, colored children, colored enterprises and colored people all exposed to death. Firing began, and it seemed like a mighty battle in war time. The shrieks and screams of children, of mothers, of wives were heard, such as caused the blood of the most inhuman person to creep. Thousands of women, children and men rushed to the swamps and there lay upon the earth in the cold to freeze and starve. The woods were filled with colored people. The streets were dotted with their dead bodies. A white gentleman said that he saw ten bodies lying in the undertakers office at one time. Some of their bodies were left lying in the streets until up in the next day following the riot. Some were found by the stench and miasma that came forth from their decaying bodies under their houses. Every colored man who passed through the streets had either to be guarded by one of the crowd or have a paper (pass) giving him the right to pass. All colored men at the cotton press and oil mills were ordered not to leave their labor but stop there, while their wives and children were shrieking and crying in the midst of the flying balls and in sight of the cannons and Gatling gun. All the white people had gone out of that part of the City, this army of men marched through the streets, sword buckled to their sides, giving the command to fire. Men stood at their labor wringing their hands and weeping, but they dare not move to the protection of their homes. And then when they passed through the streets had to hold up their hands and be searched. The little white boys of the city searched them and took from them every means of defence, and if they resisted, they were shot down. From an eye-witness and a reliable colored lady, from New York, it was stated that they went into a colored man's house, he sitting at the fire, they thought he fired a shot; he ran, they shot him down, then took up a stick of wood and bursted his brains out; then they went on firing, it seems, at every living Negro, killing a great many of them; searching everyone they could get hold of; this went on all day and night, more or less. The city was under military rule; no Negro was allowed to come into the city without being examined or without passing through with his boss, for whom he labored. Colored women were examined and their hats taken off and search was made even under their clothing.

They went from house to house looking for Negroes that they considered offensive; took arms they had hidden and killed them for the least expression of manhood. They gathered around colored homes, firing like great sportsmen firing at rabbits in an open field and when one would jump his man, from sixty to one hundred shots would be turned loose upon him. His escape was impossible. One fellow was walking along a railroad and they shot him down without any provocation. It is said by an eye witness that men lay upon the street dead and dying, while members of their race walked by helpless and unable to do them any good or their families. Negro stores were closed and the owners thereof driven out of the city and even shipped away at the point of the gun.

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Notes

1. *Wheel* was slang for bicycle.