

The "Revolutionary Mayor" of Wilmington

As told by Alfred M. Waddell, *Collier's Weekly*, November 26, 1898.

As you read...

A COUP D'ETAT

After the riots of November 10, 1898 (see <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newsouth/4360>), in Wilmington, the white mob forced Republican Mayor Silas P. Wright, who was white, and other members of the city government, to resign. The new city council elected Alfred M. Waddell, the mob's leader, mayor, effective that same afternoon. This was a *coup d'etat* — a French phrase that refers to a violent overthrow of a legitimate government.

A few weeks after the riot, *Collier's Weekly* magazine published this account of events by Alfred Waddell, who had led the violence. In his account, Waddell blamed the violence on blacks and Wilmington's white Fusionist leaders. He described how he was then elected mayor and claimed that the transfer of power in Wilmington was completely legal. The mayor and council, said Waddell, knew they were incompetent and resigned before they were "run out of town." In the years after the riot, Waddell's story became the most widely accepted version of events.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. According to Waddell, how did the riot start?
2. Why does he say that he agreed to lead the march to the press?
3. In Waddell's account of the riot, what do you believe or disbelieve? Why?
4. What did the army officer mean when he called the riot "the most orderly performance [he] ever witnessed"? Why does Waddell mention this?
5. How was Waddell "elected mayor"?
6. Waddell says that "many negroes have come to me and said they are glad I have taken charge." Do you believe him? If so, do you think the blacks who spoke to him were sincere?
7. How does Waddell justify the riot and the change of government?
8. Do you think that Waddell believed his own account of events? That is, do you think that he genuinely saw things this way? Why or why not? If not, do you think that he expected others to believe his story? Why or why not?

THE STORY OF THE WILMINGTON, N.C., RACE RIOTS

By Col. Alfred M. Waddell

Leader of the Reform Movement and now Revolutionary Mayor of Wilmington

My active connection with what has been termed the Revolutionary Government commenced when the Campaign Committee called upon me to make a speech stating my views; and I would like to say, in this connection, that some of the daily press representatives who have given an account of my speech selected two paragraphs standing alone. They came to the conclusion that I was a violent revolutionist.

I said in my speech:

If there should be a race conflict here (which God forbid!), the first men who should be held to strict accountability are the white leaders, who would be chiefly responsible, and the work should begin at the top of the list. I scorn to leave any doubt as to whom I mean by that phrase. I mean the Governor of this State, who is the engineer of all the devilry and meanness.

That is one part of the speech. I also said:

We will not live under these intolerable conditions. No society can stand it. We intend to change it, if we have to choke the current of the Cape Fear River with carcasses.

That is the other paragraph which some of the press representatives took out. All the rest of the speech, which was chiefly a statement of facts, was omitted. Those paragraphs, disconnected from the text, were sent out as my speech.

When the crisis came, there was a universal demand that I should take charge. Last week, at the mass meeting, they made me chairman by acclamation, and also chairman of the Citizens' Committee of Twenty-five.

Demand was made for the negroes to reply to our ultimatum to them, and their reply was delayed or sent astray (whether purposely or not, I do not know), and that caused all the trouble. The people came to me. Although two other men were in command, they demanded that I should lead them.

I took my Winchester rifle, assumed my position at the head of the procession, and marched to the "Record" office. We designed merely to destroy the press. I took a couple of men to the door, when our demand to open was not answered, and burst it in. Not I personally, for I have not the strength, but those with me did it.

We wrecked the house. I believe that the fire which occurred was purely accidental; it certainly was unintentional on our part. I saw smoke issuing from the top story. Some one said the house was afire. I could not believe it. There were a number of kerosene oil lamps hanging round. They were thrown down and smashed, and the kerosene ran over the floor. It is possible that some fellow set it afire with a match. Immediately there were shouts when the fire occurred.

"Stop that fire! Put it out! This won't do at all!"

I at once had the fire alarm bell rung. We saved the wooden buildings next to the "Record" office, and soon had the fire out.

I then marched the column back through the streets down to the armory, lined them up, and stood on the stoop and made a speech to them. I said:

“Now you have performed the duty which you called on me to lead you to perform. now let us go quietly to our homes, and about our business, and obey the law, unless we are forced, in self-defense, to do other wise.” I came home... In about an hour, or less time, the trouble commenced over in the other end of town, by the negroes starting to come over here. I was not there at the time. I was here in this part of town. But we began immediately to turn out and prepare. And right here I want to say this about my part: I never dreamed the time would come when I would lead a mob. But I want to say, too, a United States Army officer, a prominent man, was here, and saw the whole performance. He said:

“I never witnessed anything like this before. It is the most orderly performance I ever witnessed!”

Then they got seven of the negro leaders, brought them downtown, and put them in jail. I had been elected mayor by that time. It was certainly the strangest performance in American history, though we literally followed the law, as the Fusionists made it themselves. There has not been a single illegal act committed in the change of government. Simply, the old board went out, and the new board came in — strictly according to law. In regard to those men who had been brought to the jail a crowd said that they intended to destroy them; that they were the leaders, and that they were going to take the men out of the jail.

I ordered a force of military around the jail. I said to the people:

“My position has been radically changed. I am now a sworn officer of the law. That jail and those people must have protection.”

I went out and appealed to the people in different parts of the town. They realized the situation and told me I was right, and that they would stand by me.

I stayed up the whole night myself, and the forces stayed up all night, and we saved those wretched creatures’ lives.

I waited until next morning at nine o’clock and then I made the troops form a hollow square in front of the jail. We placed the scoundrels in the midst of the square and marched them to the railroad station. I bought and gave them tickets to Richmond, and told them to go and to never show up again. That bunch were all negroes. Then they had taken other fellows that they sent out, and had them somewhere protected. They took them under guard to another train — there were three whites in that party — and sent them off also.

Rumors fly here and there that the negroes are arming. There is no truth in that. They are utterly cowed and crushed, and are not going to interfere with anybody. I have sent messengers of both races out into the surrounding woods, where, it is said, fugitives are in hiding, begging the people to come back to their homes, and to rest assured they will be protected in their persons and property. A great many have come in, and I expect more will come to-night.

The negroes here have always professed to have faith in me. When I made the speech in the Opera House they were astounded. One of the leaders said:

“My God! when so conservative a man as Colonel Waddell talks about filling the river with dead niggers, I want to get out of town!”

Since this trouble many negroes have come to me and said they are glad I have taken charge. I said:

“Never a hair of your heads will be harmed. I will dispense justice to you as I would to the first man in the community. I will try to discharge my duty honestly and impartially.”

No one knows better than I that this has been a serious matter, but it has, like all such affairs, its humorous side. After the crisis had passed, an old negro came complaining to me about his jack-knife which he wanted me to get back for him. It seems it had been taken from him during the fracas. Then another negro came, complaining that some cattle had been penned up, and he wanted them “tu’nd loose.”

The pendulum swing from the most tragic incidents to the most trivial. I have been bombarded with every kind of petition and complaint, both for protection against imaginary trouble, and for what I consider would be persecution — that spirit of cruelty that a revolution always develops; people who want to gratify their animosity and personal spite.

As to the government we have established, it is a perfectly legal one. The law, passed by the Republican Legislature itself, has been complied with. There was no intimidation used in the establishment of the present city government. The old government had become satisfied of their inefficiency and utterly helpless imbecility, and believed if they did not resign they would be run out of town.

On the web

Waddell's memoir

<http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/historyfiction/item.aspx?id=als>

Alfred Waddell's 1908 memoir, *Some memories of my life*, is available from the Eastern North Carolina Digital Library. He describes the race riot briefly beginning on page 242.

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