

# The Wilmington Race Riot

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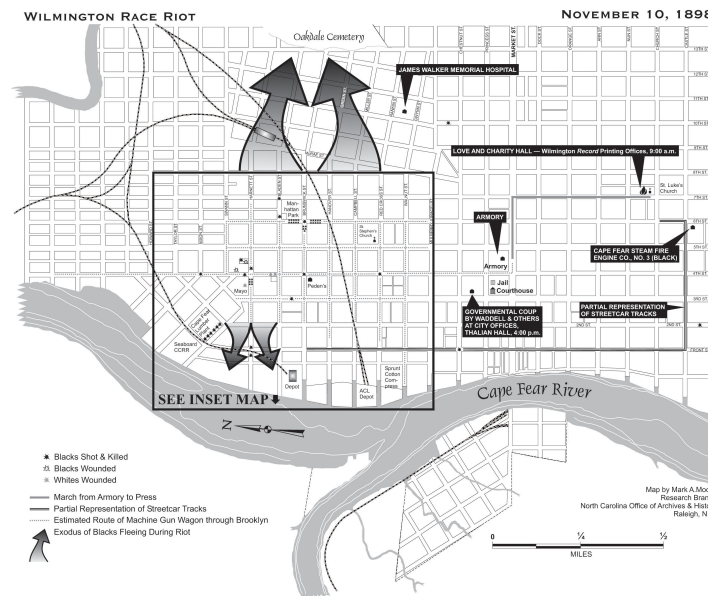


Figure 1. Map of the Wilmington Race Riot, November 10, 1898. See also the inset map.

In 1898, Wilmington was a thriving port city on the coast of North Carolina. About two-thirds of Wilmington's population was African American. African Americans were business people who owned barbershops, restaurants, tailor shops, and drug stores. African Americans also held positions as firemen and policemen. Overall, the African American and white races existed peacefully but separately.

Good relations continued until the election of 1896, when the white Democrats lost control of state politics. A group of predominately white Populists and African American Republicans won political control of the state. The white Democrats promised to avenge their defeat at the hands of white Populists and African American Republicans in the election of 1898. Daniel Schenck, a Democratic party leader, warned, "It will be the meanest, vilest, dirtiest campaign since 1876" (the election that ended reconstruction in the South).

The Democratic campaign focused on white women's fears of African American males and the threat of African American men being lynched. Prior to the election, a white newspaper in Wilmington published a controversial speech given by a Georgia feminist. In her speech she supported the lynching of African American males for inappropriate relationships with white women. Alex Manly, an African American newspaper editor in Wilmington, was infuriated by the newspaper article. Mr. Manly wrote editorials in his newspaper arguing that white males were just as guilty of having inappropriate relationships with African American women. The exchange of words between the two newspapers increased racial tensions. Alfred Moore Waddell, a former Confederate officer and U.S. Congressman, called for the removal of the Republicans and Populists then in power in Wilmington. He proposed in a speech that the white citizens, if necessary, should "choke the Cape Fear with carcasses."

African American voters turned out in large numbers for the election of 1898. However, the Democrats who favored white supremacy stuffed the ballot boxes and won the election. Two days after the election, violence erupted into the "Wilmington Race Riot." About 500 white men had assembled at the armory, and Waddell led them to the Daily Record office several blocks away. The crowd following Waddell grew to about 2,000 people as they moved across town.

During what is now called the Wilmington Race Riot, a mob set Alex Manly's newspaper office on fire, and tensions between African Americans and whites exploded. The whites demanded that Manly and his newspaper cease to publish and that Manly be banned from the community. Manly escaped from Wilmington because he was mistakenly thought to be white. African Americans armed themselves and whites began to hunt and gun them down. The mob of whites included clergymen, lawyers, bankers, and merchants who all believed that they were asserting their rights as citizens. When the riot ended the next day, it was reported that twenty-five African Americans had been killed. However, it was strongly suspected that hundreds of African Americans had been killed and their bodies dumped into the river. In addition, hundreds of African Americans were banished from the city of Wilmington. This event, the Wilmington Race Riot, marked a turning point in North Carolina's history because more restrictions were placed on African American voters.

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## On the web

### **The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898**

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/WilmingtonRaceRiot.pdf>

In this lesson from the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, students will learn about the events of the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot via a Power Point presentation, analyzing primary source documents, and class discussion. Students will explore the role of propaganda and spin in instigating the events of 1898 and will discuss the importance of learning about such history, though painful and controversial, today. This lesson will culminate with students creating a memorial design for teaching about the 1898 riot and honoring those affected.

### **The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission**

<http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/1898-wrrc/>

Between 1998 and 2006, the state Office of Archives and History was charged by the General Assembly with investigating the Wilmington Race Riot. The commission's complete report (at over 400 pages) is available online.

#### **Primary sources**

[http://docsouth.unc.edu/highlights/riots\\_1898.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/highlights/riots_1898.html)

*Documenting the South* at UNC Libraries has made a number of primary sources about the riot available online.

#### **More from LEARN NC**

Visit us on the web at [www.learnnc.org](http://www.learnnc.org) to learn more about topics related to this article, including African Americans, New Hanover County, North Carolina, Wilmington, Wilmington Race Riot, history, and riots.

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#### **Figure 1 (page 1)**

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