

The Wilmington Record editorial

Wilmington *Record*, August 18, 1898. Quoted in Robert, H. Wooley, "Race and Politics: The Evolution of the White Supremacy Campaign of 1898 in North Carolina." Ph. D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1977.

As you read...

This editorial, which appeared in the *Wilmington Record*, an African American newspaper, appeared during the 1898 election campaign. It was attributed to (assumed to be written by) editor Alex Manly, though associate editor William L. Jeffries may possibly have written it. The editorial was a blunt and angry response to a speech by Mrs. Rebecca Felton of Georgia, who spoke out in favor of the widespread lynching of African Americans in order to protect white women.

During the campaign, Democratic newspapers and orators referred to the *Record* editorial repeatedly, and white anger over the editorial not only helped the Democrats to victory but was a cause of the violence in Wilmington that November.

REBECCA FELTON

Rebecca Felton, a crusading journalist for the *Atlanta Constitution* and the wife of a Populist politician, made a speech before the Georgia Agricultural Society about the problems facing farm wives. Felton told her listeners that the greatest problem farm wives faced was the danger of being raped by black men while their husbands worked in the fields, and that lynching was the answer:

“When there is not enough religion in the pulpit to organize a crusade against sin; nor justice in the court house to promptly punish crime; nor manhood enough in the nation to put a sheltering arm about innocence and virtue — if it needs lynching to protect woman’s dearest possession from the ravening human beasts — then I say lynch, a thousand times a week if necessary.”

(As quoted in David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed: the Wilmington Race Riot and Its Legacy* [UNC Chapel Hill Press, 1998], 227-228.)

LYNCHING

Following Reconstruction, whites in the South attempted to “reclaim” the South for whites. Part of that “redemption” included a reign of terror that involved the destruction of African American property and the murder of African American men.

Lynching was the most powerful symbol of white violence against black men. A mob of whites would drag a black man from his home or from a jail, tie him to a tree or post, and hang him. Afterwards they might desecrate the body, perhaps dismembering and/or burning it.

Often, the black man had been accused of raping a white woman or of “insulting” her. This was usually a cover story or an excuse, though, and most men who were lynched had become economically successful or had attempted to use political power in a way that threatened white supremacy. Occasionally, black men and white women who were in consensual relationships were lynched together. There was rarely any evidence that any of the black men murdered were guilty of rape.

Lynchings were public affairs — there are photographs and even postcards of crowds gathered to watch them. Yet whites were rarely punished. During the late nineteenth century, more than a thousand black men were lynched in the U.S. South. By 1963, it is estimated that more 3,500 black men were lynched by white mobs.

THE BLACK RESPONSE

Many African Americans in Wilmington were angry with Alex Manly for publishing this editorial. They believed that he had unnecessarily flamed racial tensions in Wilmington, and that by publishing this editorial, he endangered the safety of all blacks who lived in the city.

The Republican party in Wilmington was mostly composed of African American men, who denounced Manly and urged him to recant (take back) his editorial. Some even tried to force Manly to leave town, hoping that this would quiet the uproar among whites in Wilmington. As we'll see later in this chapter, they were right to fear a violent response.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. According to Manly, were black men raping white women?
2. What did Manly believe was the solution to rape?
3. What did Manly accuse white men of doing?
4. What did Manly believe was the “true” nature of the relationships between black men and white women?
5. Given what Rebecca Felton said about black men, do you think Manly was justified in writing this editorial? Why or why not?



Figure 1. Alexander Manly.

A Mrs. Felton from Georgia, makes a speech before the Agricultural Society, at Tybee, Ga., in which she advocates lynching as an extreme measure. This woman makes a strong plea for womanhood and if the alleged crimes of rape were half so frequent as is oftentimes reported, her plea would be worthy of consideration.

Mrs. Felton, like many other so-called Christians, loses sight of the basic principle of the religion of Christ in her plea for one class of people as against another. If a missionary spirit is essential for the uplifting of the poor white girls, why is it? The morals of the poor white people are on a par with their colored neighbors of like conditions and if one doubts that statement let him visit among them. The whole lump needs to be leavened by those who profess so much religion and showing them that the presence of virtue is an essential for the life of any people.

Mrs. Felton begins well for she admits that education will better protect the girls on the farm from the assaulter. This we admit and it should not be confined to the white any more than to the colored girls. The papers are filled often with reports of rapes of white women and the subsequent lynchings of the alleged rapists. The editors pour forth volumes of aspersions against all Negroes because of the few who may be guilty. If the papers and speakers of the other race would condemn the commission of the crime

because it is crime and not try to make it appear that the Negroes were the only criminals, they would find their strongest allies in the intelligent Negroes themselves; and together the whites and blacks would root the evil out of both races.

We suggest that the whites guard their women more closely, as Mrs. Felton says, thus giving no opportunity for the human fiend, be he white or black. You leave your goods out of doors and then complain because they are taken away. Poor white men are careless in the matter of protecting their women, especially on the farms. They are careless of their conduct toward them and our experience teaches us that the women of that race are not any more particular in the matter of clandestine meetings with colored men than are the white men with colored women. Meetings of this kind go on for some time until the woman's infatuation, or the man's boldness, bring attention to them, and the man is lynched for rape. Every Negro lynched is called a "big burly, black brute," when in fact many of those who have thus been dealt with had white men for their fathers, and were not only not "black" and "burly" but were sufficiently attractive for white girls of culture and refinement to fall in love with them as is very well known to all.

Mrs. Felton must begin at the fountain head if she wishes to purify the stream.

Teach your men purity. Let virtue be something more than an excuse for them to intimidate and torture a helpless people. Tell your men that it is no worse for a black man to be intimate with a white woman than for the white man to be intimate with a colored woman.

You set yourselves down as a lot of carping hypocrites in fact you cry aloud for the virtue of your women while you seek to destroy the morality of ours. Don't ever think that your women will remain pure while you are debauching ours. You sow the seed — the harvest will come in due time.

On the web

More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including New Hanover County, North Carolina, Wilmington, Wilmington Race Riot, history, and lynching.

Image credits

More information about these images and higher-resolution files are linked from the original web version of this document.

Figure 1 (page 2)

Photograph from the John Henry William Bonitz Papers #3865, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Original image available from UNC Libraries / North Carolina Collection (<http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/1898/bios/manly.html>). All Rights Reserved.