The 1898 White Supremacist Campaign and Massacre, a brief narrative

In 1898, the state’s Democratic Party, with Furnifold M. Simmons at the helm, decided to promulgate white supremacy in the state as a way to take back control of the state government. After regaining statewide political power in the 1870s, the Democrats lost it in the 1890s. As historian Leon Prather put it, “In 1894 after a reign of almost twenty years, the Democrats were toppled from power by the so-called Fusion coalition of Populists (disgruntled Democrats) and Republicans.” This initial win was followed in 1896 by the election of Daniel L. Russell, a Wilmingtonian who became “the first Republican governor since the era of Reconstruction.” These gains challenged the social order and in response, “...North Carolina’s up-and-coming landed and business elites, engineered and led the white supremacy campaign of the 1890s.”

North Carolina Democrats looked for a unifying issue to organize around during the 1898 election season. And they chose to rally around the idea of white supremacy. This idea took hold in 1897: “Immediately following a key meeting of the Democratic Executive committee in
Raleigh on 20 November 1897, the first statewide call for white unity was issued...it called upon all whites to unite and ‘reestablish Angle Saxon rule and honest government in North Carolina.’” So, “For almost a year, the Democratic Party – the self-avowed ‘party of white supremacy’ – had conducted a statewide campaign of racist appeals and political violence aimed at shattering the coalition of black Republicans and white Populists that had been in office since 1894.” Along with the existing party structure, newly formed groups like the White Government Union and the Red Shirts were also involved in the campaign, perhaps to make it easier for white men who were not traditionally aligned with the Democratic Party to rally around the idea of voting on the basis of race.

This multi-faceted campaign for white supremacy utilized a three-pronged approach, according to LeRae Umfleet: “Editor Josephus Daniels, a hearty supporter of the Democratic Party’s white supremacy platform, recalled that Simmons was ‘a genius in putting everybody to work — men who could write, men would could speak, and men who could ride — the last by no means the least importance.’” In the run up to the election, Furnifold Simmons, state party leader, “…carefully orchestrated the campaign, opening discussions through printed media and a few speeches in late summer, followed by fall speecmaking spectacles with parades and feasts in the last five weeks of the campaign. His approach was to employ newspapers, political rallies, and coercion to win votes.”

Men Who Could Write

Newspaper articles and editorial cartoons fanned the flames of racial hatred, dangling the specter of a mythical “Negro Domination” over the heads of white male voters. The Raleigh News and Observer, edited by Josephus Daniels, led the charge. It published articles and editorial cartoons that played on white fears of black power. The white supremacy campaign played out in the pages of various local newspapers as well. Wilmington was home to a number of democratically-leaning newspapers including the Wilmington Messenger and Wilmington Star. The Star, published by William H. Bernard, claimed to be the oldest daily in the state, and to have the largest daily circulation in Wilmington. Bernard ran the newspaper from 1867 to 1909 and according to his obituary, he was “…prominent in politics and in the days when Senator Simmons was chairman of the state democratic committee and Major Bernard was a committeeman the advice of the Wilmingtonian was often asked and undoubtedly had its part in shaping the course of the successful and powerful party leader.” Bernard was intertwined with the Democratic leadership during the white supremacy campaign. The Star’s pages were filled with articles that wrote about African Americans in derogatory ways, and many promoted and normalized white supremacy.
The pages of the *Wilmington Messenger* were filled with similar sentiments. The paper declared that they were in support of the white supremacy campaign, and had been in favor of it for years.\(^{15}\) It published a steady stream of articles in support of white supremacy and the slate of Democratic candidates for office.\(^ {16}\) There were also articles decrying the so-called “Negro Domination” that Wilmington and New Hanover County were experiencing as a result of previous elections.\(^ {17}\) In the run up to the election, whites were encouraged to do all they could to ensure change. And the paper reported on events like a convention, held in Goldsboro at the end of October, where “The cry of the East has gone up for deliverance from negro domination,” and thousands met to rally against the idea of equality and in favor of the removal of African Americans from political life.\(^ {18}\) These articles came to a head on Election Day, where the *Messenger* asked “What Will You Be?” on the front page, in an article with the subheading, “Question of Race, Not Politics” and text that said “Tomorrow will settle in North Carolina the question as to the negro in politics, It is practically settled now, because the great body of white people have declared that the Anglo Saxon race MUST and WILL rule and they mean it absolutely.”\(^ {19}\)

This drum beat of anti-African American sentiments became a roar after the local African American newspaper, the *Daily Record*, published an editorial in August of 1898. The *Record’s* editor, Alexander Manly, was also its co-owner. Alexander and his brother Frank bought the paper in 1895 and turned it into a daily newspaper in 1898. The Manly brothers were active in the civic and political life of the community.\(^ {20}\)
During the 1898 election season, the *Daily Record* became embroiled in controversy. In the summer of 1898, Georgian white supremacist Rebecca Felton gave an inflammatory speech that received widespread attention.\(^{21}\) The *Daily Record* wrote an editorial in response. The editorial fueled white supremacists’ fears of racial mixing.\(^{22}\) As the 1898 election approached, Democrats used the *Daily Record*’s August editorial to fan the flames of racial hatred. For months, the white-owned *Wilmington Star* reprinted an article with the title “A Horrid Slander” that repeated the assertion that Manly’s editorial was an “infamous assault on the white women of this state.”\(^{23}\)
Men Who Could Speak

It wasn’t only the newspapers that were stumping for white supremacy; speakers around the state also gave rabble-rousing speeches in support of the campaign. In Wilmington, Alfred Moore Waddell addressed a large crowd at gave a speech in the run up to the election that declared “Negro domination shall henceforth be only a shameful memory to us, and an everlasting warning to those who shall ever again seek to revive it” and that he, Waddell was willing to “choke the current of the Cape Fear with carcasses” if that was necessary to ensure white men once again ruled the state. Waddell, like a number of other of the speakers went on to benefit politically from their support of white supremacy. He became mayor of Wilmington on November 10, 1898.

Born in Wayne County, Charles B. Aycock also gave “rousing” speeches around the state in support of the Democratic party. According to some, Aycock was “Foremost among a large group of able Democratic orators who spoke throughout the state…” A noted orator, and longtime supporter of the Democratic Party, the Greensboro Telegram declared “No man or pen can do justice to the resistless logic, the burning eloquence, the power and pathos of a speech delivered by Chas. B. Aycock.” Aycock became governor of the state of North Carolina in 1900.

Henry Groves Connor also benefited from speaking on behalf of the white supremacy campaign. Connor became speaker of the house when the Democratic Party took control in 1899. In that role, Connor helped disenfranchise African American male voters (and some poor white voters). This had been one of the major goals of the Democratic Party’s 1898 election campaign. In 1899 the legislature submitted a “Suffrage Amendment” that was passed in 1900. This law got around the U.S. constitution’s restriction of the states’ ability to by grandfathering in people who were able to vote (or had ancestors who were able to vote) in 1867. This was before the 1868 NC constitution provided voting rights for African American men, so it was a way to give whites who were illiterate but could pay the new poll tax access to the ballot.

Men who could ride

There were also a group known as the Red Shirts who supported the campaign using the threat of violence. According the Leon Prather, “The Redshirts were a sinister Klan-like organization.” And other historians agree with this characterization: Umfleet asserts in Day of Blood, “…Red Shirts were characterized by their distinctive red outfits, un Concealed weaponry, and blatant public displays of white supremacy propaganda.” The group spread from South Carolina into North Carolina before the election, and were an armed presence on the city streets and at
rallies and at speeches before the election. Unlike the Klan, however, “…the Red Shirts wanted Republicans, Populists, backs and the entire white population to know who they were and what they stood for – rule by the Democratic Party and white supremacy.” Red Shirts were often heavily armed to intimidate opponents. They were connected by membership to the White Government Union clubs, and both organizations added to the political furor in the state, and tensions on the streets of the city of Wilmington.

These three interlocking elements – fiery orators, racially charged newspaper articles and cartoons, and men willing to carry guns and act as intimidators – helped set the stage for the events surrounding the election of 1898.

November 8, 1898

Wilmington was a focal point in the 1898 campaign to elect democrats under a white supremacist ticket. As LeRae Umfleet has put it, “Wilmington’s status as the state’s largest city, governed by Populists and Republicans supported by a large black voting majority, made it a perfect test case for Simmons’ propaganda program, which singled out the city with claims that it was under ‘negro domination.’” On November 8, 1898, in a tense and corrupt election, Democratic candidates were elected in the Republican city of Wilmington. Voters were intimidated into not voting – in one primarily Republican precincts more Democratic votes were cast than there were registered voters. The next day, November 9, the front page of the Wilmington Messenger declared that the election was “A glorious day for the Good Old North State.” And an article headed “Glorious Victory” crowed “Yesterday was a glorious day for white supremacy in New Hanover county.”

November 9, 1898

The election was not the end of the campaign. Next to that article in the Wilmington Messenger was a notice: “Attention White Men: There will be a meeting of the White Men of Wilmington this morning at 11 o’clock at the Court House. A full attendance is desired, as business in the furtherance of White Supremacy will be transacted.” This meeting was attended by an estimated 1,000 people, including what the paper called “…Wilmington’s very best citizens, including ministers, working men, lawyers, doctors, merchants and all classes of our people.” And it did further the white supremacist cause: resolutions drafted at the meeting became known as the “White Declaration of Independence.” The resolutions asserted whites should rule and demanded that the Daily Record’s editor, Alexander Manly, leave town. Attendees declared “We, the undersigned citizens of the city of Wilmington and the county of New Hanover, do hereby declare that we will no longer be ruled, and will never again be ruled by men of African origin.” More than 450 white men signed the declaration. The meeting
identified a group of African American leaders who were asked to respond to these demands by 7:30 AM on November 10. The Committee of Colored Citizens drafted a reply, and it was supposed to be delivered by a young lawyer, Armond Scott. Fearing for his safety, Scott put the reply in the mail, and did not deliver it in person. It did not arrive at its destination in the proscribed amount of time.

After the meeting where the White Declaration of Independence was written and signed, the Messenger announced “Never again so long as the world rolls and the sun shines upon the children of men shall the noble White Race be brought under the ruthless hoofs of the African and his base, treacherous white leaders, the lowest of the low.”

**November 10, 1898**
On November 10, 1898, a large crowd gathered and when the Committee of Colored Citizens’ response did not arrive, the mob marched from the Wilmington Light Infantry’s armory on Market Street to the Love and Charity Hall at 7th and Nun streets, the home of the Daily Record’s printing press. They burned down the building. After Alexander Manly’s printing press burned, groups of white men left the Southside, and traveled to the Northside by foot and by streetcar. Shots rang out at 4th and Harnett, starting a wave of violence in the city. It’s not clear how many died in total. Estimates are wide-ranging and confused. Much of the violence happened on the Northside of town, and most of the violence was perpetrated by whites. All of those who are known to have died were African American. In the chaos that ensued, hundreds of African Americans fled to the swamps around the city for safety. And, in the aftermath, a number of blacks and whites were forced to leave town, never to return.

In 1900 African Americans were in a slight majority in the county. But the actual number of black county residents had gone down since 1890 by more than 800 people. In contrast, the white population increased by more than 2,500 in that decade. This change was undoubtedly partly a reaction to the white supremacy campaign and racially-motivated violence of November 1898.

Local Democrats also decided to use the violence that they perpetrated as an excuse to get rid of the city’s democratically elected government. They wanted to get rid of the local Republicans and their Populist allies who had not been up for re-election. One by one, city officials were forced to resign, and a slate of Democratic Party members were put in their place. For example, white supremacist campaigner Alfred Moore Waddell became mayor of the city in place of Republican Silas P. Wright. These political changes had wider ramifications for employment. Many municipal jobs were patronage jobs, meaning they were awarded to government supporters. So the chief of police was also forced out of office, and other African American municipal employees such as black firefighters also lost their jobs. All the police were ousted, and Red Shirts were given jobs in the new police force.

The events of 1898 caused ripple effects and had a lasting effect on race relations in Wilmington and the state of North Carolina. The gains of Reconstruction were wiped out. White supremacists took the reins of government and held them tightly for decades. After 1898, North Carolina’s General Assembly worked to pass laws that segregated blacks and whites. The legislature also took power from 13 black-majority counties and placed it in their own hands. And, they passed a suffrage amendment that disenfranchised African American male voters who’d gained the vote after the Civil War. These moves both eradicated the African American majority in both Wilmington and the state as a whole.

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American vote, and lowered the numbers of white people eligible to vote. New Hanover County voted 2967 to 2 in favor of the amendment, showing how the black vote had been eradicated by the violence two years earlier.\textsuperscript{53}

It would be more than six decades before African Americans were able to reassert their constitutionally protected rights to the vote and to equal treatment under the law.

\textsuperscript{1} LeRae Sikes Umfleet, \textit{A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot} (Raleigh, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2009), p. 36
\textsuperscript{2} H. Leon Prather, Sr., \textit{We have Taken a City: Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898} (Wilmington North Carolina: Nu World Enterprises, Inc, 1984 [Second Printing 1998], P. 34 and p 35
\textsuperscript{4} Prather, \textit{We have Taken a City}, p. 56
\textsuperscript{6} The White Government Union was a group of county level organizations that were formed in the late July early August of 1898 throughout North Carolina to help persuade white men to vote for white supremacist candidates for office in the November 1898 elections. See “White Government Union” \textit{News and Observer}, July 31, 1898, p. 4 “It is the plan of the leaders of the white party to organize a white Government Union to secure united white action by white men. It has no secrecy, grips or pass-words, and is designed to do nothing but promoted the elevation of the white man.” Also: “White Government Unions are being organized all over the state. In less than thirty days there will be one in every precinct.” \textit{Wilmington Morning Star}, August 11, 1898, p.1; “Very Important” \textit{The Semi-Weekly}, August 2, 1898, p. 4; “Populists for White Government,” \textit{The Wilmington Messenger}, September 23, 1898, p. 4; “The White Labor Movement,” \textit{The Wilmington Messenger}, November 19, 1898, p. 8; “Local Dots,” \textit{The Wilmington Morning Star}, November 8, 1898, p.1
\textsuperscript{7} https://www.ncpedia.org/red-shirts
\textsuperscript{8} Umfleet, \textit{Day of Blood}, p. 38
\textsuperscript{9}Umfleet, \textit{Day of Blood}, p. 36
\textsuperscript{10} The News and Observer functioned as the voice of the state Democratic Party https://exhibits.lib.unc.edu/exhibits/show/1898/bios/daniels
\textsuperscript{11} “The Star was unabashedly Democrat. Bernard, in his spare time, served for years on the Democratic Party’s state and New Hanover County executive committees, and he managed the congressional campaigns of conservative Democrat Alfred M. Waddell.” In Ben Steelman, Star-News the Early days, published October 14, 2007, accessed at https://www.starnewsonline.com/article/NC/20071014/News/605122376/WM/
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{The Morning Star}, October 20, 1898, p. 1 and p. 2
\textsuperscript{13} “William H. Bernard,” \textit{The Wilmington Morning Star}, February 24, 1918 p. 4
\textsuperscript{14} “White Supremacy” \textit{Wilmington Morning Star}, September 6, 1898, p. 1; “More Negro Scoundrelism,” “White Government Unions” \textit{Wilmington Morning Star}, September 22, 1898, p. 1; “At the Opera House: Great Demonstration by the Democratic Voters of the City of Wilmington” September 27, 1898, p. 1 reporting on an eloquent speech on behalf of “Good Government and White Supremacy"
A great work to be done” Wilmington Messenger, September 17, 1898. “So far as we know the Messenger was the first paper this year in the state to...urge it upon the democrats to make a fight for the overthrow of negro rule and a strictly White Man’s government for North Carolina and all white folks. While years ago the Messenger had pressed this matter, it was not until some months ago that it renewed the fight on that line. It was immediately prompted to that course by a talk with Mr. Charles B. Aycock several months ago, when he said to us that we must have a campaign for a white man’s party—the supremacy of the white men over the negroes who were now cursing the state by domination and ruinous rule. We wrote next day on that line and have been at it more or less to this time.”

“White Government Ticket,” Wilmington Messenger, October 2, 1898.

“Business and Politics: The Chamber of Commerce Declares Against Negro Domination” Wilmington Messenger, October 21, 1898, p5; article repeated in the numerous times before the election.

“The Negroised East: the Deplorable condition Revealed, Cry for Deliverance,” Wilmington Messenger, October 29, 1898

“What will You Be?“ The Wilmington Messenger, November 8, 1898, p. 1

Umfleet, Day of Blood, p. 184, Alex was a member of the Chestnut Street Presbyterian Church, and he was the MC for 1898’s Decoration Day, which was organized by the John C. Abbot Port of the Grand Army of the Republic, a Union veterans’ organization. “National Decoration Day Tomorrow,” The Wilmington Messenger, May 29, 1898, p. 5

In the speech, Felton declared “...if it needs lynching to protect woman’s dearest possession from the ravening human beast – then I say lynch; a thousand times a week if necessary.” Umfleet, Day of Blood, p. 62

The Daily Record editorial suggested that some sexual relationships between white women and black men were based on mutual consent The editorial even used the words “fall in love” to characterize white women’s feelings towards black men. That was an incendiary sentiment in an era where mixed-race marriages were illegal. NC’s anti-miscegenation law dates back to 1715. See Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, Flora J. Hatley Wadelington, A History of African Americans in North Carolina, Second Revised Edition (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2011)

“A Horrid Slander” was repeatedly published in the Wilmington Star from August 30 through to the election. Originally published alone, a second article was placed next to it. This article detailed the attempted rape of a young white girl: “More Negro Scoundrelism: Black Beasts Attempt to Outrage the Young Daughter of a Respectable Farmer” Wilmington Morning Star, October 20, 1898

“Sizzling Talk: Most Remarkable Speech by the Hon. A.M. Waddell” Semi-Weekly Messenger, October 29, 1898, 7

https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/aycock-charles-brantley

“Aycock’s Speech” Greensboro Telegram, October 21, 1898, p. 1

Charles B. Aycock became governor in 1900 and declared “…we have solved the negro problem....We have taken him out of politics and have thereby secured good government...” Governor Aycock on “the negro problem” accessed on Learn NC; Speech to the North Carolina Society, Baltimore, December 18, 1903, in R.D.W. Connor and Clarence Hamilton Poe, eds., The Life and Speeches of Charles Brantley Aycock (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1912), pp 161-163


LearnNC “The Suffrage Amendment”

H. Leon Prather, Sr., We Have Taken a City: Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898 (Nu World Enterprises Inc., Wilmington, North Carolina, 1984), p. 83

Um fleet, Day of Blood, p. 42; “The Red Shirts, unknown in North Carolina before the 1898 campaign, had originated and grown into a powerful white supremacy force in South Carolina...The first appearance of Red Shirts in North Carolina occurred in October 1898 at a Democratic campaign rally in Fayetteville, where [Benjamin R.] Tillman attended a parade that featured thousands of spectators and two hundred Red Shirts.”
34 “In Fifth Ward Tonight” *Wilmington Morning Star*, October 16, 1898, p. 1 The Rough Riders/Red Shirts meeting was right after the White Government Union meeting. “The White Government Unions,” *Wilmington Messenger*, October 27, 1898, p. 8 Mike Dowling, identified as a leader of the Red Shirts by Prather was presiding over the White Government Union meeting. Dowling was also connected to the White Laborers’ Union. *Wilmington Morning Star*, December 6, 1898, p. 1 Dowling was a fireman, and in December 1898, he was presented with a “handsome gold-headed cane” that was given to him as “…an expression of appreciation for the efficient services rendered by Mr. Dowling prior to and during the recent ‘race war.’” “Mike’ Dowling Honored,” *Wilmington Morning Star*, December 6, 1898, p. 1
35 Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, p. 38
36 “A Glorious Day for the Good Old North State,” *The Wilmington Messenger*, November 9, 1898, p. 1
37 “Glorious Victory,” *The Wilmington Messenger*, November 9, 1898, p. 8
38 “Attention White Men,” *The Wilmington Messenger*, Wednesday November 9, 1898, p. 8
39 “Remarkable Meeting,” *Wilmington Messenger*, November 10, 1898, p. 8
40 “Remarkable Meeting: The Negro Editor Banished from City,” *Wilmington Messenger*, November 10, 1898, p. 8
41 “Remarkable Meeting: The Negro Editor Banished from City,” *Wilmington Messenger*, November 10, 1898, p. 8
42 “Let the People Rejoice,” *Wilmington Messenger*, November 10, 1898
43 Umfleet came up with the number 22 in her work, p. 117-119; Alfred Moore Waddell estimated “about twenty” died (quoted in Stephen Kantrowitz, “The Two Faces of Domination in North Carolina, 1800-1898, in *Democracy Betrayed*); Rev J. Allen Kirk, “A Statement of Facts Concerning the Bloody Riot in Wilmington, N.C., Of interest to Every Citizen of the United States,” included a reference to an eye witness who “…believes there were more than one hundred destroyed.” https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/kirk/kirk.html; “Awful Calamity: Wilmington’s Dred Fear Realized,” *Wilmington Messenger*, November 11, 1898, p. 1 said 7 African Americans were killed and three mortally wounded in “A Day of Horrors and a Night of Wild Alarms.”
44 Awful Calamity: Wilmington’s Dred Fear Realized,” *Wilmington Messenger*, November 11, 1898, p. 1 stated “It is said that at least 500 men, women and children were on the road and in the woods beyond Smith’s creek bridge.”
45 Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, p. 101
46 Whites who were banished included now ex-mayor Silas Wright, George French, and ex-chief of police John Melton. More African Americans seem to have been banished than whites: along with Alexander Manly and his brother, Thomas C. Miller, Ari Bryant, and Robert B. Pickens were arrested and targeted for removal. Lawyer Armond Scott was also told to leave for his own safety.
48 Prather, *We have Taken the City*, p. 138 re chief of police.
49 Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, p. 127
50 Prather, *We have Taken the City*, p. 144
51 Umfleet, *Day of Blood*, p. 137
52 Umfleet, *Day of Blood* p. 138. Suffrage amendment approved by the General Assembly in February 21, 1899, with a grandfather clause for illiterate whites.