

## The Wilmington Coup <sup>[1]</sup>

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 Coup, previously referred to as the "Wilmington Race Riot." About 500 white men had assembled at the [armory](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, and Waddell lead 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 Coup but has also been referred to as the Wilmington Race Riot or Wilmington Massacre, 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](#) <sup>[3]</sup> 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](#) <sup>[4]</sup> from the city of Wilmington. This event, the Wilmington Coup, marked a turning point in North Carolina's history because more restrictions were placed on African American voters.

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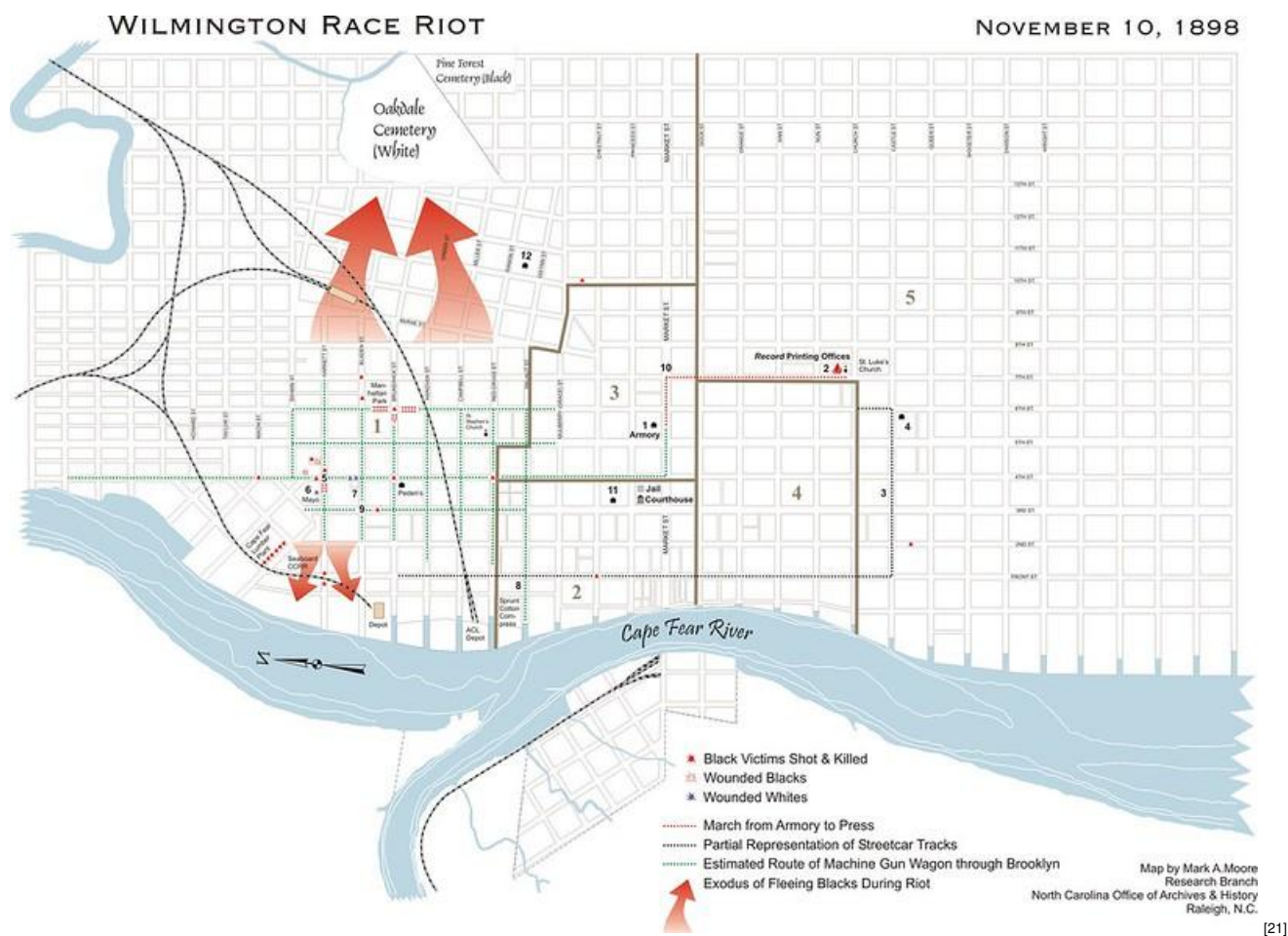
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[Wilmington, North Carolina, 1898: Prelude to a Riot](#) <sup>[18]</sup>

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A contemporary map of the events that took place during the Wilmington Coup.

The Ghosts of 1898 [22]: Wilmington's Race Riot and the Rise of White Supremacy, 2010

from the *News and Observer*

Politics of a Massacre: Discovering Wilmington 1898 [23]

from East Carolina University

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