

Wilmington Massacre November 1898 ^[1]

Correcting the Historical Record on the 1898 Wilmington Coup and Racial Terror

By Sarajane Davis, North Carolina Government & Heritage Library, 2020

After the Civil War, Reconstruction and Industrialization caused big changes in North Carolina. 1898 was a pivotal year in the state's history. Yet, myths surround one of the biggest events from that year. For most of the 1900s, officials and historians said that on November 10th, 1898 there was a "race riot" in Wilmington. Many people claimed that a group of African Americans rioted that morning. The myth claimed that white Wilmington residents stepped in to restore order. In fact, what really happened was racialized violence conducted against African Americans by a group of powerful white supremacists. Along with violence against the Wilmington African American community, the white supremacist group succeeded in removing African Americans from political participation and leadership in the city.

As you read this article, consider the following questions:

- ***What is a coup? How many successful coups have occurred in U.S. History?***
- ***How does referring to the events of November 1898 as the Wilmington Coup versus the Wilmington Race Riot or the Wilmington Massacre affect historical interpretation of these events and the way people remember history?***

Racial Violence in Wilmington, November 10, 1898

Coup is a shortened version of the French word coup d'état. A coup occurs when a small group of people use violence to overthrow a government. The violence exerted on November 10th, 1898 meets the standards for a coup. It is important to remember that those actions were not spontaneous. The people who participated in the coup took months to plan their action. They plotted and announced their goals ahead of time. Their goal was to regain control of the municipal government. In those days most of Wilmington's population was African American. Since 1894, a multi-racial government had led the city.

White supremacists mobilized their forces against the *Fusion* government throughout 1898. African Americans gaining political power outraged and threatened them. So they launched a multi-faceted plan. They wanted to undermine African American economic development and overthrow the multi-racial government. One part of their plan included threatening African Americans. They assaulted Black people who tried to register to vote in the upcoming election. The other part of their plan included publicity. White newspapers ran phony stories claiming that African Americans were stockpiling weapons. This led to rumors that African Americans were planning to riot. The white supremacists also gave anti-Black speeches across Wilmington. They hoped to increase animosity and fear in the broader Wilmington community.

On the morning of November 10th, an armed mob of at least 400 people surrounded the office of Alex Manly. He was the editor of the Black newspaper, the *Record*. Since Manly had already fled Wilmington, the mob turned their attention elsewhere. They terrorized allies of the fusion government and African Americans across the city. Historians estimate that the mob murdered sixty people and forced over 2,000 to flee. This is the only successful coup in United States history.

A False Narrative of November 1898 Emerges

What is bias? What is a false narrative? How did the leaders of the coup construct a false narrative about their government takeover and the racial violence they initiated? How was this narrative advanced and why did it endure?

A distorted version of this history emerged on purpose. Elite members of the mob called on their supporters around the state. Popular newspapers in Charlotte and Raleigh immediately circulated the myth about a riot. Racial *bias* was evident in newspaper coverage from around the state. White supremacists across the state, deemed the coup a victory for the business elite. Many mainstream news outlets completely ignored African American perspectives. They recirculated the story that Wilmington's white community saved the city. Many scholars in the early 1990s accepted the mainstream coverage of the events.

November 10th became a very significant day. After the coup, white supremacists gained control over the local and state governments. Wilmington became a model for how racial violence challenged African American political power. Racial progress was immediately halted. The coup also played a key role in the establishment of Jim Crow segregation.

A More Accurate Narrative Is Recovered

How was the more balanced/holistic and historically accurate narrative recovered? Is it significant that a Black historian and educator, Helen G. Edmonds, recovered this story?

In the 1950s Helen Edmonds, published her book, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894–1901*. She was the first scholar to challenge ideas about Wilmington in November 1898. Her book describes the state-wide efforts to undermine the fusion government. She also describes efforts to limit African American political power. Wilmington officials dismissed her arguments about the coup d'état. They said her research and writing were inaccurate and dramatized. In 1998, the public's attitude changed. That year marked 100 years since the coup. More people became curious about what actually happened. In 2000, the North Carolina General Assembly created a committee to investigate.

In 2006 the appointed committee released its findings in a public report. Their report included two pages of conclusions. For example, African American life in Wilmington was very different after the coup. It also stated that racial violence was a part of the coup. The committee concluded that there was a state-wide political campaign rooted in white supremacy. And their report reflected this. Dr. Edmonds's research was vital to uncovering the truth. Her book provided a strong foundation for the investigative report. Moreover, her contributions help us understand how to think about history. Her story teaches scholars to consider different perspectives.

Concluding Questions: *What types of questions can you ask to ensure you have a historical story that considers multiple, if not all, perspectives? Why is this important?*

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[Explore Life in 1898 Wilmington with *Crow*](#), ^[13] a novel for young adults

[The Wilmington Coup of 1898](#) ^[14]

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Research Branch, Office of Archives and History
North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources

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[Helen G. Edmonds Papers online](#) [16]
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