

An Explosion of Racial Violence – Wilmington, 1898

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November 10th, 1898, was a turning point in North Carolina history when a group of armed vigilantes overthrew a legitimately elected government and massacred multiple black individuals (Umfleet, 2006, p. 5). The aftermath of this event affects people even today, especially black youth (Roland & Swan, 1965). However, the weight of this event is ignored even in education standards (Ward & Buchanan, 2021).

Description of the Artifact

A black-and-white picture taken by Henry Crongeburg captures the event (Umfleet, 2006, p. 151; Library of Congress, 1898). The picture, which is one of a 5-picture montage located on the Library of Congress website, is titled The Wrecked 'Record' building and group of vigilantes (Library of Congress, 1898). In the forefront of the photograph is a large group of people which gathered for the picture. Directly behind them is the remainder of the Daily Record building (Library of Congress, 1898). The top floor of the two-story rectangular-shaped building is mostly burnt down so that only the back part of the wooden frame remains. The first floor of the building is mostly intact from the outside, though the picture shows that the interior of it is charred from the view of the thin windows surrounding the building (Library of Congress, 1898).

According to the state report commissioned by the state of North Carolina in 2006, the photograph of the event was taken by Henry Crongeburg and the authors of the report retrieved it from New Hanover Public Library (Umfleet, 2006, p. 151). A copy of this picture is also available through the

Library of Congress (Library of Congress, 1898). This picture represents a major event in a time of many changes for the area.

The period in which this took place was before the Civil Rights Movement, but Wilmington was still a progressive area. This progressiveness was uncommon for the time (Kirshenbaum, 1998, pp. 7-8).

Historical Context

In 1898, the economy of Wilmington was favorable to its population, including black-owned businesses such as the Daily Record, which was able to profit from subscriptions to the newspaper (Zucchini, 2020, p. 50). Aside from private businesses, multiple high-ranking black individuals in government and private capacities thrived throughout the city (Umfleet, 2006, p. 6). This progressiveness in equality was made possible due to voting registration becoming less restrictive in North Carolina following reconstruction, and the Republicans taking a majority within the government (Kirshenbaum, 1998, pp. 7-8).

Despite all the progressive strides that the city of Wilmington had made, inequalities were still present. On average, black individuals had lower-paying jobs than their white counterparts (Umfleet, 2006, p. 483). The education of black students was also limited in comparison to their white counterparts (Zucchini, 2020, p. 54). Black students could attend up to sixth grade while white students could attend up to twelfth grade (Zucchini, 2020, p. 54). These inequalities, though present, were becoming smaller and smaller up until the Democrats launched a massive white supremacy campaign, using and targeting newspapers (Umfleet, 2006, p. 5).

Democrats, using their influence in newspapers, started a campaign that targeted black people claiming that they were hurting white women (Kirshenbaum, 1998, p. 9). The newspapers repeatedly posted stories about how white women were in trouble. This rhetoric caused a massive upset amongst white males (Kirshenbaum, 1998, pp. 9-13). Any small act a black man did to a white woman – intentional or not – was

exaggerated and used in this campaign (Kirshenbaum, 1998, pp. 9-13).

A major player in this campaign was the News & Observer, which the state-commissioned report officially named as a big player in the spread of these stories (Umfleet, 2006, p. 5). Multiple pieces of propaganda were posted throughout this campaign to raise the ire of their white audience (Kirshenbaum, 1998 & News & Observer, 2006). One popular propaganda post from the News & Observer depicts a giant foot labeled "The Negro" crushing a figure labeled "White Man" (News & Observer, 2006, p. 7). Another piece of propaganda shows tears falling from the "Goddess of Democracy" as she tries to run away from a chain and ball labeled "NEGRO RULE" (Kirshenbaum, 1998, p. 17). There is another piece of propaganda published by the News & Observer showing a devil-like figure with "Negro Rule" written across its wings appearing to terrorize the figures below it (News & Observer, 2006, p. 7).

These pieces of propaganda encouraged many white citizens to vote to elect Democratic candidates (Umfleet, 2006, p. 107). Threats and intimidation tactics from white supremacists were used on the November 8th, 1898, election to deter black individuals from voting (Umfleet, 2006, p. 107). On August 18th, 1898, Alex Manly, editor for the Daily Record, published an article consisting of counterclaims to the reports done by newspapers such as the News & Observer. This article put Manly as a direct target of white supremacists, which would become apparent on November 10th (Umfleet, 2006, p. 116).

The actual event of November 10th, 1898 is described by Umfleet as a group of armed vigilantes overthrowing a legitimately elected government (2006, p. 6). The coup as it would later be known to become started by burning down the Daily Record newspaper building at 9 am on November 10th (Davidson, n.d.). The armed group then traveled north from the building (Davidson, n.d.). Along the way, the group killed several people (Umfleet, 2006, p. 181). The exact number of people killed is not known due to inconclusive record keeping (Umfleet, 2006, p. 181). Martial law was declared in Wilmington to attempt to quell the mob (Davidson, n.d.). However, the government response to the mob was a failure on all levels and was not effective in calming the armed group (Umfleet, 2006, p. 5).

During and after the initial massacre, multiple businesspeople were "banished" from the city of Wilmington (Davidson, n.d.). One of these banished individuals included Alex Manly the person who had written the Daily Record article that caused so much outrage amongst white supremacists (Ward & Buchanan, 2021). Multiple African Americans and white Republicans were banished from the city, escaped to keep their life, or both (Umfleet, 2006, p. 181). Quickly, the individuals who had been banished from the city were replaced by white supremacists (Davidson, n.d.). The Republicans in government positions who had been banished were replaced by Democrats (Davidson, n.d.).

As Democrats took control of the government throughout Wilmington and greater North Carolina, swift changes were made (Kirshenbaum, 1998, p. 27). In Wilmington, government positions had been replaced with white supremacists. The first of these to be affected were firefighters and police, which were released by Democratic leaders and members (Umfleet, 2006, p. 181).

To look at the impact, and to remember the legacy of the event, a group in Wilmington was established named "The Centennial Foundation" (McLaurin, 2000). The goal of this group was to come up with a way to remember this event in a productive manner (McLaurin, 2000). However, this group did come up with some issues when discussing the possibility of reparations, as many people wanted reparations to be given out, but governmental support would be lost if they mentioned it. In the end, they chose to not do reparations. The issues faced by this group show how speculative people are about remembering events such as the Wilmington Massacre. (McLaurin, 2000). Even a debate as small as what to call the event stirs up debate, since the connotation of different names implies different meanings. Until 2010, the November 10th event was often referred to as a "race riot" (Ward & Buchanan, 2021). Many activist groups argued that this connotation was not making the event out to be what it was. Therefore, in 2010, the name of it in most research from then on was changed to "coup d'état" or "massacre" (Ward & Buchanan, 2021).

On average, both before and after the massacre, the average black individual made less than their white counterparts due to lower-paying jobs (Umfleet, 2006,

p. 483). Additionally, despite the widespread banishment of black individuals, no property tax evidence records show a significant amount of property being stolen from black individuals in New Hanover County (Umfleet, 2006, p. 6). After 1898, most of this property remained owned by the previous owners (Umfleet, 2006, p. 6). These property records do not necessarily show that black individuals were not oppressed by this, just that their property was not taken in the legal sense despite being banished from the city.

Even though these factors need to be considered, it cannot be said that the remainder of the black and Republican population in New Hanover County was not affected. The white supremacy campaign most definitely impacted the education of black families. This can be proven by a study done in 1965 that dives into the average IQ of black students and their white counterparts in the Wilmington area. This study went on to show that the average IQ of white students was 99.55, while the average IQ of their black counterparts was only 81.24 (Roland & Swan, 1965, p. 21).

Conclusion

The picture of the Daily Record building housed at the Library of Congress is an important artifact to show November 10th's significant impact on American history. This event, despite its importance in the country's history, is not talked about a lot.

The event of November 10th is powerful, but the usage of the "white woman in danger" claims are not unique to this trope, as would be shown by an event to later take place in Mississippi. In 1955, an African American boy named Emmett Till was accused of cat-calling a woman. Despite no evidence of this, he was kidnapped and attacked by multiple white men and violently beaten to death (Pool, 2015). Even though the men admitted to the crime, they were let free (Pool, 2015).

The point is these events continued even after November 10th, 1898. Part of the problem is that these events are not covered enough. The state of North Carolina does not have the Wilmington massacre as a required subject to cover in North Carolina history and is just referred to as an optional "conflict" to discuss (Ward & Buchanan, 2021). Even this event was not added as optional until recently and was omitted all together from the education standards (Ward & Buchanan, 2021). North Carolina is not alone in this: Other states such as Florida and Oklahoma omit events in their history such as the Wilmington Massacre from their standards as well (Ward & Buchanan, 2021).

A common adage states that failure to learn and understand history will cause it to repeat itself. The photograph in the Library of Congress does not just represent a violent uprising. Rather, it represents a part of American history that the education system has failed to cover, and that has had lasting impact on the community of New Hanover County and the greater state of North Carolina. These uncomfortable topics must be covered. Omitting these topics is not history, it is storytelling.

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