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## North Carolina City Confronts Its Past in Report on White Vigilantes

By JOHN DeSANTIS

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WILMINGTON, N.C., Dec. 18 - Beneath canopies of moss-draped oaks, on sleepy streets graced by antebellum mansions, tour guides here spin stories of Cape Fear pirates and Civil War blockade-runners for eager tourists.

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Corbis

A photograph from the Nov. 26, 1898, issue of Collier's Weekly showed the offices of The Daily Record, a black-owned newspaper in Wilmington, N.C., after a group of white vigilantes wrecked the building and dismantled the printing press. A report about the riots was released last week.

Only scant mention is made, however, of the bloody rioting more than a century ago during which black residents were killed and survivors banished by white supremacists, who seized control of the city government in what historians say is the only successful overthrow of a local government in United States history.

But last week, Wilmington revisited that painful history with the release of a draft of a 500-page report ordered by the state legislature that not only tells the story of the Nov. 10, 1898, upheaval, but also presents an analysis of its effects on black families that persist to this day.

Culled from newspaper clippings, government records, historical archives and interviews, some previously unexplored, the report explodes oft-repeated local claims that the insurrection was a frantic response to a corrupt and ineffective post-Reconstruction government.

"The ultimate goal was the resurgence of white rule of the city and state for a handful of men through whatever means necessary," the historian LeRae Umfleet wrote in the report's introduction.

The report concludes that the rioting and coup fully ended black participation in local government until the civil rights era, and was a catalyst for the development of Jim Crow laws in [North Carolina](#).

"Because Wilmington rioters were able to murder blacks in daylight and overthrow Republican government without penalty or federal intervention, everyone in the state, regardless of race, knew that the white supremacy campaign was victorious on all fronts," the report said.

In the period immediately after the Civil War, the Democratic Party-ruled government in Wilmington, which was then North Carolina's largest city, was displaced by a coalition that was largely Republican and included many blacks. The loss of power stirred dissatisfaction among a faction of white civic leaders and business owners.

The tensions came to a head on Election Day, Nov. 9, 1898, when the Democrats regained power, according to historians largely by stuffing ballot boxes and intimidating black voters to keep them from the polls. Not waiting for an orderly transition of government, a group of white vigilantes demanded that power be handed over immediately. When they were rebuffed, in the words of the report, "Hell jolted loose."

The mob - which the report said grew to as many as 2,000 - forced black leaders out of town, dismantled the printing press of a black-owned newspaper, The Daily Record, fired into the homes of blacks and shot down black men in the streets.

Estimates of the number of black deaths are as high as 100, state officials said, although they add that there is no way of truly knowing.

"No official count of dead can be ascertained due to a paucity of records from the coroner's office, hospital, or churches," the report said.

Black women and children fled to swamps on the city's outskirts made frigid by November's chill. There are accounts of pregnant women giving birth in the swamps, the babies dying soon after.

No white deaths were verified.

Five years ago, members of the North Carolina General Assembly commissioned a report on the incident that they said would be made part of the state's official record. The final report is to be presented to lawmakers next year.

The release of the draft report - and its painful conclusions - have been politely, if uncomfortably, received in this city.

"I spend a lot of time looking forward and not a lot of time looking in the rearview mirror," said Mayor Spence Broadhurst. "But we can use our history to grow on. It was a horrible situation in 1898, and this is 2005. But I think it is good for us to talk about it and to fully understand it."

Styled after similar efforts to document racial atrocities in Rosewood, Fla., and in Tulsa, Okla., the report begins with a thorough account of Wilmington's status as the Confederacy's premier port, and the complex structure of its black society, which included slaves as well as a sizable population of free black craftsmen before Emancipation. Rifts between black tradesmen and white Democrats in the years after Reconstruction are chronicled, along with the growth of black society in prominence and power. In 1897, a year before the race riot, black residents numbered 3,478 or 49 percent of Wilmington's working population, according to a directory for that year. By 1900 that number had fallen to 2,497, or 44 percent, according to data in the report.

According to the 2000 census, Wilmington had a population of 76,000, and nearly 71 percent of its residents were white and 26 percent were black.

Federal and state authorities did nothing in response to the racial rioting in Wilmington, and according to the report, the revolt became a model of sorts when violence later erupted in other cities.

A 1906 upheaval in Atlanta, the report said, "suggests that the lack of governmental response to the violence in Wilmington gave Southerners implicit license to suppress the black community under the right circumstances."

In the years after the Wilmington rebellion, blacks and whites alike tended not to speak of it.

"I did not even know it happened until I was a grandmother," said Lottie Clinton, 68, a lifelong resident of Wilmington who is black and a member of the Riot Commission. "My family thought the more positive things I learned, the better off I would be."

Another commission member, Anthony Gentile, a Wilmington contractor who is white, said he had questions initially about whether the report should have been done at all.

"We didn't want to keep open wounds open," Mr. Gentile said. "There were a lot of emotions, and there was a lot of animosity. I was not in favor of doing it."

He continued, "Everyone made mistakes 100 years ago, let's deal with today."

But, he said, "My opinion changed, and I was surprised to learn the depth of feeling that existed and that it was not that long ago."



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