

Chapter 7

VIOLENCE IN THE STREETS

The white supremacy campaign was so inflammatory that violence seemed unavoidable. "You cannot think or imagine anything to equal or compare to the policy the Democrats seem to have adopted to carry this section," Benjamin Keith, a Fusionist alderman, wrote to Sen. Marion Butler in late October. "I look for a lot of innocent men killed here if things continue as they are now."

Stealing the election would not be enough for the conservatives. For one thing, Wilmington's local Fusionist government remained in office, since many local officials — the mayor and the board of aldermen, for example — had not been up for reelection in 1898. And Wilmington remained the center of African-American economic and political power, as well as a symbol of black pride. White Democrats were in no mood to wait.

The day after the election, Hugh MacRae, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology-trained industrialist and one of the Secret Nine, called a public meeting. "Attention White Men," the headline in the *Wilmington Messenger* proclaimed. Court testimony later described the meeting at the courthouse as a "respectable representative assemblage of businessmen, merchants, lawyers, doctors, divines, and mechanics." One local white man wrote to a friend in Raleigh that "businessmen are at present holding a big meeting to take steps to run the mayor and some prominent Negroes out of town."

The meeting began with former Mayor S.H. Fishplate calling Alfred Waddell to the podium. Waddell unfurled a "White Declaration of Independence," drawn up by the Secret Nine. The U.S. Constitution "did not anticipate the enfranchisement of an ignorant population of African origin," Waddell read aloud. The framers of the Union "did not contemplate for their descendants a subjection to an inferior race." Never again, the declaration said, would white men of New Hanover County permit black political participation. The crowd roared and rose to its feet.

An appointed committee revised the declaration, adding calls for the resignations of the mayor, the chief of police, and the board of aldermen, in addition to the demand for Alexander Manly's newspaper to "cease to be published" and "its editor banished from the city." The committee selected Waddell to head a Committee of

Twenty-Five to "direct the execution of the provisions of the resolutions."

The committee summoned 32 prominent "colored citizens" to the courthouse. "There the black men saw arrayed against them the real financial powers of the city," H. Leon Prather writes, "backed by weapons superior in both number and firepower. It was clear, too, that the voice of white supremacy did not waver; there was murder in the air."

Waddell read them the White Declaration of Independence. He firmly explained the white conservatives' insistence that "the Negro" stop "antagonizing our interests in every way, especially by his ballot," and that the city "give to white men a large part of the employment heretofore given to Negroes." He demanded that *The Daily Record* stop publication and its editor leave the city. The African-American leaders struck a compliant pose, as their options were limited. Waddell gave them a 12-hour deadline, an empty gesture, since the Democrats had already stolen the election, editor Manly had already fled the city and the *Record* had already ceased publication.

The following morning at 8:15, Waddell met a heavily armed crowd at the city's stately white marble armory. He lined up the Committee of Twenty-Five at the head of the procession, shouldered his Winchester rifle, and assumed the head of the column, his white hair flowing in the light breeze. Passing up Market Street, a swelling crowd of men marched to Love and Charity Hall, the black community center on Seventh Street between Nun and Church streets, where the *Record* had been published. Led by Waddell, the mob battered down the door of the two-story frame structure, dumped kerosene on the wooden floors and set the building ablaze. After it was destroyed, some of the whites posed for a photograph with their guns in front of the blackened building to commemorate the moment.

But soon the streets filled with an-



gry blacks and whites. Red Shirts on horseback poured into the black community. Sporadic gunfire quickly turned to disciplined military action at the intersection of Fourth and Harnett streets. "Now, boys, I want to tell you right now I want you all to load," T.C. James, who commanded one group of foot soldiers, reportedly told them, "and when I give the command to shoot, I want you to shoot to kill."

Thomas Clawson, editor of the *Wilmington Messenger*, was standing nearby with a group of newspaper reporters, and wrote that "a volley tore off the top of a [black] man's head and he fell dead about 20 feet in front of the news-hawks." The initial orderly barrages quickly fell toward a swirling cacophony of gunfire, as white men randomly chased black citizens through the streets and fired into homes and businesses.

Sometimes the white marauders targeted particular blacks. A howling mob surrounded the home of Daniel Wright, a well-known black politician, whom some accused of having fired on the mob. By the time they had managed to haul Wright out of his house, a large crowd had gathered and murder mutated into amusement. Someone knocked Wright down with a pipe. "String him up to a lamp post!" a member of the mob yelled. But the white men who wanted Wright to run the gantlet prevailed. The mob turned him loose, chanting "Run, nigger, run!" Wright ran for 15 yards or so until about 40 shots ripped him to pieces. "He was riddled with a pint of bullets, like a pigeon thrown from a trap," one observer wrote.

Red Shirts and other vigilantes romped through the black sections of town to "kill every damn nigger in sight," as one of them put it. "What have we done, what have we done?" one black man cried. And George Rountree, an architect of the campaign, found himself unable to answer, since "they had done nothing."

Eventually, Gov. Russell was notified of the violence and, from his office in Raleigh, called out the Wilmington Light Infantry to restore order. However, the horse-drawn rapid-fire Gatling gun under the command of Capt. William Rand Kenan brought more fear than peace to black neighborhoods.

At the end of the day, no one knew how many people had died. The *New York Times*, then a conservative paper, put the death toll at nine. Waddell, writing in his memoirs, estimated about 20 black casualties. Rountree, MacRae and J. Alan Taylor put the number at 90. Local historian Harry Hayden, an admirer of the white supremacy campaign, reported that some of his white sources boasted that they'd killed "over 100" black folks.

Echoing the oral traditions of their grandparents' generation, some African-Americans in Wilmington believe that an honest body count would have exceeded 300. Since about 1,400 blacks fled Wilmington in the wake of the massacre and coup, it will probably always remain impossible to determine the body count. The only certainty in the matter of casualties is that democracy in North Carolina was gravely wounded on the streets of Wilmington on Nov. 10, 1898.

Wilmington Light Infantry with rapid-fire gun, 1898.

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INTIMIDATING FIREPOWER

Leaders of the white supremacy movement signaled their deadly intentions both before and during the riot through their machine gun squad.

Weeks before the election, local business interests purchased a gun capable of firing 420 rounds per minute. The weapon was trumpeted in the press and its power demonstrated to black leaders in an exhibition Nov. 1.

Just two days before the riot, the Naval Reserves acquired a Hotchkiss gun that could fire 80 to 100 shots per minute. On the day of the riot, both guns were wheeled through black sections of Wilmington and aimed at crowds under orders to disperse.

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