

# Chapter 8

## BANISHMENT AND COUP



Wilmington Light Infantry and Naval Reserves members escort captured blacks. Fusionist leaders were marched to the train station.

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While the streets became a killing ground, the Committee of Twenty-Five launched a coup d'état in the corridors of City Hall, forcing the mayor, the board of aldermen, and the police chief to resign at gunpoint. By 4 p.m. that day, the committee had replaced elected Fusionist city officials, both black and white, with its hand-picked white appointees. The new mayor, fresh from leading the mobs in the streets, was Col. Alfred M. Waddell. In short, the paramilitary force that wealthy conservatives had built to seize power in North Carolina now ran the city of Wilmington.

For days after the coup, hundreds of African-Americans who had fled the white mobs huddled in the forested thickets around Wilmington. Many had escaped too quickly to bother with coats or blankets, and slept on the ground in the wet November woods. "Bone-chilling drizzling rain falls sadly from a leaden sky," Charles Francis Bourke of Collier's Weekly wrote from the scene. "Yet in the swamps and woods, innocent hundreds of terrified men, women and children wander about, fearful of the vengeance of whites, fearful of death, without money, food, [or] sufficient clothes." Children whimpered in the cold, their parents reluctant to light fires for fear that the mobs would find them. "In the blackness of the pines," Bourke observed, "I heard a child crying and a hoarse voice crooning softly a mournful song, the words of which fell into my memory with the air: 'When de

battle over we kin wear a crown in the new Je-ru-sulum.'"

But the work was not complete in this new Jerusalem along the Lower Cape Fear. Everyone seemed to understand that a purge was in order. "Immediately after Waddell became mayor," H. Leon Prather writes, "the Secret Nine furnished him with a list of prominent Republicans, both white and black, who must be banished from Wilmington."

The white mob gathered at the city jail to watch soldiers with fixed bayonets march Fusionist leaders to the train station. Those local citizens slated for banishment fit three rough categories: African-American leaders who insisted on citizenship for their people or who openly opposed the white supremacy campaign; black businessmen whose prosperity offended local whites; and white politicians who had, as the Wilmington Morning Star wrote of

the soon-to-be-exiled United States Commissioner R.H. Bunting, a "political record of cooperating with the Negro element."

Silas Wright, the white Republican mayor whom Waddell had deposed, fit the same "white niggers" category as Bunting and stood among the first names on the banishment list. George Z. French, another white Fusionist stalwart and a deputy sheriff, narrowly escaped lynching. A raging mob placed a noose around his neck and started to string him up from a light pole on North Front Street. Frank Stedman, a member of the Committee of Twenty-Five, saved the white law enforcement officer's life, but the mob dragged French to the train station and told him to "leave North Carolina and never return again upon peril of his life."

Chief of Police John Melton, a staunch white Populist, found himself accosted, The News and Observer reported, by a mob that would have lynched him but for some soldiers who intervened. One local white Democrat recalled that he would "never forget" how Melton looked when "one of the boys went upstairs and took a rope with a noose in it and threw it at his feet, [and Melton] turned just as white as a sheet." The mob dispatched him and two other white Fusionists on a train to Washington, D.C., amid cries of "white nigger."

The black men who were hustled to the train station at the point of a bayonet included Salem J. Bell and Robert B. Pickens, who operated a successful fish and oyster business.

Ari Bryant, who owned a butcher shop, was "looked upon by the Negroes as a high and mighty leader," the Wilmington Morning Star mocked, by way of explaining Bryant's banishment. The most prosperous exile may have been Thomas C. Miller, who had been born in slavery and yet had become a financial force in Wilmington, dealing in land, loaning money and entering mortgages with blacks and whites alike. One member of the detachment that took Miller recalled that he was "one Negro that we could not make keep quiet and he talked and talked until Ed McKoy's gun went 'click click' and when we told him to shut up, he kept a little quieter."

Like most triumphant revolutionary governments, having silenced its principal opponents, the new administration declared its devotion to public order. They fired all the black and Fusionist city employees, starting with firefighters and police officers. They declared that school committees henceforth would be composed "exclusively of white citizens," even in black districts. The white terror in the streets persisted, even though Waddell notified whites "who seem disposed to abuse the opportunity of carrying arms which recent events afforded" that "no further turbulence or disorderly conduct will be tolerated." In an article he wrote for Collier's Magazine two weeks after the riot, Wilmington's new mayor explained that "there was no intimidation used in the establishment of the present city government."

### 'WHITE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE'

Flush with victory in the stolen election, Alfred Waddell introduced the "White Declaration of Independence" on Nov. 9. Given that Wilmington's politics and economy were controlled by whites before and after the election, the declaration's seven main points suggest the wide gap that existed between reality and rhetoric in the city that fall.

Here are excerpts from the declaration:

**"First** That the time has passed for the intelligent citizens of the community owning 90% of the property and paying taxes in like proportion, to be ruled by negroes.

**"Second** That we will not tolerate the action of unscrupulous white men in affiliating with the negroes so that by means of their votes they can dominate the intelligent and thrifty element in the community, thus causing business to stagnate and progress to be out of the question.

**"Third** That the negro has demonstrated by antagonizing our interest in every way, and especially by his ballot, that he is incapable of realizing that his interests are and should be identical with those of the community. ...

**"Fifth** That we propose in the future to give to white men a large part of the employment heretofore given to negroes ...

**"Sixth** We are prepared to treat the negroes with justice and consideration in all matters which do not involve sacrifices of the interest of the intelligent and progressive portion of the community. But are equally prepared now and immediately to enforce what we know to be our rights.

**"Seventh** That we have been, in our desire for harmony and peace, blinded both to our best interests and our rights. A climax was reached when the negro paper of this city published an article so vile and slanderous that it would in most communities have resulted in the lynching of the editor. We deprecate lynching and yet there is no punishment, provided by the courts, adequate for this offense. We therefore owe it to the people of this community and of this city, as a protection against such license in the future, that the paper known as the 'Record' cease to be published and that its editor [Alexander Manly] be banished from this community."