

# Chapter 10

## THE IMPACT OF 1898



A scene of the segregated South, taken in 1938 at the Halifax County Courthouse in northeastern North Carolina.

PHOTO BY JOHN VACHON/FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

The Wilmington race riot did not invent segregation in the South but instead cemented it. Right after the Civil War, Southern whites had attempted to segregate public life, often modeling their efforts on laws passed in the North in the 1840s. Newly freed black Southerners chose to build their own worlds of community and aspiration, though they steadfastly resisted any segregation that smacked of exclusion. In Fusion-era North Carolina, blacks and whites had attempted, in their halting and imperfect way, to practice multiracial politics. But the white supremacy campaign slammed the door on democracy and installed a new order.

The new social order was frequently referred to as "Jim Crow," after a stock minstrel show character whose antics demeaned African-Americans. The power of white skin in the Jim Crow South was both stark and subtle. White supremacy permeated daily life so deeply that most white people could no more ponder it than fish might consider the wetness of water.

The racial etiquette that emerged from the white supremacist violence of 1898 was at once bizarre, arbitrary and nearly inviolable, inscribed in what W.E.B. Du Bois called "the cake of custom." A white man who would never shake hands with a black man might refuse to permit anyone but a black man to shave his face, cut his hair or give him a shampoo. A white man might share his

bed, but never his table, with a black woman. Black breasts could suckle white babies, and black hands could pat out biscuit dough for white mouths, but black heads must never try on a hat in a department store, lest it be rendered unfit for sale to white people. Black maids washed the bodies of the aged and infirm, but the starched white uniforms they were compelled to wear could not be laundered in the same washing machines that white people used.

The folkways of white supremacy made it permissible to call a favored black man "Uncle" or "Professor," so long as he was not actually your uncle or a real college professor. Thus the titles contained a mixture of mockery and affection. But a black man must never hear the words "mister" or "sir" from white lips. Black women were "girls" until they were old enough to be called "auntie." Under no circumstances should they ever hear a white person of any age address them as "Mrs." or "Miss."

The eternal racial views of almighty God were well-known to white North Carolinians in the Age of Jim Crow.

Most white Christians came to believe that white supremacy was the will of God; the Lord himself had placed them above the "sons of Ham," whose appointed purpose was to be hewers of white people's wood and drawers of white people's water.

This was the genius of white supremacy. Though it was a social order imposed and maintained by force, its defenders made it seem not only natural but even divinely ordained. Any challenge to white supremacy, North Carolina's superintendent of schools told an auditorium filled with black college students in 1927, would represent "a violation of God's eternal laws as fixed as the stars."

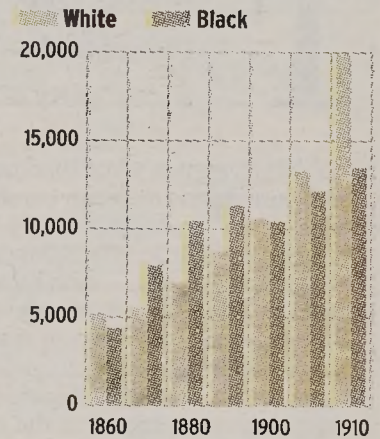
This was the world shaped by the men who had overthrown the Fusion government and ensured that white supremacy would reign in North Carolina. In the years after the campaign, they crowed about it. "We have fought for this issue and against that policy," Charles Aycock told supporters before he died in 1912, "but everywhere and all the time we have fought for white supremacy."

### MEASURING THE EFFECTS OF WHITE SUPREMACY

It is impossible to fully measure the effects of the white supremacy campaign on blacks, but these statistics begin to suggest them:

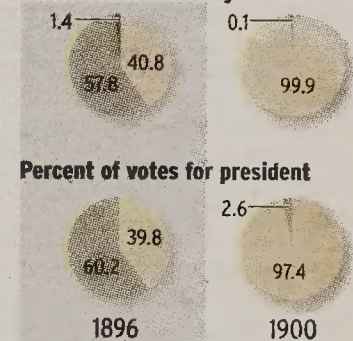
Wilmington becomes a white-majority city.

Wilmington population by race

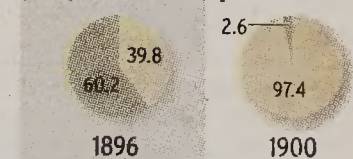


North Carolina becomes a one-party state.

Percent of votes for governor

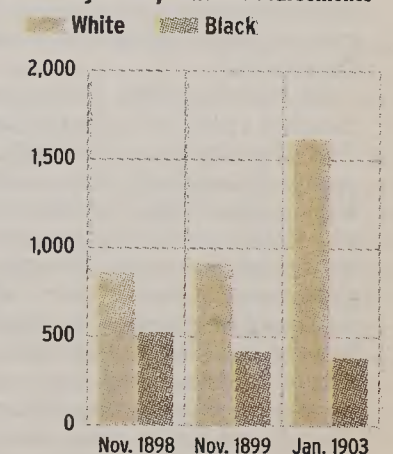


Percent of votes for president



African-American education suffers.

Wilmington city school disbursements



Source: 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission Report

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