Epilogue

BUILDING FROM THE PAST

Modern Wilmington has risen on the banks of the Cape Fear River.

WILMINGTON STAR-NEWS PHOTO BY PAUL STEPHEN

As a historian, I find it easier to understand what happened in the past than to draw easy lessons for the future. We cannot go back and change the history and yet, as William Faulkner observed, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

What I do know is that in order to change the past, we must understand and confront it. I first heard about the Wilmington race riot of 1898 in 1971, soon after I entered Roland-Grise Junior High School in Wilmington. Some friends and I were playing baseball in Hugh MacRae Park. As day dimmed toward dusk, we huddled in a dugout to smoke cigarettes and discuss the mysteries that seventh-graders ponder. As we chattered away in the dark, we began to hear engines racing and car doors slamming. At first, we assumed that it was only the stirrings of a Little League game. But when we peered out of the dugout, hundreds of white men and a few women had gathered on the baseball diamond, many brandishing rifles and shotguns and others waving U.S. and Confederate flags. Several held a banner that proclaimed the name of their organization: The Rights of White People.

Their leader, Sgt. Leroy Gibson, walked up to the makeshift microphone and began bellowing about how the "niggers" and "nigger lovers" had all the rights and white working people had none. "The niggers keep talking about how Waddell said in 1898 they were gonna fill up the river with carcasses," he said. "I don't know if they did or not. But if this integration and rioting business doesn't stop, we're going to clog that river with dead niggers this time, and I mean it."

What I saw that day was hatred. What I have seen too often since then is the neglect of public schools and civic responsibilities. What I learned in the years that followed was that the venom and the apathy were an inheritance, passed down through the generations from days of slavery and the riot of 1898. It was only much later that I learned that this sad epic in our state's and nation's history harbors stories of hope. In their imperfect way, the losers of 1898 — the leaders of the Fusion movement who tried to practice interracial politics and create strong public institutions — offer examples that we can learn from. We have made great strides since 1898, but the effort to separate people into "us" and "them" continues.

A new Fusion movement, one rooted in hope and generosity, and encompassing not only blacks and whites but new immigrants to the state, could still redeem the best dreams that have made us. We look to Wilmington in 1898, then, not to wring our hands in a fruitless nostalgia of pain, but to redeem a democratic promise. And so we hold fast to what Charles Chesnutt, an African-American from North Carolina and one of our great writers, called "the shining thread of hope," which permitted him, over a century ago, to close his own story of the Wilmington catastrophe: "There's time enough, but none to spare."