

## EDITORS' NOTE

This special section has a simple aim: to share an important story with as many North Carolinians as possible.

The News & Observer and The Charlotte Observer worked together on the project and supplemental coverage. Both newspapers will extend distribution through other papers and on request.

The Wilmington Star-News will also include the section in its editions.

The section is built around author and historian Timothy B. Tyson's account of the events that occurred in Wilmington in 1898 and the roots and legacy of those events.

Because newspapers including The N&O (then called The News and Observer) and The Charlotte Observer (then the Charlotte Daily Observer) are part of this history, we sought a writer from outside our staffs to tell the story and explore its connections to our own times.

If you have questions or comments, please contact:

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## ABOUT THE COMMISSION REPORT

In 2000, the General Assembly responded to bills introduced by Rep. Thomas E. Wright and the late Sen. Luther Jordan demanding that North Carolina expose and explain the events of 1898 by establishing the Wilmington Race Riot Commission. This 13-member panel of scholars and political leaders, led by Wright and Sen. Julia Boseman of Wilmington, was charged with initiating and reviewing an investigation of the events to be completed by the Office of Archives & History in the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources.

Written by the office's principal researcher, LeRae S. Umfleet, a 464-page report was approved by the commission in May.

While the report provides a thorough history of the riot, the commissioners also made 15 recommendations to "repair the moral, economic, civic and political damage wrought by the violence." They also said that "newspapers (News and Observer, The Charlotte Observer, Wilmington Star-News, The Washington Post, etc.) should acknowledge the role of media in the events of 1898."

**Read the text of commissioners' recommendations on Page 16.**

**Read the full report and more on 1898 online at [www.newsobserver.com](http://www.newsobserver.com) key word 1898**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Timothy B. Tyson is senior research scholar at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, where he also has appointments in the Divinity School and the history department. He is also in the American studies department at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Tyson is co-editor with David S. Cecelski of "Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy," which won the 1999 Outstanding Book Award from the Gustavus Myers

Center for the Study of Human Rights.

His most recent book, "Blood Done Sign My Name," recounts a racial murder committed in the town of Oxford in 1970 and the African-American uprising that followed. UNC-CH selected the book for its 2005 Summer Reading Program. "Blood" was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and won the Southern Book Award for nonfiction from the Southern Book Critics Circle, a Christopher Award and the North Caroliniana Award.

Born in Raleigh in 1959, Tyson grew up in Sanford, Oxford, Wilmington and Fayetteville, where his father served as a Methodist minister and his mother taught fourth grade. He lives in Chapel Hill with his wife, Perri Morgan, and their children, Hope and Sam.

**Go to [Charlotte.com](http://Charlotte.com) for a condensed version of this report and a multimedia presentation narrated by historian Tom Hanchett, complete with historical photos.**

# Prologue

## ECHOES OF VIOLENCE

In 1971, Wilmington trembled on the edge of race war. Seventeen years after the U.S. Supreme Court had outlawed segregation, the city's schools were finally attempting to integrate. Arson, assault, sniper fire and several killings were the response. Black militants hurled bricks and bottles at passing motorists. Angry white mobs met in Hugh MacRae Park, near my family's home in leafy Lincoln Forest, brandishing weapons and Confederate flags. Sgt. Leroy Gibson, the ex-Marine who led the local "Rights of White People" organization, routinely threatened to clog the Cape Fear River with dead black people if the "race-mixing" continued.



In 1971, National Guard troops patrolled the streets of Wilmington as integration of the public schools brought the city to the brink of a race war. Here, Guardsmen check a Castle Street store.

NEWS & OBSERVER FILE PHOTO

Blacks were not the only North Carolinians whose lives Gibson threatened. A large crowd of his followers rallied in front of the home of the superintendent of schools, Heyward Bellamy. The mob had found this white Southerner guilty of trying to make integration work. As they threatened to lynch him, the gang cut Bellamy's power lines and slashed his tires so he could not escape with his family. What saved them from the white supremacist militia, recalled his son Frank, who was in third grade at the time, was Bellamy's threat to use "the sawed-off shotgun my uncle the highway patrolman had given him."

The violence in the early 1970s knew no color, though it was all about the color line. Truckloads of white vigilantes roared through the city, spraying bullets in black neigh-

borhoods and shooting an African-American minister who appealed for peace. Black snipers fired at police officers from rooftops downtown. Someone murdered two security guards at Williston school. Police killed a black teenager near Gregory Congregational Church. Six hundred frightened National Guard troops patrolled the streets. Bellamy and his colleagues struggled mightily, but clashes between black and white students in the hallways of our high schools threatened to bring public education to a halt.

In the midst of this upheaval, my father, the Rev. Vernon C. Tyson, called a meeting of black and white parents at our church to see whether something might be done to bring peace.

At the meeting, he heard African-American parents make bitter reference to "what happened" and

"what caused all this" — as if the roots of Wilmington's racial troubles were obvious. And yet the quizzical expressions and vacant nods of white parents made my father suspect that they were oblivious, as was he, to something that every black parent understood.

"When you say, 'What caused all this,'" he finally asked, "what are you talking about?" At first the black parents refused to believe that the white preacher did not know what they meant. Finally, one black mother paused to point in the direction of the Cape Fear. Flashing her mind's eye back more than 70 years, to Nov. 10, 1898, she told him: "They say that river was full of black bodies."

*Timothy B. Tyson*