

Chapter 1

WILMINGTON: SYMBOL OF BLACK ACHIEVEMENT

At the close of the 19th century, Wilmington was a symbol of black hope in post-Civil War America. The largest and most important city in North Carolina, it had a black-majority population — 11,324 African-Americans and 8,731 whites. The beautiful port city on the Cape Fear, about 30 miles upriver from the open Atlantic, boasted electric lights and streetcars when much of the state lumbered along in darkness. Its port did not quite match those of Savannah or Charleston, but it shipped tons of cotton around the world.

Wilmington's middling prosperity rested upon its black majority. Blacks owned 10 of the city's 11 eating houses and 20 of its 22 barber-shops. Black entrepreneur Thomas Miller was one of Wilmington's three real estate agents. The city's business directory listed black-owned Bell & Pickens as one of only four dealers and shippers of fish and oysters. Many of Wilmington's most sought-after craftsmen were also black: jewelers and watchmakers, tailors, mechanics, furniture makers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, stonemasons, plasterers, plumbers, wheelwrights and brick masons. Frederick Sadgwar, an African-American architect, financier and contractor, owned a stately home that still stands as a monument to his talents and industry.

What's more, the black male literacy rate was higher than that of whites. The Daily Record, said to be the only black-owned daily newspaper in the United States, was edited by the dashing and progressive Alexander Manly, the mixed-race descendant of Charles Manly, governor of the state from 1849-51.

Black achievement, however, was always fragile. Wealthy whites might be willing to accept some black advancement, so long as whites held the reins of power. But black economic gains also provoked many poor whites who competed with them, and wealthy whites persistently encouraged animosity between poor whites and blacks in a divide-and-conquer strategy. In the years after Reconstruction, aspiring black farmers, businessmen and professionals often found themselves the victims of exclusion, harassment, discrimination and a range of violence that included the horrors of lynching.



Market Street between Front and Second streets, 1898.

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Pedens Shop was one of many black-owned businesses in Wilmington. Blacks owned 20 of the city's 22 barber-shops. One of the city's three real estate agents was black. And black-owned Bell & Pickens was one of four shippers of fish and oysters.