

SUPREMACY

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ecutive committee on Nov. 20, 1897. At its end, Francis D. Winston of Bertie County published a call for whites to rise up and “reestablish Anglo-Saxon rule and honest government in North Carolina.” He attacked Republican and Populist leaders for turning over local offices to blacks. “Homes have been invaded, and the sanctity of woman endangered,” the Democratic broadside claimed. “Business has been paralyzed and property rendered less valuable.”

This claim ignored the enormous commercial expansion in North Carolina in the 1890s. Despite the pain of farmers pelted by the national agricultural depression, textile mills had increased fourfold; invested capital had surged to 12 times its 1890 value; the number of employed workers in North Carolina had skyrocketed during the decade; and the railroad interests had obtained a 99-year lease on public railways. But the truth was not the point. The Democrats clearly planned to portray themselves as the saviors of North Carolina from the Fusionist regime — and from “Negro domination.”

By any rational assessment, African-Americans could hardly be said to “dominate” North Carolina politics. Helen G. Edmonds, the scholar from N.C. Central University, which in her day was called North Carolina College for Negroes, weighed the matter in her classic 1951 work, “The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894-1901.” She wrote:

“An examination of ‘Negro domination’ in North Carolina revealed that one Negro was elected to Congress; ten to the state legislature; four aldermen were elected in Wilmington, two in New Bern, two in Greenville, one or two in Raleigh, one county treasurer and one county coroner in New Hanover; one register of deeds in Craven; one Negro jailer in Wilmington; and one county commissioner in Warren and one in Craven.”

Indeed, all three political parties were controlled by whites. Two of them — the Populists and the Democrats — could fairly be described as hostile to blacks, though the Populists supported a small degree of black office-holding in an arrangement based on the arithmetic of political power. Given that North Carolina’s population was 33 percent African-American, it would be far more accurate to describe the state of affairs as “white domination.”

But to white supremacists, the fact that black votes — usually for white candidates — could sway elections was tantamount to domination. They wanted blacks removed from the political equation.

Chapter 4

PROPAGANDA, PASSION ACROSS THE STATE

To achieve victory in 1898, Democrats appealed to irrational passions. They used sexualized images of black men and their supposedly uncontrollable lust for white women. Newspaper stories and stump speeches warned of “black beasts” and “black brutes” who threatened the pure flower of Southern womanhood. They cast any achievement or assertion by African-American men as merely an effort to get close to white women.

Aware that a picture could be worth a thousand votes, Josephus Daniels engaged the services of cartoonist Norman Jennett to pen front-page caricatures of blacks. Jennett’s masterpiece was a depiction of a huge vampire bat with “Negro rule” inscribed on its wings, and white women beneath its claws, with the caption “The Vampire That Hovers Over North Carolina.” Other images included a large Negro foot with a white man pinned under it. The caption: “How Long Will This Last?”

Sensational headlines and accounts of supposed Negro crimes were Daniels’ stock in trade: “Negro Control in Wilmington,” “A Negro Insulted the Postmistress Because He Did Not Get A Letter,” “Negroes Have Social Equality” and “Negro On A Train With Big Feet Behind White” were typical.

The News and Observer was one of many newspapers spreading anti-black propaganda. “The Anglo Saxon/A Great White Man’s Rally,” read a headline in the state’s leading conservative paper, the Charlotte Daily Observer. It offered readers a stream of sensationalized and fabricated stories about black crime, corruption and atrocities against white women. Star reporter H.E.C. “Red Buck” Bryant traveled North Carolina filing triumphant dispatches about the white supremacy campaign and disparaging accounts of the Fusion government.

Populist leader Marion Butler, who was elected by the Fusion legislature to the U.S. Senate in 1895, anticipated the crucial role newspapers would play in the 1898 campaign. The year before, he wrote, “There is but one chance and but one hope for the railroads to capture the next legislature, and that is for the ‘nigger’ to be made the issue” with the Raleigh and Charlotte papers “together in the same bed shouting ‘nigger.’”

This propaganda fell on fertile soil.



N&O cartoonist Norman Jennett penned caricatures of blacks. THE NEWS AND OBSERVER



Headlines from the Charlotte Daily Observer, October and November 1898

The racist assumptions that made it effective were commonplace. Without the cooperation of the newspapers, though, especially The News and Observer, the white supremacy campaign could not have succeeded. Although he never apologized for his central role in the campaign, Daniels later acknowledged that his newspaper had been harsh, unfair and irresponsible. The News and Observer was “cruel in its flagellations,” Daniels wrote 40 years later. “We were never very careful about winnowing out the stories or running them down ... they were played up in big type.”

Nor was it a secret, as Election Day approached, that violence was part of the Democrats’ strategy. Two weeks before the slaughter in Wilmington, The Washington Post ran these headlines: “A City Under

Arms — Blacks to Be Prevented from Voting in Wilmington, N.C. — Prepared for Race War — Property-Holding Classes Determined Upon Ending Negro Domination.”

The white supremacy forces did not depend solely upon newspapers, but required a statewide campaign of stump speakers, torchlight parades and physical intimidation. Former Gov. Thomas J. Jarvis and future Govs. Robert B. Glenn and Cameron Morrison struck many a blow for the conservative cause.

“The king of oratory, however, was Charles B. Aycock,” historian H. Leon Prather writes, “the Democratic Moses, who would lead North Carolina out of the chaos and darkness of ‘Negro domination.’” As he did throughout the campaign, Aycock mesmerized a standing-room-only crowd at the Metropolitan

House in Raleigh, pounding the podium for white supremacy and the protection of white womanhood.

White men have neglected poor and long-suffering white women, he explained in his famous “guilt and degradation” speech, which he repeated across the state that fall. “For them,” he said of the wives, daughters and sweethearts of white men, “it is everything whether Negro supremacy is to continue.”

Wilmington, Aycock explained later, was “the storm center of the white supremacy movement.” Here was the largest city in the state, with a black majority and a black-owned daily newspaper, and several African-American office holders. Wilmington represented the heart of the Fusionist threat. And so it became the focus of the Democrats’ campaign.