

# **APPENDIX I**

**ESSAY ON WILMINGTON CRIME, ECONOMY AND  
CORRUPTION PRIOR TO 1898**

## WILMINGTON, 1898: COMMERCE, CORRUPTION, AND CRIME

[In 1997, in anticipation of the activities commemorating the centennial of the racial violence in Wilmington, Chancellor James R. Leutze of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, posed three questions to the staff at Archives and History. The questions and answers prepared--respectively by Wilson Angley, Jerry L. Cross, and Michael Hill of the agency's Research Branch--follow.]

### *I. Was Wilmington in financial distress at the time of the riot; and, if so, was this unique to Wilmington?*

As has long been the case, Wilmington's economy in the late 1890s was heavily dependent on trade and related maritime activity. The city's trade had rebounded quickly after the Civil War, with principal articles of commerce remaining largely the same. As before, chief export commodities were wood products, naval stores, and cotton. Overall, exports far exceeded imports in both tonnage and value, with many vessels arriving in ballast to receive their outward-bound cargoes.

By the 1890s, however, the composition of Wilmington's export trade had begun to change markedly. The naval stores market had collapsed in the early 1870s and had never fully recovered. By 1895 naval stores comprised a mere seven percent of total exports in terms of value. Lumber and wood products, while constituting a large part of total exports in terms of volume, were far less significant as sources of revenue. By 1895 they comprised only three percent of exports by value.

Compensating somewhat for the decline in naval stores and wood products was cotton, which became increasingly the mainstay of Wilmington's economy. Especially important was the foreign trade in cotton, which exceeded the value of domestic shipments by the 1880s. By 1895 cotton shipments comprised fully ninety percent of the total value of Wilmington's export commodities. Paramount in the export of cotton was the firm of Alexander Sprunt and Son.

Despite its importance, however, Wilmington's export trade in cotton was overshadowed by that of Charleston and Savannah, to say nothing of Galveston and New Orleans. Moreover, the shipment of cotton was unable to compensate fully for declines in wood products and naval stores, while creating a dangerous dependence on a single commodity. During the 1890s, Wilmington's export tonnage declined from 88,000 tons to 81,000. By the end of the decade, Wilmington's future as a major port appeared uncertain.

Wilmington's industrial expansion since the Civil War had been significant but not particularly impressive. The most noteworthy strides had been taken in cotton compressing and fertilizer production, both of which employed

large numbers of Wilmington's workers. The dominant processor of cotton for shipment was the Champion Compress Company. By 1896 there were at least four large fertilizer plants.

Other industries of note included shipbuilding and the construction and operation of area railroad facilities. By 1900 Wilmington contained a total of 131 manufacturing firms, with total output valued at nearly three million dollars. Still, Wilmington was about to be eclipsed by more progressive cities in the Piedmont, and would soon surrender its status as the state's largest city.

Within the context of Wilmington's overall economy, there is reason to conclude that many aspiring whites resented the presence and competition of blacks in the professions, as well as those in city and county government. Wilmington's black community included numerous lawyers, ministers, teachers, doctors, merchants, and businessmen. White supremacy orators struck a responsive chord in their listeners by alleging that successful blacks were enjoying luxuries and privileges at their expense.

Similar feelings of envy and resentment appear to have been widespread among working class whites as well. Sources repeatedly allude to an economic competition between black and white laborers for jobs and livelihoods. They also indicate that black workers may sometimes have occupied positions by virtue of the fact that they were willing to accept lower wages and poorer working conditions. It is significant to note, therefore, that white leaders on the eve of the Wilmington riot included demands for additional jobs among their top priorities.

Clearly related to Wilmington's general economic condition were the issues of solvency and fiscal management with respect to municipal government. The contemporary Democratic press, among its other charges, alleged that the City of Wilmington was unable to pay off its bonded indebtedness and, under the existing government, faced possible bankruptcy. Unfortunately, no conclusive evidence, either to confirm or discredit that allegation, has been found during the course of this research. An entry in the records of the board of aldermen, however, indicates that the city's leaders were closely monitoring the fiscal affairs for which they were responsible during months preceding the riot. On August 8, 1898, the aldermen approved the following specific measure with respect to the city's indebtedness:

That in accordance with section 6 chapter 25 of the Private Laws of 1891, the mayor, clerk, and treasurer are hereby authorized to issue Certificates of Indebtedness in exchange for the Bonds of the City held by the commission of the Sinking Fund now amounting to \$24,000, it being understood that all bonds so exchanged are to be immediately burned as required by law.

This action, while maintaining a significant amount of indebtedness, hardly seems to indicate that the aldermen were acting irresponsibly. Nor does it seem to indicate a sense of impending disaster. Moreover, the records of subsequent meetings of the aldermen convey a sense of routine attention to business, with no apparent irregularities or dereliction of duty.

With respect to governmental indebtedness, it is significant to note that Wilmington would not have been unique in North Carolina if it had, in fact, ultimately failed to meet its financial obligations. Writing less than two weeks after the fateful events of November 10, Republican Party Chairmen Alfred Eugene Holt observed that “the cities and towns of the state have for many years been accumulating heavy bonded indebtedness” and that “the spirit of repudiation” was abroad in the land. Citing the town of Oxford and Stanly, Wilkes, and Buncombe Counties as specific examples, he pointed out that the blame for these repudiations had, in each case, been “charged to the Republicans and Populists.”

## *II. Was the local government corrupt?*

There is no definitive answer to the above question. All governments since time began have contained individuals who exploited the system for personal gain. Evidence of corruption sometimes can be only suspected; at other times it takes on characteristics that can be investigated and documented, such as the Credit Mobilier, Teapot Dome, and Watergate. Wilmington’s governing body in 1898 engendered no scandal near the scale of these national embarrassments; in fact, none of the allegations made against the municipal government were ever investigated by an independent body. Such general accusations as “misgovernment,” “disreputable carpetbag regime,” and “the scum of Radical Republican rule” carried no specific instances, making it impossible to determine how much, if any, of the claims were true. These were political tools of an era marked by bitter personal politics, “yellow journalism,” and a pervasive theory of Social Darwinism, the milieu in which the Wilmington Board of Aldermen were forced to function. Many sources on which historians rely in searching for the truth were tainted by the socio-political climate of the times; consequently, the question of corruption in the local government can be addressed only by comparing the charges against the relatively few known facts.

Most of the charges leveled at the Board of Aldermen for the Port City germinated in the election campaign of 1898; one of the first however, was aimed not at the board itself but at the legislature that created it. The Fusionist controlled General Assembly of 1897 had altered the Wilmington city charter to create five wards from which ten aldermen would come. Five would be elected and five appointed by the governor. The gerrymandered districts insured that African Americans would hold a majority of votes in most wards. Democrats claim that a corrupt bargain had been struck to allow blacks to fill government offices and control the city. An appeal to the State Supreme Court was rebuffed

and the Democrats, at the time, could do little but protest since they had passed the legislation by which the assembly acted back in 1876. Outspoken prominent leaders such as Alfred Moore Waddell and Hugh McRae brought statewide attention to the situation in Wilmington, giving the Democratic Party a focal point for charges of Fusionist corruption and “Negro domination” in the election campaign of 1898.

Furnifold M. Simmons, State Democratic Party Chairman, set the strategy early in the campaign. Having discovered some misappropriations and larceny of public property in the Fusionist administration of the state penitentiary, he extended the accusations of corruption, graft, and incompetency to all Fusionist governments from the state level to the municipal. Democrats singled out Wilmington, in particular, as a city dominated by ignorant blacks, a “deplorable condition that operated to check enterprise, arrest development, and produce stagnation.” Furthermore, charged the Democrats, the Wilmington government had plunged the city deep into debt, had been unable, or unwilling, to control crime, and a black dominated court system allowed members of their race to violate laws with impunity. A check of the few reliable records fails to substantiate charges of domination and corruption.

The Board of Aldermen was composed of four African Americans and six whites. While there were numerous black officeholders, most were in minor positions and unable to dictate public policy. The claim that blacks were ignorant does not stand scrutiny since the black male literacy rate was higher than that of the whites (1,906 to 1,202), but literacy alone does not imply competency. To address that question and others, a check was made of the minutes of the Board of Aldermen from 1895 to 1898. The continual efforts of the city leaders to encourage progress through construction are evident in the numbers of building permits issued: the Sanitary Committee received regular orders to make recommendations for improved health conditions; nearly every session directed street repairs and new lighting; and cultural activity was not neglected as repairs and renovations were ordered for the Opera House. As to the claim of stagnation and indifference, the Wilmington city government under the Fusion regime seemed to carry on business as usual, no better but no worse than its predecessors.

That the Republicans and blacks squandered money and drove the city into deeper debt cannot be verified in the records; in fact, the minutes show quite the opposite. The aldermen drafted a meticulous and fair tax code and regularly reviewed its provisions. They were hampered, however, in collecting revenue as indicated by the presence of books of “back taxes due.” Thus, lack of citizen cooperation and the inability to obtain the necessary funds for operations, not squandering or graft, produced the debt of which the Democrats complained. Interestingly, white Democrats owned most of the property and wealth of the city from which the bulk of the tax money was obtained. In 1898, the aldermen attempted to relieve some of the debt by calling in burdensome municipal bonds

issued earlier, an act the Democrats deemed irresponsible because it required the issuance of certificates of indebtedness.

In conclusion, there is no documentary evidence to indicate that the municipal government of Wilmington in 1897-1898 engaged in open activities that could be labeled as corrupt, or that the men in control engaged in, or deliberately allowed, situations to exist that were detrimental to the city. As the racial issue heated up, the Fusionists, particularly the black members, became more withdrawn and more reticent to answer publicly the charges thrown at them. Democrats took advantage of the opportunity to claim that the blacks and their allies thus had something to hide, and rapidly the situation became a matter not of what was the entire truth but what the mass of people believed to be true. In his memoirs, Furnifold Simmons offered some insight into the political climate of 1898:

We [Democrats] soon aroused great enthusiasm. We cowed the enemies, and we were in a position to rout them.... Suddenly, the venality, the corruption in office, the extravagance, the speculation of funds, and the miserable scandals...passed out of the public mind, and in a whirl of indignation which burst forth like the lava from a pent-up volcano, there was thrust to the front the absorbing and paramount issue of WHITE SUPREMACY.

***III. Was there a rise in the crime rate in Wilmington prior to November 10, 1898? How many buildings or businesses were destroyed during the course of the riot on that date?***

First, it is necessary to note that there exists an extensive bibliography on the subject. Time permitted an examination of only a small fraction of the source materials. Reference to the footnotes in secondary works will lead an interested reader to other sources. These sources include speeches and firsthand narratives, reports filed in the days following by newspaper reporters, and retellings and analysis by several generations of historians and other commentators. Taken as a whole, these views constitute a multiplicity of voices and opinions.

Crime

Readers of newspapers in Wilmington and across eastern North Carolina in 1898 could not escape the focus which editors, in news columns and editorials alike, placed on criminal acts, particularly those perpetrated by blacks. George Rountree, Wilmington attorney, Democrat, and ally of those advocating the overthrow of the Fusionist town government, recalled that ‘each issue of the paper spoke of burglaries which had been committed and lawlessness was rife, and especially were there references to disorderly conduct on the part of irresponsible Negroes.’”

The chief newspapers in Wilmington were the *Morning Star*, the state's oldest daily, and the *Messenger*, both Democratic. Together with the *News and Observer*, the Raleigh daily owned by Josephus Daniels, these papers kept up a constant drumbeat on this issue. Scarcely an issue of the two Wilmington papers appeared in the summer of 1898 without notice of the latest "outrage." On July 2 "small colored boys" were held responsible for "reckless plundering." The following day three black men attempted to shoot a white man but fled before carrying through with the act. On July 31 a black man shoplifted a ham and pulled a razor on the policemen who attempted to arrest him.

The newspaper coverage was not limited to eastern North Carolina papers. The *Charlotte Observer*, generally considered more moderate on racial issues, sent their star reporter H.E.C. ("Red Buck") Bryant to Wilmington in September. He filed a report indicating that "every night, every day, almost every hour, for some months, robberies, burglaries, and various other crimes have been committed in the town." His account was widely reprinted in other papers.

The reputed crime spree appears to have peaked in August 1898 when a spate of break-ins took place in Wilmington residences. This coincided with the peak of vacation season, when many prominent white Wilmingtonians were on vacation at Wrightsville Beach or at some further remove such as the mountains. Former mayors S. H. Fishblate and W. N. Harriss were among those who returned to find their homes burglarized. On August 8 the *Messenger* reported that eight robberies had taken place over the previous weekend and that the thieves were "growing bolder every day." The newspaper further editorialized:

These robberies of residences are too frequent for a city this size, and something should be done to put a stop to their devilry. Quite a number of residences have been broken into and the community is indignant that the authorities are so powerless to catch up with the thieves or watch the houses that are left to their protection....

Two aspects of the criminal activity escaped the notice of the editorial writers but are readily apparent from a reading of the newspapers for these weeks. First, contrary to the claims of the editorialists, laws were enforced, arrests were made, and stolen property recovered. Eight boys, four white and four black, were held responsible for break-ins on July 3. The property of Mayors Fishblate and Harriss (specifically a banjo and a guitar in the case of the latter) were recovered and the thieves responsible arrested on August 19. The judicial system continued to operate. On October 19, twelve blacks convicted of crimes were sent to the penitentiary in Raleigh.

The other impression gained from a quick reading of the newspapers is that a considerable amount of the criminal activity, particularly murder and

assaults (perhaps as much as a third, to gather from the reports), was committed by blacks against blacks. On July 16 a “colored man” tried to shoot a neighbor. On July 21 a black man stabbed by another was left in grave condition. On August 12 there appears another account in the *Morning Star* of a black man killed by a black man. On November 2 a “bloodthirsty Negro” assaulted his father and daughter.

Aside from break-ins and related burglaries, the other most frequent criminal activity which received press attention is what might be termed “sidewalk incidents.” The pages of the newspapers are replete with reports about verbal exchanges, insults, and outright assaults on the streets of Wilmington. The acts of effrontery most often were directed toward white women by black men, reports stated. If police filed a report, the charge could vary from nuisance to assault and battery. Typical were reports of young blacks locking arms and refusing to yield room to pass on the sidewalk. Other incidents involved more unusual circumstances. On July 8 the *Messenger* reported a “fistic encounter” between two prostitutes, one white and one black, a “disgusting spectacle,” according to the paper. In August the paper reported that a black policeman (thirteen of the city’s twenty-four were black) insulted a white woman. He had stopped on the sidewalk to inquire of a woman on her porch as to whether she had seen a suspect he was pursuing. She said that she had not; he accused her of lying, and thus was born an “incident.”

Given the highly partisan nature of the press of the day, it is wise to be circumspect when considering these newspaper reports. Historian H. Leon Prather, Sr., author of a 1984 book-length study of what he termed Wilmington’s “coup d’etat,” casts doubt on the reliability of the newspaper evidence. “One who fully understands Southern race relations in this era could hardly believe that most of the episodes actually occurred,” he wrote.

In seeking documentary evidence apart from newspapers to corroborate or contradict the reported increase in crime, I consulted two sets of records in the North Carolina State Archives. The minutes of the Wilmington Board of Aldermen contained very few references to criminal activity in the months leading up to November 1898. The exception was an ordinance adopted in April prohibiting anyone from throwing rocks at railway cars or streetcars. An ordinance adopted in early November prohibited the sale of liquor for five days either side of Election Day. Rather, the board members, at their monthly meetings, reviewed routine items about taxes, public health, trash collection, street repairs, vendors, noise, fireworks, water fountains, wagons blocking intersections, and various other matters. One task of the board was to set the city’s annual budget. For the four years preceding the violence of 1898, the budget averaged just under \$100,000. Of that amount, the appropriation for the police was just over \$17,000; the amount did not vary appreciably over the period.



The single reference to exceptional criminal activity in the board minutes discovered in the course of this search was a motion put forward by an alderman in July 1895, over three years prior to the disturbance, to create a Police Board to investigate robberies and devise means of capturing perpetrators. At their December 1898 meeting, the new board received a report about arrests during the violence of the previous month. Eighty-three arrests were made (almost equally split by race, 42 white and 41 black), with most charges (60) for drunk and disorderly, six for larceny, three for throwing rocks, and four for firing a pistol in the city. Other charges went unspecified.

The New Hanover Circuit Criminal Court Minute Docket sheds more light on criminal activity in Wilmington during this period. Abstracted in the course of this research were the charges brought to that court during its quarterly meetings for the period 1896-1898 (see Appendix). Any charges brought as a consequence of the November 10 violence do not appear in the table since the court's final meeting for the year 1898 took place in October. These court records indicate that larcenies and related charges dominated the docket and increased slightly in 1898 from the previous year. Assault and battery charges stayed about the same. There were five murder trials in 1898 as opposed to six in 1897. No rape charges were heard in this court in 1898 (there were three the previous year).

In conclusion, available evidence indicates that the crime rate, particularly larcenies and assaults, underwent a slight increase in the months preceding November 1898. The available documentation, however, does not indicate that the activity was of the crisis proportions as described in the press. It seems clear that the situation exploited for partisan political advantage.

### Destruction

In the sources consulted, there is general agreement that wholesale destruction was limited to Free Love Hall, the building which housed the *Wilmington Record*. That structure, of course, was burned but fire companies saved the buildings on adjacent lots. James Sprunt, by all accounts, rushed to his cotton compress to save his business and to assure his employees that he would safeguard their homes. Many of those who led the attack on Manly's office, in the hours that followed, engaged in violent attacks on individuals and on property but the record indicates the complete destruction of few other buildings. In particular a dance hall and Manhattan Park in the black section of the city are said to have been wrecked. In the search for weapons, private homes, churches, and businesses were entered and ransacked; in some cases, axes were used to force entry. Many blacks who had not fled town in the days preceding November 10 did so in the face of this immediate threat. Consequently, it is a safe assumption (not to say, an understatement) to assert that businesses in the black community suffered setbacks.

APPENDIX:  
CRIMINAL CHARGES IN NEW HANOVER CIRCUIT CRIMINAL COURT, 1896-1898

	1896	1897	1898
Murder	0	6	5
Rape	4	3	0
Assault and Battery	45	56	57
Larceny; Burglary; House Breaking	57	52	64
Trespass	7	8	3
Highway Robbery	1	1	1
Concealed Weapon	17	28	24
Resisting an Officer	12	11	7
Affray	2	8	0
Nuisance	11	1	5
Injury to Property	1	2	2
Receiving Stolen Goods	0	0	1
Liquor Charges	13	3	4
Gambling	2	3	5
Cigarettes to Minor	0	9	0
Abandonment	3	3	0
Nonsupport	0	0	3
Abortion	0	1	4
Slander	1	4	1
Perjury	0	0	1
Embezzlement	1	2	3
House Burning	0	3	0
False Alarm	0	4	0
Disturb Religious Meeting	0	0	2
Disturb Excursion	0	0	1
Failure to Pay Taxes	0	1	0
Abduction	1	0	0
Vagrancy	0	0	1
Cruelty to Animal	1	0	0

Source: New Hanover Circuit Criminal Court Minute Docket, North Carolina State Archives