

Chapter 2: Forces of Change

- The 1890s dawned on a vibrant Wilmington in which African Americans played a vital role in the city's economic and political life.
- The Farmer's Alliance emerged by the end of the 1880s as a powerful political machine, and evolved into the Populist Party by 1892. Populists challenged Democrats and Republicans but most closely associated their platform with Republicans.
- Populists and Republicans created a coalition known as Fusion by the 1894 election. Fusion candidates defeated Democrats statewide and gained control of the General Assembly. Democrats were poorly organized and failed to mount a successful offense against the well-organized Fusionists led by Populist Marion Butler and Republican Daniel Russell.
- The 1895 Fusion legislature reformed state and local government, effectively curtailing the ability of incumbent Democratic officials to hold sway in local matters.
- Democrats lost to a well-organized Fusion campaign in 1896. Daniel Russell was elected as the state's first Republican governor since Reconstruction. The Fusionist legislature of 1897 made sweeping changes to Wilmington's city charter. Local white leaders were unhappy with the changes and unsuccessfully challenged the legality of the charter changes.
- The new city charter allowed each of the city's five wards to elect an alderman with Governor Russell holding the ability to appoint the other five aldermen. The charter change, coupled with Russell's patronage practices, led to claims of racism from both white Democrats and black Republicans.
- Although African American voters fell in line behind Republican candidates, they often took issue with both Republican and Fusionist strategies and candidates.
- Wilmington's black businesses grew at a faster pace than in other N. C. cities and African American workers flocked to the city.
- The black community established institutions to assist those wishing to buy a house, including the development of the Peoples Perpetual Building and Loan Association in 1889 and the American Union Association in 1897. Strides were made in home ownership, and, in 1897, over one thousand African Americans owned some sort of property in the city.
- The city's black schools prospered with increased numbers of educators drawn from the local ranks. Support organizations strengthened the city's efforts in providing public education.
- A distinctive social and cultural environment developed in Wilmington's African American population, bolstered by schools, wealth, and inherited status.
- As the 1890s wore on, Wilmington's white leaders sought methods to return to political office and economic prominence. Key to this effort was the movement to regain Democratic control of the legislature through clandestine operations.

Chapter 2: Forces of Change: Fusion Politics and the African American Community in Wilmington

The last decade of the nineteenth century dawned with a bright outlook for Wilmington's population. The city's residents, white and black, were experiencing a high degree of prosperity and a vibrant social life – a promotional booklet praised the city's "growing wealth and prosperity which abound on every hand." The prosperity reached into the African American community as it celebrated success in a variety of ways. St. Stephen's, one of the city's largest African American churches with a congregation of 1,700, celebrated the centennial of the African Methodist Church of the United States in its new sanctuary, constructed and furnished by its members such as Lewis Hollingsworth, Daniel Lee, and Edward Stills.¹

A few blocks away, another large black congregation attended church at Mt. Zion A. M. E. Church. There, in 1888, the congregation heard politically outspoken Reverend Isaiah Aldridge condemn future governor Daniel Russell for comments that he deemed to be an "assault upon an innocent people." Aldridge stipulated that he would not vote for or support candidates that "endorsed what Judge Russell had said about the savage negroes."²

After his sermon, Aldridge wrote in the Wilmington *Morning Star* that he held his political views independent of the larger Republican Party in Wilmington. He held firm to his support of the "honest" Republican ticket despite a warning from "the Bosses" that he should "keep quiet" and vote as expected or he would be fired.³ This window on Wilmington's African American community delineates the overlap among church, civic, economic, and political life in the city. Not only was the politically charged church sermon well attended but it was also publicized in local white newspapers, providing clues as to the political culture of the city and the racial discord simmering beneath the surface.



Governor Daniel Russell
Image Courtesy of
Photographic Archives, North
Carolina Collection, UNC-CH.

¹ St. Stephen's new sanctuary celebrated its first major event in 1887 with the anniversary celebration attended by prominent national church leaders. J.S. Reilly, *Wilmington. Past, Present and Future, Embracing Historical Sketches of its Growth and Progress from its Establishment to the Present Time, Together with Outline of North Carolina History* (Wilmington, 1884), 22; Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 104-5.

² Daniel Russell was born in 1845 near Wilmington on his family plantation in Brunswick County. A wealthy planter family, the Russells did not support secession although young Daniel joined the Confederacy for a brief period after graduation from the University of North Carolina. After leaving Confederate service because of stormy relationships

with Confederate officials, Russell became an ardent Republican. For more information on Russell's career, see Jeffrey J. Crow and Robert F. Durden, *Maverick Republican in the Old North State: A Political Biography of Daniel L. Russell*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 104-5, 114.

³ Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 114-115.

Birth of Fusion

By the end of the 1880s, Daniel Russell and other politicians saw potential for a break in the Democratic Party due to the growth of the new Populist Party. Nationwide, farmers had grown disenchanted with Democratic lawmakers whose laws were seen to favor big business and disadvantage agricultural interests. As a result, organizations developed to pressure for improvements to the plight of farmers. By 1889, Leonidas Polk had developed the Farmer's Alliance in North Carolina as a political base with members drawn from throughout the state. Membership in the Alliance was limited to whites only. Initially Alliance members sought to work through existing political parties without creating a third. The result was that the 1890 election ticket was dominated by farmers and Alliance members.

Because of the political power of the Alliance, Democratic Party leaders saw the need to incorporate many Alliance goals into their platform. Although the Democrats sought to add the farmers' suggestions to its bill of proposed reforms, none were ever fully addressed. As a result, a split developed within the Alliance, ending its effectiveness as an organization. The more radical members left the Democratic Party to form the Populist Party by the 1892 election. Members of the new Populist Party held that the Democratic Party's reforms were less than effective and that control of the state's affairs needed to be removed from the hands of bankers, big business, and attorneys.⁴

When Polk died in 1892, leadership of the Populist Party fell to Marion Butler of Sampson County who maneuvered the new party through that year's elections. Democrats and Republicans garnered more votes than the new third party, with

Democrats winning the majority of votes on a traditional platform that sought to remind voters of the fears of a return to Reconstruction should Republicans gain office. Despite an overall loss in 1892, Populists were able to elect fourteen members to the legislature. Republicans were heartened by the Populist Party's successes. Some Republicans, such as Daniel Russell, saw the emergence of a new party with a platform based in real issues as a boon to state politics since party lines could be drawn on "issues other than race and color."⁵



Senator Marion Butler
Image: Samuel A. Ashe, ed.
*Biographical History of
North Carolina, vol. 8.*

A review of the election results revealed to Russell and Butler that the Democratic Party was less than cohesive and that black votes were the lowest recorded since Reconstruction. By the 1894 election, "fusion" between the Populists and Democrats was an increasingly popular objective, designed to capitalize on the findings uncovered after the 1892 election. If the Populists could draw more farmers from the Democratic Party and the Republicans could reenergize black voters, together they would be able to defeat the Democrats. Heartened by this discovery, the two groups received further strengthening as the 1893 Democratic legislature failed to

⁴ Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 20-25; McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 387.

⁵ Jeffrey Crow and Robert Durden, *Maverick Republican*, 46.

address issues related to Populist and Republican goals regarding business and agriculture. Thus, a new strategy emerged for the 1894 election in which two entirely different groups would work together for a common cause. Fusion, as this merger came to be called, was unique in national politics and was not embraced by the national Republican or Populist parties. Further complication the merger was that not all members of the two parties within the state endorsed the practice either.⁶

Before fusion of the two parties could be achieved, differences between the two groups on a variety of issues had to be addressed. Leadership within each party acknowledged that the only way to achieve victory was to set aside differences, particularly those concerning racial matters. The two organizations featured similar platforms regarding election reform, increased local governmental authority, and additional support for public schools, thereby creating an easy policy fit for the merger. Likely Fusionists saw that the 1894 election had the potential to fill the General Assembly with Populists and Republicans, who would, in return, appoint like-minded individuals to the national Senate. Therefore, although not a gubernatorial or

presidential election, success in 1894 was seen as pivotal for Fusionists.⁷

Early Fusion in Wilmington

Just as Wilmington and New Hanover County experienced problems during the statewide election crises of earlier decades, the 1894 election spurred even further troubles in the region. The Democratic Party was split into factions—the Reformers and Regulars—that failed to reconcile differences. State Democratic Party leaders were brought in to mediate, albeit unsuccessfully. The Republican Party, also still undergoing internal dissent among many African American members as evidenced by Reverend Alridge’s sermon, pulled itself together to win local election victories in 1894. The methods used by Russell as Republican leader in New Hanover County were less than clear at the time.

Russell and his supporters took a series of steps to achieve their goal using tactics not seen before in the Republican Party. First, candidate nominations were left to a committee instead of a convention, thereby preventing factionalism on a large scale.⁸ Once the committee chose its candidates, the Republicans waited until the last minute to make nominations known. Additionally, because they wanted to avoid the race issue, only one African American was put forward as a candidate. Among the most obtuse of their strategies was the nomination of only one candidate for the state house even though two positions were available for the county. The Democratic ticket featured two candidates from

⁶ For more on the problems of Fusion politics, see the following: Joseph Steelman, “Republican Party Strategists and the Issue of Fusion with Populists in North Carolina, 1893-1894” *North Carolina Historical Review* (July 1970); William Mabry, “Negro Suffrage and Fusion Rule in North Carolina” *North Carolina Historical Review* (Apr. 1935); Jeffrey Crow, “Fusion, Confusion, and Negroism: Schisms Among Negro Republicans in the North Carolina” *North Carolina Historical Review* (Oct. 1976) and Allen Trelease, “The Fusion Legislatures of 1895 and 1897: A Roll-Call Analysis of the North Carolina House of Representatives” *North Carolina Historical Review* (July 1980) and James L. Hunt, *Marion Butler and American Populism*. Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 25-28; McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 390-1, 393.

⁷ Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 34-37; McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 395.

⁸ The nomination committee was comprised of four whites (Daniel Russell, William Chadbourn, Flavel Foster, and George Z. French) and three blacks (Thomas C. Miller, Daniel L. Howard, and J. O. Nixon). McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 397.

opposing factions within the party. The Republican nominating committee knew that factional hostilities within the Democratic Party would develop further rifts in the organization over those two seats. In order to facilitate this end, the Republicans offered to support the Regular Democratic candidates for office, and, in return, the Regulars agreed to stop the practice of challenging voter eligibility in the traditionally black Republican First and Fifth Wards. The end result was that Russell demonstrated his ability to manage the party, as evidenced by the large number of black voters who returned to the polls, enabling the election of Russell's candidates because he instructed black voters on which candidates to elect.⁹

The 1894 election in New Hanover County showed that when the Republican Party was well organized, it could defeat the Democrats. In New Hanover, Republican candidates were elected to all positions for which the party put forward candidates. Leader Russell claimed that the victory was "the most extraordinary political achievement of the period." Three positions—clerk of Superior Court, register of deeds and one house member—were uncontested by the Republicans and, by default, were claimed by Democrats.¹⁰

**1894 Statewide Election Results
North Carolina General Assembly**

	House	Senate
Populists	36	24
Republicans	38	18
Democrats	46	8

⁹ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 396-399.

¹⁰ Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 37-38; McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 411. Statistics for the 1894 elections results table excerpted from Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 37-38.

Statewide, the combination of the Republicans and Populists proved Democratic defeat was possible. The *Wilmington Messenger's* editor, T. B. Kingsbury, published a series of articles explaining the 1894 defeat. Kingsbury editorialized that the next election should be based on white government. He attributed the defeat to internal dissent, which had led many Democrats to stay away from the polls, and acknowledged that Fusionists were well organized as they were able to function in secrecy.¹¹ The Democratic majority in the legislature was erased and upper-level positions for the senate, state supreme court, and other statewide seats were lost. Furthermore, the new Fusionist legislature immediately began to fulfill their election campaign promises to implement changes to the system of government established by the Democrats during their tenure of control since Reconstruction.¹²

Across the state, Democrats challenged the election results. In New Hanover County, Thomas Strange, Democratic Reformer candidate for the lower house, challenged the election of

¹¹ *Wilmington Messenger*, November 7, 9, 1894.

¹² Twenty-three counties returned Republican majorities with 33 boasting a Populist majority and 34 went Democrat. Four counties featured a Republican-Populist fusion and 2 featured Republican-Democrat fusion. Six traditionally "black" counties, those with a black voting majority, returned a majority of Democratic votes and 2 other "black" counties fused with the Democrats for victory. Therefore, historian Helen Edmonds surmises that black voters were not pivotal in determining the outcome of the 1894 fusion election. Once the fusion legislature began, their first order of business was to send Populist Marion Butler to the Senate for a full term and to send Republican Jeter Pritchard to fill the remainder of the term left by the death of Zebulon Vance. Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 37-41; Gov. Russell to Thomas Settle, Thomas Settle Papers, Southern Historical Collection, UNC-CH, as quoted from McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 411; McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 398-401, 404-405.

George Z. French on grounds he had not lived in the county for twelve consecutive months. Assisting Strange were Wilmington attorneys John D. Bellamy Jr., George Rountree, Junius Davis, and P. B. Manning. French's attorneys, A. G. Ricaud and Egbert K. Bryan, made it clear to the Democrats that they would not lose the election without a fight. Despite a well-organized argument by Rountree, the Democratic election board ruled in favor of French and declared the election valid. Following on the heels of the loss, the Democratic Reformers again sought to challenge two local Republican elections for county sheriff and treasurer. After two days of debate and hearings by the Board of Canvassers, the County Board of Commissioners, all Democrats, refused the challenge and accepted Republicans for those two positions. As a result of internal strife, the county's Democrats were unable to unite to defeat the Republicans.¹³

Fusion Reform

Once the newly elected Fusionist legislature met in Raleigh, changes to state and local government began in earnest, most specifically in reforming election laws and county government systems, and in redrawing electoral districts within the state. Progressive legislative measures flew through both the upper and lower houses in 1895. Many of the election laws were designed to favor blacks and Populists and protect their suffrage rights on election days. Some of the new rules forbade employers from firing or threatening employees regarding political issues, made ballots for parties different colors and discouraged all types of coercion around election day. Another reform, focused on county government, made county commissioners

¹³ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 401-104; *Wilmington Messenger*, November 9, 1894; November 11, 1894.

more powerful and reduced the capabilities of justices of the peace. The reforms were seen as beneficial to all parties by the Fusionists, but the Democrats, whose power was substantially limited by the revisions, saw within the changes a tool for future election—officeholding by African Americans. Because popular elections would be more open to black voters, the Democrats understood that more blacks would be elected and decided that this issue was the tool they needed to divide the Fusionist Party in future elections.¹⁴

As the Fusionists made sweeping changes to state government, their changes to local county rule affected New Hanover greatly. As the state's largest city, Wilmington, with its large urban black population, became a battleground between the Democrats and Fusionists. Democrats had created a system of government in the city that minimized the voice of black Republicans through gerrymandered districts and the creation in 1877 of the Board of Audit and Finance to act as a check on the Board of Aldermen.¹⁵ The legislature, under Fusion control beginning in 1895, sought to reverse Democratic controls in Wilmington. One strategy used to eliminate Democratic power over the city's voters was to again amend the city charter.¹⁶

The proposed charter changes were drawn up by Wilmington Republicans, and, in March 1895, were steered through the legislature by Senator Frederick Rice and

¹⁴ There were a few African American legislators in 1895: James Young of Wake County, William Crews of Granville County and Moses Pearce of Vance County. Another African American, Abe R. Middleton, received a patronage position as Assistant Doorkeeper. McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 411-414; Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 41-45; Crow, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 234.

¹⁵ *Private Laws of North Carolina, 1876-77*, 230-237.

¹⁶ McDuffie, *Politics in Wilmington*, 416-417.

Representative George French. A key change was the creation of a Police Board, appointed by the General Assembly, with responsibility for the appointment and management of the city's police chief, fire chief, city clerk, treasurer, attorney, physician, harbor master, policemen, and service workers. Three white Republicans—William H. Chadbourn, Frederick Rice, and Silas P. Wright—were appointed to staff the first board alongside Populist John R. Melton and a black Republican, John E. Taylor. The Police Board, through its appointments and responsibilities, made the city's existing Democratic Board of Audit and Finance and Board of Aldermen virtually powerless.¹⁷

Local Democrats, still splintered by factionalism, were ineffectual in their response. Meanwhile, manipulated by Russell from behind the scenes, the new Police Board moved to improve city government and reward Democrats who aided in the Fusionist power grab. At the first meeting, the Police Board financially rewarded some of its members. Rice and Melton immediately submitted their resignations to the board and were subsequently elected to two of the highest paying patronage positions in city government. Rice succeeded a Democrat as city clerk and treasurer, and Melton became the chief of police. In an effort to seek bipartisan support, the Police Board was careful to appoint a few blacks to positions, as well as a good number of Democrats in an attempt to forestall Democrats' efforts to bring the race issue into the 1896 election campaign. Further improving its image, the Police Board established pay scales for employees that were substantially less than those paid by the previous Democratic board. The combination of fiscal management and nonpartisan appointments

resulted in a weaker Democratic Party and dissatisfied African American voters.¹⁸

Not only in Wilmington, but across the state, black voters criticized the Fusionists for what was perceived as discrimination in patronage appointments. A Wilmington paper published an article by a black laborer who wanted more representation in the police and street work forces. Overall, blacks viewed Fusion with skepticism and entertained thoughts of joining forces with Reform Democrats. Because of a potential break within the normally solid Republican Party, Russell sought to remedy the situation before the 1896 election in which he hoped to win the governor's office. Many blacks felt that his actions were more for public display than to effect major change in black patronage placements. As a result, despite Russell's efforts, friction between white and black Republicans continued.¹⁹

With an eye toward preparations for the 1896 elections, Russell counseled Fusionists that if they stumbled after winning in 1894 and if they did not act responsibly then the party would see "repudiation by the white people" and "restoration of the Democratic party to power in the state." He further observed that whites "will not submit to negro rule, or anything that looks like it." In order to placate African American voters, Russell clarified this point by indicating that he did not mean "that the colored man shall not hold offices, but we do say that the office holding must be confined to those who are fit for it and who are friendly to the whites, and to such limits as to show that our local affairs will not be controlled by the colored vote."²⁰

¹⁷ Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 128.

¹⁸ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 419-422.

¹⁹ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 422-425

²⁰ Daniel Russell in the *Wilmington Weekly Messenger* August 20, 1894 as cited in McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 420.

Leading the Democratic opposition to Russell and other Fusionists was the main Democratic newspaper, the *Raleigh News and Observer*. In June 1894, during the campaign season leading up to the disastrous defeat of the Democrats by Fusionists, Josephus Daniels and wealthy Democrat Julian S. Carr developed a plan for Daniels to acquire the *News and Observer* with Carr's financial backing in order to make the paper a tool of the Democratic Party. By 1895, Daniels had returned to Raleigh from Washington, D.C., where he had been serving in a post to which he was appointed by President Grover Cleveland. Once back in North Carolina, Daniels used his paper to provide a voice for the Democratic Party, attacking Republicans, blacks, Populists, and Democrats he viewed as threats to the party. When Daniels assumed control of the paper, it was financially unstable, but, with Carr's assistance and Daniels' personal style, the paper grew from a small, local circulation to a statewide success.²¹

Fusion Re-Visited in 1896

Groundwork for the 1896 election was laid slowly as each political group held its own convention, focusing not only on the local and state elections, but also the national presidential election. Nationwide, Populists and Democrats differed on standards for coining gold and silver to offset economic problems. Statewide, Populists held the balance of power—whichever political party was lucky enough to forge a relationship with the Populists would be victorious in November. Republicans met in Raleigh in May 1896 to plan their strategy and seek methods to woo

the Populists. Despite internal dissent, the convention managed to put forth Russell as a candidate for governor over Oliver Dockery, favored by African American voters. Russell's platform touted the successes of the 1895 legislature and reminded black voters that if Democrats regained power, disfranchisement was certain. The Democrats, who held their convention in June, were still disorganized after the 1894 defeat; their platform was based on a retelling of their past record and featured no new promises for change in their operations. Populists held their convention in August after observing those of the Republicans and Democrats and adopted a standard platform and their own set of candidates without acknowledging Fusion as an option.²²

The 1896 election posed a multitude of problems for New Hanover voters. Although there were clearly three distinct political parties, factions within those parties sought to merge their interests with others, creating a whirlwind of Fusion possibilities among white Republicans, white Populists, black Republicans, Regular Democrats, and Reform Democrats. With his political skills and brusque personality well known in all local camps, Russell maintained a tenuous position as a candidate. Black Republicans viewed Russell's candidacy and Fusionists with hesitancy since some believed that the Republicans could win without the help of former Democrats that had pushed for white supremacy in the past. Others questioned Russell's commitment to the concerns of African Americans. Still other factions questioned the actions of the Police Board, citing the changes instituted as an example of whites using the black vote to get elected and then turning their back on the needs of the black community.²³

²¹ For more information on Daniels and his role in politics and publishing in North Carolina, see his autobiography, Josephus Daniels, *Editor in Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941).

²² Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 48-54.

²³ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 428-432.

Preparations for the election had started months earlier when New Hanover voters worked to select candidates and adopt a platform. Black Republicans sponsored numerous meetings to debate the issues, including anti-Russell rallies in which he was portrayed as “against the citizenship of the negro.” In the end, the county Republican Party sent 45 black and 9 white pro-Russell delegates to the statewide convention. In protest, a secondary party convention was held in the county that adopted anti-Russell resolutions to object to the Russell delegation. Local black newspaper editor, Armond Scott, issued anti-Russell articles in his *Wilmington Sentinel* in which he declared that “the negro race has not an enemy greater than this man [Russell].”²⁴

Once candidates and platforms were laid out, all parties began to campaign in earnest. Although both Republicans and Democrats courted the Populists for Fusion, the Populists negotiated a complicated path between both organizations, cooperating with both the Republicans and Democrats at various levels. The Populists merged with Democrats behind Bryan for president, with Republicans on congressional and county candidates, and with some local Democrats in a couple of counties on the state ticket. Marion Butler wrote in his newspaper, the *Caucasian*, that the Populists had “undertaken a delicate yet Herculean task and while we want a genuine free silver man as president of the United States, we wish to defeat as disastrously as possible the Democratic organization in this State.” In response, Democrats relied heavily on race issues when attacking the Republicans and Populists instead of approaching the issues of reform put forth by Fusion.²⁵

²⁴ Crow, *Maverick Republican*, 63; McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 433.

²⁵ Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 54-55; McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 440-444.

In Wilmington and New Hanover, the parties were still fractured. Anti-Russell sentiment was found in African American newspapers and meetings. Racist rhetoric in local newspapers disparaged Republicans, Populists, and the 1895 legislature for imposing black officeholders on the city and county. According to black editor Armond Scott, the end result of the campaign in Wilmington was that relationships between whites and blacks were “sullen and resentful.” Anti-Russell black Republicans had put aside their dislike for him and backed his election. After the ballots were counted, Fusionists had won the election in the city, county, and state. Only one Democrat was elected to a magistrate position and four blacks were elected to posts.²⁶

Complete Fusion Victory

Again in 1896, the Republicans and Populists were successful in mounting a fusion of their parties to defeat Democrats. Russell was elected the state’s first Republican governor since Reconstruction. As a result of the new election laws, more voters turned out in predominantly African American counties. Although still a factor in the election, the Populist Party suffered losses in overall numbers of voters in the 1896 election as compared to the numbers that turned out in 1894. The primary reason for the decline was Populists returning to either the Republican or Democratic Parties instead of maintaining loyalty to the third party. The General Assembly featured 72 Republicans, 64 Populists, 33 Democrats and 1 Silverite. Among the assembly members were African Americans John T. Howe of New Hanover, W. H. Crews of Granville, James Young of Wake, W. B. Henderson of Vance, Richard Elliott of Chowan, Moses M. Peace of Vance, Edward

²⁶ McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington”, 442-450.

R. Rawls of Northampton, and W. Lee Person of Edgecombe.²⁷

In his inaugural address and first actions as governor, Russell indicated to North Carolinians that he intended to continue the trend established in the previous legislature. He would seek to revamp local governments, involving the state in municipal affairs. Furthermore, he spoke of his determination to involve the state in the control of the North Carolina Railroad. A plan to lease the use, care, and profit of the railroad to the Southern Railway was endorsed by Governor Carr before leaving office. Russell, in his inaugural address, made it clear that he would not allow the lease unless adequate compensation was paid to the state. The railroad issue would prove to be troublesome for Russell's administration and plagued most of his term. The railroad issue, coupled with other reforms, was seen by Russell as a means to combat big business.²⁸

As soon as the second Fusionist legislature was in session, the tenuous bonds of cooperation were shaken by Russell's divisive appointment of Populist Jeter Pritchard to the U. S. Senate. Partisanship

began to plague all activity. Again, the Fusionists sought to make changes to election laws and local governments so as to hamper efforts of Democrats to challenge voter eligibility and election outcomes.²⁹

Fusion Focus on Wilmington

The legislature turned its attention to managing the state's municipalities, among them Wilmington. Although black Republicans had a voter majority in the city, the gerrymandered wards provided a block to their collective voting power. The Fusionists wanted to provide more voice to Wilmington Republicans, but, at the same time, wanted to limit black voter strength in order to prevent a black majority on the Board of Aldermen. The Fusionists hoped that limiting black power would deprive Democrats of a potential campaign issue. The solution developed by the Fusionists as they amended the charter was to establish a Board of Aldermen drawn from both gubernatorial appointments and elections. It was hoped that Russell's ability to place aldermen on the board would counterbalance fears whites had about black rule and the notion that blacks would elect men to office who were "propertyless and ignorant." The resulting changes to Wilmington's city charter reflected Fusionist sentiment. Ward lines were not changed, but voters elected one alderman from each ward and the governor appointed the other five aldermen. Once the new Board of Aldermen reflected the Fusion shift, the Police Board, no longer needed to limit the board's authority, was abolished by the legislature in favor of the Board of Audit and Finance.³⁰ Other Fusionist measures

²⁷ In an attempt to counter losses to Fusionists in 1896, Democratic Party leaders successfully petitioned Superior Court Judge E. T. Boykin to appoint W. F. Alexander and Roger Moore to the County Board of Commissioners. The petition stated that the Democratic petitioners expressed their concerns that the "business of the County of New Hanover if left entirely in the hands of the three Commissioners elected at the last election will be improperly managed and that 200 citizens of the said County Elections... request the appoint of two honest and discreet citizens ... of opposite party from the majority of the present Board of Commissioners." New Hanover County Election Records, 1882-1896, State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 447-448; Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 56-60, 65-66; Crow, *African Americans in North Carolina*, 233-5.

²⁸ Crow, *Maverick Republican*, 81-87.

²⁹ Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 62-64.

³⁰ Fusionists focused on other towns as well to deny Democrats control in North Carolina urban areas. There were three groups of cities that were targeted by the fusionists. First to see charter changes were

also affected Wilmington. To many in New Hanover County, the banking, tax, and railroad reforms all seemed targeted at Wilmington's Democratic and economic leaders. Many of the reforms directly affected the ability of the city's white leaders to prosper and manage the city's affairs for their own benefit.³¹

The legislature sought to make the municipal elections in Wilmington more egalitarian because, in the past, the Democratic Party held its members in office by failing to hold elections. The changes to the charter mandated that elections be held every two years. In March 1897, municipal elections were held in Wilmington for the first time in four years.³² Factions abounded in the city. For example, the Democratic Party was still split between the old line Democrats and those who were tired of seeing the same people in office who were also benefiting financially from their posts. The old line Democrats sought to solidify their party by pulling members together against the Republican threat, which was

the cities with a black voting majority such as Edenton, New Bern, Raleigh, Washington, Wilmington and Winston. Second to come under scrutiny were those that contained an even split between whites and blacks: Elizabeth City, Fayetteville, Oxford, and Rocky Mount. The last group of cities—Asheville, Concord, Durham, Goldsboro, Greenville, and Kinston—held white voting majorities. For a full detail of changes to Wilmington's charter, 1868 to 1910, see Appendix C. McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 459-461; Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 124-131.

³¹ In banking, interest rates were lowered, thereby depriving banks of revenue. Taxation laws were changed to affect stockholders more directly. Railroad regulations were strengthened and effectively limited the ability of railroad magnates to capitalize on their holdings. McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 461.

³² According to the Board of Aldermen's minute book, the last municipal elections were held in 1893. Minutes, 1884-1898 (microfilm), Wilmington Board of Aldermen, State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

perceived as interference in the everyday rights of citizens by the Republican legislature. Furthermore, the Democrats of the city planned a legal attack on the changes made to the city's election procedures. During the pre-election fiasco, both the Democrats and Republicans from each of the city wards traveled to Raleigh to appeal to Russell to appoint members from their factions to the new Board of Aldermen.³³

Russell's appointment of members to the Board of Aldermen was crucial to the political makeup of the board. Rumors circulated that he initially planned to nominate Democrats to the positions, but, after he found out that the Democrats planned to challenge the new city charter, he decided to fill the positions with Republicans. His final appointments were Silas P. Wright, D. J. Benson, Benjamin F. Keith, Andrew J. Hewlett, and John G. Norwood. Norwood was the only black appointee, and all were Republican with the exception of Keith, a disgruntled Democrat who was a member of the Silver Party. For the Board of Audit and Finance, Russell appointed C. W. Yates, H. C. McQueen, James H. Chadbourn Jr., H. A. DeCove, and John H. Webber. Of these, Webber was the only black member, Yates and McQueen the only Democrats, and the rest Republicans.³⁴

The March 1897 election for city officials went off without any problems. At the end of the day, two black Republicans, Andrew J. Walker and Elijah Green, were elected to the Board of Aldermen as were three Democrats, William E. Springer, Owen Fennell, and Walter E. Yopp. Therefore, the new Board of Aldermen was made up of 6 Republicans, 3 Democrats and 1 member of the Silver Party. On the evening after the polls closed, both the

³³ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 36 – 39.

³⁴ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 36 – 40; Crow, *Maverick Republican*, 97.

Republicans and Democrats held caucus meetings to decide their next steps. The Republicans concentrated on who to elect mayor, and the Democrats on how to regain lost power. The new aldermen were to be sworn in the next day, but the Democrats, who were in control of the previous Board of Aldermen, planned to refuse to vacate their seats on grounds that the election was not valid. The Republicans sought to thwart the action by meeting early in the day. However, three of the new Aldermen, all Democrats, failed to show. The Republicans assumed a quorum was in place and continued with activity as the new board members presented their proof of being elected and qualified. The members were then sworn into office by Justice of the Peace G. Z. French, after which they elected Silas P. Wright mayor and elected H. C. Twining to fill Wright's vacancy on the board. The board then took over the city offices and appointed Populist John Melton as chief of police, as well as other members of the police force. They adjourned for the day and decided to wait until their first day of regular business in April for the rest of their appointments.³⁵

But the Democrats had another plan. They had persuaded the three recently elected Democrats not to be part of the new board. Then the old board and mayor met in city hall to state that the new election was held under changes to the city charter they deemed unconstitutional, and, therefore, it was their duty to hold their seats since the election was not valid. The same day the three recently elected Democrats met with the five Democratic runners-up from the recent election, holding that these men had been duly elected following the pattern of elections from the early 1890s in which two men from each ward were elected to the

board. These men also organized themselves as the Board of Aldermen, proved their elections, were sworn in, and elected a mayor from their ranks. Therefore, on March 26, 1897, Wilmington had three sets of men claiming the ability to run city government.³⁶

On March 29, Mayor Wright and his Board of Aldermen met to appoint the remaining members of city government to their posts, instructing Chief of Police Melton to not let anyone into the room unless they had specific business with the board. Other members of city government were appointed, all of whom were Republican and relatively new to public office. The Democrats saw that the Republicans could then establish a new legacy for their party, much like that run by the Democrats since Reconstruction. The Democrats' court case was their only hope to come out of the debacle ahead of the Republicans. They sought to prove that the 1897 changes to the city charter were unconstitutional and that the 1897 election was void.³⁷

Superior Court opened on April 14, 1897 and for three days of debate and testimony presented by counsels for all of the men claiming the mayor's office. At the end of the debate, the court found that the 1897 changes were unconstitutional and that Mayor Harriss and the old Board of Aldermen were the legal government for the city until successors were elected. Wright and others filed an appeal to the state supreme court, which heard the case in its September term. The state supreme court found that the 1897 election was valid because the changes to the laws were made by the legislature, a duly elected body meant to represent the people, and followed the

³⁵ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 40 – 41; Minutes, 1884-1898, Wilmington Board of Aldermen, State Archives.

³⁶ A similar confusion of multiple municipal officers also took place in New Bern. Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 42 – 43; Crow, *Maverick Republican*, 98.

³⁷ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 43 – 45.

rule of the state constitution, also written by duly elected individuals. The Democrats were soundly defeated and had no option but to look to the 1898 elections to reverse the trend of Republican rule.³⁸

Wilmington's African Americans and Fusion

As the political climate swayed within the Fusion breeze, the African American community of Wilmington continued to build upon the foundation established after the Civil War, creating an intricate society filled with clubs and organizations plus an entrepreneurial spirit unlike that found in other North Carolina towns. Despite an exodus movement led by African American George Price Jr. in 1889 and 1890, the city still featured a number of skilled artisans. Word began to filter to the city's black residents that economic situations in the city were much better than those found by "exodusters" who traveled westward.³⁹

Analysis of multiple sources provides a glimpse into the city's African American work ethic and business life for those who stayed in Wilmington. Although the city directories of the 1880s and 1890s

are incomplete in their listings, the volumes do provide a wealth of information regarding black business ownership as well as employment and housing trends.⁴⁰ Further detail on the financial situation of the city's black population can be gleaned from tax and census records as well as other records generated by corporations and businesses.⁴¹

Beyond the simple capability to sustain growth, the African American community provided entrepreneurs with a base of capital from which to draw for new ventures, and Wilmington was regarded as a "relatively attractive business environment."⁴² New businesses were able to prosper and black ownership of businesses increased in sustainability in the span of a quarter century. By 1897, Wilmington boasted 24 rated black businesses in Dun's *Mercantile Agency Reference Book*.⁴³ A number of North Carolina towns were developing a black business class, but the climate that emerged in Wilmington moved beyond the norm of the other cities by the 1890s.⁴⁴ Many

³⁸ Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 44 – 48; Crow, *Maverick Republican*, 98; *Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of North Carolina, September Term, 1897*, 172-183.

³⁹ Correspondence and newspaper articles from 1889 and 1890 indicate that many blacks who left for greater prosperity out west found low wages, substandard housing, and inflated prices for goods and services. Indications for those who remained in the city were that their situations were much better than anywhere else. Demonstrative of a break between African American economic classes, upper-class blacks such as politicians, ministers, and businessmen opposed migration whereas illiterate and semi-literate laborers were eager for the chance at a new life. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 274-281; Frenise A. Logan, *The Negro in North Carolina, 1876-1894* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 132.

⁴⁰ The city directories often list only heads of households whereas the census recorded the names of all men, women and children. For example, Leon Prather points out that the 1897 city directory featured 3,759 names for blacks living in the city whereas the 1890 census recorded 11,324 black residents in the city that year. Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 31. For further analysis of directory shortcomings, see Cody, "After the Storm," 95-99.

⁴¹ Detailed statistical and comparative analysis of the city's population before and after the riot will be found in Chapter 8.

⁴² Robert Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners: Black Economic Success in North Carolina, 1865-1915* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 43-47, 65.

⁴³ Hayumi Higuchi, "White Supremacy on the Cape Fear: The Wilmington Affair of 1898," (master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1980), 105.

⁴⁴ Frenise Logan studied reference books from the Mercantile Association of the Carolinas over several decades and noted that Wilmington's increases in the

different types of businesses operated in the city by 1895.

Furthermore, black businesses grew in competition with white businesses, with several black entrepreneurs opening businesses in fields such as medicine and legal practice, professions typically dominated by whites. Some workers, particularly in education and the ministry, saw no competition from whites.⁴⁵ Because of high morale and success within the black community, Wilmington became a destination for African Americans wishing to benefit from the city's growth potential. White employers in rural sections of the state lamented the loss, complaining that the only black laborers left to hire were "rough farm laborers" because the "well trained" workers had moved to the cities.⁴⁶ Beyond being a place for those in the lower classes to move up within the black community, Wilmington offered upper-class blacks a chance to collectively further their economic and social standing.⁴⁷ Congressman George White opened an office in the city as did new attorneys such as William E.

numbers of black businesses surpassed that of other cities and approached the leader, New Bern, by 1889. By 1893, Wilmington boasted twenty-four black owned businesses whereas New Bern's total black businesses had dropped to nine. Logan, *Negro in North Carolina*, 112; *Reference Book of the Mercantile Association of the Carolinas*, 1893, 76-80, 214-225, 317-321.

⁴⁵ Logan, in his study of African American businesses, indicated that the "ruling element" of black society was drawn from the clergy, educators, government officials, and doctors. Logan discovered that, of the 2,036 blacks working as professionals in the state in 1890, over 95 percent of those workers were either clergy or teachers, two of the employment fields left open to African Americans to serve others of their race without competition from whites unlike doctors and attorneys who had to compete with whites for clients. Logan, *Negro in North Carolina*, 105; Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners*, 65.

⁴⁶ Logan, *Negro in North Carolina*, 88.

⁴⁷ Logan, *Negro in North Carolina*, 86.

Henderson, who relocated to the city from Salisbury.⁴⁸

Although Wilmington's African American workers employed in unskilled labor positions represented a majority of the total workforce, a growing percentage of the African American male working population was employed in white collar positions, at both upper and managerial levels.⁴⁹ As in most of North Carolina's urban centers in the last decades of the nineteenth century, African American professionals in Wilmington averaged less than 5 percent of the black workforce. Some of the businessmen, such as baker Lorenzo Kennedy, worked for themselves. Although Kennedy's establishment was worth less than \$500 in 1893, he was a respected businessman, proven by his high credit rating.

The wealthiest black-owned businesses in 1893 were those of builder John G. Norwood and undertaker Thomas Rivera followed by carriage maker James A.

⁴⁸ Labor organizations were still in operation in the city during the early years of the decade. However, by 1894, the Knights of Labor reported that the statewide organization was defunct. Higuchi, "White Supremacy," 106; Logan, *Negro in North Carolina*, 104. For profiles of many Wilmington black businessmen, see Appendix A.

⁴⁹ Statewide, African American skilled laborers represented almost 10 percent of the state's skilled workforce in trades, transportation, manufacturing and mechanical industries in 1890. In 1897 Wilmington, skilled, semi-skilled and transportation industry black laborers represented 32 percent of the total workforce. A large percentage of Wilmington's workers, 34 percent, were employed in services and were most often employed in jobs such as barbers, firefighters, janitors, laborers, laundresses, nurses, restaurant and saloon keepers, policemen and domestic servants in 1897, down from 57.3 percent in 1889. Therefore, Wilmington's black working population was moving from service oriented jobs towards other types of employment. Some statistics generated from Cody in "After the Storm," 100; 1897 *Wilmington City Directory*; Higuchi, "White Supremacy," 144-146; Logan, *Negro in North Carolina*, 87.

Lowery. Although most of the city's businesses listed in 1893 were small, valued at less than \$500, and suffered a poor credit rating, the city's history as a place for blacks to prosper held up hope for a better future.⁵⁰ One of the more ambitious projects of black business leaders was the incorporation of the Wilmington Livery Stable Company in 1897, led by some of the city's successful businessmen such as John Hargrave, Frederick Sadgwar, Elijah Green, and William Moore.⁵¹



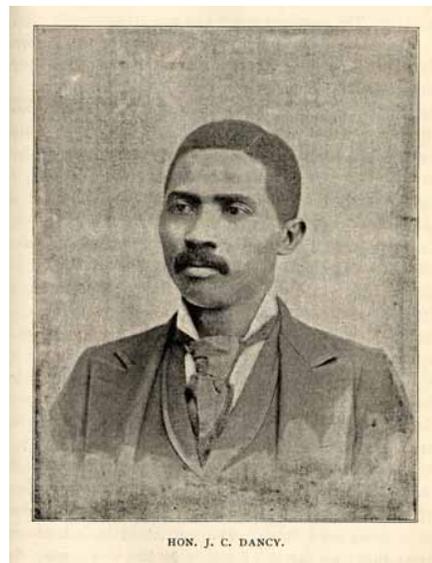
Frederick
Sadgwar
Image: Bill Reaves,
*Strength Through
Struggle*

Besides seeing increases in their financial status, Wilmington's blacks benefited from their support of Republican politics. Patronage and equitable hiring practices among city and county leaders

⁵⁰ *Reference Book of the Mercantile Association of the Carolinas, 1893*, 214-225.

⁵¹ The Wilmington Livery Stable Company was incorporated in August 1897 and its first Board of Directors were: President Franklin Wright, Secretary Redrick D. Dew, Vice President Altimore Walker, Treasurer Charles A. Foreman, and members George F. Manly, F. G. Manly, John J. Austin, Thomas Haywood, E. D. Green, Fred Jones Jr., John A. Hargrave, Frederick C. Sadgwar, William A. Moore, and G. J. Dixon. The company operated for only one year, closing its doors after November, 1898. New Hanover Incorporations, State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 296-7.

resulted in more African Americans holding public and visible offices in the city and county.⁵² Especially notable was John C. Dancy, who was nominated by President William H. Harrison and confirmed by the Senate in 1891 for the post of Collector of Customs for the port of Wilmington. Dancy was paid approximately \$4,000 a year, more than most top state officials.⁵³



HON. J. C. DANCY.

John C. Dancy

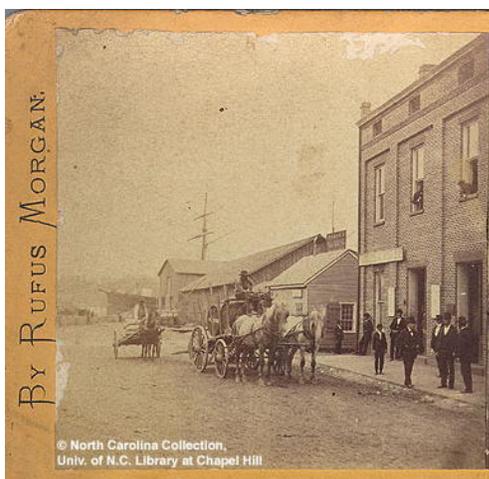
Image: J. W. Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; or, The Centennial of African Methodism, 1895*

An invaluable trade for the city's economic life was that of the stevedore. Stevedores worked on the docks loading and

⁵² In the beginning stages of the white supremacy campaign of 1898, Democratic newspapers pointed out that there were 40 black magistrates (justices of the peace), 6 black school board members, 4 or 5 black deputy sheriffs, 14 black policemen, a black legislator, a black register of deeds, 3 black aldermen, 4 black health officers, and a black collector of customs. Additionally, blacks held at least 12 federal jobs in the city. *Morning Star* (Wilmington), August 20, 1898.

⁵³ Dancy was reappointed in 1897 by President William McKinley and held the job until 1901. Logan, *Negro in North Carolina*, 46-7, 106; Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 385.

unloading ships and the trade was dominated by African Americans before and after freedom. During the 1890s, a push was underway for stevedores to organize themselves under a “boss.” Furthermore, the stevedores were required to register with the city and pay a fee for the right to work their trade. Many of the “boss” stevedores were black, such as Cato Waddell and Thomas Newkirk, who managed the firm of Waddell and Newkirk, but several white firms such as E. G. Parmele and Company paid black laborers to work their docks and ships.⁵⁴



Draymen and stevedores literally drove the city's growth during the 1890's.

Above: courtesy North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, UNC-CH.

⁵⁴ Other stevedores, black and white, working between 1891 and 1898 included Joseph Starnes, Major Lee, Fred Williams, John Turner, George W. Doyle, John McDowell, C. W. Worth, John M. Cazaux, W. H. Howe, E. D. Williams, Joseph McFarland, Henry Robinson, Andrew J. Walker, Charles Foreman, H. Robinson, J. W. H. Fuchs, W. W. Harriss, Haus A. Kure, Alex Heide, and William Goodman. More white boss stevedores and independent stevedores are found beginning in 1898, and after 1900, all of the stevedore firms are white. Stevedore Records, New Hanover County Records, State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

In addition, the city's black population was seeking ways to secure home ownership and economic independence. After early failures of the Freedman's Bank, blacks were hesitant to use banking institutions. In 1889, however, a group of African American leaders banded together to form the Peoples Perpetual Building and Loan Association.⁵⁵ The association's mission was to enable shareholders to purchase their own homes. It provided over 70 loans to shareholders between 1889 and 1898. Most of the loans were cancelled or paid in full.⁵⁶ Home ownership was a source of pride. A resident in 1898 noted that Wilmington's black home ownership rates were higher than in other parts of the country and explained that the houses “may be humble, but they have worked for them, paid for them and own them.”⁵⁷ Because home ownership was a tool to advance economic and social freedom, black leaders worked to assist others in the attainment of property. The American Union Association, formed in 1897, pursued the “acquisition of real estate and distributing the same to the poor class of colored people of the city of Wilmington, N. C. and to aid in securing

⁵⁵ First officers were A. S. Robinson, James Blain, Isham Quick, Thomas Lovick, John Neil, Virgil Brown, Sandy Williams, and Henry Epps.

Subsequent lists of officers can be found in the city directories. New Hanover Incorporations, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

⁵⁶ Interest on loans provided by the Peoples Perpetual Building and Loan averaged between 6 and 8 percent, and shareholders mortgaged their property as loan collateral. Only a handful of the 75 mortgage loans were not cancelled. Activity of the Association stopped in December 1898 with the exception of three deeds to Major Lee, William Howe, and Frederick Sadgwar Jr. between 1899 and 1906. New Hanover County Grantee/Grantor Index, New Hanover County Deed Books 3-24, State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

⁵⁷ Attorney W. E. Henderson as quoted from the *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 3, 1898 and found in Cody, “After the Storm,” 121.

homes for the destitute, the orphan, and the widow.”⁵⁸ The county deed index shows that the American Union Association acquired two entire blocks in 1897 and 1899 and then divided the blocks, registering 45 deeds for men and women in those blocks between 1897 and 1919.⁵⁹ Statewide in 1890, about 14 percent of the black population owned their homes as compared to approximately 35 percent of the white population. In Wilmington, of the black population that owned property, only 10 percent had property valued under \$100. The upper class of black property holders, those whose property was valued over \$1,000, represented only 4 percent of the population. The largest property-owning value bracket, 77 percent of the group under examination, encompassed those who owned property valued between \$100 and \$500.⁶⁰

Gregory Normal Institute, ca. 1910.
Image from W. N. Hartshorn and George W. Penniman, eds., *An Era of Progress and Promise, 1863-1910: The Religious, Moral, and Educational Development of the American Negro Since his Emancipation*

African American Property Values, 1897



* Source: Wilmington, New Hanover County Tax Roll, State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.



⁵⁸ New Hanover County Incorporations, State Archives. Members of the Association’s board were: General Superintendent Reverend Anderson Stroud, Vice President W. H. Capehart, Secretary A.J. Andrews, Treasurer Isham Thompson, and Judiciary Committee members Anthony Davis, James Simmons, and Joseph Williams.

⁵⁹ The Association acquired block 540 in 1897 and 541 in 1899. The blocks were located in the northeastern section of town and were bounded by Anderson, Miller, Rankin and Woods Streets. Subdivided portions of each block were then redistributed. The American Union Association handled the most deeds in 1898 (7) and 1899 (9), with activity ranging from 1 to 4 deeds in subsequent years. New Hanover County Incorporations, New Hanover County Grantor/Grantee Index, State Archives.

⁶⁰ Of Wilmington’s black population 8 percent owned taxable real estate in 1890. Wilmington Tax Roll, New Hanover County Records, State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh. For more on this topic, see Cody, “After the Storm,” and Appendix D.

Along with the development of wealth, Wilmington’s African American community showed a strong commitment to education. The first schools for black children were opened by northern benevolent societies and the Freedmen’s Bureau near the end of the Civil War. Following that lead, the African American community slowly began to manage its own educational system. Black leaders served on the county school board, trained and hired local black school teachers and administrators, and created local support organizations to manage the education of Wilmington’s first and second generations of children who had never known slavery. The Peabody School was first supported by the Freedmen’s Bureau, but a local support group called the Wilmington Colored

Institute began to assist in funding the school after the departure of the Freedman's Bureau.⁶¹ Other schools such as Williston and Gregory Normal Institute also boasted similar beginnings and subsequent support of the city's blacks through hard work and determination. Wilmington's black teachers included some of the city's elite with the wives and daughters of the city's most prominent politicians and businessmen working to educate the city's black children.⁶² Still, despite widespread community support for the schools, facilities were often underfunded, and teachers were paid less than white teachers.⁶³

⁶¹ The school property was leased to the city for a free public school in 1897, and the Wilmington Colored Educational Institute filed new articles of incorporation in 1898 under the leadership of Thomas Rivera, Joseph Mitchell, John G. Norwood, Aaron Kellogg, Marsh Walker, and Andrew J. Walker. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 146-148; New Hanover Incorporations, State Archives.

⁶² Mary Washington Howe, daughter of respected freedman Alfred Howe, was educated in the North and became principal of Williston School. Teachers Katie Telfair, Susie Kennedy, Nellie Chesnutt, and Mabel Sadgwar all were daughters of prominent Wilmington leaders. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 383, 410, 459, 474; New Hanover County Commissioner Records, State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

⁶³ Black teachers in the city averaged \$35.64 per pay period and black schools had an average of \$523.16 spent on them in October to November 1898. In contrast, white teachers for the same pay period averaged \$36.84 and \$858.02 was the average amount spent for school needs. For the 1897-98 school year, 51 percent of the city's black children (2290 students, male and female) attended public schools. Figures for private school attendance are unavailable. Attendance figures, teacher pay and school disbursements will change radically in the years following the riot. For more information on the impact of the riot on the city's educational system, see Chapter 7 and Appendix E. Department of Public Instruction, Superintendents Reports, State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; New Hanover County Commissioner Records, State Archives.

As the African American community advanced, it developed a distinctive social hierarchy. Lura Beam, a northern white educator who taught in Wilmington after the turn of the century, explained for her readers the difficult intricacies of black social



Williston Graded School, demolished 1915.
Image: Bill Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*



Mary Washington Howe, Principal,
Williston School
Image: Bill Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*

classifications. Although Beam was writing ten years after the riot, her account probably parallels the situation of the 1890s. Beam explained that the upper class was the financial equivalent of the white middle class. Borrowing from W. E. B. DuBois' phrase, she termed these men and women

the “talented tenth,” many of whom were mulatto and could trace their station to inherited wealth from white relatives. Most were community leaders who owned homes and sent their children to college. She conceded that some of these people were “too white” and could not easily merge with darker-skinned blacks from other classes, but that “passing” as white for these upper-class blacks was also considered a form of racial “treason.” The next group of blacks in the city was defined by Beam as middle class and few in number. These people owned homes on the fringes of the city. As described by Beam, the lowest level of black society was occupied by poor, dark-skinned laborers who rented substandard housing and who had moved into the city from the countryside. She recalled that this class was “anonymous” and was in constant motion, frequently changing jobs.⁶⁴

Many whites possibly viewed the advances of the black community as a threat to the overall good of the white community. For example, local author Harry Hayden repeated the cry of white workers in 1898 who claimed that blacks were given priority in hiring by employers. Writing in 1936, he indicated that most of the city’s artisans were black and that the city was “becoming a Mecca for Negroes and a City of Lost Opportunities for the working class whites.” Hayden explained that most of the bricklayers, carpenters, and mechanics were black, a trend that can be traced to the 1860 when those jobs were the only ones relegated to the black worker.⁶⁵ As a

⁶⁴ Beam’s findings are supported by other scholarly works by historians such as Bart Landry in *The New Black Middle Class*, Joel Williamson in works such as *New People, Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*. Lura Beam, *He Called Them by the Lightning: A Teacher’s Odyssey in the Negro South, 1908-1919* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1967), 40-42.

⁶⁵ Hayden, a local Wilmington journalist and author, worked to explain the tensions that led to the riot in

response, the Democratic Party began to develop discriminatory economic platforms, urging white employers to hire only white workers.⁶⁶

Plans Laid to Force the End of Fusion

Responding to the problems faced by the Democratic Party, an economic downturn as a result of a panic in 1893, general economic depression in 1897, and the perceived increase in African American prosperity and political control, many prominent white leaders in the city began to meet in private. The men believed that if they did not regain control of the city’s political machine, they could not prosper— whoever controlled the city government also controlled its purse, taxation policy, and internal improvements agenda.⁶⁷ Further, without such control, prominent businesses could not be wooed to relocate to the port city. The promise of major investors and outside business enterprises in the city after Democratic victory presented a tangible impetus for white business leaders to take matters into their own hands. In order to promote the city, they believed that they had to be in control; otherwise, investors would

1898 in his work, *The Story of the Wilmington Rebellion*. Further documenting the event, Hayden also wrote a complete history of the Wilmington Light Infantry, which was presented by that group’s members to the New Hanover County Public Library. Although tainted with rhetoric reminiscent of the 1898 and 1900 white supremacy campaigns, the two works offer valuable insights into the actions of the white leaders responsible for the political frenzy that resulted in the violence and the coup d’etat of November 10, 1898. Harry Hayden, *The Story of the Wilmington Rebellion* (Wilmington, N.C.: the author, 1936), 2.

⁶⁶ Similar thought processes regarding the “negro problem” developed to address the issue from both the white and black perspective throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 61-62.

⁶⁷ Michael Honey, “Class, Race and Power,” *Democracy Betrayed*, 171.

seek another location that was more attractive.⁶⁸

In the 6 to 12 months preceding the 1898 election, various groups of men organized—the most prominent group became known as the “Secret 9” (as they were called by Harry Hayden). Others in more established factions such as the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce or Merchants Association also developed plans to achieve Democratic victory in concert with other factions.⁶⁹ For these men,

⁶⁸ As soon as the leaders of the coup regained control of the city, new business ventures emerged. Undoubtedly, the leaders promised investors that once the election was over, the city would be under their control and business could resume as it had been operating in the fifteen years prior to Fusion reforms that up-ended city politics in 1897. Key developments were the establishment of the headquarters for the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad in 1900 and the construction of the Delgado Cotton Mill in 1899. Piedmont textile magnate Edwin C. Holt, who also had familial ties with Wilmington’s elite, constructed the textile mill in Wilmington. In February 1900, just after the mill opened, Holt stated that he “would not have invested his money nor advised his friends to do likewise had the political scene in Wilmington stayed under the same administration prior to November of 1898.” The mill cost \$300,000 to construct and in its first year it operated 440 looms, 10,300 spindles and could produce 25,000 yards of white cloth daily. By 1902 the mill employed 350 workers – all of them white, a fact common to the industry statewide. For more on the development of the Delgado Mill, see Rebecca Sawyer, “The Delgado-Spofford Textile Mill and Its Village: The Fabric of Wilmington’s 20th Century Landscape” (master’s thesis, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, 2001). Also Watson, *Wilmington, Port of NC*, 116-117; *Wilmington Messenger*, February 21, 1900.

⁶⁹ The Chamber of Commerce and the Merchant’s Association met regularly to discuss methods to improve their business options within the city. Further, these groups encouraged the growth of white labor unions that move to the front of the push for white labor over black in the months following the election and violence. The Chamber of Commerce issued multiple statements in the papers in support of the Democratic Party and its white supremacy tenets. On November 2, the Chamber of Commerce formally

political victory translated into economic stability and prosperity—factors lacking for them under Fusion rule. These men also facilitated the development of other organizations such as the White Government Union and Red Shirts in order to support the Democratic Party’s attempts to recapture state and local politics.⁷⁰

In the face of mounting opposition from the more organized Democratic Party, Populists and Republicans failed to mount a successful offensive. Beginning in 1897, irreparable splits developed among Fusionists, and within their respective

declared itself “against negro domination.” The Chamber issued a resolution which stated that it felt black/Republican rule in the city was “detrimental to every business interest, arrests enterprise, hampers commerce and repels capital which might otherwise find investment in our midst.” The Chamber concluded that “prosperity, peace and happiness” within Wilmington was not possible under the current regime. *Wilmington Messenger*, November 2, 1898.⁷⁰ Several men were members of multiple groups that were all working toward the common goal of Democratic Party victory. The Secret Nine were J. Allan Taylor, Hardy Fennell, W. A. Johnson, L. B. Sasser, William Gilchrist, P. B. Manning, E. S. Lathrop, Walter Parsley, and Hugh MacRae. A second group, the Group of Six, also met and its members were William L. Smith, John Berry, Henry Fennell, Thomas Meares, William F. Robertson, and Walker Taylor. The Campaign Committee of the Democratic Party was Frank Stedman, Edgar Parmele, Walker Taylor, and George Rountree. The Chamber of Commerce featured James H. Chadbourne Jr. as President with members George Rountree, Thomas Strange, William R. Kenan, Thomas C. James, Walker Taylor, S. H. Fishblate, Frank Stedman, William E. Worth, Thomas Clawson, Walter Parsley, J. Allan Taylor, Hugh MacRae, John L. Cantwell, and Samuel Northrop. In her research on the Delgado Mill, Rebecca Sawyer discovered that in 1895 Wilmington’s leading businessmen issued a stock prospectus in favor of establishing a textile mill in the city after investigation into the matter. However, the men could not act on the prospectus because of the changes to city government wrought by Fusion reform. Hayden, *Wilmington Light Infantry*, 66-7, 72; Hayden, *Story of the Wilmington Rebellion*; Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 49; Sawyer, “Delgado-Spofford Mill.”

parties, which weakened each group's ability to counter Democratic Party moves.⁷¹ Because of the rifts, Republicans and Populists were unable to keep pace and combat the aggressive regeneration of the Democratic Party. Further hampering the Fusionists' ability to combat the Democrat's onslaught was a subtle trend by the federal government which slowly abandoned a nationwide commitment for the protection of civil and political rights of citizens. Proof of the trend could be seen in the failure of the Lodge Force Bill in 1890 and the 1896 *Plessey v Ferguson* Supreme Court decision.⁷²

⁷¹ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 464-7.

⁷² The Lodge Force Bill of 1890, if passed in Congress, would have ensured fair elections for all voters, including African Americans, through the use of federal supervisors. Illegal methods such as intimidation and fraud at polling places would have been federal offences. The Bill passed in the House failed to pass in the Senate. The *Plessey v. Ferguson* ruling in the Supreme Court upheld Louisiana law that separated black and white railroad passengers by cars, provided that cars set aside for blacks were equal in accommodation as those for whites. This "separate but equal" decision codified legal segregation of the races for the courts over the next sixty years. Joel Williamson, *Crucible of Race*, 113, 253.

Leading 1898 Conspirators

County Democratic Party Campaign Committee

Frank Stedman

Edgar Parmele

Walker Taylor

George Rountree

The Secret Nine

J. Alan Taylor

Hardy Fennell

W.A. Johnson

L.B. Sasser

William Gilchrist

Pierre B. Manning

Edward S. Lathrop

Walter Parsely

Hugh MacRae

Wilmington Chamber of Commerce

James H. Chadbourn, Jr.

George Rountree

Thomas Strange

William R. Kenan

Thomas C. James

Walker Taylor

S.H. Fishblate

Frank Stedman

William E. Worth

Thomas Clawson

Walter Parsley

J. Alan Taylor

Hugh MacRae

John L. Cantwell

Samuel Northrop

The Group of Six

William L. Smith

John Berry

Henry Fennell

Thomas Meares

William F. Robertson

Walker Taylor

The men who were members of these and other groups such as the Citizens Vigilance Committee under Roger Moore, the Red Shirts/Rough Riders under Mike Dowling, or the White Government Unions all played a role in creating tensions in the city that led to bloodshed on November 10, 1898. Men whose names are underlined and in bold were connected to other groups in a variety of ways.