

Wilmington's Democrats Organize

Simmons worked to control county Democratic committees' local campaigns as he directed by Wilmingtonians often chose their own course. In New Hanover County, Colonel Thomas W. Strange in April was selected to serve as chair of the local committee and worked closely with others developing facets of the white supremacy campaign in the city.¹ Although Simmons attempted to tightly control his county committees, Democrats in Wilmington used the statewide campaign to their benefit and modified components of Simmons' scheme to fit their needs. As a result, Simmons sought to rein in Wilmington's leaders for fear that they might make "some deal that they [the Democratic Party State Executive Committee] would not approve of." In response, local Democratic Party leader George Rountree informed Simmons that he might "go to H - - -, as we were going to run the campaign to suit ourselves down here."²

¹ George Rountree recalled that about twenty of the city's best businessmen were organized into a campaign committee to support Strange's activities. Additionally, Rountree was selected to join Frank Stedman, E.G. Parmele, and Col. Walker Taylor in running the campaign. Further, the campaign committee raised "a considerable amount of money" for the benefit of the campaign. George Rountree, "Memorandum of My Personal Recollection of the Election of 1898," n.d. Henry G. Connor Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

² Rountree was born in Kinston and was educated at Harvard. A successful attorney, Rountree lived and worked in New York and Richmond before returning to his native Kinston to operate law offices there. Rountree married Meta Davis of Wilmington in 1881 and the couple moved to the city in 1890. Some speculation regarding Rountree has surfaced that indicates he may have been brought into the fray as a strategic move by Democratic Party leaders. Particularly useful for Democrats, Rountree purportedly had first hand experience with white supremacy campaigns and disfranchisement movements in Georgia. Rountree, "Memorandum,"

Following the statewide example, other organizations such as the White Government Union and Red Shirts emerged in the city. Clandestine groups also began to script plans to assist in Democratic victory. All of the movements of the various groups were carefully managed by the local Democratic Party to orchestrate a tightly woven white supremacy, anti-Republican campaign.³

Essential to the rhetoric of the New Hanover white supremacy campaign was the statewide refrain of bad incumbent government. The Democrats also linked local Republicans to the sinking ship of Fusion. To accomplish this goal, local Democrats refused to cooperate with Populists who sought to create a Democratic-Populist fusion. The Democrats identified and discredited the actions, businesses, and character of leading Populists and Republicans.⁴ They targeted chiefly the "Big Four:" Mayor and physician Silas P. Wright, northern politician George Z. French, business leader William H. Chadbourn, and northern businessman Flavel W. Foster. They accused these men of rallying black voters behind candidates in order to achieve political victory at all costs. Democrats raised the specter of "negro domination" to mean not just a black voting majority in the city or black officeholding but the capability of blacks to dictate candidates and platforms because of their voting strength.⁵

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, s.v. "Rountree, George."

³ *Wilmington Messenger*, May 1, 1898.

⁴ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 537.

⁵ "Negro domination does not mean that the government in every part of the entire State is under control of negro influences—few negroes live in the western part of our State. When the great controlling element is the negro vote, and when that vote and its influences name the officials and dictate the policy of a town, city or county, then it is dominant. When it elects negro officials of a town or county, there is negro domination." Newspaper circular, [1900], Smithwick Papers, Private Collections, State

The Democrats also targeted wealthy businessman Benjamin F. Keith and a host of other Populists and Republicans, regardless of their race. He held fast to his principles throughout the 1898 campaign, refusing multiple attempts to threaten him into joining the Red Shirts. As the 1898 election drew near, Keith wrote his Populist compatriot Marion Butler to explain that “they have not killed or run me out of town yet although they hate me with all the hatred that corporation influence can aspire. I trust that things will turn out all ok.” After threats failed to intimidate Keith, he was “visited” by a mob that forced its way into his yard at night only to be met by Keith, his wife, and his eleven-year-old son, all well armed and ready to open fire. When physical intimidation failed, the Democrats and Red Shirts targeted his business, forcing it into ruin by intimidating customers and traveling agents alike. Keith was also slandered in the papers, and, as a result, he retaliated with a fist fight to defend his honor against James Fore, who was also his neighbor.⁶

Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; Hayden, *WLI*, 58-9.

⁶ Benjamin Keith was a prominent businessman and reluctant politician in the city and, like Waddell, Sprunt, and others, had a long family tradition of prominence in southeastern North Carolina. However, Keith sought to improve his city and state through third party politics and as a member of the Board of Aldermen appointed by Russell. Years after the campaign was over, Keith was respected for his fortitude but still held deep resentment for his treatment at the hands of Democrats. Even as late as 1921, Keith was still battling with Democrats over his patronage position as Collector of Customs in the city. In a letter to President Warren G. Harding, Keith recalled the 1898 campaign for the president, providing details of the threats and dangers he and his family withstood. Keith recounted that when the Democrats realized they “could not buy with offices or could not intimidate me to join their red shirt mob,” he was notified that, unless he joined, he “would be killed and put in the Cape Fear River unless I left the city at once.” Keith believed Fore

As the campaign progressed in both speechmaking and print outlets, the four leaders were expanded to six. “Remember the Six” handbills and posters were circulated around town, and the men knew they were marked for death. Two additional men were recognized as Chief of Police John Melton and white attorney Caleb B. Locky. Governor Russell was also added to the invective as yet another leader of the city’s black voters. According to W. J. Harris of Wilmington, the men of the “Big Six” were to be shot because they worked “for the interest of the Republican Party.”⁷

One of the Big Six, Republican William Chadbourn, was postmaster and a member of a wealthy family that operated Chadbourn Lumber Company and employed white and black workers in seasonal jobs. In response to the Democrat’s white supremacy campaign issue of “negro domination” in newspapers, Chadbourn penned a letter to Republican senator Jeter Pritchard on September 26, 1898 to explain his view that

had written an article that was published statewide discrediting Keith and, as a result, went to Fore’s business, where Keith claimed 40 to 50 Red Shirts were employed and pummeled Fore by himself. Fore was partner in the Fore and Foster Planing Mill with Flavel Foster, one of the men of the “Big Six.” As a result of the unbased slander, Fore lost favor in the city and left for the remainder of the campaign. B.F. Keith to Marion Butler, November 2, 1898, Marion Butler Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Benjamin F. Keith to President Warren G. Harding, July 5, 1921, photocopy on file in Research Branch, Office of Archives and History, original in possession of Thomas J. Keith; Benjamin F. Keith, *Memories*, (Raleigh, N.C.: Bynum Printing Company, 1922), 79-111; Sprunt, *Chronicles of the Cape Fear River*, 595-597; Crow, *Maverick Republican*, 131; R.D.W. Connor, William K. Boyd, J.G. deRoulhac Hamilton, *History of North Carolina: North Carolina Biographies*, V (Chicago: The Lewis Printing Company, 1919), 117-121; *Contested Election Case*, 361; Keith, *Memories*, 107-8; Hill’s 1897 Wilmington City Directory.

⁷ *Contested Election Case*, 390.

Wilmington did not have such domination. Chadbourn also observed that the primary motivation for the Democratic campaign in the city was a desire among Democrats to regain control of political offices in the city. The letter was acquired by the press and was published in pro-Democratic Party papers such as the *Wilmington Messenger*, *Wilmington Evening Star*, and the *Raleigh News and Observer*. After pressure from Democrats, Chadbourn retracted his statement and decided that he was “for white supremacy.”⁸ After Chadbourn’s switch, the “Remember the Big Six” was changed to a “five” in the newspapers, and he was then “immune from the slaughter.”⁹ Rountree and other Democrats targeted another one of the six, Flavel Foster, during an hours-long late night visit in which they compelled him to sign a letter similar to Chadbourn’s second letter.¹⁰

⁸After the pressure from the Democrats and his capitulation, Chadbourn left the city to visit relatives in Maine and returned just before the election. In a jovial manner James Worth wrote his wife that Chadbourn and his family had “gone to Maine for his health.” Chadbourn’s conversion was so complete that he allowed his Democratic Party employees to use his horses and buggy on voter registration day, presumably to get as many people to registration sites as possible. *Contested Election Case*, 390; McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 630; James S. Worth to Josephine, November 4, 1898, James S. Worth Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library.

⁹ McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 605; *Contested Election Case*, 361.

¹⁰ Chief of Police Melton testified that Foster’s account was published as a letter in the paper on October 21, 1898, but that he didn’t believe that Foster authored the piece. The article, published with prominence in the *Messenger*, indicated that an unnamed reporter interviewed Foster “ascertaining his views upon the present condition of affairs in our city.” The article explained that Foster “recognized the fact that the situation here was extremely grave, with imminent danger of trouble between the races” and that “he believed the city would not recover from the ill effect of such a conflict in years to come.” Although Foster was portrayed as a staunch

Other Wilmington Republicans and Populists were also thoroughly intimidated by the Democrats. James Worth, a Democratic Party member and businessman, wrote his wife the week before the election to give her details on the city’s affairs since she left town. Worth said he spoke to several different Fusionists in the city and reported their replies to her. In almost a laundry list of Democratic Party targets, and written in language reflective of the larger campaign, Worth informed his wife about matters. He informed her that white George Lutterloh had changed his mind and had promised not to vote; African American Junius Murray and “his whole gang” didn’t register; and African American Jim Howe had promised not to vote, that his father and brother felt the same way, and that Howe claimed to be able to locate at least another 150 men “only too glad . . . not to vote.” Worth continued his account as he explained that George French planned to go to Maine after voting just as “Foster, Rice and the others were to leave on short notice.” Worth concluded his thoughts on the campaign as he claimed that “the small fry leaders such as Lockey and his gang were told that no ‘monkeying’ would be taken from such ‘small potatoes’ and that if he undertook to help the niggers or if he failed to support in every way Russell’s pledge that no second notice would be sent to him.” Worth observed that Lockey “came down at once like the cur that he is.” Simultaneously, a short note from A. J. Costin to Douglas

Republican, he was quoted as saying that “it would be best at this time for the Republicans not to put a county ticket in the field.” The author was hopeful that Foster’s standing within the Republican community would influence others and took care to explain Foster’s role as “one of our most public spirited citizens and no man here has been more earnestly interest in the up building and prosperity of our city.” *Wilmington Messenger*, October 21, 1898; *Contested Election Case*, 378; Rountree, “Memorandum.”

Cronly stated that “all the gentlemen that you requested me to call on have signed the paper—Mr. Parsley, declined to sign at first, but afterwards did so—making a promise.”¹¹

Increasingly throughout the campaign, white men who were perceived as leaders of the Republican Party were targeted and vilified through speeches and newspaper articles. The recollections of James Cowan of the Wilmington *Evening Dispatch* reflect the criticism and hatred shown toward the men. Cowan claimed that the “lily white” leaders of the Republican party were “scum and trash, remnants of the carpet bag regime ... interested only in their own nefarious plans and objectives” and “used the negroes votes for their own purposes.”¹²

Following this train of thought—that white Republican leaders fully controlled black voters—Republican leaders received multiple letters and circulars that featured “crossbones” and notification that, “if there was any trouble with the negroes,”

¹¹ The pledge made by Russell was one in which Republican candidates were withdrawn from several races in favor of Democratic Party candidates prior to the election, and agreed to by Russell and his supporters for the sake of peace. Costin enclosed other papers with the undated note that were not found in the collection. The note indicates that signatures on any one of the circulars featuring the names of “prominent citizens” could have been coerced. Various accounts, some exaggerated, indicate that the coercion was both physical and verbal. James Worth to Josephine, November 4, 1898, James Spencer Worth Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A.J. Costin to Mr. Cronly, Cronly Family Papers, Duke University Library, Durham.

¹² James H. Cowan, “The Wilmington Race Riot,” n.d., Louis T. Moore Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington.

the leaders would be killed.¹³ As the campaign drew to a close, statewide Republican and Populist leaders such as Governor Russell and Senator Butler scheduled a rally in the city on October 29 but cancelled it after they were threatened by the Democrats who warned them that if they came to speak, there would be bloodshed. Republican Congressional candidate Oliver Dockery came to the city anyway but did not speak because of the hostile climate.¹⁴

¹³ George Rountree penned an explanation of his fears regarding white Republican control of black votes. He claimed that he observed on election day in 1894 the change in votes among black voters at a Brooklyn Precinct according to the whim of Daniel Russell. Rountree charged that black voters “exercised no choice” but changed their voting patterns in response to a call from Russell for the election of George French over Thomas Strange. Rountree claimed that a black voter was an “automaton” and that election was proof for him of “absolute control by the leaders of the negro vote.” Rountree, “Memorandum of my personal reasons for the passage of the suffrage amendment to the Constitution,” n.d., Henry G. Connor Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; Daniels, *Editor in Politics*, 311-312.

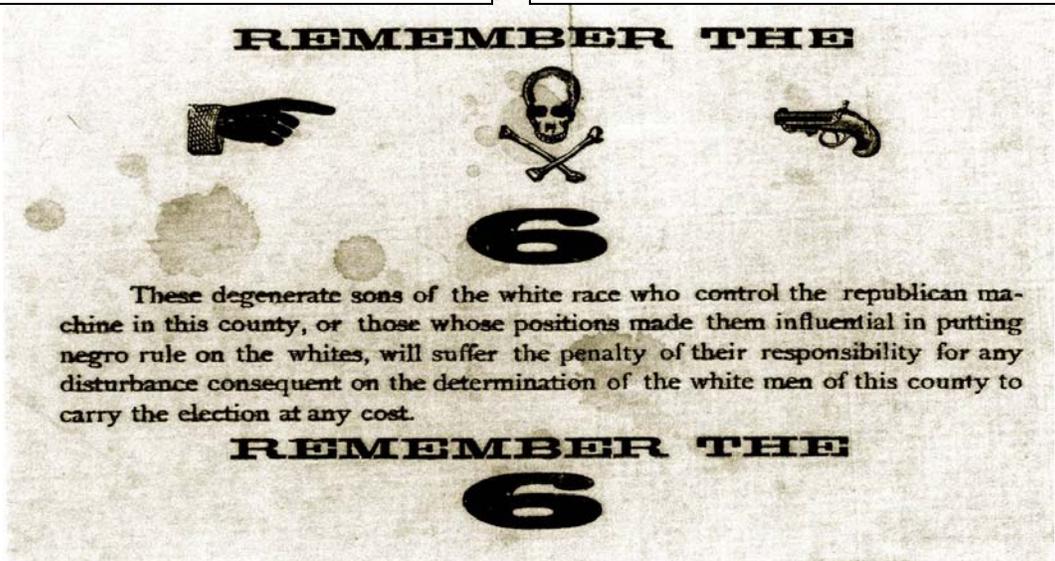
¹⁴ Rountree recalled that once Democrats discovered that Fusion leaders planned a rally in the city, Democrats feared that “if they [Fusionists] spoke and the negroes became inflamed, and had a brass band and a torch light procession, there certainly would be a riot.” A committee was appointed to “have an interview” with Russell, Butler and Prichard to “point out to them the extreme danger of a race riot that would follow an attempt on their part to speak.” Rountree opposed “harsh” language in the warning to the Fusionists but provided subtle approval of the committee led by T. M. Emerson and their ability to influence the Fusionists. Rountree, “Memorandum;” *Contested Election Case*, 360-362; McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 639-640; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), October 25, 1898.



“Remember the Big 6,” *Wilmington Messenger*, October 16, 1898



“5” *Wilmington Messenger*, October 20, 1898.



“Remember the 6” handbill. n.d.
Image: North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Although Simmons appeared to have the state Democratic machine under his control, the Democratic leaders of Wilmington most likely worked independently of Simmons, using his tactics and connections to their benefit. According to Thomas Clawson, editor of the *Wilmington Messenger*, “for a period of six to twelve months prior to November 10, 1898, the white citizens of Wilmington prepared quietly but effectively for the day when action would be necessary.”¹⁵ How effective and well organized this and other clandestine organizations were is debatable since many of the overt actions attributed to the groups are found in newspapers and accounts and reflect the overarching themes and characteristics of the statewide campaign. No doubt leading white men determined to win the election worked together to lend a distinctive cast to the Democratic campaign in the city, but it must be remembered that various members of these “secret” groups were also well-known and visible leaders of the county Democratic Party.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cowan of the *Dispatch* also echoed Clawson’s claims that the citizens had planned the coup for up to a year prior to the 1898 election. Thomas W. Clawson, “The Wilmington Race Riot in 1898, Recollections and Memories,” n.d., Louis T. Moore Papers, State Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; Cowan, “The Wilmington Race Riot.”

¹⁶ Much attention has been paid to the activities of a group of white leaders known as the Secret Nine and their conspiracy to return the city to Democratic Party control. Using recollections of participants and observers, local chronicler Harry Hayden described the actions of the Secret Nine in his history of the Wilmington Light Infantry and *The Story of the Wilmington Rebellion*. Historians have followed his lead. Under close scrutiny, many of the writers who have discussed the actions of the city’s white leaders have described the same men performing many of the same actions but with different perspectives based in the writer’s bias or perspective. Hayden’s timelines fall apart when scrutinized, particularly regarding some of the pre-election scheming of the Secret Nine.

The “Secret Nine” as defined by Hayden was composed of a group of men who met first at the home of Hugh MacRae and then regularly at the home of Walter L. Parsley. The nine were Hugh MacRae, William A. Johnson, Walter L. Parsley, J. Allan Taylor, L. B. Sasser, Pierre B. Manning, Hardy L. Fennell, William Gilchrist, and Edward S. Lathrop. At their meetings, the men developed a citywide campaign that dovetailed with Furnifold Simmons’ statewide white supremacy movement. In addition to their plans to establish protection for the city’s white women and children in the event of unrest, they understood that they were also planning a “revolt” to overthrow city government. Even as the Secret Nine planned their activities, another group of men, called “Group Six” by Hayden, met at the home of another prominent Wilmington leader, William L. Smith. The other members of Group Six were Colonel Walker Taylor, Henry G. Fennell, Thomas D. Meares, John Beery, and William F. Robertson. These two groups of men shared multiple business and family connections. For example, the Taylor and Fennell families had members in both organizations. Walker Taylor was a member of the Democratic Party County Campaign Committee and leader of the state’s regional guard unit. Further, the groups worked with Democratic Party

It must be acknowledged that the men of Hayden’s Secret Nine and Group Six were also visible leaders who very well could have merged their social and political agendas, using all of the tools at their disposal. There is no doubt that a central group of men managed the Democratic campaign and planned the ensuing *coup d’etat*. Such organization of so many disparate groups could not have taken place without the firm control of a group of close-knit, well-placed individuals. Historian Helen Edmonds acknowledged that “a certain element of preparation stood out in the activities which preceded the riot indicating strongly that” there was a degree of conspiracy and preparation. Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 166.

leaders to fuel the campaign, particularly in organizing the citizens of the city into proactive units ready for whatever unrest might arise from their plans. Once the campaign was in full swing, some of the activities of the Secret Nine and Group Six apparently merged with the official Democratic Party, the White Government Union and the Red Shirts.¹⁷

The county Democratic Committee organized itself to provide a framework for the development of the White Government Unions and the Red Shirts. Spokes of the Democratic wheel included the chamber of commerce, churches, the Wilmington Light Infantry, the Merchant's Association, and a host of other civic and fraternal organizations.¹⁸ Pulling these disparate organizations together were a handful of closely connected men who all shared similar backgrounds, political desires, and social savvy. These men also followed the strategy of Simmons in finding men who could write, speak, and ride.

Just as Simmons used printed media to further the statewide campaign, Wilmington's newspapers joined in the fight. Following themes of black "insolence," ineffective city government, corrupt and unqualified police and judges, and dangers to the purity of white women and girls by black "brutes," the papers published and reprinted accounts of black disrespect.¹⁹ As the campaign progressed,

Wilmington editors increasingly filled their columns with instances of black on white violence and ineffective responses to that violence by city government. Front page coverage of national news and politics declined, and headlines such as "White Supremacy," "Russell's Deviltry," "Republican White Elephant," and "The Negroized East" became standard fare.²⁰ Although the papers had reported criminal cases and arrests of blacks before the election campaign, these normally trivial topics gained importance in the pages of the *Wilmington Messenger*, *Evening Dispatch*, and *Morning Star*, providing printed fuel for the white supremacy firestorm. Following the lead of Josephus Daniels in Raleigh, Wilmington papers invited correspondents from throughout the state and nation to visit their city. Whenever those reporters visited, they were treated as royalty, enjoying unfettered access to white leaders, their homes, and participation in all aspects of the campaign, even being escorted through town in Red Shirt parades.²¹ After reading the papers, many Wilmington residents were on edge and ready for the impending doom spelled out in their papers.

Again, following Simmons' example, local Wilmington Democrats brought a host of speakers to the city throughout the campaign. Not only did these individuals present orations to large crowds at rallies and at spots such as Thalian Hall, they also spoke to smaller groups as they stood outside Democratic Party headquarters, in the homes of prominent

¹⁷ Hayden, *WLI*, 66-70; George Rountree, "Memorandum."

¹⁸ *Wilmington Messenger*, November 2, 1898; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), October 8, 1898.

¹⁹ Sidewalk encounters in which white women were in perceived danger from black "insolents," male and female, peppered the papers. For more on the print campaign, see Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 52-55, McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 574-575, 602-605; Shelia Smith McKoy, *When Whites Riot: Writing Race and Violence in American and South African Cultures* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 42; Andrea M. Kirshenbaum, "Race, Gender and Riot: The Wilmington, North Carolina

White Supremacy Campaign of 1898," (master's thesis, Duke University, 1996), chapter 3.

²⁰ *Morning Star* (Wilmington), October 25, 1898; *Wilmington Messenger*, October 21, 1898, October 29, 1898.

²¹ Henry Litchfield West of the *Washington Post* and P. R. Noel of the *Richmond Times* were escorted through town during a parade and seated among dignitaries at speeches. *Wilmington Messenger*, November 4, 1898.

men, and at club meetings. Not only did the standard speechmakers make their rounds, but local Wilmington leaders also pressed the issue. For example, J. Allan Taylor of the Secret Nine read a prepared statement to the Chamber of Commerce in October that was later republished in the newspapers.²² Another speaker and Democratic Party leader, attorney George Rountree, met with a White Government Union and planned to “inflame the white men’s sentiment.” Rountree discovered that his prepared speech was unnecessary because the men were “already willing to kill all of the office holders and all the negroes.”²³ As evidenced by Rountree’s experience, the speeches and the print campaign material evolved into a valuable, effective, tool to enflame the city’s residents.

Alfred Moore Waddell

While not the most prolific of the speakers for Simmons’ early campaign, Wilmington resident Alfred Moore Waddell proved the most cataclysmic of performers. Waddell, an aging member of Wilmington’s upper class, had served in the United States Congress from 1870 to 1878, and, by the end of the 1898 campaign, had worked himself into a position of prominence as a representative of the oppressed whites in New Hanover for the rest of the state and a symbol of redemption for the county’s enflamed white voters.²⁴

²² The prepared statement is perhaps the correspondence of William Chadbourn. Hayden, *WLI*, 68.

²³ George Rountree, “Memorandum.”

²⁴ Waddell (1834-1912) was born in Hillsborough to parents who descended from Cape Fear leading families. Well educated, Waddell graduated from the University of North Carolina and practiced law before the Civil War. Waddell attained the rank of Lt. Col. in the 41st North Carolina Regiment but resigned his position due to ill health. A political conservative, Waddell was elected to Congress in 1870 and served three additional terms. As an orator,

Waddell emerged as the fieriest of white supremacy’s speechmakers after an oration he gave on October 24 at Thalian

Waddell was sought after to provide moving speeches in political campaigns and civic ceremonies. Waddell prided himself on his family lineage and, as a result, penned several works on his family’s history and the Cape Fear region. Waddell’s third wife, Gabrielle, noted in her journal that he gave a “great” speech at the Opera House in Wilmington on October 24, 1898. A relative wrote that there was “such demand for him all over the state since (what they call) his wonderful speech.” Historians have speculated on Waddell’s motivation to thrust himself into the spotlight. Leon Prather claimed that, although Waddell’s exterior indicated a calm tempered man, his “speeches contained some of the most violent tirades ever uttered from the rostrum.” Further, Waddell was apparently experiencing difficult financial burdens by 1898 since other Wilmington residents such as Benjamin Keith knew that Waddell was unemployed. Chief of Police Melton thought that Waddell’s motivation was more to “get a position and office” since “he had been out of public life for a long time, and that was his opportunity to put himself before the people and pose as a patriot, thereby getting to the feed trough.” To back up this claim, Melton later testified that Waddell was “hired to attend elections and see that men voted correctly.” Waddell’s wife provided additional support for the household by teaching music daily. According to Jerome McDuffie, who interviewed Wilmington residents, Waddell’s law practice was in decline, and he “had been seeking an office” in order to “lighten the burden of his wife.” *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, s.v., “Waddell, Alfred Moore;” *Diary of Gabrielle de Rosset Waddell*, October 24, 1898, de Rosset Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; Letter to R.A. Meares, October 29, 1898, de Rosset Papers, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; Daniels, *Editor in Politics*, 301; McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 579, 644; Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 87-8; Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 109; Benjamin Keith to Marion Butler, November 17, 1898; Marion Butler Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; Leon Prather, “We Have Taken A City: A Centennial Essay,” in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot and Its Legacy*, ed. David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 25-26; *Contested Election Case*, 378-9, 381.

Hall. The speech was attended by a wide spectrum of Wilmington residents, including a large number of Red Shirts and wives of leading businessmen. Waddell was situated on the stage alongside “sixty of Wilmington’s most prominent citizens.” Waddell opened calmly, explaining that if the election season were an ordinary one, he wouldn’t be presenting a speech, but, since he could no longer “remain silent as I have done for some years,” he felt compelled to speak. As was the case for many speeches of the period, Waddell’s oration was published in the newspapers. Examination of his words demonstrates his mindset regarding the campaign and race relations—reflective of the sentiment and inflammatory nature of similar speakers at the height of the 1898 Democratic Party Campaign.

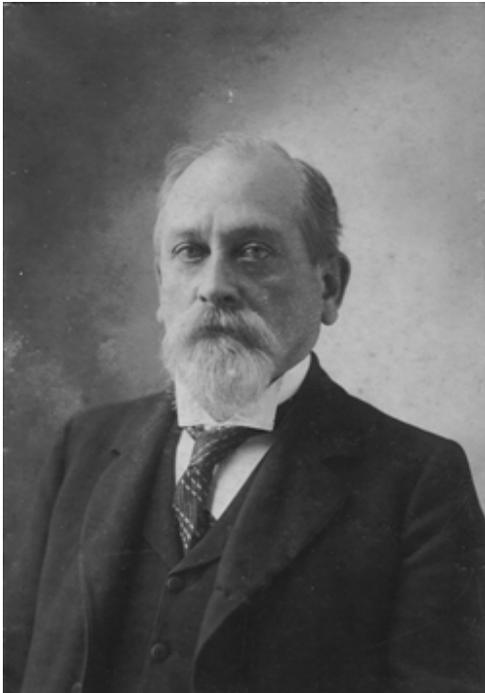
Waddell claimed that it was “best and wisest for both races” that white people who worked to make the United States the “grandest country on the globe . . . should alone govern it as a whole in all its parts.” Waddell suggested that blacks had been misled by people who professed to be their friends and contended that “the mass of them are ignorant and . . . have been played upon and preyed upon by vicious leaders of their own race and by mean white men who make this agitation a source of profit.” Waddell continued to stereotype and draw racist conclusions about African Americans as he claimed that if they were allowed to rule the South, “in less than a hundred years” they would return to “savagery.” Because he vested his understanding of blacks in his opinions of their intellect, he claimed that “the greatest crime that has ever been perpetrated against modern civilization was the investment of the negro with the right of suffrage.”

Moving from his analysis of the black race, Waddell claimed that “the salvation of society depends on the outcome of this election.” Waddell then emphatically

stated that the present situation was due to the actions of Governor Russell – “I do not hesitate to say thus publicly that if a race conflict occurs in North Carolina the very first men that ought to be held to account are the white leaders of the negroes who will be chiefly responsible for it and the work ought to begin at the top of the list. I scorn to leave any doubt as to whom I mean by this phrase—I mean the governor of this state, who is the engineer of all the deviltry and meanness.”

Waddell stated that he hoped that violence was not to be the duty of white men but proclaimed that if violence was necessary, “I trust that it will be rigidly and fearlessly performed.” Waddell then moved to political matters as he discussed the changes in election laws wrought by the Fusionists then turned the argument for “freedom of the ballot” against them.

On the topic of “negro domination,” Waddell contended that blacks constituted a voting block that could determine the outcome of elections. To this point, he asked the crowd “who ‘dominates’ any corporation or businesses, its agents appointed to carry it on or the owners who select them?” Waddell concluded that his “heart leaps out to the man who, in this crisis, talks and acts” like an “Anglo-Saxon who . . . feels that he is the sovereign and the master on the soil . . . and dares all who question it to put it to the test.” The final passage of Waddell’s speech stirred patriotic sentiment in his audience and contained lines destined to be oft-quoted in subsequent days and years—that the whites would “choke the current of the Cape Fear with [black] carcasses” in order to win the election.



Alfred Moore Waddell
Image: Cape Fear Museum



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Univ. of N.C. Library at Chapel Hill

Thalian Hall, Wilmington, N.C.
Image Courtesy of North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

We are the sons of the men who won the first victory of the Revolution at Moore's Creek Bridge ... who stained with bleeding feet the snows of Valley Forge ... and only left the service of their country when its independent sovereignty was secured. We are the brothers of men who wrote with their swords from Bethel to Bentonville the most heroic chapter in American annals and we ourselves are men who, inspired by these memories intend to preserve at the cost of our lives if necessary the heritage that is ours. We maintained it against overwhelming armies of men of our own race, shall we surrender it to a ragged rabble of negroes led by a handful of white cowards who at the first sound of conflict will seek to hide themselves from the righteous vengeance which they shall not escape? No! A thousand times no! Let them understand once and for all that we will have no more of the intolerable conditions under which we live. We are resolved to change them, if we have to choke the current of the Cape Fear with carcasses. The time for smooth words has gone by, the extremest limit of forbearance has been reached. Negro domination shall henceforth be only a shameful memory to us and an everlasting warning to those who shall ever again seek to revive it. To this declaration we are irrevocably committed and true men everywhere will hail it with a hearty Amen!

Alfred Moore Waddell, Thalian Hall, Wilmington, N.C., October 24, 1898

After the speech, Waddell received hearty applause and the paper claimed that the speech “electrified his hearers” as it was “the most remarkable delivery ever heard in a campaign here in the memory of this generation.” The writer was prophetic when he closed the article with the observation that the speech “will ring for all time.”²⁵

Waddell’s popularity as an eloquent speaker who could reach his audience continued throughout the remainder of the campaign as a result of his Thalian Hall appearance. He received requests for speeches almost daily. At a large campaign rally in Goldsboro on October 28, Waddell thrust Wilmington into the spotlight as he detailed the “outrages” in the city since it had come under Fusion rule. Part of his Goldsboro speech included another adaptation of his famous line that Democrats would win the election if they had to clog the Cape Fear River with “carcasses.”²⁶

After Waddell’s first October speech was printed in the papers, he received praise for his stance from his cousin Rebecca Cameron in Hillsborough. Cameron’s response to Waddell’s rhetoric is forceful. Cameron opened her letter by informing Waddell that women were “amazed, confounded, and bitterly ashamed of the acquiescence and quiescence of the men of North Carolina at the existing conditions; and more than once have we asked wonderingly: where are the white men and the shotguns!” She continued with a full letter supporting his speech. Cameron concluded her diatribe by informing Waddell that the ladies “are aflame with anger here. I wish you could see Anna, she is fairly rampant and blood thirsty. These blond women are terrible when their fighting blood is up.” She added

²⁵ Waddell’s speech was published in its entirety in the *Wilmington Messenger*, October 25, 1898.

²⁶ *Wilmington Messenger*, October 28, 29, 1898; *Morning Star* (Wilmington), October 28, 1898;

as a last thought: “I hope it will not come to the last resort but when it does, let it be Winchesters and buckshot at close range.”²⁷

Waddell claimed that he did not seek prominence but was, instead, “begged to make a speech and did so, and that started the fire and from that time until now I have acted entirely upon the request of the people.”²⁸ As part of the speechmaking campaign, Democratic Party leaders pulled in Waddell in the late stages of the campaign, leading to localized rhetoric easily fueled by daily changes in the campaign. After Waddell’s speeches in which he proposed violence, Democratic Party leaders decided that the “temper of the community was hot enough and needed quieting down rather than heating up.”²⁹

Although behind-the-scenes leaders apparently tried to temper some of the rhetoric, as the campaign drew to a close, well-received, highly motivational speakers such as Waddell were seen by the populace as leaders of the Democratic Party movement.

In Wilmington, the combined punch of the print campaign and speeches moved beyond the standard “white men must rule” rhetoric in the city, and another white supremacy tool—fear—emerged. Benjamin Keith observed that the papers had readers “believing everything that was printed, as well as news that was circulated and peddled on the streets.” Keith saw that the “frenzied excitement went on until every one but those who were behind the plot, with a few exceptions, were led to believe that the

²⁷ Rebecca Cameron to Alfred M. Waddell, October 26, 1898, A. M. Waddell Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 110-111.

²⁸ AM Waddell to Benehan Cameron, November 16, 1898, Benehan Cameron Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

²⁹ Rountree, “Memorandum.”

We are the sons of the men who won the first victory of the Revolution at Moore's Creek Bridge ... who stained with bleeding feet the snows of Valley Forge ... and only left the service of their country when its independent sovereignty was secured. We are the brothers of men who wrote with their swords from Bethel to Bentonville the most heroic chapter in American annals and we ourselves are men who, inspired by these memories intend to preserve at the cost of our lives if necessary the heritage that is ours. We maintained it against overwhelming armies of men of our own race, shall we surrender it to a ragged rabble of negroes led by a handful of white cowards who at the first sound of conflict will seek to hide themselves from the righteous vengeance which they shall not escape? No! A thousand times no! Let them understand once and for all that we will have no more of the intolerable conditions under which we live. We are resolved to change them, if we have to choke the current of the Cape Fear with carcasses. The time for smooth words has gone by, the extremest limit of forbearance has been reached. Negro domination shall henceforth be only a shameful memory to us and an everlasting warning to those who shall ever again seek to revive it. To this declaration we are irrevocably committed and true men everywhere will hail it with a hearty Amen!

Alfred Moore Waddell, Thalian Hall, Wilmington, N.C., October 24,

1898

negroes were going to rise up and kill all the whites.”³⁰ A news correspondent explained that the whites were fearful of an uprising because blacks had received “from their churches and from their lodges . . . reports of incendiary speeches, of impassioned appeals to the blacks to use the bullet that had no respect for color, and the kerosene and torch that would play havoc with the white man's cotton in bale and warehouse.” The correspondent who made this observation further explained that the fear of a black uprising was an “ostensible ground for the general display of arms” and even if the blacks were acquiescent, the whites still would have armed themselves as a tool to demonstrate their determination to win the election.³¹ Much later in life editor Josephus Daniels acknowledged that he helped to fuel a “reign of terror” by printing stories written so as to instill fear and anger in readers.³²

³⁰ Keith, *Memories*, 97.

³¹ Henry West, “The Race War in North Carolina,” *The Forum* 26 (January 1899): 580.

³² Daniels published his autobiography, which detailed his involvement in Democratic Party activities as editor of the *News and Observer*, in 1941. Daniels, *Editor in Politics*, 288.

Because many white men feared that they could not protect their families in the event of trouble, some white women left the city before the election. For instance, Richard and Louis Meares ushered their mother to South Carolina by November 5, and James S. Worth sent his wife and children out of the city by November 3.³³ In her account of the riot, Wilmington resident Jane Cronly recorded that on the evening of the election, her family heard a rumor that the blacks “disappointed in having been cheated out of the election, might set fire to somebody's property.” She noted that “this fear was probably the outcome of anxiety on the part of those people, who having abused and maltreated the negroes were fearful of their just vengeance” and that the warning was false.³⁴ On the other hand, Mary Parsley of Wilmington wrote to her sister

³³ Louis Meares to Richard Meares, November 5, 1898, Meares and de Rosset papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; James S. Worth to Josephine Worth, November 3, 1898, James S. Worth Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

³⁴ Jane Cronly, n.d., Cronly Papers, Duke University Library, Durham.

Sallie in New York and apologized for a sloppy letter because her “head is so full of the scary times I don’t know what to do.” Sallie later received a letter from her mother in Wilmington who described election day as one of “intense uneasiness . . . no one can realize the torture or suspense until experienced.”³⁵

Other Wilmingtonians were not as susceptible to the propaganda that generated much of the fear among residents. Businessman Robert Mason wrote his cousin on election day that all was quiet and that the situation was exaggerated by the newspapers and “in the excited minds of some of the extremists.” He expressed his hopes that the “conservative elements will keep things down.” In response to fears among his workers that a riot was imminent, Mason claimed that it was “idiotic” to close the mill since he thought that to do so would acknowledge a threat that he perceived did not exist.³⁶ The sentiment, reflected by the upper-class businessmen, was that the threat of violence was sufficient and they hoped to avoid actual violence. Upper class insider Louis Meares wrote that he had “great confidence in the ability of our people to suppress the indiscretion of a certain class of whites who are inclined to urge a conflict and so to smooth over the pending trouble.”³⁷

The White Government Union emerged as a primary outlet for the dissemination of information and the

³⁵ Mary Parsley to Sallie, November 2, 1898, Eccles Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection; Mother to Sallie, November 9, 1898, Eccles Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

³⁶ Mason was the cashier for the North Carolina Cotton Oil Company. R. Beverly Mason to Bess, November 8, 1898, John Steele Henderson Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; 1897 *Wilmington City Directory*.

³⁷ Louis Meares to Richard Meares, November 5, 1898, Meares and de Rosset Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

organization of the citizenry in the city. Attorney William B. McKoy and other Wilmington leaders organized WGU meetings throughout the city, and, by mid-August, Wilmington had a WGU in every ward, its members proudly displaying their large white “White Government Union” campaign buttons. WGU meetings took place at regular intervals and the newspapers advertised meeting times and places for each ward and precinct. Most of the meetings took place in prominent locations such as the office of congressional candidate John D. Bellamy Jr., the office of William B. McKoy, Democratic headquarters in the old National Bank Building, or the Seaboard Air Line Railroad building. Membership was open to anyone who desired “decent government,” including women who could participate in meetings but had no vote in club decisions. The night before the election, Wilmington’s WGU met in a joint session at the courthouse under the chairmanship of Frank Stedman, with all individual WGU clubs in attendance. After speeches by Waddell and Bellamy, the group named over 150 men to attend polls in their wards and precincts all day during the election, asked businesses that employed voters who planned to vote Democratic to close, and appointed an additional group of over eighty men to represent the candidates during ballot counting.³⁸

The bridge between the WGU and the Red Shirt/Rough Rider phenomenon is much more evident in Wilmington. Mike Dowling, admitted leader of Red Shirt/Rough Rider activity and member of a WGU stated that the club sought to win the election “at all hazards and by any means

³⁸ *Morning Star* (Wilmington), August 11, 18, 19, 25, 26, 27, 1898; *Morning Star* (Wilmington), September 2, 3, 9, 18, 21, 22, 1898; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), August 24, 25, 1898; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), October 8, 24, 1898; *Wilmington Messenger*, November 8, 1898.

necessary.” These methods included the use of intimidation—WGU club members would “announce on all occasions that they would succeed if they had to shoot every negro in the city.” To facilitate their goal, all members were armed and paraded the streets, day and night. Dowling reported that the red shirts worn by him and his men were provided by the county Democratic Party. Dowling, captain of the Rough Riders, provided his men with whiskey during parades to “fire them up, and make them fiercer and more terrorizing in their conduct.” Even after Mayor Silas Wright ordered the closure of saloons, Dowling claimed that congressional candidate John D. Bellamy Jr. “distributed the whiskey from his office.”³⁹

Activities in Wilmington again mirrored the statewide campaign with the growth of a Red Shirt contingent towards the end of the campaign. According to several of Wilmington’s Populists and Republicans, the Red Shirts provided a frightful, dangerous incentive to remain quiet and at home in the weeks prior to the election.⁴⁰ In Wilmington, a large Red Shirt rally was held on November 3 in which participants wearing their regalia marched or rode horses throughout town led by Chief Marshal Roger Moore and his aides. The leader of the “Fifth Ward Rough Riders” in

³⁹The information from Dowling regarding his activity in the Red Shirt/Rough Rider brigade as well as in the WGU was obtained by Republican Oliver Dockery, Bellamy’s opponent in the 1898 election. Dockery challenged the validity of Bellamy’s election and subpoenaed Dowling’s testimony. Dowling was rewarded with a city job after the violence but, by 1900, had several run-ins with Wilmington leaders after the 1898 campaign and had no compulsion to protect them while giving testimony in 1900. Winston-Salem *Union-Republican*, March 15, 1900.

⁴⁰L. H. Bryant testified in 1899 that he was a Populist and that armed men, carpenters from the railroad, visited his home and told him not to vote. *Contested Election Case*, 394-5.

the parade was G. W. Bornemann. Another leader of the Red Shirts/Rough Riders was Mike Dowling. The parade began downtown and, after a procession through traditionally black neighborhoods, particularly Brooklyn, ended at Hilton Park where there were a number of speakers and a large picnic.⁴¹ Although contemporary newspaper accounts pointed to the peaceful conduct of the rally, just one day later the Rough Riders got out of hand. “Condemned by all true and good citizens,” the Rough Riders spilled into South Front Street and jeopardized all of the careful planning initiated by the Democrats as they attacked “inoffensive persons” and “ran amuck” on the streets. The next day, November 5, the newspaper reprimanded the men and explained that “in their wild rowdyism, they represented nothing but themselves” and nearly “invited riot.”⁴² Chief of Police John

⁴¹It is unknown how many men participated in the rally. The *Dispatch* claimed 100 Red Shirts were in the parade and that over 1,000 people gathered at Hilton Park. Henry L. Hewett testified that he rode in the procession but would not estimate the number of participants. Chief of Police John Melton also testified that on the day of the Red Shirt parade there was sporadic shooting into homes, particularly that of Dixon Toomer, and into a black school on Campbell Square. Melton identified Theodore Swann as the leader of the Rough Riders. *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), November 3, 1898; *Contested Election Case*, 219, 360-387.

⁴²Jim Worth wrote to his wife: “We had a little row last night about dark that might have brought on something worse. Some of the Fifth Ward “Rough Riders” on a spree ran foul of some darkies downtown early in the evening and maltreated several. The boys were “run in” by the police a little later and were today fined \$25.00 each and the costs. Rather expensive “fun” for that class of boys. Down on Front Street about dark last night they tackled every nigger that came along regardless and ran several across the street and into nearby alleys. Fortunately they had no arms or there might have been serious trouble as a crowd of both colors quickly formed; but very little was done except to make the boys move on.” Jim Worth to Josephine, November 4, 1898, James S. Worth Papers, Southern

Melton received a report from two black men who had been assaulted with a sword by the Rough Riders and Red Shirts. The men “showed marks of violence on their persons” from the attacks and were later confined at home and unable to swear out warrants against their attackers.⁴³

Just as in the statewide campaign, Red Shirt participants were drawn from various levels of society. The makeup of the Red Shirt/Rough Rider brigades in Wilmington is somewhat difficult to ascertain. As evidenced by their leader Mike Dowling, some of the Red Shirts were Irish immigrants.⁴⁴ Historian Shelia Smith McKoy observed that for some of Wilmington’s Irish residents, “attaining whiteness—the process of replacing an ethnic identity for a racial identity—was integral to their participation in the white riot.” Further, she contended that “the Irish embraced white supremacy in order to make their whiteness visible” in a world where the economic and social plight of poor whites was often invisible to the greater Democratic Party machine.⁴⁵ Other rhetoric tied the Red Shirts to Scottish roots. During a speech given at a rally, William B. McKoy explained that the concept of the red shirt as a sign of battle originated in Scotland, where widowed Highlanders used their husbands’ bloody shirts as banners to demonstrate to the king their plight. Although a weak explanation for the use of the red shirt, in an area of strong Scots heritage, McKoy

Historical Collection; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), November 5, 1898.

⁴³ *Contested Election Case*, 362.

⁴⁴ In an interview with Harry Hayden, Captain T. C. James of the Wilmington Light Infantry, referred to Dowling as a “hotheaded” Irishman. Hayden, *WLI*, 75.

⁴⁵ McKoy acknowledged Wilmington’s pre-Civil War population featured a large contingent of recent Irish immigrants and that by 1890, many of their descendants lived in sub-standard housing and were unemployed alongside more recent Irish immigrants. Shelia Smith McKoy, *When Whites Riot*, 43.

nevertheless appealed to concepts of homeland, protection of women, and honor.⁴⁶

Non-Democrats in Wilmington watched the activities of the Red Shirts with trepidation. W. J. Harris, a white “borned and bred Republican” appointed Inspector of Weights and Measures by the Fusionists, observed that “hatching of the Red Shirts” was effective since he “was right smartly intimidated” at election time. He explained that “Populists voted the white supremacy ticket through fear” even as he and others felt that the talk of guns and force by Democrats was a bluff. Harris considered

⁴⁶ Other speculative explanations for the origin of the Red Shirt are found scattered in the historical record. J. G. deRoulhac Hamilton noted that often the Ku Klux Klan outfits were all in red, indicating that perhaps the Red Shirt movement from South Carolina was an outgrowth of that organization. In *Born Fighting*, James Webb stated that the “warrior aristocracy” of the Scotch-Irish “was still in place in the South of the late 1800’s.” Webb explained that “a significant percentage” of whites in the South “were living in economic conditions no different than blacks” and that “the diminishment of blacks” was “a device for maintaining social and economic control ordered from above at the threat of losing one’s place—or job—in the white community.” Webb continued to explain the Scotch-Irish mentality when he stated that “violence in defense of one’s honor had always been the moniker of this culture” and that even though whites “believed emphatically in racial separation, the true battle lines . . . were not personal so much as they were political and economic.” Several references to men who were members of the Red Shirts are found scattered throughout the historical record. Theodore Swann was identified as a leader of the Rough Riders. Swann’s family had roots in Wilmington and he was most likely born in the city. The Swanns were carpenters and brick masons, perhaps leading to some competition and tension between the family and prominent African American carpenter families in the city. James Webb, *Born Fighting: How the Scotch-Irish Shaped America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 238-246; Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, 461; *Wilmington Messenger*, November 4, 1898; 1870 and 1900 New Hanover County Census for Theodore Swann and his father B. F. Swann.

the Red Shirts to be a gang, and sometimes called them a “militia,” with their strength centered in Dry Pond. Before the election, he witnessed their violence against blacks on Front Street after they had been drinking “fighting whiskey,” and, as a result, he tried to stay out of the Red Shirts’ path. However, because he had held political office and was seen as a minor leader within the Republican Party, Harris explained that “the night of the election they come and give me a salute of about thirty-six guns but I didn’t let them know I was there.” The next day, one of Harris’ friends was surprised to see him alive, and the Red Shirts visited him again the next night. Harris explained that he overheard two Red Shirts complaining that northern reporters had left the city the day after the election because there was no riot. Harris heard them say that the riot would be the next day, attesting to the planned nature of the impending riot and coup. Harris concluded his explanation of the Red Shirts when he said that although the sheriff tried to arrest rowdy Red Shirts, they would be released on bail and back to their tricks within a day—“about as well to arrest the Cape Fear River as to do anything with that [Red Shirt] gang.”⁴⁷

During the campaign, the Red Shirts succeeded in intimidating many in the African American community. Nada Cotton recalled for her family that the “Red Shirt campaign was started to intimidate the negro and keep him from the polls.” She remembered that the Red Shirts paraded in the streets and that “every able-bodied white was armed.” An outside correspondent noted that a “great mass” of blacks were “in a state of terror amounting almost to distress.” Jane Cronly observed that despite “all the abuse which has been vented upon them for months they have gone quietly on and have been almost obsequiously polite as

if to ward off the persecution they seemed involuntarily to have felt to be in the air.” She continued to explain that “in spite of all the goading and persecuting that has been done all summer the negroes have done nothing that could call vengeance on their heads.” On the night of the election, Michael Cronly was called out in the “cold and damp for three hours” by his block commander to defend the block against a threat of fire. Cronly remarked that they all acknowledged that it was “perfect farce . . . to be out there in the damp and cold, watching for poor cowed disarmed negroes frightened to death by the threats that had been made against them and too glad to huddle in their homes and keep quiet.”⁴⁸

On the other hand, other Wilmington residents circulated unsubstantiated rumors that the blacks were organized in efforts to band together against the intimidation. On the November 7 Jim Worth informed his wife, whom he had sent out of town before the election, that he “wouldn’t be greatly surprised if there should be some kind of conflict with the blacks tonight.” He continued to explain that “the last two nights they were to avenge the ‘red shirt’ wrong of a few nights ago.” He explained that “it has not as yet amounted to much except a few brickbats thrown, flourishing of a few guns and pistols and lots of talk.”⁴⁹ The Wilmington papers recounted almost daily incidents of black crime portrayed as yet another means of retaliation against white aggression. Whether true or contrived by the papers, these accounts spread throughout the state and further united Wilmington whites in their resolve to combat blacks with force..⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Contested Election Case*, 387-394; *Wilmington Messenger*, October 20, 1898.

⁴⁸ Jane Cronly, n.d., Cronly Papers, Duke University Library, Durham.

⁴⁹ Jim Worth to Josephine, November 7, 1898, James S. Worth Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁵⁰ Several news accounts and manuscript records detail blacks stealing food and claiming hunger. Perhaps as a result of a hostile environment with few

Democrats also used economic pressures against their targets. The city's leading businessmen contended that "the substitution of white for negro labor" would solve many of the city's problems. These men needed the political contest to be over so they could return to business. The unsettled situation was seen as "detrimental to every business interest" because of the impact upon business and capital recruitment for the city.⁵¹ At the beginning of October, the chamber of commerce met and passed resolutions requiring members to

jobs available, men had to resort to crime in order to feed themselves and their families. Former chief of police Melton answered a series of questions in 1899 regarding the arson problems faced by the city and replied that the arson cases were well before the beginning of the white supremacy election campaign and that the "firebugs" had been arrested. Melton observed that during the spring and summer months when residents were out of the city at vacation homes on the beach, crime at those residences increased annually and was usually instances of young boys breaking and entering to steal minor items. James Worth wrote his wife before the election that a black man had approached his house and asked his mother for something to eat since he had eaten nothing for two days. Another letter writer, Mrs. Edward Wootten, informed her son that blacks had been "robbing pantries." James Worth to Josephine, November 3, 1898, James S. Worth Papers, Southern Historical Collection; Mother to Edward Wootten, November 8, 1898, Wootten Papers, University of North Carolina at Wilmington; *Contested Election Case*, 369-70.

⁵¹ It is clear that after the city returned to Democratic control business leaders were successful in a variety of business ventures. The Delgado Mill began construction in 1899, the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad located its headquarters in the city and other businesses grew as well. The turn of the century was a period of prosperity for businessmen throughout the country, Wilmington's business leaders were not able to capitalize on the wealth being accumulated by railroad and industry magnates until after 1898. Review of industrial schedules from the 1890 and 1900 census plus business directories and port records demonstrates the growth seen in the city following 1898 as businessmen focused on business and not politics. *Wilmington Messenger*, November 2, 1898.

"exert . . . utmost influence and personal effort to effect results which will restore order" and protect property and lives. As a result, the Merchant's Association met on October 7 and developed a plan for the establishment of a "permanent labor bureau for the purpose of procuring white labor for employers." The group agreed to meet on a weekly basis and promised that their mission to hire more white men would not falter after the election.⁵² For their part, the city's white laborers pressured leaders to acknowledge their economic plight and organized a White Laborer's Union to ensure their needs would be addressed once the Democrats regained power. At the end of October about 35 laborers organized the union. They elected Red Shirt Mike Dowling chair, and stated that their purpose was to "organize a white laborer's union with a view to replacing negro labor with white labor and with this object in view to co-operate with the Wilmington Labor Bureau recently organized as a result of the meeting of the business men and tax payers of Wilmington."⁵³

Vigilance Committees and Paramilitary Organization

Another component of the Wilmington campaign, and apparently unique to the city, was the development of a "Vigilance Committee," which was under an additional umbrella of the militia-like organization led by Roger Moore and attributed to the Secret Nine. Also called the "Citizen's Patrol," the Vigilance Committee attempted to pull the Red Shirts and White Government Unions under their control.

⁵² *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), October 8, 1898.

⁵³ C. C. Redd, George W. Cameron, D. A. Rowan, C. W. Millis and M. G. Silva were appointed by those present to draw up a constitution and by-laws before the next meeting. *Wilmington Messenger*, October 28, 1898.

The clear lines of all the various organizations began to blur by the time of the election as the oft-repeated specter of black violence created within the city an edgy armed camp. Some of the highest ranking Democratic Party leaders in the county lost sight of some peripheral activities because, as Rountree admitted, they were “busy in other activities.”⁵⁴ As spokesman for the Democrats, Waddell proclaimed in late October that “we are going to protect our firesides and our loved ones or we will die in the attempt.”⁵⁵

For the purposes of organized protection for homes, women, and children, white leaders divided the city into sections along ward lines. Following military chain of command structures, a man was then selected to serve as ward captain in each of the five wards. Hayden indicated that two of the Secret Nine, E. S. Lathrop and P. B. Manning, were established as contacts for the ward captains to communicate with other leaders unknown to the captains. Further, each ward captain selected a lieutenant to command individual blocks. Lieutenants reported daily to the ward captain the number of armed men they represented and the numbers of women, children, and invalids that would need protection. The lieutenants then received orders to organize the men of each block for regular patrols. An outsider commented that the city “might have been preparing for a siege instead of an election” because men of all backgrounds had “brushed aside the great principles that divide parties and individuals and stood together as one man.”⁵⁶ One method used

by the Citizen’s Patrol for identification was a white handkerchief tied to the left arm.⁵⁷ Democratic leader Thomas W. Strange wrote to Benehan Cameron of Durham that the city was “like an armed camp” because of nightly street patrols.⁵⁸ A reporter for the *Richmond Times* visited the city just before the election and attended a meeting at the home of “a leading citizen” who was involved in a conference with ward captains. The reporter explained that the men, some of whom were Confederate veterans, had “every detail arranged” and were not “hot-headed boys” but, instead, “the most prominent men in the city who have resolved that there shall be no further negro rule.” The reporter took pains to point out the differences between the organized

discovered “murmurings” of Vigilance Committees at that early stage. Chief of Police Melton testified that guns were carried on the street during the campaign and that armed men were posted on every corner in the city all night for a few days before the election. *Hayden, WLI*, 66, 70; Thomas Clawson, “The Wilmington Race Riot in 1898, Recollections and Memories” Louis T. Moore Papers, State Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; “Minutes of the Organizational Meeting of the Association of Members of the Wilmington Light Infantry,” December 14, 1905, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; Henry West, “The Race War in North Carolina,” *The Forum*, January 1899, 579; Daniels, *Editor in Politics*, 285; Jim Worth to Josephine, November 16, 1898, James Spencer Worth Papers, Southern Historical Collection.; *Contested Election Case*, 360; James Cowan, “The Wilmington Race Riot.”

⁵⁷ Jack Metts, November 9, 1898, Hinsdale Papers, Duke University Library, Durham.

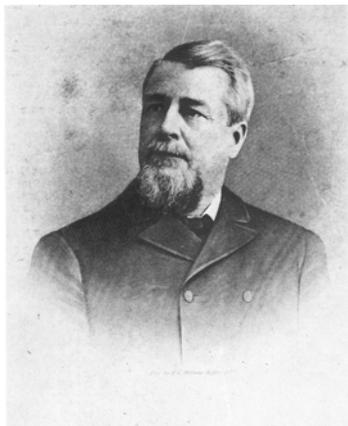
⁵⁸ Historian Jerome McDuffie observed that the Vigilance Committee was associated mainly with leading businessmen and property owners, resulting in less white supremacy rhetoric. Further, he noted that they did not hold rallies, openly brandish weapons to intimidate, and that discussions of this group were “tempered” with a degree of “moderate paternalism.” McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” 621; Thomas Strange to Benehan Cameron, November 16, 1898, Benehan Cameron Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁵⁴ Rountree, “Memorandum.”

⁵⁵ *Wilmington Messenger*, October 29, 1898.

⁵⁶ It is unclear as to when the patrols began. James Cowan, editor of the *Wilmington Dispatch*, claimed that the patrols took place for a year, but most other accounts indicate that the patrols began in the period immediately preceding the election. In August, a correspondent of the *News and Observer* visited the city to investigate claims of “negro domination” and

businessmen and the rowdy Red Shirts even as he recognized that the Red Shirts were the “outward and visible sign of the determination here to prevent the negroes from voting.”⁵⁹



Roger Moore
Image: William L.
DeRossett, *Pictorial and
Historical New Hanover
County*.

A crucial figure in the preparations of the city for the potential of violence on election day was Colonel Roger Moore. Moore, a former Confederate cavalry officer, was a member of the city’s aristocratic elite. His family, early settlers of the Cape Fear region, was politically and economically prominent across several generations. In 1868, Moore had organized the first Ku Klux Klan efforts in Wilmington. Owing to his military background and KKK participation, Moore was selected at the age of 60 to command the paramilitary units of citizens. Moore’s widow defended his actions in a letter to the editor after his death in 1900. Mrs. Moore claimed that her husband, with the assistance of Dr. J. E. Matthews, organized and led the “revolution” of 1898. For at least 6 weeks prior to the election, Moore developed “plans by which disaster could be averted” as he built up his organization. She praised the “men who spent many sleepless nights watching and guarding the safety and residents of the whole town.” Her main purpose in writing the letter was to proudly

⁵⁹ *Wilmington Messenger*, November 5, 1898.

attach her husband’s name to the riot and prove his actions saved many lives, while discrediting Waddell’s role in the pre-election and pre-riot planning. The organizational framework developed by veteran Moore led to the response of Wilmington whites on November 10—patrols manned by armed, exhausted, tense men who were unfamiliar with near-battle conditions facilitated street fighting on a large scale.⁶⁰

The Wilmington Light Infantry

The Wilmington Light Infantry (WLI) boasted a long history of militia service to North Carolina, having been formed in 1853. Members of the WLI served in the Civil War after being mustered into service by the North Carolina General Assembly on May 10, 1861. After the Civil War, members returned to Wilmington and

⁶⁰ Waddell and Moore held some animosity towards each other. The root of the animosity is unknown but might stem from any number of causes, including their Confederate service record. Waddell was Lt. Col. of the 3rd Regiment, N.C. Cavalry and resigned due to illness in August 1864. Waddell was immediately replaced by Moore who had led the regiment instead of Waddell since June 1864 after the capture of the regiment’s captain. Moore’s widow made a point to explain that Waddell, despite his speechmaking, did not know of the amount of planning that took place behind closed doors, and only after he was appointed mayor did he learn all the details of the coup. She also explained that Moore sought to prevent wholesale slaughter of blacks on the day of the riot at Sprunt’s Compress and at the jail that night. The account given by Moore’s widow is corroborated by William de Rosset in his history of the region. Mrs. Roger Moore, Correspondence, University of North Carolina at Wilmington Library; Louis Manarin and Weymouth T. Jordon, Jr., comps., *North Carolina Troops 1861-1865* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, Department of Cultural Resources, 1968), 3:180; William Lord de Rosset, *Pictorial and Historical New Hanover County and Wilmington North Carolina, 1723-1938* (Wilmington, 1938), 30-31; Prather, *We Have Taken a City*, 100-101; Clawson, “The Wilmington Race Riot”; James Cowan, “The Wilmington Race Riot.”

maintained the volunteer militia group as part of the State Guard under the command of the adjutant general of North Carolina. As veteran members of the WLI advanced in age, Veteran and Reserve Corps of the WLI were organized in 1892. The Veteran Corps was comprised of men who were members prior to April 15, 1861. The Reserve Corps was comprised of members who had been active members in good standing for five years. The Veteran and Reserve Corps assisted active members through leading by example and “inspiring them with that ‘esprit de corps’ so essential to the welfare of a military organization.”⁶¹ These men of the Reserve Corps also provided behind-the-scenes management within the WLI, connecting it with other facets of the white supremacy movement.

Members of the Wilmington Light Infantry came from throughout the city and represented a cross section of upper- and middle-class families. Sons of prominent white Wilmington businessmen served in the WLI as they worked themselves up through the ranks of Wilmington businesses as clerks, accountants, and bookkeepers. Candidates for membership had to apply to join by letter, and their applications were then voted on by other members; 5 negative votes equaled rejection. Once a member, the initiate was required to participate in drills and meetings. Prompt payment of dues and expenses related to membership was expected. Furthermore, the corps required members to uphold strict guidelines for conduct and public appearances while in uniform.⁶²

⁶¹Wrenn, *Wilmington North Carolina*, 206-207; Hayden, *WLI*, 45; Wilmington Light Infantry, *Constitution and Bylaws* (1904) Cape Fear Museum, 15-19. See Appendix F for Roster of WLI and Naval Reserves members.

⁶² WLI, *Constitution*, 15-19; *Wilmington Messenger* November 26, 1905, December 16, 1905; Hayden, *WLI*, 45-46.



Unidentified member of WLI, n.d.
Image courtesy of Cape Fear Museum,
Wilmington

The leadership of the WLI took pains to separate themselves from the citizen’s patrol even though Commander Walker Taylor was a prominent member of the Democratic Party’s county committee and clandestine organizations. Other members of the WLI were also members of the White Government Union. In the literature generated by participants and witnesses, a distinction is drawn between the citizen’s patrols and the official state militia in the uniforms of the WLI. As part of their role as official members of the state’s home guard, the WLI sought to provide additional peace measures in the city. WLI member John Metts wrote on November 9 that the past week had been exceptionally busy. On the Saturday night before the election, he was ordered by Captain T. C. James to “order the company up” because there were reports of the blacks forming mobs in the northern and southern sections of the city. The reports proved false but still demonstrated the readiness of the WLI.⁶³ In

⁶³ For further indication of the differences between the WLI and the Citizen’s Patrol, witness James Cowan’s explanation that once the WLI was

addition, there were in the city furloughed members of Company K and the Naval Reserves—men still in federal service for the Spanish-American War effort.⁶⁴

Amidst heated rhetoric regarding the fear of black attempts to retaliate against white leaders, the men and women of Wilmington prepared for whatever violence transpired and all expected some sort of outbreak. A Richmond reporter noticed that “the whites, or some of them, would welcome a little ‘unpleasantness’” since they were “prepared for it.” The reporter provided a metaphor for the impending conflict as he stated that “it requires an electric storm to purify the atmosphere.”⁶⁵ Many whites were on edge – the city had been worked into a fever over repeated reports, true and contrived, of violence against whites by blacks. Mrs. Edward Wootten, a Wilmington resident, wrote her son on November 8 that their block captain had told her husband that he should be ready on a moment’s notice. She had her husband buy extra bread so that they would have something to eat if violence broke out. The “safe place” for her block was a nearby church, but she decided that if the Presbyterian church bell sounded the alarm, she would stay at her home because each block was guarded by groups of 4 to 8 men at each corner. She lamented that she had

mobilized by the governor on the day of the riot, the Citizen’s Patrol ceased to exist because “there was no further need for their services.” James Cowan, “The Wilmington Race Riot;” Jack Metts, November 9, 1898, Hinsdale Papers, Duke University Library, Durham.

⁶⁴ It was decided by Democratic Party leaders that federal troops should not participate in activities because their involvement would possibly result in Federal intervention. Despite such warnings about participation, many members of the active troops participated in rallies and other activities, including the riot, wearing parts of their uniforms. Rountree, “Memorandum,” *Minutes of the Association of the WLI*.

⁶⁵ *Wilmington Messenger*, November 5, 1898.

no gun because they were all in the hands of her male family members but did note that the “hatchets were handy.” She prepared coffee for the men guarding her block and assured them that more would be made if “trouble came.” She did not believe “the negroes will dare start so terrible a thing but if they are drinking they may do more than if sober and it would take a small match to set all on fire.” Considering herself a strong woman, she felt “truly sorry for timid women and the little children.” Her letter ended the next morning with a short statement from her husband: “All quiet—we lay by our arms all night for riot—all quiet.”⁶⁶

Adding to the fever pitch was the emphasis placed on weaponry. The papers had editorialized several times during the campaign that the city needed to purchase a rapid-fire gun for the general protection of the city, and articles proclaimed that “guns were still coming to North Carolina” in advance of the election. Adding to the fear of riot instilled in readers through their papers, Wilmington’s editors simultaneously ran articles reporting that everyone in the city, black and white, was armed. The city’s white businessmen acted, and, “at the cost of \$1,200,” they “purchased, equipped, and manned a rapid-fire gun” because “complete preparation would best assure protection.”⁶⁷ Once the rapid-fire gun was

⁶⁶ Such quiet female support of the campaign can be found as an undercurrent in newspaper articles, parades, attendance at speeches and WGU events. Wootten Collection, University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

⁶⁷ John Bellamy testified that the purchase of a gun was done by the merchants for the protection of life and property “separate and apart” from the Democratic committees and that the purchase was “kept very quiet.” *Wilmington Messenger*, November 4, 1898; Iredell Meares, “Wilmington Revolution” broadside, Edmund Smithwick and Family Papers, Private Collections, State Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; *Contested Election Case*, 256-7.

in the city, the gun squad assembled the gun, the squad, and black leaders of the community on a boat and demonstrated the gun's ability on November 1, 1898.⁶⁸

Chief of Police Melton estimated that there were between 2,000 and 3,000 guns in the city by the election. Reports of accidental shootings were scattered throughout the papers. In the *Morning Star* the day of the election, 2 articles near each other reported that a white man accidentally shot a compatriot while "inspecting" a pistol on the street, and a white "guard" was wounded by a black man with an "old fashioned rifle or shotgun loaded with buck" in Brooklyn. The day before, the *Messenger* claimed that Norfolk merchants were shipping guns to North Carolina in record numbers over the past 30 days. The *Messenger* observed that "there will be no guns or pistols publicly displayed at the voting places . . . but the bushes will be full of them." A reporter visiting the city estimated that there were "enough small arms imported in the state in the last sixty days to equip an entire division of the United States army." He noted that the whites were armed with Winchesters and that the blacks were equipped with "old army muskets, shotguns, or pistols." Waddell's preelection night speech summed up the mood of the Democrats:

You are Anglo-Saxons. You are armed and prepared, and you will do your duty. Be ready at a moment's notice. Go to the polls tomorrow, and if you find the Negro out voting, tell him to leave the polls and if he refuses kill, shoot him down in his tracks. We shall win tomorrow if we have to do it with guns.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ The exhibition of the gun as it was shot down river near Eagle's Island proved to African American leaders that if it were used against men in the streets, scores would die in a short span of time. *Contested Election Case*, 344-6.

⁶⁹ There are conflicting descriptions of the rapid fire gun(s) in the city and there was more than just one rapid fire gun in Wilmington. The *Messenger* reported on the day of the election that a "rapid-fire

In such an atmosphere, African Americans also sought to arm themselves. However, the menacing control exerted by white supremacy advocates over life in the state identified efforts of blacks to purchase weapons. One such attempt was widely publicized in local and state papers. According to Democratic newspapers, William Lee and M. H. McAllister tried to order rifles from Winchester Arms Company of New Jersey. The company referred the request to their North Carolina agent, Odell Hardware of Greensboro. Odell's manager, Charles H. Ireland, suspicious of the order, contacted Wilmington merchants William Worth and Nathaniel Jacobi. After learning that Lee and McAllister were black, Odell refused to fill the order and forwarded the request to the *News and Observer*, which then looked into the matter. Editor Josephus Daniels discussed the issue with Iredell Meares of Wilmington who said that William Lee was actually John William Lee, chairman of the New Hanover County Republican Executive Committee. Local Republicans denounced the claims as they were published in the *News and Observer* and local papers, particularly since the county Republican chair's full name was actually John Wesley

Hotchkiss gun arrived here last night by the New York steamer for the Wilmington Division, North Carolina Naval Battalion." Charles H. White testified that he assisted in operating the gun purchased by "the people of the city" and it was a Colt that could fire 420 shots per minute. *Contested Election Case*, 343-6, 362; *Morning Star* (Wilmington), November 8, 1898; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), November 7, 1898; Iredell Meares, "the Wilmington Revolution," Smithwick Papers, State Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; Alfred Moore Waddell as quoted in *Outlook*, November 19, 1898; *Wilmington Messenger*, November 8, 1898.

Lee and he claimed no knowledge of the order.⁷⁰

Rumors circulated throughout the state that Wilmington outsiders also tried to help local African Americans protect themselves in response to white armament. The story that Congressman George White of Tarboro attempted to equip blacks through the purchase of guns via his wife received much attention. In an article published the week before the election, the *Wilmington Evening Dispatch* declared that not only was a Wilmington black leader in Norfolk and Baltimore purchasing guns and ammunition but that other black leaders such as White were assisting the effort. The *Dispatch* quoted from the *News and Observer* that whites in Tarboro discovered that White's wife received an "express package containing rifles, name of shipper withheld." The paper concluded the article with a simple, menacing statement: "[W]hite people are ready and prepared for any emergency."⁷¹

Due to indications that blacks were arming themselves, local Wilmington leaders moved to determine the extent of weapon stockpiles in the black community. Two detectives, one of each race, were hired by Edgar Parmele, George Rountree, Frank Stedman, and Walker Taylor at the urging of Atlantic Coastline Railroad president John Kenly. The detectives informed the men that the blacks "were doing practically nothing." Additionally, the Group Six decided to hire

⁷⁰ The fact that the *News and Observer* was included in the matter reflects the important role that Josephus Daniels and the paper played in the 1898 campaign. It was not illegal for blacks to own or purchase guns. Local Wilmington Republicans probably denounce the rumor for the sake of peace and safety. McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 625-6; *Wilmington Messenger*, October 9, 1898; *News and Observer* (Raleigh), October 8, 1898; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), October 10, 1898; *Morning Star* (Wilmington), October 9, 1898.

⁷¹ *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), November 2, 1898; Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 107-8.

2 black Pinkerton agents to investigate. Walker Taylor of the Group Six was informed by these detectives that the blacks were contemplating arson instead of arming themselves.⁷²

After the election, many of the city's merchants were called to testify in a court case challenging the validity of John Bellamy's victory over Oliver Dockery in November. Attorneys requested specifics on the number of guns sold in the days and weeks leading up to the election. Two merchants, Joseph Jacobi and William E. Springer, were evasive in their answers and provided little information as to the number of guns they sold. Three other merchants provided a glimpse into the total sales of weapons in the city. Charles D. Foard testified that he sold 25 to 30 guns and pistols between November 1 and 10; Owen F. Love, member of the Second Ward White Government Union, did not believe the WGU would tolerate violence but still sold about 59 guns. J. W. Murchison reported that he sold about 200 pistols, 40 to 50 shotguns, 125 repeating rifles, including 75 Colt repeaters that could repeat 25 times, and 50 Winchesters that could repeat about 15 times. Under cross-examination by a Democratic Party attorney, Murchison stated that the sales for 1898 were similar to sales from other election years. The line of questioning for all merchants appeared to acknowledge that gun sales escalated in election years and that the weapons sold by these merchants were to whites only.⁷³

⁷² William Parsley wrote a relative after the riot that "every blessed one of them [blacks] had a pistol of some sort and many of them rifles and shotguns loaded with buckshot." William Parsley to Sal, November 12, 1898, Eccles Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁷³ The testimony presented in the challenge to Bellamy's election by his opponent Oliver Dockery has provided insight regarding the activities of many of the leading participants in the campaign and riot. *Contested Election Case*, 8-18.

The election campaign of 1898 represented the beginning of the end for the Republican Party and the promise of full control of state politics by 1900 for the Democrats. The use of violence and intimidation using both clandestine and overt methods proved a successful model for the Democratic Party to disassemble the fragile framework of cooperation between white and black Republicans and Populists. In Wilmington, Democratic victory at the ballot box, whether honestly or fraudulently obtained, would be a reality. Less clear was how the hysteria and fear stimulated by the campaign would dissipate.