

1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report

1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission

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Front cover: Destruction of Manly printing press, November 10, 1898.
Image courtesy of the New Hanover County Public Library

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Some time, we are told, when the cycle of years has rolled around, there is to be another golden age, when all men will dwell together in love and harmony, and when peace and righteousness shall prevail for a thousand years. God speed the day, and let not the shining thread of hope become so enmeshed in the web of circumstance that we lose sight of it; but give us here and there, and now and then, some little foretaste of this golden age, that we may the more patiently and hopefully await its coming!

--Charles Waddell Chesnutt, *The Wife of his Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899).

Chesnutt, a North Carolina native, was the author of *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), based on the Wilmington events of 1898.

1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission FINDINGS

Political

1. The racial violence of November 10, 1898, in Wilmington precipitated an armed overthrow of the legitimately elected municipal government.
2. The organizers of the overthrow took part in a documented conspiracy. The leaders, members of the Democratic white elite in Wilmington and New Hanover County, achieved their political goals through violence and intimidation.
3. Involved in the conspiracy were men prominent in the Democratic Party, former Confederate officers, former officeholders, and newspaper editors locally and statewide rallied by Josephus Daniels of the Raleigh *News and Observer*.
4. Organizers of the coup instituted a banishment campaign, targeting political opponents, black and white, leading to the expulsion from the city of over twenty targeted individuals and a mass exodus of over 2,100 others. Consequently, the Republican power base in Wilmington was destroyed.
5. The overthrow or *coup d'état* took place within the context of an ongoing statewide political campaign based on white supremacy. The Wilmington events spurred the subsequent development of statutory basis for segregation (i.e., Jim Crow) and disfranchisement legislation in North Carolina.
6. Publication of an editorial by African American editor Alex Manly in August 1898 and subsequent reprintings by the white press stimulated public debate. The burning of Manly's press and office were the flashpoint on November 10. The mob action satisfied a perceived need for the organizers of the coup. Yet, the overthrow still would have taken place irrespective of Manly's role.
7. The events of November 10 left an unknown number of dead on Wilmington's streets. The coroner performed fourteen inquests but other evidence indicates that the total number of deaths was as high as sixty.
8. Government at all levels failed to adequately respond to the violence or to reverse the political overthrow. Troops sent to Wilmington by Governor Daniel L. Russell were ineffective in quelling the violence of November 10.

Economic and Social

1. Prior to November 1898 African Americans in Wilmington were employed in all segments of the workforce, as professionals, skilled artisans, government employees, maritime crew members, industrial workers, laborers, and domestics. After 1898 the number of blacks employed as professionals (aside from ministers), as skilled artisans, and in government jobs declined while the number working in lower status jobs increased.
2. Prior to November 1898 African Americans in Wilmington benefited from a cohesive social network composed of churches, strong fraternal organizations, and other civic and benevolent groups. After 1898 the network gradually rebounded but the social structure was altered as a result of statutory segregation.
3. One result of the Wilmington diaspora (the departure of African Americans from the Port City, voluntary or otherwise) was a decline in economic opportunity for black citizens.
4. Analysis of statistical data indicates that Wilmington's black businesses and workers suffered losses after 1898 in terms of job status, income, and access to capital.
5. After 1898, black-owned businesses suffered economic decline as some businesses closed or moved from the city's business district to traditionally black neighborhoods.
6. Analysis of deeds and tax records indicates that most black property owners in Wilmington retained ownership of holdings after 1898. No evidence was found to support the thesis that seizure of black-owned property by whites was widespread after 1898.
7. Analysis of residential patterns after 1898, based on the mapping of city directory and tax data, indicates that segregated neighborhoods in Wilmington increased and that the city's center became almost exclusively white.
8. After 1898, Wilmington's black schools and teachers received significantly less funding compared to white schools and teachers, a pattern reflective of trends across North Carolina. Black literacy rates in the city dropped to rates much lower than those of whites.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Objective: *The recommendations of the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission seek to repair the moral, economic, civic and political damage wrought by the violence and discrimination resulting from a conspiracy to re-take control of city, county, and state governments by the Democratic Party's white supremacy campaign.*

Empowerment: Acknowledging that the democratic process failed in Wilmington resulting in persistent, unfavorable treatment especially to the African American community, government leadership at all levels will pursue actions that repair the wrong.

1. Acknowledge that the violence of 1898 was a conspiracy of a white elite that used intimidation and force to replace a duly elected local government; that people lost their lives, livelihoods, and were banished from their homes without due process of the law; and that governments at all levels failed to protect its citizens.
2. Establish a Restructuring & Development Authority including local leadership to supervise implementation of a strategic vision funded through an endowment, supported by federal, state, and local governments, as well as media and businesses, especially those which benefited from the consequences of 1898.
3. Support amendment of the federal Voting Rights Act to add New Hanover County.
4. Create a study commission to examine the broader impact of slavery, Jim Crow, and discrimination on the lives of African Americans.

Economic Redevelopment: Recognizing the long term economic disadvantages created by banishment, loss of civil service positions, and intimidation, funding from all sources will be directed by the Restructuring & Development Authority to improve economic development opportunities.

5. Support judicial redress to compensate heirs of victims who can prove loss and relationship to victims via intestacy statutes.
6. Provide incentives for business development of areas impacted by the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 (e.g., establish enterprise zone; create small business incubator with tax incentives to attract minority-owned businesses).
7. Increase minority home ownership in impacted areas (e.g., use eminent domain to acquire vacant commercial properties in Brooklyn and Southside; sell properties to low income residents of those sections with guaranteed mortgages).

Education: Educational information about the events of 1898 will be made available to all ages and regions using print, audio-visual media, and the worldwide web.

8. Maintain and update the final report of the Wilmington Race Riot Commission with the North Carolina Office of Archives and History; distribute the published report to appropriate local, state, and national repositories and to individuals who contributed toward the research and development of a more complete record.

9. Incorporate the 1898 events into Department of Public Instruction curriculum learning expectations; develop appropriate grade-level curriculum materials; and provide teacher workshops for effectively integrating the materials into instruction.
10. Newspapers (*News and Observer*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Wilmington Star*, *Washington Post*, etc.) should acknowledge the role of media in the events of 1898 and work with the North Carolina black press association to prepare a summary of the Commission report for distribution statewide. The Commission calls upon said papers to study the effects of 1898 and impact of Jim Crow on the state's black press and to endow scholarships at the state's public universities.
11. Fund development for a documentary to be aired nationally, regionally, and locally. The documentary should be suitable for inclusion in school curriculum materials.
12. Increase support for tutoring and mentoring programs in New Hanover County, targeting at-risk youth.

Commemoration: Recognition of the documented events of 1898 will be conspicuously displayed and made available in prominent public locations.

13. Fund establishment of an 1898 exhibit at the Cape Fear Museum and creation of a traveling exhibit designed by the Museum for use statewide.
14. Provide additional funding for New Hanover County Public Library to make resources available relative to 1898 and its impact.
15. Erect plaques, markers and/or monuments to identify key participants and locations of 1898 events statewide and in Wilmington.

The members of the Commission and the staff of Archives and History stand ready to assist the General Assembly in implementing these recommendations.

Remarks by Commissioners:

Representative Thomas Wright, Co-Chair

“Truth is essential in helping formulate and shape one’s future. What an awesome task and privilege to Co-Chair the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission. It is my sincere hope and desire that this significant piece of North Carolina history and American history would be acknowledged and identified as one of America’s pivotal points of change. I hope that we take the opportunity to learn from this historical fact and celebrate our diversities and our progress, thereby helping to yield better prosperity for all Americans.”

Irving Joyner, Vice-Chair

“Senator Luther Jordan’s vision that a complete record of the 1898 Wilmington race and political rebellion be officially recorded has been accomplished. This report represents the most exhaustive review of the events, motivations and impacts of the most extreme manifestation of white supremacy in this State since slavery. In North Carolina, November 10, 1898 was the beginning of the total political and economic disenfranchisement of this State’s African-American community. The overthrow of the legitimately elected Wilmington City government and the resulting oppression of heretofore successful efforts by African-Americans to participate in the American dream was calculated as a signal to others around the State that North Carolina was to become another haven of white power and privilege and designed to reverse the loss of the Civil War. This white supremacy campaign was successful and repressed the political, social, educational and economic development and aspirations of African-Americans in this state for over ninety (90) years. Today, the State of North Carolina and other beneficiaries of this overthrow are obligated to repair the breach and the harm suffered by African-Americans during this period of repression.”

Ruth Haas

“The Wilmington Race Riot Commission has worked diligently to call for relevant information; to review material that comprises the report; and to objectively assess the known facts, claims, and myths arising from the event of 1898. I am comfortable in supporting the findings and recommendations of the Commission as a result of this thorough process.”

Lottie D. E. Clinton

“Prayer is the pain pill that helped me work through this challenge as a Commissioner, however, there were times when God decided to let me feel the pain and the reality of the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot. I could not believe that anyone would execute such a forceful, fatal, final deliberate act of cruelty toward a people within a Community who were unaware of their evil intent and purpose. Everyday we write our own History as we live our lives and act and interact with people. May the truth be told, may acceptance be complete, and may the healing be thorough for all the people, beginning now. "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." 3John 1:4”

John Haley

"We can no longer pretend that the violence in Wilmington on 10 November 1898 was a race riot. Instead, it was the culmination of a well-orchestrated statewide campaign by white supremacists to intimidate, segregate, and depoliticize African Americans."

Alfred Thomas, M.S.W.

“All the citizens of the State of North Carolina need to know the good, the bad, and the ugly relating to the 1898 race riot in Wilmington. It is now up to the state legislature to show what good can come from this incident. This final report shows the bad and the ugly.”

Keever Clark

“This has been an awesome opportunity serving with so many different personalities. This was such a harmonious group. Looking for the truth in all the right places gave the instant feeling that we were doing what was right and just. Thank all of you for serving so well.”

Kenneth L. Davis

“Over one hundred years after the racial violence and coup of 1898 some people still promote yesterday's deceptions as today and tomorrow's history. The future they want most to control is the continued distortion of African American contributions to Wilmington and the nation. They want to continue the myth that the cause of the racial violence that took place in Wilmington on Thursday, November 10, 1898, was caused by a corrupt government made of in large part by Negroes.

This report accurately records facts that many, over the years, were eager to obscure. The 1890's were a time when the Democratic Party, primarily made up of former confederates, were bitter because they had lost the Civil War and had been subjected to harsh occupation by Union forces during Reconstruction. They wanted to return to the master slave relationship and invoke the failed doctrine of white supremacy. What happened in November of 1898 was a breakdown in the rule of law. Alfred Moore Waddell and the leaders that orchestrated the violence should be recorded in history for what they really were, felons! The wanton destruction of property and the indiscriminant murder of innocent people cannot be justified even in the historical context of 1898.

Documenting the events of 1898 have been contentious and emotional but we had a moral obligation to correct an egregious wrong that has gone on too long without being remedied. The names of Thomas C. Miller, Alexander Manly, Arie Bryant, Robert B. Pickens, Salem J. Bell, Carter Peamon and others banished from Wilmington including those Negroes killed or wounded John Townsend, Charles Lindsey, Josh Halsey, Daniel Wright, John R. Davis, Samuel McFarland, William Lindsey, Alfred White, George Davis, George Henry Davis, George Miller, John Dow and according to the November 12, 1898 edition of The Evening Dispatch “a number killed not accounted for and who will never be accounted for.” should be recognized not as rioters or criminals but as victims of an illegal racist regime.

The injustices of 1898 were more than an attack on unarmed Negroes, the silencing of the Black press and the removal of an allegedly corrupt city government; it was an attack on the constitution, the fabric that binds this nation together. We must remove the diabolical stain of racism from the fabric of freedom and democracy that still exist in Wilmington today. It exists in the gentrification of black communities, it exists in the attempt to re-segregate schools, it exists in hiring and promotions practices in the public and private sector and it exists in the distorted historical facts of the events of 1898.”

Introduction

Over the years, scores of authors have written about the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot. Yet, the State of North Carolina has never formally investigated the insurrection. On the heels of Florida's investigation into the 1923 Rosewood Massacre, Oklahoma's inquiry into the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, and the centennial of the Port City's tragic event in 1898, the General Assembly in 2000 enacted legislation calling for the creation of a commission to examine the riot and to develop a historical record. The law also called on the commission to delve into the "economic impact of the riot on African-Americans in this State."

The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission bill was sponsored by two Wilmington legislators, Senator Luther H. Jordan, who died in April 2002, and Representative Thomas E. Wright. The men developed the Commission to build upon earlier work done to commemorate the centennial anniversary in 1998, when local residents of both races participated in a variety of programs that brought renewed interest to the subject. The Commission is composed of thirteen members, appointed by the legislature, the governor, mayor and city council of Wilmington, and New Hanover County Board of Commissioners. Assisting the Commission with its work have been staff members of the Department of Cultural Resources, who have provided research and administrative assistance. This report is the culmination of three years of work by Commission members and staff of the Department of Cultural Resources.

The work done in Florida and Oklahoma to study similar localized rioting based on racial divisions became a model for the Commission report. Those states developed legislation to support investigations into their riots. Their findings, a combination of scholarly research and analysis, were seen as an ideal model for North Carolina. The Rosewood Report, completed in 1993, and the Tulsa Report, completed in 2001, provided detailed explanations for the causes and effects of the riots and led to a series of recommendations for the states to address the wrongs perpetrated generations earlier.

In recent decades, authors of books, articles, theses, and dissertations have studied causes of the Wilmington riot and the subsequent event itself but few have searched to find answers to what the riot did to the city of Wilmington. This report seeks to explain the development of the African American community in Wilmington in the framework of an overall story of the city's growth from the 1860's through to the first decades of the twentieth century. To understand the context of what happened in 1898, consideration of every aspect of life in the city must be included in a study. The report follows a chronological format, beginning with the Civil War and Reconstruction and ends with analysis of the impact of the riot and the Democratic Party's campaign of 1898 on African Americans in New Hanover County. Analysis and discussion of African American life in twentieth century Wilmington ends just before the advent of World War I. Simply put, beginning with World War I, the city began to undergo a series of economic changes similar to those of the rest of state and nation that affected all citizens, regardless of race. Wartime building booms interspersed with depression and economic lulls combined with the advent of the modern civil rights movement to create new dynamics in race relations. A singular event, still remembered by many residents, was the Wilmington 10 incident in February, 1971. Mindful of their past, witnesses and participants in that episode drew connections to the 1898 riot and saw that the violence of 1971 was distinctly related to unresolved conflicts of 1898.

In researching the causes and effects of the violence, a wide variety of source materials have been used. Primary source materials, some already used heavily by previous historians, plus others uncovered in the process of this report, were consulted wherever possible. Most work in searching for primary source materials such as letters, diaries, contemporary newspaper articles, and oral history interviews has focused on learning more about the African American community, the events of the campaign and violence of 1898, and the effects of the violence. Repositories at state universities, churches, and state and private organizations house many of these materials.

Secondary source materials have been used to supplement the history of the city during Reconstruction and the years leading up to the 1890's in addition to providing insight into the overall history of the state and nation. Controversial sources have been cited in the document where appropriate. Most modern historians acknowledge that early histories of Reconstruction, those written by students under the influence of Professor William A. Dunning of Columbia University – what has become known as the “Dunning School” – generated a great deal of literature after the turn of the twentieth century on the history of the South and Reconstruction. These histories reflected their belief systems on race grounded in the concepts of second class status for African Americans and the inherent supremacy of the white race. Therefore, when leading North Carolina scholars such as J.G. deRoulhac Hamilton, R. D. W. Connor, and Samuel A. Ashe wrote state histories, the narratives were laced with pre-suppositions about the “rights” of white citizens, the supposed failures of Reconstruction, and the drawbacks of universal suffrage.

Many local historians have repeated the narrative developed by participants, witnesses and beneficiaries of the 1898 campaign such as Alfred Moore Waddell, James Sprunt, and William Lord de Rosset. These men repeated the story of the riot and its causes as a response of white citizens to a corrupt municipal government unable to reduce crime or facilitate economic improvements for residents. A counter-narrative that contradicted this story was less widely circulated and was not widely accepted by readership. Not until the publication of *The Negro in Fusion Politics* in 1951 by African American scholar Helen Edmonds did the counter-narrative receive scholarly attention. Edmonds was vilified by leading Wilmingtonians at the time her work was published and not until later publications, specifically *We Have Taken a City* by Leon Prather in 1984, did the counter-narrative receive equal footing with the nearly 100 year old story perpetuated by Waddell and contemporaries. Subsequent study has focused on various aspects of the riot, its causes and its participants and has incorporated both the “necessary evil” narrative of white leaders and the African American perspective. This report seeks to bridge the gap between what the white leaders said and did before and after November, 1898 and the facts of the status, lives, and contributions of the African American community. Although white leaders attempted to justify their actions in every word and deed after November 10th, the truth of what happened lies within their clouded narratives.

One of the most helpful white narratives of the event was written by Harry Hayden, a local Wilmington newspaperman. Hayden, a native of the city, first wrote a booklet called *The Story of the Wilmington Rebellion* in 1936 and later wrote a history of the Wilmington Light Infantry in 1954, which included specific details about the riot. For both works, Hayden

interviewed riot witnesses and participants, having been only a child at the time of the riot. Hayden's work is infused with the narrative developed by the white leadership regarding the perceived necessity of their actions but contains details of conspiracy, murder and intrigue not found in other contemporary sources. Corroboration of portions of his work has been possible and the documents have been treated as resting somewhere between primary and secondary source materials. Hayden generated multiple versions of his work in the process of creating the two well-known documents from 1936 and 1954. His work, in whole or partial form, can be found in repositories in Wilmington, Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill. J. Allan Taylor's personal copy of the *Story of the Wilmington Rebellion* is located in the North Carolina Collection in Chapel Hill. Taylor, a member of the "Secret Nine," the influential body of white businessmen who led the campaign that resulted in the violence and overthrow of municipal government, scribbled commentary in the margins of the booklet. His most revealing notation was "masterful duplicity."

The "masterful duplicity" described by Taylor referred to the ability of white leadership in Wilmington to develop long-range plans for instigating violence, a strategy to quell that violence and their subsequent ability to call the affair a riot – implying a sudden break in peacefulness rather than reveal its true character, that of a planned insurrection. The ultimate goal for Taylor and other leaders was the resurgence of white rule of the city and state for a handful of men through whatever means necessary. Many familiar with the history of the city and the events of November 10 will be quick to tell you that the coup d'état—the overthrow of democratically elected officials—of the afternoon of November 10 is just as important to understand as are the murders and banishment campaign. The change in government on November 10th fully ended black participation in city and county government until the advent of the civil rights era. Furthermore, the 1898 campaign capped by violence in Wilmington proved to be a catalyst for the state—Jim Crow legislation and subjugation of African Americans resulted statewide. Because Wilmington rioters were able to murder blacks in daylight and overthrow a legitimately elected Republican government without penalty or federal intervention, everyone in the state, regardless of race, knew that the white supremacy campaign was victorious on all fronts.

The impact of the riot—the economic, cultural and physical changes to the Wilmington landscape—is complicated to document. As will be seen in the report, some changes happened immediately and others developed over time. Black entrepreneurship and employment were dramatically reduced, cultural institutions were diminished, and educational opportunities decreased. The destruction of the Alexander Manly newspaper office on the morning of November 10 silenced the black press in the city for over a decade. Not until the development of the *Cape Fear Journal* in 1927 did the city have another regular African American newspaper.

To understand the economics of the riot, outside contributors have been consulted and brought into the project. The work on the economic impact of the riot has been done by an economics graduate student, Tod Hamilton, in conjunction with the Institute for African American Research led by Dr. William Darity at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Tod's work has been vital to the statistical survey of the changes wrought to the African American financial scene. As of the release of the report, Tod's work is ongoing and his preliminary findings have been incorporated and appended to this report.

This report should show that the riot was not an isolated, spontaneous, incident but was the result of a series of events that were directed and planned by upper class white businessmen in order to regain control of government and that Wilmington should not be viewed as existing in a vacuum—it was part of a larger campaign to take over state government in 1898—Democratic Party strategists thrust the city into the spotlight as an example of Republican corruption and bad government because of the participation of African Americans in local politics. The report will not answer the question of how many people died as a result of the violence. Extant records and physical evidence cannot completely answer the question. The report will challenge the claims of wholesale property seizure—no evidence was found to prove that whites seized black property or forced blacks to sell at deflated prices right after the riot—unethical behavior by some whites in the years after the riot did not translate into city-wide property transitions. Furthermore, the report has demonstrated that the violence and campaign impacted all aspects of African American life—churches, cultural celebrations such as Emancipation Day and Jonkonnu, business development, and schools.

This long term project has had the assistance of many helpful and supportive people over the years. Proper acknowledgement of all who contributed to the project will be difficult but I will make a humble attempt. Thanks to members of the Commission who volunteered their time to assist with research and read drafts of the report—Lottie Clinton, Kenneth Davis, Harper Peterson, Helyn Lofton, Ruth Haas, Alfred Thomas, Irv Joyner and John Haley—for they led the way. Special thanks should go to Beverly Tetterton of the New Hanover County Public Library for her depth of knowledge about Wilmington history and willingness to answer my incessant questions—without Beverly’s help in locating resources, particularly those of the late Bill Reaves, the work would be less complete. The staff of the Research Branch, the Office of Archives and History, and the State Library deserve compliment for their understanding and helpfulness in facilitating this report—Michael Hill, Vivian McDuffie, Ansley Wegner, Mark Moore, Dennis Daniels, Lisa Keenum, Dr. Jeffrey Crow, Dr. David Brook, Matt Burton, Denise Craig, Jo Ann Williford, Fay Henderson, Earl Ijames, Sion H. Harrington III, Chris Meekins, Cheryl McLean, Steve Case, Katherine Beery, Chris Graham, Hilary Kanupp, Mary Ajiboye, Ron Vestal, Kay Tillotson, Joy Heitman, Tom Vincent, Pam Toms, Debbie Blake, Claudia Brown, Chandra Burch, Cynthia Jones, Dick Lankford, Steve Claggett, Judy Easley, Gwen Mays, Steve Massengill, Lisa Coombes, Bonnie Spiers, Joyce Throckmorton, Alan Westmoreland, among others.

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LeRae Umfleet
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Into Reconstruction and Out Again	1
Chapter 2: Forces of Change (1890-1897)	34
Chapter 3: Practical Politics: White Supremacy Campaign of 1898	56
Chapter 4: Eve of Destruction	94
Chapter 5: November 10: “Hell Jolted Loose”	121
Chapter 6: Resounding Change	156
Chapter 7: Destiny of a Race	193
Chapter 8: Rebuilding	222

Appended Materials

Appendix A:	African American Biographical Sketches	260
Appendix B:	African American Churches in Wilmington	280
Appendix C:	Changes to Wilmington’s Charter, 1868-1901	284
Appendix D:	New Hanover County Tax Lists: 1897 and 1900	290
Appendix E:	Wilmington Schools	327
Appendix F:	Roster of WLI and Naval Reserves	338
Appendix G:	“ ‘Ever Threatened ... Ever in Need:’ Alexander Manly’s Confrontation with the Democratic Campaign in 1898 North Carolina,” by James Vincent Lowery	346
Appendix H:	Psychology of the Wilmington Riot	354
Appendix I:	Essays on Wilmington Crime, Economy and Corruption prior to 1898	358
Appendix J:	Letters to President McKinley	368
Appendix K:	City Directory analysis	384
Appendix L:	Property Transactions by African Americans with J-Z Surnames	393
Appendix M:	“Remembering 1898: Literary Responses and Public Memory of the Wilmington Race Riot” by James Vincent Lowery	413
Appendix N:	Timeline	429
Appendix O:	“1898 Wilmington Race Riot Economic Impact Analysis” findings by Tod Hamilton and William A. Darity, Jr.	437

Bibliography

List of Maps

African American Churches in Wilmington	Located after page 30
Wilmington Ward Boundaries	Located after page 33
Fire Stations in Wilmington, 1898	Located after page 31
Wilmington Schools, 1898	Located after page 51
Homes of Key Participants	Located after page 119
Wilmington Race Riot	Located after page 127
Wilmington Race Riot Inset	Located after page 127
African American Businesses, 1897	Located after page 227
African American Businesses, 1900	Located after page 227
Residential Patterns by Race, 1897	Located after page 247
Residential Patterns by Race, 1905	Located after page 247