

ZINN EDUCATION PROJECT

TEACHING PEOPLE'S HISTORY

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Nov. 10, 1898: Wilmington Massacre

Time Periods: Industrial Revolution: 1877 - 1899

Themes: African American, Reconstruction, Democracy & Citizenship, Laws & Citizen Rights

On Nov. 10, 1898, white supremacists murdered African Americans in Wilmington, North Carolina and deposed the elected Reconstruction era government in a coup d'état.

It was the morning of November 10, 1898, in Wilmington, North Carolina, and the fire was the beginning of an assault that took place seven blocks east of the Cape Fear River, about 10 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean. By sundown, [Alex] Manly's newspaper [*The Daily Record*] had been torched, as many as 60 people had been murdered, and the local government that was elected two days prior had been overthrown and replaced by white supremacists.



For all the violent moments in United States history, the mob's gruesome attack was unique: It was the only coup d'état ever to take place on American soil.

Lost in the fire that destroyed *The Daily Record* were the lives of Black citizens and the spirit of a thriving Black community, and also the most promising effort in the South to build racial solidarity. — Adrienne LaFrance and Vann Newkirk in *The Lost History of an American Coup D'État*



Marker installed in 2019. Photo by Vince Winkel, WHQR News.

Background

Before the violence, this port city on the Cape Fear River was remarkably integrated. Three out of the ten aldermen were African Americans, and Black people worked as policemen, firemen, and magistrates.

Democrats, the party of the Confederacy, vowed to end this “Negro domination” in the 1898 state legislative elections. Their strategy was to enlist men who could write (white journalists and cartoonists), men who could speak (white supremacists who whipped up emotions at rallies), and men who could ride (the Ku Klux Klan-like “Red Shirts” who were basically armed ruffians on horseback).

The white supremacists used an [editorial](#) by [Alex Manly](#), the editor of Wilmington’s Black newspaper the *Daily Record*, to stir a firestorm at the time of the elections. The editorial responded to a speech by a Georgia socialite who promoted lynching as a method “to protect woman’s dearest possession from the ravening human beast.”



Alex Manly, editor. Source: UNC-Chapel Hill.

Manly condemned lynching and pointed out the hypocrisy of describing Black men as “big burly, black brute(s)” when in reality it was white men who regularly raped Black women with impunity. He added that some relations between the races were consensual.

White supremacist rallies kept white outrage at the editorial at a fever pitch. Former Confederate colonel Alfred Waddell gave a speech suggesting that white citizens should “choke the Cape Fear (River) with carcasses” if necessary to keep African Americans from the polls.

On election day, the Red Shirts patrolled Black neighborhoods with guns. Democrats won every seat, but these were state legislative seats. African Americans still maintained power in Wilmington's city government.

Some 800 white citizens led by Waddell met at the county courthouse and produced the "White Declaration of Independence" which stated: "We, the undersigned citizens... do hereby declare that we will no longer be ruled, and will never again be ruled by men of African origin."

The following day – Nov. 10 – Waddell led a mob of 2,000 armed men to the *Daily Record* and burned the building to the ground.

Armed rioters in front of destroyed press building.

Rumors tore through the Black neighborhoods. The tinderbox ignited at the corner of Fourth and Harnett, where African Americans at Walker's Grocery Store faced off against white men at Brunje's saloon. A shot was fired and someone yelled, "White man killed."

Gunfire erupted. Unarmed Black men scattered in all directions and were gunned down. Violence quickly spread. The Wilmington Light Infantry, the White Government Union, and the Red Shirts poured into the Black neighborhoods with rifles, revolvers, and a Gatling gun.

Wilmington Light Infantry machine gun crew.

As bullets were still flying, Waddell threw out the democratically-elected aldermen and installed his own. This was nothing less than a coup d'état. The hand-picked men “elected” Waddell mayor. Many Black leaders were jailed “for their own safety” and then forcibly marched to the train station under military escort and sent out of town.

After the riot, thousands of Black citizens fled. In 1900, the North Carolina legislature effectively stripped African Americans of the vote through the grandfather clause and ushered in the worst of the Jim Crow laws.

The background text is adapted from a description by Barbara Wright, author of [Crow](#), a book of historical fiction from grades 7+ about the Wilmington Massacre.

Learn from [The Lost History of an American Coup D'État](#) in *The Atlantic* and the documentary film, [Wilmington on Fire](#) (see trailer below.)

Wilmington on Fire (trailer)



Read about more [massacres in U.S. history](#). Most of these massacres were designed to suppress voting rights, land ownership, economic advancement, education, freedom of the press, religion, LGBTQ rights, and/or labor rights of African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, and immigrants. While often referred to as “race riots,” they were massacres to maintain white supremacy.

Related Resources

ARTICLES

Burning Tulsa: The Legacy of Black Dispossession

Article. By Linda Christensen. If We Knew Our History Series. Students need to learn the hidden history of the 1921 Tulsa Massacre and how this links to racial wealth inequality today.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES (FREE)

Repair: Students Design a Reparations Bill

Teaching Activity. By Ursula Wolfe-Rocca. In this activity, students take on the role of activist-experts to improve upon a

Congressional bill for reparations for Black people. They talk back to Congress' flimsy legislation and design a more robust alternative.



TEACHING ACTIVITIES (FREE)

When the Impossible Suddenly Became Possible: A Reconstruction Mixer

Teaching Activity. By Adam Sanchez and Nqobile Mthethwa. 25 pages.

A mixer role play explores the connections between different social movements during Reconstruction.



TEACHING ACTIVITIES (FREE)

Who Gets to Vote? Teaching About the Struggle for Voting Rights in the United States

Teaching Activity. By Ursula Wolfe-Rocca. 2020.

Unit with three lessons on voting rights, including the history of the struggle against voter suppression in the United States.



IF WE KNEW OUR HISTORY

The Other '68: Black Power During Reconstruction

From the urban rebellions to the salute at the Olympics, commemorations of 1968 — a pivotal year of Black Power — have appeared in news headlines throughout this anniversary year. Yet 2018 also marks the 150th anniversary of 1868 — the height of Black Power during Reconstruction.

ARTICLES

Plessy v. Ferguson: The Organizing History of the Case

Article. By Keith W. Medley.

The role of the Comité des Citoyens and *The Crusader* newspaper in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case.



BOOKS: FICTION

A Moment in the Sun

Book – Fiction. By John Sayles. 2011. 955 pages.

Spanning five years and half a dozen countries, Sayles' novel of historical fiction paints a picture of the late 1890s – from the racist coup in Wilmington, North Carolina, to the bloody dawn of U.S. interventionism in Cuba and the Philippines.



THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Nov. 3, 1874: White League Attacks Black Voters

Deadly election “riots” took place in Barbour County, Alabama against African-American politicians and voters.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Oct. 20, 1942: Durham Manifesto

The Southern Conference on Race Relations (SCRR) was held in Durham, NC to address dichotomy between African American soldiers fighting overseas in the name of democracy while in the U.S. they were facing racial violence and being denied basic human rights.



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