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Individual to Collective Memory

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# Commemorating Wilmington's Racial Violence of 1898

## From Individual to Collective Memory

by **Melton A. McLaurin**



scholars do not dispute the essential facts about the racial violence that occurred in Wilmington, North Carolina, more than a hundred years ago, although interpretations of the event by the city's current residents reflect the racial divide that is their common heritage. On November 10, 1898, an armed mob of whites led by some of Wilmington's most respected and influential citizens destroyed the state's only daily African American newspaper by burning the building in which it was housed. They then turned their fury and guns on the city's black population, killing at least nine blacks, according to the contemporary white press, scores according to the oral tradition within the African American community. The mob then drove others, perhaps hundreds—men, women, and children—from their homes into surrounding swamps in search of safety. Over the next two days, while Wilmington's black citizens unsuccessfully appealed to the federal government for protection, groups of armed whites forcefully expelled from the city both black and white political and business leaders opposed to conservative Democratic rule and white supremacy. Led by the city's white elite, armed whites used the threat of paramilitary forces to remove from office Wilmington's duly elected, biracial city government, replacing it with representatives of the old elite in what has been called the only successful coup d'état in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Nor is there significant disagreement within the scholarly community over the reasons for Wilmington's racial violence. In 1894 North Carolina's large and aggressive Populist Party fused with the Republicans to capture control of the state legislature. This Fusionist majority rewrote the state's election laws, significantly increasing black participation in state and local politics for the first time since Reconstruction. As a result, the Republicans elected Daniel Russell of Wilmington governor in 1896, and the Fusionists retained control of the state legislature while winning control of a number of municipal governments, including Wilmington's. This challenge to Bourbon Democratic control of North Carolina politics led to a furious, highly emotional Democratic counterattack in 1898, one based largely on an appeal to white voters' fear of "Negro domination." Orchestrated by



*Alexander Manly, editor of Wilmington's Daily Record, North Carolina's only black daily in 1898, said that many blacks charged with rape merely had engaged in consensual relationships, and he suggested that white men protect their women better against sexual advances from men of all races. Photograph of Manly, courtesy of the Bonitz Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill.*

Furnifold M. Simmons of New Bern, state Democratic Party chairman, and Josephus Daniels, editor of the Raleigh *News and Observer*, the state's most influential Democratic newspaper, the campaign employed Wilmington as a symbol of "Negro domination." Wilmington was a logical choice, since by 1898 the city had a black majority with a large and rapidly expanding middle class, and blacks served in both the municipal government and civil service.<sup>2</sup>

The efforts of one member of Wilmington's black middle class to refute Democratic charges ensured that Wilmington would remain at the eye of the storm of the 1898 campaign. The Democrat's sexually charged racial rhetoric drew a response from Alexander Manly, editor of Wilmington's *Daily Record*, the state's only black daily. Refuting the black-rapist charges of the Democratic press, Manly asserted that many blacks charged with rape were in reality discovered in consensual relationships and suggested that white men be more protective of their women against sexual advances from males of all races. Manly's editorial was carried daily by Wilmington's Democratic press in a successful effort to inflame white voter fears in preparation for the November 8 elections. His editorial, and the white Democratic response to it, provided the spark that ignited the white mob violence against the city's blacks following the election.<sup>3</sup>

Wilmington's 1898 racial violence represents an egregious example of the



*Ignited by Alexander Manly's words and the subsequent white response in print, a white mob expelled city leaders who were opposed to white supremacy, killed and injured blacks, drove others from their homes in search of safety, and burned the building in which Manly's Daily Record was housed. Scene outside the Daily Record after it was destroyed, courtesy of the Cape Fear Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina.*

means by which the white South disenfranchised and imposed a strict form of racial segregation upon its black population at the turn of the century. The region maintained this system of Jim Crow through a variety of mechanisms, but primarily through the use, or threat, of violence, including state-sponsored violence, until well into the seventh decade of the twentieth century. In addition to violence, segregation was also supported by a mythic past consciously created by the South's dominant white society and successfully incorporated into the national consciousness. Black protests against the system were essentially ignored, even at the national level, largely because white America shared the racist beliefs that undergirded both *de jure* segregation and the white South's version of the past.<sup>4</sup>

#### WHITE AWAKENINGS TO THE REALITIES OF RACE

Although African Americans had begun to openly challenge segregation by the end of the Second World War, especially through the increasingly responsive judicial and executive branches of the federal government, southern whites remained devoted to the system. Only a relatively few white southerners, primarily intellectuals and academics, were willing to question publicly either segregation or the mythic past that supported it. These white critics created a body of writing

that Fred Hobson, a leading scholar of southern literature, describes as the racial conversion narrative. The work of these writers, including Lillian Smith, Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, Sarah Patton Boyle, and Willie Morris, lent support to the postwar condemnation of segregation by black writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Maya Angelou. The white writers, Hobson observes, had participated in the South's system of segregation and were intimately familiar with how cultural values, the legal system, and violence were employed to maintain it. For a variety of reasons, including their personal experiences with blacks and a strong Christian faith, these writers underwent a "conversion experience," during which they came to see segregation as morally unacceptable and an impediment to the South's cultural and economic development.<sup>5</sup>

A survey of the autobiographical writing of white southerners of the post-World War II era who challenged Jim Crow underscores the degree to which the region's white population clung to segregation and a vision of the past that portrayed the institution as necessary and desirable to both races. Their work reveals that they were acutely aware of white society's loyalty to the code of segregation and the racist assumptions upon which that code was based. So strong was society's support of the code that almost all the writers who repudiated segregation record a scene or scenes in which they publicly supported it, despite growing mis-



*In 1898 editor Josephus Daniels used Raleigh's News and Observer as part of a campaign to portray Wilmington as a symbol of "Negro domination." Photograph of Daniels, courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill.*

givings about its morality. Such scenes persist even in the work of the most recently published autobiographers, including Tim McLaurin and Melany Neilson. Hobson, too, observes the continuing appeal of the white racial conversion narrative into the 1990s, although he contends that the more recent autobiographers have been more concerned with issues of class. That writers continue to grapple with the region's racial heritage is hardly surprising, for it must be recognized that even the most recent autobiographers, such as McLaurin and Neilson, individuals now in their forties, personally experienced both the segregated South and the extreme social turmoil that accompanied its overthrow.<sup>6</sup>

Recent autobiographers' continuing portrayals of their participation in segregation rituals convey the anger, pain, sadness, and guilt felt by participants. The occasional expression of a sense of guilt for the larger white society found in white autobiography, however, remains an individual response to the region's racial heritage and does not indicate a shift in racial attitudes on the part of the white majority. The very nature of the racial conversion genre suggests that the larger white society continued to adhere to racist beliefs, even after federal legislation and court rulings had destroyed segregation as a system. Any other position taken by the autobiographer would essentially negate the conversion genre's central theme.



*Ralph Ellison (left), author most recently of Juneteenth and most famously of Invisible Man, and Richard Wright (right), author of Native Son and Black Boy, were part of a postwar generation of black writers who condemned segregation. Photograph of Ellison by Bob Adelman, courtesy of Random House, and photograph of Wright courtesy of Harper Collins.*

In white southern autobiography, as in fiction, the past is a powerful presence, and autobiographers reveal a nuanced understanding of how white society employed what came to be an “official” version of the past to justify and support the institution of segregation. Nowhere is this understanding of the past as an integral part of the segregated present better expressed than in Katharine Lumpkin’s *The Making of a Southerner*, one of the earliest postwar southern autobiographies. In the first three chapters, and especially in chapter three titled “A Child Inherits a Lost Cause,” Lumpkin graphically details how every institution of white southern society conveyed the values and beliefs that upheld segregation. Family, school, church, and political party at every turn reinforced the laws that maintained a segregated society, and they did so in large measure by presenting a uniform, and mythologized, version of the region’s past.<sup>7</sup>

The mythologized view of southern history presented a wealthy, antebellum planter aristocracy that was morally superior to its northern counterpart. The planter elite benevolently treated slaves supplied by greedy, cruel, Yankee traders, and the Civil War resulted from Yankee jealousy of the South’s success. After four years of gallant resistance, the numerically superior northern forces subdued the South’s heroic troops, after which the region endured the horrors of Reconstruction, including the rule of ignorant, rapacious blacks supported by a northern Republican party bent upon destroying the South. To save white civilization and the virtue of southern womanhood, the gallant men of the South organized into such groups as the Ku Klux Klan. Using violence only when forced to do so, they overthrew their black and Republican oppressors and reestablished the rule of honest, God-fearing whites who continued to look out for the true interest of the region’s blacks.

Elements of this mythology can be found in practically every racial conversion narrative penned by white southerners since World War II in large part because it was taught to them in the region’s schools. At the time of Wilmington’s racial violence, southern patriotic organizations such as the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), and especially the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) were crusading to see that every southern state adopted history texts that reflected the mythology of the Lost Cause. Under the leadership of such figures as Mildred Lewis Rutherford, historian-general of the UDC, and Stephen D. Lee, chairman of the UCV’s historical committee, these organizations were remarkably successful.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of this success, white southerners were taught this sanitized version of history in the region’s public schools until well into the 1970s, although most academic historians had repudiated it more than a decade earlier. The longevity of formal instruction in a mythologized past in the region’s public schools had significant consequences. Despite the enormous social, political, and economic changes wrought by the civil rights revolution between 1954 and 1968, changes



*The mythic view of southern history says that to save white civilization and the virtue of white womanhood, gallant men organized into such groups as the KKK. The Klan, demonstrating in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in the 1980s, courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, the University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill.*

forced upon an antagonistic white society primarily through the unrelenting and courageous efforts of the region's African Americans, whites continued to be instructed in the mythology of the Lost Cause, and their collective perception of the past remained unaltered.<sup>9</sup>

While the Civil Rights movement ultimately resulted in incorporating the African American past in public school curriculums, as well as in motion pictures, television, and other popular cultural media, generations of whites schooled in the mythologized southern past continued to determine how the past was celebrated at the community level. Through a variety of voluntary associations—churches, clubs, historical societies—as well as through local governmental bodies, they struggled to preserve a segregated past. White Wilmingtonians incorporated a justification for and a defense of the actions of the white supremacy forces of 1898 into their mythologized version of the past. Just as significantly, they refused to recognize any validity in the black community's quite different collective memory of 1898. This counter memory, expressed soon after the events in the writings of Charles Chesnutt and at mid-century by the work of black historian Helen Edmonds, was also maintained within Wilmington's black

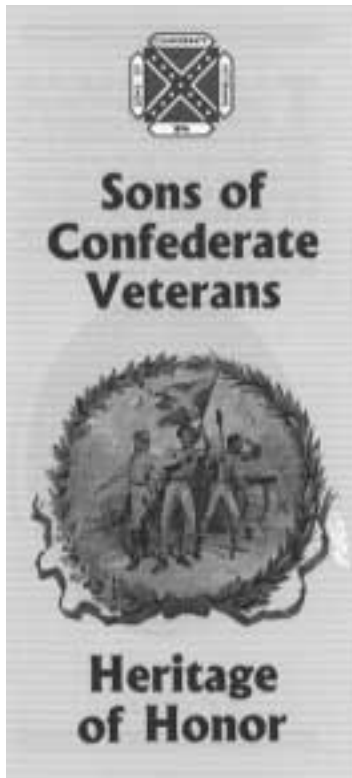


community. Wilmington's white leadership, however, prevented the black community's radically different memory of the 1898 events from entering the community's public discourse or from being memorialized by the city's many historical monuments and markers. This bifurcation of the past, or the creation of segregated pasts, contributed substantially to the racial violence that accompanied the desegregation of Wilmington's public schools in the 1970–71 academic year, racial violence that once again focused national attention on the city.<sup>10</sup>

This generational cultural lag accounts for the fact that only recently have white southerners begun collectively to question the old mythology and to seek a more inclusive understanding of the past, although it is clear that such a shift in perceptions of the collective, public past is now occurring. While the recent debate over the flying of the Confederate battle flag over the South Carolina capitol grabbed national headlines, this shift in collective memory, which represents a paradigm change, is a far more significant story, illustrated by any number of events within the past decade. Three such cases are especially noteworthy because they indicate broad-based white support for a more objective and inclusive view of the region's racial past—a situation quite different from the protests of the few white southern intellectuals who publicly challenged the racial status quo immediately following World War II.

In 1994 the Florida legislature addressed one of the state's most violent racial incidents of the twentieth century. Responding to rumors that a black rapist had attacked a white woman, in January 1923 a mob of armed whites attacked blacks in their homes in Rosewood, Florida. The embattled blacks defended themselves with deadly accurate gunfire, killing two members of the attacking mob. Over the next two days, armed mobs reinforced by white men from communities throughout north central Florida destroyed every black home in Rosewood, killing at least six black men. For seventy-one years the state of Florida refused to acknowledge what had happened at Rosewood. Then in 1990 a pro bono team at Holland and Knight, the state's largest law firm, initiated a successful legal battle on behalf of Rosewood victims and their descendants. In 1994, after the discovery of additional survivors and more than three hundred direct descendants, the Florida state legislature offered a delayed apology in the form of a claims bill modeled after the Japanese Reparations Act of 1988 that awarded \$2.1 million to be divided among the Rosewood survivors.<sup>11</sup>

In 1996 the people of Tulsa, Oklahoma, erected a memorial to commemorate those killed in 1921 in one of the nation's worst incidents of racial violence. As with the Rosewood violence, the Tulsa incident resulted from a report of an assault by a black man on a white woman. White mobs, including members of the Ku Klux Klan, burned a thirty-five-block business district in the city's thriving black community known as the "Negro Wall Street of America." Before the governor sent in the National Guard to stop the mayhem, hundreds of homes were



*Such southern patriotic organizations as Sons of Confederate Veterans once crusaded to see that every southern state adopted history texts that reflected the myth of the Lost Cause. This modern-day literature from the group still quotes Robert E. Lee's evocation of the myth: "To you, Sons of Confederate Veterans, we submit the vindication of the Cause for which we fought." Courtesy of Sons of Confederate Veterans.*

destroyed and estimates of the number of blacks killed topped two hundred and fifty. For the next seventy-five years, Tulsa whites blamed blacks for instigating the riots and suppressed information about the incident. No memorial was built, and articles about the riot were cut from newspapers kept at the city's library. Prodding from the city's black community led to the 1996 commemorative services held at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, which was rebuilt after being destroyed by fires that broke out following the riot. Some twelve hundred citizens, black and white, participated in church services and then marched to the site of the new memorial that bears the names of black businesses destroyed in the rioting. Prominent political leaders from Tulsa and the state attended the ceremonies, including Tulsa's mayor, Susan Savage, and David Boren, president of the University of Oklahoma and former U.S. senator.<sup>12</sup>

In 1995 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution renouncing its racist roots and apologizing for its past defense of slavery. The resolution declared that Convention delegates "unwaveringly denounce racism, in all its forms, as deplorable sin" and "lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest." The resolution apologized to all African Americans for Southern Baptists' "condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime" and expressed repentance for "racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously or unconsciously."



*Racial violence in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921 resulted from a report of an attack by an African American man on a white woman. White mobs burned a thirty-five-block business district in the city's thriving African American community, destroyed hundreds of homes, and killed more than 250 African Americans. Scenes from the riot, courtesy of the Archives & Manuscript Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society.*

Although Southern Baptists had condemned racism in the past, this was the denomination's first effort to deal with the legacy of slavery. The resolution came to the convention as the result of a grassroots movement begun in 1994 that saw a number of Baptist state conventions pass statements of repentance.<sup>13</sup>

WILMINGTON, BLACK AND WHITE,  
RECKONS WITH THE PAST

Wilmington's recent efforts to commemorate the tragic and terrible events of 1898 is further evidence that an increasing number of whites are willing to acknowledge publicly that their concept of their region's history is seriously flawed. Like the Rosewood settlement, the Tulsa commemoration, and the Southern Baptist apology for slavery, the Wilmington commemoration began as a grassroots action. With strong support from some faculty and staff at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Wilmington, informal conversations about 1898 began in late 1995 among academics, leaders within the African American community, and "traditional" civil rights activists within the religious community. In June 1996 faculty members and representatives from a variety of Wilmington institutions held the first meeting to determine "some sort of commemoration of the events of 1898." The group agreed that whatever actions were taken should tell the story and significance of those events, be as inclusive of all elements of the community as possible, and eventually result in a living memorial and a physical monument "of some type." This initial meeting was of enormous significance, for it set the agenda for the community's commemorative effort. By the early fall of 1996, the group had representation from practically every civic organization concerned with racial justice, had developed an informal but effective organizational structure, and had obtained grant funding to sustain its work. It was also a truly biracial organization. White membership stemmed primarily from the old strongholds of whites supportive of civil rights activities, the academic community, a surprising array of religious organizations, and a few governmental agencies; black membership came from the same sources in addition to a variety of civil rights organizations. In October the group finalized plans for a major public program at the county museum on the 1996 anniversary of the riot to "invite broad public involvement in the planning effort of the next two years."<sup>14</sup>

The November 10 program was an enormous success, attended by well over two hundred people, including members of the city council and local state representatives. The featured speaker was Winston-Salem's white Republican district attorney Thomas Keith, whose great-grandfather had been forced to flee Wilmington in 1898 and whose perspective on the events forcefully challenged the traditional Wilmington version. Building on the interest generated by this program, in January the planning group adopted an institutional structure and a set

of goals for carrying out its commemorative efforts. To insure that the organization's biracial character would be maintained, all committees were presided over by black and white co-chairs. The group determined that its goals should be to tell the story of the 1898 events, to heal the wounds those events and their legacy inflicted upon the community, and to honor the memory of those who died in and whose lives were disrupted by the racial violence. The group also determined that it would both initiate its own commemorative projects and help coordinate and publicize commemorative events planned by community organizations.<sup>15</sup> Well-organized, financed by grant funds from outside the community, possessed of a clear plan of action, and with publicly expressed support from community institutions and organizations, the 1898 Centennial Commission by early 1997 was going to impact the community, despite the misgivings of those within the community who clung to the mythic past.

Encouraging the white community, especially those steeped in the mythology of the Lost Cause and often directly descended from leaders of the 1898 white supremacy effort, to accept an altered view of the city's history proved no easy task. Some prominent whites publicly objected to any effort to commemorate the events of 1898, while others privately expressed the concern that such efforts would worsen race relations. On several occasions UNC-Wilmington offered its services as a mediator, inviting representatives of various constituencies to dis-



*With strong support from some faculty and staff at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, as well as from others in the community, informal conversations about how to commemorate the events of 1898 began in 1995. The University of North Carolina at Wilmington, courtesy of UNCW University Relations.*

cuss both the need for and the manner of commemorating such a tragic past. Whites seemed most threatened by black concerns that the issue of economic justice be addressed, especially by calls for reparations, and by the depiction of their family members as immoral and unfeeling racists. Some objected strenuously to the concept of a memorial to the victims, one prominent white Wilmingtonian going so far as to boast that he would be the first to tear down any monument that was erected. Blacks, on the other hand, expressed frustration at the reluctance of some whites to make moral judgements about the 1898 violence and to acknowledge that the events had enormous, and continuing, effects on the lives of both white and black Wilmingtonians.<sup>16</sup>

Even within the commission's membership, strong disagreements occurred, one of the first over what to call the events of 1898. Some favored "massacre," others "coup d'état," still others "race riot." Each appellation carried political and racial connotations, and in the end the group agreed to use the term "racial violence." Efforts to produce a short "official" history of the events for inclusion in the commission's newsletter led to heated debate among professional historians and between academic historians and black and white community members. Class as well as racial differences surfaced, especially among representatives of African Americans in the inner city who expressed the view that the commission was for the middle class only. Rumors that commission staff members were pock-

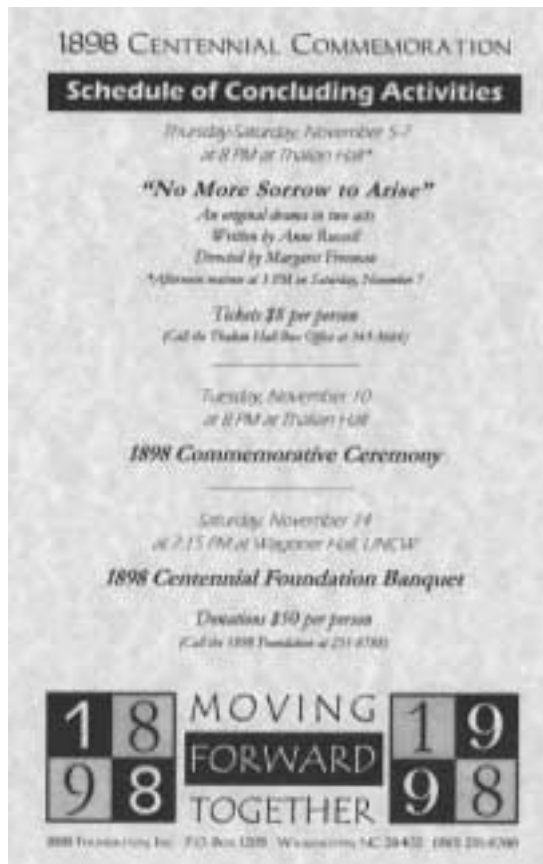


*In 1997 Tulsa Mayor Susan Savage and Oklahoma State Representative Don Ross visited Wilmington to assure city leaders and the public that Wilmington could have a meaningful and peaceful commemoration of the events of 1898. Photos courtesy of the Office of the Mayor of Tulsa and Oklahoma State Representative Don Ross's office.*

eting thousands of grant dollars surfaced in the African American community, a charge echoed within the traditional white elite. Once the city and county governments gave their financial support to the commission, subtle pressures ensured that the group's personnel were acceptable to certain constituencies, especially the white middle and upper classes and some African Americans suspicious of "outsiders" within the commission. As a result, Bolton Anthony, who had resided in the community for approximately three years as the director of a grant-funded community project for the university and served as the commission's original white co-chair, was persuaded to become the commission's executive director, allowing James Megivern, who had resided in Wilmington for over twenty-five years, to become co-chair. In practice, these personnel changes made in response to pressures from the community greatly enhanced the commission's effectiveness. Anthony was significantly more effective as the executive director who supervised the organization's daily activities and drafted its grant proposals, while Megivern proved a more effective public representative to a variety of community groups. Gradually, as plans for the commemoration began to take shape, it became evident that large segments of the community, both blacks and whites, would participate in the events, and the commission labored diligently to expand that number.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout 1997 the commission planned for the centennial year and sponsored programs designed to broaden community participation. In March Susan Savage, mayor of Tulsa, and Oklahoma state representative Don Ross visited Wilmington. Savage and Ross assured local political and business leaders and the public that Wilmington could have a meaningful, and peaceful, commemoration of the events of 1898. In the fall the commission, which had changed its name to the 1898 Centennial Foundation, brought in facilitators from national organizations promoting racial reconciliation, including Common Ground, to plan a series of "racial dialogues" in churches and homes throughout the community. The foundation conducted a workshop on race relations for community leaders in government, education, and business. It also sponsored a lecture series on the 1898 violence that paired academic and local historians at several venues within the community and laid plans for "Wilmington in Black and White," a series of public presentations by paired black and white local leaders on the current state of race relations in the city. Foundation members employed at Screen Gems, a movie studio that had become a significant factor in the city's economy within the past decade, began to produce a documentary film on the efforts of the community to address the legacy of 1898.<sup>18</sup>

In January the Foundation launched its activities for the Centennial year with a public program called "Moving Forward Together," which was attended by over six hundred people. Two Democratic members of the U. S. House of Representatives, members of the City Council and the mayor, and members of the County



*In January 1998 the Centennial Foundation launched its activities with a public program called "Moving Forward Together."*

*Courtesy of Bertha Todd, Co-chair of the 1898 Centennial Foundation.*

Commission attended, as did a representative of Governor James Hunt. The attendance of so many political figures signaled a willingness on the part of local leaders in both parties at least to acquiesce in the foundation's plans for commemorating the events of 1898. Although it rejected calls from some segments of the African American community, especially younger, inner-city residents, to demand reparations from the white elite, the foundation developed a program to promote economic justice. In late April the foundation brought in a speaker to discuss black-heritage-based tourism and in September sponsored a conference on creating a climate of economic inclusion. In May the foundation initiated an ambitious series of dialogue sessions that enrolled more than four hundred persons, with a waiting list of nearly one hundred and fifty. To encourage participation in its events, the foundation stressed that "no one living in Wilmington today was a participant in the events of 1898. Consequently, none of us bears personal responsibility for what happened." But, the foundation insisted, "all among us — no matter our race or history, whether we have arrived here only recently or come from families that have called Wilmington home for generations — all are responsible for 1998. On each of us falls the personal responsibility to make our community one where economic justice and racial harmony flourish."<sup>19</sup>



Even as the scope of the Centennial activities and the diversity of participants illustrated a historic shift in the perception of the past publicly endorsed by the white community, controversy over the manner in which the past was portrayed frequently surfaced, both within the foundation and the larger community. Such controversies revealed not only the traditional fault lines of race and class, but also the newer one of residency. Many recent city and county residents, predominantly white and drawn to the region by its robust economy and quality of life, wondered why 1898 mattered and why the past should be revived. Blacks moving into Wilmington, many of whom had fled the segregated city for careers north of the Potomac only to return as retirees, had no such questions.

Two public events in particular illustrate the inevitable tensions that accompanied the community's efforts to reexamine its racial heritage. Early in 1998 the Wilmington in Black and White lecture series was repeated in St. Stephens A.M.E. Church, one of Wilmington's oldest and most influential black congregations, located not far from the site of much of the violence of 1898. The second lecture featured speakers who had not participated in the original series: John Haley, an African American and a historian of race relations from the university, and George Rountree III, a noted local attorney, the grandson of one of the leaders of the 1898 violence, and a former member of the UNC-Wilmington Board of Trustees. Rountree was the first prominent white Wilmingtonian directly descended from one of the leaders of the white Democratic forces in 1898 to participate openly in the foundation's activities, although Hugh MacRae II, the grandson and namesake of another leader of the 1898 violence, had made substantial financial contributions. Word of Rountree's participation quickly spread through the community grapevine, and the program, originally scheduled for the church's educational hall, was moved to the larger sanctuary to accommodate an anticipated larger audience.

A near capacity crowd with a slight African American majority sat in a hushed, tension-filled atmosphere while John Haley set the stage with a brief, objective account of the events of 1898. He concluded with an introduction of Rountree as the namesake and grandson of the man who had led the rioting in 1898 and introduced legislation in the North Carolina legislature that had disenfranchised the state's African American citizens some ninety-seven years ago. Rountree then rose to address a hushed audience. He began with a declaration of his support for equality by evoking his appreciation of a childhood mammy, and the silence thickened. He refused to apologize for his grandfather's actions, insisting that he was the product of his times. He then spoke of his personal relationship to his grandfather, of his boyhood image of this almost God-like figure. What emerged was Rountree's perception of his grandfather as a devoted family man, dedicated community leader, a man of strong religious beliefs and unyielding moral principles. Such was the man he knew and such was the man he remembered; it was only the times that had been out of joint.



*The attendance of political leaders at the Centennial Foundation's activities, including North Carolina's Governor Jim Hunt, signaled a willingness to acquiesce to the foundation's plans for commemorating the events of 1898. Photograph courtesy of the Governor's Office.*

An audience participation period followed, and Rountree was immediately challenged. Kenneth Davis, an African American employed by Corning and a stalwart in the foundation, rose to tell Rountree of the achievements of a generation of African Americans in Wilmington after the Civil War, achievements his grandfather had snuffed out. His past, and the past of Wilmington's black community, Davis made clear, was not the past Rountree preferred. Rountree acknowledged Davis's view of the past, but did not retreat from his position. Inez Easom, a young African American and the descendant of individuals whose lives had been transformed by the rioting, called for reparations to the black community for what it had suffered and lost, and younger African Americans supported her call with muffled shouts of approval. Rountree countered with the notion of private charity to address what he acknowledged were inequalities within the community, saying that he bore no responsibility for what had occurred a hundred years ago. Anne Russell, also a descendant of Wilmington's old white elite, tried without success to elicit from Rountree an acknowledgement that although he bore no responsibility for those events, he personally had benefited from them. Finally, Kenneth Davis again rose to speak, and, while making clear his disagreement with Rountree's assessment of his grandfather, thanked him for coming to St. Stephens to share his views with the audience. John Haley drew the presentation to a close, and the members of the over-forty generation of blacks and whites went forward to speak personally to both presenters, while young African Americans left conversing among themselves.<sup>20</sup>



*When George Rountree III, a noted local attorney and the grandson of one of the leaders of the 1898 violence, spoke in defense of his grandfather's character at one of the Centennial Foundation's public forums, Kenneth Davis, one of the Foundation's African American stalwarts, rose to tell Rountree of the achievements of a generation of African Americans in Wilmington after the Civil War—achievements Rountree's grandfather had snuffed out. Photograph courtesy of Kenneth Davis.*

The issue of reparations, which had surfaced again at Rountree's presentation, was unquestionably the most potentially divisive issue the foundation faced. Had the foundation demanded reparations, it would have lost all support from governmental agencies, many businesses, and most of the white community. Yet the undeniable economic injustice that Wilmington's black population had suffered throughout the segregation era, and to a degree continues to suffer, had to be addressed in some manner if the foundation were to retain its credibility in the African American community. The foundation adopted a two-pronged approach to this dilemma. The first was the creation of an economic development committee to explore the possible economic benefits of black-heritage tourism, a concept that was strongly endorsed by a number of African Americans within the organization. The second approach, accomplished through cooperation with the Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, was the creation of the community-based Partners for Economic Inclusion, which sponsored a major conference in September 1998 to address "the issue of inclusion of the black community in the greater business environment."<sup>21</sup>

In October UNC-Wilmington hosted a public symposium on the 1898 racial violence and its legacy, featuring the nation's leading scholars of the event and the literature it produced and the unveiling of a state highway historical marker for Alex Manly, the black editor whose editorial had helped spark the 1898 violence. Attended by well over a thousand people, the symposium gave local residents the opportunity to discuss the events with the academic scholars most knowledge-

able about what had happened in the city in 1898. “Break out sessions” in which the scholars talked directly with members of the audience followed the formal presentations. Black and white Wilmingtonians poured out, sometimes haltingly, the legends of 1898 that had been shared in their families. Some blacks spoke with bitterness about what they had experienced in the Wilmington the events of 1898 had created, others with sadness about the world of black achievement and hope the violence had destroyed. Again, young blacks called for reparations and greater inclusion in the region’s obvious economic prosperity. Some whites told of being assured by parents and grandparents that the violence had been necessary, while others told of family members trying to protect blacks from mob violence. Some of the voices were loud and emotional, some almost hushed, but all were heard, and there was little anger evident. African American descendants of Alex Manly and others who had been driven out of the city and of those who had stayed after the violence talked with white descendants of those who had planned, organized, and perpetrated the violence. After the final presentation on October 24, across the large auditorium in which the event was held, out into the building’s expansive foyer, blacks and whites clustered in groups of ten and twelve, sharing their stories of 1898, as if reluctant to disengage from their reengagement with the complexity of a past they finally shared.<sup>22</sup>

The 1898 Centennial Foundation’s formal commemorative program concluded with a series of events in November. Volunteer actors and musicians produced a drama based on the 1898 events in the city’s historic playhouse, Thalian Hall, where a hundred years ago whites had gathered to demand that the city’s black population adopt a “White Man’s Declaration of Independence,” which was, in fact, a call for the almost total subjection of the black populace to the will and whim of the white majority. After the play, members of the audience were asked to sign “The People’s Declaration of Racial Interdependence,” a call drafted by the foundation for continued efforts to achieve racial equality and economic justice within the community. Over a thousand, including most of the city’s political leadership, did so. On the precise centennial anniversary of the riots, November 10, 1998, the foundation sponsored a moving ceremony at Thalian Hall. The program featured the combined choirs of the St. Luke A.M.E. Zion Church and the First Presbyterian Church, where a hundred years earlier, after the overthrow of the biracial Fusionist municipal government, the minister had exalted, “We have taken a city.” Their combined voices proclaimed that the city’s white community had arrived at a more complex, and far more accurate, perception of the past. A half century earlier, Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin had discovered that while she had been struggling with the concept of African American inferiority, to the African Americans she knew “the inferiority of race . . . was nonexistent, only a fiction, a myth, which white minds had created for reasons of their own.” In 1998 white Wilmingtonians acknowledged that their version of the



*The Centennial Foundation continues today primarily as a facilitating agency. Placement of a permanent memorial to the victims of the 1898 riot, like this monument to the prospering African American businesses destroyed by Tulsa's racial violence in 1921, now remains the project most directly under the foundation's control. Courtesy of Oklahoma State Representative Don Ross's office.*

past was yet another myth and that the African American version was far more accurate.<sup>23</sup>

The 1898 Centennial Foundation continues today primarily as a facilitating agency, advancing its goals through and in cooperation with other community agencies and organizations. Placement of a permanent memorial to those slain in 1898 in a park near the scene of their deaths remains the project currently most directly under the control of the foundation. The degree to which the foundation has created within the community a willingness publicly and permanently to commemorate the events of 1898 is seen by the membership of its memorial committee. White co-chairs of the committee are Hugh MacRae II and Katharine Taylor, the great granddaughter of Walker Taylor, another of the leaders of the white Democratic forces of 1898. The black co-chairs are Frankye Manly Jones, of Alexandria, Virginia, the niece of Alex Manly, and Luther Jordan, a prominent Wilmington businessman and state senator. The foundation also continues to promote policies to foster economic justice, focusing on the inclusion of Wilmington's rich African American heritage in plans to further develop the region's growing tourism industry and working with the Partners for Economic Inclusion and the Chamber of Commerce. Working through the local YWCA, the foundation also plans to continue a program of racial dialogues in homes, organizations, and religious institutions throughout the city.<sup>24</sup> Only time will tell how successful these efforts to address the continuing legacy of racial segregation will be. It is undeniable, however, that the commemorative events sponsored by the

foundation and other community organizations provoked Wilmingtonians to serious, thoughtful examinations of how racial attitudes affect the social, economic, and political life of the community. And, perhaps most significantly, a crucial, if tragic, segment of the city's past was reclaimed and incorporated into the public discourse.

This shift from a few principled whites challenging the region's mythologized past to a collective demand for a more inclusive view of the past has been a long time coming. The battle over which past the region presents to the public, and how it is presented, is not over. Because of deeply imbedded cultural values and enduring racism, it may continue to be debated for some time. Not all black Wilmingtonians supported the 1898 commemorative events; some saw them as too little, too late. Others were disappointed by the foundation's refusal to endorse a call for financial reparations. Nor were all of Wilmington's whites prepared to abandon their traditional views of the past. Some of the city's most prestigious white religious institutions did not formally support the foundation's commemorative efforts, although many within these congregations did. Some members of Wilmington's prominent white families continue to honor publicly the region's mythologized past. George Rountree III expressed publicly the sentiments of those who refused to accept a revised, and more accurate, view of the past. His grandfather, Rountree declared, had only "helped return the control of government property to property owners who have a stake in the society. . . . Let me make plain that I offer no apology for him [his grandfather]. He needs no apology."<sup>25</sup> Despite the protestations of Rountree and a few other representatives of Wilmington's former elite, the way the white citizens of Wilmington view their past is changing. The commemorative events of 1998 clearly indicate that in Wilmington, as in much of the South, the mythic past, though still powerful, is no longer what it was.

#### NOTES

1. The best works in print on Wilmington's racial violence of 1898 are H. Leon Prather, *We Have Taken a City: Wilmington's Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984), and David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed, The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998). The most complete treatment of the event is Jerome A. McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington and New Hanover County, North Carolina, 1865–1900, the Genesis of a Race Riot," Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University, 1979.

2. Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894–1901* (University of North Carolina Press, 1951); Andrew C. Craft, "Wilmington's Political-Racial Revolution of 1898: A Geographical and Cartographic Analysis of the Wilmington, North Carolina Race Riot," Honors Thesis, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, 1993; McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," especially vol. 1.

3. Prather, *Taken a City*, 68–98; McDuffie, “Politics in Wilmington,” vol. 2, 588–768.
4. The literature on the segregated South is voluminous. For two recent excellent surveys, see Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (Pantheon Books, 1998), and Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (Knopf, 1998).
5. Fred Hobson, *But Now I See, The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (Louisiana State University Press, 1999).
6. Melton McLaurin, “Rituals of Initiation and Rebellion: Adolescent Responses to Segregation in Autobiography,” *Southern Cultures*, 3 (Summer 1997): 5–24. Hobson, *But Now I See*, 120–48.
7. Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, *The Making of a Southerner* (1946; University of Georgia Press, 1991), 111–47.
8. Fred Bailey’s work on the campaign to see that a southern version of history was taught in the region’s schools is perhaps the most detailed. See his articles “Mildred Lewis Rutherford and the Patrician Cult of the Old South,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 77 (Fall 1994): 1–27; “Free Speech and the ‘Lost Cause’ in Texas: A Study of Social Control in the New South,” *Southern Historical Quarterly* (January 1994): 452–77; and “The Textbooks of the ‘Lost Cause,’ Censorship and the Creation of Southern State Histories,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 75 (Fall 1991): 507–33.
9. Melton McLaurin, “The Image of the Negro in Deep South Public School State History Texts,” *Phylon*, 32 (Fall 1971): 237–46.
10. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1901); Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics*. The most thorough treatment of the racial violence accompanying the desegregation of Wilmington’s public schools is John L. Godwin, “Wilmington and the North Carolina Way: Race, Culture, and Economy through the Civil Rights Years,” Ph. D. Thesis, University of South Carolina, 1988; see also Kevin Carlisle, “To Stand Alone: Desegregating Wilmington’s Schools,” Honors Thesis, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, 1994.
11. For a good brief discussion of the Rosewood racial violence, see Thomas R. Dye, “Rosewood, Florida: The Destruction of an African American Community,” *The Historian*, 58 (Spring 1996): 605–23; Eileen Finan, “Delayed justice: The Rosewood Story,” *Human Rights: Journal of the Section of Individual Rights & Responsibilities*, 22 (Spring 1995): 8–11; Eric Morgenthau, “Big Law Firm Works Free to Seek Justice in 71-Year-Old Case,” *Wall Street Journal*, 4 April 1994, A1; Wolfgang Saxon, “Minnie Langley, 83; Sought Recompense for Racist Rampage,” *New York Times*, 19 December 1995, B14.
12. “75 Years Later, Tulsa Confronts Its Race Riot,” *New York Times*, 31 May 1996, A8; see also Jonathan Z. Larsen, “Tulsa burning,” *Civilization*, 4 (February/March 1997): 46; “Oklahoma clears black in deadly 1921 race riot,” *New York Times*, 26 October 1996, A8; and “City of Tulsa, OK, finally recognizes suffering of blacks in 1921 race riot,” *Jet*, 90 (17 June 1996): 4.
13. “SBC Denounces Racist Past,” *Christian Century*, 112 (5 July 1995): 671; see also *New York Times*, 21 June 1995, A1.
14. Letter from William Fewell, co-chair of Remembering 1898, to Friends, 6 November 1996, and letter from Bolton Anthony, co-chair of Remembering 1898, to area pastors, 25 October 1996, 1898 Centennial Foundation Collection, University of North Carolina at Wilmington Archives, hereinafter cited as 1898 Collection.
15. Wilmington *Morning Star*, 11 November 1996, B1; Minutes of the 1898 Centennial Commission meeting, 7 Jan 1997, 1898 Collection.
16. Report on Executive Committee Meeting, 1898 Centennial Commission, 7 January 1997; Status Report, Executive Council Meeting, 1898 Centennial Commission, 1 April 1997; Bolton

Anthony, co-chair, 1898 Centennial Foundation, to Melton McLaurin, 24 February 1997, all in 1898 Collection; statement on monument destruction made personally to the author.

17. Memo from Rhonda Bellamy to 1898 Centennial Commission Executive Council Members, 1 May 1997; By-Laws of 1898 Centennial Foundation, 5 May 1997; Memo from Bolton Anthony to 1898 Centennial Foundation Executive Council Members, 1 July 1997; Melton McLaurin to James Leutze, 25 July 1997; Memo from Bolton Anthony to "Historians," 25 July 1997; Bolton Anthony to Various Community Leaders, 25 September 1997; Minutes, 1898 Centennial Foundation Executive Council Meeting, 9 November 1997, all in 1898 Collection. The author also personally discussed the possibility of a change in Bolton Anthony's position with members of the Wilmington City Council and the 1898 Foundation.

18. Memorandum to Executive Council Members from Bolton Anthony, co-chair of the 1898 Centennial Commission, 25 March 1997, 1898 Collection; 1898 Centennial Foundation, *Report on Activities*, Fall 1997, 1898 Collection.

19. Bolton Anthony to members of the 1898 Centennial Foundation Executive Council, 16 February 1998, 1898 Collection; 1898 Centennial Foundation, *Report on Activities*, Fall 1997, 1898 Collection; *Wilmington Morning Star*, 18 January 1998, B1, 3 September 1998, B1.

20. This summary of the events of the evening of 12 February 1998 is based upon the memory of the author, who attended, and on the flyer "Wilmington in Black and White," printed by the 1898 Centennial Foundation, in the 1898 Collection.

21. 1898 Centennial Foundation, *Report on Activities*, Fall 1998, 9; Bolton Anthony, *Confronting Dangerous Memories, Wilmington Centennial Commemoration of the Coup of 1898*, 32–36, 53–55, 1898 Collection.

22. *Wilmington Morning Star*, 24 October 1998, A1, 25 October 1998, B1; *Raleigh News and Observer*, 1 November 1998, 25A, 27A; Larry Reni Thomas, "Was the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 Another Rosewood?," *Durham Urban Journal*, December 1998, 4–5, 9, 11, 18. This account also draws upon the memory of the author.

23. 1898 Centennial Commission, *The Centennial Record*, December 1998, 1898 Collection; Program, 1898 Centennial Foundation Commemorative Ceremony, 10 November 1998, 1898 Collection; *Wilmington Morning Star*, 11 November 1998, B1, B2.; Lumpkin, *Making of a Southerner*, 215.

24. The 1898 Foundation, *Report on Activities*, Spring 1999, 1898 Collection.

25. George Rountree as quoted in the *Raleigh News and Observer*, 1 November 1998, 25A, 27A.