

Wilmington Race Riots - In 1898, Wilmington was a thriving port city on the coast of North Carolina. About two-thirds of Wilmington's population was African American. African Americans were business people who owned barbershops, restaurants, tailor shops, and drug stores. African Americans also held positions as firemen and policemen. Overall, the African American and white races existed peacefully but separately.



Two days after the 1898 election of a Fusionist white mayor (a fusionist attempts to help opposing side get along) and biracial city council, two-thirds of which was white, white supremacists illegally seized power and overturned the elected government. 2000 white men participated in an attack on the black newspaper, Daily Record, burning down the building. They ran officials and community leaders out of the city, and killed many blacks in widespread attacks. Both black and white residents later appealed for help after the coup to President William McKinley, but his administration did not respond. After the riot, more than 2,100 blacks left the city permanently, having to abandon their businesses and properties, turning it from a black-majority to a white-majority city.

Primary Source - Wilmington N.C. Nov 13, 1898

Wm McKinley: — President of the United States of America,

I a Negro woman of this City appeal to you from the depths of my heart, to do something in the Negro's behalf. The outside world only knows one side of the trouble here, there is no paper to tell the truth about the Negro here, or in this or any other Southern state. The Negro in this town had no arms, (except pistols perhaps in some instances) with which to defend themselves from the attack of lawless whites. On the 10th Thursday morning between eight and nine o'clock, when our Negro men had gone to their places of work, the white men led by Col. A. M. Waddell, D. Bellamy, & S. H. Fishblate marched from the Light Infantry armory on Market st. to Seventh down seventh to Love & Charity Hall (which was owned by a society of Negroes and where the Negro daily press was.) and set it afire & burnt it up And firing Guns Winchesters. They also had a Hotchkiss gun (stationary machine run) & two Colt rapid fire guns.After destroying the building they began searching every one and if you did not submit, [you] would be shot down on the spot. They searched all the Negro Churches. And to day (Sunday) we dare not go to our places of worship. They found no guns or amunition in any of the places, for there was none. And to satisfy their Blood thirsty appetites would kill unoffending Negro men to or on their way from dinner. Some of our most worthy [illegible] Negro Men have been made to leave the City. Also some Whites, G. Z. French, Deputy Sheriff, Cheif of police, Jno. R. Melton, Dr. S. P. Wright, Mayor, and R. H. Bunting, united states commissioner. We don't know where Mr. Chadbourn the Post Master is, and two or three others white. I call on you the head of the American Nation to help these humble subjects. We are loyal we go when duty calls us. And are we to die like rats in a trap? With no place to seek redress or to go with our Greiveances?

Can we call on any other Nation for help? Why do you forsake the Negro? Who is not to blame for being here. This Grand and Noble Nation who flies to the help of suffering humanity of another Nation? And leave the Secessionists and born Rioters to slay us. Oh, that we had never seen the light of the world. When our parents belonged to them, why, the Negro was all right. Now, when they work and accumalate [sic] property they are all wrong. The Negroes that have been banished are all property owners to considerable extent, had they been worthless negroes, we would not care.

Will you for God sake in your next message to Congress give us some releif [sic] If you send us all to Africa on we will be willing or a number of us will gladly go. Is this the land of the free and the home of the brave? How can the Negro Sing My Country tis of Thee? For Humanity's sake help us. For Christ sake do. We the Negro can do nothing but pray. There seems to be no help for us. No paper will tell the truth about the Negro. ... There was not any Rioting Simply the strong slaying the weak. They speak of special police every white Man and boy from 12 years up had a gun or pistol, and the Negro had nothing, but his soul he could not say was his own. Oh, to see how we are Slaughtered, when our husbands go to work we do not look for their return. ... I cannot sign my name and live. But every word of this is true. The laws of our state is no good for the negro anyhow.

Yours in much distress,

-Wilmington NC