

Wilmington 1898

Wilmington, North Carolina

In Sixty Seconds

Before. Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898 was the largest city in the state and home to a thriving Black middle class. It had a biracial "Fusion" government elected through an alliance of Republicans and Populists. Three of its aldermen were Black. It had a Black-owned daily newspaper, the Wilmington Daily Record, and a rising Black professional class.

What happened. On November 10, 1898, two days after losing the statewide election, white supremacists led by former Congressman Alfred Moore Waddell marched on the city. They burned the offices of the Daily Record. They forced the elected mayor, aldermen, and police chief to resign at gunpoint. They installed themselves as the new government by noon.

Who did it. A group called the Secret Nine had planned the coup for months. Alfred Moore Waddell led the armed march and became the new mayor. The News and Observer, a Raleigh newspaper, ran months of inflammatory coverage preparing public opinion. The participants were celebrated as heroes across the state.

After. More than 2,100 Black residents permanently fled the city. The biracial Fusion government was never restored. North Carolina passed a new constitution in 1900 that effectively disenfranchised Black voters until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The state did not officially acknowledge that a coup had occurred until 2006.

The Named

Alex Manly

age 32. Editor of the Wilmington Daily Record, the only Black-owned daily newspaper in the South. His grandfather had been a North Carolina governor. Escaped the city by train just hours before the mob arrived at his offices.

Armond Scott

age 25. Young Black attorney and member of the Wilmington professional class. Escaped the violence by hiding in a coffin a Black undertaker had loaded onto a north-bound freight car.

Thomas C. Miller

age 50. Successful Black real estate investor and pawnbroker. Owner of significant property in Wilmington. Forced out of the city at gunpoint and banished.

John Dancy

age 41. Federal customs collector for the Port of Wilmington, one of the highest-ranking Black federal appointees in the South. Targeted specifically by the coup leadership as a symbol of Black federal authority.

For Discussion

1. The Wilmington Coup remains the only successful armed overthrow of an elected government on American soil. Why has an event of that magnitude been almost entirely absent from American civic memory for a century, and what factors decide which political violence enters the national story and which does not?
2. The Secret Nine planned the coup for months. The Raleigh News and Observer ran months of inflammatory coverage. Both the organizing and the media work were required for the coup to succeed. Which of those two layers has been harder for historians to reconstruct, and what does that answer tell you about how organized political violence is prepared in public view?
3. The Fusion government was an alliance of Republicans, Populists, and Black voters. What coalitions in contemporary American politics most closely resemble Fusion, and what makes such alliances durable or brittle at the moment their majority is tested?
4. North Carolina's 1900 constitution disenfranchised Black voters for sixty-five years after the coup. When an act of political violence succeeds, the legal architecture built on top of it often outlives the violence by generations. Where else does that pattern appear in American history, and what does it take to dismantle the legal architecture after the violence itself is long past?
5. The 2006 state commission used the word coup d'etat formally for the first time in North Carolina government communications. What changes when a state officially names an event for what it was, and what stays unchanged even after official naming?

Primary Sources

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