Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, N.C. (hereafter, NHCPL).

82. Senate and House Journals, 1868, 41–42.


86. Senate and House Journals, 1868–1869, 209, 223, 645; 1869–70, 466; Wilmington Journal, February 1869, Bill Reaves Collection, NHCPL; Balanoff, “Negro Legislators,” 42–44.

87. Galloway grew ill so suddenly that his wife and two young sons, John L. and Abraham Jr., were not able to return from a trip to New Bern before his death.

David S.
Cecelski

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Widow’s Declaration of Pension for Martha A. Little,” 29 January 1894, Colec
Galloway pension file, VA.


89. Evans, Ballots and Fence Rails, 137–41.

90. The Christian Recorder, 24 September 1870, Wilmington Journal, 2–4 September 1870, Bill Reaves Collection, NHCPL; Raleigh Weekly Standard, 17 September 1870.

Here’s an idea: Name a woman’s running shoe after a mythical demon who preyed on sleeping women. Reebok did … The dictionary defines incubus as an evil spirit that in medieval times was thought to descend upon women and have sex with them … “I’m horrified and the company is horrified [said a Reebok spokeswoman]. We are a company that has built its business on women’s footwear, so to do anything that’s denigrating to women is not what we’re about.”

— New Orleans Times-Picayune, 20 February 1987, C1

Glenda E.
Gilmore

Murder, Memory, and the Flight of the Incubus

My first word of Susan Smith’s missing children in Chester, South Carolina, came as I pulled into my son’s preschool in Charlotte, North Carolina. The stunning radio report grew worse with every “fact.” Horrible images washed over me: a carjacking, a menacing black attacker, two towheaded tykes, a frantic young blond working mother. I hugged my own little guy and stumbled out of the car. Some of the other mothers were crying. We said lingering goodbyes that morning and arrived early that afternoon to gather our children. That evening the television news broadcast a composite sketch of the alleged kidnapper. On the screen before me appeared a caricature of a black criminal:
a powerfully built man with very dark skin, crazed eyes, a menacing mouth, a tight stocking cap on the small dome of his head.

Susan Smith was lying, I realized in a rush. For I had “seen” this man before, in sources almost one hundred years old. He was the incubus in mythology, he is a winged demon that has sexual intercourse with women while they sleep; on the ground in 1898, he represented the black beast rapist. White politicians created him to seize political power and to extend white male “protection” to white women of the lower classes. This figure gave the Wilmington racial massacre of 1898 its force; it haunted white women’s dreams and pushed white men to reach deep inside themselves to fan a rage that became murderous. A century later, when all else failed Susan Smith—parents, marriage, career, love—she used the one morsel of status left to her as a poor white Southern woman with a past. If threatened by a black man, she could become beloved again, cleansed in the blood of her lambs. She could even use the power of the black male rapist myth to get away with murder. Or so she thought.

The incubus I spotted that night on television first flew about North Carolina in the spring and summer of 1898, after Furnifold Simmons, chairman of the Democratic Party, met with Charles Brantly Aycock and Josephus Daniels at the Chatawka Hotel in New Bern in March. Aycock was a young man on the make, a struggling attorney in the eastern part of the state. Daniels edited the Raleigh News and Observer, the state’s preeminent Democratic newspaper. They holed up at the Chatawka in a desperate attempt to find a way back to power after the Democratic Party had lost the governor’s seat and the legislature in 1896 to a biracial coalition of Populists and Republicans known as Fusionists. The Democrats found their ploy in the idea of “home protection.”

They would use a rape scare to pull white apostates back into the Democratic Party. Simmons dispatched his agents around the state. Headlines screamed: “An Incubus Must Be Removed.” Democrats founded White Government Leagues, embellished local accounts of African American “outrages” for statewide broadcast, and even tried their hands at song. These lyrics appeared on the front page of the Wilmington Messenger two days before the massacre:

Rise, ye sons of Carolina!
Proud Caucasians, one and all;
Be not deaf to Love’s appealing—

Daniels was perfectly willing to publish fabrications of “Negro atrocities” on a daily basis. The actual facts of the matters seemed difficult to pin down. If the situation appeared calm locally, reports circulated that the white people in the next town had suffered outrages. If conditions in that town looked sleepy enough when one arrived, news came that trouble had broken out farther down the road. Local correspondents sent in reports of street altercations, of sassy black women pummeling innocent white virgins with umbrellas, of “assaults with attempt to rape,” and of rapes. Simmons and Daniels concentrated on stories about the eastern black-majority counties, which they fed to the Piedmont, where white Democrats had recently voted Populist, and to western North Carolina, where whites most often voted Republican. It was a brilliant strategy.

The Democrats charged that as the white man slumbered, allowing African Americans to take political power, the incubus of black power had visited their beds as well. The “safety of the home” became the Democrats’ campaign slogan. White men must “restore to the white women of the state the security they felt under the [previous] twenty years of democracy.” The Populist white man who valued his class interests above his race learned with a shock that he had opened the gates of hell for some distant white woman. The Democrats’ pressure swelled white men’s egos and honed their indignation. An explosion seemed imminent.

In fact, there was only a rape scare, not a rape epidemic. Available crime statistics show no appreciable increase in either rapes or “assaults with intent to rape” in either 1897 or 1898.7 Black men were not inspired to rape by the hope of political power, nor were those African American men in law enforcement and the judiciary negligent in carrying out their duties toward black criminals. The rape scare was a politically driven wedge powered by the sledgehammer of white supremacy. Charles Aycock described Wilmington as “the storm center of the White Supremacy movement.” As a black-majority city, Wilmington became emblematic of the problem of “Negro rule” and provided fertile ground for stories of “Negro outrages.” Tales of woe issued forth from Wilmington’s outnumbered whites, reprinted and embellished by Jose-
phus Daniels up in Raleigh. The problem in Wilmington was not rape; it was the practice of democracy. After the Republicans and Populists won control of the state legislature in 1894, they had returned counties and local offices to “home rule.” As a result, African Americans, white Republicans, and Populists won election to local posts previously held by Democrats who had been appointed on the state level. In other words, the Fusionists restored local democracy to heavily black towns and counties.

In 1897, Wilmington Republicans won a majority on the board of alderman and elected a white Republican as mayor. White Democrats promptly protested, and the previous Democratic city administration refused to yield city hall to the newly elected Republicans. Before it was over, yet a third board of aldermen constituted itself and elected yet another mayor. Ultimately, the state supreme court decided in favor of the duly elected Republicans. Wilmington’s white Democrats, accustomed to ruling without majority support by state appointment, would not abide by the decision; they vacated their offices but immediately began to undermine the new government.9 Thus, in the beginning, the roots of the Wilmington racial massacre grew in political soil, but the Democrats’ sexually slanderous depiction of black men rammed down on those roots to nourish a mutant growth.

In Wilmington, the discontent of deposed officeholders quickly blended with that of frustrated white workers. Businessmen organized a “white man’s labor bureau” to take jobs away from black men. The point was never to drive much-needed black labor out of Wilmington, but rather to skimp off the best jobs as an object lesson. As a contemporary put it, “Of course, enough white laborers to supply the demand cannot be secured, but it is thought that after a few negroes have been turned adrift, the rest will need no further warning.”10 The chamber of commerce boldly declared “against Negro Domination,” arguing that officeholding by black officials “arrests enterprise, hampers commerce and repels capital.”11 Many characterized the white supremacy campaign as a “business men’s movement” arguing that even the “democratic political leaders are simply trailing behind.” It did not bode well for the peacefulness of the community when the leading newspaper became a “veritable arsenal, a large closet being stored with revolvers and rifles,” or when a “business men’s committee... purchased a Colt rapid-firing gun with which to protect the cotton wharves and other property from incendiary mobs.”12

The sources of white men’s discontents were political and economic, but the language of “home protection” gave that discontent a powerful psychosexual charge. Without the hysteria that swelled from the belief that their wives and daughters lived in danger, it is unlikely that otherwise average white men could find it within themselves to commit mass murder, as they ultimately did in Wilmington. A white man might protest an election or gripe about the prosperity of his black neighbors while he had trouble finding work, but it took Furnifold Simmons’s incubus hovering over the city to incite him to kill. Asserting manhood and protecting womanhood—upholding “family values” one might say—provided a rationale for self-defense. To be remade into killers, white men had to connect gender and race; they had to believe that one duty—the exercise of patriarchy—prevailed over all other commandments, including the biblical injunction against murder. Manipulated by propagandists elsewhere in the state, encouraged by their own ministers, inflamed by leading white men in their own community, they came to believe that black men’s very presence in public affairs threatened white women. The lie of the incubus became their reality.

Looking back on the racial massacre in 1936, a Wilmington resident recalled the compelling power of the incubus. Colonel John D. Taylor, a one-armed Confederate hero, and his son, J. Alan Taylor, allegedly talked in the weeks just prior to the 1898 election. “Alan,” the old veteran warned, “we are a conquered people.... The day is coming, however, when Northerners will regard our cause, ‘State’s Rights,’ as just.... Meanwhile, we must continue to grin and bear it.” To which his son, a rising young man, was said to have replied, “But my little daughter, Mary, and young son, Douglas, now in their ‘teens are representative of a new generation; and I am going to do my utmost to make Wilmington a clean, safe, and happy place.... I do not want them, and their little friends growing up... among rapists!”13 Together with eight other white men, J. Alan Taylor organized an armed militia to patrol each of the city’s five wards, block by block. This group, known among themselves as “the Secret Nine,” refashioned their identities. From the clay of upstanding businessmen, they remolded themselves into murderous “revolutionaries.”14

Given the lack of real, live black rapists, Wilmington’s white men, now organized and armed in secret militias, began to see all around them signs that pointed to tears in the social fabric, that seemed to be portents of the incubus lurking just out of sight. It was in this tense atmosphere that Alexander Manly, editor of the only black daily newspaper in the state, the Daily Record, tried to counter the rape scare in August. Manly felt he must answer the unfounded charges that lay thick on the ground, and he took the opportunity to do so when the white-
owned Wilmington Messenger resuscitated a year-old speech that Rebecca Latimer Felton had given in Georgia. According to Felton, neglectful Southern white men had let things deteriorate to the point that lynching of black rapists was the only remedy, a pronouncement that fit perfectly with the white supremacists’ campaign.¹⁵

To answer the Democrats’ dangerous revitalization of Felton’s command to “lynch 1,000 weekly,” Manly fought fire with fire.¹⁶ First, he argued that often white women cried rape after illicit affairs across the color line came to light. Then Manly pointed out that white men both raped and seduced black women. Why, he wondered in print, was it worse for a black man to be intimate with a white woman than for a white man to be intimate with a black woman? “We suggest that the whites guard their women more closely,” Mrs. Felton says, thus giving no opportunity for the human fiend, be he white or black,” Manly chided. “The women are taken away. Poor white men are careless in the manner of protecting their women.” Thus, Manly played directly into the “home protection” campaign and brushed up against white men’s bruised patriarchy.¹⁷

It was the sexually charged political climate that gave Manly’s words their explosive effect. Manly dared to equate the morals of poor white and poor black people. For Manly, class trumped race; poor white women were no better than poor black women. Manly’s best-aimed blow was the suggestion that some white women freely chose black men as lovers, which shook the monolithic power of whiteness. All white women were pure, regardless of their class or circumstances. All black men were animals or children. Therefore, no white woman could prefer a black man over a white man.

Reaction to the August editorial came swiftly. Felton declared: “When the negro Manly attributed the crime of rape to the intimacy between negro men and white women of the South the slanderer should be made to fear a lynchers’ rope.”¹⁸ The Wilmington Messenger reprinted the statement each day until the election, often as the lead-in for a new “outrage” report, and the Raleigh News and Observer often ran parts of the column.¹⁹ Manly, very handsome himself, had commented that some black men were “sufficiently attractive for white girls of culture and refinement to fall in love with.” To this one editor added, “Here he tells of his own experience, and he has been holding clandestine meetings with poor white women, wives of white men.” But others, realizing the problem of alleging that any white women sought trysts with black men, simply called Manly’s editorial “a dirty defamation,” a “sweeping insult to all respectable white women who are poor,” and a “great slur.”²⁰

Tensions ran high as rumors circulated that whites were plotting to burn Manly’s press and lynch him.

Ten days before the racial massacre, Furnifold Simmons seized upon Manly’s editorial as if it had inspired the home protection campaign rather than answered it. Manly, Simmons told white Wilmingtonians, had “dared openly and publicly to assail the virtue of our pure white womanhood.” All other political issues paled by comparison to this attack on the home. Politics “passed out of the public mind, and in a whirl of indignation, which burst forth like the lava from a pent up volcano, there was thrust to the front the all absorbing and paramount question of White Supremacy.” The “sturdy manhood” of North Carolina should not “submit” to a “mongrel ticket” backed up by “federal bayonets,” Simmons warned, even as he reminded white men that “the issues involved are pregnant with momentous consequences.”²¹

We don’t know if Furnifold Simmons read Sigmund Freud, but we can be sure that Simmons read his audience perfectly. His barely concealed sexual references—pent up volcanoes, lava bursting forth, thrustings to the fore, federal bayonets, mongrel tickets, and pregnant issues—struck white men where they lived. Such language linked the most intimate issues of home and family to local politics and federal law in a bond that Southerners would take a century to uncouple.

While Manly’s editorial provided fodder for fully sexualizing the home protection campaign, John C. Dancy’s vice presidency of the newly formed National Afro-American Council illustrated to Wilmingtonians the direct connections between black political power and home protection. Dancy had been born a slave in Tarboro, North Carolina, where his father thrived as a builder after Emancipation. He attended Howard University and then taught and worked in journalism. As a lay leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, he was a staunch temperance man who had traveled the world in support of the cause. Now, at forty-one, Dancy stood at the peak of his ambition, since the national Republican administration had appointed him collector of customs for the Port of Wilmington, one of the few salaried appointments available in the fledgling federal bureaucracy.²² At its first meeting in Rochester, New York, the National Afro-American Council adopted a resolution to “secure uniform marriage laws in all the states, and revision of the laws in the twenty four States where inter-marriage between whites and blacks is not allowed.”²³

Here, thought white Democrats, was an astoundingly bold use of black political power to undercut white patriarchy through legal reform. By passing such a resolution, white men could argue, the new organizatio-
tion of black men declared its members’ desire to marry white women. The legal right to marry white women, however, was probably not at all what the resolution meant to those present. In truth, black delegates addressed an entirely different but very pressing issue for their constituents. Their proposals sought to extend statutory protection to black women who were in long-term liaisons with white men, a common occurrence, particularly in the South.

In Wilmington, whites used the resolution as an object lesson for the damage that could ensue if blacks held political power. Dancy held one of the highest paid and most coveted appointments in the state. He had enjoyed the respect of many whites. A scant eight months earlier, before the statewide white supremacy campaign, the Wilmington Messenger said of him, “He has never been an extremist and numbers his personal friends among both races. He is true to his convictions, but always courteous and conservative in their expression.” Suddenly, Dancy represented everything wrong with the Fusion takeover two years earlier; there was no longer such thing as a “courteous and conservative” black leader. Indeed, white Democrats argued, political success had licensed Dancy’s personal desire to marry white women, as evidenced by his vice presidency of an organization promoting interracial marriage. The white Democrats argued that “the success of the combination [of Republicans and Populists] in this State . . . has evidently emboldened the race, especially [sic] those in this State led by Dancy.” In less than a year, politics had led Dancy straight into white men’s homes; soon he would stand beside their beds with the force of law propping up his white friends. Whites ignored Dancy’s protest that he personally had opposed the resolution.

In such a heated racial climate, each stroll down the street suggested to white people fresh evidence of the incubus that lurked in their midst. They began to turn incidents that might have earlier gone unnoticed into evidence of an African American plot on the safety of white homes. Some of these confrontations involved black and white men only. When, for example, Hugh MacRae, a prominent white man, stood in the street several feet from the curb deep in conversation with a friend, he simply expected traffic to move around him. Accustomed to deference, MacRae assumed that he literally owned the street. When a two-wheeled cart, pulled by “a fast-stepping horse,” came toward him, he probably never thought of moving. But the black driver surged “defiantly” onward, and Hugh MacRae jumped up on the sidewalk, grievously offended. MacRae recounted the incident that evening to his uncle, Walter MacRae, who is said to have exclaimed, “If something is not done to put down this surly and rebellious attitude of the Negroes towards the whites, we will have a repetition of the Sepoy rebellion, which ended only after the British had shot some of the mutinous leaders at the very mouths of cannon, to which they were lashed.”

Even childish pranks proved fodder for news accounts of what could go wrong when African Americans had full civil rights. The Daily Charlotte Observer reported in all earnestness the ignoble experience of “two of Wilmington’s most prominent and respected businessmen.” One day, while out driving, the two men encountered a “dozen little negro boys.” The children chased the white men’s carriage and “made vulgar remarks about the horse and the men.” Finding themselves compared to the nether regions of a horse simply undid the white men. Respect and prominence depended not on one’s accomplishments, but on the deference one commanded in public. For whites a hundred years ago character did not exist apart from reputation, apart from what others thought of you. Of the two—character and reputation—reputation mattered more. Self-respect reflected public opinion—not inner worth—in a way that is difficult for us to imagine today.

The leading white men of Wilmington, so accustomed to deference, could not abide a world in which black men failed to stop for them or little boys teased them in the streets comparing them to horses’ asses. To whites such minor occasions seemed justification for murder because they reflected an attitude that could easily undermine white men’s unquestioned right to be at the top of the social, political, and economic order and, just as important and all but inseparable, the right to rule in their homes. If indignity was a slippery slope down which they refused to slide, true democracy was out of the question. When Simmons’s emissary, Francis Winston, arrived in Wilmington to organize the official White Supremacy Leagues, he pulled out his usual incubus speech “to inflame the white men’s sentiment.” But this old tune played too resoundingly: Winston found Wilmington’s white men “already willing to kill all of the office holders and all of the negroes.” In a curious reversal of his usual role, Winston claimed that he “immediately reacted and became a pacifist.”

If white men could not abide a lack of deference from black men, they certainly were not going to tolerate it from black women. The patriarchy of the white man and its theoretical sheltering capacities never stretched to black women. If white men were to protect womanhood, what did it mean that they would not extend chivalry to black women? Black women in Wilmington made this a public issue through
an informal campaign of their own: they demanded that white streetcar conductors extend their arms to help them on and off the cars. Our evidence is fragmentary on this point; we must imagine the individual occurrences: a well-dressed middle-class black woman, heading home from shopping, attempting to juggle her burdens and mind her skirt as she jumped up on the car’s high step. The white conductor must have stood there passively, watching her struggle, although his job was literally to conduct people on and off the car. The cars remained unsegregated at this point, but these moments of boarding and disembarking became a portent of the Jim Crow racial structure to come. Black women must have protested on the spot, demanding assistance; the conductor must have reacted with confusion. Some African Americans likely took the issue up with the car company or local officials. One white supremacist reported that an “audacious Negro grudge [was] developing against the streetcar conductors because they did not help black women on and off the conveyance as they did white women.”

The importance of this cryptic reference rests on our ability to imagine the world black women envisioned: a world in which women of certain classes, black and white, enjoyed white male protection in public places. In 1898 black women in Wilmington tried to hold chivalry to its word. They imagined a future in which white men’s much vaunted protection would transcend race. The failure of their attempt reveals that patriarchy’s allure to white men lay not in its duties, but in its benefits: in the power that the heights of social hierarchy conferred upon white men. That power gave them control over white women, over white children, and over black people of all ages and both sexes. It led them to take their proper places in government and to rule in the home. White men would risk much to preserve their status, even if they refused to follow the responsibility that their power was said to carry.

Moreover, black women’s autonomy in public challenged the idea of female deference. Black and white women had met each other on the streets day in and day out since Emancipation, but the political climate that put sexuality and home protection at the center of electoral decisions reordered daily encounters between women of different races. We have only the flimsiest strands of evidence rendered by white sources to recover black women’s outrage at the white supremacy campaign. The white newspapers began to report street confrontations between black and white women as signs of “Negro outrages.” The stories suggest that black women struck back in the language of the streets.

The most infamous of these confrontations came in Wilmington. One morning, several white women encountered a black woman stand-

The Flight of the Incubus
When election day dawned in Wilmington, voters crowded into the polling places, but in many ways, the occasion was anticlimactic, since Fusionists had been afraid to campaign in New Hanover County, and Republican-held municipal offices were not up for election that year. The only offices for which Wilmingtonians could vote were one congressional seat, a place in the state senate, and a sprinkling of judgeships and county positions. When the polls closed that afternoon, the Democrats claimed a “glorious victory,” yet the Democratic congressional candidate won within the city by a mere 54 percent of the vote. It was important to portray the election as a political triumph for white supremacy to confer legitimacy on its unfinished business. Alongside the election results, the Wilmington Messenger ran a boxed advertisement: “ATTENTION WHITE MEN. There will be a meeting of the White Men of Wilmington this morning at 11 o’clock at the Court House. A full attendance is desired, as business in the furtherance of White Supremacy will be transacted.” Thus the white men of Wilmington served notice that a democratic victory would not satisfy them; they wanted more.

This unfinished “business in the furtherance of White Supremacy” explains why white men ran amok in the streets of Wilmington two days after the election, murdering some black leaders and driving others from town. The massacre testifies both to the larger purposes of the campaign and to the ineradicability of hatred unleashed. What happened in Wilmington was about more than party politics or economic jealousy. It was about how political rhetoric can license people to do evil in the name of good. By now, Furnifold Simmons’s machine could boast of a statewide Democratic victory. By now, the Secret Nine knew that there was no threat to their homes from black rapists; they knew that no incendiary mobs of black men gathered to burn the cotton sitting on the wharves. Yet these white men wanted more than an electoral victory: they wanted their honor back. They wanted revenge for being considered, even for a moment, as black men’s equals.

Hundreds of white men arrived at the courthouse the morning after the election ready to finish what the white supremacy campaign had started. The crowd clamored for Alfred Moore Waddell to mount the stage. Two days earlier, Waddell had uttered the most infamous get-out-the-vote speech in North Carolina history, taking Simmons’s vague rhetoric of home protection to its logical, and violent, conclusion. “You are Anglo-Saxons,” Waddell had told the men as they prepared to vote. “You are armed and prepared, and you will do your duty. . . . Go to the polls tomorrow, and if you find the negro out voting, tell him to leave the polls, and if he refuses, kill him. We shall win tomorrow, if we have to do it with guns.” Indeed, the Anglo-Saxons had won, but now they still fished for the chance to use the guns. From the meeting after that victory came a “White Declaration of Independence.” It urged employers to fire black help and ordered Alexander Manly out of the city. Then whites demanded resignations from the chief of police and the Republican mayor, who had another year to serve, and terrifed them into giving up their offices.

The next day, black leaders failed to respond in a timely fashion to an ultimatum issued by the writers of the White Declaration of Independence ordering Alexander Manly to leave the city. Five hundred angry men demanded that the captain of the Wilmington Light Infantry lead them to burn Manly’s press, to which he retorted, “What, me lead a mob? Never!” So the group turned to Alfred Waddell, whoshouldered his Winchester, his white hair flowing in the breeze, and marched out toward Love and Charity Hall, the black mutual aid society building that housed Manly’s newspaper.

When the rampage came, the black targets of white wrath reflected the three objects of the white supremacy campaign: black women, black politicians, and black prosperity. An army of white men rampaged through the city. They strip-searched black women, looking for weapons. Then the white men hunted down prominent black leaders and white Republican officeholders, including John Dancy, and either shot them or chased them out of town. The Wilmington Light Infantry, mobilized to keep the peace, just jumped into the fray.

Manly had long since escaped the city, but the mob burned Love and Charity Hall to the ground, igniting several other structures. The Colt rapid-firing gun proved terrifyingly effective, as effective as lashing rebellious Indians to cannons had been in the Sepoy rebellion. Black men were shot in the back as they ran. Black barber Carter Peamon, who had saved the lives of two white men earlier in the day, found himself forcibly deported on a switch engine. When he jumped off the train, an “unknown white man” shot him dead. The Secret Nine arrested Robert Bunting, the United States Commissioner; John Melton, the chief of police; and two other white men, planning to banish them from the city the next morning. “What have we done, what have we done?” one African American man screamed. George Routree, a white man who moments before had telephoned to have the rapid-firing gun sent over, found himself unable to answer since “they had done nothing.”

At the end of the day, no one knew how many had died. Alfred Waddell seized the mayor’s office, and his cronies demanded the “resignations” of Republican officeholders, filling the positions themselves.
Subsequently fourteen coroner's juries met, and all found that the black victims had died “at the hands of unknown persons.” Waddell thought around twenty African Americans had died. George Rountree, J. Alan Taylor, and Hugh MacRae bragged of ninety dead. It is doubtful that the terrified family members of the slain would have presented their loved ones' dead bodies to the Democratic city officials for a coroner's inquest.

Sometimes, murder does its best work in memory, after the fact. Terror lives on, continuing to serve its purpose long after the violence that gave rise to it ends. During the massacre, hundreds of Wilmington's African Americans left and huddled in the woods surrounding the city. In the next month, 1,400 blacks left Wilmington. Six months later, prosperous African Americans were still departing by the scores in special rented cars attached to regular passenger trains going north and west.

Some who lacked the means to flee appealed to the federal government for assistance. Three days after the Wilmington massacre, an anonymous African American woman sent a letter to Republican president William McKinley begging for help. Why had he not sent troops? Why had he left Wilmington's black citizens unprotected “to die like rats in a trap”? “We are loyal, we go where duty calls,” she said, noting that many of Wilmington’s young black men served in the 3rd North Carolina Volunteer Regiment mobilized for the Spanish-Cuban/American War. Now, with the damage done, McKinley could at least send a ship for the survivors, perhaps working out a way to take them to Africa, where “a number of us will gladly go.” Then she hurled the rhetoric of patriotism back at the president of the United States: “Is this the land of the free and the home of the brave? How can the Negro sing my country tis of thee?” “Why,” she asked her president, “do you forsake the Negro?”

Why indeed? There is evidence that the administration at least differed before deciding to leave the unpunished murderers holding office in Wilmington. Several of the deposed white officeholders fled to Washington, where black congressman George White tried to get them an audience with the president. When that failed, on Christmas Eve, R. H. Bunting and John Melton penned a pathetic appeal to McKinley, begging for help. According to Bunting and Melton, the Wilmington press warned them if they returned home to collect their belongings or settle their affairs, they would be killed.

Even before Bunting and Melton wrote to McKinley, the United States attorney general demanded that the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of North Carolina look into prosecuting the perpetrators of the riot. The U.S. Attorney, C. M. Bernard, seemed to be the very picture of bureaucracy as he professed his willingness to cooperate on the one hand, while putting obstacles in his superiors' path on the other. Bernard was “not only ready and willing, but anxious” to bring the perpetrators to trial, but what would he use for proof? Despite the fact that murder has rarely been so well-documented or boasted of, Bernard argued that his case was weak, with “no information reliable from any witnesses except from newspaper reports” and Bunting and Melton's letters. Moreover, he needed a “complaint from somebody, or a witness of some kind,” and Bunting and Melton had fled to Washington. By April, Bernard apparently had investigated further and wrote to the attorney general that, with more information, he could indict the white supremacists for violating election laws across the state. Bernard might have been an inept or unwilling investigator, but he was quite cunning when it came to escaping the responsibilities of his office. Rather than proceed with the case, he outlined a long list of information he would have to obtain before he could prosecute and demanded federal assistance to get it. He asked for an undercover man from the Secret Service and two fearless attorneys from out of state to try the case. Without this commitment of federal resources, it was best not to risk prosecuting, the U.S. Attorney cautioned his Washington bosses. If they prosecuted and failed to convict, the authority of the federal government would be undermined in North Carolina for generations to come.

The likelihood of an acquittal is what ultimately convinced the men in Washington to drop the matter. Within living memory, a war had been fought to establish federal authority. But thirty-eight years later, that “authority” still did not include enforcement of the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of civil rights—even though the same authority was often used to check labor union risings. From the end of the Civil War until Dwight D. Eisenhower sent federal troops into Little Rock in 1957, no president dared to prove the power of the Reconstruction amendments on Southern soil. The federal government's failure to act in the aftermath of the Wilmington racial massacre became a pattern it followed for another fifty years.

Since the federal government refused to take action to punish Alfred Waddell, George Rountree, J. Alan Taylor, Hugh MacRae, and others of their ilk, the cultural work of the Wilmington racial massacre spread from its intensely local context to serve as an object lesson for African Americans across the nation. Publicity washed over Wilmington. The white supremacists who led the riot bragged in the national press about their success and justified their actions. As far away as Omaha, Nebraska, African Americans held a mass meeting to condemn “the crim-
nal collusion of the Government and State authorities” with the leaders of the massacre. 54

Alexander Manly helped spread the word of what had happened in Wilmington as he toured the nation telling “the story of his flight from Wilmington.” 55 When he spoke to a New York audience of 200 people, mostly black women, he stated unequivocally what he could not say in North Carolina. The white man, Manly argued, had been trying “for years . . . to obliterate all traces of virtue and morality from the negro race,” by seducing and attacking “colored women of the South.” Felton’s protection of white women was misplaced, Manly pointed out, since “negro girls were the unprotected females more than the whites.” Wilmington’s whites had seen successful black men as a “menace to the white man’s commerce,” and therefore wanted to rob them of political rights. Condemning McKinley for his inaction, Manly also pointed out that while the black 3rd North Carolina Volunteer Regiment was “away fighting for the flag, the white man in the South rose up to drive the colored man from the ballot box.” 56

If the terror that murder inspires lives on to do its work, at other times its legacy is the way that memory blurs the facts, tangling story lines, balling up separate strands of the tale so that they become only kernels of truth. The truth of Wilmington fell away. It went unmemorialized; indeed, it was even reversed. For example, in one ridiculous reversal of good and evil, Harry Hayden, a 1936 chronicler of the massacre who glorified the white supremacists, changed the name of the African Americans’ Love and Charity Hall to Free Love Hall. 57

When I began writing about the Wilmington racial massacre, I was curious about how white Wilmingtonians remembered it. Most, it turned out, knew nothing of it. But one white man I asked, a prominent racial liberal, had heard of it. He gave it the gloss of a late 1960s race riot. In 1898, he told me, black people in Wilmington revolted against their abject poverty and lack of civil rights, rioting in their neighborhoods and burning some businesses. They did this, he argued, with some justification, although he could not remember what it was. Even in his relatively sympathetic rendering, the lesson of the 1898 massacre vanished. In his tale, poor blacks created social disorder with cause. The truth—that upper-class whites led a racial massacre against middle-class blacks—is so obscured that deeds of which white Wilmingtonians boasted for a half-century astound us today. The very name that adhered to the violence—“riot”—misleads, as the black woman who begged McKinley for help predicted it would. “There was not any rioting,” she told the president, “simply the strong slaying the weak.” 58

It is important for us to be clear about what happened in Wilmington in November 1898, to state it plainly, and to memorialize it honestly. The explanatory power of the Wilmington racial massacre is found in the ways that white leaders murdered to uphold their class position, their manhood, and their whiteness. The point of the lesson lies in the murderers’ very ordinariness. It does no good to demonize the white men who killed or led others to kill and then went on to be good citizens, loving husbands, and caring parents and grandparents. What we must do is understand them, as did one man reflecting at the time on the massacre: “I suppose anything must be justifiable to preserve a woman’s virtue, a man’s honor, and our Christian Civilization. . . . The late unpleasantness was simply natural evolution, an evil preventing a much greater evil.” 59 If such thinking led everyday men to commit unspeakable acts, then we must stand forever in awe of the power of rhetoric to incite murder.

The political and economic facts of the white supremacy campaign and the Wilmington racial massacre died in 1898, but the rhetorical power of the black incubus lived on. As complicated as life is, we are rarely able to untangle our own cultural legacies; rather, we tend to accept them as a matter of course, to call them our “feelings,” sometimes to name them our “prejudices.” First, the politics of the massacre faded; then even its memory faded. But the most powerful legacy of the Wilmington racial massacre lived on: the idea that black men represent the greatest danger against which white women must be constantly vigilant. Now, as one hundred years ago, this simply is not true. All statistics show that rapes and assaults are overwhelmingly more likely to be committed against white women by men of the same race and the most likely perpetrator is someone known to the victim.

Of course, white women are not taught to fear their acquaintances, lovers, and family members. They are taught to fear black men. Growing up as a white girl in the South, I learned an intricate racial etiquette that served to isolate me from black men even as I moved around them in public places. Never look a black man in the eye. Never sit down on a park bench beside a black man. Move to the other side of the sidewalk, or better yet the other side of the street, if a black man comes toward you. If the elevator doors open and a black man is inside, stand there and look distracted—do not enter. The racial choreography to which I moved served to prevent me from coming face to face with black men, but the dance itself always reminded me of the danger. I might never see the incubus, but everywhere I went, I could feel the brush of his wings.

That is why Susan Smith conjured up a black criminal to cover up a
heinous crime. It seemed logical to her, foolproof even. It was as if nothing much had changed in the South.

In fact, much has changed. Collectively and individually, white and black Southerners have tried to shed the horrors of their past and build an integrated society. We have not succeeded completely, but then we have powerful memories to face. Once we face them, their lessons bear down on us, causing us to question ideas that seem apolitical, and sometimes, at first glance, unrelated to race.

In the end, the case of Susan Smith can comfort us. That she falsely accused a black man of two monstrous murders she had committed is deplorable, outrageous . . . and ultimately understandable. It was the lesson that Susan Smith learned from her culture. The miracle is that she did not succeed. While Smith had simply to pluck the mythology of the black criminal from her intellectual surroundings and use it in her own defense, the ubiquitous nature of the tale did her in. The white South Carolina sheriff who heard her story knew that he had heard it before. And he knew that his daddy and his granddaddy had heard it too. He did not believe her. It took a century, but he did not believe her. This time, the flight of the incubus came to ground.

Notes

Thanks, as always, to Jacqueline Hall and Karen Latham for a thousand readings and brilliant editing. Thanks to David Cecelski and Tim Tyson for encouraging me to allow humanity to creep into my history.

1. Of course, there had been discussion in the press about the possibility of black men raping white women and accounts of such crimes prior to 1898. But using such possibilities in a statewide political campaign to link black political power and rape was a fresh strategy to win back offices from the interracial coalition of Unionists and Republicans. For an assessment of the gradual politicalization of rape after the Civil War, see Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). For the connections between politics and sexuality during Reconstruction, see Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).


9. *H.L.W., "The Wilmington Rebellion"* (typescript in the author's possession), 9. The typescript, originally in the possession of a Wilmington family, was written by H.L.W. around 1946 and sent to me by a North Carolinian in 1996. Written ten years after Harry Hayden's "Story of the Wilmington Rebellion" (Wilmington: privately published, 1936), the H.L.W. typescript includes names of men who perpetrated illegal acts that are absent in Hayden's account. H.L.W.'s treatise invoked the Wilmington massacre as a warning to black North Carolinians against pushing for integration in the post-World War II period.

10. The best account of these events is H. Leon Prather, *We Have Taken a City: Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1984), 39–45.


15. The other eight men were Hugh MacRae, W. A. Johnson, P. B. Manning, L. B. Sasser, E. S. Lathrop, Hardy Fennell, William Gilchrist, and Walter L. Parsley, according to H.L.W., "The Wilmington Rebellion," 7.


17. "Lynch 1,000 Weekly, Declares Mrs. Felton."
20. Wilmington Messenger, 1 November 1898, 6.
21. Ibid., 3 November 1898, 5.
24. Wilmington Messenger, 1 March 1898, 1.
26. On Dancy's distancing himself from the call for marriage reform, see Charlotte Observer, 13 October 1898, 6. Dancy later told John Edward Bruce that he thought T. Thomas Fortune actually favored mixed marriages, and Dancy had argued in opposition to the resolution. Fortune had very little knowledge of Southern politics, and Bruce seemed to harbor a lifelong dislike for mixed-race people. See John C. Dancy to John Edward Bruce, 31 January 1899, Salisbury, N.C., reel no. 1, mss. autograph letters no. 311, John Edward Bruce Papers, Schomburg Center, New York, quoted in Hodges, White Women, Black Men, 276.
31. Wilmington Messenger article, reprinted in Raleigh News and Observer, 8 September 1898, 4.
33. Wilmington Messenger, 5 November 1898, 4.
34. Proclamation in the Daily Record, n.d., reprinted in Raleigh News and Observer, 22 October 1898, 2; H. L. West, in Washington Post, quoted in Wilmington Messenger, 1 November 1898, 2.
35. Wilmington Messenger, 4 November 1898, 1.
37. Wilmington Messenger, 9 November 1898, 8.
39. Copy of speech, 9 November 1898, folder 2B, Alfred Moore Waddell Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Wilmington Messenger, 10 November 1898, 8; Prather, We Have Taken a City, 107–11.
42. Anonymous to Wm. McKinley, 13 November 1898.
44. Ibid., 19.
45. Rountree, "Memorandum."
46. Prather, We Have Taken a City, 96–124; Thomas Clawson, "The Wilmington Race Riots in 1898," Clawson Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Weldon, "North Carolina Race Conflict"; Rountree, "Memorandum; Wilmington Messenger, 11 November 1898, 1.
49. Anonymous to Wm. McKinley, 13 November 1898.
51. R. H. Britting and John R. Melton to Hon. William McKinley, 24 December 1898, file 17743–1898, Record Group R660, Department of Justice, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
52. C. M. Bernard to Hon. John W. Griggs, Atty. Gen'l, 5 December 1898; Bernard to Griggs, 1 April 1899, file 17743–1898, Record Group R660, Department of Justice, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
53. See, for example, McKelvey, "The Cause of the Troubles in North Carolina."
54. "Negroes Demand Protection," n.p., [7 December 1898], microfiche 394, Hampton University Clipping Files.
58. Anonymous to Wm. McKinley, 13 November 1898.
59. George Howard to Henry Groves Conner, 14 November 1898, folder no. 40b, box 3, Henry C. Connor Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.