

How The Only Coup D'Etat In U.S. History Unfolded

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Heard on [Weekend Edition Sunday](#)

Think of a coup d'etat and images of a far-flung banana republic likely come to mind. So it might come as a surprise that it happened here in the United States — just once, in 1898.



A group of white men posed for a news photographer at the fire-damaged offices of a black newspaper in Wilmington, N.C.
Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives & History

A mob of white supremacists armed with rifles and pistols marched on City Hall in Wilmington, N.C., on Nov. 10 and overthrew the elected local government, forcing both black and white officials to resign and running many out of town. The coup was the culmination of a race riot in which whites torched the offices of a black newspaper and killed a number of black residents. No one is sure how many African-Americans died that day, but some estimates say as many as 90 were killed.

"Some of the elderly African-Americans told my stepfather that the Cape Fear River was running red with blood," Bertha Todd, a teacher, recalls in producer Alan Lipke's documentary series, "Between Civil War and Civil Rights."



Col. Alfred Moore Waddell led the white supremacists who descended on Wilmington's City Hall on Nov. 10, 1898.
Library of Congress

Especially chilling was the fact that the insurgency had been carefully planned — a conspiracy by powerful white Democrats.

Southern Democrats lost their grip on power in North Carolina in 1894 and plotted to wrest control from the biracial Republican Party in 1898 elections. They campaigned on a platform of white supremacy and protecting their women from black men.

As the Nov. 8, 1898, vote approached, whites in Wilmington mobilized. They held supremacist rallies and parades and organized militias of "Red Shirts" to intimidate blacks from voting. The statewide election restored Democrats to power, and two days later, the white supremacists descended on Wilmington's City Hall.

Their leader, Col. Alfred Moore Waddell, had publicly threatened in a pre-election speech to "choke the current of the Cape Fear River" with black bodies, according to a 2006 report chronicling the events by the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission. After the coup, Waddell was elected mayor of Wilmington.

North Carolina Democrats began passing a flurry of Jim Crow laws in 1899, and new voting restrictions further disenfranchised blacks through a poll tax and literacy test.

In "Between Civil War and Civil Rights," George Rountree III reads from the memoir of his grandfather, a white civic leader in Wilmington who feared competition from blacks:

"The obvious test for intelligence was reading and writing. It would exclude all those immigrants that were coming into our country, at the rate of a million a year, until they had qualified themselves, and it would exclude a large number of ignorant and stupid Negroes until they had qualified themselves."

But Southerners were careful to give the voting restrictions a veneer of legality, wrote William Everett Henderson, a Wilmington lawyer exiled by the coup. Henderson's great-granddaughter, Lisa Adams, also appears in the documentary series and reads from his papers:

"So now we have bold and unscrupulous legislative enactments in open defiance of the national Constitution. And that last earthly tribunal, the U.S. Supreme Court, well knows the intent."

TRANSCRIPT

ROBERT SMITH, host:

This is Weekend Edition from NPR News. I'm Robert Smith. All this month, we're focusing on how race affects politics. Many of you have contributed your thoughts on the issue, and later we'll hear from two listeners. But first, we revisit an era when discussions about race and politics could turn violent.

Ms. BERTHA TODD (Teacher): Some of the elderly African-American citizens told my stepfather that the Cape Fear River was running red with blood.

SMITH: That's teacher Bertha Todd talking about the 1898 race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina. It was an election year, and Democrats then had a plan to take power in the state. They campaigned on a platform of white supremacy and protecting their women from black men. George Roundtree was a Democrat and a white civic leader at the time. His grandson George Roundtree III reads from his grandfather's memoir.

(Soundbite of George Roundtree's Memoir)

Mr. GEORGE ROUNDTREE III: (Reading) It became evident to our committee that if the Negroes were nominated for office, we would have an exceedingly difficult time to beat them. It was not a great while before the businessmen in the city were deeply interested in the campaign and the supremacy of the white race. And of course, a considerable amount of money was necessary to do all the things which we intended to do.

SMITH: Those plans included organized militias to intimidate blacks from voting. Two days after the 1898 election, one of those red-shirt militias formed to march through the streets of Wilmington. They were headed to burn down the offices of the local black newspaper. No one's sure how many African-Americans died in the riots, but some estimate as many as 90 were killed. Now, Wilmington was a port town and at the time had an integrated city government. After the riots in the streets, the white supremacists forced the mayor and members of the city council to resign. It's the only coup d'etat in U.S. history. Their leader, Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell, told a reporter...

Unidentified Actor: (As Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell) The old government had become satisfied of their inefficiency and believed if they did not resign, they would be run out of town.

SMITH: George Roundtree would soon go on to spearhead efforts in North Carolina to make voting more difficult for poor blacks and immigrants. Again, his grandson George Roundtree III...

Mr. ROUNDTREE III: The obvious test for intelligence was reading and writing. It would exclude all those immigrants that were coming into our country at the rate of a million a year until they had qualified themselves, and would exclude a large number of ignorant and stupid Negroes until they had qualified themselves.

SMITH: Southerners were careful to give the voting restrictions a veneer of legality. At least that's what William Everett Henderson wrote. He was a Wilmington lawyer at the time, exiled by the coup. His great granddaughter Lisa Adams reads from his papers.

(Soundbite of William Everett Henderson's Memoir)

Ms. LISA ADAMS: (Reading) So now we have bold and unscrupulous legislative enactments and open defiance of the national Constitution, and that last Earthly tribunal, the U.S. Supreme Court, well knows the intent.

SMITH: Some of those restrictions would remain in effect throughout the South until the civil rights era of the 1950s. This historical footnote is adapted from independent producer Alan Lipke's "Between Civil War and Civil Rights" documentary series.

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