

# Teaching Guide: Wilmington Massacre

## Note for Teachers:

This is the Teaching Guide for the Wilmington Massacre Case Study:  
[museumofthenewsouth.org/schools/wilmington-massacre/](https://museumofthenewsouth.org/schools/wilmington-massacre/)

This case study assumes prior knowledge by students of what the Reconstruction era was.

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## Background Information

The election of 1898 and the Wilmington Massacre were significant turning points in the history of North Carolina and the South. Those events led to the instantaneous disenfranchisement of Black voters, made white supremacy synonymous with southern Democrats, ushered in segregation, and limited the economic and educational opportunities for African Americans. The consequences of the massacre and coup impacted North Carolina's politics and economic development well into the twentieth century.

Before the Wilmington Massacre, three political parties competed for power in North Carolina: the Republican Party of formerly enslaved and free African Americans and white Union sympathizers, the Democratic Party of former Confederates and Whigs who called for an end to so-called "radical" Reconstruction and federal intervention, and the Populist Party, mostly made up of poor farmers. In 1870 Democrats were able to gain a majority in the State's General Assembly and reverse changes made by Reconstruction Republicans. Severe economic depression in the 1880s inspired many farmers to join the Populist Party, led nationally by North Carolinian Leonidas L. Polk, because it supported the economic interests of farmers over that of banks and big business. The Populist Party became large enough to split the 1894 ballot with the Republican party, this collaboration became known as the "Fusion movement". Fusion candidates defeated Democrats throughout North Carolina, and this tactic was most successful in the Tarheel State of all the Southern states.

As the election of 1898 got closer, the Democratic party focused almost exclusively on a platform of white supremacy and sent speakers throughout the South to spread the message. In Georgia, Rebecca Felton gave a speech promoting the lynching of African American men accused of rape and violent crimes against white women. In August 1898, Alexander Manly, the African American publisher of a popular Black newspaper in Wilmington, NC called the *Daily Record* responded to Felton in an editorial. Democrats fought back with editorials of their own, but they also resorted to violence and recruited armed groups of men called Red Shirts to intimidate African American men and stop them from voting. These tactics were successful, and on November 8, Democrats regained their seats in the state legislature.

African Americans made up most of Wilmington's population and many were highly educated and successful politically and economically. Despite the efforts of white supremacists, the fusionists maintained power in Wilmington's government. However, white supremacists were conspiring against this new fusion. November 9, the day after elections, former Confederate colonel and Democrat Alfred Waddell spoke to around 600 white people at the courthouse. Waddell announced a "White Declaration of Independence" stating: "We, the undersigned citizens... do hereby declare that we will no longer be ruled, and will never again be ruled by

men of African origin." Wadell demanded that Manly close his newspaper and leave the city. Manly escaped that night with his brother and two other Black men.

On November 10 the Wilmington Massacre began when Wadell led a mob of 2,000 armed men to the *Daily Record* office to attack Manly; the mob saw that Manly was not there and burned the building to the ground. As tensions and rumors spread through the city, African American and white men faced off with each other. A shot rang out and someone yelled that a white man had been killed. White men fired on unarmed Black men as they tried to flee, and many of them were injured or killed. Violence spread throughout the city quickly. Three different white supremacists fought: the Wilmington Light Infantry, the White Government Union, and the Red Shirts. Each group was armed and entered Black neighborhoods. Roughly 60 to 300 African Americans were killed that day. There were no white deaths reported.

Waddell forced the elected African American aldermen of Wilmington to resign, then immediately installed his own men. The same men elected Waddell mayor. This is the only known successful coup in American history. Many Black leaders were jailed before being forced to leave Wilmington by military escort. After the events African Americans continued to flee the city, some making it out and some hiding, where they faced freezing temperatures and starvation. Nearly 2,000 Black residents left the city permanently making Wilmington a majority-white city.

The Wilmington Massacre and its aftermath mirrored events taking place throughout the South in the 1890s. Segregation took a firm and legal hold and disenfranchisement and policy like the Grandfather Clause instituted in the State legislature in 1900 removed the right to vote from all but a few Black men. The Democratic party won easily in North Carolina for years to come and continued to spread propaganda of the so-called "dangers" of Black political power as well as a false narrative of the events of Wilmington. The Populist Party lost its stronghold in North Carolina after the Wilmington Massacre and ceased to exist by 1909.

## Activity Instructions and Rubrics

### **Article**

Have students write their own 200-word newspaper article on the events of the Wilmington Massacre from the perspective of someone who witnessed it in 1898. At a minimum they should include proper newspaper format (headline, lead paragraph, body paragraphs, byline, and article column style), some background information, information on the event itself answering who, what, where, when, how and why, and some personal perspective.

**Modification:** Have students write a 100 word newspaper press release that answers who, what, where, when, why and how of the events of Wilmington.

**Extension:** In preparation, have students research accounts of the Wilmington Massacre from white and African American newspapers of the time as well as how accounts of the event have changed over time.

### **Letter**

Have students write a one to two page letter to one of their state Senators explaining why they believe voting access is important and cite current and historical references. Their letter should include at least one reference to the historic events of the 1898 North Carolina election and Wilmington Massacre and their connection to the issues of political power and voting rights. Students are given the example of the John Lewis Voting Rights Act in the activity prompt. The link below will allow them to find the address of one of their senators.

[Find Your Senator](#)

**Modification:** Have students write a one page letter about what they learned about Wilmington and how it shapes their understanding of a current event today.

**Extension:** Have students research and then create and give a presentation on either the John Lewis Voting Rights Act and its impact or ways in which current voting rights activists are advocating for voters.

### **Memorial**

Have students create their own memorial to Wilmington in either a drawing or three dimensional format in materials of their choosing. Their memorial should also include a title and an artist's statement. The link below will allow them to see the memorial in Wilmington. Before they begin, have students brainstorm their memorial's message, audience, and how it will communicate their message with materials, images and words.

[1898 Monument & Memorial Park, Wilmington](#)

**Modification:** Have students draw a memorial and write a paragraph that explains their choices and their memorial's connection to Wilmington.

**Extension:** Have students design and/or create a second memorial to a figure or event in Black political history since the events of Wilmington.

### Wilmington Massacre: Newspaper Article Rubric

<b>Article Parts</b>	<b>Exceeding Expectations</b>	<b>Meeting Expectations</b>	<b>Minimally Meeting Expectations</b>	<b>Not Yet Meeting Expectations</b>
<b>Format</b>	Has headline, lead paragraph, body paragraphs and byline and is presented in article column style.	Missing one of the required article elements.	Missing two of the required article elements.	Missing three or more of the required article elements.
<b>Content</b>	Presents factual information and no opinions (except where applicable). Article answers the 5W 1H questions. Contains relevant details, and the writing style is clear, utilizing effective journalistic language.	Presents factual information and few opinions. Article answers most of the 5W 1H questions. Contains details and topic is covered well.	Presents some facts and some opinions. Answers some of the 5W 1H questions but few details are given.	Missing many facts. Answers few of the 5W 1H questions. Ideas wander. Too short to meet the criteria.
<b>Mechanics</b>	Excellent spelling, punctuation, and grammar with less than three errors.	Excellent spelling, punctuation, and grammar with less than six errors.	Spelling, punctuation, and grammar slightly distract the reader. There are nine errors or less.	Spelling, punctuation, and grammar significantly distract the reader. There are ten or more errors.

## Student Objectives

1. Students will be able to use background knowledge and primary sources to explain events leading up to a historic event and identify its possible causes and repercussions.
2. Students will be able to analyze written primary sources and historic images to gather evidence and contextualize a historic event.
3. Students will be able to make connections between a historic event and current events and take informed action on a current topic.

## Relevant NC 8th Grade Social Studies Standards

**8.B.1.1** Determine how the relationship between different regional, social, ethnic, and racial groups have contributed to the development of North Carolina and the nation.

**8.C&G.1.2** Compare how decisions of state and local government conform and conflict with the democratic ideals of the nation

**8.C&G.1.3** Critique the policies, laws, and government structures of North Carolina and the nation in terms of conforming to or conflicting with American democratic ideals.

**8.H.1.1** Explain the causes and effects of conflict in North Carolina and the nation.

**8.H.1.3** Explain how slavery, segregation, voter suppression, reconcentration, and other discriminatory practices have been used to suppress and exploit certain groups within North Carolina and the nation over time.