

An Ugly Chapter

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A state-sanctioned look at the 1898 riot in Wilmington should have been ordered by the General Assembly long before 2000. The riot, with white supremacists overthrowing an elected city government that had too many African-Americans for the racists' tastes, is said to stand as the only coup d'etat in American history. It was a harrowing, disgraceful and little discussed event in the state's history. The examination that's now been completed offers a valuable look at a singular and pivotal episode in North Carolina's past. The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission issued its draft report Thursday and must make recommendations by May for how the state should react to the findings. That could include an atonement of some appropriate type by the state, and memorials to keep the event in the public's consciousness.

Certainly this event must be included in the North Carolina history curriculum in the public schools. People who live here need to understand the conditions that produced the riot and the consequences when white supremacists took control of Wilmington's government. At the same time, and because of the same kind of forces coming to a head, they also were taking control of the state government in Raleigh.

The riot was an outgrowth of tensions that had festered since the Civil War. Many whites resented African-American advances, and the Democratic Party became their champion. Newspaper publishers -- including Josephus Daniels, the founder and editor of The News & Observer -- used their influence to stoke the racial animosity that catapulted Democrats in the 1898 elections.

That animosity grew especially strong in Wilmington, the state's largest city at the time, resulting that November in the torching of a black-owned newspaper and then violence that led to deaths and injuries of black residents.

The following months saw the introduction of Jim Crow laws passed in Raleigh that weren't wiped away until the civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s. Daniels' role during the period is a well-documented and embarrassing blot on this newspaper's past. As an institution, the newspaper was complicit in a cause that brought shame, and that still brings regret.

The Daniels family owned The N&O until a decade ago. This page still carries Josephus Daniels' words, taken from his will, calling on the paper to "devote itself to the policies of equality and justice to the underprivileged." That tradition honors Daniels for the principles he went on to advocate during a career that lasted another 50 years after 1898.

Evidence suggests he came to understand the wrong he had done, and that he tried to make amends. His successors certainly did, in their editorial advocacy for civil right and in corporate support for progressive causes.

We take Josephus Daniels' admonition to those who would direct the paper "in the tomorrows" as showing that people can learn from their mistakes. In recommending further steps in response to its findings, the Wilmington Riot Commission can help extract history's hard lessons for a remorseful state.