

B. State-sponsored Historical Investigations: Wilmington and Rosewood

Representatives of two United States commissions created by state legislation participated in the meeting: the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission and the Rosewood Commission.⁸ Both groups dealt with historical events and have submitted reports. The Wilmington Commission is the most recent (its final report was submitted in May 2006) and awaits official response. Rosewood has a longer record of accomplishment in terms of steps taken in response to its report.

Professor Irving Joyner told meeting participants that Wilmington was the only recorded coup d'état in United States history. It concerned the overthrow, on November 11, 1898, of a legitimately elected city government. The Democratic Party had gained control of the North Carolina General Assembly in October of 1898, and began planning the overthrow of the Wilmington city government. Supported by the racist discourse promoted in the local press, a group of Democrats and other white racists organized in the Klan and Red-shirts went in and ran white populists and black leadership out of town, having surrounded them with armed white men and forced them to resign their offices. The death count ranged from 14–60 individuals, and there was displacement of 20 targeted individuals, and a mass exodus of over 2100 others. The absence of a public outcry and official response to the violence allowed for denial about the true nature of what occurred to settle into North Carolina history.

At the time, Wilmington was the most prosperous city in the state. It had a majority African-American population that was politically aligned with the Populist Party, made up mainly of white farmers and laborers, and which co-governed with the Republican Party. The governor of North Carolina was himself a member of the Populist Party and enjoyed support from the African-American population. After the coup, between 1898 and 1968, no African American was elected to serve in the North Carolina General Assembly, and only since 1984 have more than four African Americans served simultaneously.



Irving Joyner

Leading up to the centennial anniversary of the coup in 1998, two African-American state assemblymen, representing New Hanover County (Wilmington is the county seat), drafted the legislation required to create the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission. It was formed in 2000, with no financial resources. Commission members worked for three years without any funds, until they were finally reimbursed for their expenses and given the support of one staff person.

The Commission recommended economic development programs in the city of Wilmington in the parts of town where people had been forcibly removed from their land, and legislation aimed at creating a new statute of limitations so that the descendants of victims could make claims for redress. Specific recommendations were made to the News and Observer and Charlotte Observer newspapers, including acknowledgment of the papers' role in the events of 1898, an educational

⁸ The organizers also approached representatives from the Tulsa Race Riot Commission process, but they did not send a delegate to the meeting. A representative from the Southern Truth and Reconciliation group (STAR) indicated that in Atlanta there would soon be a series of important activities around the centennial of that city's 1906 "race riot," to disseminate information, using art and other forms to reflect on what happened. See http://www.1906atlantaraceriot.org/Centennial_Remembrance_Weekend.pdf for events that took place in September 2006.

supplement on the case to go out to all of their readers, and scholarships for African American students who hope to study journalism.

Rosewood, Florida had a similarly violent history of massive displacement of African Americans. A small community of approximately 25–30 families, it was located in the central part of the state. The majority of the hamlet’s population was African American. In January of 1923, a group of white vigilantes — responding to allegations that a white woman had been raped by a black man from Rosewood — entered the town. In the ensuing mob violence, some 8–17 people were killed, and the entire hamlet was dispossessed. Prior to a Grand Jury investigation of the violence, the remnants of the town were completely destroyed. This led to dismissal of the case on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

Decades later, in 1993, the Florida Board of Regents received a report submitted by five distinguished Florida academics titled, “A Documented History of the Incident Which Occurred at Rosewood, Florida in January, 1923.” The report recorded documentary evidence and testimonies from survivors, and its authors concluded that the acts of violence committed were unwarranted and that criminal justice had failed in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. The authors of the report operated on a US\$ 50,000 budget appropriated by the State House of Representatives. One year after the report was submitted, the State of Florida enacted legislation to provide US\$ 2 million in compensation to the surviving victims of the Rosewood massacre. The Bill specifically required law enforcement officers to re-interview available witnesses to determine if criminal proceedings could be pursued; created a fund to compensate Rosewood families for loss of property and for those who sustained emotional trauma; and established a scholarship fund for the descendants of the Rosewood families.

Accompanying the efforts of the Board of Regents and the state legislature, two groups in particular emerged to heighten awareness of the Rosewood massacre and displacement. The Rosewood Forum, founded in 1994, is a civil society organization that works to raise awareness about the events and their aftermath among the general public. The second organization, the Rosewood Heritage Foundation, was founded in 1995 by survivors and descendants of the victims of the massacre. The work of the Rosewood Heritage Foundation has supported the development of bus and speaking tours. Both organizations have been central to the inclusion of Rosewood in state history texts and have produced a variety of exhibitions and pedagogical materials for schools.

Both commissions were sparked by the recent modest resurgence of African American lawmakers who were instrumental in developing the mandates and securing legislative approval for the respective historical inquiries. At the time of the events in question, both communities were home to prosperous African American families immediately following Reconstruction. Black citizens not only held authority in the local community — serving as educators, doctors, and business people — but as members of local and state political leadership. Both commissions point to the violent attack on black communities as a response to the growth and the social promise these communities held out to former slaves and other African American citizens. Both commissions link that violent and racist attack to later and even present-day repercussions.



Sherry Dupree

In terms of operational style, both commissions functioned as investigative bodies assigned to research particular moments in history, with mandates that focused on describing events and consequences, as well as making recommendations for appropriate present-day redress. The commissions operated with limited funding, and each was comprised of a panel of distinguished researchers that included historians, legal experts, and educators. The two commissions investigated singular events that occurred in the relatively distant past, making the search for survivors or descendants particularly difficult. They framed reparations as a debt, not only to victims from the era, but also to their descendants and the larger community. As shown through the Rosewood case, landmark decisions on reparations have been made in Florida, while the debate on this topic is still pending for Wilmington.

The options for continued activism vary from state to state and at this time those for Wilmington have yet to be fully explored. The North Carolina General Assembly was expected to debate the findings and proposed remedies only in early 2007. A state-wide information campaign was being contemplated, and the delay in the legislative debate, while it might allow interest to cool, might also offer a greater opportunity to garner grassroots support for measures of redress and other state responses to the report. The achievements of the Rosewood Commission are measured in part by the recognition and reparations given to victims and their descendants; however, following this, the state of Florida passed legislation barring future claims related to Rosewood. In essence, the state asserted that its work has been completed and that it has made a good-faith attempt at addressing a past injustice.

In this context, Ed Whitfield raised the question, “What is the incentive for the perpetrators of these acts to come forward for reconciliation?” He continued:

The educational aspect of this is the most important. People have a need to have the myths of denial to cover for the activities they are doing. The process of taking off the layers of lies and myths that leaves bare the truth allows people to say there is something fundamentally wrong in our history. What happened in Wilmington was sanctioned at the highest levels of government, and these lies have to be exposed.

Joyner noted:

We are looking at education and community support, but we are also looking at the supposed power of our African American legislators in the General Assembly. That has never really been tested before. We are putting it on their shoulders. Republicans want to expose the Democratic Party. We have laid bare many of those open secrets and we are prepared to ride it out.

Sherry Dupree, from the Rosewood Heritage Foundation, cautioned that:

Politics is something we have to be very careful with; the country often does not want to deal with justice. There is also a lot of fear, and you have to have a couple of people to really go for it and begin. As you build the roots, you will find that church groups are strong and will support you. We have not talked about the private organizations.... They know what really happened and can talk about it among themselves. The Masons have given us a lot of good information about Rosewood.