



A City Changed by Race:
Triumphs and Hardships of African-American
Residents in Wilmington, NC during Reconstruction

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Project Background and Goals

- Wilmington, NC conditions of slavery were particularly lenient in comparison to other large southern towns.
 - A Rhode Island newspaper reporter visiting the city in 1846 wrote, “There is probably no place in the world where slaves are treated with more lenity and indulgence than in Wilmington”.
 - A great number of slaves had residential freedom, living in separate quarters than their masters. Also, slaves commonly hired out their time, working in different trades for separate income.
 - White laborers were angered by the competition slaves gave them for work; one of the many causes leading to a 1777 law making it illegal for slaves to hire out their own time. However an act in 1785 was passed excluding Wilmington slaves from this restriction.
- In 1898, the Democratic party and White Supremacists overthrew Wilmington’s biracial majority Republican Party in a bloody riot, sending hundreds of prominent African Americans citizens out of the city, leaving the others subject to developing Jim Crow laws
- What happened in between?
- Emancipation Day occurred in Wilmington on February 22, 1865
- From that day, the population of and opportunities given to African Americans grew exponentially in Wilmington
- I chose to research the positive changes for the African American community by exploring information from primary sources including city newspapers, directories, family papers and federal documents.
- I also wanted to determine if substantial evidence existed for developing white supremacy attitudes during this time
- The United States Freedman’s Bureau was a major source of information for this project as it provided records of activities of whites and blacks in Wilmington, NC

Project Results

African American Triumphs...

- Wilmington's growing black population created a strong community during reconstruction, developing and strengthening its own churches, sports teams, literary societies, benevolent associations, entertainment groups, police and fire departments, businesses and more
- The Freedmen's Bureau helped blacks through monthly provisions and aid
- The Bureau's greatest contribution was its foundation for an educational system provided by Freedmen's schools and grants
 - 8 schools serving 588 pupils implemented by 1868
- 36 African American men became influential in Wilmington and state politics in the decade following the Civil War
 - Each held multiple positions including aldermen, registrar, and even representatives to the state congress

...and Hardships

- The Freedmen's Bank caused black investors to lose much of their savings because of poor management
- An "exodus" occurred in 1868 of poor blacks out of the area because of impoverished conditions
- The city's first hospital, built in 1881, gave no indoor facilities for blacks
- The Bureau's report of racial violence showed a great majority of white on black violence, most cases went unresolved
- Wilmington's white population did not appreciate the Freedmen's Bureau, claiming it gave blacks undeserved advantage
 - Occupied much of its time with letters for property reclamation or petty grievances
- While African Americans seemingly succeeded in life on their own during reconstruction, the time period created hostility in whites that would eventually erupt two decades later