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My Ancestors Won't Have the Final Word

While I don't feel responsible for my ancestor's role in the Wilmington massacre, I do feel compelled to help repair what he helped destroy.

by [Lucy McCauley](#)



A new North Carolina highway historical marker to the 1898 Wilmington Coup is unveiled during a dedication ceremony in November 2019. (Matt Born/The Star-News via AP)

One raw November evening in 2021, I sat down for pizza at a friend's table in Wilmington. This was no ordinary dinner. I'd met the other guests—Kieran, Priscilla, and Leila Haile—only briefly before. We'd all come to town to attend events marking the anniversary of the 1898 massacre and coup d'état.

There was no denying the differences between us. I'm white, beyond middle-aged; the Hailes are millennial people of color. Yet we are deeply connected by the legacy of a single day in November more than a century ago.

I was nervous. Would the Hailes point an accusing finger? Would they see my ancestor in *me*?

Just before the massacre, their great-great-grandfather Alexander Manly had barely escaped lynching by fleeing town. His purported crime? As founder of *The Daily Record*, a Black daily newspaper, he'd dared to write an editorial refuting widespread propaganda that portrayed Black men as sexual predators.

White supremacists cynically used Manly's editorial to stir up more hatred against Black citizens. They felt threatened by Wilmington's shifting power dynamic. A multiracial political party dominated City Hall, and the city's white population had dropped to less than half.

On November 10, 1898, an armed white mob burned down Manly's newspaper office. They roamed the streets, gathering up Black civic and business leaders and driving them from town. Many were killed—estimates range from 60 into the 100s. By day's end, the mob had staged a *coup d'etat*, replacing the city council with like-minded white people and the mayor with a former Confederate colonel.



A photo of the destruction of The Daily Record's office in November 1898. Photo: New Hanover County Public Library

Among the behind-the-scenes ringleaders of this event was my own great-grandfather, William Berry McKoy, a fact I didn't discover until 2018 while watching the documentary *Wilmington on Fire*. What I learned shook me to my core.

Not only was my ancestor armed and on the streets that day, he'd also led the White Government Union clubs, whose explicit mission was to suppress Black voting and "re-establish in North Carolina the Supremacy of the White Race." McKoy, a title lawyer, had also apparently used legal loopholes that allowed local banks to steal properties belonging to expelled Black residents.

The great-grandfather I met in that documentary was very different from the one I'd known through family lore—a Princeton graduate and man of letters who taught Sunday school. I wondered: If my ancestor's accomplishments were a measure of who we were—as my family had always implied—then how did this new information change my sense of myself?

A reckoning began as I examined the half-truths I'd learned over decades from people I'd trusted. I thought about the careful training I'd received, by tacit example, *not* to confront uncomfortable facts. And I began to suspect that I was not alone. No doubt, many white Southerners remember times they witnessed or participated in exclusive cultural rites or enjoyed unearned privileges. We never had to think about it. Yet our Black classmates and community members can tell us how painful and confusing our indifference, our seemingly willful ignorance, was for them.

It wasn't until I was well into adulthood, for example, that it struck me how sitting in gardens wearing a hooped skirt and holding a parasol during Wilmington's annual Azalea Festival was not just a celebration of the city's signature bush. It was a nod to plantation life, slavery, and the "Lost Cause." The Azalea Belle tradition ceased in 2020 after George Floyd's murder and widespread protests. But for me as a teenager in the 1970s, being a Belle had felt no more problematic than the memorial to the Unknown Confederate Soldier standing a block from our house, or the occasional Confederate flag flying from someone's porch.

I'd hardly noticed how, years after legislation had integrated public institutions, Wilmington remained socially segregated. Only white people sat at my school lunch table. People of color didn't appear at our families' churches, organizations, and beach clubs.

It didn't help that, for more than a century, the city and state had covered up the horror of 1898. We didn't learn about it, not at school or at home. That collective amnesia prevailed until the mid-1990s, when the massacre and coup were widely exposed in books and articles. But even then I was unaware, having settled in New England as a young adult. On visits home, no one in my family mentioned 1898.

Once I grasped my ancestor's role, I committed to educating myself. I learned about Wilmington's prosperous Black community that had blossomed throughout the 1890s, against the odds—and the rich exchange of ideas, culture, and humanity that was destroyed on November 10, 1898.



Lucy McCauley with Cedric Harrison, owner of [WilmingtonNColor](#) bus tours, and driver Steve Whitehead. (Photo courtesy of the author)

I discovered that many of those remarkable families recouped their losses by reinventing themselves elsewhere, underlining how shortsighted a “gain” the white mob attained. What might the compounded wealth of those businesses have contributed to Wilmington; had they been permitted to flourish? Meanwhile, Wilmington's white people got to keep their property—and that of Black families they expelled—and to pass along inherited generational wealth, with interest, to descendants like me.

But I also learned about something else that families of white supremacists inherit. Those brutal acts of violence and injustice lurking in our ancestral trees can set off flywheels of emotional and spiritual fracturing through entire family lines. Left unacknowledged and unaddressed, some of us continue to carry that weight of dysfunction in our lives.

Part of coming to terms with my history, then, was to work with a trusted counselor. I also doubled-down on efforts I'd begun years before, when I'd learned my ancestors had enslaved people: I studied books about whiteness, expanded my media consumption of Black voices, and participated in cross-racial conversations.

This is how I came to be sitting at my friend Kim Cook's dinner table that November night in 2021, passing around plates of pizza. Cook is a criminology professor at UNC-Wilmington who teaches restorative justice. I later learned that she'd told her guests about my infamous ancestor before she'd invited me. But that night, Manly's descendants never asked about my great-grandfather or pointed any fingers.

The evening was carried by a mutual willingness to show up, to extend ourselves beyond our comfort levels. And though at first I felt intimidated by their easy, witty banter, after a while I relaxed and let myself enjoy communing with new friends. Kieran is a musician and multimedia engineer living in Los Angeles. His wife, Priscilla, is a Belizean-American preschool educator. And Leila, Kieran's cousin, directs an art gallery and works as Portland, Oregon's disability program coordinator.



The author with Kieran, Priscilla, and Leila Haile, as well as Rebecca Trammell, at that dinner in 2021. (Photo courtesy of Lucy McCauley)

I listened as Leila and Kieran recounted tales of their grandmother Patricia Haile, Alex Manly's granddaughter. She had carried the scars of 1898 generations later, teaching her children to "stay ready so you don't have to *get* ready!" I could feel just how heavily that mantle of trauma weighed on their own generation too. I wondered: How can white people help shift the devastating narrative that our forebears set in motion?

While I don't feel responsible for my ancestor's actions, I do feel a conviction to work to repair what he helped destroy. In this 125th anniversary year and beyond, we have an opportunity to work toward a healing process across racial lines, no matter where we live in the U.S.

What might repair look like? For starters, white people can fully acknowledge the role some of our ancestors played in enslavement and historical violence. We can work through any residual guilt and shame, fear, or apathy that blinds us from seeing and addressing the systemic cycle of racial inequity that continues today.

Beyond that, white people can commit to advocating for racial equity within a process that's led by the Black community. Together we can develop ways to restore what's owed to descendants of citizens who were enslaved, lynched, or expelled from their towns. We can address our cities' pockets of searing poverty, bereft of reasonable access to nutritious food or health services. We can tackle the host of barriers to home ownership or better fund schools in minority neighborhoods.

The challenge to right so many wrongs can feel overwhelming. But let's ask ourselves: What kind of legacy do white descendants of enslavers and perpetrators of violence want to pass down? What do we really want to do with what we've inherited—ideologically and materially?

We need to move beyond our individual discomfort and find ways of repair. There's power in making amends on our families' behalf through action.

History doesn't have the final word about the future.

Lucy McCauley's writing has appeared in The Atlantic, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, and The Wilmington Star-News, among other publications. She worked as a researcher on the PBS documentary The Fire and the Forgotten, about the 1921 Tulsa massacre. She is a member of Wilmington's chapter of Coming to the Table, a national organization focused on racial healing.

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