

BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

APRIL 1, 2014

THE CONTINGENCY OF RACE AND RECONSTRUCTION IN WILMINGTON

SPEAKER: Dr. Chris Fonville

Chris is much more than a noted and knowledgeable historian. He is a native son of Wilmington. If anyone “grew where he was planted,” Chris qualifies. He speaks with great insight and feeling. His pragmatism helps us understand this *design for disaster* called post Civil War reconstruction.

The same stars we tried to steer in the 1865 Galaxy are still shining. Chris says those missed opportunities are still blinking at us today. Chris would agree with economist Pieter Emmet: “The words *emancipation* and *abolition* must be regarded with utmost suspicion.” The reconstruction era focus Chris shares with us is that of the Southern States from 1863-1898. The goal was always a smooth re-entry and transformation ending in one mighty United States of America—**as directed by Congress**. The War ended and thousands of blacks and some whites descended on Wilmington giving it a black majority from 1860 – 1910. The infrastructure was in shambles as was the transportation system. Add to this mess a very bitter and racist Wilmington citizenry. Sherman’s’ Army has about 20-25,000 freedmen following him in 1865. He could not provide for them and sent about 8000 to Wilmington. The population swelled to somewhere above 35,000.

These 14 years, two months and 30 days of radical reconstruction scared Wilmington and left wounds still seeping today. This great city suffered! Andrew Johnston aimed for a moderate policy and came one vote short of impeachment. Radical Republicans imposed harsh terms and gave power to the likes of the KKK. “Carpetbaggers” took as much and as often as they could. A nasty nationwide depression occurred called the panic of 1873. U.S. Grant tried to suppress the KKK and protect African Americans. “Scalawags” (native whites of the South) escalated tensions. Intense controversy erupted surrounding the best way to incorporate eleven seceding states into a republican form of government.

Jim Crow Laws and The Black Code (ya just had to be there) successfully subordinated African Americans. These ultimately led to the politically motivated attack by whites against the city's leading African Americans. It will variously be called The Wilmington Coup d' Etat, Massacre or Race Riot of 1898. This illegal overthrow of a legitimately elected local government, Chris summarizes, is the basis of the seeping wounds we still face today. We attempted 100 years later to give some closure to victims. Reparations were suggested for descendants of the up to 100 who lost a life. Chris closes by saying that those stars still blink and the race for justice goes on and on.

Submitted by Dan Fink