

One Misstep (1908–1924)

Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up the folds of the garment.

TONI MORRISON, *THE BLUEST EYE*

IN 1910 MARY AND SIDNEY WILSON lived in a house facing a dirt road in the predominantly African American community of Castle Hayne, a rural area on the outskirts of Wilmington, North Carolina. Neighbors' homes dotted the lane. Their houses, many of which had dirt floors, were heated by fireplaces and woodstoves. Electricity and running water would not come to the community for many more years. Yards in the community were swept clean by brooms made from native grasses. Almost all of the homes were surrounded by vegetable gardens, where residents grew food for themselves and to trade with neighbors. Dirt roads connected Castle Hayne to nearby Wilmington. There were a few wagons and buggies. Most people walked wherever they needed to go. Children and adults fished and relaxed along the Cape Fear River that snaked around the town.¹

In 1905, at the age of seventeen, Mary Wilson gave birth to her first child, a daughter whom she named Asynia.² Soon after, Mary apparently had another child who died shortly after birth. In 1908 she delivered her third child, this time a boy, Junius. Daughter Carrie followed in 1911. Her husband Sidney worked for the railroads as a woodcutter while Mary reared the children and tended the home. Junius's mother had grown up in Harnett County, North Carolina, the daughter of Nathaniel and Joanne Nixon Foy.³ Before Mary was born, her father worked as a farm laborer in Pender County. Migrant work as a

carpenter required Nathaniel to live apart from the family for extended periods, leaving them to manage on their own.⁴ In her husband's absence, Joanne worked as a farm laborer to support Mary and her five siblings. Sidney Wilson also grew up in North Carolina. His parents likely were James and Annie, who, like the Foys and many other African Americans in the Tar Heel State, farmed the countryside.⁵

A few doors down from Mary and Sidney lived their older neighbors Arthur Smith Sr. and his wife Annie with their four sons: George, Arthur Jr., Jim, and King. In 1880 Arthur Sr. had worked with Mary's father on the farm in Pender County.⁶ By 1910 Arthur Sr. and his adult sons worked alongside Sidney Wilson as woodcutters. Mary turned to Annie for advice about raising children. The families frequently gardened, collected firewood, and enjoyed free time together. Their bonds of affection and support strengthened over the years.⁷

Although the Wilsons' resources were meager, their lives must have seemed much more promising than the lives of their grandparents, who were almost certainly born into slavery. In just fifty years, their neighborhood of Castle Hayne had witnessed the enormous change from slavery to freedom. Progress in race relations was less linear; it included both profound opportunities for African Americans seen in very few areas of the South but also times of racial terror and brutal violence. Living in eastern North Carolina at the dawn of the twentieth century, Junius Wilson, his parents, and his community were the inheritors of a complicated legacy of freedom and horror.

FOR MUCH OF THE LATTER PART of the nineteenth century, Wilmington was a city of promise for African Americans. It did not start out that way. During the late antebellum period, the Cape Fear region in eastern North Carolina was one of the state's plantation districts, growing rice with the labor of enslaved African Americans. The sale of products made from pine trees—such as turpentine, tar, and rosin—served as the other main source of income for the region. Wilmington, the state's largest city at that time, was filled with commerce and industry. Although North Carolina as a whole seemed modest and middling compared to its wealthy neighbors Virginia and South Carolina, many of Wilmington's gentry laid claim to the polish and affluence of elite plantation culture.⁸

The Civil War facilitated the emancipation of more than half the population of the city of Wilmington. At the war's end, the economy came to a standstill: in addition to the loss of slave labor forces, railroad and shipping lines were badly damaged by war. At the same time, Wilmington filled with war refugees, both black and white, from around the South. Food was scarce and sanitation was inadequate. In spite of the chaos of daily living, members of the African American community began to celebrate their freedom and come together. Through-

out the state, plans for economic survival and growth were charted. Political leaders began to emerge within the black community. Churches and schools were established.⁹

When the Union army began to withdraw authority from the Wilmington area, whites in the newly emerging Conservative Party (the name often used to describe southern Democrats of that era) attempted to reestablish their control over the county. In an effort to map out how planters and their former slaves would interact, they created the Black Code. The code effectively removed many of the rights that emancipation had promised African Americans. Both police and militias made sure that black citizens followed these rules. The Ku Klux Klan emerged to enforce racial subjugation. White-owned newspapers publicized the Klan, which rapidly grew in strength.¹⁰

In 1867, when the federal government required each southern state to adopt universal male suffrage, Conservative white elites lost not only their tenuous grip on their plantation labor force but also much of their political power. The voting population of the Lower Cape Fear region doubled as African Americans joined the rolls. Despite intimidation by the militias and the Klan, Wilmington's blacks were determined to claim their rights. In the April 1868 election, Republicans garnered more votes than the Conservatives in four of the seven Cape Fear counties. In the city of Wilmington, the large number of black citizens allowed the Republicans to receive twice as many votes as the Conservatives. Throughout the state, new opportunities arose for North Carolina's black community, sometimes created by blacks themselves and sometimes promoted by supportive whites. The Peabody Fund of Boston helped communities establish educational facilities for free schools for both white and black North Carolinians. The American Missionary Association opened a school for the state's deaf and blind African American children, and the state soon oversaw its operation. The future was awash with possibilities for African Americans and new fears for many in the white community.¹¹

Wilmington's first Republican ticket did not include the name of a single African American. Soon, though, blacks not only represented the community in city government but also made up almost half of the officers of the police force. In 1869 New Hanover County elected its first African American representative to the North Carolina House. Members of the black community became barbers, restaurateurs, artisans, educators, preachers, lawyers, and physicians. Wilmington had an African American daily newspaper, the *Daily Record*. The city continued to send black legislators to represent the district in the North Carolina Assembly for decades. Many blacks regarded Wilmington as "one of the South's most successfully reconstructed cities."¹²

As the years passed by, it became clear to North Carolina's African Ameri-

cans that significant change in the racial dynamics of the region would be a long battle with many setbacks and disappointments. Conservatives used techniques such as gerrymandering to dampen significantly the political voice of the states' African Americans. But in Wilmington, with its black majority, Conservative Democratic rule was never solid or stable. More than in other parts of North Carolina, Wilmington's African Americans retained some political voice. In addition, they continued to build a strong social infrastructure based on black churches, schools, and professional achievements.¹³

There were renewed hopes in the African American population of Wilmington when interracial alliances began to develop in the late 1880s. During this period, both Junius Wilson's mother's family and the Smiths moved closer to Wilmington. Black and nonelite white farmers emphasized their common concerns in order to gain more political power. In 1894 this coalition of Republicans and Populists, called the Fusion Party, was able to end twenty years of Democratic rule. By 1896 the Fusionists gained every statewide office. Interracial democracy seemed to be the way of the future.¹⁴

IN 1898 THE CONSERVATIVE DEMOCRATS struck back. Angered that white Populists had abandoned racial solidarity to unite with Republicans, Democratic leadership conducted a massive statewide white supremacy campaign in order to end what they called "Negro rule" and "Negro domination." The Democrats claimed the Fusion government was full of corruption and scandal.

Strategies to split the Fusion alliance were not all based on allegations of misdeeds, however. The Democrats' most successful tactic was the drawing of a fierce line between black and white citizens. Democrats suggested that Wilmington's African Americans were publicly disrespectful of whites. Extensive discussion of interracial mixing and black men's supposed interest in white women ignited flames of suspicion. From white racial fears emerged the image of the predatory and sinister black man threatening the purity of the defenseless women of the white South. Rebecca Felton of Georgia called on the white men of the South to "lynch a thousand times a week if necessary" in order to protect white women from black rapists. Her call fanned the flames of racial hatred and fear among Wilmington's whites.¹⁵

Alexander Manly, the editor of Wilmington's black newspaper, wrote a column in August 1898 responding to Felton and her supporters. He argued that, although true rape should not be condoned by anyone, the truth was that many accused rapists were innocent. Sexual relations between black men and white women were not by definition rape. African American men, as Manly wrote, could be "sufficiently attractive for white girls of culture and refinement to fall in love with them, as is well known to all." He continued that it was "no worse

for a black man to be intimate with a white woman than for a white man to be intimate with a colored woman.” The white community exploded in anger. Under headlines such as “Negro Defamer of White Women” and “A Horrid Slander of White Women,” Manly’s editorial was widely condemned in the white press for attacking southern white womanhood.¹⁶

The Democrats exploited racial tensions in order to dismantle the fragile Fusion alliance and end its progress toward interracial democracy. Alfred Waddell, a white supremacist who sought to oust the Fusion government, claimed that African Americans were inherently criminal and that white men who had betrayed their race by voting for the Fusionists were “responsible for the evils of Negro rule.” He promised to protect his version of the South, even if he and his supporters had to clog the Cape Fear River with the corpses of Wilmington’s blacks in order to end Fusionist rule.

The Red Shirts, a militant wing of the Democratic Party, backed up Waddell’s threats by terrorizing both blacks and pro-Fusionist whites throughout the state. The Democrats, with their warning of impending race war, succeeded in almost silencing the Republicans in Wilmington and surrounding areas. By November 1898 white voters, persuaded of the dangers of black political participation, were galvanized to vote the party of white supremacy back into office. African Americans, on the other hand, avoided the polls in large numbers in order to evade bloodshed. In a city with a Republican majority of 5,000 in 1896, the Democrats won the 1898 election by 6,000 votes—a turnaround of 11,000 votes in two years.¹⁷

Although the Democrats had regained political power, many positions in the city government were not open for election and were still held by Republicans. The Democrats were unwilling to allow any vestiges of interracial democracy. The day after the election, a mass meeting of the city’s white men approved the “Wilmington Declaration of Independence,” a document that promised that blacks would no longer have any political power in the region. One of the document’s resolutions explicitly condemned Manly’s column and demanded that the editor leave Wilmington and cease publication of his newspaper. A committee of white citizens, appointed to carry out the declaration, called thirty-two prominent black community leaders to meet with the white committee. Waddell, head of the committee, told them they had been chosen to deliver the message to the black community and the ultimatum to Manly.

Although Manly had already closed the offices of the *Daily Record* and fled from Wilmington, a mob of as many as 2,000 heavily armed white men bent on violence gathered the next morning. The men marched to Manly’s office, smashed his furniture, poured kerosene over the floors and walls, and lit it afire. This was just the beginning of a day of violence in the city. Although many

African American citizens fled to avoid bloodshed, others organized themselves for retaliation. When the white militia met the blacks, shots rang out. A white man fell. Then six black men fell during the heavy fire that followed. For the next hours, gunfire could be heard throughout the city. The white vigilantes moved into the poor black sections of town to “hunt niggers.” Many African Americans left their homes to hide in the woods, where the mob could not find them. One witness reported the murder of an African American deaf man, shot by the mob when he did not hear and thus failed to respond to the white mob’s order to halt.¹⁸

Newspapers varied tremendously in their reporting of the death toll. One paper estimated that nine people had been killed, while another guessed sixteen. Waddell himself suggested that about twenty blacks were shot to death. Some witnesses claimed that more than 100 of the city’s African Americans were murdered. Many people told stories about the Cape Fear River being “choked” by black bodies.

Whatever the truth about the death toll, no one questioned the fact that black political power had ended in Wilmington. The mayor, city aldermen, and the entire police force resigned. Democrats took over their positions. Alfred Waddell was unanimously elected by the new board of aldermen to be Wilmington’s mayor. The Democrats passed new regulations—such as the grandfather clause, poll taxes, and literacy tests—that severely curtailed black voting. Soon, following the Supreme Court’s legalization of enforced racial separation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, North Carolina passed extensive segregation ordinances that peppered the state with signs reading “For Colored” or “Whites Only.”¹⁹

Many African American leaders and white Republicans were banished from the city, ordered by the Democrats to march to the train station along a route of jeers and bayonets. Hundreds of black citizens who were not expelled moved away as quickly as they could. The city lost its black majority. Wilmington was no longer a mecca for African Americans, but a place to be feared by them.

CASTLE HAYNE WAS SLIGHTLY out of sight of Wilmington, but never fully out of its reach. For years, residents of Castle Hayne looked to Wilmington as a place of possibility and opportunity. Now, however, their proximity to the city seemed dangerous. News of the riot surely spread like wildfire through the predominantly African American town and other local black communities. Although Mary and Sidney Wilson were still young when the riot occurred, their families as well as the Smith family must have heard accounts of the Cape Fear River clogged with dead bodies.²⁰ Perhaps people fleeing from the city shared their houses or camped in their fields. Perhaps they even knew people who were shot, or met their grieving families. Even after the violence had ended, the Wilming-

ton Race Riot could not have been far from their thoughts. The lingering threat of destruction would have been palpable even for young Mary.

The aftermath of the Wilmington riot was devastating to the city's African Americans. Jim Crow regulations emerged, which put southern blacks in a new kind of shackles. Rather than feeling an expanding sense of power and pride, the residents of Castle Hayne must have felt besieged or even conquered. But the Wilmington area was not alone. Racial tensions were inflamed across the nation. Although Wilmington was one of the first race riots following Reconstruction, many cities followed. In 1900 violence erupted in New Orleans and New York. Springfield, Ohio, rioted in 1904 and Springfield, Illinois, in 1907. Georgia gubernatorial candidate Hoke Smith expressed his willingness to "imitate Wilmington" in his efforts to squelch African American advancement. Chicago's riot broke out in 1905. In 1906 Atlanta followed suit. Although each city's riot was unique, most followed a pattern of black achievements, white feelings of resentment, some catalyst such as an incident bringing up sexual fears, and then a brutal response by whites.²¹ As the news of these other riots and their similarities to the Wilmington massacre reached the residents of the city and its environs, memories of the city's own revolution must have thundered in their hearts.

Massacres and riots were only one expression of violent racial tensions throughout the nation during the early twentieth century. Lynching was another. Earlier in 1898 there had been an incident in Lake City, South Carolina, just south of Wilmington. The home of the black postmaster had been set afire by angry whites. When the postmaster and his family tried to escape the flames, a mob opened fire with their guns, killing the postmaster and his infant child and severely wounding several other family members. Motivated by fears of black achievements and uncontrolled black sexuality, lynching expressed the white community's desire to right the social order. Although the number of white participants and the number of black deaths in any one incident were generally much lower than the numbers appearing in riot statistics, lynch law nevertheless terrorized African Americans. The uncertainty of who made up the mobs meant that anyone in the white community might be a lyncher. In addition, anyone accused of a crime was at risk. Since the mob would act without awaiting the results of a trial, anyone could become the victim of a lynch mob. As African American crusader Ida B. Wells laid bare in works like *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*, hundreds of black men and women died at the hands of vigilante mobs during the 1890s.²² One historian estimates that a person was lynched every other day between 1889 and 1899.²³

News of riots and lynchings reverberated for decades. For example, a few months before the Wilmington Race Riot, Emma Hartsell, a young white girl,

was raped and murdered in Concord, North Carolina. The two men accused of the crime, Tom Johnson and Joe Kizer, were caught by a mob. A ballad about the lynching, sung for many generations after the deaths, gives an account of what happened next:

They got to town by half past seven
Their necks were broken before eleven.
The people there were a sight to see
They hung them to a dogwood tree.

The mob then riddled the men's bodies with bullets. Near the end of the song was a threat to all African American listeners:

And one thing more my song does lack
I forgot to say the men were black.²⁴

For decades after the Wilmington riot, African Americans justifiably feared severe reprisals for anything perceived by whites to be a subversion of the racial hierarchy of Jim Crow society. Young black men were frequently the target of white fear and anger. One misstep could bring incarceration or even death to the individual and ruin to his or her family. Edgar Allen Hunt, a child at the time of the 1898 massacre, later recounted that his father repeatedly "told us what to expect, how to act, how to stay away from them [white people]. Don't trust them. I mean he gave us the whole ball of wax having been in the race riot seeing some things. So, coming up, we kind of knew what we were supposed to do." Parents' stories and lessons provided the next generation of Africans Americans with resources to survive Jim Crow.²⁵

AFTER THE FIRST DECADE of the twentieth century drew to a close, both the Smiths and the Wilsons had reasons to feel hopeful. Although each had suffered the loss of infants, now their families were expanding. The couples had their own homes in a small but tight-knit community. The lumber industry provided Sidney, Arthur Sr., and eventually Arthur's sons with work. Focusing on the future but mindful of the past, the families on Blue Clay Road worked assiduously to eke out a living and to provide a better future for their children.²⁶

Some time probably passed before Mary and Sidney realized that their young son Junius was deaf. It is not clear when or why he lost his hearing. Perhaps he was born deaf. His birth at home would not have been attended by a doctor, but even if it had been, a physician could not have made a diagnosis of deafness in a newborn. Junius possibly lost his hearing as a toddler. As a young child, he contracted several illnesses: measles, whooping cough, and scarlet fever.²⁷ All could result in deafness; scarlet fever was an especially common

cause of deafness in children during this time. As a deaf youngster, Junius could not respond to calls, but unintended vibrations such as doors opening or pots hitting the floor could draw his attention, masking his inability to hear. Confusion might have escalated to frustration as Mary and Sidney tried to teach their child words and appropriate behavior. Without language, Junius might have misinterpreted his parents' expressions of anger, perhaps thinking they were amusing. Both child and parents likely felt helpless in the face of this invisible barrier to communication. Mary might have doubted her abilities as a mother or felt guilty about her son's disability. Perhaps she grieved, worrying that her son could never grow up to be independent, to marry and have a family, to be "a man." Many mothers of deaf children become especially protective of their deaf offspring, often leading to conflicts with other family members.²⁸

Tensions within the Wilson household escalated. Eventually, Sidney left the family, ultimately moving to Georgia and remarrying.²⁹ Alone with three children, Mary leaned heavily on the Smiths. Now an independent young man, Arthur Smith Jr. tried to help his friend by counseling Mary and supporting her financially. Junius was especially difficult to manage since he was now able to walk and run but could not heed the warning calls of concerned adults. As the deaf boy matured, Junius's inability to convey his needs and questions—and his inability to understand the rules of Jim Crow society—might have raised several serious concerns for Mary and the Smith family: How do you teach a deaf child? What was he capable of becoming? How do you keep him safe? How do you keep the rest of the family safe?

THE ECHOES OF WILMINGTON resonated with a new voice during Junius's childhood. Thomas Dixon, a native of North Carolina, published *The Leopard's Spots* in 1902. The first book in a trilogy about race relations, *The Leopard's Spots* interpreted the events of Wilmington and Jim Crow ideology through a fictional lens. Dixon portrays a thinly veiled Wilmington as a community overwhelmed by the corrupt rule of African American legislators. Like pre-riot Wilmington, the fictional town has a newspaper owned and run by a black man. Dixon portrays a town where young blacks would no longer step aside to allow whites to pass on the sidewalks. Dixon's main character, Charles Gaston, fears "they could not be overthrown short of a political earthquake." The earthquake arrives soon enough. In a fictional mimicry of the Emma Hartsell rape and murder that preceded the actual Wilmington riot, Dixon tells of the rape and murder of young Flora Camp. After her body is found, a white mob lynches an African American. The man, protesting his innocence the whole time, is doused with oil and set afire. After Gaston is accused of causing the death of a black man, a mob of 500 African Americans threatens his life. As

Dixon writes, “This event was the last straw that broke the camel’s back.” And then: “The incendiary organ of the Negroes, a newspaper that had been noted for its virulent spirit of race hatred, had published an editorial defaming the virtue of the white women of the community.” At this point in the novel, Gaston becomes Alfred Waddell, leading the whites of Wilmington into battle against the insolence and arrogance of the black community. After the office of the “Negro paper” was burned down and the editor put on a northbound train, shots rang out all over the city until all resisting blacks were driven into the surrounding woods.³⁰

Dixon’s second novel was even more inflammatory. *The Clansman*, published in 1905, tells the story of a white woman trying to escape a black rapist in the years immediately following the Civil War. As he did in his first novel, Dixon argued that the ultimate goal of any free African American was sexual intercourse with elite white women. Dixon believed that by attempting to have sexual relations with white women, African Americans were trying to convey two things: in addition to expressing the social equality of blacks and whites, sex with white women was symbolic rape of former slave masters. Any real-life efforts by African Americans to fight for racial justice brought white fears of social equality and the end of their privileged status. *The Clansman* intensified fears of “the black brute.” Dixon’s prose describes “the bestial figure of a negro—his huge black hand plainly defined—the upper part of the face is dim, as if obscured by a gray mist of dawn—but the massive jaws and lips are clear.” The image is literally burned into the eyes of his victim, a “fire-etched record of the crime” on the “retina of these dead eyes the image of this devil.” Only the Klan could respond to such terror.³¹

With such powerful visual imagery, it is no wonder that *The Clansman* was made into a movie. When the film was released in 1915 under the title *The Birth of a Nation*, it became by far the largest-grossing movie as well as one the most complex movies to date. Dixon’s script combined with the filmmaking genius of D. W. Griffith to present a horrifying portrayal of Reconstruction to viewers. Dixon and Griffith sought to bolster their historical arguments by citing Woodrow Wilson’s *A History of the American People*. Wilson had attended graduate school with Dixon at Johns Hopkins.³²

AS WILMINGTON’S WHITE CITIZENS flocked to see the film that President Wilson called “history writ in lightning,” Junius Wilson’s family enrolled the boy at the residential North Carolina School for the Colored Blind and Deaf in Raleigh. Mary realized that her deaf son might gain opportunities there that his hearing peers in Castle Hayne might not enjoy.³³ Potentially, he could attend school

longer than his hearing neighbors. He would receive vocational training as well as academic education. This training could enhance his chances of becoming independent—from family support as well as from state support—when he reached adulthood. The likelihood that Junius would become more literate than his mother seemed high. The school for African American deaf children also provided food, shelter, and clothing for enrolled students, easing the Wilson family's financial burden. Since the deaf boy was too young to help them support the family, the Smith men might have encouraged Mary to enroll Junius as soon as possible.

With few other options, Mary had to trust that sending Junius away to Raleigh was best for everyone. Given the family's complex and vulnerable situation in Castle Hayne, the boy's removal probably was a relief. Still, Mary, who had already lost one child, must have grieved the loss of Junius as he moved to the residential school. Having spent seven years nurturing and protecting him, Junius's mother now had to trust strangers to raise her child. Would they take good care of him? Because she could not communicate complex thoughts to her deaf son, Mary was unable to explain to Junius where he would be going or when he would be coming back to the family. Would he even understand that he was being sent to school and not being taken away permanently? Her sense of helplessness and loss were compounded by their lack of communication.

Since Junius had no clear way to communicate with strangers, sending the eight-year-old boy alone on the train to Raleigh seemed impractical. Annie Smith, who could read and write, accompanied him to the school. When they arrived, she filled out paperwork to admit Junius to the school. Although she listed Mary and Sidney as the boy's mother and father, she wrote that the person to contact for information or in the case of an emergency was herself. The postbox the school was to use belonged to her husband Arthur. Officially, the school considered Annie and Arthur Smith Sr. as Junius Wilson's guardians.

The first day at the school in January 1916 must have bewildered Junius. Lacking any formal language—written or signed—he could not understand why he was being taken away from his family. Nor could he appreciate the nature of his new setting. The boy had never attended school before. Classrooms and dormitories seemed alien and intimidating. The quick sign language flashing on his classmates' fingers might have fascinated him but, unable to comprehend, he might have misinterpreted their long gazes and touches, common features of deaf communication, as threatening advances. Months probably passed before Junius realized that his family would not be coming any day to get him and that the school was to be his home for the academic year.³⁴



North Carolina School for the Colored Blind and Deaf
(Courtesy of Gallaudet University Archives)

Although the transition must have been difficult, Wilson eventually learned his way around, made friends, began to learn how to communicate more effectively, and settled in.

THE NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOL for the Colored Blind and Deaf, founded in 1868, was the first separate school for African American deaf children in the United States. The American Missionary Association provided the initial building on South Bloodworth Avenue, a street in the southern section of Raleigh. Several years later, North Carolina's state legislature provided new brick buildings. In 1907 the state mandated that all deaf children eight to twenty-one years of age attend school. In accordance with the law, Junius was sent to the residential program as soon as he was of age.³⁵

In spite of the inherent limitations caused by Jim Crow's racial caste system, the Raleigh school enjoyed distinctive assets in its early decades. Its superintendent from 1896 to 1918 was John E. Ray, an experienced educator of the deaf. Beloved by the white deaf community, Ray earned praise as a "clear and forcible sign maker" and as an adept interpreter.³⁶ An advocate of deaf teachers and signed communication, Ray employed several deaf faculty members. The Tillinghast brothers, Thomas and David, master signers and leaders in the white

deaf world, both taught at the North Carolina school. David left in the early 1890s, when the legislature established a new white deaf school in Morganton, but Thomas stayed on, working with black deaf students for another decade.³⁷

Two black deaf faculty, both northerners, also joined the school. Blanche Wilkins graduated from the Minnesota School for the Deaf in 1893. She joined the literary department at the North Carolina school in 1895 and became the wife of the hearing African American principal, Charles N. Williams, in 1899.³⁸ Thomas Flowers graduated from the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. Barred from Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., because of his race, Flowers attended Howard University before accepting a position at the Raleigh school. Committed to the development of deaf education, particularly African American deaf education, Flowers actively participated in professional conferences for instructors of the deaf. In 1914 he presented a paper titled “The Colored Deaf,” in which he underscored the parental role educators filled for deaf children. Emphasizing that deaf children looked to teachers for “kindness, gentleness, and sympathy,” Flowers emphasized to his colleagues that a deaf student’s “success in life depends entirely upon your encouragement and training during his school career.”³⁹

Highly educated deaf instructors of both races presented students at the Bloodworth Avenue school with cultural and racial role models unavailable elsewhere. Their contributions even provided some with the skills to challenge Jim Crow. One exceptional alumnus of the school, Roger Demosthenes O’Kelly, attended nearby Shaw University and in 1912 successfully received a degree from Yale Law School. O’Kelly was the only black deaf lawyer in America at the time.⁴⁰

By the time of Junius Wilson’s admission, the school had changed. Thomas Tillinghast retired from the school; Blanche Williams, widowed in 1907, eventually took her children north. By 1916 Flowers joined Williams in Chicago, where they married and participated in missionary work.⁴¹ O’Kelly replaced Flowers for a year, then he, too, left.⁴² National deaf pedagogical trends discouraged the hiring of new deaf faculty. By the turn of the century, the rise of oralism (the teaching of speech and lip-reading) motivated schools across the country to replace deaf teachers with hearing instructors who would speak to students rather than sign with them. By the end of the First World War, the percentage of deaf instructors employed throughout the nation dropped to roughly 20 percent. Deaf African Americans rarely graduated from deaf institutions and almost none found jobs as educators, either in the North or South. As oralism spread, the opportunities for exceptional black deaf teachers disappeared almost entirely.⁴³

Ray died in 1918 and was replaced as superintendent by Gustavus Ernest Lineberry. Neither the new superintendent nor the principal knew sign lan-

guage fluently. Lineberry steered the school towards oral policies, restricting the use of sign language inside the classroom. Few of the hearing teachers had facility in sign language. He firmly closed the door to deaf faculty.⁴⁴

According to an alumnus of the school, Lineberry was a “Joseph with a coat of many colors.” His letters to parents of students were condescending, and many people thought of Lineberry as hard and dictatorial.⁴⁵ He was also a product of the racial thinking of the time. Although he was an outspoken advocate for expanded provisions to his schools, Lineberry invested much more in the blind program for white students than he did in the deaf and blind program for black students. A teacher remarked that Lineberry believed “that blacks should be kept in their places and that vocational training took priority over developing academic excellence and scholarship. During his frequent visits to the campus, his demeanor toward the faculty and students was one of plantation owner to overseers and, if not slaves, the next small step up.”⁴⁶

Training offered at the school during Lineberry’s tenure reflected his priorities and outlook. While state annual reports noted that North Carolina deaf and blind schools provided a rigorous curriculum “consisting of spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic, higher mathematics, geography, grammar, the sciences, kindergarten training, and vocal and instrumental music,” it appears that in actuality, the colored departments lagged far behind their white counterparts.⁴⁷ The school emphasized vocational education. Racist expectations of African American pupils’ low mental capacities and career potential led Lineberry, as well as administrators at other southern black schools, to emphasize the physical abilities of the pupils. In other words, they encouraged vocational work over traditional classroom work.⁴⁸

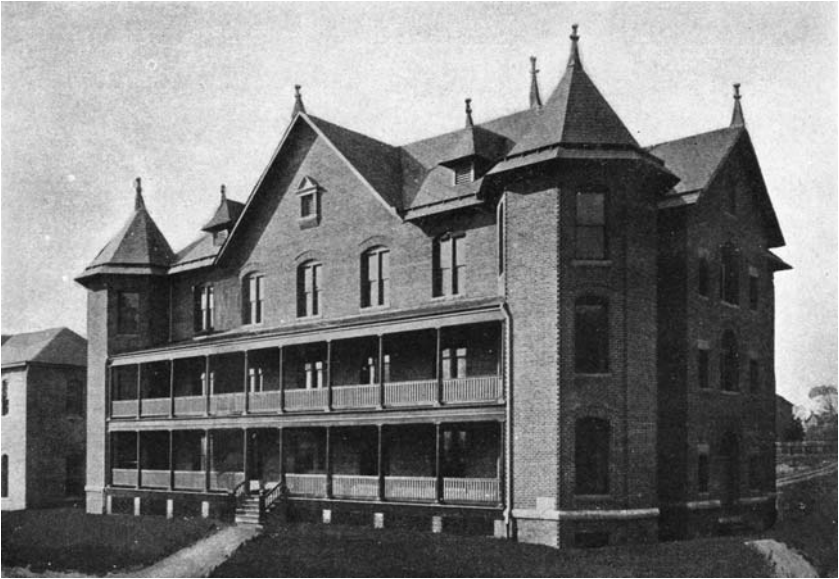
In principle, vocational training promoted independence, allowing deaf adults to support themselves financially and relieving both their families and the state from long-term economic burdens. At the North Carolina school, black deaf boys were taught shoe repairing, carpentry, and cabinetmaking, along with dairy work.⁴⁹ These particular skills required little interaction among workers, solving the common communication problems for deaf adults seeking jobs. In practical terms, vocational training especially appealed to superintendents because it kept students busy. Without sports teams or other social outlets for students, schools needed to distract their wards during the long daytime hours. Also, vocational programs saved the school money as students produced furniture, food, and clothing as part of their training. A blind peer of Wilson’s claimed that “all ‘the Old Man’ [Mr. Lineberry] wanted was to see us work.” He continued, “‘The Old Man’ campaigned for a new campus [in 1929] only because the [Raleigh] fire department was giving him

trouble about the conditions of the building, and because the new site being considered had a farm—more work for us.”⁵⁰

Frustrated faculty and administrators complained about the academic structure of the school. Some lamented the lack of classroom differentiation. Thomas Flowers had already noted in 1914 that “the matter of poor classification and lack of grading according to mentality is a great drawback to the work.” He continued, “The large and miscellaneous classes, poorly grouped, containing all sizes and ages, and oftentimes with no brain force” did not help matters.⁵¹ Other faculty and staff complained that many students did not have the intellectual power to succeed in school. By 1914 school regulations allowed administrators to discharge “imbeciles” and those of “unsound” mind. Lineberry regularly invoked this clause, commonly judging students “feble-minded” in their expulsion papers.⁵² As late as 1932, the North Carolina institution did not graduate a single student.

THE FACT THAT THE new generation of teachers did not understand much about deafness had significant linguistic and cultural consequences. Since the early 1800s, deaf residential schools represented the birthplace of deaf culture. In these environments, young deaf people and deaf adults, primarily white, shared a codified language of signs: American Sign Language, or ASL. From this intergenerational linguistic experience, a culture flourished. By the 1900s, black deaf children in the South rarely had such adult deaf role models or a consistent means to transmit a codified sign language. For many years, North Carolina had been the exception. But by the late 1910s, children at the Raleigh school, no longer exposed to signing deaf adults, crafted and transmitted their own signed language. In a reversal of roles, the students taught sign language to the hearing teachers at their schools. This dialect became known to many as “Black Signs,” but the label does not capture the linguistic complexity of the situation. While ASL in white residential schools across the nation contained regional differences, Black Signs could vary dramatically between different states’ segregated schools. As interpreters in the South have noted, without prior exposure to “Raleigh signs”—the name given the sign language developed by students at the North Carolina School for the Colored Blind and Deaf in Raleigh—or other Black Signs dialects, it is virtually impossible to understand the language, even if one is fluent in ASL.⁵³

Jim Crow had specific linguistic ramifications. When the white deaf school relocated to Morganton, opportunities for black students to see white deaf children signing, or to have white deaf alumni as teachers, disappeared. Physical isolation, both from white schools and other black schools, meant that



Boy's dormitory, North Carolina School for the Colored Blind and Deaf
(Courtesy of Gallaudet University Archives)

Raleigh's black students created communication systems truly accessible only to their immediate community. The underfunded North Carolina school offered no public speaking or theatre performances, venues that traditionally promoted stylized and articulate signing. Even interpreted church services, popular during Ray's administration, seem to have ended when Lineberry took over. In contrast to the white experience, local black deaf communities also were denied close affiliation with the school. Consequently, Black Signs at the Raleigh school evolved independently, shaped more by students' creativity and immediate need to express basic ideas than by educated adults attuned to the rich and deep possibilities of visual language.

Junius, like his classmates, was unaware of the differences in sign languages. As Mary Wright, a student at the school a decade after Wilson, recalled, "I later learned that our signs were different, but at the time, I was not aware of the difference because we did not have any contact with the white deaf students" educated in the western part of the state.⁵⁴ As Junius gained language through Raleigh signs, his primary mode of communication was not readily understandable to deaf people outside his school, be they white or black. And of course, Raleigh signs were almost completely ineffective in communicating with hearing people.⁵⁵

Raleigh signs did provide Wilson, who could not vocalize articulately, with a means of communication with his peers. The school gave Wilson both a community and a cultural identity—that of a black deaf North Carolinian. For roughly eight years, the school served as Junius’s primary home and community. He matured from a child into a young man there. Junius learned that deafness was normal, at least within the school walls. He became aware that isolation and barriers reigned in the outside world but not in his own deaf community. Through Raleigh signs, Junius not only learned broad concepts but playful slang and visual humor. Merely by watching his peers, he could appreciate the value of close physical proximity and direct eye contact for easier communication. He came to understand the written and manual (signed) alphabet.

Junius Wilson also learned his name. Following deaf cultural traditions, his friends created a sign name for him. Something akin to nicknames, deaf name-signs usually embodied physical or personality traits within a regular sign.⁵⁶ Wilson’s name sign was the initial *J* signed on the middle of the chest. The hand movement of his sign name mimicked the sign language word for “happiness,” indicating that he might have been playful and enthusiastic in his new home. The placement on his body also mimicked the formal sign for “pride”; Junius likely puffed out his chest as he introduced himself.

While Junius Wilson’s academic ability remains unknown, he apparently demonstrated enough skill and obedience to remain at the school for roughly eight years, despite the fact that many of his peers left sooner either because of academic dismissal or because of behavioral issues. Despite his schooling, documents suggest that Wilson was barely literate.⁵⁷

Among deaf people, Wilson’s restricted literacy mattered little. At the school, students learned the importance of easy signed communication. Along with his peers, Wilson embraced cultural deafness, including aspects of that culture that often made hearing people uneasy: gaining attention by touching each other, waving arms widely, and hollering to hard of hearing friends so they would turn heads and eyes to catch ensuing signs. Students at the North Carolina school spent most of their time together signing with one another, telling jokes and stories, informally educating one another.⁵⁸ Despite limited formal educational opportunities, the pupils galvanized a common identity and a sense of belonging, a sense of home.

JUNIUS’S STUDENT RECORDS offer conflicting information about his attendance over the years. A train ticket from Castle Hayne to the school in 1918 suggests that he returned to Raleigh for the fall term, but other forms announce that he was “out” during much of that academic year. It is unclear why Wilson

was not enrolled in classes. The institution had not dismissed Wilson; nor had he finished his education. The ten-year-old boy had had only two years of schooling, enough to provide him with sign language skills but not much else.⁵⁹

Various factors might have motivated Wilson's temporary removal from the school. Perhaps the Spanish flu pandemic worried Junius's mother. By October 1918, nearly 200,000 Americans had fallen victim to the disease. That same month, the city of Charlotte was quarantined, and many soldiers at Fort Greene fell ill. Millions around the world died from the flu by the beginning of 1919. Mary and her family almost certainly knew people who had perished from the deadly virus. Students in residential institutions were especially vulnerable to the spread of infectious diseases, and some students from the Raleigh school had already died.⁶⁰ Junius's mother might have preferred to keep her son at home under her own care.

Perhaps Mary, recently remarried, wanted her family together and felt that with her additional resources she would be able to parent Junius in her own home. Such an attempt at family life might have been more complex than she had imagined. Junius had to become accustomed to his new stepfather, Henry Clark, a man much older than his own father and totally unaccustomed to dealing with deaf people. No one in the little town knew Raleigh signs, the language that had enabled him to communicate freely for the first time in his life. Surely Junius became frustrated, unable to be fully himself even among his kin.⁶¹

Whenever he was home, Junius likely did small chores and followed his young sister Carrie around with the other little ones. Still too young to be of significant help, Junius would not be able to join the men cutting lumber for the railroad. World War I rationing and demobilization of troops created tensions in nearby cities. Many blacks felt concerned about another violent outburst. Focusing on home and security, Mary and her neighbors the Smiths might have wanted the children close to the household during this time. Young Junius was capable of antagonizing one of the white inhabitants of Castle Hayne and not even realizing his indiscretion. Such an act could endanger the entire family. Mary, realizing this threat, would have sought to avoid such a confrontation.

For Junius, the efforts to keep him safe might have felt especially restricting. Away at school, the young boy surely missed his family and the recreation he enjoyed along the river in Castle Hayne.⁶² But when he left the Raleigh campus, his loneliness likely grew even deeper. Deaf children commonly feel ambivalent when they return to their biological families after extended time at residential schools. Junius missed his new friends, his new language, his new cultural community—in short, his new home.⁶³

During the summer of 1919, before Junius returned to Raleigh as a pupil, a fresh series of race riots called the Red Summer spread like wildfire across the nation. Between April and October, more than two dozen towns and cities in both the North and South erupted in violence. Diverse factors fueled the outbreaks of Red Summer, including racism, xenophobia, a high unemployment rate, and widespread fears of communism and treason against the United States. The first major riot occurred in Charleston, South Carolina, a city just south of Wilmington and in many ways similar to it. Although Wilmington did not riot during that summer, concerns about racial violence were heightened both for the city's blacks and its white residents. In a time of such explicit danger, Junius's presence in the family could not have been comfortable. Perhaps his mother was relieved when her son returned to Raleigh in September 1920.⁶⁴

WHEN WILSON RETURNED TO SCHOOL, his peers probably greeted him with hugs or pats and likely peppered him with questions, swapping stories about their time apart. It would be relatively easy for him to reenter the fold of this tight-knit deaf community. As the years passed, he became one of the older students in the school. New students probably looked up to the young man. Conceivably, he became one of the storytellers and informal mentors. As Junius watched peers and older classmates leave the school, he might have considered his own prospects for life after school.

In Raleigh, one annual event united the black deaf community with the hearing African American world: the Negro State Fair. Because of North Carolina's strong agricultural base, both county and state fairs were ubiquitous. Since the Negro State Fair's founding in 1879, African American communities flocked to the festival and celebrated the achievements of their race. As with other fairs, the Negro State Fair was filled with contests for the best livestock, produce, canning, and household exhibits. Young boys and girls displayed their wares from vocational programs. They also challenged their peers in athletic events. Couples and groups danced to folk music. Families wandered the exhibits and entertainment booths, taking in the mixed smells and sights. Young and old alike crowded around the fields to watch horse and buggy races.⁶⁵ Politicians stumped their party's line to whomever would listen. At night, the fair thrilled bystanders with firework displays. In the Jim Crow South, events such as the Negro State Fair were especially important to African Americans. The fair was an opportunity to celebrate on a large scale and to demonstrate their prowess as skilled farmers and laborers. Fundamentally, fairs promoted a sense of community pride.

For students at the black deaf school, the Negro State Fair represented one of the highly anticipated opportunities to leave campus as a group and inter-

mingle with hearing African Americans in town. For some children, the fair was their first and only opportunity to see exotic circus animals and recent inventions, such as new plowing machines. Older students who had already attended one of the annual pageants likely told stories to newcomers at the school, spinning tales of adventure and games unimaginable to deaf youth from the rural South. Since the Negro State Fair in Raleigh occurred in late September or October, the deaf schoolchildren would wait with anticipation during the first month of school for their annual field trip.

The carnival atmosphere of the fair overwhelmed some students. Flashing hands asked for explanation or confirmation of the unusual visions before them. Probably, deaf students wandered the grounds in tight groups for fear of losing sight of, and thus all contact with, their friends. In the crush of people, it would be easy to become separated from one another. Unable to hear teachers call out, a deaf student could quickly become distracted and lost.

Junius likely attended the fair a few times as a student at the North Carolina School for the Colored Blind and Deaf. By 1924, when he was sixteen years old, he might have even been one of the students who spun stories about carnival food, agricultural contests, horse races, and parades to prepare younger pupils for the experience. But this year the fair would be different for Junius. Wilson remained at the fair long after his classmates returned to the institution. He had “slipped away while at the fair and stayed 2 nights and 1 day.”⁶⁶

It is unclear how Junius separated from his classmates during the field trip to the fair. Perhaps he considered his escapade for months. Knowing that the fair was coming to town, the deaf teenager might have calculated a way to extend his visit. Perhaps he just took advantage of a chance to slip away from his peers or became separated accidentally. But Junius could have easily rejoined his classmates that evening rather than two days later. Wilson likely had attended the fair often enough to know how to return to the school. Even if he had trouble finding his way, any adult in Raleigh would have assumed he belonged at the institution and helped steer him back there. Whether or not Junius intended to separate from his classmates, he intended to stay for a little while.⁶⁷

The fair at night presented an exciting and exotic world to all its spectators. Fireworks lit up the night sky with unexpected brilliance, a visual display of flashing colorful explosions fully accessible to a deaf person. The pounding explosions vibrated and thundered in his body. For the young man raised in the sheltered environment of the residential deaf school, the fair was a feast for the senses. The flashing movements of the amusement rides, the odors of the stables, and the smells of carnival foods were exhilarating and liberating. Even decades later, Wilson grew animated describing the fair. As an old man, he mimicked the elephant’s large swaying trunk and lumbering walk to all who

tried to communicate with him.⁶⁸ Wandering alone for hours among the throngs of people at the fair that first night away, the young Wilson might have felt simultaneously lost and free: his deafness would have gone unnoticed and his rebellion undetected. The sixteen-year-old young man possibly imagined that after finishing school, he would be able to visit fairs as often as he wished. Wilson's indiscretion appears to be less a deliberate rejection of the North Carolina school than a temporary escape to excitement and adventure.⁶⁹

School administrators saw Wilson's act differently. Lineberry and others certainly believed that the escapade was deliberate and intentional. They interpreted Junius's disappearance as a blatant act of disobedience. The deaf boy demonstrated independence rather than submission. He challenged the white superintendent's authority and made the school look irresponsible. When Junius returned to the institution, the administration chose to expel him. Wilson's act caused particular consternation among the administration: of the roughly fifty dismissal files found in the school's records, his is the only one that contained an explicit reason for dismissal. It was made clear to the boy that he would be severely punished for his misbehavior, and the memory of that threat stayed with him into old age.⁷⁰

The deaf boy's tenure at the North Carolina school had ended, and with it his ties to the black deaf community that had given him a cultural identity and a language. Wilson's brief escape to the carnival cost him his place at the school and sent him back to his family in Castle Hayne. He would soon find out that the community of his birth was no longer home.⁷¹