

Scene on Radio S6: Echoes of a Coup

E1: What was Lost

John Biewen: January 2021. An outgoing president and his supporters try to overturn the results of an election.

Donald Trump, January 6, 2021: ...because we're gonna have somebody in there that should not be in there and our country will be destroyed and we're not gonna stand for that. (Crowd cheers)

John Biewen: Making the transfer of power anything but peaceful.

Dana Bash, CNN, Jan 6: They broke the glass in the United States Capitol and now they are climbing through the window....

Steven Fabian, Inside Edition, Jan 6: It has been absolute madness here today, some even calling it an insurrection....

Ari Melber, MSNBC: ...that experts and people with government experience are calling a, quote, coup attempt.

Stephen Sackur, BBC News: ... an attempted coup.

John Biewen: An *attempted* coup. But this podcast series is not about a failed coup in 2021. Most historians agree there's been only one *successful* coup in U.S. history. In Wilmington, North Carolina. November 1898. When men openly proclaiming white supremacy, in a well-planned conspiracy, removed the city's mayor and city council at gunpoint.

LeRae Umfleet: And this is the exact definition of a coup d'etat. Armed overthrow of a legally elected government.

John Biewen: It was a coup *and* a mass murder, a white supremacist massacre of Black people – by the dozens if not the hundreds. It should be as well-known as the mass killings two decades later in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Rosewood, Florida.

Cedric Harrison: They ended up seeing some Blacks just going about their day to day, minding their own business, and ended up shooting them where they stood.

Music

John Biewen: As with so many horrifying episodes in U.S. history, white America enforced a long silence about Wilmington 1898, or straight up lied about it. More than a century later, North Carolina did own up to what happened in Wilmington. But the state, and the nation, have done very little to make it right – or less wrong.

Bertha Boykin Todd: Sometimes wounds don't heal properly. And the physician has to lance the wound. It hurts. It's painful. But it will not heal properly until he has to lance it.

John Biewen: Hey everybody, it's John. I am so pleased to be back with a new season – well, more of a mini-season, this time. (A fuller Season 7 is under construction and coming soon.) And I'm happy to introduce Michael A. Betts, the Second. Welcome, Michael.

Michael A. Betts, II: Thrilled to be working with you, John.

John Biewen: You grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina. You're an Afro-Indigenous man, now an assistant professor in the Film Studies program at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Michael A. Betts, II: Yep. And I was your student, when I was in a graduate program at Duke a half-dozen years ago. I talked you into collaborating with me on this series.

John Biewen: That wasn't hard. Of course, this project is entirely in the spirit of stuff we've done on Scene on Radio – on white supremacy, on struggles over democracy in the U.S. And in fact, Wilmington 1898 got a mention in our Season 3 series on patriarchy.

Michael A. Betts, II: Patriarchy plays an important role in this story. So much of what you've tried to do on Scene on Radio, along with your collaborators, has been about telling important truths that are often not recognized – especially by, let's just say it, folks in the dominant culture.

John Biewen: People who look like me. And you grew up in North Carolina learning nothing about Wilmington 1898 – even though it's clearly a pivotal moment in the state's history, even the nation's history.

Michael A. Betts, II: I didn't hear about it until I was in *graduate* school. So, I went to public and private schools in this state through high school, then four years at the flagship state university, UNC Chapel Hill. I first learned what happened in Wilmington in 1898 when I was in my late twenties, working on a Master's degree at Duke.

John Biewen: Wow.

Michael A. Betts, II: Reminds me of your story from *your* hometown, in Minnesota, about the U.S.-Dakota war and the mass execution there.

John Biewen: Yes. Which I grew up not hearing about. But there's something even more kind of urgently resonant about the story of Wilmington right now. Because once again we're in a time when overt, persistent, orchestrated attacks on democracy – from within – are very much with us.

Michael A. Betts, II: And so is the threat, and the reality, of political violence.

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John Biewen: From the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, welcome to Scene on Radio Season 6: *Echoes of a Coup*. This is Episode One. I'm John Biewen.

Michael A. Betts, II: And I'm Michael A. Betts, II.

John Biewen: Michael, you had to persuade me to do this first episode the way we're doing it. Because we're not just setting the scene immediately before the explosion of November 1898, the way listeners might expect – and frankly the way I would have imagined it. We're going back a little further.

Michael A. Betts, II: That's right. As I researched this story and learned about Wilmington in the 19th century, I just got overwhelmed by the reality of what that place was, and what was lost. I just don't think most Americans – Black, white, Brown, you name it – most of us don't even have the capacity to *imagine* the world of Wilmington before white supremacists mangled that world. Because we just haven't heard much about places where Black people thrived, and did brilliant, heroic things – not only in the decades after the Civil War, but before. During the time of enslavement.

John Biewen: You convinced me. And so did the discovery – news to me – that the Wilmington area was the birthplace of two extraordinary historical figures: David Walker and Abraham Galloway. For folks who don't know those names, no worries, that's one more reason to stick around and listen.

[Sounds of the Cape Fear River]

Michael A. Betts, II: Wilmington, North Carolina, was an important coastal settlement long before Europeans arrived. It's no mystery why. The wide river now called the Cape Fear flows into the Atlantic here.

John Biewen: The first colonial village in the area, Brunswick Town, was established in 1725. Renamed Wilmington in 1739, the town was destined to become a regional hub of culture, trade, and politics.

LeRae Umfleet: For modern tourists and visitors here in Wilmington, the waterfront didn't look like this in 1898, even into the early 20th century.

Michael A. Betts, II: That's Historian LeRae Umfleet. We're standing on the boardwalk that lines the Cape Fear River today. Maybe more than any other single person, Umfleet uncovered what happened in Wilmington in 1898. But for now, we asked her to help us picture this place in the before times.

LeRae Umfleet: It would have been a very bustling area. Not a serene walkway with glorious trees, blooming beautiful flowers, but instead, very much an industrial complex of working docks and boats coming and going and goods being moved to and fro.

John Biewen: Goods like salt, tar, and cotton. Products that allowed some white folks to gain huge wealth made possible by Black hands. Before the end of the Civil War in 1865, of course, most of those Black workers were enslaved. But because of its

location on the waterways, Wilmington was different from the inland plantations that come to mind when we talk about the slave-based economy.

Michael A. Betts, II: Writer David Cecelski grew up on the North Carolina coast. He gained vivid insights into the maritime world of pre-Civil War Wilmington while writing about a remarkable man who's mostly missing from the history books: Abraham Galloway.

David Cecelski: Born just south of Wilmington, North Carolina in 1837. He escaped from bondage hidden in a ship out of Wilmington Harbor in 1857.

John Biewen: Cecelski says most enslaved people who escaped from eastern North Carolina, like Galloway, did so on the water.

David Cecelski: Galloway went north and immediately got involved in sort of the, uh, most militant, darkest, most subversive sides of the anti slavery movement. working out of Canada and with the John Brown crowd.

Michael A. Betts, II: John Brown, as history shows us, led an anti-slavery assault on Harper's Ferry, Virginia on October 16th, 1859. He and his followers had hoped to inspire the slave population in the area to rise up and seize control of the federal armory and arsenal. From there, with weapons in hand, a growing mass of escaped slaves across the south would attack and overthrow the slave power. Brown's assault failed, leading to his capture, trial, and hanging.

John Biewen: Abraham Galloway wasn't involved in the Harper's Ferry scheme. But after Brown's death he sailed to the Caribbean, to join an effort by some of Brown's followers to launch another attack on the American South.

David Cecelski: He first really shows up on the radar as they're planning what they called a second John Brown, that was going to come out of a base in Haiti, and make a second attempt and siege on the Deep South, with the idea that that would push the United States into a civil war in which they could fight for the end of slavery.

Michael A. Betts, II: The onset of the actual Civil War interrupted those plans. Galloway returned to the U.S., determined to help the Union side however he could.

John Biewen: He was risking his freedom and his life, returning as a fugitive former slave. But he was savvy and fearless. And, having apprenticed as a brick mason as an enslaved boy, he had deep respect for enslaved people and knew what they were capable of.

David Cecelski: Galloway goes on to establish a network of slave spies he's recruited into the Union Army. He's in the South before the Union Army, and he's working with other enslaved people in an intelligence capacity all the way from the Chesapeake Bay to the Mississippi River.

Michael A. Betts, II: Among other exploits as a Union spy, he used his connections with Black boatmen on the North Carolina coast to scout and arrange landings for Union boats. During the war, in 1863, he snuck into Wilmington, which was then held by the Confederacy, and spirited his enslaved mother to safety – possibly, in my mind, the most badass of his many badass moves.

John Biewen: Even as he was giving the Union crucial help, Galloway got disillusioned about the North.

David Cecelski: He eventually is so appalled by Lincoln's lack of commitment to African American freedom and to the mistreatment of African Americans by Union soldiers in the South that he becomes a leader of what we could really call a third force. He organizes the first African American freedom groups in the history of the American South. They were called Equal Rights Leagues. The first ones were in New Bern and Beaufort, North Carolina.

Michael A. Betts, II: In 1864, Galloway led a group of Black North Carolinians, most of them former slaves, to meet with Lincoln at the White House. Galloway argued for Black citizenship and voting rights in exchange for Black men serving in the Union Army.

David Cecelski: At a certain point Lincoln needs them when the Civil War is on the line, and has to negotiate with Galloway and his colleagues in a way that

helps propel the war from being the so-called “brothers’ war,” white people's brothers, to being a war of liberation.

John Biewen: This fact is usually glossed over in accounts of the Civil War, but 10-percent of Union soldiers were Black, and almost 40-thousand Black men died fighting on the Union side.

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Michael A. Betts, II: Galloway wasn’t done. After the war, Cecelski says, he turned more fully to politics – as a state lawmaker.

David Cecelski: He's elected in the first group of African American leaders to our General Assembly. He introduces the first amendment for women's suffrage in North Carolina.

John Biewen: In 1870, just two years after he was elected to the North Carolina State Senate, Abraham Galloway dies. He was just 33.

David Cecelski: He's an incandescent freedom fighter. I should say, all before the age of 30.

Michael A. Betts, II: I can’t help but wonder, how did this man do what he did? An escaped slave, a brick mason with no formal education: How could Galloway do such

brilliant and heroic things, that left so much impact on my home state and this country? He's been called a cross between James Baldwin and James Bond.

John Biewen: David Cecelski says a lot of what made someone like Abraham Galloway possible was the distinctive, low-key cosmopolitan culture around Wilmington and the Cape Fear River.

David Cecelski: He came out of this culture of African American resistance that was especially developed around southern ports, and which had been operating subversively, sort of below the radar. It was behind the Underground Railroad before the war. It makes it possible for the Union to succeed in the South during the Civil War and then afterwards that militancy finally and a, a vision of African American freedom and a different vision. I mean, a vision of a more democratic, more inclusive, more communal United States comes out of that into the post war years.

Michael A. Betts, II: Although Abraham Galloway himself didn't work on the water, he grew up around boats in a small pilot fishing village just south of Wilmington. This is the world he would have seen all of his young life:

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David Cecelski: If you had looked out on the water that's almost all you would have seen: African American sailors on ships, African Americans on flatboats

carrying cargo down vessels, African Americans guiding the largest ships that could come into North Carolina into our ports and back, African American stevedores hauling goods on and off of vessels, African American women working as oyster shuckers and, selling seafood in the streets. It was an African American maritime world and because of that a deceptively sophisticated world politically. In a place like that, in Galloway's world, you knew what was happening all over the world. You met African American men who had walked down the streets of London with white women arm in arm.

John Biewen: That's an act, of course, that would have gotten those Black men killed in the American South. Crucially, though, some of the Black men working around the Wilmington Harbor would have taken voyages that taught them about the world.

David Cecelski: You met African American enslaved people on the docks who could speak French, Dutch, Spanish, and English, because they had been everywhere. They didn't just know about the slave revolution in Haiti. They had been there, and they were in touch with one another. They knew exactly what was happening. Galloway worked hand in hand with a man, an enslaved man, who was subscribed to the New York Post and the Congressional Quarterly while he was still enslaved. Marx and Engels were writing for the New York Post in that period.

Michael A. Betts, II: This is not even close to the picture of slavery that was drawn for me in school.

David Cecelski: These were very sophisticated political thinkers. And in general, they were way more committed to a transatlantic freedom movement than, say, the better-known white abolitionists of New England or the nice Quakers.

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John Biewen: This picture of Wilmington, a place where Black people were committed to a transatlantic freedom movement, and had access to information and relative opportunity – even during enslavement – it’s eye-opening. And it can help us make sense of the political, economic, and social reality of Wilmington a few decades later, *after* the Civil War.

Michael A. Betts, II: It helps to explain why, twenty years after the violent dismantling of the democratic South of the Reconstruction years, Wilmington still stood as an exception. That is, until 1898.

[BREAK]

John Biewen: Abraham Galloway was one kind of brilliant Black political thinker and activist who emerged from Wilmington, North Carolina. Another, born about forty years before Galloway, was David Walker.

Cedric Harrison: David Walker was born right here in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1796 as a *free* black man. That's right, a free black man born right here in Wilmington during the height of enslavement.

Michael A. Betts, II: That's Cedric Harrison, owner and operator of WilmingtonNColor, which gives tours in Wilmington to teach folks about the city's Black history. Cedric is explaining that Walker's mother was free, so he was born free, too. This resulted from the same legal concept, first created in colonial America, that condemned any child born to an enslaved Black woman to a life in bondage.

John Biewen: We talked about these laws in our *Seeing White* series – one was passed after Elizabeth Key won her freedom from slavery in Virginia in the 1650s. The laws tied the status of newborn children, free or enslaved, to the status of their mothers.

Michael A. Betts, II: So, David Walker, as a free young man, moved to Charleston, South Carolina...

Cedric Harrison: ...where there was a big population of free Blacks, and they thoroughly immersed him in the African Methodist Church, which introduced him and inspired him to the abolitionist movement.

Michael A. Betts, II: Walker moved to the North, where he helped runaway fugitives from slavery to find work. Eventually he landed in Boston, and began as a freelance writer for the first Black national publication in the U.S., Freedom's Journal.

John Biewen: In 1829, he published one of the earliest and most radical abolitionist statements in Antebellum America: *His Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, But in Particular – this is part of the title, too – in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America.*

Cedric Harrison: And he broke this story up into four sections. The first one challenged slavery as a whole. The second one challenged religion and how they were trying to make Christianity and the Bible make people's mindsets be OK with enslavement. The third one challenged ignorance and the people that actually bought it and followed and supported it.

Michael A. Betts, II: The book also attacked colonization, and called on enslaved Black people to revolt. This is a passage from the book:

VO, Wiley, David Walker: I declare, it does appear to me, as though some nations think God is asleep, or that he made the Africans for nothing else but to

dig their mines and work their farms, or they cannot believe history, sacred or profane. I ask every man who has a heart, and is blessed with the privilege of believing—Is not God a God of justice to *all* his creatures?

Cedric Harrison: And the reason why a lot of people don't know about this piece of literature still to this day is because as soon as it came out, it was deemed illegal.

Michael A. Betts, II: Local and state governments across the south labeled the book seditious and banned publication. The state of Georgia offered a reward for anyone who could bring in Walker, alive or dead. White people's fear of a potential slave rebellion was constant from the colonial years up to, and through, the Civil War.

John Biewen: Some used the danger of Black people's retribution as a reason to keep them in bondage. In 1820, during the debate about adding Missouri to the union as a free state, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter:

VO, Mike Wiley, Thomas Jefferson: As it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.

Michael A. Betts, II: As for the political thinker and writer, David Walker, some people blamed his abolitionist book for the biggest slave rebellion in the United States, led by Nat Turner in August 1831.

John Biewen: David Cecelski, the historian we heard from earlier, said this gnawing fear that enslaved people would rise up made slaveholders wary about places like Wilmington Harbor.

David Cecelski: If you claimed enslaved people as your property out in the rice fields, you wanted to make sure they never saw this world.

Michael A. Betts, II: Celcelski is talking about the Cape Fear River docks that were staffed and operated mostly by Black men – for the economic benefit of white people.

David Cecelski: There were sailing vessels, you would see black men giving orders to whites. It was a different world, and you had to live with it, but you did everything you could to restrict it.

John Biewen: By “you,” Cecelski means the slaveholders and other white elites who worried about slave revolts.

David Cecelski: For years, it was the death penalty for a black sailor to talk to a slave. Talk.

Michael A. Betts, II: As proof that slaveholders understood the sophistication of Black sailors: In 1822, South Carolina became the first state to pass an act – requiring free Black sailors to be imprisoned while their ships were docked at the local port, to make sure they weren’t mingling with enslaved people around the harbor.

John Biewen: Slaveholders believed that free Black sailors had helped Denmark Vesey plan his attempted slave rebellion that year. Other southern coastal states, including North Carolina, later passed similar laws.

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Michael A. Betts, II: So, maybe Wilmington, North Carolina could produce the likes of David Walker and Abraham Galloway because the city's Black spaces – namely, the waterfront – were so cosmopolitan. Wilmington Harbor was teeming with people from across the world, some of them dreaming of freedom for Black people. I mean, we're talking diversity.

David Cecelski: And I hate to use a trope, but the bar scene in Star Wars, in the first Star Wars (Michael laughing), if anyone can remember that far back. That was Wilmington's Harbor District when Galloway was there. Most of the people would have been Africans, many of whom still wore their Africanness and many would've been, um, British and Russian and Hawaiian and Sandwich Island and others who didn't know what the heck American race was about. And the boarding houses and the bars, and the taverns, and all this sort, would have had all those people mixing together. The economy, the merchant economy, white people's economy, depended on them. That's the only reason they're allowed to be there.

John Biewen: David Cecelski, who wrote the book on Abraham Galloway, says yes, Galloway was an extraordinary figure within that Black Wilmington culture – but he wasn't a unicorn. In the usual portraits of American slavery, offered by mostly-white historians and storytellers, enslaved Black people are flattened into helpless victims. But Cecelski came to see that – of course – many enslaved people were brilliant, savvy, and highly skilled.

David Cecelski: One of the things that I had to learn to kind of stop condescending to Galloway and these people. That he was this incredible by himself individual, that he came out of this world of such people.

Michael A. Betts, II: So, it's people like Galloway, but not just Galloway, who made sure that the Black people of North Carolina – this third force, this informal intelligence network – stayed informed of what was happening when the Union came to fight the Confederacy. And when Northern ships were about to launch their first offensive off the coast of North Carolina in late 1861, Black people far from Wilmington knew things because of Wilmington Harbor.

David Cecelski: Before they – they're offshore on the Outer Banks, enslaved men and women in Goldsboro, which is 150 miles west of there, start escaping.

John Biewen: Because they knew.

Cecelski: Oh, yeah. They're headed east. In fact, and then everyone's headed east. And people like Galloway are the ones who are making sure they find the way.

Michael A. Betts, II: This is even before the first gunboat is through the inlet off the Outer Banks.

David Cecelski: They're headed down rivers, and they're going across land, they're confiscating their owners' boats. It's a giant boat lift that starts. And it could have gone very wrong. The Union only captured a sliver of the coast, but that was enough. So these are people who are connected, like they, the people in Goldsboro are a long way from the ocean and from this little world of Star Wars bar things, you know, but they know about it. They know about it because their people are moving up and down the rivers. You know, they're the ones carrying tobacco down the river and they're in the port. They interact with that world. And every night, when those flat boats and the bateaus, they call them, pull up to camp on a river, and, you know, the enslaved people on all the nearby plantations are getting off and coming down and visiting. And they're doing all the things that people do. They're falling in love, and they're sharing music, and they're conspiring for freedom.

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John Biewen: Throughout the Civil War, Wilmington was a crucial port for the Confederacy. The British, helping the Southern cause, smuggled weapons, clothing and food into Wilmington, sneaking past the Union blockade, in exchange for cotton and tobacco. Wilmington was the last port held by the Confederates to fall to the Union, near the end of the war in February 1865.

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Michael A. Betts, II: After the Civil War, Black people in North Carolina tried to conjure a future of freedom for themselves and their children. The United States had its own challenge: Trying to stitch itself back together.

William Sturkey: Reconstruction was the process by which the country was reconstructed after a civil war that tore it apart.

Michael A. Betts, II: William Sturkey is a historian at the University of Pennsylvania.

William Sturkey: The South seceded from the United States of America in order to protect the institution of slavery among its borders. Became this whole other country, had its own constitution, had its own government, everything. When that country was defeated, the United States was bringing the southern states back into the United States. And so to do that, it had to go through this process of reconstruction, rebuilding America. The most crucial question in the middle of that question was, what happens to all of these formerly enslaved people? A lot

of them are natural born citizens. A lot of them are men who should have the right to vote if they pay taxes and or own land. And so the process of Reconstruction was designed to fold the region, especially that population, back into the framework of the United States and, of course, the American Constitution.

John Biewen: For a time after the Civil War, the Federal government occupied the states of the defeated Confederacy, and the party that favored multiracial democracy at the time, the Republican Party, had the votes to enforce its will. Congress struck down the attempts by southern states to reimpose slavery, or something close to it.

William Sturkey: Early on in Reconstruction, before the more progressive reforms began to take shape, there were things like Black Codes, where, you know, states enacted new laws restricting the movement and even the employment of young African Americans. They also restricted their rights to free speech, to the press, to assembly, to weapons, all sorts of different things. And so a lot of leaders in the North said, No, this isn't what we had in mind. This isn't giving equal opportunity to these people. We need to pass some new laws that do that. And so the most important part of Reconstruction were the Reconstruction Amendments: thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen.

Michael A. Betts, II: The Thirteenth Amendment banned slavery, except as punishment for crime. The Fourteenth guaranteed all people equal citizenship rights, regardless of race. And the 15th granted Black Americans the right to vote – well,

Black men. It would take the 19th Amendment, in 1920, to grant voting rights to women.

William Sturkey: Now, Reconstruction ended in 1877, and it didn't fulfill all of the promises, but those amendments were included as part of the Constitution. And it was those amendments that then later set the stage for all of the claims made during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Those amendments provided the institutional foundations of a multiracial democracy.

John Biewen: Still today, those Reconstruction amendments are the basis for rights that most of us take for granted: birthright citizenship, protections for interracial and same-sex marriage. The right to privacy, which led to the Roe v. Wade decision guaranteeing the right to abortion, was found in the 14th Amendment. Needless to say, Americans and our courts are still fighting over these rights and the interpretations of these pivotal Constitutional amendments.

William Sturkey: And so while they were not perfect, Reconstruction was an era that was filled with a lot of contests over people who were upset with the formerly enslaved people getting all these rights, as well as the formerly enslaved people moving all over the place, unsure of their rights and trying to establish new lives. And there was a lot of confusion and there was a lot of violence. And if Reconstruction ultimately ended falling short of its goals, but it put in that foundation that non-white people can and should be citizens in this country with equal rights.

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Michael A. Betts, II: When the North defeated and occupied the South in 1865, and the process of Reconstruction began, the Black world of vibrant communication and political activism that had been clandestine in places like the port of Wilmington, moved out of the shadows.

John Biewen: It wasn't so very far to go from the Wilmington of the Antebellum years, to the one that emerged after the Civil War, to the Wilmington that was still thriving, relatively speaking, as a place of freedom and opportunity for Black people, in the 1890s – a place where, even politically, Black people had real power, as we'll see in the next episode.

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Michael A. Betts, II: From the time we started doing research for this series, John and I were asking ourselves this question: Why? Why were the conditions of multiracial democracy that had been put in place during Reconstruction – why were they still operative in Wilmington, North Carolina, of all places, as late as 1898? When across most of the South, white supremacists had violently seized back power, and begun instituting the crushing apartheid of Jim Crow, back in the 1870s?

William Sturkey: This question about why is Wilmington in Reconstruction mode so late? Reconstruction is over everywhere. And I think one of the things

that hat question does is, it asks for a very pessimistic reading. And that's: why Black civil rights weren't overthrown earlier.

John Biewen: Historian William Sturkey, calling us out.

William Sturkey: The reason why African Americans still had political and economic success in Wilmington is because that was the rule of the law. There were other places, like in Mississippi and even in, like, Louisiana, where there were race riots that violated every portion of the Constitution you could ever, you know, find applicable, and people lost the rights that were guaranteed to them under the Constitution of the United States of America. Wilmington is a place where the rule of law still held up through the 1890s. Now, it was not a place where African Americans were necessarily running everything. It was not a place where they had, you know, just buckets and buckets full of cash. It was a place where Black people still had their own significant challenges, but it was a place where they could still participate in the electoral process.

John Biewen: See the point Sturkey is making? Our question should not have been: Why was Wilmington special? It should have been: Why did white people in most of the South get away with violently overthrowing the new democratic America? Why did those with power in the North allow them to do that?

Michael A. Betts, II: Not, what was going on in Wilmington that made it the outlier, but *what was up* with Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina and the rest?

William Sturkey: Those places were the outliers. Those places where, even though they might have been more common, legally those places were the outliers because they were denying African Americans the right to vote that was then protected in the Constitution itself.

Michael A. Betts, II: Wilmington was not the exception but the rule – or, it should have been. In North Carolina, Black political power was real into the late 1890s, and so was a share of *white* political power that was *supportive* of Black political power.

John Biewen: The state had a powerful Fusionist movement – a coalition of two parties: The Republicans, then the more liberal party, the Party of Lincoln. And the Populist Party, which consisted mostly of working-class whites who'd left the openly white supremacist Democratic party. The Fusionists were a populist movement ... similar to populists in the west and the Midwest.

William Sturkey: Populism says, well, the poor Black and white farmer, we're in this together. Or even the poor, or even the middle class black and white farmer, we're in this together. If we do things to regulate railroads, if we do things to expand the money supply, if we do things to offer some debt relief for farmers, those are going to benefit not just white people, but also Black people. And that's exactly what happened in North Carolina. There became a Fusionist movement that had real electoral victories that were unexperienced elsewhere.

Michael A. Betts, II: In the state capital, Raleigh, Fusionists held the Governor's office and a majority in the state assembly in 1898. A majority of the state's Congressional delegation were Populists or Republicans.

John Biewen: In Wilmington itself, Fusionists held the mayor's office and controlled the city council; three aldermen were Black. The city, North Carolina's largest at the time, was also a haven of Black economic success.

Cedric Harrison, tour audio: In 1897, Wilmington had 125 African American entrepreneurs owning and operating businesses and had become a national symbol of Black success.

Michael A. Betts, II: This is audio from Cedric Harrison's bus tour, WilmingtonNCOLOR.

Cedric Harrison, tour audio: African Americans, who were in the majority, own 10 of the city's 11 dining establishments and 20 of its 22 barbershops. Black people worked for themselves as architects, lawyers, doctors, jewelers, watchmakers, and tailors....

Michael A. Betts, II: Not to mention three Black-owned banks. All of this Black success, this genuine progress toward equality among Black and white people in Wilmington: It was intolerable to the white supremacists in the city and the state, in 1898. They would not let it stand.

Music

John Biewen: So, Michael. I'm a Midwestern transplant, but you're a North Carolinian born and raised. What reflections do you have about what we learned for this episode?

Michael A. Betts, II: It's really overwhelming to me to hear these historians describe what Wilmington was. If it had been allowed to continue, what would Wilmington be – for that matter, what would the United States be like now?

John Biewen: It's almost unimaginable, but only because it would be such a different world than the one we're living in. And speaking of that, we came out of that interview with William Sturkey, and we looked at each other and said, whoa, we just got schooled.

Michael A. Betts, II: Yes! When we asked the question about why Wilmington was the outlier twenty years after Reconstruction ended, and he said, it wasn't. That's the wrong way to look at it.

John Biewen: Again, we're so accustomed to thinking of white supremacy as the default, the expected thing – certainly in that time period. So we tend to think it was inevitable that Reconstruction would only last about ten years. In fact, isn't it amazing that multiracial democracy was "allowed" to happen at all! And of *course* the North wouldn't hold the line for long.

Michael A. Betts, II: And of course white supremacists in the South, through terrorism, systematic violence, and sheer force, would shove Black people back into a marginalized, disenfranchised, exploited position and install Jim Crow for a century. But none of that was inevitable.

John Biewen: The fact that it all happened the way it did was, and is, a grotesque national failure. Meanwhile, another failure of imagination: Abraham Galloway. Why is he not a household name? Don't answer that. And where is the movie about his life?

Michael A. Betts, II: I want that movie *now* but I'm not holding my breath. Look how long it took to get "The Woman King" made. But I want to highlight two points about him: On one hand, this country just hasn't told the stories of people like Galloway. That's why his story almost seems unbelievable – like he's Nick Fury or somebody.

John Biewen: We won't tell the listeners that you had to explain to me who Nick Fury is. I'm not really a Marvel Comics guy.

Michael A. Betts, II: And let's also not tell them my office shelves are filled with comic book figures. But the other point is that, as David Cecelski said, Galloway is both singular and representative. Black people took action – creative, courageous, coordinated action – to get themselves free, under slavery; during the Civil War, on behalf of the Union effort to defeat the Confederacy; during the Civil Rights Movement of the last century; and ever since.

John Biewen: Amen.

[music]

John Biewen: Next time, the white supremacist conspiracy. The planning and buildup to the massacre and coup of 1898.

Music

Credits:

John Biewen: Echoes of a Coup is an initiative of America's Hallowed Ground, a project of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University. It's produced by Michael A. Betts the Second, and me. Our script editor is Loretta Williams. Voiceovers by Mike Wiley. Music in this episode by Kieran Haile, Blue Dot Sessions, Lucas Biewen, Kevin MacLeod, Jameson Nathan Jones, Alon Peretz, and Florian. Our website is Sceneonradio.org. We post transcripts there. Scene on Radio is distributed by our friends at PRX. The show comes to you from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.