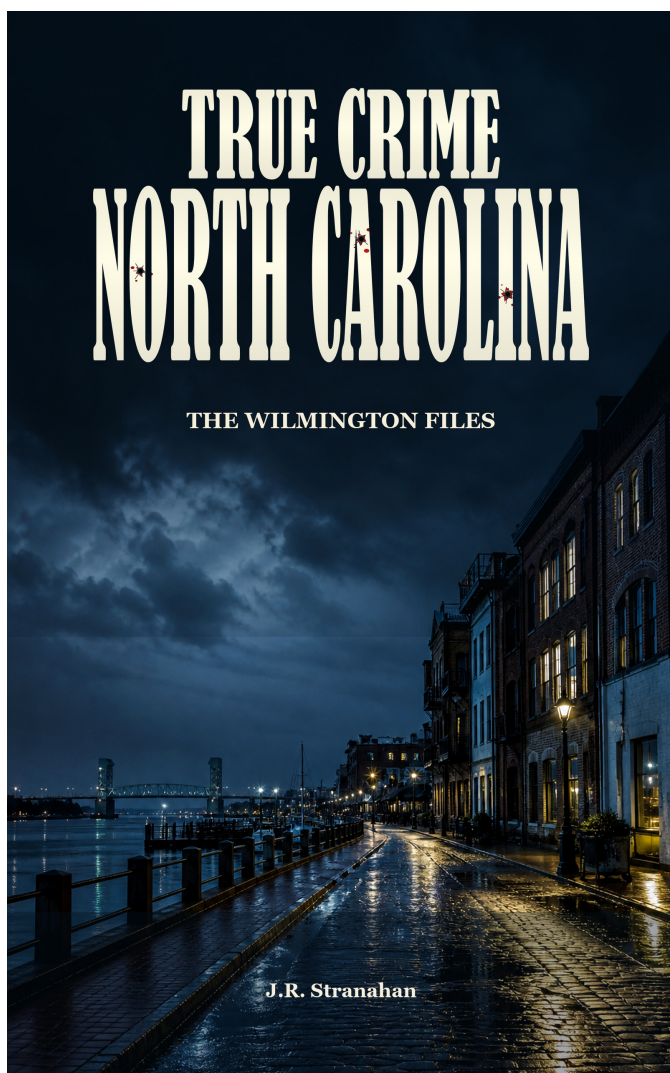


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J.R. Stranahan

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# Chapter 1: Nathan Willis and the Contested Record

Nathan Willis entered the surviving record through an accusation. That is often how a person appears in an old crime story, especially when the person was Black and the newspaper was written for white readers. The accusation can occupy columns. The life that preceded it may receive a line, if it receives anything at all.

In November 1897, Willis was described as about thirty three years old and living near Town Creek in Brunswick County. The Wilmington Morning Star reported that a young white man had disappeared while returning from a fishing place near the state line. Searchers found the man's body in South Carolina. He had been shot, and his money and some clothing were missing. The newspaper wrote that suspicion settled on Willis. It also printed details that appeared to connect him to the dead man's property. Those details were allegations gathered before any trial. They were not findings reached after witnesses had been questioned in court.

Willis was arrested on Thanksgiving Day. The Morning Star said threats of lynching were made but not carried out, and that he was taken toward the jail at Conway, South Carolina. Then its account changed direction. A dispatch from Southport reported that a mob had taken Willis from the sheriff, carried him into the woods, chained him between pine trees, and killed him by fire. The paper presented the killing as punishment for the earlier death. Its phrasing treated the accusation as settled and the mob as an instrument of judgment.

No lawful judgment appears in that account. There was no indictment described, no defense, no jury, no opportunity to test who had possessed what or when. If the report was accurate, the mob did not merely accelerate a criminal process. It destroyed the process before it began and killed the person whose guilt the process was supposed to

decide.

The historical problem is that the report did not stand uncontested. A study prepared by the Chicora Foundation traces a Raleigh newspaper's account of the killing and also notes that the Wilmington Morning Star later denied that the event had happened. Modern memorial work lists Nathan Willis among North Carolina's lynching victims, with Town Creek and November 27, 1897 attached to his name. The archive therefore offers both an assertion and a denial, followed by later recognition.

That conflict cannot honestly be smoothed away. A writer might be tempted to choose the version that produces the cleanest chapter. A reader might reasonably want a verdict on whether the report was true. The sources do not supply enough evidence for that kind of certainty. They do supply enough to show how precarious a Black prisoner's life could become once a rumor of mob action entered the countryside.

Willis's case crossed jurisdictions before any court could establish jurisdiction in the legal sense. The dead man was reportedly found in South Carolina. Willis lived in North Carolina. Officers were said to be carrying him toward Conway. News traveled through Wilmington and Raleigh. Each border created another place where responsibility could be blurred. Which sheriff held him, where custody changed, and where the alleged mob gathered would have mattered in a prosecution. In the public account, those questions dissolved into a story of vengeance.

The language of the first report also deserves attention. Willis was identified by race before readers learned anything about him. The white victim was given the social assumption of innocence and injury. Willis received the presumption of guilt. The report described the alleged killing of Willis in language that presented suffering as a deserved penalty. That was not neutral reporting. It was a moral argument for punishment without trial.

Later denial did not necessarily repair the harm. A denial can correct a false story, but it can also become part of a record that makes violence hard to prove. The Chicora study refuses to pretend that the

contradiction is resolved. That restraint is valuable. It tells us that responsible history sometimes has to carry uncertainty instead of eliminating it.

Equal Justice Initiative data records the broader setting. It identifies documented racial terror lynchings by county and lists twenty two in New Hanover County and one in Pender County during the period it studied. The figures do not prove the details of Willis's case. They do establish that mob killing in the region was not an implausible rumor imported from somewhere else. The Lower Cape Fear had a documented history of racial terror.

Modern memorial lists do something that the original report did not. They restore a name. Nathan Willis is not filed under the name of the man he was accused of killing. He is listed as a person whose own death requires remembrance. That does not erase the accusation, nor does it decide the factual question behind it. It changes the starting point.

Starting with Willis rather than the allegation exposes what the old newspaper omitted. He had reached adulthood in a region shaped by Reconstruction's collapse and the rapid consolidation of white political power. He lived near waterways and roads that connected rural Brunswick County to Wilmington and to South Carolina. The report associated him with fishing and an ox cart, small details that locate him in the labor and movement of the coastal borderlands. Beyond that, the record used here says little about his family, work, or community.

Silence about those parts of his life is not evidence that they did not exist. It is evidence that the institutions creating the surviving record did not consider them important. That is one of the cruelties of an archive built around accusation. It can preserve the contents of a suspect's pockets and lose the names of the people waiting for him to return home.

The basic legal point remains clear even while the historical event is contested. Arrest did not make Willis guilty. Suspicion did not make the newspaper's account a verdict. If a mob took him, the act was not an

alternative form of justice. It was a killing committed while the state claimed authority over his body. If the report was false, the willingness to print it as deserved punishment still reveals a public culture in which such a killing could be narrated as ordinary consequence.

Nathan Willis's story therefore begins this book with a warning. Records can preserve violence. They can also reproduce it. The difference depends on whether we repeat the accusation as truth, acknowledge the contradiction, and remember that the person at the center never received the hearing the story assumed he did not need.

The border setting made that duty harder to enforce. A crime reported in South Carolina could be investigated by one set of officers, while an arrest in North Carolina involved another. Transfer to Conway required a route, a vehicle, and identifiable custodians. If a prisoner vanished between those points, each office could claim that the critical moment happened somewhere else. Jurisdiction, which should define responsibility, can become a way to disperse it when records are weak.

Newspaper circulation crossed those same lines more easily than official accountability. A dispatch sent from Southport could appear in Wilmington and be repeated in Raleigh before anyone checked the jail register in Conway. Readers far from Town Creek received a complete moral narrative: accusation, capture, punishment. The speed of that narrative mattered because correction never travels through memory with the same force as the first shocking account.

For Willis, even the correction is incomplete. The later denial noted by the Chicora researchers does not supply the documents that would establish where he was after arrest. A jail entry or court appearance might show that he survived the reported date. A death record or coroner's inquiry might support the report. Without those materials, the responsible account must stop before certainty.

Stopping is not the same as giving up. It identifies the exact records that would answer the question and the institutional failures that left them unavailable. It also prevents a contradictory archive from becoming

entertainment. The uncertainty concerns a man's life, not a clever mystery ending.

## Sources

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