

The Tulsa Race Massacre

OKLAHOMA HISTORY CENTER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

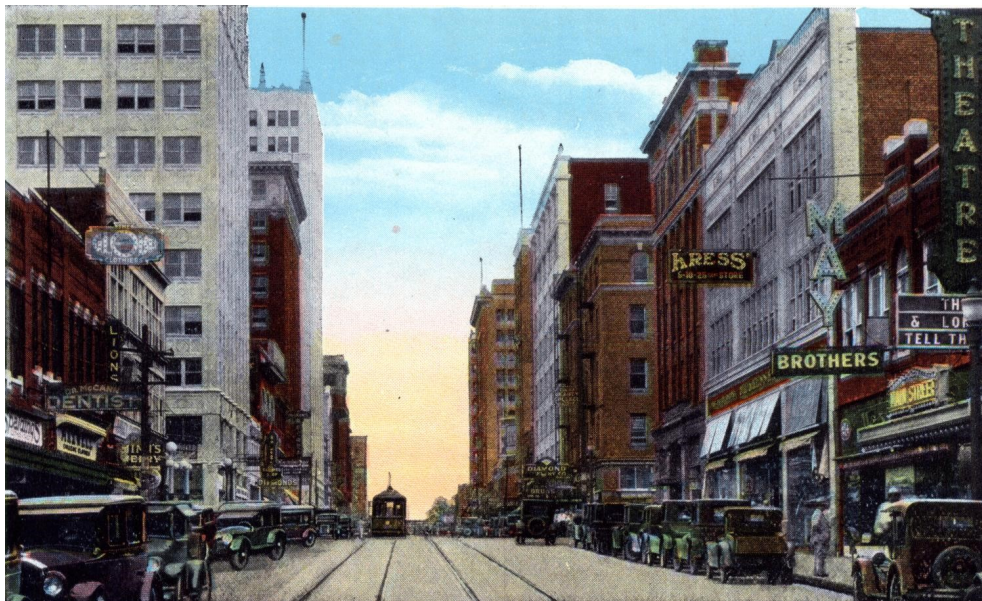
The Tulsa Race **Massacre** challenges our understanding of early Oklahoma as a **frontier** offering freedom, opportunity, and **progress** to anyone. The experiences of individual Oklahomans may have occasionally aligned with that understanding, but that occurred infrequently at best. The lives and experiences of Oklahomans are much more complex. The events that transpired on the night of May 31 and the following day are difficult to comprehend, and the fact that it happened is frightening. We have a responsibility to face this chapter in order to know our history.



After the Riots, June 1, 1921. Image courtesy the Library of Congress.

Tulsa, 1920

Tulsa's long history as an important town and later city in Oklahoma began with the **removal of the Fives Tribes** in the 1830s. The Muscogee (Creek) settled in the area. In the 1870s, the Perryman family based their sizable cattle ranch in what would become south Tulsa. The town grew slowly, with a rail line arriving in the 1880s. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the discovery of huge oil fields nearby convinced city leaders to market Tulsa as convenient and enjoyable place to conduct the business and financial sides of the oil industry. Several oil industry companies agreed and established their headquarters there. This spurred **economic development** in the city as executives built further **accommodations** for the industry and funded building construction, oil **infrastructure**, and a growing **hospitality industry**. The rapid growth of the oil industry resulted in Tulsa earning the nickname "the Oil Capital of the World." By 1920, Tulsa served as the base for over 400 petroleum companies.



Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1924. (1596010, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).

This concentration of wealth and the state-of-the-art features made Tulsa an attractive destination for a population already on the move in the early 1900s as they sought opportunity. The population soared. In 1900, 1,390 residents made up Tulsa's population. By 1910 the number rose to an astonishing 18,182 and then grew even more rapidly in ten years, reaching 72,075 in 1920. Newcomers, from manual laborers to chauffeurs to scientists, found livable wages, and all of the convenience and excitement of a modern city.

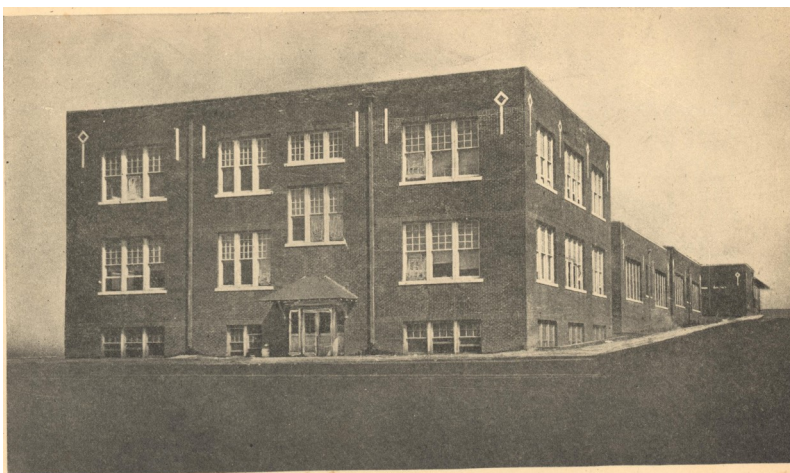
Black Wall Street

Within this thriving environment, a neighborhood born of both **Jim Crow** segregation and the booming wealth of Tulsa existed near downtown. The **Greenwood District** existed because of a smart business transaction on the part of O. W. Gurley, a wealthy and well-connected African American landowner who came to Oklahoma because of the Land Run of 1889. After moving to Tulsa in 1906, he purchased 40 acres of land along the Frisco rail tracks in north Tulsa. As he built a **rooming house** and several other buildings on this land, Oklahoma officially became a state. The first legislative action, **Senate Bill One**, established segregation between African Americans and whites throughout the state. Oklahoma implemented a sweeping system of segregation, limiting where African Americans could live and shop in addition to how they traveled and existed in public spaces.

At the same time, the economic success of Tulsa attracted African Americans from within Oklahoma and throughout the US. With few options outside of Greenwood and with **entrepreneurs** actively developing the district into a **self-sustaining** economic district, the area increased in both population and variety of goods and services. By 1920 the population in Greenwood reached 11,000. Manual laborers and hospitality workers made up the majority and the foundation of the neighborhood who faced challenging work conditions but relatively livable wages.

Because of Jim Crow laws and wish to support their community, residents spent their money within Greenwood, feeding the growth of the economy. A wide variety of professionals, entrepreneurs, and workers shared quality school and hospital systems, a public library, hotels, parks, and theaters in Greenwood. During this time, African Americans struggled to gain access to these features of city life in most places because of segregation. The homes in the **densely** populated district ranged from thrown-together **shanties** to **luxurious** multi-story homes on “**Professor’s Row**.” Greenwood attracted nationally renowned African American leaders and activists such as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. In fact, Booker T. Washington gave Greenwood its nickname: Black Wall Street.

Booker T Washington High School in Greenwood, 1920. (21516.21, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).



Yours Fraternaly,
Dr. A. C. Jackson,
Consulting Physician & Surgeon

Chronic diseases and diseases of Women a Specialty.
Calls made in the country. Phone 2573 In office at Night.
Corner Greenwood and Archer Tulsa, Okla.

Doctor Jackson was a nationally renowned surgeon and lived in Greenwood. Image courtesy of OSU Digital Collections.

Causes and Catalysts

National Factors

White Supremacy

Even after the horrors of World War I, many white Americans continued to believe and enforce the ideas of white **superiority**. White political leaders embraced this belief system and used of their **institutional power** to further those beliefs. While many whites directed **prejudice, discrimination**, and violence toward other groups such as Mexican and Chinese immigrants in the early 1900s, the racism of many white Americans remained focused on African Americans. The **second Ku Klux Klan** organized in 1915 with white supremacy as one of their primary beliefs. During the 1920s, the Klan successfully enrolled between 3 and 8 million members (out of a US population of approximately 100 million) who lived not just in the South, but the entire country. As president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson used his executive power to segregate Washington DC and limit the already **sparse** employment of African Americans in the federal government. Prior to this, the district had remained desegregated since the Civil War. White communities expressed fear and resentment, sometimes with violence, against African American soldiers returning from World War I, especially if they were in uniform. **Lynching**, especially of African Americans in the South, occurred regularly, and the numbers attacked increased. The **eugenics** movement provided a scientific-sounding justification for these actions until it fell out of favor following World War II.

Segregation

Jim Crow segregation laws developed from the ideas of white supremacy. At the same time, segregation laws hid African Americans from the daily lives of whites in the same town. Businesses either refused to serve African Americans or offered services unequally. African Americans purchasing food at a diner were not allowed to eat on the premises with whites. In retail stores, clerks interrupted their assistance to African American customers when white customers entered. Entire cities were segregated. Entrances, waiting rooms, and water fountains were segregated. Transportation such as busses or trains required Africans Americans to sit in separate cars or sit behind whites and be willing to give up their seat if it became crowded. Ambulances refused to carry African Americans



Sign on restaurant, Lancaster, Ohio. Image courtesy the Library of Congress.

and hospitals were white only. Most parks were for the exclusive use of whites. African Americans were prevented from serving on juries and they were forced to use separate bibles when testifying in court. Without contact and first-hand knowledge, many whites simply accepted the racist presentation of African Americans: in magazines, radio programs, **minstrel shows**, newspapers, and, significantly, the new format of movies. For many African Americans, presenting as **compliant** in the presence of whites became a survival strategy. African Americans who did not act the way whites expected them to could be in danger of losing their jobs or facing physical attack.



“Birth of a Nation” Promotional Poster, 1915. Image courtesy New York Public Library.

Causes and Catalysts

National Factors

Great Migration

African Americans living in the South faced limits in all aspects of their lives. They confronted the brutality of segregation and the violence that supported it. They experienced a lack of opportunity caused by the **sharecropping** system and the refusal of other industries to hire African Americans. The widespread **infestation** of **boll weevils** that ruined cotton crops throughout the region attacked both white and African American farmers. These conditions resulted in compelling reasons to leave the South if a family could save up enough money to do so. As the first migrants gained a foothold outside the South, the support they could offer convinced others to make the journey. Incredible numbers of African Americans moved permanently away from the South beginning in the 1890s and continuing into the 1970s. Oklahoma's initial appeal to African Americans came in the early 1900s because of their eligibility to gain, potentially, a **homestead** in the land runs. The existence of many All-Black towns convinced some to come to Oklahoma and the oil boom brought others. For many whites in places that lacked an African American presence, racist assumptions prevailed. Once the environment integrated, the whites of the area perceived their new neighbors negatively, which reinforced stereotypes and a sense of superiority. Many whites viewed newly arrived African Americans as competitors for jobs, housing, and resources, which created even more racial tension.



African-American leaders of 16 counties in Oklahoma. Oklahoma offered many all-black towns for migrants fleeing the South. (961735, Edd Roberts Collection, OHS).

Rapid Urbanization

Some of those whites witnessing the Great Migration were migrants as well. Increasingly, the best opportunity existed in the cities. War-related jobs and the **agricultural depression** after the war led to the movement of people from all backgrounds to cities in the North and the Midwest, like Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, and Tulsa. This process could be extremely disorienting, especially as the country underwent several abrupt cultural transformations at the same time, including an increase in **secularism**, the changes in how women lived, the growth of illegal drinking establishments, and the automobile's transformation of society. Just as in Tulsa, the cities' populations skyrocketed in very short periods. This created challenges to fulfill the food, housing, employment, and safety need of new residents.

Causes and Catalysts

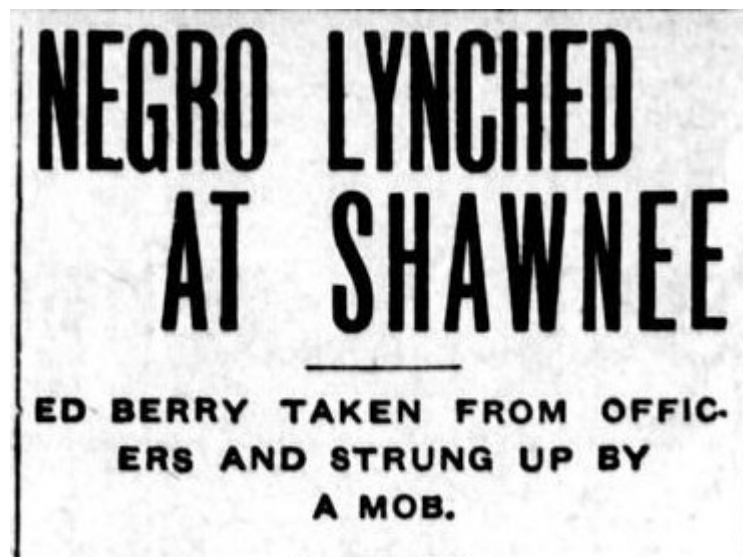
National Factors

Lynching

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a form of community violence called lynching served as a tactic to enforce Jim Crow segregation and inequality. Lynching is the killing of a person by a mob without any legal trial. In many places, communities lynched individuals for alleged crimes and union organizing. In the South, communities increasingly used lynching as a way to instill **terror** in the African American population. In the 1880s, four African Americans were lynched to every one white person. After 1900, the ratio increases to 17 African American victims for every one white person.

In Oklahoma, lynching victims varied. Prior to statehood, African Americans made up 17 of 110 lynching victims from 1889 to 1906. From 1907 to the time of the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921, mobs lynched 33 African Americans, both men and women. There were almost no white victims in this period.

A frequent “reason” for lynching an African American man was sexual contact with a white woman. This included **allegations** of rape, **sexual assault**, and **consensual** relationships. For African Americans in Oklahoma, it was understood that white communities practiced lynching, and the likelihood of mob violence increased dramatically if an allegation of sexual contact with a white woman occurred.



A mob lynched Edward Berry on August 6, 1915 after being arrested for assaulting a white woman. *Colony Courier* (Colony, Okla.), August 12, 1915.

Causes and Catalysts

Local Factors

Media Coverage of African Americans

The major newspapers in Tulsa, the *Tulsa World* and the *Tulsa Tribune*, did not report much on the African American community. When they did, the papers used prejudicial stereotypes rather than an accurate presentation. When reports included African Americans, the papers attempted comedy through mockery or presented African Americans as the major criminals in the city. When covering the African American community, these papers focused almost exclusively on crimes while offering limited coverage of white crime. If reports included whites participating in crime, the papers frequently found a way to blame African Americans, as the papers asserted they controlled white opportunities for gambling, drinking, and prostitution. The local African American paper, the *Tulsa Star*, observed this **bias** in reporting and declared to its readers:

“The *World-Sun* have at least 500 subscribers among the Negroes of this city, which amounts to \$3,900.00 per year. Quite a fat sum to pay to be insulted and outraged at frequent intervals, eh?...A paper which will not publish their social news, but take a keen delight in publishing any article calculated to discredit the Negro in any way and to stir up prejudice against him”

This media bias exposed whites in Tulsa to the consistent message that African Americans were to blame for crime. Later, after the violence and white Tulsans tried to understand what happened and why, this bias would impact the way the city leaders and residents make decisions.



The major newspapers focused almost exclusively on reporting crimes committed by African Americans. These headlines are from the *Tulsa World*, March 14, 1920, p. 22; July 31, 1920, p. 13; August 8, 1920, p. 8; August 10, 1920, p. 9; September 6, 1920, p. 3.

Causes and Catalysts

Local Factors

The Belton Lynching

In the summer of 1920, a year before the massacre, two men and a woman robbed and shot a taxi driver they had hired to take them to a dance. While in the hospital, the taxi driver identified Roy Belton as one of the attackers. The story spread quickly through Tulsa, and when the taxi driver died from the wound, a mob converged on the courthouse jail. They demanded Belton be handed over to the mob. The mob, which numbered in the hundreds, drove him out of town and hung Belton from a tree. After the incident, both the chief of police and the sheriff expressed gratitude to the mob for making criminals think twice. Both the *Tribune* and the *World* applauded the actions of the mob as superior to government action. The *World* predicted that Belton's lynching "will not be the last by any means." Although Belton was white, the African American community viewed this killing with grave concern.



The lynching of Belton in Tulsa occurred at the same time as another in Oklahoma City. Both incidents left Greenwood residents uneasy. *Drumright Evening Derrick*, August 30, 1920.

The Elevator Incident

On May 30, 1921, Dick Rowland went to his job as a shoe shiner in a downtown Tulsa office building. Segregation law prevented Dick Rowland from using the restroom in his building, so he was forced to use the restroom on the top floor of a nearby building—the closed “Colored” restroom. Elevators in the 1920s required operators, and women often filled these jobs. On this day Sarah Page, a white woman, was operating the elevator when Rowland came to the building to use the upstairs restroom. When the elevator reached the first floor, a clerk heard Page scream and saw Rowland run out of the building. The clerk reported the incident to the police. The police, after speaking with Page, apparently did not consider investigating the incident or apprehending Rowland a high priority. They waited until the next day to arrest Rowland.

Causes and Catalysts

Local Factors

The *Tribune*

Rowland's arrest occurred after the *Tulsa World*, the morning newspaper, released their day's edition. Then the *Tribune*, the afternoon paper, learned of the incident. One of the central controversies in the story of the Tulsa Race Massacre lay in what the *Tribune* did with this story. Many Tulsans reported the *Tribune* contained two articles on Rowland. One, a front page story reported that "Diamond Dick" Rowland assaulted a "17-year-old white elevator girl" and that the police arrested him. The other piece on the **editorial** page, "To Lynch a Negro Tonight," has been never been verified because no complete copy of this issue has ever been located. Throughout the afternoon, the newsboys sold their papers by shouting, "A Negro assaults a white girl!" Throughout the white community in Tulsa, rumors of a plan to lynch Rowland spread.

Local Law Enforcement

The law enforcement's response may not be a primary cause of the massacre, but their actions once the violence began made the situation more deadly. The police chief **deputized** 500 men, all white, from the crowd that gathered as a potential lynch mob. He gave them weapons and sent them out to "deal" with the situation as they saw fit. These newly empowered men **looted**, burned, and killed with that police authority. The local National Guard focused their efforts on arresting and interning all African Americans that they could locate. This left Greenwood vulnerable with few to defend it. At certain points in the hours-long conflict, the National Guard also shot at African American residents in coordination with other attackers.

Nab Negro for Attacking Girl In an Elevator

A negro delivery boy who gave his name to the police as "Diamond Dick" but who has been identified as Dick Rowland, was arrested on South Greenwood avenue this morning by Officers Carmichael and Pack, charged with attempting to assault the 17-year-old white elevator girl in the Drexel building early yesterday.

He will be tried in municipal court this afternoon on a state charge.

The girl said she noticed the negro a few minutes before the attempted assault looking up and down the hallway on the third floor of the Drexel building as if to see if there was anyone in sight but thought nothing of it at the time.

A few minutes later he entered the elevator she claimed, and attacked her, scratching her hands and face and tearing her clothes. Her screams brought a clerk from Renberg's store to her assistance and the negro fled. He was captured and identified this morning both by the girl and clerk, police say.

Rowland denied that he tried to harm the girl, but admitted he put his hand on her arm in the elevator when she was alone.

Tenants of the Drexel building said the girl is an orphan who works as an elevator operator to pay her way through business college.

This is the front page article of the *Tulsa Tribune* about the incident between Page and Rowland on the afternoon of May 30, 1921.

The Massacre

The Crowd Gathers

On May 31, hundreds of white Tulsans gathered outside of the Tulsa County Courthouse as the afternoon turned into evening. They sent in a group of men demanding the deputies hand Rowland over. The sheriff had taken measures to prevent anyone from taking custody of Rowland. At 9 p.m., an armed group of 25 African American men, many of whom were recent World War I veterans, came to the courthouse to offer their assistance in protecting Rowland. The Sheriff declined their help and assured the men that the situation remained under control. The group returned to Greenwood. The arrival of the men angered the white mob which continued to grow in size. It now stood at approximately two thousand. The sheriff took additional precautions and pleaded with the crowd to disperse.



The Sheriff held Rowland in the Tulsa County Courthouse.

The Spark

Shortly after 10 p.m., a group of 75 African American men, returned to the courthouse and were once again told to leave. As they departed in a single-file line, a white man attempted to disarm one of the African American men. The man resisted. In the scuffle, the weapon discharged. Both sides exchanged fire.

Running Battle

The African American men engaged in a fighting retreat back to Greenwood as armed whites attacked them. The local police force expanded as the chief deputized 500 white men and boys. Those who did not have weapons went to local pawnshops, hardware stores, and sporting goods stores, breaking in and stealing guns. The targets of the mob evolved from the original armed group to any African American person. Indiscriminate killing began. As both sides reached Greenwood, deadly battles erupted, particularly along the Frisco railroad tracks. In other parts of Greenwood, whites drove into the neighborhood and killed residents from their cars. Some whites began setting fires to property in Greenwood at around 1 a.m. White rioters prevented the fire department from extinguishing the flames.

The National Guard

Some rioters demanded the weapons at the National Guard armory. The guardsmen on duty refused to hand out the weapons. Later, after the authorities officially asked for the assistance of the National Guard, their primary responsibility lay in arresting all of the African Americans in Greenwood and holding them at various locations throughout the city. Another group of guardsmen assisted other whites in attacking groups of remaining African American men who were still defending their property, families, and community.

The Invasion

As dawn approached, approximately 10,000 whites hovered around the edges of Greenwood. Many African Americans remained in their homes, hoping to avoid the conflict and protect their families and property. White men had hauled a machine gun to the top of a grain elevator. At 5:08 a.m., a signal pierced the air. In response to the signal, the machine gunners began firing into Greenwood. The rest of the mob began marching and driving into the neighborhood. Moving from house to house, white rioters broke into homes and businesses and forced the occupants out for internment. Then, they looted the properties.



Armed White Rioters. Image courtesy OSU Digital Collections.



Armed Civilians. Image courtesy OSU Digital Collections.

The Fires

The white rioters set fires “house by house, block by block” as they moved through Greenwood:

“As the whites moved north, they set fire to practically every building in the African American community, including a dozen churches, five hotels, 31 restaurants, four drug stores, eight doctor’s offices, more than two dozen grocery stores, and the black public library. More than a thousand homes were torched, the fires becoming so hot that nearby trees and outbuildings also burst into flame.” (Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, p. 198)



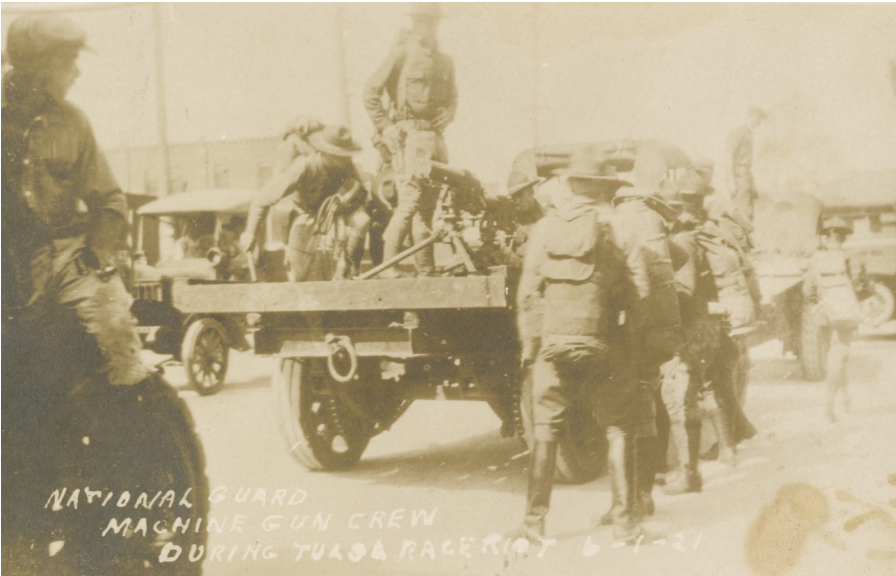
Tulsa Race Riot, 1921. (1619126, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).



Standpipe Hill destruction. Image courtesy of OSU Digital Collections.

State Troops Deployed

Deployed at 10 p.m. the night before, one hundred Oklahoma City National Guard troops made their way to Tulsa. Upon their arrival at 9 a.m., their commander secured a declaration of **martial law**. As more Guard members entered Greenwood, most of the rioters headed home. The National Guard took custody of the camps and declared order restored at 8 p.m. that evening.



National Guard Machine Gun Crew during Tulsa Race Riot, June 1, 1921. Image courtesy of National Museum of African American History and Culture.



Internment at Convention Hall. Tulsa Race Massacre Collection of 1921. OSU Digital Collections.

The Aftermath

The Internment

By the end of the day, the **internment camps** held 6,000 African American residents. The next day, authorities moved them to the fairgrounds. The National Guard forced these prisoners, both men and women, to labor. The mayor threatened to arrest anyone refusing work for **vagrancy**. Authorities required them to clean up the destruction caused by the white rioters. The length of stay varied for most of those imprisoned. Release depended on white employers **vouching** for their African American workers. After that the city issued passes, called **green cards**, for them to carry to show their employment. By the middle of June, no one remained in these camps.



Entrance to refugee camp on the fair grounds, Tulsa, Okla., after the race riot of June 1st, 1921.. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The Red Cross

After the violence **subsided**, a Red Cross official from St. Louis named Maurice Willows arrived to assess whether the city required the Red Cross's assistance. The Red Cross had never conducted **relief** efforts following a man-made disaster except for war. He quickly determined the riot victims might not have any other assistance if the Red Cross did not intervene. He convinced the leadership of the Red Cross to declare Tulsa a natural disaster area. The mayor announced the Red Cross was to be entirely responsible for the relief effort. The Red Cross stayed for months, assisting African American residents with food, shelter, and medical needs, both those immediately connected to the violence and those that developed under such challenging long-term conditions. As the majority of the **displaced** lived in tents for a year or more, the Red Cross's efforts limited suffering and death arising from the aftermath of the massacre.

Maurice Willows, a strong advocate for the riot victims, also did what he could to preserve the historical record of these events.



Headquarters staff, American Red Cross Disaster Relief Headquarters., Tulsa, 1921. Image courtesy the Library of Congress.

The Uprising Narrative

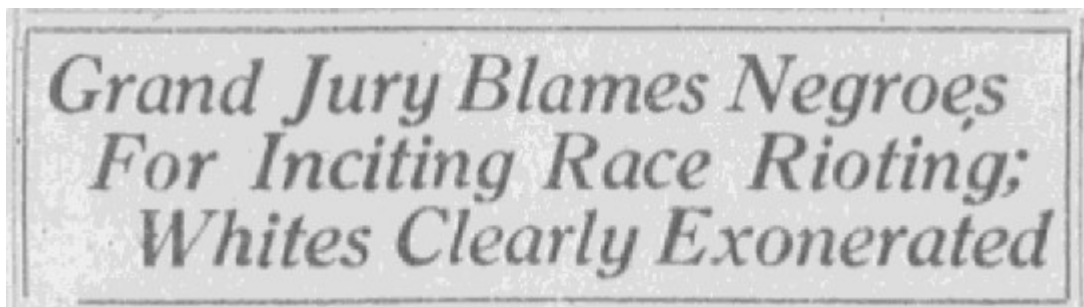
Within a week the leaders of the major institutions in Tulsa began promoting a **narrative** that blamed the residents of Greenwood themselves for the violence. The *Tulsa Tribune*, the state's attorney general, many ministers, and the mayor advanced this argument. The attorney general, in a speech in Tulsa on June 17, said:

“The cause of this riot was not Tulsa. It might have happened anywhere for the Negro is not the same man he was thirty years ago when he was content to plod along his own road accepting the white man as his benefactor. But the years have passed and the Negro has been educated and the race papers have spread the thought of race equality.”

The grand jury convened to investigate, followed the attorney general's lead and concluded in its report:

“The crowd assembled about the courthouse being purely spectators and curiosity seekers... There was no mob spirit among the whites, no talk of lynching and no arms. The assembly was quiet until the arrival of armed negroes, which precipitated and was the direct cause of the riot.”

The lead attorney for the state used her power to give **immunity** to any whites who looted homes or murdered African Americans. This remained the **dominant** narrative until attention to the massacre began to fade outside the African American community in Oklahoma.



Tulsa World, June 26, 1921, p. 1.

Land Issues

In early June, some city officials promised to rebuild and began setting up structures to assist the residents of Greenwood. The city directed donations from across the country to the relief efforts of the Red Cross. They actively refused support for reconstruction from other cities, announcing that restoring the city was strictly a “Tulsa affair,” and the residents of Tulsa would take care of it. By June 3, a trade organization called the Real Estate Exchange floated the idea of *not* rebuilding, but instead rezoning the neighborhood for industrial purposes. Realtors attempted to get African American landowners to sell but wanted the land at discounted rates. Maurice Willows used his influence to convince African American property owners to keep their land. The city responded by applying a fire code to the area that would make rebuilding too expensive for most individual property owners. Well known attorney and activist, B. C. Franklin, along with I. H. Spears and T. O. Chapelle, encouraged residents to start the rebuilding process even though they faced arrest by doing so. Their lawyers vowed to secure the release of anyone arrested for rebuilding. They filed a suit against the city for taking property without due process. They won the lawsuit, providing the neighborhood a chance to survive.

Another challenge facing residents in their attempt to rebuild lay in the insurance companies’ refusal to pay on claim for damages related to the massacre. Insurance policies contained **exemptions** from paying for damages related to riots.

The residents of Greenwood rebuilt the neighborhood with very little outside investment or support.



After the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, attorney B.C. Franklin (right) set up his law office in a tent. At left is I.H. Spears, Franklin’s law partner. These men worked to prevent dispossession of Greenwood residents. Image courtesy Tulsa Historical Society.

Controversies

The record of an event is fluid. People who experienced the event remember things differently or may have reasons to avoid telling the whole truth. Our current understanding can change as we learn new facts or develop new ways to look at things. Because of this, most events in history contain some controversies about what happened. There may not be enough evidence to prove or disprove a claim, some claims may not be believable in one time, but reliable in another, and people investigating the event may not explore all of the sources available or have the resources to do so. People may refuse to accept new evidence because of the impact that new evidence might have on the future. The historical record of the Tulsa Race Massacre contains many controversies.

The *Tribune* Editorial

Many of the survivors and witnesses of the massacre remember an editorial in the *Tulsa Tribune* called “To Lynch Negro Tonight,” in the same issue as the front-page article “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator.” No complete issue of this paper has ever been located. Someone tore both stories out of the newspaper before historians created an archive of the paper. In 1946, Loren Gill found the front-page article and used it in his thesis on the massacre. The editorial remains a mystery.

Number Killed and Mass Graves

The earliest stories about the massacre reported between 80-175 deaths. Those estimates were reduced significantly. Today, the official death toll stands at 36. Most people believe this number far too low. People who witnessed the massacre stated they observed evidence of a greater number of dead. These claims led to an investigation into the existence of mass graves in Tulsa, which then became a controversial issue on its own. There is some evidence for the existence of mass graves but the investigation remains incomplete. It is not clear if the investigation will ever be completed.

Reparations

A movement to provide reparations for the harm done grew out of the increased attention and scholarship on the massacre following the 1970s. Legal scholar Alfred Brophy contributed much scholarship and support to this effort. Many people who support reparations argue that the city promised to assist in rebuilding and that the massacre could have been prevented by government action. Legal efforts to compel governments to pay reparations for the Tulsa Race Massacre have been unsuccessful. The courts have generally stated that too much time has passed. In 2001, the Commission to Study the Tulsa Riot of 1921 recommended the payment of reparations after completing their investigation.

Bombing

Some who witnessed the massacre recall airplanes dropping bombs on June 1. These witnesses include lawyer B. C. Franklin. Other people report the rioters used planes for reconnaissance. This part of the event will likely never be resolved to the agreement of all, but its importance is apparent. An entire chapter of the report released by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 is devoted to the subject.

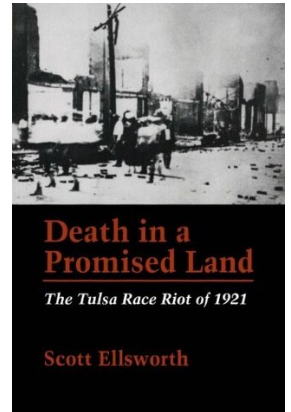
Riot or Massacre?

Another issue centers on the name of the event. Many people believe calling the events of May 31 and June 1 a “riot” does not accurately describe what happened. Some people point to the use of “riot” contributing to the insurance companies’ refusal to pay out claims. Others argue that people during that period used the word “riot” to describe any large conflict between whites and other groups. A massacre describes the killing of a large number of people indiscriminately, but it may also suggest that African Americans offered no resistance, which is inaccurate.

Recent Events

Resurgence of Attention

For decades after the Tulsa Race Massacre, scholars and officials ignored the event. In the early 70s, a journalist named Ed Wheeler began studying the massacre at the suggestion of a local Tulsa editor. Refused by the publication Wheeler wrote the piece for, he ultimately published in a small periodical called *Impact*. In 1982, Scott Ellsworth wrote a comprehensive history called *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*. As this work attracted more attention and scholarship of the Tulsa Race Massacre, more articles and books followed.



Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921



Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot

In 1997, the Oklahoma Legislature established the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. After four years of investigation and the participation of high-profile historians like Scott Ellsworth and John Hope Franklin, they released a 200-page report, creating an official history.

Scott Ellsworth's *Death in a Promised Land* spurred greater attention and research on the Tulsa Race Massacre.

Centennial Commission

Scholarship and education about the Tulsa Race Massacre continues through the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission, the Greenwood Cultural Center, and through the work of a new generation of historians, journalists, and scholars.



The John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation and Reconciliation Park

This center, named for B. C. Franklin's son, noted historian John Hope Franklin, seeks to “transform the bitterness and mistrust caused by years of racial division, even violence, into a hopeful future of reconciliation and cooperation for Tulsa and the nation.” The park is designed to educate visitors about African American history in Oklahoma, including the development of the Greenwood district and the Tulsa Race Massacre. The Center develops education resources and hosts events focused on community dialogue.

Reading with a Purpose: The Black Press



Several African American communities in Oklahoma offered their own newspapers. The most important of these newspapers is the *Black Dispatch*, produced by editor and civil rights activist Roscoe Dunjee. Explore the editorial page of the June 17, 1921, issue of the *Black Dispatch* here:

<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc152337/>

1. In “Where the Responsibility Lies,” what does the author identify as contributing to the violence?
2. What is the main idea of “Fight it Out in the Courts”?
3. What argument does Drusilla Dunjee Houston make in “A Blessing in Disguise”?
4. Why do you think Houston makes this argument to Oklahoma’s African American population at this time?

Explore other examples of the African American press in Oklahoma to examine how viewed the Tulsa Race Massacre.

The Muskogee Cimeter

African-American Newspapers in The Gateway to Oklahoma History. Oklahoma Historical Society.

<https://gateway.okhistory.org/explore/collections/MUSKC/>

The Oklahoma Guide

African-American Newspapers in The Gateway to Oklahoma History. Oklahoma Historical Society.

<https://gateway.okhistory.org/explore/collections/OKGD/>

Tulsa Star

African-American Newspapers in The Gateway to Oklahoma History. Oklahoma Historical Society.

<https://gateway.okhistory.org/explore/collections/TULSA/>

Glossary

accommodations: Doing or building something that makes something easier for a person or group

Agricultural Depression: In the 1920s, prices for agricultural products fell drastically and the rural part of the United States fell into an economic depression many years before the Great Depression affected the country.

allegation: Make a claim that someone broke a law

bias: A strong feeling or opinion, positive or negative, without any information to justify it

boll weevils: A kind of beetle that devastated the cotton crop of the South for many years

compliant: Obeying without challenge

consensual: Agreement from everyone involved

controversy: An argument or point of disagreement

densely: Crowded

deputize: To give someone the power to enforce the law

discrimination: Deciding that a group is better or worse than other groups and acting on that belief

displaced: Being forced away from home without a place to go

dominant: The most important or powerful

economic development: Increasing the amount of businesses and work

editorial: A news story that features the opinion of the writer

entrepreneurs: A person that starts and runs a business

eugenics: The belief that selective breeding for desirable traits will improve the human race. In the United States, this belief was intimately tied with race and class as indicators of desirable traits.

exemption: Not being required to do what others have to do; being excused from an obligation

frontier: The place beyond the settlement of one's group

Green Cards: The cards given to Greenwood's African Americans showing their employment, which allowed them to move around in Tulsa after the massacre

Greenwood District: The successful African American district in Tulsa

homestead: A grant of public land to individuals willing to settle and farm the land for five years

hospitality industry: Workers whose main job is looking after well-being of others

immunity: Free from

infestation: An unusually high number of, usually, insects that then cause damage

infrastructure: All of the things needed to do something; in the oil industry, pipelines, seismic equipment, trucks, storage facilities, refineries are necessary to acquire and sell the product. These are examples of infrastructure.

institutional power: the power that comes from being a decision maker in government or a large organization

internment camps: Places to detain people considered dangerous, especially during war

Jim Crow laws: Laws that promoted segregation and racist practices.

loot: Massive stealing from homes and businesses, especially during periods of unrest

luxurious: Extremely comfortable

lynching: The killing of a person by a group without a legal trial

martial law: government by the military

massacre: Deliberately and violently killing a large number of people

minstrel show: Comedy shows based on mocking African Americans

narrative: A version of a story

prejudice: preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience

Professor's Row: The neighborhood on Standpipe Hill in which the wealthiest Greenwood residents lived; many of these residents held prestigious professional positions or were wealthy entrepreneurs.

progress: Advancing and getting better

relief: Food, clothing, shelter or money given to a person facing a specific difficulty

Removal of the Five Tribes: The forced relocation of the Five Tribes (Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole) from the Southeast to Indian Territory

riot: A violent public disturbance that law enforcement cannot control

rooming house: A large house where individuals can rent a room

second Ku Klux Klan: Terrorist organization in the 1910s and 1920s that targeted African Americans and minority groups, immigrants, and people that violated laws enforcing morality

secularism: A move away from focusing on religion

self-sustaining: Keeps itself going, doesn't require outside assistance

Senate Bill One: The first law passed by the Oklahoma state legislature. It required systems of segregation be put in place.

sexual assault: Any sexual contact that involves force or occurs without consent

shanties: A shelter constructed from used materials

sharecropping: A system of agriculture in which a landowner rents land to landless farmers. The payment is a percentage of the crop. In the American south, this system resulted in poverty and oppression that lasted generations.

sparse: Not crowded

subside: Reduce from the peak

superiority: The highest or best

tenets: basic beliefs in which all agree

terror: violence used to frighten others from doing something

urbanization: Moving from rural areas to the city

vagrancy: A person without a means of support. In the American South, many places had vagrancy laws that required African Americans keep a job or face incarceration.

vouch: To use one's personal reputation to affirm something is true

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