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The Tulsa Race Massacre

The Destruction of a Community



The Tulsa Race

Massacre is one of the most violent and devastating racial attacks in American history, occurred from Tuesday, May 31 to Wednesday, June 1, 1921, in the Greenwood

District of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Known at the time as “Black Wall Street” for its booming African American community and booming economy, Greenwood was a rare example of Black prosperity during the early 20th century. Yet within the span of roughly 24 hours the neighborhood was destroyed by a white mob. This resulted in the deaths of an estimated 100 to 300 Black residents, the destruction of over 1,200 homes, and the displacement of thousands.

The tragedy of the Tulsa Race Massacre is more than just a violent episode—it represents a larger historical pattern of racial injustice, systemic inequality, and the deliberate erasure of Black success. Understanding the events leading up to the massacre, its aftermath, and its lasting

impact is essential in confronting America's legacy of racism and violence against African Americans.

The Greenwood District: A Symbol of Black Excellence

At the heart of the Tulsa Race Massacre lies the Greenwood District, a neighborhood often referred to as “Black Wall Street.” During the early 1900s, Black Americans faced extreme segregation and discrimination, particularly in the Southern United States. Oklahoma, which became a state in 1907, had swiftly adopted Jim Crow laws that restricted the rights of Black citizens and codified segregation in all aspects of public life. Despite these challenges, African Americans in Tulsa had built a community.



Greenwood was home to successful Black-owned businesses, including grocery stores, barbershops, movie theaters, hotels, and banks. The district's main street, Greenwood Avenue, bustled with commerce and culture. Black professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers contributed to the neighborhood's life. JSTOR Daily puts into perspective how much wealth truly existed in Greenwood, “The average income of black families in the area exceeded “what minimum wage is today.” As a result of segregation, a “dollar circulated 36 to 100 times” and remained in Greenwood “almost a year before leaving”. The money circulating in one place means that wealth stayed in Greenwood far longer than most other communities.

The Spark: The Accusation

The immediate trigger of the massacre was an incident involving a young Black man named Dick Rowland and a white woman named Sarah Page. On Monday, May 30, 1921, Rowland entered an elevator operated by Paige in the Drexel Building, which was segregated and located in downtown Tulsa. What exactly occurred between the two remains unclear, but Page reportedly screamed, and Rowland fled. Some reports say that Rowland may have tripped and grabbed Page to steady himself, while others say it was a misunderstanding.

Despite the lack of evidence, Rowland was arrested the following day, and rumors of an alleged assault spread rapidly throughout Tulsa. Fueled by sensationalist newspaper headlines and longstanding racial prejudice, tensions quickly escalated. A white mob gathered at the courthouse around Tuesday evening demanding that Rowland be lynched. In response, a group of Black World War I veterans also made an appearance and were determined to protect Rowland and ensure he would have a fair trial. These black veterans showed up armed and prepared to defend him. A confrontation ensued, shots were fired, and the situation spiraled out of control.

The Massacre Unfolds

After the initial confrontation at the courthouse, white mobs turned their fury toward the Greenwood District. In the early hours of Wednesday, June 1, 1921, the mob began looting, burning, and killing after walking 1.5 miles from where the courthouse altercation occurred. Black residents attempted to defend themselves and their property, but they were vastly outnumbered and outgunned. Some white attackers were deputized and armed by local law enforcement, while others were simply ordinary citizens emboldened by hatred and racism.

The official death toll was reported at 36, but modern estimates place the number much higher, likely between 100 and 300. According to the Oklahoma Historical Society (OHS) the population of Tulsa, Oklahoma was 72 thousand. Of the 72 thousand only about 12.3% of the population were black. This means only 8 thousand of the population was black. While some Black residents were left homeless, and more than 6,000 were rounded up and detained in makeshift internment camps, where they remained under armed guard for days or weeks. (OHS) These camps were located at the Convention Hall in Tulsa, The Tulsa Fairgrounds, McNulty Baseball Stadium, and city jail. No white individuals were held accountable for the violence, and the incident was largely ignored or covered up by local and national institutions for decades.



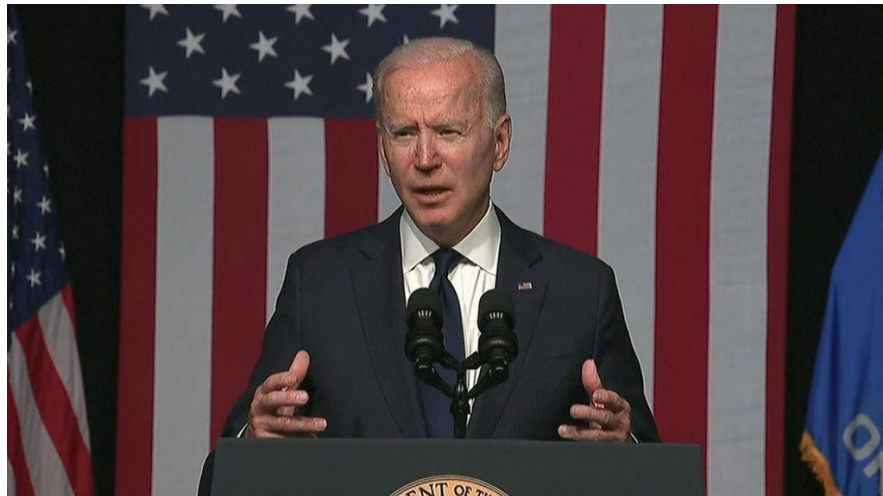
All That Was Left of His Home After Tulsa Race Riot

The Huge Coverup

One of the saddest parts of this tragedy is the years that followed it. For decades the history of Tulsa, Oklahoma was covered up. This massacre sparked zero serious investigations while thousands of survivors were scared into silence. The state of Oklahoma and the city of Tulsa did not recognize the horrors of this event until 1996 when Oklahoma sent out the Oklahoma Commission to investigate the tragedy. Tulsa wasn't the first event that highlighted the massive problem with violence against African communities. Thousands of people lost more than just their lives in their own town for just being black and successful.

Rediscovery

As mentioned above, it wasn't until 1996 that the Oklahoma state government created a commission to fully begin investigating the massacre. Five years later the



commission came to a realization. They acknowledged that the violence that happened that day was racially motivated, and that the city didn't do what was necessary to protect its black community. A recommendation for reparations was considered for the families that were affected however it doesn't seem like reparations will be brought back up. According to the OHS, the Oklahoma Commission proposed:

- Direct payments to the survivors and decedents
- A scholarship for the Greenwood community

- A reparations fund for economic development for the Greenwood District and tax reliefs for the businesses impacted
- The establishment of a memorial to remember the tragedy

In 2021, on the 10th anniversary of the massacre, Joe Biden visited Tulsa. This makes him the first president to do so. There he gave a speech where he called the event a “massacre not a riot”. There in his meeting he also met with the last standing survivor of the massacre who is now over 100 years old.

There is now more coverage than ever when it comes to the Tulsa Race Massacre. There are museums and memorials now like the Greenwood Cultural Center and the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park. More needs to be done for the victims, but this is a start for something that could grow.

The Historical Relevance

The Tulsa Race massacre is a testament to what happens when racial bias goes unchecked. It shows us that Black success was and still is seen as something that is feared and should be destroyed. The Greenwood District was something that would have been celebrated had it been a white community. Since it was black however, it was cruelly destroyed and forgotten. We see this pattern in a lot of aspects of black history. Black communities face violence and begin to be undermined by the white population when they begin to make something of themselves.

We can see the Tulsa Race Massacre as a lesson of how history can be manipulated or completely forgotten. Without people fighting for their voices to be heard, we might have never known this story. It's important to retell these stories again and again no matter how terrible and painful they can be. We must never forget them again.

What Now?

The Tulsa Race Massacre was mass terrorist attack on a prospering innocent black



The Oldest Survivor, Viola Fletcher 110

community. The event highlights

how deep racism is rooted into American history and how much white people hated to see Black Americans succeed. Remembering Tulsa means more than just remembering the tragedy that occurred there but also standing up so something like this will never happen again.

With the tragedy happening a little more than 100 years ago from today, the community of Greenwood still feels the effects of hatred long ago. The victims of the tragedy had to build themselves up from nothing and were treated terribly along the whole way. Remembering Tulsa helps us deliver the justice that the victims of this massacre never lived to see.

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