

## THE TULSA RACE RIOT OF 1921?

**What:** A roughly 18 hour long riot that destroyed a large Black community in Tulsa, Oklahoma that has been called “one of the worst incidents of racial violence in U.S. history” and is also “one of the least-known.”

**Where:** The Greenwood section of Tulsa, OK, a thriving and largely self-sufficient Black community on the outskirts of Tulsa, often referred to as the “Black Wall Street.”

**When:** May 31 to June 1, 1921.

### Some historical context

- The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot can be placed within the context of two pivotal events during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both events altered patterns of population and employment in Tulsa as well as other cities throughout the US.
  - 1915: The beginning of the “Great Migration” with southern Black Americans moving to northern and western cities in search of jobs and a better life.
  - 1918: The end of World War I with Black Americans returning to the US after serving honorably with the US army in Europe.
- The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot was one in a series of similar events during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 2001 Oklahoma Commission report puts it this way: “[T]he 1921 riot is, at once, a representative historical example and a unique historical event. It has many parallels in the pattern of past events, but has no equal for its violence and its completeness” (p. 19). This historical pattern includes similar events across the US, including:
  - 1906: [Atlanta GA](#)
  - 1917: [East St. Louis MO](#)
  - 1919: [Red Summer](#) with riots in multiple cities, both north and south
  - **1921: Tulsa OK**
  - 1923: [Rosewood FL](#)
  - 1927: [Little Rock AR](#)

### A brief outline of events – refer to the “resources” section for more information

- Incident in an elevator. On May 30, Dick Rowland, a 19 year old Black man, went into the elevator of a downtown Tulsa office building to use the segregated men’s room on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. Details are unclear, but at some point the 17 year old elevator operator, Sarah Page, screamed and Mr. Rowland ran from the building.
- Arrest and jail. The next day Mr. Rowland was arrested and jailed. Concerned for his safety, Tulsa police moved Mr. Rowland from the regular jail to the top floor of the county courthouse, where he remained throughout the next several days.
- Rival armed gangs. Beginning late that afternoon, an angry gang of armed white men gathered outside the courthouse, eventually numbering about 1000. Also during the

night, a gang of 50-100 armed Black men arrived outside the courthouse with the intent of protecting Mr. Rowland.

- Chaos and retreat. A white man tried to take a pistol away from a Black man, who fought back. This led to running gun fight as the vastly out-numbered Blacks retreated across the railroad tracks separating downtown Tulsa from Greenwood. During the night white gang members broke into stores and stole guns and ammunition. Tulsa police deputized some of the white men. Many others likely believed that they were acting under the government's protection and that a Black "insurrection" was under way.
- Rampage. The next day, June 1, the white gang rampaged through Greenwood shooting people, setting fires, and taking anything of value. Tulsa police officers were often passive bystanders.
- Government response. The governor declared martial law and called in the Oklahoma National Guard to restore order. They did so by joining the fight against the Black community and in the process detained several thousand Black Americans in several city and county facilities set up as detention centers. Black citizens were required to carry ID cards outside of these detention centers.

### **Immediate aftermath**

- The number of deaths is unknown. Estimates range from 39 to as many as 300 people killed. Thousands more were left homeless. In addition, 35 city blocks of the Black Wall Street were destroyed. This includes more than 1200 homes along with dozens of businesses and community institutions: hotels, churches, grocery stores, drugstores, auto garages, barber and beauty shops, real estate offices, and so on.
- No one was ever prosecuted or punished, at any level of government, for crimes committed during the riot. The indictment against Dick Rowland was eventually dismissed.
- Blame for the riot was placed on the citizens of Greenwood. For example, A [Human Rights Watch report](#) quotes a Tulsa City Commission report, issued 2 weeks after the riot: "Let the blame for this negro uprising lie right where it belongs – on those armed negroes and their followers who started this trouble and who instigated it and any persons who seek to put half the blame on the white people are wrong..."
- In the years after 1921, the story of the riot was largely suppressed in Oklahoma and elsewhere. It was not included in textbooks used in Oklahoma public schools. A bill passed by the Oklahoma legislature and signed by the governor in 2000 created a study commission and charged the commission with issuing a comprehensive report. The [Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921](#) was published in February of 2001. The report concluded that the riot was about "two Oklahomas" that continued to exist long after 1921. One claimed the right to "push down, push out, and push under the other" ... and to "be dismissive of, ignorant of, and oblivious to the other."

## Lasting legacy

- Greenwood began to rebound during the 1940s. However, this progress was largely derailed by urban renewal and interstate highway construction during the 1950s and 1960s. To this day, Tulsa remains segregated and Black people experience higher poverty, more police violence, shorter life expectancies, and lower home ownership.
- Community activists are again working to revitalize the community, with historical markers, “good trouble” protests, and school programs created to reduce racial gaps in reading proficiency and other educational skills. There are also ongoing efforts to locate unmarked graves and properly bury victims of the riot, along with lawsuits asking the government to provide reparations to the survivors and their descendants, as recommended by the Oklahoma Commission report.
- Within Tulsa, the long-term legacy of the massacre includes:
  - Loss of trust between Black and white communities.
  - Loss of the culture of achievement fostered by the growth of the “Black Wall Street.”
  - Inability of Black residents of Greenwood to transfer accumulated wealth from one generation to the next.

## Resources

### Video

- PBS (2021), [Tulsa: The Fire and the Forgotten](#). 1:24:44. **May require PBS Passport.** This video summarizes the story of Tulsa from its early years to recent years that have included law suits demanding reparations, searches for the unmarked graves of survivors, and efforts to revitalize the Greenwood area.

### Print

Each of these articles tells the story of Tulsa from a different angle, with different historical information about Black history in Tulsa and a different set of additional resources.

- Jeremy Cook and Jason Long (May 24, 2021). [How 24 hours of racist violence caused decades of harm](#). *The Atlantic*.
- Kweku Larry Crowe and Thabiti Lewis (Winter, 2021). [The 1921 Tulsa massacre](#). *HUMANITIES*, Volume 42, Number 1.
- History.Com Editors (May 2022). [Tulsa Race Massacre](#).
- Randi Richardson (May 28, 2021). [Tulsa Race Massacre, 100 years later: Why it happened and why it still matters today](#). NBC News. This article includes links to e videos that include first-hand accounts from survivors:
  - Blood on Black Wall Street: The Legacy of the Tulsa Race Massacre (43:21).
  - 107-year-old survivor of Tulsa massacre Viola Fletcher calls on U.S. to acknowledge 1921 event (3:19).
  - Looking back at the Tulsa massacre a century later (7:04).
- Tulsa Historical Society and Museum. [1921 Tulsa Race Massacre](#).