

1921 Tulsa Race Massacre
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In the period immediately following the Civil War, the situation of African Americans improved in a few important ways. Reconstruction, as it was called, brought legal recognition, national citizenship, and improved rights regarding property ownership, all guaranteed by three new constitutional amendments, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. Even though Reconstruction officially ended in 1877, these changes set the stage for new development of African American communities in various regions of the country. One of those regions was on “Indian Land” in Oklahoma. Between 1865 and 1920, dozens of Black townships were founded in this region.

One of these townships was named Greenwood, and was located on the edge of Tulsa. Greenwood continued to attract Black investment and labor, and grew quickly into one of the most developed Black communities in the nation. The community soon sported many Black-owned businesses, including shops, restaurants, grocery stores, hotels, movie theaters, salons and barbershops, a library, jewelry and clothing stores, schools, a bank, a hospital and a post office. Black lawyers, doctors and dentists hung up their shingle, and at its zenith, the community was believed to be about 10,000 strong.

However, Tulsa was deeply segregated, and Greenwood was its own island within the larger city. Racism was rampant, and resentment grew as poorer whites in Tulsa started to notice the lifestyles of some of the wealthier Black businesspeople from Greenwood. Across the country, racial violence was growing, and Black constitutional rights were threatened. There were a number of anti-Black riots around the country in 1919. Then in Tulsa in 1921, a black shoe-shine worker named Dick Rowland was accused of attempted sexual assault on a 17-year-old white woman. A white mob demanded the sheriff release Rowland to them for lynching. On May 31st, a small group of armed Black men came to the courthouse to help guard Rowland while he was in jail. A larger group of about 75 armed Black men came when word of a possible lynching spread. They were met by a group of about 1,500 whites. The Black men retreated to Greenwood, and groups of armed white men soon attacked the community, looting houses and businesses, setting them on fire, and shooting at and killing any Black people they saw who were trying to escape the mayhem. In all, hundreds of Black people lost their lives, and over a thousand homes, businesses, churches, and other institutions of Greenwood were burned down.

On June 1st, the governor called in the National Guard, and Black residents were rounded up and kept without release until they could be vouched for by a relative or employer. No whites were ever held accountable for the destruction, and no reparations or remittance was ever given. At the time, it was a loss of an estimated \$1.5 million in real estate and \$750,000 in personal property (equivalent to \$33 million in 2020 dollars), and thousands were left homeless. To this day, these losses have never been officially or unofficially compensated for.

May 31st, 2021, was the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre.

Sources:

<https://www.tulsa2021.org>

<https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/tulsa-race-massacre>