

# Tulsa race riot

The **Tulsa race riot**, or **Tulsa race riot of 1921**, occurred between May 31 and June 1, 1921, when a white mob started attacking residents and businesses of the African-American community of Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma,<sup>[1]</sup> in what is considered one of the worst incidents of racial violence in the history of the United States.<sup>[2]</sup> The attack, carried out on the ground and by air, destroyed more than 35 blocks of the district, at the time the wealthiest black community in the nation. More than 800 people were admitted to hospitals and more than 6,000 black residents were arrested and detained, many for several days.<sup>[3]</sup> The Oklahoma Bureau of Vital Statistics officially recorded 39 dead, but the American Red Cross estimated 300.

The riot began over a Memorial Day weekend after a young black man was accused of raping a young white female elevator operator at a commercial building. After he was taken into custody, rumors raced through the black community that he was at risk of being lynched. A group of armed African-American men rushed to the police station, to prevent a lynching, where the young suspect was held and a white crowd had gathered. A confrontation developed between blacks and whites; shots were fired, and some whites and blacks were killed. As this news spread throughout the city, mob violence exploded. Thousands of whites rampaged through the black community that night and the next day, killing men and women, burning and looting stores and homes. About 10,000 black people were left homeless, and property damage amounted to more than \$1.5 million in real estate and \$750,000 in personal property (\$31 million in 2018). Some black people claimed that policemen had joined the mob; others said that National Guardsmen fired a machine gun into the black community and a plane dropped sticks of dynamite.<sup>[4]</sup> In an eyewitness account discovered in 2015, Greenwood attorney Buck Colbert Franklin described watching a dozen or more planes, which had been dispatched by the city police force, drop burning balls of turpentine on Greenwood's rooftops.<sup>[5]</sup>

Many survivors left Tulsa. Both black and white residents who stayed in the city were silent for decades about the terror, violence, and losses of this event. The riot was largely omitted from local and state, as well as national, histories: "The Tulsa race riot of 1921 was rarely mentioned in history books, classrooms or even in private. Blacks and whites alike grew into middle age unaware of what had taken place."<sup>[6]</sup>

With the number of survivors declining, in 1996, the 75th anniversary of the riot, a bi-partisan group in the state legislature authorized formation of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. Members were appointed to investigate events, interview survivors, hear testimony from the public, and prepare a report of events. There was an effort toward public education about these events through the process. The Commission's final report, published in 2001, said that the city had conspired with the white mob against the Tulsa black community; it recommended a program of reparations to survivors and their descendants.<sup>[1]</sup> The state passed legislation to establish some scholarships for descendants of survivors, encourage economic development of Greenwood, and develop a memorial park in Tulsa to the riot victims. The park was dedicated in 2010.

## Tulsa race riot



Buildings burning during the Tulsa race riot

<b>Location</b>	Greenwood, Tulsa, Oklahoma
<b>Coordinates</b>	<span><span><span><span><span>36°09′34″N</span> <span>95°59′11″W</span></span></span><span><span>﻿</span> / <span>﻿</span></span><span><span>36.15944°N 95.98639°W</span><span><span>﻿</span> / <span>36.15944; -95.98639</span></span></span></span></span>
<b>Date</b>	May 31 – June 1, 1921
<b>Weapons</b>	Guns, incendiary devices, explosives
<b>Deaths</b>	39 officially (1921) 300 according to Red Cross then and Oklahoma Commission on Tulsa Riot Final Report (2001) <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Non-fatal injuries</b>	Over 800
<b>Perpetrators</b>	White mob and the police <sup>[1]</sup>

# Contents

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## Background

### Monday, May 30, 1921 – Memorial Day

- Encounter in the elevator
- Brief investigation

### Tuesday, May 31, 1921

- Suspect arrested
- Newspaper coverage
- Stand-off at the courthouse
- Offer of help
- Taking up arms
- Second offer
- Riot

### Wednesday, June 1, 1921

- Fires begin
- Daybreak
- Attack by air
- Other whites
- Arrival of National Guard troops

## Aftermath

- Casualties
- Property losses
- Public Safety Committee
- Rebuilding
- Breaking the silence

## Tulsa Race Riot Commission

### 21st-century State and city actions

- 2003 lawsuit against the city of Tulsa and the state of Oklahoma
- John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park

## New eyewitness account

## Representation in other media

## See also

## References

## Further reading

## External links

# Background

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Post-World War I, northeastern Oklahoma had a racially and politically tense atmosphere. The territory had been established for resettlement of Native Americans from the Southeast, some of whom had owned slaves. Other areas had received many settlers from the South, whose families had been slaveholders before the [American Civil War](#). It was admitted as a state on November 16, 1907. The newly created state legislature passed [racial segregation laws](#), commonly known as [Jim Crow laws](#), as one of its first orders of business. Its 1907 constitution and laws had voter registration rules that effectively [disenfranchised](#) most blacks; this also barred them from serving on juries or in local office, a situation that whites enforced until after passage of the federal [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#). Major cities passed additional restrictions.<sup>[4]</sup>

In the early 20th century, [lynchings](#) were common in Oklahoma, as part of a continuing effort by whites to assert and maintain [white supremacy](#).<sup>[4][7][8]</sup> Between the declaration of statehood and the Tulsa race riot 13 years later, 31 persons were lynched in Oklahoma; 26 were black, and nearly all were men and boys. During the twenty years following the riot, the number of lynchings

statewide fell to two.<sup>[9]</sup>

On August 16, 1916, Tulsa passed an ordinance that mandated residential segregation by forbidding blacks or whites from residing on any block where three-fourths or more of the residents were of the other race. Although the United States Supreme Court declared the ordinance unconstitutional the next year, it remained on the books.<sup>[4]</sup>

As returning veterans tried to reenter the labor market following World War I, social tension and anti-black sentiment increased in cities where job competition was high. At the same time, black veterans pushed to have their civil rights enforced, believing they had earned full citizenship by military service. In what became known as the "Red Summer" of 1919, industrial cities across the Midwest and North experienced severe race riots, most often led against blacks by ethnic whites among recent immigrant groups, who competed with blacks for jobs. In Chicago and some other cities, blacks defended themselves for the first time with force but were outnumbered.

Northeastern Oklahoma was in an economic slump that increased unemployment. Since 1915, the Ku Klux Klan had been growing in urban chapters across the country, particularly since veterans had been returning from the war. Its first significant appearance in Oklahoma occurred on August 12, 1921, less than three months after the Tulsa riot.<sup>[7]</sup> By the end of 1921, Tulsa had 3,200 residents in the Klan by one estimate.<sup>[7]</sup> The city's population was 72,000 in 1920.<sup>[10]</sup>

The traditionally Black district of Greenwood in Tulsa had a commercial district so prosperous that it was known as "the Negro Wall Street" (now commonly referred to as "the Black Wall Street").<sup>[11]</sup> Blacks had created their own businesses and services in this enclave, including several grocers, two independent newspapers, two movie theaters, nightclubs, and numerous churches. Black professionals: doctors, dentists, lawyers, and clergy, served the community. Because of residential segregation in the city, most classes of blacks lived together in Greenwood. They selected their own leaders and raised capital there to support economic growth. In the surrounding areas of northeastern Oklahoma, blacks also enjoyed relative prosperity and participated in the oil boom.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Monday, May 30, 1921 – Memorial Day

### Encounter in the elevator

It is alleged sometime around or after 4 pm, 19-year-old Dick Rowland, a black shoeshiner employed at a Main Street shine parlor, entered the only elevator of the nearby Drexel Building, at 319 South Main Street, to use the top-floor restroom, which was restricted to blacks. He encountered Sarah Page, the 17-year-old white elevator operator who was on duty. The two likely knew each other at least by sight, as this building was the only one nearby with a restroom which Rowland had express permission to use, and the elevator operated by Page was the only one in the building. A clerk at Renberg's, a clothing store located on the first floor of the Drexel, heard what sounded like a woman's scream and saw a young black man rushing from the building. The clerk went to the elevator and found Page in what he said was a distraught state. Thinking she had been assaulted, he summoned the authorities.<sup>[12]</sup>

The 2001 Oklahoma Commission Final Report notes that it was unusual for both Rowland and Page to be working downtown on Memorial Day, when most stores and businesses were closed. It suggests that Rowland had a simple accident, such as tripping and steadying himself against the girl, or perhaps they were lovers and had a quarrel.<sup>[13]</sup>

Whether – and to what extent – Dick Rowland and Sarah Page knew each other has long been a matter of speculation. It seems reasonable that they would have least been able to recognize each other on sight, as Rowland would have regularly ridden in Page's elevator on his way to and from the restroom. Others, however, have speculated that the pair might have been lovers – a dangerous and potentially deadly taboo, but not an impossibility... Whether they knew each other or not, it is clear that both Dick Rowland and Sarah Page were downtown on Monday, May 30, 1921 – although this, too, is cloaked in some mystery. On Memorial Day, most – but



A map of Tulsa in 1920. Greenwood was in northern Tulsa.

not all – stores and businesses in Tulsa were closed. Yet, both Rowland and Page were apparently working that day...  
 ...Yet, in the days and years that followed, everyone who knew Dick Rowland agreed on one thing: that he would never have been capable of rape.

The word "rape" was rarely used in newspapers or academia in the early 20th century. Instead, "assault" was used to describe such an attack.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Brief investigation

Although the police likely questioned Page, no written account of her statement has been found. It is generally accepted that the police determined what happened between the two teenagers was something less than an assault. The authorities conducted a low-key investigation rather than launching a man-hunt for her alleged assailant. Afterward, Page told the police that she would not press charges.<sup>[4]</sup>

Regardless of whether assault had occurred, Rowland had reason to be fearful. At the time, such an accusation alone put him at risk for attack by whites. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Rowland fled to his mother's house in the Greenwood neighborhood, the center of the black community.<sup>[13]</sup>

## Tuesday, May 31, 1921

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### Suspect arrested

On the morning after the incident, Detective Henry Carmichael and Henry C. Pack, a black patrolman, located Rowland on Greenwood Avenue and detained him. Pack was one of two black officers on the city's approximately 45-man police force.<sup>[4]</sup> Rowland was initially taken to the Tulsa city jail at First and Main. Late that day, Police Commissioner J. M. Adkison said he had received an anonymous telephone call threatening Rowland's life. He ordered Rowland transferred to the more secure jail on the top floor of the Tulsa County Courthouse.<sup>[14]</sup>

Word quickly spread in Tulsa's legal circles. As patrons of the shine shop where Rowland worked, many attorneys knew him. Witnesses recounted hearing several attorneys defending him in personal conversations with one another. One of the men said, "Why, I know that boy, and have known him a good while. That's not in him."<sup>[15]</sup>



One of the sensationalist news articles that contributed to tensions in Tulsa

### Newspaper coverage

The *Tulsa Tribune*, one of two white-owned papers published in Tulsa, broke the story in that afternoon's edition with the headline: "Nab Negro for Attacking Girl In an Elevator", describing the alleged incident. According to some witnesses, the same edition of the *Tribune* included an editorial warning of a potential lynching of Rowland, entitled "To Lynch Negro Tonight". The paper was known at the time to have a "sensationalist" style of news writing. All original copies of that issue of the paper have apparently been destroyed, and the relevant page is missing from the microfilm copy, so the exact content of the column (and whether it existed at all) remains in dispute.<sup>[16][17][18]</sup>

### Stand-off at the courthouse

The afternoon edition of the *Tribune* hit the streets shortly after 3 p.m., and soon news spread of a potential lynching. By 4 pm, the local authorities were on alert. White people began congregating at and near the Tulsa County Courthouse. By sunset at 7:34 pm, the several hundred whites assembled outside the courthouse appeared to have the makings of a lynch mob. Willard M. McCullough, the newly elected sheriff of Tulsa County, was determined to avoid events such as the 1920 lynching of white murder suspect Roy Belton in Tulsa, which had occurred during the term of his predecessor.<sup>[19]</sup> The sheriff took steps to ensure the safety

of Rowland. McCullough organized his deputies into a defensive formation around Rowland, who was terrified. The sheriff positioned six of his men, armed with rifles and shotguns, on the roof of the courthouse. He disabled the building's elevator, and had his remaining men barricade themselves at the top of the stairs with orders to shoot any intruders on sight. The sheriff went outside and tried to talk the crowd into going home, but to no avail. According to an account by Scott Ellsworth, the sheriff was "hooted down".<sup>[12]</sup>

About 8:20 pm, three white men entered the courthouse, demanding that Rowland be turned over to them. Although vastly outnumbered by the growing crowd out on the street, Sheriff McCullough turned the men away.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Offer of help

A few blocks away on Greenwood Avenue, members of the black community gathered to discuss the situation at the courthouse. Given the recent lynching of Belton, a white man accused of murder, they believed that Rowland was greatly at risk. The community was determined to prevent the lynching of the young black man, but divided about tactics. Young World War I veterans were preparing for a battle by collecting guns and ammunition. Older, more prosperous men feared a destructive confrontation that likely would cost them dearly. O. W. Gurley walked to the courthouse, where the sheriff assured him that there would be no lynching. Returning to Greenwood, Gurley tried to calm the group, but failed. About 7:30 pm, a mob of approximately 30 black men, armed with rifles and shotguns, decided to go to the courthouse and support the sheriff and his deputies to defend Rowland from the mob. Assuring them that Rowland was safe, the sheriff and his black deputy, Barney Cleaver, encouraged the men to return home.<sup>[4][20]</sup>

## Taking up arms

Having seen the armed blacks, some of the more than 1,000 whites at the courthouse went home for their own guns. Others headed for the National Guard armory at Sixth Street and Norfolk Avenue, where they planned to arm up. The armory contained a supply of small arms and ammunition. Major James Bell of the 180th Infantry had already learned of the mounting situation downtown and the possibility of a break-in, and he took appropriate measures to prevent this. He called the commanders of the three National Guard units in Tulsa, who ordered all the Guard members to put on their uniforms and report quickly to the armory. When a group of whites arrived and began pulling at the grating over a window, Bell went outside to confront the crowd of 300–400 men. Bell told them that the Guard members inside were armed and prepared to shoot anyone who tried to enter. After this show of force, the crowd withdrew from the armory.<sup>[4]</sup>

At the courthouse, the crowd had swollen to nearly 2,000, many of them now armed. Several local leaders, including Reverend Charles W. Kerr, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, tried to dissuade mob action. The chief of police, John A. Gustafson, later claimed that he tried to talk the crowd into going home.<sup>[12]</sup>

Anxiety on Greenwood Avenue was rising. The black community was worried about the safety of Rowland. Small groups of armed black men began to venture toward the courthouse in automobiles, partly for reconnaissance, and to demonstrate they were prepared to take necessary action to protect Rowland.<sup>[12]</sup>

Many white men interpreted these actions as a "Negro uprising" and became concerned. Eyewitnesses reported gunshots, presumably fired into the air, increasing in frequency during the evening.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Second offer

In Greenwood, rumors began to fly – in particular, a report that whites were storming the courthouse. Shortly after 10 pm, a second, larger group of approximately 75 armed black men decided to go to the courthouse. They offered their support to the sheriff, who declined their help. According to witnesses, a white man is alleged to have told one of the armed black men to surrender his pistol. The man refused, and a shot was fired. That first shot may have been accidental, or meant as a warning; it was a catalyst for an exchange of gunfire.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Riot

The gunshots triggered an almost immediate response by the white men, many of whom fired on the blacks, who fired back at the whites. The first "battle" was said to last a few seconds or so, but took a toll, as ten whites and two blacks lay dead or dying in the street.<sup>[19]</sup> The black contingent retreated toward Greenwood. A rolling gunfight ensued. The armed white mob pursued the blacks toward Greenwood, with many stopping to loot local stores for additional weapons and ammunition. Along the way innocent bystanders, many of whom were leaving a movie theater after a show, were caught off guard by the mob and began fleeing. Panic set in as the white mob began firing on any blacks in the crowd. The mob also shot and killed at least one white man in the confusion.<sup>[12]</sup>

At around 11 pm, members of the Oklahoma National Guard unit began to assemble at the armory to organize a plan to subdue the rioters. Several groups were deployed downtown to set up guard at the courthouse, police station, and other public facilities. Members of the local chapter of the American Legion joined in on patrols of the streets. The forces appeared to have been deployed to protect the white districts adjacent to Greenwood. This manner of deployment led to the National Guard being set in apparent opposition to the black community. The National Guard began rounding up blacks who had not returned to Greenwood and taking them to the Convention Hall on Brady Street for detention.<sup>[12]</sup>

Many prominent Tulsa whites also participated in the riot, including Tulsa founder and KKK member W. Tate Brady, who participated in the riot as a night watchman. He reported seeing "five dead negroes", including one man who was dragged behind a car by a noose around his neck.<sup>[22]</sup>

At around midnight, white rioters again assembled outside the courthouse. It was a smaller group but more organized and determined. They shouted in support of a lynching. When they attempted to storm the building, the sheriff and his deputies turned them away and dispersed them.

## Wednesday, June 1, 1921

Throughout the early morning hours, groups of armed whites and blacks squared off in gunfights. At this point the fighting was concentrated along sections of the Frisco tracks, a dividing line between the black and white commercial districts. A rumor circulated that more blacks were coming by train from Muskogee to help with an invasion of Tulsa. At one point, passengers on an incoming train were forced to take cover on the floor of the train cars, as they had arrived in the midst of crossfire, with the train taking hits on both sides.<sup>[4]</sup>

Small groups of whites made brief forays by car into Greenwood, indiscriminately firing into businesses and residences. They often received return fire. Meanwhile, white rioters threw lighted oil rags into several buildings along Archer Street, igniting them.<sup>[4]</sup>

### Fires begin

At around 1 am, the white mob began setting fires, mainly in businesses on commercial Archer Street at the southern edge of the Greenwood district. As crews from the Tulsa Fire Department arrived to put out fires, they were turned away at gunpoint.<sup>[4]</sup> By 4 am, an estimated two dozen black-owned businesses had been set ablaze.

As news traveled among Greenwood residents in the early morning hours, many began to take up arms in defense of their community, while others began a mass exodus from the city. Throughout the night both sides continued fighting, sometimes only sporadically.

### Daybreak



Fires burning along Archer and Greenwood during the Tulsa race riot of 1921

Upon the 5 a.m. sunrise, reportedly a train whistle was heard (Hirsch said it was a siren). Many believed this to be a signal for the rioters to launch an all-out assault on Greenwood. A white man stepped out from behind the Frisco depot and was fatally shot by a sniper in Greenwood. Crowds of rioters poured from places of shelter, on foot and by car, into the streets of the black community. Five white men in a car led the charge, but were killed by a fusillade of gunfire before they had gone a block.<sup>[4]</sup>

Overwhelmed by the sheer number of whites, more blacks retreated north on Greenwood Avenue to the edge of town. Chaos ensued as terrified residents fled for their lives. The rioters shot indiscriminately and killed many residents along the way. Splitting into small groups, they began breaking into houses and buildings, looting. Several blacks later testified that whites broke into occupied homes and ordered the residents out to the street, where they could be driven or forced to walk to detention centers.<sup>[4]</sup>

A rumor spread among the whites that the new Mount Zion Baptist Church was being used as a fortress and armory. Purportedly twenty caskets full of rifles had been delivered to the church, though no evidence was ever found.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Attack by air

Numerous eyewitnesses described airplanes carrying white assailants, who fired rifles and dropped firebombs on buildings, homes, and fleeing families. The planes, possibly including six biplane two-seater trainers left over from World War I as well as other privately-owned aircraft, were dispatched from the nearby Curtiss-Southwest Field outside Tulsa.<sup>[1][23]</sup> Law enforcement officials later stated that the planes were to provide reconnaissance and protect against a "Negro uprising".<sup>[23]</sup> Law enforcement personnel were thought to be aboard at least some flights.<sup>[1]</sup> Eyewitness accounts, such as testimony from the survivors during Commission hearings and a manuscript by eyewitness and attorney Buck Colbert Franklin discovered in 2015, said that on the morning of June 1, men in the planes dropped incendiary bombs and fired rifles at black residents on the ground.<sup>[23][5]</sup>

## Other whites

As unrest spread to other parts of the city, many middle class white families who employed blacks in their homes as live-in cooks and servants were accosted by white rioters. They demanded that families turn over their employees to be taken to detention centers around the city. Many white families complied, and those who refused were subjected to attacks and vandalism in turn.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Arrival of National Guard troops

Adjutant General Charles Barrett of the Oklahoma National Guard arrived with 109 troops from Oklahoma City by special train about 9:15 am. Ordered in by the governor, he could not legally act until he had contacted all the appropriate local authorities, including the mayor T. D. Evans, the sheriff, and the police chief. Meanwhile, his troops paused to eat breakfast. Barrett summoned reinforcements from several other Oklahoma cities.

By this time, thousands of surviving black citizens had fled the city; another 4,000 persons had been rounded up and detained at various centers. Under the martial law established this day, these detainees were required to carry identification cards.<sup>[24]</sup>

Barrett declared martial law at 11:49 am,<sup>[4]</sup> and by noon the troops had managed to suppress most of the remaining violence. A 1921 letter from an officer of the Service Company, Third Infantry, Oklahoma National Guard, who arrived May 31, 1921, reported numerous events related to suppression of the riot:

- taking about 30-40 African Americans into custody;
- putting a machine gun on a truck and taking it on patrol;
- being fired on from Negro snipers from the "Church" and returning fire; \*
- being fired on by white men;
- turning the prisoners over to deputies to take them to police headquarters;
- being fired upon again by negroes and having two NCOs slightly wounded;



National Guard with wounded.

- searching for negroes and firearms;
- detailing a NCO to take 170 Negroes to the civil authorities; and
- delivering an additional 150 Negroes to the Convention Hall.<sup>[25]</sup>

## Aftermath

### Casualties

The riot was covered by national newspapers and the reported number of deaths varies widely. On June 1, 1921, the *Tulsa Tribune* reported that 9 whites and 68 blacks had died in the riot, but shortly afterwards it changed this number to a total of 176 dead. The next day, the same paper reported the count as 9 whites and 21 blacks. The *New York Times* said that 77 people had been killed, including 68 blacks, but it later lowered the total to 33. The *Richmond Times Dispatch* of Virginia reported that 85 people (including 25 whites) were killed; it also reported that the Police Chief had reported to Governor Robertson that the total was 75; and that a Police Major put the figure at 175.<sup>[26]</sup> The Oklahoma Department of Vital Statistics count put the number of deaths at 36 (26 black and 10 white). Estimates in contemporary Red Cross documents ran as high as 300.<sup>[27]</sup>

Walter Francis White of the N.A.A.C.P. traveled to Tulsa from New York and reported that, although officials and undertakers said that the fatalities numbered ten white and 21 colored, he estimated the number of the dead to be 50 whites and between 150 and 200 Negroes;<sup>[28]</sup> he also reported that ten white men were killed on Tuesday; six white men drove into the black section and never came out, and thirteen whites were killed on Wednesday; he reported that the head of the Salvation Army in Tulsa said that 37 negroes were employed as gravediggers to bury 120 negroes in individual graves without coffins on Friday and Saturday.<sup>[29]</sup> The *Los Angeles Express* headline said "175 Killed, Many Wounded".<sup>[30]</sup>

Maurice Willows, an American Red Cross social worker, wrote the 1921 report of the aid society on their activities during and after the violence. He reported that up to 300 blacks were killed. He described the numerous aid stations in the city set up by the Red Cross to aid the wounded. He also reported that in the rush to bury the bodies, no records were made of many burials.<sup>[4]:108, 228</sup><sup>[31]</sup>

Of the some 800 people admitted to local hospitals for injuries, the majority are believed to have been white, as both black hospitals had been burned in the rioting. Additionally, even if the white hospitals had admitted blacks because of the riot, against their usual segregation policy, injured blacks had little means to get to these hospitals, which were located across the city from Greenwood. More than 6,000 black Greenwood residents were arrested and detained at three local facilities: Convention Hall, now known as the Brady Theater, the Fairgrounds (then located about a mile northeast of Greenwood), and McNulty Park (a baseball stadium at Tenth Street and Elgin Avenue).<sup>[4]:108–109</sup>

Several blacks were known to have died while in the internment centers. While most of the deaths are said to have been accurately recorded, no records have been found as to how many detainees were treated for injuries and survived. These numbers could reasonably have been more than a thousand, perhaps several thousand.<sup>[32]</sup>

### Property losses

The commercial section of Greenwood was destroyed. Losses included 191 businesses, a junior high school, several churches and the only hospital in the district. The Red Cross reported that 1,256 houses were burned and another 215 were looted but not burned. The Tulsa Real Estate Exchange estimated property losses amounted to \$1.5 million in real estate and \$750,000 in personal property (\$31 million in 2018).



Little Africa on Fire. Tulsa Race Riot, June 1, 1921 Apparently taken from the roof of the Hotel Tulsa on 3rd St. between Boston Ave. and Cincinnati Ave. The first row of buildings is along 2nd St. The smoke cloud on the left (Cincinnati Ave. and the Frisco Tracks) is identified in the *Tulsa Tribune* version of this photo as being where the fire started.



Residential block burned down

The Red Cross estimated that 10,000 people, mostly black, were made homeless by the destruction. Over the next year, local citizens filed more than \$1.8 million in riot-related claims against the city by June 6, 1922.<sup>[4]</sup>



"All that was left of his home", photograph, June 1, 1921



Taken from the southeast corner of the roof of Booker T. Washington High School, this panorama shows much of the damage within a day or so of the riot and fires. The road running laterally through the center of the image is Greenwood Avenue; the road slanting from the center to the left is Easton; and the road slanting off to the right is Frankfort.

## Public Safety Committee

By June 6, the Associated Press reported that a citizens' Public Safety Committee had been established, made up of 250 white men who vowed to protect the city and put down any more disturbance. A white man was shot and killed that day after he failed to stop as ordered by a National Guardsman.<sup>[33]</sup>

## Rebuilding

Governor James B. A. Robertson had gone to Tulsa during the riot to ensure order was restored. Before returning to the capital, he ordered an inquiry of events, especially of the City and Sheriff's Office. He called for a Grand Jury to be empanelled, and Judge Valjean Biddison said that its investigation would begin June 8. The jury was picked by June 9. Judge Biddison expected that the State Attorney General would call numerous witnesses, both black and white, given the large scale of the riot.<sup>[34]</sup>

State Attorney General S.P. Freeling initiated the investigation, and witnesses were heard over 12 days. In the end, the all-white jury attributed the riot to the black community, while noting that the law enforcement officials had failed in preventing the riot. A total of 27 cases were brought and the jury indicted more than 85 individuals. In the end, no one was convicted of charges for the deaths, injuries or property damage.<sup>[35]</sup>

On June 3, a large group of more than 1000 businessmen and civic leaders met, resolving to form a committee to raise funds and aid in rebuilding Greenwood. Judge J. Martin, a former mayor of Tulsa, was chosen as the chairman of the group. He said at the mass meeting:

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"Tulsa can only redeem herself from the country-wide shame and humiliation into which she is today plunged by complete restitution and rehabilitation of the destroyed black belt. The rest of the United States must know that the real citizenship of Tulsa weeps at this unspeakable crime and will make good the damage, so far as it can be done, to the last penny."<sup>[34]</sup>

Despite this promise of funding, many blacks spent the winter of 1921–1922 in tents as they worked to rebuild.

A group of influential white developers persuaded the city to pass a fire ordinance that would have prohibited many blacks from rebuilding in Greenwood. Their intention was to redevelop Greenwood for more business and industrial use, and force blacks further to the edge of the city for residences. The case was litigated and appealed to the Oklahoma Supreme Court by B. C. Franklin, where the ordinance was ruled as unconstitutional. Most of the promised funding was never raised for the black community, and they struggled to rebuild after the violence.

## Breaking the silence

No prosecution took place of any whites for actions committed during the riot. The city settled into an uneasy peace, and decades of virtual silence about the events were held. It was not recognized in the *Tulsa Tribune* feature of "Fifteen Years Ago Today" or "Twenty-five Years Ago Today". A number of people tried to document the events, gather photographs, and record the name of the dead and injured. Mary E. Jones Parrish, a young black teacher and journalist from Rochester, New York, was hired by the Inter-racial Commission to write an account of the riot. She was herself a survivor, and wrote about her experiences, as well as collecting other accounts, gathering photographs, and compiling "a partial roster of property losses in the African American community". She published this in *Events of the Tulsa Disaster* (1922; reprinted 1992 and 1998). It was the first book to be published about the riot.<sup>[36]</sup>

The first academic account was a master's thesis written in 1946 by Loren L. Gill, a veteran of World War II. But it did not then receive circulation beyond the University of Tulsa.<sup>[36]</sup>

In 1971 a small group of survivors gathered for a memorial service at Mount Zion Baptist Church, both blacks and whites. That year the chamber of commerce decided to commemorate the riot, but when they read the account and saw photos gathered by Ed Wheeler, host of a radio history program, they refused to publish it. He took it to both major newspapers, which refused to handle it. His article was finally published in *Impact Magazine*, a new publication aimed at a black audience, but most of white Tulsa never knew about it.<sup>[36]</sup>

In the early 1970s, "[a]long with Henry C. Whitlow, Jr., a history teacher at Booker T. Washington High School, [Mozella Franklin] Jones had not only helped to desegregate the Tulsa Historical Society, but had mounted the first-ever major exhibition on the history of African Americans in Tulsa. Moreover, she had also created, at the Tulsa Historical Society, the first collection of riot photographs available to the public."<sup>[36]</sup> She worked informally with a white woman, Ruth Sigler Avery, who also was trying to get accounts of the riot told to the public. They encountered pressure, particularly in the white community, to keep silent.<sup>[36]</sup>

## Tulsa Race Riot Commission

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In 1996, following increased attention to the riot because of the 75th anniversary of the event, the state legislature authorized the Oklahoma Commission to Investigate the Tulsa Race Riot, appointing individuals to study and prepare a "historical account" of the riot. Undertaking the study "enjoyed strong support from members of both political parties and all political persuasions".<sup>[37]</sup>

In addition to conducting interviews and hearing testimony, the Commission arranged for archeological non-invasive ground surveys of Newblock Park, Oaklawn Cemetery, and Booker T. Washington Cemetery, identified as possible locations for mass graves of black victims of the violence. According to oral history and other sources, such mass graves had existed. Documentation and timing suggested that whites would have buried blacks at the first two locations. Blacks were said to have buried members of their community at the third location after the riot, perhaps people who had died of their wounds. The Washington Cemetery

(reserved for blacks) was the most distant from downtown. Investigations were done in 1997 and 1998. While the total areas could not be surveyed, preliminary data suggested there were no mass graves in these locations. In 1999 an eyewitness was found who had seen whites burying blacks at Oaklawn Cemetery. A team investigated the potential area with more equipment.

The Commission delivered its report on February 21, 2001.<sup>[1]</sup>

In addition to thoroughly documenting the causes and damages of the riot, the report recommended actions for substantial restitution to the black community; in order of priority:

1. Direct payment of reparations to survivors of the 1921 Tulsa race riot;
2. Direct payment of reparations to descendants of the survivors of the Tulsa race riot;
3. A scholarship fund available to students affected by the Tulsa race riot;
4. Establishment of an economic development enterprise zone in the historic area of the Greenwood district; and
5. A memorial for the reburial of the remains of the victims of the Tulsa race riot.<sup>[13]</sup>

The Tulsa Reparations Coalition, sponsored by the Center for Racial Justice, Inc., was formed on April 7, 2001 to obtain restitution for the damages suffered by Tulsa's Black community, as recommended by the Oklahoma Commission.<sup>[38]</sup>

In June 2001, the Oklahoma state legislature passed the "1921 Tulsa Race Riot Reconciliation Act". While falling short of the Commission's recommendations, it provided for the following:

- More than 300 college scholarships for descendants of Greenwood residents;
- Creation of a memorial to those who died in the riot. A park with statues was dedicated as John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park on October 27, 2010, named in honor of the notable African-American historian from Tulsa,<sup>[39]</sup> and
- Economic development in Greenwood.<sup>[40]</sup>

## 21st-century State and city actions

In 2001 Tulsa Mayor Kathy Taylor held a "celebration of conscience" at which she apologized to survivors and gave medals to those who could be located.<sup>[41]</sup>

On June 1, 2001, Governor Keating (R) signed the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Reconciliation Act. It recognized the event but the state legislature had opposed the request for reparations.<sup>[41]</sup> Each of the 118 survivors of the riot, the youngest of whom was 85, was given a gold-plated medal bearing the state seal, which was approved by bi-partisan leaders.<sup>[41][42]</sup>

### 2003 lawsuit against the city of Tulsa and the state of Oklahoma

Five elderly survivors of the riot, represented by a legal team that included Johnnie Cochran and Charles Ogletree, filed suit against the city of Tulsa and the state of Oklahoma (*Alexander, et al., v. Oklahoma, et al.*) in February 2003, based on the findings of the 2001 report. Ogletree said the state and city should compensate the victims and their families "to honor their admitted obligations as detailed in the commission's report".<sup>[43]</sup> The federal district and appellate courts dismissed the suit, citing the statute of limitations had been exceeded on the 80-year-old case.<sup>[44]</sup> The state requires that civil rights cases be filed within two years of the event. The court did not rule at all on the issues. The Supreme Court of the United States declined to hear the appeal.

In April 2007, Ogletree appealed to the U.S. Congress to pass a bill extending the statute of limitations for the case, given the state and city's accountability for the destruction and the long suppression of material about it. The bill was introduced by John Conyers, Jr. of Michigan and heard by the Judiciary Committee of the House but not passed.<sup>[45]</sup> Conyers re-introduced the bill in 2009 as the John Hope Franklin Tulsa-Greenwood Race Riot Claims Accountability Act of 2009 (H.R. 1843), and in 2012. It has not gotten out of the Judiciary Committee.<sup>[41]</sup>

### John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park

This was developed in 2010 in the Greenwood area as a memorial to victims of the riot. In October 2010 it was named for noted historian John Hope Franklin, who was born and grew up in Tulsa.<sup>[46]</sup> He became known as a historian of the South. The park includes three statues of figures by sculptor Ed Dwight, representing *Hostility*, *Humiliation* and *Hope*.<sup>[47]</sup>

## New eyewitness account

In 2015, a previously unknown eyewitness account of the events of May 31, 1921, was discovered and obtained by the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. In the 10-page typewritten manuscript, noted Oklahoma attorney Buck Colbert Franklin recalls standing in his office, watching "planes circling in mid-air: "They grew in number and hummed, darted and dipped low. I could hear something like hail falling upon the top of my office building. Down East Archer, I saw the old Mid-Way hotel on fire, burning from its top, and then another and another and another building began to burn from their top."<sup>[5]</sup>

What he saw was a city under siege: "Lurid flames roared and belched and licked their forked tongues into the air. Smoke ascended the sky in thick, black volumes and amid it all, the planes—now a dozen or more in number—still hummed and darted here and there with the agility of natural birds of the air." Making his way outside, Franklin found the source of the strange sound that had peppered his building. "The side-walks were literally covered with burning turpentine balls. I knew all too well where they came from, and I knew all too well why every burning building first caught fire from the top."<sup>[5]</sup>

Franklin conveys the day's awful noise—the droning of planes, the spattering of turpentine balls as they rained down upon homes and hospitals, offices and shops, the roar of the conflagration that eventually consumed the district. He wrote:

"I paused and waited for an opportune time to escape. 'Where oh where is our splendid fire department with its half dozen stations?' I asked myself. 'Is the city in conspiracy with the mob?'" <sup>[5]</sup>

Buck (Charles) Colbert Franklin (1879–1957) was of African-American and Choctaw ancestry. He became known for defending African-American survivors of the Tulsa Massacre and other civil rights cases. Franklin was the father of famed African-American historian John Hope Franklin (1915–2009). He was the grandfather of John W. Franklin, who is a senior program manager with the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Franklin remembers the first time he read his grandfather's manuscript: "I wept. I just wept. It's so beautifully written and so powerful, and he just takes you there', Franklin marvels. 'You wonder what happened to the other people. What was the emotional impact of having your community destroyed and having to flee for your lives?'" <sup>[48]</sup>

## Representation in other media

Publication of the Final Report by the Riot Commission and related publicity has stimulated artistic works related to the historic riot:

- "Tulsa", an opera by Lindsay Davidson composed in 2004 to a libretto by Dr Tom Hubbard<sup>[49]</sup>.
- "Tulsa 1921", a song by Smokey and the Mirror, a contemporary American folk music duo, is about the events in Tulsa.
- *The Tulsa Lynching of 1921: A Hidden Story* (2000), a documentary directed by Michael Wilkerson, was first released on Cinemax in 2000.<sup>[50][51]</sup>
- *Fire in Beulah*, (2001), a novel by Rilla Askew, is set during the riot; it is published by Penguin Books.
- *Big Mama Speaks*, Hannibal B. Johnson's one-woman play featuring Vanessa Harris-Adams, features remembrance and reminiscence about the Black Wall Street.<sup>[52]</sup>
- *If We Must Die*, (2002), a novel by Pat Carr about Tulsa's 1921 Greenwood Riot, published by TCU Press.
- *Before They Die*, (2008), a documentary by Reggie Turner that is supported by the Tulsa Project, chronicles the last survivors of the Tulsa Race Riot and their quest for justice from the city and state.<sup>[53]</sup>
- *Race Riot Suite* (2011), a jazz suite by Jacob Fred Jazz Odyssey, released by Kinnara Records, was recorded at Tulsa's Church Studio.
- The documentary *Hate Crimes in the Heartland* (2014) by Rachel Lyon and Bavand Karim provides an in-depth examination of the riot.<sup>[54]</sup>
- *Dreamland Burning*, (2017), a novel by Jennifer Latham about events in Tulsa in 1921 interwoven with modern consequences, published by Little, Brown Books.

## See also

- [Mass racial violence in the United States](#)
- [Ocoee massacre](#)
- [Rosewood massacre](#)
- [Wilmington Insurrection of 1898](#)
- [Jaybird–Woodpecker War](#)
- [List of incidents of civil unrest in the United States](#)

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### External video

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