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PERSECUTION TRACK

Tulsa Race Massacre: The Burning of Black Wall Street

A Two Americas Companion Document

ERA:	ERA V — World Wars, Migration & Segregation
DATE:	May 31 – June 1, 1921
TRACK:	Persecution
LENS:	Secular & Political
250 BADGE:	Yes — event postdates 1776
CONTENT WARNING:	Yes — graphic violence

"They didn't just burn our homes.

They burned the proof that we had built them."

— Survivor testimony, 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Commission

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Tulsa Race Massacre: The Burning of Black Wall Street (1921)

ERA V

PERSECUTION

SECULAR & POLITICAL

250 BADGE

On the night of May 31, 1921, a white mob supported by the Tulsa Police Department and deputized civilians invaded the Greenwood District — the wealthiest Black community in America, known as Black Wall Street. Over 18 hours, they burned 35 square blocks, killed an estimated 300 Black residents, and left 10,000 people homeless. No one was ever charged. The city of Tulsa buried the massacre in its official record for the next seventy-five years.

BLACK WALL STREET

The Greenwood District of Tulsa was not a ghetto — it was a prosperous, self-contained Black city within a city, the product of legal segregation turned into economic sovereignty. By 1921, Greenwood contained over 300 Black-owned businesses: law offices, hotels, theaters, a hospital, two newspapers, a library, and a school system. Dr. A.C. Jackson — described by the Mayo Clinic as the most able Black surgeon in America — practiced there. The district's value was estimated at more than \$1.5 million (over \$25 million in 2024 dollars). Booker T. Washington had visited and called it the Negro Wall Street of America. What had been built in Greenwood was proof of what Black self-determination could produce when left unmolested. That proof was intolerable.

THE MASSACRE

The trigger was nineteen-year-old Dick Rowland, a Black shoe shiner, and a seventeen-year-old white elevator operator named Sarah Page. What occurred between them — a stumble, nothing more — was reported by the Tulsa Tribune as an assault. That evening, a white mob assembled at the courthouse. Armed Black men from Greenwood arrived to protect Rowland from the expected lynching. A shot was fired. What followed was not a riot. It was a military assault.

Over the night of May 31 and morning of June 1, the Tulsa Police Department and deputized white civilians moved on Greenwood in force. Private aircraft circled the district; survivors reported gunfire and incendiary materials dropped from the planes — making Tulsa one of the first instances of aerial assault on American civilians in U.S. history. More than 1,200 homes were burned. Every business, church, and school was destroyed. Thirty-five city blocks reduced to ash. Estimates of the dead range from the official count of 36 to historian Scott Ellsworth's documented estimate of 300 or more. More than 6,000 Black residents were interned in detention camps. When they were released, they returned to rubble.

SUPPRESSION AND DENIAL

The massacre was buried almost immediately. The Tulsa Tribune removed the original Rowland article from its archives. Insurance claims were denied — policies voided on grounds of riot. The Oklahoma state government did not officially investigate for seventy-five years. When the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Commission reported in 2001, it documented city and state government complicity and recommended reparations. The Oklahoma legislature declined to authorize them. In 2023, the last known survivor — 109-year-old Lessie Benningfield Randle — died with no reparations paid.

LEGACY AND CONNECTION TO PRESENT DAY

The Tulsa Race Massacre established a template: Black economic achievement, when concentrated and visible, would be met with organized destruction — and the perpetrators would face no legal consequence. The pattern runs from Wilmington 1898 through Rosewood 1923. The centennial in 2021 renewed national reckoning; litigation by survivors and descendants remained active through 2024. The land beneath the former Greenwood District — now largely occupied by the University of Tulsa and municipal infrastructure — has never been restored. The massacre is now embedded in Oklahoma school curriculum, but the legal and financial accountability it demands remains unresolved.

Connection	Detail
Wilmington Parallel	Tulsa 1921 followed the same template as the 1898 Wilmington Coup — organized destruction of Black economic and political power by white mobs with government complicity. NC's Black press explicitly drew this parallel in 1921 reporting.
Carolina Times (Durham)	Editor Louis Austin and NC Black weeklies reported on Tulsa's destruction in 1921 and connected it to the Wilmington precedent. The papers circulated through Fayetteville and Cumberland County via the Brotherhood porter network.
Gillespie Street, Fayetteville	Fayetteville's own Black business corridor along Gillespie Street faced the same pattern of suppression and displacement. The Greenwood destruction was understood locally as a warning about the vulnerability of Black economic concentration.
Present-Day NC	Market House designation debate, NC reparations discussions, and the Wilmington 1898 Memorial Commission connect to the same unresolved legacy of wealth destruction and denied accountability that Tulsa represents.

KEY FIGURES

Dick Rowland — Nineteen-year-old Black shoe shiner whose arrest on a fabricated charge triggered the massacre. He was never charged; charges were dropped in September 1921.

Dr. A.C. Jackson — Described by the Mayo Clinic as the most able Black surgeon in America. Killed during the massacre while surrendering. His death was emblematic of the community Greenwood had built.

O.W. Gurley — Founder of Greenwood's first Black-owned businesses and real estate holdings. Lost his entire investment in the massacre.

J.B. Stradford — Hotel owner and NAACP leader who was falsely blamed for inciting the violence and driven from Tulsa. Exonerated posthumously in 1996.

Scott Ellsworth — Historian whose 1982 *Death in a Promised Land* is the definitive academic account of the massacre and the first to document its true scale.

Lessie Benningfield Randle — Last known survivor of the massacre. Died February 2, 2023, age 109 — with no reparations paid.

CHICAGO-STYLE CITATIONS

[1] Ellsworth, Scott. *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982.

TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Secondary

[2] Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission*. Oklahoma City, 2001. <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>

TYPE: Government Document · Oklahoma Historical Society

[3] Hirsch, James S. *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and Its Legacy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Secondary

[4] Messer, Chris M., Thomas E. Shriver, and Alison E. Adams. 'The Destruction of Black Wall Street.' *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 77, no. 3–4 (2018): 789–819.

TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Secondary · AJES

[5] Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 'The Case for Reparations.' *The Atlantic*, June 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

TYPE: Reputable Secondary

[6] Johnson, Hannibal B. *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District*. Fort Worth: Eakin Press, 1998.

TYPE: Peer-Reviewed Secondary

[7] Equal Justice Initiative. 'Tulsa Race Massacre (1921).' EJI, 2020. <https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-tulsa-race-massacre/>

TYPE: Reputable Secondary · eji.org

[8] Tulsa World. *Contemporaneous coverage, May 31–June 2, 1921*. Tulsa World Archive. <https://tulsaworld.com/1921-tulsa-race-massacre>

TYPE: Contemporaneous Newspaper · Tulsa World Archive

PAIRED CONTRIBUTION ENTRY

V-C3

Black Wall Street: What Greenwood Built (ERA V · Contribution) — NEEDS DRAFTING. Documents the 300+ Black-owned businesses, professional class, and civic infrastructure that Greenwood built before its destruction. The pair documents the achievement and the organized assault on it together.

entry_research_status: needs_citation · entry_content_warning: true · entry_250_badge: true · entry_present_day_nc: true · V-C3 pair: NEEDS DRAFTING