

The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921

A Brief Historical Summary of Context & Facts



“The soul of the city was torched.”

Comments: *I’m a credentialed teacher who has the responsibility of working with our youth. I’m also an American citizen that believes in elevating culture and improving the human condition. After spring of 2020, I felt compelled to study black history in America; I felt it was my responsibility as a professional to explore this important area in order to learn from history and move forward properly, and this exploration eventually led me to Tulsa. Here’s what I think ALL Americans should know—at the minimum. It’s not a pleasant topic or story, but it’s a historical event that must be known and discussed. It was cited in the report below that “History knows no fences.” So, let’s break down the walls of secrecy to learn the real facts of history...to prevent this from ever happening again. -RJ*

Statistics Summary: On the evening of May 31, 1921, the largest race “riot” in history occurred in Tulsa, OK and a “lifetime was swept away in hours.” Decades later, the Tulsa Riot has been officially renamed as the **Tulsa Massacre**; however, my report summary comes from the “riot” reference “*Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*” paper. Figures varied to some degree, but here are the summaries:

- The actual riot began on Memorial Day weekend on the evening of May 31, 1921 and was over by the next day of June 1st by around 8:00 PM. The total time of the rioting was between 16-18 hours.
- 35-40 square blocks were burned to the ground—the devastation stretched for more than a mile.
- The 1920 Census recorded that about 11,000 blacks lived in the north Tulsa area of “Greenwood.” This all-black area had their own segregated library, hospital, two schools, public health office, numerous churches, and hundreds of businesses including amazing hotels and entertainment venues plus two black newspapers the *Tulsa Star* and the *Oklahoma Star*.
- The Red Cross Report cited that 1,256 black homes were burned, 215 homes were looted that were not burned, and 314 buildings were looted that were not burned.

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- Deaths were estimated between 35-500+. The most common number seems to be about 300 deaths that included both blacks and whites, but most of the deaths were blacks.

Backstory & Context: Tulsa was not the only American city to have issues with racial tension and racial violence. It was written that this tragic event could have occurred in numerous American cities. Tulsa during this era was a “Magic City” and oil boomtown with big money and lots of opportunities that brought people of all colors to the American Midwest. Here are some key points that led up to May 31, 1921 in Tulsa.

- The “reported cause” according to white media for the start of this riot was an allegation of rape by a young black shoe shiner named Dick Rowland. It was alleged that he attempted to rape a young white woman named Sarah Page who was an elevator operator at a downtown Tulsa office building. It’s accepted that the rape, or attempted rape, never happened and that white Tulsa was looking for a reason to attack black Tulsans on the north Tulsa’s “Greenwood” area.
- There was a lot of criticism right after the “riot” regarding calling the violence a riot. The general consensus was that this was not an impromptu riot from temporary rage, but rather, this event was a planned conspiracy and operated with some degree of organization. There was a clear intent to level and destroy the whole black community including the spiritual strength of Greenwood.
- Tulsa’s massacre went far beyond rioting. It was actually called an “ethnic cleansing and race war” and finally...officially renamed as a massacre.
- In my opinion, there were three critical factors leading up to the riot; one was national, and two were local. Nationally, existing racial tensions across America set the state for the 1921 massacre. Locally, the decreasing oil prices led to economic difficulties and civil unrest for white Tulsans working in the oil industry. Thirdly, the *Tulsa Tribune* newspaper had been running a series of inflammatory pieces on Tulsa vice and crime that built up community anxiety of blacks “crossing race lines” with white women mixing with black males in local nightclubs and areas of prostitution. Then on May 31st, the inflammatory reporting of the alleged rape by the *Tulsa Tribune* was just the final act that triggered the beginnings of the massacre beginning on May 31st. Additionally, there are many citations of whites being jealous of the success of blacks in north Tulsa—basically, white Tulsa was looking for a reason to lash out and punish the blacks for being successful and upwardly mobile in society, and the factors above just pushed the agenda.
- Following the 1921 massacre, there was a major backlash of bad publicity for Tulsa. The criticisms were not only from Americans but also were global. The resulting exposure of this tragedy led to a “*conspiracy of silence*” that lasted for decades. Newspapers stopped talking about the massacre and official records mysteriously “disappeared” from public records; however, the black community refused to forget and kept telling the stories within their

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community. The open sores of 1921 massacre never went away, and eventually, a statewide effort was launched to bring the real facts forward and tell the truth about history. This historic effort conducted by multiple races of Oklahomans was important for the healing of Tulsa and continues even today with numerous historical efforts to keep telling the story and telling the authentic facts.

Racism Roots: Tulsa had a strong Ku Klux Klan (KKK) presence. The key Democrats and many Tulsa leaders were directly aligned with the KKK.

- In the decade prior to 1921, there were 23 lynching deaths of blacks occurring in 12 different Oklahoma towns.
- Following the 1918 “Spanish Flu” pandemic, racial tensions exploded in the “Red Summer of 1919” where violent race riots occurred in dozens of American cities; therefore, the stage was already set for Tulsa in 1921.
- Following the 1921 Tulsa massacre, KKK membership exploded. By the mid 1920s, there was an estimated 100,000 KKK members in Oklahoma.
- Post-massacre Tulsa saw the construction of the KKK’s Klavern “Beno” Hall. Beno was said to mean: “Be No Nigger, Be No Jew, Be No Catholic.”
- Following the massacre, the racism did not go away. Whites were cited “touring” the devastation and even sent out “death postcards” that depicted gruesome images of murdered black men during the hours of racial rage. It was cited that some whites even had a “local pride” after the massacre.

Segregation: Even though not a southern city, Tulsa was extremely segregated. Here are some specific examples.

- Tulsa was so segregated that there were basically **two Tulsas**—one was white and the other Tulsa was black. This division created a lot of misunderstanding between cultures.
- Blacks were not allowed to own businesses Tulsa outside the black area of Greenwood in northern Tulsa.
- Blacks were generally not allowed to use businesses in Tulsa beyond northern boundaries unless white employers granted special permission.
- Despite the oil boom, blacks were essentially blocked from working directly in these high-paying jobs and had to take more menial jobs.

Greenwood & “The Black Wall Street” Culture: This area of north Tulsa was exclusively black and also called “Little Africa.” Blacks were essentially banned from the rest of Tulsa so learned to take care of their own. Greenwood prospered greatly. Blacks took care of blacks with churches, businesses, a library, a hospital, a mortuary, their own black real estate developers and black real estate owners, and black hotels. Greenwood had an extremely high culture with many prominent and successful black families. While many poor blacks at this time lived in very crude housing, it was cited that some areas of Greenwood rivaled the best neighborhoods in all of Tulsa.

- Originally, only blacks were sold plots of land in Greenwood.

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- The success and high-culture foundation of Greenwood was from “grit, hard work, and determination.” There was an amazing sense of ***“it takes a village to raise a child.”*** Nuclear and extended families were essential in Greenwood. Families had a father, mother, and many times had grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all in the same immediate area—it was quite a support system for the children. Greenwood adults believed in discipline, excellence in education to escape from poverty, religion, respect, and a deep love for their youth and community.

Failure of Legal, Law Enforcement, & Regulatory Systems: Despite that hundreds of black people died, not one single white person was ever arrested and went to jail or prison. Not one. There were also many other unethical maneuvers by the legal and insurance systems.

- There was a coordinated and planned effort by Tulsa officials to support the violence.
- About 500 “special deputies” were quickly sworn in immediately after the violence began—they were all white and armed. These special deputies basically had an open season on hunting down and murdering blacks who offered any level of resistance to arrest. As the blacks were arrested and detained in gathering places outside of black Greenwood, it left the black area of north Tulsa defenseless to the public rioters, looters, and arsonists. The special deputies also assisted in the actual crimes beyond shooting.
- Special deputies used WWI surplus machine guns to shoot down and kill blacks. Tulsa was also the first American city to see “aerial bombing” as biplanes were used to drop kerosene and nitroglycerin firebombs on the Greenwood area.
- Captured blacks were led to gathering places or holding camp areas. Some blacks were shot in the heels as they marched away while under arrest.
- As blacks fled Tulsa, some were ambushed and killed in rural areas.
- Fire fighters were banned from assisting black Tulsans whose homes and businesses and community structures were on fire.
- There was basically a complete breakdown of proper law and order—facilitated by white Tulsa officials and community leaders. The Tulsa Massacre was essentially a black hunting day where it was temporarily legal to murder blacks just because they were black.
- The Real Estate Commission estimated personal property losses at \$750,000 but the black residents claimed 1.8 million in damages. The Commission disallowed most of the claims by citing a “riot exclusion clause” in order to deny the claims.
- The city used new rezoning regulations to discourage rebuilding by black Tulsans.
- It wasn’t until June 1, 1996 that a public apology was delivered for the Tulsa Massacre of 1921...*and the apology was delivered by a black politician.*

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Death Summaries: The most accurate estimate seems to be about 300 deaths that included both whites and blacks but was mostly blacks. Numerous eye witness reports cited dead black bodies “stacked up like cord wood.”

- Whites who died were aged 16-39. The median age was 27. Whites were young, single, and non-professionals who largely chased the oil boom.
- Blacks who died were aged 19-63. The median age was 35. These blacks were more conservative, religious, and family oriented. It appears that many of the blacks killed were of higher culture than the whites that killed them.
- There was a heat wave occurring during the 1921 massacre with 100-degree temperatures. Mass unmarked graves were used to avoid disease; however, this also became a convenient way to bury the actual history of blacks who died. The destiny and burial sites of many murdered blacks were never found by surviving family members. Dead blacks were also dumped into the Arkansas River right next to Tulsa.
- Funeral homes were also segregated in Tulsa, but the only black funeral home was destroyed during the riot; hence, most of the dead blacks ended up in mass graves or in the river.
- Cemeteries were also segregated in Tulsa during this era, so even the mass graves were apart from deceased white sections.

Post-Massacre Aftermath & Shame: It’s shocking what happened after the massacre. Black Tulsans were victimized, abused, and targeted by the legal and insurance systems, yet they persevered and rebuilt Greenwood by taking care of their own again—in many ways, some blacks cited they “*built back better*.”

- An estimated 9,000-10,000 blacks were immediately homeless after the massacre.
- There was virtually no public support for massacre survivors. Many had to spend the winter of 1921-1922 in tents or lean-to structures without electricity, running water, and sewage facilities.
- During the martial law period, blacks were required to carry “green cards” even though they did not cause the massacre.

Summary & The Future: The Tulsa Massacre could have occurred in many other American cities during this era of racial tension, segregation, and violence. In the end, blacks were blamed to inciting the violence because a crowd of blacks showed up on the steps of the courthouse where the black Dick Rowland was being held on rape-related charges. The mob was calling for a lynching of Rowland, so blacks merely were trying to protect another vigilante death. Looking into the near future, could another mass racial tragedy happen again in America? YES. This is why I’m publishing a summary of America’s worst racial “riot” massacre in addition to my Tulsa Massacre podcast on “*The Long Road*” Show. ***We must learn from history—or we are doomed to repeat the worst parts of it.***

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Reference: *“Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921”* (February 28, 2001)

- <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>

Suggested Reading: There are many books, articles, and film or video archives of the Tulsa Massacre, but these appear to be critical resources.

- *“Death in The Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921”* by Scott Ellsworth (1992)
- *“They Came Searching: How Blacks Sought the Promised Land in Tulsa”* by Eddie Faye Gates (1997)

I hope this summary of facts from the Tulsa Massacre of 1921 compels you to do your own research—to watch a documentary or read a website or find and read one of many books on this tragic event in history. I hope you do these things not to fuel more racism and more hate and more violence, but as the black elders cited in interviews many decades after 1921...to learn to love each other and care for each other so this NEVER happens again. –Ron Jones, MS

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* Updated 5.8.21

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