



The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Marks the 100th Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre

June 4, 2021

The 1920 Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma was one of the most, if not the most, successful concentrations of Black business in America. The commercial district was comprised of grocery stores, libraries, convenience stores, doctor's offices, banks, attorneys, and all the supporting businesses necessary to complete a prosperous American community. The residential area consisted of playgrounds, schools, and thousands of homes ranging in different sizes and designs.¹

The community by any standard was an American success. It was known as "Black Wall Street," the name Booker T. Washington bestowed on Greenwood "for the economic opportunity created by the city's Black community."²

One hundred years ago this week, a White mob killed numerous Black residents, burned down more than one thousand homes, and demolished the prosperous Black business district.³ The chaos and destruction committed over a two-day period became one of the worst acts of racially-motivated violence and terror in the country's history. One hundred years on, the Commission observes this sobering anniversary and mourns the deep loss Black families have endured.

The dream of an economically and politically empowered, self-run Black community came to an end on May 31, 1921. Incited by a lynch mob who were after a Black man falsely accused of attacking a White woman, the attack would grow to engulf the entire 35-block neighborhood of Greenwood, destroyed in its entirety. Black residents, many of them veterans of World War I, came to the courthouse armed to protect the accused man from lynching. As they were leaving, a White man allegedly attempted to disarm one and a shot was fired, beginning a violent confrontation which caused mob violence to

¹ See What the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Destroyed, New York Times, May 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/24/us/tulsa-race-massacre.html>

² See Russell Westbrook makes history again, with a documentary called 'Tulsa Burning,' Victoria Hernandez, LA Times, May 28, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/sports/story/2021-05-28/russell-westbrook-is-making-history-tulsa-burning-documentary>.

³ 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>

⁴ The Tulsa Race Massacre, Oklahoma Historical Society, <https://www.okhistory.org/learn/trm4>

⁵ Oklahoma Commission Report at p. 11 ⁶
Oklahoma Commission Report at p. 107

Oklahoma Commission Report at p. 11

⁸ Oklahoma Commission Report at p. 124. The City of Tulsa is undertaking an exhumation project at the site of what may have been a mass burial. The investigation into mass graves is ongoing. See 1921 Graves Investigation, City of Tulsa, <https://www.cityoftulsa.org/1921graves>.

⁹ Oklahoma Commission Report at p. 120

explode.⁴ Groups of armed White residents, some given weapons by city officials, shot Black men in the streets and set fire to houses and businesses block by block.⁵ Aircraft dropped firebombs on the neighborhood, igniting even more fires.⁶ City officials let the neighborhood burn as they waited for National Guard troops to arrive.⁷ In the end, burned bodies were reported to be buried in mass graves, leaving the true death toll unknown.⁸ Contemporary reports confirmed 39 deaths attributed to the violence,⁹ with estimates of the actual total losses ranging from 175 to 300 people killed.¹⁰ More than 6,000 Black residents were interned in mass camps as martial law was imposed,¹¹ and 10,000 were left homeless.¹² No one has ever been convicted for taking part in the violence.¹³

Greenwood was the wealthiest Black neighborhood in the country. The elegant 54-room Stradford Hotel, known to be the finest guest accommodation available to Black visitors, was owned by a man who had been enslaved.¹⁴ The losses encompassed 191 businesses, several churches, a junior high school and the only hospital in the neighborhood.¹⁵ The generational effects of this destruction are still felt, as the wealth generated from the successful businesses that were razed could not be passed on. A 2001 report estimated the losses totaled more than \$30 million in today's dollars.¹⁶ The loss of opportunity is incalculable. In the wake of this destruction, we must commit to support and encourage Black entrepreneurship to grow again for the betterment of America. Black families deserve no less.

The Oklahoma Advisory Committee to the Commission recently issued a Memorandum on racial disparities in policing which recognizes that 1921 city officials "did not stem the violence but added to it, often through overt illegal acts."¹⁷ As with other incidents of racial terror White Americans inflicted on Black Americans, we recognize the failures to protect Black communities, account for the losses and hold the perpetrators accountable. The extent of the devastation and loss of life was intentionally covered up by authorities and only officially recognized in the late 1990's, with an official report issued in 2001.¹⁸ Efforts to uncover what Black residents endured, in Tulsa and elsewhere, must continue. We must not shrink from documenting and teaching even shameful acts in our history. We grieve the losses in Tulsa today as we mark one hundred years since the destruction.

¹⁰ Oklahoma Commission Report at p. 124

¹¹ The Tulsa Race Massacre, Oklahoma Historical Society, <https://www.okhistory.org/learn/trm5>

¹² Oklahoma Commission Report at p. 88

¹³ See Tulsa Race Massacre: In aftermath, no one prosecuted for killings, and insurance claims were rejected but Greenwood persevered, Randy Krehbiel, Tulsa World, May 29, 2021, https://tulsaworld.com/news/local/racemassacre/tulsa-race-massacre-in-aftermath-no-one-prosecuted-for-killings-and-insurance-claims-were-rejected/article_3ba23c3c-886d-5821-9970-02153261960a.html

¹⁴ See Tulsa's 'Black Wall Street' Flourished as a Self-Contained Hub in Early 1900s, Alexis Clark, History Stories, January 27, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/black-wall-street-tulsa-race-massacre>

¹⁵ Oklahoma Commission Report at p. 144

¹⁶ Oklahoma Commission Report at p. 189

¹⁷ An Advisory Memorandum of the Oklahoma Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, June 2021, <https://www.usccr.gov/files/2021/05-26-OK-SAC-Advisory-Memorandum-Racial-Disparities-in-Policing.pdf> ¹⁸ See His book helped expose Tulsa's massacre of Black citizens. Now he's helping find their graves, Stuart Miller, LA Times, May 18, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-05-18/his-book-helped-expose-tulsas-massacre-of-black-citizens-now-hes-helping-find-their-graves>