



FURTHER BLACK HISTORY MONTH REVIEW

MASSACRE IN TULSA

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By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

One hundred and five years ago this May, arguably the worst racial conflict in U.S. history broke out in Tulsa, Oklahoma — in a section of town called the Greenwood District, where Black folks lived and prospered. Booker T. Washington himself coined a nickname for the area: Black Wall Street.

For decades, what happened in Greenwood was referred to as a race riot, but no longer — what happened that day was no riot. It was an attack on the Black community by an armed and organized white mob.

A CITY WAITING FOR A SPARK

Like many cities of the Jim Crow era — especially in the South and the Southwest — Tulsa was segregated. Black laborers might have jobs serving the white community, but they lived, dined, shopped and entertained themselves in Greenwood. By all accounts, the community was a thriving, healthy one.

But the gulf between white and Black residents widened on May 30, 1921, when a young man named Dick Rowland — who shined shoes outside an office building in downtown Tulsa — took a bathroom break. Not allowed to use the whites-only restroom in his own building, he had to walk down the street, take the elevator to a top floor and use the “Colored” restroom.

Most days, Rowland did this with no problem. This one day, however, something happened between him and the 17-year-old woman who operated the elevator. It’s theorized he tripped and bumped into her or stepped on her foot. She let out a scream, which frightened Rowland. He bolted out of the building.

The police arrived, interviewed the woman and declined to do anything: No harm, no foul. But that’s not the way rumor mills work. The next day, the white community was all abuzz about the Black boy who raped a white woman in a downtown elevator. The police tracked Rowland down and brought him in.

The afternoon newspaper, the Tulsa World, was very much a white supremacist-leaning publication and very much into sensationalistic stories and headlines. The paper fabricated a story about an attempted rape, noted the man had been arrested and jailed and left it to its white readers to connect the dots.

Which leads to another unfortunate artifact of the Jim Crow era: lynch mobs.

Mobs of white men were known to confiscate prisoners from local law enforcement officials, take the prisoners out of town and hang them. Many police departments regarded lynch mobs as an efficient way of taking care of business and a deterrent to further crime.



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Armed white men drive through the streets of Greenwood on June 1, 1921.



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Smoke billows over the Greenwood district of Tulsa.

THE MASSACRE BEGINS

Leaders of the Black community saw it coming. A group of about 25 Black men, many of them World War I veterans, came to the courthouse around 9 p.m. that evening offering to provide security for Rowland. The sheriff declined, despite a growing white mob outside. An hour or so later, a group of 75 Black men returned to again offer their services. Again, the sheriff declined.

This time, however, a member of the white mob — which had grown to about 2,000 — attempted to snatch away a firearm from one of the Black men. The gun discharged.

That was when hell broke loose.

With the white mob on their heels, the Black men bolted for home. The local police deputized 500 white men and boys, who broke into local stores to arm themselves and then drove through Greenwood, firing at residents from their cars. By midnight, white men were running amok through the area, setting fires to Black-owned property and then blocking fire departments from offering aid.

At daybreak the morning of June 1, the massacre escalated when 10,000 armed white men flooded into Greenwood. They went from house to house, arresting residents and looting the homes before torching them. More than a thousand homes were destroyed that day, along with 12 churches, five hotels, 31 restaurants, four drug stores, eight doctor’s offices, two dozen grocery stores and the Black public library.

The spree didn’t end until 8 p.m. that evening — a good 18 hours after it had started — when the Oklahoma City National Guard managed to restore order. The Guard took custody of the about 6,000 Black residents who had been taken captive. Members of the white mob were allowed to return to their homes.

PRISONERS IN THEIR OWN CITY



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The Black survivors who had been taken captive by the mob were housed at the state fairgrounds. The National Guard put them to work clearing rubble and burying bodies.

Over time, white business owners wanted their manual labor back. Internees were released to white business owners who vouched for them. The city issued green identification cards so the Black laborers could prove they were employed and had permission to move through the city.

Meanwhile, most white residents — and the white-owned newspapers — would blame the Black community for the entire incident. The state’s lead attorney granted immunity to any white people who had looted buildings or had killed Black people during the raids.

THE RELIEF EFFORT



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More than 10,000 people were left homeless by the massacre.

Realizing victims of the riot were unlikely to get help from anyone else, the Red Cross stepped in to declare Tulsa a natural disaster area. The mayor of Tulsa issued an announcement saying, essentially, that the Red Cross was on its own for any relief effort.

For months, the Red Cross supplied shelter, medicine and food for victims of the massacre while they rebuilt their lives and their homes. Many of the homeless would live in tents or thrown-together shacks for more than a year afterward.

Suggestions were made, from time to time, to offer aid or even reparations to the residents of Greenwood. Those suggestions went nowhere.

COUNTING UP THE DEAD



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One question remained: How many had lost their lives in the massacre? The death toll at the time was reported to be 36: 26 Black people and 10 white people. Other estimates went as high as 200 Black people. The Red Cross said somewhere between 55 and 300 had died.

A 2001 state commission also resulted in conflicting numbers. Only 39 deaths have been documented, but the actual number is likely to be somewhere between 100 and 300. Survivors would tell stories of Black bodies being loaded onto trains and dumped off bridges into the Arkansas River. Others were tossed into mass graves.

Recently, the city of Tulsa has made an effort to locate and document these mass graves, working off the descriptions from survivors. Only a dozen or so graves have been found, but the search goes on.