

# Tulsa 1921

Greenwood District, Oklahoma

## In Sixty Seconds

**Before.** Greenwood was thirty-five blocks of Black-owned businesses, hospitals, schools, banks, hotels, a library, and a public bus system. Founded by O.W. Gurley in 1906. Home to roughly 10,000 residents. A dollar circulated within the community thirty-six times before it left. Booker T. Washington called it "Negro Wall Street."

**What happened.** On May 31, 1921, a white mob, some deputized by city officials, attacked Greenwood with firearms and incendiary devices. Witnesses reported aircraft dropping firebombs. The National Guard disarmed Black residents rather than the attackers, then detained thousands of survivors in internment camps.

**Who did it.** A white mob organized through the Tulsa Tribune's inflammatory coverage of a false accusation against a Black teenager named Dick Rowland. City officials deputized members of the mob. The Tulsa Tribune later removed the inciting editorial from its own archives.

**After.** Insurance claims were denied. No one was prosecuted. The event was omitted from Oklahoma history textbooks for decades. Greenwood was rebuilt, smaller, by 1925. The Oklahoma Commission that investigated the massacre was not established until 1997. Survivors are still alive and still advocating.

## The Named

### O.W. Gurley

age 52. Founder of Greenwood. Bought forty acres in 1906 and sold only to Black residents. Owned the Gurley Hotel, a grocery store, and a rooming house, all destroyed in the massacre.

### A.J. Smitherman

age 37. Editor and publisher of the Tulsa Star, one of two Black newspapers in Greenwood. Fled to Boston. Was indicted for inciting the riot by defending Dick Rowland.

### J.B. Stradford

age 60. Owner of the Stradford Hotel, the largest Black-owned hotel in America at the time. Son of a man born into slavery. Fled charges of inciting the riot.

### B.C. Franklin

age 42. Attorney who practiced from a tent after his office was destroyed. Sued the City of Tulsa over the ordinance preventing rebuilding, and won. Father of historian John Hope Franklin.

## For Discussion

1. Greenwood's economy worked because a dollar circulated thirty-six times before leaving the district. What conditions would need to be in place for a similar multiplier effect to function in a Black neighborhood today, and what structural forces worked against that circulation then and work against it now?
2. The Tulsa Tribune's inflammatory article is widely credited as the spark for the massacre. What responsibility does local press coverage hold for the violence that follows its framing of a story, and how has that responsibility been reshaped by the decline of local newspapers and the rise of social media?
3. Insurance claims filed by Black Tulsans were denied almost universally under riot exclusion clauses. When a financial product protects one population and systematically fails another through terms that everyone formally agrees to, is the failure in the contract, in its enforcement, or somewhere else? What contemporary products show the same pattern?
4. The Oklahoma Commission was not formed until 1997 and its report was not published until 2001. What explains the seventy-six-year gap between the event and official acknowledgment, and what would have to change to shorten that gap for a comparable event today?
5. B. C. Franklin kept practicing law from a tent after his office was burned and filed suit against the City of Tulsa on behalf of survivors. When court-based reparations fail, what non-judicial paths have communities historically used to secure meaningful redress, and which of those paths have produced lasting results?

## Primary Sources

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5. Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Greenwood District collection materials.

