

## The Ghosts of Greenwood Past

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### A Walk Down Black Wall Street

#### BLACK WALL STREET: HIGHLIGHTS

- *The Greenwood District, a prosperous African American entrepreneurial community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the early twentieth century, became known as the “Negro Wall Street” or “Black Wall Street.”*
- *A sensationalized encounter between two teenagers, an African American boy and a white girl, triggered the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, the worst such incident in American history.*
- *The roots of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot lie in jealousy, land lust, and the then-prevailing*

*hostility toward African Americans nationwide.*

- *The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot devastated the African American community in Tulsa, destroying some 1,250 businesses and homes and killing between 100 and 300 people.*
- *As the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot wound down, officials rounded up African American men in Tulsa and herded them into internment camps, ostensibly for their own protection. This left the Greenwood District populated, for a time, primarily by women and children.*
- *Hundreds of Tulsa's African American citizens lived in tents set up by the American Red Cross after the destruction of the Greenwood District.*
- *No white person has ever been convicted for any crime associated with the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, though many African American men faced indictments for inciting the event that leveled their community and resulted in the deaths of their loved ones.*
- *The term "race riot" does not accurately reflect what happened in Tulsa on May 31 and June 1, 1921. Many use terms like burning, pogrom, assault, and massacre to characterize what amounted to an invasion of Tulsa's black community by white mobs.*
- *In a remarkable demonstration of the human spirit, Tulsa's African American community rebuilt after the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, bigger and better than ever. The Greenwood District peaked economically in the 1940s.*
- *The Greenwood District declined, beginning in the late 1960s, and continuing through the 1970s and 1980s. Integration, urban renewal, changing economic conditions, and the lack of a systematic business mentorship process coalesced in causing a downward spiral for this once-vibrant entrepreneurial community.*
- *Today, the Greenwood District is part of a larger arts, entertainment, educational, and cultural area.*

Early in the twentieth century, the black community in Tulsa—the "Greenwood District" or simply "Greenwood"—became a nationally renowned entrepreneurial center. Legendary African American statesman and educator, Booker T. Washington, dubbed Greenwood Avenue, the

nerve center of the community, “The Negro Wall Street” for its now-famous bustling business climate.

Legal segregation forced black Tulsans to do business with one another. This economic detour—the diversion of black dollars away from the white community—allowed the thirty-five-square block Greenwood District to prosper. Dollars circulated repeatedly within the black community. Greenwood’s insular service economy rested on a foundation of necessity. This necessity, in turn, molded a talented cadre of African American businesspersons and entrepreneurs.

Savvy entrepreneurs like Simon Berry developed their businesses around the needs of the community, niche marketing by today’s standards. Berry created a nickel-a-ride jitney service with his topless Model-T Ford. He successfully operated a bus line that he ultimately sold to the City of Tulsa. He owned the Royal Hotel. He shuttled wealthy oil barons on a charter airline service he operated with his partner, James Lee Northington, Sr., a successful black building contractor. Simon Berry earned as much as \$500 a day in the early 1920s.

Prominent professionals like Dr. A.C. Jackson transcended, if only temporarily, the color line. Dr. Jackson, christened the most able Negro surgeon in America by the Mayo brothers (of Mayo Clinic fame), treated patients of both races. Dr. Jackson died tragically in the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot (the “Riot”), the worst of the so-called “race riots” in early twentieth century America. Gunned down by a white teenager while surrendering at his residence, Dr. Jackson, lacking medical attention, bled to death.

Industrious families like the Williams’ found economic success in multiple ventures. The Williams’ owned and operated several businesses, including a theatre, a confectionery, a rooming house, and a garage.

Capable, confident women like Mabel B. Little operated thriving beauty salons and other enterprises. Women likewise added elegance and allure to the fabled thoroughfare. Greenwood Avenue bustled on Thursday, the traditional “maid’s day off.” African American women, many of whom worked in the homes of affluent whites, took advantage of the day’s opportunity to “gussie up” and stroll down Greenwood way.

Brilliant educators like E.W. Woods, principal of Booker T. Washington High School for over thirty years, gained respect and renown throughout the city. Mr. Woods arrived in Tulsa by foot in 1913 from Memphis in answer to a call for “colored” teachers. He became known as “the quintessential Tulsan” for his preeminent leadership in the realm of public education. The Tulsa Convention Center—the only facility large enough to accommodate the throngs of mourners—hosted Mr. Woods’ 1948 funeral.

From movie theatres to professional offices, from grocery stores to schools, from beauty salons to shoeshine shops, the Greenwood District had it all. So developed and refined was Greenwood Avenue, the heart of the Greenwood District, that many compared it favorably to such historic streets as Beale Street in Memphis and State Street in Chicago.

African American boosters like E.P. McCabe touted Oklahoma, then divided into Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory, as a virtual “promised land” for African Americans. McCabe dreamed of an all-black state carved out of Oklahoma Territory. He and others in the late 1800s recruited African Americans to rise up from the South and head for the Midwest.

Oklahoma attracted hordes of weary Southerners fleeing the oppression of the Jim Crow South. They went in search of full citizenship, land ownership, and economic opportunity. Though McCabe’s “black state” dream never materialized, Oklahoma boasts more than fifty all-black towns throughout its history—more than any other state.

The promise of Oklahoma faded significantly when she became a state in 1907. The new Oklahoma Legislature passed as its first measure Senate Bill Number 1. That law firmly enshrined segregation as the law of the land in Oklahoma. Jim Crow reigned.

The Greenwood pioneers parlayed Jim Crow into an economic advantage. They seized the opportunity to create a closed market system that defied Jim Crow’s fundamental premise: African American incompetence and inferiority. The success of the Greenwood District, given the prevailing racial pecking order, could scarcely be tolerated, let alone embraced, by the larger community.

Over time, fear and jealousy swelled. African American success, including home, business, and land ownership, caused increasing consternation and friction. Black World War I veterans, having tasted true freedom only on foreign soil, came back to America with heightened expectations. Valor and sacrifice in battle earned them the basic respect and human dignity so long denied in America—or so they thought. But America had not yet changed. Oklahoma proved no exception.

The underlying climate of racial oppression for African Americans in the United States prior to and during 1921 and the physical intimidation associated with it seems almost unfathomable today. It was open season on African Americans.

In 1919, there were more than two dozen major race riots in America. In 1921, at least 57 African Americans fell victim to lynching. Despite these atrocities, the American government did little to protect her dark-skinned denizens. Indeed, the United States Senate three times failed to pass measures making lynching a federal offense.

In Tulsa, a seemingly random encounter between two teenagers lit the fuse that would set Greenwood alight. The alleged assault on a young white woman, seventeen-year-old Sarah Page, by a young black man, nineteen-year-old Dick Rowland, triggered unprecedented civil unrest. That event became the immediate catalyst for the Riot. Fueled by sensational reporting by *The Tulsa Tribune*, jealousy over black economic success, and a racially hostile climate in general, mob rule held sway.

Authorities arrested Dick Rowland. A white mob threatened to lynch him. African American men, determined to protect the teen from the rumored lynching, marched to the courthouse that held young Rowland. Law enforcement authorities asked them to retreat, assuring Dick’s safety.

They left. The lynch talk persisted.

A second group of African American men from the Greenwood District proceeded to the courthouse. The black men exchanged words with the swelling group of white men gathered on the courthouse lawn. A gun discharged. Soon, thousands of weapon-wielding white men, some of them deputized by local law enforcement, invaded Greenwood.

In fewer than twenty-four hours, people, property, hopes, and dreams vanished. The Greenwood District burned to the ground. Mobs prevented firefighters from extinguishing the flames. Property damage ran into the millions. Hundreds of people died. Scores lay injured. Many African Americans fled Tulsa, never to return. In an instant, Tulsa stood defiled and defined.

Ever courageous, the Greenwood District pioneers rebuilt the community from the ashes. Official Tulsa leadership hindered the rebuilding and rebirth of Greenwood, blaming black citizens for their own plight, turning away charitable contributions for rebuilding, and creating reconstruction roadblocks. Some individuals and institutions in the greater Tulsa community stepped up, however, providing much needed assistance. For example, Holy Family Cathedral and First Presbyterian Church offered refuge to African Americans. The American Red Cross, called “Angels of Mercy” by many, provided stellar care—medical care, food, shelter, and clothing—for Riot victims, some of whom lived for months in tents.

The law firm of Spears, Franklin & Chappelle provided legal assistance to Riot victims. These African American lawyers lodged claims against the City of Tulsa and insurance companies for damage occasioned by the Riot. Beyond that, they counseled and consoled Riot victims and made urgent appeals to African Americans nationwide for assistance. One of these men, B.C. Franklin, the father of famed historian, the late Dr. John Hope Franklin, led the charge.

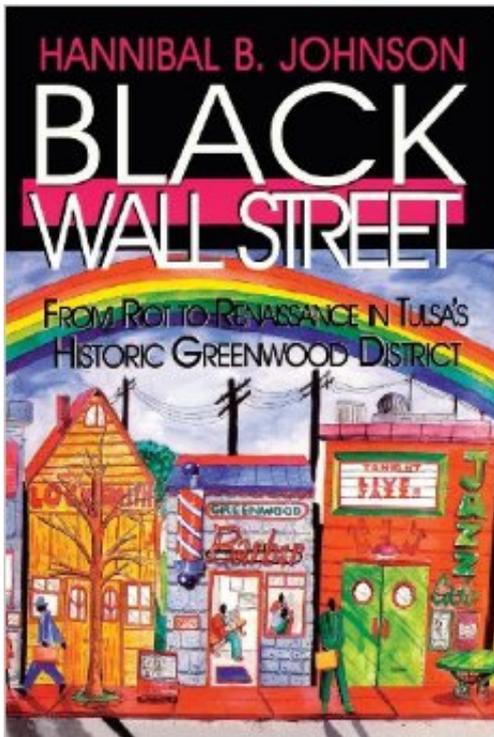
Mt. Zion Baptist Church provides yet another example of the remarkable courage and determination of the people of post-Riot Greenwood. The \$75,000 church, only six weeks old when the Riot broke out, had been built with the help of a \$50,000 loan from a single individual. Rumors during the unrest that preceded the Riot included a fictitious but persistent story that Mt. Zion housed a stash of arms for the looming racial conflict. The mob torched Mt. Zion during the Riot, leaving nothing but a dirt floor basement.

Church members, still dazed by the devastation of the Riot, made several key decisions. They

elected to continue to meet, often in private homes. When presented with the option of extinguishing the \$50,000 mortgage through bankruptcy, the church leadership balked. While the legal obligation could perhaps be eliminated, they felt a moral obligation to pay off the loan, even absent the building. Decades later, Mt. Zion did just that. The church paid off the loan and raised enough money to build a new structure. Mt. Zion remains a vital and vibrant part of Greenwood.

Remarkably, and in stunningly short order, the Greenwood District came alive once again, bigger and better than ever. In 1925, the area hosted the annual conference of the National Negro Business League. By 1942, more than 200 businesses called the Greenwood District home. The Greenwood story speaks to the triumph of the human spirit and to widely cherished virtues such as faith, determination, integrity, humility, and compassion.

Integration, urban renewal, a new business climate, and the aging of the early Greenwood pioneers caused the community to decline through the years, beginning in the 1960s, and continuing throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. A comprehensive arts, entertainment, educational, and cultural complex is now emerging. As the area sits poised for a renaissance, the ghosts of Greenwood past loom large on the horizon.



The foregoing article is based on Hannibal B. Johnson's book, [Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District](#), available on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) or from the publisher, Wild Horse Media Group, owner of the Eakin Press imprint, at [sales@eakinpress.com](mailto:sales@eakinpress.com) or [billy@wildhorsemedia.com](mailto:billy@wildhorsemedia.com).

