

## AFD Ep 378 Links and Notes - Tulsa 1921 [Bill/Rachel] - Recording May 30

Today's episode is another look back at the events that happened in 1921. The Tulsa Race Massacre, or the Bombing of Black Wall Street, occurred on May 31, 1921. Today we are going to focus on the economic conditions of Black Wall Street, and the unique position that Black people in Oklahoma held in contrast to Black communities in other former slave-holding states.

- <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2015/02/26/black-wall-street-we-did-it-by-ourselves-and-were-punished/>
  - *The bombing of Black Wall Street (otherwise known as the Tulsa Race Riot) is a textbook example of the results of [white] discomfort [with Black success]. In the early 1900s, the city of Tulsa began to grow at a rapid pace. By 1921, just after the first world war, the city was already going through its second oil boom.*
  - *The [Greenwood] neighborhood flourished and became a center of Black affluence, earning it the nickname "Black Wall Street."*
  - *On May 31, 1921, a white mob descended on Greenwood, destroying 1,000 homes and [many] businesses, displacing most of the district's 10,000 residents.*
  - *By the next morning, on June 1, Greenwood had been burned almost to the ground, and up to 300 people were killed. **Residents even reported that planes had gone over the neighborhood and dropped crude bombs on businesses and residential buildings.** [This will not be the last time this year that we discuss the centennial of people in the US getting bombarded from private aircraft, as this was repeated in the Battle of Blair Mountain in West Virginia later in 1921.] *Troops were deployed to try to restore order, but it was too late. The destruction left many of the residents homeless and living in tents for almost a year.**
  - *There is a lot of speculation on what the actual motivation behind the attack was. Although it was initially stated that it was because of [an] alleged (and later dismissed) attack of [a] young White woman, there was already high racial tension before then. [White residents' membership in The Ku Klux Klan had grown rapidly](#) in the few years before the attack, and many of the White people in the Tulsa neighborhoods just outside of Greenwood were poor.*
  - *Seeing the neighborhood just next door doing so well probably made the already existing tension even worse.*
- Here is the official history from the Tulsa Historical Society & Museum website: <https://www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/>
  - *In the early morning hours of June 1, 1921, Greenwood was looted and burned by white rioters. Governor Robertson declared martial law, and National Guard troops arrived in Tulsa. Guardsmen assisted firemen in putting out fires, took African Americans out of the hands of vigilantes and imprisoned all black Tulsans not already interned. Over 6,000 people were held at the Convention Hall and the Fairgrounds, some for as long as eight days. Twenty-four hours after the violence erupted, it ceased. In the wake of the violence, 35 city blocks lay in charred ruins, more than 800 people were treated for injuries and contemporary reports of deaths began at 36. Historians now believe as many as 300 people may have died.*
  - From the official Race Riot Commission Report of 2001 for the 80th anniversary review of the facts: *Public officials provided firearms and*

*ammunition to individuals, again all of them white. Units of the Oklahoma National Guard participated in the mass arrests of all or nearly all of Greenwood's residents.*

- *Designating it a riot prevented insurance companies from having to pay benefits to the people of Greenwood whose homes and businesses were destroyed. It also was common at the time for any large-scale clash between different racial or ethnic groups to be categorized a race riot.*
- The rise of Tulsa
  - Glenn Pool Oil Reserve oil boom (1905):  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glenn\\_Pool\\_Oil\\_Reserve](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glenn_Pool_Oil_Reserve) In November of 1905, an oil speculator named Robert Galbreath, drilling on land owned by Ida Glenn (a Creek native) and her husband Robert, drilled and found a “gusher”. This discovery brought oil production into the state of Oklahoma, and made Tulsa the capital of oil in Oklahoma, and the world. Because Creek natives owned land in this area, many Creek land allotment owners became millionaires. This boom – which propelled Oklahoma to the top of global oil production for some time – followed smaller, earlier turn of the century booms in the area around the recently incorporated town of Tulsa. Some prominent oil fortunes like the Getty family originate in the first few years of the 20th century in Tulsa’s oilfields, even if bigger booms in California or Saudi Arabia really made it. As in the Pennsylvania oil rush of the mid-19th century, oil towns like Tulsa became critical for short-term storage of crude oil before transportation to refineries and then to the rest of the world, as well as a place for oil workers to live and merchants to supply equipment.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Tulsa,\\_Oklahoma#Oil\\_boom:\\_1901%E2%80%931907](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Tulsa,_Oklahoma#Oil_boom:_1901%E2%80%931907) Tulsa and neighboring Red Fork already had rail access due to the cattle grazing industry before statehood, which made it convenient and quick to promote an oil industry as soon as the gushers were located. Statehood was not far behind striking oil.
  - Statehood (1907): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Oklahoma#Statehood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Oklahoma#Statehood)
    - From 1902-1905, five major indigenous nations in present-day eastern Oklahoma (including Tulsa and the oilfields) – then known as Indian Territory – unsuccessfully proposed to Congress, through the normal statehood procedures, the creation of a majority-indigenous state called Sequoyah (named for the early 19th century Cherokee figure). It would have had a fairly significant Black minority population, as well.
    - When this was rejected by the federal government, the fallback option for the indigenous governments in the territory was to take a leadership role in an application for statehood for the entirety of what is now Oklahoma.
  - There was another oil boom around Tulsa in 1915, shortly before the US entry into WWI, which lasted into the Depression era:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Tulsa,\\_Oklahoma#Second\\_oil\\_boom:\\_1915%E2%80%931930](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Tulsa,_Oklahoma#Second_oil_boom:_1915%E2%80%931930)
  - The rise of the Greenwood neighborhood, whose 10,000 Black residents made up about 14% of the Tulsa population circa 1920
    - The federal government after Reconstruction had officially abandoned Civil War-era plans to provide land grants to free slaves in the slave states, including possibly considering resettling them in what is today Central Oklahoma  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Oklahoma#The\\_Land\\_Run\\_of\\_1889](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Oklahoma#The_Land_Run_of_1889)

- However, slaves freed after the Civil War in the indigenous nations within modern-day Oklahoma were given land grants, partially due to a federal policy choice to punish some tribal governments for supporting the Confederacy's rebellion. These were the "tribal freedmen" as opposed to the general freedman population, which received very little assistance or restitution after slavery. These land grants translated to a substantial pocket of Black wealth accumulation over half a century! Having made some initial money from farming or cattle grazing, some transitioned that startup capital into business, especially after the oil boom started and Tulsa began expanding rapidly. Both farming and commercial activities attracted other freedmen to the area from the rest of the US, too, even before the oil, and that migration surged after the oil boom.
  - *As word spread that Indian Territory was a safe place for African Americans to settle, between 1865 and 1920, more than 50 Black townships were founded in Oklahoma.*  
<https://www.history.com/news/black-wall-street-tulsa-visionaries>
- Many of the Black land grants in Indian Territory were remote and poor agricultural lands but sat on top of enormous undiscovered oil reserves. The oil booms after 1900 and the leasing arrangements for production (or alternatively outright land sales to oil companies) meant some Black landowners cashed in big, at least relative to the median Black American at the time – and in some cases even comparably to White fortunes.
- There is a great new article in the Associated Press this month that focuses specifically on what they refer to as the "seed money" for the Greenwood or Black Wall Street boom in Tulsa:  
<https://apnews.com/article/ok-state-wire-business-race-and-ethnicity-874fade343fc7515210117c4efe1335f>
  - *Unlike Black Americans across the country after slavery, Williams' ancestors and thousands of other Black members of slave-owning Native American nations freed after the war "had land," says Williams, a Tulsa community activist. "They had opportunity to build a house on that land, farm that land, and they were wealthy with their crops." "And that was huge — a great opportunity and you're thinking this is going to last for generations to come. I can leave my children this land, and they can leave their children this land," recounts Williams, whose ancestor went from enslaved laborer to judge of the Muscogee Creek tribal Supreme Court after slavery. In fact, Alaina E. Roberts, an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh, writes in her book "I've Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land," the freed slaves of five Native American nations "became the only people of African descent in the world to receive what might be viewed as reparations for their enslavement on a large scale." Why that happened in the territory that became Oklahoma, and not the rest of the slaveholding South: The U.S. government enforced stricter terms for reconstruction on the slave-owning American Indian nations that had fully or partially allied with the Confederacy than it had on Southern states.*
  - *By 1860, about 14% of the total population of that tribal territory of the future state of Oklahoma were Black people enslaved by tribal members. After the Civil War, the Black tribal Freedmen held*

*millions of acres in common with other tribal members and later in large individual allotments. The difference that made is “incalculable,” Roberts said in an interview. “Allotments really gave them an upward mobility that other Black people did not have in most of the United States.” The financial stability allowed Black Native American Freedmen to start businesses, farms and ranches, and helped give rise to Black Wall Street and thriving Black communities in the future state of Oklahoma. The prosperity of those communities — many long since vanished — “attracted Black African Americans from the South, built them up as a Black mecca,” Roberts says. Black Wall Street alone had roughly 200 businesses.*

- Explicit racial segregation zoning ordinances in Tulsa channeled Black customers to Black businesses, keeping Black community spending within the community, circulating repeatedly:  
<https://www.investopedia.com/insights/origins-black-wall-street/>
  - *As segregation grew stronger, Greenwood’s Black business district thrived, mainly because residents fed their purchasing dollars back into the local economy, while earning their incomes from white employers. This was possible because the migration of oilmen to Tulsa created a spike in demand for domestic help, which enabled Black residents to attain high-paying labor jobs as maids, chauffeurs, gardeners, janitors, shoe shiners, and porters. These workers often earned enough money to send their children to universities like Columbia Law School, Oberlin College, the Hampton Institute, the Tuskegee Institute, Spelman College, and Atlanta University, which positioned them to secure white-collar jobs after graduation.*
  - <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2015/02/26/black-wall-street-we-did-it-by-ourselves-and-were-punished/>
- It should be acknowledged that some of the Black wealth that built Greenwood came not from reparative land grants after slavery but rather from later federal policies seizing back and redistributing land from the indigenous nations that had received it as part of the forced resettlement in the Trail of Tears. In 1889, after a decade of lobbying by the railroad industry (including funding a PR campaign to promote illegal settlement), the federal government opened two million acres of these lands to new settlers in the first “Land Rush.” While the settlers were mostly White, there were some Black settlers from other parts of the country who saw an opportunity to become landowners, too, and some of these were among the founders of Tulsa’s Greenwood neighborhood later on, having translated those land expropriations into enough seed money to become commercial entrepreneurs, real estate developers, and financial lenders.  
<https://www.history.com/news/black-wall-street-tulsa-visionaries>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unassigned\\_Lands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unassigned_Lands)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land\\_Rush\\_of\\_1889](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_Rush_of_1889)
- Additionally, there was a great deal of inequality and stratification within the Black community in Tulsa and unsurprisingly the capital-owning class of Black residents tended to be the biggest beneficiary of the segregation economics: *Although wealthy Black people lived in Greenwood, plenty still struggled, working menial jobs and living in shanties. But the money they*

*spent in the district helped build the community. "People working outside the district, particularly the domestics, the housekeepers, cooks, nannies or the ushers at the magnificent Art Deco theaters or bellhops at the great hotels would get paid and then return to Greenwood with their money," says Michelle Place, executive director of the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum. "With segregation, they can't spend their money anywhere else. They can make their money out of the district, but they can't spend it there."* <https://www.history.com/news/black-wall-street-tulsa-visionaries>

- Some additional context from shortly before the 1921 massacre: Don't forget the Green Corn Rebellion of 1917, which we covered on Lend Lease Episode 15 in December 2019: <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2019/12/09/lend-lease-15-oklahoma-and-oregon-resist-the-great-war-dec-8-2019/>
  - Tenant farmers, both black and white, were being squeezed by the landowners, forcing them to take on ever-increasing debt. The Socialist Party and the Working Class Union organized the tenant farmers in opposition to rent-seeking by the landowners, and also the Great War ("The country folk had no intention of allowing President Woodrow Wilson and his agents in the county seats to send them to die in France.") When they rose up and rebelled against the draft ("they had no quarrel with the Germans"), a posse was formed to crush the rebellion. **After the rebellion was dispersed, there was a backlash against the Socialist Party and other pro-worker movements. The Ku Klux Klan used this anti-union sentiment to recruit, and cross-burnings and other terrorist acts grew in number and severity.**
- Since 2018, the City of Tulsa has been engaged in an investigation of possible unmarked grave sites of those killed in the massacre of 1921 and is marking the centennial this coming week by beginning to exhume some of the gravesites for DNA identification work: <https://www.cityoftulsa.org/1921graves>
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YKgl\\_jVRvg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YKgl_jVRvg)
  - Survivors and descendants of the Tulsa Race Massacre are still seeking justice and damages for what happened in 1921, and have filed a lawsuit against Tulsa. They have previously been brushed off by both the State of Oklahoma and the Federal Government in their search for justice.
- Listeners might also want to check out the NPR Code Switch feature on the present-day redevelopment happening in Greenwood, but that's beyond our scope for this episode today: <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/25/1000118546/tulsa-100-years-later>
- Additional resource from 2006: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070929123005/http://www.americanheritage.com/places/articles/web/2006-currie-ballard-film-1920s-tulsa-riot-muskogee-national-baptist-convention.shtml>