



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum

EFLA STUDY GUIDE

UNIT 7: The Great Migration & Harlem Renaissance (1919 – 1935)

CLASS 4: Black Wall Street – The Tulsa “Riot” of 1921

OVERVIEW

On May 31, 1921, a white mob of thousands launched a full assault on the community of Greenwood, a thriving Black enclave in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The mob attacked African American residents and set fire to their homes and businesses, igniting one of the worst race riots in U.S. history. The details are grueling: war planes dropped bombs on Greenwood and fired machine guns at Black residents as they ran for cover, and police officers and the National Guard participated in the brutality.

This act of white racial terror destroyed 35 city blocks and left 10,000 African Americans homeless. The mob killed at least 300 African American men, women and children and brutalized hundreds more. The reason—an alleged rape of a 17-year old white female by a 19 year-old Black male. Although the allegations were highly suspect, and the Black youth, Derrick Rowland, was [exonerated](#), the circulation of the news by local newspapers and the Ku Klux Klan [galvanized](#) white rage. And like most lynchings of Black men during the late 19th and 20th centuries, the charges of rape masked a deeper reality; many whites resented challenges to their feelings of white racial superiority, including displays of Black success. White resentment and envy ran deep in Tulsa long before the allegations of rape.

Greenwood, once referred to as “Little Africa,” was a prosperous African American community that stood as a testament to the [self-reliance](#), pride and mutual cooperation that shaped the rebuilding of Black life in the aftermath of slavery and [Reconstruction](#). The Black district was home to dozens of profitable businesses, newspapers, theaters, libraries and banks, including several multimillionaires. Booker T. Washington referred to Greenwood as the “Negro Wall Street,” later known as “Black Wall Street.” In the early 1900s, Greenwood attracted southern [migrants](#) who were fleeing to the North and West in an attempt to escape the brutality of white racial domination in southern states, including economic and political [repression](#). What many African Americans found when they traveled to the North and West was more segregation. Although racism divided Tulsa, Black residents pooled their resources together to create a lucrative business community and Black professional class. In the face of racial discrimination and segregation, African Americans in Greenwood achieved [self-determination](#).

The destruction of Black Wall Street resulted in approximately \$1.5 million in damage (equivalent to \$20 million today), yet white rage went unpunished. Not one of the thousands of white rioters was arrested. Rather, those arrested were Black and the National Guard detained roughly 5,000 Black men and women for days. A grand jury eventually blamed Black residents for the riot, and thousands of African Americans who lost their homes lived in tents throughout the city that were monitored by the police. Despite the city's refusal to offer aid to survivors, African Americans rebuilt their community within a span of five years and it flourished until the era of [desegregation](#) in the 1960s.

In 1997, the Oklahoma State Legislature authorized a commission to study and research the Tulsa (Greenwood) Race Riot of 1921. The findings, which were released in 2001, called for [reparations](#) to be paid to survivors and their descendants. In fact, a number of survivors, represented by African-American Harvard Law professor Dr. Charles Ogletree, sued for reparations, taking their case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Yet [restitution](#) was denied based on a statute of limitations that required the filing of lawsuits within two years. In 2013, the Oklahoma police chief issued a formal apology for the role police officers played in the 1921 Greenwood [massacre](#).

The massacre at Greenwood was not the only instance of white violence committed against a thriving Black community. In the summer of 1919, known as the “Red Summer,” whites attacked African Americans and burned down Black neighborhoods in cities all over the country, including Chicago, Illinois, Omaha, Nebraska, Knoxville, Tennessee and Washington, D.C. In 1923, false allegations of rape justified the lynching of a Black man in the booming Rosewood community in central Florida. When African Americans defended their community, white men killed Black men and women and burned down their homes and businesses. No one was charged for these murders or the destruction of property.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- ✓ Recount the true story of “Black Wall Street” and its destruction, as told by eyewitness accounts from both blacks and whites
- ✓ Identify how the local, city and state governments and media of Oklahoma collaborated in the Tulsa Massacre and its cover-up”
- ✓ Understand the role the Ku Klux Klan played in the Tulsa Massacre of 1921

ASSIGNMENT

View the following materials and answer the study questions.

DOCUMENTARY: *Black Wall Street: The Tulsa "Riot" of 1921* (1:16 hour)

Study Questions

1. What incident (s) sparked the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921? What were the real motives behind the Tulsa Race Riot?
2. What role did the local sheriff play in the Tulsa Riot of 1921? Who was responsible for ordering the air bombing "Black Wall Street?"
3. What did local authorities do to suppress the knowledge of the Massacre?
4. How many black people were murdered during the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921? What was the damage done to "Black Wall Street" and the black community of Tulsa?
5. What did the Oklahoma government do to the aid to blacks that was coming from other states? What lie did "embarrassed" city officials and clergymen present to the world regarding aid to blacks after the Massacre?
6. What happened with the trial of Dick Rowland, the man responsible for attempting to rape the white elevator worker that sparked the riot?
7. How were blacks confined after the Massacre?

VIDEO: *Black Wall Street - Before They Die* (6:31 min)

Study Questions

1. What did the survivors remember most about the race riot?
2. Why did Black residents of Greenwood rarely visit downtown?
3. According to one of the survivors, why did Black people avoid talking about the riot, especially to their children?
4. Do you believe survivors and their descendants should receive reparations? Why or why not?

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Books and Articles

Hannibal B. Johnson, *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District*

Link: http://www.amazon.com/Black-Wall-Street-Renaissance-Greenwood/dp/1934645389/ref=pd_bxgy_b_img_z

Tim Madigan, *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, by

Link: http://www.amazon.com/The-Burning-Massacre-Destruction-Tulsa/dp/0312302479/ref=pd_sim_b_3?ie=UTF8&refRID=1Z0CZ394QRB5Q1ET7QZG

Jay Jay Wilson (Author), Ron Wallace (Contributor), *Black Wallstreet*

Link: http://www.amazon.com/Black-Wallstreet-Jay-Wilson/dp/1592327001/ref=pd_sim_b_2?ie=UTF8&refRID=0VRHNSBHVM2MMXVTBGRS

A. G. Sulzberger, "As Survivors Dwindle, Tulsa Confronts Past," *New York Times*, June 19, 2011

Link: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/20/us/20tulsa.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Documentaries

Black Wall Street & The Tulsa Race Riot Of 1921 (54:09 min)

Link: <http://vimeo.com/14680242>

Websites

Before They Die! – The Road to Reparations for the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Survivors

Link: <https://tulsasurvivors.wordpress.com>

"A Black Holocaust in America" – The Tulsa Race Riot

Link: <http://www.blackwallstreet.freesevers.com/index.htm>

Learn NC: Durham's "Black Wall Street"

Link: <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newcentury/6001>

The Rise and Fall of America's Black Wall Street: The Story of African American Entrepreneurship in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1836-1921, by Alicia Murphy

Link: http://www.lourdes.edu/portals/0/files/academics/artssciences/history/online_narrative_history/onhj11summer/pdf/black_wall_street.pdf