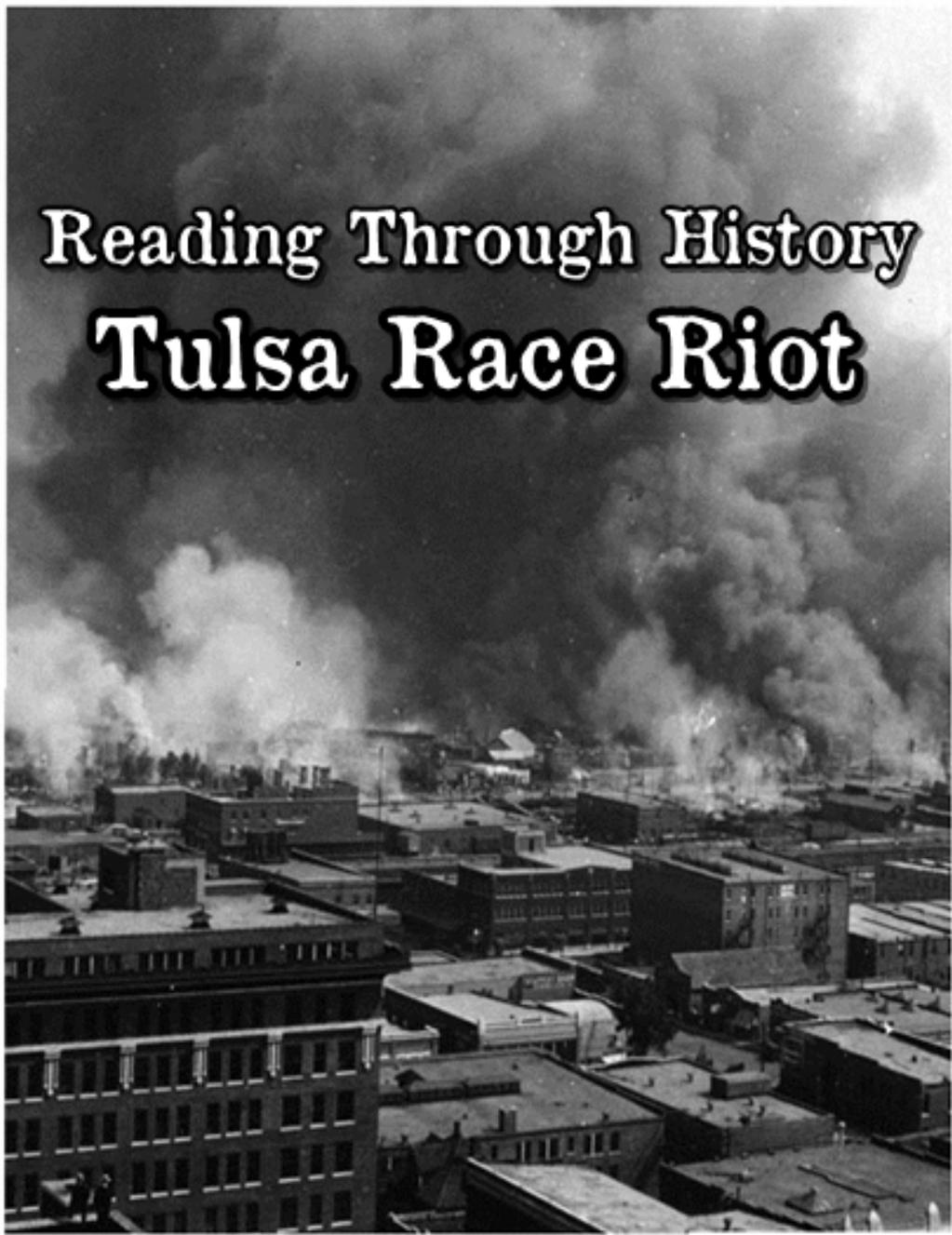


Reading Through History
Tulsa Race Riot



Excerpt from Oklahoma History
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The Tulsa Race Riot

One of the worst race riots to ever occur in the United States happened in Tulsa, Oklahoma. What precipitated the riot? What happened in the aftermath?

Between the years of 1910 and 1920, the city of Tulsa was experiencing enormous growth. The population was soaring as people from all over the country made their way to Tulsa to find work in the blossoming oil industry. As Tulsa grew, Greenwood grew as well.



Greenwood was the African American district, just north of Tulsa. By 1921, Greenwood had a population of more than 15,000 and a host of successful businesses including doctors, lawyers, movie theaters, hotels, and restaurants. Its business district was so successful that Greenwood had become known throughout the nation as “The Black Wall Street”. Greenwood had become the wealthiest African American community in the nation.

Words to watch for:

*precipitated apprehended
exaggerated altercation*

Many poor whites living in Tulsa became jealous of the success Greenwood was experiencing. Young men had returned from fighting in World War I and were unable to find work in Tulsa. This mounting frustration greatly contributed to the events that would occur on May 31st and June 1st of 1921.

On May 30th, 1921, a nineteen-year-old African American shoe shiner, Dick Rowland, entered an elevator in the Drexel Building. The elevator operator was a seventeen-year-old white female named Sarah Page. It is unclear what happened, but experts speculate that Dick Rowland lost his balance and reached out to stabilize himself. Miss Page believed she was being assaulted and screamed, which caused Mr. Rowland to run away in fear. Rowland was apprehended by the police and charged with assault.

This incident was reported by the *Tulsa Tribune* in an exaggerated and sensational fashion. In turn, a group of angry white citizens arrived at the courthouse that evening with the intentions of hanging Dick Rowland. Likewise, a large group of blacks arrived at the courthouse with the purpose of protecting Rowland. Tensions were high between the two groups and a scuffle broke out. During the altercation, shots were fired. Suddenly, the entire city erupted into a sea of violence.

The white mob crossed the railroad tracks into Greenwood and began leveling the community. Firebombs were thrown at businesses and homes were burned to the ground, sometimes with families still trapped inside. Many people were shot as they attempted to run away, while others were dragged to death behind vehicles.

Black citizens did not intend to stand idly by while their homes were destroyed and neighbors were killed, so they fought back. Some, who had recently returned from fighting in Europe, began digging trenches and fortifying positions. Greenwood virtually became a warzone.

By the morning of June 1st, Greenwood had been turned into a smoking pile of rubble. The mayor of Tulsa had appealed to the Oklahoma governor to send the National Guard. However, the National Guard did not arrive until late on the morning of June 1st. By this time, most of the fighting had died down. Black rioters were rounded up by the thousands and taken to detention centers.



The official death toll from the riot was 39. However, many bodies were hidden or disposed of before they could be counted. Historians estimate that the actual number of dead could be as high as 300. More than 800 were wounded. Thirty-five city blocks were destroyed by fire. This included 191 businesses, a junior high, several churches, and a hospital. More than 10,000 Greenwood residents were left homeless.

Dick Rowland was never charged with a crime. Sarah Page dropped the charges against him, and Rowland was escorted from Tulsa shortly after the riot and never returned to the city.

Following the Tulsa Race Riot, there was a concentrated effort to omit the incident from state and local history. Newspaper articles about the riot were destroyed and it was rarely mentioned in state history textbooks. Many residents of the state grew up without knowing the violence had ever occurred. Finally, in 1996, the state created a commission to study the riot and create a historical account so that the memory of the events could be preserved.

The city of Greenwood never recovered completely. It took more than ten years to rebuild the area. Today, this region is known as North Tulsa.

Multiple Choice: *Select the choice that completes the statement or answers the question.*

1. _____ Which of the following best describes Greenwood?
 - a. Greenwood was a slum in Tulsa where African Americans were forced to live.
 - b. Greenwood was an all-African American college in eastern Oklahoma.
 - c. Greenwood was an exclusive white community on the south side of Tulsa.
 - d. Greenwood was a wealthy African American district just north of Tulsa.

2. _____ Which of the following contributed to the events which occurred in Greenwood and Tulsa on May 31st and June 1st of 1921?
 - a. Young men were frustrated because they could not find work after returning from the war.
 - b. African Americans were taunting poor whites and teasing them about not being able to find a job.
 - c. The citizens of Tulsa had forced African Americans to live in slums, which were becoming dangerously overcrowded.
 - d. An outspoken critic of segregation began giving speeches and stirring the citizens of Greenwood into action.

3. _____ Which of the following best summarizes the incident that initiated the violence that occurred in Tulsa and Greenwood in 1921?
 - a. A young African American male was charged with assault after an unknown incident occurred in an elevator between him and a young white woman.
 - b. Two rival gangs attacked each other over an incident that had occurred several weeks before. The tension between the two groups had been escalating for days.
 - c. An African American male was accidentally shot by a white police officer who was attempting to shoot a fleeing suspect.
 - d. A white female was attacked by an African American female as the two women were both attempting to board the same bus.

4. _____ Which of the following best describes Greenwood after the riot occurred?
 - a. Many businesses, churches, a school, and a hospital had been destroyed by fire and more than 10,000 people had been left homeless.
 - b. The damage was primarily confined to regions of the city where no one lived.
 - c. There was extensive damage to residential areas in Tulsa, but Greenwood survived the riots with very little damage.
 - d. Greenwood suffered very little damage to homes, but many businesses were destroyed. The people of Greenwood rebuilt over the next year.

5. _____ Which of the following statements is inaccurate of the Tulsa Race Riot?
 - a. Dick Rowland was never charged with a crime.
 - b. Following the incident, there was a concentrated effort to omit the riot from state and local history.
 - c. In 1996, the state created a commission to study the riot and create a historical account of the event.
 - d. The city of Greenwood recovered from the riot very quickly.

Vocabulary: Match each word with its correct definition. Consider how the word is used in the lesson. This might help you define each term. Use a dictionary to help if necessary.

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| a. precipitate | d. altercation |
| b. apprehend | e. omit |
| c. exaggerate | |

1. _____ to hasten the occurrence of; bring about prematurely

2. _____ a heated or angry dispute

3. _____ to magnify beyond the limits of truth

4. _____ to leave out; fail to mention

5. _____ to take into custody; detain

Guided Reading: Fill in the blanks below to create complete sentences.

6. By 1921, Greenwood had a population of more than _____ and a host of successful businesses.

7. Many poor whites living in Tulsa became _____ of the success Greenwood was experiencing.

8. The incident was reported on by the _____ in an exaggerated and sensational fashion.

9. The white mob crossed the railroad tracks into _____ and began leveling the community.

10. Black citizens did not intend to stand idly by while their homes were _____ and neighbors were killed.

11. The mayor of Tulsa had appealed to the Oklahoma governor to send the _____.

12. Historians estimate that the actual number of dead could be as high as _____.

13. Dick Rowland was escorted from _____ shortly after the riot and never returned to the city.

14. Newspaper _____ about the riot were destroyed, and it was rarely mentioned in state history textbooks.

15. Many residents of the state grew up without knowing the _____ had ever occurred.

Summarize: *Answer the following questions in the space provided. Attempt to respond in a complete sentence for each question. Be sure to use correct capitalization and punctuation!*

1. Who was the young African American shoe shiner who became involved in the incident which eventually led to the Tulsa Race Riot?

2. What did Greenwood become known as throughout the nation?

3. When did the Tulsa Race Riot occur?

4. Where was Greenwood located?

5. Why were many poor whites jealous of Greenwood?

6. How were the events surrounding the riot covered up?

Student Response: *Write a paragraph addressing the questions raised below. A thorough response should consist of three to five complete sentences.*

7. Why do you suppose historians are nearly certain that Dick Rowland did not actually assault the woman that he was arrested for assaulting?

Answer Key:

**Tulsa Race Riot:
Multiple Choice:**

- 1) D
- 2) A
- 3) A
- 4) A
- 5) D

Vocabulary:

- 1) A
- 2) D
- 3) C
- 4) E
- 5) B

Guided Reading:

- 6) 15,000
- 7) jealous
- 8) Tulsa Tribune
- 9) Greenwood
- 10) Destroyed
- 11) National Guard
- 12) 300
- 13) Tulsa
- 14) Articles
- 15) Violence

Summarize:

1. Dick Rowland was the young African American involved in the incident.
2. Greenwood was known as the Black Wall Street.
3. The Tulsa Race Riot occurred on May 31st and June 1st of 1921.
4. Greenwood was located just north of Tulsa.
5. Poor whites were jealous of the success Greenwood was experiencing (OR because they were unable to find jobs).
6. Newspaper articles about the event were destroyed and it was rarely mentioned in history textbooks.

Student Response:

7. Student answers will vary.