

BLACK WALL STREET NARRATIVE

Greenwood, Oklahoma, 1921. The north side of Tulsa was a prosperous community — exclusively black — because Jim Crow laws prohibited “negroes” from living in white neighborhoods and where it was “said” more than 3000 Ku Klux Klan members resided in the area. At that time, there were countless all black communities, like Greenwood, scattered throughout the U.S. — 60 in the Oklahoma Territory alone. Greenwood, however, was the jewel of “Negro America.” Though white Tulsans called it, “little Africa,” Booker T. Washington gave it the name we know it as today, “Black Wall Street’ — and it was the wealthiest black community in America — where black men and women came to pursue the “American dream.” It boasted:

- Black owned banks
- Pharmacies
- Grocery stores
- Movie theaters
- Restaurants
- Churches
- Newspaper publishing
- Law offices
- A bus company
- It’s own school district — where the average student wore a uniform with a suit and tie
- A business college
- A Hospital — with an entire black staff and an internationally acclaimed surgeon
- Millionaires — which Greenwood was known to have had more millionaires residing there than the entire United States combined.
- And of the only 2 airports in the state of Oklahoma, one of them was for the half-dozen private airplanes, own by its black oil tycoons.

To top it off, the minimum wage and living standard of a resident of Black Wall Street far exceed that of the average white citizen of Tulsa.

But on May 30th, 1921, all that changed. Dick Rowland, a shoeshine boy, entered the elevator in the Drexel building to use one of the only few Colored bathrooms, in downtown Tulsa — on the top floor. Sarah Page, a 17 year old a white elevator operator, began operating the elevator when it “lurched,” causing Rowland to stumble. He bumped into Sarah, and she screamed. Rowland, knowing what Frederick Douglass had penned as the truth, with regard to the treatment of black men in America; “to be accused, was to be convicted, and to be convicted was to be punished.” In this case, “punishment,” when it came to the accusations of a white women, meant death and knowing her scream was a likely death sentence, young Rowland ran away. He was later seized and apprehended — with the intent of being lynched. Word of a black man raping a defenseless white girl spread throughout the Tulsa area. Dozens and then hundreds, until a mob of over 2000 white men gathered at the county courthouse — demanding justice. But, justice for what? Sarah Page wasn’t assaulted, her clothes weren’t ruffled, and though her story wavered during questioning, she ultimately affirmed she was not harmed. Moreover, she refused to sign a statement saying that she had been raped. But don’t let facts get in the way of a false accusation of a black man who needed to be put in his place — at the end of a rope.

The TULSA TRIBUNE reported, “a negro assaults a white girl” and later “. . . to Lynch Negro tonight.”

With no basis in fact for the allegations of rape, the mob persisted in their demand for the justice of a white girl who emphatically stated that no injustice had been done.

Walter White of the NEW YORK EVENING POST wrote, “Chief of Police John A Gustafson, Sheriff McCulloch, Mayor T.D. Evans and a number of reputable citizens, among them prominent oil operator, all declared the the girl had not been molested; that no attempt at criminal assault had been made. Victor F. Barnett, managing editor of the TRIBUNE stated that his paper had since learned that the original story about the girl's face was scratched and her clothes torn was untrue.”

And there you have it . . . “fake news.” But the damage had already been done, and the wheels were set in motion. Armed Black WWI veterans were among the less than 100 members of the Greenwood community who came to prevent another lynching of a black man as thousands had been lynched since the generation of Reconstruction. A verbal confrontation led to a shot being fired, triggering what would soon become the most bloody racial conflict in American history.

Some 500 members of the White mob were armed and deputized by city officials and those who didn't own weapons looted stores to obtain guns and ammunition along the way. Thousands of angry white men descended upon “little Africa,” as a few white families provided sanctuary to those fleeing from violence. Over the course of 24 hours the mob looted, murdered, and razed the wealthiest black city in America to the ground.

Eyewitness testimony stated "a dozen or more" planes circled the black area, dropping "burning turpentine balls" over the city of Greenwood and firing bullets at Black residents, young and old, gunning them down in the street. It was the first and only time Americans used planes to attack and kill its own citizens as it destroyed an entire city.

Authorities engaged in a concerted effort to prevent help from arriving until considerable damage was done by:

- Cutting off communication requesting help
- Blocking transportation ways of firefighters and ambulances; and
- Even preventing the Red Cross from coming in earlier to help the injured and terrorized community.

TULSA TRIBUNE:

“As they passed the city’s most traveled street, they held both hands high above their heads, their hats in one hand, as a token of their submission to the white man’s authority. They will not return to the homes they had on Tuesday afternoon, only the heaps of

ashes, the angry white man's reprisal for the wrong inflicted on them by the inferior race.”

Following the massacre, insurance companies refused to compensate the residents, though the city and its officials were found negligent in preventing it. Decades of silence about the terror, violence, and theft passed. There were no convictions for any of the charges related to the murders or violence. Not one white person was ever held responsible for these crimes — though dozens of black men were indicted for inciting a riot. Government and city officials, not only failed to invest and rebuild the once thriving Greenwood community, but blocked efforts to do so and even actively sought to appropriate their land. The crime wasn't acknowledged by the city or the State of Oklahoma for over 70 years, rarely mentioning it in history books, classrooms, or even in private. Most residents grew into middle age completely unaware of what had taken place. Even a report detailing the history of the Tulsa Fire Department from 1897 to 2017, made no mention of the massacre.

And on that Memorial Day weekend, June 1st, 1921, Greenwood, OK was brought to an abrupt end. Black Wall Street was wiped off of the map.

- 300 African Americans murdered, possibly more
- 1000's injured
- More than 10,000 left homeless
- 40 city blocks burned to the ground and
- The few homes left? . . . were completely looted

The Tulsa Real Estate Exchange estimated property losses amounting to the equivalent of more than \$32 million in today's money. Unbeknownst to most, Tulsa's Black Wall Street wasn't the only Black town to be ethnically cleansed in America. It wasn't the only city forgotten, nor was it the only black town where no one was ever arrested, prosecuted, or where victims were never compensated.

. . . . Time has passed, memories have faded, and survivors have died, taking the knowledge of, not only how the cities were destroyed but,

arguably even more tragic, the knowledge of how these countless all Black towns were built.

Can a biblical blueprint be extrapolated from what we've found? That is indeed our challenge; to cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate in order to:

- Turn our desolate neighborhoods into thriving communities and
- Build them up by utilizing the keys to economic and societal development

Let us Rediscover, let us Reunite, and let us Rebuild a new Black Wall Street