

Black Wall Street & the Tulsa Race Massacre

Terror and Triumph

1830s – Present

Opportunity & Prosperity

Segregation & Violence

Spirit of Determination

"Urban Renewal"

Hope & Reconciliation



Black Wall Street

In 1921, Tulsa, Oklahoma was home to one of the most prosperous Black communities in America: the Greenwood neighborhood, also known as “Black Wall Street.”

Greenwood was a thriving business district of restaurants, theaters, hotels, grocery and drug stores, libraries, churches, and a new schoolhouse. Its 10,000 Black residents were largely **affluent** despite living under segregation.



Black Wall Street - Devastated

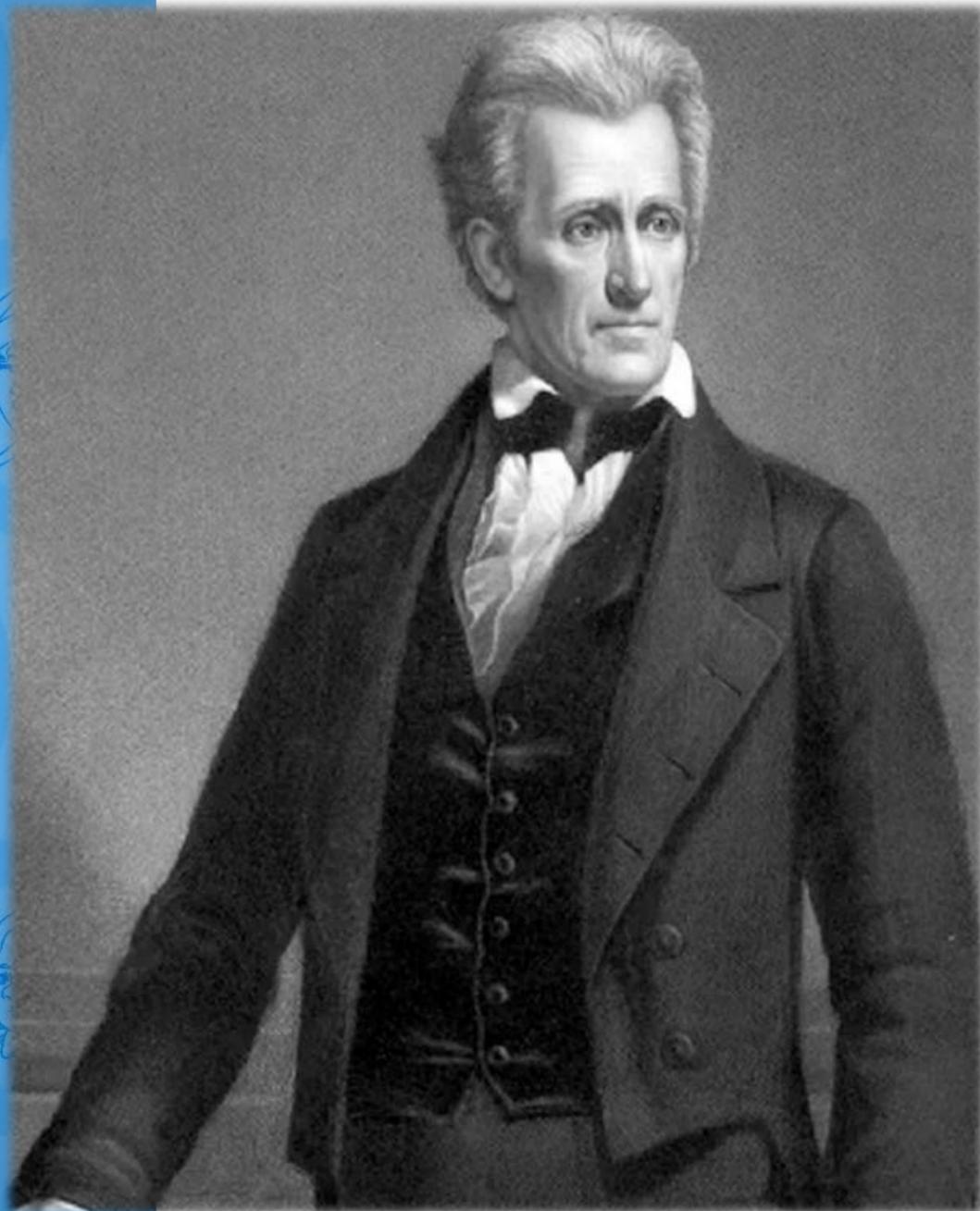


Then, from the night of May 31 to afternoon of June 1, a mob of their White neighbors destroyed it all.

An unknown number – possibly 300, by some estimates – were killed in what is now remembered as the Tulsa Race Massacre.

In the years that followed the destruction, Black Tulsans fought a difficult battle to rebuild their lives and **livelihoods** after one of the worst incidents of racial violence in American history.

Frontier Origins



Black Americans first came to what is now Oklahoma in the 1830s as a result of President Andrew Jackson's removing American Indians from the southeastern United States. The Five Tribes – Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole – owned slaves, and brought them along on their forced trek westward, remembered as the Trail of Tears.

While some Indian slaveowners were no less brutal than their White counterparts, others were more tolerant. After the Civil War (during which the Five Tribes fought for the Confederacy), the Creek and Seminole granted newly freed slaves tribal membership.

Opportunity & Equality



John and Loula Williams, owners of the Dreamland Theatre, in Tulsa with their son.

Economic opportunity and racial equality in the Oklahoma and Indian Territories appealed to Black Americans escaping the South. By the turn of the century, civil rights gains by southern Blacks during **Reconstruction** had been taken away with the rise of “Jim Crow” law.

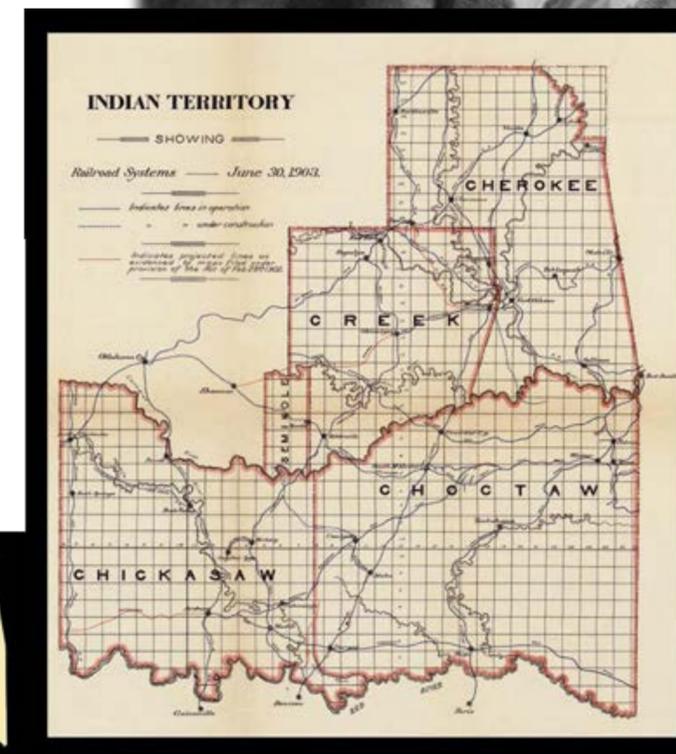
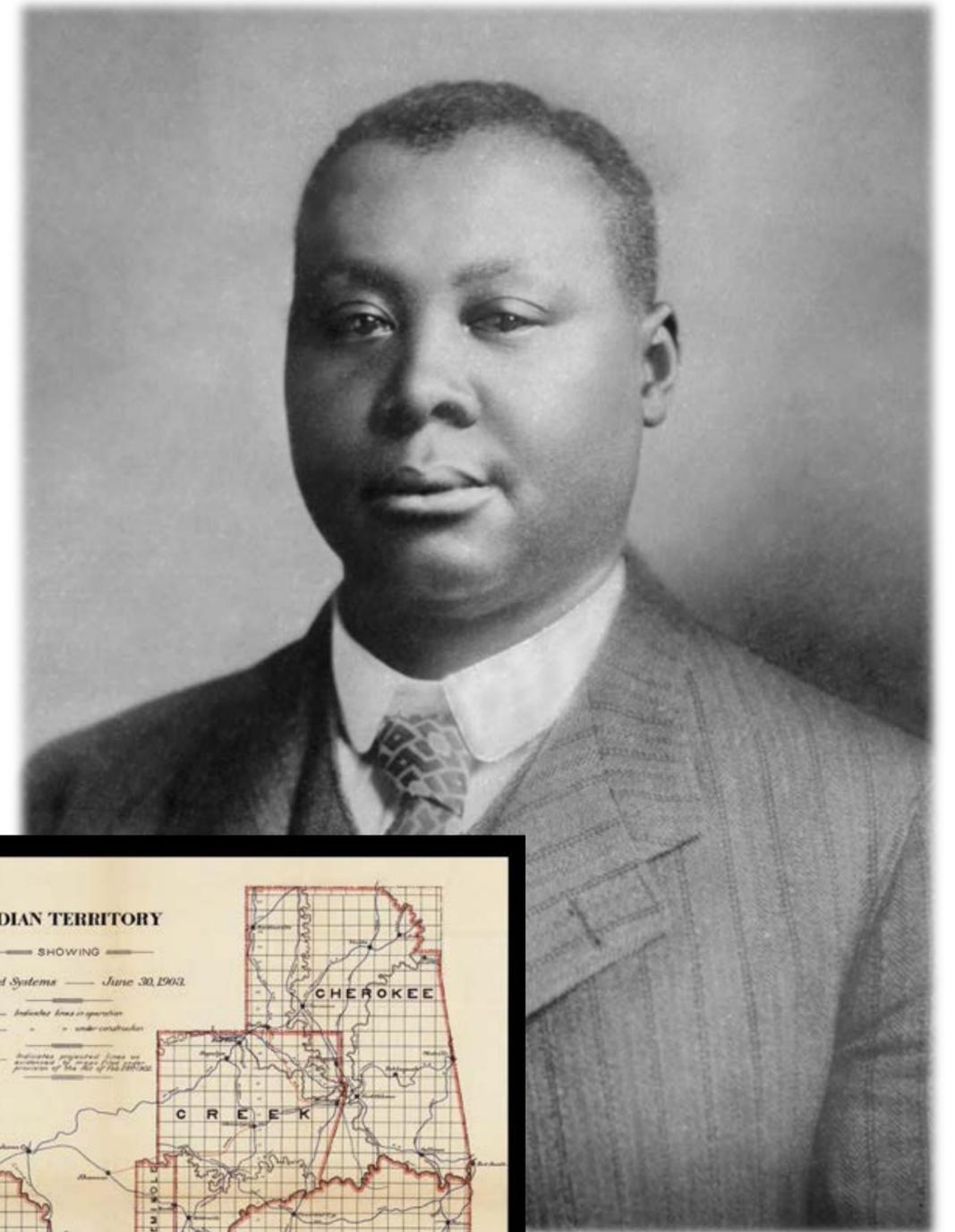
John Wesley Williams – a Mississippi-born **entrepreneur** who, with his wife Loula, owned and operated the Dreamland Theatre, Tulsa’s first Black theatre, in the 1910s – later explained to his son: “I came out to the promised land.”

Oklahoma Statehood

Black tribal members and settlers alike opposed statehood – which combined the “Twin Territories” of Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory into a single state. Many of the settlers who were seeking statehood were from the South and would make segregation the law of the land.

J. Coody Johnson (1864-1927), a Creek tribal member of African ancestry, and other tribal leaders had visited President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907 and pleaded with him to keep his campaign promise to veto statehood with segregationist constitutions. Their case was ignored, and that same year Oklahoma became the 46th state.

J. Coody Johnson; map of the Indian and Oklahoma territories.



State of Oklahoma

The president of Oklahoma's constitutional convention, future governor William H. Murray, was a progressive reformer... but he also believed **explicitly** in White racial superiority.

Segregationist laws soon separated the population.

Despite the oppressive new laws, most Black Oklahomans held onto their prosperity. And, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the city of Tulsa grew larger and more wealthy, as more and more oil rigs were constructed.



Prosperity in Tulsa



With this wealth, a spirit of freedom and independence flourished in Black Tulsa, and civic resistance to racial discrimination was not uncommon. When Black veterans of WWI returned home to the country they'd fought for, this insistence on equality became stronger still.

The Greenwood neighborhood of north Tulsa became a center of this resistance, famous not only for its bustling “Black Wall Street” commercial district but as a central hub for civil rights activism.

But on the other side of the railroad tracks, White resentment of Greenwood's prosperity grew.

The Low Point of American Race Relations

Like the authors of their state constitution, many White Tulsans held clearly racist beliefs. At least some of the city's leaders were members of the Ku Klux Klan, a secretive **vigilante** organization that swelled in membership in the early 1900s.

Given that its members kept their status hidden, it's impossible to know how much the Klan influenced Tulsa's political life. But long before the horrors of 1921, many White and Black Tulsans were harassed if they violated racial or ethnic taboos.

Prominent civil engineer W.H. Holway, a White Protestant, later claimed that for years the Klan "ran the whole county and state – schools, juries, everything." He recalled being threatened by Klansmen because he had Roman Catholics on his payroll, and was urged by city officials to give in to Klan demands to fire them.

Cartoon from the Chicago Defender, a Black-owned newspaper, warning of the Klan's national political power, c. 1925



“Red Summer” of 1919

This situation was not unique to Oklahoma. In fact, there were vicious race riots across the country in the years before the Tulsa massacre.

The infamous “Red Summer” of 1919 saw racist attacks on Black communities in Washington, D.C.; Norfolk, Virginia; Chicago, Illinois; Omaha, Nebraska; Elaine, Arkansas; and Wilmington, Delaware.



The politically engaged Blacks in Tulsa were well aware that this violence, like the regular lynchings across the country, could spread to their city. But the fighting experience of WWI veterans, combined with a broader Western tradition of firearms ownership, meant Black Tulsans were inclined to armed resistance and self-defense.

A Minor Incident Intensifies

On May 30, a young Black man named Dick Rowland got into an elevator in an office building in downtown Tulsa. Rowland worked across the street, but the nearest “colored” restroom he could use was on the second floor of another building.

The elevator operator that day was a teenaged White woman named Sarah Page. When Rowland got off the elevator, a clerk down the hall heard Page scream and called the police. While it’s unclear exactly what happened, it does not seem that anyone thought the incident was serious at the time.

Officers interviewed Page but waited until the next day to arrest Rowland for assault – or possibly to protect Rowland himself, as **unsubstantiated** rumors had begun to spread that a Black man had assaulted a White girl.

Nab Negro for Attacking Girl In an Elevator

A negro delivery boy who gave his name to the police as “Diamond Dick” but who has been identified as Dick Rowland, was arrested on South Greenwood avenue this morning by Officers Carmichael and Pack, charged with attempting to assault the 17-year-old white elevator girl in the Drexel building early yesterday.

He will be tried in municipal court this afternoon on a state charge.

The girl said she noticed the negro a few minutes before the attempted assault looking up and down the hallway on the third floor of the Drexel building as if to see if there was anyone in sight but thought nothing of it at the time.

A few minutes later he entered the elevator she claimed, and attacked her, scratching her hands and face and tearing her clothes. Her screams brought a clerk from Renberg’s store to her assistance and the negro fled. He was captured and identified this morning both by the girl and clerk, police say.

Rowland denied that he tried to harm the girl, but admitted he put his hand on her arm in the elevator when she was alone.

Tenants of the Drexel building said the girl is an orphan who works as an elevator operator to pay her way through business college.

Trouble Grows... A Crowd Forms

On May 31, the Tulsa Tribute, one of the city's two White-owned newspapers, printed an editorial under the headline "To Lynch Negro Tonight."

That night in Greenwood, at the Dreamland Theatre, a man got up on stage and announced that Whites were going to lynch Rowland at the courthouse. "We're not going to let this happen," he declared. Meanwhile, hundreds of White Tulsans gathered outside the Tulsa County Courthouse, some demanding that Rowland be turned over to the crowd. The sheriffs and his deputies refused.



Around 9:00 p.m., about 25 armed Black men, some veterans in uniform, marched to the courthouse to protect Rowland.

The sheriff declared that the situation was under control and tried to get everyone to leave, but the arrival of Black men with guns had riled up the mostly White crowd.

What Happens When A Crowd Forms?

Do you think that groups of people sometimes behave differently than individuals do?

If so, why do you think this happens?

Have you ever heard of the phrase “a mob mentality” ?

What do you think this means?

What is vigilantism? Is it legal?



Shots Fired



After about 75 more armed Black Tulsans arrived at 10 p.m., the sheriff asked them to leave, assuring them that Rowland was safe. Apparently satisfied, the group of Black Tulsans, now 100 strong, began to march away from the courthouse.

Then, an older White man tried to take one of the Black men's rifles. There was a struggle and shots were fired.

In the brief gunfight that followed, twelve people – two Black, ten White – were killed as the crowd – possibly as large as two thousand people, including women and children – scrambled for cover. Black Tulsans began to retreat north to Greenwood.

Fighting Turns to Massacre

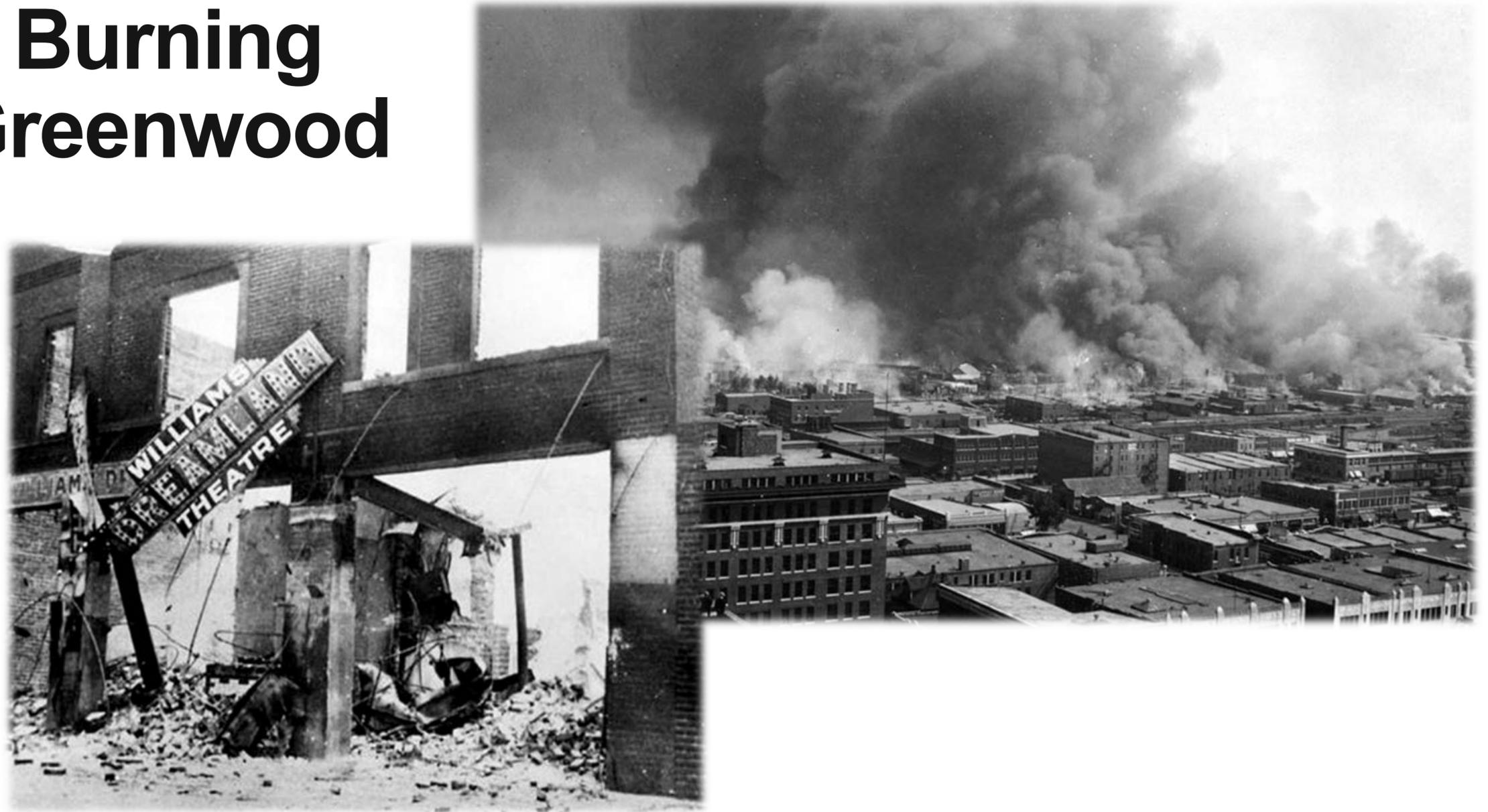
Gangs of White men pursued them, some apparently deputized by Tulsa police. In the early hours of the Wednesday, June 1, a mob of armed White Tulsans numbering in the thousands, some dressed in their military uniforms, crossed the railroad tracks north into Greenwood.

Black Tulsans were ready to fight back, but were unprepared for the size of the mob attack on Greenwood. Vigilante gunmen fired machine guns into Black homes and businesses. Biplanes flew overhead, firing into the streets and, according to many eyewitnesses, dropping homemade bombs.

National Guard machine gun crew sent in to stop the riot.



The Burning of Greenwood



As fires spread through Greenwood, mobs looted black homes and businesses, killing those who resisted. Even Whites who tried to help their Black neighbors, or calm those in the mobs, including the Tulsa Fire Department and members of the National Guard, were threatened or fired upon until they relented and allowed the violence to continue.

The National Guard Arrives

In an attempt to restore order, the National Guard arrived and declared martial law just before noon on June 1st. But by then, the damage was mostly done. Thirty-five square blocks had been burned to the ground, including over 1000 homes and most of Greenwood's shops and restaurants, doctor's offices, the new school, the hospital, and its Black-owned hotels and theatres.

Thousands of Black Tulsans who had fled Greenwood during the attack were then housed at the fairgrounds for days. The National Guard forced Black men to clean up the wreckage of their own neighborhoods.



No Charges Were Ever Filed

Many legal efforts have been made to reclaim the property stolen or destroyed during the massacre, and to make **restitution** for the wealth destroyed overnight, likely the equivalent 30 million dollars today.

But no restitution has ever been made, and no one who participated in the massacre was ever charged with a crime.



Battling Back

But even in the shadow of these horrifying events, the people of Greenwood fought back, battling efforts by the city to seize their property and cover up the scale of the massacre, and rebuilding the homes and businesses the mob had destroyed.

Many survivors of the tragedy made the decision to leave and start again elsewhere.

But others stayed to rebuild, fighting legal, political, and spiritual battles against a Tulsa government that was indifferent at best and bitterly hostile at worst.



Disaster Relief Efforts

Days after the massacre, Maurice Willows, a White Red Cross official from St. Louis, managed to convince his organization to declare Tulsa a “natural disaster area.” Officially, the Red Cross did not **intervene** after a man-made crisis.

With this **pretense** in place, Willows and Red Cross social workers provided vital medical assistance, food, and supplies to **dispossessed** Blacks.

Willows also kept careful records, estimating the death toll at 300, much higher than city officials reported. He also insisted on calling the massacre “civil warfare” rather than a “Negro uprising,” as other government reports had.



Some Facts Will Never Be Known



Death in a Promised Land

The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921

Scott Ellsworth

Foreword by John Hope Franklin

Nobody knows exactly how many people were killed in Tulsa during those two days of violence and destruction.

Why do you think this is so?

80 years later, in 2001, the state of Oklahoma put together a commission to investigate the massacre, and could only confirm 39 killed. But many historians, drawing on estimates by Willows and other witnesses, put the number closer to 300 victims — the vast majority of them Black.

For decades, Black-owned newspapers kept the memory of the Tulsa massacre alive in the Black community. In 1982, historian Scott Ellsworth's book *Death in the Promised Land* helped restore Greenwood to wider public memory and gave new voice to surviving witnesses and their descendants.

“What’s in a Name?”

In the days following the burning of Greenwood, local and national press labeled the devastating events a “race war.” But later, if the tragedy was remembered at all, it was typically referred to as a “race riot.”

Many modern historians and activists believe that the word “riot” implies that Black and White Tulsans were equally responsible for the events.

Others believe the word “massacre” makes Black Tulsans seem like passive victims who didn’t fight back when confronted with a brutal invasion – when, in fact, armed resistance and self-defense were widespread.

Which term is more appropriate? What other labels could be used?



A National Response, Local Obstruction

As news of the tragedy spread across the country, the NAACP and Red Cross were flooded with donations to help survivors, from sources such as Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. of Harlem – the most famous Black minister in America – and a collection taken up by Black inmates of the Wisconsin State Prison.



Tulsa’s city government slowed relief efforts, resisting support from “outsiders” and insisting that responsibility for relief lay with the city of Tulsa alone. But local efforts to help were minimal and ineffective.

Even if White political leaders truly wanted to see Greenwood rebuilt, the amount of work that needed to be done was more than they could handle.

Attempted Land Grab



Attorneys Spears (left) and Franklin (right) with their secretary, Effie Thompson, working out of a tent only days after the burning of Greenwood.

On June 3, just days after the destruction, a White-led influential trade organization called the Real Estate Exchange recommended that the city not rebuild Greenwood, but instead replace the whole area with an industrial zone.

The group's president argued that such a zone would not only be conveniently close to the railway, but would further separate Black and White Tulsans. They said "the **intermingling** of the lower elements of the two races ... is the root of the evil and should not exist."

Attorneys like B.C. Franklin, a survivor of the massacre, fought to prevent this kind of organized theft and tried to help Black Tulsans get their looted property back.

Determination in the Face of Hostility

Black attorneys and civil rights advocates sued the city, arguing it had taken the “burned district” of Greenwood illegally, and won. With legal rights secured, they began to rebuild. By 1925, **infrastructure** was restored enough to host a conference of the National Negro Business League.

The fact that a partially restored Black Tulsa emerged only a few years after the massacre was a victory over hatred and despair. As historian Hannibal B. Johnson said in 2020:

“The real story here is about the indomitable human spirit. It’s about these remarkable Black people who had vision: they created something that was of national renown and watched it be destroyed unjustly. Most of them remained. They were resilient. They rebuilt, even in the face of great hostility.”



Rebuilt Black Wall Street in 1930's Tulsa.

Rising from the Ruins

Greenwood's prosperity in the 1930s and 40s, according to historian Scott Ellsworth and others, not only met but exceeded what it accomplished before 1921.

In the early 1940s, Black Wall Street had returned and was thriving, with over 200 Black-owned businesses operating in Greenwood. Ten years later, it was once again one of the largest centers of Black enterprise in America, with a population of about 10,000, the same number of residents as before 1921.



Marching band, perhaps from Booker T. Washington High School, marching through Greenwood, c. 1940s

The False Promise of “Urban Renewal”

Ironically, it was integration efforts of the 1950s and 60s that led to Greenwood’s economic decline – with Black consumers now able to spend their money outside their own community, the need and desire for a “Black Wall Street” began to dissolve.

In addition, so-called “urban renewal” efforts across America, beginning in the 1950s, razed many Black urban centers to make way for public housing, massive highways, and other city planning schemes. In the 1970s, most of historic Greenwood was demolished again, this time to make way for an eight-lane highway, Interstate 244.



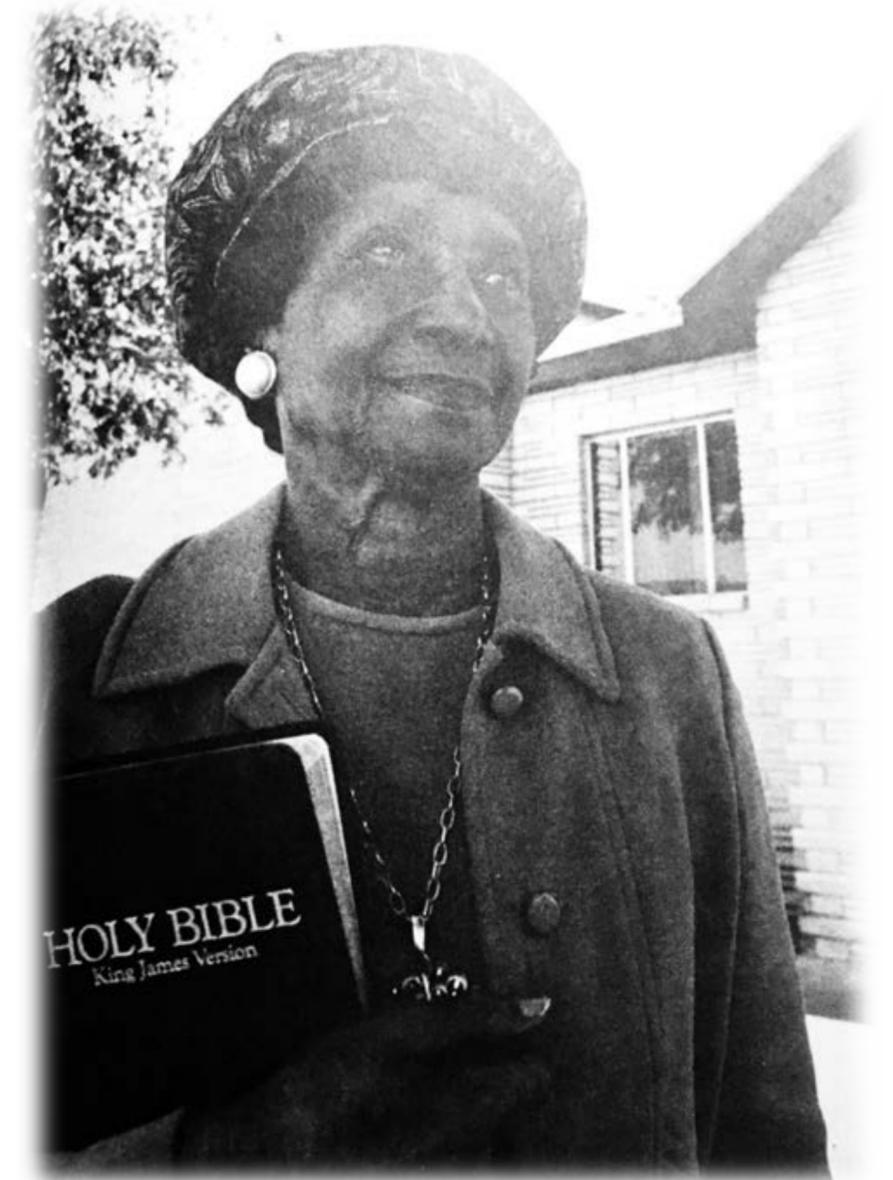
The False Promise of “Urban Renewal”

Speaking to the Tulsa City Commission in 1970, massacre survivor and Greenwood resident Mabel Little compared urban renewal to the devastation she and her neighbors endured a half-century earlier:

“You destroyed everything we had. I was here ... and the people are suffering more *now* than they did then.”

**Do you know what “urban renewal” means?
What about “eminent domain”?**

**What are these supposed to accomplish?
Why might they fail, or make things worse?**



Mabel Little in an image from her memoir, *Fire on Mount Zion: My Life and History as a Black Woman in America* (1992)

Hope & Reconciliation

Despite Greenwood's remarkable victories, the loss of life and wealth in 1921 remains staggering. Efforts are still underway to locate mass graves around Tulsa and establish a spirit of hope and reconciliation.

Tulsa's Reconciliation Park was Dr. John Hope Franklin's vision to transform the bitterness and mistrust caused by years of racial division, even violence, into a hopeful future of reconciliation and cooperation for Tulsa and the nation.

It memorializes the Tulsa Race Riot, "the worst civic disturbance in American history." The Park also tells the story of the Black American contribution to founding and building Oklahoma.



Reconciliation Tower was dedicated in 2010 at the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park in Tulsa.

Centenary Commemorated

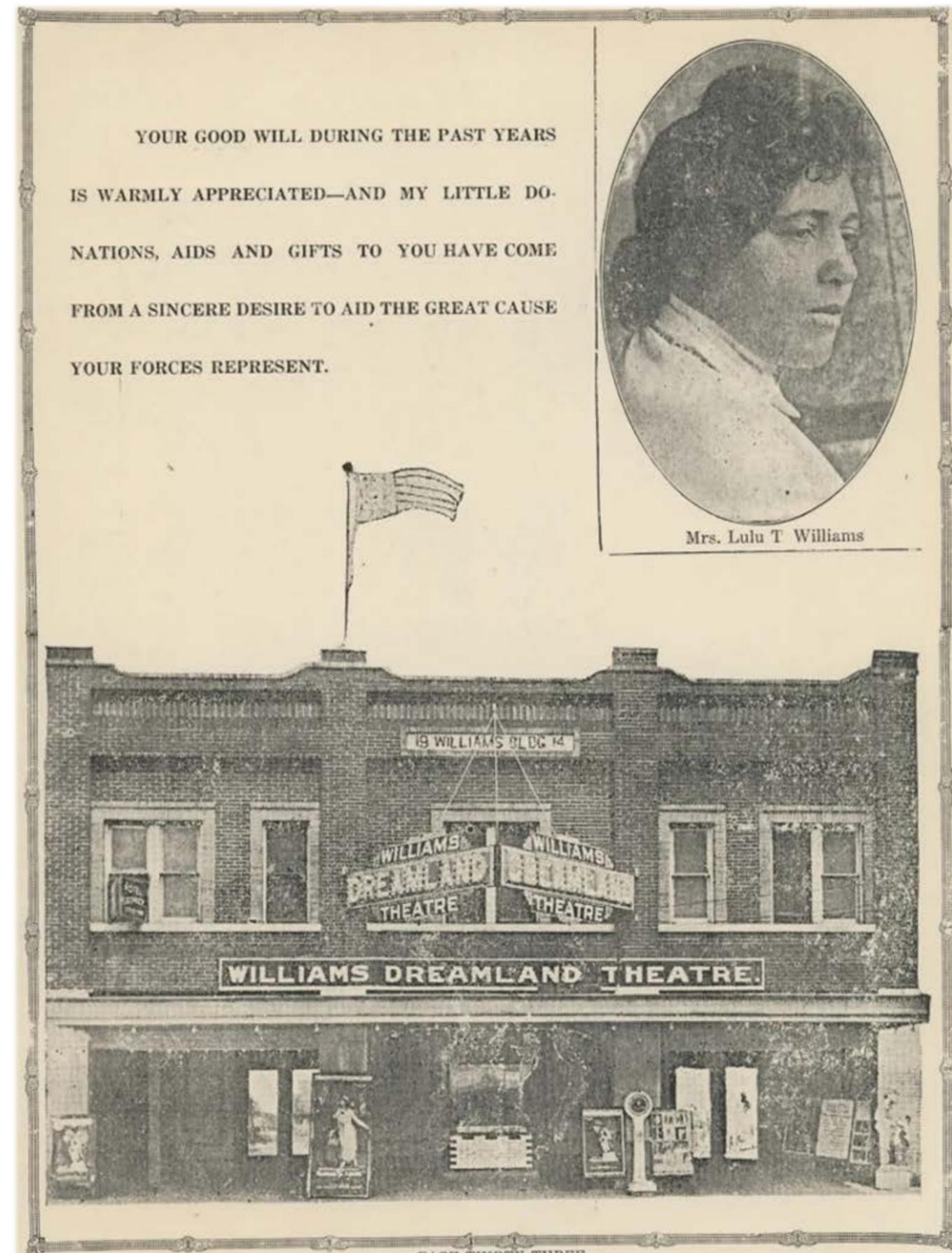
In 2021, Tulsa commemorated the centenary of the massacre in a spirit of reconciliation, and a new historical center, called Greenwood Rising, was opened to keep the memory of Black Wall Street alive.



Vocabulary

Affluent
Centenary
Dispossessed
Entrepreneur
Explicitly
Infrastructure
Intermingling
Intervene
Livelihood
Martial Law
Pretense
Reconstruction
Restitution
Unsubstantiated
Vigilante

Page torn from an original 1921 yearbook from Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, a tribute to Loula Williams, who with her husband, John, owned the Dreamland Theatre. Tulsa Historical Society and Museum / Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel.





WOODSON
CENTER

BLACK *History*
and **EXCELLENCE**