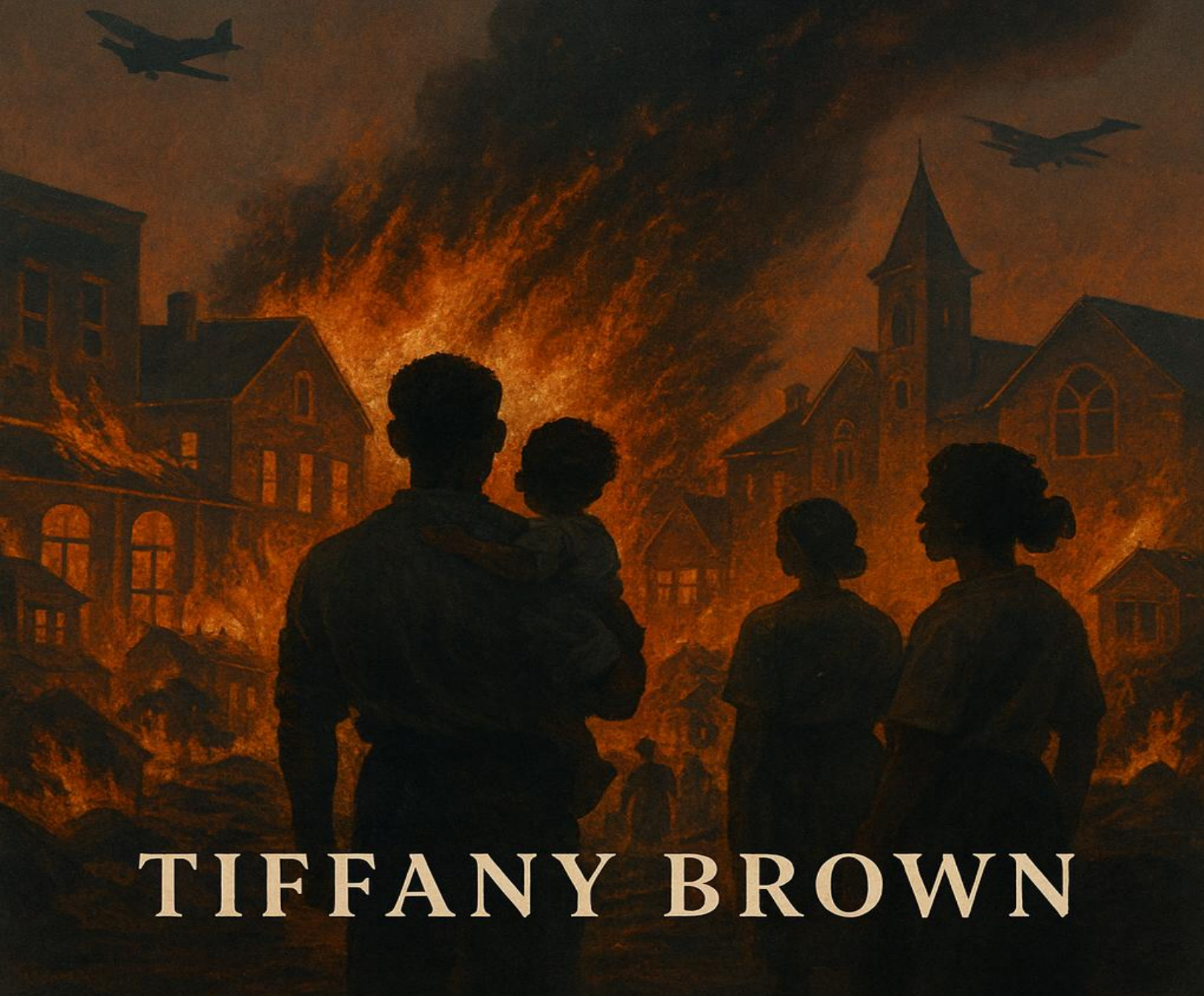
BURNING GREENWOOD

THE TULSA RACE MASSACRE AND THE FIGHT FOR JUSTICE



TIFFANY BROWN

Burning Greenwood:

The Tulsa Race Massacre and the Fight For Justice

Dedication

For the men, women, and children of Greenwood —
those who built a city of brilliance from the red earth of Oklahoma,
and those whose names the flames tried to erase.

For the mothers who searched the ashes for what could be saved,
and the fathers who rebuilt with blistered hands and unwavering pride.
For the dreamers, the preachers, the teachers, and the children
who dared to believe that tomorrow could be better than today.

For the survivors who carried the truth when the world turned away.
For the descendants who speak that truth now, loud and unbroken.

For every reader who opens this book with a willingness to remember —
may you feel the strength of those who came before you,
and may it call you to justice, courage, and light.

And for my daughters —
may you always know that your history is sacred,
your story is power,
and your future is your own to claim.

Epigraph

“Out of the ashes, we must rise stronger than before.”

-. Mary E. Jones Parrish (1922)

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Burning Greenwood: The Tulsa Race Massacre and the Fight for Justice

Published by
Guiding Hand Publishing
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA
www.guidinghandpublishing.net

Author: Tiffany Brown
Cover and Illustrations: Guiding Hand Publishing Studio

First Digital Edition – 2026
Version 1.0

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Disclaimer This book contains historical accounts based on verified survivor testimony, archival records, and scholarly research. While dialogue and atmosphere may be reconstructed for readability, all events are drawn from documented history.

Acknowledgments

This book could not exist without the courage of the survivors and descendants of Greenwood, who carried truth through silence and shame, refusing to let history be erased.

I am grateful to the historians, journalists, and archivists who preserved these stories, especially those who continue to uncover the graves, records, and memories long buried. Your work turns tragedy into testimony.

To the educators who teach hard history with compassion and courage: your classrooms keep the flame of justice alive.

To my family and my daughters, who remind me that love, truth, and resilience are inherited strengths.

And finally, to every reader, young or old, who opens this book not just to learn but to understand. May you remember Greenwood not as an ending, but as a beginning.

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Author's Preface

When I first began researching the Tulsa Race Massacre, I expected to find tragedy. What I didn't expect was the overwhelming strength of the people who lived through it.
The more I learned, the clearer it became: Greenwood wasn't just destroyed — it was rebuilt.

This book exists to tell the truth and to hand that truth to a new generation.
You cannot heal what you refuse to face, but when we name what was taken, we reclaim what still belongs to us — dignity, memory, and power.

May these pages light a path toward justice, and may every reader who opens this book carry Greenwood's flame forward.

— Tiffany Brown

Prologue
O.W. Gurley and the Dream of Greenwood

Before there was tragedy, there was vision.

In 1905, a Black entrepreneur named Ottowa W. Gurley stood on a stretch of red Oklahoma earth just north of the Frisco railroad tracks. To most white Tulsans, this was little more than scrubland—dusty, undeveloped, and easy to overlook. But Gurley saw something more.

He saw possibility.

Gurley was a man shaped by ambition and faith. Born in Huntsville, Alabama in 1868 to formerly enslaved parents, he believed deeply in education, hard work, and self-determination. Like thousands of other Black settlers after Reconstruction, he moved west seeking freedom from the violence and limits of the South. Oklahoma—then Indian Territory—was being promoted as a "promised land" where Black families could own property and govern their own communities.

By the time Gurley arrived in Tulsa, he had already run a successful general store in Perry, Oklahoma, and worked as a postal clerk under President Grover Cleveland. He had business experience, savings, and, more importantly, a plan.

Building a City Within a City

Gurley purchased over forty acres of land north of the railroad tracks and set aside plots specifically for Black settlers. He believed Black people should have a place to live, work, and build wealth free from the discrimination that dominated white Tulsa. He opened a rooming house, a grocery store, and later a hotel, which became one of the community's earliest landmarks.

Other entrepreneurs followed.

Within a few years, Greenwood Avenue was alive with energy—law offices, barber shops, restaurants, a drugstore, a theater, and the Tulsa Star newspaper. Gurley's vision inspired a movement: he encouraged Black professionals and laborers from across the South to move to Tulsa and invest in what people began calling

"Negro Wall Street."

Residents could shop, bank, and even go to the doctor without ever crossing into white Tulsa. For many, this was the first taste of genuine independence.

A Leader and a Symbol

To those who knew him, O.W. Gurley was both businessman and community builder. He hosted meetings, helped newcomers find land, and extended credit to Black families who wanted to open stores of their own. His hotel, the Gurley Hotel, served as a gathering place for travelers and activists. It wasn't uncommon to see visiting ministers or educators staying there while planning lectures or church revivals.

In an America still scarred by segregation, Gurley's Greenwood was revolutionary: a thriving Black-owned district where wealth circulated within the community, and children grew up seeing successful people who looked like them.

By 1921, Greenwood's population had grown to over 10,000 residents and hundreds of businesses. It was one of the most successful Black communities in the nation.

The Man Behind the Movement

When violence came to Tulsa in May 1921, O.W. Gurley tried to calm the tension. According to his later testimony, he warned the armed men gathering outside the courthouse not to engage, but the situation was already spiraling beyond anyone's control. He watched as the dream he built—his land, his hotel, his neighbors' homes—was reduced to smoke and ashes.

After the massacre, Gurley left Tulsa, relocating to Los Angeles, where he continued running small businesses until his death in 1938. His name faded from history for decades, even though his vision had given birth to one of the most remarkable examples of Black enterprise in America.

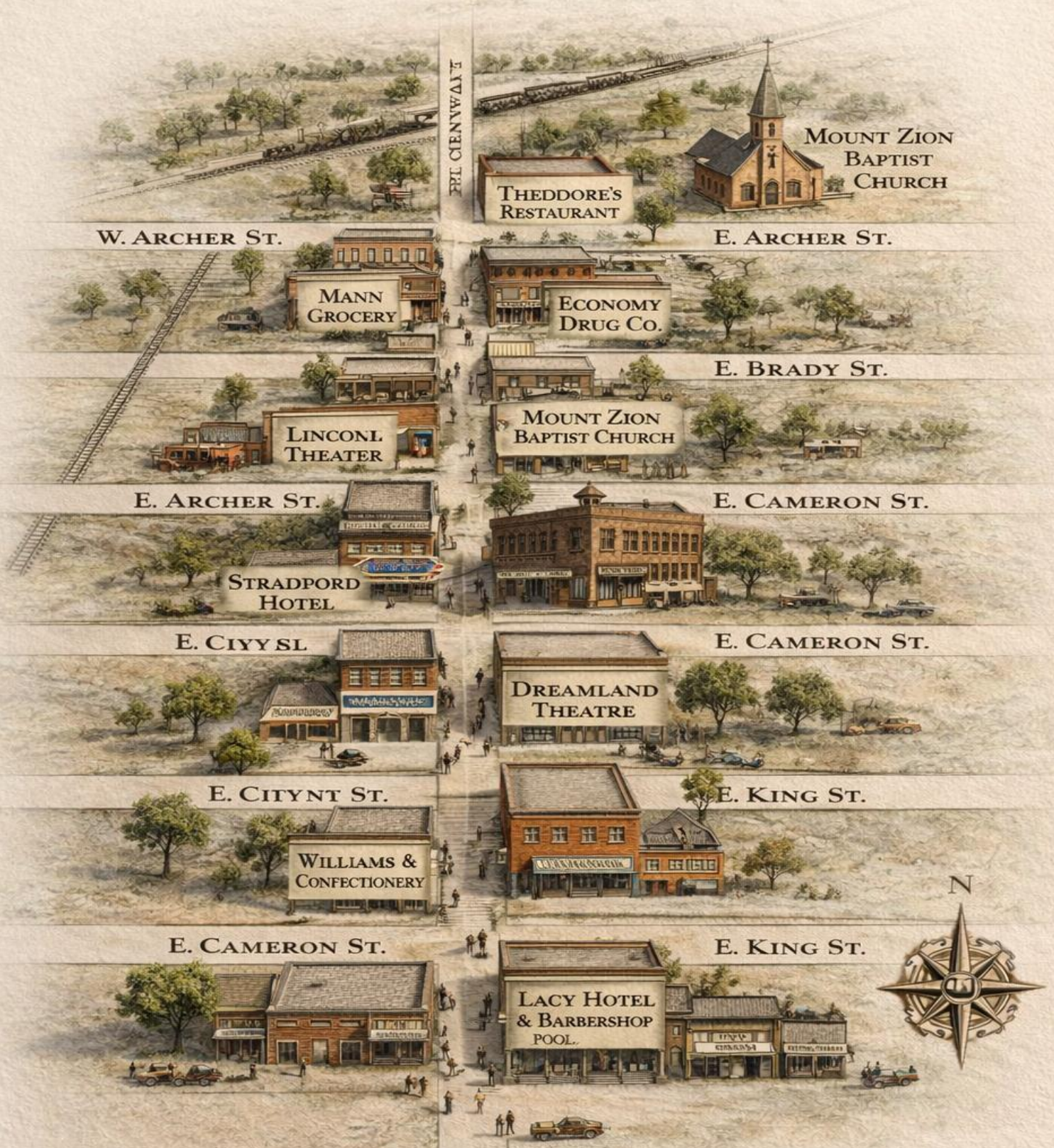
Legacy

O.W. Gurley's dream did not die in the flames. Greenwood's people rebuilt, brick by brick, spirit by spirit. Today, his story stands as proof that one person's belief in possibility can plant an entire community.

He looked at empty land and saw a future.
And for a time, that future thrived.

Greenwood Avenue

— Tulsa, Oklahoma — Circa 1921 —



Chapter 1: A City Within a City

"We had everything we needed right here." — Survivor, interviewed 1996

The sun rose over Tulsa, spilling gold light across the red dirt roads of Greenwood. The air was soft with promise, filled with the hum of streetcars and the laughter of neighbors greeting one another on their porches. Every morning, the scent of fresh bread floated from Williams Confectionery, and the streetcar rattled down Greenwood Avenue past rows of brick storefronts owned by Black families. The sidewalks bustled with motion — men in pressed suits tipping their hats, women in long skirts carrying shopping baskets, and children chasing one another past barber shops, cafes, and beauty parlors.

This was Greenwood, a community built from the ground up by people who had once been told they could have nothing. They made something magnificent instead.

A Neighborhood Like No Other

At the turn of the century, when much of America still refused to see Black success as possible, Greenwood proved otherwise. There were tailors, doctors, lawyers, and teachers — all living within walking distance of one another. There were theaters that showed the latest films, churches whose choirs shook the walls with joy, and corner stores where you could buy everything from sugar to Sunday hats.

On Saturday nights, jazz drifted from open doorways, mingling with the smell of hot pies and fried catfish. People came dressed in their best, strolling arm in arm along Greenwood Avenue beneath the glow of streetlamps. The neighborhood pulsed with life, a living declaration that Black prosperity could thrive even in the shadow of Jim Crow.


R.TIKE'S GROCERY & MEATS
BARBER SHOP

A Vision Brought to Life

Much of that success began with O.W. Gurley, who believed in what others could not yet see — that a Black-owned, self-sufficient community could flourish in Tulsa. He bought acres of land north of the Frisco tracks and sold lots only to Black settlers, ensuring Greenwood would remain in the hands of its own people. Gurley's hotel became a hub of business and conversation, and soon the street filled with opportunity.

The Williams family opened the Dreamland Theatre, a grand building with velvet curtains and a polished piano that gleamed under electric lights. Down the block, Mabel Little's Beauty Salon offered elegance and dignity to women who wanted to look their best for church on Sunday. Banks lent money to Black entrepreneurs. Doctors treated patients with skill and care. Every dollar spent in Greenwood passed through many hands before leaving the community.

It was a city within a city — and it worked.

A Place of Pride

Children grew up believing that the world was larger than the limits others tried to set for them. They saw their parents running businesses, attending college, and buying property. Greenwood taught them to walk with their heads high.

As one visitor once wrote, "You could stand on Greenwood Avenue on a Saturday evening and feel as though you were in Harlem, Chicago, or any grand city in the country."

Before it burned, Greenwood was alive.

On Greenwood Avenue, the sidewalks hummed with footsteps and conversation. Storefront windows reflected the movement of people going about their day—men in pressed suits on their way to work, women stopping to talk outside beauty shops, children darting past with schoolbooks tucked under their arms. Music spilled out of open doors. The smell of fresh bread and hot meals drifted from cafés and restaurants. On Sundays, church bells rang out across the neighborhood.

This was Greenwood.
A Black community built by Black hands, for Black people, in a nation that often denied them both safety and opportunity.

By 1921, Greenwood was one of the most prosperous Black communities in the United States. It existed just north of the railroad tracks in Tulsa, Oklahoma—tracks that did more than divide neighborhoods. They divided worlds.

South of the tracks was white Tulsa.
North of them stood Greenwood.

Built on Determination

Greenwood did not rise by accident. It rose out of necessity.

In the early 1900s, segregation laws—known as Jim Crow—controlled nearly every aspect of life in Oklahoma. Black residents were barred from many white businesses, schools, hospitals, and neighborhoods. Instead of waiting for access that would never come, Greenwood residents created their own.

They built grocery stores, clothing shops, hotels, barbershops, theaters, newspapers, law offices, medical clinics, and schools. Money circulated within the community again and again, strengthening local families and businesses. Black doctors treated Black patients. Black teachers educated Black children. Black bankers funded Black dreams.

Some historians estimate that a single dollar stayed in Greenwood up to 36 times before leaving the neighborhood.

This wasn't just economic success.
It was independence.

A Place of Safety

Greenwood was also a place of refuge.

In a country where racial violence was common and lynchings were rarely punished, Greenwood offered something rare—relative safety. Children could walk to school without fear. Families gathered for picnics and parades. Young people imagined futures as lawyers, musicians, doctors, and business owners.

The Dreamland Theater hosted films and performances. Churches served as centers of faith and community organizing. Boarding houses welcomed Black travelers who were denied lodging elsewhere. Greenwood was not perfect—but it was *whole*.

It was proof of what Black Americans could build when allowed even a small measure of freedom.

Success That Drew Hostility

But Greenwood's success did not go unnoticed.

Across the tracks, many white residents of Tulsa looked north with resentment. Greenwood challenged a dangerous belief—that Black people were inferior and incapable of self-governance or success. Each thriving business, each well-dressed family, each educated child contradicted the lies that upheld segregation.

After World War I, racial tension across the United States was already high. Black veterans returned home expecting the democracy they had fought for overseas. Instead, they were met with violence, discrimination, and exclusion. Between 1917 and 1921, dozens of racial attacks erupted across the country.

Greenwood stood as both a symbol of Black possibility and a target for white anger.

What Greenwood Represented

Greenwood was more than a neighborhood.
It was a statement.

It said Black life had value.
It said Black intelligence, creativity, and leadership mattered.
It said a future could be built—even in the face of hatred.

That message terrified those who believed the social order must never change.

And when fear mixes with racism, it often turns violent.

No one in Greenwood knew exactly when the danger would come. But it was already gathering—quietly, just beyond the tracks.

Reflection Questions – Chapter 1

Think*:* *(think about what it means to build something meaningful when others expect you to fail. Why do you think Greenwood focused so heavily on building its own institutions rather than relying on white Tulsa.)*

1. What made Greenwood successful?

   _____

   _____

Write:

2. How did Greenwood challenge the stereotypes and beliefs held by many white Americans at the time?

   _____

   _____

3. How did segregation shape Greenwood's growth?

   _____

   _____

Discuss:

4. Why might economic independence be seen as threatening in a segregated society?

   _____

   _____

Chapter 2: Tension Beneath the Surface

The people of Greenwood worked hard to build something remarkable—but the soil beneath that success was never stable. It trembled with resentment, fear, and hate, waiting for the smallest spark to break it open.

By 1921, Tulsa was a city divided by more than train tracks. On the north side, Black families built lives filled with hope and purpose. On the south side, many white residents viewed that progress as an insult to the order they thought they were born to protect. What lay between them wasn't just geography.

It was the unfinished business of America's promises.

A Nation After War

World War I had ended only a few years before. Thousands of Black men had served bravely overseas, believing that fighting for democracy would earn them equality at home. They returned to find the same hatred waiting—sometimes worse.

In city after city, white mobs rioted when Black veterans walked proudly in uniform. Between 1917 and 1921, America experienced what historians now call the "Red Summer"—a season of racial terror. Dozens of violent attacks broke out from Chicago to Washington, D.C., to Elaine, Arkansas.

The message was clear: the war might be over, but equality was still a battle.

Segregation by Law, Inequality by Design

In Oklahoma, Jim Crow laws ruled everyday life. Restaurants, theaters, public restrooms, even phone booths were segregated. Signs reading "Whites Only" and "Colored" divided the city. Black citizens could not live in certain neighborhoods or ride in the same railroad cars as whites.

The legal system didn't just tolerate racism—it enforced it.

Oklahoma had only been a state since 1907, but racial segregation had been written into its laws from the beginning. In Tulsa, the white-dominated city government gave little attention—or respect—to the needs of Black citizens. Most public funds went to white schools and neighborhoods, leaving Greenwood to build its own.

Yet that separation, meant to keep Black residents powerless, had done the opposite. Greenwood's isolation had become its strength.


CAFE

The Uneasy Prosperity

By the early 1920s, Greenwood's success was impossible to ignore.
Doctors drove new cars. Black-owned theaters sold out shows. People from other states visited just to see the thriving "Negro Wall Street." Newspapers celebrated it; white businessmen envied it.

Some white Tulsans relied on Greenwood economically—many of the city's maids, porters, and cooks came from the district—but even those relationships were shaped by racism. Greenwood's success was tolerated only so long as it stayed "in its place."

Jealousy simmered beneath the surface.
White-owned banks refused to lend to Black entrepreneurs. White politicians spread rumors about corruption in the north side. And white newspapers painted Black prosperity as a threat to "law and order."

That resentment wasn't just personal—it was systemic. It lived in laws, headlines, and whispered conversations. Greenwood didn't just face prejudice; it faced pressure.

The Growing Divide

In 1920, Tulsa was booming from oil money. Drillers and businessmen grew rich overnight, and the city's population exploded. But with the rush came greed, lawlessness, and the constant need to control labor and land. Many white Tulsans saw Greenwood not as a partner in that prosperity, but as competition.

And then came the lie.

Across America, white-owned papers ran stories about alleged crimes by Black men against white women. These stories, often fabricated or exaggerated, fueled fear and rage. They were designed to remind white readers of who supposedly "belonged" at the top of the social order.

When a young Black shoe shiner named Dick Rowland entered an elevator downtown on May 30, 1921, the weight of that lie was already heavy in the air.

The Pressure Builds

Rumors had already become weapons. Misinformation spread faster than truth. And in a city divided by race, it didn't take much to ignite suspicion.

For Greenwood, the question wasn't if there would be trouble. It was when.

Every success—every shop, every church, every happy child walking to school—was a quiet act of defiance against a system built to crush Black hope.
And those who clung to that system were watching.

The match was in the air.
All it needed was one spark.

Reflection Questions – Chapter 2

Think: *(Think about how laws designed to separate people affected where they could live, work, and learn.)*

1. How did Jim Crow laws shape daily life in Tulsa for both Black and white citizens?

   _____

   _____

Write:

2. Why might Greenwood's success have caused resentment instead of admiration?

   _____

   _____

Discuss:

3. What national events made racial tension worse in 1921?

   _____

   _____

4. Do you see patterns today that echo this kind of inequality or resentment?

   _____

   _____

Chapter 3: The Elevator Incident

"It all started with one scream." — Survivor account

The last day of May 1921 began like any other in Tulsa.
Downtown was crowded that afternoon, filled with people leaving work early to escape the heavy summer air. Streetcars clattered past shop windows, and the smell of oil, dust, and cigar smoke drifted through the streets.

Among the workers was Dick Rowland, a nineteen-year-old Black shoe shiner known for his quiet manners and tidy appearance. He worked at a stand on Main Street, one of the few jobs open to young Black men in the downtown district. Like many others in Greenwood, he dreamed of a better life and was saving what he could to build a future.

On May 30, Rowland entered the Drexel Building to use the elevator that served the upper-floor restrooms reserved for Black employees. Inside was Sarah Page, a seventeen-year-old white elevator operator.

What happened next would ignite one of the darkest chapters in American history.

Some accounts say the elevator jolted suddenly, causing Rowland to stumble and grab Page's arm. Others claim she screamed when the doors opened unexpectedly. Whatever occurred lasted only seconds. Rowland fled immediately, knowing how quickly fear could turn deadly for a Black man in 1921 Oklahoma.


1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Rumor and Fear

By evening, the incident was already being twisted into something far more dangerous than the truth. What had begun as an unproven accusation quickly turned into a story fueled by fear and racism.

Rumors spread rapidly through white Tulsa that Dick Rowland had attacked the young white elevator operator. There was no evidence to support this claim, but facts mattered little once fear took hold. The next afternoon, the Tulsa Tribune published a headline that inflamed the city:

“Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator.”

The language was sensational and false, but its effect was immediate. Newspapers carried power, and the headline reinforced long-standing racist stereotypes that portrayed Black men as threats. It encouraged anger, fear, and a sense of urgency among readers, even though no investigation had yet taken place.

As the story circulated, groups of white men began gathering outside the county courthouse, where Rowland had been taken for questioning. The crowd grew as the hours passed. Some demanded that the sheriff turn Rowland over to them. Others arrived armed with guns, while some carried ropes, a clear signal of their intentions.

News of the growing mob reached Greenwood quickly. Residents understood what was happening because they had seen it before. Across the South, innocent Black men had been arrested, accused, and lynched based on rumors alone. Newspapers often played a role, turning suspicion into justification for violence.

Greenwood’s residents knew what was at stake. They knew that if the mob succeeded, there would be no trial and no justice. Determined to protect one of their own and prevent a lynching, they prepared to act.

Greenwood would not stand by in silence.

TULSA TRIBUNE

TULSA, OKLAHOMA

TUESDAY, MAY 31, 1921

TO LYNCH NEGRO TONIGHT

Masked Mob Vows to 'Get' Negro Youth Held in County Jail in Pistol Attack

Veterans Step Forward

Among those who heard the news were veterans of World War I. These men had worn the uniform of the United States and fought overseas in the name of democracy. They had faced violence on foreign soil and returned home believing that their service would be met with respect and fairness. Instead, they were confronted with the same racism and danger they had hoped to leave behind.

The veterans understood what was at stake. They knew that if Dick Rowland were taken by the mob, he would not survive the night. The threat was clear, and time was running out. Determined to prevent another lynching, a group of about twenty-five armed Black veterans drove downtown to the courthouse to offer protection.

They positioned themselves outside and spoke directly with Sheriff Willard McCullough. He assured them that Rowland was safe inside the courthouse and told them that there was no need for their presence. He urged them to return home and promised that the situation was under control. Trusting his word, and hoping to avoid further violence, the veterans left and returned to Greenwood.

But the mob did not disperse.

Instead, the crowd outside the courthouse continued to grow. By 9 p.m., more than a thousand people had gathered. Some shouted threats and demanded Rowland be handed over. Others passed out weapons, including guns and ammunition. The mood shifted from anger to anticipation, as if violence were expected rather than prevented.

Police officers were present, but they did little to stop what was unfolding. The crowd was allowed to swell. Weapons changed hands openly. No serious effort was made to calm tensions or protect the community that would soon be targeted.

The moment for prevention was slipping away, and the consequences would be devastating.

The Courthouse Standoff

When the veterans returned to check on Rowland later that night, the scene was worse.
Drunken men filled the steps, waving rifles and shouting.
One white man tried to grab a veteran's pistol. The gun went off.

No one knew who fired first, but that single shot shattered the night.

Gunfire erupted from every direction. People ducked for cover. Windows broke. Panic spread through the streets as the veterans retreated toward Greenwood, firing warning shots as they went. Behind them, the mob armed itself and prepared to invade.

The night sky filled with the echo of gunfire and shouted orders. In the distance, the faint glow of flames began to rise.

A City on Edge

By nightfall, the rumor had spread across Tulsa like wildfire.

At the courthouse downtown, white men gathered in growing numbers, demanding that Dick Rowland be turned over to them.

In Greenwood, word traveled just as fast. Men who had fought for democracy in France now faced a different kind of battle at home. They knew what lynch mobs could do—and they would not stand by and watch it happen again.

As darkness settled over the city, cars rolled slowly down the dusty road toward the courthouse. The air was thick with heat, anger, and fear. The night would not stay quiet for long.

From the courthouse steps to the streets leading north, the sound of boots and shouting filled the air. Greenwood's families waited in silence, uncertain what would come next—only that it was already on its way.

The Night of May 31

"They set the city on fire and called it justice." — Survivor testimony

By midnight, chaos had overtaken Tulsa.
White mobs looted hardware stores for guns and ammunition. Police began deputizing white men on the spot, handing them weapons and orders to "get a Negro."

Carloads of armed men roamed the streets near the railroad tracks.
They fired into homes and businesses on the edge of Greenwood.

Inside the community, families gathered in fear. Some guarded their doors with hunting rifles. Others hid their children in church basements or cellars, praying the violence would pass.

The city was divided, and the line between rumor and reality had vanished.

What began as a whisper of suspicion had turned into a roar of violence.
By dawn, the mob would cross the tracks, and Greenwood would burn.

Reflection Questions

Think: *(Think about how one moment of fear can become the spark that exposes everything a society tries to hide).*

1. How did rumors and the media escalate this situation into violence?

   _____

   _____

Write:

2. How did rumors and the media escalate this situation into violence?

   _____

   _____

3. Why was it important for Greenwood's veterans to defend Dick Rowland, even at great risk?

   _____

   _____

Discuss:

4. What does this event reveal about justice and power in 1921 Tulsa?

   _____

   _____

Chapter 4: Hell Comes to Greenwood

"By dawn, Greenwood was gone." — Survivor account

The Morning the World Changed

The night had been restless. By dawn on June 1, 1921, fear had turned into fire.

As the first light crept over Tulsa, Greenwood was already under siege. Smoke rose from the edges of the district, darkening the early morning sky. Gunfire cracked through the streets, sharp and unrelenting. Screams echoed between buildings as flames caught hold and spread from block to block.

Families woke to chaos. Mothers pulled children from their beds, wrapping them in blankets and clutching them close. Fathers shoved furniture against doors and windows, hoping it might slow the violence outside. Some prayed. Others listened in silence, waiting for the next sound that would tell them how close danger had come. Nothing they did was enough to stop what was unfolding.

White mobs surged across the railroad tracks into Greenwood. Many had been newly deputized by city officials and carried badges pinned hurriedly to their shirts. Others came armed with rifles, pistols, and torches. Together, they moved with purpose, not confusion. They fired into homes and businesses. They dragged residents into the streets. Their shouted commands were not meant to keep order. They were threats. "Hands up." "Get out."

Greenwood's men tried to defend their families and their homes, but they were outnumbered and outgunned. Ammunition ran low. Help never arrived. Within hours, entire blocks were burning. Roofs collapsed. Walls gave way. Streets that had once been filled with shops, music, and daily life became paths of destruction.

By midmorning, Greenwood was no longer just under attack. It was being erased.

Fire From the Sky

Eyewitnesses later recalled a new and terrifying sight. Airplanes circled above Greenwood. At frst, some residents believed the planes belonged to police or the National Guard and had been sent to restore order. That hope quickly disappeared when explosions followed.

Survivors remembered objects falling from the sky onto homes and businesses. Firebombs made from oil-soaked rags, turpentine balls, or dynamite were dropped from the air. Whether these attacks were officially ordered or carried out by private citizens, the result was the same. Greenwood was burning from above as well as from the ground.

Mary Jones Parrish, a teacher who survived the massacre, later described what she witnessed. She wrote that airplanes flew low over her house and dropped objects that set buildings on fire. Her account matched the memories of many others who watched helplessly as flames spread faster than anyone could escape them.

The fires consumed everything in their path. The Dreamland Theatre, once filled with laughter, music, and community pride, became a furnace of heat and smoke. Churches where families gathered, schools where children learned, hotels that welcomed travelers, and small shops built through years of hard work all collapsed into glowing ash.

The attack from the sky made escape nearly impossible. It turned Greenwood into a battlefield and confirmed that this was not random violence. It was destruction carried out with intent, leaving little standing and changing the community forever.

Greenwood burns under a smoky sky as families flee their homes. Planes circle overhead, dropping incendiaries while fire spreads block by block. June 1, 1921.

The City Turns Against Its Own

While Greenwood burned, many white residents looted freely. They smashed windows, stole jewelry, pianos, and furniture, then set fire to what remained. Police officers looked on, and some joined in.

By noon, martial law had been declared, but it came too late for Greenwood. The damage was done.

Black residents who fled their homes were rounded up at gunpoint and forced to march to makeshift detention centers. Men were separated from their families. Women carried babies wrapped in wet towels to protect them from the smoke.

Those who resisted were beaten. Some were shot.

Thousands of people—citizens of Tulsa—were now prisoners in their own city.

Voices in the Smoke

In the chaos, acts of courage still shone through.

A mother shielded her children beneath a railroad bridge while bullets flew overhead.

A minister led a group of families through back alleys, whispering prayers as they escaped toward the countryside.

Doctors treated the wounded in secret basements, using torn cloth as bandages and rainwater to cool burns.

Mary E. Jones Parrish wrote later, “I saw my home in flames, and I knew that I must go. I did not cry. I did not scream. I only prayed.”

By the time night fell again, Greenwood was gone.

Ashes and Silence

More than 1,200 homes were destroyed. Thirty-five city blocks were reduced to cinders. Churches, schools, and businesses that had taken years to build were erased in a single day.

The sky glowed orange long after midnight. In the morning, only smoke and silence remained.

No official count could capture the full toll. Hundreds were injured. Dozens—perhaps hundreds—were dead. Bodies were carried away in trucks or thrown into unmarked graves.

The people of Greenwood, once known for their music and enterprise, now walked through ashes, searching for the missing.

And in that silence, the survivors knew something deeper than their homes had been destroyed. Their faith in justice had burned too.

But even then, under the smoke and ruin, something else smoldered—a will to endure.

They would rise again.
Just not yet.

Reflection Questions – Chapter 4

Think: *(Think about how violence becomes possible when systems meant to protect people instead empower destruction.)*

1. What emotions do you think Greenwood residents experienced as violence moved from rumor to reality?

Write:

2. How did the speed and coordination of the attack affect the community's ability to protect itself?

3. Why is it important to understand that this destruction was not random, but organized and enabled?

Discuss:

4. How does the use of planes, deputized mobs, and law enforcement involvement change the way we understand responsibility for the violence?

5. What does this chapter reveal about how quickly fear and racism can override law, morality, and human life?

Chapter 5: Internment, Ashes, and Survival

When the fires finally died, silence swept over Greenwood like ash.
What had once been a city within a city now looked like a battlefield. Blackened bricks stood where homes had been. Iron bedsprings twisted out of the rubble. The air smelled of smoke and sorrow.

Thousands of residents had been left with nothing—no homes, no businesses, no safety. Families who had fled the night before returned at sunrise to find their lives reduced to charred debris. Children walked barefoot through the ashes, searching for toys that no longer existed. Mothers sifted through soot for keepsakes: a ring, a photo, a Bible that somehow survived the flames.

Imprisoned in Their Own City

Instead of being treated as victims, the survivors of Greenwood were rounded up like criminals. Armed white guards patrolled the streets, forcing Black residents into internment camps set up at the Tulsa Fairgrounds and the Convention Hall downtown.
Anyone without a white employer to vouch for them was detained.

By June 1, more than 6,000 Black residents—men, women, and children—were imprisoned behind barbed wire, watched by armed guards. Those who tried to leave were stopped at gunpoint. Families were separated, their names taken down on hastily written lists.

Inside the camps, the Red Cross arrived to do what the city of Tulsa would not: feed the hungry, tend to the wounded, and bring order to chaos. Makeshift tents became hospitals. Lines of people waited for food, blankets, or word of loved ones.

One worker later wrote, “We were treating an entire city that had been burned alive.”

Timeline *of the* — 24 Hours *of* Fire —

— May 31—June 1, 1921 —

Within 24 hours, an armed white mob had burned *Greenwood* to the ground and left hundreds of Black residents dead.

8:20 PM — A young Black man accused of assaulting a white woman. He is arrested in downtown Tulsa.

9:00 PM — White mob gathers at the courthouse, demanding the prisoner.

10:00 PM — 75 Black men arrive to protect the young man from a lynch mob. The mob begins arming itself, preparing to attack Greenwood.

11:30 PM — Gunfire erupts outside the courthouse, starting the violence. A group heads to Greenwood, firing at Black residents, burning homes and businesses.

1:00 AM — A mob of over **1,000** white men invades Greenwood. Plane circling the district drops firebombs onto buildings below.

4:00 AM — Thousands of Black residents flee as Greenwood is destroyed. Fires spread out of control; bodies are left lying in the streets.

9:00 AM — National Guard troops and deputized white mobs begin rounding up Black residents at gunpoint.

"The city smolders, 35 city blocks in ruins. Thousands held in detention, Over 300 reported dead."
—"Tulsa firefighter

In the days that followed, the survivors faced not just loss, but rejection. Insurance companies refused every single claim. City officials called the massacre a “riot,” which allowed them to deny compensation and evade responsibility.

Greenwood’s people, already stripped of everything, were told they would get nothing.
And yet, amid the ruins, they began to rebuild.

Men scavenged bricks from the ashes, cleaning them by hand to use again. Women cooked communal meals in iron pots over open fires. Churches that had burned to the ground held services outdoors, under the wide Oklahoma sky.

Their hymns carried over the rubble, voices cracked but unbroken.

The Work of Healing

The Red Cross stayed for months. They documented the dead, treated the injured, and recorded the stories of those who survived. Their reports would later serve as some of the only official records of what happened in Greenwood.

But the city of Tulsa never launched an investigation, never charged the perpetrators, and never paid reparations.

When Greenwood’s people were finally released from the camps, many had nowhere to go. Still, they refused to leave. They pitched tents on the ruins of their own homes and began again—one brick, one nail, one prayer at a time.

Even in ashes, Greenwood still lived.

Reflection Questions – Chapter 5

Think: (*Think about how rebuilding can be a form of resistance.)*

1. What do you think it meant for survivors to be treated like criminals instead of victims after the massacre?

Write:

2. How might it have felt to return home and find everything—homes, churches, and schools—gone?

3. Why do you think the city chose to call the massacre a "riot"? What effect did that word have on how history remembered Greenwood?

Discuss:

4. How did the Red Cross's actions differ from those of the city government? What does this reveal about responsibility and compassion?

5. In what ways did Greenwood's people show strength even in the face of destruction and injustice?

Chapter 6: Rebuilding Without Justice

When the smoke cleared and the last embers died out, Greenwood's people faced a truth even harder than the flames: no help was coming.

City officials called what had happened a "riot." That single word—used to rewrite the truth—allowed the government, the police, and insurance companies to deny all responsibility. Families who had lost everything filed claims for burned homes, destroyed stores, and shattered dreams. Every one of them was rejected.

Denied Help, Denied Justice

Tulsa's white leaders said the destruction was "their own fault." Instead of offering relief, the city passed new building ordinances that made it nearly impossible for Greenwood residents to rebuild. The land was declared "unsafe," and plans were made to push Black families out altogether.

But Greenwood refused to disappear.

Men and women who had survived the massacre began the impossible task of starting over. Some lived in tents set up on the ashes of their own homes. Others slept in churches or Red Cross shelters. And every morning, they began to work—clearing rubble, salvaging bricks, and drawing new plans for what could rise again.

Denied Insurance Claims—

—*Economic Loss in Greenwood*—

More than 1,200 homes and nearly 200 businesses were destroyed. 193 insurance claims filed. 0 paid.

Destroyed

+1200 Homes

+200 Businesses

Filed

193

Insurance Claims

Paid

0

Claims Paid

+1200 Homes

+200 Businesses

"They called it a riot so they wouldn't have to pay."

— Greenwood Survivor, 1921

Burning Greenwood: The Tulsa Race Massacre and the Fight *for* Justice (Guiding Hand Publishing, 2026)

Rising from the Ruins

Carpenters rebuilt homes from scrap lumber. Masons stacked scorched bricks, cleaning each one by hand. Women cooked communal meals in large iron pots, feeding anyone who came to help. Children hauled water from wells and carried tools for their elders.

Out of the wreckage came community.

Churches held services in open lots. Teachers taught lessons under makeshift tents. The smell of smoke was still in the air, but so was determination. Greenwood's people were not waiting for permission to exist—they were already doing it.

Faith and Determination

The Red Cross stayed for months, documenting the destruction and offering supplies the city refused to give. Their reports, filled with names, losses, and survivor stories, would later stand as some of the only official records of what truly happened.

Reverend H. T. F. Johnson of Mount Zion Baptist Church preached to his congregation from a pile of rubble where his sanctuary had once stood. “We will rise again,” he told them, “because faith is stronger than fire.”

And they did.

By 1922, more than eighty businesses had reopened in Greenwood. By 1925, over a hundred new homes stood where ashes once lay. The Dreamland Theatre returned. Doctors reopened their offices. Children played in rebuilt schoolyards.

Legacy of Defiance

Greenwood’s rebirth was not easy, and it was never fully restored to what it had been. Many families never recovered what was lost. No one was ever held accountable. But the people who stayed turned grief into resistance.

Brick by brick, they built a new Greenwood—not just to live in, but to prove that they could not be erased.

The massacre had been meant to destroy them.
Instead, it revealed their strength.

Even without justice, they rebuilt.
Even without recognition, they remembered.

And through it all, the fire that burned their city never touched their spirit.

Reflection Questions – Chapter 6

Think: (*Think about what it means to rebuild in a system that refuses to acknowledge your suffering.)*

1. Why do you think Greenwood's residents chose to rebuild even when they were denied justice, money, and support?

Write:

2. How might rebuilding homes, churches, and businesses become an act of resistance rather than just survival?

3. What does the refusal of insurance companies to pay claims reveal about power and inequality in America at the time?

Discuss:

4. How did community cooperation help Greenwood rebuild when government systems failed them?

5. Do you think rebuilding without justice is enough? Why or why not?

Chapter 7: Erased From History

When the fires were extinguished and Greenwood began to rebuild, another kind of destruction quietly took hold.

Silence.

The story of the Tulsa Race Massacre did not disappear by accident. It was buried on purpose.

The Silence After the Smoke

In the days following the massacre, Tulsa's white leaders worked quickly to control the narrative. Newspapers stopped using the word "massacre" and replaced it with "riot," shifting blame onto the very people who had been attacked. City officials avoided investigations. Police reports vanished. Grand juries declined to indict anyone involved in the violence.

No one was held accountable.

The destruction of Greenwood was treated not as a crime, but as an unfortunate disturbance that Tulsa wanted to forget. Businesses reopened south of the tracks. Oil money continued to flow. White Tulsa moved on.

Greenwood did not have that luxury.

A History Not Taught

For decades, the massacre was absent from classrooms, textbooks, and public conversations. Students in Tulsa grew up learning local history without ever hearing Greenwood's name. Teachers avoided the subject. Libraries held no official records. Museums displayed nothing.

Black children learned about the massacre at home, in whispers and warnings. White children often never learned about it at all.

This silence shaped generations.

Without official acknowledgment, survivors were left to carry their trauma alone. Their memories were dismissed or doubted. Some were told to stop talking about the past if they wanted peace. But silence does not erase truth. It only delays it.

What Was Lost, Then Hidden

The erasure went far beyond memory. It was systematic, deliberate, and devastating. Official records were destroyed or never created at all. Property deeds vanished, leaving families unable to prove what they had owned. Insurance claims were dismissed without investigation, even when evidence was strong and losses were undeniable. Photographs that could have told the truth were locked away in archives, removed from public view, stripped of their power to testify.

Even death certificates told only fragments of the story. Many failed to list causes of death, while others omitted names altogether. Lives were reduced to numbers, or worse, erased entirely. This absence was not accidental. Documentation is how societies acknowledge harm. By withholding it, Tulsa denied the humanity of the victims and protected those responsible.

By refusing to record the full scale of the violence, the city avoided accountability. Without paper trails, there were no legal claims to honor, no court cases to pursue, no officials to blame. The destruction of evidence became a shield. Silence became policy. History was edited to favor comfort over truth.

The absence of evidence became a weapon. It was used to dismiss survivors, to question their memories, to deny their losses. What was not written down was treated as if it never happened. And in that silence, injustice was allowed to harden into permanence, passed down through generations as both loss and unfinished business.


CHAPTER 5:
The History of Tulsa
Greenwood District
Ized States Records
REPORT OF DEATHS
They call it a riot.
TULSA RACE MASSACRE
--Official Records Destroyed--

Whispers That Would Not Fade

Despite the silence, Greenwood's survivors remembered.

They told their children and grandchildren about the night the sky burned. They spoke of planes overhead and gunfire in the streets. They remembered neighbors who never came home. They remembered the camps, the guards, and the rebuilding that followed.

These stories lived in living rooms, churches, and family reunions. They survived through oral history, passed down when official history refused to listen.

Memory became resistance.

Truth Resurfaces

In the 1970s, historians and activists began asking questions Tulsa had avoided for half a century. Survivors stepped forward, many for the first time. Their testimonies challenged the version of history that had been taught.

In 1997, the state of Oklahoma finally launched an official investigation. The Tulsa Race Riot Commission confirmed what Greenwood's people had always known: the massacre was real, organized, and devastating.

The truth had been buried, but it had not died.

Why Remembering Matters

Erasure is not neutral. When history is hidden, injustice is allowed to repeat itself.

Remembering Greenwood is not about the past alone. It is about who gets to be believed. It is about whose pain is acknowledged. It is about whether a nation is willing to face the harm it has caused.

For decades, Greenwood was erased from textbooks. But it lived on in memory.

And memory, once spoken, becomes power.

Reflection Questions – Chapter 7

Think: (*Think about what it means when a community's story is not written down or is intentionally left out of history books)*

1. Why do you think powerful institutions chose silence instead of accountability after the massacre?

Write:

2. How might growing up without learning the truth about Greenwood shape a person's understanding of justice and history?

3. What dangers exist when history is intentionally erased or rewritten?

Discuss:

4. Who benefits when painful history is hidden, and who is harmed by that silence?

5. Why do survivor stories and oral histories matter when official records are missing or incomplete?

Chapter 8: Truth Resurfaces

For more than half a century, Greenwood's story survived in whispers.

It lived in family conversations, church gatherings, and memories shared quietly between generations. Survivors remembered the fire, the gunshots, the planes, and the silence that followed. Even when the world refused to listen, they carried the truth.

Eventually, the silence began to crack.

The First Questions

In the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of Black activists and scholars began asking questions Tulsa had long avoided. Why had an entire neighborhood vanished? Why were there no trials, no compensation, no public acknowledgment?

Journalists started digging into old newspaper archives. Historians searched for survivors. Students challenged what their textbooks left out.

What they uncovered contradicted the official story.

The word "riot" did not fit the evidence. Greenwood had not destroyed itself. It had been attacked.

Survivors Speak

As attention slowly returned to Greenwood, survivors stepped forward, many for the first time. Some were elderly. Others had spent decades burying their trauma to survive.

They described white mobs roaming the streets. They spoke of gunfire, fires, and airplanes overhead. They told of being forced into camps and denied help afterward.

Their stories matched each other. They matched photographs. They matched Red Cross records.

The truth was undeniable.

The State Confronts the Past

In 1997, Oklahoma finally established the Tulsa Race Riot Commission. Its task was to investigate what had happened in 1921 and determine responsibility.

Four years later, the commission released its findings.

It confirmed that Greenwood had been destroyed by a coordinated white mob, aided by law enforcement and city officials. It confirmed that planes had been used. It confirmed mass displacement, loss of life, and total economic devastation.

It also confirmed something survivors already knew.

No justice had been done.

Truth Without Repair

When the commission finished its work, it made clear recommendations. It called for reparations, scholarships, and economic investment to help repair the harm done to Greenwood. For many survivors and descendants, this felt like a long-awaited turning point. The truth had finally been acknowledged by the state itself.

But little changed.

No direct compensation was paid to survivors or their families. Lawsuits were dismissed, often because courts said too much time had passed. Programs were discussed, but funding did not follow. Promises were made, then delayed, then quietly set aside.

The truth had resurfaced, but justice remained out of reach.

Even so, something important had shifted. Greenwood was no longer hidden. The massacre could no longer be dismissed as a rumor or a misunderstanding. It was named. It was documented. It was recognized as a crime against a community.

Being visible did not erase the harm or replace what was lost. But it changed the conversation. It opened the door to teaching this history, remembering it publicly, and demanding better from the future.

Truth without repair was not enough.

But truth made it impossible to pretend nothing had happened.

And Greenwood was no longer invisible.


TRUTH
WHAT WAS LOST
GREENWOOD

Why Truth Matters

Truth alone does not rebuild burned homes or return stolen land. It does not replace generational wealth that was taken in a matter of hours. But truth changes something just as powerful. It changes what a society is willing to excuse, deny, or ignore.

For decades, Greenwood's destruction survived in the margins of history, spoken softly or not at all. Once that story was finally spoken aloud, it could no longer be contained. It moved into classrooms where students began asking harder questions. It appeared in documentaries that challenged long-standing myths. It stood inside museums and memorials, demanding to be seen. Truth forced America to confront a reality it had worked carefully to bury beneath silence and euphemisms.

Truth became a form of resistance because it disrupted comfort. It challenged official narratives. It stripped away the language that softened violence and replaced it with facts, names, and responsibility. Each retelling weakened denial and strengthened accountability.

And resistance, once named, creates the possibility of change. It opens the door to conversations about justice, repair, and responsibility. It reshapes public memory and influences what future generations will accept as normal or inevitable.

Greenwood's story was no longer just a whisper passed down in private.

It was a demand for acknowledgment.

A demand for accountability.

And a demand that history, once uncovered, must never be buried again.

Reflection Questions – Chapter 8: Truth Resurfaces

Think: *(Think about how truth can be buried, but not erased forever)*

1. Why do you think it took more than seventy years for the truth about Greenwood to be officially acknowledged?

Write:

2. What risks did survivors take by speaking publicly about the massacre after decades of silence?

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3. How does hearing survivor testimony change the way history should be understood compared to reading official records alone?

Discuss:

4. Why might truth without accountability still feel incomplete or painful for survivors and descendants?

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5. Do you believe uncovering historical truth can lead to real change? Why or why not?

Chapter 9: Reparations and Resistance

Truth brought Greenwood back into the public eye, but it did not bring justice. As survivors shared their stories and researchers uncovered more evidence, the nation began to understand the true scale of what had happened in 1921. Newspapers revisited the story. Schools slowly began to teach it. Museums and documentaries helped tell the truth more fully.

Many people believed this new attention would lead to accountability. They believed that once the facts were known, action would follow.

But that did not happen.

Instead of justice, survivors and their families faced delays, legal barriers, and excuses. Court cases were dismissed, often because judges said too much time had passed. Leaders expressed sympathy and regret, but sympathy did not lead to repair. Greenwood's story was finally acknowledged, yet meaningful change remained out of reach.

What Reparations Mean

Reparations are not charity. They are not gifts or favors. Reparations are an attempt to repair harm that was deliberately caused and never corrected.

For Greenwood, reparations meant compensation for homes and businesses that were burned to the ground. Families lost everything they had built, sometimes over generations. Reparations also meant access to land and wealth that had been stolen, opportunities that could have been passed down but were cut off by violence and discrimination.

Survivors and descendants asked for scholarships so future generations could pursue education. They asked for economic investment to rebuild the community that had been destroyed. They asked for direct payments to those who were harmed and never made whole. They also asked for something just as important: public acknowledgment of wrongdoing and responsibility.

They were not asking for special treatment.
They were asking for fairness.
They were asking for repair.
They were asking for what had been taken and never returned.

WHAT REPARATIONS COULD LOOK LIKE

Addressing harm requires a range of measures. Reparations can take many forms:

FINANCIAL JUSTICE

- Direct Payments to Survivors & Descendants
- Financial Compensation for Property Loss
- Investment in Black-Owned Businesses

EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE

- Full Scholarships for Descendants
- Curriculum Change to Teach Greenwood's History
- Mental Health Services for Survivors
- Looks like Educators refusing to skip a chapter. Textbooks never bury

COMMUNITY JUSTICE

- Rebuilding & Investing in Greenwood
- Affordable Housing & Grants for Homeowners

- Rebuilding & Investing in Greenwood
- Affordable Housing & Grants for Homeowners
- Community Centers and Youth Programs

Blocked by the System

When survivors finally turned to the courts, seeking accountability for what had been taken from them, they were met with closed doors. Lawsuits were dismissed, not because the harm was in question, but because of technical arguments. Judges ruled that too much time had passed, even though that time had been shaped by fear, silence, and deliberate obstruction. The legal system treated delay as disqualification, ignoring the reality that Greenwood's survivors had spent decades fighting simply to be heard.

State leaders expressed sympathy and acknowledged the tragedy, but sympathy did not translate into responsibility. Public statements replaced action. Task forces were formed. Reports were written. Yet the outcomes survivors sought, compensation, land access, and meaningful repair, remained out of reach.

The same systems that failed Greenwood in 1921 continued to fail it decades later. Law enforcement that once stood aside was replaced by legal processes that moved slowly or not at all. Bureaucracy became another barrier. Procedure became another excuse.

Promises were made in public and abandoned in practice. Each delay reinforced the message that recognition did not require repair. Justice was acknowledged in words but withheld in action.

Greenwood was not only destroyed by violence. It was stalled by a system that proved unwilling to correct its own failures.

When the system refused to act, Greenwood's fight did not end. It changed shape.


JUSTICE
FOR
GREENWOOD
END 10 YEARS
OF INJUSTICE
REPARATIONS
FOR
GREENWOOD!
AMENDS
NOW

Resistance Takes Many Forms

When reparations were denied, resistance did not end.

Descendants organized. Activists protested. Historians published research. Educators rewrote lesson plans. Greenwood's story became a symbol of larger conversations about racial violence, economic theft, and historical accountability.

Resistance also took quieter forms. Families preserved documents. Churches held memorials. Artists, poets, and writers told Greenwood's story in new ways.

Remembering became an act of defiance.

Why the Fight Continues

Reparations are not only about the past. They are about the future.

When injustice is left unaddressed, its effects continue across generations. Wealth lost in 1921 could not be passed down. Opportunities disappeared. Neighborhoods were reshaped by policies rooted in the same discrimination that destroyed Greenwood.

To demand reparations is to demand a different future. Greenwood's fight is not finished because history is not finished.

Resistance as Hope

Every time Greenwood is remembered, the lie that it never mattered is challenged.

Every time a student learns this history, silence loses its grip.

Resistance does not always look like victory. Sometimes it looks like persistence.

And persistence, over time, becomes power.

Reflection Questions – Chapter 9

Think: *(Consider the difference between apology, accountability, and repair.)*

1. Why do you think reparations for Greenwood have faced so much resistance, even after the truth was officially confirmed?

Write:

2. How are reparations different from charity or sympathy? Why does that distinction matter?

3. In what ways did the loss of wealth in 1921 affect later generations of Greenwood families?

Discuss:

4. What forms of resistance do you see in Greenwood's story besides protests or lawsuits?

5. Do you believe a society can move forward without repairing past harm? Why or why not?

Chapter 10: Memory Is Power

For decades, Greenwood was nearly erased.
Not only its buildings, but its story. Not only its wealth, but its meaning. Streets were rebuilt without acknowledgment. Records were lost or ignored. What had been one of the most vibrant Black communities in the nation was reduced, in public memory, to silence. That silence was not accidental. It was meant to finish what the fire began.

It did not succeed.

Memory as Survival

Greenwood survived because its people remembered.

When history books failed to tell the story, families carried it themselves. Parents spoke at kitchen tables late at night. Grandparents shared memories during quiet moments, choosing their words carefully but refusing to let the truth disappear. When classrooms skipped over Greenwood, elders whispered the story to children, knowing that remembering could be risky but forgetting would be worse.

Memory lived in names passed down through generations. It lived in warnings meant to keep children safe. It lived in prayers spoken softly, not because they were weak, but because they were sacred. Even when the world refused to listen, Greenwood's people held the truth close.

Remembering became an act of survival.

To remember Greenwood was to push back against erasure. It was to reject the lie that the community had failed or that its destruction did not matter. Memory preserved dignity when justice was denied. It kept Greenwood alive long before museums, textbooks, or public apologies ever did.

Greenwood endured because its people refused to let silence have the final word.


GREENWOOD
RISING

Why Memory Threatens Power

Forgetting makes injustice easier to repeat.

When a society forgets who was harmed and how, it avoids responsibility. Memory interrupts that comfort. It demands honesty. It exposes patterns. It forces questions that power would rather avoid.

Greenwood's memory challenges the idea that violence was rare or accidental. It shows how racism, fear, and greed can be organized, protected, and excused.

That is why remembering is powerful.

The Role of Education

When Greenwood finally entered textbooks, it changed more than lessons. It changed conversations.

Students asked why they had never learned this before. Teachers questioned what else had been left out. Communities began examining whose stories were told and whose were erased.

Education does not just share facts. It shapes values.

Teaching Greenwood is not about guilt. It is about truth.

Carrying the Story Forward

Memory is not passive. It requires action.

Each generation decides whether to carry the story forward or let it fade again. Museums, memorials, books, classrooms, and conversations all become places where memory can live.

So do people.

When someone speaks Greenwood's name with understanding, memory grows stronger.

What Memory Makes Possible

Memory alone does not rebuild neighborhoods or return stolen wealth. But it creates the conditions for justice.

It opens the door to accountability. It fuels resistance. It reminds us that progress is not guaranteed and that silence is never neutral.

Greenwood's story is not only about what was lost. It is about what was carried.

The fire tried to erase a community. Memory kept it alive.

And as long as Greenwood is remembered, its story still has power.

Reflection Questions – Chapter 10: Memory Is Power

Think: *(Reflect on who controls memory and why that control matters.)*

1. Why do you think memory itself can be a form of power, especially for communities that have experienced violence or erasure?

Write:

2. How does learning about Greenwood change the way you think about American history and whose stories are told?

3. What responsibility do individuals have in preserving and sharing difficult history?

Discuss

4. How can remembering Greenwood help prevent similar injustices in the future?

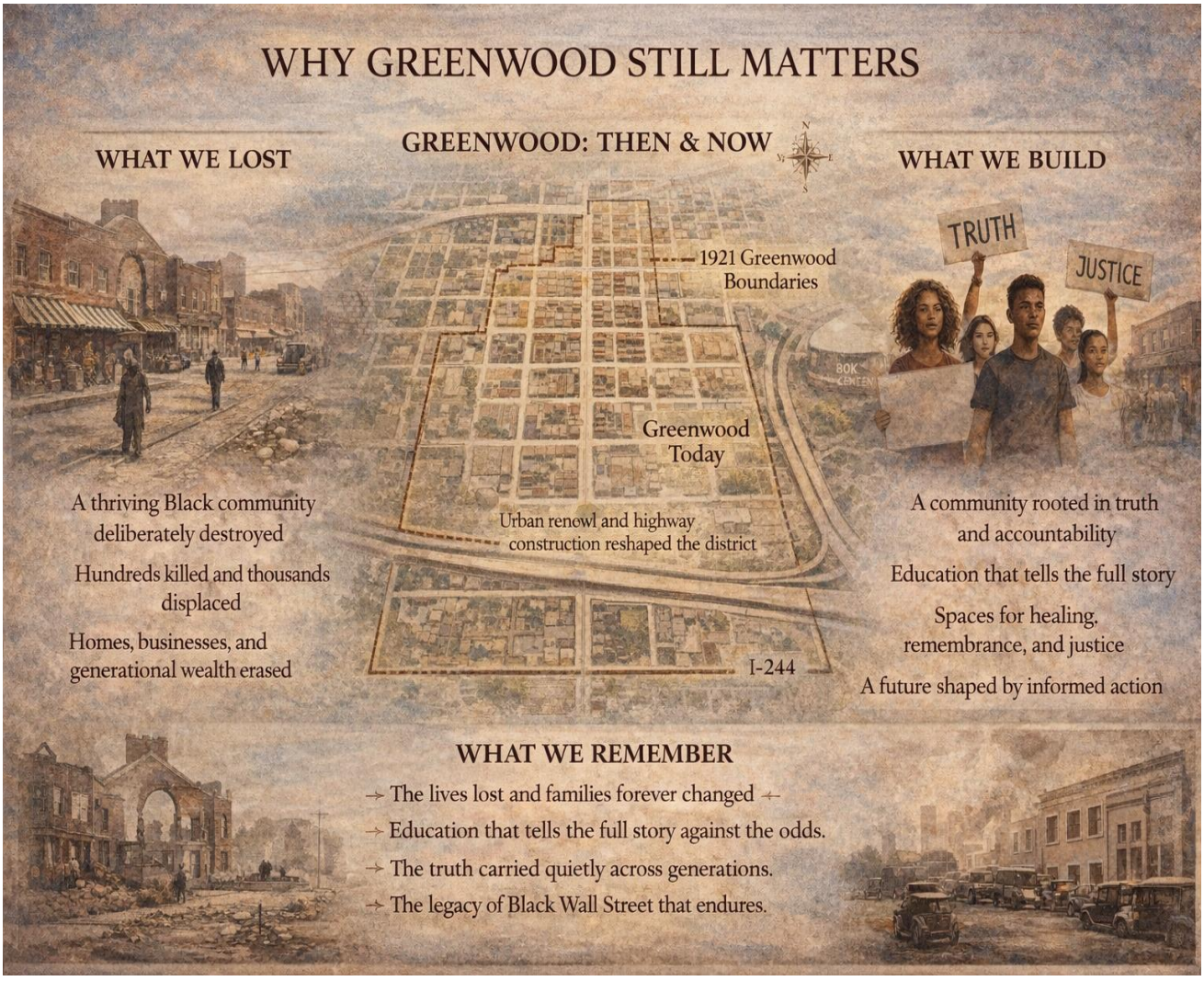
5. In what ways can education challenge silence and create change?

Conclusion: Keep the Flame Alive

Greenwood was built with vision.
It was destroyed with violence.
And it survived through memory.

This book began with a thriving community and moved through fire, silence, and resistance. But Greenwood's story does not end in ashes. It ends with a choice.

Every generation faces the same question: *What will we do with the truth once we know it?*



Why Greenwood Still Matters

The Tulsa Race Massacre was not an accident of history. It was the result of fear, racism, and systems designed to protect power at the expense of human life. Those systems did not disappear in 1921. Their effects can still be felt today.

Understanding Greenwood helps us recognize how injustice is built, how it is hidden, and how it is allowed to continue.

History does not repeat itself exactly, but it echoes.

What Justice Requires

Justice is more than remembering harm. It requires acknowledgment, repair, and change.

That means listening to survivors and descendants. It means teaching the truth even when it is uncomfortable. It means questioning whose voices are missing from the stories we are told.

Justice begins when silence ends.

Your Role in the Story

Greenwood's story now belongs to you.

Not to carry as guilt, but as responsibility.

You carry it when you speak up against misinformation. You carry it when you ask better questions. You carry it when you refuse to accept incomplete histories.

You carry it when you remember that progress is not automatic and that democracy requires vigilance.

A Future Built on Truth

The people of Greenwood built a city that proved what was possible when vision, determination, and community came together. They created businesses, schools, churches, and neighborhoods that reflected pride and self-belief. Greenwood was more than a place. It was proof of what could be built, even in the face of exclusion.

When Greenwood was destroyed, its people did not disappear. They rebuilt with courage and dignity, often without help and under constant pressure. When their story was pushed aside and erased from public memory, they carried it themselves. They spoke it quietly at first, then more boldly, until the truth found its way back into the world.

That is their legacy.

The future does not belong to forgetting. It belongs to those who are willing to learn the full story, to sit with uncomfortable truths, and to refuse easy answers. Remembering Greenwood is not about the past alone. It is about shaping a future that does not repeat the same harm.

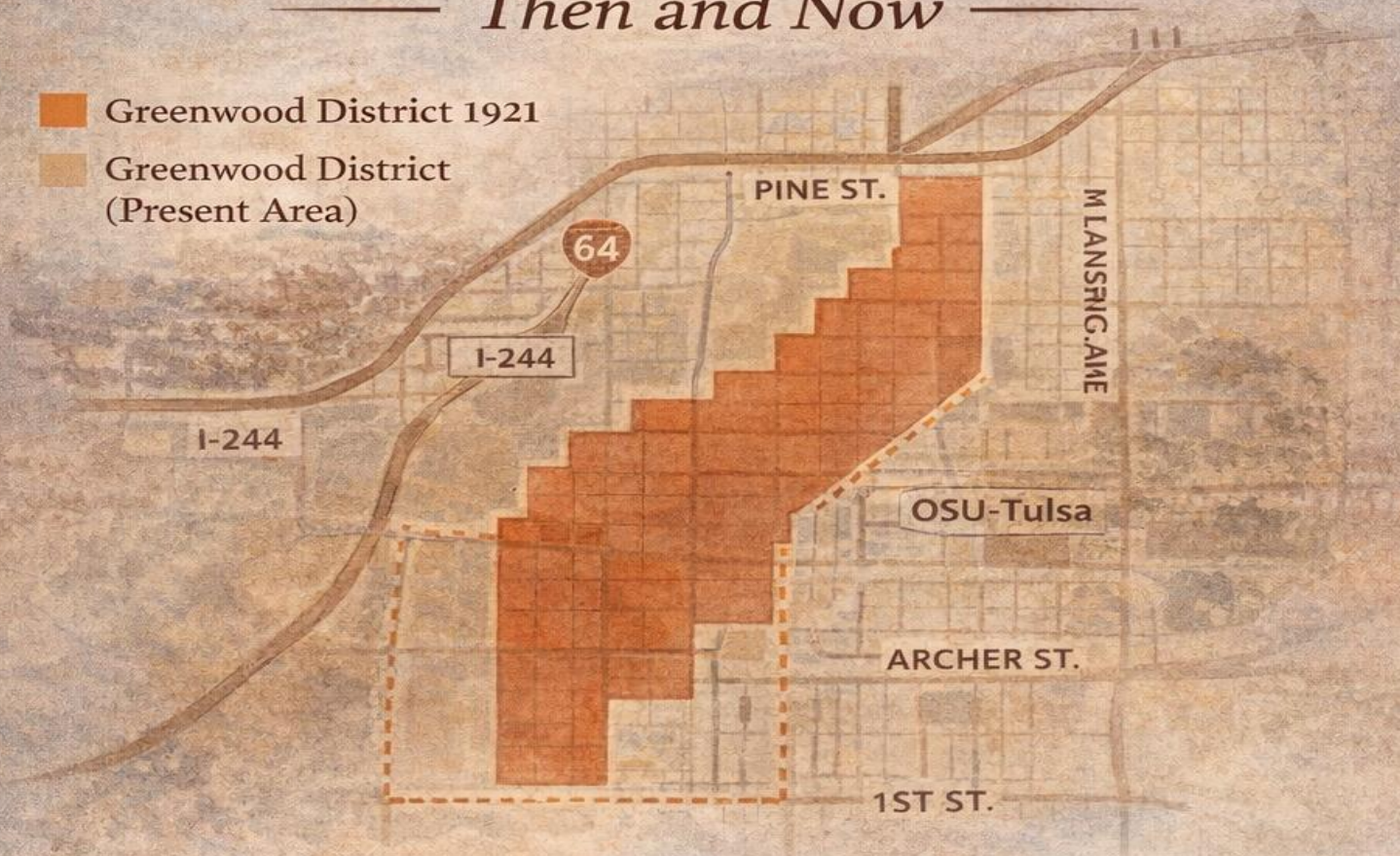
Keeping the flame alive means telling the story even when it is inconvenient. It means challenging misinformation and asking better questions. It means honoring those who came before by building something better for those who come next.

History does not end with what was taken.
It continues with what we choose to protect, what we choose to repair, and what we choose to build together.

The flame is in your hands now.

Greenwood

Then and Now



What We Lost

In 1921, Greenwood lost over 35 blocks. Homes, hotels, churches, and businesses were destroyed. Hundreds of African Americans were killed or injured, and thousands were left homeless.

What We Remember

Greenwood fought back by remembering.
The survivors rebuilt.
Their descendants carried the story.
Today, we honor that memory by teaching the past and standing up for justice.

What We Build

Today, Greenwood is smaller, but its legacy is alive. Advocates fight for the community that remains. New investments and projects help rebuild. Healing, justice, and opportunity are what we work to build for future.

Final Reflection
Carrying Greenwood Forward

You have read about a community that was built with care, destroyed by violence, and nearly erased by silence.

Greenwood's story asks more than sympathy. It asks awareness. It asks honesty. And it asks responsibility.

History does not live only in the past. It shapes laws, neighborhoods, wealth, and opportunity in the present. When stories like Greenwood's are ignored, injustice is easier to repeat.

Reflection is not the end of learning. It is the beginning.

Take a moment to think about what Greenwood's story means for you, your community, and the future you want to help build.

BONUS SECTION
Voices That Survived

Why These Stories Matter

The Tulsa Race Massacre did not end when the fires stopped burning.

It lived on in the memories of those who survived. For decades, those memories were ignored, doubted, or deliberately silenced. Survivors were told to move on. Children were taught nothing. Official records disappeared. What remained were voices, often whispered, sometimes hidden, but never gone.

This section exists to honor those voices.

Survivor testimony is not supplemental history. It *is* history.

Each profile that follows is drawn from documented accounts, oral histories, court testimony, and archival records. These individuals did more than endure violence. They carried truth forward when doing so came at great personal cost.

Their lives remind us that Greenwood was not just a place. It was people.


GROCER-CO

Survivor Profiles

Mary E. Jones Parrish

Author, Educator, Historian

Mary E. Jones Parrish was living in Greenwood during the massacre and became one of the earliest and most important chroniclers of what happened.

In 1922, she published *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, one of the first firsthand accounts written by a survivor. At a time when newspapers lied and officials refused to investigate, Parrish documented names, losses, and lived experiences.

She described watching Greenwood burn, seeing families displaced, and witnessing the trauma that followed. Her writing was not emotional exaggeration. It was careful, factual, and determined.

Parrish understood that memory was fragile. She wrote because she feared that if survivors did not record the truth themselves, it would be erased.

Without her work, much of what we know today might have been lost forever.

Buck Colbert Franklin

Attorney, Father, Rebuilder

Buck Colbert Franklin was a lawyer in Greenwood and the father of historian John Hope Franklin. During the massacre, he narrowly escaped death while walking through burning streets.

In his later writings, Franklin described stepping over bodies, watching buildings collapse, and feeling the weight of helplessness as armed mobs took control of the city.

After the massacre, he played a critical role in rebuilding Greenwood. He helped residents file legal claims, challenge zoning laws meant to prevent rebuilding, and restore some sense of order.

Franklin's work showed that survival did not end with staying alive. Survival also meant resisting erasure through law, documentation, and persistence.

George Monroe

Eyewitness, Child Survivor

George Monroe was a child living in Greenwood in 1921. His memories, recorded decades later, offer a powerful reminder of how violence shapes childhood.

He recalled running through smoke, hiding with family members, and seeing homes destroyed. Long after the massacre, Monroe spoke about the fear that stayed with him and the silence that followed.

No one explained what happened. No one apologized. The world simply moved on.

His testimony matters because it shows how trauma does not disappear with time. It settles quietly into lives, shaping how survivors see safety, belonging, and trust.

Eddie Faye Gates

Oral Historian, Witness to Witnesses

Eddie Faye Gates was not a survivor of the massacre itself. She was a survivor of its silence.

As an educator and historian, Gates dedicated her life to locating survivors and recording their stories at a time when many were elderly and feared speaking publicly.

She listened. She documented. She preserved.

Without her work, many survivor voices would have been lost to time. Gates helped ensure that Greenwood's history did not depend solely on official records that failed it.

Her legacy reminds us that remembering is an active choice.

Viola Fletcher

Survivor, Advocate for Justice

Viola Fletcher was seven years old when the massacre destroyed her home.

Over a century later, she testified before Congress, describing running from gunfire, seeing bodies in the street, and living with the consequences of that night for her entire life.

At 100 years old, Fletcher reminded the nation that survival does not mean healing. Justice delayed is justice denied.

Her testimony made clear that Greenwood's story is not ancient history. It is living memory.

What These Voices Teach Us

Survivors were not believed.
They were not compensated.
They were not protected.

But they endured.

Their stories expose the cost of silence and the power of truth. They challenge us to ask harder questions about whose pain is acknowledged and whose is ignored.

To remember Greenwood is to listen to those who lived it.

And once we listen, we are responsible for what we do next.

Student Pledge: Keep the Flame Alive

I pledge to remember Greenwood.
I pledge to question incomplete histories and seek the truth.
I pledge to listen to voices that were silenced and stories that were ignored.
I pledge to challenge injustice when I see it, even when it is uncomfortable.
I pledge to carry history forward with honesty, empathy, and courage.

Because remembering is an act of justice.
And truth deserves witnesses.

Name: _____
Date: _____

Glossary

Black Wall Street
A nickname for Greenwood, reflecting its concentration of successful Black-owned businesses and institutions.

Jim Crow Laws
State and local laws that enforced racial segregation and discrimination in the United States after Reconstruction.

Lynching
An act of mob violence, often involving murder, carried out without legal process, commonly used to terrorize Black communities.

Red Summer (1919)
A period of widespread racial violence across the United States following World War I.

Dick Rowland
A young Black shoe shiner falsely accused of assaulting a white woman, an allegation that sparked the Tulsa Race Massacre.

Sarah Page
The white elevator operator involved in the incident with Dick Rowland.

Tulsa Race Massacre (1921)
A coordinated attack on the Greenwood community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, resulting in the destruction of homes, businesses, and loss of life.

Internment Camps
Detention areas where Black residents of Greenwood were held after the massacre, including the Tulsa Fairgrounds.

Reparations
Efforts to repair harm caused by injustice through compensation, acknowledgment, or systemic change.

Erasure
The deliberate removal or omission of people or events from historical record.

Timeline of the Tulsa Race Massacre

1905–1921
Greenwood grows into one of the most prosperous Black communities in the United States.

May 30, 1921
Dick Rowland enters an elevator in downtown Tulsa. An incident is misreported as an assault.

May 31, 1921 (Afternoon)
Tulsa Tribune publishes an inflammatory headline accusing Rowland.

May 31, 1921 (Evening)
White mobs gather outside the courthouse demanding Rowland be lynched. Black veterans arrive to protect him.

May 31, 1921 (Late Night)
A gunshot is fired during a confrontation outside the courthouse.

June 1, 1921 (Early Morning)
White mobs invade Greenwood. Homes and businesses are looted and burned. Airplanes are reported dropping incendiaries.

June 1, 1921 (Morning)
Martial law is declared. Thousands of Black residents are detained.

June 1921–1922
Red Cross provides aid. Insurance claims are denied. No perpetrators are charged.

1997–2001
Oklahoma Tulsa Race Riot Commission investigates and confirms the massacre.

Present Day
Greenwood's story continues to shape conversations about justice, memory, and reparations.

Source Notes & Further Reading

Primary Sources

- Mary E. Jones Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster* (1922)
- Oklahoma Tulsa Race Riot Commission Final Report (2001)
- American Red Cross Relief Records, Tulsa, 1921

Archives & Institutions

- Library of Congress
- Tulsa Historical Society & Museum
- Oklahoma Historical Society
- National Archives

Secondary Sources

- Ellsworth, Scott. *Death in a Promised Land*
- Hirsch, James. *Riot and Remembrance*
- Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

In 1921, one of the most successful Black communities in America was destroyed in less than twenty-four hours.

Greenwood, known as *Black Wall Street*, was a place of ambition, independence, and pride. Built by people who were told they could have nothing, it stood as proof of what Black excellence could achieve, even under Jim Crow.

Then it was burned.

Burning Greenwood traces the rise of Greenwood, the violence that tore it apart during the Tulsa Race Massacre, and the decades of silence that followed. Drawing on survivor testimony, historical records, and modern investigations, Tiffany Brown tells the story of a community that refused to disappear.

This is not only a book about destruction. It is a book about memory, resistance, and the ongoing fight for justice. From the families who rebuild against impossible odds to the descendants and activists who continue to demand truth and accountability, Greenwood's story is still being written.

History does not end with what was taken.
It continues with what we choose to remember and what we are willing to change.

A true story of violence, survival, and unfinished justice.

GUIDING HAND PUBLISHING