

The Destruction of Black Wall Street: Tulsa's 1921 Riot and the Eradication of Accumulated Wealth

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ABSTRACT. The Tulsa race riot of 1921 was one of the most destructive riots in American history. Prior to the riot, the Greenwood community was among the wealthiest African-American neighborhoods in the state. Residents of Greenwood had successfully developed their own business infrastructure, and by the early 1920s the neighborhood was rapidly expanding and flourishing economically. The attack by white citizens on a flourishing black neighborhood not only resulted in mass casualties, but it destroyed nearly all of the African-American-owned businesses and churches, as well as many residential properties. The economic prosperity of Greenwood was obliterated overnight. The Greenwood community was perceived as a threat to white hegemony. The riot and its aftermath served to effectively impede African-American prosperity. The city of Tulsa provided very little monetary assistance following the event. Greenwood residents attempted to rebuild following the destruction, but the community never regained

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the same economic standing. We argue that the Tulsa riot of 1921 was one of many examples of racial violence during the early part of the 20th century that had long-lasting economic and social legacies for African Americans.

Introduction

In 1921, the African-American Greenwood community in Tulsa, Oklahoma was victim to one of the deadliest and most destructive riots in American history. In addition to mass casualties, the Greenwood community suffered losses including completely destroyed homes, businesses, churches, and public buildings, totaling approximately \$1.8 million in 1921 dollars. Despite the devastation, the city of Tulsa provided virtually no assistance to Greenwood residents to rebuild their neighborhood. The riot resulted not only in the destruction of 35 city blocks in Greenwood, but it wiped out the accumulated wealth of countless residents and stymied the community's economic prospects for the future. (For further reading on the riot, see Ellsworth 1982; Gates 2003; Johnson 1998; Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921 2001.) The Greenwood district was distinct because, prior to the riot, the African-American community had achieved tremendous economic success due to abundant entrepreneurial activities. However, the accumulation of wealth in this community was perceived as a threat, triggering significant hostility toward African-American residents. In this article, we make important connections between this perceived economic threat and the racial violence that occurred in 1921. We start by analyzing the community's wealth prior to the riot, highlighting its thriving economic activities. We then discuss the Tulsa riot and analyze the role played by local government—both directly and indirectly—in perpetuating the violence and in stymying Greenwood's economic development.

Our research draws on a variety of primary and secondary source materials, including archival documents from legal cases and the National Guard, census data, published oral narratives, and newspaper coverage. Archival news coverage from the daily newspapers *Tulsa World* and *Tulsa Tribune* was particularly important for analyzing the

local sociopolitical context before, during, and after the riot. The local white population felt that the success of the Greenwood community was threatening to their white privilege and the status quo (Bonilla-Silva 2015; Jensen 2005; King and Wheelock 2007). Moreover, the destruction of Greenwood provided an opening for white citizens to establish commercial development in the area. The flashpoint occurred when reports of physical contact between an African-American man and a white woman surfaced. By all indications, the contact had been innocuous and accidental. Yet, the act was framed as an “attack” on a white woman, and it quickly provided the impetus for a mob of angry white men to unleash their fury on the Greenwood community. We argue that the Tulsa Riot represents one of many efforts to reinforce white racial domination through both violence and economic destruction.

Prosperity in Tulsa, Oklahoma: Greenwood as the “Black Wall Street”

Before the devastation in 1921, the Greenwood district of Tulsa was home to an affluent African-American community of over 10,000 residents (Ellsworth 1982; Gates 2003; Johnson 1998). According to Booker T. Washington, Greenwood was the “Negro Wall Street” of America (Greenwood Cultural Center 2017); others referred to the area as the “Negro Metropolis” to highlight its rapid growth and economic opportunities (Jones Parrish [1922] 1998). By 1920, Greenwood’s thriving development made Tulsa a population center for African Americans throughout the region. Population data from the period show that in 1910 African Americans comprised 8.3 percent of Oklahoma’s population, and 10.8 percent of Tulsa’s population. By 1920, these figures showed an even stronger African-American presence in Tulsa. The overall percentage of African Americans in the state decreased to 7.4 percent, but Tulsa’s African-American population increased to 12.3 percent. This can be explained in part by northern migration patterns (Gregory 2005). More specifically, the increase in the African-American population in Tulsa was directly tied to the unique economic and social attractions of the Greenwood area.

The Greenwood community worked to encourage economic initiative and entrepreneurialism, and community leaders promoted

independence and encouraged financial autonomy. For example, the editor of the African-American *Tulsa Star* newspaper, A. J. Smitherman, noted: "Let us make employment for our own. To do so means race independence and progress . . . Keep as much wealth as possible within the race. The future will take care of itself" (*Tulsa Star* 1918: 4). By 1920, the financial accomplishments in the community were even being recognized by white residents of Tulsa. For example, in one of its rare pre-riot acknowledgments of the African-American community, the white-owned daily newspaper *Tulsa World* reported: "Residents in the Negro section of the city have proven themselves no less enterprising than the white people. In all of the Negro additions numerous dwellings are to be seen" (*Tulsa World* 1920: 5). The 1920 census recorded a multitude of African-American-owned businesses in the community, including billiard halls, clothing stores, music shops, furniture stores, confectionaries, meat markets, hotels, restaurants, and a movie theatre (U.S. Bureau of Census 1920). According to the 1921 city directory, Greenwood comprised 191 businesses (Ellsworth 1982). It was also home to a library, two schools, a hospital, and two newspapers (O'Dell 2001).

Narratives from members of the community at the time provide a detailed picture of the prosperous conditions in Greenwood. For example, the executive secretary for the YMCA remembered:

There were four well-equipped drug stores, many grocery stores. Elliott & Hooker, men's and women's furnishing store, carried as high a grade of goods in the city; two fine hotels accommodated the traveling public; Welcome Grocery was a model; modern barber shop, and two shoe shops with up-to-date machinery. Dreamland theatre catered to the pleasure and entertainment of the people. The physicians were equipping themselves with all the modern apparatus required to alleviate human suffering. Young men as dentists had invested heavily in preparing to take care of the distressed in their line. Women had invested in beauty parlors and dress-making establishments. Cafes were prepared to feed satisfactorily the many patrons . . . Four upholstered jitney busses carried the people from their homes to their work. An undertaking establishment equipped with caskets ranging from \$50 to \$1,000, all for the accommodation of the colored people. (G.A. Gregg, cited in Jones Parrish [1922] 1998: 82)

Numerous professionals contributed to the community's prosperity, including dentists, pharmacists, jewelers, lawyers, nurses, photographers, physicians, and real estate and insurance agents (U.S. Bureau of Census 1920). Moreover, census data and city directory information show that the number of professionals in Greenwood increased precipitously between 1907 and 1920. For instance, in 1907 there was only one lawyer, but by 1920 there were at least eight lawyers active in the community. There were two physicians/surgeons in 1907, compared to 19 in 1920. There were no listed contractors, carpenters, builders, or house and sign painters in 1907, but there were 48 by 1920. Within the same time frame, the number of barbers had grown from 1 to 36 (Ellsworth 1982; U.S. Bureau of Census 1920).

Illustrative narratives and oral histories from Greenwood residents help to capture the entrepreneurial spirit of the community prior to 1921. One notable example involved John and Loula Williams, who moved to Tulsa in the early part of the 20th century after John secured a job with an ice cream company. Shortly thereafter, he began earning extra income by repairing cars and saved enough money to open a garage on Greenwood Avenue. Later, the couple built a three-story building, which included their apartment, office space for local professionals, and a confectionary. They continued to prosper, and in 1914 they purchased another two-story building, which housed a larger garage and the iconic Dreamland Theater, the first African-American-owned movie theater in Tulsa (Ellsworth 1982).

Another illustrative case is J. B. Stradford, who moved to Tulsa in 1899 after earning a law degree from Indiana University. He purchased vacant parcels of land in Greenwood and resold them to African-American residents for development. He eventually purchased 15 rental houses and became the owner of the Stradford Hotel (*New York Times* 1996). The three-story, 65-room hotel opened in 1918 and was perhaps the largest African-American-owned hotel in the United States. At the time of the riot in 1921, J. B. Stradford was one of the largest wealth holders in Greenwood (Gerkin 2014; *New York Times* 1996). These types of financial success and prosperity served to attract other African-American families to Greenwood just before 1920 (Gates 1997; Little 1992). One resident's narrative highlighted the quality of life in her description

of her childhood home in Greenwood. Jimmie Lilly Franklin recalled:

It was a large home with four bedrooms, one bath, living room, dining room, and an office which was used by Papa, who was a photographer. The house was furnished with beautiful things, including a living room which had a Kimball piano, two sofas, two upholstered chairs, a settee, and four bedrooms full of oak furniture, and a dining room which contained an oak dining room set. Papa had a photographic studio, a dark-room, and several large cameras. (cited in Gates 2003: 68)

Greenwood was thus a thriving African-American community with prosperous businesses, which served as a vibrant district in which local residents could live and work.¹ In short, Greenwood represented an upper-middle-class community in the early part of the 20th century (White 1921; Jones Parish [1922] 1998).

African-American Prosperity as a Threat to the Status Quo

Sociological research has demonstrated a strong correlation between race, economic threats, and prejudice (Blalock 1967; Feldmeyer et al. 2015; Olzak and Shanahan 2014). For example, seminal work on group threat theory argues that hostility towards minority groups is grounded, at least in part, on perceived threats to the dominant status quo (Blalock 1967). As King and Wheelock (2007: 1255) explain: “Dominant groups seek to preserve their advantaged social position and view encroachments on their prerogatives by minority groups as disrupting to the existing social order.” Over the last several years, threat perspectives have been used to analyze a broad range of social phenomena including trends in arrest rates, incarceration, and police forces (Eitle, D’Alessio and Stolzenberg 2002; Greenberg and West 2001; Jacobs and O’Brien 1998). In their research on punitive attitudes, King and Wheelock (2007) find that whites support harsher punitive measures for African Americans when they perceive them to be an economic threat. King and Wheelock (2007: 1272) explain:

The perception that African Americans are a strain on *material* resources, more so than perceptions of African Americans as threats to public safety, is a particularly salient predictor of punitiveness. Many whites are

not simply concerned about managing dangerous classes, but more so about managing those perceived as menacing material resources such as jobs and welfare.

Economic threats are also associated with structural factors such as increases in minority population size (Blalock 1967; Olzak and Shanahan 2014).

The threat perspective helps us understand reactions to the Greenwood community. The rapid growth and success of Greenwood was met with resentment and envy by many white residents of Tulsa who felt threatened by the economic prosperity of the African-American community. These perceptions were heightened by increases in the population of the Greenwood district. The more generalized sense of threat was further exacerbated by the fact that the Greenwood neighborhood was expanding its boundaries. Thus, not only was Greenwood increasing its population of affluent African-American residents, but it was simultaneously expanding the physical boundaries of the community. Walter White (1921: 909), who investigated the riot for the NAACP, reported:

The negro in Oklahoma has shared in the sudden prosperity that has come to many of his white brothers, and there are some colored men there who are wealthy. This fact has caused a bitter resentment on the part of the lower order of whites, who feel that these colored men, members of an "inferior race," are exceedingly presumptuous in achieving greater economic prosperity than they who are members of a divinely superior race.

Immediately following the riot, several analysts pointed to this economic threat as the primary cause of the riot (*Chicago Defender* 1921a, 1921b; *The Independent* 1921). A victim who fled to Chicago after the riot explained: "It must have been that the poor whites were jealous of the way the Colored people were getting along" (*Chicago Defender* 1921d: 3). In fact, some reports noted that in the weeks and months leading up to the riot, warnings were given to Greenwood residents (*Chicago Defender* 1921b; *New Republic* 1921; *Survey* 1921). For instance, the *Chicago Defender* (1921b: 1) reported:

Letters had been sent to prominent men of the Race demanding that they stop extending the bounds of the district within which they were

segregated. A rumor has been extant for some time to the effect that it was the desire of white industry or of private citizens to appropriate the lands which the Race had gained possession of. Since the area had become a segregated district to them, the value had increased and white speculators saw a chance for immense profits if they could only drive the inhabitants out.

The Tulsa race riot was based, at least in part, on the perceived economic threats posed to whites by a growing upwardly mobile African-American population. As Butler (1991: 221–222) concluded:

Afro-Americans in Tulsa were victims because of their own economic success. When reports of the alleged assault by a black man on a white woman reached the white community, blacks had already been warned to leave ... In short, blacks were considered to be an economic problem.

Looking for a Scapegoat: Racial Framing and Manufactured Physical Threats

The economic prosperity of Greenwood created improved living conditions for African Americans in Tulsa, but paradoxically it simultaneously served to undermine the security of the neighborhood as the white community grew increasingly frustrated with the situation. Thus, the very structural conditions that benefited African Americans prompted envy and anger among many whites. The resulting tension festered inside the white community. Feagin (2006) argues that perceived threats are embedded within a larger, more systemic white racial frame, which operates to rationalize discrimination against African Americans. He defines this white racial frame as “an organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate. This white racial frame generates closely associated, recurring, and habitual discriminatory actions” (Feagin 2006: 25). In the early part of the 20th century, whites commonly used violence as a response to a perceived threat from African Americans. But in Tulsa, as in many other similar cases, angry whites needed a justification to respond to Greenwood’s success.

This justification came in the form of an alleged attack on a white woman by an African-American male from Greenwood. The alleged

attack occurred on May 30, 1921, when there was accidental physical contact between Dick Rowland, a shoe shiner, and Sarah Page, a white elevator operator. It is commonly understood today that Rowland simply slipped and inadvertently grabbed Page's hand, prompting her to scream (Butler 1991; Ellsworth 1982; Gates 1997, 2003). But at the time the incident was reported to police as a physical assault of an African-American man on a helpless white woman.² This framing of the event—which fed into the broader racial framing of the period that cast African-American men as aggressive—prompted Rowland's arrest on the morning of May 31. News coverage of the event published by the *Tulsa World* (1921a1) in an afternoon edition reflected this racial framing of the event:

A negro delivery boy who gave his name to the public 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.³ [emphasis added]

This form of sensationalized "yellow journalism" often contributed to lynching in the early part of the 20th century, particularly when the person being accused was an African-American male and the alleged victim a white woman. White (1929) noted that the "press and the pulpit" presented an image of African Americans as prone to violence. Moreover, lynching was framed as a legitimate response in order to preserve the purity of white women. Accusations of sexual assaults on white women by African-American men were direct causes of previous white

riots in cities such as Atlanta, Georgia in 1905 and Springfield, Illinois in 1908. To promote due process, and merely to survive, many African Americans began turning to collective self-defense (Lee and Humphrey 1943; Smith McKoy 2001; Waskow 1966).

In Tulsa, the media's racial framing of the event and its exaggerated emphasis on violence by an African American resonated with the frustrations of whites and fueled their animosity and hatred. As news of the alleged assault spread, whites began gathering at the courthouse where Rowland was being held. While some of the whites present were there to feed their curiosity, many others arrived with the sole intention of assisting in Rowland's lynching (*Tulsa World* 1921c, 1921f). By 4:00 p.m., law enforcement officials began communicating with one another about these intentions and devising a plan to prevent the lynching (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921g). In the meantime, some residents of the Greenwood district, including community leaders and social activists such as J. B. Stradford, gathered at the *Tulsa Star* offices around 5:00 p.m. and began formulating their own response out of concern that Rowland might be lynched (Gates 1997; *Tulsa Tribune* 1921e). Meanwhile, the angry white crowd outside the courthouse continued to grow to nearly 300 people by 7:30 p.m. (Gill 1946). Concerned for Rowland's safety as well as the security of their community, around 25 Greenwood residents offered to assist the authorities. At 9:00 p.m., they drove to the courthouse armed with guns. As one member of the Greenwood community argued shortly after the riot, the historical experience of African Americans with lynching and insufficient police protection justified their bringing guns to the courthouse:

This lack of confidence in law enforcement causes the Negro to feel that it is necessary to protect himself in most cases of threatened lynching. If the party is a member of our group, he is most generally lynched, even though promised the assurance of protection by law. (Jones-Parrish [1922] 1998: 45)

The officials declined the offer and the group returned to Greenwood (*Tulsa World* 1921f). Further outraged at the scene, and by the appearance of armed African Americans, whites went home to

gather arms (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921b). By 9:30, the crowd estimated outside the courthouse had ballooned to nearly 2,000 (Ellsworth 2001). Concerned that lynching was becoming increasingly imminent, a second contingent of around 50 armed African Americans arrived around 10:00 p.m. An editorial in the *Tulsa Tribune* on June 1 described the scene:

A small band of negroes brings firearms onto the scene. At first they were few. At the outset there was nothing to indicate that the whites had been moved to a battling protest. But when the first small band of negroes added to their armed forces the war began. (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921c: 1)

The presence of armed African Americans was interpreted and framed by white residents and officials as an “uprising” (*Tulsa World* 1921f, 1921g, 1921n). A fight broke out between an African American and a white, resulting in an accidental gunshot and the advent of perhaps the deadliest race riot in U.S. history (*Tulsa World* 1921b).

The Destruction of Greenwood

Following the initial gunshot, African Americans began “a retreating fight” back toward the Greenwood area (Ellsworth 2001). There were several casualties during this initial stage, but the precise number is unknown. Scattered fighting occurred in downtown Tulsa over the next few hours. Meanwhile, whites prepared for an armed response, with help from local law enforcement. Approximately 500 men were deputized (Ellsworth 2001; *Tulsa World* 1921h). Some white men were provided with arms by the police (*Tulsa World* 1921o). According to Charles F. Barrett, Oklahoma’s Adjutant General at the time of the riot, the deputizing was a one-sided affair. Barrett (1941: 209) explained how deputizing white citizens served to embolden them and legitimate racial violence:

The chief, like all good officers, did not want to call for help as long as there was a hope that he could quell the uprising with his own forces, which, indeed, had been increased by the deputizing of five hundred special deputies. He did not realize that in a race war a large part, if not a majority, of these special deputies were imbued with the same spirit of

destruction that animated the mob. They became as deputies the most dangerous part of the mob.

Additionally, National Guard reports prepared after the riot reveal that whites broke into businesses to obtain guns and ammunition (Barrett 1941).

As word spread throughout the Greenwood community about an impending white assault on the area, African Americans began preparing lines of defense (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921). In its earliest stages, gunfire was exchanged near the Frisco railroad tracks, which served as a dividing line between African-American and white commercial districts (Ellsworth

Figure 1

Mt. Zion Baptist Church burning. In the foreground, parishioners are quickly removing objects from the burning building. Eyewitnesses stated that some of the fires in large buildings, including this church, may have been started by incendiary bombs dropped from the numerous planes flying over the city on June 1, 1921 (Warner 2001: 105). Note also the unpaved street in this black neighborhood, even though the church was on a non-residential street. Similar streets in white neighborhoods were paved.

Source: Tulsa Historical Society & Museum



2001). Later, around 5:00 a.m., witnesses reported hearing sirens, whistles, and other auditory cues that signaled the onslaught of organized, white, angry mobs into the Greenwood district (Jones Parrish [1922] 1998). The *Tulsa World* noted that prominent white businessmen were among those driving cars loaded with armed whites into the Greenwood area (*Tulsa World* 1921b). In addition, at least six airplanes were deployed throughout the area (*Tulsa World* 1921a), some of which were reportedly used to shoot at African Americans (Jones Parrish 1998).

Police and other city officials did not attempt to stop the white rioters or prevent any murders, ultimately emboldening the white residents further. After the riot, the police chief of Tulsa, John Gustafson, was tried and found guilty of neglect during the event (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921i). An official testified that the police chief's instructions were to "protect the lives of white citizens and to make every effort to establish peace and order" (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921g: 1). During the trial, a white resident testified that he observed police taking no action to quell the riot. Indeed, some law enforcement officers encouraged white residents to participate or fanned the flames of the violence. A white resident reported being told by a police officer to "get a gun and get a nigger" (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921h: 1). In some cases, police and other officials even participated directly in the violence. Residents and officials testified that they observed officers breaking windows and starting fires (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921h).

When the local chapter of the National Guard arrived on the scene, they also aligned themselves with the white rioters during the event. While describing the scene, a guardsman reported: "The most visible point from which *enemy* shots came was the tower of the new brick negro church" (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921f: 5 [. . .]). A special detachment of nearly 100 guardsmen had been ordered to help terminate the riot but did not arrive until 9:15 a.m. on June 1 (Barrett 1941).

As white rioters increasingly entered the Greenwood district throughout the early morning hours of June 1, they turned to the looting and destruction of property. African-American homes, businesses, and churches in Greenwood were set on fire. White men brandishing weapons prevented firefighters from putting out the fires, and, as a result, the fires raged for hours.

Valuable assets and other items that were easily transportable were looted from African-American homes. Many Greenwood residents had

Figure 2

Entire Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, OK, burning. Photo taken from rooftop of a downtown building shows the extent of destruction by fire. At least 1,200 houses were destroyed, along with hotels, newspapers, churches, and other large buildings.

Source: Tulsa Historical Society & Museum



been reticent to put their money in white-owned banks, and kept large amounts of cash in their homes. Consequently, most families lost all of their earnings and savings as a result of looting, fire, and destruction (Jones Parrish [1922] 1998). James Durant, a survivor of the riot, noted the link between looting and the envy whites had for African-American advancement in Greenwood:

The site of these elegant homes, magnificently furnished, so infuriated white mobsters that they smashed fine dishes, hacked up valuable pianos, victrolas, musical instruments, tore down fancy lace curtains from Europe. (cited in Gates 2003: 66)

African Americans in Greenwood were severely outnumbered and out-resourced. Many were shot and killed for “resisting,” and others were simply killed for being African American in Greenwood at the time (Ellsworth 2001). Many of the surviving residents of Greenwood were forced to surrender as their homes were being invaded and destroyed, while others were able to flee the city. As residents surrendered to the

white authorities, they were arrested and taken together to mass detention centers (*Tulsa World* 1921d). Detainees were abused there. For instance, the *Tulsa Tribune* (1921a: 2) described the following incident: “Six blacks roped together in a line, were hauled into Convention hall early this morning by Leo Irish, motorcycle officer . . . He tied them together with a line and led them a hot pace behind his motorcycle” (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921a: 2).

Most of the rioting had ceased by 11:30 a.m. on June 1, when martial law was imposed by the authorities (Barrett 1941). By this time, nearly all Greenwood residents had been killed, placed under arrest, or escaped the city. An estimated 5,000 Greenwood residents—more than half of the population of the community—were interned at locations such as McNulty Park and Convention Hall (*Tulsa World* 1921d). In the days following the riot, African Americans could only leave the detention centers if they were issued a “green card,” which could only be obtained if white

Figure 3

African American men being led into an internment building during the riot. Around 5,000 African Americans were interned during the riot.

Although white men with guns invaded the African American neighborhood, the latter were treated as enemy combatants because a few defended themselves. In the month after the riot, African Americans were still required to have a pass to move about town.

Source: Tulsa Historical Society & Museum



employers came for the person and agreed to keep him or her indoors. As martial law expired on June 3, there were lingering concerns among white leaders that African Americans in Tulsa and surrounding communities might plot revenge (*Tulsa World* 1921j). Officials continued to require all African Americans to carry green cards throughout July to prevent African Americans from entering the city to incite anger or gather information for propaganda at a more national level (*Tulsa World* 1921p).

According to Red Cross reports published shortly after the riot, 184 African Americans and 48 whites were hospitalized for surgical care within 24 hours (Hower 1993: 147). White patients did not have their names recorded, presumably to avoid having their identities linked to riot participation (*Tulsa World* 1921a). Another 531 were provided with first aid treatment within the first three days of the riot's aftermath (Hower 1993). While there were officially 36 deaths (26 African Americans, 10 whites), it is widely agreed that the actual number of African-American deaths was much larger (Ellsworth 2001). Documenting the number of dead was difficult because traditional burials were not provided to African Americans. Indeed, in multiple articles the *Tulsa World* newspaper noted the National Guard's recognition that bodies were dumped into unmarked graves and possibly the Arkansas River (*Tulsa World* 1921d, 1921k). The Red Cross ultimately estimated a death toll of 300 (Brooks and Witten 2001: 124).

The Eradication of Wealth in Greenwood

The race riot completely devastated the Greenwood district and left the neighborhood in ruins. There was complete destruction of 35 city blocks (Gill 1946). That included more than 1,200 residential homes (O'Dell 2011). An additional 314 homes were looted but not destroyed during the assault (Hower 1993). African-American-owned businesses were razed, including the Dreamland Theater, the Stradford Hotel, and the offices of the two African-American newspapers, the *Tulsa Star* and the *Oklahoma Sun*. A recently completed elementary school was also torched. The Mt. Zion Baptist Church, which had only recently been constructed at a cost of \$85,000, was also burned to the ground (Gill 1946). The Oklahoma Commission (2001: 145) formed to investigate the riot

Figure 4

African American man killed during the Tulsa Riot. Officially 26 African Americans and 10 whites were killed, but the Red Cross estimates that around 300 were killed. Many were buried in mass graves or thrown in the river. Most deaths were of unarmed African Americans, defined as “the enemy” by the white mob.

Source: Tulsa Historical Society & Museum



Figure 5

Living in tents provided by Red Cross. With most of the housing destroyed by the riot, African-American families had no place to live for the next year or more except in tents from the Red Cross. Since average night-time temperatures in Tulsa, OK in the winter are below freezing, the loss of housing imposed an extreme hardship on the survivors of the riot.

Source: Tulsa Historical Society & Museum



in 1997 concluded that the total property damage was approximately \$1.8 million. If 1,200 median priced houses in Tulsa were destroyed today, the loss would be around \$150 million. The additional loss of other assets, including cash, personal belongings, and commercial property, might bring the total to over \$200 million. The Stratford Hotel alone would be worth \$2–\$3 million today.

In 1922, Greenwood resident Mary E. Jones Parrish published *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*. The book contained detailed descriptions of Greenwood prior to the riot, as well as eyewitness testimonies of events during and after the riot (Jones Parrish [1922] 1998).⁴ Her research provided one of the earliest and most detailed accounts of the enormous loss sustained during the event. For instance, four property owners reported losses ranging from \$50,000–\$125,000. Numerous others incurred losses of over \$20,000. Virtually all businesses owned by African Americans were burned to the ground, including the Gurley Building (valued at \$55,000), the Stratford Building (valued at \$50,000), the Smith Building (valued at \$30,000), and the Williams Building (valued at \$30,000). Numerous other business buildings, whose values ranged from \$8,000 to \$30,000, were completely destroyed as well (Jones Parrish [1922] 1998: 119–126). Jones Parrish ([1922] 1998) also recorded many of the residential values of homes destroyed during the riot, which ranged from \$300 to \$7,000. Her listings include the address, proprietor's name, and estimated value of the residence. This rich detail of loss recorded so shortly after the riot by Jones Parrish provides a more comprehensive understanding of Greenwood's value prior to the riot, and highlights the tremendous loss of property. In addition, she offered testimonials of those who lost everything during the riot. For instance, R. T. Bridgewater noted: "My safe had been broken open, all of the money stolen, also my silverware, cut glass, all of the family clothes, and everything of value had been removed, even my family Bible" (Jones Parrish [1922] 1998: 46). C. L. Netherland also had to start over again, as described by Jones Parrish ([1922] 1998: 57):

From a 10-room and basement modern brick home, I am now living in what was my coal barn. From a 5-chair white enamel barber shop, 4 baths, electric clippers, electric fan, 2 lavatories and shampoo stands, 4

workmen, double marble shine stand, a porter and income of over \$500 or \$600 per month, to a razor, strop and folding chair on the sidewalk.

Additional insights into the magnitude of lost wealth in Greenwood come from various court cases against insurance companies. For example, O'Dell (2001: 145–146) writes:

North Tulsans claimed a variety of possessions in these cases. For example, Dr. R.W. Motley claimed not only his surgical instruments and medicines, but Chippendale book cases, a set of the Harvard Classics, a mahogany library table, a silk mohair library outfit, a Steinway piano, and Rodgers silverware, among other items. Other claims were for livestock, rental property, and other essential materials.

The loss of property was matched in many cases by the loss of cash. Gill (1946: 51) explains the tendency of African Americans of the period to keep “large sums of money in their homes instead of in the banks. Several Negroes reported to the banks that they had charred money to exchange.” In many cases, individuals lost over \$1,000 in cash (Jones Parrish [1922] 1998).

Official Responses and the Lack of Adequate Compensation

Our analysis of the post-riot time period revealed that Tulsa officials and other white citizens worked to exploit the economic devastation that resulted from the riots in Greenwood. For instance, there were reports in the *Tulsa World* that several white citizens attempted to capitalize on the desperation of Greenwood residents. Most notably, they approached African Americans with low offers for their properties in the hope of securing valuable land at cheap prices:

Several white men have made offers to negro property owners, believing they will except (sic) almost any price for their property in Africa, not only because they are hard pressed for money, but because they fear to rebuild in Tulsa. (*Tulsa World* 1921i: 3)

According to some reports, white business leaders had been interested in the Greenwood area long before the riot: “Large manufacturing interests wanted the district in years past for business purposes and the

district was a ‘marked spot’” (*Chicago Defender* 1921e: 3). The Kansas & Texas Railway Co. began offering 50 percent discounts to African Americans seeking to leave the city; however, the discounted price of tickets was only applicable for one-way tickets (*Tulsa World* 1921m).

City officials also moved quickly to exploit the situation. The mayor of Tulsa formed the Reconstruction Committee to study the impacted area and offer proposals for its future use. On June 3, just two days after the riot, committee members formally suggested the land be used for commercial purposes (*Chicago Defender* 1921a). The Reconstruction Committee emphasized not only the potential economic impacts of commercial development, but it also noted its social value as well, arguing that such development would create a buffer zone between whites and African Americans:

We further believe that the two races being divided by an industrial section will draw more distinctive lines between them and thereby eliminate the intermingling of the lower elements of the two races, which in our opinion is the root of the evil which should not exist. (*Tulsa Tribune* 1921d)

The Reconstruction Committee proposed acquiring the devastated area and relocating the entire African-American community further north. Shortly after these recommendations were made, the city attempted to manipulate and impose these plans by extending fire zones into Greenwood (*Tulsa World* 1921l). That action would have disallowed the construction of frame houses—effectively forcing the relocation of the African-American community. Maurice Willows, Director of the Red Cross efforts in Tulsa immediately after the riot, recalled his efforts to garner exceptions for some Greenwood victims:

Shortly after this action the Red Cross asked the city authorities to grant the negroes permission to build temporary wooden houses on their lots. This permission was granted, only to be recalled a week later when it was found that a startling number of houses were under erection within the newly-extended fire limits. (Hower 1993: 159)

Officials’ plans for the relocation of Greenwood were eventually thwarted by the efforts of Spears, Franklin & Chappelle, a local

African-American legal firm. The lawyers successfully argued to the Oklahoma Supreme Court that Tulsa's plan to strip away African Americans' property rights to satisfy the commercial aims of white land speculators was unconstitutional. Despite this concession, rebuilding Greenwood would require tremendous resources given the magnitude of losses incurred by its business owners and residents. Gill (1946: 79) captures the sentiment following the legal victory: "The restrictions having been lifted, the work of reconstruction began in earnest. The majority of the Negroes could not rebuild as they wanted to at first because they did not have the money."

Figure 6

Sorting through the rubble of buildings destroyed by the Tulsa riot of 1921. After African Americans were finally released from detention and allowed to return to their homes, they were still not able to rebuild. At first, the city tried to block them from doing so, but even after they were allowed to rebuild, few had the money to do so because of inadequate compensation. Insurance companies refused to pay for claims.

Source: Tulsa Historical Society & Museum



Moreover, it soon became evident that Greenwood residents would be given very little assistance in rebuilding their community. As early as June 8, 1921, African Americans began seeking compensation for damages. Charles B. Wickham, a doctor, filed the first claim against the city for its role in the riot; however, the city was deemed not liable for damages caused by mobs (Gill 1946).

By July 30, 1921, fourteen hundred law suits covering claims of more than \$4,000,000 had been filed, and at that time a number of property owners had not been heard from. In addition to real property, these claims included household goods, office equipment, jewels, money and other items of personal property . . . Most of the suits were dismissed. (Gill 1946: 55)

In addition, insurance companies cited a “riot clause” in their policies and successfully avoided compensating any claims brought forward by African Americans for their destroyed homes, businesses, and property.⁵ Thus, repeated efforts for assistance in rebuilding Greenwood were met with resistance, neglect, or subterfuge.

Equally harmful to victims’ attempts to rebuild was the lack of adequate assistance from the city. Despite the fact that a mob of angry white citizens, bolstered by white officials, had destroyed 35 city blocks of African-American-owned houses and businesses, very little help was provided toward rebuilding efforts. Red Cross records reveal that relief and reconstruction funds were minimal compared to the vastness of the damage: \$60,000 was set aside by the county; \$40,000 came from the city, \$25,000 was provided through private donations, and \$6,000 came in the form of merchandise contributions (Hower 1993: 157). Moreover, the mayor of Tulsa rejected any offers of financial assistance from outside sources. The mayor’s explanation for this decision was that “this was strictly a Tulsa affair and that the work of restoration and charity would be taken care of by Tulsa people” (*Tulsa World* 1921i: 4). The funds provided by the city and its people afforded very little assistance in the way of rebuilding and restoration. An article in *Chicago Defender* poignantly summarized the tragedy: “Men who labored years to accumulate wealth lost it within twenty-four hours. The city of Tulsa is indifferent as to their welfare” (*Chicago Defender* 1921c: 1).

**Beyond Tulsa:
Riots and the Loss of Wealth Among African Americans**

The Tulsa race riot of 1921 represents one of myriad acts of violence against African Americans. During this period, numerous riots erupted throughout the nation, often taking the form of white mobs attacking African-American communities (Waskow 1966). For example, in 1919 a riot erupted in Elaine, Arkansas after African-American sharecroppers gathered at a local church to band together against the low wages they had received from plantation owners. Learning of the “insurrection,” whites gathered outside and fired shots into the church, killing several people. A massacre ensued that lasted several days and led to a substantial number of deaths (Rucker 2015; Waskow 1966).

In Rosewood, Florida, several African Americans, along with two whites, were killed during a riot in January 1923. Like Tulsa, Rosewood hosted a self-sufficient and prosperous African-American community of over 300 residents. After reports that an African-American male had assaulted a white woman, local whites invaded the African-American neighborhood, burning out dozens of homes and businesses. The community was completely destroyed and never rebuilt (Dye 1996).

This period from approximately 1910 to 1970 was known as the “Great Migration,” which was characterized by the relocation of millions of African Americans to new geographic regions. To escape the socioeconomic and political ills associated with the rural South, African Americans moved into more urban localities in northern states in pursuit of expanded opportunities (KJC White et al. 2005). Much of the early migration was made possible by World War I. Positions once held by whites in cities were left vacant and African Americans were heavily recruited to fill them. However, as African Americans moved into urban centers, the challenges of the South became challenges in the North. For example, the Chicago riot of 1919 began after an African-American youth was stoned to death after violating segregation laws by swimming in the part of a lake designated for whites (Tuttle 1978).

As whites returned from the war, they immediately sought to strip African Americans of the gains they had made (Franklin 1966). For instance, after labor competition between whites and African Americans grew to a boiling point, a riot broke out in East St. Louis on July 2,

1917. Over 200 houses were burned, African Americans were lynched, and nearly 50 people were killed in total (though this number is thought to be underestimated) (Rudwick 1964). Similar riots and aftermaths occurred in cities such as Knoxville and Washington, DC (Waskow 1966).

These acts of racial violence can be understood in part as a response to the perceived threats posed by African Americans to white hegemony. Jim Crow laws were used to maintain a dominant/subordinate relationship and to “depoliticalize” African Americans (Williamson 1986). However, the structure of segregation had the latent consequence of facilitating the emergence of independent, autonomous African-American communities. Importantly, whites interpreted this development as a source of economic and material competition (King and Wheelock 2007). Moreover, growing competition also coincided with the perception among whites that African Americans had become “radicalized” after issuing elevated demands for equality and that they were willing to use force, if necessary (White 1921). Indeed, this era witnessed calls from African-American leaders to defend themselves against white violence (Ellsworth 1982). After investigating the Tulsa case, Walter White (1921: 910) of the NAACP used Tulsa’s example to discuss the growing number of “pogroms” against African-American communities:

How much longer will America allow these pogroms to continue unchecked? There is a lesson in the Tulsa affair for every American who fatuously believes that Negroes will always be the meek and submissive creatures that circumstances have forced them to be during the past three hundred years. Dick Rowland was only an ordinary bootblack with no standing in the community. But when his life was threatened by a mob of whites, every one . . . was willing to die to protect Dick Rowland.

These massacres of African-American communities not only led to the loss of innocent lives, but they also destroyed the economic prospects for future generations. In the many cities such as Tulsa where riots and massacres occurred white citizens and officials effectively wiped out the accumulation of wealth. Almost universally, rebuilding efforts were left entirely up to the devastated African-American communities (Ogletree 2003). The only exception

was Rosewood, Florida where reparations were granted, but not until nearly 70 years later (Howard-Hassmann 2004).

Instances of racial violence and rioting during the early part of the 20th century have had long-lasting economic and social legacies for the impacted communities. The once thriving Greenwood community—the so-called Black Wall Street—was a beacon of economic development and a model of African-American self-sufficiency in the early 20th century. Yet, the community's prosperity was undermined overnight as it fell victim to racial violence and economic destruction.

In Tulsa, a commission was established in 1997 to study the riot and make recommendations for action. The final 2001 report recommended reparations for survivors and their descendants. Others have also made arguments for reparations. For example, Alfred Brophy (2002) provides four compelling reasons as to why reparations are a legitimate and necessary response to the Tulsa case: (1) the city was culpable; (2) there were survivors; (3) the harm was temporally and spatially concentrated; and (4) some city leaders at the time of the riot acknowledged a moral responsibility to help rebuild what had been destroyed. The same justification for reparations could be provided in a number of cases involving riots throughout the early part of the 20th century. Despite these repeated calls for recompense, the city's only action has been to establish a memorial near the affected area. Attempts to garner reparations for Tulsa survivors and descendants continued through 2004, when the U.S. Supreme Court chose not to consider the case based on the statute of limitations (see Boczkiewicz 2004). The failure to provide reparations did not simply affect the direct victims of collective white violence. It was a part of a larger pattern that deprived later generations of African Americans of household assets and conveyed an implicit message that white violence would be either condoned or tolerated. That is the legacy that now demands a response.

Notes

1. While the Greenwood neighborhood was notable for its prosperity and entrepreneurialism, records indicate that nearly 10 percent of African Americans in the community worked in the private family industry, which meant working for white households as housecleaners, drivers, cooks, etc. In

addition, approximately 1,000 workers were listed as “laborers,” whose earnings came from temporary employment.

2. While Rowland was initially charged and arrested with assault, police did not make an arrest until the following day and did not file the name of the alleged victim. Rowland was released two weeks later (Gill 1942). Moreover, a day after the riot, Tulsa Sheriff McCullough noted that Page had told police only that she was grabbed by the arm and had screamed (*Tulsa World* 1921e).

3. This article, along with an editorial, was removed from its hard-bound copy before being placed on microfilm; however, a master’s student at the University of Tulsa obtained a copy of it and reprinted the front-page article in his 1946 thesis (Gill 1946: 22).

4. While *Events of the Tulsa Disaster* was originally prepared in 1922, only 21 copies were published and distributed. A second edition was released in 1998 and was kept in its original form, with the exception of a few footnotes (Jones Parrish [1922] 1998: 10–11).

5. The naming of the violent events in Tulsa in 1921 is far from an arbitrary choice of words. We have followed the standard historical convention of referring to the event as a “riot.” But we also recognize there are problems with that designation. As the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum (2018) states:

In recent years there has been ongoing discussion about what to call the event that happened in 1921. Historically, it has been called the Tulsa Race Riot. Some say it was given that name at the time for insurance purposes. Designating it a riot prevented insurance companies from having to pay benefits to the people of Greenwood whose homes and businesses were destroyed. It also was common at the time for any large-scale clash between different racial or ethnic groups to be categorized a race riot.

The Tulsa Historical Society goes on to suggest that a more accurate term would be “massacre,” which is defined as “the act or an instance of killing a number of usually helpless or unresisting human beings under circumstances of atrocity or cruelty.” As a legal matter, if the Oklahoma courts had agreed that the event was a massacre, the insurance companies might then have been forced to pay compensation to the victims.

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