

Tulsa Race Riot

May 31–June 1, 1921

During this time, black residents in the Greenwood section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, were living very prosperously. All of the businesses in this section were owned by blacks and doing very well. So well, in fact, that the section had come to be known as “the Negro Wall Street.”

On Memorial Day in 1921, a black 19-year-old shoe shiner named Dick Rowland went to an elevator in the Drexel Building. There, a white 17-year-old elevator operator named Sarah Page worked. It is believed that the two teenagers were previous acquaintances. While entering the elevator, Rowland tripped and grabbed Page’s arm to prevent himself from falling. Sarah let out a startled scream, loud enough, that a clerk at a clothing store heard it. The clerk saw a young black man running from the scene and rushed to help the distraught elevator operator. Miss Page never actually said she was assaulted, but the clerk jumped to an obvious conclusion. He then alerted the proper authorities.

The police started a quick and discreet investigation, but never questioned Sarah. They only questioned the clerk and other witnesses. This was due to the fact that police knew this was not really an assault. Still, they felt they must take some action to appease white residents in Tulsa. However, Dick Rowland knew what could happen to him if caught, so he went into hiding. The following day, Rowland, was found by a detective and a black patrolman, and taken into custody. He was booked, and taken to the top floor of the Tulsa County Courthouse to be questioned. Word spread of the situation, and those that knew Rowland, black and white, knew he was a good person, and that this was a misunderstanding. When the newspapers became aware of the situation, however, they may have lit the fuse that ignited the future events.

The late afternoon edition of the *Tulsa Tribune* read “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in an Elevator.” This paper was known for its outlandish headlines. The article that followed read “To Lynch Negro Tonight.” Reading this, whites began to gather outside of the Tulsa courthouse. Some were just there to see if a lynching would take place. The Tulsa sheriff attempted to protect Rowland from the mob by stationing his deputies around the building. The white lynch mob was demanding that the sheriff hand Rowland over to them. He refused and warned them if any tried to storm the building, they would be shot. Back at Greenwood, the black community became aware of what was transpiring at the courthouse. A group of twenty to thirty black men, armed with shotguns, went to help the sheriff and his men. The sheriff turned the men away. The whites, noticing that the men came armed, grew concerned about a “Negro uprising.” Some of the whites returned to their homes to arm themselves, and they returned to the courthouse.

As the armed whites returned, the number of the lynch mob was around 2,000. At this point, a number of blacks returned to the courthouse to offer assistance, but were again turned

away. As the black men were dispersing, they were accosted by a white member of the mob. A fight ensued, and a white man was shot and killed. The gunshot set off the riot in Tulsa. The whites opened fired on the blacks, and the blacks fired right back. Outnumbered, the blacks retreated. As the men were retreating, the white mob followed them back to Greenwood, shooting any blacks they came across. In the early morning of June 1, the mob began attacking families in their homes. Shots were fired into homes without any reason. The mob began burning down homes and businesses, making many leave their homes. As the families were fleeing their homes, they were shot at by the mob.

At the end of the riot, by official numbers, there were thirty-nine people dead: twenty-six black and thirteen white. Many black citizens believed closer to three hundred were dead. Further speculation estimated that as many as 3,000 were dead, many of whom are buried in unmarked mass graves in Tulsa.

In 1997, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the event, renewed attention was given to the riot. A new investigation was launched. The Tulsa Riot Commission was founded to study and develop a “historical account” of the riot. The commission completed its report and delivered it on February 21, 2001. It recommended that reparations be delivered to those directly impacted by the riots. It found that those present and family members of those present at the time should be awarded restitution. However, no reparations were given out. The Oklahoma State Legislature passed the “1921 Tulsa Race Riot Reconciliation Act.” It set up college scholarships for descendants of the riot victims, created a memorial, and started redeveloping the section of Greenwood. As of today, none of the reported mass graves has been discovered.



Tulsa, Oklahoma, June 2, 1921

Name: _____

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1. Why did the police not question Sarah Page after the incident with Dick Rowland?
2. How did the local newspapers contribute to the civil unrest in Tulsa?
3. More recently, what was established to investigate the events of the Tulsa Race Riots?

Open-Ended Question

4. How would the race riots of the early 20th century compare with the more modern race riots, such as the 1992 riots in Los Angeles? Explain your answer.

Tulsa Race Riot

May 31–June 1, 1921

1. Why did the police not question Sarah Page after the incident with Dick Rowland?
Secretly they believed that no crime was committed, and that it was more of a misunderstanding. But they felt they needed to make an arrest anyway to appease the white citizens of Tulsa.
2. How did the local newspapers contribute to the civil unrest in Tulsa?
The local newspapers practiced sensational journalism, and sometimes would exaggerate stories. They claimed the young girl was assaulted by a Negro, and a lynching was set to take place.
3. More recently, what was established to investigate the events of the Tulsa Race Riots?
Tulsa Riot Commission

Open-Ended Question

4. How would the race riots of the early 20th century to the more modern race riots, such as the 1992 riots in Los Angeles? Explain your answer.
Answers will vary.