



## Black Wall Street: The Promised Land

### Materials:

- Black Wall Street PowerPoint
- Copies of Newspaper Accounts
- Copies of excerpt from *Black History 1619 to 2019*
- Photos

In *Black History 1619-2019: An Illustrated and Documented African-American History*, thirty-five pages are devoted to this horrific story of the Black Wall Street massacre on May 31 – June 1, 1921. The 100-year anniversary of this event is on May 31 – June 1, 2021. Please be advised that strong language is used in the newspaper accounts of this massacre and may not be appropriate for some younger students.

### Plan of Instruction:

1. **Introduction: (Excerpt from *Black History 1619-2019: An Illustrated and Documented African-American History*)**

On September 17, 1907, Oklahomans voted to approve their constitution and then elected an economically populist but racist first legislature. The legislature was careful not to organize Jim Crow laws because of the disapproval of President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt proclaimed statehood on November 16, 1907.

From December 2, 1907, to May 26, 1908, lawmakers made segregation the first order of business for the state legislature. Senate Bill 1 went through the overwhelmingly Democratic body. The law required separate facilities for blacks in public transportation, public education, other public places, no marrying outside of their race, and turned Oklahoma into a white-dominated state. After the economic depression of 1907, Democrats formed a coalition of progressive reformers, poor farmers, poor workers, and the unemployed to de-power blacks.

Blacks and others were attracted to the area by the discovery of oil. Soon other industries benefited from this oil wealth, and blacks embraced the concept of the “promised land” as they were anxious to develop a community of their own and create their opportunities.

O.W. Gurley, an entrepreneur and landowner bought 40 acres sold to “blacks only.” Gurley was acknowledged as the community’s founder. However, J.B. Stradford also bought up large tracks of undeveloped land northeast of the tracks that he sold to blacks only. This black neighborhood became known as Deep Greenwood (“Black Wall Street”) and was the “promised land.” With Jim Crow laws, white racism was a significant impetus for the growth of the Black Business District. Blacks could work in white areas, but their money was not welcomed by white businesses, so the black community had to create their businesses to spend their money.

At first, black residents began making good money as day laborers, domestics, bootblacks, and



restaurant cooks for the white *nouveau riche*, but soon black professional occupations were represented. Blacks began to buy land on Greenwood Avenue, and the road evolved into the center of Black Wall Street. Restaurants, furriers, jewelry stores, hotels, theater, churches, black newspapers (*Tulsa Guide*) (*Weekly Planet*) (*The Tulsa Star*), grocery store, funeral parlors, dance halls, barbershops, medical and dental offices, schools, libraries, black hospital, two garages/filling stations, insurance companies, loan companies, contractors, dressmakers, shoemakers, tailors, printers, photographers, physicians, surgeons, hotel, airline charter service, and nightclubs created an influential progressive neighborhood.

G.A. Gregg remembered that, "The Tulsa colored people in every sense of the word were building a modern, up-to-date business city." It was the most successful black community in America and became more prosperous than its white counterpart across the tracks. In isolation, Deep Greenwood only thrived more.

Post-World War I northeastern Oklahoma had a racially and politically tense history. The territory had many settlers from the South who were slaveholders before the Civil War. White supremacy was maintained with lynching and other violent acts that kept blacks in their place. Black veterans who returned to Tulsa after WWI believed that they had earned full citizenship after they were asked to fight to defend U.S. freedom abroad. The American Negro had changed – blacks wanted equal rights and social equality.

The massacre of Black Wall Street is not mentioned in most American history textbooks today, so many people do not know that this happened or who the predators were that caused these atrocities in this wealthy black neighborhood. The events on May 31 and June 1, 1921, are documented here. More than 191 businesses, 1,256 homes destroyed, and 10,000 blacks left homeless and at least 330 dead in Deep Greenwood, Oklahoma, after the massacre.

On May 30, 1921, Sarah Page, a white 17-year-old divorcee, went to the police to file charges that a black man, Dick Roland, attempted to "criminally assault her" in an elevator in the Drexel Building. One story given said that Roland had accidentally stepped on her foot, she slapped him, he grabbed her arm to prevent her from hitting him again and then fled. The next day Rowland was arrested and jailed. *The Tulsa Tribune* reported that a black man had assaulted a white girl. Threats to lynch Dick Rowland were made, and he was moved to another location. Dick Rowland was an ordinary bootblack with no standing in the community, but when threats were made, the 11,000 in Deep Greenwood were willing to come to his defense. Whites and blacks were motivated by false rumors, a struggle ensued, shots rang out, and twelve men were shot dead – ten whites and two blacks.

By June 1, fighting increased, and whites who entered Deep Greenwood systematically burned buildings, ransacked, and pillaged homes, took valuables from homes, and then burned them. Planes were used as reconnaissance and dropped turpentine balls on the buildings and shot at blacks from the air. The fire soon engulfed the entire black district.



Oklahoma lawyer, Buck Colbert Franklin (1869-1960) wrote, “I could see planes circling in mid-air. They grew in number and hummed, darted, and dipped low. I could hear something like hail falling upon the top of my office building. Down East Archer, I saw the Midway Hotel on fire, burning from its top, and then another and another and another began to burn from their top...lurid flames roared and belched and licked their forked tongues into the air. Smoke ascended the sky in thick, black volumes and amid it all, the planes – now a dozen or more in number – still hummed and darted here and there with the agility of natural birds of the air.”

Deep Greenwood burned all day Wednesday and continued to smolder into Thursday afternoon – at the end of the attack, Black Wall Street, the most affluent all-black community in America, was destroyed. Thirty-five city blocks were set on fire, 300 people were killed, most black businesses were gone, twenty-one churches, a hospital, a post office, schools, and a library were destroyed.

This "shadow of shame" in Deep Greenwood, Oklahoma, was not a race riot but was compared to European pogroms, which wreaked havoc and violently demolished Jewish neighborhoods beginning in Russia in 1821. The criminal assault accusations of Sarah Page against Dick Rowland were just an excuse for whites to attack the "uppity blacks" in Deep Greenwood. Sarah later dropped charges against Dick Rowland, and it seems that they knew each other better than Sarah first admitted. She expressed remorse for her false accusation and the massacre that followed in Deep Greenwood. There were 88 indictments served against blacks and whites alike, but all were either dismissed or ignored. Not one white was sent to jail for the burning of Black Wall Street – most of the blame for the massacre was placed on blacks. Only Chief Gustafson was convicted, fined, and fired for failure to take appropriate action in his handling of the massacre.

Because of the Greenwood massacre, the KKK became more dominant in Tulsa, and supporters were elected and reelected throughout the 1920s. There was an auxiliary KKK for women, “Kamella,” and a junior clan for boys 12 – 18 years of age. In the months and years after 1921, postcards were sold in Tulsa’s downtown streets to raise money for the KKK. The residents of Deep Greenwood did not freely speak of these atrocities until late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **2. Lecture: PowerPoint Presentation**

### **a. Slide 1: Title, *Black Wall Street: The Promised Land of Deep Greenwood***

### **b. Slide 2: One of the Wealthiest Black Communities in America**

The discovery of oil in Oklahoma, and surrounding areas in Tulsa, attracted both whites and blacks. Most blacks hoped to escape the racial conditions in some of the areas in the South, however, this new state experienced a change in racial climate.

### **c. Slide 3: John B. Stradford**

John B. Stradford was Deep Greenwood's Republican leader. Stradford was the wealthiest man in Black Wall Street in 1921, was the son of an escaped slave, Julius Caesar Stradford, and J.B. came to Oklahoma in 1899. He was the owner of the most elegant black hotel in the country. This 54-room luxury hotel rivaled white hotels in Tulsa; beautiful chandeliers graced the lobby



and banquet room, it contained a pool hall, a dining room and a salon.

**d. Slide 4: Black Wall Street, One of the Wealthiest Black Communities in America**

"The Tulsa colored people in every sense of the word were building a modern, up-to-date business city." It was the most successful black community in America and became more prosperous than its white counterpart across the tracks. In isolation, Deep Greenwood only thrived more.

**e. Slide 5: The Promised Land**

John and Loula Williams came to Oklahoma, and John said, "I came out to the promised land." John and Loula found the promised land and successfully started several businesses. They would later have a son named Bill. John started work at the Thompson Ice cream Company and made enough to buy a car. John quit work at the ice cream company when his car repair business became lucrative. He and his wife started a confectionery, secured rental properties, and then opened the Williams Dreamland Theatre.

**f. Slide 6: Businesses in Deep Greenwood** (share the slide for class discussion)

**g. Slide 7: Dick Rowland**

Sarah Page accused Rowland of "criminal assault," and the threats to lynch Rowland brought the black community out to defend him. *The Tulsa Tribune* was a "white" newspaper.

- Have students read the newspaper article
- Do the students detect a bias in the reporting? In what way?

**h. Slide 8: March to Courthouse**

Dick Rowland was an ordinary bootblack; he polished shoes for a living and had no special status within the community. But 11,000 black people in Greenwood were willing to come to his defense to protect him from being lynched.

**i. Slide 9: Buck Colbert Franklin**

(read Franklin's eyewitness account of airplanes dropping turpentine balls on buildings)

- How does his account support the photos taken of the fire?
- Is this a race riot or a pogrom?
- What is a European pogrom? Does that fit the description for the massacre at Deep Greenwood instead of a race riot? (European pogroms were where Jewish neighborhoods were demolished beginning in Russia in 1821)

**j. Slide 10: Black Wall Street Burns**

- The most affluent black community in America was destroyed
- Thirty-five city blocks leveled
- At least 300 people killed
- 191 black businesses destroyed
- Twenty-one churches destroyed



- 1,256 homes leveled
- A hospital, a post office, a library, and schools destroyed

**k. Slide 11: Williams Dreamland Theatre**

In the best American entrepreneurial tradition, the Williams family prospered but lost everything that they built. The entire city was placed under martial law.

**l. Slide 12: Stradford Hotel**

John B. Stradford built his elegant 54-room hotel in Greenwood, Oklahoma for a cost of \$50,000 and opened it on June 1, 1918. The hotel lay in ruins after the burning of Deep Greenwood and was never rebuilt again. Stradford was indicted for inciting a riot and fled Deep Greenwood.

**m. Slide 13: Mt. Zion Baptist Church**

Mt. Zion Baptist Church was just 40 days old when it was burnt to the ground during the massacre. The cost to build and furnish it was \$135,000.

**n. Slide 14: Destruction**

- What were the reasons for this massacre?
- Were the black citizens more successful than the white citizens?

**o. Slide 15: Homes Destroyed**

Survivors search ruins of their homes for anything they can salvage, the only item identifiable is the metal bed frame in the middle of the photo.

**p. Slide 16: Homeless**

During the riot, homes were looted and burned, leaving thousands homeless. Whites took the rest of black families' possessions and threw them out in the street. The white mob was motivated by jealousy and race hatred.

**q. Slide 17: Black Prisoners**

*The Tulsa Tribune* (a white racist newspaper) reported on June 1, 1921:

"...a motley procession of negroes wended its way down Main Street to the baseball park with hands held high above their heads, their hats in one hand, a token of their submission to the white man's authority...They will return, not to their homes but to heaps of ashes, the angry reprisal inflicted on him, the inferior race."

- What racist comments are in this article?
- Why does the article refer to negroes as an inferior race?
- What did Black Wall Street prove by the successes of blacks in Deep Greenwood?

**r. Slide 18: Black Law Firm**



Just five days after the Tulsa race riot, the law firm of P. A. Chappelle, I. H. Spears, and B. C. Franklin set up temporary law office in a tent. These three black lawyers defended the survivors of the Greenwood riot. Buck Colbert Franklin was also the father of the future civil rights advocate and historian John Hope Franklin.

**s. Slide 19: The KKK and the Tulsa Race Riot**

The Ku Klux Klan became more dominant in Tulsa after the massacre in Deep Greenwood. The Klan numbered more than 3 million nationwide in the early 1920s and won political power in Oklahoma, Indiana, and Oregon. The Klan used the massacre in Deep Greenwood as a recruiting tool. They declared “the riot was the best thing that ever happened to Tulsa,” and sold postcards in Tulsa’s downtown streets to raise money.

**t. Slide 20: The Tulsa Tribune (Reporting on Massacre)**

*The Tulsa Tribune* sensational reporting fanned the flames of racial unrest. Their inflammatory reporting of the possible lynching of Dick Rowland was the genesis of the “Black Wall Street” massacre in Deep Greenwood, Oklahoma. This racist article written on Saturday, June 4, 1921, with the title “It Must Not Be Again” classified Greenwood as a “niggertown,” a cesspool of the lowest people who walk on two feet. It wrongly places the blame for the massacre on black people alone.

**u. Slide 21: Negro Associated Press**

The NAP wrote articles that clearly identified the reasons for the Greenwood massacre. It was to rid the area of phenomenally successful black entrepreneurs and the upscale housing section owned by blacks. The NAP, located in Chicago, served more than 150 U.S. Negro Newspapers

- Have students compare the two points of view of the newspapers.
- How reliable are firsthand accounts? Are primary accounts free from bias?

**v. Slide 20: John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park**

John Hope Franklin (1915 – 2009) was a civil rights advocate and historian and the son of Buck Colbert Franklin. The Reconciliation Park is dedicated to the story of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, and to the important role African Americans played in building Oklahoma.

**w. Slide 21: Summary**

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## Nab Negro for Attacking Girl In an Elevator

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

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

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

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

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

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

### SOCIALISTS WIN PLEA

#### Two Papers are Restored to Mailing Rights

WASHINGTON. — The Milwaukee Leader and the New York Call were restored today to the second class mailing privileges, it was announced by the postoffice department.

#### WETUMKA MAN NAMED.

#### W. C. Farmer Appointed on State Education Board.

OKLAHOMA CITY.—W. C. Farm-  
er of Wetumka, Hughes county,



X.



## TULSA WHITES VENT SPLEEN ON BUSINESS SUCCESS-OF NEGROES.

### Raped White Girl Myth

### Negro Business Section And Better Home Sec- tion Laid Waste. by Torch.

(By The Associated Negro Press)

Tulsa, Okla., June 10th.—Tulsa lies stricken almost unto death. The city is literally in sackcloth and ashes, and it seems like a veritable miracle that it has escaped complete destruction. Whatever it enjoyed in the matter of thrift, enterprise and a fair name has been, for the moment at least, by a wanton, lawless mob, actuated by jealousy and race hatred, which sought to wipe out the Negroes and their section of the city for the simple reason their prosperity and intelligent development was becoming too evident to suit the wishes of a certain element of whites.

**WHOLE TRUTH NOT TOLD.**

Some began to apply the torch to the business concerns of the colored people located along Greenwood Avenue.

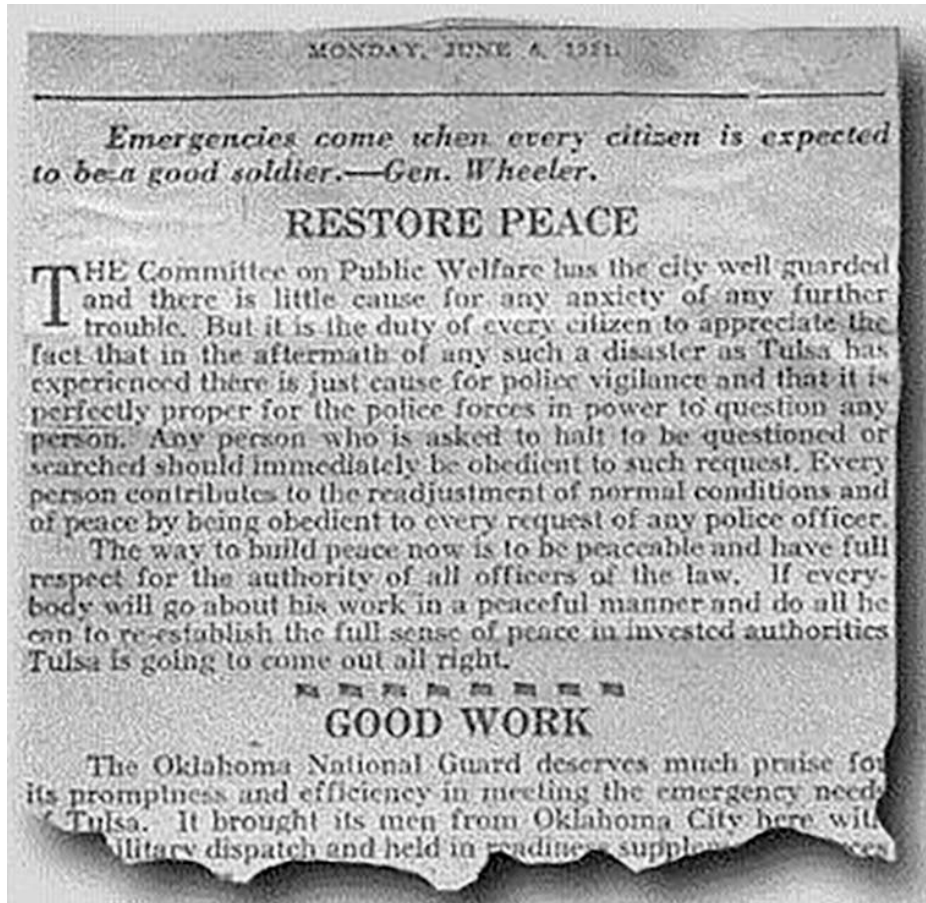
### PROMINENT NEGROES KILLED.

It was but a short step from the business section to the better residential sections in this locality. Here three prominent Colored men met death defending their homes from the torch bearing mob. Dr. A. C. Jackson, the leading Colored physician of this city, was killed on his door step and his well appointed home touched by the torch and totally destroyed by the fire that followed. The same fate befell Wesley Williams, the wealthiest Negro in Tulsa and the owner of the Dreamland theatre—also destroyed by fire. Williams was reported to be worth more than \$200,000. Dr. John Wayne died fighting protecting his home which was destroyed by fire. John Wheeler, one of the oldest employees at the First National

Associated Negro Press



The **Tulsa Tribune** sensational reporting fanned the flames of racial unrest. Their reporting of the possible lynching of Dick Rowland started the Tulsa massacre in Greenwood, Oklahoma on May 31, 1921. This article was written on Saturday, June 4, 1921, "*Must Not Be Again*" was a racist article that classified Greenwood as a "*niggertown*," a cesspool of the lowest people who walk on two feet and places the blame of the massacre on blacks alone.



The Greenwood massacre was not a 'disaster' it was a pogrom against successful blacks and the destruction of 35 blocks of Black Wall Street, elimination of more than 1,256 homes, removal of more than 191 businesses, and left 10,000 blacks homeless.



**Excerpt from *Black History 1619 to 2019: An Illustrated and Documented African-American History***

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At first, black residents began making good money as day laborers, domestics, bootblacks, and restaurant cooks for the white *nouveau riche*, but soon black professional occupations were represented. Blacks began to buy land on Greenwood Avenue, and the road evolved into the center of 'Black Wall Street.' Restaurants, furriers, jewelry stores, hotels, theater, churches, black newspapers (*Tulsa Guide*) (*Weekly Planet*) (*The Tulsa Star*), grocery store, funeral parlors, dance halls, barbershops, medical and dental offices, schools, libraries, black hospital, two garages/filling stations, insurance companies, loan companies, contractors, dressmakers, shoemakers, tailors, printers, photographers, physicians, surgeons, hotel, airline charter service, and nightclubs created an influential progressive neighborhood.

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had many settlers from the South who were slaveholders before the Civil War. White supremacy was maintained with lynching and other violent acts that kept blacks in their place. Black veterans who returned to Tulsa after WWI believed that they had earned full citizenship after they were asked to fight to defend U.S. freedom abroad. The American Negro had changed – blacks wanted equal rights and social equality.

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