

Tulsa Race Riot of 1921: Black Wall Street Burned

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Intro

America has evolved through years of experience and hard work. We still fail to accept diversity and end racial conflict. An example of this, was the "Red Summer." This led to events like the black community of Tulsa, Oklahoma burning down. (thirteen.org, 2002; ferris.edu). This event was known as the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. Due to a false accusation, a riot broke out ruining Black Wall Street (Krehbiel, 7). Black Wall Street was once a thriving community. Blacks had to compromise due to separate but equal laws. As a result, racism and violence grew. The Tulsa Race Riot is important to remember because racial conflicts still happen today. Some Americans still struggle to fight for equality and acceptance.

Rising Conflicts of Black Wall Street

Even with an expanding economy, life was never easy for African Americans. With successful businesses, also came conflict. The white community soon became jealous of black success.

Earlier events in history led to Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. Despite the Civil Rights Act of 1875, discrimination continued (thirteen.org, 2002). Laws created extreme segregation not just in Tulsa, but throughout America. Restrictions were placed on blacks and their normal lives. Conflicts over segregation and Jim Crow laws started as early as the 1860's, as well as Black Codes, causing events like the Plessy vs. Ferguson case. Plessy vs. Ferguson started in 1896. A black man refused to sit in a "colored only" seat on a train. He was later arrested for breaking the Louisiana law and taken to court. Homer Plessy refused to be treated unequal but the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was

legal if it was “Separate but equal.” (refer to Appendix A). This forced races to live separately (Williams, 2009).

Other conflicts like the Jim Crow Laws started the “Red Summer” (thirteen.org, 2002). One of the first race riots of the Red Summer, started in Wilmington in 1898. Overtime race riots appeared all over the country in places like Washington, Nebraska, and Texas. Years later there was another one in Chicago during 1919. A 17-year-old African American boy went swimming. He went across the borderline that separated the white and “colored only” beaches. He was stoned to death causing one of the worst race riots, excluding Tulsa’s, in American history. The same year, the Ku Klux Klan lynched at least 83 innocent black men (History.com, 2009).

These events were fueled by hatred over the African-American race and their growing economic success. Even America’s President believed in segregation: “As president, Wilson oversaw unprecedented segregation in federal offices” (Lehr, 2015). President Wilson even viewed the film *The Birth of a Nation*: “On the evening of March 21, 1915, President Woodrow Wilson attended a special screening at the White House of *The Birth of a Nation*, a film directed by D.W. Griffith and based on *The Clansman*, a novel written by Wilson's good friend Thomas Dixon. (Karlin, 2015).” (Refer to Appendix B). With the laws of the 1920’s, and even the president’s racial actions, there wasn’t much people could do to stop segregation.

African Americans dealt with racism and Jim Crow laws in their lives, but they still had dreams. Tulsa, Oklahoma was a segregated community but blacks would soon create Black Wall Street where their businesses would thrive. Tulsans believed that

living separately would solve problems and stop the conflict between blacks and whites; or so they thought.

History of Tulsa: Black Wall Street

Tulsa, Oklahoma was first incorporated on January 18, 1898 (Tulsa History). It was known as the “Oil Capital of the World.” Oil deposits inspired former slaves to move to Tulsa from the south. There was conflict with this idea. Because of Jim Crow and now Black Codes, many whites would not accept blacks in their neighborhood. The compromise of separate but equal, caused a new way of life and was widely recognized by Americans. The Greenwood community in Tulsa, Oklahoma soon became known as Black Wall Street. This was the start of very successful African-American entrepreneurs (Krehbiel, 2). W.E.B. Du Bois’ exhibits at the World Fair in Paris, France, in 1900 influenced many African Americans. His exhibit at the fair represented the accomplishments of blacks and emphasized his hope in them. “He believed that a clear revelation of the facts of African American life and culture would challenge the claims of biological race scientists... The photographs of affluent young African American men and women challenged the scientific "evidence" and popular racist caricatures of the day that ridiculed and sought to diminish African American social and economic success (Library of Congress; Gannon, 2016).” This exhibit inspired many of the African Americans moving from the South into cities such as Tulsa, Oklahoma. This ignited Black Wall Street.

The same year, Booker T. Washington founded the National Negro Business League (Blackpast.org). The league opened economic opportunities to the blacks coming from

the Great Migration. Many blacks believed Tulsa's oil would bring economic opportunities. All of these events inspired black business leaders to begin building and investing in Black Wall Street.

Black Wall Street: Compromise Leads to Success

Blacks were not allowed to shop in the white community of Tulsa. The money African Americans spent went back to their own community (OneUnited Bank, February, 24). To avoid conflicts with whites, blacks in Tulsa began opening their own businesses. I feel as if this was their only choice because of segregation. How much compromising does one race have to go through? Blacks were compromised through slavery and were now forced to live in their own community. A black man named Herman J. Russell opened up his first grocery store in 1905. He later built homes and hotels for African Americans arriving from the south during the Reconstruction era and the Great Migration (Williams, 2014). The Reconstruction era that lasted from 1865-1877, motivated blacks to move to the north of the U.S. During the Reconstruction era, Black Codes were made restricting blacks from many opportunities. Blacks were not allowed to have guns, own farmland, some were jailed for not having jobs, and many families in poverty had children taken away. Black Codes limited job opportunities. Many freedmen were angry with these ideas and decided to move north (History.com, 2010;). The Great Migration happened through decades that lasted from 1916-1970. This event was another key factor into pushing African Americans to move north. Over the years it moved over 6 million African Americans to look for job opportunities and less racism. Chicago, New

York, and Tulsa were great destinations for blacks to start their own communities because of economic growth in these cities (History.com, 2010).

These events allowed Tulsa's population to expand and to create Black Wall Street. At this time, a Tulsa businessmen, Herman J. Russell, built over 1,000 homes in Tulsa for people relocating from the Great Migration (Christensen, 2013). John B. Stratford was also a hotel builder and founder of the very famous Royal Palm Crowne Plaza during the 1920's. He became one of the richest men in Tulsa until the riot. Other business owners such as Lisa Price-the founder of Carol's-daughter, a cosmetic store, and surgeons like Dr. Andrew Jackson, one of the best in the country at the time, helped progress the community known as Black Wall Street (Williams, 2014). Carol Anderson, Associate Professor of African American Studies, describes the community of Black Wall Street: "They have done everything that they were supposed to do in terms of the 'American Dream'. You work hard, you save your money, you go to school, you buy property (Emory University, 2012)." Black Wall Street had over 150 businesses, 23 churches, hospitals, multiple banks, and even theatres (Christensen, 2013). The residents of the Greenwood area lived separate but "equal" lives. Segregation did not stop the black community from being successful. This would soon change. (refer to Appendix C and D).

Tulsa Race Riot of 1921

May 30, 1921, was the start of the Tulsa Race Riot. A young African American man named Richard Rowland worked shining shoes in the Drexel Building in downtown Tulsa, Oklahoma. Many of the elevator operators back then were typically women. One

day Rowland had to take the elevator to go to the “colored only” restroom. On his way out of the elevator, he tripped and grabbed a young white woman’s shoulder. This woman, Sarah Page, was only 17. She screamed “Rape!” (Krehbiel, 7; Greenwood Cultural Center; Christensen, 2013; Emory University, 2012; ZinnEd Project, 2013).

Quoted from *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, Richard repeats, “A clerk from a clothing store heard the scream and saw me running out of the building. He called the police and said I attempted to rape Sarah Page. The next day I was arrested. I feared for my life because in those days, black men were lynched without trial.” (Ellsworth, Scott 1992). (Refer to Appendix E). Rowland was moved to the top floor of the Drexel Building to be protected from the lynching mob. Tulsa’s sheriff, Willard McCullough ordered other officers to shoot anyone coming to get Rowland, including the sheriff himself (Ellsworth, Scott 1992). When Rowland was taken to court, the whole town went with him. Both whites and blacks waited outside the courthouse. The blacks went to go to the courthouse to protect Rowland while the whites were threatening to lynch Rowland for his accused crime. Tulsa’s Police Commissioner even said, “We are going to lynch that Negro, that black devil who assaulted that girl.” (Krehbiel, 9). (Refer to Appendix F). Luckily, Rowland was not pressed with charges and released soon after. Sheriff McCullough, describes the actions of Tulsa’s white residents: “Then a bunch of them tried to get guns at the National Guard Armory. When they didn’t get guns there, they broke into Bardon’s Sporting Goods and took guns and ammunition.” (Ellsworth, Scott 1992). A black man threatened to use his pistol if

needed. He and a white man were caught fighting with the pistol. A gun was fired. The Tulsa Race Riot had begun (Krehbiel, 12).

Bad to Worse

On the next day, May 31, destruction began in Tulsa. Reckless behavior and fighting began to take place as well as looting of local businesses in the Greenwood area. The riot became so out of control, that at 1:30 am Major Byron Kirkpatrick, part of the National Guard, asked for federal assistance (Krehbiel, 13). Tulsa's Chief of Police, John A. Gustafson, sent a telegram to Governor James B. A. Robertson (Digital Prairie Home, 2005). (Refer to Appendix G). Many think federal assistance called in airplanes for reconnaissance purposes only. The reality was the planes were used to bomb the Greenwood community (Krehbiel, 15). Throughout the course of the day, Black Wall Street was burned to the ground, destroying one of the most successful cities in America during the 1920's (refer to Appendix I). All thirty-seven blocks of Black Wall Street were destroyed, leaving nothing but ash and rubble. Members of the National Guard arrested about 6,000 African Americans and detained them through the course of the day (ZinnEd Project, 2013). Other blacks were taken to detention centers at Convention Hall, McNulty Park, and finally to fairgrounds at Admiral Boulevard and Lewis Avenue (Krehbiel, 22). (Refer to Appendix H). Even though the people held at detention centers were fed and had medical assistance, I feel this was unjust and unexceptable. Blacks were isolated from society but then arrested while their homes were being destroyed. One victim quoted from *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*

described: “And while our homes and businesses were looted and burned behind us, they made us stay until a white person came and vouched for us. Anyone who was vouched for received a card. Anyone without a card on the streets could be arrested. Of course, we had to pay for our food and all while we were being ‘protected.’” (Ellsworth, Scott 1992).

The Aftereffects: Short-Term Impact

June 1, 1921, was the last day of this dreadful event. It is said that over 10,000 African Americans were left homeless. The estimated damage was about \$26 million present day (Greenwood Cultural Center). Immediately after the event, Tulsa began to rebuild. It cost the Greenwood community of Tulsa about \$1.5-\$2 million just to get back up and running. Even with this money to repair destroyed Tulsa, the best homes could only be built with \$1,000 or less (Krehbiel, 22). It took a total of 10 years of repairing to fix the amount of damage in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Many African Americans worked as domestic servants in homes of the white community (refer to Appendix J). Others continued to stay at detention centers finding work cleaning up Tulsa but having to pay for food and basic shelters being built (Christensen, 2013).

After the riot, many were arrested for stealing and even murder, although several were wrongfully accused. A total of 30 white men were arrested for robbery and 37 death certificates were found. The death certificates included 25 black men and 12 white men. Other people were burned to death and unidentifiable (Krehbiel, 23). “The number of deaths, most of them African American, is estimated to be between 27 and 250. No one knows for sure. (Myers, Anna 152)”. One of the saddest losses in the riot was the

death of Dr. Jackson. His wife explains, “A mob attacked my home and killed my husband on the night of June 1, 1921... My husband and I fought off the mob that attacked our home. An officer who knew my husband came up to the house and assured him that if he would surrender he would be protected... En-route to the hall, disarmed, Dr. Jackson was shot and killed in cold blood. (Ellsworth, Scott 1992).”

A year after the riot, the Ku Klux Klan passed through Tulsa, Oklahoma. A former KKK member W. Tate Brady participated as a night watchman in the riot (Greenwood Cultral Center). By 1923, the Ku Klux Klan was winning powerful positions in U.S. office. (Krehbiel, 25).

Long-Term Impact

There are many long-term effects of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. Now in 2018, Tulsa is continually trying to create small businesses to reunite the African American community that was once Black Wall Street. Tulsa leaders are planning to build new businesses by 2021, - one-hundred years after the riot (Fox News U.S., 2017). At the same time, the black community of Tulsa doesn't want to relive the trauma of their past generations. Even with this negative situation, Oklahoma remains one of the best places to start a business in America today. (Marcus, 2017; The Consummate Dabbler, 2014).

The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, explains to American citizens today that we still need change. Long after the riot, there was still racial conflicts such as Brown v.s. The Board of Education and the Little Rock Nine.

America's society thought that living separately was going to solve their problems. Sadly, this compromise led to conflict and hatred causing Black Wall Street to eventually

burn down (Krehbiel; Greenwood Cultural Center; Myers, Anna 2002; Christensen, 2013).

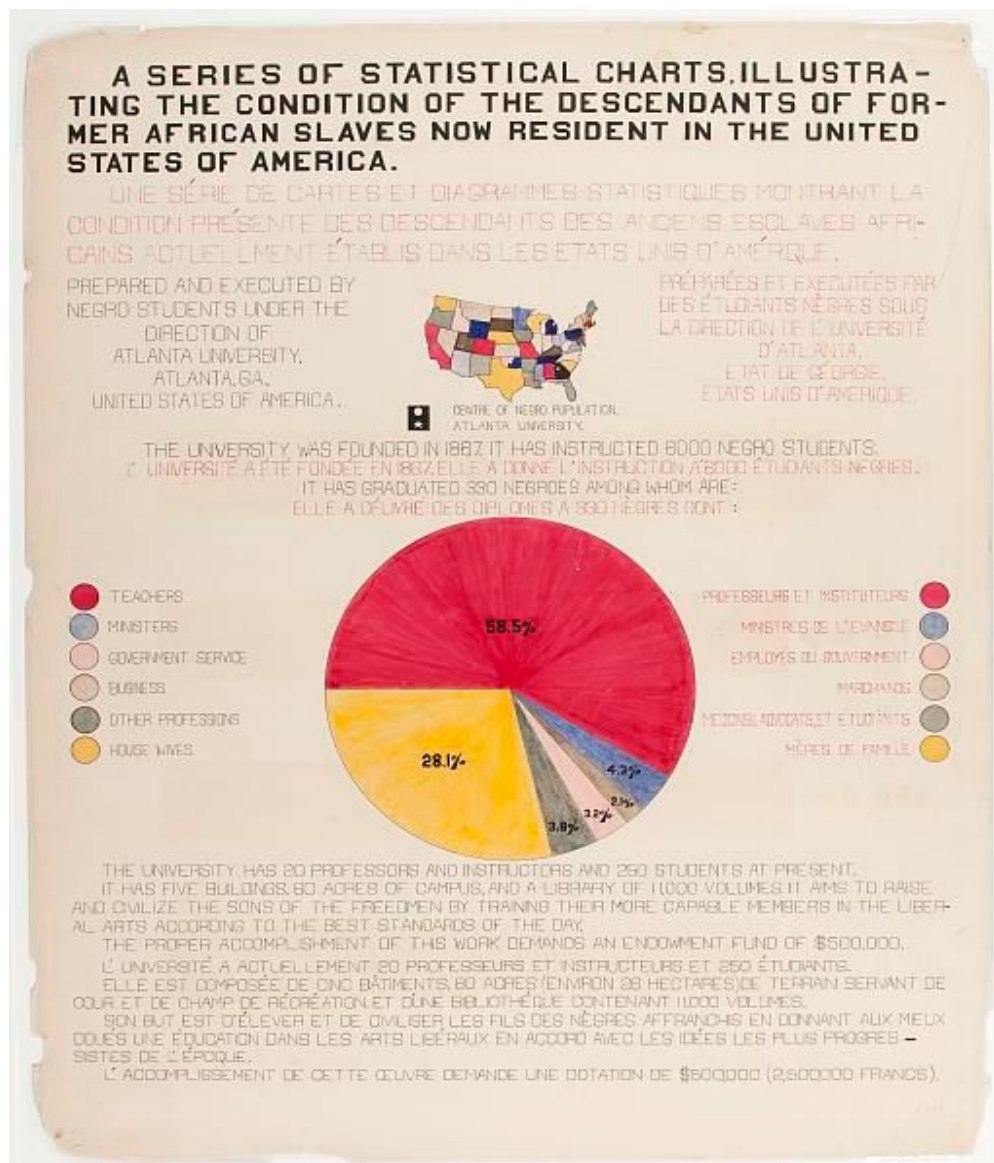
Today there is still racism in America that needs to stop. Recent events in the news show this. LeBron James, a NBA basketball star spoke about his political beliefs. Lauren Ingraham verbally attacked him saying to “Shut up to dribble.” Other racial events include former KKK members running for office today with the same beliefs they had 100 years ago. It’s 2018; when will it stop?

Conclusion

Every American has their own rights including “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” So why aren’t we living it? To end the conflict between hatred, race, and diversity, we as a nation must work together to end it once and for all. We need to put aside our own opinions and focus not on our differences but our similarities. Society needs to show empathy towards each other.

The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 helped me realize, that African Americans became successful even through social injustice and adversity It also shows me that the African American race is very resilient especially through decades of hatred and rejection.

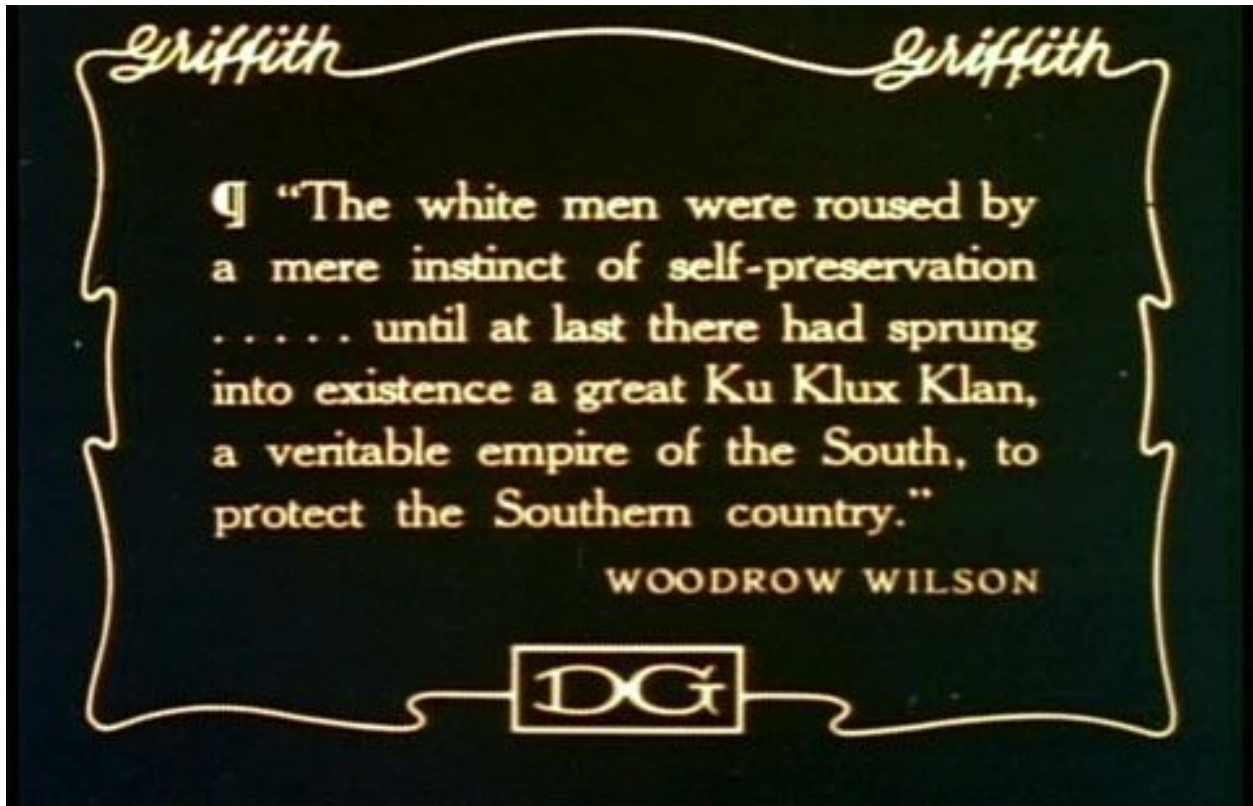
Appendix



Appendix A

Statistical pie chart of occupations given to African Americans in the 1900's.

“A series of statistical charts illustrating the condition of the descendants of former African slaves now in residence in the United States of America.” Library of Congress. Undated. Blogs.loc.com December 19, 2017



Appendix B

Quote said from President Woodrow Wilson in the movie, *A Birth of a Nation*. Elyse Feliz, “Yes, President Woodrow Wilson, Democrat, said this and worse. This quotation appeared in *The Birth of a Nation*.” Truth out. Undated. Truth-out.org, Accessed January 15, 2018.



Appendix C

Some of the business owners of Black Wall Street.

OBWS “Business owners of Black Wall Street pose for group photo.” Official Black Wall Street. July 22, 2015. officialblackwallstreet.com, January 19, 2018.



Appendix D

Black man is looking for a job and realizes it's for whites only.

“Man looking at White Only Sign.” Ferris State University, Michigan. Undated. Ferris.edu, Accessed January 2018



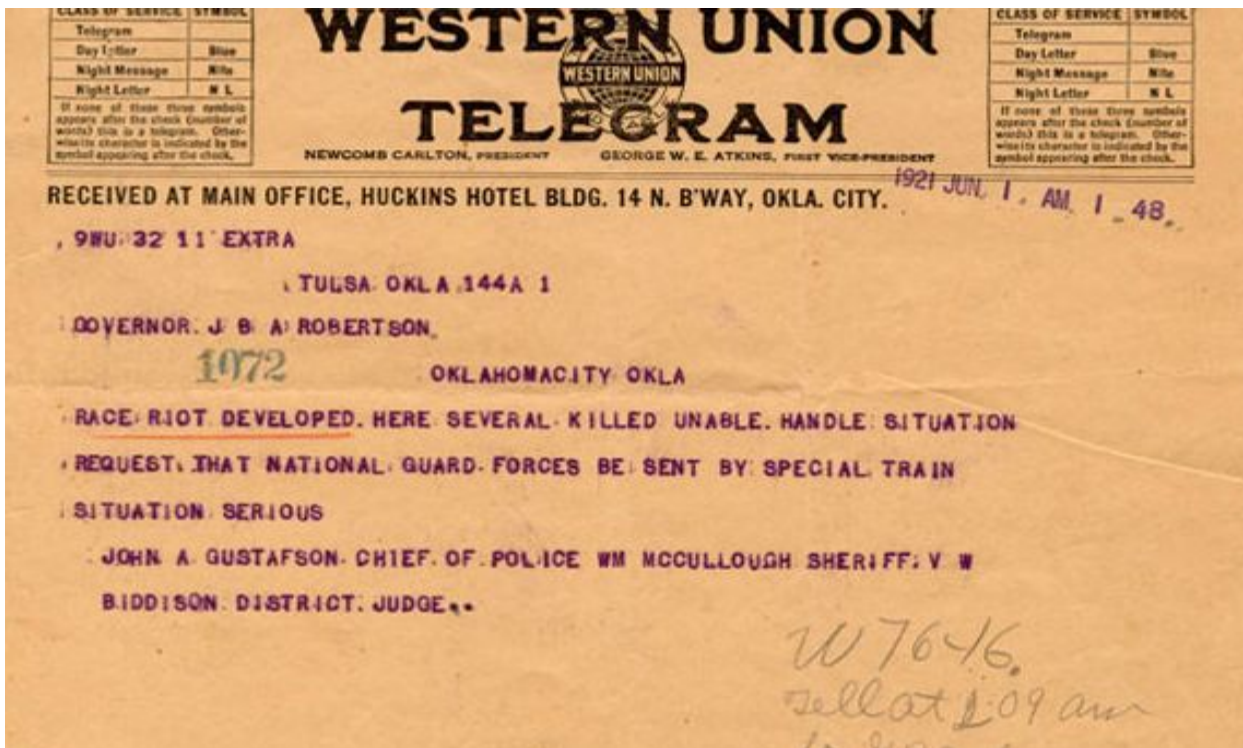
Appendix E

Newspaper on the day of the riot about Richard Rowland.
"Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator newspaper." *Fly Historic Wings. Undated. Fly.historicwings.com, January 14, 2018.*



Appendix F

Lynching mob waiting outside the courthouse.
"Tulsans waiting outside Tulsa's courthouse during Rowland's trial." *Tulsa World. Undated. Tulsaworld.com, Accessed December 2017.*



Appendix G

Telegram sent for federal assistance.

“Telegram sent during the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.” Digital Prairie, Oklahoma library. January 28, 2005. digitalprairie.ok.go, Accessed January 8, 2018.



Appendix H

Some black Tulsans most likely being taken to Detention Centers during the riot.
“Armed white men ride with a few black men in the car during the riot.” Tulsa Historical Society and Museum. Tulsa, Oklahoma. Undated. tulsahistory.org, Accessed January 4, 2018.



Appendix I

Tulsa Race Riot on June 1, 1921.

“A day after the riot, Tulsa’s Black Wall Street is destroyed.” For Harriet. Undated. Forharriet.com, December 2017.



Appendix J

Black Tulsans picking up after the riot.

Ella Mahler, “Victims of Tulsa’s race riot combing the ruins for their possessions.” Oklahoma Historical Society, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Undated. okhistory.org, Accessed December 2017

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This website showed me a photo of some of the black Tulsans being sent to detention centers during the Tulsa Race Riot.

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This website allowed me to see the occupations being taken African Americans in the 1900’s.

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