

# Tulsa Race Riot of 1921: Black Wall Street Burned

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## Intro

America has continued to evolve through many years of experience and hard work. One thing that hasn't changed is the ability for everyone to accept diversity and racial conflict. It wasn't until the late 1800's (Civil War) when people really became aware of this issue, especially in America. This realization led to many race riots in the early 1900s, including a time known as the "Red Summer" (thirteen.org, 2002; ferris.edu). What other Americans don't know is that in 1921, the black community of Tulsa, Oklahoma was burned down. Thanks to one lie, a riot broke out ruining Black Wall Street (Krehbiel, 7). The riot was caused due to white and black Americans failing to compromise by living separately. This led to conflict over African Americans being successful. As a result, racism and hatred grew. This is an important event to remember no matter how you live your life today because racial issues still happen everywhere. Races of every kind still struggle to fight for equality even after time and time again failing to end racism, accept diversity, and treat others equally.

## 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." The area where hundreds of oil wells were found is best known as Tulsa's Glen Pool (aoghs.org). The black community of Greenwood in Tulsa soon became known as (Negro) Black Wall Street. This was the start of very successful African-American entrepreneurs (Krehbiel, 2). The community was also very influenced by W.E.B. Du Bois' exhibits at the World Fair in Paris, France, in 1900. His exhibit at the fair represented the great accomplishments of African

Americans in the U.S. The exhibit included hundreds of maps, photographs, charts, and books showing the great success of African Americans (Bridgers, 2014). The same year, Booker T. Washington founded the National Negro Business League (Blackpast.org). This allowed Black Wall Street to soon form. The Harlem Renaissance was another event that encouraged African Americans to start their businesses. The Harlem Renaissance was another nation-changing event that started in 1917 and ended in 1935. This event allowed many African Americans to express their arts and talents. This also helped others understand that there is more to a “colored” human being than the color of their skin (History.com, 2009). All of these events inspired black business leaders who began building and investing in Tulsa’s Black Wall Street.

### Black Wall Street: Compromise Leads to Success

To avoid conflicts with whites, blacks in Tulsa began opening their own businesses. A black man named Herman J. Russell opened up his first grocery store in 1905. He later started to build homes and hotels for many of the African Americans moving in from the south during the Great Migration (Williams, 2014). The Great Migration moved over 6 million African Americans to the North of the U.S. to look for job opportunities and less racism because of Jim Crow Laws (History.com, 2010). There were over 1,000 homes eventually built over time in Tulsa (Christensen, 2013). John B. Stratford was also a hotel builder and was actually the founder of the 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-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, and even theatres (Christensen, 2013). The Tulsan community was soon becoming popular with Black Wall Street. The residents were compromising-living separate but equal lives, but that would soon change. (refer to Appendix A and B).

### Rising Conflicts of Black Wall Street

Even with a expanding economy in the Greenwood area, life was never easy for African Americans. With successful businesses, also came conflict. The white community did not like the idea of a “colored” being more successful than themselves. Jim Crow laws started as early as the 1860’s. Even with the knowledge of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, discrimination continued (thirteen.org, 2002). These laws created extreme segregation not just in Tulsa, but in the whole country. Everything was separated. Restrictions based on your color, or race, created stricture for African Americans and their normal lives. Conflicts over segregation and Jim Crow laws caused other events such as the Plessy vs. Ferguson case. Plessy vs. Ferguson started earlier, in 1896 when a black man named Homer Plessy 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 opposed the idea of not being treated equally. The Supreme Court ruled that segregation was legal as long as it was “Separate but equal.” This allowed states make it

a way of life for “Separate but equal” ideas (refer to Appendix C). This idea soon spread across America making each race live separately (Williams, 2009). Other conflicts such as the Jim Crow Laws started the “Red Summer” (thirteen.org, 2002). One of the first race riots started in Wilmington in 1898. Overtime race riots started to increase all over the country. Some places included states such as Washington, Nebraska, and Texas. A race riot in Alabama happened in 1906. Years later there was another one in Chicago during 1919. A 17-year-old boy while swimming went across the borderline that separated the “whites only” or “colored only” beaches. He was stoned to death causing one of the worst race riots, excluding Tulsa’s, in American history. In the same year, the Ku Klux Klan lynched at least 83 innocent black men (History.com, 2009). All 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 Woodrow 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 D). With the laws of the 1920’s, and even the president’s racial actions, there wasn’t much to do to stop segregation.

Even though many African Americans dealt with racism and the struggle of Jim Crow laws in their lives, they still had dreams. They believed nothing could stop them. Tulsa, Oklahoma was a segregated community but African Americans still had Black Wall

Street, where their businesses were thriving. Tulsans believed that living separately would solve problems and stop the conflict, or so they thought.

### 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 young woman was only 17, named Sarah Page. She screamed “Rape!” (Krehbiel, 7; Greenwood Cultural Center; Christensen, 2013; Emory University, 2012; ZinnEd Project, 2013). Richard Rowland repeats, quoted from the book, “Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921”, “ 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 protect himself 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 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. Willard McCullough, Tulsa's sheriff, 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 to happen in Tulsa. Reckless behavior and fighting began to take place as well as looting of local businesses. 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 the 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 also taken to detention centers at Convention Hall, McNulty Park, and then 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, it made it impossible for African Americans to stop the situation at hand. One victim quoted in the book, "Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921" described it: "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

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 (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 all 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 that was still safe and sound (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 to be built (Christensen, 2013).

After the riot, many were arrested for stealing and even murder, although many were found not guilty. 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).

Only a year later after the riot, the Ku Klux Klan passed through Tulsa, Oklahoma. The Ku Klux Klan was first founded in 1877 but later disappeared from society and operated secretly for many years. Passing through Tulsa was one of their first appearances since 1915, when they reunited. Many believe it had something to do with the riot. By 1923, the Ku Klux Klan was winning powerful positions in U.S. office (Krehbiel, 25). “Powerful positions included Governors Edward Jackson of Indiana and Clifford Walker of Georgia, as well as U.S. Senators Earle Mayfield of Texas and Rice Means of Colorado (Rothman, 2016).”

### 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. At the same time, the African American community of Tulsa doesn't want to relive the trauma of their past generations. Even

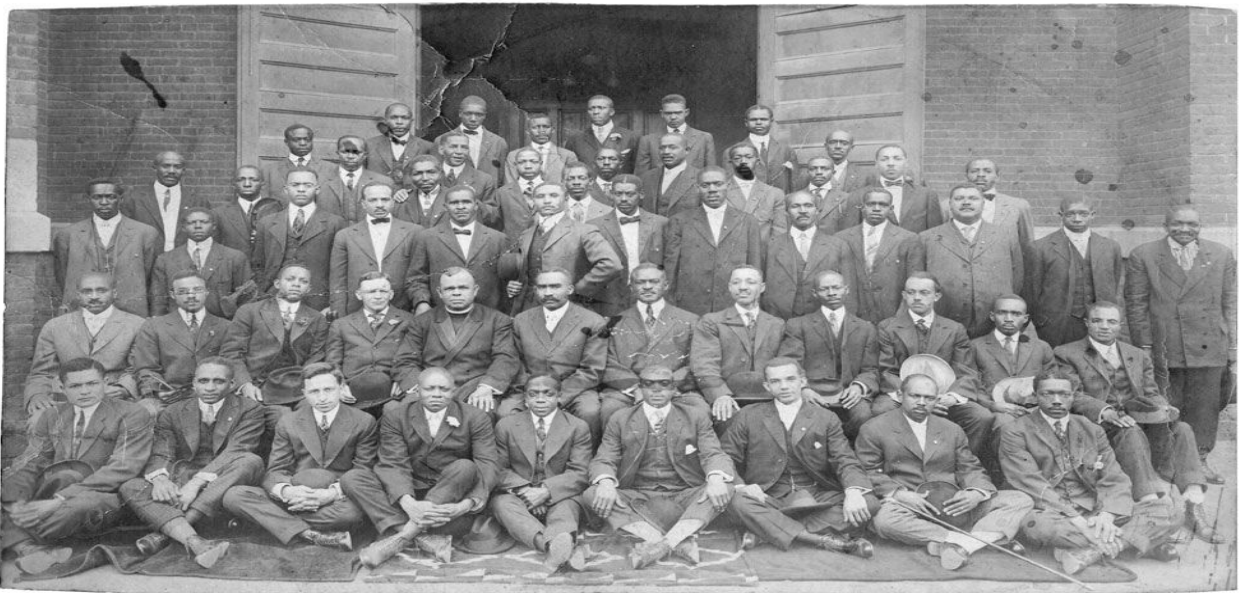
with this negative situation happening, Oklahoma remains one of the best places to start a business in America today. The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 event also goes to show that, no matter your diversity including race, anyone can run a business and live the “American Dream.” (Marcus, 2017; The Consummate Dabbler, 2014).

The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, explains to American citizens today that we still need change. Both whites and African Americans thought that living separately was going to solve their problems. In this case, the whites allowing the blacks to create Black Wall Street. 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 racism all over America that needs to stop. Wars are still happening, there’s multiple stereotypes based on race, some people even have problems with accepting diversity. One major event happening today in America is “Black Lives Matter”. This organization formed to show the American audience that life for African Americans still isn’t safe even today. Every American has their own rights including “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”, as stated in the Declaration of Independence. 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 on how we can appreciate each others differences. Society needs to show empathy towards each other. The only way we can accept our differences is if we understand them. This starts with you.

## Conclusion

Learning about the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, helped further explain what my personal ancestors and earlier generations had to go through to become equal (to some extent). Everything that has happened in the past must stay in the past. Our future generations must continue to fight for their rights and equality to learn from the past to change the beliefs of people today and in the future.

## Appendix



### **Appendix A**

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](http://officialblackwallstreet.com), January 19, 2018.*



## **Appendix B**

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.*

**A SERIES OF STATISTICAL CHARTS, ILLUSTRATING THE CONDITION OF THE DESCENDANTS OF FORMER AFRICAN SLAVES NOW RESIDENT IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.**

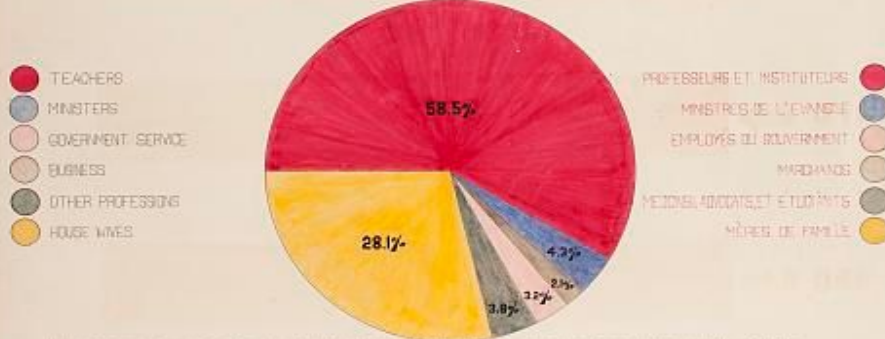
UNE SÉRIE DE CARTES ET DIAGRAMMES STATISTIQUES MONTRANT LA CONDITION PRÉSENTE DES DESCENDANTS DES ANCIENS ESCLAVES AFRICAINS ACTUELLEMENT ÉTABLIS DANS LES ÉTATS UNIS D'AMÉRIQUE.

PREPARED AND EXECUTED BY NEGRO STUDENTS UNDER THE DIRECTION OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY, ATLANTA, GA., UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.



PRÉPARÉES ET EXÉCUTÉES PAR DES ÉTUDIANTS NÈGRES SOUS LA DIRECTION DE L'UNIVERSITÉ D'ATLANTA, ÉTAT DE GEORGIE, ÉTATS UNIS D'AMÉRIQUE.

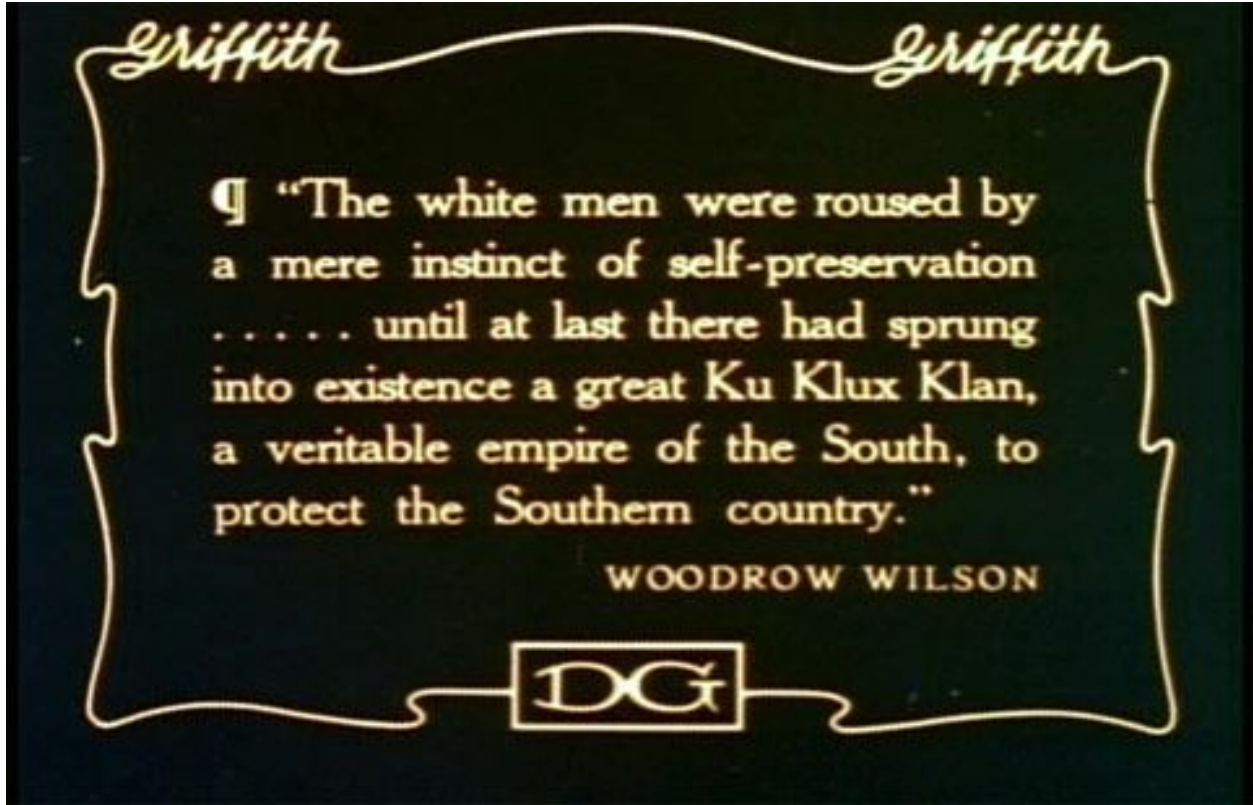
THE UNIVERSITY WAS FOUNDED IN 1867. IT HAS INSTRUCTED 8000 NEGRO STUDENTS. L'UNIVERSITÉ A ÉTÉ FONDÉE EN 1867. ELLE A DONNÉ L'INSTRUCTION À 8000 ÉTUDIANTS NÈGRES. IT HAS GRADUATED 330 NEGROES AMONG WHOM ARE: ELLE A DÉLIVRÉ DES DIPLOMES À 330 NÈGRES DONT :



THE UNIVERSITY HAS 20 PROFESSORS AND INSTRUCTORS AND 250 STUDENTS AT PRESENT. IT HAS FIVE BUILDINGS, 80 ACRES OF CAMPUS, AND A LIBRARY OF 11000 VOLUMES. IT AIMS TO RAISE AND CIVILIZE THE SONS OF THE FREEDMEN BY TRAINING THEIR MORE CAPABLE MEMBERS IN THE LIBERAL ARTS ACCORDING TO THE BEST STANDARDS OF THE DAY. THE PROPER ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THIS WORK DEMANDS AN ENDOWMENT FUND OF \$500,000. L'UNIVERSITÉ A ACTUELLEMENT 20 PROFESSEURS ET INSTRUCTEURS ET 250 ÉTUDIANTS. ELLE EST COMPOSÉE DE CINQ BÂTIMENTS, 80 ACRES (ENVIRON 28 HECTARES) DE TERRAIN SERVANT DE COUR ET DE CHAMP DE RÉCRÉATION ET D'UNE BIBLIOTHÈQUE CONTENANT 11000 VOLUMES. SON BUT EST D'ÉLEVER ET DE CIVILISER LES FILS DES NÈGRES AFFRANCHIS EN DONNANT AUX MEUX DOTTÉS UNE ÉDUCATION DANS LES ARTS LIBÉRAUX EN ACCORD AVEC LES IDÉES LES PLUS PROGRÈS — SISTES DE L'ÉPOQUE. L'ACCOMPLISSEMENT DE CETTE ŒUVRE DEMANDE UNE DOTATION DE \$500,000 (2,500,000 FRANCS).

**Appendix C**

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 D

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 E

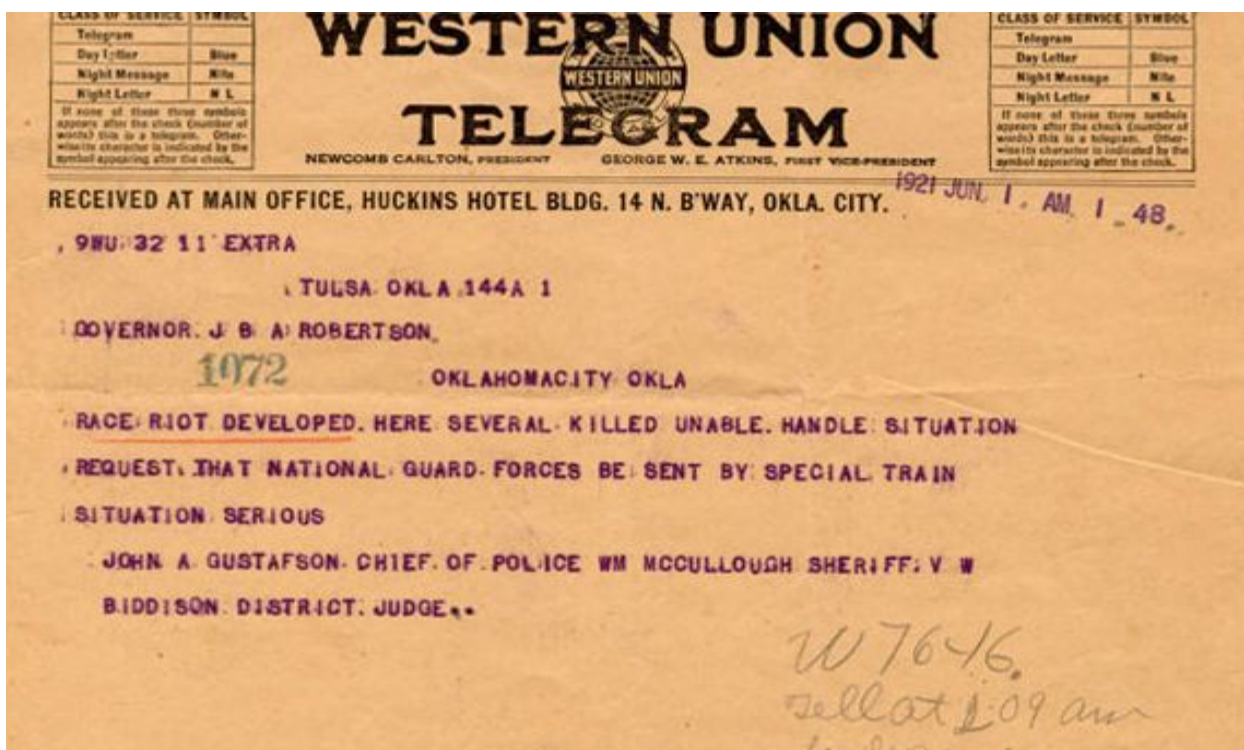
Newspaper on the day of the riot about Richard Rowland.  
"Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator newspaper." *Fly Historic Wings. Undated. Fly.historicwings.com, January 14, 2018.*



### 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*

## Annotated Bibliography

### **Primary Sources:**

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This website help me access a photo taken on June 1, 1921, capturing the destruction in Tulsa. Oklahoma.

*“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.*

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

*“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*

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

*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*

This website helped me find a photo showing Tulsans cleaning and finding belongings after the riot.

*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.*

This website showed a quote seen in movie, *A Birth of a Nation*, said by our President in the 1920’s.

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

This website allowed me to find a photo to represent segregation not just in Tulsa but all over America as well as Jim Crow laws.

*“Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator newspaper.” Fly Historic Wings. Undated. Fly.historicwings.com, January 14, 2018.*



This source helped me find a historic newspaper that was made during the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.

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

This website showed a photo of business owners of Black Wall Street.

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This helped me find the original telegram sent for National assistance during the race riot of 1921.

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*Ellsworth, Scott. Death in a promised land: the Tulsa race riot of 1921. Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2001. Accessed January 18, 2018.*

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