

FROM EXECUTIVE PRODUCER RUSSELL WESTBROOK  
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# TULSA BURNING

THE 1921 RACE MASSACRE

EDUCATION GUIDE



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Executive produced by NBA superstar and philanthropist Russell Westbrook and directed by Peabody and Emmy-Award® winning director Stanley Nelson and Peabody and duPont-Award winner Marco Williams, *Tulsa Burning* commemorates the 100th anniversary of the horrific Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, one of the worst acts of racial violence in American history, and calls attention to the previously ignored but necessary repair of a town once devastated.

In the 1920s, the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma, also known as Black Wall Street, was one of the most prosperous African American communities in the United States. Filled with booming businesses and thriving entrepreneurs, the district served as a mecca of Black ingenuity and promise, until the evening of May 31, 1921, which marked the start of the devastating Tulsa Race Massacre. More than thirty-five city blocks were burned to the ground and hundreds of Black city dwellers were killed. The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 is one of the most tragic moments in our nation's history, yet this harrowing event is largely unknown to many Americans. It is an often-overlooked story that needs to be told.

"Tulsa Burning: The 1921 Race Massacre" takes an in-depth, sobering look at the tragic events of a century ago and focuses on a specific period, from the birth of Black Wall Street, to its catastrophic downfall over the course of two bloody days, and finally the fallout and reconstruction. The documentary also follows the city's current-day grave excavation efforts at Oaklawn Cemetery where numerous unmarked coffins of victims who were killed and buried during the massacre have been recovered. It will also feature rare archival footage and imagery from the time, coupled with commentary and interviews from numerous historians, city leaders, and activists, including the Tulsa Historical Society & Museum, the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation, the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission and the Historic Vernon A.M.E. Church, among others.

#### **Curriculum Links:**

*Tulsa Burning: The 1921 Race Massacre* would be useful for American History, African American History, and Social Studies courses. Please note that the documentary contains disturbing imagery of racial violence and viewer discretion is advised. For students under 14, we recommend that you consult with parents or educators before watching.

#### **Join the Conversation:**

Contribute to the conversation using #RememberTulsa. Discussing the Tulsa Race massacre may be difficult for some students. The guidelines below can help provide a framework for group discussions of this history and its legacy.



# DISCUSSIONS ABOUT RACISM, RACIAL VIOLENCE AND BIAS FACILITATION GUIDELINES

- Parents and educators/facilitators can start conversations by presenting some guidelines formally or informally, and moving the dialogue forward.
- Acknowledgment and understanding are key to beginning conversations about racism, racial violence and bias.
- These conversations can be formal or informal, but the important part is that everyone finds a supportive environment to talk.
- Listen first, speak second. In a thoughtful conversation, everyone has valuable opinions; let's listen carefully before we speak.
- These topics can be very difficult for many students to discuss, especially African Americans and other people of color. Create space for those who might not be able to engage with these topics, or for those who engage differently.
- Empathy is key. Racism and violence bias has left a lasting legacy of pain with many individuals and communities. While we may not fully understand it, we should know it exists and extend empathy toward others.
- Don't expect perfection. None of us have the perfect words to describe how we feel. Encourage everyone in the discussion to be sensitive to multiple perspectives.

After watching all or parts of this documentary, viewers may wonder how they can get involved and help make progress on issues of racism and the legacy of racialized violence.

- **Start a conversation.** Talking to one another about history and the legacy of events such as the Tulsa Race massacre is an important first step.
- **Go deeper.** Explore more history and context. Learn more about where America has been on issues of race and bigotry, and what solutions are being proposed. By learning more about these issues, all of us can be better informed about how to make progress. Share what you have learned.
- **Stay connected.** Connect with people or organizations in your community who are building bridges across lines of race, religion or nationality.

## **Setting the Stage: Background information:**

View this article to learn about the history of Black Wall Street and entrepreneurs such as O.W. Gurley, A.J. Smitherman, and Mabel Little: [9 Entrepreneurs Who Helped Build Tulsa's Black Wall Street](#). View additional background about Tulsa at the time of the massacre from the Oklahoma Historical Society: [Tulsa Race Massacre | The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture \(okhistory.org\)](#)

## Tulsa's Black Wall Street Flourished As a Self-Contained Hub in the Early 1900s by Alexis Clark ([View the complete article here](#))

By 1921, Tulsa was a growing, prosperous city with a population of more than 100,000 people. The city was highly segregated, with most of the city's 10,000 Black residents living in a neighborhood called Greenwood. Founded in 1906, Greenwood was developed on Indian Territory, the vast area where Native American tribes had been forced to relocate, which encompasses much of modern-day Eastern Oklahoma. Some formerly enslaved African Americans who were integrated into tribal communities acquired allotted land in Greenwood through the Dawes Act, a U.S. law that gave land to individual Native Americans. And many Black sharecroppers fleeing racial oppression relocated to the region as well, in search of a better life after the Civil War. O.W. Gurley, a wealthy Black landowner, purchased 40 acres of land in Tulsa, naming it Greenwood after the town in Mississippi. Gurley began developing Greenwood. Then word began to spread about opportunities for Blacks in Greenwood and many relocated to the community, seeking opportunity.

Eventually, Greenwood became one of the most affluent Black communities in the country. On Greenwood Avenue, there were shops, restaurants, grocery stores, hotels, jewelry and clothing stores, movie theaters, barbershops and salons, a library, and offices for doctors, lawyers and dentists. Greenwood also had its own school system, post office, a savings and loan bank, hospital, and bus and taxi service.

### TERMS TO KNOW

Students can define and think about the meaning of these terms before and after watching the documentary.

- Affluence
- Black Codes
- Disparity
- Entrepreneurship
- Reconstruction
- Reparations
- Resilience
- Restitution
- Segregation
- Self-Determination

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can prompt group discussions or essays related to the topics covered in the documentary.

- How were African Americans able to acquire land in the former Indian Territory?
- What were the Black towns, and what were some of the reasons they were important to African American families?
- Why did African Americans and Native Americans not want Oklahoma to become a state? How did life change for them after statehood?
- Why do you think Booker T. Washington called Greenwood the Black "Wall Street?"
- Greenwood is described as a "city within a city" in this documentary. What do you think that phrase means? What were some of the characteristics of Greenwood?
- Why did African Americans need to build a "city within a city"?
- Why do you think it was important for African American communities to publish newspapers? What role did the Black press play during the time of the Tulsa massacre?
- Why do you think African American WWI veterans were so threatening to Whites in Tulsa?
- What are some of the reasons Black residents of Greenwood weren't reimbursed for their losses after the massacre?
- Reverend Dr. Turner speaks of the fact that survivors of the massacre never found justice. What do you think justice would mean in this case?
- While the story of the Tulsa Massacre is a tragedy, it is also described as a story that shows the resilience of the Black community there. How do you think Black Tulsans showed resilience?
- What connections do you see between the events surrounding the Tulsa Race Massacre and the movement for racial justice today?
- Why do you think it is important for people today to learn about the 1921 Tulsa massacre?

## ACTIVITIES

1. **Additional Background Context.** Before or after watching the documentary, students can learn more about the context by reading about Reconstruction, The Black Codes, and World War I and the Red Summer.
2. **Exploring Black Wall Street.** Research Black Wall Street and write a short biography or create a presentation about one of Greenwood's entrepreneurs.
3. **First-Person Account: Mary Jones Parrish.** Mary Jones Parrish was a Black journalist and teacher who witnessed the Tulsa Massacre. Parrish wrote a first-person account of the massacre and recorded the recollections of survivors. Students can read Parrish's text (located online or for purchase) and discuss in small or large groups.
4. **Survivors Stories.** The John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation has collected stories of survivors of the massacre. Visit 1921 Race Massacre Survivors | johnhopefranklin (jhfcenter.org) to read one or more of these stories and discuss with your class or group.

## REFLECTION: SURVIVOR STORY

"We lost everything. Everything that we owned was burned to the ground! What I miss most were the family photos that we had in our house. My father had lots of photographs of family in our house, and those can never be replaced." – Tulsa Race Massacre survivor Binkley Wright (Find additional information and survivors stories from the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation at [Curriculum Resource | johnhopefranklin \(jhcenter.org\)](https://jhcenter.org))

- How would you feel if you lost all of your family photographs?
- What do you think would be the long-term impact for families of having all of their belongings destroyed?
- What role do family photographs play in helping us understand history? What is lost when photographs are lost?



# PHOTO ANALYSIS

## Photo 1



Credit: DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University



Credit: DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University

## Photo Analysis Questions

- Describe what and who you see in each photograph.
- Why do you think these photographs might have been taken?
- What do you wish you could ask the photographers about these photographs?
- What do these two photographs have in common?
- How are they different?
- Which do you think was taken first? Why do you think so?
- Why do you think someone wrote on these photographs?
- Why do you think it is important to have photographs from historical events?

## Additional Photos:

The Tulsa Historical Society has an extensive collection of photographs related to the Tulsa Race Massacre which can be viewed here: [Photos - Tulsa Historical Society & Museum \(tulsahistory.org\)](http://Photos - Tulsa Historical Society & Museum (tulsahistory.org))

The Library of Congress has helpful resources for analyzing photographs:  
[Analyzing Photographs & Prints | Teacher Resources - Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](http://Analyzing Photographs & Prints | Teacher Resources - Library of Congress (loc.gov))



# DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: “THE TULSA RACE RIOT AND THREE OF ITS VICTIMS,” BY B.C. FRANKLIN

I reached my office in safety; but I knew that that safety would be short-lived. I now knew the mob-spirit. I knew too that government and law and order had broken down. I knew that mob law had been substituted in all its fiendishness and barbarity. I knew that the mobocrat cared nothing about the written law and the constitution and I also now knew that he had neither the patience nor the intelligence to distinguish between the good and the bad, the law abiding and the lawless in my race. From my office window, 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 old Mid-Way hotel on fire, burning from its top, and then another and another and another building began to burn from the top. "What, an attack from the air too?", I asked myself. Lurid flames roared and belched and licked their forked tongues in the air. Smoke ascended the sky in thick, black volumes and amid it all, the

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planes--now a dozen or more in number--still hummed and darted here and there with the agility of natural birds of the air. Then a filling station farther down East Archer caught on fire from the top. I feared now an explosion and decided to try and move to safer quarters. I came out of my office, locked the door and descended to the foot of the steps. The side-walks were literally covered with burning turpentine balls. I knew all too well where they came from and I knew all too well why every burning building first caught from the top. I paused and waited for an opportune time to escape. "Where, oh where is our splendid fire department with its half dozen stations?", I asked myself. "Is the city in conspiracy with the mob?", I again asked myself. As I stood there in contemplation of these and other gruesome facts, I saw two sights that will live in my memory to my dying days. One was a woman on the opposite side of the street. She was traveling south, hair disentangled and disheveled--in the very path of whizzing bullets. She was calling wildly to a little tot that, a few moments before, had dashed in panic before her and turned off Greenwood on Archer at the corner. I hollered to her, "Turn back woman, for God's sake turn back. You will be mown down". Never turning her head, she answered, as she hurried on, "I must follow my child". And so she did follow her child and not a bullet touched her although they literally rained down the street. This brave self-denying mother lives today here in Tulsa and with her that tot--now a splendid young lady--whom she risked her life to save. The other sight

Credit: National Museum of African American History and Culture

This is an excerpt from "Tulsa Race Riot and Three of Its Victims," a 10-page unpublished manuscript written in August 1931 by Tulsa lawyer B.C. (Buck Colbert) Franklin (1879-1960). Franklin was an eyewitness to the Tulsa Race Massacre and his law office was burned down in the attacks. After the massacre, Franklin dedicated himself to defending the rights of massacre survivors, resuming his law practice from inside a tent. In a case he took to the Oklahoma Supreme Court, he successfully argued against a Tulsa city ordinance that would have made it too expensive for many Greenwood residents to rebuild. The manuscript describes Franklin's experiences and observations on May 31 and June 1, 1921, including his chance meetings with a World War I veteran and his family.

- What is the major event Franklin describes in this passage?
- What information can you infer from this passage about Franklin and his state of mind during the massacre?
- Why do you think Franklin decided to write down his experiences during the Tulsa Race Massacre?
- Who do you think Franklin would have wanted to read this account? Who was his intended audience?
- Why is it important to be able to read first-person accounts of history?



# QUOTE ANALYSIS

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

-James Baldwin

In the documentary, this quote from American writer and activist James Baldwin (1924–1987) is seen displayed in a rendering of the Greenwood Rising History Center. (Learn more about Greenwood Rising: [Greenwood Rising \(tulsa2021.org\)](https://tulsa2021.org))

- What does this quote mean to you? Try to rephrase it in your own words.
- In what ways does this quote relate to the Tulsa Race Massacre and its aftermath?
- Why do you think the people behind Greenwood Rising might choose to display this quotation on the wall of the history center?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

[Official Website: Tulsa Burning: The 1921 Race Massacre, History.com](#)

[Article: The Tulsa Race Massacre, History.com](#)

[Article: Tulsa's 'Black Wall Street' Flourished as a Self-Contained Hub in Early 1900s, History.com](#)

[Article: How the Tulsa Race Massacre Was Covered Up, History.com](#)

[Curriculum Resources: 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission](#)

[Exhibit: 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, Tulsa Historical Society and Museum](#)

[Educational Resources: Greenwood Cultural Center](#)

[Article: The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre: What Happened to Black Wall Street, National Endowment for the Humanities](#)

[Research Guide: Tulsa Race Massacre, Library of Congress](#)

## Books

Ellsworth, Scott. *The Ground Breaking: The Tulsa Race Massacre and An American City's Search for Justice*. (Icon Books, 2021.)

Hill, Karlos. *The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre: A Photographic History*. (University of Oklahoma Press, 2021.)

Johnson, Hannibal. *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District*. (Eakin Press, 2007)

Parrish, Mary E. Jones. *The Nation Must Awake: My Witness to the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921*. (Trinity University Press, 2021)