

# The tulsa race riots of 1921 history essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 was one of the most traumatic race riots in the history of the United States. Evaluating the events in retrospect, its hard to explain how such an ordeal, starting with just a simple encounter in an elevator, could have escalated into one of the deadliest extra-military conflicts ever to take place on American soil. How was it that a scream heard by almost no one was able to directly trigger the amassing of thousands in an angry mob? And how did that unruly mob then gain assistance from the very authorities that were sent to put it down? I propose that this was all possible because of an element of racism known as representative realism which was facilitated by personal biases and sensationalist media accounts.

The phenomenon of representative realism occurs when a subconscious set of mental “ filters” developed from our beliefs and experiences weighs heavily in our interpretation of reality. In this particular instance, the ‘ filters’ were composed of racist ideas, causing certain truths to be warped by the biases of the observer. In this case, two ‘ truths’ were distorted, first, that concerning the events that sparked the riot, and, second, that concerning what was taking place during the riot itself.

To understand all of this, we must first have a thorough knowledge of the events. This begins not with the firing of the first shots or even with the string of seemingly insignificant events that led to the first signs of difficulty. Rather, one must begin with the zeitgeist, and consider the world as Tulsans did in May of 1921. We need not only understand how this tragedy could happen, but why, in the end, it did.

Of all the qualities that impressed visitors to the city of Tulsa in the days before the race riots, one of them was just how modern it was. Recently constructed office buildings stood downtown, motorized vehicles rumbled back and forth along Main Street, and rows of freshly painted houses stood in residential neighborhoods. Compared to other cities in the region, Tulsa was nothing less than a sensation. In fact, Tulsa has grown so much and so quickly that local tourism promoters called it the Magic City.

However, the Chamber of Commerce brochures and postcards did not reveal everything. Tulsa was in some way, not one but two cities. In the shadow of the thriving center, there was a second community all unto itself. Some disparagingly called it “ Little Africa” though in later years it became known simply as ‘ Greenwood’. In early 1921, it was the home of almost ten thousand African-American men, women and children. 5, 6

Most residents of Tulsa’s primarily African American suburb came to Oklahoma, like their white neighbors during the great boom just before and after Oklahoma achieved statehood. Some came from Mississippi, some from Missouri, and others all the way from Georgia. For many, Oklahoma represented not only a chance to escape the harsh realities of race in their former Old South states, but literally a land of hope, a place to start over.

The backbone of the community was Greenwood Avenue. Running for over a mile, the street had a certain symbolic meaning. Unlike Tulsa’s other streets, which crossed into both black and white neighborhoods, Greenwood Avenue was present only in the African American community. 9

For a community of its size, the business district of Greenwood offered an impressive range of commercial structures. John and Loula Williams, who had a three story building on the northwest corner of Greenwood Avenue and Archer Street, also operated the Dreamland Theater, a 150 seat venue that offered live music and theatrical revues as well as silent films accompanied by pianist. Nearby where the buildings that housed nearly all of Tulsa's black professional offices. There were no less than ten of each in all the major occupations and the greatest tally was fifteen ' the number of African American physicians in Tulsa at the time of the riots. 11

The intellectual culture on Greenwood was also surprising, at least by standards within the region. There were not one but two black newspapers ' the Tulsa Star and the Oklahoma Sun. Afro-Americans were barred from using the new Carnegie library in the city's center, so a smaller black library branch was constructed, and came to be replete with its own unique offerings. Nationally recognized African American leaders like WEB Dubois had even taught in Tulsa before the riot. In addition, Greenwood was also home to a local league of businesses, several fraternal orders, a branch of the YMCA, and several women's clubs. The last of these was populated by the community's secondary school teachers, the number of whom in employ was never less than thirty.

Political issues of the day also attracted considerable interest. The Tulsa Star, in particular, provided not only comprehensive coverage of national, state and local political campaigns and election results, but also devoted considerable space to record activities in local clubs of black Democrats and Republicans. In addition, the Star also covered some quasi-political

movements, including Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, various back-to-Africa movements, and some nationalist organizations. One such group, the African Blood Brotherhood, later claimed to have had a chapter on Greenwood before the riot. 12

Around the neighborhood were many small stores, barbers, and two family-owned grocery markets. Prior to the riot, these businesses made Greenwood, on a per capita basis, one of the most financially successful African American communities in the country. Grit, hard work and determination were the main reasons for this success. Entrepreneurial spirit had been imported to Tulsa from small communities in the outlying rural areas.

There were also other reasons. Tulsa booming economy was an important factor, as was the fact that, in general, Greenwood was basically the only the place where black Tulsans could chose to shop. Due to the city's mandate of residential segregation, blacks were generally barred from patronizing downtown shops owned by whites, or at least risk insult if they tried. While many black Tulsans made a conscious decision to sponsor the African American merchants, the fact of the matter is that that most had few other options. 15

Despite the fact that this separation seemed to be becoming more entrenched during the months that preceded the riots, more than a few white Tulsans feared, usually due to sensationalist news reports, that the opposite was true. It was primarily the Tulsa Tribune that asserted that black Tulsa was on the rise toward equal status with white Tulsa. It was this idea of

black Tulsa's ' rising up' both in an economic and combative sense that was created by the Tribune and some other, smaller news outlets.

The Tribune's deliberately sensational articles would be the primary ideas or ' filters' that later led to instances of representational realism. Anecdotal reports were issued about blacks Tulsans ignoring or challenging Jim Crow practices. Whites were angry at and jealous of the material success of Greenwood's elite - a feeling that there was no doubt enhanced by equally sensational reports on the sharp fall in crude oil prices and the subsequent layoffs in the oil industry immediately prior to the riots. In the first weeks and months of 1921, white Tulsans were made to fear that the Color Line was not only in danger of being slowly erased, but felt that its erasure was already happening. 42

Adding to this fear was the fact that, at the time, the vast majority of white Tulsans had almost no direct knowledge of the African American community. A handful of white-owned businesses existed on Greenwood and some whites occasionally visited the area for one reason or another, but most white Tulsans had never set foot in the African American neighborhood and had no desire to do so in the future. Most whites lived in all white neighborhoods, attended all white schools and churches, and worked mainly in all white environments. For most of Tulsa's white population, the little they knew or thought they knew about the African-American community was based upon racial stereotypes, deeply rooted prejudices, and, most importantly, media-driven rumor and innuendo.

Though heavily exaggerated and sometimes completely fabricated, newspaper accounts were not altogether unfounded. In the spring of 1921, serious racial troubles had been brewing not just in Tulsa but across America for some time. Few periods were as turbulent as the years surrounding World War I. In 1919, more than two dozen different race riots erupted in cities and towns across the country. It's important to note, however, these riots were not like those of the 1960s and 1990s, and were primarily characterized by white mobs invading African American neighborhoods, attacking African-American men and women, and burning down houses and businesses. There wasn't one single record of the inverse having occurred, a fact that Tulsa's news outlets deliberately omitted. 19

Even prior to the riot, violence against black Oklahomans was part of the national unrest. Largely because of the conditions of frontier lawlessness, Oklahoma had long been plagued by lynchings. From 1911-1921, 23 such instances were reported in Oklahoma. All were vigilante actions and all 23 of the victims, save for one, were African Americans. 30

Tulsa in particular had become a bustling center of Klan activity. Though there are no truly reliable records of membership, it's estimated that there were 3200 Klansmen in Tulsa at the time of the riot. Other reports put the figure at as high as 6000. To give one a perspective on the pervasive nature of the Klan, an initiation ceremony was held south of the city during the summer that followed the riot. Over a thousand new members were brought in during that one evening. There were so many in attendance that a large traffic jam resulted on the road to the suburb of Broken Arrow, which sat along the route.

It was within this cultural context that on May 30th, 1921, Dick Rowland, a black man, and Sarah Page, a white woman, had a short and initially insignificant encounter on an elevator. The scope of the event would be rapidly magnified as the story was repeatedly re-interpreted, each time filtering through the idea matrix of individuals with racial prejudice.

Rowland was a black man of approximately 19 at the time that the riots took place, though the actual date of his birth has been a subject of some debate. He and his two sisters had been orphans and apparently lived on the streets of Vinita, where they slept and begged for food. When he was approximately six, Rowland was taken in by an African-American woman named Damien Ford, the proprietor of a small, Tulsa grocery store.

Dick Rowland would grow up in Tulsa and eventually drop out of school to take a job shining shoes in a white-owned salon located downtown on Main Street. Shoe shines normally cost about a penny in those days, but the worker was usually tipped at least nickel for every shine and sometimes made much more. During a workday, a shoe shiner could pocket a lot of money. This was seen as an especially good prospect for a young African-American for whom there would be few other employment opportunities.

There were no toilets at the salon where Dick Rowland worked. The owner had arranged it so that African-American employees could use the “colored” bathrooms, in the Drexel building across the street at 319 S. Main Street. To gain access to the toilet, which was located upstairs, Rowland and the other shoe shiners had to ride the building’s elevator. The lift was not automatic,



and required an operator to be present at all times. This work was usually reserved for women. 79

At the end of May 1921, the Drexel building elevator operator was a white woman of seventeen named Sarah Page. She had come to Tulsa from Missouri, and it's assumed she lived in a rented room nearby on North Boston Avenue. In addition, it was reported that Page had enrolled herself in a local business school, a move that was almost necessary in order for her to stay competitive. While Tulsa was still riding its construction boom, some building owners had begun to recruit African-American women to perform as lift operators at a lower salary than their white counterparts. 80

Dick Rowland and Sarah Page were both downtown on Monday, May 30th, 1921. At approximately 3pm Dick Rowland walked into Sarah Page's elevator. Seconds later, Page was heard screaming, and Rowland was seen exiting the building at a quickened pace. 82

There is a great deal of speculation and discussion concerning what actually took place within the confines of the elevator. Subsequent to the riot, the most common explanation was that Rowland had somehow tripped as he entered the elevator and, attempting to catch his fall, had grabbed Page's arm causing her to scream. Rowland then fled, naturally startled by her reaction. A separate theory asserts that the two were romantically involved and that Pages scream was the result of a lover's quarrel. Regardless, all who knew Rowland, black and white, proclaimed that he was completely incapable of the rape he would be accused of. 83

The first to respond to Page's cry was an employee of Renberg's clothing store, an outlet on the Drexel building's first floor. He heard Page scream and saw Rowland exit the building right after. He then hurried to the lift where he discovered the disheveled Page and then called the police. The police arrived, took reports from the employee and Page, and then began a low-key investigation. The next morning they arrested Rowland at home, and carted him off to the downtown jail for processing.

Meanwhile, Richard Lloyd Jones, editor of the Tulsa Tribune, made contact both with the police and the Renberg's employee. It just so happened that the Tribune also had offices in the Drexel building and thus he found about the event shortly after it had occurred. When the newspaper contacted the police for comment, they were naturally tightlipped about an ongoing investigation, and thus Jones' primary source was the Renberg's employee. That afternoon, he released the following article:

#### Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator

A Negro delivery boy who gave his name to the public 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 the clerk, police say.

Tenants of the Drexel Building said the girl is an orphan who works as an elevator operator to pay her way through business college. 89

Immediately subsequent to this publication, talk of lynching began. Ross T. Warner, the manager of the downtown offices of the Tulsa Machine and Tool Company, wrote that after the Tribune came out that afternoon, " the talk of lynching spread like a prairie fire." 94

Talk soon turned into action. As word of the alleged sexual assault in the Drexel Building spread, a crowd of whites began to gather on the street outside of the Tulsa County Courthouse, in whose jail Dick Rowland was being held. As people got off of work, and the news of the alleged attack reported in the Tribune became more widely dispersed across town, more and more white Tulsans, infuriated by what had supposedly taken place in the Drexel Building, began to gather outside the courthouse at Sixth and Boulder. By sunset — which came at 7: 34 p. m. that evening — observers estimated that the crowd had grown into the hundreds. Not long afterwards, cries of " Let us have the nigger" could be heard. 95

By 9: 30 p. m., the white mob outside the courthouse had swollen to nearly two- thousand persons. They blocked the sidewalks as well as the streets, and had spilled over onto the front lawns of nearby homes. In the city's African American neighborhoods, meanwhile, tension continued to mount over the increasingly ugly situation down at the courthouse. Some of the men, however, decided that they could wait no longer. Hopping into cars, small groups of armed African American men began to make brief forays into downtown, their guns visible to passersby.

As the black men were leaving the courthouse for the second time, a white man approached a tall African American World War I veteran who was carrying an army-issue revolver. " Nigger", the white man said, " What are you doing with that pistol?" " I'm going to use it if I need to," replied the black veteran. " No, you give it to me." Like hell I will." The white man tried to take the gun away from the veteran, and a shot rang out. America's worst race riot had begun. 106

While the first shot fired at the courthouse may have been unintentional, those that followed were not. Almost immediately, members of the white mob — and possibly some law enforcement officers — opened fire on the African American men, who returned volleys of their own. The initial gunplay lasted only a few seconds, but when it was over, an unknown number of people — perhaps as many as a dozen — both black and white, lay - dead or wounded. 107

Outnumbered more than twenty-to-one, the black men began a retreating fight toward the African American district. With armed whites in close

pursuit, heavy gunfire erupted again along Fourth Street, two blocks north of the courthouse. 108

A short while later, a second, deadlier, skirmish broke out at Second and Cincinnati. No longer directly involved with the fate of Dick Rowland, the beleaguered second contingent of African American men were now fighting for their own lives. Heavily outnumbered by the whites, and suffering some casualties along the way, most were apparently able, however, to make it safely across the Frisco railroad tracks, and into the more familiar environs of the African American community. 110

Shortly thereafter, whites began breaking into downtown sporting goods stores, pawnshops, and hardware stores, stealing — or “borrowing” as some would later claim — guns and ammunition. Dick Bardon’s store on First Street was particularly hard hit as well as the J. W. McGee Sporting Goods shop at 22 W. Second Street, even though it was located literally across the street from police headquarters. The owner later testified that a Tulsa police officer helped to dole out the guns that were taken from his store. 113

It appears that the first fires set by whites in black neighborhoods began at about 1:00 a. m. African American homes and businesses along Archer were the earliest targets, and when an engine crew from the Tulsa Fire Department arrived and prepared to douse the flames, white rioters forced the firemen away at gunpoint. By 4:00 a. m., more than two-dozen black-owned businesses, including the Midway Hotel, had been torched. 121

On the evening of May 31st, the National Guard was deployed to diffuse the escalating conflict. At approximately 11:00 p. m., perhaps as many as fifty

local National Guardsmen — nearly all of whom had been contacted at their homes — had gathered at the armory on Sixth Street. The Tulsa units of the National Guard were exclusively white.

Once armed, guardsmen began to lead groups of armed whites on “ patrols” of downtown streets. This activity was later taken over by members of the also all-white American Legion. Tulsa police officials also assisted the guard, presented the guardsmen with a machine gun mounted on the back of a truck.

Taking the machine gun with them, about thirty guardsmen headed north, and positioned themselves along Detroit Avenue between Brady Street and Standpipe Hill, along one of the borders separating the city’s white and black neighborhoods. The “ skirmish line” that the National Guard officers established was set-up facing the African American district. Moreover, the guardsmen also began rounding up black Tulsans, whom they handed over — as prisoners — to the police.

While some black Tulsans chose to stay and fight, most realized the futility of doing so and tried get themselves and their families to safety. They had been outmanned and outgunned when facing the white civilians alone. Now the opposition was assisted by the police and National Guardsmen. In the early hours of June 1, a steady stream of black Tulsans began to leave the city, hoping to find safety in the surrounding countryside. “ Early in the evening when there was first talk of trouble,” Irene Scofield later told the Black Dispatch, “ I and about forty others started out of the town and walked to a little town about fifteen miles away.” Others joining the exodus,

however, were not as fortunate. Billy Hudson, an African American laborer who lived on Archer, hitched up his wagon as conditions grew worse, and set out — with his grandchildren by his side — for Nowata. He was killed by whites along the way. 130

In the pre-dawn hours of June 1, thousands of armed whites, led by National Guardsmen, had gathered in three main clusters along the northern fringes of downtown, opposite Greenwood. One group had assembled behind the Frisco freight depot, while another waited nearby at the Frisco and Santa Fe passenger station. Four blocks to the north, a third crowd was clustered at the Katy passenger depot. While it is unclear how many people were in each group, some contemporary observers estimated the total number of armed whites who had gathered as high as five or ten thousand. 141

Several eyewitnesses later recalled that when dawn came at 5: 08 a. m. that morning, an unusual whistle or siren sounded, perhaps as a signal for the mass assault on Greenwood to begin. Although the source of this whistle or siren is still unknown, moments later, the white mobs made their move. Crowds of armed whites poured across the Frisco tracks, headed straight for the African American commercial district. 146

Numerous other eyewitnesses —both black and white — confirm the presence of an unknown number of airplanes flying over Greenwood during the early daylight hours of June 1. There is little doubt but that some of the occupants of the airplanes fired upon black Tulsans with pistols and rifles. Moreover, there is evidence, to suggest that men in at least one airplane dropped some

form of explosives, probably sticks of dynamite, upon a group of African American refugees as they were fleeing the city. 153

As the waves of white rioters descended upon the African American district, a deadly pattern soon emerged. First, the armed whites broke into the black homes and businesses, forcing the occupants out into the street, where the police and National Guard led them away at gunpoint to one of a growing number of internment centers. Anyone who resisted was shot. Moreover, African American men in homes where firearms were discovered met the same fate. Next, the whites looted the homes and businesses, pocketing small items, and hauling away larger items either on foot or by car or truck. Finally, the white rioters then set the homes and other buildings on fire, using torches and oil-soaked rags. House by house, block by block, the wall of flame crept northward, engulfing the city's black neighborhoods. 155

Attempts by black Tulsans to defend their homes and property were undercut by the actions of both the Tulsa police and the local National Guard units, who, rather than focus on disarming or arresting the white rioters, took steps that led to the eventual imprisonment of practically all of the city's African American citizens. 162

As the morning wore on, and the fighting moved northward across Greenwood, the guardsmen who were positioned along the crest of Sunset Hill started to actively join in the invasion of black Tulsa, with one detachment heading north, the other to the northeast. As later described by Captain John W. McCuen in the after action report he submitted to the commander of Tulsa's National Guard units:



We advanced to the crest of Sunset Hill in skirmish line and then a little further north to the military crest of the hill where our men were ordered to lie down because of the intense fire of the blacks who had formed a good skirmish line at the foot of the hill to the northeast among the out-buildings of the Negro settlement which stops at the foot of the hill. After about 20 minutes of " fire at will" at the armed groups of blacks the latter began falling back to the northeast, thus getting good cover among the frame buildings of the Negro settlement. Immediately we moved forward, " B" Company advancing directly north and the Service company in a north-easterly direction. 173

The guardsmen then came upon a group of African Americans barricaded inside a store, who were attempting to hold off a mob of armed white rioter's. Rather than attempt to get the white invaders and the black defenders to disengage, the guardsmen joined in on the attack. Again, as described by Captain McCuen:

At the northeast corner of the Negro settlement 10 or more Negroes barricaded themselves in a concrete store and dwelling and a stiff fight ensued between these Negroes on one side and guardsmen and civilians on the other. Several whites and blacks were wounded and killed at this point. 174

At approximately 11am on June 1st, the governor intervened, calling for martial law. State Troops were dispatched and began to move into what little remained of Tulsa's African American neighborhoods, disarming whites and sending them away from the district. This brought the rioting to an end. 197

As previously stated , there were two ' truths' distorted by representative realism. The first was that concerning the events that sparked the riot. It was a single cry by Sarah Page that set in motion the events that would ultimately leave half the city in devastation. This escalation occurred as the accounting of events proceeded along a chain of racially-biased informational relay. At each stage or ' link' in the chain, representational realism resulted in dissonance between what actually took place and what was perceived and recounted to the next link.

The Renberg's employee served as this chain's first link. It is known that the employee heard what he took as a scream of distress, saw Rowland exit the building post-haste, and hurried to the lift where he discovered a discombobulated Page. The subsequent police report notes nothing of any bruising or torn clothing and, more importantly, it does not note that Sarah Page claimed to have been raped. What it does note, however, is the fervent assertion by the Renberg's employee that a rape did happen, despite simultaneously admitting that he hadn't actually seen anything happen.

The second link in the chain was Richard Lloyd Jones, editor of the Tulsa Tribune. When Jones received the information from the Renberg's employee, it passed through Jones' own filters which, in addition to including racist inclinations, caused him to interpret the information in terms of its usefulness in selling newspapers. Thus, he deliberately sensationalized the information resulting in the following day's incendiary headline.

The third and final link was the public who received the newspaper. Over the course of the weeks and months that proceeded, the Tribune's sensationalist

stories had given them notion that a black uprising was imminent. When they later saw black Tulsans ride by the courthouse with their weapons on display, their analysis was filtered through this earlier notion, and led them to react as if an uprising was taking place, even though all evidence pointed to the contrary. Obviously a single carload of blacks had not intended to 'rise up' against a thousand-strong mob of whites.

This leads to the second, truth that was distorted by representative realism, which concerned what was actually taking place during the riot itself. It is apparent to any unbiased party that the black community's position was defensive for the duration of the conflict, and it was the white community that was engaged in an 'uprising'. The National Guardsman, however, responded as if the opposite were true. This is more serious than the similar behavior exhibited by white civilians, as the Guard was commissioned with the duty of restoring order. Moreover they were briefed in detail prior to being deployed. They were well aware that the riot began as an aggression toward the black community in response to an attempt by a small group of blacks to defend a prisoner from a lawless mob of whites.

Nonetheless, arriving on the scene of the conflict already underway and seeing armed blacks take aim at opposing whites, it's clear that the 'negro uprising' idea filtered the guardsmen's perception and resulted in an upside down assessment of the circumstances. This was the notion they abided despite the fact that almost all conflicts took place in the black part of town and the fact that the black side was almost always outnumbered. The most startling evidence of the role of representative realism was seen after the event, when National Guard officers were debriefed. Despite now being in a

non-hostile environment and being put on record, several guardsmen actually used the phrase ' negro uprising' and used the term " enemy" in reference to the black population they were dispatched to protect.

Given the facts of what took place, it seems almost impossible for anyone to have come to the conclusion that Sarah Page was raped or that a Negro uprising was taking place on the following day. However, with the space of just a few hours, both of these beliefs were almost ubiquitous amongst a community of thousands. This is the power of representative realism. Once the right preconceived notions have been impressed, it only takes a certain trigger, and anyone, regardless of duty or morality, can be driven to do the extreme.

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African-Americans Representative Realism and the Tulsa Race Riot

Abroad