

# Tulsa Race Riot

The Tulsa race riot began the day after Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old bootblack (shoeshiner) in Tulsa, delivered a package to the Drexel Building downtown. He rode the elevator with Mrs. Sarah Page, a young white woman who was the elevator operator. Elevators then were less automated; an operator had to control the ride and open and close the doors.

When he left the elevator, Rowland stumbled and stepped on Mrs. Page's foot. Mrs. Page became frightened and screamed. Rowland, also frightened, ran from the building. The woman claimed Rowland had tried to assault her, and the police arrested him the following day.

The *Tulsa Tribune* printed a story, including false statements concerning torn clothing and scratches on Mrs. Page's face. Tulsa's chief of police, county sheriff, and mayor denied that any harm had been done to the woman. Even though the paper admitted that the statements about her condition were false, whites became angry. Lynch talk began to circulate. By 7:00

p.m. on May 31, 1921, a mob of about 2,000 white men gathered around the County Courthouse, where Rowland was in jail.

By 9:30 p.m., African-American men began to gather, too, determined to prevent a lynching. Groups of them were circling the block in cars. Several whites and blacks were reportedly armed. The crowd ignored pleas from law *enforcement* officials to disperse.

About seventy-five African-American men got out of the cars and began milling with the white crowd. This enraged several of the whites, one of whom tried to disarm an African-American man. During their struggle, the weapon discharged, and chaos began. Several shots were fired, and one white man sitting in his car a block away was killed by a stray bullet. When a black man was wounded and ambulances arrived to attend him, white rioters surrounded him. They refused to let the ambulance attendants remove him. He died there.

Rioters smashed doors and windows of hardware stores, pawn shops, sporting goods stores, and gun shops in Tulsa to arm themselves. Looters quickly followed. The governor's office ordered Tulsa's Nation-



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al Guard to protect the arms in the Tulsa Armory and to be ready in case civil authorities need help. By coincidence, the unit had been mobilizing that night for its annual training encampment. When 300 to 400 whites tried to storm the Tulsa Armory, the Guard was there to stop them.

By midnight, factions had formed combat lines along both sides of the railroad tracks by Greenwood. Overnight, white mobs *infiltrated* the African-American area, looting and burning the entire neighborhood and preventing firefighters from combating the fires. Tulsa guardsmen patrolled with bayonets, checking on banks, power plants, water plants, and downtown business buildings.

That spring, thousands of blacks lived in Tulsa's Greenwood neighborhood. A railroad track separated Greenwood from the rest of the white population. But a mob mentality took over on May 31. Whites were arming themselves and threatening to lynch blacks. As the violence grew worse, the Chief of Police, John A. Gustafson, saw that the track would not prevent the mob from



attacking Greenwood. On June 1, 1921, he and Tulsa County Sheriff William McCullough, along with District Judge V.W. Biddison, sent the following telegram to Governor Robertson:

“Race riot developed here. Several killed. Unable handle situation. Request the National Guard forces be sent by special train. Situation serious.”

The state activated guardsmen in Oklahoma City as well as Wagoner, Muskogee, Vinita, and Bartlesville in case they were needed. When the Oklahoma City troop train arrived at the Tulsa railroad yard at 8:00 a.m., the entire African-American sector appeared to be burning. General Charles Barrett was there. He later reported 25,000 whites, “armed

***Burning of the Greenwood area during the Tulsa race riot in 1921***  
*Oklahoma Historical Society*

to the teeth, were ranging the city in utter and ruthless defiance of every concept of law and righteousness.” The state declared martial law, meaning the military controlled law *enforcement*, as of 11:30 a.m., June 1. Then it transported the additional mobilized troops to Tulsa.

When the riot was over, between thirty and forty blocks of homes and businesses had burned in the African-American part of Tulsa. There were 1,315 homes destroyed. Another 314 homes were looted and vandalized, and 4,291 blacks were left homeless. More than 3,000 Tulsans were wounded. It is said that many more did not seek treatment because they didn’t want to be identified with the riot.

Thousands of residents had fled the African-American neighborhood of Greenwood. A few, especially maids, received shelter from their white employers. Members of one white church put blacks inside their building and marched around the *perimeter* to protect them from white rioters.

In Claremore and other places, detention camps were set up to house the African-American *refugees* and, supposedly, to protect them. However, the inhabitants were not allowed to leave for several days unless a white employer called for them.

During the riot, white soldiers, law officers, and deputized volunteers disarmed blacks and took them prisoner. These prisoners went to Convention Hall, where they were searched and then transported to various holding camps around the city. On the other hand, authorities simply disarmed white rioters and sent them home.

The total official death count was thirty-six — twenty-six blacks and ten whites — but African-Americans refused to accept the count. Many fled the city and never returned. Several missing persons were assumed to have fled, although there was no evidence of either flight or death.

Governor Robertson called for a grand jury investigation of the riot. The report blamed “an *impudent* Negro, a *hysterical* girl, and a ‘yellow’ journal.” (“Yellow” was slang for papers making ordinary news sensational and overly exciting the public.) The investigation resulted in eighty-nine *indictments*. Only one was against a white defendant.

The riot affected race relations in Oklahoma for many years. In 1997, the state legislature formed a commission on the riot. It issued a report in 2001. It recommended that the state pay reparations to survivors and descendants of survivors. It also recommended a scholarship fund, an enterprise zone for economic development, and a memorial.