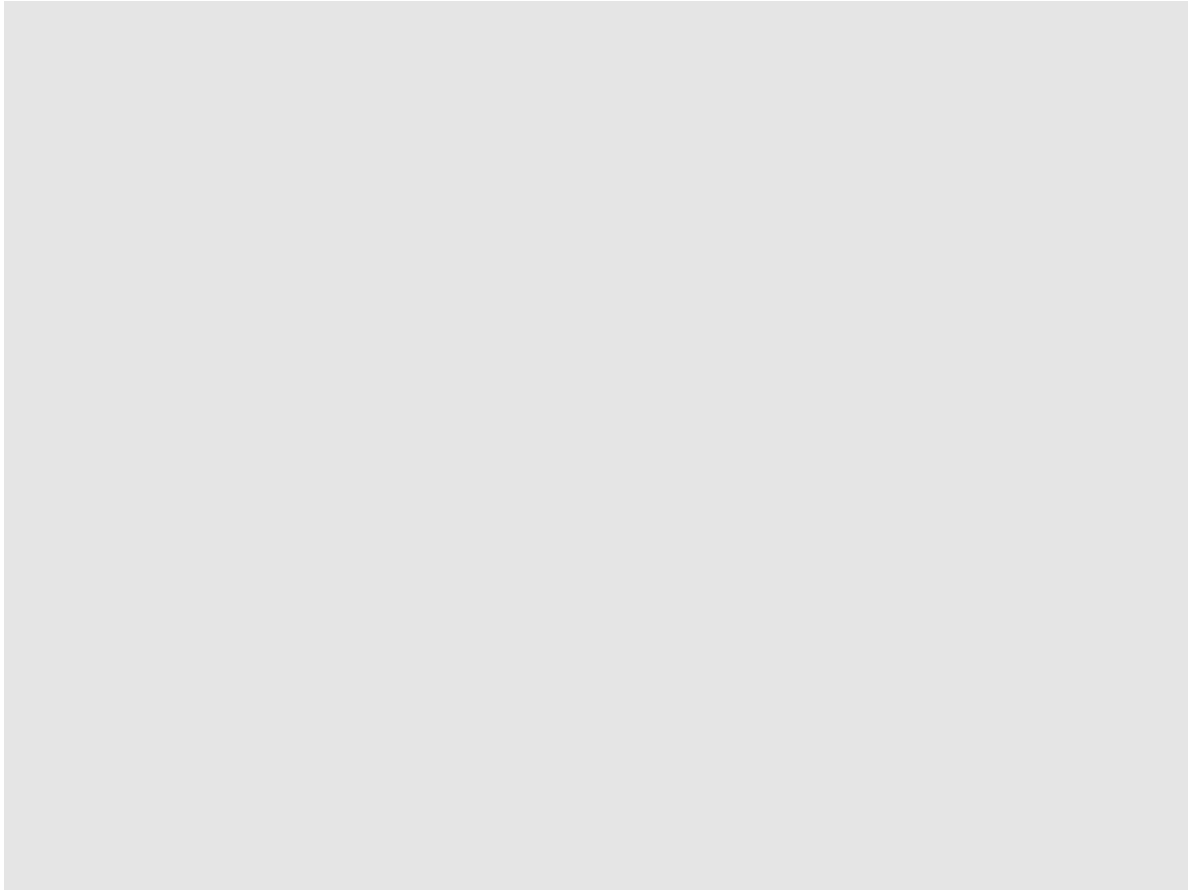


Tulsa Race Massacre: This is what happened in Tulsa in 1921

tulsaworld.com/tulsa-race-massacre-this-is-what-happened-in-tulsa-in-1921/collection_3763032b-1ecb-5203-b256-2ba1c370f6af.html

May 31, 2020

In 1921, white mobs invaded Greenwood and burned it down



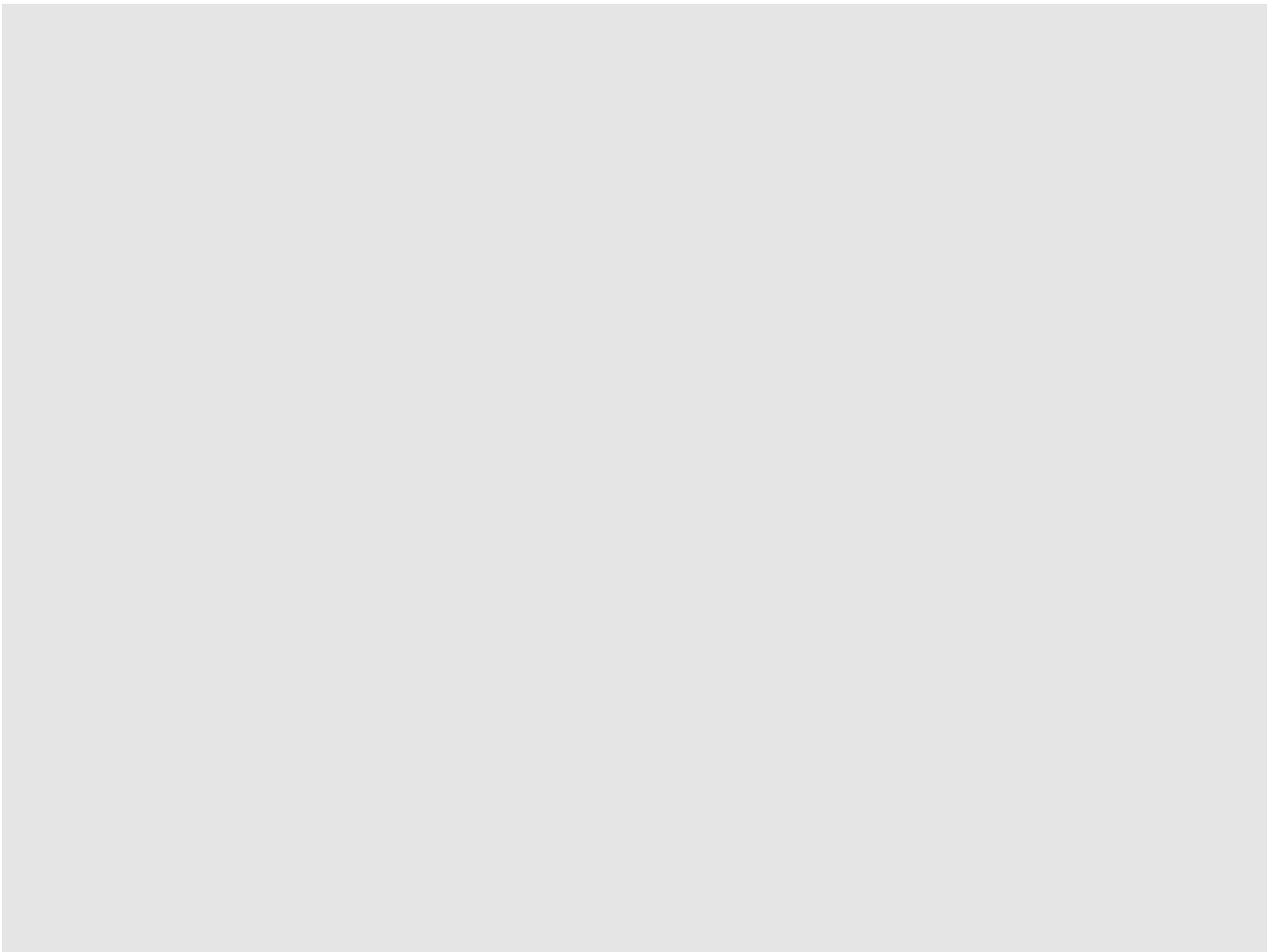
In 1921, Tulsa was home to one of the most prosperous African American communities in the country. Businesses flourished along Greenwood Avenue — dubbed Black Wall Street, according to tradition, by the great educator Booker T. Washington. Residential neighborhoods spread out in a bustling community of several thousand souls.

In a little more than 12 hours, it was gone. A riot that began at the Tulsa County Courthouse on the night of May 31, 1921, escalated into an all out assault on Greenwood on the morning of June 1.

(Photo of Mount Zion Baptist church on June 1 courtesy Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa)

[Read the story here](#)

A growing but divided city had tensions rising. How World War I influenced residents.



Tulsa in the spring of 1921 was a proud place. In the space of a decade and a half, it had grown from a dusty town of a few thousand to a city approaching 75,000. Through hard work and luck, it had become the hub of the great Mid-Continent oilfield and had no trouble bragging about it.

But there were divisions in the city and tensions were rising after World War I. [Read the full story](#)

The influence of World War I

World War I cemented Tulsa's position as a center of the burgeoning oil and gas industry. Much of the oil that powered the Allies to victory came through the city's pipelines and refineries and much of its production was financed by Tulsa banks.

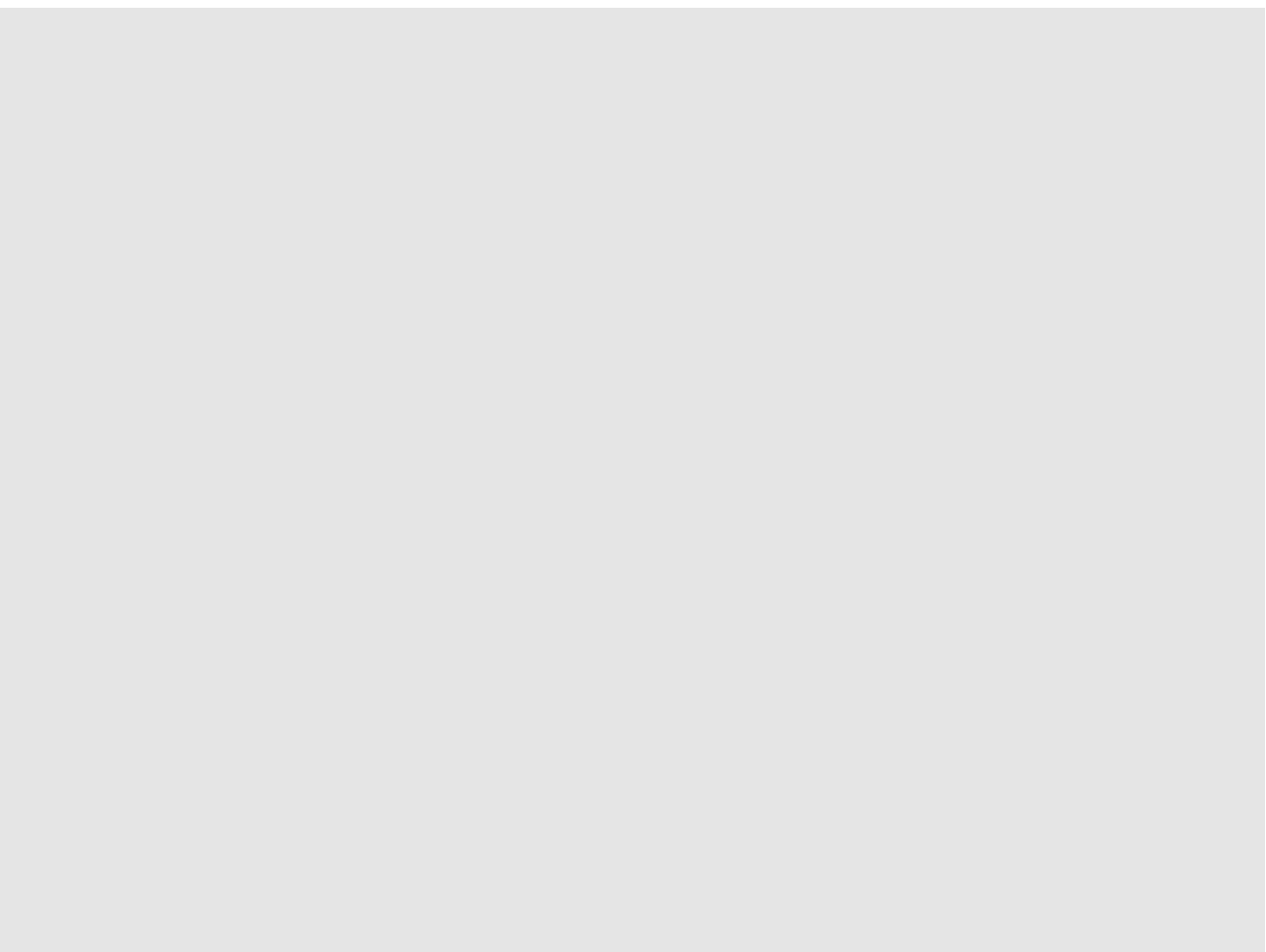
On a social level, the war created a heightened sense of patriotism that sometimes manifested itself in white vigilantism. The war also fostered a sense of purpose among black Americans. Some 350,000 served in the U.S. forces, and while most were relegated to support duties, a few units served in combat. Black Americans came out of the war keenly aware of the injustices they faced at home, more confident of their own abilities and more willing to fight for their civil rights.

Read the story

(Photo of downtown parade courtesy Beryl D. Ford Collection/Rotary Club of Tulsa)

Beryl D. Ford Collection

Key figures in 1921



Local and state leaders during 1921 included police chiefs, the mayor, the National Guard's leader and members of the Tulsa community.

Tulsa Police Chief John Gustafson (pictured above) was among them. He was hired in April 1920 despite a previous dismissal from the force and a checkered background. **[See the key figures here](#)**

A.J. Smitherman and The Tulsa Star

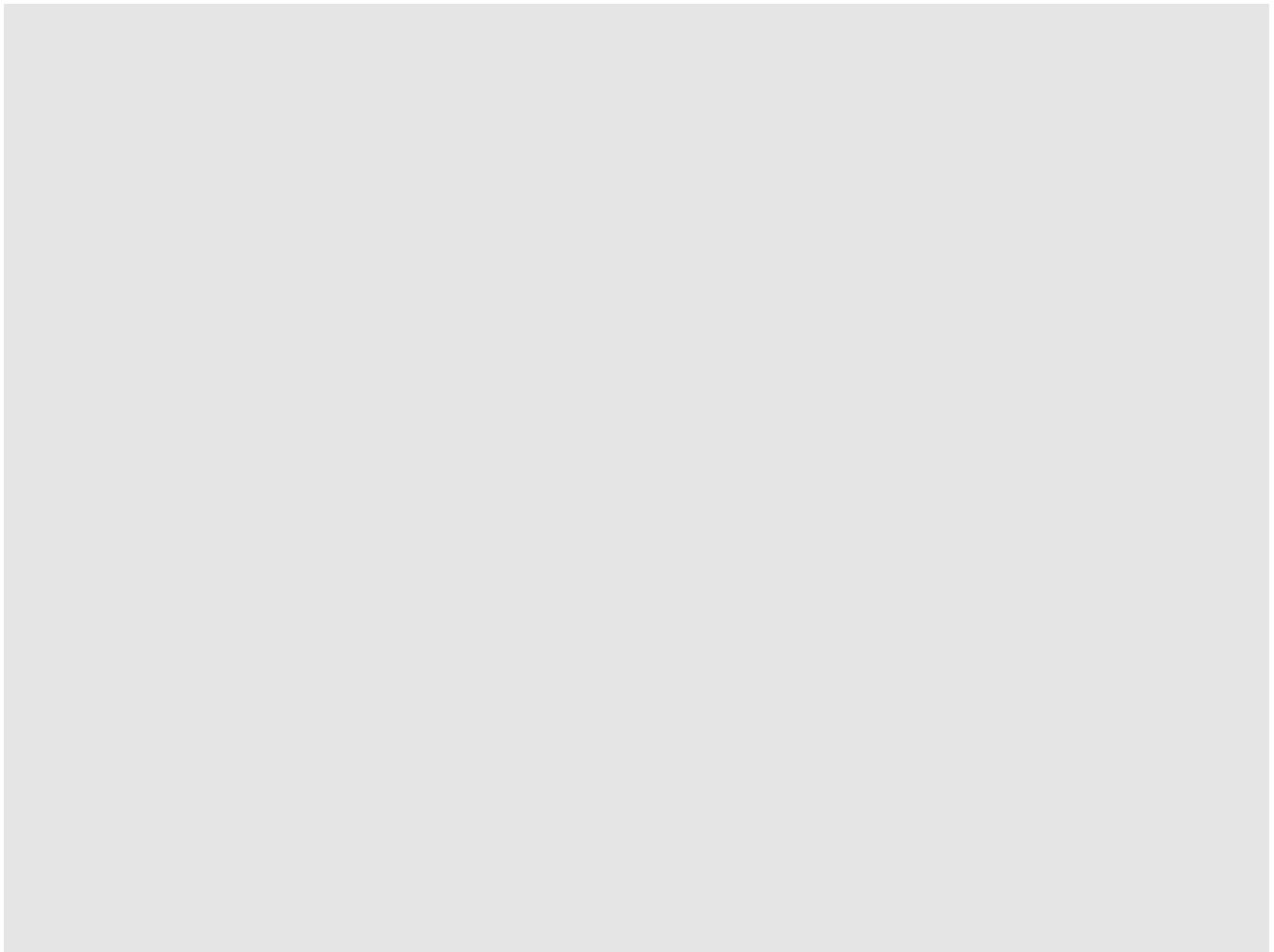
The Tulsa Star, like its editor and publisher A.J. Smitherman, was spirited and bold and sometimes known to swim against the tide. It fought racism in all its manifestations, but also what it considered timidity on the part of African American leaders.

A typical editorial retort appeared on Nov. 27, 1920:

“If, as the Tulsa World says, there are leading Colored men who favor the ‘Jim Crow’ railroad transportation laws of Oklahoma, it is the opinion of the Star these so-called black leaders are ripe for a full coat of tar and feathers and a swift ride on fence rails out of any community in which they live.”

[Read the story](#)

Greenwood was defined by freedom and opportunity



“I came not to Tulsa as many came, lured by the dream of making money and bettering myself in the financial world, but because of the wonderful cooperation I observed among our people, and especially the harmony of spirit and action that existed between the business men and women.”

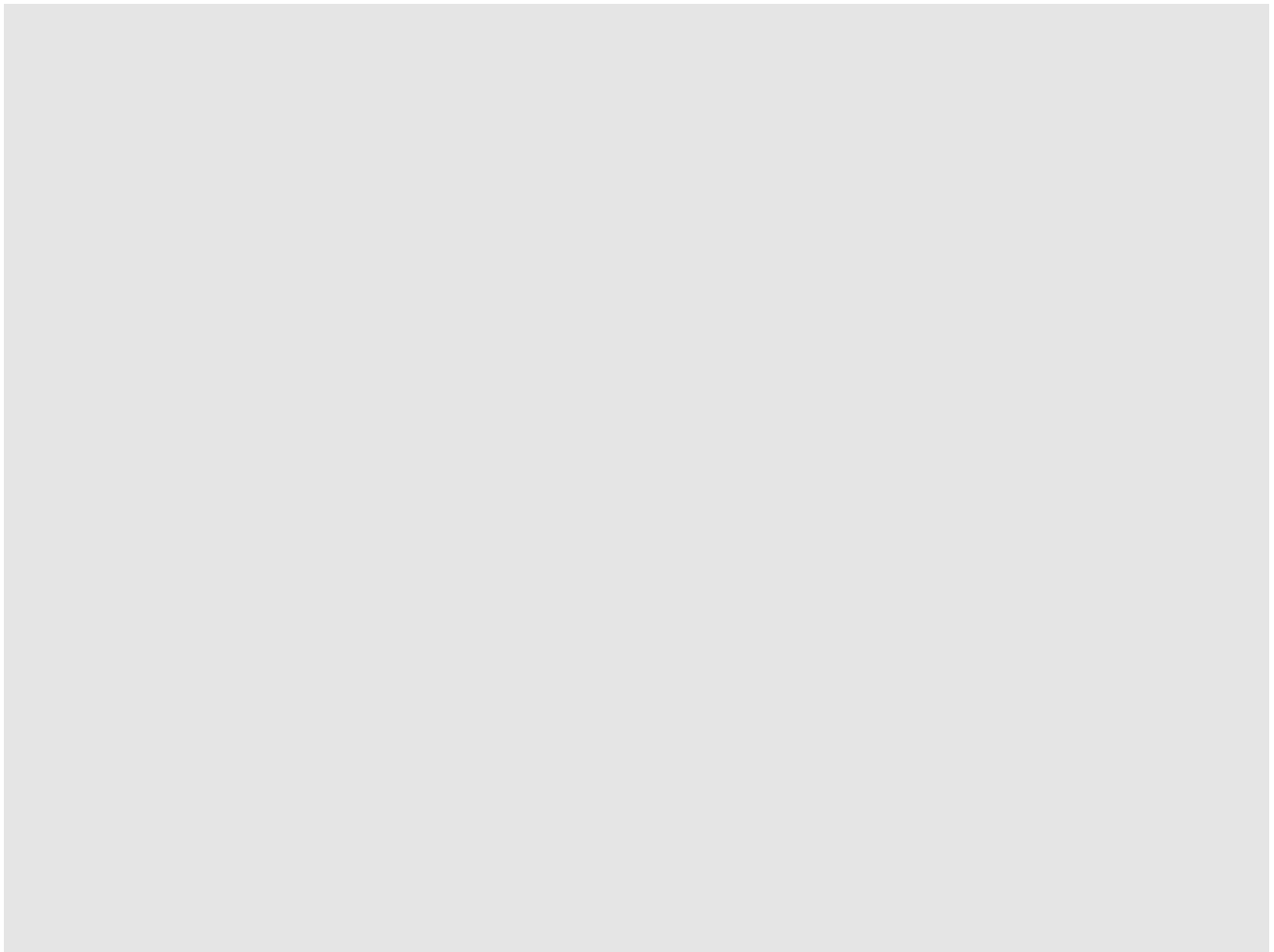
That is the way Mary E. Jones Parrish, a young businesswoman, described Tulsa’s African American community in 1921.

(Photo above shows Black Wall Street after it was rebuilt. Courtesy of Tulsa Historical Society)

Read the story

Tulsa Historical Society

An encounter on an elevator and concerns about a lynching



We will probably never know exactly what happened in the Drexel Building (pictured above) elevator on the rainy morning of May 30, 1921.

The general outline of the story is that a young black man known as Dick Rowland got on the elevator on the third floor of the building at 319 S. Main St., and before the doors opened on the ground floor the white operator, Sarah Page, was screaming. [Read the story](#)

Two lynchings in 1920

Two lynchings on the last weekend of 1920 held important implications for Tulsa nine months later. Lynchings in the early 1920s were still common — at least 61 in 1920, according to one source, and 64 in 1921. Most of the victims were black.

In Tulsa, a white drifter named Roy Belton, also known as Tom Owens, was taken from the Tulsa County jail on Aug. 28, 1920, and hung from a sign along what is now Southwest Boulevard near Union Avenue.

One day later, Claude Chandler, a black moonshiner accused of killing two lawmen and wounding a third, was taken from the Oklahoma County jail and hanged.

(Photo courtesy Tulsa Historical Society)

[Read the story](#)

Photo credit: Tulsa Historical Society

Tulsa Tribune article cited for sparking massacre

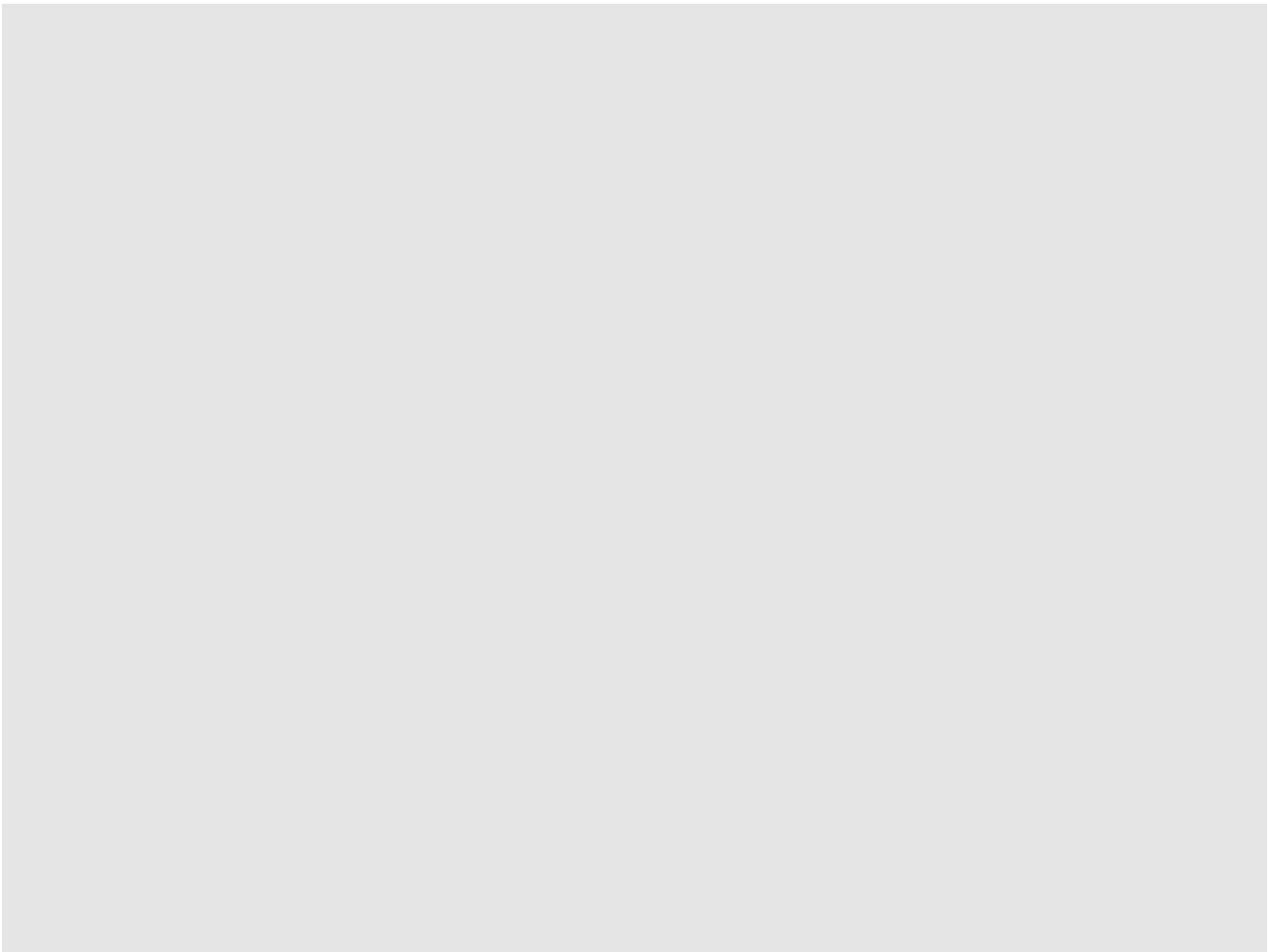


Dick Rowland's arrest was reported in a front-page story in the May 31, 1921, afternoon Tulsa Tribune. Headlined "Nab Negro for Attacking Girl In an Elevator," the somewhat sensational account reported, accurately if perhaps imprudently, that Rowland was to be charged with attempted assault. It said Rowland scratched Sarah Page and tore her clothes.

As early as June 1, the Tribune's rival, the Tulsa World, quoted the Tulsa Police Department's chief of detectives as saying the story was largely responsible for inciting whites to become aggressive.

[Read the full story and the complete Tribune article](#)

Dick Rowland's life threatened while jailed as crowd gathers outside



After his arrest, Dick Rowland was taken to the city jail, a decrepit, bug-infested lockup at 15 W. Second Street that was notoriously inadequate, even by the meager standards of the day.

At about 4 p.m., Police Commissioner J.M. Adkison said later, he received an anonymous telephone call threatening Rowland's life. After discussing the matter with Police Chief John Gustafson, it was decided to move Rowland to the county jail four blocks away. The jail was on the top floor of the county courthouse (pictured above). **Read the story about the phone call**

A crowd gathers and a shot is fired

That evening, a crowd began to form around the Tulsa County Courthouse, where Rowland was being held. No doubt most had read the Tribune story about his arrest or heard about it.

Certainly they had heard another lynching might be in the works. Sheriff W.M. McCullough said the only attempt to take his prisoner occurred at 8:20 p.m., when three white men entered the courthouse and were quickly turned away.

Read the story

Tulsans take up arms and there are issues with special deputies



In the wake of the first shots, the Tulsa World reported a few hours later, “Armed men seemed to spring from everywhere ... Practically all hardware stores were emptied of guns and ammunition.”

Several hundred of the unarmed whites first went to the National Guard Armory on East Sixth Street, now the home of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 577, demanding weapons. They were faced down by Major James Bell, several of his men, a civilian and a motorcycle policeman named Leo Irish, with Bell telling them to get moving or get shot. **Read the story**

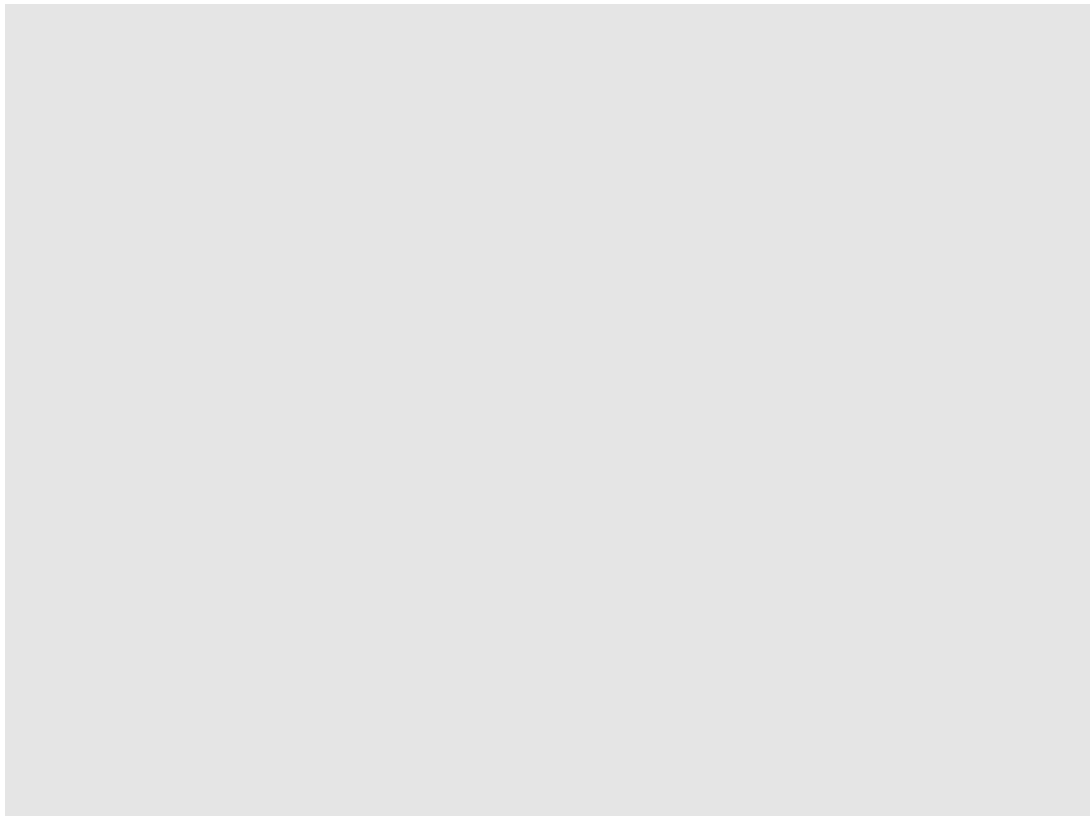
Special deputies blamed for murder and destruction

Although reluctant to send officers to the courthouse or accept help from the National Guard while the situation there could have been controlled, Tulsa’s police chief and police commissioner did not hesitate to hand out dozens — and probably hundreds — of special commissions after the shooting started on the night of May 31.

These special officers would be blamed for much of the murder and mayhem to follow. Major James Bell of the Oklahoma National Guard told his superiors “these special deputies were imbued with the same spirit of destruction that animated the mob. They became as deputies the most dangerous part of the mob and after ... the declaration of martial law the first arrests ordered were those of special officers.”

Read the story

Fighting begins in Greenwood and the neighborhood is soon overrun



By shortly after midnight, African Americans and whites were exchanging gunfire across the Frisco railroad tracks and along Detroit Avenue north to Sunset Hill — the boundary between black and white Tulsa.

Col. L.J.F. Rooney, commanding the local National Guard units, deployed 30 members of his only rifle company to Detroit Avenue, where most of the best black-owned homes faced white homes across the street. **Read the story**

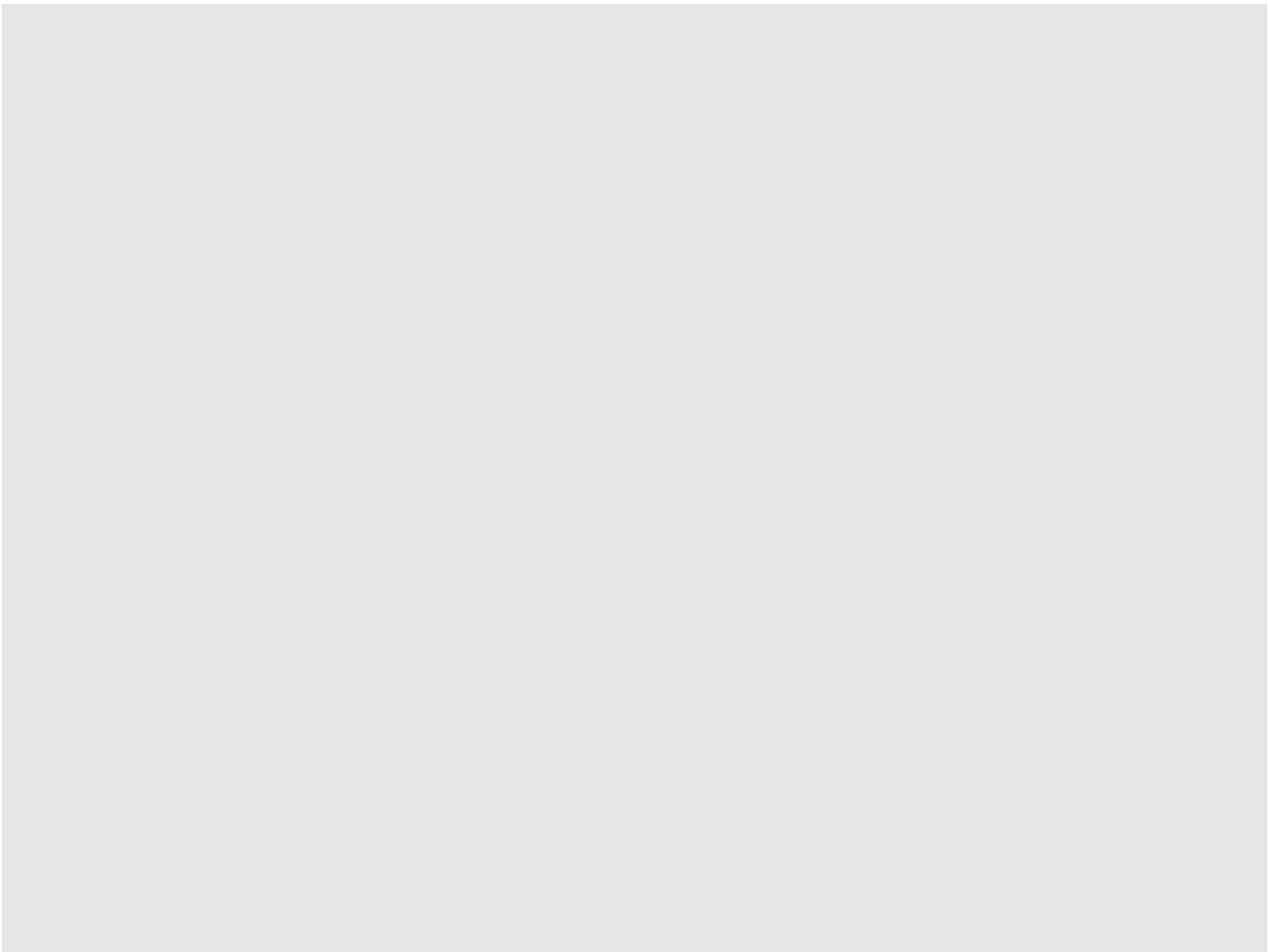
The invasion of Greenwood begins

Some said a loud whistle signaled the invasion of Greenwood. In any event, at dawn on the morning of June 1, the neighborhood was overrun.

Black Tulsans had been surrendering themselves to National Guardsmen patrolling the district's western fringe throughout the night, but in the morning, roughly 30 men under the command of Capt. John McCuen advanced into Greenwood itself. Their orders were to take into custody every African American they could and subdue any who resisted. **Read the story**

Strain, Michael (Mike)

Mobs won't let firefighters douse the flames



So intent were the white rioters on destroying Greenwood that they stopped firefighters from getting to the blazes.

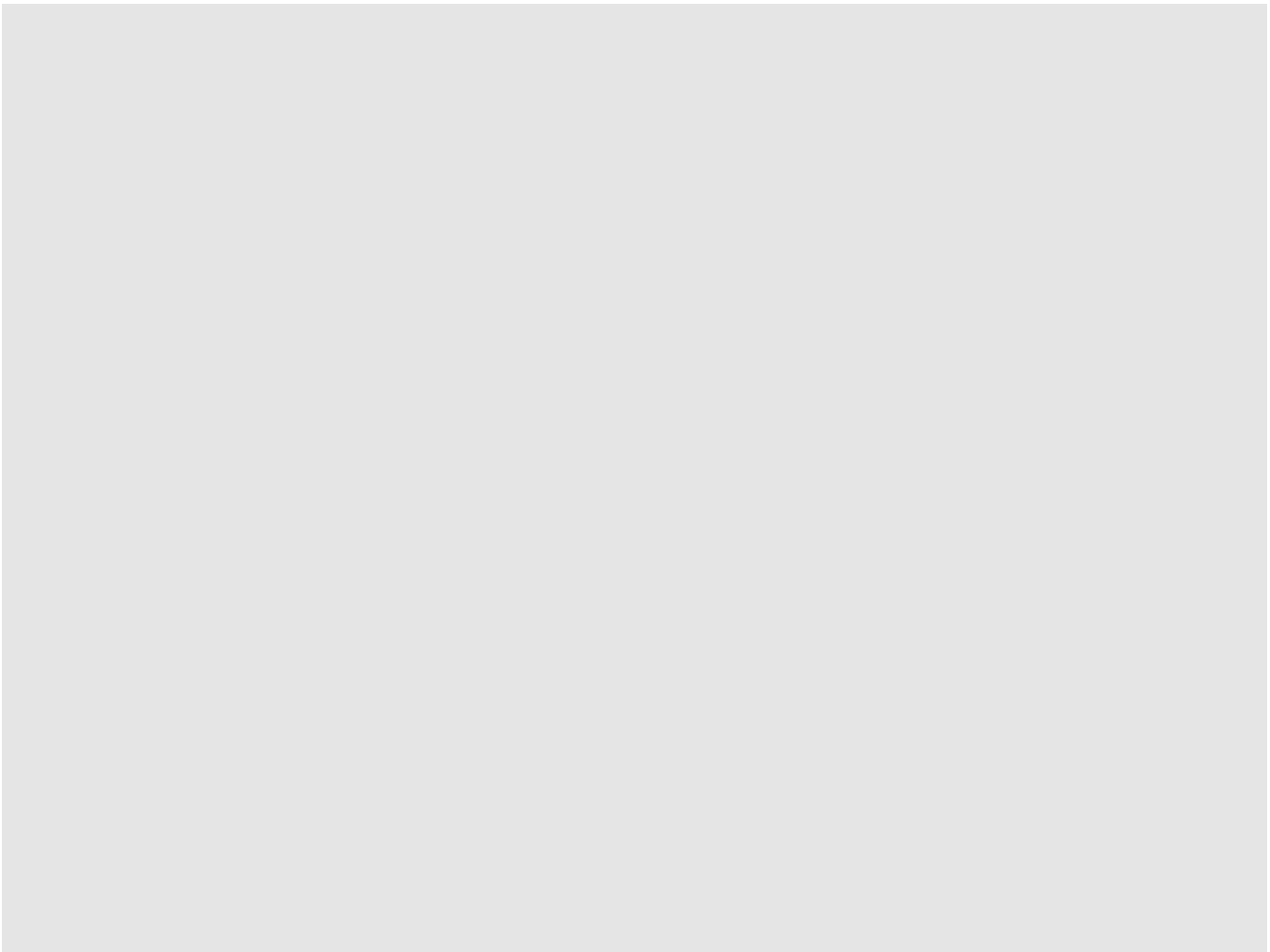
Firefighters testifying in an insurance case several years later said they were threatened and even shot at when they arrived on the scene of the earliest fires. Later, they received orders from Fire Chief R.C. Alder not to respond to alarms from the black district because of the danger.

That order remained in effect until the fires were out of control. **[Read the story](#)**

(Photo courtesy Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa)

Mike Simons

Airplanes flew over Greenwood as it was attacked

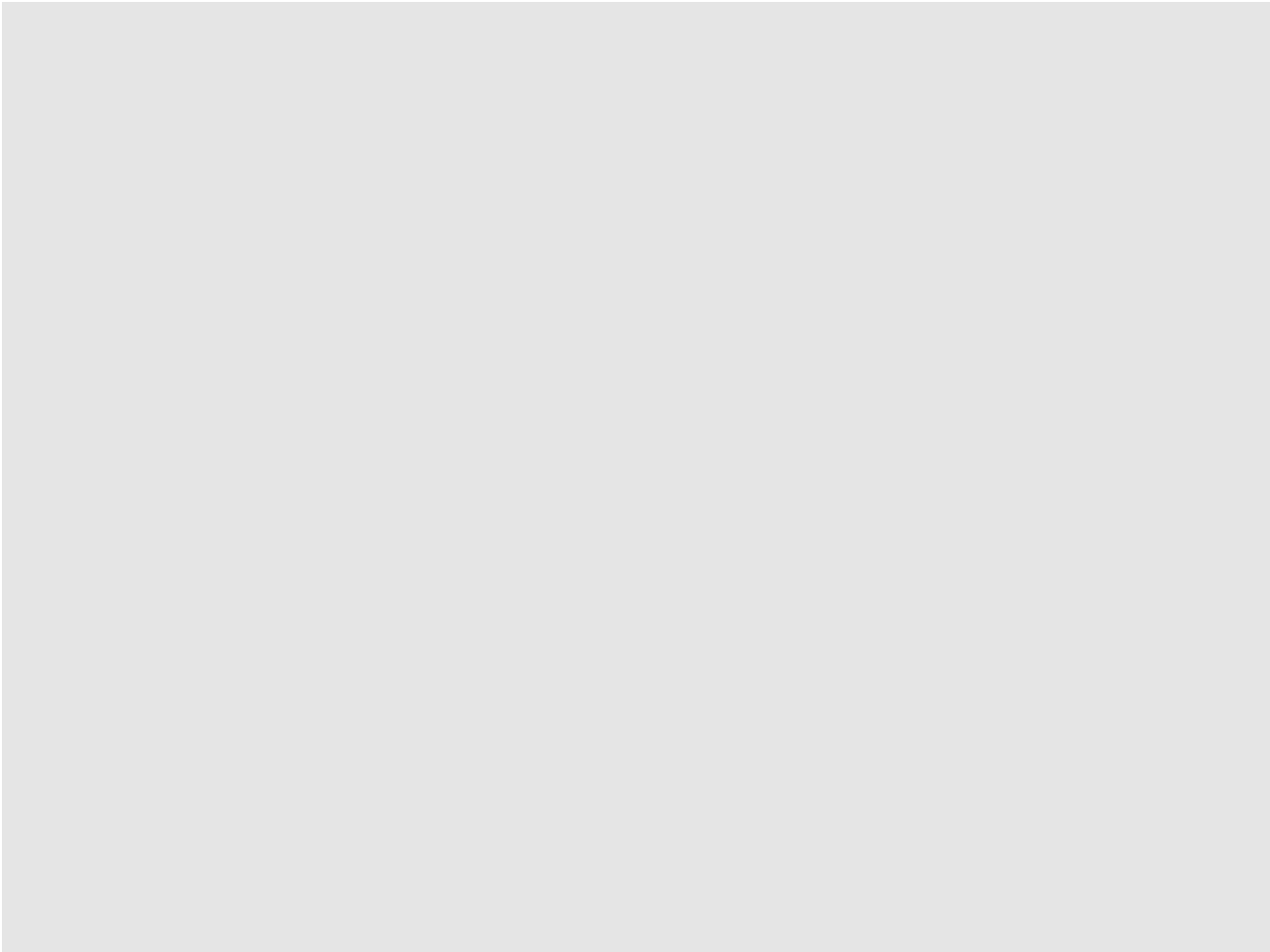


Six airplanes circled the Greenwood area during the morning hours of June 1. What they were doing, and why there were so many, has long been a matter of passionate debate. Many people believe they were used to shoot at people on the ground and bomb Greenwood. Officials said the small craft, generally thought to be two-seat, single-engine Curtis “Jenny” biplanes, were merely keeping track of activities on the ground and relaying the information through written messages dropped in weighted metal cylinders attached to streamers.

Read the story

(Photo courtesy Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa)
Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa

National Guard called in, denies report that machine guns were used to kill dozens



Three active Oklahoma National Guard units were based in Tulsa on May 31, 1921: a rifle company (Third Infantry, Company B), a supply company and a sanitation detachment, which was essentially a medical unit.

The rifle company, commanded by Captain John McCuen, had an authorized strength of 65 but McCuen said he never had more than 30 men at his disposal during the violence.

A special train carrying 100 members of two rifle companies and a machine gun company was dispatched from Oklahoma City at about 5 a.m. on June 1 and arrived in Tulsa shortly after 8 a.m. Adjutant General Charles Barrett accompanied the train.

Read the story

Report: Machine guns killed dozens; Guard denied it

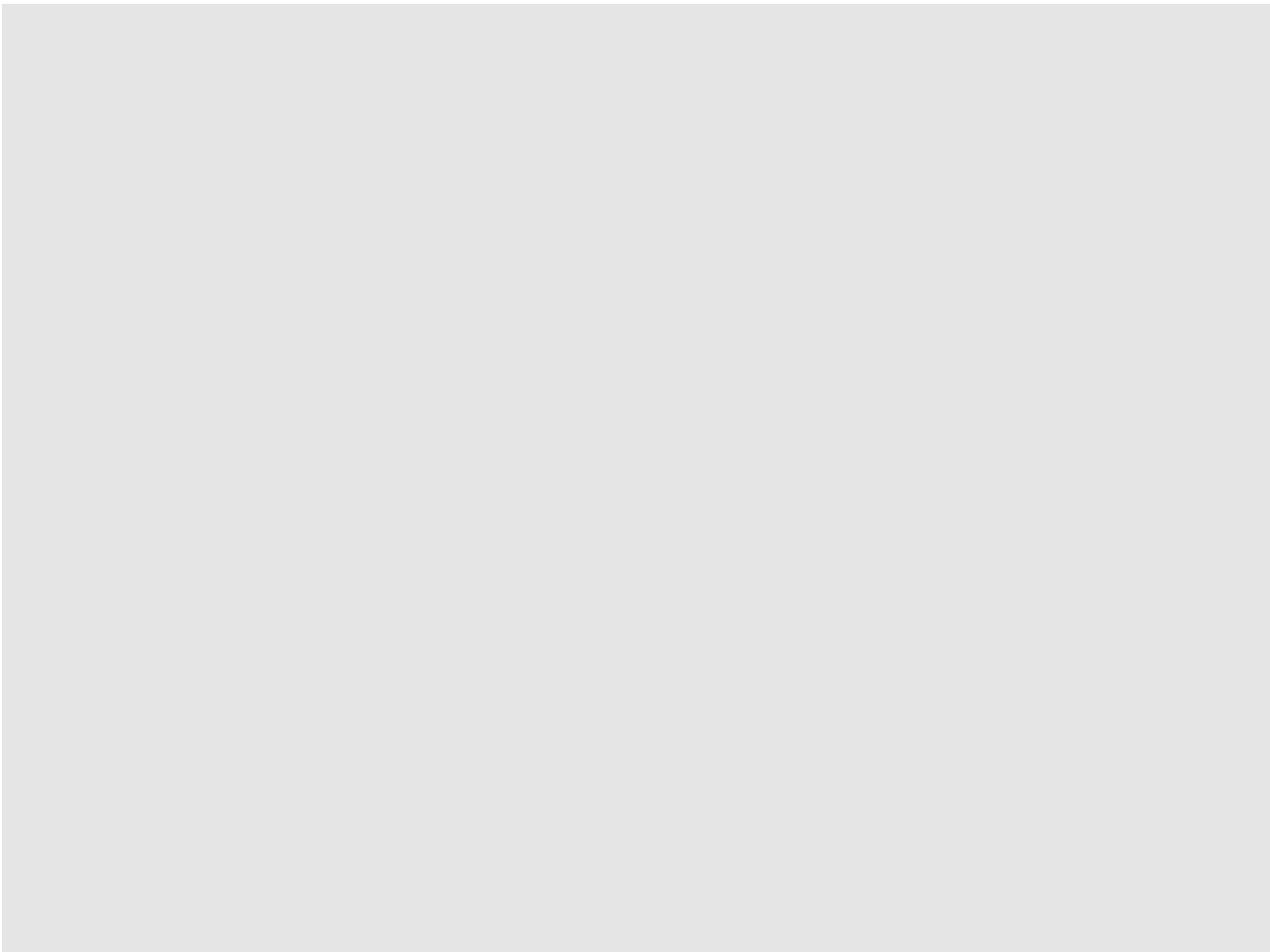
The Tulsa Tribune, on June 1, citing “reports reaching police headquarters,” said “national guardsmen turned a deadly fire from two machine guns” on a group of African Americans, killing “half a hundred.” Mary Jones Parrish, in her “Events of the Tulsa Disaster,” described machine gun fire from atop a grain elevator located south of the Frisco tracks with direct sight down Greenwood Avenue.

The National Guard vehemently denied the Tribune story. It said it had no machine guns in its Tulsa armory but “dug up” a disabled World War I souvenir that was driven around on the back of a truck in an attempt to intimidate the public.

(Photo courtesy Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa)

TULSA WORLD

Dr. A.C. Jackson was killed as he tried to surrender in his front yard



Of all the deaths resulting from the race massacre, none was more vividly documented than the murder of Dr. A.C. Jackson.

A well-known physician and surgeon, Jackson was also the most prominent person known to have died in the massacre.

According to Jackson's white neighbor, former city commissioner John Oliphant, Jackson emerged from his house on North Detroit Avenue at mid-morning on June 1, after fighting in the area had subsided, with his hands in the air.

[Read the story](#)

Tulsa World

Death toll remains unknown; search for graves continues today



The number of people killed in the race massacre has been a mystery from the start.

As the June 2, 1921, Tulsa World reported, under a story headlined “Dead Estimated at 100”:
“The difficulty ... is caused by the fact that the bodies were apparently not handled in a systematic manner.”

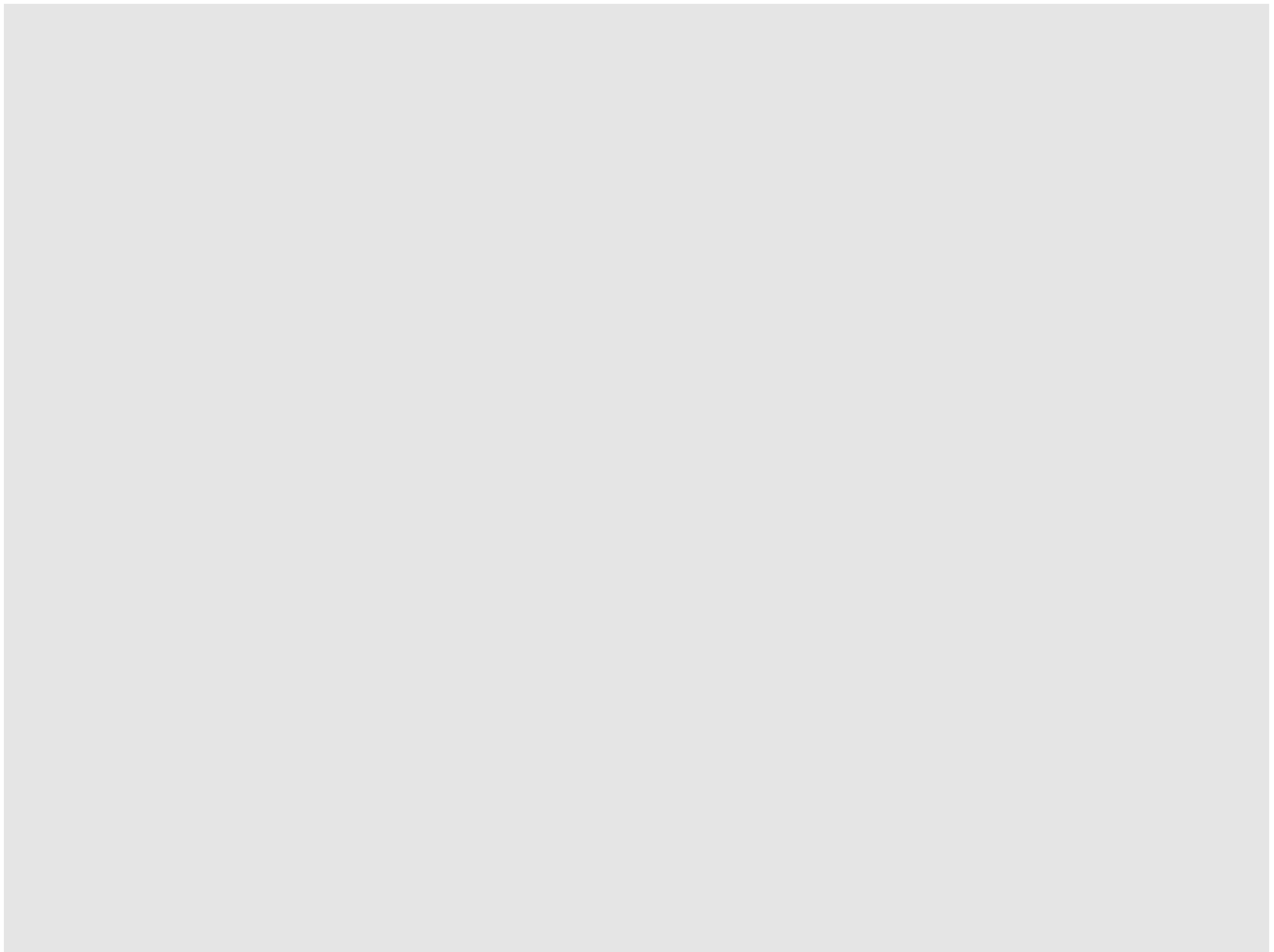
Major Byron Kirkpatrick, a Tulsa attorney on Adjutant General Charles Barrett’s staff, acknowledged reports that “a number of bodies were removed in motor trucks operated by citizens.”

“Kirkpatrick said he did not know where (the bodies) were taken,” said the World, “whether they were placed at some specific point for later attention, if they were dumped into a large hole, or thrown into the Arkansas river.”

Read the story

Strain, Michael (Mike)

Black Tulsans were marched through the streets and detained at camps throughout city



Thousands of black Tulsans were taken into what was described as protective custody on May 31-June 1. Some were released within hours, while others remained in a camp at the fairgrounds for days and even weeks.

Gathering up African American residents was supposed to protect those not involved in fighting and help identify those who were. And those who surrendered do seem to have avoided the worst of the violence.

But the action also opened up the Greenwood District for marauding whites to burn and loot and shoot any blacks remaining in the neighborhood.

[Read the story](#)

(Photo courtesy Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa)

Mike Simons

Red Cross reports the massive devastation in Greenwood

Figures from July 31, 1921 Red Cross report

House burned 1,256
Houses looted but not burned 221
Families living in tents 245
Number of families registered 1,912
Number of persons registered 5,739

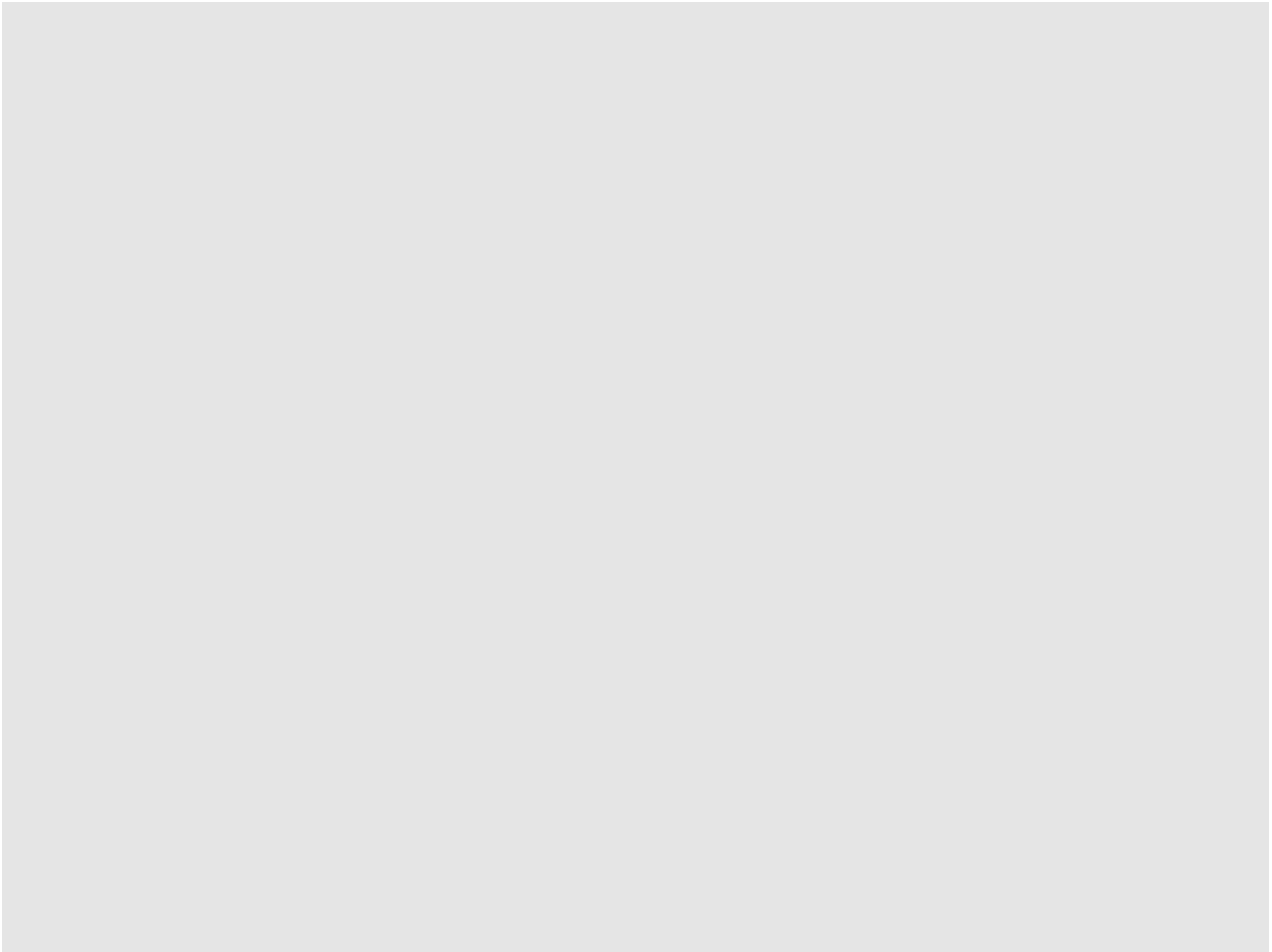
From Dec. 30, 1921 Red Cross report

Whites hospitalized at Red Cross expense 48
Blacks hospitalized at Red Cross expense 135
Red Cross first aid cases related to massacre 531
One-room homes constructed 180
Two-room homes constructed 272
Three-room homes constructed 312
One-story brick or cement buildings 24
Two-story brick or cement buildings 24
Three-story brick or cement buildings 3
Families living in tents 49

(Construction summary includes buildings not built with Red Cross assistance.)

Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa

Key locations in Tulsa during the 1921 Race Massacre



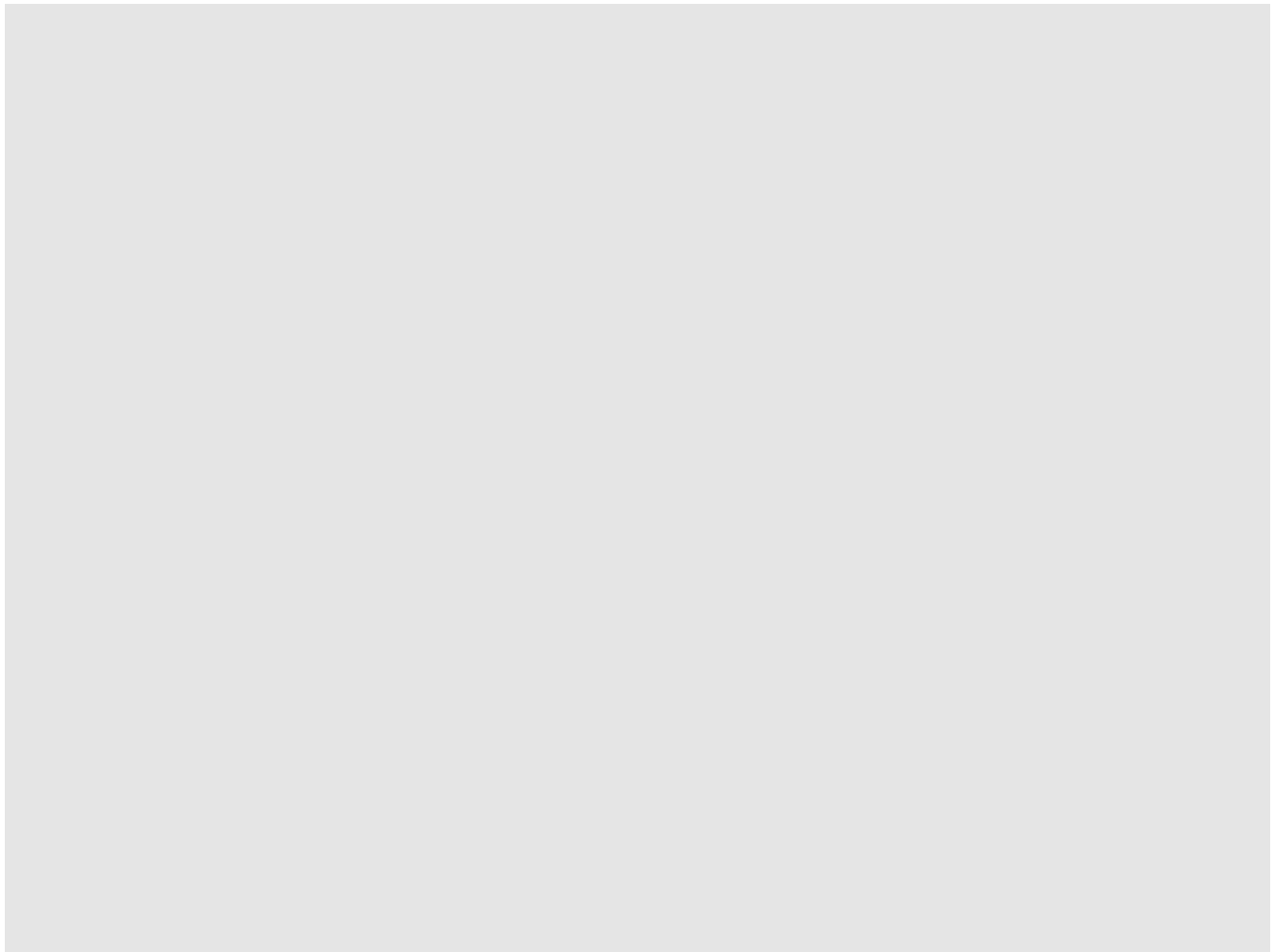
The tragedy began to unfold with an encounter in the Drexel Building that led to an arrest and a sensationalized newspaper report.

A crowd gathered at the courthouse as rumors of a lynching began to circulate.

Just hours later, Greenwood was destroyed.

[Click here to see a 1921 map of Tulsa that shows where it happened.](#)

Mount Zion Baptist Church was burned down but, like Greenwood, persevered and rebuilt



Amid the growing tension and subsequent violence rapidly sweeping through the Greenwood neighborhood, a rumor began circulating:

Mount Zion Baptist Church was acting as the headquarters for a black citizen-led uprising to engage in a counter offensive against the mob of white rioters who descended upon the area. There was allegedly a stash of weapons and ammunition stored inside the church waiting to be deployed, according to the unsubstantiated story at the time.

An eyewitness account by William “Choc” Phillips, a white teenager, was documented in the **2001 report of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921**. It detailed what happened next that day 99 years ago, when armed white mobs swept through Greenwood killing and burning.

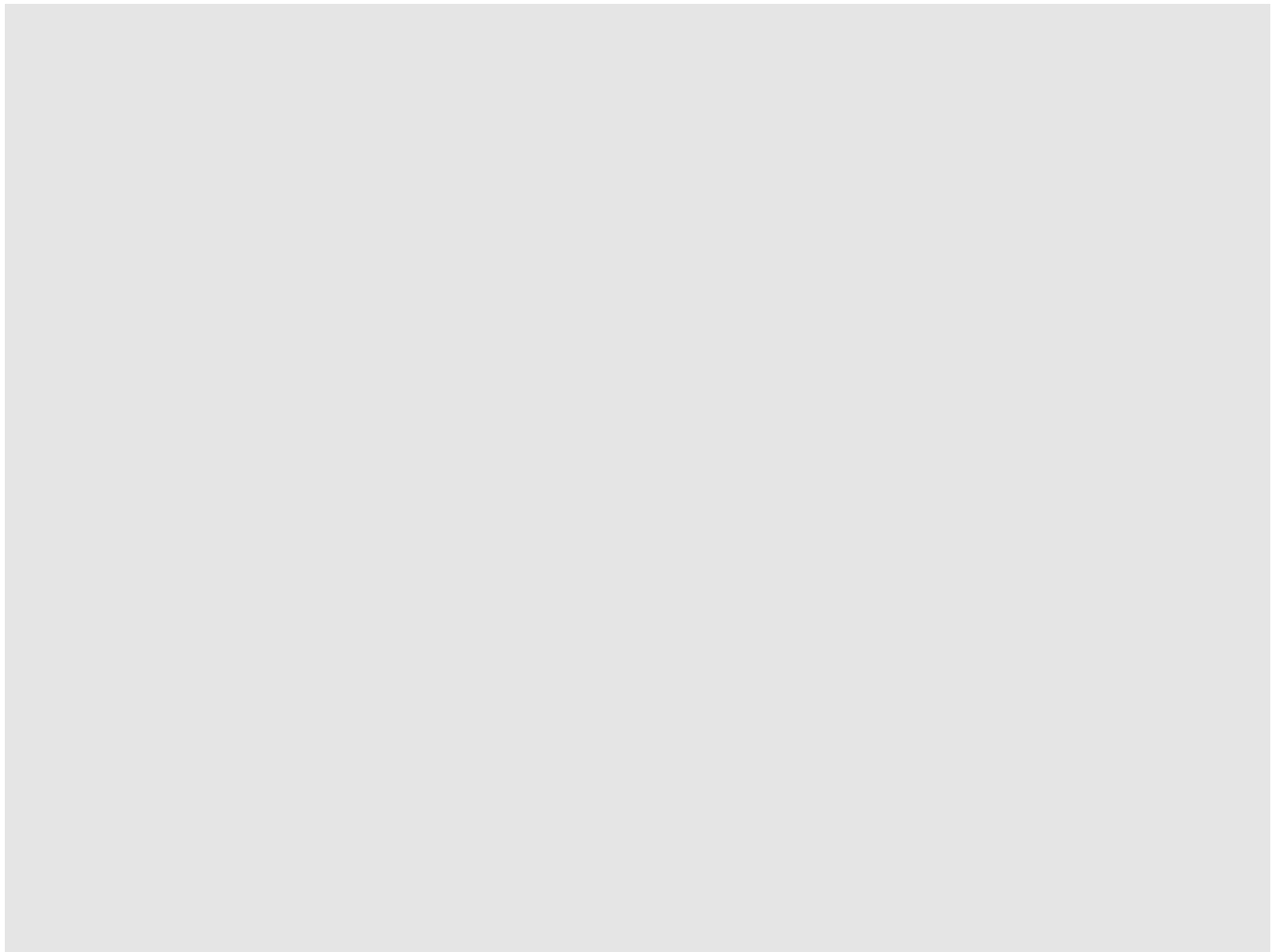
Phillips, who later became a Tulsa Police officer, described men firing machine guns at the church, where black riflemen attempted to protect their already damaged neighborhood.

[Read the story](#)

(Photo courtesy of Tulsa Historical Society & Museum)

Unknown

Tulsa Race Massacre: Quotes from survivors, officials and others



"There was a great shadow in the sky and upon a second look, we discerned that this cloud was caused by fast approaching aeroplanes. It then dawned upon us that the enemy had organized in the night and was invading our district the same as the Germans invaded France and Belgium."

Mary Jones Parrish, author of "Events of the Tulsa Disaster"

"I heard him holler and looked up and saw him coming about twenty-five feet away from me or thirty, with this hands up, and he said, 'Here am I.' ...

"I said to the fellows, "This is Dr. Jackson. Don't hurt him. ... Two men fired at him ... he fell at the second shot with the high powered rifle."

Former City Commissioner John Oliphant, describing the murder of Dr. A.C. Jackson

"... Some negroes who had barricaded themselves in houses refused to stop firing and had to be killed."
John W. McCuen, Captain of the B Company Third Infantry Oklahoma National Guard, in a written report

"After lining up some 30 or 40 of us men they ran us through the streets to Convention Hall, forcing us to keep our hands in the air all the while. While we were running some of the ruffians would shoot at our heels and swore at those who had difficulty in keeping up. They actually drove a car into the bunch and knocked down two or three men. When we reached Convention Hall, we were searched again. There people were herded in like cattle. The sick and wounded were dumped out in front of the building and remained without attention for hours."

James T.A. West, High School Teacher (Source: "Events of the Tulsa Disaster")

"My greatest loss was my beautiful home and my family Bible. I am 92 years of age, so they failed to bother me."

Jack Thomas (Source: "Events of the Tulsa Disaster")

"Shortly after daylight on Wednesday, June 1, 1921, I received a call to come to the hospital to dress two wounded men. I dressed hurriedly and started to the hospital. Just as I opened my front door a shot was fired at me from a nearby hill, the bullet grazed my leg. I shut the door. A few moments later my wife, hearing the shots, slightly opened the door and a second volley was fired."

Dr. R.T. Bridgewater

Bridgewater was taken to Convention Hall to be held but soon was released. He returned to find his home ransacked. "I saw my piano and all of my elegant furniture piled in the street. My safe had been broken open, all of the money stolen, also my silverware, cut glass, all of the family clothing, and everything of value had been removed, even my family Bible."

(Source: "Events of the Tulsa Disaster")

Photo courtesy of Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa
Mike Simons

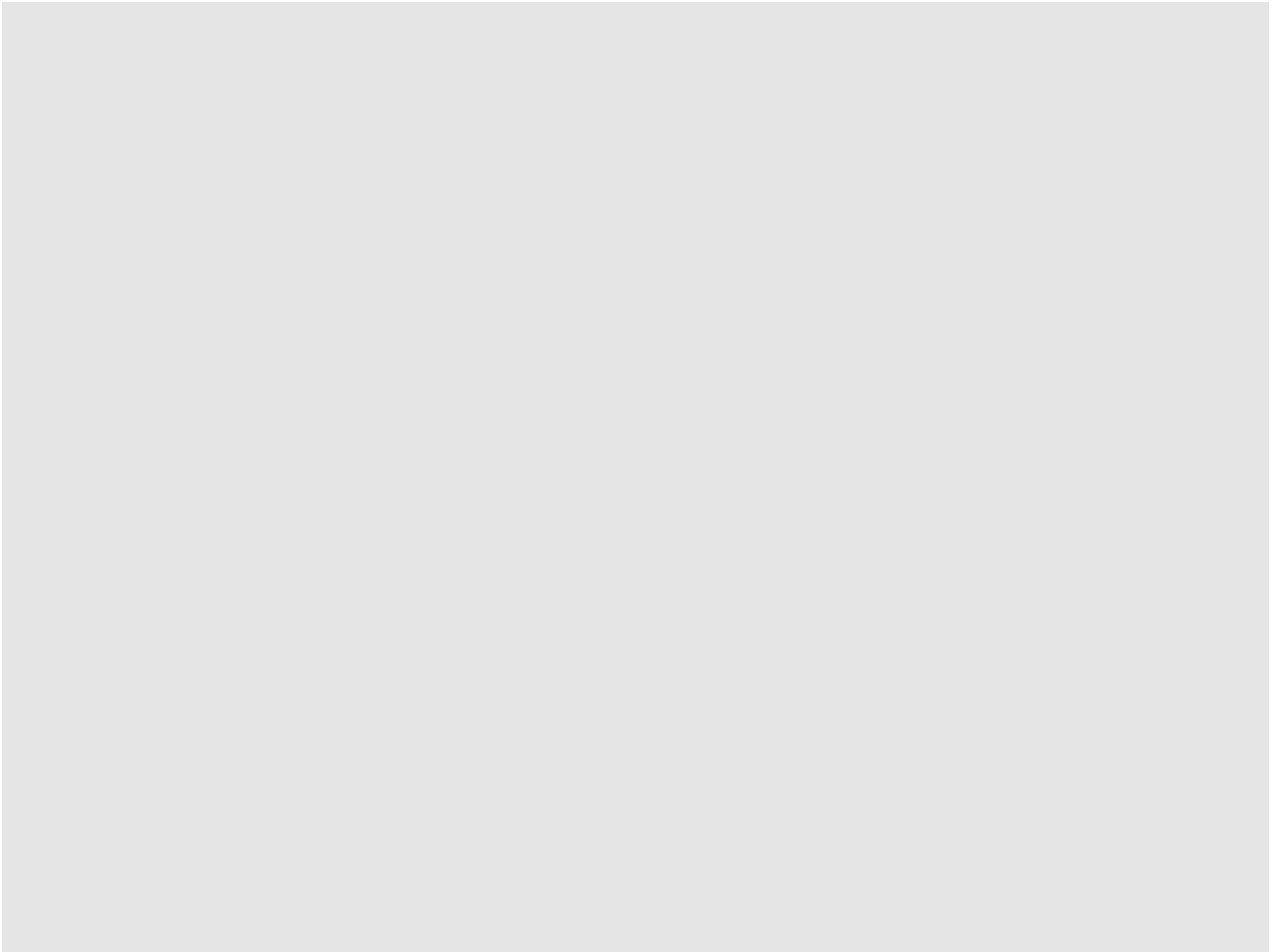
Tulsa Race Massacre: Recommended reading



If you're interested in learning more about the Tulsa Race Massacre, **[click this link to find four book recommendations.](#)**

Additional historical documents, including a 2001 commission's report, 1921 pages from the Tulsa World and Tulsa Tribune and more, **[click this link.](#)**

Tulsa Race Massacre / The Tulsa World Library



[See all of the coverage of the race massacre in this special report.](#)
