

# Black Wall Street & the Tulsa Race Massacre

## Terror and Triumph

### Part 1

1830s – 1921

Opportunity & Prosperity

Strict Racial Segregation

Violence & Terror

Spirit of Determination



## Black Wall Street

In 1921 Tulsa, Oklahoma was home to one of the most prosperous Black communities in America: the **Greenwood** neighborhood, also known as “Black Wall Street.”

Home to a thriving business district of restaurants, theaters, hotels, grocery and drug stores, libraries, churches, and a new schoolhouse, its 10,000 Black residents were largely affluent despite living under segregation.



## Black Wall Street - Devastated

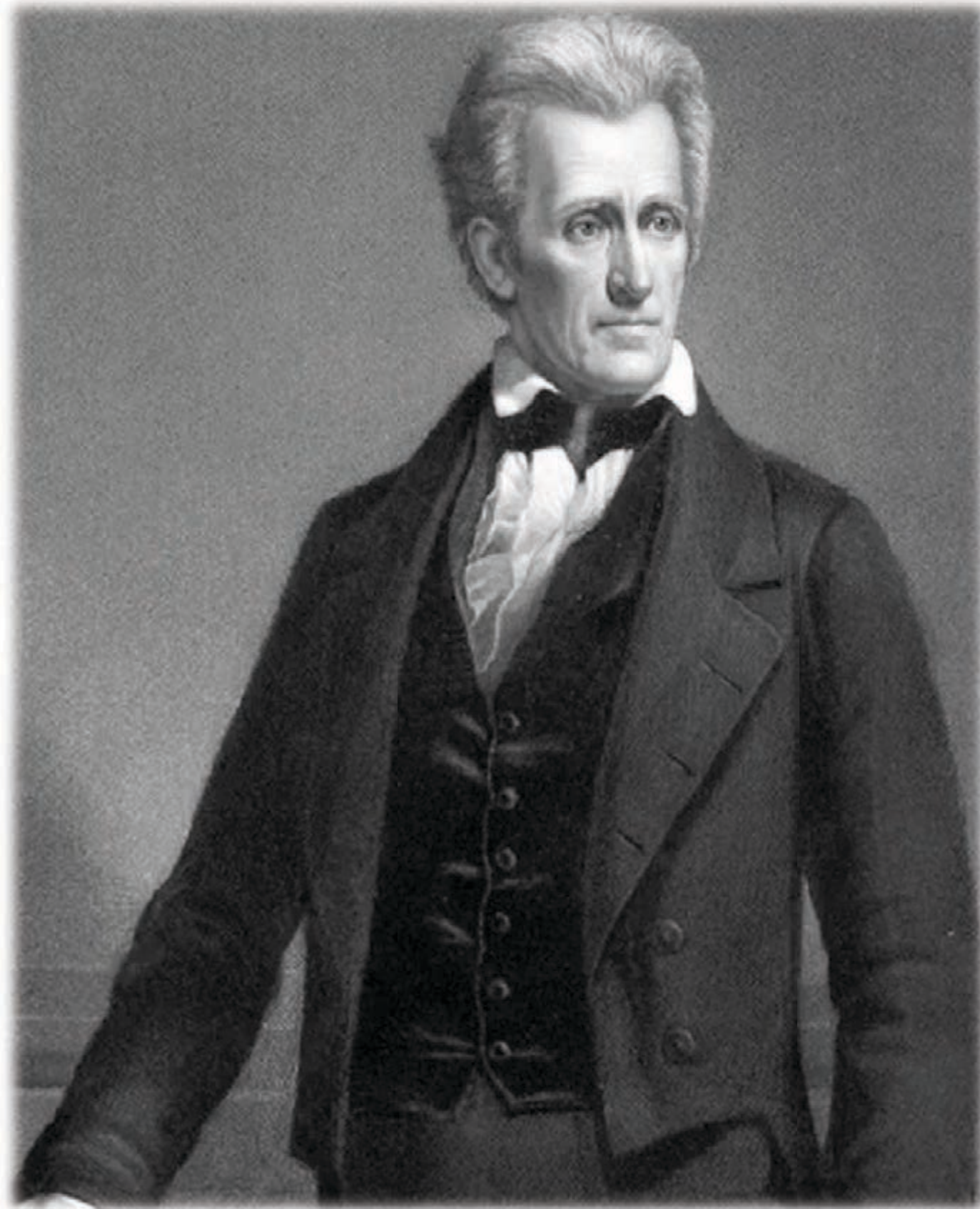
Then, from the night of May 31 to afternoon of June 1, a mob of their White neighbors destroyed it all.

An unknown number – possibly 300, by some estimates – were killed in what is now remembered as the **Tulsa Race Massacre**.

In the years that followed the devastation, Black Tulsans fought a difficult battle to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in the wake of one of the worst incidents of racial violence in American history.



# Frontier Origins



Black Americans first came to what is now Oklahoma in the 1830s as part of **President Andrew Jackson's** expulsion of American Indians from the southeastern United States. The Five Tribes – Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole – owned slaves, and brought them on their forced trek westward, remembered as the *Trail of Tears*.

While some Indian slaveowners were no less brutal than their White counterparts, others were more tolerant; after the Civil War (during which the Five Tribes fought for the Confederacy), the Creek and Seminole granted newly freed slaves tribal membership.

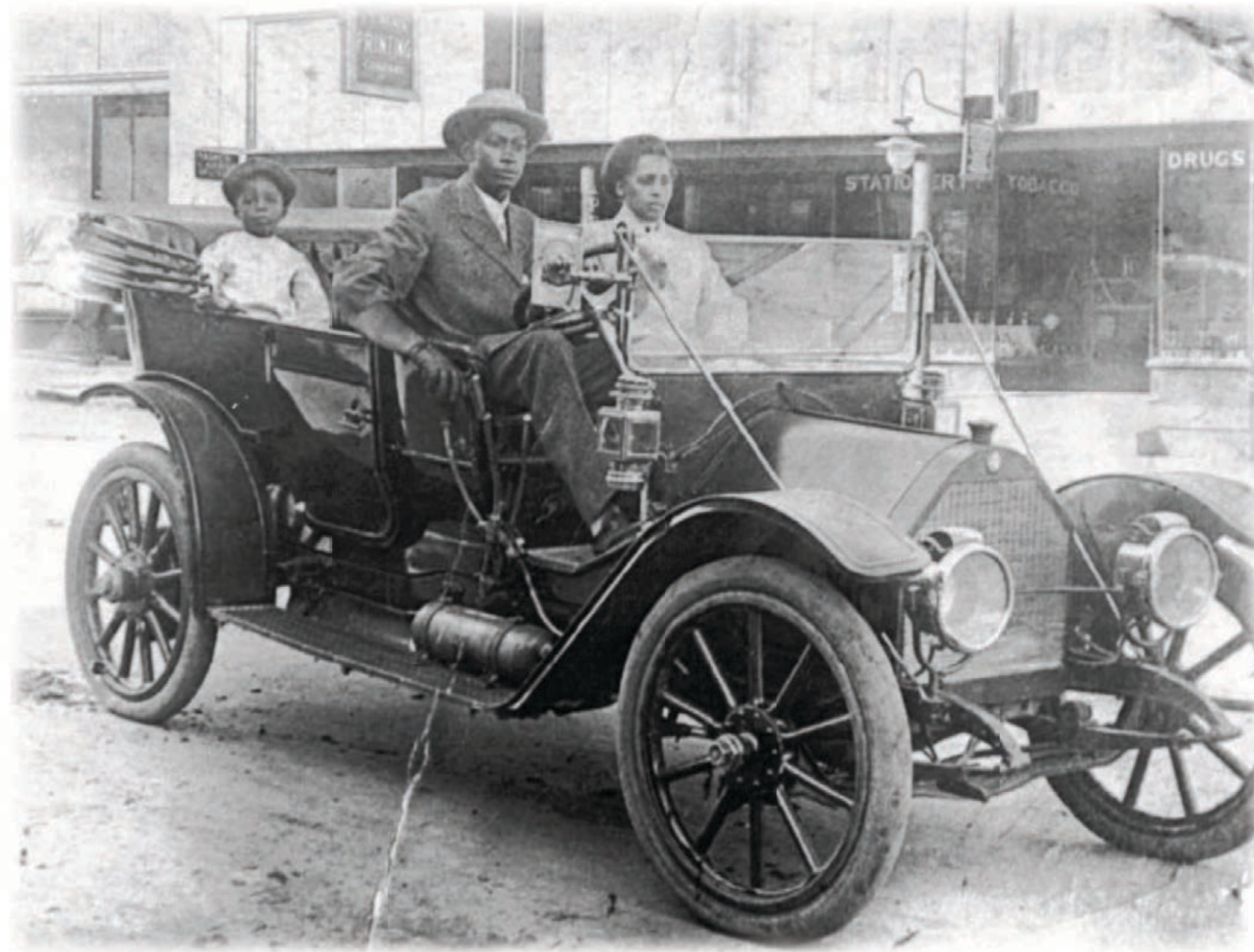
## J. Coody Johnson

From this population grew men like **J. Coody Johnson (1864-1927)**, a Creek tribal member of African ancestry who studied at historically Black Lincoln University and became a lawyer.

Throughout his career, Johnson defended the racial equality that Black Creeks and Seminoles had achieved in the territories, and opposed Oklahoma statehood efforts – knowing that the White political leadership, made up largely of settlers from the South, would impose “Jim Crow” laws.



# Opportunity & Equality



*John and Loula Williams, owners of the Dreamland Theatre, driving in Tulsa with their son.*

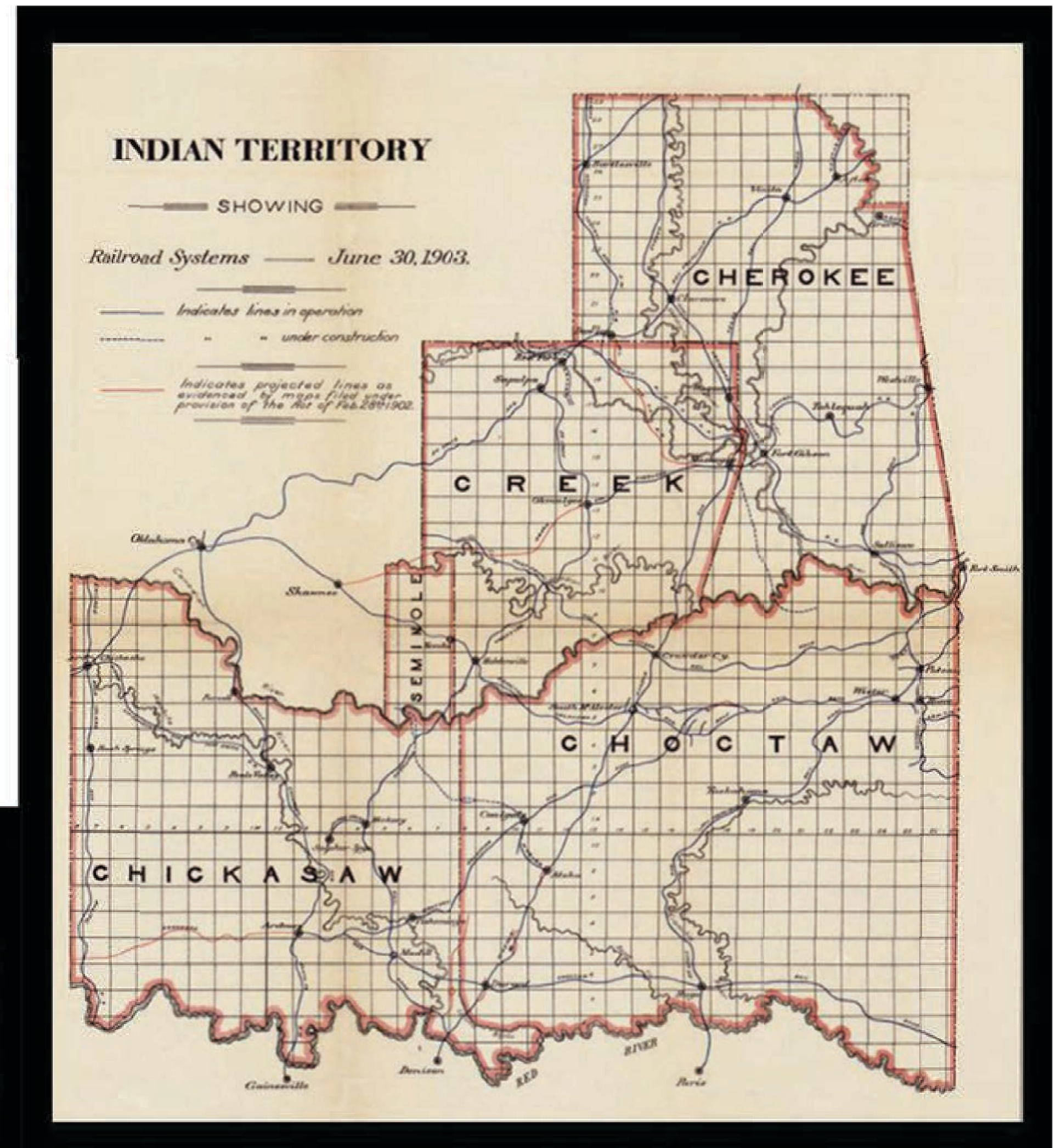
Economic opportunity and racial equality made the Oklahoma and Indian Territories a magnet for Black Americans escaping the South, as Reconstruction efforts faltered and postwar civil rights gains were beaten back by a resurgent White supremacist leadership.

**John Williams** – a Mississippi-born entrepreneur who, with his wife **Loula**, owned and operated the *Dreamland Theatre*, Tulsa’s first Black theatre, in the 1910s – later explained to his son: “I came out to the promised land.”

# Oklahoma Statehood

Black tribal members and settlers alike opposed statehood – which combined the “Twin Territories” of Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory into a single state – because it would reimpose the racial hierarchy they had come west to escape.

J. Coady Johnson and other tribal leaders had visited **President Theodore Roosevelt** in 1907 and pleaded with him to keep his campaign promise to veto statehood with segregationist constitutions. Their case was ignored, and that same year *Oklahoma became the 46th state.*



# State of Oklahoma

The president of Oklahoma's constitutional convention, future governor **William H. Murray**, was a progressive reformer... but he also believed explicitly in White racial superiority.

Segregationist laws soon separated the population.

Despite this reality imposed by statehood, most Black Oklahomans held onto their prosperity. And, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the city of Tulsa grew dramatically, its population rising along with its wealth, as more and more **oil wells** were struck.





# Prosperity in Tulsa



With this wealth, a spirit of freedom and independence flourished in Black Tulsa, and civic resistance to racial discrimination was not uncommon. When Black veterans of WWI returned home to the country they'd fought for, this insistence on equality became stronger still.

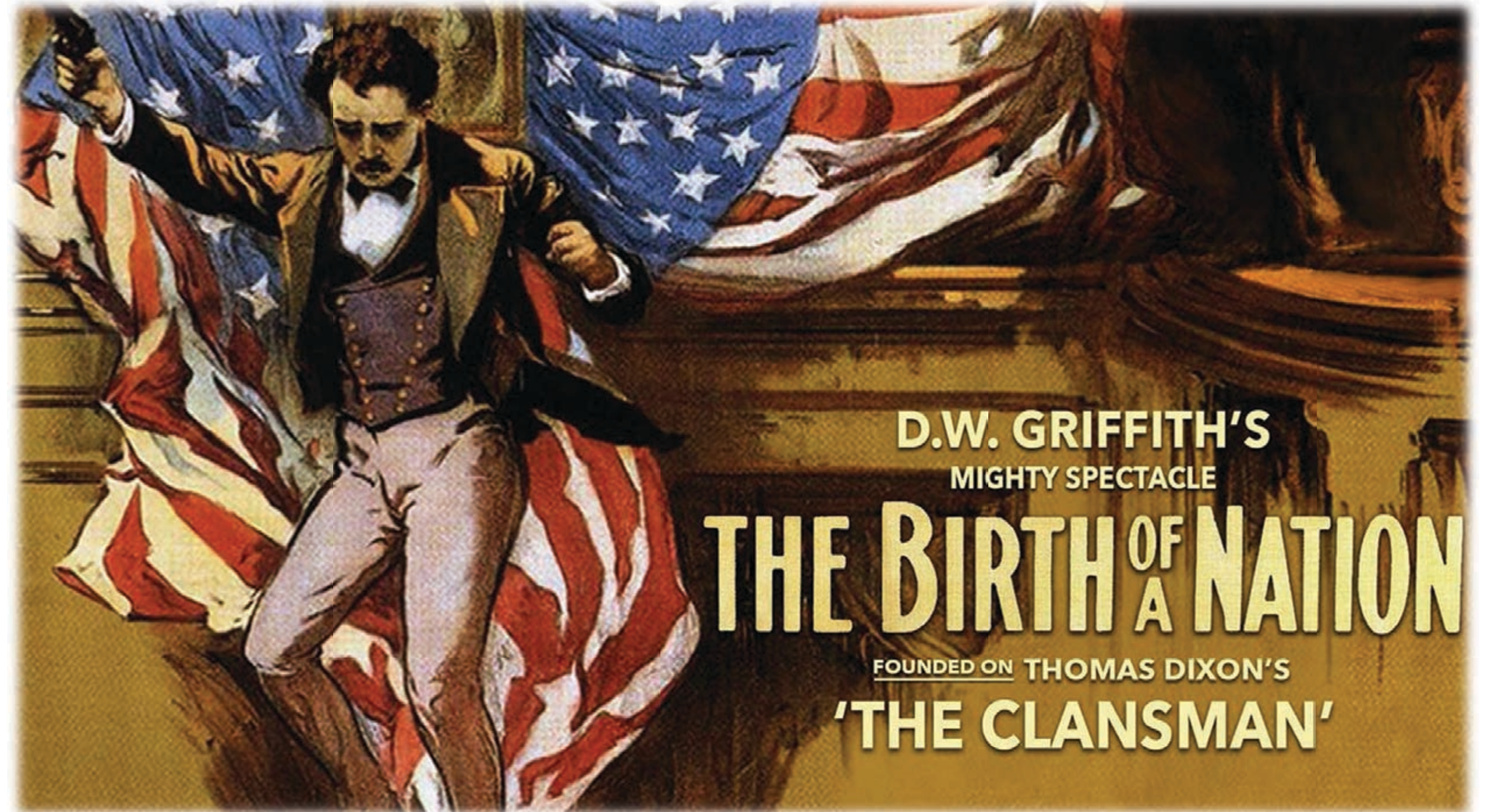
The Greenwood neighborhood of north Tulsa became a center of this resistance, famous not only for its bustling “Black Wall Street” commercial district but as a central hub for civil rights activism.

But on the other side of the railroad tracks, White resentment of Greenwood’s defiant prosperity grew.

# Early 1900s: the Low Point of American Race Relations

Like the authors of their state constitution, many White Tulsans held clearly racist beliefs. It is likely some of the city's municipal leadership were members of the Ku Klux Klan, a secretive vigilante organization that swelled in membership in the early 1900s, due in part to the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, America's first Hollywood blockbuster.

This silent film epic portrayed the original Klan of the postwar South as valiant defenders of tradition, though in fact they'd been terrorists waging a guerilla war against Reconstruction-era governments that supported Black rights and integration.



# Klan Influence

Given that its members kept their status hidden, it's impossible to know how thoroughly the Klan was enmeshed in Tulsa's political life. But long before the horrors of 1921, many White and Black Tulsans were harassed if they violated racial or ethnic taboos.

Prominent civil engineer W.H. Holway, a White Protestant, later claimed that for several years the Klan "ran the whole county and state – schools, juries, everything." He recalled being threatened by Klansmen because he had Roman Catholics on his payroll.

After refusing to fire his workers, Holway received calls from prominent Tulsans, including the mayor, suggesting he comply with those demands – indicating the Klan was well-connected to political power, even if those leaders weren't members themselves.



*Cartoon from the Chicago Defender, a Black-owned newspaper, warning of the Klan's national political power, c. 1925*

# “Red Summer” of 1919



## “Red Summer” of 1919

This situation was not unique to Oklahoma. In fact, the years before the massacre were marred by vicious race riots across the country.

The infamous “**Red Summer**” of 1919 saw racist attacks on Black communities in Washington, D.C.; Norfolk, Virginia; Chicago; Omaha; Elaine, Arkansas; and Wilmington, Delaware.

The politically engaged Black professional classes of Tulsa were well aware that this violence, like the regular lynchings across the country, could eventually spread to their city.

The fighting experience of WWI veterans, combined with a broader Western tradition of firearms ownership, made Black Tulsans uniquely inclined to armed resistance and self-defense.

## A Minor Incident Intensifies

On May 30, a young Black man named Dick Rowland got into an elevator in an office building in downtown Tulsa. Rowland worked across the street, but the nearest “colored” restroom he could use was on the second floor of in another building.

The elevator operator that day was a teenaged White woman named Sarah Page. When Rowland got off the elevator, a clerk down the hall heard Page scream and called the police. While it’s unclear exactly what transpired, police behavior and contemporary accounts indicate the incident was not serious.

Officers interviewed Page but waited until the next day to arrest Rowland for assault – or possibly to protect Rowland himself, as unsubstantiated rumors had begun to spread that a Black man had assaulted a White girl.

### ***Nab Negro for Attacking Girl In an Elevator***

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

Rowland denied that he tried to harm the girl, but admitted he put his hand on her arm in the elevator when she was alone.

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

# Trouble Grows

On May 31, the *Tulsa Tribute*, one of the city's two White-owned newspapers, printed an inflammatory editorial under the headline: "To Lynch Negro Tonight."

In Greenwood, *at the Dreamland Theatre*, a man got up on stage and announced that Whites were going to lynch Rowland at the courthouse. "We're not going to let this happen," he declared. "We're going to go downtown and stop this lynching."

Black Tulsans began to gather in the business district, many of them armed.



## A Crowd Forms

That night, hundreds of White Tulsans gathered outside the **Tulsa County Courthouse**, some demanding that Rowland be turned over to the crowd. The sheriffs and his deputies refused.

Around 9:00 p.m., about 25 armed Black men, some veterans in uniform, marched to the courthouse to protect Rowland, offering to assist law enforcement in repelling the potential lynch mob.



The sheriff declared that the situation was under control and tried to disperse, but the arrival of Black men with guns had riled up the crowd.



# What Happens When A Crowd Forms?

Do you think that groups of people sometimes behave differently than individuals do?

If so, why do you think this happens?

Have you ever heard of the phrase  
“a mob mentality” ?

What do you think this means?

What is vigilantism? Is it legal?



## Shots Fired

After about 75 more armed Black Tulsans arrived at 10 p.m., the sheriff asked them to leave, assuring them that Rowland was safe. Apparently satisfied, the group of Black Tulsans, now 100 strong, began to march away from the courthouse.



Then, an older White man tried to seize one of the Black men's rifles. A struggle ensued, and shots were fired.

In the brief gunfight that followed, twelve people – two Black and ten White – were killed as the crowd (possibly as many as two thousand people, including women and children) scrambled for cover. The Black Tulsans began to retreat back north to Greenwood.

# Fighting Turns to Massacre

Gangs of White men pursued them, some apparently deputized by Tulsa police, armed with either personal firearms or weapons.

In the early hours of the Wednesday, June 1, a mob of armed White Tulsans numbering in the thousands, some dressed in their military uniforms, crossed the railroad tracks north into Greenwood.

Black Tulsans were ready to fight back, but unprepared for the scale of the mob attack on Greenwood. Vigilante gunmen fired **machine guns** into Black homes and businesses indiscriminately. Biplanes flew overhead firing into the streets and, according to many eyewitnesses, dropping homemade incendiaries.



*National Guard machine gun crew sent in to stop the riot.*

# The Burning of Greenwood



As fires spread through Greenwood, mobs pillaged black homes and businesses, killing those who resisted. Even Whites who tried to help their Black neighbors, or calm those in the mobs (including the Tulsa Fire Department and members of the National Guard) were threatened, or fired upon, until they relented and allowed the violence to continue.

# Accounts of Stolen Property

As violence spread, White Tulsans entered unguarded Black homes and looted them, hauling away property that exemplified the prosperity Black Wall Street had created.



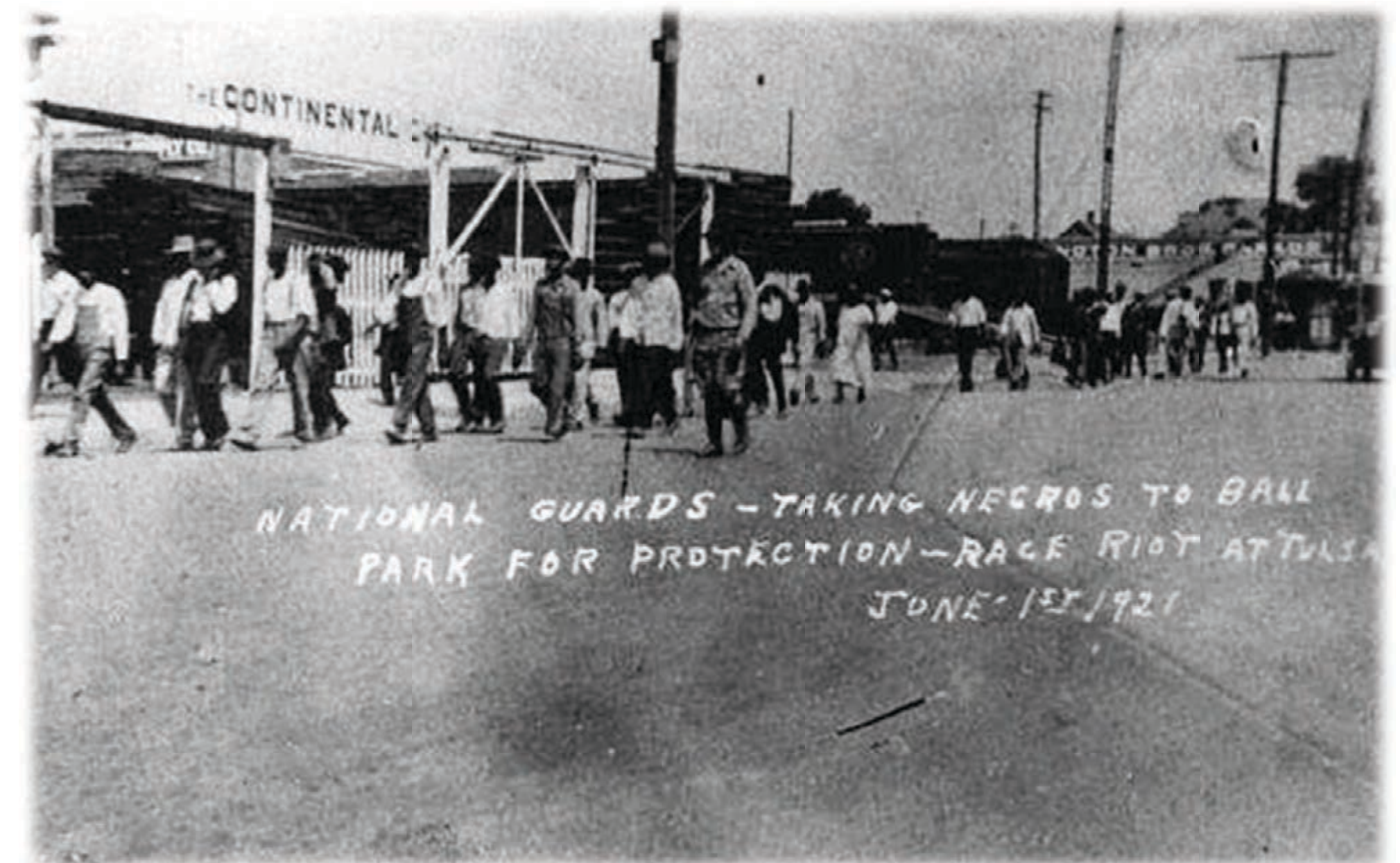
John W. Franklin, grandson of massacre survivor B.C. Franklin said: *“For years [after in Tulsa] Black women would see White women walking down the street in their jewelry and snatch it off.”*

B.C. Franklin was a lawyer who tried to help Black Tulsans get their property back in the months after the massacre, and authored a key written eyewitness account of the event.

## The National Guard Arrives

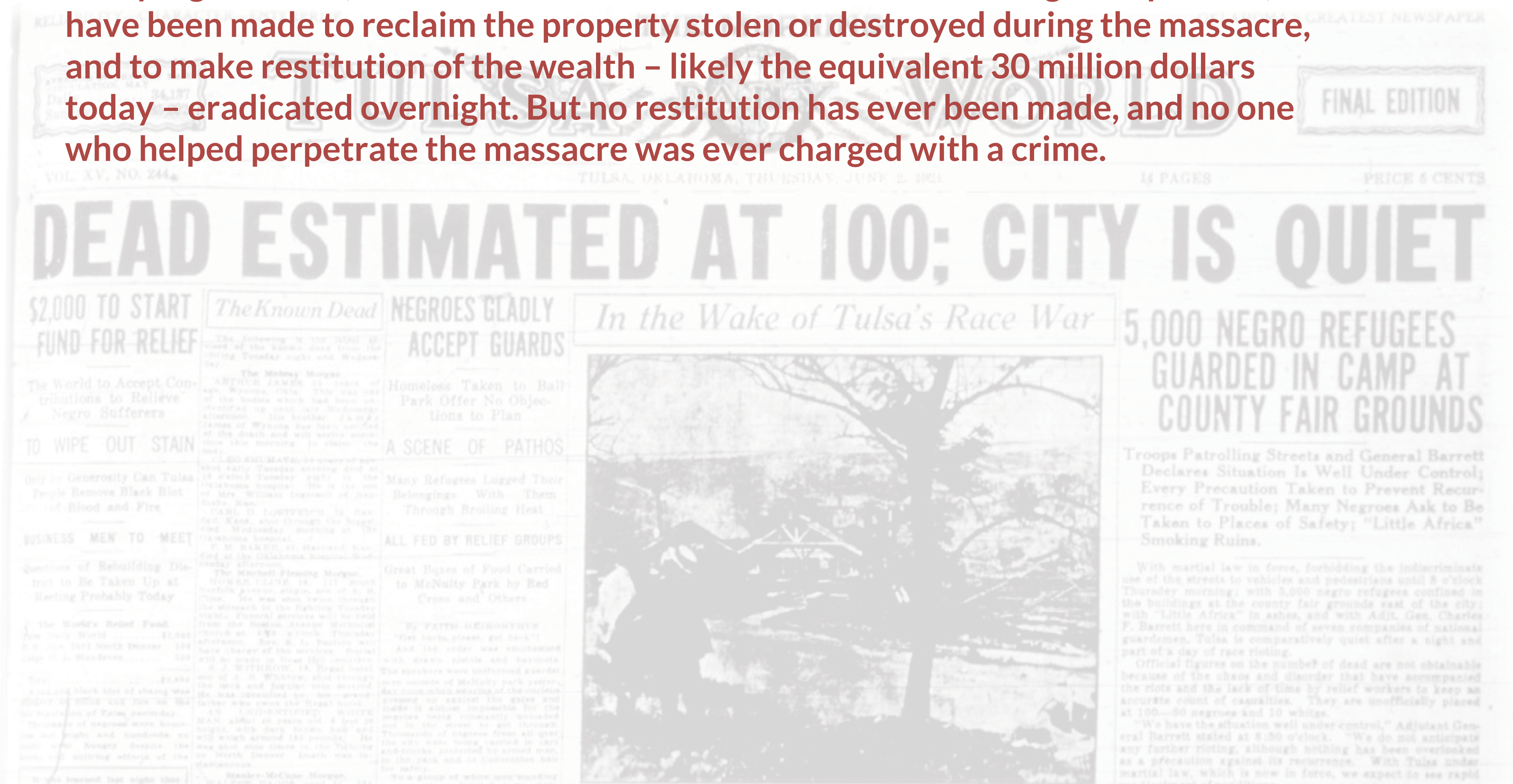
The National Guard arrived and declared martial law just before noon on June 1st. But by then, the carnage was mostly finished. Greenwood had been reduced to burning ruins. Thirty-five square blocks had been burned to the ground, including over 1000 homes, most Greenwood shops and restaurants, doctor's offices, the new school, the hospital, and its Black-owned hotels and theatres – including the Dreamland Theatre.

Thousands of Black Tulsans who had fled Greenwood during the attack were then quartered at the fairgrounds for days. The National Guard forced Black men to clean up the wreckage of their own neighborhoods.



# No Charges Were Ever Filed

Many legal efforts, from the immediate aftermath in 1921 through the present, have been made to reclaim the property stolen or destroyed during the massacre, and to make restitution of the wealth – likely the equivalent 30 million dollars today – eradicated overnight. But no restitution has ever been made, and no one who helped perpetrate the massacre was ever charged with a crime.



**\$2,000 TO START FUND FOR RELIEF**

The World to Accept Contributions to Relieve Negro Sufferers

**TO WIPE OUT STAIN**

Only by Generosity Can Tulsa People Remove Black Blot of Blood and Fire

**BUSINESS MEN TO MEET**

Questions of Rebuilding District to Be Taken Up at Meeting Probably Today

The World's Relief Fund.  
The Tulsa World \$1,000  
The Tulsa Daily News 100  
The Tulsa Evening News 100  
Total \$1,200

A column that list of names was printed in this issue for the first time of Tulsa yesterday. Thousands of negroes were brought to the city and hundreds of negroes were brought to the city yesterday despite the fact that the city was in a state of martial law.

*The Known Dead*

The following is the list of names of the known dead from the rioting Tuesday night and Wednesday.

**The McKinley Morgan**  
ARTHUR B. JAMES, 25 years of age, Wyandotte, Okla. This was one of the bodies which had been unidentified up until last Wednesday afternoon. His brother, JAMES B. JAMES of Wyandotte has been notified of the death and will arrive here this morning to claim the body.

**LEO EARL MARY**, 35 years of age, who died Tuesday evening and was buried Tuesday night in the Oklahoma funeral home in the care of Mrs. William Ingraham of Tulsa, Okla.

**CHARLES L. LUTHER**, 35 years of age, who died Wednesday morning at the Oklahoma funeral home.

**W. M. BAKER**, 40 years of age, who died at the Oklahoma funeral home Wednesday afternoon.

**The Herbert Fleming Morgan**  
HERBERT FLEMING, 18, 111 North Market street, son of A. H. Morgan. He was shot twice through the stomach in the rioting Tuesday night. Funeral services will be held from the Central Avenue Methodist church at 1:30 p.m. Thursday afternoon. Mrs. E. L. Morgan will have charge of the services. Burial will be made in the 100 cemetery.

**E. J. WITHERS**, 18, 1024 North Main st. of Tulsa, who died through the riot and funeral was arranged. He was identified by his grandfather who owns the funeral home.

**An unidentified white man**, about 40 years old, 5 feet 10 inches tall, dark brown hair and eyes, who was shot through the chest in the rioting on North Denver. Death was instantaneous.

**Stanley McCune Morgan**, 22, 111 North Market street, who died Tuesday night.

**NEGROES GLADLY ACCEPT GUARDS**

Homeless Taken to Ball Park Offer No Objections to Plan

**A SCENE OF PATHOS**

Many Refugees Logged Their Belongings With Them Through Boiling Heat

**ALL FED BY RELIEF GROUPS**

Great Boxes of Food Carried to McNulty Park by Red Cross and Others

**By FAYTH HEIDENSTEIN**  
"Get back, please, get back!" And the order was repeated with drawn pistol and bayonet. The speakers were uniformed guardsmen outside of McNulty park yesterday. They were warning the curious crowd to remain the grass and were in a hurry to get through thousands of negroes from all over the city who were coming to see the spectacle presented by armed men in the park and in conversation had the safety.

To a group of white men standing

*In the Wake of Tulsa's Race War*



**5,000 NEGRO REFUGEES GUARDED IN CAMP AT COUNTY FAIR GROUNDS**

Troops Patrolling Streets and General Barrett Declares Situation Is Well Under Control; Every Precaution Taken to Prevent Recurrence of Trouble; Many Negroes Ask to Be Taken to Places of Safety; "Little Africa" Smoking Ruins.

With martial law in force, forbidding the indiscriminate use of the streets to vehicles and pedestrians until 8 o'clock Thursday morning; with 5,000 negro refugees confined in the buildings at the county fair grounds east of the city; with "Little Africa" in ashes, and with Adj. Gen. Charles F. Barrett here in command of seven companies of national guardsmen, Tulsa is comparatively quiet after a night and part of a day of race rioting.

Official figures on the number of dead are not obtainable because of the chaos and disorder that have accompanied the riots and the lack of time by relief workers to keep an accurate count of casualties. They are unofficially placed at 100—50 negroes and 10 whites.

"We have the situation well under control," Adjutant General Barrett stated at 8:30 o'clock. "We do not anticipate any further rioting, although nothing has been overlooked as a precaution against its recurrence. With Tulsa under martial law, which is now in force, we expect to see rapid restoration of order."

# Battling Back

But even in the shadow of these horrifying events, the people Greenwood fought back, battling efforts by the city to seize their property and cover up the scale of the massacre, and rebuilding the homes and businesses the mob had destroyed.

**Part 2 of this presentation tells the story of those heroic efforts to renew and restore Greenwood.**





# Vocabulary

**Affluent**  
**Livelihood**  
**Expulsion**  
**Resurgent**  
**Hierarchy**  
**Explicitly**  
**Vigilante**  
**Guerilla**  
**Unsubstantiated**

**Incendiaries**  
**Martial Law**  
**Exemplify**  
**Restitution**  
**Pretense**  
**Contradiction**  
**Denigrating**  
**Immolation**  
**Centenary**



1776

UNITES