

Black Wall Street & the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre

Terror and Triumph

Part 2

1921 – present

Mourning in Greenwood

Rising from the Ashes

“Urban Renewal”

Hope & Reconciliation

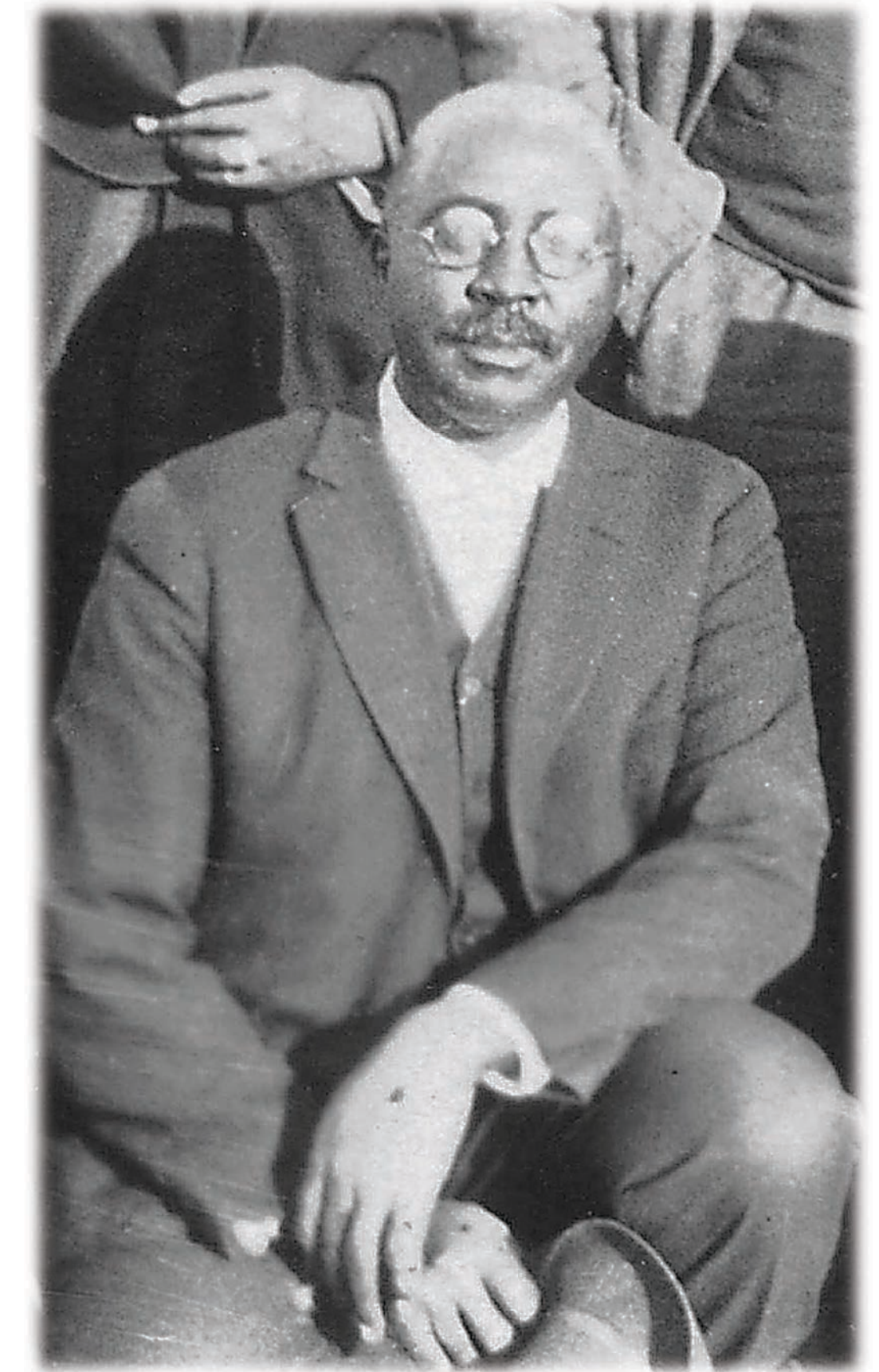


O.W. Gurley: “Founder of Greenwood”

Ottawa "O.W." Gurley was a hotelier and landowner whose business loans helped other Black entrepreneurs like himself get started; because of this, he's sometimes remembered as the "founder" of Greenwood and its Black Wall Street.

Born to freed slaves in the Deep South, he emigrated to Oklahoma in 1889 and found freedom and prosperity – and reinvested that wealth in his community.

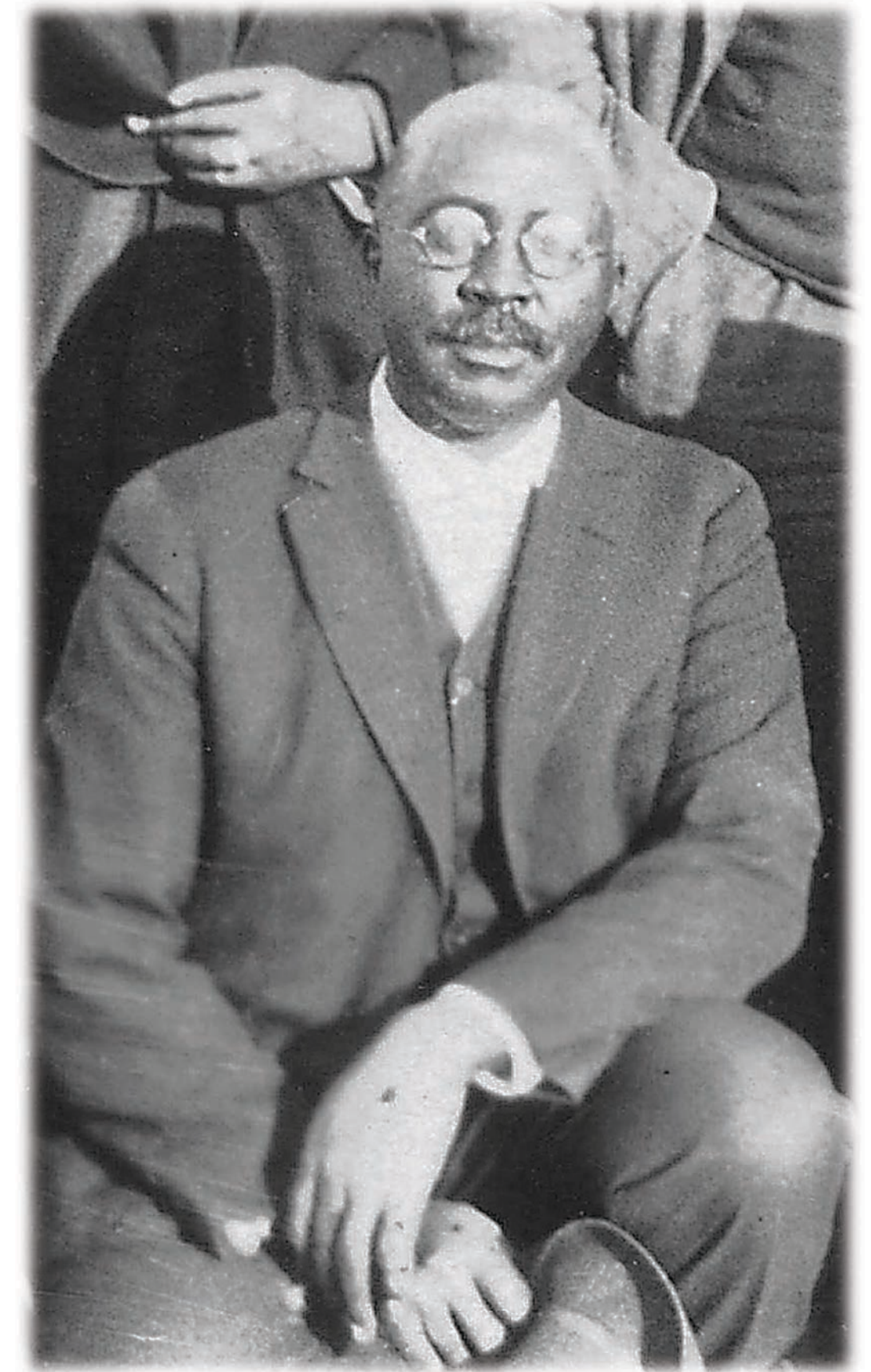
But Gurley's home, his famed hotel, and other businesses were destroyed in the 1921 massacre. In the wake of this catastrophe, Gurley fled to California, never to return to the city he had done so much to build.



The Fate of Black Wall Street

Many survivors made the same agonizing choice to leave and start again elsewhere. But others stayed to rebuild, fighting legal, political, and spiritual battles against a Tulsa government that was indifferent at best and bitterly hostile at worst.

Against overwhelming odds, the Black Wall Street that men like O.W. Gurley had created rose again from the ashes.



Disaster Relief Efforts

Days after the massacre, Maurice Willows, a Red Cross official from St. Louis, managed to convince his organization to declare Tulsa a “natural disaster area.”

With this pretense in place, Willows and Red Cross social workers provided vital medical assistance, food, and supplies to dispossessed Blacks.

Willows also kept careful records, estimating the death toll at 300 in direct contradiction of Tulsa city officials, and insisted on reporting the massacre as “civil warfare” rather than a “Negro uprising,” as other government reports had.



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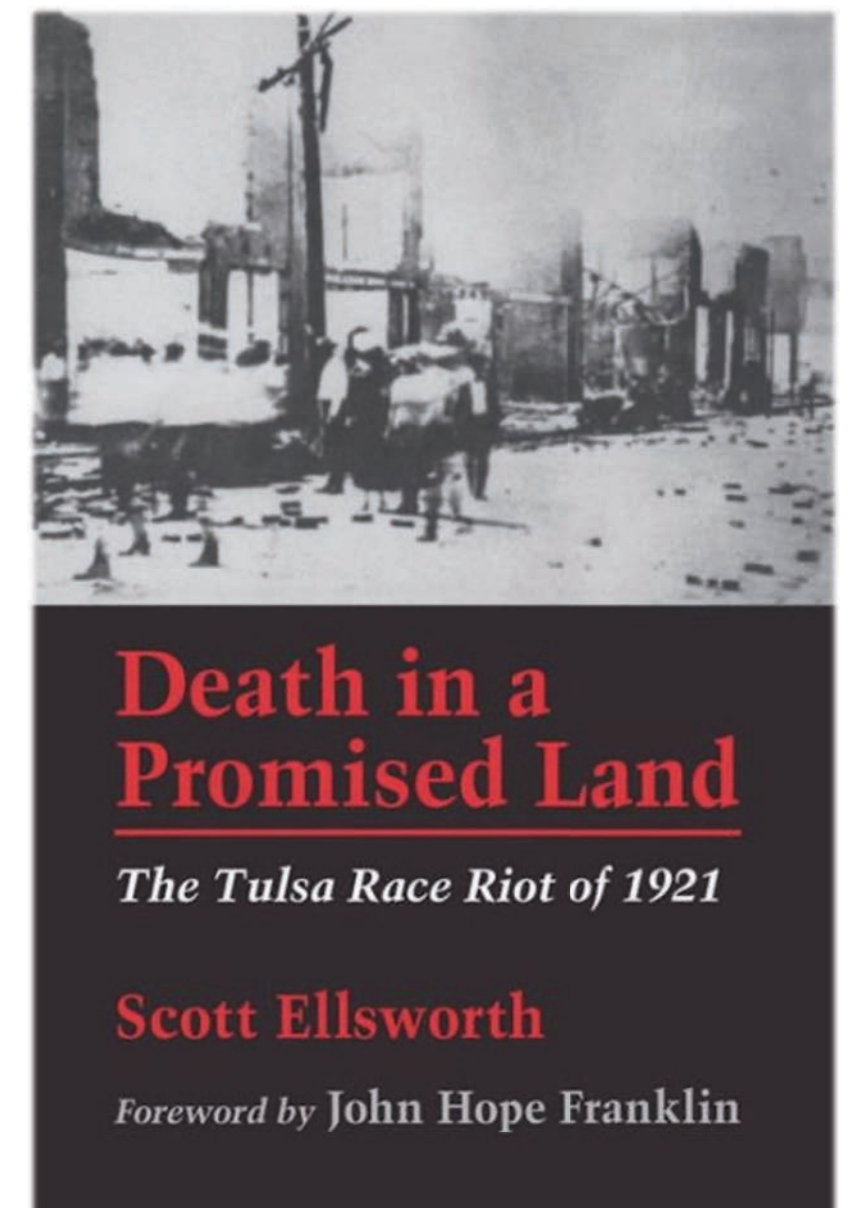
Some Facts Will Never Be Known

Nobody knows exactly how many people were killed in Tulsa during those two days of violence and destruction.

Why do you think this is so?

80 years later, in 2001, the state of Oklahoma put together a commission to investigate the massacre, and could only confirm 39 killed. But many historians, drawing on estimates by Willows and other witnesses, put the number closer to 300 victims — the vast majority of them Black.

For decades, Black-owned newspapers kept the memory of the Tulsa massacre alive in the Black community. In 1982, historian Scott Ellsworth's book *Death in the Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* helped restore the massacre to wider public memory and gave new voice to surviving witnesses and their descendants.



“What’s in a Name?”

In the days following the burning of Greenwood, local and national press labeled the devastating events a “race war.” But later, if the tragedy was remembered at all, it was typically referred to as a “race riot.”



Many modern historians and activists believe that the word “riot” implies that Black and White Tulsans were equally responsible for the events.

Others believe the word “massacre” paints Black Tulsans as passive victims who didn’t fight back when confronted with a brutal invasion – when, in fact, armed resistance and self-defense were widespread.

Which term is more appropriate? What other labels could be used?

A National Response – and Local Obstruction

As news of the tragedy spread across the country, the NAACP and Red Cross were flooded with donations to help survivors, from sources such as Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. of Harlem – the most famous Black minister in America – and a collection taken up by Black inmates of the Wisconsin State Prison.

Tulsa’s municipal government obstructed relief efforts, denigrating support from “outsiders” and insisting that responsibility for relief lay with the city of Tulsa alone. But local efforts to that effect were minimal and ineffective; even if the desire of White political leaders to rebuild had been sincere, **the scale of destruction was too great.**



Attempted Land Grab

On June 3, with the ruins of Black Wall Street still smoldering, an influential trade organization called the Real Estate Exchange recommended that the city not rebuild Greenwood, but instead replace the whole area with an industrial zone.

The group's president argued that such a zone would not only be conveniently close to the railway, but would further wall off Black and White Tulsans and **“thereby eliminate the intermingling of the lower elements of the two races, which in our opinion is the root of the evil and should not exist.”**

Attorneys like B.C. Franklin and his colleague, I.H. Spears, fought to prevent this kind of organized theft, and worked to ensure that Black Tulsans would keep their land and try to recover looted goods.



Attorneys Spears (left) and Franklin (right) with their secretary, Effie Thompson, working out of a tent only days after the burning of Greenwood.

Determination in the Face of Hostility

The fact that a partially restored Black Tulsa emerged only years after the 1921 massacre is an incredible victory over hatred and despair. As historian Hannibal B. Johnson said in 2020:

“The real story here is about the indomitable human spirit. It’s about these remarkable Black people who had vision: they created something that was of national renown and watched it be destroyed unjustly. Most of them remained. They were resilient. They rebuilt, even in the face of great hostility.”

Black attorneys and civil rights advocates sued the city, arguing it had taken the “burned district” of Greenwood illegally, and won. With legal rights secured, they began to rebuild. By 1925, infrastructure was restored enough to host a conference of the National Negro Business League.



Rebuilt Black Wall Street in 1930's Tulsa.

Rising from the Ruins

In the 1930s and 1940s, argues Scott Ellsworth and others, **Greenwood's prosperity not only met but exceeded what it accomplished before 1921.**

B.C. Franklin's account of the massacre (written in August 1931, only a decade afterwards – reflects on the “the wonderful, almost miraculous comeback of the Race here in the accumulation of property and in the acquiring of a larger, richer, and fuller spiritual life.”

In the early 1940s, Black Wall Street had returned and was thriving, with over 200 Black-owned businesses operating in Greenwood.



Greenwood street scene, late 1920s

Tulsa Renewal: 1930s – 1950s

A beauty salon owner named Mabel Little was one of the thousands of Black Tulsans who lost their livelihoods to the massacre. She worked to rebuild her community, but job opportunities led her to California, where she worked in a bomber factory during WWII.

When she returned to Greenwood in the early 1950s, she found it booming, once again home to one of the largest centers of Black-owned businesses in America, with a population of about 10,000, the same number of residents as before 1921.



Marching band, perhaps from Booker T. Washington High School, marching through Greenwood, c. 1940s

The False Promise of “Urban Renewal”

Ironically, it was integration efforts of the 1950s and 60s that led to Greenwood’s economic decline – with Black consumers now able to spend their money outside their own community, the need and desire for a “Black Wall Street” began to dissolve.

In addition, so-called “urban renewal” efforts across America, beginning in the 1950s, razed many Black urban centers to make way for public housing, massive highways, and other city planning schemes. In the 1970s, most of historic Greenwood was demolished again, this time to make way for an eight-lane highway, Interstate 244.



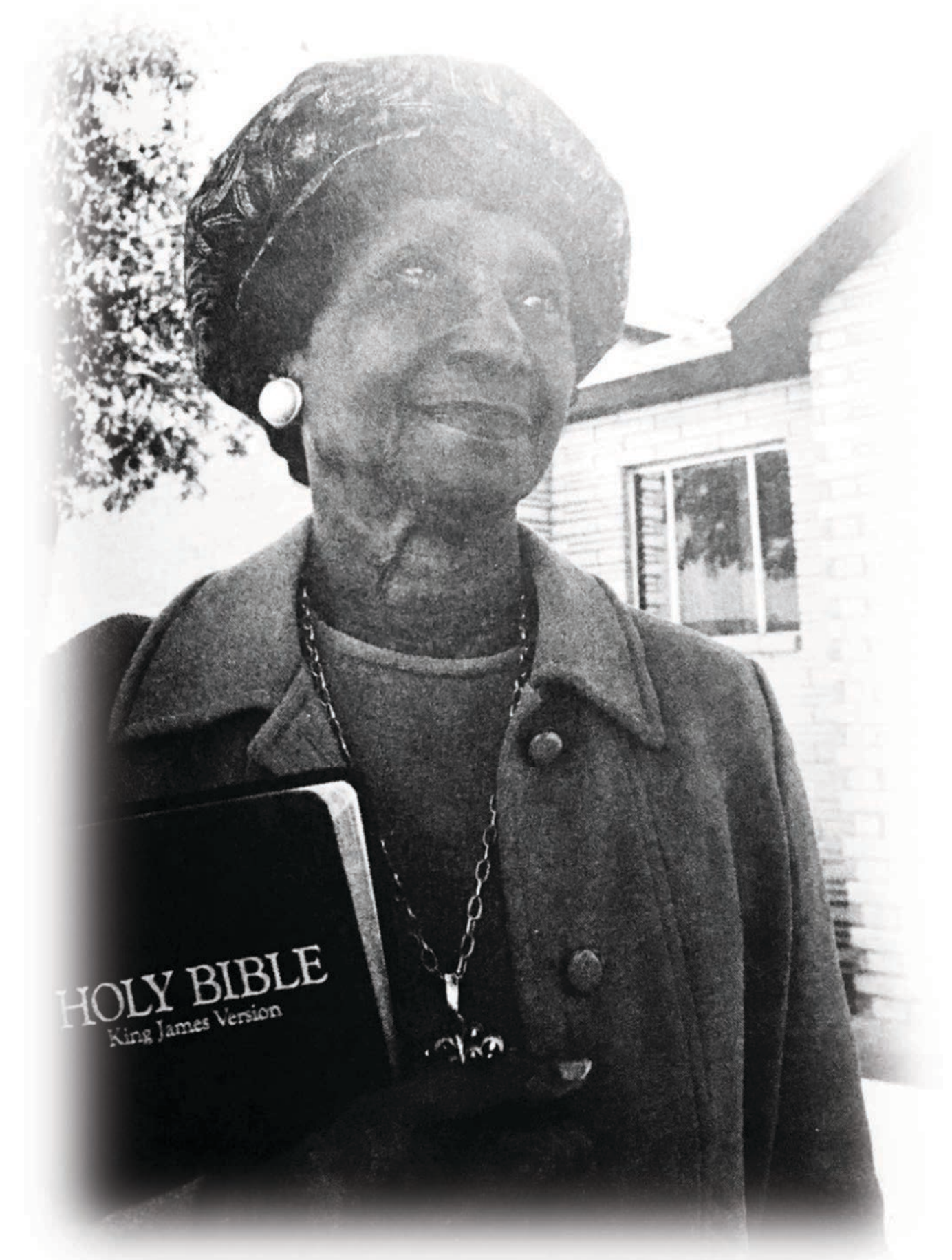
The False Promise of “Urban Renewal”

Speaking to the Tulsa City Commission in 1970, Mabel Little compared these efforts to the devastation of the massacre she survived a half-century earlier:

“You destroyed everything we had. I was here in it, and the people are suffering more now than they did then.”

**Do you know what “urban renewal” means?
What about “eminent domain”?**

**What are these supposed to accomplish?
Why might they fail, or actually make things worse?**



*Mabel Little in an image from her memoir,
Fire on Mount Zion: My Life and History as
a Black Woman in America (1992)*

Hope & Reconciliation

Despite Greenwood's remarkable victories, the loss of life and wealth in 1921 remains staggering. Efforts are still underway to locate mass graves around Tulsa and establish a spirit of hope and reconciliation.

Tulsa's Reconciliation Park was Dr. John Hope Franklin's vision to transform the bitterness and mistrust caused by years of racial division, even violence, into a hopeful future of reconciliation and cooperation for Tulsa and the nation.

It memorializes the Tulsa Race Riot, called the worst civic disturbance in American history. The Park also tells the story of African Americans' role in building Oklahoma.



Reconciliation Tower was dedicated in 2010 at the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park in Tulsa.

Centenary Commemorated

In 2021, Tulsa commemorated the centenary of the massacre in a spirit of reconciliation, and a new historical center, called *Greenwood Rising*, was opened to keep the memory of Black Wall Street alive.



Vocabulary

Affluent
Livelihood
Expulsion
Resurgent
Hierarchy
Explicitly
Vigilante
Guerilla
Unsubstantiated

Incendiaries
Martial Law
Exemplify
Restitution
Pretense
Contradiction
Denigrating
Immolation
Centenary



1776

UNITES