

“The Responsibility is Placed in Your Hands Entirely” – Red Cross Relief after the Tulsa Massacre

Netisha Currie

Among the holdings in the American Red Cross Collection at the National Archives is a photo album and report documenting the destruction, relief, and partial recovery of the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma, known as Black Wall Street. With its photographs, newspaper clippings, and correspondence this report reveals both the racial divide created in the interest of white supremacy and the resilience of people of color.

The Tulsa Race Massacre (or Riot, or Disaster) began on Memorial Day, May 30, 1921. Dick Rowland, working at his shoeshine post in downtown Tulsa, took an otherwise inconsequential break to use the restroom. During this era, a simple bathroom break for a young Black man was not so simple. Most of the United States operated under a strict system of segregation, which meant Rowland did not have equal access to any available restroom. The only restroom apportioned for use by Black people was in another building down Main Street—on the top floor of the Drexel Building.

When Rowland arrived at the Drexel Building, he took a usually uneventful ride in the elevator, which was being operated by a young white woman, Sarah Page. It is not known for certain what happened in the elevator, but Dick Rowland may have slipped or the elevator was jolted and he fell into Sarah Page, causing her to scream. The white stereotypical belief that Black men posed an ever present danger to white women was likely on the mind of the shop owner who heard Sarah Page scream and saw Dick Rowland run from the elevator. And so he called the police.

The next day, on May 31, police took Rowland into custody for allegedly assaulting Sarah Page. Afternoon newspapers reported that a Black boy had assaulted a white girl, and that he was to be tried at the municipal courthouse that day.¹ Tulsa’s segregated society responded in different ways, but came together at the Tulsa County Courthouse. A rumor of lynching had spread throughout the day, and white residents assembled to witness or take part. A group of Black men, also hearing of

a planned lynching, arrived at the courthouse with firearms intending to protect Rowland from the lynch mob. The sight of armed Black men did not sit well with white Tulsans, who alternately called for the men’s disarmament or retrieved their own firearms. As tensions rose a shot was fired, igniting what was described in a 1921 liability lawsuit as nearly 24 hours of “lawlessness and rioting [...] between the white and colored citizens of Tulsa, to the extent that the colored business and residence portions of said city were practically wiped out of existence by the rioters.”²

Before it was destroyed on May 31 and June 1, 1921, the Greenwood District of Tulsa had been a bustling and thriving business and residential community for its Black citizens. It represented a community shaped by “economic detour”—in which the prevention of full and equal access to economic markets causes a population to forge a separate path.³ Systemic segregation meant that the Black residents could neither live in the same space nor patronize stores in the white section of Tulsa. The economic detour meant that Black residents needed to create a thriving self-sustaining economy. Many Black Tulsans earned money from white employers as domestics or assistants, but poured their money into their own community. Within the confines of Greenwood, there were hotels, hospitals, a school system, public transit, newspapers, entertainment venues, as well as basic amenities such as grocery stores and barbershops.

When the bullets stopped flying and the fires ceased on June 2, Tulsa Mayor T.D. Evans sent a short communication to the Red Cross:

To the Red Cross Society:
Please establish headquarters for all relief work and
bring all organizations who can assist you to your aid.
The responsibility is placed in your hands entirely.
T.D. Evans, Mayor

Director of Disaster Relief Maurice Willows arrived in Tulsa with the stated purpose of “picking up the fragments—the relief of human suffering—the care of the sick and wounded, and bringing order out of chaos.” Their task was monumental, as displayed by the statistics given in his report on the number of people made homeless, wounded, and property damaged.

The Red Cross report and photo album contain narrative summaries, correspondence, newspaper clippings, statistics and accounting, as well as photographs of a devastated Greenwood, and the relief work of the “angels of mercy” (as Black survivors called the Red Cross).

Stepping into a role of total responsibility for a relief effort was not novel to the Red Cross. However, this was the first time a mass undertaking was implemented for an event that was not a natural disaster. The Red Summer of 1919 (the period spanning most of the year that race-based domestic terrorism and conflicts occurred in almost 40 cities throughout the United States) prompted the General Manager of the Red Cross to issue a policy for how to respond to civil unrest such as riots and strikes. The guidance directed staff to act in accordance with the Red Cross’s position of impartiality, as the organization is closely associated with the federal government and serves “the American people as a whole.” Even in the face of such clear race-based violence, the white staff of the Red Cross provided essential food, shelter, and medical care to the Black community, fulfilling the duty to treat people “in disturbances regardless of faction to which they may belong.”

Although the mayor of Tulsa turned over control to the Red Cross in the recovery of Black Wall Street, the actions of city leaders throughout the rest of 1921 advanced the goals of white supremacy. Two weeks after the massacre, Mayor Evans sent a message to the Tulsa City Commission placing blame on “those armed negroes and their followers who started this trouble,” and laid out a proposal for the reconstruction of Greenwood that entailed displacing all the residents and destroying businesses by building a railroad station and erecting an industrial park in the area that had just been destroyed by white Tulsans.⁴ Newspaper clippings collected in the Red Cross report reveal that a fire ordinance prohibiting people from rebuilding their Greenwood homes and businesses was struck down in court. Landowners filed suit charging that the ordinance was unconstitutional, as it attempted to confiscate property without due process.

In the face of ongoing oppression and disruption, the disaster survivors continued to rebuild. The Red Cross reported that during the tragedy, over 1,200 buildings were burned leaving upwards of 10,000 people homeless (see p. 23). Within a week,

the Red Cross had distributed 384 tents that would be fortified with a wood floor, and eventually replaced by a standard wood frame structure of one or two rooms. The extent of aid and relief, as in many aspects of the Red Cross work, stopped short of a supportive hand. Survivors of the massacre were only supplied the lumber to rebuild their homes; for labor, they had only themselves to rely on and any able-bodied friends who could pitch in. Greenwood, once lined with homes ranging from fancy mansions to modest well-kept abodes, now resembled a shantytown emerging from war.



Frame house of Callie Rodgers and family. Before the event, Rodgers owned half a block of property. The people in this photo were identified through *Events of the Tulsa Disaster* by Mary E. Jones Parrish. [157670060_155]



Ruins of the Titus Building, re-settled with the tent home of the “Widow Titus.” The Titus building stood on Greenwood Street, the main business thoroughfare of Black Wall Street. [157670060_176]

Burning down 35 blocks of a city not only rendered people homeless, but also jobless. The day after the violence ceased, the Oklahoma National Guard issued orders that would force able-bodied men to work doing manual labor, and women to take charge in feeding “refugees.” When martial law was lifted, the Red Cross continued to recruit labor from Black Tulsans—paying men 25 cents an hour to dig sanitation ditches and the like. Women cooked or sewed garments to earn a similar wage. High school students, whose families had lost all of their possessions and possibly savings were also “furnished with work” in exchange for receiving school books.

Although the people of Greenwood had gone through a traumatic ordeal, those in charge did not allow idle time for mourning and processing. Paternalistic attitudes persisted among many white leaders of the city, and also within the Red

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TULSA COUNTY CHAPTER AMERICAN RED
CROSS DISASTER RELIEF COMMITTEE
PREFACE

The story of the tragedy enacted in Tulsa, Okla., on the night of May 31st, 1921, and the morning of June 1st, 1921, has been told and retold in the press of the County, with all sorts of variations as to causes, actual happenings and immediate results.

Unprejudiced and indirectly interested people have from the beginning referred to the affair as the "race riot", others with deeper feeling refer to it as a "massacre", while many who would saddle the blame upon the negro, have used the designation, "artfully coined", "negro up-rising". After six months work among them, it has been found the majority of the negroes, who were the greatest sufferers, refer to June 1st, 1921, as "the time of déwa' ". Whatever people choose to call it the word or phrase has not yet been coined which can adequately describe the events of June 1st last.

This report refers to the tragedy as a "disaster".

(Signed)

Director.

When the smoke had cleared it was found that

- ✓ 1256 buildings had been burned.
- ✓ 314 buildings (mostly homes) which were spared the torch, were looted and robbed of everything worth while.
- ✓ 10,000 (approximate) persons were homeless.
- ✓ 183 persons were in hospitals, practically all for gunshot wounds or burns.
- ✓ 531 other persons were seriously enough injured to require first aid medical or surgical care.
- Many --- were dead. (Figures are omitted for the reason that NO ONE KNOWS.)

✓ PROPERTY LOSSES.

A conservative estimate, based upon such data as has become available during a seven months period of relief work, places the losses on buildings, business stocks, household goods and personal property, at three million five hundred thousand dollars. (The only purpose of this estimate is to indicate the approximate size of the economic destruction.)

THE AMERICAN RED CROSS AND RELIEF.

In a situation such as this, which can better be imagined than described, it is not strange that the community instinctively turned to the American Red Cross.

True, the disaster was not "an act of God". It was "Tulsa made", but the American Red Cross, in accepting responsibility, generously and properly took the position that disaster had visited thousands of human beings, the majority of whom were innocent victims, helpless, and practically re-

A quantitative account of the destruction of the Greenwood District. The Red Cross chose not to record a total number of dead because there was no reliable way of accounting for people who died. The lack of an official tally by the organization that was in charge of the relief effort may factor into why estimates for loss of life vary widely today.

RED CROSS RELIEF AFTER THE TULSA MASSACRE

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Cross—driving the directive to make people work for relief. “The whole relief program was bound to the principle of helping the colored people to help themselves,” Maurice Willows stated in the report. Similarly, the head of the city’s Reconstruction Committee commented, “Our object is to put the Negroes

back on a self-supporting basis. Negroes are a servant class of people and there is no reason why the women should not work as well as the men.” The only work opportunities available that may have aligned with a person’s previous line of work were in the medical field.

The Red Cross wrapped up relief operations in Greenwood on December 31, 1921. In the six months following the massacre, 2,480 families had received some form of relief, over 700 semi-

Lessons/Teaching Activities

What’s in a Name?

At present, this event is commonly referred to as the Tulsa Race Massacre. Over the years, and depending on who was referencing it, the event has had different names including: race riot, disaster, uprising, and even pogrom. The Red Cross noted in 1921 that the name changed depending on the speaker (See Preface to Report on p. 22). Have students look up the definitions of these descriptors and, taking into account the intentions of the people involved, decide how to label the event. Then have students fully explain their reasoning in a paper, or set up a group project where teams debate the pros and cons of usage for each term.

Pages 5 and 44 from the report:

www.docsteach.org/documents/document/summary-tulsa-massacre (includes pg. 5)

www.docsteach.org/documents/document/report-tulsa-massacre-willows (includes pg. 44)

How Much was Destroyed?

The photo album attempts to capture the scale of destruction with various panoramic photos. But just how large an area is 35 blocks? This can be an interactive exercise where students use an overlay of the Greenwood district matched up against different cities or areas in their hometown. In addition to the physical scale, students can also explore the monetary valuation that was assigned to the destruction of Greenwood (stated in the report conservatively at \$3.5 million in 1921 dollars). Compare the modern dollar amount to average middle class homes and business districts in their area. Images 155, 176, and 181 - www.docsteach.org/documents/document/tulsa-massacre

Who Gets to Tell History?

The Red Cross report and album is one document that is widely available to tell the story of this event, but does that mean it should be the only account students see? Introduce the historical and sociological concepts of perspective and agency (the capacity of individuals to express themselves and their power, as well as to act independently). Once students understand these concepts, have them look over selected photos and excerpts of

the report. Do they feel that the survivors of the event who were receiving relief were allowed to express agency in this account? Students can also be asked to explore other contemporary accounts of the event that have surfaced, and compare and contrast:

The Tulsa Riot and Three of its Victims by B.C. Franklin (available through NMAAHC https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2015.176.1)

Events of the Tulsa Disaster by Mary E. Jones Parrish (http://129.244.102.213/speccoll/collections/F704T92P37%201922_Events/Events1.pdf)

Other newspapers of the time can also be explored

Further Reading

Hannibal B. Johnson, *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa’s Historic Greenwood District* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Eakin Press, 1998)

Randy Krehbiel, *Tulsa, 1921: Reporting a Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019)

Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982)

“Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.”

Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, February 28, 2001

“1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.” Tulsa Historical Society and Museum. www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/.

Dreams of Black Wall Street (formally Black Wall Street, 1921). www.dreamsofblackwallstreet.com/



Men from Tulsa's Greenwood District sift through the rubble of the Gurley Hotel to recover bodies of people who died in the massacre. [157670060_1811]

permanent buildings and homes were rebuilt, and 49 families were still living in tent-homes. With time and persistence, over the next decade, residents of Greenwood rebuilt and recreated another version of Black Wall Street.

Author's Note

Learning about the Tulsa Race Massacre may make students and teachers uncomfortable as they are met with a painful and ugly chapter of American history. The Red Cross photo album provides the visual proof of this event, and despite all the evident destruction, it also shows students that people survived. Beyond the scope of these records from 1921, the Greenwood district was rebuilt and residents and business owners thrived again for a time. The report, presented from the perspective of the ostensibly neutral Red Cross, gives readers one account of the disaster and its aftermath (students should be encouraged to question the Red Cross's approach to some aspects of relief work at the time). The lesson of the Tulsa Race Massacre and other events of mass violence against indigenous and other peoples of color in this country is not to memorize the amount of bloodshed, but to delve into the root cause of the violence. In many cases, the mindset of perpetrators was shaped by generations believing in the idea of white supremacy, instead of living by the words of the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal." 🌐

Notes

1. *Report to A.L. Farmer from Maurice Willows*. 12/31/1921; DR-6.08 Oklahoma, Tulsa Co., Riot Reports and Statistics; Central Decimal Files, 1881–1982; American National Red Cross Collection; National Archives at College Park. Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotes are taken from this document.
2. *G.W. Hutchins v. City of Tulsa et. al*, 3798 (N.D. Okla. 1922); Law Case Files, 1925–1938; Records of the District Courts of the United States; National Archives at Fort Worth
3. Hannibal B. Johnson, *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Eakin Press, 1998), 18.
4. Johnson, *Black Wall Street*, 239–241.



NETISHA CURRIE is an archives specialist at the National Archives in College Park. She is the founding chair of the Say it Loud! African American Employee Affinity Group, and has been recognized by the Archivist of the United States for exceptional work done in promoting records relating to the Black experience. She received a B.A. from Oberlin College in Archeology and an M.A. from

George Washington University in Museum Studies. She can be reached at Netisha.Currie@nara.gov.

ANDREA (ANG) REIDELL and **KIMBERLEE RIED** served as editors of this article. Ang is an education specialist and Kimberlee is a public affairs specialist. Both are in the Museum Programs Division in the Office of Legislative Archives, Presidential Libraries, and Museum Services at the National Archives. Ang can be reached at Andrea.Reidell@nara.gov and Kimberlee can be reached at Kimberlee.Ried@nara.gov.