

Greenwood, Oklahoma
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This story is hard to tell and hard to hear. It is the story of the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma. It is not ancient history. It is a story of the year 1921, the year my father was born.

During the oil boom of the 1910s, the area of northeast Oklahoma around Tulsa prospered, including the Greenwood neighborhood, north of Tulsa's downtown business area. Greenwood was the African-American district of Tulsa. Of course, during these times, most U.S. cities were strictly segregated by race and African-Americans were not allowed to patronize white-owned businesses. So, in Greenwood, African-American people had built their own thriving neighborhood, almost a separate city. By 1921, Greenwood was a flourishing district of over 10,000 people, covering over 40 square blocks, and had come to be known nationally as the "Black Wall Street." It was the home of a number of prominent African-American businessmen, quite a few of them millionaires.

The buildings on Greenwood Avenue housed the offices of almost all of Tulsa's African-American lawyers, realtors, doctors, and other professionals. In Greenwood, there were fifteen well-known African American physicians. Greenwood published two newspapers, the *Tulsa Star* and the *Oklahoma Sun*, which covered not only Tulsa, but also state, national and world news and elections. Greenwood housed around 30 churches, over 20 restaurants, 30 grocery stores and two movie theaters, plus two hospitals, a bank, a post office, libraries, hotels, schools, a half-dozen private airplanes and even its own bus system.

Sometime during the early afternoon of Memorial Day, Monday, May 30, 1921, a young African American man named Dick Rowland left his shoeshine stand on the first floor of the Drexel Building in downtown Tulsa to use the bathroom. The only bathroom he was allowed to use was on the top floor, so he took the elevator. The elevator was operated by Sarah Page, a young white woman. After using the restroom, Rowland took the elevator back down to the first floor. As Rowland was leaving the elevator, Page screamed. Men from other shops on the first floor of the building came running and Rowland fled. As best as could be determined afterwards, Rowland may have slipped as he exited the elevator and grabbed Page instinctively to steady himself.

By late the next morning, Tuesday, May 31, Rowland had been arrested and put in the courthouse jail in Tulsa. That afternoon, the 4:00 p.m. edition of the *Tulsa Tribune* published a false account of the event. At the time the story was published, statements from Rowland and Page had not yet been collected.

The story, which appeared on the front page of the paper, claimed that Rowland had attacked Page with premeditation, scratching her hands and face and tearing her clothes. The hint of alleged rape is clear. Even worse, on the editorial page, the editor in chief wrote an opinion piece calling on all "concerned citizens" to gather at the courthouse that evening to see justice done.

That evening, spurred by the false story and inflammatory editorial, a crowd of around a thousand white men and women gathered at the courthouse, demanding that Rowland be given up to them. At the same time, several hundred African-American men from Greenwood, many of them World War I veterans, came to the courthouse to prevent a lynching. Quite a few on both sides were armed. The scene was tense and volatile. At some point, according to best report, a white police officer attempted to disarm an African-American man. In the struggle, the gun was discharged into the air. On hearing this shot, many others present, both black and white, began to fire.

Within minutes, the streets were clear, as the African-American men fled to Greenwood and additional white men poured to the scene and began arming themselves from a sporting goods store and the National Guard armory. By midnight, mobs of thousands of armed white men began preparing to march to Greenwood, many of them newly deputized as police officers by Tulsa's chief of police.

At 5:00 a.m. on the morning of Wednesday, June 1, the march began. As the mobs hit the edge of Greenwood, they began setting fire to every home and business. When the Tulsa fire department came, they were not allowed to put out the rapidly-spreading fires.

Soon, the entire Greenwood district was filled with angry mobs looting houses and businesses before setting them on fire. African-American men, women and children were shot as they tried to flee.

Greenwood's men responded by fighting back as best they could. Many of them were skilled combat veterans who had served in Europe during World War I. However, their efforts were soon hampered by many being taken into so-called "protective custody" by police and moved to internment camps on the edge of Tulsa. Some of the men trusted that the police who were taking them into custody were going to stop the looting, burning and killing. But it was clear that events were far beyond the possibility of control.

Planes from a nearby National Guard airfield were brought to the scene to coordinate the attack on Greenwood. There were a number of witnesses reporting that the planes dropped incendiary bombs and strafed those trying to flee.

At 11:30 a.m., National Guard units from Oklahoma City arrived and put the city under martial law. They also began taking all African-Americans into "protective custody." No white rioters were imprisoned. By the evening of June 1, what came to be known as the "Tulsa Race Riot" was over.

Thirty-five square blocks of Greenwood were a smoking ruin, with few buildings left standing. Over 8,000 African-Americans were homeless and in custody. Over 600 businesses and 1500 homes were destroyed. Death tolls have never been certain, but at least 30 whites and over 1000 African-Americans are thought to have been killed. Immediately after the event, the city of Tulsa attempted to take over the entire district by eminent domain and turn it into an industrial area, relocating African-Americans farther north. This attempt failed. No insurance companies paid out to their Greenwood shareholders, because their policies had a "riot exclusion clause." Greenwood was partially rebuilt through the sole efforts of its residents alone, but many, many residents never returned.

This terrible story has a Unitarian Universalist connection that I will share with you later.