



Patient Reflection

Greenwood Rising: The Tulsa Race Massacre and Its Legacy

Historical Context

In the early 20th century, the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was one of the most prosperous Black communities in the United States. Nicknamed “Black Wall Street,” it was home to doctors, lawyers, educators, entrepreneurs, and a thriving Black middle class. The Ku Klux Klan was also resurging, fueling violence against African Americans during the “Red Summer” era. In Tulsa, resentment toward the prosperous Black community of Greenwood grew alongside strict segregation. However, on May 31 and June 1, 1921, this community was devastated when white mobs, with the complicity of local authorities, launched a violent attack that left as many as 300 Black residents dead, thousands homeless, and over 35 square blocks of homes and businesses burned to the ground. For decades, this atrocity was mischaracterized as the “Tulsa Race Riot,” a term that implied mutual conflict and violence. In the years before the 1921 Tulsa massacre, racial tensions were high nationwide. The immediate spark came on May 30, 1921, when Dick Rowland, a young Black man, was accused of assaulting a white female elevator operator. Sensationalized news coverage and false rumors spread quickly. The next day, a white mob gathered to lynch Rowland, and armed Black residents came to protect him. A standoff outside the courthouse led to gunfire, unleashing white mobs (some deputized) who looted, burned, and killed in Greenwood. The violence was the result of years of racial hostility, provoked by national white supremacist movements and a near-lynching the night before. This language served to obscure the truth: this was not a riot. It was a calculated act of racial terror, carried out to suppress Black success and instill fear. The use of the word “riot” also allowed insurance companies to deny claims for damages, leaving survivors and their descendants without restitution. Today, efforts like the [Greenwood Rising History Center](#) and the work of historians, activists, and descendants have helped correct the record. The event is now more accurately known as the Tulsa Race Massacre, acknowledging it as a one-sided, state-supported act of racial violence. This shift in terminology is more than semantics; it represents a broader reckoning with how we name, remember, and teach complex histories. It affirms the experiences of survivors and challenges us to confront the ongoing legacies of racial violence, economic injustice, and historical erasure. Greenwood Rising honors not only the destruction that occurred but also the resilience, dignity, and resistance of the Black community in Tulsa and beyond. Understanding this history requires patient reflection, careful language, and a commitment to telling the truth, especially when it challenges the dominant narrative.

Connection to Habit

The history of the Tulsa Race Massacre and the long silence that followed calls for patient reflection. For decades, the event was mislabeled a “riot,” minimizing the truth and preventing justice. Only through careful reexamination of survivor testimonies, photographs, newspaper accounts, and government records has a fuller, more honest picture emerged. The shift to calling it a “massacre” reflects the power of slowing down, questioning inherited narratives, and listening to voices that were long ignored. Understanding Greenwood’s destruction and its legacy requires us to move beyond quick summaries and commit to the difficult, ongoing work of examining what happened, why it was hidden, and what that means today.

Discussion Questions

- What caused the white mob to attack the Greenwood District, and how did local authorities respond?
- Why was the Tulsa Race Massacre hidden or misrepresented in public memory for so long?
- Why does the shift from calling this event a “riot” to a “massacre” matter?
- How can language shape how we understand, remember, or forget historical events?
- What role does patient reflection play in correcting the historical record?
- In what ways does the legacy of the Tulsa Race Massacre continue to affect the descendants of Greenwood residents today?
- What lessons can we learn from Greenwood Rising about the importance of historical truth and community resilience?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Composition journal or notebook paper
- Projector to show both primary sources: [Little Africa on Fire \(1921\)](#) and [Viola Fletcher Testifies Before Congress](#)
- [Patient Reflection: Viola Fletcher's Testimony](#) document

Step One: Patient Reflection - Image Analysis [5-10 mins]

Project or distribute the [Little Africa on Fire \(1921\)](#) photograph. Ask students to take a few minutes to observe it in silence. Use the following questions to guide individual journaling then whole class conversation.

- What do you notice first about this image?
- What questions does this image raise about what happened in Tulsa on June 1, 1921?
- What might this photo not show?
- What do you know about this event? If anything, how does this image challenge or complicate what I thought I knew?
- How does the caption reflect the perspective of the photographer?

Step Two: Patient Reflection - Viola Fletcher's Testimony

Watch the Testimony and Reflect [15 mins]

Have students write notes during the [testimony video](#), using the guiding questions in the [Patient Reflection: Viola Fletcher's Testimony](#) document.

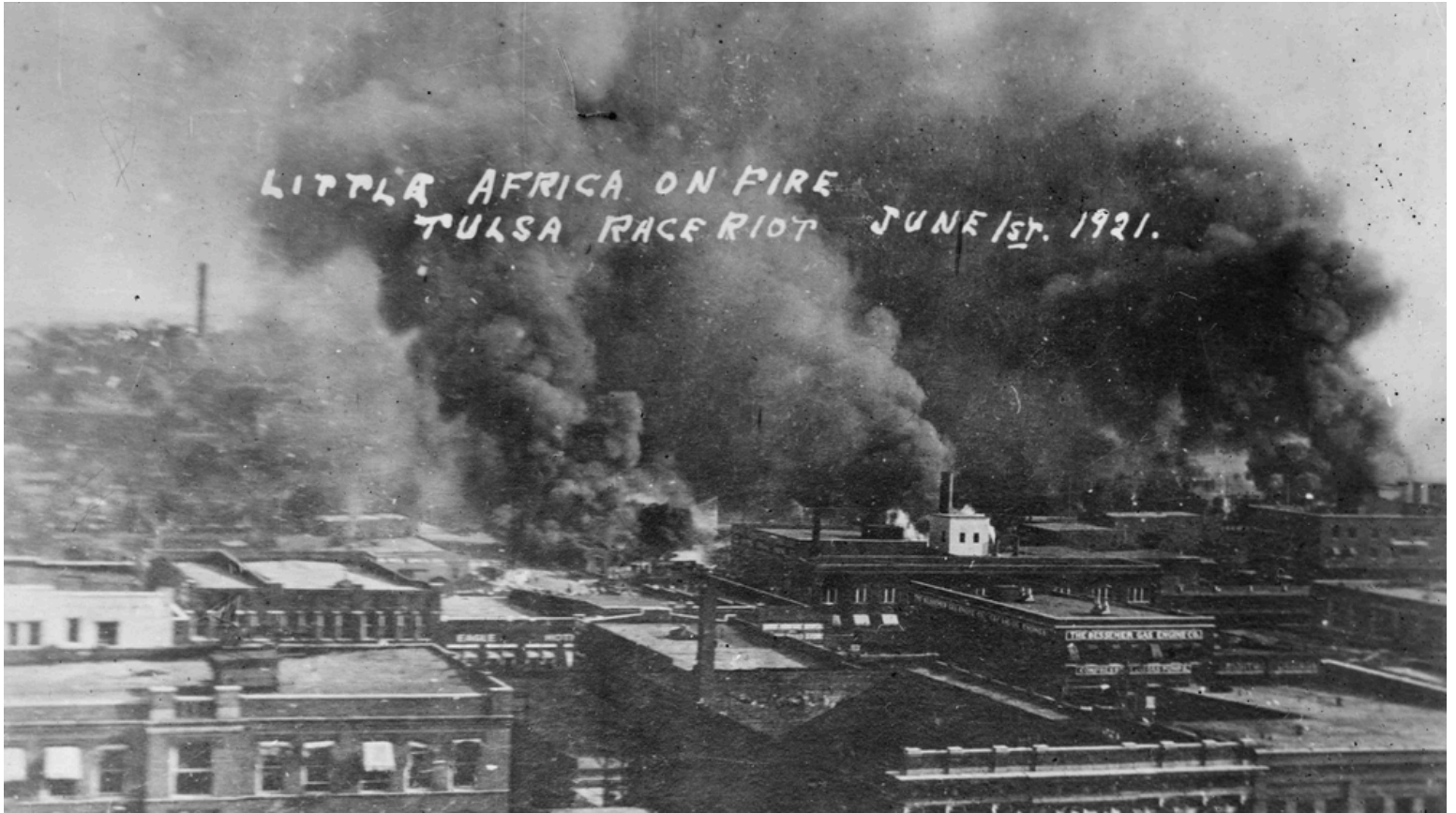
Step Three: Group Discussion [15 mins]

As a class, discuss the following:

- Why is it important that survivors like Viola Fletcher are able to share their stories publicly?
- What does this testimony teach us about the long-term impact of historical violence?
- What role should the government play in addressing past injustices like the Tulsa Race Massacre?
- How does hearing this from a living person change the way we understand history?

Primary Sources

Photo: "Little Africa on Fire"/Tulsa Race Massacre (June 1st 1921)



Source: [Little Africa on fire, Tulsa, Okla. Race riot, June 1st, 1921.](#)

