

Let's Walk Through Black Wall Street

Intro: Polaris, or the North Star, marks the northern direction and was used by slaves to reach freedom. To this day, the North Star is a symbol of hope, passion, drive, and purpose. But the question is, where on Earth am I, and where is the North Star?

(music plays)

To everyone tuning in from all around the world, welcome to another episode of Finding the North Star, a podcast created in hopes of becoming content with my African American identity. I'm your host, Krista Savage-White, here to educate myself and others. This series will cover topics involving culture, contemporary issues, and history about Black people in America. Stay tuned to find out today's topic!

(music continues)

Main Objectives:

Today's episode is titled "Let's Walk Through Black Wall Street." This episode covers the following topics:

- The rise of Black Wall Street
- The Tulsa Race Massacre and why it happened
- The aftermath of the massacre and how it impacted survivors
- The erasure of the massacre from history even with its 100th anniversary
- How White supremacy has and continues to be the status quo

Questions to answer during this episode and after:

- Before this podcast episode, did you know how Black Wall Street functioned and that it was a powerful community?
- Before this podcast episode, had you ever heard of the Tulsa Race Massacre?
- What emotions did you feel while hearing about the massacre and what happened afterwards? Anger? Sadness? Fear? Regardless of race/ethnicity, be honest about your feelings.
- How do you think meritocracy uplifts/hinders a person's ability to accomplish their dreams? Think of intersectionality as a guiding theory for this question.
- After listening to this episode, what is your insight about how you benefit/suffer in a White supremacist system? Will you watch the documentary *Blood on Black Wall Street: The Legacy Of The Tulsa Race Massacre* for further insight?

Even after listening to this episode, I encourage everyone to do further reading by viewing the cited sources of this podcast and other credible sources on this matter via Google or another search engine.

Before I start getting into the nitty-gritty, I would like to highlight the documentary *Blood On Black Wall Street: The Legacy Of The Tulsa Race Massacre*. Available on the NBC News Youtube channel, it formed the foundation of the script and gave me some direction on

information to cover in this episode. It is upsetting to watch, but you will learn a lot from it, especially about how the effects of White supremacy still carry on to this day and impact Black people on a personal level. Again, that documentary is *Blood On Black Wall Street: The Legacy Of The Tulsa Race Massacre*. Link to it is in the description box.

The origins of Black Wall Street trace back to 1905, when businessman O.W. Gurley bought 40 acres of Tulsan land and reserved it for Black people. As a son of former slaves and due to brutal segregation laws, Gurley's vision was to create something by Black people, for Black people. Thus, he started allocating time, effort, and resources to fulfilling his mission. Greenwood's first business opened on Greenwood Avenue in 1906 as a boarding house for Black folks looking for a resting place. Segregation laws barred many Black people from entering and patronizing White-owned businesses, and thus, a Black-owned boarding house was a necessity. But Greenwood would only get larger over the next 15 years.

Alongside another businessman and former slave J.B. Stradford, Gurley turned Greenwood into one of the most powerful Black communities in the U.S. The Jim Crow laws in the South motivated some Black people to migrate from the region in hopes of escaping oppression, which led for the development of communities such as Greenwood District, better known as Black Wall Street (and as Booker T. Washington once called it, Negro Wall Street).

On Gurley's end, he expanded the area through building residencies, establishing the Vernon AME Church, and owning dozens of properties. He was also Greenwood's sheriff deputy, which not all residents appreciated. Even so, as the word of Greenwood District spread, so did its influence. Gurley provided loans to encourage Black people to start their own business, as White people refused to lend Black people loans during that time. That move prospered the amount of middle and upper-class Black people, with some of them even becoming millionaires.

Greenwood was the place of opportunity for Black people, and it functioned like any town. It had a variety of businesses, such as medical offices, law firms, barbershops, grocery stores, luxury stores, and had its own hospital and public library. John and Loula Williams are just two entrepreneurs that were successful in the area. Not only did they own a candy shop, but they also constructed and owned the 750-seat Dreamland Theater. Andrew Smitherman is another entrepreneur who served as a lawyer and the director of the Tulsa Star newspaper. Oh, and let me not forget to talk about the school system. Their school system was highly efficient, preparing students to go off to HBCUs or the Ivy League through teaching school subjects such as Latin, science, geometry, and bookkeeping.

Because of Greenwood's overall stability, the Black Tulsan population expanded from 2,000 in 1910 to around 10,000 in 1920. The town spanned 35 city blocks and 600 Black-owned businesses at its peak., with the Stradford Hotel being allegedly the largest Black-owned hotel in the U.S. It contained 54 rooms, and hear this out, a dining hall, gambling hall, saloon, and brought in jazz musicians to perform for guests and the town's residents.

It's important to note that even with the flourishing of Greenwood District, some people never got to participate in all that prosperity. There were class divides, with the working-class living in low-quality shelter, such as shanties and shacks.

Nevertheless, Black Wall Street could rival New York, Chicago, and Atlanta during its time. Historians estimated that every dollar spent on Black Wall Street circulated the community 30+ times. Can you talk about stability? As author and historian Hannibal B. Johnson stated in a Forbes interview, "Greenwood was perceived as a place to escape oppression—economic, social, political oppression in the Deep South. It was an economy born out of necessity. It wouldn't have existed had it not been for Jim Crow segregation and the inability of Black folks to participate to a substantial degree in the larger White-dominated economy." That's exactly right.

But who was still unhappy with Black people doing their own thing? WHITE FOLKS! White supremacists were so unable to stay out of Black business that they wanted to gain attention somehow. And this is where things start to get grim—the Tulsa Race Massacre. But let's do a happy transition right quick, shall we?

(Transition music)

1921, the year when White supremacists felt the need to steal land once again, because they hate seeing Black people win. Anything that's a threat to them they want to take down, so that they can remain at the top. White supremacists will make up any excuse for their terrorism and bigotry.

May 31, 1921 was the day The Tulsa Tribune reported that a 19-year-old Black teenager named Dick Rowland attempted to rape a 17-year-old White teenager named Sarah Page at the Drexel Building's elevator. Witnesses have given various accounts of events, but keep in mind that during that time, a Black man could be tried for rape or sexual assault and executed just for looking at a White woman. Meanwhile, a White man could do the same or worse to a Black woman without any punishment. I stated back in episode 3 that even 100 years post-antebellum (that is, post-Civil War) period, no White man was convicted for being a sexual predator. Not one.

Page claimed that Rowland attacked her physically, while Rowland denied those claims and stated he placed his hand on her arm. Allegedly, all Rowland did was slip and unintentionally grab Page's hand on the elevator. Although a store clerk called the police after hearing her scream to arrest him for attempted rape, Page didn't press charges against him. Let's be real, a White woman could lie about what a Black man did to her and get away with it. White society hated interracial relationships.

After the arrest, tensions rose between the Black and White Tulsans. Black folks gathered at the courthouse in protest of Rowland's possible lynching, while White supremacists demanded that he plead guilty for the crime. Unsurprisingly, White Tulsans were so selfish that they refused to wait for a verdict, and instead incited racial violence for 18 hours. They destroyed all 35 blocks

of Greenwood through using private airplanes to drop firebombs, setting buildings on fire, and possessing guns.

It didn't help that the police also contributed to Greenwood District's destruction, aiding guns to White Tulsans and not stopping the destruction. They would later blame Black people for igniting the riot, even though White supremacists singlehandedly killed an estimated 300 people, injured 800 others, and left its nearly 10,000 residents homeless. Death toll has been recorded as 37, but that number is much higher for sure. Hence why historians estimate that there were really around 300 deaths, much higher than 37. The reasons for the underestimation of the death toll all comes down to White people not wanting to take any blame and wanting to forget that it all happened, on top of blaming Black people for causing it. In general, when there's an underreporting of casualties for anything, it's all out of shame and knowing that it was wrong. Right is wrong and wrong is right in the minds of the oppressors.

In today's money, White Tulsans damaged an estimated \$200 million in property and assets. After that massacre, much of the residents lost all their wealth, including Gurley and Stradford. This incident is remembered as the Tulsa Race Massacre and was done in the name of defending White womanhood. Now do you know what I mean when I said White womanhood is protected in the last episode? I wasn't lying, and this is proof that White women are second only to White men in terms of privilege.

Sadly, while dozens of Black people were arrested during the massacre and held in detention camps, White people did not face any of those same punishments. And although various residents filed for \$1.8 million (or \$27 million in today's money) of their property, only a White shop owner received any sort of compensation. As the Rev. Dr. Robert Turner, pastor of the Vernon A.M.E. Church stated, "The first aerial terrorist attack in American history was not done by Al Qaeda. It was not done by the Japanese, but the first time we were attacked by air in this country was done by White men. And they flew places that were owned by privately held corporations."

White supremacists really are our #1 terrorists. Can never mind their own business and always steal things that don't belong to them. Let me not forget to mention that the White mobs stole personal valuables, money, clothing, and started laying claim to items they didn't own. How ironic—oh, how ironic is it to want to exclude Black people from your own spaces while at the same time getting angry when they create their own spaces. But even so, why they felt that was is not rocket science.

White Tulsans were jealous of Black people wealthier than them. They were angry that Black people worked around the racist system to make their own contributions to society. Local newspapers called the Greenwood District names such as "Little Africa" and "N-town." White Tulsans called the Black Tulsans who lived there "bad n-s who drank booze, took dope, and ran around with guns." Ran around with guns? The irony. But then again, it's not surprising that they blamed Black people for their problems. They stereotyped Black people as "criminals" who needed to be kept under control. The Tulsa World newspaper even suggested that the KKK "could restore order in the community."

Those White-owned newspapers not only wanted to maintain White supremacy, but also allow those terrorists (yes, those terrorists) to kill Black people. Though let's be real. White people are the oppressors, and they fear that the oppressed will take away their power. (I know it's not "all" White people, but that dynamic is the norm.). That's why they do all they can to grant the oppressed as few opportunities to succeed as possible. It's why after you think about it, it's not surprising that politicians and insurance companies refused to fund the rebuilding of Greenwood, as they classified it as a "race riot" and blamed Black people for starting it. Yep, the stereotypes continue.

That was despite the White mobs conducting an airstrike on a small neighborhood with privately-owned airplanes. Think about it. If the roles were reversed, White people would be so angry at Black people that they'd retaliate in harsher ways. Nowadays, the government provides aid for different disasters and tragedies, but back in 1921? The local, state, and federal governments were like, "nope, we have nothing for you." Imbalances on who the government helps were existent then. They are still existent now. But applying this to Black Wall Street, it shows that there were plenty of White supremacists, even if they wanted to play the "I'm not racist" card. Let's just give a standing ovation to 1921 U.S. government for being complicit in the endangerment of Black lives by not reimbursing Black businesses, Black people, and the entire Greenwood District. (Sike. Curse them.)

NAACP leader Walter F. White was right when he said that White Oklahomans were "lethargic and unprogressive by nature, it sorely irks them to see Negroes making greater progress than they themselves are achieving." He stated this decades ago, but White people hated, and still hate, the thought of Black people gaining power and in turn, losing their economic, social, and overall power in society.

Some good news is that the residents of Greenwood District managed to rebuild without the support of White politicians and insurance companies. They hosted the 1925 National Negro Business League National Conferences and they remained stable during the 1940s with more than 200 Black-owned businesses functioning. Even so, much of the rebuilt businesses shut down in the following decades, and many survivors never regained their wealth. Some businesses never reopened.

The Tulsa Massacre has not only affected the victims and their families, but also African-American families throughout the country. All of this shows that meritocracy is a myth, because at the end of the day, it's only the select few who benefit. And the select few who benefit is mainly the White people. That is why the answer to addressing these events and problems in society is not by avoiding the subject, but rather by evaluating history and learning about why this is.

(Transition music)

Integration during the 1960s sounded glossy in the history books, but with that came gentrification in historically Black communities, and Black Wall Street is no different. During

that time, Tulsa was just one of many U.S. cities to commit to “urban renewal” plans, or as Greenwood residents prefer to call it, “negro removal.” That plan included redlining, zoning, and highway construction intersecting the neighborhood. All of that done in the name of White supremacy.

This is something that the history books won’t tell you. They want to tell you that after integration happened, everyone had equal rights, things were peaceful, and everyone had equal opportunity. Nope. What they refuse to tell you is that White supremacy remained the norm through gentrification and that “zero discrimination policies” really don’t mean zero discrimination. It still benefits White folks by default, because it opts for ignoring race as an ongoing problem that BIPOC people face each day.

I think back to a speech Nikole Hannah-Jones gave at a 2017 storytelling conference in Bucharest, Romania. If y’all have heard of the 1619 Project, she is the creator of that. You may have also heard about her refusing her tenure position and UNC-Chapel Hill after they previously denied her and chose to become a Howard University faculty member instead. If you ask me for my opinion on that, I can’t blame her for that, but I don’t want to veer too much off topic.

Anyways, I listened to her talk, and she expressed the major events (i.e., slavery, segregation) in such a way that it felt like those events didn’t happen a long time ago. And they didn’t. And what struck out to me about her speech was how she talked about her research on school segregation and how it still exists. She heard things about the way to treat everyone equally is to stop talking about race, but the disparities on which race/ethnicity of students gets the furthest ahead are still there. That part hit me so much, and as I continued researching the history of Black Wall Street, I thought back to those points she made.

So often, people want to think that if everyone works hard despite their obstacles, they can succeed and achieve anything they want. And then when a person vocalizes barriers that they have tried their best to overcome but it still holds them back, they’re blamed for “not working hard enough” and “being lazy” without knowing the person’s story and without considering the barriers that do exist. Racism is no exception, and the destruction and gentrification of Black Wall Street upheld White supremacy. Brenda Nails-Alford is the granddaughter of massacre survivors, and she said it best: “Our community lost, through no fault of its own, twice.”

The Tulsa Race Massacre is something that both White and Black people have hidden from memory. For White people, it’s because they knew they were guilty but wanted to pretend it wasn’t their fault. For Black people, it’s because of fear and not wanting to place that burden on their descendants. Researchers who investigated the massacre in the 70s faced career and death threats. The Tulsa newspapers didn’t want to mention it either, even though its yellow journalism fueled the racism and contributed to the deaths and damaged livelihood of Black people.

It wasn’t until 1996 that the Oklahoma Commission formed the Tulsa Race Riot Commission to investigate the massacre, releasing their report in 2001. Oklahoma Public Schools didn’t start covering the massacre as part of their curriculum until 2000. While there have been sites

dedicated to commemorating the Tulsa Massacre victims, such as the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park, the “Black Wall Street” mural, and the Greenwood Rising history center, Black residents say that it’s not enough.

Some of them, such as Tulsa city councilor Vanessa Hall-Harper and chairwoman of the Greater Tulsa Area African-American Affairs Commission Kristi Williams, pledge to never set foot in that building, and can you blame them?

Can you blame them for making that pledge? Can you blame them for doing that when despite their struggles, Greenwood has not been added to the National Register of Historic Places, which would grant tax credits and fiscal benefits for them? Can you blame them for doing that when segregation and discrimination still exist in Tulsa, Black-owned businesses have decreased thanks to gentrification and that wealth being redirected to already-wealthy White people? Today, Black people only own 1.25% of Tulsa’s businesses. Doing the math, that’s 250 businesses. That’s less than the Greenwood District at its peak. And you thought that there was progress made.

Now let me get back to my “can you blame them” speech. Can you blame them for doing that even after the Tulsa Race Riot Commission released their report, then-federal judge named James O. Ellison dismissed the call for reparations in 2004, stating that, “That plaintiffs’ claims are barred by the statute of limitations is strictly a legal conclusion and does not speak to the tragedy of the riot or the terrible devastation it caused.”

As I’m reading an NBC News article from that time, there was a two-year statute of limitations on the case, meaning that it couldn’t be prosecuted after that time frame. I’m not sure what that specific timeframe was, but this was not just a crime. It was a terrorist attack that affected thousands of Black residents. Thousands of them. And then with these old White governors rejecting the teaching of Critical Race Theory in public schools without knowing what it means and Oklahoma passing legislation that protects killer motorcyclists at protests (thank you, Kevin Stitt), wha-what progress has been made? I see some backward movement, but very little forward movement. Every time we move one step forward, we move three steps back, meaning that we really didn’t move forward at all, but rather backwards.

The discussion of reparations is still alive. Back in May, Viola Fletcher, Hughes Van Ellis, and Lessie Randle, who survived the tragedy and are all centenarians, made their case for reparations in Congress. Of course, their calls are ignored. And yes, while we are in the middle of a pandemic, racism is a pandemic that has raged for more than 400 years and will rage even after COVID is exterminated.

Descendants of massacre victims continue to feel the impact of White supremacy and what could’ve been. The few Black businesses in the Greenwood District are working through the trauma, though the Tulsa Development Authority and the Oklahoma State University System now own the vast majority of Greenwood (because OSU-Tulsa is in that area).

When you hear about the Tulsa Race Massacre and the aftermath, it tells you a lot about how little progress has been made in racial equity. I stated in the beginning of this episode, and I'll say it again. I recommend watching *Blood on Black Wall Street: The Legacy Of The Tulsa Race Massacre*. Though I also recommend reading two Tulsa World articles: "A hot-button issue: Not all Black Tulsans are happy about Greenwood Rising" and "From O.W. Gurley to its present-day legacy: Greenwood District land ownership has evolved in the last century," as well as The Architect's Newspaper article "Tulsa's Greenwood Rising museum strikes a nerve in a community still seeking justice," because it shows you how deep that impact is felt among Black residents in Greenwood.

Though I want to give a quick glance at what the costs would look like today with the damage done and the wealth lost. Let's be real. White society doesn't want to pay Black people reparations, because they don't want to be held accountable for their heinous actions—from stealing land to inciting terrorism to gentrification, they don't want to be held accountable for the wicked stuff they've done. Nor do they want to see Black people live their best lives. They'll refuse to give them aid while at the same time blaming them for "being too lazy." Like, you have the power! But then again, they don't want to give up power, they want to keep it. Here's what many of them don't want to know.

With \$200 million in reparations (the amount of damage in 2021 dollars), Tulsa can give all its Black residents a full-ride scholarship. With Tulsa's average price for a home, it can buy 4,187 houses. That's 4,187 houses for new homeowners and homeowners looking for a property upgrade. And with \$200 million in reparations, there could be 6,421 Black businesses in Tulsa. Keep in mind that if there were 1,900 Black businesses in Tulsa, they could bring \$10 billion (yes, you heard right) \$10 billion in revenue annually, which would more than offset the reparations by 40 times. We'll talk more about reparations in the next episode, but for now, let those figures sink in as I go into my reflection.

Reflection: Black Wall Street was such a powerful community, but for a century, the history has been hidden. There has been a search for graves of the Tulsa Race Massacre victims, which will unearth a deeper story about more of the ugly things that happened during that tragedy. The Tulsa Race Massacre continues to affect not just descendants of the victims, but also African American families throughout the country. It wasn't the first time that White people destroyed Black disparity. They've done it time and time again since the 1400s. (Slavery came before 1619, y'all. Consider that. 550+ years of INJUSTICE.) Let's not forget about the Jim Crow laws, the Three-Fifths Compromise, the barring Black people from different opportunities, and so many more. Even so, the destruction of Black Wall Street showed that even post-slavery and obeying the Jim Crow laws, Black people still couldn't have nice things thanks to White people's thievery.

I know that in my family, we could've had generational wealth. It's said that my great and great-great grandfathers could've been a millionaire, but it didn't happen due to the systemic barriers. Oh, and the so-called "colorblind" folks, don't you dare say that they didn't work hard enough, because they did. My double-great grandfather owned land and worked hard to get it, but he could've been a millionaire had he been White, because the system is set to benefit them. And my triple-great grandmother was a slave.

Knowing about this history is hard. For me, it was upsetting watching the documentary alone. But it needs to be told. The imbalances with who excels in the business world and has generational wealth has always existed, but the Tulsa Race Massacre only further cemented that. And with the property decreasing in value after that attack, prices went down, and it reminds me of a story my mother told me that happened months back that shows how home values are different between Black and White homes. It happened to involve an interracial couple, Black woman and White man named Abena and Alex Horton. They were attempting to appraise (or assess the value) of their home, and with the photos of Black people, including Abena's family members, and with the Black-authored books, the home was valued at \$330K dollars. But after taking all of that down, replacing Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison with William Shakespeares on the bookshelves and Abena leaving her husband Alex home alone, the value of that home went up to \$465K.

Maybe that doesn't sound drastic to some, but that's a 40% increase in value. And when you consider that Black homes on average are valued less than White-owned homes for irrelevant differences, it matters. It absolutely matters. That compounds overtime, and the loss of wealth due to systemic racism is something that needs to be talked about more often. My mother has a couple of art pieces of Black art in her home. Her home can be devalued significantly just because of those few art pieces. So if anyone listening wonders why I sound angry in my podcast at times, my anger is absolutely valid. Because of the lack of generational wealth, because my triple-great grandmother was a slave, because systemic racism continues to impact my family all the way to me, I have every right to be angry. It's something that White people, no matter how hard they try, could ever relate to. Not even my White friends.

As a reminder, today's episode was titled "Let's Walk Through Black Wall Street." This episode covered the following topics:

- The rise of Black Wall Street
- The Tulsa Race Massacre and why it happened
- The aftermath of the massacre and how it impacted survivors
- The erasure of the massacre from history even with its 100th anniversary
- How White supremacy has and continues to be the status quo

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To view the list in full, visit the sources section of the episode description box.

Outro: Thank you to everyone who’s listened up to this point! I hoped you learned some stuff in this episode and engaged your mind with the content! A disclaimer is that my opinions are not representative of the general public or of every Black person. However, the goal is to start a discussion about these issues and encourage everyone to think critically. It is important that we self-reflect on our prior knowledge, new knowledge, our biases, and how we benefit or suffer from a particular issue. In turn, that can lead to more consciousness about our actions, our biases, and lead to a more equitable and balanced society.

In the meantime, I would like to hear about your takeaways or feedback on this episode! Your takes and additional subject knowledge are always welcome! Get the discussion rolling by writing to findingthenorthstarpodcast@gmail.com. What will the next subject be? You will have to wait until later to find out. Until then, this is Krista Savage-White signing off!

(music plays)

END EPISODE