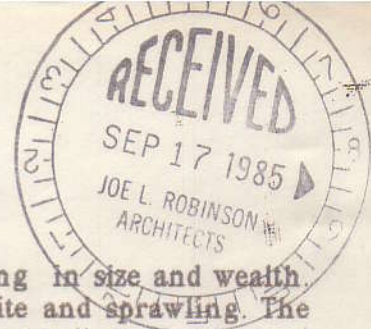


GREENWOOD: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE



At the turn of the 19th century, Tulsa was young, vibrant and rapidly growing in size and wealth. There were two cities, one Black, encircled and rigidly segregated, the other white and sprawling. The absence of inter-community race relations was interpreted as an amicable understanding of roles and responsibilities -- "their place." Along with whites, many Blacks from southern states bought small parcels of oil land in Oklahoma from the Indians. They proved profitable. Some 500 Blacks owned these oil bearing lands and resisted all offers, often accompanied by threats, to sell these lands for less than its actual value. Every increase in the price of oil produced more bitterness and strife. The segregated Black economy also produced in addition to successful landowners, a successful business district and an affluent class of entrepreneurs. The business district, beginning at Greenwood and Archer Streets, would soon earn the name, "The Black Wall Street of America."

"The Black community had become more visible and more established. Two Black churches, the Vernon African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Macedonia Baptist, were founded in 1895 and 1897 respectively. Immigration no doubt also affected the social life of Black Tulsa. After the turn of the century, Blacks born in other states became the majority.

While there was hurried construction of impoverished shanties, Tulsa's Black community offered some of the city's more beautiful and prominent homes. One such home was owned by Sam and Lucy Mackey. They had purchased the land, including three lots at 356 North Greenwood, from Marion and Eliza Martin in 1911. The Martins had bought the land from the Cherokee Nation.

A fair number of domestic workers "lived-in" with their white employers. As for the others, apparently it was not until 1905 that Blacks began to live along Greenwood Avenue, the year a strip of land in the area was sold to a group of Blacks. In 1907, one year before statehood, the Black community had two doctors, a newspaper, and three grocers. By 1910 the Black population had grown to 10 percent of the total population of the city and there was at least one Black trade union, the Hod Carriers Local 109.

At the conclusion of World War I, economic competition between the races and charges of peonage were occurring at the very time of rising Black expectations and a determined attitude of self-assertion. Racism, discrimination and exploitation were encouraged by a pronounced absence of law enforcement. Moreover, the law officers, press, church, political power structure and general public tolerated the open lawlessness. Six percent of the city population was under indictment and the criminal court dockets were badly clogged.

By the year of the 1921 race riot, the Black population had grown to almost 11,000 and the community counted two schools, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Booker T. Washington; one hospital, two newspapers, two theaters, a public library, 23 churches, and three fraternal lodges. The second lowest Black illiteracy rate of any county in Oklahoma testified to the presence of a Black school, and three-fourths of Tulsa's Black school-age children were in school.

A focal point of the community was the intersection of Greenwood and Archer Streets. This geographical location--a single corner, for much of the 20th century, had something of a symbolic life of its own. It has been a spot of delienation between the city's Black and white worlds. Confined by law, racism and social custom, Tulsa's Black community had continued and grown as a separate city, serving almost exclusively the needs of the residents there.

The first two blocks of Greenwood Avenue, north of Archer were known as "Deep Greenwood." It comprised the heart of Tulsa's Black business community. Two and three-story buildings lined the street. There were a variety of commercial establishments, including a dry goods store, two theaters, grocery stores, confectionaries, restaurants, and billard halls. Four hotels and 11 rooming houses were also located there. Deep Greenwood was also a favorite place for the offices of Tulsa's unusually large number of lawyers, dentist, doctors, and other professionals. The district would especially come alive on Thursday evening, the traditional "maids day off," for domestic servants living in white communities.

While Greenwood, without challenge, was one of the finest Black business districts in America, these service oriented establishments catered to the wage-earning population. Few of them employed more than a handful of people. Economically, North Tulsa depended upon the wages paid to Black workers by white employers. Despite its visible solidity of brick, Greenwood rested upon an uncertain economic foundation reflecting ominous social and racial realities.

Racial Warfare

The distorted and exaggerated report of a white woman employed as an elevator operator triggered a racial outbreak on June 1, 1921. No riot ever engulfed a city with less warning, pent of hatred, or found the local authorities less prepared with corrective measures. It appeared to be a "spontaneous flare-up" based on prejudices, suspicion and rumor. A sickly gray pall hung over the northern horizon, and sweating men and women trudged disconsolately through the June heat down Main Street, watched by a thin crowd of curious spectators, and by nervous national guardsmen. It was June 2, 1921. The worse racial warfare in the nation's history had ended.

The men marched with heads bowed low, hands held in the air "in submission to the white man's authority," said one account, but the women marched with a haughty etched in the faces of those who watched the bizarre parade. Behind them, under the gray pall smoke, more than 1,000 homes and scores of businesses lay in ashes -- the remnants of what had been three days before "The Black Wall Street of America." During the riot, 35 city blocks were looted and burned to the ground. Property losses far exceeded the initial estimate of \$5 million.

Black citizens were arrested if discovered on the streets without green cards, countersigned by their employers. Tulsa Fairgrounds were used as an interment camp for Blacks arrested during the riot -- prisoners of war, only guilty of being men, women and children of color. The Mount Zion Baptist Church had been built at the cost of \$84,000 less than six weeks before. It now lay gutted and charred. The parishioners who had borrowed \$50,000 to help pay for the church and had signed the note a few weeks before, suddenly found themselves in debt and nothing to show for it. It is to their everlasting credit that the congregation voted to pay back the money, a process which would take 21 years.

In 1915 Sam and Lucy Mackey mortgaged their property at 356 North Greenwood, to complete their dreamhouse. The note was repaid three years later.

The rebuilding of "The Black Wall Street" after the riot, particularly that of Deep Greenwood, is a story of almost as great importance as the riot itself. Perhaps more than anything else, this rebuilding was a testament of the courage of resilience of Tulsa's Black pioneers in their struggle for freedom and economic independence.

Many of the buildings along the first block of Greenwood Avenue, running north on Archer Street, were rebuilt by the end of 1922. Although the burned out shells of the pre-riot structures were for-the-most-part torn down. The new building assumed the form of their predecessors. The 1922 Williams Building, for an example, bears a great resemblance to its pre-1921 structure. Many of these later buildings were constructed as the originals had been, the red bricks from the local brickyard located on Standpipe Hill, two blocks north of the avenue.

Few of the property owners possessed insurance. Those who did were notified that unless they could prove that either the city or the state was negligent in the protection of their property, the insurance policy would be void. The insurance companies alleged they were not liable for fires caused by rioting or civil insurrections. Some whites, cognizant of the plight of Black property owners, attempted to purchase this charred real estate at prices far below the market value. The Adjutant General stopped the practice by ordering the County Registrar of Deeds to stop the registration of titles from the destroyed area.

Greenwood was Growing Again

By 1922, 14 of the 23 churches were holding services in facilities in various states of ruin. More than 80 businesses had been re-established. In 1923, The Black Wall Street was well on its way to reclaiming its national reputation. Greenwood was growing again!

The dreamhouse of Sam and Lucy Mackey had been one of the more than 1,000 homes destroyed in the riot. But dreams do not die easily. In 1926, with the support of an employer, the couple mortgaged their property for \$6,500 to The Oklahoma City Building and Loan Association (no Tulsa bank or lending institution would make loans in the area), and began building more than a modest home for the times. In 1930, the note had been paid off and the Mackeys borrowed \$9,000 from C.A. Herdford to make improvements. The home remained as a symbol of pride and resilience until it was sold, by a daughter, Vernon Wilson-Prince, to the Tulsa Urban Renewal Authority (TURA), in the 1970s.

Even though individual hardships were felt, and the ever-present yoke of discrimination and segregation persisted, the Greenwood business district continued to prosper through the Great Depression and well into the 1930s. World War II and the war industries brought even more prosperity. A Black business directory listed more than 400 businesses. However, with the end of the war, came the end of the opportunities it had created. It also marked the first evidence of decline for The Black Wall Street of America.

While emotion and a sense of pride ran deep in the 1950s, it could not hold back the continuing decline. Many of the pioneers who had made it happen were aging, retired or had been captured by time. Sam and Lucy Mackey had divorced. The Dreamland Theater, an early landmarks, was closed. By the end of the decade, more than half of the businesses were abandoned or closed. Stable employment during the war years had provided new opportunities for home ownership and many of the rooming houses had been lost to progress.

In the 1960s only a few businesses remained. An expressway now cut through the heart of The Black Wall Street of America. The civil rights movement came to Tulsa. The desegregation of places of public accommodations followed shortly. As the 1970s approached, only three businesses existed on Greenwood; the law offices of E.L. Goodwin, Sr., The Oklahoma Eagle and Georgola's Fried Chicken. The renewal authority pushed Georgola's to a new location. Goodwin, one of the refugees carted off to the fairgrounds during the 1921 riot, in addition to his holdings on Greenwood, had acquired several properties in the path of the renewal authority. Goodwin would sale only on the condition that he could gain title or option to purchase the remaining building on the once famed avenue. A bold gamble on his part. The renewal authority agreed. The Mackey house was scheduled to be torned down. Voices led By Mabel B. Little and other leaders protested. They claimed most of North Tulsa's heritage had been lost to decay, decline and demolition. The old house had to be saved and enshrined for future generations. The past, they contended, must be preserved, appreciated, and known.

The Greenwood Chamber of Commerce secured a \$3.5 million grant, from the Economic Development Administration to restore the old Greenwood business district. The renovation has now been completed. The Mackey house sat for years abandoned, scarred by vandals and as a principal address for vagrants. The Business and Industrial Development Corporation (BIDC), a North Tulsa service agency, was approached to restored the historic landmark. The agency accepted the challenge and secured a 99-year lease from the City of Tulsa and a commitment to financially assist in the renovation. In addition, BIDC planned to attach a second phase, a multi-purpose arts and humanities complex. The Greenwood Culural Center had been given birth.

BIDC organized the North Tulsa Heritage Foundation Inc., to construct and operate the facility. The cost of phase I, named for Mrs. Little, and phase II, named for Goodwin, is estimated at \$1.2 million. The organization also pledged \$25,000 to furnish the facility. The State of Oklahoma has provided a \$175,000 grant for phase I. The City of Tulsa has committed \$125,000. While TURA has donated two acres of land. Private fundraising efforts have brought an additional \$10,000. To date \$335,000 has been raised and goals for corporate, foundation and grants have been set. Phase I is scheduled to be completed in February of 1986.