

Will Tulsa's Greenwood ever be fully restored?

By Brakkton Booker
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People hold candles during a vigil for the centennial commemorations of the Tulsa Race Massacre in the historic Greenwood neighborhood on Monday.

Today, we focus on a brutal racial attack the nation went to great lengths to forget: The Tulsa race massacre of 1921. Let's jump right in.

On this day a century ago in Tulsa, Okla., the scope of the destruction of an heinous act of racial terror was just beginning to become clear.

The near obliteration of the once-flourishing Greenwood neighborhood, a haven for Black people seeking prosperity and a reprieve from the oppression of post-slavery America, reverberates to the present day.

This is not just because, remarkably, there are survivors who can recount their haunting memories of seeing white mobs execute as many as 300 residents and destroy more than 35 square blocks of the area commonly referred to as Black Wall Street.



A Black Wall Street Memorial is shown in the Greenwood district during commemorations of the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre on Monday. |

It's because those survivors and the descendants of the estimated 10,000 residents who were left homeless when their residences and businesses were pillaged have spent a century hoping for acknowledgment and restitution.

"I'll never forget the violence of the white mob," 107-year-old Viola Fletcher told members of Congress last month during a hearing on the Tulsa massacre.

"I still see Black men being shot, Black bodies lying in the street. I still smell smoke. ... I still see Black businesses being burned. ... I live through the massacre every day," she added.

Her younger brother Hughes Van Ellis, 100, told lawmakers the legal system never provided closure for the survivors.

"You may have been taught that when something is stolen from you, you can go to the courts to be made whole. You can go to the courts to get justice. This wasn't the case for us," Van Ellis said.

“We were made to feel like our struggle was unworthy of justice. That we were less valued than whites. That we weren't fully Americans.”

On the campaign trail, President Joe Biden was called out for being out of touch on matters of race. But since winning the nomination and being sworn into office, he has made racial equity a centerpiece of his administration.

He travels to Tulsa today to deliver remarks commemorating the tragedy and meet with the survivors and families of the 1921 victims. He's also expected to unveil a set of policies aimed at shrinking the wealth gap between Black and white Americans, including designating \$10 billion in infrastructure funds to go toward revitalising distressed communities.

On a background call with reporters Monday evening, administration officials acknowledged that while neighborhoods like Greenwood are free to apply for the federal grants, there would be no funds set aside specifically for Tulsa.

When asked if the president supports reparations for the families and the survivors of the Greenwood massacre, White House officials reiterated that Biden supports the establishment of a commission to study reparations. A measure to set up such a committee, H.R. 40, was passed by the House Judiciary Committee in April and is still awaiting a vote by the full House. (Biden has not said whether he supports HR 40.)

While the president is traveling to Tulsa as “sympathizer-in-chief,” it's important to remember not only the initial brutal act, but also the systemic cover-up of the attack.

For decades the history of the Tulsa massacre was rarely spoken about in the city, let alone the rest of the country. In fact, just a few weeks ago, the Oklahoma City Council formally condemned the decades-long effort “to obscure the truth and shield the white community, especially state and local officials, from accountability,” The Oklahoman reports.

“As mayor, I hold our local government to the highest standard. Tulsa's city government failed to protect Black Tulsans from murder and arson on the night of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, and from discrimination in subsequent decades,” Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum said in a Facebook post.

Many of the hundreds of massacre victims remain unknown, as evidenced by the mass graves in the city-owned Oaklawn Cemetery, where scientists discovered unmarked coffins last fall.

The city of Tulsa begins a full excavation and analysis of the cemetery today.