

**The Memorialization of Black History Amid Black Tragedy: Tulsa Race Riot then,
Massacre Now**

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102 years, 1,230 months, 37,440 days that Ms. Viola Ford Fletcher has had to hold onto the pain accompanied by the memories of “black men being shot, black bodies in the street, and black businesses being burnt.” In all this time, she still recalls the smell of smoke coming from the flames flooding the buildings and the screams of her black Tulsan neighbors. More significantly, she recalls the white mob that woke her up in the middle of the night to bring these memories upon her. On May 30th, 1921, the Greenwood District of Tulsa Oklahoma, also known as Black Wall Street, was a place where six-year-old Viola Fletcher had a beautiful home, great neighbors, friends to play with, and a bright future. It was a place where Ms. Fletcher felt safe. For Ms. Fletcher, Greenwood was a place where her family had a richness in wealth, culture, heritage, and community.

These sentiments of safety, having a home, and having a childhood in Greenwood were shared by the other last survivor, Ms. Lessie Benningfield Randle. Mother Randle, as she is referred to by her community, recalls living with her grandmother where she had toys, a home, and no fear. She remembers the beautiful successful black community. Accompanied by those happy memories, she also remembers what she refers to as a “war,” the white men coming into the town burning the buildings, pillaging homes, and murdering black people. With both being six years old, Ms. Fletcher and Mother Randle could not understand why this was happening.

On May 30th, 1921, Ms. Fletcher and Mother Randle knew no fear, but on May 31st, 1921 they would come to experience fear and the robbing of their future. They would also come to understand the truth of anti-black violence in America and the traumatic racial violence of the Tulsa Race Massacre, then referred to as the Tulsa Race Riot.¹ For Fletcher, Randle, and many of the survivors who have passed, have had to hold onto the memories, the stories, and the

¹ “Tulsa Race Massacre Survivors Testify,” May 19, 2021.

experiences of the dark past of May 31st and June 1st, 1921 alone for many years as the greater part of American History had forgotten the Massacre.

The two-day Tulsa Race Riot, as it was referred to then, took place on May 31st, 1921, and ended on June 1st, 1921. The Riot began not with the burning of homes and the destruction of a black community as described by Fletcher and Randle, but with an accusation. On May 30th, 1921, Dick Rowland, or “Diamond Dick”, a nineteen-year-old local black shoe shiner, accidentally slipped and touched the hand of Sarah Page, a white woman elevator operator, in the elevator of the Drexel building. The Drexel building at this time was the only building in that predominantly white area that had a bathroom that black people could use. After accidentally touching Sarah, she screamed out of the elevator accusing Rowland of assault, and Rowland was arrested by Tulsa Police on May 31st.² After the arrest, white people began to surround the courthouse where Rowland was being kept planning out a lynching of Rowland. With the fear of another black inmate being lynched, black men gathered weapons to guard the courthouse where Rowland was held to support the police department in protecting Rowland.³ White men angered by the show of armored protection by the black people gathered weapons and returned to the courthouse. With tensions high between black and white people in front of the courthouse, a fight between the two racially divided groups broke out, which led to the accidental firing of a gun belonging to one of the men. This act of an accidental firing sparked the beginning of the Massacre.⁴ Although the physical atrocities of the Massacre began on May 31st, 1921, many historians attribute the start of the massacre long before the accusation of the assault to the

² Alfred L. Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation*. Cary: Oxford University Press, 2003, 62.

³ Chris M. Messer. “THE TULSA RACE RIOT OF 1921: TOWARD AN INTEGRATIVE THEORY OF COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE.” *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 4 (2011): 1217–32.

⁴ Karlos K. Hill. “Community-Engaged History: A Reflection on the 100th Anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.” *The American Historical Review* 126, 2021.

increased frustrations from the black community surrounding the increased amount of lynching and the lack of access to equal protection under the law to prevent it.⁵

The division caused by the protection of Rowland led to the trauma experienced by many black Tulsans such as Mother Randle and Ms. Fletcher. Like many other black Tulsans in 1921, the story of Ms. Fletcher and Mother Randle had been lost to American history, tucked away under the framing of the Massacre as a race riot, which was one of many at the time. However, the story of Fletcher and Randle would not be lost forever. The story of the Tulsa Race Massacre and the stories of the last three survivors, Randle, Fletcher, and Mr. Hugh Van Ellis, also known as Uncle Red, began to gain traction in the year 2020.

Sparked by the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the revitalization of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) inspired an emphasis on black education in black history.⁶ This emphasis on black history motivated more media attention on past collective black trauma, which is why many black people began to have their first encounter with the memory of Tulsa in 2020. This media attention continued about Tulsa as the Massacre began to enter its centennial anniversary on May 31st, 2021. However, in this telling of the memory of Tulsa, the atrocity had no longer been remembered as a race riot, but the remembrance shifted to the term massacre. However, some may argue that the anniversary dates of the massacre play a larger role in the remembrance of Tulsa and the shift in its acknowledgments as a Massacre. In the case of the Tulsa Race Massacre, the murder of George Floyd prompted the revitalization of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) which created a movement for the accurate representation of anti-black violence in America, increased engagement for black people in their history, and

⁵ Jordan Brasher, et. al “Was Tulsa’s Brady Street Really Renamed? Racial (in)justice, Memory-Work and the Neoliberal Politics of Practicality.” *Social & Cultural Geography* 21, 2020.

⁶ Hill, “Community-Engaged History: A Reflection on the 100th Anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.”

demanded reparations as a financial acknowledgment for what the victims and communities lost because of those inaccuracies and lack of memorialization.

Uncle Red was 102 years old when he fought his last fight for the remuneration of the damages from the Tulsa Race Massacre a fight he regarded as the “race against time,” due to his aging. He died October 9th, 2023, in Denver, Colorado from cancer. Mr. Ellis was not even five months old when his family became “refugees in [their] own country” by the massacre. Still, Mr. Ellis had joined Mother Randle and Ms. Fletcher in a lawsuit against Oklahoma as the last three survivors. Unfortunately, Mr. Ellis was unable to see justice in his time. This narrative of Hugh Van Ellis’s death and his last moments was covered in a news article called “Hugh Van Ellis, Tulsa Race Massacre Survivor, Dies at a 102,” a story published by the New York Times. Although deeply saddened by the death of a survivor, what is more intriguing about this story is the use of the term massacre in the headline.⁷ This article joined the many articles after the murder of George Floyd that used this terminology. The use of massacre here is interesting since a mere ten to twelve years before the publishing of this article and similar ones from 2020 to 2023 the Massacre was still coined a Race Riot. For comparison, an article written in 2010 called “Before They Die and Before We Forget,” an article referring to the making of a Tulsa Race Massacre documentary attempting to contend with the “racing of time” in the remembrance of Tulsa. Its bolded subheading refers to the documentary as one about the Tulsa Race Riots. It goes on to refer to this massacre in Tulsa as a riot about six more times in the article.⁸

⁷ Christine Hauser, "Hughes Van Ellis, Tulsa Massacre Survivor, Dies at 102". *The New York Times*. October 10, 2023.

⁸ Brian W. Carter and Kaylee Davis. "Before they Die and before we Forget: Reggie Turner made the Documentary on the Tulsa Race Riots to Inform America about a Pivotal Turn in Black History." *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 2010.

The comparison of these two stories is so impactful because they both speak to the notion of the importance of sharing the story of Tulsa as the survivors of Tulsa dwindle due to age, yet one refers to what happened at Tulsa as a Race Massacre and never even mentions the term Race Riot while the other goes to mention Race Riot about seven times in the article. Why is that? From a larger scope, some may say the shift is a natural change over time that happens in language, but at a closer glance, this has more to do with the protest of the murder of George Floyd providing a new voice and narrative to all anti-black violence in America, past and present.

To understand the shift in the labeling of Tulsa from Race Riot to Massacre, one must first see the true definitions of the terms Race Riot and Massacre as well as understand the current climate of protest in America to acknowledge why this terminology is not consistent with its definition or messaging to modern times. According to Merriam-Webster, a race riot is defined as a riot caused by racial dissension or hatred.⁹ Additionally, the term riot itself is defined as a violent public disorder or a public violence, tumult, or disorder. To contextualize the violence aspect of the term riot, violence is defined as the use of physical force to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy.¹⁰ In looking at all three terms, none of them speak to murder, which was a key part of what took place in Tulsa. Therefore, in looking in Merriam-Webster for the definition of massacre, it is defined as the act or an instance of killing a number of usually helpless or unresisting human beings under circumstances of atrocity or cruelty.¹¹ In reflecting on the stories of Ms. Randle, Mother Randle, and Uncle Red, many unarmed black men, women, and children of Tulsa were murdered and terrorized by armed white men. The term riot does not speak to that

⁹ "Race riot," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*.

¹⁰ "Riot," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*.

¹¹ "Massacre," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*.

experience because it does not speak to murder. This term ultimately sanitizes or diminishes the history of the Massacre in this framing.

The framing of the Massacre in this terminology of Race Riot is challenged on this same ground by many people after the murder of George Floyd. Authors such as Hannibal Johnson, author of *Black Wall Street 100 — An American City Grapples With Its Historical Racial Trauma* published in 2020 states that “they felt the word ‘riot’ was soft and not an accurate descriptor of what happened.” Additionally, activists in Atlanta, Georgia who sought the same transition in naming for the 1906 Atlanta Massacre as the Tulsa Massacre received also stated that the term Race Riot is “misleading” to a “history that is not largely known” and that the term “Massacre is a better descriptor.”¹² In breaking down both comments, they sincerely speak to the analysis in the previous paragraph that the term race riot in referring to the Tulsa Race Massacre does not grant access to the full extent of the horrific events of the Massacre such as murder, and to not give the Massacre that access to a history not well known is misleading to a new generation of people trying to understand anti-black history in America. The shift in the language gives people the ability to access the accuracy of the anti-black violence tragedy of the massacre.

Beyond the shift in framing to Massacre giving access to the truth of the violence, it also allows a clear definition between race riots of the past and riots of the present. For many people after the murder of George Floyd, they have the image in their mind of a riot as synonymous with black protests which have often been framed with looting, destruction of property, and attack of police officers. This narrative has been framed in media and even in political discourse as seen in Governor Ron DeSantis, Florida Governor, referring to BLM as the “BLM riots and George Floyd riots” and that he “called out the National Guard” in seeing protests in other states

¹² Ernie Suggs, "Historians, advocates work to change 1906 massacre discussion". *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. September 22, 2022.

because he “stood by the police.” In this framing alone, there is no clear definition between riot and protest, which shows that some people did not allow room for the peaceful protesting that occurred, but also immediately frames any sort of speaking out against what happened to George Floyd as violent, or at least violent enough to need the National Guard.¹³ With these remarks, it is apparent that riots of modern times tend to be ones with no clear definition between protest and riot, but are also framed as violence for black causes. This framing adds to the misleading aspect that was in conversation about the Atlanta Massacre. Activist and CEO of Atlanta’s National Center for Civil and Human Rights, Jill Savit agrees with this perspective in a statement she makes saying “With ‘riot’ there is a context where it sounds like the Black community was rising up and committing the violence. This was not an attack by the Black community. It was an attack on the Black community.” Savit makes this statement because, as pointed out with DeSantis’ perspective, riot in today’s framing is violence for a black cause, typically as Savit points out, that is coming out of the black community.¹⁴

Ultimately, this understanding of riot in current terms is “misleading” to people today trying to learn about the riot. This is why the Black Lives Matter Movement calls for a renaming of the Tulsa Race Massacre from Race Riot because it weakens the demand for “justice for Greenwood” by misrepresenting the accuracy of the violence with outdated and inaccurate language. It weakens this cause by not giving survivors their due sympathy because it uses “soft” and “misleading” language that does not motivate the call to action that comes with a term such as massacre that breeds feelings of the murder of innocence that must be avenged and protected.

¹³ A.G. Gancarski. "Ron DeSantis continues mocking Nikki Haley over George Floyd position". *Newstex Blogs Florida Politics*. November 19, 2023.

¹⁴ Suggs, "Historians, advocates work to change 1906 massacre discussion".

As mentioned thus far, the revitalization of the Black Lives Matter Movement initiated by the murder of George Floyd prompted the switch from Race Riot to Massacre to properly characterize anti-black violence in America, which led to a modern strengthening in the fight for Greenwood. This revitalization and change from memorializing Tulsa as a Race Riot to a Massacre also allowed for a demand for reparations as many Tulsa victims were denied that opportunity due to the naming of Tulsa as a Race Riot. However, with the changing of the name, there was a case to be made for reparations to be given for the Massacre, not the Race Riot.

After the Massacre, once the dust settled, some black Tulsans attempted to go back to Greenwood to rebuild by claiming their insurance, but what they would soon find out is that their claims would be denied under the “riot clause.” The riot clause was a clause within their insurance plan that denied any insurance claim for racial riots that destroyed property in which the money was needed for the claim. In other words, it meant that they did not have coverage in the case of a riot to rebuild. Another reason why the term Race Riot is so harmful is because it upholstered the lack of access and equal protection of property for black people. This lack of aid resulted in the filing of lawsuits against the city of Tulsa and the insurance companies that denied the claims. In one round of suits, the plaintiffs sued Tulsa for 3,035,235.87 dollars. These suits were dismissed by the city, and the insurance suits were upheld by the “riot clause,” which justified why they refused to approve claims. News outlets of this time also reported that there were about 3 million lost in the pillage of Black Wall Street, and still very few strides in financial reconciliation would come.¹⁵

¹⁵ TULSA RIOT VICTIMS SUE CITY FOR MILLIONS: \$3,035,235.87 IS ASKED FROM CITY OF TULSA ALLEGATIONS ASSERT THAT NEGLIGENCE OF CITY OFFICIALS CAUSED IMMENSE LOSS." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, Jun 23,

With the massacre being largely forgotten for more than 100 years and there being fewer survivors to tell their stories, the recompense for receiving any financial reparation nearing the was slim. However, the “Black Lives Matter protests...stirred considerable renewed interest in reparations for Black Americans to help ameliorate past and continuing harms.”¹⁶ This “renewed interest” was prompted by the protest of the murder of George Floyd. Similar to Tulsa, the murder of George Floyd shines a light on the lack of equal protection under the law because when handled by police black people have been systematically unfairly treated and unprotected. This lack of equal protection under the law is a similar sentiment that the black Tulsans experienced before the massacre with the increase in lynching. In Brophy’s *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation*, Brophy speaks about the feelings that black citizens had leading up to the massacre, which was that they had been upset by the lack of equity in protection under the law in terms of separate but equal. He expounds on this by using the findings and news reports of the Tulsa Race Massacre grand jury, which essentially blamed black Tulsans for the riot and exonerated the white men and police officers.¹⁷ This exoneration of white men and blaming of black men is a sentiment shared in the history of antiblack violence in America as seen in the consistent narrative used when an unarmed black person is killed by a police officer, which is that they were resisting arrest. This act of resistance justified the forceful actions. An argument that was introduced in the murder of George Floyd, but dismissed by many.¹⁸ The sentiment of a lack of equal protection, however, remained allowing protestors and activists to share the frustrations of Tulsa. Therefore, the

¹⁶ "Reparations for Black Americans gains slow momentum following BLM". *Impact News Service*. February 15, 2022.

¹⁷ Brophy, 11-12 and 136-139.

¹⁸ "African American Man Dies In Minneapolis After Officer Kneels On His Neck". *The Frontrunner*. May 27, 2020

murder of George Floyd reignited past emotions of the Tulsa Race Massacre, which led to its centralization in the conversation of anti-black violence in America.

George Floyd's murder was a tragedy that shook the nation. This murder allowed black people, activists, and the media to engage with the history of anti-black atrocities in the American nation such as the Tulsa Race Massacre. It allowed survivors to get to tell their stories to a new generation on their terms before they passed away. It allowed them to reignite their fight for justice in their time. More importantly, it highlighted the importance of learning and knowing black history as it could get lost, and why it is so important for black people to be included in the telling of their history and its memorialization, especially concerning black tragedies that have been sanitized and whitewashed.¹⁹ Ultimately, the murder of George Floyd can spark such a passion for the remembrance of Tulsa because it allows for change in the view Tulsa race massacre away from the language and perspective of a race riot, which produced sentiments to unify all people indiscriminately in the memory of Tulsa. It also prompted a call for reparations to rectify the continued lack of equal protection under the law for all. Although the revitalization of the Black Lives Matter Movement took place around the centennial anniversary of the Tulsa, in attributing the spark of memorializing the Tulsa Race Massacre to its anniversary date it ultimately contributes to the whitewashing and sanitizing of black-centered history by not recognizing the role of black individuals in returning their history to the nation and themselves.

¹⁹ Brasher , et. al "Was Tulsa's Brady Street Really Renamed? Racial (in)justice, Memory-Work and the Neoliberal Politics of Practicality." *Social & Cultural Geography* 21, 2020.

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