



Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how "We the People" interact with the government and each other. Let's help each other expand our civic literacy.

The premise of the [U.S. Declaration of Independence](#) is that all men are created equal, with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This premise has a complicated history, and a look at the ways in which we have and have not lived up to these big ideas is necessary to help us progress towards the promises of our Founders.

In the early 20th century, the prevailing attitudes and policies regarding racial equality were reinforced by a United States Supreme Court decision from 1896, [Plessy v. Ferguson](#). In this case, the Supreme Court issued the doctrine of [separate but equal](#), which deemed racial segregation to be constitutional and prevented the full promise of the Declaration from being applied to African Americans.

May 31, 2021, provides an opportunity to examine that promise and reflect on the work still to be done as the nation remembers the [Tulsa Race Massacre](#) on its centennial.

Like many communities in the early 20th century, Tulsa, Oklahoma was segregated. In 1921, it had more than 100,000 residents, 10,000 of whom were African American. With segregation firmly in place, the African American community of Tulsa resided in the Greenwood District. Known as "Black Wall Street," the Greenwood District was a prosperous home to an active African American community, vibrant downtown, and flourishing businesses.



Greenwood District, known as 'Black Wall Street'

Despite these successes, segregation made it extremely difficult to carry out day-to-day activities for African Americans. Racial attitudes and perceptions were enough to justify violence against them, with little to no consequences for the perpetrators, and this contributed to the events in Tulsa on May 31 and June 01, 1921.

On May 31, 1921, Dick Rowland, a 19 year-old black shoe shiner, needed to use the restroom. Because of separate but equal, the only restroom Dick was allowed to use was at the top floor of a nearby building. Upon stepping into the elevator that would take him to the restroom, Sarah Page, a white 17 year-old elevator operator, screamed (historians speculate that he tripped and grabbed her arm, surprising her).

Upon hearing the scream, someone called the police, and Dick Rowland was arrested. Sarah Page knew Dick Rowland, and upon his arrest, she told police nothing happened and did not press charges.

However, the newspapers spread the story that something happened to a white woman that involved a black man, and in 1921, that was enough to lead to violence.

Mobs of white men descended on the courthouse where Rowland was held. They wanted to [lynch](#) him. Groups of African-American men arrived well-armed to defend Rowland. Tensions flared and a shot was fired. Ten white men and two black men were dead, and the men who arrived to defend Rowland retreated back toward the Greenwood District. The white mob followed, heavily armed and increasingly violent.

The Greenwood District was burned to the ground by the mob. This mob was supported by [men in airplanes](#), shooting, and, according to some reports, dropping bombs from the air. [By the end of the massacre](#) on June 1, 1921, more than 1,000 homes had been burned to the ground, leaving 10,000 people homeless; historians and witnesses estimate that about 150 people were killed. Property losses exceeded \$30 million in today's dollars. Mobs of white men descended on the courthouse where Rowland was held. They wanted to lynch him. Groups of African-American men arrived well-armed to defend Rowland. Tensions flared and a shot was fired. Ten white men and two black men were dead, and the men who arrived to defend Rowland retreated back toward the Greenwood District. The white mob followed, heavily armed and increasingly violent.

It is [only recently](#) that attention has been paid to what happened on these two dark days in 1921.

The Greenwood District took ten years to rebuild, overcoming vows by white city leaders and newspaper editors that no strong black community would be allowed in Tulsa again. But 'Black Wall Street' breathed again, until the end of segregation legally allowed blacks to live, work, and shop where they pleased. Ultimately, the Tulsa Race Massacre was one of [many such incidents](#) throughout the late 19th and early half of the 20th centuries (including [Ocoee](#) and [Rosewood](#) here in Florida), evidence that the Founders' promise that 'All Men Are Created Equal' had a long way to go.



Greenwood District, after the Massacre

To Think and To Do: What It has been said that the [Founding Documents](#) are in many ways [aspirational](#). In your opinion, how might we as a nation and a people work to fulfill the aspirations of those documents and the promise of the Declaration that 'all men are created equal', with the right to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'?

Learn MORE about the Tulsa Race Massacre. Free registration may be required.

- [The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and the financial fallout](#), from the Harvard Gazette
- [An Eyewitness Account of Tulsa](#), from the Smithsonian
- [Tulsa: The Fire and the Forgotten](#), from PBS

