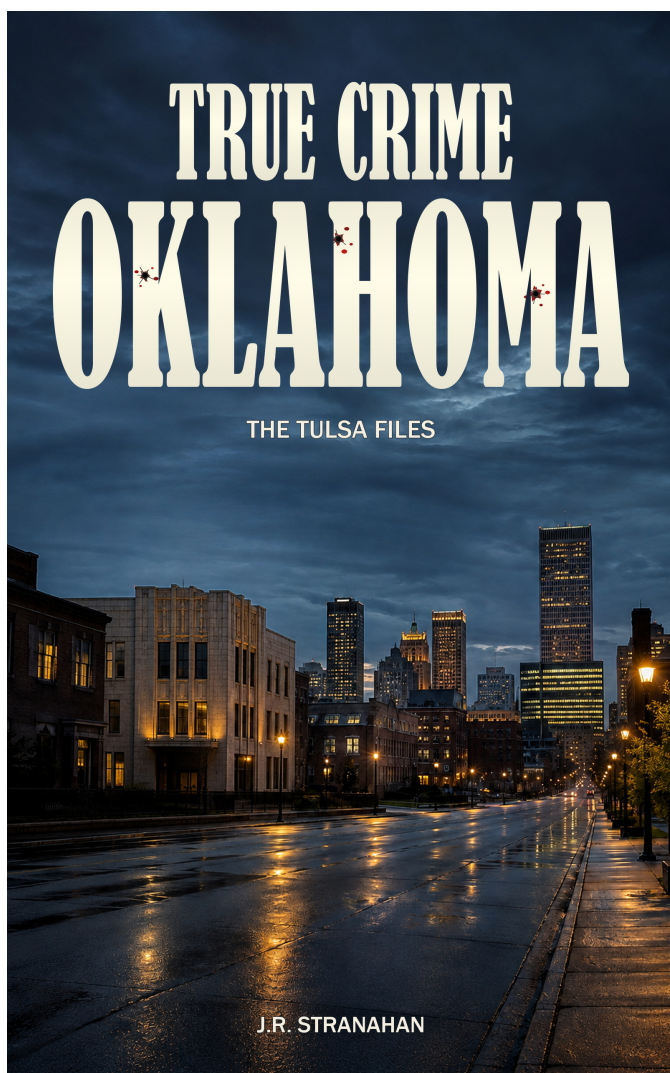




True Crime Oklahoma: The Tulsa Files

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Greenwood: Lives Before the Fire

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Chapter One: Greenwood: Lives Before the Fire

Greenwood had a theater before it had a place in the history of American massacres. Loula Williams owned the Dreamland, a confectionary, and other theaters elsewhere in Oklahoma. J.B. Stradford owned a hotel. The Nails family had a shoe shop. There were drugstores, grocers, churches, professional offices, and houses in which children grew up surrounded by the things their parents had worked to acquire.

Long afterward, survivors remembered some of those things with great precision. A piano. A sofa. Swings in a yard. Jewelry, silver, and a family's first automobile. Their accounts restore a neighborhood that can disappear in the familiar photographs of its destruction. The photographs show what was left. The memories explain what had been there. 1.1

Greenwood's commercial life grew within a segregated city. Black residents who faced humiliation or exclusion in white businesses spent money in their own district. Black farmers and residents of surrounding towns came there to shop as well. That circulation of trade supported an unusually successful business community, remembered as Black Wall Street.

The name can mislead if it suggests a district of banks and brokerage houses. Greenwood's wealth lay in trade, property, businesses, professional work, and the institutions its residents sustained. Prosperity did not remove the disadvantages imposed by Tulsa's government. The district received less investment in paved streets, sanitation, and running water than white neighborhoods. It was a place of achievement within unequal conditions, not a place that segregation somehow made fortunate. 1.2

Children could experience its security without yet understanding all the forces outside it. Viola Ford Fletcher and Lessie Benningfield Randle later described childhood homes filled with family and toys. Their memories included ordinary safety. In the early hours of June 1, 1921, that safety was broken by white Tulsans who entered Greenwood with firearms, took residents into custody, stole their belongings, and set buildings alight. 1.3

The courthouse had failed before

The danger of a lynching was not hypothetical in Tulsa. Less than a year before the massacre, an armed crowd had taken Roy Belton, a white prisoner, from the courthouse jail and killed him. Police Chief John Gustafson ordered his officers not to interfere. Afterward he publicly suggested that the killing would benefit the city, despite professing opposition to mob justice.

A.J. Smitherman, who published Greenwood's Tulsa Star, drew a different lesson. A cell high in the courthouse could not keep a prisoner safe if officials let a mob reach him. For Black Tulsans, Belton's death showed what might happen when the next threatened prisoner was Black. 1.4

Oklahoma's own history gave them further reason for concern. Black settlement had once carried a promise of opportunity, expressed in all-Black towns and in the land and businesses families acquired. Some Black Oklahomans were descendants of people enslaved by members of the tribal nations forced into Indian Territory. Their histories and tribal affiliations did not disappear when they became residents of Greenwood. Others had come in later migrations.

Statehood in 1907 brought laws enforcing segregation. The opportunities some families found coexisted with racial restrictions and terror. A decade before Greenwood burned, a white mob in Okemah had taken a Black mother and her son from jail and lynched them. The possibility that officials might abandon a prisoner was part of lived knowledge in the state. 1.5

This background matters to what happened at the Tulsa courthouse on May 31. The armed Black men who went there did not arrive in a city where a jail, a badge, and a promise had always been enough to prevent murder. They arrived in a city that had recently demonstrated the opposite.

An elevator, an accusation

On May 30, Dick Rowland used an elevator in the Drexel Building. He was a young Black man; the operator, Sarah Page, was a young white woman. A white clerk reported that Rowland had tried to assault her. Police arrested him the next morning.

What happened in the elevator is not known with certainty. Later explanations have included an accidental stumble, a foot stepped on, or a private relationship between the two. In a later federal interview, Gustafson said Page had no scratches, bruises, or disarranged clothing and had reported no improper remark by Rowland. She did not pursue the charge. 1.6

The Tulsa Tribune nevertheless published an inflammatory account on May 31. It portrayed the encounter as an attempted assault and claimed evidence of injury. It also misrepresented Page's background. A reader of that article received a story of danger that the known evidence did not establish.

Some survivors remembered a separate editorial calling for a lynching. Historians have searched for it, and the 2001 state commission offered a reward for a copy. None was found. There are competing explanations for the missing editorial, including the possibility that it appeared in an edition that did not survive and the possibility that memories of separate newspaper items became combined. 1.7

The documented article was inaccurate and racially charged. It appeared while Rowland was in custody and talk of lynching spread through Tulsa.

By early evening, a white crowd had gathered outside the courthouse. Some demanded that Rowland be handed over. Sheriff Willard McCullough refused. He placed deputies around the prisoner and disabled the elevator. When three men pushed inside, he stopped them from proceeding. For Rowland, these were consequential acts of protection. They did not disperse the crowd outside. 1.8

Two visits

Black residents came to the courthouse in two groups. The first, numbering roughly twenty-five men, arrived shortly after 9:00 p.m. Many were veterans, some wearing uniforms, and many carried weapons. They offered to help protect Rowland. After receiving assurances that he would be safe, they returned to Greenwood.

The sight of armed Black men enraged people in the white crowd. Its numbers increased. Word reached Greenwood that the gathering had grown to around two thousand, and a second group of approximately seventy-five Black men went to the courthouse. 1.9

There is conflicting evidence about whether McCullough had asked them to come. The 1921 federal file includes accounts suggesting that some people believed he had telephoned for assistance. McCullough denied summoning them. Gustafson, his political opponent, repeated a report that he had. The later Justice Department review concluded that the records leave open both the possibility of an invitation and the possibility that the Greenwood men believed they had one.

Their presence was later made to carry an extraordinary burden of blame. Official accounts would treat it as the provocation that caused the disaster, shrinking the threatened lynching into something slight or unserious. Yet the sheriff himself had confronted men demanding his prisoner, and Tulsa had already seen a mob penetrate that jail. The Greenwood men's concern for Rowland had a concrete basis. 1.10

Elsewhere, white men sought more weapons. Hundreds went to the armory and demanded rifles and ammunition. Major James A. Bell and

other guardsmen turned them away. The failed attempt appears in the National Guard's own records. Its timing is significant: the effort to arm the crowd began before the first exchange of gunfire at the courthouse.

1.11

The most familiar account of that first shot describes a white man trying to take a Black veteran's gun. Another account survives in the federal investigator's interviews. A white attorney, L.W. Crutcher, said a white man was given a firearm after complaining about the behavior of the Black men and then fired into their group. These versions cannot be joined into one uninterrupted scene. They are different accounts of a moment that witnesses experienced amid a hostile crowd.

What followed is less uncertain. More shots were fired. People fell. The Greenwood men retreated north, pursued by white men. Violence spread beyond the people who had stood at the courthouse. Black Tulsans who had played no part in protecting Rowland became targets.

1.12

The tracks

The Frisco tracks marked a boundary between Greenwood and white Tulsa. During the night, they became a line across which men fired. Black residents took positions to defend their homes and businesses. Some had military experience. The fighting was severe enough that passengers on an incoming train had to shelter on the floor.

Officials requested National Guard help from outside Tulsa by telegram at about 1:45 a.m. Troops already living in Tulsa were meanwhile taking part in events on the ground. Those two groups would later be confused in recollections and summaries. They did not arrive at the same time or perform identical roles. 1.13

Police also gave special commissions to white civilians with little apparent screening. One later police account put the number at about five hundred in half an hour. Many had been part of the crowd demanding or anticipating Rowland's lynching. Some had been drinking.

A badge did not transform those circumstances into training, restraint, or lawful purpose.

White men broke into businesses to obtain firearms. A hardware-store owner later identified a police captain as distributing guns from his store. The special deputies were subsequently implicated in the same violence they might have been expected to prevent. The 2025 federal review found no evidence that police adequately supervised them after appointing them. 1.14

Rumors of a Black uprising traveled through white Tulsa. One report claimed armed reinforcements were coming by train from nearby towns. Guardsmen went to the station, but the train did not carry the force they expected. In Greenwood, residents were being disarmed and taken away. Even Black domestic workers in white households were rounded up, although their presence at their employers' homes plainly did not place them in a battle on the streets.

Fires began near the tracks during the early hours. Firefighters who tried to respond were threatened by armed white men and told to let the buildings burn. The taking of residents into custody left homes and businesses without the people who might have protected them. 1.15

There were families who escaped during the night. Others had not yet understood how extensive the danger would become. As some firing diminished, the district could appear to have withstood the attack. Across the tracks, however, groups of white men were being organized into companies and moved into position.

This organization was not reconstructed solely from distant childhood memories. The Tulsa Daily World reported the work of city officials and guardsmen in forming armed men into companies. Guard reports likewise recorded organization. A federal interview described an officer recruiting men from outside the city for a raid. The evidence of coordination is one reason the events cannot adequately be explained as an uncontrollable crowd that simply wandered north. 1.16

A mother at the window

For Mary E. Jones Parrish, the evening had begun with work. She taught typewriting and shorthand under the YMCA. Her class kept her occupied until about nine. After the students left, she opened a book she wanted to finish. Her daughter remained awake, looking out the window and occasionally drawing her mother's attention to the people passing outside.

Parrish did not initially put down the book. Then her daughter reported seeing men with guns. That brought her to the window. Small groups were gathered in the street. When she went downstairs, she learned about the threat against the young man in jail and the Black men going to help protect him.^{1.42}

She knew Tulsa as a place she had chosen, not merely a place she happened to occupy when violence arrived. She had visited in 1918, returned to Rochester, and later gone to McAlester to help care for her dying mother. After her mother's death, she settled in Tulsa. In her later account she explained that the cooperation she observed among Black businesspeople had drawn her more strongly than the possibility of making money. She admired people working together to sustain schools, churches, businesses, and homes.

That memory of why she came remained part of the story of why she stayed. Throughout the coming ordeal, relatives would urge her to leave. She would repeatedly decide that she wanted to see what happened to her community.^{1.43}

On the night of May 31, she and her daughter watched from their window until Parrish told the child to lie down. The sound of gunfire continued. Parrish had read about racial violence in other cities, but for hours she could not take in that it was happening around her own home. When she understood the danger, she held her daughter, read from the Psalms, and prayed for courage.

Around half past one, the firing seemed to lessen. Then someone outside called attention to fire on Cincinnati. Parrish could see smoke. Later she watched the Midway Hotel burning. A friend called the fire department and was told help would come. None arrived while they watched. Near five, another call, this one to police, produced an assurance that militia would reach the city around seven.^{1.44}

The women were not consulting a reliable schedule for their rescue. They were making calls from a building in a district under attack, trying to learn whether help was coming. From the Woods Building they could see men unloading with rifles near the granary by the tracks. Parrish and a woman she identified as Mrs. Jones moved between doors and windows. Occasionally they leaned out and were warned to get back before they were shot. The electric lights had gone out. They waited for daylight because they hoped it would make things better.

In her account, daylight made the danger clearer. She heard aircraft and saw them approaching. She saw people leaving burning houses, some carrying babies or leading children, others old and struggling to move. Still she found herself unable to leave. Her daughter, now dressed, was placed behind the back of a duofold so that a bullet would have to pass through the furniture before reaching her. Looking outside, Parrish saw a man fall after hearing him groan. Someone pulled her back into the building.^{1.45}

At last the Joneses decided to go. They left through a door onto Archer. Parrish took Florence Mary through the west door and into Greenwood Avenue. Mother and child had no time to collect hats. Parrish described the street ahead as empty for a block or more. A voice warned that they would both be killed if they remained out there. She kept moving. She believed the building they had left would be destroyed, and she was trying to reach a friend's home beyond Standpipe Hill.

The route did not bring the relief she expected. She could see houses burning and armed men on the hill. As she approached the Greenwood Addition, other people fleeing the district joined her path. When she

reached the friend's house, the family was gone. They had waited for her during the night and then fled themselves.1.46

Parrish followed the crowd. New arrivals were asked how far the fire had spread when they left. She eventually encountered the Thompson family on a truck headed east, and Mrs. Thompson called her aboard. The ride carried them past people who had to continue on foot. An older couple struggled along the road; the woman asked the people in the truck to take her coat because carrying it had become too much. They accepted it. Parrish never found the woman again to return it.

Farther out, a woman warned them against passing through another town and invited them to her home instead. They accepted. Food and water had become immediate concerns. They had bought bread from a wagon along the road. Children were thirsty. At the house, so many people needed water that a washtub was used in place of a pail. Parrish helped another exhausted couple by taking their baby for a while after a broken wagon wheel had forced them to walk.1.47

Even an offer of help could sound threatening after what they had seen. An older man sent to obtain food returned with news that Red Cross trucks would bring supplies and take people back to Tulsa. The group left before the trucks could reach them. They did not yet trust the offer. Parrish later wrote with gratitude about the Red Cross, but she did not revise away her first fear of people arriving from the city they had escaped.

The next refuge required another walk across the prairie, with adults carrying children to protect their legs from weeds. Their hosts supplied a hot meal and somewhere to sleep. Though more than thirteen miles from Tulsa by her estimate, Parrish could still see smoke at about ten that night. The following morning, a white employer arrived looking for a man who worked for him and confirmed that Greenwood had burned. Parrish remembered that confirmation as the moment she first cried.1.48

Her account does not tell the whole district's story. It gives something the larger chronology cannot: the sequence of decisions made by one

mother who could not see beyond the next street, the next house, or the next offer of shelter.

Daybreak

Shortly after five on the morning of June 1, witnesses heard a whistle or siren. The advance into Greenwood began. By then the violence had changed in character from the exchanges around the courthouse. Armed white men moved against a residential district. Children, women, older people, and people unable to defend themselves were caught in it.

Survivors later described being awakened urgently and told to leave. Some escaped without shoes or daytime clothes. Parents led children through the streets. Families became separated. Other people hid inside houses as men entered, searched, and set fires. 1.17

The testimony is sometimes difficult to place on one exact clock. People in different parts of Greenwood could hear gunfire before they saw it, see smoke without knowing which building had begun to burn, or be forced out before they knew where relatives had gone. Those limits do not weaken the shared account of an attack. They explain why no one survivor's recollection can serve as a view from above the entire district.

The murder of physician A.C. Jackson became one of the documented individual crimes. A white witness described seeing Jackson leave his home with his hands raised. The witness asked the armed men not to harm him. Jackson was shot and later died. His home was then looted and burned. 1.18

Other testimony describes people shot while trying to escape or while unable to move quickly enough. Not all of those victims can now be identified with confidence. The history contains named deaths and accounts whose victims remained unnamed. Preserving that distinction is part of preserving the people, rather than filling the uncertainty with an invented list.

Greenwood's defenders continued to resist in places. Men used the belfry of Mount Zion Baptist Church as a firing position. Stradford tried to

defend his hotel and surrendered after receiving a promise that it would not be burned. It burned anyway. The presence of armed resistance does not turn the burning of a neighborhood into an even contest between two armies. 1.19

Looting accompanied the fires. Residents' possessions were carried away before buildings were destroyed. Accounts from Black survivors are corroborated by white witnesses interviewed immediately afterward. They described furniture, clothes, sewing machines, phonographs, vehicles, and other property being stolen. Women as well as men participated in taking goods. Police often failed to intervene.

The remembered pianos and jewelry belong here again, for a reason different from their place in the opening memories. Objects once evidence of work, pleasure, or family achievement became objects taken from people whose homes were burning. The theft was personal before it could be added to an estimate of the district's financial loss. 1.20

The doctor who could not reach his patients

Dr. R.T. Bridgewater received a call shortly after daylight asking him to come to the hospital and dress the wounds of two men. He hurried to prepare. When he opened his front door, a shot from a nearby hill grazed his leg. He closed the door. His wife, hearing the firing, opened it slightly, and another volley struck the porch.

In the testimony he gave on June 22, Bridgewater remembered his wife urging him to leave. He put his medical cases down in the hall. She and their niece dressed, and they left the house locked. A call to treat wounded men had become an attempt to keep his own family alive. 1.53

They traveled northeast, eventually reaching a friend's home about two miles outside the city. From there they watched the fire spreading. Around ten, men arrived in cars saying troops had come. Men dressed as soldiers then directed people to return, assuring them it was safe. The family went back toward Tulsa together, but did not remain together.

Bridgewater's wife and niece were directed along Greenwood. He was searched and ordered toward Convention Hall with his hands raised and his hat off. More than one set of officers searched him along the way.

He reached the hall about half past ten by his recollection. Later he was released to accompany the county physician and a Red Cross worker to Morning Side Hospital, where he could finally assist the wounded. He stopped at home to collect the medical cases he had left behind.

The house had survived. Its contents had not been protected. His piano and furniture had been piled outside. The safe had been opened and the money taken. Clothing, silverware, rugs, cut glass, and the family Bible were missing. Windows and light fixtures were broken. The telephone had been pulled from the wall. Broken glass covered the floors, including enough in the basement for the family to gather two tubs of it. His car was gone.^{1.54}

He did not have time to put the household in order. He moved furniture onto the porch and went on treating people. The family's first night after the attack was spent on the floor at the fairgrounds. They slept at a school before returning to a house with broken doors and windows. Alongside work at a sanitarium for less severely wounded patients, Bridgewater answered calls around the city for the Red Cross. He was also the assistant county physician.

His account went beyond the first days. After several days of heavy work, he was asked to go to the fairgrounds at night. His wife was ill and frightened and asked him to remain with her. Having already answered two calls that evening, he asked to be excused. The next night, still exhausted, he asked that another doctor be sent. Someone else was found. Bridgewater continued his daytime treatment work.

A week or ten days later, he said, he encountered newspaper statements accusing him of refusing Red Cross work without pay. The white medical association voted to discontinue a weekly allowance on that basis. He disputed the accusation and described the work he had actually done. His statement preserved the doctor's objection: after

being fired upon, detained, and robbed, he had spent days treating the injured, yet his two requests for relief were being used against him.^{1.55}

Carrying a mother

Carrie Kinlaw had spent part of the night with a neighbor before returning home. Early in the morning she saw people running from Greenwood and being fired upon from a hill. Her mother, who had been unable to care for herself for four years, was several blocks away in the direction from which they were fleeing.

Kinlaw went toward her. She and her sisters put their mother on a cot. Three women carried the cot while another carried a bundle of clothes. They moved her about six blocks under gunfire. Groups of armed white people stopped them, demanding to know about men and guns and ordering their hands raised. Kinlaw remembered boys among the armed groups, not only adults.^{1.56}

Around eleven, the family was separated. Her mother and one sister were taken away, supposedly to Convention Hall. Kinlaw was later picked up by a truck and taken to the same place, but she could not find her mother there. Red Cross workers helped her search. That night, they located her at the North Methodist Church.

The following day Kinlaw went to see what remained of her houses. Of three rental properties, she found one small structure still standing. She brought her mother there. She tried to obtain a pass to send her away and could not. Finally she used what little money she had to arrange her departure anyway. According to Kinlaw's testimony, her mother remained unconscious for two weeks and died.^{1.57}

Her account does not include a medical determination of the cause of death. It does establish the conditions through which an already dependent woman had been carried, the family's separation, and the difficulty her daughter faced even in arranging care away from the city. Not everyone who survived the gunfire was able to recover from what followed.

What could be seen from the air

Aircraft were seen over Tulsa during the massacre. Their precise part in the violence remains disputed. Survivors and other witnesses reported shots from planes and objects dropped onto Greenwood. Attorney B.C. Franklin later described seeing incendiary material. Newspapers and civil suits also contained allegations of aerial attack.

The Justice Department's 2025 review examined these accounts without treating every element as resolved. It found that there had been witnesses who could have testified to firing and incendiaries, had investigators pursued criminal cases promptly. It also noted the lack of pilot testimony and difficulties in determining which aircraft did what. 1.21

The same care applies to theories that Greenwood's destruction had been planned long before May 31 to obtain its land. The attack that developed overnight was organized. That does not by itself prove a months-long conspiracy. The 2025 review found the evidence of an earlier comprehensive plan insufficient, while recognizing that people with property interests quickly sought to use the destruction for their advantage. The distinction between those propositions becomes especially clear in what the city did after the fires. 1.22

Different uniforms, different conduct

National Guard troops from outside Tulsa arrived at about 9:15 on June 1. They first had to locate and report to local authorities. Martial law was declared later that morning, after much of Greenwood's destruction had already occurred. Contemporary Black accounts credited some of the arriving troops with checking looting and restoring order. Other accounts faulted the delay before effective action.

The later federal review distinguished those troops from Tulsa's resident guardsmen, some of whom were also police officers. It also distinguished the National Guard from the wartime Home Guard and the American Legion, organizations with overlapping personnel that

witnesses sometimes named interchangeably. 1.23

This is more than a dispute over terminology. An account that says only that the Guard arrived and stopped the violence omits the role of local guardsmen earlier in the night and morning. An account that treats every guardsman as performing the same acts ignores evidence of conduct that varied by time, unit, and person.

The review also examined explanations that residents were taken into custody for protection. Some guardsmen may have understood their orders that way. The surviving record does not establish one motive for all of them. What the detention accomplished, however, was observable: armed Black residents were removed from Greenwood, many white looters remained free, and homes were left exposed. Later-arriving troops also participated in holding Black residents in camps, while white residents were not subjected to the same system. 1.24

McCullough's conduct likewise cannot be captured by saying he either protected Greenwood or joined its attackers. He refused to surrender Rowland. He then remained focused on the courthouse while the wider violence developed. The later record includes his admission that he slept during part of the crisis. Protecting one prisoner was his duty and saved that man from the crowd. It did not meet the city's larger emergency. 1.25

Police Chief Gustafson faced a grand-jury investigation and was convicted and removed from office. That outcome is sometimes allowed to stand in for a criminal reckoning with the massacre. It was not a set of murder convictions for the deaths in Greenwood. The wider grand-jury account blamed Black men for the violence, including their pursuit of social equality among its supposed causes. 1.26

Passes

For thousands of Black Tulsans, surviving the attack did not bring freedom to go home. They were held at the Convention Hall, McNulty Park, and the fairgrounds under armed guard. Many had no homes left to return to, but the camps were not merely temporary accommodation offered on equal terms. Residents were confined without individual grounds to suspect that they had committed a crime.

At the camps' fullest, estimates placed the population between four thousand and six thousand. Some people remained for days; others for as long as two weeks. Food and sanitation could be inadequate. Residents needed special identification to leave. Obtaining it required a white sponsor. 1.27

The pass system made the racial distribution of power tangible. Black people working for white employers could receive permanent green cards. Others were issued red travel permits that lasted only a day. A missing or expired permit exposed its holder to arrest again. Even an employment card did not protect everyone from official demands about where they could work.

Some detainees were compelled to clear debris and bury the dead. A National Guard field order required labor from able-bodied Black men remaining in the camps. Red Cross records described payment for some of this work, but the conditions of relief left the dispossessed with little choice. A man might work to obtain the money that would buy his next meal while helping clear the ruins of his own community. 1.28

The Red Cross organized medical care, clothing, food, and shelter, working with local people and volunteers from elsewhere. Booker T. Washington High School became a hospital. Many survivors later remembered the relief workers with gratitude. That gratitude can coexist with the record of restrictive conditions under which relief operated and the government's treatment of the people who needed it.

Tents remained long after the immediate detention period. Some had no floors. People lived in makeshift accommodation through sickness and cold. The destruction of a home was not limited to the minutes in which it burned. It exposed families to continuing hardship at a time when they were also trying to locate relatives, mourn deaths, replace possessions, and earn money. 1.29

A card and a paycheck

When Parrish and Florence Mary returned to Tulsa in a Red Cross truck, they came through the white part of the city, sitting on the truck bed without bundles of belongings. The truck stopped at Exposition Park. There she saw people under guard, cots set out, clothing being distributed, and people waiting for sandwiches. A friend whose house had survived invited her to come home with the family. The house was standing, but possessions had been disturbed and some were missing. 1.49

The next morning she went out looking for news and help. At the high school, the Red Cross sign brought relief. Across the street stood a YMCA tent. Both organizations were familiar presences in a landscape that had ceased to be familiar. Before returning to seek supplies, she reached her brother Reuben in McAlester by long-distance telephone. He had heard that she and her daughter had burned in the building. No one who spread that report had seen them leave.

That call corrected the worst possible news for one family. Around the relief stations, many others were trying to do the same. Lists of letters and telegrams were posted. Theo Baughman of the Oklahoma Sun produced a small daily newspaper carrying lists to help relatives locate one another. People watched for those names and for the names of the dead in the larger newspapers. 1.50

Parrish stood in line to obtain clothes for her daughter. She had worked to support herself and was accustomed to buying what she needed. Now the clothes they wore were all they had, and she was not permitted to go into town to replace them. Inside the clothing room she found

supplies, but on leaving she was searched to make sure she had taken no more than one change. Gratitude for clothing and humiliation at the conditions under which it was issued occupied the same account.

At the YMCA tent, people met friends and exchanged their experiences. Parrish's brother Edward came for her, making his way past guards to reach the district. She again declined to leave. Later another brother invited her to Langston. She was preparing to accept that invitation when the Reverend H.T.S. Johnson engaged her to report for the Inter-Racial Commission.^{1.51}

That work gave her a reason to remain. In the ensuing weeks, she collected accounts from people whose experiences differed from her own. Before those accounts became historical sources, they were the reports of people she encountered in a damaged city, trying to explain where they had gone, whom they had lost, and what had happened to their property.

Her employment did not exempt her from the pass system. Returning from business downtown with a friend on a rainy day, she was stopped by a guard who demanded their cards. Neither had one. They were ordered to city hall.

There she met Professor Gregg, the YMCA's executive secretary. He tried to establish her standing by explaining her work and showing the check she had just received for three months' service. The check bore the signature of the executive secretary of the central YMCA. It was evidence that her work was known to the organization and that she had been paid for it. It did not satisfy the requirement for a white person to vouch for her.

She had never worked for a white employer in Tulsa. At last she thought of a business firm that knew her and called. Someone from the firm came and identified her. Then she received a card.^{1.52}

Parrish's description makes the rule concrete. She had a named position, a person willing to explain it, and a paycheck showing three

months of work. What she lacked was not evidence of who she was. It was the endorsement the authorities had decided a Black resident must obtain before moving freely in the city.

Counting what was lost

Dimple L. Bush could describe the continuing medical work from inside the hospital. Eleven months after the massacre, she was working as secretary at Maurice Willows Hospital. The last patient still being treated there for injuries from the attack had been discharged on April 28. He remained on crutches. The calendar had moved almost a year beyond the gunfire before that period of inpatient treatment ended.^{1.61}

Bush had escaped the violence herself. She and her husband left the Red Wing Hotel on June 1 after men outside urged them to get out of the line of fire. She recalled becoming so weak when she reached the street that she could not walk. A taxi driver helping women escape took them to friends farther north on Greenwood. Within minutes, firing in that area forced them to continue.^{1.62}

They joined another family and others walking north. There was no settled destination. Her husband and a companion eventually decided to try to reach the Kennedy Building, where he worked. On the way, near Main and Archer, she saw Black men being hurried toward Convention Hall with their hands raised. People watched from the sides of the street. Bush remembered some expressions of pity but many people treating the prisoners' humiliation as entertainment.

At the Kennedy Building the couple received shelter for the day. By evening, Bush said, they were permitted to go into the streets if they wore a tag marked for police protection. A person without one could be arrested. As the days passed, further cards were required to establish employment or relief work and to enter the Black district. Reaching a place of safety had not given the couple unrestricted movement through their city.^{1.63}

Her hospital work later put her in front of lists that might otherwise look authoritative to a researcher. She reported finding sixty-three names under wounded and fifteen under dead, then explicitly warned that the list was incomplete and could not be relied on as a correct total. She did not present an institutional document as a comprehensive count simply because it was kept in a hospital file.1.64

The objects of her memory were often people trying to assist one another. She recalled a wounded mother and son each trying to help the other, injured men unable to travel farther, children searching for parents, and wives waiting for men who had been taken away. Bush separated what she had seen from information nurses later gave her about premature births. Her account moved between the street she had escaped and the treatment institution where she was working months later. Both belonged to the duration of the attack's consequences.1.65

No precise death total can be supplied with confidence. Estimates have reached three hundred and sometimes higher. Records are incomplete, bodies were handled irregularly, and missing residents included both people killed and people who left Tulsa and never returned. A number repeated often is not the same thing as an identified list.

The Red Cross recorded extensive injuries and medical treatment. Its figures included roughly seven hundred injured people and 163 operations in the week after the massacre. These counts show a scale of suffering without pretending to capture every person affected. 1.30

The physical damage was easier to photograph than the deaths were to enumerate. The Red Cross estimated that more than twelve hundred houses had burned, with additional houses looted. Commercial and religious buildings had been destroyed as well. Photographers recorded expanses of ruins. Some images were made into postcards, turning the expulsion and destruction into things that could be displayed or sent through the mail.

Property estimates varied, depending on what was included and who calculated them. The figures could include buildings and merchandise

while missing income that would never be earned, businesses that could not reopen, documents destroyed, or the loss of a family's accumulated security. They were evidence of damage, not a complete measure of a neighborhood. 1.31

In 2025 the city's continuing graves investigation illustrated why the historical work still required careful distinctions. Researchers identified George Melvin Gillispie as a person buried at Oaklawn but did not establish his cause of death or classify him as a confirmed massacre victim. Separately, archival veterans' records identified James Goings as a victim of the massacre, while his specific burial remained unconfirmed. A name attached to remains and a name established as a massacre victim were related kinds of work, but they were not interchangeable. 1.32

The rule against rebuilding

Tulsa's white leadership initially promised help. A Public Welfare Board collected money for immediate needs. It also rejected aid from outside the city, even returning a thousand-dollar check from the Chicago Tribune. The reasons for refusing assistance cannot now be established with certainty. What can be established is that people needed help and a source of it was turned away.

Mayor T.D. Evans replaced that board with a Reconstruction Committee. He publicly favored industrial use for the land Greenwood occupied and suggested moving its Black settlement farther north and east. The committee provided no substantial program of reparations. 1.33

On June 7, only a week after the attack, the city enacted a fire ordinance extending restrictive building requirements into much of Greenwood. New structures had to be made of specified fire-resistant materials and reach at least two stories. For families whose resources had just been destroyed, the requirements could make rebuilding impossible.

The contemporary presentation of the ordinance was explicit about its expected result. Greenwood would become an industrial and wholesale

district, and Black residents would not be able to replace their homes there. The law supplied a means to achieve through building restrictions part of what the attackers had accomplished through force: removal of the people who lived on the land. 1.34

B.C. Franklin and fellow attorneys I.H. Spears and T.O. Chappelle worked from a tent on Archer Street. They collected information for claims and challenged the ordinance. First they obtained temporary relief on notice grounds. In September they secured a permanent injunction protecting property rights against the city's measure.

The injunction was a victory with practical consequences. It removed a legal obstacle placed directly in the path of residents trying to rebuild. It did not restore their houses, replace stolen money, or return a family member. Before the ordinance was stopped, people had been arrested in attempts to reconstruct homes. 1.35

Insurance offered another apparent route. Many buildings had been insured. Owners sought payment and encountered policy exclusions for damage caused by a riot. Claims against insurers and suits against the city did not produce the broad recovery Greenwood required. A 1926 state supreme court ruling upheld the use of the exclusion in the litigation before it. The legal classification of the destruction had consequences for the people paying the cost. 1.36

Dora Wells's rooms

The businesses people tried to restore had supported other workers as well as their owners. Before the attack, Dora Wells had operated a garment factory employing several Black women. The destruction took her home and business. Parrish described Wells returning on June 2 to find their remains still smoldering. 1.66

Wells began with three small rooms. Parrish credited her with erecting the first frame building in the contested district, a contemporary description of her speed in rebuilding rather than a complete survey of construction dates. The small replacement also became a place to

shelter other survivors. Wells fed people and helped the sick despite being among the property owners who had suffered heavily herself.

In August she traveled as a delegate to the Elks' national gathering in Boston. There she described the situation in Tulsa. Assistance followed from eastern temples, churches and clubs. With members of Tulsa's Cosmopolitan Temple, she distributed clothing to 267 people, according to Parrish's account. Eligibility for that clothing did not depend on belonging to her fraternal organization. Separate cash donations were distributed among Daughter Elks.1.67

That distinction showed how several networks operated at once. A person could organize through a particular church or lodge and still provide food, clothing or shelter to people outside it. Wells's new rooms were not a replacement garment factory on the former scale. They were what she had managed to build, and she used them to meet needs that extended beyond her own household. Her trip to Boston also brought outside assistance into a city whose official leadership had earlier turned some outside offers away.

A congregation's investment

The history of Mount Zion Baptist Church, contributed to Parrish's volume by its pastor, R.A. Whitaker, described the work that preceded the destruction. The congregation had been organized in 1909. Under a succession of pastors it acquired its site, but securing the land did not immediately provide a place of worship. Whitaker recalled being ordered to leave a school building shortly after his arrival. The congregation moved to a dance hall in the Woods Building and then to a tabernacle.1.68

The new church grew from fundraising, credit and repeated work rather than a single large donation. Whitaker described one rally which raised \$715.15 toward the foundation. He named businesses that extended credit and members and friends who helped. The account was written as gratitude to people who had stayed with the project through years when finishing it was uncertain.1.69

That history helps explain what the attack on a church removed. A building represented accumulated payments, donated labor, relationships with suppliers, and the expectation that the congregation would finally have a permanent place to gather. The destruction did not cancel those years of work or make the people who had invested them disappear. It left them to decide how to resume worship and construction without what they had built.

A chair on the sidewalk

C.L. Netherland had owned a barber shop with five white-enamel chairs, electric clippers, a fan, baths, and places for washing and shampooing. Four men worked there. A porter attended the business, which also had a marble shoeshine stand. In the statement Parrish published, Netherland estimated his monthly income at five or six hundred dollars.^{1.58}

On June 1, armed white men took him to Convention Hall with his hands raised. From there he was sent to the ballpark. He slept on two benches. The next morning he left and found his wife staying with friends. He then bought a folding chair, a razor, and a strop and went back to Greenwood.

He set up on the sidewalk amid the ruins. That was his replacement shop. The family was living in what had been a coal barn instead of its ten-room brick home. His brief account put the former business and its replacement side by side: the equipment, workers, and income on one side; a chair and hand tools on the other. He had resumed cutting hair, but resuming work was not the same as recovering the business that had supported him.^{1.58}

J.C. Latimer, an architect and contractor, described a different obstacle to returning. He and his brother worked for themselves. When he was detained, the requirement that a white person vouch for him was therefore especially difficult. He was eventually released through another man's intervention. On returning home, he discovered that looters had changed into clothing taken from the house.^{1.59}

Before detention he had endured a journey through the city with his hands raised. A man had struck him in the jaw as he surrendered. When he later lowered his hands to shade his head from the sun, a guard hit them with a gun and ordered them back up. Among the people humiliating the captives, Latimer remembered boys. Their youth troubled him. He feared what they were learning from being permitted to treat adults that way. 1.60

These accounts were written within weeks, while their authors were trying to live in the aftermath. Netherland had already returned to work. Latimer had regained entry to his home. Neither wrote as though those steps canceled the losses or the treatment they had received.

The first federal account

The Justice Department sent a Bureau of Investigation agent, T.F. Weiss, to examine whether federal law had been violated. On June 2 he telegraphed an initial conclusion that no federal violation appeared. His report followed on June 6.

Weiss described the threatened lynching as slight and half-hearted. He suggested the violence had arisen spontaneously rather than from racial feeling. He said he had spoken with more than a hundred witnesses, yet the report summarized only five individual interviews, all with white men. Black testimony was compressed into a general account of hearing shots, seeing fires, and fleeing. 1.37

The imbalance is visible within the document. One white witness described an officer recruiting men outside Tulsa for a raid and later claiming to have killed Black residents. Another described looting. Those reports pointed toward conduct that demanded investigation, but Weiss's account did not develop them into an inquiry identifying and questioning every implicated official.

The report also described Black and white people mingling amicably the day after the attack. That characterization sits uneasily beside the records of martial law, camps, passes, and compelled work. Reading the

federal document alongside those records reveals a gap between its reassuring conclusions and the conditions in which survivors were living. 1.38

The 2025 Justice Department review did not pretend it could reconstruct every decision made by federal officials in 1921. It found no evidence that a prosecutor had evaluated Weiss's report, while acknowledging the possibility of material lost, misfiled, or not yet located. It nevertheless identified the narrowness of the investigation that survived on paper. Much of the violence had been witnessed, and some alleged offenders could have been investigated while witnesses and suspects were alive. 1.39

Return to court

Survivors and descendants brought a federal suit in 2003. They argued, among other things, that the state commission's 2001 report had provided a basis for recognizing the government's role. The courts ruled that the applicable filing period had expired. That ruling did not decide that Greenwood had escaped injury. It closed the legal route the plaintiffs had used.

A later action, filed in 2020, pursued claims under Oklahoma law. In *Randle v. City of Tulsa*, survivors argued that the massacre's continuing effects constituted a public nuisance and that defendants had benefited improperly from using its history. The Oklahoma Supreme Court upheld dismissal in June 2024. It concluded that the claims did not fit the legal grounds for relief asserted. 1.40

The case carried a painful contrast between longevity and deadline. Survivors had lived long enough to describe the events themselves. That did not mean the courts would permit the remedy they sought. The legal questions concerned the reach of statutes and claims; the continuing historical work concerned what had happened to people and property and how it had been recorded.

The Justice Department's 2025 inquiry reached a similarly limited endpoint in criminal law. Modern hate-crime statutes could not be applied backward to create offenses in 1921. Limitations periods under the civil-rights statutes then in force had long expired. Investigators found no living perpetrators. The department concluded there was no viable prosecution to bring. 1.41

Its report still changed the official account. It rejected the idea that the destruction could be explained as spontaneous unrest without racial purpose. It examined the evidence of police involvement, coordinated attack, detention, dispossession, and failed redress. It also marked the subjects on which the evidence did not permit certainty.

Greenwood's history survived because people kept speaking, collecting, writing, and searching. Survivor interviews preserved households that photographs of ruins could not show. Lawyers recorded claims. Families retained names and documents. Researchers returned to graves and archives with questions that earlier officials had left unresolved.

At the beginning of that history are people living in a neighborhood: children with toys, patrons going to a theater, a woman running businesses, a doctor receiving patients, families furnishing rooms. The massacre belongs in a record of crime because those lives were attacked. Their lives also belong in the account before the attack begins.

Sources from the edition

Chapter One: Greenwood: Lives Before the Fire

The principal source for this chapter is the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, *Review and Evaluation: Tulsa Race Massacre*, updated 2025 report, File 144-59N-731, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/media/1383756/dl> . Page references below use its printed page numbers, not the PDF viewer count. Mary E. Jones Parrish's 1922 collection supplies contemporary testimony and accounts of rebuilding; its original printed pagination and PDF-image pagination are identified separately.

1.1. DOJ report, pp. 10-11 and notes 63-82.

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1.2. DOJ report, pp. 10-11 and notes 83-85.

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1.3. DOJ report, pp. 10-11 and notes 74-81; pp. 28-31.

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1.4. DOJ report, pp. 9-10 and notes 57-62.

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1.5. DOJ report, pp. 8-9 and notes 38-49. No separate full account of the Okemah case is included here.

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1.6. DOJ report, pp. 13-14 and notes 104-111.

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1.7. DOJ report, pp. 14-16 and notes 112-124.

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1.8. DOJ report, p. 16 and notes 125-130.

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1.9. DOJ report, pp. 17-18 and notes 131-147.

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1.10. DOJ report, pp. 17-18 and notes 133-148.

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1.11. DOJ report, pp. 18-19 and notes 149-157.

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1.13. DOJ report, pp. 22-23 and notes 202-208.

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1.14. DOJ report, pp. 21-22, 32-33 and notes 190-201, 298-305.

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1.15. DOJ report, pp. 23-24 and notes 209-216.

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1.16. DOJ report, pp. 24-25 and notes 217-226.

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1.17. DOJ report, pp. 25-29 and notes 227-273.

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1.18. DOJ report, p. 29 and notes 274-276. Jackson's age is omitted because the report's figure requires independent checking.

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1.19. DOJ report, p. 31 and notes 292-295.

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1.20. DOJ report, pp. 30-31 and notes 283-291.

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1.21. DOJ report, pp. 42-45, particularly its conclusion on p. 45 and notes 388-404.

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1.22. DOJ report, pp. 46-48 and notes 419-427.

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1.23. DOJ report, pp. 37-41 and notes 333-372.

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1.24. DOJ report, pp. 39-41 and notes 354-374.

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1.25. DOJ report, p. 36 and notes 329-332.

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1.26. DOJ report, p. 52 and notes 477-485.

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1.27. DOJ report, pp. 48-49 and notes 428-440.

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1.32. City of Tulsa, “1921 Graves Investigation,” June 18, 2025 updates on George Melvin Gillispie and James Goings, <https://cityoftulsa.org/mayor/1921-graves-investigation/> . Current page inspected September 6, 2026. The passage deliberately distinguishes burial identification from identification as a massacre victim.

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1.33. DOJ report, pp. 53-54 and notes 489-499.

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1.34. DOJ report, pp. 54-55 and notes 500-504.

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1.35. DOJ report, p. 55 and notes 505-508.

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1.36. DOJ report, p. 55 and notes 509-513.

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1.38. DOJ report, pp. 58-59 and notes 535-545.

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1.39. DOJ report, pp. 59-60 and notes 546-551.

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1.40. DOJ report, pp. 56-57 and notes 514-522; *Randle v. City of Tulsa*, 2024 OK 40, Oklahoma Supreme Court, June 12, 2024, <https://law.justia.com/cases/oklahoma/supreme-court/2024/121502.html> .

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1.41. DOJ report, pp. 72-75 and notes 602-610.

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1.42. Mary E. Jones Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster* (1922), "My Experience in Tulsa," paragraphs beginning "On the evening of May 31st" and "Occasionally she would call." Original public-domain account, transcribed by TOTA, <https://www.tota.world/article/3670/> . Digitized original: University of Tulsa, https://lib.utulsa.edu/speccoll/collections/F704T92P37%201922_Events/Events1.pdf .

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1.43. Parrish, same section, opening paragraphs beginning "After visiting Tulsa in 1918" and "But I came not to Tulsa."

Return 1

1.44. Parrish, same section, paragraphs beginning "My little girl and I watched," "When it dawned," "About 1:30," "I had no desire," and "About 5 o'clock."

Return 1

1.45. Parrish, same section, paragraphs beginning "Jones and I walked," "After watching the men unload," "It then dawned," and "By this time my little girl." Aircraft observations are her testimony, not a separately established account of particular aircraft crews or weapons.

Return 1

1.46. Parrish, same section, paragraphs beginning "Still I could not flee" through "We finally reached my friend's home."

Return 1

1.47. Parrish, same section, paragraphs beginning "At the section line" through "When they both were just about exhausted."

Return 1

1.48. Parrish, same section, paragraphs beginning "Everything went well" through "The next morning we were up."

Return 1

1.49. Parrish, same section, paragraphs beginning "The Red Cross truck arrived" through "All of the places of business."

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1.50. Parrish, same section, paragraphs beginning "Arising early," "However, in looking around," "Then I felt more relieved," "Leaving the Red Cross Headquarters," "Posted in conspicuous places," and "In order to help the people."

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1.51. Parrish, same section, paragraphs beginning "Returning to the Red Cross Headquarters," "I finally succeeded," "Having worked hard," "On arriving home," and "Days passed."

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1.52. Parrish, same section, paragraphs beginning "This proved to be an interesting occupation" through "We went to the City Hall."

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1.53. Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, testimony of Dr. R.T. Bridgewater dated June 22, 1921, printed p. 33, digitized original PDF p. 29. https://lib.utulsa.edu/speccoll/collections/F704T92P37%201922_Eve

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1.54. Bridgewater testimony, printed pp. 33-34, PDF pp. 29-30.

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1.55. Bridgewater testimony, printed pp. 34-35, PDF pp. 30-31. His account supplies his report of the newspaper statements and his response; this passage does not claim inspection of the newspaper items themselves.

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1.56. Parrish, testimony of Carrie Kinlaw dated June 23, 1921, printed p. 36, PDF p. 32.

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1.57. Kinlaw testimony, printed pp. 36-37, PDF pp. 32-33. The timing of her mother's death is the daughter's account, not a medical cause-of-death finding.

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1.58. Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, statement of C.L. Netherland, printed p. 42, PDF p. 37. The business inventory and income are Netherland's reported figures.

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1.59. Parrish, statement of J.C. Latimer, printed p. 47, PDF p. 41.

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1.60. Latimer statement, printed pp. 44 and 47, PDF pp. 39 and 41. Printed pp. 45-46 are photographic plates in the original pagination, not missing narrative between these passages in the inspected copy.

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1.61. Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster* (1922), Dimple L. Bush account, printed pp. 53 and 54, PDF pp. 47 and 48. Hospital position, eleven-month vantage point, April 28 discharge and patient's continuing need for crutches. Original volume: https://lib.utulsa.edu/speccoll/collections/F704T92P37%201922_Events/Events1.pdf.

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1.62. Bush account, printed p. 53, PDF p. 47. Hotel departure, weakness, taxi assistance and displacement from friends' home.

Return 1

1.63. Same, printed pp. 53 and 54, PDF pp. 47 and 48. Route to Kennedy Building, observations, shelter and identification requirements.

Return 1

1.64. Same, printed p. 54, PDF p. 48. Bush explicitly describes the hospital list as incomplete and unreliable as a total.

Return 1

1.65. Same, printed p. 54, PDF p. 48. Her observations of injured people and separated families are distinguished from nurses' later information.

Return 1

1.66. Parrish, entry "Mrs. Dora Wells," printed p. 52, PDF p. 46. Garment factory, losses, small replacement and contemporary priority claim.

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1.67. Same, printed pp. 52 and 53, PDF pp. 46 and 47. August 20 departure for Boston, donors, 267 clothing recipients and distinction between clothing distribution and lodge cash aid.

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1.68. R.A. Whitaker, "History of Mt. Zion Baptist Church," in Parrish, printed pp. 55 and 56, PDF pp. 49 and 50. Organization, succession,

school, Woods Building, tabernacle and construction.

Return 1

1.69. Same, printed p. 55, PDF p. 49. Fundraising total, credit and the pastor's acknowledgment of members and suppliers. This is a contemporary congregational account, not independently inspected financial books.

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