"Old and young had to pile on trucks. When we were being driven through town, the [whites] were seen clapping their hands rejoicing over our conditions."

Mrs. Roseatter Moore, 1922

A CENTURY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE
Greenwood: From Ruins to Renaissance
The first African-Americans came to Oklahoma as slaves of the Five Civilized Tribes who were removed from the southeastern part of the United States to Indian Territory. The largest numbers came between 1831 and 1839. By 1900, African-Americans comprised five percent of Tulsa's population, and in 1905, they began to form their own community along Greenwood and Archer streets. Despite its proximity to Tulsa, Greenwood functioned as a separate city and it is remembered by those who lived there as a self-sufficient community. Laws and social customs dictated the role of Greenwood, a district which served almost exclusively the needs of its African-American residents. While segregation defined the boundaries of Greenwood, it was unable to inhibit the development of this thriving community. At its peak, Greenwood was cited as one of the most successful African-American business districts in the nation, known as the "Black Wall Street of America." Greenwood fostered the arts as well as business and was host to a number of outstanding jazz performers such as Cab Calloway, Dizzie Gillespie, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, and Nat "King" Cole.
Despite its prosperity, the position of Greenwood was a precarious one. Functioning independently within Tulsa, Greenwood, like other ethnic enclaves, experienced contradictory interaction with, and isolation from, the surrounding white community. While there seemed to be a peaceful co-existence between the African-American and white citizens of Tulsa, racial tensions existed and culminated in an incident of staggering proportions. A report that a black man had assaulted a white woman triggered a race riot on June 1, 1921. Documentation of the Greenwood riot remains incomplete — most of the survivors have died. The results, however, are well-known. More than 1,000 homes, twenty-three churches, and scores of African-American businesses lay in ashes. In three days, thirty-five blocks were demolished and property losses exceeded $5 million.

The law offices of J. H. Spears, B. C. Franklin, and P. A. Chappelle formed a hasty partnership and operated from a tent when the riot ended. Providing most of their services at no cost, the trio served more than $4 million in claims against the city.

Without outside help, Greenwood’s residents rebuilt their community, and the district prospered through the Depression. Ironically, the desegregation laws passed in 1968 contributed to Greenwood’s decline as African-Americans gained broader consumer opportunities and began spending money elsewhere. In the 1970s, the Greenwood business district ceased altogether when an expressway was built through its urban center. Beginning in the early 1980s, however, efforts of Greenwood’s leaders resulted in a renaissance for the community. Today, there is a university, a thriving commercial district, a cultural center and gallery, a number of annual civic projects, and the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame.

_A CENTURY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE_ Greenwood: From Ruins to Renaissance records the history of a particular community from the turn of the century to the present day. At the same time, it illustrates the universally shared experiences of African-Americans throughout this century as it poignantly documents their struggle for equality in spite of continuing social, economic, and political boundaries.
Georgola's Cafe: "It was the fried chicken place...fried in cayenne pepper."
Bettie Downing

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