

# Section 1 | Black Wall Street

## History of Greenwood

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### The Founding of Tulse Town

The City of Tulsa was not formally incorporated until 1898, but its history stretches back far beyond that date. The land that now comprises and surrounds the municipality of Tulsa first was home to various American Indian tribes, including the Caddo, Wichita, Quapaw, Commanche, and Apache tribes, among others. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 and subsequent forced removals of Native American tribes divided present-day Oklahoma into pockets of tribal land. Indian Territory, as it came to be known, became home to thirty-nine forcibly relocated nations, each with its own culture and language. As Russell Cobb notes in *The Great Oklahoma Swindle*, “More languages were spoken in Indian Territory than in all of Europe” (41).

Tulsa’s origins can be traced as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In *Tulsa: from Creek Town to Oil Capital*, the great Oklahoma historian Angue Debo observed that “the first historic Tulsa was a thriving Creek Indian settlement on the Tallapoosa River in what is now the state of Alabama” (3). An important hub for the Creed Confederation, the town was originally known as Tvlahasee — which translates approximately to “Old Town” — before its name was shortened to Tallasi (Debo 4). Like today’s Tulsa, Tallasi was surrounded by satellite communities, one of which was known as the Locvpokv. After their removal from Alabama and a brutal two-year odyssey to the newly establish Indian Territory, the Tallasi-Locvpokv arrived at the Council Oak Tree in 1836, where they scattered the ashes of their lost ancestral home and began anew. As the decades passed, Tullasi become Tulse Town and then, finally, Tulsa, the sprawling city along the Arkansas (Cobb 48).

### Exodusters

The rich and complex history of Black Americans in Oklahoma largely begins with forced removals of the American Indian tribes during the 1830s and 1840s. When the Five Tribes were driven from their ancestral lands, Black families, both slaves and freed, accompanied them, together enduring the desolate journey that later would be known as the Trail of Tears (*Black Wall Street* 2-3). Slavery continued to be practiced in Indian Territory until the end of the Civil War, though the differences between the chattel slavery of the antebellum South and the practices of the American Indian tribes is still a subject of historical debate. When the Dawes Commission began the process of land allotment at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many freedmen also received allotments (Crowe and Lewis). However, the relationship between the Tribal Nations, African

American tribal members, and the freedmen after the Civil War remains an intricate and provocative topic of historical research.

In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Black settlers began to make their way to Indian Territory. Spurred by the failures of the Reconstruction era and the oppression of Jim Crow, these settlers saw the territory as a potential haven in a time of increasing segregation and near constant threat. Black Southern migrants known as "Exodusters" made their way to Kansas and Oklahoma, as Hannibal Johnson writes, in search of "economic opportunity, full citizenship rights, and self-governance" ("Exodust" 13). Recognizing the territory's potential, Edward Preston (E. P.) McCabe and other Black visionaries set out to make Oklahoma the first all-Black state, forming clubs to promote this vision and petitioning then-President Benjamin Harrison to advocate on their behalf (Crowe and Lewis).

Although this movement ultimately failed to germinate, it resulted in a proliferation of all-Black towns throughout Oklahoma. The National Park Service's 2005 survey on the 1921 Race Massacre notes, "From 1865 to 1920, African Americans established more than 50 identifiable towns and settlements in what is now the state of Oklahoma" (15). These settlers were diverse in their backgrounds and life experiences: some were former slaves, some were the descendants of slaves and freedmen who had traveled with the tribes, some were the descendants of runaway slaves who had escaped the antebellum South, some still were Exodusters. As the famed local historian Eddie Faye Gates writes, "Some of [the settlers] were 'Native Negroes' -- those who had never been slaves. They were descendants of African explorers who had come to the Americas BEFORE European explorers" (11-12). Despite these differences, many of Oklahoma's Black settlers came for the same reason: to find a land free of injustice and bigotry, a place where they could live and prosper without the looming threat of violence. They were searching for "the promised land."

### **Beginnings of Greenwood: The Promised Land**

The origins of Greenwood District are tied closely to Oklahoma's early Black boosters and visionaries. In 1893, Ottawa W. (O. W.) Gurley participated in the Cherokee Outlet Land Run and staked a claim in what would become Perry, Oklahoma. After the discovery of oil in Tulsa at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Gurley made his way east to Tulsa (Crowe and Lewis). In 1906, he purchased 40 acres of land just north of the historic "Frisco" Railway to be sold exclusively to Black settlers, and he opened his first business on a dusty trail in the nascent community: a rooming house to welcome travelers and new residents. Gurley named the trail Greenwood Avenue – either after a town in Arkansas, where he had lived previously, or after the city of Greenwood, Mississippi. The growing district soon adopted the name as well.

The discovery of oil at Red Fork in 1901 and Glenn Pool in 1905 and the resulting influx of wealth spurred Greenwood's growth. Some residents worked as shoeshines, domestic workers, gardeners, cooks, and chauffeurs (Crowe and Lewis); others started businesses such as beauty parlors, restaurants, and drug stores (Ellsworth 23). Black settlers traveled to Greenwood both from out-of-state and from surrounding communities, including the all-Black towns scattered throughout Oklahoma, in search of economic opportunity, while others in Greenwood had deep ties to Tulsa that stretched back several generations.

The community grew at a remarkable pace, transforming into a mecca for Black entrepreneurs and thinkers. John B. (J. B.) Stradford, a former Kentucky slave, became a leading figure in Greenwood. Although a lawyer by trade, Stradford was a formidable businessman. Like Gurley, he bought tracts of land and sold them exclusively to Black settlers (Gerkin 54). Eventually, he constructed the Stradford Hotel, a modern fifty-four room brick establishment that "housed a drug store, barber shop, restaurant, and banquet hall" (Franklin and Ellsworth 23).

As Greenwood grew, it attracted the attention of some of the nation's leading Black thinkers and cultural figures. In March 1921, Stradford and Andrew J. (A. J.) Smitherman, the owner and publisher of the *Tulsa Star* newspaper, brought the famed civil rights leader and co-founder of the NAACP W. E. B. DuBois to Tulsa, where he lectured to a wide audience (Gerkin 54). By that time, Greenwood's population was approximately 10,000 people, and the district was recognized as one of the preeminent Black communities in the nation. As Hannibal Johnson writes in *Black Wall Street*, "Beautiful, bustling and Black, Greenwood held its own with Chicago's State Street and Memphis' Beale Street" (26).

### **Out of Vision and Necessity**

Greenwood was the result of ingenuity, acumen, persistence, and hard work, a culmination of E. P. McCabe's vision of a thriving, self-sufficient all-Black community; however, Greenwood was also a product of necessity. On December 18, 1907, the first Oklahoma legislature passed Senate Bill One, the state's first Jim Crow law. Although ostensibly about public transportation, the bill began the process of strictly segregating the state. The disenfranchisement and further segregation of Black Americans through legislation and the constant threat of extralegal violence undoubtedly were factors in the creation, expansion, and prosperity of Greenwood (19). In his autobiography, B.C. Franklin, father of the celebrated historian John Hope Franklin, writes, "In the end, Tulsa became one of the most sharply segregated cities in the country" (200).

Despite residential and commercial segregation ordinances, many Greenwood residents worked for white employers. In the 2001 report by the Oklahoma Commission, Scott

Ellsworth writes, "The vast majority of Greenwood's adults were neither businessmen nor businesswomen, but worked long hours, under trying conditions, for white employers. Largely barred from employment in both the oil industry and from most of Tulsa's manufacturing facilities, these men and women toiled at difficult, often dirty, and generally menial jobs — the kinds that most whites considered beneath them—as janitors and ditch-diggers, dishwashers and maids, porters and day laborers, domestics and service workers. Unsung and largely forgotten, it was, nevertheless, their pay checks that built Greenwood" (43).

Largely prohibited from patronizing Tulsa's white-owned stores, Greenwood's workers and families turned to Black-owned businesses in the community to supply their needs and wants. In response, more Black-owned business sprouted and flourished in the district, thus generating a cycle of investment in Greenwood. In *Black Wall Street*, Hannibal Johnson writes, "Then, as now, such investment, whether coerced or voluntary, yields more than economic rewards. It promotes community self-sufficiency and self-determination as well. So it was in the Greenwood District of the early years" (10).

### **"A Regular Monte Carlo"**

Spanning approximately 40 square blocks, Greenwood extended north from its southern boundary of Archer Street and the Frisco Railway, which served as the dividing line between the community and white Tulsa. At its peak, the district stretched past its original northern boundary of Pine Street in Cherokee County. As Scott Ellsworth writes, "By 1921, new all-Black housing developments — such as the Booker T. Washington and Dunbar Additions — now reached past Pine and into the open countryside north of the City" (40). Lansing Street and the Midland Valley tracks served as Greenwood's eastern boundaries, while Standpipe and Sunset Hills served as its western boundaries.

Greenwood Avenue, where O. W. Gurley established his rooming house in the district's early days, became the heart of the community. Known as "Deep Greenwood," the several-block stretch of Greenwood Avenue featured "one, two and three-story red brick buildings" which housed "dozens of Black-owned and operated businesses, organizations and institutions," according to the National Park Service's 2005 survey (16). Deep Greenwood was a hub of Black commerce, and its charming brick buildings housed barber shops, beauty parlors, restaurants and cafes, grocery stores, meat markets, clothing stores, cleaners, a jewelry store, a drug store, a tailor, even a photography studio. There was an all-Black library branch, a U.S. Post Office substation, the all-Black Frissell Memorial Hospital, a skating rink, and a significant number of churches, including the Mount Zion Baptist Church and Vernon AME. At least four hotels — the Stradford Hotel, the Gurley Hotel, the Red Wing Hotel, and the Midway Hotel — peppered Greenwood's streets, and office buildings for lawyers, realtors, dentists, and

doctors, such as the renowned physician Dr. A. C. Jackson, were plentiful (Franklin and Ellsworth 23).

One of the crown jewels of Greenwood was the Dreamland Theater, a 750-seat theater that showed silent films and live musicals for the district's residents. The community also boasted two Black-owned newspapers, the *Tulsa Star* and the *Oklahoma Sun*, which kept its readership apprised of local and national news (Ellsworth 41). Two schools, Dunbar Elementary School and Booker T. Washington, served Greenwood, the latter named after an important figure in the story of Greenwood.

### **The Birth of Black Wall Street**

Today, Greenwood is widely recognized as the "Black Wall Street," a title bestowed upon the district by the celebrated educator, cultural icon, and founder of the Tuskegee Institute Booker T. Washington. As Eddie Faye Gates writes, Washington visited Greenwood on his way to speak in the all-Black town of Boley, Oklahoma (25). Impressed by the growth and success of Greenwood, he called it "the Negro Wall Street of America," which evolved into "the Black Wall Street" during the civil rights movement (Ross 24).

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