

Tulsa massacre: centennial of white mob rampage to be commemorated in Oklahoma

An estimated 300 Black people were killed in 1921 in Greenwood



A man takes a photo of a mural as people pass during commemoration of the 100-year anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on Saturday.

Richard Luscombe
Mon 31 May 2021

One of the darkest chapters in the long and turbulent history of racial violence in America will be commemorated in Oklahoma on Monday, the 100th anniversary of a rampage by a white mob that left an estimated 300 Black people dead.

Details of the 1921 Tulsa race massacre, which saw the razing of the prosperous Greenwood neighborhood known as the Black Wall Street, were hidden for decades as authorities covered up the existence of mass graves and destroyed evidence of thousands of Black people being interned by the Oklahoma national guard.

The riot began after armed members of the Black community attempted to prevent the lynching of a youth accused of assaulting a white woman. Hundreds of Black-owned businesses, churches and homes were burned, leaving an estimated 8,000 homeless and 800 more injured.

In recent years, historians have joined with activist groups and descendants of the victims to expose the truth of the atrocity, which will be remembered in events in the city this week including a visit on Tuesday from President Joe Biden.

The anniversary comes at a critical time for race relations in the US, following high-profile police killings of African Americans including George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

Law enforcement organisations around the US have been warned by the federal Department of Homeland Security of the potential for targeted violence at events to commemorate the Tulsa massacre, a federal official told the Associated Press.

The official said the alert was issued given the nature of the commemoration and the “volatile threat environment”.

Scott Ellsworth, a University of Michigan historian whose book *Death in a Promised Land* helped put Tulsa on the pathway to confronting its racist past, told the Guardian: “The story of the massacre was actively suppressed in the white community for 50 years.

“Some people don’t want to talk about this at all; they just want to cover it back up. Others are shameful about it. Others are heartbroken. You had whole generations of people who grew up in Tulsa not knowing about it.”

Earlier this month, Viola Fletcher, 107, the oldest survivor of the massacre, testified before Congress that she was still seeking justice.

“I am here asking my country to acknowledge what happened in Tulsa in 1921,” she said.

“The night of the massacre, I was awakened by my family. My parents and five siblings were there. I was told we had to leave and that was it.

“I will never forget the violence of the white mob when we left our home. I still see Black men being shot, Black bodies lying in the street. I still smell smoke and see fire. I still see Black businesses being burned. I still hear airplanes flying overhead. I hear the screams. I have lived through the massacre every day.”

Two groups, the 1921 Tulsa race massacre centennial commission, and the Black Wall Street legacy festival, will host events through the week.

A Remember & Rise ceremony planned for Monday, however, was cancelled amid a dispute over payments to survivors. The event was due to feature a performance from John Legend and a speech from the voting rights campaigner Stacey Abrams. Neither Legend or Abrams immediately commented on the cancellation.

Other commemorations will include marches, talks and the opening of a \$30m history centre and museum featuring photographs of Greenwood in the 1920s.

Among those honored will be Loula Tom Williams, a Greenwood entrepreneur and owner of the Dreamland Theatre, a de facto Black community centre that was burned by the mob.