

# The New York Times

## ***Anniversary Event for Tulsa Race Massacre Unraveled Over Reparations***

*A centennial commission that raised \$30 million for a history exhibit center said the government should be responsible for repaying survivors and their descendants.*



*Mt. Zion Baptist Church burns after being torched by white mobs during the 1921 Tulsa massacre.*

**By Campbell Robertson and Audra D. S. Burch**

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In a weekend of events commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, one scheduled for Memorial Day at the city's minor league baseball stadium was to have been a main attraction. It was to be televised, with John Legend performing, and Stacey Abrams giving the keynote speech before thousands.

But the event, called "Remember and Rise," was abruptly called off on Thursday, with the organizers citing "unexpected circumstances with entertainers and speakers." Its sudden cancellation came amid an intensifying debate over who should compensate the few survivors of the massacre, which left between 100 and 300 dead and destroyed more than 1,000 homes and businesses, and their descendants.

"This is supposed to be about the survivors and the descendants," said the Rev. Dr. Robert Turner, pastor of the Historic Vernon African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Tulsa neighborhood of Greenwood. "I really think that part of the trauma is a chaotic community and a community still trying to uncover the truth and figure out

how we can work together. We should be focused on the people who lived and died in Greenwood.”

The act of remembering the Tulsa Race Massacre has been smothered, resisted and contested for the entire century since it took place. For many decades, few spoke of how hordes of white Tulsans with deep racial resentment had stormed Greenwood, one of the country’s most prosperous Black neighborhoods. Overcoming a fierce defense by those who lived in Greenwood, the mob brutally slaughtered residents before pillaging and burning most of the district to the ground.

But 25 years ago, Tulsa seemed finally to be beginning the process of reckoning. A commission convened by the State Legislature issued a report in 2001 recounting the horror of those two days, and concluded that the payment of reparations “would be good public policy and do much to repair the emotional and physical scars of this terrible incident in our shared past.”

Nothing yet has come of that recommendation. And unity around it has been elusive.

The mayor of Tulsa has said that cash payments to survivors would divide the city, despite sitting on a commission that has publicly stated it “believes strongly in reparations.” Two weeks ago, Gov. Kevin Stitt of Oklahoma was ousted from that commission, which was organizing Monday evening’s ceremony as well as some of the other high-profile commemoration events, days after he signed legislation that banned the teaching of some race concepts in Oklahoma schools.

The commemorations in the city have in the meantime been unfolding along two different tracks, organized by groups publicly dedicated to justice but at odds with each other over how best to go about achieving it.

Over the past week, a flurry of behind-the-scenes negotiations took place between people involved with these two groups: leaders of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission, a four-year-old body that includes city, state and federal representatives, as well as figures in the community, and lawyers representing the known survivors of the massacre, who are taking part in events organized by a group called Justice for Greenwood but had no plans to participate in the commission’s events.

Those discussions — over whether the commission should take money it had raised and use it for reparations, how much money that would be and who would control it — ran aground on Wednesday. According to the commission, Ms. Abrams, a voting rights activist and former candidate for governor in Georgia, withdrew that same day. Mr. Legend followed on Thursday, with neither citing a specific reason. The commission announced the cancellation on Thursday night.

To many who had been involved for years in these efforts, this was not a complete surprise.

“This clash was coming,” said J. Kavin Ross, chairman of the committee overseeing the city’s search for mass graves of massacre victims. “It was just a matter of time.”

In 2017, Kevin Matthews, a Black state senator, founded the centennial commission, which is dedicated to commemorating the event and “telling Greenwood’s story in a major way.” The mostly Black commission is made up of elected officials, philanthropy and education representatives and community members. It has raised \$30 million, nearly all of it for a history exhibit center called Greenwood Rising and much of the rest for a cultural center and art projects in Greenwood.

Damarion Solomon-Simmons, a lawyer who is representing the survivors in a lawsuit against the city and a range of city and state entities that were involved in the massacre or its aftermath, has argued that a portion of that \$30 million, along with revenue from the history center, should be used as direct reparations. The commission, he said in an earlier interview with *The New York Times*, includes representatives of governmental authorities that were implicated in the massacre, and had raised money “utilizing the narratives of the massacre for a building” while not giving financial support to “actual survivors and descendants.”

The commission, for its part, has argued that a campaign aimed at its efforts at remembrance is misplaced.

“The centennial commission was never about raising money for reparations,” said Hannibal B. Johnson, a Tulsa lawyer who is the commission’s education chair. “The reparations should come from government entities because there is evidence they were complicit. That is their moral obligation.”



*Viola Fletcher, the oldest living survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre, center, appears before the Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Subcommittee at the U.S. Capitol last week.*

This debate had been overlooked by many outside of Tulsa, but it began to rise into public view in recent weeks. On May 19, the three known survivors, who were children

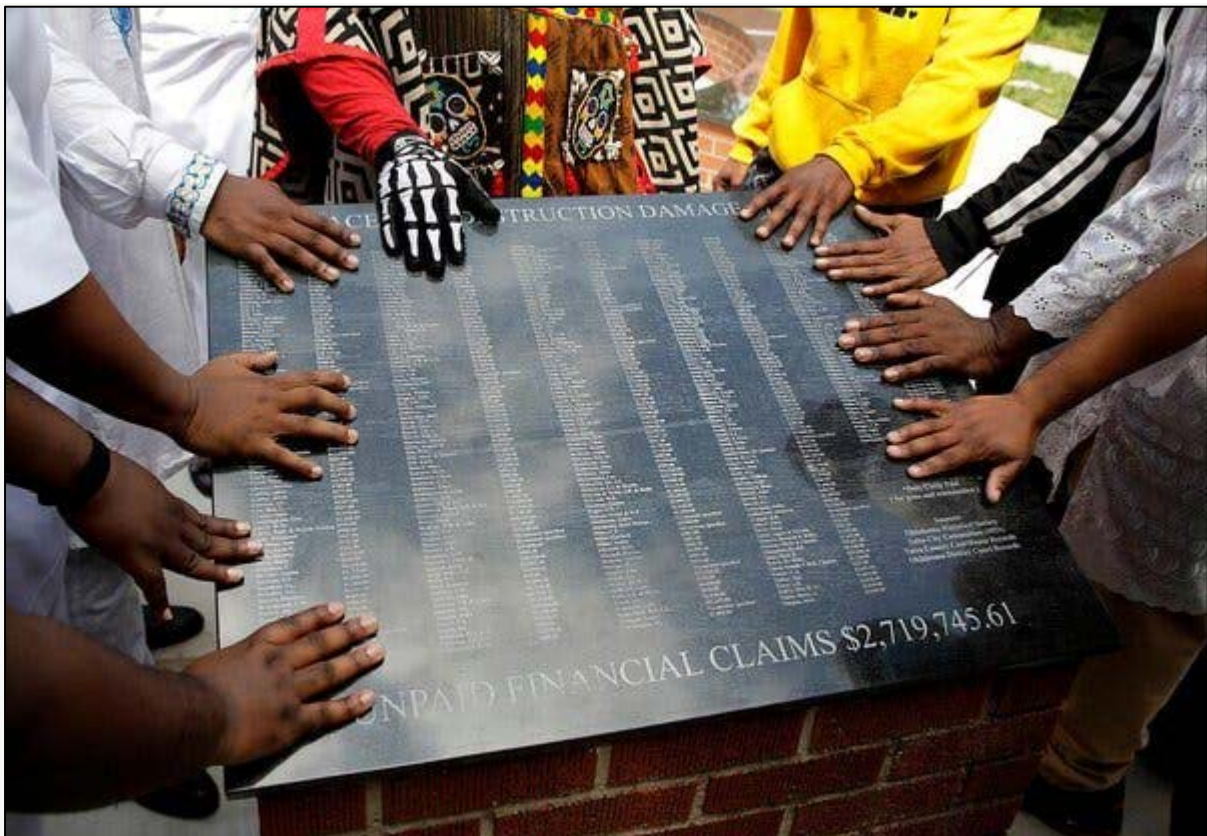
at the time of the massacre, appeared before a congressional committee, asking for justice.

Viola Ford Fletcher, 107, talked of the memory of Black men shot and Black bodies lying in the streets. “Our country may forget this history, but I cannot,” Ms. Fletcher said. She, her brother, Hughes Van Ellis, 100, and another witness, Lessie Benningfield Randle, 106, all pressed for reparations.

In an interview, Mr. Solomon-Simmons and a team of lawyers from the New York-based firm of Schulte Roth & Zabel, his co-counsel in the litigation, said it was only after the growing media attention in recent weeks that the centennial commission agreed to talk.

Last Saturday, the lawyers sent an email to the commission listing seven items that “we need in order to come to an agreement,” including \$1 million for each of the three known survivors, a \$50 million pledge to a fund for survivors and descendants, and a public apology by Mr. Matthews for what they called his “inaccurate portrayal” of the survivors’ campaign for reparations.

These items, including the amounts, were open for negotiation, Mr. Solomon-Simmons said, though some of the details — including that the fund for survivors be administered by descendants and residents of the community and be held in a Black-owned bank — were considered nonnegotiable. While the legal team insisted on answers by Wednesday, they said they did not make any threats to derail the commission’s plans.



*Members of the African Ancestral Society touch the 1921 Black Wall Street Memorial during the march today.*

But, said Mr. Solomon-Simmons, without naming anyone in particular, some people who were planning to participate in events organized by the centennial commission were only just learning that survivors were not going to be taking part. “Once they saw what was going on they started asking tough questions,” he said. Still, he said the event’s cancellation caught him by surprise.

Mr. Matthews said the commission negotiated with Mr. Solomon-Simmons and the other lawyers in good faith. He said that on May 22 the commission offered \$100,000 paid directly to each survivor and \$2 million to establish a reparation fund, and the legal team accepted. The next day, he said, the legal team raised the ante, asking for significantly more.

A member of the legal team working with Mr. Solomon-Simmons said that the offer was welcomed but considered tentative, and that the commission did not respond to any of the nonfinancial requests they had made.

“I cannot commit other people’s money to that extent,” Mr. Matthews said, adding that he also did not have the authority to meet some of the other demands. “I don’t think it was in anybody’s heart or desire not to try to meet the requests, but they were not reachable within a number of days. It was impossible and my response was, we can’t do that.”

Mr. Matthews said he supported reparations but believed that it was the government’s responsibility, insisting that the commission’s mission was always to tell Greenwood’s story.

But he also said he understood the anger. “I am not upset because I think it comes from a good place,” Mr. Matthews said. “Who can say how much should be done after 100 years of being basically ignored and treated less than? We are a community that is suffering from emotional distress and trauma.”