



Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, Inc.



Martha Yates Jones (left) and Pinkie Yates (right), daughters of Rev. Jack Yates, in a decorated carriage in front of a house, 1908

June 19, 2021

Dear Friends of Hallie Q. Brown,

This weekend marks Juneteenth, a 156-year-old celebration commemorating the end of Slavery, more specifically, the point at which Union forces arrived in Galveston, TX to deliver and enforce the Emancipation Proclamation from two years prior. Until a year ago, many people across this country were unaware of it, and now today it is a federal holiday, signed into law by President Joe Biden on June 17, 2021.

Nearly every state in America recognized it before this year. Texas was the first state to do so in 1980. By 2002, the count was up to eight states recognizing it; 2006 brought an additional seven states and by 2008,

approximately half the states recognized it officially. Going into this year, 47 states had recognized Juneteenth formally with several of them designating it as a paid holiday. Only South Dakota has failed (twice now) to pass legislation to this effect. And while this is a great step forward, it's worth understanding the dynamic of why.

According to a [Gallup poll](#) last month, more than two in three Black Americans (69%) say they have a lot or some knowledge about Juneteenth, compared with 40% of Hispanics and 31% of white Americans.

On May 30, 1921, a 19-year-old Black shoe shiner took a break from his stand inside a local pool hall to use the restroom. He walked from the hall to the Drexel Building which housed the only "Colored" public restroom in the segregated city of Tulsa. He tripped as he entered the open wire-caged elevator operated by Sarah Page, a 17-year-old White person, and instinctively grabbed for anything to catch himself, which happened to be Ms. Page's arm (in some accounts he stepped on her foot). Ms. Page was startled and screamed. When the elevator opened, Mr. Rowland ran out and a clerk in a department store in the building called the police. But it was the store clerk, not Ms. Page, who assumed that Mr. Rowland tried to assault her and reported this to the police. Ms. Page refused to press charges against Mr. Rowland, and there are some sources that say they knew each other and were even involved. The clerk's false claim, plus an inflammatory article, "Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator," and an editorial in the Tulsa Tribune are what set things in motion. The editorial, "To Lynch Negro Tonight" according to witnesses, appeared in the city version of the same edition and reported on plans of White residents to lynch Rowland that night. However, all copies of this edition have either gone missing or have the editorial section torn out.



What followed is as unprecedented as it is unknown. A half hour after the Tribune hit the streets, talk of lynching circulated the White community. Three hours after, a lynch mob of hundreds of White men headed to the courthouse where Rowland was being held. They were met by 25 Black armed WWI veterans who set up at the courthouse to protect Rowland. A group of an additional 75 veterans soon joined them, which enraged the White mob. A shot was fired, and that is when "all hell broke loose," resulting in a firefight that left ten White men and two Black men dead, which then exploded into throngs of White men moving through the Greenwood district, setting fire to every building, shooting everyone, pillaging businesses. It was the first time that bombs were dropped on American soil as the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) dropped them from the air. As many as 300 Black residents were killed, 35 square blocks were burned to the ground, 10,000 people were left homeless, 191 businesses were destroyed, and the equivalent in today's dollars of approximately \$32M in personal and business damages were done. This was a truly major event in American history.



Left: Armed White civilians. **Right:** Armed White rioters (image from the OSU Digital Collections)

And yet, an overwhelming number of people in our country learned about this tragedy not from history books or classes, but rather the opening scene of HBO's acclaimed superhero drama, *Watchmen* last year. This scene was so intense and so incredible that the internet blew up with people searching for information and asking the question, was it real? Stop and consider that for a moment. That one of the most significant events of this country has been so buried and minimized, that a fantasy television show did more to enlighten this country in 4 minutes than history text books over the past 4 decades. Were this only the sin of omission that people refer to it as, you could simply incorporate it in lessons and highlight the necessary change. But unfortunately, it is a much more purposeful act of revisionism and suppression done intentionally to both marginalize the Black community and avoid culpability for the actions of the Tulsa Massacre. It lays precedent for other incidents and instances.

While they may have reveled in the fervor of the destruction, the Chamber of Commerce, elected officials and Sheriff very quickly realized how much of a public relations issue this was...not how horrific an act it was, but how much it would affect the city's reputation and the impact on being considered a cosmopolitan city and the oil capitol in the US. Actions took place rather quickly, the editorial page being ripped out before the Tribune could be transferred to microfiche, the Police Chief sending officers to White photography studios to collect photos and negatives or images of the riot (they were being used to create postcards among other things), and articles report on this incident as a "riot" by the Black residents. The city and state promptly buried it, literally. In October 2020, the first mass grave was uncovered, and is set to begin examination. In addition, in 2001, the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 released its final report, revealing that the city had conspired with the White mob and recommended reparations, among other things. In 2010, a park to commemorate the victims opened and in 2020, the massacre was added to the Oklahoma school curriculum.



It took 99 years to add one of the most significant historical events in their state to their curriculum! This is more than a sin of omission: it is the absence of knowledge that places our Black and brown communities out of

context in our country. The myths and the stereotypes that have fostered racial hatred and violence could largely be avoided if we had an accurate reflection of our country's history and culpability. Black people have been stereotyped as lazy and freeloading...ever since Slavery ended and we stopped "working for free." We have been told to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and if we don't like our neighborhood, to move, ignoring the impact that redlining has had on opportunity for homeownership and generating wealth -- especially when you consider between 1934 and 1962, when the federal government issued \$120B in resources for home ownership and less than 2% went to non-Whites. We have been characterized as criminals because we are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, but with no eye towards the inequitable enforcement of that law and the discrimination, maltreatment and even death we face at a disproportional rate, many times ending in fatality like George Floyd.

The solution here is really rather easy and presents minimal financial cost: record and teach history accurately. Remember and relate the experiences of Black Wall Street, Rosewood, Rondo Neighborhood and so many more across our country. Tell the stories of the people who had impact and moving our country forward from Phyllis Wheatley to Katherine Johnson to Hallie Quinn Brown, and so many others. The absence of these elements, of a full and fair accounting of Slavery and its impact has a direct causal relationship to the racial injustice of today. The White community, by and large, is unaware of how much these experiences have shaped the world and their perceptions. Truly understanding how much of this country was built on the backs of, and at the expense of, the lives of Black and brown people changes the dynamic and understanding of how we arrived here. Knowing this can change the conversation from adversarial to empathetic and help this country honestly begin to heal.



And in my opinion, that is one of the best things we can do.

Respectfully,



Jonathan Palmer
Executive Director

For more information and details on the history of the Tulsa Massacre, please visit our [Addressing Systemic Racism](#) page on our website.

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