

# A Brief History of Racism

**1619** – that was the year when the first Black slaves set foot on what is now the United States of America. The pilgrims did not land at Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts until 1620.

The date and the fact of the arrival of slaves is not surprising. There was a robust slave trade across the Atlantic all through the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch sailors made a small fortune carrying slaves from West Africa to the South and Central American colonies long before the first slaves were sold to the Jamestown settlers. It is estimated that 30% of the captured slaves died in route. No one knows for sure since the record keeping was poor, at best.

A brief geography aside: The prevailing winds near the equator are from the east. These are called the *Trade Winds*. Farther north and south, between 30° and 60° latitude, the prevailing winds are *Westerlies*. The slave trade was one third of a round trip that started in European waters where ships were loaded largely with manufactured goods. The ships would then sail south along the eastern coast of Portugal to the west coast of Africa and buy slaves from Africans who had kidnapped people from neighboring areas, trading the European manufactured goods for the slaves. Then they would head west with the favoring trade winds to the Americas where they traded the slaves for sugar, tobacco, and other goods that were abundant in the Americas. After tracking northward along the coast for a while (in the waters of the Gulf Stream) they would encounter the westerlies and head back to Europe. This was known as the Great Triangle Route.

If you think back to the numbers, slaves arrived in 1619, and remained enslaved, generation after generation, until the end of the Civil War in 1865. (The Emancipation Proclamation came earlier than that, but with the war raging, most slaves had no idea that President Lincoln had issued the proclamation until after the war ended.) Blacks were enslaved for 245 years in a country that was less than 100 years old. The country is now 245 years old – the same number of years that the Blacks were enslaved. We can now imagine how long that was. There were millions of people enslaved and forced to work hard jobs and long days for their entire lives with no hope of freedom and no benefit to them or their families derived from their labors.

## Our Long, Dark History of Slavery in this Country

*Have You Heard of AfricaTown?*

The time was late 1859 or early 1860. The USA was on the brink of a Civil War. The importation of slaves from abroad had been illegal since January 1, 1808. But smuggling of slaves still persisted. Actually, most states had banned the importation of slaves in the 1770's, but when Thomas Jefferson gave his inaugural address in 1806 he promised Federal legislation to end the importation of slaves. This legislation was passed in March 1806 and became law in 1808. It still did not keep slaves from being imported, illegally.

In May 1919 the remains of a sunken slave ship, *The Clotilda*, was found in the Mobile River in southern Alabama. The ship arrived in the area of Mobile in 1859 or 1860, carrying about 100 Black African slaves from what is now the African country of Benin. The Clotilda made many trips back and forth between Africa and the southern USA in the 50 years after importation of slaves was banned. On that last trip, the authorities were suspicious that there was a ship full of slaves coming and were waiting for it. The crew of the ship, off-loaded the slaves into the swamp, continued up the Mobile River, scuttling the schooner and burning it to eliminate evidence.

The 100+ slaves had made the two-month-long journey in the hold of a ninety-foot-long vessel, naked, with shackles on both their hands and feet, and stacked on wooden shelves with not enough space even to stand up.

This all came about because of a bet that a wealthy plantation owner had with another plantation owner, that he could smuggle 100 slaves in under the noses of the authorities and get by with it. He hired the Clotilda and its captain to sail to Benin and pick up the slaves to bring them back. The slaves were individuals that had been kidnapped by another African tribe. They were sold into slavery for life for a small bit of trade goods.

The war ended a mere five years after these slaves arrived. They wanted more than anything to return to Africa, but their former owners no longer had the ability to send them back, even if they had been willing. The now freed slaves were released from enslavement to fend for themselves. The Emancipation Proclamation made no accommodation for the future livelihood of former slaves. There were no reparations, no land, no training, no jobs. When the slaves were freed, they stayed nearby, working for their former masters and started their own town. They built homes, a church, and a school using bushes, branches, and logs from trees they cut down. They reverted to their African languages and farmed the land using methods they had used in Africa. They worked long and hard to save enough money to purchase the land where they had built the town from the masters who had purchased and enslaved them. The story of their capture and sale to slave traders was passed down from father to son, mother to daughter, for generations.

When the remains of the Clotilda were found, the “folklore” story became “real.” For the first time there was tangible evidence to support the ancestral stories of present-day inhabitants of AfricaTown. The town was severely damaged by hurricane Katrina and its population has shrunk from about 12,000 in 1960 to a mere 2,000 inhabitants today. What is left of the town is surrounded by a paper mill, chemical plants, and oil storage tanks. Residents have filed a law suite over industrial pollution. There is a lot of history here, and a lot of history that White people would like to forget.

If you are interested, you can find more about AfricaTown on NPR at <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/19/733996699/alabamas-africatown-hopes-for-revival-after-slave-ship-discovery>.

You might also like the book, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last Slave*, by Zora Neale Hurston. It is a true story of Cudjo Lewis, one of the 100 slaves who were transported on the last voyage of the Clotilda.

## **What happened in Tulsa is 1921**

*Information for this article is from the Smithsonian Magazine and History.com*

There is a lot of Black History that has been hidden, downplayed and effectively obliterated in the past 400 years. As in all history, the victors write the history. In this racist world of ours, White folks almost always write the history.

The Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was an example of what could happen to Black Americans given a little space and opportunity. This area was prosperous with many Black-owned businesses, including banks, restaurants, doctor's, dentist's, and lawyer's offices, jewelry stores, hair salons, schools, and grocery stores. It had everything you would need for a thriving all Black community to prosper. The town was founded by a Black man who had been a slave of the Indians, and was considered to be Indian by law. When the supposedly useless land the Indians had been settled on in eastern Oklahoma was found to have oil, the tribe became fairly wealthy. O.W. Gurley, a wealthy Black landowner, purchased 40 acres of land in Tulsa, naming it Greenwood after the town in Mississippi. But the prosperity of the Black community made the White folks who lived on the other side of the tracks jealous that Black folks, and inferior race, had nice houses and were doing "better than they deserved."

In May 1921, a devastating and violent riot obliterated Tulsa's Greenwood district, commonly referred to as Black Wall Street for its concentration of Black-owned businesses and prosperity. The mob rule lasted for two days. The massacre's victims were hastily buried in unmarked graves, and then a quiet effort began to suppress the memory of the atrocity.

Subsequent generations of people, including those born and raised in Oklahoma, never heard of the Tulsa Race Massacre. Starting in the 1990s, a series of events finally began to force the shocking history back into the public eye.

This incident, like many others, unfolded when Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old Black shoe shiner was arrested for the attempted sexual assault of a 17-year-old white elevator operator named Sarah Page, on May 31, 1921. She later said there was no assault.

With the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan which had an estimated 100,000 members in Oklahoma by the mid-1920s, Black residents in Greenwood were keenly aware of white mob violence. To protect Rowland from being lynched, armed Black men,

many who were World War I veterans, stood guard at the courthouse, where Rowland was being held. As tensions mounted, an angry crowd of White men arrived, and the outnumbered Black guards retreated to Greenwood. In the early morning hours of June 1, mobs of White men, descended on Greenwood, looting homes, burning down businesses and gunning down African Americans. Several dozen private planes were used to fire-bomb buildings and to shoot fleeing Blacks using machine guns. The National Guard was called in, not to stop the rioters, but to round-up the Black people.

During the massacre 6,000 Black residents were arrested by the Oklahoma National Guard and held in internment camps under martial law, some for up to eight days, while their homes and businesses were torched. According to oral histories of survivors, scores of massacre victims' bodies were burned and they were then buried in unmarked graves, unbeknownst to those detained who waited to be released and had no knowledge of where some of the victims had been buried.

The mob destroyed 35 square blocks, including the entire business district and 1,200 homes. Although the number of dead remains undetermined, it is reported that 300 people, mostly African American, were killed in the massacre. While a handful of Black people were charged with riot-related offenses, no White Tulsa residents were charged with murder or looting.

Many of the White rioters had been deputized and handed weapons by local law enforcement. The mass destruction and murders were condoned and aided by local law enforcement.

“It was a big story,” says professor Scott Ellsworth of the University of Michigan and author of *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*. Several newspapers immediately covered the devastation, including the *Tulsa World*, the *New York Times* and *The Times of London*. And some White Tulsans boasted about the bloodshed and sold photographic postcards of the carnage. But a culture of silence soon became the norm.

“The businessmen, the political types and whatnot all realize fairly quickly that they had a huge PR problem with the massacre,” says Ellsworth.

With Tulsa trying to maintain its place as the oil capital of the world, the massacre reflected terribly on the city and subsequently wasn't included in history books or newspapers for decades, nor openly discussed in both the Black and White communities. Some newspaper accounts from the period were even removed before editions were recorded onto microfilms. According to Michelle Place, executive director of the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum, White residents didn't want to admit that relatives or friends had participated in the massacre and Black residents didn't want to pass on their pain to their children.

We are still uncovering this sad story. There are other stories we will never know.

—Barbara Cooper