Today in History - May 31

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Today's Stories: Tulsa Race Massacre | Walt Whitman

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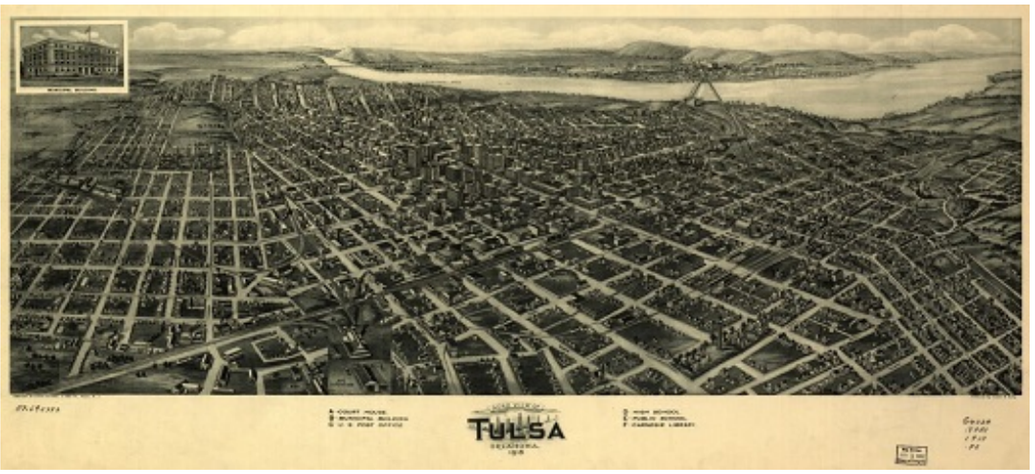
Tulsa Race Massacre

On **May 31, 1921**, this nation witnessed a race massacre and acts of dispossession against Black residents in the segregated and thriving Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Described as *"one of the largest single instances of State-sanctioned violence against Black people in American history,"*[1] the Tulsa Race Massacre resulted in the deaths of an estimated 300 African American men, women, and children. White mobs also looted, destroyed, and burned Black-owned businesses and the homes of 1,256 Black residents occupying about 40 square blocks in the predominantly black Greenwood District. Churches, schools, grocery stores, a Black-owned hotel, a movie theater, a hospital, and a public library were also destroyed. An estimated 9,000 Black residents of Tulsa were left without their homes, possessions, or funds to rebuild.

After the Mob Had Passed. Alvin C. Krupnick Co., photographer, 1921. Visual Materials from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records. Prints &

Photographs Division

The legendary African American Greenwood District, also known as “Black Wall Street,” was one of the wealthiest communities in Oklahoma prior to the massacre. With the spirit of self-empowerment, self-sufficiency, and self-determination among its residents, Black Tulsans created this thriving business district in response to state-imposed segregation and Jim Crow laws. One possible estimate of the number of times a dollar circulated before leaving the community is 19, but it is very difficult to determine, particularly over time. The level of entrepreneurial activity and success unfortunately led to resentment against the Black community.



Aero View of Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1918. Pasaic, N.J.: Fowler & Kelly, [1918]. Panoramic Maps. Geography & Map Division.
Use the Zoom In function to locate Greenwood Avenue and the surrounding Greenwood District as represented on this map from 1918, just three years before the Massacre.

The event leading to the massacre took place against the backdrop of this volatile environment. According to various accounts, Dick Rowland, a young black man, stumbled in an elevator and accidentally stepped on the foot of Sarah Page, the white girl operating the elevator. She accused him of assaulting her. According to the NAACP’s Walter White, as reported by *The Broad Ax* newspaper, this action resulted in a senseless mob ‘seeking to avenge the honor of white womanhood.’ The police arrested Rowland and took him to the courthouse. As white mobs sought to lynch the young man on the evening of May 31, a group of Black men, many of them veterans of World War I, sought to defend him and protect their families. At one point, shots were fired, and the chaos began. Several men died in the initial fight that night. As the crowd of angry white Tulsans grew, they began to loot and burn stores, homes, and other buildings in Greenwood. When it all ended on June 1, Greenwood was destroyed. For years afterwards, the survivors received no reparations, redress, or justice, although the American Red Cross offered aid through their Refugee Center in Tulsa; and the NAACP established a Tulsa Relief Fund in the immediate aftermath.

For 100 years, while every effort was made to target and destroy the Greenwood community, hide the history of the Tulsa Race Massacre, and erase a culture, the community has remained resilient. A Tulsa Race Massacre Commission was established in 1997 to investigate the event, and it published its findings in 2001. In December 2016, the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission was established. In 2020, the House and the Senate introduced resolutions recognizing the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre.

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1. H.Res.1038 – Recognizing the forthcoming centennial of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. 116th Congress (2019-2020). See Resolution (2). Congress.gov (Return to text)

Learn More

- Search the collections with Photos, Prints, and Drawings to discover images documenting this horrific event. Use keywords such as *Tulsa Riot* or *Tulsa Massacre* to get results including the following:
    - Ruins After the Race Riots, Tulsa, Okla.
    - Smoldering ruins of African American's Homes Following Race Massacre in Tulsa, Okla., in 1921
    - Little Africa on Fire, Tulsa, Okla. Race Riot, June 1st, 1921
- Explore the Finding Aid for the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Records, 1842-1999*, held by the Library of Congress Manuscript Division, to discover additional primary sources about the Tulsa Race Massacre and the Tulsa Riot Fund.
- Search Chronicling America, a database of historic American newspapers, using terms such as *Tulsa Riot* to identify articles covering this event. Coverage includes information about the funds collected by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for victims of the massacre, the NAACP investigation by Walter F. White, and President Harding's condemnation of the Tulsa race riot and "similar outbreaks of race rioting." Find suggested search strategies and sample articles in the research guide Tulsa Race Massacre: Topics in Chronicling America.
- Racial Massacres and the Red Summer of 1919: A Resource Guide compiles materials in the Library's collections related to several racial attacks against African Americans occurring in selected cities around the country during the summer of 1919. It includes digitized primary sources, links to related websites, and a print bibliography.
- Eyewitness – Tulsa riots, 1921 survivors, 2003-05-14: National Visionary Leadership Project / interviews conducted by Camille O. Cosby is a multi-media collection included in the Library's American Folklife Center collection, the National Visionary Leadership Project. It is a series of three interviews conducted on May 14, 2003 on the subject of the 1921 Tulsa, Oklahoma race riot. It Includes the memories of John Melvin Alexander, Kinney Ivis Booker, Joe Ira Burns, Otis G. Clark and Genevieve E. Jackson, who were children during the 1921 Tulsa Riot. They recall growing up in the African American neighborhood of Greenwood, race relations in Tulsa, and the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma. They discuss the bombing and burning of Greenwood, fleeing Tulsa, and the rebuilding of the neighborhood. James O. Goodwin, attorney for Tulsa Riot victims in the 2003 court case Alexander, et al., v. Oklahoma, et al., is interviewed about the case. These materials are only accessible onsite at the Library in the American Folklife Center or the Motion Picture/TV Reading Room.
- The Library of Congress Blogs provide the opportunity for the Library's subject specialists to connect their collections to significant events, people, and items of special interest. To commemorate the Tulsa Race Massacre the following blog posts are of interest:
    - How to Research the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre
    - The Tulsa Race Massacre: Relief and the Role of the American Red Cross
    - Tulsa's Greenwood District: Exploring the Impact of the Tulsa Race Massacre
    - Tulsa Race Massacre: Newspaper Complicity and Coverage
- Visit the website of the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum to view their online exhibit

1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and access their online collection of related artifacts.

- The Tulsa City-County Library(TCCL) provides information about available resources related to the Tulsa Race Massacre through their Tulsa & Oklahoma History Resources Guide. Also view TCCL's Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Exhibit.

Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman, American poet, journalist, and essayist, was born on **May 31,** 1819, in West Hills, New York. His verse collection *Leaves of Grass* is a landmark in the history of American literature.

Walt Whitman, half-length portrait, seated, facing left, wearing hat and sweater, holding butterfly. Photograph by Phillips & Taylor, Philadelphia, 1873. Prints & Photographs Division
This photo of Whitman holding a cardboard butterfly was used as the frontispiece for the 1889 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

> *I CELEBRATE myself,*
> *And what I assume you shall assume,*

> *For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*
>
> *I loafe and invite my soul,*
> *I lean and loafe at my ease . . . . observing a spear of summer grass.*
>
> Walt Whitman, opening to "Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass*, 1855.

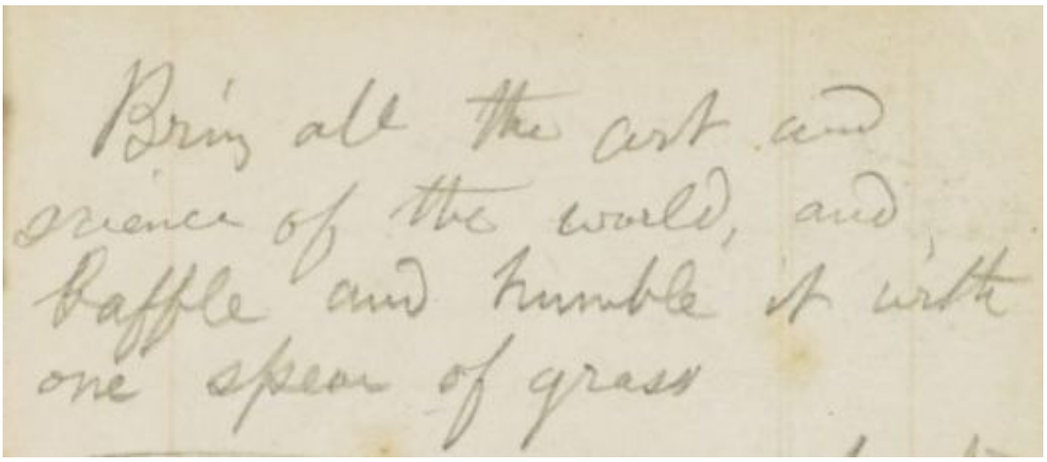
Whitman grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and at age twelve began to learn the printing trade. Over time he moved from printing to teaching to journalism, becoming the editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1846. He began experimenting with a new form of poetry, revolutionary at the time, free of a regular rhythm or rhyme scheme that has come to be known as *free verse*. In 1855, Whitman published, anonymously and at his own expense, the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Revolutionary too was the content of his poems celebrating the human body and the common man. Whitman would spend the rest of his life revising and enlarging *Leaves of Grass*; the ninth edition appeared in 1892, the year of his death.

Cardboard Butterfly, undated, in photograph of Whitman in the 1889 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Thomas Biggs Harned Collection of Walt Whitman Papers. Manuscript Division

Whitman's confidence and literary career got an enormous boost because of a letter from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the most respected essayist, philosopher, and lecturer of his generation, heralding Whitman's work as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed." Emerson greeted Whitman "at the beginning of a great career." Perhaps America's first self-publicist, Whitman allowed Emerson's letter to be published without the writer's permission in the October 10, 1855, issue of the *New-York Daily Tribune* and the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856).

The Library of Congress holds the world's largest Walt Whitman manuscript collection, numbering some 20,000 items and including many original notebooks. In these sometimes homemade or adapted notebooks, the poet jotted down random thoughts in prose and expressions in poetry. Four of Walt Whitman's early notebooks are available in the online Thomas Biggs Harned Collection of Walt Whitman Papers. The "1847" notebook (Notebook LC #80) contains remarkable trial flights of verse for what later evolved into "Song of Myself"—the opening section of *Leaves of Grass*. On page 65 and pages 68 through 72

Whitman breaks off from prose ruminations and speaks—perhaps for the first time—in the revolutionary verse form that he created.


Bring all the art and
science of the world, and
baffle and humble it with
one spear of grass

Notebook LC #80, "Earliest" Notebook. (Holloway v.2), 1847, p. 64.) Thomas Biggs Harned Collection of Walt Whitman Papers. Manuscript Division

During the Civil War, Whitman worked at the Army Paymaster's Office in Washington, D.C. In his spare time, he visited wounded soldiers in hospitals. In Whitman's "1862" notebook (Notebook LC #94) he recorded simple requests from the soldiers. For example, on page 3 Whitman notes during a visit to the Patent Office Hospital that the man in bed twenty-seven "wants some figs and a book" and that beds twenty-three and twenty-four "want some horehound candy." Whitman also recorded the stories that the wounded men told him of their war experiences. On another page (image 60), he relates "the fight at the bridge" at the September 1862 Battle of Antietam.

Inspired by the death of President Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman wrote his famous dirge "O Captain! My Captain!" in 1865. A rare example of his rhymed, rhythmically regular verse, the poem was published in the *Saturday Press* to immediate acclaim and was included in the poet's *Sequel to Drum-Taps* also published that year. Whitman revised the poem in 1866 and again in 1871. It quickly became his single most popular poem, much to his consternation, and it was the only one of his poems in his compendium *Leaves of Grass* to be widely reprinted and anthologized during his lifetime.

Whitman's reputation has grown steadily since his death. Today, he is widely recognized as one of the greatest American poets.

Learn More

- Read more in the Thomas Biggs Harned Collection of Walt Whitman Papers about the story of how Whitman's notebooks disappeared from the Library of Congress in 1942, and how they were found in New York and returned to the Library on February 24, 1995. The collection also includes background information about the notebooks and the process of scanning and preserving them.
- Learn more about Whitman through the online exhibit Revising Himself: Walt Whitman and *Leaves of Grass*, which traces the different occupations and preparations that led Whitman to become the author of *Leaves of Grass*, as well as his subsequent evolution as a poet.
- Teach students about Walt Whitman and the writing of poetry through the following Whitman-related posts on the Library blog From the Catbird Seat: Poetry and Literature at the Library of Congress:

- Walt Whitman's Wartime Experience: Using Primary Sources to Offer Context, offers ways for students to explore how Whitman's wartime work in Civil War field hospitals may have inspired many of the poems published in his collection *Drum-Taps*.
- The Power of Pairing Poems: Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, which offers ideas for exploring thematic similarities between Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing" and Langston Hughes's poem "I, Too."
- Walt Whitman's War Work: Primary Sources in the English Classroom."
- The Evolution of Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!"
- Celebrating Ourselves through Whitman's "Song of Myself"
- Using Poetry to Teach the Importance of Word Choice: Part II, which looks at word choice in Whitman's poem "Trickle Drops."

- Search the Library's collection of films on *Walt Whitman* to find videos of several Whitman readings, lectures, and symposia held at the Library. Watch, for example, the proceedings of the November 2005 symposium "Whitman and Place."
- The Library's crowdsourcing project, *By the People*, offers an opportunity for members of the public to transcribe, review, and tag documents from the Library's digitized collections. In April 2019, to mark the 200th anniversary of Walt Whitman's birth, the Library added a "Walt Whitman at 200" campaign through which volunteers can transcribe several thousand pages of Whitman's writings and papers to make them more searchable and accessible online. Learn more about Whitman and his writing, while sharing your discoveries with others, by participating in this unique Whitman project.
- The collections of the Library's Manuscript Division represent all areas of American studies, including our country's rich cultural and literary legacy. The letters and drafts of several American poets and writers, including Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Langston Hughes are among those showcased online. Another item featured is "Autumn," a poem written in 1893 by thirteen-year-old Helen Keller. Search the Library's collections on the keyword *poet* to find more documents by or about American poets.
- Explore a complete list of Today in History features related to poetry to find entries about Robert Penn Warren, Phillis Wheatley, and Edgar Allan Poe, and many other literary artists.
- To locate other Whitman materials available on the Library's website and elsewhere on the web, consult Walt Whitman: A Resource Guide.

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