



Black Wall Street

Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint™

Oklahoma History Center Museum Learning and Education Department

Compelling Question

How did African Americans live during segregation?

Standards and Practices

OKH.5.2 Examine multiple points of view regarding the evolution of race relations in Oklahoma, including:

D. emergence of “Black Wall Street” in the Greenwood District

Practice 3. Acquire, Apply, and Evaluate Evidence

Students will utilize interdisciplinary tools and master the basic concepts of social studies in order to acquire and apply content understanding in all related fields of study.

Staging the Question

Often, when studying Greenwood in the early 1900s, you will hear a version of this statement:

In fact, the district was so successful that a dollar would stay within the district an estimated nineteen months before being spend elsewhere.

(Sourced from greenwoodculturalcenter.com/black-wall-street; unable to find the original source)

Why is that significant? What does that statement suggest about the world African Americans lived in during this time?

Supporting Question 1

How did Jim Crow sow the seeds of its destruction?

Formative Performance Task

Teachers, please see the background sheet following this blueprint.

Students will explore the data in DuBois’s “The Negro in Business” to develop a list of probable businesses and economic activities that a place like Greenwood would need to keep dollars in the district for a long time.

Featured Sources

W.E.B. Du Bois, The Negro in business: report of a social study made under the direction of Atlanta University (1899). <https://archive.org/details/negroinbusiness00boisgoog>

Supporting Question 2

What do we know about Greenwood in Tulsa?

Formative Performance Task

Students will use advertisements published in the Tulsa Star to create a more accurate representation of Greenwood. They may not be able to perfectly recreate Greenwood with free resources, but they can get the “spirit” of the district.

Featured Sources

The Tulsa Star, African-American Newspapers in the Gateway to Oklahoma History. Oklahoma Historical Society. <https://gateway.okhistory.org/explore/collections/TULSA/>

Summative Performance Task

Argument

Students will build “their” Greenwood. The form that it takes is up to the teacher. Options include students standing, representing businesses and organizations, a map, a model, or a reconstruction in Minecraft or SketchUp. When the assignments are completed, teachers can have their students examine the interactive 3-D map “What the Tulsa Race Massacre Destroyed” by Yuliya Parshina-Kottas, Anjali Singhvi, Audra D.S. Burch, Troy Griggs, Mika Gröndahl, Lingdong Huang, Tim Wallace, Jeremy White and Josh Williams, *New York Times*, May 24, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/24/us/tulsa-race-massacre.html>

Extension

Students can “follow the dollar,” in which they explain the journey of one dollar spent by a consumer in Greenwood.

Taking Informed Action

Students can access the Greenwood District on Google Maps and explore what is there now.

Background Sheet: Black Economies during the Jim Crow Era

In the rural South, where the vast majority of African Americans lived after the Civil War, a system of agriculture based on sharecropping spread throughout the region and became the dominant method of economic production. Landless whites also became tenant farmers but for the freedmen, landowners and government officials used both formal and informal power to force freedmen to accept this system.¹ In this system, the landowner granted the farmer a parcel of land to farm, usually cotton, and accepted a portion of the crop as rent payment for the land. For sharecroppers, the challenge lie in surviving to the crop. They still needed food, supplies, and occasionally money for emergencies to live until harvest. A merchant, usually the landowner, offered to provide these items on credit, with another portion of the crop to pay back the debt. During this period, farmers consistently overproduced (sharecropping contributed to this endemic problem) so the price offered for cotton never rose significantly which would have allowed some profit to go to the farmer. Typically, the farmer would become indebted to the landowner, be unable to cover the debt with that year's crop, and then the farmer was unable to move or borrow from another merchant until the farmer paid the debt. These debts followed generations of families in the South.² For many, this system proved to be so stifling and risky that individuals and, in some cases, whole families and communities concluded moving out of the Deep South would be better than staying.

Once African American moved out of the Deep South in large numbers and, especially, as they urbanized, they found employment that offered disposable income. These workers, many carving out opportunity in work no one else wanted or paid very little compared to the wages offered to other workers in a factory or firm, wanted the perks their hard work and the city had to offer.³ The stereotypes perpetuated to maintain Jim Crow segregation led to a limit of how many whites were willing to offer goods and services to African American customers.

This imbalance between the demand of African American consumers and the few whites who would work with them created a space for enterprising African Americans to build their own businesses and wealth. The first and many of the most successful black-owned businesses were services that required close contact such as barbershops, beauty shops, medical care, and funeral and undertaking services. Closely following those businesses were eating and drinking establishments. Grocers and pharmacists met shopping needs that the Sears catalog could not such as fresh foods and prescribed medicines. Over time, other businesses provided extensive professional services like insurance, banking, and legal services. Often run by African Americans, the network of services available to African American travelers in the Green Book demonstrates the breadth of travel, recreation, and leisure options available.

During this period, an extensive, highly educated intellectual class of educators, editors, and writers emerged at historically black colleges and universities. Arguably, this process produced artistic movements such as the Harlem Renaissance.⁴

Many entrepreneurs focused on providing goods and services to African Americans attained astounding levels of success especially when considering the challenges African Americans confronted in the early twentieth century. Madame C.J. Walker oversaw a cosmetics empire that made her a millionaire. Maggie Lena Walker was an African American woman that ran a successful bank in the early 1900s. The men behind the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance company created the largest black-owned business for much of the century.⁵

This wealth built up in African American neighborhoods throughout the country via the black-owned businesses. Over time, the capital accumulated offered decision-makers in the African American community the freedom to support other business ventures and investments. Sometimes these investments were formal, such as investment through loans made by black-owned banks but many others were informal. Many individuals chose to support the efforts of the NAACP with their pocket change as well as a nationwide black media. Black-led churches provided support services to African Americans in wide swaths of the country where no other entity supported the vulnerable of the community as did numerous fraternal organizations such as the Prince Hall Masons, the Order of the Eastern Star, and the Knights of Pythias. Sometimes, collective fundraising paid for community improvements and services. Sometimes known as the “Second Tax” because African Americans understood their original tax burden did not support parks, education, road construction, or lighting in their neighborhoods so they contributed the money they had left to do so.

¹ The Black Codes included laws limiting African Americans only to farm and domestic work. The Freedmen’s Bureau ensured contracts were reasonable and assisted with their enforcement. Vagrancy laws and the convict lease system contributed to the stability of this system. Cooperation between landowners ensured individuals that caused trouble would capitulate or facing overwhelming difficulty. Unions refused to accept African Americans and the emerging industrial economy in the South would not hire them.

² There are subtle differences between tenant farming and sharecropping but since this is not the focus of the article, they will be used interchangeably.

³ Occupations for African Americans in cities often included service work, such as domestic service, cook, laundress, shoe shiners, and hotel porters. Some businesses also reserved certain occupations for African Americans within the company, such as elevator operators, janitors, and Pullman porters on railroads. Other occupations hired African Americans on a more equal basis, most notably the Ford Motor Company.

⁴ Braden, Donna R. “Black Entrepreneurs during the Jim Crow Era.” *The Henry Ford*, February 21, 2018. <https://www.thehenryford.org/explore/blog/black-entrepreneurs-during-the-jim-crow-era>.

⁵ Lewis, Femi. “African-American Business Owners in the Jim Crow Era.” ThoughtCo, Feb. 11, 2020, [thoughtco.com/african-american-business-owners-jim-crow-era-4040426](https://www.thoughtco.com/african-american-business-owners-jim-crow-era-4040426).