

# STORYBOARDS

John Hope Franklin

Reconciliation Park

Tulsa, Oklahoma

# **We were Oklahomans before there was an Oklahoma**

We have been here for more than four hundred years. We have been called many things; Africans called Natives, Citizens of the Five Civilized Tribes, Slaves. In the sixteenth century we walked alongside the Spanish as they searched for the lost cities of gold. In 1719, we accompanied the French up the Arkansas River, bringing trade goods to the Osage and the Wichita. When the Americans came, we were among them. We rode with Thomas Nuttall in 1819, and with Major Long in 1820. When Washington Irving visited in 1832, we were already here to meet him. We were scouts and interpreters, explorers and runaways, women and men, infants and children, slave and free. We sat down beside the campfires of the Caddo and the Pawnee, drank the pure waters of the creeks and rivers, and felt the prairie wind in our faces. With Africa in our blood, we built new lives in the land of the blackjack and the tallgrass, the eagle and the buffalo, of Wah'Kon-Tah and the skies that never end. We have been here for centuries.

We were Oklahomans before there was an Oklahoma.

## None of the Family Spoke French or English

"On the following day, wild and sudden gusts of wind on the river were making our advance dangerous. After persevering til about noon, we paddled to the left shore of a thriving Cherokee settlement. . . . None of the family spoke either French or English, with the exception of a Negro slave girl, who acted as our interpreter."

Charles Joseph Latrobe, English explorer

"The Rambler in North America"

1836

## **The Trail of Tears Was Our Trail, Too**

The Trail of Tears was our trail, too.

From North Carolina and Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia, Mississippi and Florida, we came, walking a thousand miles through summer heat and winter wind.

Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, brothers and sisters, slave and free.

# **We Had Freed Ourselves**

Many of us fought slavery in every way possible. When they told us we must not learn to read, we stole books and newspapers and learned anyway. We ran away when we could, hiding in the woods and river bottoms, and held secret prayer meetings when we could. And in 1842, near Webbers Falls, we launched one of the largest slave revolts in all of American history. The White Man's Civil War was also a Civil War within the Indian Nations. When war came, slaves and slaveholders chose sides, pitting brother against brother. The Union victories at Honey Springs and Cabin Creek in July of 1863 led to the enforcement of the Cherokee Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves long before the December 1865 ratification of the 13th Amendment.

When freedom finally came, it came not as a gift.

We had freed ourselves.

## The 79th and 83rd U.S. Colored Infantry

It was said of the troops which were to become the 79th and 83rd U.S. colored Infantry, both slave and slaveholder, "They fought like veterans, and preserved their line unbroken throughout the engagement. Their coolness and bravery I have never seen surpassed: they were in the hottest of the fight, and opposed to Texas troops twice their number, whom they completely routed."

Major General James G. Blunt, Union Army  
Battle of Honey Springs  
July 17, 1863

# **We Called It Greenwood**

When the Old West was new, you found us everywhere. We were Buffalo Soldiers and cattlepunchers, rodeo legends and frontier lawmen. One out of every three cowboys who drove the herds of cattle up the trail from Texas was either African American or Hispanic. We came to Oklahoma from all across the country, thousands of us--- on foot, in wagons, or on horseback -- Making the Run of '89, staking out farms and ranches, building new lives. Nor was that all. By 1907, when Oklahoma became a state, we had established more than two dozen all-black towns. At Langston, we founded a university. And here, in Tulsa, we built an African American multiracial community like no other, with two newspapers and more than a half dozen hotels, two theaters and fifteen churches, dozens of restaurants and grocery stores, even a Madame C.J.Walker Beauty School. Out of grit and hard work, brick and mortar, we built our own piece of the American Dream.

**We called it Greenwood**

## Good Old Greenwood Days

"How I remember those good old Greenwood days. Greenwood was something else! We had clothing stores, shoe stores, hotels, and all kinds of businesses on Greenwood then. Oh, black Tulsa always had an abundance of hotels. First, there was O.W. Gurley's hotel and then A. Huff's hotel, and the Philips, Titus, Morgan, Carr, and Sanders families which had hotels. There was the Stradford Hotel at 301 North Greenwood. We had ladies' dress shops, hat shops, and shoe shops. Blacks had some nice houses, too."

Alice Andrews, Early Greenwood resident

From Eddie Faye Gates' "They Came Searching"

# Greenwood Was Gone

But storm clouds were gathering.

In 1907, the Indian Nations were dissolved into the State of Oklahoma with segregation as the first law of the land. Suddenly, Jim Crow declared our world to be black and white. In 1910, the state legislature barred us from voting. By 1920, more than two dozen African Americans had been lynched by white mobs across Oklahoma. But none in Tulsa.

Then, on May 31, 1921, an African American teenager, Dick Rowland, was accused of assaulting a white woman, Sarah Page. An angry mob of whites soon formed to lynch Rowland, who was being held at the Tulsa County courthouse.

Soon, a group of our World War veterans went downtown in order to protect Rowland, and prevent the lynching from happening. But when a scuffle broke out and a shot was fired, the white mob turned its wrath against all of us, against Greenwood. Tulsa's darkest hour had begun.

The violence was unprecedented. Given a free hand--and guns-- by the local authorities, white rioters attacked us on the streets and in our homes, and lit the first fires along the edges of Greenwood.

## **Greenwood Was Gone, p.2**

We fought back--with guns and determination--and defended our homes and businesses, families and churches. But when dawn broke on the morning of June 1, 1921, thousands of whites, some armed with machine guns, gathered to invade Greenwood. We were simply outnumbered and outgunned.

Block by block, the tidal wave of terror came, as armed whites broke into and looted our homes and businesses. Then they set them on fire. The police and National Guard, meanwhile, rather than trying to stop the white rioters, instead arrested us.

By the end of the day, whites had burned down more than one thousand of our homes and businesses, and more than fifteen of our churches. And while we were held under armed guard, our dead were buried in unmarked graves.

Greenwood, it seemed, was gone.

## **We Expected to be Shot Down**

"Someone called to me to 'Get out of that street with that child or you will both be killed.'"

I felt it was suicide to remain in the building, for it would surely be destroyed and death in the street was preferred, for we expected to be shot down at any moment. So we placed our trust in God, our Heavenly Father, who seeth and knoweth all things, and ran out in Greenwood in the hope of reaching a friend's home."

Mary E. Jones Parrish

Journalist and Riot Survivor

"Events of the Tulsa Disaster"

# We Must Climb Together

We survived.

We mourned our dead, helped each other, and got back to work. When the city fathers tried to use the fire ordinances to keep us from rebuilding, lawyers B.C. Franklin, P. A. Chappelle, and I. H. Spears beat them in court.

And brick by brick, block by block, Greenwood rose again.

Out of the ashes of intolerance and fires of hatred, came new homes and businesses, schools and churches like Mt. Zion and Vernon A.M.E. Out of the horrors of 1921, came renewed strength and pride, grit and determination. New decades would bring new struggles. We fought against Jim Crow laws and lynch mobs, all-white juries and segregated opportunity.

In 1949, Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher, backed by the N.A.A.C.P., broke the color line and became the first African American to attend the University of Oklahoma Law School. In 1958, two years before the Greensboro sit-ins, we sat down at segregated lunch counters in Oklahoma City, Enid, and Stillwater.

In the years since, we have battled urban renewal and restrictive housing covenants, struggled to save our schools, and fought to gain recognition and reparations for Tulsa's race riot survivors. And in the end, we will persevere.

For this land, this Oklahoma, is our land, too. We have built its cities and worked its farms, raised its children and fought in its wars.

On its altars of freedom you will find our blood as well. For hundreds of years, beneath its endless skies, we have lived and worked, laughed and wept, loved and died. And as we have climbed, so have you.

Now, we must all climb together.