
What Were the Underlying Causes of the Tulsa Race Massacre?



National Guard troops carrying rifles with bayonets escort unarmed African-American men to a detention center after the Tulsa Race Massacre, June 1921.

Overview: On June 1, 1921, a mob of white Tulsans looted and burned the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Many people died but the majority—more than 300—were African American. At the time and for decades afterward, the events of that terrible night were referred to as the Tulsa Race Riot. In fact, what happened was not a riot but an organized attack on an established African-American community. This Mini-Q explores the underlying causes of the massacre.

Documents:

- Document A: Racism in the United States
- Document B: Greenwood in Ruins
- Document C: The Red Summer of 1919
- Document D: Why Congress Should Investigate Race Riots and Lynchings
- Document E: World War I Veterans
- Document F: Black Businesses in Greenwood
- Document G: Wealth in Greenwood
- Document H: Victims' Voices

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: What's in a Name?

In 1921, the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was home to about 10,000 African Americans. On June 1, 1921, hundreds of white Tulsans looted the neighborhood and burned much of it to the ground. More than 300 people died, most of them African Americans. In 1997, after more than seventy-five years, the Tulsa Race Riot Commission was formed to look into what had happened. In 2019, the commission officially changed its name to the 1921 Race Massacre Commission.

Directions: Examine the revised commission logo and, with a partner, discuss the questions that follow.



Discussion Questions

1. A “riot” can be defined as a “violent uprising.” A “massacre” can be defined as “slaughter” or “mass murder.” Discuss the difference in meaning between these two words.
2. When you think of the word “massacre,” how does it make you feel?
3. Why do you think the word “riot” was kept in this logo? Why not simply replace “riot” with “massacre”?

What Were the Underlying Causes of the Tulsa Massacre?

The Incident

The Tulsa Race Massacre has been called the worst act of racial terror in American history. The tragedy was sparked on May 31, 1921, when newspapers reported, without proof, that a young African-American man named Dick Rowland assaulted a white woman, Sarah Page, in an elevator. Rowland was taken to the county courthouse and placed in a jail cell. Hundreds of angry white men, many of them armed, gathered at the courthouse. Talk of lynching was in the air. African-American men, including a number of armed World War I veterans, also gathered at the courthouse, to protect Rowland. A gunfight broke out when a white man challenged one African-American man's right to carry a gun. The crowd of whites grew to more than 2,000 and the police made no efforts to disperse it.

African-American leaders returned to the predominantly Black section of Tulsa known as Greenwood to establish a defense. Black businessmen, determined to protect their property, hid in buildings with rifles at the ready. Then, beginning in the early morning hours of June 1, a mob of white Tulsans attacked Greenwood. African-Americans attempted to defend themselves but were outnumbered 20 to 1. The next several hours were bloody and chaotic. By late morning, the National Guard arrived on the scene and escorted hundreds of black men at gunpoint to makeshift detention camps. They were held overnight as they worried about their families and as their property was stolen and destroyed.

In the end, 35 square blocks, with homes and businesses worth over \$2,700,000, were burned to the ground. White city leaders looked on and even helped. At the time, it was reported that 36 people—26 African-Americans and 10

whites—had died. Meanwhile, Sarah Page refused to press charges against Rowland. He was released by the sheriff, left Tulsa, and never returned.

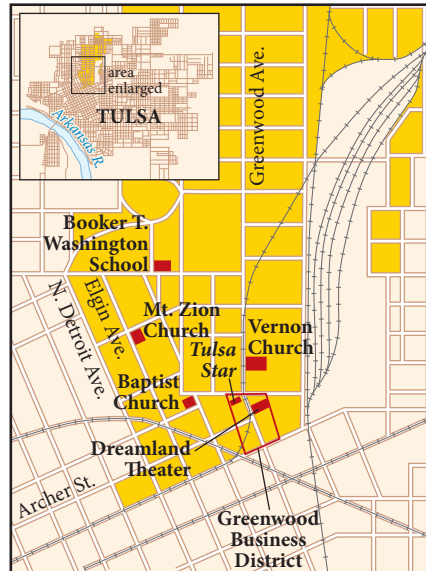
The Backstory

Racial tensions in Oklahoma had not always been so high. Native Americans, who had been forced out of Georgia in the Trail of Tears in the 1830s and 1840s, were among the very first settlers of **Indian Territory**. Many of them arrived with their enslaved Black workers. After the Civil War, African-American **freedmen** joined them in the hope that they were moving to a Promised Land. The first permanent white settlers did not arrive until the 1880s. The discovery of oil in 1904 put Indian Territory in the national spotlight. Soon Oklahoma was producing 25 percent of the oil in the United

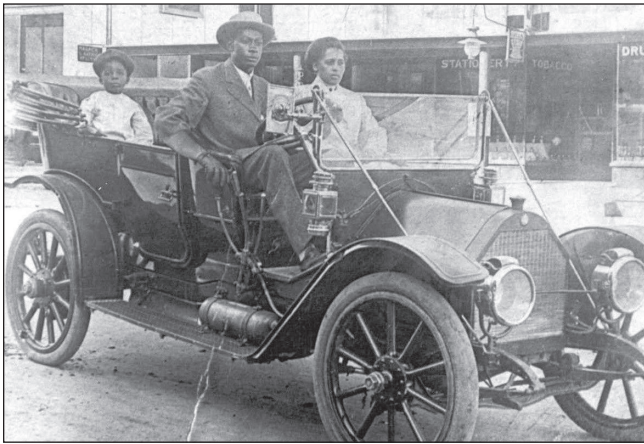
States. Both Blacks and whites flocked to Tulsa to take advantage of the profits, dramatically increasing the wealth and the population of the city.

As the new century unfolded, African-Americans in Oklahoma encountered growing prejudice and discrimination. When Oklahoma became a state in 1907, the first bill passed by the legislature **segregated** Blacks from whites on all public transportation. In 1910, any African-American man whose grandfather had been a slave no longer had the right to vote in Oklahoma. By 1921, the year of the massacre, membership in the Tulsa chapter of the Ku Klux Klan had grown to 3,200. Sadly, **Jim Crow** and its supporters were alive and well in Oklahoma.

Despite the racial tension, African-American entrepreneurs in Tulsa were building a vibrant neighborhood. By 1910, the Black population in Tulsa boasted a newspaper, two doctors, one police officer, a barber, and three grocers. In the next decade, wealth in Greenwood grew. Black Tulsans who worked in homes and businesses in the white parts of town were not permitted to



spend money at white stores or save money in white banks. As a result, the money African Americans earned stayed in Greenwood. African-American attorneys, real estate agents, entrepreneurs, and doctors owned cars and nice homes and used their money and influence to help their neighborhood prosper. In time, the Greenwood District became so wealthy that people called it “Black Wall Street.” In 1921, at a time when America was experiencing an 11 percent unemployment rate, Greenwood was one of the wealthiest African-American communities in the United States, and its residents were justifiably proud.



John and Loula Williams and their son Bill, circa 1912. The Williamses ran two businesses and a boarding house in Greenwood. Their automobile is a 1911 Norwalk.

But then the massacre leveled much of Greenwood, and its African-American residents had to start over with almost no support. While some from the white community donated money to the Red Cross to help their neighbors, it was far too little to recoup all that had been lost. Over the next few years, members of the Black community rebuilt groceries, churches, schools, shops, and homes, but racial tensions festered beneath an uncomfortable silence.

The Commission

For more than eight decades, many in Tulsa, some out of shame, some out of ignorance, were involved in a cover-up. Although members of the African-American community shared stories and organized commemorations of the horrific events



First Street in Tulsa, when the town was still part of Indian Territory.

of 1921, many whites and white-owned newspapers such as the *Tulsa Star* did what they could to hide the truth. In the 1960s, Black leaders pressured Tulsa authorities to reveal the truth about the “riot” but white silence largely continued.

At last, in 1997, the Oklahoma legislature established a **commission** made up of scholars and citizens to investigate the events of June 1, 1921. The commission interviewed survivors, read witness diaries, and gathered evidence from newspapers, church records, and the Red Cross. In 2001, the commission published a report that answered many questions.

The report stated that more than 300 African-Americans had been killed and 1,256 homes had been destroyed. Many more churches, businesses, and schools, as well as a library and hospital, had burned. City officials had not only failed to stop the violence; they’d provided firearms and ammunition to white attackers. None of these acts was prosecuted in a court of law and no financial **reparations** were made for property damage, loss of work, or loss of life. In fact, calling the disaster in Tulsa a “riot” guaranteed that Blacks would not receive any help from insurance companies in rebuilding because “riot” damage was not covered.

Your Task

The commission’s job was to bring the truth of the Tulsa Massacre to light. Your task in this Mini-Q is to examine the eight documents that follow and use them to answer the question, *What were the underlying causes of the Tulsa Race Massacre?*

Background Essay Questions

1. What happened in Tulsa on June 1, 1921?
2. What was the purpose of the commission created by the Oklahoma legislature in 1997?
3. What evidence did the commission find that made it change the name of the “Tulsa Race Riot” to the “Tulsa Race Massacre”?
4. What was the first bill passed by the Oklahoma state legislature in 1907?
5. Why was Greenwood often called “Black Wall Street”?
6. Define these terms:

Indian Territory

freedmen

segregated

Jim Crow

commemoration

commission

reparations

Timeline

1905 — Oil discovered 14 miles from Tulsa; population begins to grow dramatically

1907 — Oklahoma becomes a state

1914-1918 — World War I

1918-1920 — 675,000 Americans die from influenza

1921 — Tulsa Race Massacre

1925 — Ku Klux Klan membership in US estimated at between 2 and 5 million

1997 — Tulsa Race Riot Commission formed

2021 — Tulsa Race Massacre Centennials

Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

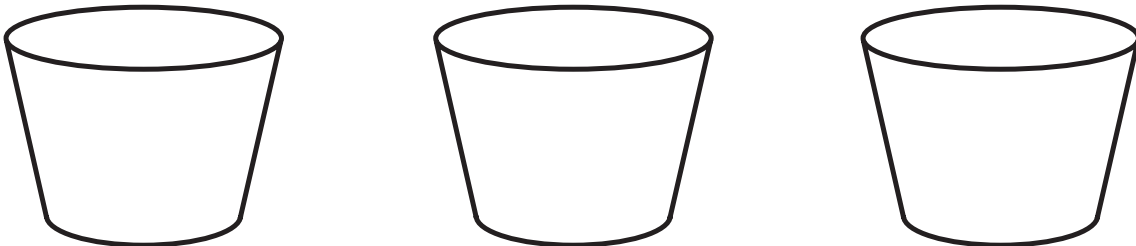
Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?
2. What terms in the question need to be defined?
3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

Pre-Bucketing

You don't want to write an essay from a big pile of jumbled evidence! Bucketing is designed to help you sort your evidence (found in the documents) into groups or categories. This will help you write a more organized paper. Pre-bucketing helps you to think ahead about what those categories might look like.

Directions: Using clues from the question and the Background Essay, think of categories you might use to sort your evidence. These categories will be your bucket labels and should be pretty general. As you read through the documents and start filling your buckets with evidence, the labels will become more specific.



Document A

Source: Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America: Targeting Black Veterans,” 2017.

The enslavement of black people in the United States for more than 200 years, built wealth, opportunity, and prosperity for millions of white Americans. At the same time, American slavery assigned to black people a lifelong status of bondage and servitude based on race and created a myth of racial inferiority . . . Under this racist belief system, whites were hard working, smart, and morally advanced, while black people were dumb, lazy, childlike, and uncivilized. The idea that black people were naturally and permanently inferior to white people became deeply rooted in individual’s minds, state and federal laws, and national institutions. This ideology grew so strong that it survived the abolition of slavery and evolved into new systems of racial inequality and abuse. In the period from 1877 to 1950, it took the form of lynching and racial terror.

EV

Source: John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans, Ninth Edition*, 2011, p. 368.

In [1918,] his sixth year in the United States, the [Jamaican] poet Claude McKay succinctly conveyed this awakening of consciousness when he confessed: “It was the first time I had ever come face to face with such . . . hatred of my race, and my feelings were indescribable . . . I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter.”

Document Analysis

1. How did the enslavement of Black people help white Americans?
2. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, what is the “racist belief system” that developed when slavery was legal?
3. How did this belief in white superiority change after slavery was abolished?
4. In what year did poet Claude McKay describe racism in America as “so intensely bitter”?
5. How could you use this document to help explain the underlying causes of the Tulsa Race Massacre?

Document B

Source: The aftermath of the Tulsa Race Massacre, June 1921.



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Source: A Greenwood family among the ruins of their home, June 1921.

Document Analysis

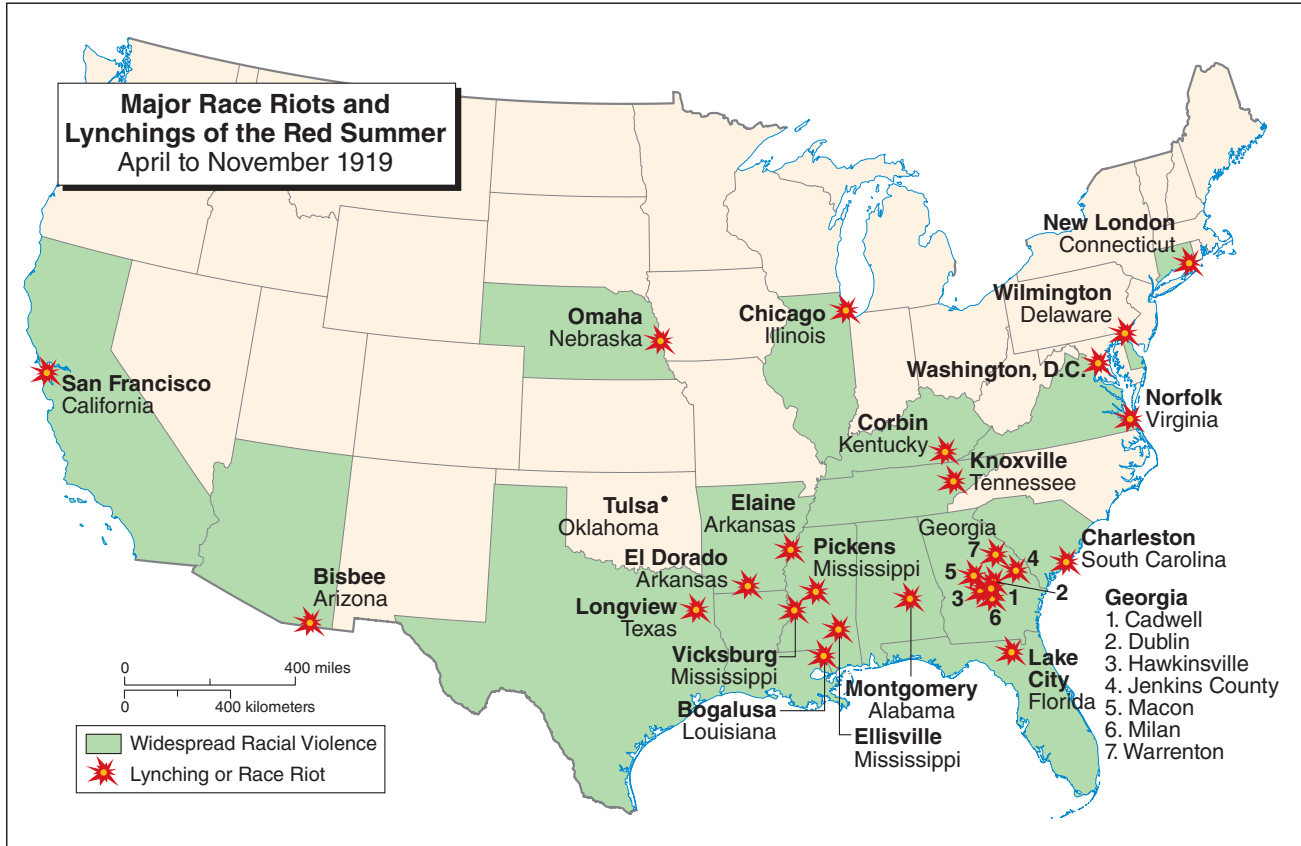
1. Examine the first photograph. What are three words you could use to describe this scene?
2. What do the people in the second photograph appear to be doing?
3. What do these photographs reveal about the amount of damage done to property in Greenwood during the Tulsa Race Massacre?

Document C

Source: Map adapted from *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* by Cameron McWhirter, 2012.

Note: In 1919, violent conflicts broke out between Black and white Americans in cities all over the United States. The deadliest of these was in rural Elaine, Arkansas, where 100-240 African Americans and five white people were killed.

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Document Analysis

1. What do the flash symbols on the map represent?
2. According to this map, how many race riots and lynchings occurred in the United States between the spring and fall of 1919?
3. Use the map to make a generalization about where racial violence in the United States was most severe. Be specific about how many incidents occurred in different regions.

Document D

Source: Dr. George E. Haynes “Why Congress Should Investigate Race Riots and Lynchings” excerpted in article, “For Action on Race Riot Peril”, The New York Times, October 5, 1919.

Note: George E. Haynes was an African-American educator and Director of Negro Economics of the Department of Labor. Haynes’ report is divided into five sections. Section 1 lists 8 race riots, 29 “race clashes,” and 55 lynchings or burnings of African Americans at the stake in 1919. In addition, he notes that 2,472 colored men, 50 colored women, 691 white men and 11 white women were lynched between 1889-1918.

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Section 2: The Failure of the States

The States have proven themselves unable or unwilling stop lynching as the figures show. Even attempts to prosecute are so rare as to be exceptional ...

Section 3: A National Problem

Lynching and mob violence have become a national problem. President Wilson was aroused by the danger of mob violence to make a statement July 26, 1918, in which he called the subject one which “vitaly affects the honor of the nation and the very character and integrity of our institutions...”

Section 4: Consequences of Lynching

Persistence of unpunished lynching of negroes fosters lawlessness among white men imbued with the mob spirit and creates a spirit of bitterness among negroes. In such a state of public mind a trivial incident can precipitate a riot. ...

Section 5: The Danger

Disregard of law and legal process will inevitably lead to more and more frequent clashes and bloody encounters between white men and negroes and a condition of potential race war in many cities of the United States.

Document Analysis

1. What is the title of George Haynes’ report? When was it published?
2. According to Haynes, what did states do to prevent lynching?
3. According to Section 3, how significant was the problem of lynching and mob violence in the United States?
4. What did Haynes predict was the danger if lynching and mob violence continued to go unpunished?
5. How could you use both Documents C and D to explain one underlying cause of the Tulsa Race Massacre?

Document E

Source: African American dressed in WWI uniform, <https://www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/the-great-war-tulsans-during-wwi/>



Source: Hannibal B. Johnson, *Black Wallstreet: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District* p. 19-20.

Note: 370,000 African-American soldiers served in the US military during World War I.

At the conclusion of World War I in 1918, ...African-American expectations rose. Buoyed up by the spirit of patriotism and emboldened by the American dream of better lives for themselves and their children, African Americans became more vigilant in principle and assertive in action. Black soldiers, like their white counterparts, fought, bled, and died in the war. Upon return, they waged a civil war against injustice on the home front.

In many quarters, basic respect for these African-American patriots was all but non-existent. ...[For example,] a black officer...was attacked by a white mob simply for wearing his officer's uniform—a privilege he had earned. The mob forced the officer to remove his uniform and gave him an ultimatum: leave town (and with it, home and family) that night or die.

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Document Analysis

1. Look closely at the photograph of the WWI soldier from Tulsa. What words come to mind to describe this young man?
2. According to Hannibal Johnson, how did World War I change African Americans' attitudes and beliefs?
3. What do you think Johnson means that African Americans "waged a civil war against injustice on the home front"?
4. How could you use this document to explain an underlying cause of the Tulsa Race Massacre?

Document F

Source: Adapted from *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* by Scott Ellsworth, 1982.

Note: Greenwood grew from comprising 5 percent of Tulsa's total population in 1900 to 10 percent in 1910. By 1921, 11,000 African Americans lived in the city, most of them in Greenwood.

Select Black-Owned Businesses in Greenwood Listed in Tulsa City Directories, 1907-1921

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BUSINESSES	1907	1914	1916	1917	1918	1919	1920	1921
Billiard Halls	-	3	6	5	4	5	6	9
Clothing, Dry Goods	1	-	-	2	2	2	1	2
Confectionary, Soda Fountains	-	3	4	5	7	16	2	4
Boarding Houses	3	4	3	1	6	5	9	11
Grocers & Meat Markets	3	9	7	18	11	21	23	41
Hotels	-	1	1	1	2	2	4	5
Restaurants	1	1	17	15	11	17	21	20
Funeral Parlors	-	-	1	2	2	2	2	1
Total of all Businesses	8	40	42	47	52	76	72	108

Document Analysis

1. How many Black-owned restaurants were in Tulsa in 1907? In 1921?
2. How many Black-owned grocery stores and meat markets were in Tulsa in 1907? In 1921?
3. What was the total number of Black-owned businesses in Tulsa in 1907? In 1921?
4. Using information from the Background Essay, what inferences could you make about why there was such a sharp increase in the number of businesses in Tulsa during this time?
5. How could you use this document to help explain one of the underlying causes of the Tulsa Race Massacre?

Document G

Source: W.E.B DuBois quoted by editor of *The Daily Oklahoman*, *Editor Says Pride Cause*, June 2, 1921, p. 2. \ <http://archive.newsok.com/olive/apa/oklahoman/#panel=document>

Note: W.E.B. DuBois was a well-known civil rights activist during the first half of the 20th century. He co-founded the NAACP, and edited and wrote for a periodical called *The Crisis*. DuBois visited the Greenwood District in Tulsa, and was impressed by it. This African-American neighborhood was so wealthy, many referred to it as “Black Wall Street.”

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I have never seen a colored community so highly organized as that of Tulsa. There is complete separation of the races, so that a colored town is within the white town. I noticed a block of stores built by white men for negro business. They had long been empty, boycotted by the negroes. The colored people of Tulsa have accumulated property, have established stores and business organizations and have also made money in oil. They feel their independent position and have boasted that in their community there have been no cases of lynching. With such a state of affairs, it took only a spark to start a dangerous fire.

Document Analysis

1. How does W.E.B. DuBois describe the Greenwood District of Tulsa?
2. When whites built a segregated block of stores for African Americans within the white district, how did African Americans respond?
3. Why did African Americans feel they were in a position to boast or brag about Greenwood?
4. What is DuBois suggesting when he says, “With such a state of affairs, it took only a spark to start a dangerous fire”?

Document H

Source: Mary E. Jones Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, 1922.

Note: These two eyewitness accounts appeared in a book by Mary E. Jones Parrish, who ran a typewriting school in the Greenwood District. After “the disaster,” as she called it, she collected photographs and interviewed people about their experiences.

After they had the homes vacated one bunch of whites would come in and loot. Even women with shopping bags would come in, open drawers, take every kind of finery from clothing to silverware and jewelry. Men were carrying out the furniture, cursing as they did so, saying, “These [d---] Negroes have better things than lots of white people.”

I stayed until my home was caught on fire...

—Unnamed Woman

On reaching the house I saw my piano and all of my elegant furniture piled in the street. My safe had been broken open, all of the money stolen, also my silverware, cut glass, all of the family clothing, and everything of value had been removed, even my family Bible. My electric light fixtures were broken, all the window lights and glass in the doors were broken, the dishes that were not stolen were broken, the floors were covered (literally speaking) with glass, even the phone was torn from the wall. In the basement we gathered two tubs of broken glass from off the floor. My car was stolen and most of my large rugs were taken. I lost seventeen houses that paid me an average of over \$425.00 per month.

—Dr. R.T. Bridgewater, assistant county physician

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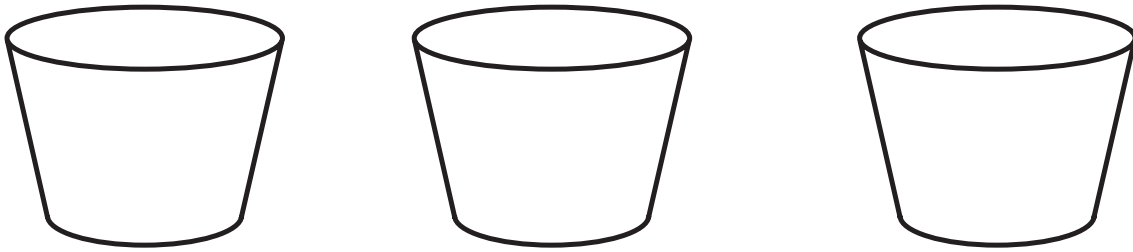
Document Analysis

1. Is this document a primary or secondary source? Explain.
2. According to the unnamed woman, who were the looters in her home?
3. Considering both accounts, give several examples of what was stolen.
4. Aside from theft, what types of harm did victims experience?
5. What inferences can you make from the document about what may have motivated these crimes? Explain.
6. How could you use this document to identify a cause of the Tulsa Race Massacre?

Bucketing – Getting Ready to Write

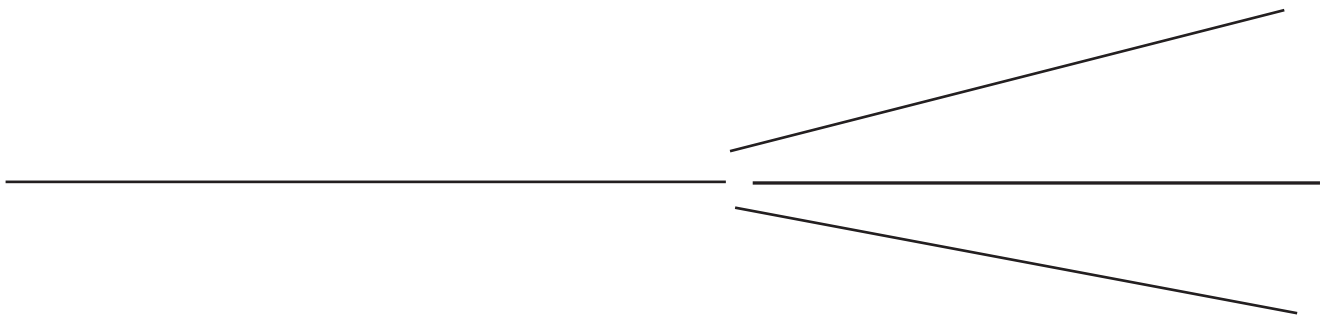
Bucketing

Look over all the documents and organize them into your final buckets. Write final bucket labels under each bucket and place the letters of the documents in the buckets where they belong. Remember, your buckets are going to be your body paragraphs.



Thesis Development and Road Map

On the chickenfoot below, write your thesis and your road map. Your thesis is an arguable claim that answers the Mini-Q question and can be supported with evidence. The road map is created from your bucket labels and lists the topics you will examine in order to prove your thesis.



From Thesis to Essay Writing

Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

Working Title

Introductory Paragraph

Grabber:

Background:

Restating the question:

Thesis and roadmap:

Body Paragraph #1

Baby Thesis for bucket one:

Evidence: Supporting detail from documents with document citation

Argument: Connecting evidence to the thesis

Body Paragraph #2

Baby Thesis for bucket two:

Evidence:

Argument:

Body Paragraph #3

Baby Thesis for bucket three:

Evidence:

Argument:

Conclusion

“Although” statement and summary of main idea:

EV

