The state of Oklahoma has a unique history. That is also true of the African Americans who settled here and their descendants. For those enslaved by tribal members, the Civil War resulted in the granting of land and, to a certain extent, status within the Five Tribes. This core set of landed Blacks drew freedmen from the South and idealistic African Americans from across the US who wanted to create a space protected from the raw racism and barriers to economic opportunity that existed in the rest of the country. The ease of securing land in Indian Territory in the late 1800s proved beneficial for the small African American communities popping up throughout both Indian and Oklahoma Territories. Access to the traditional form of wealth—land—sparked vibrant economies. Black communities with money attracted more entrepreneurs, skilled laborers, and professionals. The territorial period in Oklahoma offered opportunity for African Americans unmatched anywhere else in the country.

With statehood came a major shift in the daily experience for African Americans. The state rapidly established the most comprehensive system of segregation in the US. To put this system in place, whites used multiple forms of violence: forcing Black residents to move, lynching, and massacre are all events in Oklahoma's history. In between the state laws and the extralegal violence, there also emerged organized white groups—from neighbors who agreed to only sell to whites, to the KKK—that cooperated to deny Black Oklahomans their rights and economic opportunity.

As in the rest of the nation, Black Oklahomans resisted these changes. Because of the diversity of the Black population, its relative wealth, and the powerful organizations that existed in Black communities, the efforts of Black Oklahomans to create systems of equality laid the groundwork for the national Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s.
Permanent Black settlement in Oklahoma dates back to the 1830s, although some Blacks came with early European explorers many years prior to the formation of Indian Territory. Between 1830 and 1842, the federal government forcibly removed the Five Tribes from their land in the southeastern portion of the United States and relocated them to Indian Territory. Because each of these tribes had adopted the institution of slavery from earlier contact with the British and Americans, many within the tribes held Black people in enslavement. These journeys to Indian Territory, known as the Trail of Tears, introduced permanent Black settlement in Indian Territory.

After the Civil War, the Reconstruction Treaties of 1866 included provisions for emancipation, access to land, and recognition of rights within the respective Native nation. Many Freedmen chose to live near each other.

In the late 1800s, a movement to force the adoption of private land ownership became popular. The government introduced the Dawes Severalty Act (1887) and the Curtis Act (1898), which provided for the allotment of a piece of tribal land to each of its citizens. This included the Freedmen. Similar to the period after emancipation, Blacks often selected plots near each other.

Much like other members of these tribal nations who were allotted land, many Freedmen were vulnerable to efforts by non-tribal members wanting to gain control of their allotment. This was especially true if a valuable resource such as oil was discovered on the allotment, or if railroads or land developers desired the land. In the early stages of allotment, landowners were not allowed to sell their land. A typical strategy to gain control of land owned by Freedmen was for an outside party to argue the landowners were incompetent and unable to control their affairs. The allottee would be taken to court and a guardian, usually white, would be appointed to make the financial decisions for their ward. Sometimes these individuals made decisions to benefit their wards. Other guardians charged large fees to their wards and sometimes drained their accounts. The population of Blacks in the Twin Territories increased as the land left over after allotment was offered to non-Indian settlement. The various means of distributing land, such as land runs and lotteries, attracted a number of Black settlers.
Sarah Rector was an African American member of the Muscogee Nation. She was born in 1902 near the historic All-Black town of Taft. Because she was a tribal member, she received an allotment of land. She owned this land, but her dad managed it because she was still a child. In order to pay taxes on the land the family owned, he leased Sarah’s land to an oil company. On October 24, 1913, oil was discovered on Sarah Rector’s allotment. More than 200 barrels gushed from her land every hour. Her income soon rocketed to $1,100 a month. In 1915, $1,100 had the same purchasing power as $28,000 does today! She quickly became a millionaire. Control over the land was taken from Rector’s parents, and guardianship was granted to a white man named T. J. Porter. Sarah Rector used her wealth to make other investments, but by her death in 1967, a large portion of her wealth was gone.
Drovers

In addition to the Freedmen, there were significant populations of African Americans within the borders of Indian Territory throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. The incredible growth of the cattle industry as urban populations in the East demanded meat introduced the continual presence of Black *drovers*, who escorted cattle to the railheads in Kansas from Texas. Numbers vary, but a significant portion of the workforce moving cattle through Indian Territory were Black.

Many Black cowboys had been formerly enslaved and responsible for caring for livestock or working in a kitchen. For many of these workers, the challenges of the long drive were small compared to the lack of opportunity offered by *sharecropping*, the kind of work most African Americans did. Drovers’ pay often seemed too low to potential workers, but for Black cowboys, the pay was better than most of the other employment available, especially if one worked as a trail cook, a job often held by a Black worker.

Some Black cowboys appreciated the relative lack of *discrimination* during most of the drive. Traveling through the sparsely populated Indian Territory, the group of 12 to 15 men and boys usually had few interactions with strangers. Black cowboys faced strict *segregation* and other racist laws and customs only in the parts of towns where white women lived.
Buffalo Soldiers

From 1866 until the allotment period, Buffalo Soldiers were frequently stationed at forts in Indian Territory. They were given a number of responsibilities: maintaining peace among the tribal nations and escorting supply wagons and rail and telegraph workers. They also engaged in numerous conflicts, large and small, with the Plains tribes recently forced to reservations in Indian Territory. From 1881, the responsibilities of soldiers in Indian Territory included the **expulsion** of Boomers seeking to force the opening of land to non-Indian settlement. This became a primary activity for Buffalo Soldiers as the decade of the 1880s unfolded.

Much like the cattle drives, the army offered some Black men the opportunity to earn a better wage and avoid the system of segregation rapidly spreading across the South and West. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Buffalo Soldiers fought against different tribal nations during the Plains Wars. Many units of Black soldiers were especially respected by their foes for their ability to stay cool in an intense battle, their horsemanship, and their coordinated tactics. A total of 19 Black men and two infantry units earned the Medal of Honor between 1866 and the early 1890s.
All-Black Towns

As non-Indian settlement descended on Indian Territory, many Freedmen and settlers established All-Black towns to protect themselves and make life more enjoyable. After the Civil War, the US government forced the Five Tribes to provide lands and rights to Freedmen within their own nations. When the tribes’ communally-held land was divided into individual allotments in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Freedmen were allotted land. Many Freedmen selected plots near each other, and some of these locations grew into All-Black towns in Indian Territory. In Oklahoma Territory, many Blacks settled near each other after the land runs.

In both Oklahoma and Indian Territories, All-Black towns provided safety, community, and opportunity for their residents. Boley, located in Okfuskee County, was founded in 1903. In a short time, thousands settled in or near this vibrant city, which included two banks, two colleges, electricity, and an ice plant.

Langston, well known because it is the location of the historically Black college or university (HBCU) of the same name, was founded by Edward P. McCabe in 1890. Originally named Lincoln and founded in 1903, Clearview is located in Okfuskee County. At its peak, the town had a newspaper, a brick school building, two churches, and an excellent baseball team. Taft was the site of several schools, a mental hospital, and correctional centers.

Today, there are 13 historically All-Black towns still in existence.
Segregation means “to separate.” In the southern US in the 1880s and 1890s, many counties and states passed laws that separated whites from Blacks. The purpose of these laws was to make whites feel like they were a part of a special group and better than Black people. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court declared that these governments could segregate people in a case called Plessy v. Ferguson. This court case established a precedent, which said that the government could segregate if the things offered to both groups were “equal.” African Americans and some whites protested this decision. Many believed that just having the separation made Blacks and whites unequal.

The Five Tribes were relocated from the region that would become known as the South, and these nations adopted many of the values and cultural practices that non-Indians brought to the region. This included the enslavement of Blacks. Later, in the 1800s, many who moved to Oklahoma as it was settled by non-Indians in the were from the South. Many people in Oklahoma shared the belief that non-Blacks should be guaranteed better treatment through the passing of laws.

Jim Crow during the Territorial Period

As Oklahoma Territory became organized and governed by non-Indians, it lacked laws requiring segregation, or Jim Crow laws. The first Territorial Legislature allowed counties the option to have segregated or integrated schools. During the territorial period, the idea of segregated schools became more popular, and in 1897 the Territorial Legislature passed a law requiring segregation in schools.

The Wilson family moved to Guthrie along with thousands of others as part of the Land Run of 1889. Even though the school year was only a month long, this Black family’s two children, Eva and Janetta, attended the only school and their classroom was integrated. The following year, the Black children in the neighborhood continued to attend an integrated school. In the spring of 1891, Logan County residents voted to segregate. The next school year, Belle Wilson, the mother of the children, attempted to enroll her children in school and was refused by the teacher. The new school for African American children was significantly farther than the four blocks the children walked to their original school. For a month, parents continued to try to enroll the children at their original school and appealed to county officials for assistance. The family sued the school district. This case gained the attention of the territorial attorney general, who took over the case. The case went back and forth as it moved through the court system. The Wilson family would lose their case, as would later Black Oklahomans before the Supreme Court found the principle of “separate but equal” unconstitutional in 1954.
The Enabling Act (1906) allowed people in the Twin Territories to prepare for statehood, and the election of delegates to a constitutional convention took place. William H. Murray, president of the constitutional convention, held racist beliefs. He stated in the first speech at the convention that Blacks could never be equal to whites. He worked to include strict segregation and voting restrictions in the state constitution, as did many of the other delegates. These Oklahomans wanted the state constitution to prevent marriage between whites and Blacks, and to segregate schools and public facilities. They also wanted to include a section that would take away Black Oklahomans' right to vote. The segregation and voting restrictions in the state’s founding document was one of the most hotly debated issues to come out of the convention.

Many African Americans were angry at this attempt, and they organized to advocate for themselves. They formed the Negro Protective League. This civil rights organization had chapters throughout the state with hundreds of members. They held mass meetings and mailed thousands of letters to convince people that the constitution, as written, should be opposed. They passed a series of resolutions concerning what the constitution should include and shared these with delegates and newspapers. A group of African American leaders from the Negro Protective League in Oklahoma traveled to ask the president in person to oppose the constitution. Theodore Roosevelt did not do as they asked, but the leaders in Oklahoma were fearful that the president would not support the constitution if it included major sections commanding segregation. They decided to keep only the section requiring school segregation in the constitution.

Front page of The Muskogee Cimter, June 21, 1907. The Muskogee Cimter was an important African American newspaper in early Oklahoma.
Senate Bill One

Because segregation and voting restrictions became such a central part of the debate around the constitution, many people in Oklahoma wanted to make sure the first legislature passed Jim Crow laws rapidly. Four days into the first state legislative session, the Oklahoma State Senate passed the first state law, Senate Bill One, as emergency legislation. Known as the “Separate Coach Bill,” this law required public transportation to be segregated. It passed the senate with a vote of 37 to 2, while it passed the house 91 to 14. Governor Charles Haskell signed the bill into law.

The African American community in Oklahoma responded with anger at this introduction of segregation into new areas. In Red Bird, they threw rocks and coal at a train carrying state officers and Democratic politicians to a convention. In Taft, Black residents burned the depot down. Many Black Oklahomans simply refused to comply with the law early in its enforcement. After the initial response, the Negro Protective League took to the courts in an effort to defend their rights and repeal this law. Langston founder and Republican Party leader E. P. McCabe filed suit, as did The Muskogee Cimeter editor and lawyer W. H. Twine. The McCabe case made it to the Supreme Court; the justices found the segregation law constitutional.
Resistance

Throughout the country, most African Americans opposed segregation laws and ordinances. Because of the relative wealth of Black communities, the more complex racial identities of the population, and Black leaders comfortable with risk, Oklahoma became center stage for the fight to end segregation and advance civil rights. Blacks challenged segregation on every front in the state. Several of those challenges led to real change, both through the courts and through persuasion. In many instances, the lessons learned and the precedents set in Oklahoma rippled throughout the national civil rights effort, making it stronger and more effective.

African American individuals, communities, and organizations all contributed to the effort to resist segregation and increase opportunity. The Negro Protective League, which formed during the effort to add segregation requirements to the state constitution, allowed Black Oklahomans to coordinate their efforts and pursue sustained protest. In 1913, Black Oklahomans, led by a group of Oklahoma City doctors, organized its first chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1931, Oklahoma became the first state to have a state conference of NAACP chapters. Newspapers published by Black Oklahomans shared information about protests and other ways to get involved. Civic organizations, such as the Ministerial Alliance, the Negro Business League, and fraternal organizations supported these organizations and their goals. Black religious leaders connected these groups to large audiences, provided meeting space, and coordinated tactics.

Roscoe Dunjee’s *The Black Dispatch* is one of several newspapers that helped Black Oklahomans resist Jim Crow laws.
Voting

Prior to statehood, few restrictions prevented Blacks from voting in Oklahoma. Democrats of the time did not try to appeal to Black voters, but both the Republican and Socialist Parties did. Because of the long-standing support African Americans gave to the Republican Party, leaders valued their votes and participation. This meant that African Americans participated in campaigns, elections, and party appointments until the 1910s in Oklahoma. Edward P. McCabe was appointed treasurer of Logan County. The first Territorial Legislature included a Black representative from Kingfisher named Green I. Currin. After a brutal attack on a Black man, Currin introduced the first civil rights bill in Oklahoma’s history, which failed to become law by one vote. David Wallace followed Currin to serve in the second Territorial Legislature.

Black political activity continued without controversy into statehood but only briefly. The first state legislature also included A. C. Hamlin, an African American from Guthrie, as a representative. He convinced the lawmakers to designate a large amount of money for Taft School, which educated Black students who were blind, deaf, or orphaned.

Green I. Currin was the first African American legislator in the Oklahoma Territorial Legislature (image courtesy Oklahoma Senate).

A. C. Hamlin was a representative in the first Oklahoma State Legislature (image courtesy Oklahoma House of Representatives).
The Grandfather Clause and *Guinn v. Oklahoma*

In 1910, the Democrats proposed a voter registration petition that required a literacy test before a person could vote. A petition meant that the people of Oklahoma would vote on whether or not this measure became law. This measure could exclude many people in Oklahoma at the time because illiteracy was not uncommon in the early 1900s. The law had an exception that said:

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but no person who was, on January 1, 1866, or any time prior thereto, entitled to vote under any form of government, or who at that time resided in some foreign nation, and no lineal descendant of such person, shall be denied the right to register and vote because of his inability to so read and write sections of such Constitution.
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While this law did not say clearly that Blacks could not vote, the exception could only apply to whites because no African American could vote in 1866. It became known as the “grandfather clause.”

Many Black organizations, the Socialist Party of Oklahoma, and many Republicans worked to prevent this from becoming law. The Negro Protective League, once again, worked to educate the public and advocate against the petition. The Voter Registration Act did become law. Two state election officials, Frank Guinn and J. J. Beal, were indicted for conspiring to deny the vote to eligible individuals. This case made its way to the Supreme Court. It was the first case in which NAACP submitted a brief. The Supreme Court declared Oklahoma’s grandfather clause unconstitutional, and this victory would serve as evidence that the judicial system could help Black Americans protect their civil rights.

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The party to which the overwhelming majority of Black Oklahomans belonged, the Republican Party, declined to actively oppose the grandfather clause, *Sapulpa Evening Light*, September 2, 1910.

*The Industrial Democrat*, a Socialist paper from Oklahoma City, educated its readership about the grandfather clause and encouraged readers to work against it. This article is from July 23, 1910.
Black Voting After Guinn

Although they lost in the Supreme Court, lawmakers did not give up trying to exclude Black voters. In 1916, after the Guinn case ended, the legislature passed a “temporary” law that gave African Americans who had been prevented from registering to vote because of the grandfather clause the chance to register. They had a total of 12 days. Those Oklahomans who had already registered under the now-unconstitutional grandfather clause would remain registered. If Black Oklahomans failed to register in the short time period allowed, they would not be permitted to register.

No option existed for Blacks to vote outside of registering in those 12 days until 1939. In 1934, a Red Bird resident named I. W. Lane attempted to register to vote. The county registrar had been instructed not to register Black Oklahomans and turned Lane away. Lane sued, and the case made its way to the Supreme Court. In 1939, the court declared Oklahoma’s voting law unconstitutional in Lane v. Wilson. Thereafter, Black Oklahomans faced no legal barriers to voting.

I. W. Lane, originally from Alabama, filed suit when the Wagoner County registrar refused to register him to vote (image courtesy town of Red Bird).

Registration Law Before Supreme Court

The question of whether Oklahoma’s registration law is in conflict with the Federal Constitution will be passed on by the Supreme Court of the United States. The Washington tribunal agreed this week to review the case of I. W. Lane, Wagoner County Negro, who sued registration officials for $10,000 damages because of his inability to register.

Lane charged a conspiracy on the part of three officials to prevent Negroes of the county from voting. He lost his case in the Federal District Court, and the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals at Denver recently ruled against him on appeal.

News about the Lane case appeared in Harlow’s Weekly, December 17, 1938.
Housing

There are untold numbers of stories about efforts to end residential segregation in each of the towns and cities of Oklahoma. Many towns in Oklahoma were **sundown towns** with signs posted that Black Oklahomans must leave the city limits before sundown or face dangerous consequences. In larger cities, there was usually an area that traditionally housed African Americans. In many cities in Oklahoma, the areas that typically offered housing to Blacks were the least desirable locations. For example, In Oklahoma City, these areas were often found in low-lying places near the Canadian River that flooded frequently. During territorial times, segregated living spaces were not enforced through law or **ordinances**. When Black Oklahomans challenged this customary segregation, government officials rapidly passed laws and ordinances enforcing segregation. The efforts of Black Oklahomans in Oklahoma City offers an example of how one community in the state challenged these rules.

The Campaign against Residential Segregation in Oklahoma City

The Oklahoma City council passed a residential segregation ordinance in 1916. Its similarity to a Louisville, Kentucky, ordinance that was declared unconstitutional in 1917 meant that it would no longer be enforced. In 1918, the city council passed another ordinance to replace the earlier rule. The ordinance required those blocks that were majority white or Black needed the permission of 75 percent of the residents for a person of the other race to reside on that block. In 1919, William Floyd purchased a home on a block that was majority white. He was arrested.

Roscoe Dunjee and a dentist name A. P. Bethel bailed Floyd out of jail. They called a meeting at Tabernacle Baptist Church and over 400 people responded. At the meeting, the local NAACP agreed to take the case. The federal judge presiding over the case stated in a preliminary hearing that he believed the ordinance was unconstitutional. At that point, the city dropped the charges and Floyd was unable to continue his federal suit. For over a decade, the city limited its attempt to impose residential segregation.
In 1930, the city issued its first comprehensive development plan. The plan laid the groundwork for two ordinances, passed in 1933 and 1934, that segregated the city. In 1933, Governor William H. Murray supported the city council in their efforts. To prove the need for segregation, Murray issued an executive order and called out the National Guard to establish a “segregation zone.” Defending his interference in local matters, Murray said, “I have no law for this, but I have the power.”

The Black community in Oklahoma City responded rapidly. Sidney Hawkins violated the segregation ordinance by purchasing a home on a “white” block. He was arrested numerous times for his attempts to reside in his house. Onie Allen’s case challenged Murray’s emergency order. The decisions in both cases once again found housing discrimination based on race to be unconstitutional. The effort to maintain segregation by white residents continued. In 1939, there were three bombings in the city in response to Blacks moving into white block.

In the late 1920s, the white residents of the east side formed an organization to ensure that Black residents were unable to move any further north. The main method they used to force segregation was the restrictive covenant, which is a legal document a person signs that limits their rights. In this case, whites who owned homes signed a legal document that promised they would not sell to a Black family. In 1948, this kind of restrictive covenant was declared unconstitutional in the case of Shelley v. Kraemer. Real estate agents steered clients to the sections of town that matched their race; this practice ensured the continuation of residential segregation.

Although segregation was entrenched in the city, the areas where Blacks could establish neighborhoods expanded beyond the traditional, densely populated neighborhoods with the creation of the Edwards Edition in 1937. Entrepreneur Walter Edwards bought a large piece of land in northeast Oklahoma City located between NE 10th and NE 16th. He had a white man file the paperwork with the city. Then, he began selling the land to Black families. He was also able to get the Federal Housing Authority to give loans to Black families in 1939. This allowed many families to move to the new edition and create a new Black neighborhood in Oklahoma City.
Education

There was a single line in the Oklahoma state constitution that required separate schools for white and Black students, and the state devised a complicated funding method to pay for the dual school system. The constitution required that these facilities be “neutral,” meaning that one could not be better than the other. In reality, the Black schools were consistently funded at a much lower level. In Oklahoma City, the white schools were housed in four brick buildings, valued at $75,000. The single building for the Black school was made of wood and was worth $5,000. Black teachers made 65 percent of what white teachers were paid. The white libraries received thousands of dollars while the Black libraries received hundreds of dollars.

Once the NAACP organized in Oklahoma, they followed a strategy to equalize funding for Black students in the state. In 1947, Emma Lee Freeman, a teacher, filed a federal lawsuit arguing that her smaller salary was unconstitutional. The district court judge agreed.

The NAACP national office worked closely with the state chapter on many issues. The most well known is the effort to desegregate professional and graduate schools. This nationwide effort included two cases in Oklahoma that helped lead to the Brown v. Board of Education case that overturned the “separate but equal” rule. The first case, Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, began when Ada Lois Sipuel, a Chickasha native and Langston graduate, applied to the University of Oklahoma law school. She was denied because of her race.
There was already a law that required an equivalent option for Black students seeking postgraduate education, and the district court ordered that the regents had to admit Sipuel or provide an equal option. Instead of admitting Sipuel, the regents attempted to rapidly establish a law school for Black students at the Capitol using the law library there. The case, led by Tulsa lawyer Amos T. Hall and Thurgood Marshall, then centered on whether those facilities were equal. The Supreme Court found that they were not and ordered that Sipuel be admitted to the University of Oklahoma law school.

Shortly thereafter, George McLaurin, a Langston professor, applied to the University of Oklahoma to pursue a doctorate in education. Eventually, he was admitted but every moment on campus was segregated. He was required to sit away from the students in class, and the other buildings and services on campus were segregated for McLaurin as well. McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents, also argued by Hall, centered on whether the on-campus segregation prevented McLaurin from receiving an equal education to his white peers. The Supreme Court agreed with McLaurin and found the law requiring segregation in higher education was unconstitutional.

These two cases, along with the Texas case Sweatt v. Painter, effectively ended segregation based on race in professional and graduate programs.
In 1931, authorities arrested Jess Hollins, a Black man, for the rape of a white 17-year-old. Hollins was not able to read and write. He had no lawyer and affixed his thumbprint to a written confession even though there is strong evidence he was innocent. In response to reports that lynch mobs were forming in the Tulsa suburb of Sapulpa, a trial was held in the basement of the courthouse with no public notice and no jury. He received the death penalty and was scheduled to be executed. Shortly after the verdict, the Young Communist League and the International Labor Defense, two communist organizations working to expand their influence among African Americans, intervened in the case and began representing Hollins in appeals. They successfully got the first case thrown out, and he was to be retried. The communist organizations dropped out of the defense at this time because of a change in their policy. The second trial took place in 1934. The all-white jury found Hollins guilty and sentenced him to death. The national NAACP did not want to be associated with the case, so Roscoe Dunjee hired lawyers to represent Hollins and used The Black Dispatch to build support and funds for Hollins. The defense argued that Blacks were excluded from the jury, which violated Hollins’s constitutional rights. The Supreme Court agreed and ordered a new trial. His third trial also took place before an all-white jury, and he was sentenced to life in prison, where he died in 1950.

Hollins v. State of Oklahoma (1935) previewed major changes involving the rights of those accused of crimes that would take place in the 1960s with cases such as Gideon v. Wainwright (1963), Griffin v. California (1965), and Katz v. United States (1967).
African American Business in Oklahoma

After emancipation, opportunities in the ways a Black person could earn a living expanded dramatically. Racist views held by non-Blacks often limited their interest in providing goods and especially services to Black communities, and the demand for these goods and services were often met by Black men and women with an entrepreneurial spirit. Some chose to self-fund while others appealed to the community, sometimes through small loans from **penny banks** or **mutual aid** groups, for assistance in opening a business. The earliest businesses in any community revolved around basic needs: barbering, restaurants, rooming houses, and funeral services. The development of All-Black towns and expanding economies in urban areas meant greater purchasing power in Black communities, and a greater diversity of business offerings reflected these evolved economies. At times and in some places, these business operators found themselves with non-Black clients, confronting the segregated system in place. Regardless of who choose to **patronize** these businesses, untold numbers of Black **entrepreneurs** found a level of success in Oklahoma.

Advertisements from Boley's newspaper
*The Beacon*, March 12, 1908.

Postcard of Dr. M. B. Moore’s clinic in Oklahoma City, 1946 (image courtesy Metropolitan Library System).
Sydney D. Lyons

Sydney Lyons (Choctaw) was born in 1860 or 1861 in either Choctaw Nation or Arkansas. He grew up in Texas. As a young man, he developed a hair product called “The Texas Wonder,” which he marketed to Black women. Lyons came to Oklahoma as a participant in the first land run. He settled in Guthrie and opened a grocery store serving the Black community. He resumed manufacturing and marketing his hair product under the name “The East India Hair Grower.” This product met with significant success, and it was distributed and sold all over the country. He used the profits from The East India Hair Grower to invest in other business enterprises. He owned a section of buildings in the Oklahoma City neighborhood called Deep Deuce. When the oil and gas industry began to boom, he made investments in land that offered the potential for oil production. This, too, proved successful. He discontinued the hair product in 1935 and focused on his real estate holdings. He died of heart failure in 1942.

O. W. Gurley

Originally born in Alabama, Ottawa W. Gurley moved to Pine Bluff, Arkansas, as a child. He married Emma Evans in 1888. He remained in Arkansas and worked as a letter carrier after attending Branch Normal College until 1893, when he participated in the Cherokee Outlet land run. He managed to stake a claim in Perry, and became an important figure in this community, working as a school principal, participating in politics, and running a grocery store. In 1905, the couple moved from Noble County to Tulsa. Gurley purchased 40 acres of land north of the Frisco tracks. He built one of the first businesses, a rooming house, on what would become Greenwood Avenue, the main street in the historic neighborhood of the same name. The population in Tulsa and Greenwood exploded and Gurley made shrewd decisions as a business owner and real estate investor. He built the Gurley Hotel and owned several other buildings, which were rented by other businesses.

The Gurleys lost everything in the Tulsa Race Massacre. Shortly after, O. W. Gurley was arrested for incitement, but was released and the case never went to trial. He and Emma moved to Los Angeles where they ran a small hotel until his death in 1967.
Loula and John Williams

Loula Williams was born in Tennessee in 1879. John Williams was born in Mississippi in 1882. They met in Mississippi and moved to Arkansas, where Loula worked as a teacher and John worked for a railroad. They moved into Greenwood as it was welcoming its first residents in the early 1900s. John, an exceptional mechanic, worked a skilled job as an ice cream manufacturer and Loula worked as a teacher in a suburb of Tulsa called Sand Springs. They earned enough to purchase luxuries and begin investing. With the purchase of their vehicle, John learned automobile repair and offered his services as a side job. Eventually, he grew his client base large enough that he was able to quit his job and open his own auto repair shop.

They used the profits to build the Williams Building, a three-story building that housed Loula's candy shop and soda fountain on the first floor, their home on the second, and office space on the third. The next business they developed was the Dreamland Theatre, which opened in Greenwood just as films became a commercial venture. This proved so successful that Loula and John opened at least two more Dreamland Theatres in other towns. Their property would be destroyed during the Tulsa Race Massacre and insurance companies refused to pay claims afterward. They had to use the profits from their other theaters to rebuild. A new theater went up in 1922 but Loula suffered poor health for the remainder of her life, eventually being declared incompetent. She died in 1927 while John lived until 1940.

The Mann Family

Five brothers in the Mann family, known by their initials: M. M., B. H., O. B., P. M., and J. D., were originally from Texas. They built three grocery stores in Greenwood and one in Okmulgee beginning in 1919. During the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, the brothers attempted to protect the community and their property. Of their three stores, one was completely destroyed, and another suffered major damage.

In the aftermath of the massacre, one of the brothers, O. B., was indicted on charges as white Tulsans attempted to blame Black Tulsans for the attack. O. B. vanished for several years but later returned to Greenwood and the grocery business.

By 1935, the Manns had rebuilt their businesses and added others, such as a luncheonette. M. M. would establish the Greenwood Chamber of Commerce in 1938. The family continued in the grocery business until the 1970s, when urban renewal destroyed the neighborhood.
Simon Barry

Born in Mississippi in 1890, Simon Barry moved to Tennessee, where he taught auto mechanics to students at a small college. He moved to Tulsa in the 1910s. He started a jitney service for Greenwood residents and visitors in 1919. Jitneys were vehicles for hire, but they did not provide private rides; if other people were going the same way, they joined you in the car. There were no other transportation services available for Blacks, so Barry’s jitney service was able to expand. With profits from his first business, Barry established an auto repair shop and taught others how to repair vehicles.

It is unclear where Barry was during the Tulsa Race Massacre, but some of the jitney drivers drove back and forth, ferrying Black residents out of danger.

In 1925, Barry indulged his passion for airplanes and purchased one with a partner. This proved to be a wise decision, as many people associated with the oil industry were willing customers for a charter airplane service. Barry continued to refine his businesses. He began buying buses and he received permission from the City of Tulsa to operate the bus line. In the 1940s, he sold his bus line with the requirement that the Black drivers and mechanics would keep their jobs. Eventually, the City of Tulsa would gain ownership of Barry’s bus service.

Florence Kemp

Born in Boley in 1931, Florence Jones Kemp moved to Oklahoma City with her mother as a teenager. An excellent seamstress at an early age, she thought tailoring or fashion would be her future career. Her mother taught her to cook because she sometimes had to work and was not available to prepare meals. Kemp spent a summer in California visiting family who owned a restaurant. She worked there, learned how restaurants operated, and saved her wages and tips. When she came back to Oklahoma City, she opened Florence’s Restaurant in Deep Deuce in 1952. In the beginning, she mostly served workers on their lunch breaks, but it did not take long for other customers to learn about the soul food restaurant. Because of urban renewal, Florence’s Restaurant was forced to relocate to NE 23rd, where Kemp continues to operate to this day. Florence’s Restaurant is the only Oklahoma recipient of the prestigious James Beard Foundation Award, which recognizes chefs, restaurateurs, authors, and journalists.
The Rolfe Family
Robert H. Rolfe was born in 1886, and very little is known about his early life. His parents may have come to Oklahoma to participate in the Land Run of 1889. He married Nannie Mare in 1910. During the early part of his career, he established a broom factory in Oklahoma City. Eventually, it grew to be the largest broom manufacturer in the southwest. In 1933, he left that business because of health reasons, and two years later he opened Rolfe Funeral Home. His two sons, Henry and Walter, took over the business in the 1940s after earning degrees in funeral science. Both men worked in the Black community in Oklahoma City for their entire careers. All three men participated in civic and philanthropic organizations such as the NAACP and the YMCA and were deeply involved in their churches.

The Temple Family
Earl Temple was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1910. After the death of his parents when he was young, he was reared by an aunt in New Jersey. He moved to Morristown, Tennessee, to earn a degree in funeral science and opened his first funeral home there. After service in World War II, he and his first wife, Odessa, opened a funeral home in Oklahoma City in 1947. During his career, Temple was heavily involved in civic and professional organizations. He was a Mason, a congregant of Tabernacle Baptist Church, and a lifelong member of the NAACP. He was appointed to the Oklahoma State Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors and served two five-year terms. Temple's sons, Mark, Christopher, and John, and John's wife Joh'Re, learned the business and continue to operate it.

Earl Temple (center), participating in a civil rights protest at Anna Maude's Café. Photo by Johnny Melton (20246.38.281.1, John Melton Collection, OHS).
Percy James

Percy James was born around 1889 in Louisiana. It is not clear when or why he moved to Oklahoma. In the 1910s, carbonated beverages were becoming more popular in the country. The Oklahoma Coca-Cola Bottling Company successfully supplied the white areas of the city, but they refused to deliver to Black businesses and neighborhoods. Around 1918, Percy James stepped in and established a beverage company for African American communities. Initially, he called his signature beverage Afri-Cola but changed it to Jay Kola after a couple of years. He added other flavors and offered a full line of soft drinks to his customers. Jay Kola was delivered throughout the state and is fondly remembered by many Black Oklahomans. Percy James invested in other businesses with his profits. He sponsored a Black baseball team called the Jay-Kola Giants. He also built a movie theater in Deep Deuce, Oklahoma City’s segregated Black neighborhood, and named it the Jewel Theatre after his daughter. He opened Jewel Theatres in other towns with a large number of Black residents. The Jay Kola business came to an end upon his retirement in 1963.
J. J. Simmons

Joseph Jacob “Jake” Simmons Jr. (Muscogee) was born in 1901 in Haskell, Oklahoma, the ninth of ten children born to a Freedmen family. Simmons’s father was a well-to-do rancher who worked in the cattle industry. Jake Simmons Jr. told his father at an early age that he wanted to be an oilman. He attended Tuskegee Institute on advice from Booker T. Washington during his stay on the Simmons’s ranch. Since Simmons was born before the cutoff for allotments, he received 160 acres. This land contained significant oil deposits. This resulted in a flush of wealth for Simmons and the beginning of his career as an oilman. He started by working as a broker, buying and selling leases. He diversified his investments by purchasing farmland and dealing in real estate, cattle, and insurance. He expanded his brokerage to other states. Simmons worked with the early oilmen of Oklahoma such as Frank Phillips. He eventually developed a global reach, focusing on the newly independent countries in Africa. Simmons was appointed to the National Petroleum Council in 1969.

Simmons was critical to the Civil Rights Movement in Oklahoma. He was a party to a civil rights case, which settled in the Supreme Court in 1938 that argued Black residents should not have to pay for a bond passed to support the white schools. He also served as president of the state chapter of the NAACP and the Negro Business League. He provided untold monetary support to other civil rights campaigns.

Viola Watkins

Viola Watkins was born in Texas in 1904. The youngest of thirteen, she moved to Oklahoma to attend Langston University. After graduating, she taught in Guthrie schools for 25 years. Watkins moved to Oklahoma City. The house she chose was within walking distance of her church and she became an active member of St. John’s congregation. Other church members asked Watkins to care for two elderly family members and she agreed, moving them in with her. Other church members sought her out to care for their vulnerable family members, and Watkins found herself with a new career. She opened a series of facilities, increasing in size and capacity throughout the late 1960s, leading to the opening of Skyview Nursing Center, a 68-bed skilled nursing facility. Working with members of her family, Watkins was able to pay off the half-million dollar loan in five years because of her skill in business and her popularity in the community. She owned the largest Black business in Oklahoma owned by a woman. Watkins died in 1984, but Skyview continues today as Voyage Long Term Care.
Born in Mississippi in 1891, Walter J. Edwards moved to Wellston, Oklahoma, in 1907. In 1915, he began working as a laborer in an Oklahoma junkyard. Frugal with his money, Edwards was able to open his own business in a short period of time. He continued to invest in new businesses and owned a diverse cross-section of businesses, including gas stations, an iron foundry, and a baggage-hauling company. He lost his fortune in 1929 with onset of the Great Depression and set out to rebuild. He began in the scrap metal business and owned Edwards Scrap Metal and Junk Yard. From this base, Edwards operated several other businesses including a taxi service, auto repair, and pharmacies.

In the late 1930s, W. J. Edwards identified a need for Black families to have choices about where to live. In Oklahoma City, the Black section of the city was very small and densely populated. In 1936, the segregation ordinance that constrained Black families to this area was struck down. Edwards purchased land outside of the segregation zone and found a white man to subdivide the land to avoid attention. Then he began selling the land to Black families. He even found federal financing for some of these purchases. This was extremely uncommon because of a federal policy called redlining, which denied government financing to homes in Black neighborhoods. They built and sold over 750 homes for Black families in Oklahoma City.

Edwards built two separate business empires in his lifetime. He and his wife, Frances Gilliam Waldrop, also contributed to their community with generosity. When constructing their housing addition there were too few skilled Black workers, so they hired unskilled workers and trained them in the construction trades. In the 1940s, Frances Edwards needed hospital care and the only medical care available to Black people in Oklahoma City was in a poorly equipped basement. Her condition did not improve and the doctors said she needed adequate facilities with trained staff. The Edwards's used that experience to inform them of the need for a hospital to serve the Black community. They built the hospital, which offered a better care for patients and training opportunities for Black doctors and nurses. They remain known as important philanthropists in Oklahoma.


W. J. and Frances Edwards (image courtesy W. J. Edward Memorial).
The importance of the church to African American communities in Oklahoma cannot be overstated. During the allotment period, missionaries from the Baptist and Methodist denominations found success in organizing congregations of Freedmen throughout Indian Territory. Organized Black churches began around the turn of the century in the larger cities and the All-Black towns. The church offered congregants a place for worship, community, purpose, and the chance to work toward non-religious goals, such as civil rights, in an organized way. Religious leaders supported their communities by offering space, raising funds, working with other groups, and endorsing causes. Church leaders had long ago established services for vulnerable members of the community. They provided the safety net for Black residents that state and local governments provided for white communities. The Black churches have often been a target for vandalism and arson for those hostile to African American communities.

Some of the oldest churches in Oklahoma continue today. There were several churches to choose from in Muskogee, where the Black residents represented over 30 percent of the town’s population at statehood. The oldest, First Baptist, grew out of an 1870s mission school and was organized in 1890. The historic brick building’s cornerstone was laid in 1904. With roots reaching back to 1889, Avery Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church formally organized in the 1890s in Oklahoma City. The church grew rapidly before statehood and changed locations three times during that period. With statehood, the church constructed a brick building. The church would remain in this building for over fifty years.

Dr. W. L. Haywood, Zelia Breaux, and Ralph Ellison attended this church. In Tulsa, Reverend J. E. Roy organized Vernon AME Church in 1905. It grew slowly, until it had 71 congregants at statehood. A brick building was in the process of being constructed beginning in the 1910s. The white mob that attacked the Greenwood neighborhood during the Tulsa Race Massacre destroyed thirteen churches, including Vernon AME. The congregation rebuilt quickly after the massacre, and their numbers increased to 400 members.

Vernon AME, Tulsa (image courtesy National Historic Register of Places).
Black Fraternities and Sororities

When Oklahoma opened for unrestricted settlement in the late nineteenth century, Blacks from the southern states brought **fraternal** groups with them. The Prince Hall Masons, Order of the Eastern Star, the State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Knights of Pythias, Elks, Odd Fellows, and Shriners would all play an important role in the fabric of Black communities in Oklahoma. The lodges offered recreation, companionship, recognition, and talent development, which made life in a segregated world more bearable.

The organizations focused on community needs and worked to meet them. They raised funds from members and community events to devote to building and supporting the community and its members. Blacks in Oklahoma understood that the taxes they paid would not be reinvested into their own towns and neighborhoods. Black fraternal and sororal organizations filled that void throughout the state.

Order of Easter Star, Boley, 1926 (20699.02.197.303, Currie Ballard Collection, OHS).

Prince Hall Masons

Prince Hall Freemasonry began in 1775 when Prince Hall, a free Black man, organized a chapter with 14 other Black men. After the Civil War, chapters of Prince Hall Masons could be found in most Black communities in the country. Oklahoma was no exception. Most of the Black leaders in the early twentieth century belonged to one of these groups. Green I. Currin, the first Black territorial legislator, served as grand master of the St. John Grand Lodge of the AF&AM Masonic Order of Oklahoma. Civil rights leader and newspaper publisher Roscoe Dunjee's *The Black Dispatch* and *The Bookertee Searchlight* were both considered the official publications of the state organization of the Knights of Pythias. In 1912, the Masons built a Masonic temple in Boley, which was the tallest building between Oklahoma City and Okmulgee.

Men attending a mason event, date unknown (20699.02.197.130, Currie Ballard Collection, OHS).
Queen Bathsheba Order of the Eastern Star

The Order of the Eastern Star was organized as the Indiahoma Grand Chapter in 1898. Oklahoma Territory followed with its own Queen Esther Grand Chapter in 1900. The Queen Bathsheba Grand Chapter formed in 1908 from the Grand Chapters of the Oklahoma and Indian Territories. Their work centered on collecting and paying out burial insurance for its members, scholarships for students, and contributing to charitable causes.

Bathsheba members donated $500 to survivors of the Tulsa Race Massacre (The Black Dispatch, August 26, 1921).

Letter from Queen Bathsheba Grand Chapter in Hennessey, 1916 (Currie Ballard Collection, OHS).

State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs

The first Black women’s club predated statehood by one year; the Excelsior Club was established in Guthrie in 1906. Clubs in Oklahoma City followed a year later. By 1910, enough clubs existed in Oklahoma to organize a state-wide federation of clubs. Originally, it was called the Oklahoma Federation of Negro Women’s Clubs. In 1921, the name changed to the Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs. These clubs embraced charitable and political goals. Under Drusilla Dunjee Houston’s leadership, the federation protested lynching and supported women’s suffrage. They produced a publication for their membership and operated a home for young girls in Tulsa.

Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs banners, 1910 (image courtesy Smithsonian Institution).
The Knight of Pythias was organized in Washington, DC, in 1864. The guiding principle of the organization revolved around a Greek legend about two friends who sacrificed for each other. Men in Vicksburg, Mississippi, organized the first Pythian lodge for African Americans. Much like the Masons, the Knights of Pythias offered African American members an opportunity for networking, mutual aid, and a sense of belonging. Roscoe Dunjee was a Knight of Pythias and popularized the organization within Oklahoma. He published both *The Black Dispatch* and, briefly, *The Bookertee Searchlight*, as the “official organ of the Knights of Pythias Oklahoma.”
Black Greek Letter Organizations

As historically Black colleges and universities and the few integrated institutions of higher education began attracting and graduating Black professionals, students established Black Greek letter organizations (BGLOs). These organizations served important functions throughout the lives of the members. On campus, these groups lent support to students as they attempted to earn both undergraduate and graduate degrees. On the integrated campuses, the BGLOs helped students deal with the isolation of attending a school with very few Black students. Alpha Phi Alpha began in 1906 at Cornell University to help Black students keep working toward their degree instead of leaving school because of the isolation. At historically Black colleges and universities, belonging to a BGLO meant the opportunity to forge a close connection with a group at a large institution. While pursuing degrees, members of BGLOs organized their groups to perform service projects, support members’ academic goals, and host frequent social gatherings.

Once members graduated, they organized alumni versions of their BGLO. In many ways, the groups served functions similar to the Prince Hall Masons, Eastern Star, or the Knights of Pythias. They all organized social activities for members, raised funds for worthy organizations and individuals, and hosted meetings and conferences for members. The major difference between the two types of organization is one of geography. The Prince Hall Masons, Order of the Eastern Star, and the Knights of Pythias were organized locally, and often focused on community needs. The BGLOs rapidly gained a national footprint as alumni moved to new locations for work or family. Members worked to ensure that fellow members knew about distant job opportunities, and provided a network to join once an individual moved to a new place. Each of these organizations worked to end segregation and promote political activity.

Kappa Alpha Psi

Kappa Alpha Psi originated at Indiana University in 1911, and an alumni chapter was organized for professionals in central Oklahoma in 1921. This was the first BGLO in Oklahoma. The chapter remained active for five years and then went inactive for a decade. The fraternity organized a chapter on the Langston campus in 1933, and in the 1940s and 1950s, several new chapters organized throughout the state.
Alpha Phi Alpha

Alpha Phi Alpha is the oldest Black fraternity in the country. Founded at Cornell University in 1906, Alpha Phi Alpha expanded into an intercollegiate fraternity. The Beta Eta Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha organized in 1938, and Dr. Gravelly E. Finley served at the first president. The Alphas conducted service projects involving mentorship and education regularly.

Delta Sigma Theta

The Delta Sigma Theta Sorority began at Howard University in 1913. In 1938, eight women organized the Oklahoma City Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta. The first president was Buzeder Ragland and Sareeta Finley served as the first vice-president. Sorority activities were a regular focus in the pages of The Oklahoma Eagle once an alumnae chapter was established in Tulsa. During the 1940s and 1950s, more chapters were added in other towns such as Okmulgee and Langston. Just as the other BGLOs, they organized social events, fundraisers, and scholarships. In Tulsa, the annual scholarship fundraiser was a variety show called the Jabberwock.

Dr. Gravelly Finley was a charter member of Oklahoma City’s chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha (23427.4, Finley-Slaughter Collection, OHS).

This headline in The Oklahoma Eagle announces the 1953 Jabberwock, a charity variety show (The Oklahoma Eagle, February 12, 1953).

Deltas, date unknown (20699.02.197.054, Currie Ballard Collection, OHS).
The Alpha Kappa Alpha shield was designed by Phyllis Wheatley Waters in 1920 (image courtesy Alpha Kappa Alpha).

Alpha Kappa Alpha
The first chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) organized in Tulsa in 1931 when the charter was approved for the Alpha Chi Omega chapter. The graduate Alpha Upsilon Omega chapter also began in 1931 on the Langston University campus. In 1939, the undergraduate Alpha Zeta chapter formed at Langston. These organizations hosted social, community, and educational activities locally. They regularly participated in the Delta Sigma Theta’s Jabberwock variety show. The Tulsa chapter became known for holding a pre-Thanksgiving Vesper Service that hundreds attended yearly. For many years, the women of AKA mentored Tulsa high school students and provided scholarships. Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher was in the sorority, as was Nancy Davis, the first African American female to earn a graduate degree from Oklahoma State University (OSU).

Nancy Davis, far right, at the dedication of a statue on the OSU campus honoring her civil rights work (image courtesy OSU).

Like other Black Greek letter organizations, Alpha Kappa Alpha Alphas advocated for expansion of opportunities for Black Americans (The Oklahoma Eagle, May 20, 1944).
The Black Press

During the early 1900s, newspapers published by Black editors could be found in most communities with a sizeable African American population. Editors devoted most of their column space to the usual topics of local papers: area news, advice, and advertisements. The Black press served other important purposes as well. Larger newspapers published by whites in the same communities either ignored stories about their Black neighbors or embraced racist frames to present them. The Black press included these stories with greater accuracy. Subscriptions frequently came from outside the community, which helped create a network of Black publishers and readers throughout the country. These editors used their column space and editorials to advocate for the recognition of Black political and civil rights.

Edward P. McCabe and *The Langston City Herald*

Born in New York, Edward P. McCabe settled in Kansas after training as a lawyer. Active in Republican politics and a strong advocate for All-Black towns, he moved to Oklahoma in 1890, and established *The Langston City Herald* in 1891. His primary goal for the paper was to attract more Black settlers to Oklahoma. He campaigned to reserve a portion of Oklahoma in the hopes of creating an All-Black state.

He operated *The Langston City Herald* until 1902. The weekly paper, with subscribers in many states, included appeals for African Americans to settle in Oklahoma, presenting the territories as a promised land with excellent soil and minimal conflict. The paper also shared international, national, and local news. Articles and editorials examined issues facing African Americans at the time and argued for the defense of their rights.

Masthead of *The Langston City Herald*
George Napier Perkins and *The Oklahoma Guide*

George Napier Perkins was born in Tennessee and moved to Arkansas as a teenager. A soldier and lawyer, Perkins served in several civic positions in Arkansas, including as a delegate to the Reconstruction-Era Constitutional Convention, justice of the peace, and city councilor. Perkins concluded Oklahoma offered great opportunity to Blacks and migrated to Guthrie.

Perkins continued his public service in Guthrie, serving on the city council from 1894 to 1902. The territory began its shift to excluding Blacks from participation in government in the early 1900s, so Perkins shifted to activism, promoting an All-Black state and arguing against the efforts to establish segregation by law.

He established *The Oklahoma Guide* in 1892. A long-running paper, it continued past Perkins’s death in 1914 and was published until 1922 by his niece Elmira S. Ridley.
W. H. Twine and *The Muskogee Cimeter*

Known as “The Black Tiger,” William Henry Twine made the Sac and Fox Land Run in 1891. Trained as a lawyer, he was admitted to the Oklahoma Territory Bar and began the first Black law firm in the same year. He moved to Muskogee after concluding the upcoming allotment of tribal lands would result in work for lawyers. Beginning in 1898, he published *The Pioneer Paper*. In 1904 he closed that *The Pioneer Paper* and began publishing *The Muskogee Cimeter*.

When no African Americans were selected for the Single Statehood Convention in 1905, he and others organized an alternate convention. These activists worked through multiple organizations and through the Black press to oppose efforts by political leaders to exclude Blacks and force second-class citizenship on them. The Negro Protective League of Oklahoma and Indian Territories and the Anti-Jim Crow League are two of the groups Twine worked with to advance equality. He met with President Theodore Roosevelt to oppose the proposed state constitution because of its endorsement of segregation. He and another lawyer filed a lawsuit testing Senate Bill One. His work gained the attention of many, including the newly-formed Ku Klux Klan. Twine faced death threats for years.

*The Muskogee Cimeter* offered a wealth of information in its pages. The editorial pages argued tirelessly for Black participation in politics. The paper heavily featured political news with an evident pro-Republican bias.

![Image]

A. J. Smitherman and *The Tulsa Star*

A. J. Smitherman moved to Muskogee from Alabama as a child. He left the state to attend college and earn a law degree. He returned in 1908 and began working for W. H. Twine as both a lawyer and journalist. Both men worked to protect clients from the “guardianship racket” in which whites petitioned the courts to take control of the financial affairs of American Indians and Freedmen who had been allotted land. They successfully defended the property rights of Warrior A. Rentie, whose land earned over $100,000 a year. The men regularly used both the courts and *The Muskogee Cimeter* to advance their causes. Over time, Smitherman moved away from the Republicanism of his mentor and started his own paper in Muskogee, where he advocated Blacks should make the parties earn their support.

Smitherman moved to Tulsa in 1913 and established *The Tulsa Star* with an investment from J. B. Stratford. Smitherman created the first Black daily newspaper and the first Black newspaper in Tulsa.

From the beginning, the pages of *The Tulsa Star* demanded the recognition of rights, argued in favor of the principle of self-defense, and chronicled the frequent confrontations Smitherman engaged in with those who wanted to commit violence on Black communities. In 1917, he investigated a story about the torching of a Black neighborhood in Dewey, Oklahoma, which resulted in charges for 36 members of the mob. He stopped lynchings and was a vocal critic of law enforcement that refused to protect those in their custody.

He continued to publish until the night of May 31, 1921. On that night, Smitherman led two groups of Black men to the courthouse in an attempt to protect a Black man being held in custody and threatened with lynching. When a fight broke out on the second attempt, the large crowd of white men began chasing the Black men. The Tulsa Race Massacre had begun. During the night, whites invaded Greenwood and set fire to the community, including *The Tulsa Star* offices. Smitherman fled, knowing many would work to blame him for the violence the whites had perpetrated. The State of Oklahoma attempted to prosecute him for the riot and worked to have him extradited. He refused to return and established another paper, this time in Buffalo, New York. He published until his death in 1961.
Theodore Baughman, the Goodwin family, and The Oklahoma Eagle

Two men, Theodore Baughman and James Henri Goodwin, worked at The Tulsa Star. In June 1920, Theodore Baughman established a competing paper named The Oklahoma Sun. After the Tulsa Race Massacre forced A. J. Smitherman from the state, Baughman salvaged what equipment he could from the wreckage of The Star’s offices. He began publishing under the name The Oklahoma Eagle, and continued throughout the 1920s. In 1933, Goodwin’s son approached Baughman about purchasing the paper. Baughman went into partnership with Goodwin in 1936. Baughman died in 1937 and Goodwin gained full ownership over the paper. The Goodwin family has operated The Oklahoma Eagle for four generations and, as of 2023, it remains in publication.

August 20, 1925, issue of The Oklahoma Eagle

E. L. Goodwin (image courtesy The Oklahoma Eagle).
Roscoe Dunjee was born in 1883, the son of a Baptist minister. He dropped out of school and started a farm, but continued to educate himself by reading the 1,500-volume library his father left him. Successful as a truck farmer, he gained enough wealth from this career to purchase a printing press. In 1915, he began publishing *The Black Dispatch*. Dunjee’s sister, Drusilla, became a contributing editor from the paper’s inception. In addition to working on the paper, Drusilla Dunjee Houston published a three-volume history about Ethiopia and the Cushite Empire, presenting, much like W. E. B. Du Bois, credible studies on African history.

The Dunjees used *The Black Dispatch* to advocate for many issues, but the theme of civil rights for African Americans was central to the paper. Roscoe Dunjee used the paper to popularize civil rights campaigns, both local and national. His insightful editorials and national scope resulted in the paper gaining subscribers throughout the United States. His work on the *Black Dispatch* led the National Newspaper Publishers Association to recognize Dunjee as “a giant in American journalism.”

Publishing Oklahoma City’s only Black newspaper, Dunjee worked tirelessly to defend and advance the rights of African Americans. He helped found the state chapter of the NAACP and, within that organization, helped guide numerous court cases testing segregation throughout the state’s institutions, including these successful decisions: *Hollins v. State of Oklahoma* (1935), *Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* (1948), and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1950). He also organized the tests and subsequent court cases that led other courts to declare residential segregation in Oklahoma unconstitutional. The exceptional strategy and organization Dunjee brought to the opposition of segregation makes him a towering figure in Oklahoma history and an overlooked civil rights activist of national importance.
Inman Page was born into slavery in Virginia in 1853. His family relocated to Washington, DC, and Page attended Howard University, where he worked to pay off his tuition and fees. He attended classes there for two years and then applied to Brown University in Rhode Island. He and another man were the first Black students to attend the university. After a difficult beginning, Page performed well and earned the title of class orator at graduation. He began a teaching career in Mississippi and then moved to Lincoln University in Missouri. At that time, Lincoln shifted to an all-Black faculty and he led the school as president. Page moved to Langston’s Colored Agricultural and Normal University in 1898 to serve as president. He greatly increased the number of students attending the school and oversaw the construction of new buildings on campus in the 18 years he was president. In 1916, he was fired to make room for a Democratic appointment to the position. He moved to schools out of state and then took a position as principal of Oklahoma City’s Douglass High School. He retired from Douglass six months before his death in December 1935.

At both Langston and Douglass, Page worked with his daughter, Zelia N. Breaux.

F. D. Moon

Born in 1896, Frederick Douglass Moon had no access to a segregated high school from his home in Lincoln County. He attended the Colored Agricultural and Normal University beginning in ninth grade and until his second year of college. He would go on to earn a bachelor’s and master’s degrees. He began teaching and rapidly gained a reputation as a gifted educator. He worked through professional organizations to advance education for Black Oklahomans and support the fight for civil rights. Moon moved to Oklahoma City in 1940 and served as the principal of Douglass High School for 21 years. He was the first African American president of the Oklahoma City School Board, serving in that role only two years after his election to the school board. He died shortly after, in 1975, in Oklahoma City.

Zelia N. Breaux

Zelia N. Breaux was born in 1880 to Inman Page and Zelia B. Page. While her father served as president of Lincoln University in Missouri, Breaux earned a bachelor’s degree in music. Inman Page offered his daughter a position on the faculty of the Colored Agricultural Normal University in Langston upon his acceptance of the presidency there. She established the music department there and organized glee clubs, bands, and choral societies in addition to teaching classes and conducting the orchestra.

Breaux left her position at the university to become supervisor of music for the segregated schools in Oklahoma City. She built an unmatched music program, which started with hiring a music teacher for each grade. She also chaired the music department at Douglass High School. She offered the same wide variety of musical activities for students that she began at Langston, and the Douglass High School Band earned national attention.

Outside of school, Breaux managed the Aldridge Theatre. She invited local school artists to perform there while also hosting some of the most popular professional acts in the nation such as Count Basic, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith.

Breaux’s legacy extended through the impact of her students, which included Charlie Christian, Jimmy Rushing, and Ralph Ellison.
Melvin Tolson built his literary career while teaching at Langston University (2012.201.B1289.1.0263, OPUBCO Collection, OHS).

Melvin Tolson

Melvin Tolson was born between 1898 and 1900, and his family traveled the Midwest following his father’s assignments as a Methodist minister. He attended Fisk and Lincoln Universities and graduated with honors. He spent a significant period of his life in Texas, teaching speech and English at Wiley College. His work building a nationally renowned debate team is captured in the film The Great Debaters, with Denzel Washington portraying Tolson. He moved to Langston University in 1947, where he taught English and drama. It was at Langston that Tolson produced his literary works. Considered an important poet in modernism, a style of writing that purposefully rejected traditional ideas and rules of writing, Tolson often used musical structures for his poetry. Many of his poems examined the African American experience and ideas about Africa. He produced three major volumes of poetry and other writings while at Langston. Tolson also served as the mayor of Langston for several terms.

Judith Ann Carter Horton

Judith Ann Carter was born in Wright City, Missouri, in 1866. She left home to pursue her education, working her way through school, and graduated from Oberlin in 1891. She established the state’s first women’s club for African Americans in 1904, the Excelsior Club. This club would be the beginning of a larger organization of women’s clubs for Black Oklahomans. The club network grew so large, they were able to form the Oklahoma State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs. Horton served as president of the Federation for three terms, and also worked with the National Association of Colored Women. In 1907, her husband, D. G. Horton, attempted to use the Carnegie Library in Guthrie and was refused because of his race. In response, Judith Horton led the campaign to build a library for Black residents of Guthrie. She received assistance from her club and the editor of The Guthrie Guide, George Napier Perkins. The Excelsior Library opened in 1908 and remained a centerpiece of the Black community in Guthrie for 40 years. She worked as a librarian at the Excelsior Library without pay for 11 years. Horton accepted a position as a Latin and English teacher, and held this position until her retirement in 1936. She continued to serve the community in various ways until her death in 1948.

Lawyers and Doctors

J. Coody Johnson

In the chaos of the Civil War in Indian Territory in 1864, J. Coody Johnson was born to refugees at Fort Gibson. A citizen of the Muscogee Nation, Johnson attended school in Wewoka, and the Seminole Nation sponsored his college degree at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He then returned to Indian Territory and worked as a cowboy. Judge Isaac Parker, charged with handling cases in Indian Territory, needed interpreters and hired Johnson. Johnson began studying for a law degree under the judge, and served in both the Muscogee and Seminole governments at the highest levels. He was nicknamed “The Black Panther.”

As statehood became a reality and the demands increased for strict segregation, J. Coody Johnson organized with other Freedmen and Black Oklahomans to fight this attempt. He organized and led the Negro Protective League and was one of a small delegation of Black Oklahomans that met with President Theodore Roosevelt in an effort to defeat the proposed state constitution. Later, he helped spearhead the fight against the grandfather clause.

Johnson found success not only in law but in oil and real estate as well. He owned a huge ranch in Muskogee where he held the first Black State Fair in Oklahoma. Johnson donated a significant amount of his estate and acreage to provide for a school for Black children, resulting in the Johnson Grove School.
Born in 1879 in the Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory, to a Freedmen family, Buck Colbert Franklin attended several schools pursuing his education. While teaching and farming, B. C. Franklin studied the law by correspondence through the Sprague School of Law in Detroit. Franklin passed the bar exam with ease, scoring second-highest among those taking the exam. He practiced law in the All-Black town of Ren-tiesville before moving to Tulsa in 1921. Within months, the Tulsa Race Massacre occurred, causing B. C. Franklin to be held by authorities for several days. Immediately upon release, Franklin began organizing survivors of the massacre. He filed suit against the city for their plans to institute a fire ordinance that would prevent almost all the residents of the Black neighborhood of Greenwood from rebuilding on their property. B. C. Franklin also wrote an important eyewitness account of the events of the massacre and an autobiography. He died in 1960.

B. C. Franklin

B. C. Franklin, right, with his law partner, I. W. Spears, left, and secretary Effie Thompson, center, working in a tent days after the Tulsa Race Massacre (image courtesy the National Museum for African American History and Culture).
Amos T. Hall

Amos T. Hall was born in 1896 in Louisiana. He attended Rust College in Mississippi and Gilbert Industrial College in Louisiana. He moved to Tulsa in 1921 and began studying law books he found in a church. Completely self-taught, Hall passed the bar exam in 1925. He worked with B. C. Franklin in a case concerning whether coerced confessions were constitutional, and they were successful in getting their client’s conviction reversed. As that case came to a conclusion, he served as the lawyer for Emma Lee Freemen, who sued the Oklahoma City School Board for equal pay for Black teachers and won. At the same time Hall worked on these cases, he also represented Ada Lois Sipuel in court with Thurgood Marshall. Hall then went on to represent George McLaurin in his case.

Amos T. Hall stands with Roscoe Dunjee and Clara Luper as major architects of the Civil Rights Movement in Oklahoma during the critical decades of the 1940s and 1950s. Precedents that Hall helped to establish would contribute to the overturning of the system of legal segregation that dominated much of the country for over half a century.

The Oklahoma Eagle reported the funeral of Amos T. Hall, November 25, 1971.
W. L. Haywood

Dr. W. L. Haywood was born in 1883 and was orphaned at age five. He graduated from Meharry Medical College in 1908. He came to Oklahoma when he fell ill on a train ride to California, and found Dr. W. H. Slaughter for treatment. During the visit, Dr. Slaughter convinced Dr. Haywood to settle in Oklahoma City. Dr. Haywood founded Utopia Hospital, the first hospital in the city for African Americans. Dr. Haywood helped establish the first Black Greek Letter organization in Oklahoma, Kappa Alpha Psi, in 1922. He was active in the NAACP and co-founded the Oklahoma Medical, Dental and Pharmaceutical Association. He was the first Black physician to work on the faculty of University Hospital in 1943. During his tenure, he oversaw the integration of departments ranging from cafeteria services to nursing. He ensured Black doctors had full privileges at the hospital.

W. H. Slaughter

Born in 1872 in Alabama, W. H. Slaughter settled in Oklahoma after graduating from Meharry Medical College in Nashville. Dr. Slaughter was Oklahoma City’s first Black physician and served the African American community for five decades. He also invested in property and became the largest Black landowner in the city. He dedicated his free time to civic duty, including service in the Negro Chamber of Commerce, the Negro Business League, and Avery Chapel A. M. E. Church. Dr. Slaughter joined the local chapter of the NAACP, supporting their campaigns through the decades. He established the Oklahoma Medical, Dental, and Pharmaceutical Association for Black medical professionals in the 1920s. Dr. Slaughter worked to support the war efforts during World War II by coordinating a war bond campaign. His final years were spent spearheading the construction of a YMCA and YWCA building for the African American community.
Gravely Finley

Gravely E. Finley was born in Arkansas in 1908. He graduated from Meharry Medical College. In 1935, he married Dr. W. H. Slaughter’s daughter, and they moved to Oklahoma City in 1937, where he established a practice in the Deep Deuce neighborhood. Dr. Finley was the first physician on staff at St. Anthony’s Hospital. A dedicated member of Alpha Phi Alpha, Dr. Finley established a chapter of the organization in Oklahoma City in 1938. He supported the NAACP, the YMCA, Habitat for Humanity and the Medical, Dental and Pharmaceutical Association. In addition to the civic work he did in Oklahoma City, he also traveled to Africa and established a medical clinic in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Opaline Wadkins

Born in 1912 in Texas, Opaline Deveraux Wadkins accepted a position in Oklahoma City to recruit more Black nurses. Upon her arrival, Wadkins began lobbying for better medical facilities for Black residents of Oklahoma City. The state decided to build a dedicated ward of University Hospital for Black patients. Dr. W. L. Haywood and Wadkins served as the liaison between the all-white staff of doctors and the all-Black staff of nurses. At the same time, she organized a training program at Douglass High School to train practical nurses. In the five-year period, from 1949 to 1953, Wadkins trained over 200 nurses in this program. She successfully fought to open the University of Oklahoma College of Nursing to Black students and was the first African American to receive a master's degree from that college. She accepted a position from the US Health Department focusing on improving maternal health and infant mortality in southwestern Oklahoma among tribal members. The programs she instituted reduced infant mortality by 50 percent. Wadkins developed programs that were hosted by African American churches focusing on diabetic and maternal health, and she capped her career by establishing the Langston School of Nursing. In 1976, Governor David Boren declared November 14 as “Opaline Wadkins Day.”
Aviators

James Herman Banning and Thomas Allen

Born in 1899 in Canton, Oklahoma, James Herman Banning moved to Iowa and studied electrical engineering. He opened an auto repair shop and decided to learn to fly. The flying schools near Banning refused to enroll him because he was Black. Eventually, he found a former army pilot who agreed to train him. Banning was the first African American to receive a flying license in the US. In 1929, he went to Los Angeles to become the chief pilot for the Bessie Coleman Aero Club. He partnered with mechanic Thomas Allen in 1932 to become the first Black pilot to fly across the country. They touted themselves as the “Flying Hoboes,” and raised funds along the way for fuel and supplies. In 21 days, Banning and Allen landed in Long Island, achieving their goal. Four months later, he died while performing.

Thomas Allen was born in 1907 and moved to Oklahoma City when he was 12. He loved the new technology of airplanes and he traded his saxophone for flying lessons. After working with Banning on their cross-country flight, Allen found work as a mechanic at Douglas Aircraft Company. Later, he would serve as a lecturer and guide at the Oklahoma Air Space Museum.
Military

Staff Sergeant Ruben Rivers

Ruben Rivers (Cherokee) was born in Tecumseh, Oklahoma, in 1921. His large family moved to Earlsboro in 1930, where he worked on the family farm and attended school. For a short period after high school, he worked on the railroad. Upon US entry into World War II, Rivers enlisted and was assigned to the 761st Tank Battalion under George S. Patton. In 1944, with Allied forces advancing through France, Rivers was in the lead tank and came upon German soldiers that had placed heavy roadblocks to prevent the tanks’ advance. In the face of enemy fire, he got out of his tank, attached a cable to the main barrier in the roadblock, and managed to tow the obstacle out of the way. He survived this assault, but about a week later, Rivers was killed in another attack he led.

Rivers would not receive this posthumous Medal of Honor until 1997. In 1993, a study had been conducted and concluded that Black service members had been discriminated against in the awarding of Medals of Honor. The report noted that, in 1993, no Medal of Honors had been awarded to Black service members for their service during World War 2. The selection of seven service members for Medals of Honor in 1997, which included Rivers, attempted to begin to address this discrimination.

Brigadier General Roscoe “Rock” Conkin Cartwright

Brigadier General Roscoe “Rock” Conkin Cartwright was born in 1919 in Kansas but grew up in Tulsa, graduating from Booker T. Washington High School. He returned to Kansas to attend college but ran out of money. He worked around Tulsa until he was drafted into the US Army in 1941, receiving training at Fort Sill. He attended Officer Training School during this time and was commissioned a second lieutenant for the 599th Field Artillery Division. From there, he traveled with his unit and fought in Italy. At the end of the war, he transferred to the “regular” army and gained promotion to captain. He served in Korea and Vietnam, retiring from the military in 1971. He died tragically in a commercial airplane crash with his wife in 1974. Members of the US Army formed an organization called The ROCKS, Inc., that has grown into the largest professional military organization with a primarily African American membership.
The Tuskegee Airmen served in a segregated US military during World War II. Generally, African Americans were given low-status support positions such as cooking and moving supplies. Some African Americans managed to be assigned to combat positions. Before World War II, the leadership in the military did not believe African Americans could be successful pilots. In 1940, bowing to pressure from Black Americans, Franklin Roosevelt included anti-discrimination language in the Selective Service Act and the War Department began a program to train African Americans in aviation, from ground crew to pilots. The location of this program was Tuskegee, Alabama. The Army Air Corps assigned the airmen to North Africa as the 99th Fighter Squadron and then the 332nd Fighter Group. They were led by Benjamin O. Davis Jr., the first African American to attain the rank of brigadier general in the US Air Force. During the remainder of the war, they offered support for bombing runs in North Africa, Sicily, and Europe. The Tuskegee Airmen continued their service after the war as the military transitioned to a period of occupation. They were known as the “Redtails” because the tails of their airplanes were painted red.

Three airmen have connections to Oklahoma: Lieutenant Faythe A. McGinnis and Lieutenant Robert C. Smith of Muskogee, and Major Charles B. Hall, who settled in Oklahoma City after the war. McGinnis was the first casualty of the Tuskegee Airmen, tragically losing his life in 1942 on a training mission. In 1943, Charles Hall was the first Tuskegee Airman to shoot down an enemy plane. In 2016, the Congressional Gold Medal was awarded to all three men.
Authors

Ralph Ellison

One of the most influential authors of the twentieth century, Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma City in 1913. His father, a lover of literature, named Ellison in honor of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ellison attended Douglass High School, then under the leadership of Inman Page, and received music lessons from Zelia N. Breaux. Training as a musician resulted in his acceptance to Tuskegee Institute to study music in 1933. Ellison found it difficult to fit in with the culture at Tuskegee. He traveled to New York one summer to earn money for tuition and never returned to the university. Rapidly embracing the rich culture of the Harlem Renaissance, he befriended Langston Hughes and began working for the New York Federal Writers Program. This served as a launching pad for his writing career. He began publishing short pieces for a wide variety of publications. During World War II, he served in the US Merchant Marine and returned to New York at the war’s conclusion. He began writing Invisible Man, his most important work, and published it in 1952 to critical acclaim and impressive sales. He was honored with the dedication of the Ralph Ellison Library in Oklahoma City in 1975. Ellison died in 1994.
John Hope Franklin

John Hope Franklin was born in Rentiesville, an All-Black town, in 1915. His father, Buck Colbert (B. C.) Franklin, was a prominent attorney who used his knowledge of the law to protect the integrity of Black Wall Street and the property rights of its citizens in the aftermath of the Tulsa Race Massacre. The elder Franklin took an 11-year-old John Hope Franklin to attend a lecture by renowned Black scholar W. E. B. DuBois. In subsequent decades, they would become close friends and allies. He attended Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, but was denied admission to the all-white University of Oklahoma, and elected to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. He earned a bachelor’s degree in 1935. From there, he transferred to Harvard where he earned both a master’s and PhD in history.

In 1947, he wrote *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes*. This groundbreaking history sold millions of copies, and updated editions are still printed today. In the early 1950s, he assisted the NAACP Legal Defense team arguing *Brown v. Board of Education* with research demonstrating the harms of segregation. In 1956, he became the first African American department chairman at the primarily white Brooklyn College.

This was one of many firsts, such as the becoming the first Black president of several historical associations, including the American Historical Association, the Southern Historical Association, and Phi Beta Kappa. In 1995 Franklin was awarded the nation’s highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

John Hope Franklin died in 2009 at the age of 94, after decades of teaching, scholarship, and advocacy. In 2018, the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park was dedicated in Tulsa in his honor.
Musicians

It is no coincidence that Oklahoma produced several important musicians during the first half of the twentieth century. A strong tradition of playing instruments existed in many families, and there was access to instruments and skilled musicians to instruct. The importance of musical performance by community members in churches, picnics, and dances provided a strong incentive to learn to play. Local segregated school districts, such as Oklahoma Public Schools, hired Black educators to manage different disciplines in the schools for African Americans. Visionary educators such as Zelia Breaux constructed musical education offerings that were unmatched elsewhere and created a reputation of exceptional skill for those who went through those programs. The vibrant all-Black entertainment establishments in neighborhoods like Deep Deuce offered serious musicians the opportunity to practice their craft while earning money and a chance to work with internationally-known musicians who performed there.

Charlie Christian

In the world of American popular music, Charlie Christian made a major impact. Originally from Texas, Christian’s family moved to Oklahoma City when Christian was two. He was from a musical family, and learned the trumpet as a child and the guitar upon the death of his father. Music flowed in the African American neighborhood of Deep Deuce in Oklahoma City in the 1920s and 1930s, and Christian spent time there practicing and learning. In 1937, Christian took up the electric guitar. His debut on the electric guitar made quite a splash within the local music scene. It was not long before music promoter John Hammond began finding opportunities for Christian beyond Deep Deuce. Christian began touring with Benny Goodman. Charlie Christian died of tuberculosis in 1942, at the age of 25. He only played professionally for a handful of years but his contribution to music—taking the guitar from a background rhythm instrument to a featured soloing instrument—laid the foundation for how American musicians approached the guitar for generations to come.
**Lowell Fulson**

Born in Tulsa in 1921, Lowell Fulson (Choctaw) grew up with a musical family. He picked up the guitar as a child and played in church. He served in the military for two years and then relocated to Oakland, California, where his music career took off. He recorded several hits in the late 1940s when Rhythm and Blues was developing into its own genre. Fulson wrote several hits, including “3 O’Clock Blues,” ’Reconsider Baby,” and “Tramp.” His accolades include induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame. He died in 1999.

![Lowell Fulson](image.jpg)

*Lowell Fulson (image courtesy KOSU).*

**Advertisement for a Fulson performance, The Oklahoma Eagle, October 10, 1957.**

**Jimmy Rushing**

Born in Oklahoma City in 1901, Jimmy Rushing’s father played tuba for local bands. Rushing picked up music easily, including the piano, which his parents expressly forbid him from learning. Rushing attended Douglass High School, which had an unmatched music department led by Zelia N. Breaux. Rushing continued his musical study at Wilberforce University. After school, he began performing with lesser-known bands. In 1935, Rushing joined the Count Basie Orchestra where he remained as a vocalist for 13 years. His success continued when he formed his own band. Fellow Oklahoman Ralph Ellison was a fan of Rushing. He received numerous vocalist awards throughout his career. Rushing died in 1972, and was honored by the US Postal Service with a stamp featuring his image in 1994.

![Jimmy Rushing](image.jpg)

*Jimmy Rushing performing; photo by William Gottlieb (image courtesy the Library of Congress).*

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Roy Milton

Roy Milton was born in Wynnewood in 1907 and moved to Tulsa before joining Ernie Fields’s band as a vocalist in the 1920s. Later, he began playing the drums for Fields as well. In 1933, Milton decided to break with Fields and start his own band. He moved to Los Angeles and formed the Solid Senders. Frequently on tour, they did stop to record Milton’s first major hit, “R.M. Blues.” A core artist on the Specialty record label, the Solid Senders had nineteen Top Ten R&B singles. Milton died in 1983.

Don Byas

Born in Muskogee in 1912, Don Byas came from a musical family. As a child, he received musical instruction in violin, clarinet, and saxophone. He played with local swing bands as a teenager and formed his own group when he attended Langston. After school, he moved to New York, where he played saxophone with a variety of groups and performed at the Cotton Club. He played with the biggest names in jazz, including Billie Holiday, Charlie Christian, and Thelonious Monk. In 1941, he began performing with Count Basie. During that time, the Count Basie Orchestra was featured in two films and Byas had a role in both. He left Count Basie in 1943, and his interest shifted to an emerging type of jazz called bop. He joined smaller groups that included more experimental artists, such as Charlie Parker and Max Roach. After World War II, Byas moved to Europe, and did not return to the US until 1970. He died in 1972, and was inducted into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame in 1997.
Activities

Comparing Perspectives: Life in Boley

Many historians, especially social historians, are interested in what day-to-day life was like for most people in a specific place, job, or time. By studying and comparing the stories of different people’s life experiences, we can get an idea of what was typical and what was unique to an individual. Of course, different people will never have identical stories, but they are often similar. If the stories do have a lot in common, then you have evidence indicating that part of the story was probably true for most people living there. This is called a generalization and is an important part of writing history.

To practice comparing stories and making generalizations, try this activity.

1. Make a large Venn diagram on a piece of paper that looks like this:

2. Label the part where the circles overlap “similar” and the left and right parts “unique.”

3. Read two interviews with residents of Boley here. These interviews are from the Spotlighting Oklahoma Oral History Project from Oklahoma State University.

4. Think about parts of the stories that were the same. Did they have the same experience in school? Did they eat the same foods? Write down topics that were the same in the middle of the diagram. Put the name of each person above the “unique” sections. List a topic in the “unique” section to indicate experiences that were unique to that individual.

5. Can you generalize from this information about life in Boley? Or, do you have too few similarities to draw any conclusions? Do you think reading another interview would support your generalizations about life in Boley?
Working with Diverse Primary Sources: Charlie Christian’s Music

Charlie Christian was a very important musician. You can learn about his musical style and impact [here](#).

A primary source is a record was created during the time being studied or by the person being studied. Most people will think about dusty handwritten documents when they think of primary sources, but primary sources can be almost anything depending on the topic studied. As technology changes, different types of primary sources become available. We have many recordings of Charlie Christian performing. You can search “Charlie Christian” on youtube.com to hear these pieces. As you listen, remember most people consider Christian responsible for helping to create a different style of music and making the electric guitar an important instrument. As you listen to the different musical performances, do you hear any evidence that supports these claims?

![A 1947 album of Christian's performances (image courtesy National Museum of American History).](image-url)
Working with Diverse Primary Sources: National Register of Historic Places Nominations

The National Register of Historic Places is an official list of places with historical importance. States, Native nations, and federal agencies nominate places to be accepted on the list. Once they are accepted, the people who own the property are eligible for benefits to help preserve the site and make sure it is maintained. You can learn more about the register at nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/.

Create a Photo Exhibit

When people nominate a place, they create a record that details its importance. In Oklahoma, several places connected with African American history are on the register. To find these, visit okhistory.org/blackhistory and scroll down to the section labeled “Historic Places.” Click a link to load a page with information about the property. The page will show a button linking to a photograph (if one is available) and a button linking to the nomination form. The nomination form has detailed descriptions of the place and its historical importance.

Using these resources, create a photo exhibit (printed or digital) to show some important buildings and places relating to Black history in Oklahoma. If you do not like the picture in the nomination, you can use it to see what the property looks like and then search for a different picture. Use the description in the nomination form to get the information you need to explain why the place is of historical importance.

Excelsior Library in Guthrie opened in 1908 in a different building by Judith Carter Horton. This was the first African American library in Oklahoma and served the Black community in Guthrie during the time of segregation. This building was in use from 1955 to 1970.
An important skill is being able to summarize, or briefly explain, different written works. This can be a challenge because creators of some historical documents used different words and formats to express themselves. If you read more from that time period and gain knowledge about the topic, it will get easier to understand.

In 1907 when Jim Crow segregation proposals for the constitution were being debated throughout the state, thousands of Black Oklahomans voiced their opposition. They wrote letters, held meetings, signed petitions, spoke to representatives, and wrote opinion pieces. An example of one of these opinion pieces is entitled “Wanted Men” and can be found here.

Read the piece. How would you summarize this piece? Ask yourself, what are the most important points the author makes? Taken together, what do these points mean?

Continue to practice as you learn about the campaign against the constitution by reading and summarizing other parts of The Muskogee Cimeter.

Although most of the segregation proposals failed to make it into the Oklahoma Constitution, school segregation was included. This image shows a segregated school in Poteau (image courtesy Owlcation).
Glossary

advocate: to publicly support a policy or cause.
alumnae: a female graduate or former student of a school, university, or organization.
bar exam: test required for individuals who want to practice law.
civic: relating to a citizen, a city, or the community.
civilian: someone who is not in the military.
coerce: forcing someone to do something through violence or threats.
commercial: selling goods and services for a profit.
communally: shared by members of a group.
confrontation: an intense, face-to-face disagreement.
congregant: a member of a religious institution.
correspondence: letters, email, or messages.
delegation: a small group that represents the views of a larger group.
denomination: a kind of religious group that is independent of other groups.
dense: crowded.
discrimination: treating groups differently.
diversified: including many different kinds of operations or products.
drover: worker who herds livestock.
editorial: a type of news communication that strongly shares an opinion.
emancipation: the act or process of freeing someone from the control of another.
emergency legislation: a type of bill that, if passed into law, will go into effect immediately.
entrepreneur: a person who starts business ventures.
executive order: a directive by a governor or the president that has the force of law.
expulsion: kicked out of a group.
extradite: a legal process that brings a person who has left a place back to that location to face trial.
fraternal: like a brother.
Freedmen: (capitalized) individuals formerly enslaved by a member of the Five Tribes.
freedmen: formerly enslaved by individuals not connected to the Five Tribes.
generalization: a statement that, based on evidence, is likely true.
grandfather clause: a type of rule that exempts some people based on some characteristic but applies to everyone else.
**guardian**: a person who handles the affairs of another individual and is legally responsible for them.

**HBCU**: historically Black college or university.

**illiteracy**: being unable to read or write.

**incentive**: a positive consequence that motivates behavior.

**incitement**: provoking unlawful behavior.

**incompetent**: unable to manage oneself or one's own affairs.

**indicted**: formally accused of a serious crime.

**infant mortality**: the measurement of how many children die before they reach the age of five in a place.

**integrated**: mixed together.

**integrity**: a person who has strong moral principles that can't be changed.

**intercollegiate**: activities involving more than one college or university.

**Jim Crow Laws**: state or local ordinances, which created the system of racial segregation that existed throughout much of the United States from the end of Reconstruction to the 1960s.

**lease**: paying to use someone else's property.

**missionaries**: people who work to convince others to join a particular religion.

**mutual aid**: voluntary sharing of resources between a group of people.

**orator**: an excellent public speaker.

**ordinance**: a rule passed at a municipal level that has the force of law.

**party appointments**: when individuals are appointment to a position by a person whom they helped get elected.

**patronize**: help or support.

**penny bank**: a bank that specializes in small deposits and small loans.

**philanthropist**: a person that gives large sums of money to help people.

**posthumous**: after death.

**precedent**: a decision by a court that causes other, similar cases to be decided in the same way.

**prestigious**: having a high status.

**prominent**: important, well-known.

**prosecute**: to conduct a criminal case against someone.

**racial identity**: what race(s) a person considers themselves.

**racist**: a person who believes a particular racial group is better or worse than others.
resolution: the published beliefs of a group.

restrictive covenant: a clause in a legal agreement that prevents a person from doing something they could usually do with their own property.

salvaged: taken from trash and reused.

segregation: to separate.

sharecropping: an agreement that allows a landless farmer to use the land owned by someone else by paying rent with the crop grown on the land.

social historian: someone that studies everyday life.

sparsely: not crowded.

sue: to use the court system to receive compensation for a harm done.

sundown town: a community that threatens violence toward a visitor of a different race if they remain after dark.

truck farmer: a farmer that grows crops to sell in a local urban area.

unconstitutional: a law or policy that violates the agreement in the Constitution; if something is unconstitutional, it is not allowed in the United States.

urban renewal: a policy that lasted from the 1950s to 1970s and sought to revitalize urban areas; it is considered a failed policy that unfairly targeted Black communities for destruction.

voting restrictions: rules that limit, sometimes severely, who is allowed to vote.

ward: a person who has a guardian.
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