EARN YOUR GROWTH

BLACK WALL STREET & BLACK ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

From Reconstruction to Greenwood: entrepreneurship, community institutions, wealth-building, and the struggle to protect Black prosperity.

A comprehensive historical study guide | EYG Legacy Archive

Study focus: Reconstruction (1865-1877), the decades that followed, and the Greenwood District of Tulsa, which flourished primarily in the early twentieth century.

Purpose: learn the documented history, recognize both achievement and structural barriers, and turn evidence-based lessons into responsible action.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- Historical timeline and essential vocabulary
- Reconstruction: freedom, land, labor, citizenship, and institutions
- Black entrepreneurship, banks, schools, and mutual aid
- Greenwood / Black Wall Street: origins, growth, and the 1921 massacre
- Other Black business communities and influential leaders
- Myths, historical evidence, primary sources, and study questions
- EYG lessons: ownership, economic cooperation, and community responsibility

Historical note: “Black Wall Street” most commonly refers to Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Greenwood was built decades after Reconstruction. This guide traces the Reconstruction-era foundations that helped make later Black commercial districts possible.

01 | Timeline: from emancipation to Greenwood

1863

Emancipation Proclamation applies to areas in rebellion; it does not immediately end slavery nationwide.

1865

Thirteenth Amendment abolishes slavery, except as punishment for crime; Freedmen’s Bureau operates in the postwar South.

1866-1870

Civil Rights Act of 1866 and Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments expand formal citizenship and voting protections.

1867-1877

Congressional Reconstruction and Black political participation; violent white-supremacist backlash and economic coercion.

1877

Federal retreat from Reconstruction enforcement accelerates the rise of Jim Crow regimes.

1880s-1900s

Black schools, churches, fraternal societies, insurance firms, newspapers, and banks expand despite exclusion.

1906

O. W. Gurley is widely credited with helping establish the Greenwood business district in Tulsa.

1910s-1921

Greenwood grows into a nationally recognized Black business district.

May 31-June 1, 1921

White mobs attack Greenwood; homes and businesses are destroyed and residents are killed and displaced.

1920s onward

Survivors rebuild parts of Greenwood; segregation, urban renewal, and highway construction later reshape the district.

Key distinction: Reconstruction was a political and social era from 1865 to 1877; the best-known “Black Wall Street” in Tulsa developed later. Connecting them requires tracing institutions and migration across generations.

02 | Reconstruction: freedom without equal resources

A new legal framework

The Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery; the Fourteenth established birthright citizenship and equal-protection guarantees; and the Fifteenth barred denial of voting rights on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. These changes mattered enormously, but enforcement was uneven and rights were repeatedly attacked.

Land and labor

Most freed families did not receive the land needed for independent farming. Sharecropping, crop-lien debt, discriminatory contracts, and violence constrained economic mobility. Some families purchased land or started businesses; others faced severe obstacles to saving or borrowing.

Institutions of self-determination

Black communities founded churches, schools, mutual aid associations, newspapers, and civic organizations. These institutions pooled resources, trained leaders, circulated information, and helped families survive exclusion from white-controlled systems.

What ended in 1877?

The Compromise of 1877 is shorthand for the political settlement associated with the withdrawal of remaining federal troops from Southern statehouses. Black activism did not end; political and economic possibilities narrowed as disenfranchisement and Jim Crow expanded.

Think, discuss, and apply

- How are legal freedom and economic opportunity different?
- Why did land access matter for families trying to build wealth?

03 | Building an economy under segregation

Entrepreneurship in context

Black-owned shops, farms, hotels, restaurants, barbershops, newspapers, professional practices, and manufacturing enterprises served local needs. Segregation created some captive markets for Black businesses while simultaneously limiting financing, mobility, property rights, and access to wider customers.

The role of networks

Church congregations, lodges, women’s clubs, schools, and family networks often supplied customers, referrals, loans, education, and mutual assistance. Cooperation could support enterprise, but it could not fully offset discriminatory laws or organized violence.

Banking and insurance

Institutions such as the True Reformers Bank (founded 1888 in Richmond, Virginia) and North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company (founded 1898 in Durham) illustrate efforts to accumulate capital and offer services in markets where Black customers were underserved.

Education and skilled professions

Teachers, physicians, attorneys, builders, printers, and tradespeople formed essential parts of local economies. Historically Black colleges and universities, normal schools, and apprenticeship networks expanded professional opportunity.

Think, discuss, and apply

- List three institutions besides businesses that made commerce possible.
- Explain why segregation could create a market while also restricting its growth.

04 | Greenwood, Tulsa: what Black Wall Street was

The place

Greenwood was a predominantly Black neighborhood and commercial corridor in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It emerged amid oil-driven regional growth, Black migration, and enforced residential segregation. “Black Wall Street” became a shorthand for its concentration of Black enterprise and professional life.

Business and community life

Historical accounts describe hotels, restaurants, grocers, theaters, salons, medical and legal offices, churches, and schools. The district was not uniformly wealthy: workers, renters, and lower-income residents lived alongside prosperous entrepreneurs.

O. W. Gurley and J. B. Stradford

O. W. Gurley invested in property and commercial development in Greenwood. J. B. Stradford, a businessman and hotel owner, became another prominent figure. Neither person alone “created” the district; residents, employees, families, and many business owners built it.

The meaning of success

Greenwood demonstrates business formation, institution-building, and collective ambition despite legal and economic discrimination. It should not be romanticized as proof that structural barriers were unimportant or that everyone benefited equally.

Think, discuss, and apply

- What businesses would a self-sustaining commercial corridor need?
- What is lost when we tell Greenwood only as a story about a few wealthy men?

05 | The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre

What happened

Following an accusation involving a Black teenager, Dick Rowland, and a white elevator operator, Sarah Page, a confrontation and white mob violence escalated on May 31 and June 1, 1921. Armed white attackers invaded Greenwood, killing residents, looting property, and burning homes and businesses.

Scale and uncertainty

Roughly 35 city blocks were devastated according to commonly cited historical assessments. The precise death toll remains unknown; estimates differ, and records are incomplete. Thousands were left homeless. Avoid presenting any single contested death count as definitively established.

Government and accountability

Official investigations document failures by authorities and involvement of some officials or deputized men in the violence. Survivors faced insurance denials and obstacles to rebuilding. The 2001 Oklahoma commission report and later historical research are essential sources.

Rebuilding and remembrance

Residents rebuilt businesses and homes despite enormous losses. Later discriminatory planning, urban renewal, and highway development further damaged the area. Modern remembrance and reparations debates address both the 1921 destruction and its continuing consequences.

Think, discuss, and apply

- Why must a study guide distinguish documented evidence from disputed numbers?
- How can a community rebuild economically after property, records, and lives are destroyed?

06 | Other Black centers of enterprise

Durham, North Carolina - Hayti

Durham’s Hayti neighborhood and its Black business network were closely linked to institutions including North Carolina Mutual and Mechanics and Farmers Bank. Later urban renewal and highway projects profoundly disrupted the neighborhood.

Richmond, Virginia - Jackson Ward

Jackson Ward became a prominent center of Black finance, commerce, culture, and community institutions. Maggie Lena Walker’s banking leadership is a key story to research.

Washington, D.C. - U Street

The U Street corridor developed a dense Black cultural and business ecosystem in the early twentieth century, including theaters, restaurants, clubs, and professional services.

Mound Bayou, Mississippi

Founded in 1887 by formerly enslaved men Isaiah Montgomery and Benjamin Green, Mound Bayou became a notable Black town emphasizing self-government, landholding, and economic development.

Eatonville, Florida

Incorporated in 1887, Eatonville is among the earliest incorporated Black municipalities in the United States and is associated with author Zora Neale Hurston. Its history illustrates local governance and community identity.

Think, discuss, and apply

- Compare two communities: what institutions did they share?
- Which local Black business district could you research in your own region?

07 | People and institutions to study

Maggie Lena Walker (1864-1934)

Richmond banker and civic leader who became the first Black woman to charter a bank and serve as its president in the United States. Her work linked finance with organized community advancement.

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

Educator and institution builder associated with Tuskegee Institute and the National Negro Business League (founded 1900). His economic program was influential and contested by contemporaries, including W. E. B. Du Bois.

Madam C. J. Walker (1867-1919)

Entrepreneur who built a national hair-care business and sales network, employing and training many Black women. Avoid unsupported claims that she was unequivocally the first self-made female millionaire.

Robert Reed Church Sr. (1839-1912)

Memphis entrepreneur and landowner who invested in real estate and civic life. His story offers another perspective on Black business under Jim Crow.

Mary Ellen Pleasant (1814-1904)

San Francisco entrepreneur and abolitionist whose activities show that Black economic history extended beyond the postwar South.

Institutions over individuals

Research the Freedmen’s Bureau schools, Black churches, fraternal orders, historically Black colleges, mutual aid networks, Black newspapers, and local credit institutions alongside famous entrepreneurs.

Think, discuss, and apply

- Which leader combined economic activity with civic organizing?
- Why is it important to study ordinary workers as well as business founders?

08 | How wealth was built - and blocked

Assets and inheritance

Land, buildings, tools, inventory, savings, and business goodwill are assets that can produce income or be transferred to heirs. Racial terror, property destruction, and exclusion from credit interrupted asset accumulation across generations.

Credit and contracts

Access to reasonably priced loans, enforceable contracts, insurance, and courts matters as much as entrepreneurial skill. Discriminatory lending and uneven legal protection increased risk for Black business owners.

Consumer support and business ecosystems

A thriving district requires more than spending money at local stores: it depends on suppliers, trained employees, transportation, banking, infrastructure, public safety, and repeat customers.

Economic success was diverse

There was no single Black economic experience. Region, gender, occupation, land ownership, migration status, and class shaped opportunity. Some entrepreneurs prospered; many workers faced poverty and exploitation.

Think, discuss, and apply

- What are the differences between income, assets, and intergenerational wealth?
- Why is “just start a business” an incomplete explanation of economic mobility?

09 | Misconceptions and careful historical interpretation

“Greenwood existed during Reconstruction.”

Incorrect. Reconstruction ended in 1877; Tulsa’s Greenwood district developed decades later. Reconstruction-era gains and losses shaped the later context, but the periods are distinct.

“Every Greenwood resident was wealthy.”

Incorrect. Greenwood had prosperous entrepreneurs and a broad working population. A successful district does not imply equal wealth among residents.

“The 1921 massacre destroyed Black Wall Street forever.”

Misleading. Greenwood suffered catastrophic destruction, but residents rebuilt significant parts of the neighborhood. Later policies and disinvestment caused further damage.

“Segregation alone made Black businesses successful.”

Misleading. Segregation sometimes channeled Black consumers toward Black businesses but also excluded entrepreneurs from markets, capital, and protection. Community skill and cooperation operated within severe constraints.

“One number captures all losses.”

Misleading. Death estimates, property-loss valuations, and long-run wealth effects involve different evidence and assumptions. Always state the source and date of a figure.

Think, discuss, and apply

- Choose one misconception and identify a primary source that could test it.

10 | Source literacy: how to verify a historical claim

Primary evidence

Seek census and property records, city directories, insurance maps, court records, business advertisements, photographs, oral histories, and contemporary newspaper reporting. Note that each source has limitations and potential bias.

Triangulation

Compare at least two independent records when possible. For example, combine a city directory listing with a Sanborn fire-insurance map and an archival photograph to establish the location and type of a business.

Ethical storytelling

Credit creators and archives, check reuse permissions, distinguish survivor testimony from later interpretation, and avoid AI-generated “historical photographs” presented as authentic.

11 | EYG: ownership, legacy, and action

Study before sharing

Select one claim about Greenwood, find the original archive or reputable historical study, and write a three-sentence explanation with a source link.

Map the local economy

Identify five businesses and five supporting institutions in a historical Black community. Explain how jobs, customers, schools, finance, and transportation connected.

Interview with care

Ask an elder or local business owner about changes in property ownership, employment, and community organizations. Obtain consent before recording or publishing.

Build practical knowledge

Learn the difference between revenue and profit, how interest works, what a balance sheet shows, and why emergency savings and insurance matter.

Practice cooperative responsibility

Support trustworthy local enterprises where practical; mentor aspiring entrepreneurs; share verified resources; and advocate for fair access to education, infrastructure, and capital.

12 | Guided review and short-answer assessment

- 1. What years define Reconstruction, and why did its constitutional amendments matter?
- 2. Explain the difference between freedom in law and control of economic resources.
- 3. What was Greenwood, and why did the nickname “Black Wall Street” emerge?
- 4. Identify two founders or leaders associated with Greenwood and explain their roles.
- 5. Summarize the Tulsa Race Massacre without using an unverified death toll.
- 6. Explain two ways Black churches, schools, and mutual aid societies supported commerce.
- 7. Compare Greenwood with Hayti or Jackson Ward.
- 8. Why are land, credit, insurance, and legal protection essential to building wealth?
- 9. Name one historical misconception and show how you would fact-check it.
- 10. Propose one achievable, evidence-based action inspired by this history.

Mini research project

Create a two-page EYG archive entry about a Black-owned business founded between 1865 and 1930. Include the founder, location, products or services, community role, at least three sources (one primary if available), an explanation of historical constraints, and a present-day lesson clearly labeled as your interpretation.

13 | Research library and source links

These reputable starting points support further verification. Exact article titles and site paths can change; use each institution’s search function if a link moves.

Tulsa Historical Society & Museum

https://www.tulsahistory.org/

Greenwood and 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre background, exhibits, and local history.

Oklahoma Historical Society

https://www.okhistory.org/

Tulsa history, photographs, historical encyclopedias, and state collections.

1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission Report (2001)

https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf

Foundational state-commission investigation; its title uses the terminology of the time.

National Museum of African American History and Culture

https://nmaahc.si.edu/

Black entrepreneurship, Reconstruction, archives, and cultural collections.

National Archives - African American History

https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans

Freedmen’s Bureau, census, federal records, and Reconstruction evidence.

Library of Congress

https://www.loc.gov/

Historic newspapers, maps, photographs, and oral histories.

National Park Service - Reconstruction Era

https://www.nps.gov/reer/index.htm

Reconstruction-era history and interpretive resources.

Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture

https://www.okhistory.org/publications/encyclopediaonline

Research entries on Greenwood, Tulsa, and Oklahoma communities.

Digital Public Library of America

https://dp.la/

Search across digitized collections from libraries and archives.

North Carolina Museum of History

https://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/

Starting point for North Carolina Black business history and Hayti research.

Teaching note

The best EYG history lessons connect accomplishment and injustice without flattening either. Celebrate the innovation and agency of Black communities while explaining how public policy, economic structures, and racial violence affected what could be built and retained.

EYG reflection: Embrace the discomfort. Do the work. Own your journey. Become more. Earn your growth.

Black Communities, Economic Power & Displacement

Supplement to the Black Wall Street & Reconstruction Study Guide

This expanded chapter examines Black-owned businesses, community institutions, property ownership, racial terror, and displacement across the United States. The original guide is preserved before this supplement. It is a research guide, not a claim that all communities suffered identical events.

How to classify what happened

Mob destruction: direct attacks, arson, killings, and forced flight. **Government displacement:** eminent domain, parks, urban renewal, or highway projects. **Economic exclusion:** unequal access to credit, insurance, markets, and property protections. **Continuing community:** some districts remain significant despite redevelopment and historical barriers. These categories can overlap.

Greenwood / Black Wall Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma | early 1900s-1921 and after

Greenwood developed a dense network of Black-owned shops, hotels, professional offices, theaters, churches, and homes. During the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, a white mob killed residents and destroyed much of the district. Survivors rebuilt despite severe losses and limited compensation.

Study lens: Track business ownership before the massacre, physical destruction, insurance disputes, rebuilding, and present-day preservation.

Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, Detroit, Michigan | early 1900s-1960s

Black Bottom was a predominantly Black residential and commercial neighborhood; adjacent Paradise Valley became a major entertainment and business center. Mid-century urban renewal and highway construction demolished large areas and displaced residents and businesses. This was not a single event in which the whole district was burned by a mob.

Study lens: Study the effects of redevelopment decisions, property valuation, compensation, and community networks.

Seneca Village, Manhattan, New York | 1825-1857

Seneca Village was a community of predominantly Black property owners, alongside Irish and German residents, with churches, schools, and homes. New York City acquired the land through eminent domain for Central Park, displacing residents in 1857. It predates Reconstruction and was not destroyed in a race massacre.

Study lens: Examine land ownership, voting qualifications, eminent domain, and the limits of property protection.

Jackson Ward, Richmond, Virginia | late 1800s-present

Jackson Ward developed into a center of Black finance, commerce, and culture. Maggie Lena Walker founded the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank in 1903. The Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike and urban renewal divided and displaced parts of the neighborhood. Jackson Ward was not wholly burned down.

Study lens: Compare institutional ownership, banking, highways, and preservation of surviving landmarks.

Sweet Auburn, Atlanta, Georgia | late 1800s-present

Auburn Avenue became a major center of Black entrepreneurship, churches, civic life, and professional services. Segregation helped concentrate Black businesses in the corridor, while later disinvestment and freeway construction damaged its commercial vitality. The neighborhood also remains central to civil rights history.

Study lens: Explore how both forced segregation and collective institution-building shaped local business ecosystems.

Hayti, Durham, North Carolina | late 1800s-1960s

Durham's Hayti district supported Black-owned enterprises, homes, churches, and cultural institutions, alongside major Black financial institutions in the city. Urban renewal and construction of the Durham Freeway displaced families and businesses.

Study lens: Compare the promise of public infrastructure with the costs imposed on established communities.

Wilmington, North Carolina | 1898

A white supremacist coup and massacre overthrew Wilmington's legitimately elected biracial local government. Black residents, political leaders, and businesses suffered violence, exile, and lasting economic losses.

Study lens: Study the connection between political power, newspapers, business ownership, and racial terror.

East St. Louis, Illinois | 1917

Racial violence during labor and housing tensions resulted in deaths, arson, and displacement of Black residents. The destruction affected homes and livelihoods, not just storefronts.

Study lens: Consider labor competition, segregation, policing, and the economic consequences of mass displacement.

Elaine, Arkansas | 1919

Black sharecroppers organizing to obtain fairer cotton payments faced mass racial violence and prosecutions. The precise death toll remains contested. The case illuminates economic organizing in an agricultural community rather than an urban business district.

Study lens: Ask how access to courts, labor contracts, and collective bargaining shaped wealth-building.

Ocoee, Florida | 1920

On Election Day, white mob violence targeted Black residents amid attempts to vote. People were killed, homes and property were burned, and Black residents were driven from the area. The community's removal had lasting political and economic consequences.

Study lens: Study voting rights together with land dispossession, intimidation, and the long-term loss of community wealth.

Rosewood, Florida | 1923

White mob attacks destroyed the predominantly Black community of Rosewood, killed residents, and forced survivors to flee. Survivors and descendants later sought recognition and redress; Florida passed a compensation law in 1994.

Study lens: Compare destruction, forced migration, property records, testimony, and the meaning of reparative measures.

Mound Bayou, Mississippi | founded 1887

Founded by formerly enslaved men Isaiah T. Montgomery and Benjamin Green, Mound Bayou developed as a Black self-governing town with farms, businesses, schools, and institutions. Its history is chiefly a case of institution-building amid Jim Crow constraints, not a community burned to the ground.

Study lens: Identify the opportunities and limits of autonomy under discriminatory state and national systems.

Boley, Oklahoma | founded 1903

Boley was one of Oklahoma's historically Black towns, with businesses, civic institutions, and agricultural ties. Its trajectory illustrates Black town-building and later economic pressures rather than a documented wholesale burning comparable to Tulsa.

Study lens: Research Black town founding, transportation links, population change, and preservation.

Allensworth, California | founded 1908

Colonel Allen Allensworth and other founders established a Black-led town built around education, farming, and self-determination. Water access, railroad decisions, and other challenges undermined its prospects; the site is now preserved as a state historic park.

Study lens: Examine how infrastructure and water access can determine whether a community thrives.

Bruce's Beach, Manhattan Beach, California | 1910s-1920s; later restitution

Willa and Charles Bruce operated a beach resort serving Black visitors. The city used eminent domain in the 1920s to take the property, amid racial hostility. Los Angeles County later returned parcels to descendants in 2022; the family subsequently sold them to the county.

Study lens: Compare historical dispossession with modern property restitution and compensation.

Oscarville, Georgia / Lake Lanier area | 1912; reservoir built later

After racial violence in Forsyth County in 1912, many Black residents were expelled and lost access to land and livelihoods. Lake Lanier was constructed decades later, beginning in the 1950s; the expulsion and reservoir construction should not be conflated into one event.

Study lens: Separate documented chronology from viral stories; examine deeds, migration, and land loss.

Pierce City, Missouri | 1901

Following an accusation against a Black resident, white mob violence killed Black people and drove much of the Black population from Pierce City. The expulsion disrupted households and property ownership.

Study lens: Study the economic impact of racial expulsions in small towns.

Forsyth County, Georgia | 1912

Racial terror and expulsion drove Black residents from the county. This is a countywide displacement history, not a single burned commercial district.

Study lens: Trace property transfers and how forced migration changed opportunities across generations.

Beyond a list of towns: recurring mechanisms

Land: property acquisition and inheritance created opportunities, while dispossession broke intergenerational transfer. **Credit:** banks and mutual aid societies enabled enterprise, but discriminatory lending restricted scale. **Political power:** the ability to vote, serve on juries, and influence local decisions affected protection of businesses. **Infrastructure:** road placement, zoning, public services, and eminent domain reshaped commercial corridors. **Violence:** attacks imposed immediate losses and long-term trauma and migration. **Preservation:** archives, oral histories, landmark protections, and reparative policies shape public memory.

What does not belong in the same category?

Not every successful Black business district was destroyed, and not every destroyed Black community was a wealthy commercial hub. Greenwood was devastated by a massacre; Black Bottom and Hayti were substantially displaced through redevelopment; Seneca Village was taken for a park; Jackson Ward and Sweet Auburn retain living institutions and historic landmarks. Comparing these cases is useful precisely because the mechanisms differ.

Research exercise: reconstruct one community

1. Establish the location and date range using maps and census records. 2. Identify businesses, churches, schools, newspapers, and property owners from city directories and primary records. 3. Find documented causes of decline or destruction, distinguishing direct evidence from interpretation. 4. Trace survivors, rebuilding, restitution, and current preservation. 5. Present the findings with dates, captions, citations, and one practical community-development lesson.

Discussion questions

• How can a thriving neighborhood still be vulnerable to displacement?

• How do land ownership, banks, and schools reinforce one another?

• What is lost when businesses close beyond their monetary value?

• Why is it inaccurate to describe every neighborhood as burned down?

• How might local communities preserve property records and oral histories?

• Which forms of repair or preservation have been tried, and how can their results be evaluated?

Primary archives and trustworthy starting points

Tulsa Historical Society - Tulsa Race Massacre
https://www.tulsahistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/

National Park Service - Reconstruction Era
https://www.nps.gov/subjects/reconstruction/index.htm

National Park Service - Maggie L. Walker
https://www.nps.gov/mawa/index.htm

National Park Service - African American Civil Rights
https://www.nps.gov/subjects/civilrights/africanamerican.htm

NYC Central Park Conservancy - Seneca Village
https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/seneca-village

Detroit Historical Society
https://detroithistorical.org/

Atlanta History Center
https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/

Durham County Library - North Carolina Collection
https://durhamcountylibrary.org/

Florida Department of State - Florida Memory
https://www.floridamemory.com/

Florida State Parks - Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings / Rosewood research gateway
https://www.floridastateparks.org/

Georgia Historical Society
https://www.georgiahistory.com/

California State Parks - Allensworth
https://www.parks.ca.gov/

Library of Congress - Chronicling America
https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83045462/

National Archives - African American history
https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans

Editorial note: This is a selected national survey, not an exhaustive inventory of every Black-owned business or destroyed community. Verify specific casualty estimates, financial valuations, and contested claims against original records before publishing.