

# Greenwood: The 'Black Wall Street' of Tulsa



*A mural in Greenwood commemorating Tulsa's Black Wall Street. Credit: Daniel Jeffries, Tulsa Planning Office*

## The History of Greenwood

Greenwood was created in 1906, when O.W. Gurley, a wealthy African American landowner and entrepreneur from Arkansas, purchased 40 acres of land “[to be sold to Coloreds only.](#)” Tulsa’s oil boom was attractive to blacks fleeing oppression in the south for better opportunities in the north. As Blacks arrived in Tulsa they were faced with entrenched racial segregation and white businesses and cultural and spiritual centers refused to serve them. They settled in the Greenwood community, which served as black Tulsa’s primary thoroughfare and held deep symbolic meaning for the African American community.

The commercial district was nicknamed “Deep Greenwood” and was home to luxury shops, hotels, women’s clubs, clothing and dry good stores, night clubs, beauty parlors, drug stores, restaurants, two theaters, two newspapers, more than a dozen churches, an all-black branch library, a Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) branch, a hospital, and professional offices for lawyers, realtors, doctors, dentists, and other professionals. Before the destruction of Tulsa’s Greenwood district in the [1921 Tulsa Race Massacre](#), [Greenwood rivaled the finest African American business districts in the US](#), holding its own with black wall streets in Chicago and Atlanta.

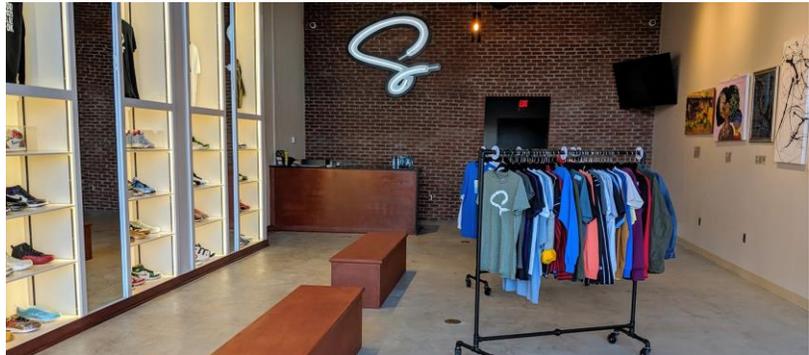
## Business Spotlight: Silhouette Sneakers and Art

[Silhouette Sneakers & Art](#) is a limited-edition sneaker and streetwear boutique, art gallery, and event space that opened in Greenwood last fall. Owner Venita Cooper says she considers legacy the cornerstone of her business—both the legacy of Black Wall Street and the legacy she hopes her business will leave in the community.

“The way that Black Wall Street originally achieved success was through collaboration, investment in their own, and apprenticeship. It was a community that fed back into its community,” Cooper said. She’s trying to replicate this model by cultivating community and using the store as a platform to amplify the work of Tulsa’s artists, designers, and creators. From

displaying a rotating selection of street-inspired art from local artists to stocking the store with local brands to commissioning local designers to work on pieces for an apparel collection launching this spring, Cooper is determined to lift up local makers.

Silhouette's focus on community building and development has prompted collaborations with local nonprofits, as well. Cooper recently worked with a local artist to design a limited-edition sneaker they're auctioning off to support a nonprofit. She's also collaborating with a Tulsa arts alliance to launch a youth streetwear program with 4th and 5th graders at a public school.



Cooper also hopes to share the streetwear and sneaker culture experience with a diverse customer base by renting out the store for organizations to host events and by lowering the average price of her sneakers to make them more accessible. So far, the store has brought in diverse clientele from all walks of life. Cooper said, “a rapper could be buying sneakers next to a mom from the suburbs.”

Silhouette was able to get off the ground due to a great amount of support from Tulsa. Cooper received grants from private foundations and grants from the city meant to support small businesses in communities of color. The backing from Tulsa was so strong that the mayor was Silhouette's very first customer.



*Silhouette Sneakers & Art owner Venita Cooper (right) with George Kiel of Coiski Media (left). Photo courtesy of Silhouette Sneakers & Art.*

While Cooper said that locating her business on Black Wall Street was mostly “serendipitous,” she recognizes the significance of being on Black Wall Street, especially in an industry that has so much of its roots in black culture. With the centennial of the 1921 race massacre coming up, Cooper hopes that the narrative around Greenwood is one that recognizes what happened and looks at the “resilience of black entrepreneurship to create something different and successful.”

*UrbanMain has been working with the City of Tulsa's [Destination Districts](#) program and the [Oklahoma Main Street](#) program.*