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**OBITUARIES** LOCAL

# Olivia Hooker, one of the last survivors of the 1921 Tulsa race massacre, dies at 103

By **DENEEN L. BROWN**  
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Olivia Hooker was 6 at the time of the Tulsa race massacre, which erupted on May 31, 1921, when a white lynch mob descended on the courthouse where a black teenager was being held. (Michael Noble / Washington Post)

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Olivia Hooker called it “the catastrophe, the notorious 48 hours of fire and death that leveled “Black Wall Street” in Tulsa, Okla. She was 6 at the time of the Tulsa

rampage, which erupted on May 31, 1921, when a white lynch mob descended on the courthouse where a black teenager was being held.

A group of black war veterans tried to protect the teen, and in the ensuing violence, as many as 300 black people died; thousands more saw their homes and livelihoods destroyed by torch. Some people were burned alive, and 40 square blocks of business and residential property — valued then at more than \$1 million — were destroyed.

Hooker was among the first black women to serve in the Coast Guard and retired as an associate professor of psychology at Fordham University in New York. But at the time of her death on Wednesday at 103, she had also become one of the last known survivors of the Tulsa race massacre and an enduring witness to what is often regarded as the deadliest episode of racial violence in American history — and one that was long an afterthought in history texts, if mentioned at all.

In interviews, she recalled the details of the rampage through a young girl's frightened eyes. Her father had been an owner of a department store in the community of Greenwood, a center of commerce known as Black Wall Street. When the mob marched on Greenwood, burning houses and shooting people in the street, her mother hid her and her siblings under a big oak dining-room table as their home was being ransacked.

“We could see what they were doing,” she told the Washington Post in June. “They took everything they thought was valuable. They smashed everything they couldn't take. My mother had [opera singer Enrico] Caruso records she loved. They smashed the Caruso records.”

They also poured oil over her grandmother's bed but didn't light it because members of the white mob were still in the house.

“It took me a long time to get over my nightmares,” she told the Post. “I was keeping my family awake screaming.”

As a little girl, her most searing memory of the massacre was what the mob did to her doll.

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“My grandmother had made some beautiful clothes for my doll. It was the first ethnic doll we had ever seen.... She washed them and put them on the line. When the marauders came, the first thing they did was set fire to my doll's clothes. I thought

"The first thing they did was set fire to my doll's clothes," said Olivia Hooker. (Family photo)

that was dreadful."

Her family survived the massacre. Her father temporarily relocated the family — including her mother and their five children — to Topeka, Kan., while he remained in Oklahoma attempting to rebuild his business. He went on a speaking tour to black Methodist churches to bear witness to the murder and incineration in Tulsa.

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Hooker returned to Tulsa to attend Booker T. Washington High School. "The teachers were scholars, and they were determined every child would do his best,

every child would be taught the King's English," she recalled.

During World War II, she was part of her Delta Sigma Theta sorority's efforts to integrate the Navy. She told the Post that she applied to the Navy, which had started accepting women. "They wrote back and said there is a complication. They wouldn't tell me what the complication was."

So she enlisted in the Coast Guard in early 1945, three years after Congress passed a law approving the creation of the Coast Guard Women's Reserve to help fill jobs vacated by men who went abroad to fight in the war. Hooker became one of the first African American women to join the women's reserve, known as SPARs.

She was stationed in Boston and performed administrative duties before the SPARs program was disbanded in 1946. She was discharged as a petty officer 2nd class, according to a Coast Guard report, then went on to complete her doctorate. She became a senior clinical lecturer at Fordham in 1963 and retired from the university in 1985.

Thirty years later, the Coast Guard named a building on Staten Island after her, breaking a tradition of ship- and building-christening in honor of only those who have died. The service said it was making an exception because of Hooker's "distinguished service to the Coast Guard and her wonderful efforts in serving and helping others."

Olivia Juliet Hooker was born in Muskogee, Okla., on Feb. 12, 1915, and was one of five children. She graduated from Ohio State in 1937, then taught elementary school in Columbus, Ohio. In 1947, she received a master's degree in psychology from Teachers College at Columbia University. In 1961, she earned a doctorate from the University of Rochester.

She died at her home in White Plains, N.Y., said her goddaughter, Janis Porter, who did not provide an immediate cause. She had no immediate survivors.

In 1997, Hooker worked on the Tulsa Race Riot Commission, which investigated the massacre and issued a report in 2001 "detailing for the first time the extent of the city and state government's involvement in the riot and in the cover-up that followed and the total lack of remedy available in the courts at the time," according to a congressional report.

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Olivia Hooker gives her account of the 1921 massacre before members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other leaders on Capitol Hill in May 2005. (Manuel Balce Ceneta / AP)

Tulsa was racially segregated and reeling from a recent lynching when Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old shoe shiner, walked to the Drexel Building, which had the only toilet downtown available to black people. Rowland stepped into an elevator. Sarah Page, a white elevator operator, began to shriek.

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“While it is still uncertain as to precisely what happened in the Drexel Building on May 30, 1921, the most common explanation is that Rowland stepped on Page’s foot as he entered the elevator, causing her to scream,” the Oklahoma Historical Society reported.

The Tulsa Tribune published a news story with the headline, “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator,” which many historians say prompted the massacre. Tulsa’s mayor recently reopened an investigation into mass graves, where witnesses say victims of the massacre were buried.

In 2003, more than 100 survivors and about 300 descendants of those who lost property or were killed in the massacre filed a civil rights lawsuit against the city of Tulsa and the state of Oklahoma, seeking compensation for the damages that occurred as a direct result of the government’s involvement in the massacre. In 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court dismissed the lawsuit without comment.

Survivors were crestfallen.

“I was glad so many of us were still there, still in the world trying to do good,” Hooker told the Post in June. “There are a lot of answers I was never able to figure out.”

As she sat in the front row at a Coast Guard ceremony in 2015, she watched as President Obama honored her, recounting her life story. He described her as a “tireless voice for justice and equality.”

***Brown writes for the Washington Post.***

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