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Look What Has Been Taken From Black Americans

By Trevon Logan and William Darity Jr.

6-8 minutes

Whose cotton is it?

Photographer: Russell Lee/Archive Photos/Getty Images

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Americans are learning more and more about their country's tragic racial history — about the myriad Black lives and livelihoods that have been destroyed and stolen, from the days of slavery to the death of George Floyd. But how, as part of any effort at conciliation, can our nation place a value on what has been taken?

The example of one little-known event — the Elaine, Arkansas massacre of 1919 — offers some insight.

In the first half of the 20th Century, White mob terror against Black Americans occurred across the nation, rural and urban, north and south. In 1910 alone, there were an estimated 16 massacres. The year 1919 was so deadly it was called The Red Summer, with more than 30 separate incidents. The violence [persisted](#) for years -- in Ocoee, Florida (1920), in Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921), in Rosewood, Florida (1923), among many more.

Spanning from May through October, the Red Summer represented White people's hostile response to the demands of Black soldiers returning from World War I. Having served their country, often with distinction, Black veterans came home unwilling to accept the Jim Crow status quo. Their resistance to the "rules" of American apartheid sparked violent [reprisals](#), including murders and the destruction or appropriation of property.

While the Tulsa riot has garnered more national attention, most recently ignited by President Trump's campaign rally there, the events that transpired in Elaine in late September and early October 1919 are no less significant. The context was a conflict over freedom of contract. White people in Elaine had long been the privileged first buyers of Black farmers' crops, primarily cotton, at prices well below the market rate. The Black farmers, led by returning veterans from World War I, sought to unionize and establish conditions where they could sell their crops to the highest bidder, as any other farmer would.

Often, mistakenly, the Black farmers seeking to form the union have been described as "sharecroppers." Although most were working land that they paid for with a share of their crops, some were true tenant farmers with no legal obligation to "share" with the White landlords. These men drew the greatest ire.

U.S. soldiers and local vigilantes responded to the "insurrection" by indiscriminately [killing](#) at least 200 Black people, including women and children. After the massacre -- under the auspices of "southern justice" -- the Black victims of violence were brought to court and charged as perpetrators. Twelve tenant farmers who survived the massacre received death sentences, and 75 others, all sharecroppers, received prison sentences.

All too often, the economic consequences of such events are difficult to document -- records of details such as land ownership are missing, some having been destroyed. But the case of Elaine is unusual: Thanks to the efforts of the courageous journalist Ida Wells-Barnett, it is possible to calculate the financial damages to Black residents and the financial benefits to the White mob.

Wells-Barnett came to Elaine shortly after the massacre to report on the unjust incarceration and sentencing of the imprisoned farmers, particularly those on Death Row. Her [pamphlet](#), "The Arkansas Race Riot," tells the whole story of what occurred, complete with highly detailed data on the property lost to the Black farmers due to the massacre and its aftermath. Working in the community, she identified the

specific farmers and the exact acreage they farmed, and how much cotton and corn they produced, providing the basis for a direct estimation of monetary damages.

At the time, Wells-Barnett calculated that the 12 tenant farmers had been denied any proceeds from their crops on more than 350 acres. The value of cotton alone on that land exceeded **\$85,000**. Adding the animals and farm equipment pushed the value to more than \$100,000 -- equivalent to more than \$6 million today, or \$500,000 per family, based solely on what was stolen in 1919. Wells-Barnett also gauged that the other 75 jailed sharecroppers were robbed of a cotton crop worth \$1000 each, **based** on the worst sharecropping agreements in Arkansas at the time. That's \$60,000 each in today's terms.

All told, the value of the property stolen from the Black farmers -- from fewer than 100 people in one town in one year in rural Arkansas -- amounted to more than \$10 million today. This estimate is based on crop and property theft alone. It excludes the wrongful imprisonment of the 12 men sentenced to death (who spent more than five years behind bars) and the 75 others who gave forced confessions and received **sentences** of up to 21 years. It also excludes the wrongful deaths of more than 200 Black people, and the broader consequences that the brutal and widespread violation of the rights to life and property had for Black **innovation** and entrepreneurship.

Tracking down and compensating the descendants of all the victims of such crimes would be an impossible task, if only because the historical record will never be complete. That said, one goal of the movement for reparations is to recognize the magnitude of the injustice that has been done. The effects of the crimes of 1919 have compounded over time, aggravated by further atrocities and racist policies. Only after accounting for the full toll of this violence and theft can we find a way to repair the damage done.

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