

A Sampling of Truth-seeking Projects in the United States¹

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There is really no precedent for a state-wide truth commission process in the United States, so it may be helpful to look at national truth commissions in other contexts for ideas. However, it is also instructive to see the different kinds of truth-seeking efforts that have been undertaken in the U.S. This is a very limited sampling but may provide some sense of what has been done:

Official government commissions at the national level

- Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) (relocation and internment of American citizens and resident aliens 1942-45)²
 - Created by an Act of Congress in 1980 to review the 1942 Executive Order that was used to order the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans, determine the impact of this and recommend appropriate remedies.
 - The Commission's report was titled "Personal Justice Denied"³
 - The commission held 20 days of hearings around the country in 1982, listening to more than 750 witnesses, including survivors of WWII, government officials, public figures, people who had been interned, advocacy organizations, historians and others who had studied the subjects of the inquiry.
 - Eventually led to some reparations in the form of individual compensation to Japanese Americans. Redress also included an official apology and an educational fund to support efforts to inform the public and prevent recurrence.

- Tuskegee Syphilis Study Ad Hoc Advisory Panel to the Assistant Secretary for Health and Scientific Affairs "to investigate the circumstances surrounding the

¹ This is a very basic compilation, with an uneven amount of information on each commission. Its purpose is to give a sense of the range of truth-recovery efforts in the United States, but this should not be taken as a comprehensive document or a full explanation of any of the commissions or inquiries mentioned.

² Information supplied at: <http://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/hearings.html>; and <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/4417/personaljusticedenied.html>.

³ <http://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/justice-denied/summary.pdf>

Tuskegee, Alabama, study of untreated syphilis in the male Negro initiated by the United States Public Health Service in 1932”

- Report issued in 1973
- Very limited scope to the mandate (focusing mostly on the scientific and ethical issues) and report reflects this
- A lawsuit sought substantial damages; it was eventually settled, with some compensation for survivors and heirs of the deceased.⁴

State legislative mandate: to study specific, significant events

- “Documented History of the Incident which Occurred at Rosewood, Florida, in January 1923”⁵
 - Report submitted to the Florida Board of Regents, December 22, 1993
 - Investigative team from three different Florida Universities reflects an academic approach, as requested by legislature
 - Eventually led to legislatively adopted reparations measures
 - Ongoing work by local groups to educate and inform on the issue
- “Tulsa Race Riot” of 1921⁶
 - The Oklahoma legislature created the “Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921” in 1997 and its report was submitted to the legislature in 2001
 - Advocacy to push the legislature to grant reparations has been unsuccessful and federal litigation was dismissed; other avenues are still being pursued.
- “1898 Wilmington Race Riot”⁷
 - The state legislature passed a bill in 2000 to create a commission to “examine the riot and develop a historical record”
 - Commissioners were independent but assisted by research at the Department of Cultural Resources
 - The report was published in May 2006. It reached conclusions about the facts of the racial violence of November 10, 1898 in Wilmington, which “precipitated an armed overthrow of the legitimately elected municipal government” led by the white elite. In addition to examining the political context of events, reviewed the economic and social context and consequences.
 - Made recommendations for empowerment, economic redevelopment, education, and commemoration.
 - Some apologies were forthcoming, from newspapers and the state democratic party. Newspaper published a summary form of the report and inserted it in its paper for general circulation, reaching many thousands.

⁴ http://www.brown.edu/Courses/Bio_160/Projects2000/Ethics/TUSKEGEESEYPHILISSTUDY.html.

⁵ <http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/fgils/rosewood.html>.

⁶ <http://www.tulsareparations.org/TRR.htm>.

⁷ <http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/1898-wrrc/>.

Community-based truth-seeking

- 1979 killings of 5 anti-KKK demonstrators by Klan and Nazis in absence of police protection, in Greensboro, North Carolina
 - Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project⁸ formed, created a mandate and a selection process (2001-2003)
 - The mandate calls for a Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission and sets the terms of reference.
 - In 2004 selection panel names commissioners, who are sworn in formally, if not by the “official” city.
 - The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission issues its Final Report and recommendations in May 2006.⁹

Academic initiatives

- Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice
 - Brown University President took the initiative to create a Steering Committee on this topic, composed of faculty, students, and administrators. Their charge was to report on the University’s “historical entanglement with slavery and the slave trade” and “reflect on the meaning of this history in the present.” It was expected that the report would “enrich debate” on the question of reparations.
 - The Committee’s report, “Slavery and Justice” was presented in February 2007 and made it available on the internet¹⁰

Other documentation, archives, court records and truth-telling projects

- It is of course important to consider the truth-telling dimension, potential, and limitations of many other types of documentation and other processes:
 - Court proceedings and related media coverage
 - Local advocacy efforts at truth recovery (such as Moore’s Ford Memorial Committee, or the work in Atlanta around the “race riot”)
 - Film and oral history projects
 - Academic studies
 - “popular tribunals” such as that held recently in New Orleans
- Truth commissions can make use of this kind of input to give greater depth to their work

⁸ <http://www.gtcrcp.org>

⁹ <http://www.Greensborotrc.org>.

¹⁰ http://www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery_Justice/.