

**MABEL
BONNER
LITTLE**
1896-2001



**FIRE
ON
MOUNT
ZION**

In June 1971, African Americans gathered at Greenwood's Mount Zion Baptist Church to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre. For decades the Black community had suffered in silence, told their stories were false. Survivor Mabel Little spoke of losing her home and business, the resilience of the Black community, and the importance of preserving the legacy.

Mabel Bonner was born in Spring, Texas in October 1896. After growing up on her grandfather's farm in Fulcher, Texas, she moved with her mom and sister to Boley in 1909 to be near her aunt. Her dream was to attend Langston University.

In September 1913, Mabel arrived in Tulsa by train, finding a place to stay for \$1.50 a week. Hungry and tired, she walked two blocks to a café where she met waiter Pressley Little, and fell in love. Mabel got a job at the Brady Hotel, for twenty dollars monthly, while Pressley worked at the café and shined shoes at a barbershop at Archer and Cincinnati. The couple married in December 1914.

Having learned cosmetology from her aunt in Boley, Mabel opened Little Rose Salon in 1915. Thursday nights were "Maid's Night Out" in Greenwood so her shop was always filled with beautiful young ladies because she had "the magic touch". Greenwood was a growing community, with quality schools, shoppes, hotels, and theaters. Pressley opened the Little Café, well-known for its smothered steak with rice and brown gravy.

On May 31, 1921, Greenwood was burned to the ground by an angry white mob when a white teenaged elevator operator was alleged assaulted by a Black shoeshine boy in the Drexel Building downtown. The Tulsa Race Massacre, "the single worst act of racial violence in American history", destroyed a thirty-block area of homes and businesses, killing at least 300 citizens and injuring 9,000.

Like most residents, the Littles lost everything. Left with only fifty dollars cash, they began to rebuild. While working construction jobs, Pressley developed tuberculosis. When he finally got a hospital bed in Clinton in western Oklahoma three years later, the doctors couldn't cure him. Pressley died in 1927.

After working as a World War II aircraft assembly worker in Wichita and Burbank, Mabel returned to her Tulsa business but discovered the town was still racially divided. In the late 1960s, when a still-segregated Tulsa Public Schools decided to close northside Carver and Washington schools, 75-year-old Little joined a sit-in protest and was arrested. Later, she helped create the magnet school system and early childhood education programs, which are models throughout America.

The I-244 interchange construction of the in the 1970s destroyed parts of the Greenwood District rebuilt after the Massacre. After losing everything a second time, Mabel was compensated only \$16,000 by the City of Tulsa. In 1990, she wrote her autobiography: "Fire on Mt. Zion: My Life and History as a Black Woman in America", describing her life growing up in a segregated society and the effects of the massacre on her life and community. Langston University published her book, and, finally realizing her dream, was awarded an honorary degree. Mabel Little died in January 2001 at age 104.

Today, the Mabel B. Little Heritage House Museum at the Greenwood Cultural Center honors her accomplishments, victims of the Race Massacre and the legacy of Tulsa's African-American community.