

Name: _____

Date: _____

American History Spotlight: John & Loula Williams



John Wesley and Loula Tom Williams were among Greenwood's first residents. They met in John's home state of Mississippi (Loula was born in Tennessee) and made their way to Tulsa in about 1903. The U.S. Census from 1910 lists the couple as being married for five years.

Since there were no black doctors or hospitals in the neighborhood at the time, they traveled to Hot Springs, Arkansas for Loula to give birth to their son William Danforth Williams, born on March 15th, 1905.

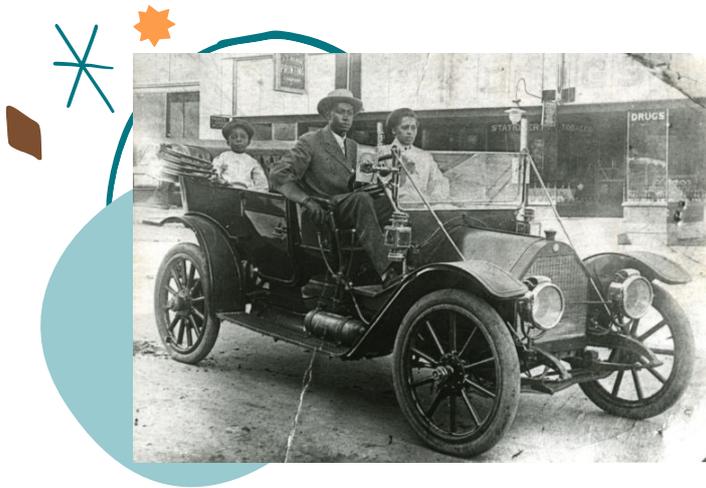
Tulsa historian Scott Ellsworth's [Death in a Promised Land](#) opens with the story of a young Bill Williams asking his father why they relocated from Mississippi to Oklahoma.

"Well," his father answered, "I came out to the Promised Land."

For black freedmen and young black men and women moving out of formerly Confederate states, Indian Territory was that promised land; a place to find that piece of the American dream.

John had a talent for machines. In 1909, he secured a position operating the steam-powered chilling equipment at The Thompson Ice Cream Company, located at 17 West Archer. His skill was in such demand and the job paid so well, that by 1911, the family purchased Greenwood's first car: A brand new Chalmers "Thirty Pony Tonneau," named for its 30 horsepower, inline four-cylinder engine. The car cost \$1,600 at the time. One of the most well-recognized photographs of Greenwood's prosperity features John and Loula in the prized automobile dressed elegantly and 6-year-old William in the back seat looking at the camera.

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John wasted no time learning to do all the repairs and maintenance on the car, soon finding himself earning money on the side working on other people's cars as well. By 1912, he had such an extensive clientele that he resigned from his job at the ice cream company to open his own auto repair garage. Williams' One Stop Garage, at 420 E. Archer St., served both black and white car owners from all over Tulsa.

Loula Williams also made a career change. Leaving her teaching job in Fisher, OK, located just west of Sand Springs, she opened a confectionery on the first floor of a three-story building the Williams' built, at 102 N. Greenwood Ave., from the profits of the auto mechanic shop. The family lived on the second floor and rented the third floor spaces as offices for attorneys. The Williams Confectionery was Loula's great pride.

By 1914, the Williams were indeed living life in the Promised Land that John had described to his son. John's auto repair shop made a decent profit and the couple earned money from the confectionery as well as the commercial rental business. Her shop quickly became the most popular hangout for teens and young couples of all races. Journalist Tim Madigan writes in his book **The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921** that the word around Tulsa was that there were more proposals for marriage that happened at Williams Confectionery than any other place in the city. The family set their sights on a new entrepreneurial goal: opening a movie theatre. Loula Williams opened Williams Dreamland Theatre in 1914, at 127 N. Greenwood. The new theatre had a seating capacity of 750, with movie tickets costing 15 cents. Loula's entrepreneurial spirit paid off. The Dreamland Theatre quickly became just as popular an attraction as the confectionery.

Sources:

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Questions:

After reading the passage in the previous pages, answer the questions below.

How did John Williams come to start his first business and what did he name it?

What type of businesses did Loula Williams start and what did she name them?

What kind of character traits do you think John & Loula possessed in order to start and create successful businesses during the early 1900s in Tulsa, Oklahoma?

If you had lived in the Greenwood District during that time, what kind of business would you have been inspired to create? Do you think your business would have been successful? Why?
