

## Crossing Racial Lines: Tod Edwards, 1875-1951



The Tod R. Edwards family of Siler City, an African-American family, operated a very successful jewelry store from 1905 until 1961.

Tod R. Edwards moved from Bynum to Siler City, where, in 1895, he opened a barbershop. When business was slow, he passed the time with his hobby – tinkering with watches and clocks using tools he made himself. These included two screwdrivers made from umbrella ribs, tweezers from a corset stay, and a small hammer made by grinding down a hammer originally made for shoeing horses. As demand for his services grew, Edwards gave up barbering and operated small watch repair shops for several years, adding a small line of jewelry and photography services to his business.

Like most areas of the South, Siler City was strictly segregated during this Jim Crow era, with African-American businesses occupying South Birch Avenue, one block south of the white business district on Chatham St.

In 1905, Tod Edwards crossed racial lines when he opened Edwards Jewelry Store in a brick building he had constructed on Chatham Street in the otherwise all-white business district. There, he did clock and watch repair and ran a photographic studio, and his wife Ella managed the fine china store. Most of his patronage came from white people.

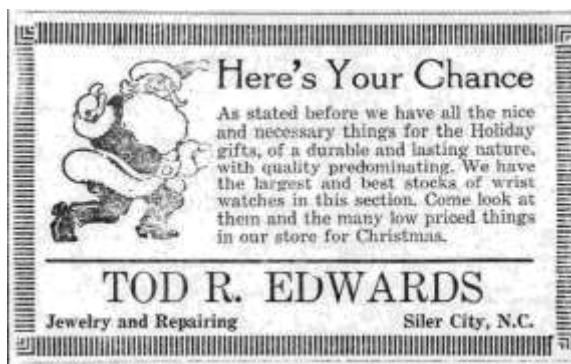


Mr. Edwards built a large, attractive house only a short distance from the store, where he and his wife Ella Cotten Edwards raised six children, all of whom attended college. He and his family ran the very successful store until his death in 1951. His wife and son, Tod Jr., kept the store open until 1961.

Mr. Edwards appears to have had a solid business sense. Interviews in his later years disclosed that he never borrowed money. He saved the money needed to build both his business and his house. He didn't want the worry of being in debt, he said. He took his first vacation at age 70, saying that folks always seemed worse off after taking a vacation than before.



Respect for the Edwards family is evident, not only from the success of their store, but also from numerous sources spanning a long time period. An article in the *Siler City Grit* in 1910 described several Siler City businesses, depicting Edward's Jewelry Store (the only business mentioned that was owned and operated by an African-American) in the most glowing terms. A 1950 article in *The State Magazine* leads with the statement, "He's a Negro, and his store is located in the center of the business section of Siler City. Few folks in that section have any more friends than he and his family."



When the store closed in 1961, the *Chatham News* proclaimed, "Seldom has the closing of a local concern engendered as much regret as the announcement that Edwards' Jewelry Store would be no more . . . For the past 66 years the Edwards Jewelry Store in Siler City was proof that whites and Negro people can live side by side without hatred and violence and with respect for each other."

Elizabeth Edwards, Tod and Ella's daughter-in-law, described civility as the core of Siler City's etiquette of race relations. Nevertheless, she noted that despite their acceptance in the Siler City business arena, the Edwards family did not escape the racism and oppression of the Jim Crow era entirely. They were, as well, strong and staunch supporters of the black community in church and schools. Tod, Ella and several of their children are buried in the Corinth AMEZ Church Cemetery in Siler City.



Friends and members of the Edwards family have loaned the Chatham Historical Museum artifacts to help tell the family's story. The "Crossing Racial Lines" exhibit will be on display January through March, 2019. Admission to the Museum is free and open to all. The Museum is open every Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday from 11:00am until 4:00pm. The Museum follows the Chatham County School schedule for weather-related closings.

*Research by Luan Harmeson, Chatham County Historical Association volunteer.*