

## **W.J. Edwards: African American Entrepreneurial Pioneer of Oklahoma City**

About this lesson

Grade Level: High School

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Time: One to two class  
periods

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**Background** Among early Oklahoma City's most prominent African American entrepreneurs, real estate developers, and philanthropists was Walter J. Edwards.

From 1915 to 1929 Edwards owned a baggage-hauling company, carpet business, iron foundry, and two drive-in gasoline stations. After losing everything in the Crash of 1929, he recouped his fortune by selling scrap iron via Edwards Scrap Iron and Junk yard, later called American Iron and Metal. His enterprises, which expanded to include a taxi line, an auto repair shop, and pharmacies, employed hundreds of persons.

From 1907 through the 1930's Oklahoma City enforced an ordinance restricting African American residents to a small area of town. By 1940 the black population had reached 20,000 in the segregated district, which lacked housing, and medical, educational, and recreational facilities. Although declared unconstitutional in 1936, the ordinance remained in force.

In 1937, Edwards Real Estate Investment Company purchased thirty-three acres in north east Oklahoma City and had it platted by C. T. Hassman, a white resident of Tuttle, in order to skirt the segregation ordinance. There, Edwards sold to black homeowners, effectively ending residential segregation. In 1939, Edward persuaded the Federal Housing Authority to approve mortgage loans for black persons, an unheard-of practice at that time. Even in this restrictive environment, African Americans, led by families like the Edwards, created a cohesive community of businesses, residential areas, entertainment venues, and social institutions paralleling those of the city's white residents.

Even more remarkable is the fact that W. J. Edwards was a self-made man. His devoted wife, Frances Gilliam Waldrop, also brought her skills as a teacher, bookkeeper, and real estate dealer to their many endeavors when they married in 1930. The Edwards family included two sons and five daughters. His influence remains important in the economic development of Northeast Oklahoma City.

### **Oklahoma History Standards**

Standard 7: The student will examine major cultural and ethnic groups represented in Oklahoma.

1. Identify cultural and ethnic groups in Oklahoma (e.g. African Americans) and explore the causes and effects of their immigration and settlement patterns.
2. Trace the cultural, political, and economic contributions of these groups.

Standard 8: The student will examine the factors that contributed to the political, economic, and social history of Oklahoma during the twentieth century.

1. Identify significant individuals and their contributions (Roscoe Dunjee).
3. Examine the historical evolution of race relations in Oklahoma (e.g. the significance of Jim Crow laws).

### **Terms**

Entrepreneurs

Economic discrimination

Self made man

Philanthropist

Jim Crow

Great Depression

### **Materials**

Handout 1 – Biography of W. J. Edwards

Handout 2 – Timeline of African American Experience in Early Oklahoma

Handout 3 – W.W. J. Edwards Addition and African American Housing

Handout 4 – Edwards Elementary School and African American Education

Handout 5 – Edwards Memorial Hospital and African American Health Care

Attachment 1 – Suggested Activity Rubric

Highlighters in three different colors (enough for the class)

### **Instructional Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- List and describe the economic, cultural and educational contributions of W. J. Edwards and his wife to the African American community in Oklahoma City in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Describe and evaluate the long range effects of his contributions to African American life in Oklahoma City.
- Describe and discuss the obstacles and difficulties Edwards had in his own business life and in his efforts to improve the lives of Oklahoma City's African Americans.
- Speculate on the long term contribution of Edwards to alleviating economic discrimination not only in Oklahoma City, but in the United States as a whole.

### **Procedure**

1. Introduce the vocabulary words to students by defining and giving examples of entrepreneur, self-made man, philanthropist, economic discrimination. Have students give examples also.
2. Make a transparency of Handout 2 – *Timeline of African Experience in Early Oklahoma*, and discuss Jim Crow Laws, Plessy v. Ferguson, (Handout 8 – List of Document Citations, Document D has an excellent website which lists Jim Crow Laws in Oklahoma). Have students share what they know about this period.
3. Tell the students briefly about Walter J. Edwards. (See Lesson Description above.) Copy and hand out Handout 1 – *Biography of Walter J. Edwards*

4. Divide the class into 3 different groups, entrepreneur, self-made man, philanthropist. Give each member of a group the same color of highlighter. Have students read the biography in their groups. Assign one group to highlight examples of an entrepreneur in the biography with its markers; a second group to highlight examples of a self-made man with another color of marker, and a third group to highlight examples of a philanthropist with a third color of marker. Have all groups list examples of economic discrimination found in the biography.
5. When the students in each group have completed reading and highlighting the biography, have each group select one or two points they found and share their findings with the entire class.
6. Have the class discuss ways in which W. J. Edwards worked to make life better for African Americans living in Oklahoma City. Categorize these findings into housing, medical and education. (Students will list specific things from their reading. Use a graphic organizer such as a Mind Map to visualize their findings.)
7. Divide the class again into three groups: housing, medical and education. (You may use different grouping or the same as before.) Each group is to research its area and present its findings to the whole class.
8. Materials for the groups: All three groups should receive Handouts 1 and 2. In addition, the Housing Group should receive Handouts 3; the Education Group should receive Handout 4, and the Medical Group should receive Handout 5.

### **Webliography**

<http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/scripts/jimcrow/insidesouth.cgi?state=Oklahoma>

<http://wjedwards.net/History%20by%20Ruth.htm> *Today's Health* magazine (February 1951)

<http://wjedwards.net/History%20by%20Lehman.htm>

- *The Edwards Family and BLACK ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS* by Dr. Paul Lehman originally appeared in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Volume LXIV, Number 4, Winter 1986-87 (Pages 88-97)

### **Document Citations**

Document A

- [http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/01workshop/sub\\_landsc.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/01workshop/sub_landsc.htm)

Document B

- [http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/01workshop/sub\\_landsc.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/bulletins/01workshop/sub_landsc.htm)

Document C

- <http://wjedwards.net/History%20by%20Lehman.htm>

Document D

- <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/scripts/jimcrow/insidesouth.cgi?state=Oklahoma>

Document E

<http://wjedwards.net/History%20by%20Lehman.htm>

- *The Edwards Family and BLACK ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS* by Dr. Paul Lehman originally appeared in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Volume LXIV, Number 4, Winter 1986-87 (Pages 88-97)

Document F

<http://wjedwards.net/History%20by%20Lehman.htm>

- *The Edwards Family and BLACK ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS* by Dr. Paul Lehman originally appeared in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Volume LXIV, Number 4, Winter 1986-87 (Pages 88-97)

Document G

<http://wjedwards.net/History%20by%20Lehman.htm>

- *The Edwards Family and BLACK ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS* by Dr. Paul Lehman originally appeared in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Volume LXIV, Number 4, Winter 1986-87 (Pages 88-97)

**Extension**

Have students research the archives of *The Oklahoman* for additional information on the Edwards family and their contributions to economic development in Oklahoma City.

**W.J. Edwards: African American Entrepreneurial Pioneer of Oklahoma City**

**Handout 1**

Biography of Walter J. Edwards  
1891 - 1972

- “Born in Maston, Mississippi, on March 23, 1891, Walter Edwards acquired only a fourth-grade education. He came to Wellston, Oklahoma, in 1907 and in 1915 moved to Oklahoma City, where he worked as a laborer in a junk yard.” Dianna Everett, Oklahoma Historical Society
- From 1915 – 1929 Edwards owned a baggage-hauling company, carpet business, iron foundry, and two drive-in gasoline stations. Adapted from Dianna Everett, Oklahoma Historical Society
- “Losing everything in the Crash of 1929, he recouped his fortune by selling scrap iron via Edwards Scrap Iron and Junk yard, later called American Iron and Metal. His enterprises, which expanded to include a taxi line, an auto repair shop, and pharmacies, employed hundreds of persons.” Dianna Everett, Oklahoma Historical Society
- “In 1930 Edwards married Frances Gilliam Waldrop, a South Carolina born teacher, bookkeeper, and real estate dealer who came to Oklahoma through Texas. The Edwards family included two sons and five daughters.” Dianna Everett, Oklahoma Historical Society
- “Frances Waldrop was born in South Carolina in 1898, one of 11 children. Her childhood home . . . was a haphazard collection of lean-to rooms, unpainted on the outside, covered on the inside twice a year with fresh newspapers. Her father was a \$20-a-month rural school teacher who turned to masonry to feed his growing family. When he died and she had to leave normal school, Frances went into the construction business with an uncle. Her . . . training qualified her to help Walter Edwards straighten out his books and put his salvage yard on a businesslike basis.” February 1951 *Today's Health* magazine
- “He was a dreamer who had a dream of helping people get started in business’ Freddie Williams.” Arnold, Anita. *Legendary Times and Tales of Second Street*.
- “In 1940 Walter Edwards won the National Negro Business League's coveted Spaulding Award, given to its most outstanding member. He also served as president of the Negro Chamber of Commerce.” Arnold, Anita. *Legendary Times and Tales of Second Street*.

- Edwards owned or loaned money to develop a drug store, gas filling/service station, ice cream company, lumber company, taxi service, and undertaking parlor. Adapted from Arnold, Anita. *Legendary Times and Tales of Second Street* and W.J. Edwards Memorial Website <<http://wjedwards.net/>>
- “W.J. Edwards, 54 made a fortune in an Oklahoma City junk business after migrating from Mississippi in 1916. He now runs own realty firm with extensive holdings, a lumber yard, grocery and a big new \$500,000 hospital. His real estate alone is worth \$1,000,000. Most of his money was made as a dealer in scrap.” Page 16 of “10 wealthiest Blacks in America” April 1949 *Ebony* Magazine
- “The Edwardses donated land for a public park and elementary school, built Edwards Memorial Hospital, and created a nearby shopping center.” Dianna Everett, Oklahoma Historical Society

**W.J. Edwards: African American Entrepreneurial Pioneer of Oklahoma City**  
Handout #2

Timeline of African American Experience in Early Oklahoma

<b>ECONOMICS</b>	1908- All railroad and streetcar companies to provide separate coaches for white and black passengers		1915- Required telephone companies to maintain separate booths for white and colored patrons				1937- Edwards buys land for housing development 1937-1939 Edwards finances loans to prospective buyers 1939- Edwards wins FHA loans for African Americans	1940- Edwards completes, sells, and occupies 40 homes	
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1905</b>	<b>1910</b>	<b>1915</b>	<b>1920</b>	<b>1925</b>	<b>1930</b>	<b>1935</b>	<b>1940</b>
<b>POLITICS</b>	1907- Required electors to read and write. Exempted those who were enfranchised on January 1, 1866, and lineal descendants of such persons.		1915- <i>Guinn v. U.S.</i> declared Grandfather Clause unconstitutional but Oklahoma replaces it with a similar restriction				1939- <i>Lane v. Wilson</i> declared the Grandfather Clause unconstitutional		
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1905</b>	<b>1910</b>	<b>1915</b>	<b>1920</b>	<b>1925</b>	<b>1930</b>	<b>1935</b>	<b>1940</b>
<b>SOCIETY</b>	1907- Separate schools for white and colored children to be provided by the legislature 1908- Unlawful for a person of African descent to marry any person not of African descent			1921 -Prohibited marriage between Indians and Negroes -Misdemeanor for a teacher to teach white and colored children in the same school	1925- Black bands were prohibited from marching with white bands in Oklahoma City parades				
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1905</b>	<b>1910</b>	<b>1915</b>	<b>1920</b>	<b>1925</b>	<b>1930</b>	<b>1935</b>	<b>1940</b>

**W.J. Edwards: African American Entrepreneurial Pioneer of Oklahoma City**

**Handout 3**

W.J. Edwards Addition and African American Housing

Edwards Real Estate Investment Company sold the homes primarily to African American families; and for the first two years, 1937-1939, the couple personally provided financing at 6% interest to prospective buyers. They could not obtain Federal Housing Administration home loans for their customers.

**Document A**

The director of the Federal Housing Authority in Oklahoma City was personally, sympathetic with their {Edwards} plans, but he felt that the idea could never be made to work. "Negroes," he said, "will never work hard enough or save enough of what they do earn, to payoff the loans. I know; I've had them working for me."

**Document B**

The Federal Housing Administration's Underwriting Manual recommended the use of restrictions to maintain homogenous populations within subdivisions.

**Document C**

In Shelley vs. Kraemer (1948), the U.S. Supreme Court determined restrictions excluding residents on the basis of race unenforceable.

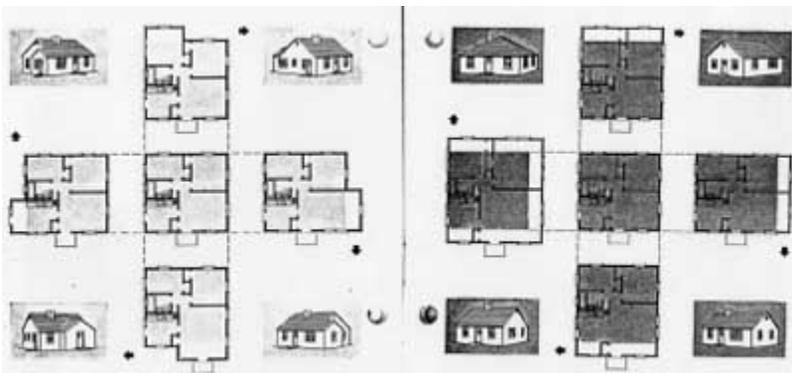
**Document D**

When construction began in 1938, the Edwardses could find but one skilled Negro bricklayer. Shortages were almost as acute among Negro carpenters and electricians. Under the supervision of a white foreman, they began to hire young Negroes who wanted to train for jobs that would give them a new measure of economic security in years to come.

**Document E**

**W.J. Edwards: African American Entrepreneurial Pioneer of Oklahoma City**  
**Handout # 3**

W.J. Edwards Addition and African American Housing (continued)



Elevations and floor plans from the 1940 edition of the Federal Housing Administration Principles

**Document F**



Typical houses within the Edwards Historic District, Oklahoma City, OK, started in the 1930s.

**Document G**

**W.J. Edwards: African American Entrepreneurial Pioneer of Oklahoma City**

**Handout # 4**

Edwards Elementary School and African American Education



Edwards Elementary School  
1123 NE Grand Blvd Oklahoma City, OK 73117  
Land and building donated by Mr. and Mrs. Edwards in 1938

**Document H**

**Jim Crow Laws in Oklahoma**

**1890:** Education [Statute]

Every three years an election for school electors to be held to vote for or against separate schools for white and colored children.

**1897:** Education [Statute]

A separate district will be established for colored children wherever there are at least eight black children. Unlawful for any white child to attend a school for black children.

**1907:** Education [Constitution]

Separate schools for white and colored children to be provided by the legislature.

**1908:** Education [Statute]

Public schools within Oklahoma to be operated under a plan of separation between the white and colored races. Penalty: Teachers could be fined between \$10 and \$50 for violating the law, and their certificate cancelled for one year. White students who attended a colored school could be fined between \$5 and \$20 daily.

**1921:** Education [Statute]

Misdemeanor for a teacher to teach white and colored children in the same school. Penalty: Cancellation of teaching certificate without renewal for one year.

**Document I**

**W.J. Edwards: African American Entrepreneurial Pioneer of Oklahoma City**

**Handout # 5**

Edwards Memorial Hospital and African American Health Care



In 1948, the Edwards Family constructed Edwards Memorial Hospital, a 105 bed facility.

**Document J**

In 1945 Mrs. Edwards became critically ill and had to be taken to the hospital. She was placed in the crowded basement ward with five other patients. During her brief stay there, her condition did not improve. Finally, her doctors one day called W. J. out into the corridor where they informed him of his wife's unimproved condition. They advised him that what his wife needed to get well was proper hospitalization and rest in a pleasant environment.

**Document K**

**W.J. Edwards: African American Entrepreneurial Pioneer of Oklahoma City**  
**Handout # 5**

Edwards Memorial Hospital and African American Health Care (continued)

The Edwards Memorial Hospital had two operating rooms, a delivery room and a light, airy nursery, a general examination room, eye, ear, nose and throat clinic, x-ray room and modern laboratory, diet kitchens, pediatric ward and physical therapy room. Rates are substantially lower than those for comparable facilities in other Oklahoma City hospitals. A father of a large family, one of the thousands who went through the hospital the day it was dedicated, paused at the modern delivery room and said, "It will be a new experience for me to be able to pace up and down a hospital corridor and have nurses tell me everything is going all right inside that room."

**Document L**

Edwards Memorial Hospital offers great opportunity for the training of Negro doctors, nurses and laboratory technicians. Acute shortages in these professions have been caused primarily by the lack of training and practicing opportunities in the country's leading schools and hospitals. Oklahoma City's leading white doctors have been completely cooperative. Twenty-six of them joined 13 Negro doctors to give the hospital its first interracial staff. It still has the only one in the South.

**Document M**

They [the Edwards] knew that at least one-third of the Negroes in the 17 Southern states died without an attending physician.

**Document N**

In 1945 the black population of Oklahoma City numbered around 30,000 with eighty-nine segregated beds located in hospital basements.

**Document O**

**W.J. Edwards: African American Entrepreneurial Pioneer of Oklahoma City**

**Attachment 1**

**Suggested Rubric for Presentation**

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1. Organization

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2. Content Accuracy

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3. Research

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4. Creativity

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5. Presentation Mechanics

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