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C.U. Williams & Son led Bloomington into auto age

Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History

This engraving appeared on C.U. Williams & Son Co. stationery in the late 1910s. The building on the right, at 207 E. Washington St., opened in 1911. Five years later, the Castle Theatre building, on the left, opened its doors with Williams using the upper floors for auto inventory. Note the water tower — a fire safety measure designed to protect valuable automobile stock. (Courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History)

February 17, 2013 5:00 am • [By Bill Kemp | Archivist/historian McLean County Museum of History](#)
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BLOOMINGTON — In 1911, Bloomington businessman Charles U. Williams opened a four-story automobile showroom and garage at 207 E. Washington St. Called “the largest in any city of Bloomington’s size,” this impressive steel-frame and brick edifice was testament to

[Funk known for condemnation of ‘Copperheads’](#)



the coming automobile age.

Williams and his son Walter sold the latest models from early automakers, including E-M-F, Chalmers, Moon, Stearns, Studebaker, Willys-Overland and Woods (the latter known for its electric cars). "The manufacturers that we are representing are all old and well established houses — their cars are long past the experimental stage," was a C.U. Williams & Son Co. promise.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, dealerships and other auto-related business began popping up on the periphery of downtown Bloomington. The most substantial and visually striking was the 1911 Williams building, its bulk lightened by second-story showroom windows designed to display twice as many cars from the street.

Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1867, Charles Williams came to Bloomington in his early 20s, finding work as a photographer and successful picture postcard manufacturer before turning his attention to the promising automobile trade.

"Many an auto buyer has been led to think that he was saving a few dollars by buying from friend or neighbor who had taken an agency," read one Williams & Son advertisement from February 1912 (agency here meaning an early type of dealership). "It usually takes but a short time for Mr. Buyer to wake up to the fact that he has an orphan on his hands — no one to look to for help — no parts — just a car on its own merits, and usually not much merit."

At this time, the Williams & Son showroom inventory included a Stearns five-passenger "Silent Knight" for \$3,500, a Chalmers six-cylinder self-starter for \$3,200, and an E-M-F five-passenger for \$875. In the early decades of the 20th century, automobiles remained an extravagance beyond the reach of most Americans. Paying \$3,500 for a car back then was the equivalent of \$82,000 today, adjusted for inflation.

Williams & Son offered not only sales and maintenance, but auto painting, "livery" service (car rentals by the hour or day), storage (when home garages were few) and even a place to charge battery-powered cars. "Entire fourth floor devoted to shop," announced one 1915 advertisement. "Good mechanics, plenty of light, no loafers. The best work at the least expense."

In late January 1916, a second Williams building opened at 209 E. Washington. This "annex" was five full stories, with the Castle Theatre occupying the street level and Williams & Son making use of the garage space above. Both fireproof buildings were designed by Bloomington architect Aaron T. Simmons, and both featured freight elevators large enough to accommodate automobiles.

A consummate salesman, C.U. Williams staged various promotional stunts to boost auto sales. In May 1917, he paraded 18 Willys-Overland models through downtown Bloomington and surrounding neighborhoods, with stops at the courthouse square and elsewhere.

During World War I, Walter Williams began tinkering with oil burners as a cleaner alternative to coal furnaces. Walter's engineering acumen and Charles' business sense gave rise to Williams Oil-O-Matic Heating Corp., which at its height sold Bloomington-made oil burners across the globe.

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C.U. Williams served as Oil-O-Matic president from 1925 (when the corporation was formed) until his resignation in July 1939. In 1945, Oil-O-Matic merged with Detroit-based Eureka Co. to become Eureka-Williams of Bloomington.

By that time, Paxton's, a local typewriter and office machine company, had moved into the 1911 building. Paxton's closed in December 2005, and today the 102-year-old building has been remodeled by Steve Parker for loft apartments and commercial space. The 1916 building has undergone an ambitious renovation, with apartments by developer Fred Wollrab on the upper floors and a reopened Castle serving as one of the city's premier live music venues.

Charles U. Williams, then 86, died Oct. 30, 1953, at his 1313 E. Washington St. home. His estate was valued at nearly \$2 million, with more than half of that coming from 12 farms in McLean and Iroquois counties.

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