

BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2024: HONORING ORRIN AND LUVINA WILSON

HON. ELISSA SLOTKIN
of Michigan
in the House of Representatives
Wednesday, February 7, 2024

Mr. Speaker, today I pay tribute to two of the most beloved residents to ever call the St. Johns, Michigan, community home: Orrin and Luvina Wilson. Settling in Clinton County post-Civil War, the Wilsons were a "power couple" before such a term existed, but it was never about seeking power for themselves. Rather, the Wilsons lived their lives in quiet but devoted and groundbreaking service to their nation and to their neighbors, and forever changed the face of St. Johns.

Orrin was just 16 years old in 1864 when he enlisted in Michigan's all-Black regiment, the 102nd United States Colored Infantry. Company K, out of Kalamazoo. He served until the war's end, and returned to Michigan where he met and married his bride. The two would soon settle in St. Johns, where they lived out the next 60 years of their lives.

In addition to his military service, Orrin was a trailblazer in so many ways. First, he took up the trade of barbering and owned his own shop for nearly 50 years, serving a mostly white clientele out of the old Steel Hotel in downtown St. Johns. He was also a founding member of the local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic, a national union of Civil War veterans, and served as its post commander for a time. Not only was he the only Black member of the St. Johns Charles Grisson Post of the GAR, it's believed he was the only Black man in the state to hold such a leadership position outside of the all-Black posts in cities like Detroit.

Luvina was a trailblazer in her own right, serving as president of the local chapter of the Women's Relief Corps, the auxiliary organization to the Grand Army of the Republic. The WRC not only supported the mission to aid Union veterans, but also assisted former Army nurses and promoted patriotism through education. And just like her husband, Luvina is believed to be the only Black woman in the state to have led an all-white post.

Orrin and Luvina raised two sons together: George and Arthur, who continued the family barbering trade. The family was active in the St. Johns United Methodist Church, where Orrin served as a trustee and treasurer for three decades. They were married for 58 years, and linked in their common goal of creating a better, more just community and nation. And united they also were in death, leaving this world just one day apart in late December of 1928. The two were buried together in the veterans' section of Mt. Rest Cemetery, with flags flown at half-mast and a large funeral procession going past the family home on South Clinton Avenue.

May their life story and memory be a blessing and inspiration to all of us.