

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



by Hynda Rudd
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Paul R. Williams, Architect of Fame

The well-known architect designed nearly 3,000 projects and helped define modern L.A. *Part one of two.*

Photos courtesy the Herald Examiner and Security Pacific Collections, Los Angeles Public Library, Christina Rice, acting photo archive director

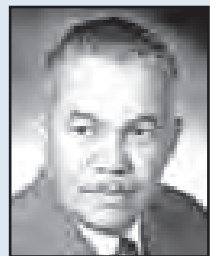
In a 50-year period of close to 3,000 projects, Paul R. Williams became one of the most prolific architects by creating a legacy of construction that defines modern Los Angeles today. He is credited with creating (or co-creating) icons including the Shrine Auditorium, the Superior Court Building downtown, the Beverly Hills Hotel, the Ambassador Hotel, the LAX Theme Building and perhaps hundreds of private homes. As an African American, Paul Williams and much of his success ran parallel with the Jim Crow era, a time in the United States when *after* the Civil War there continued to be unrest in the South between the blacks and whites.

Early Years

Paul Revere Williams was born Feb. 18, 1894, on Santee Street in Los Angeles. He was orphaned at four years old. His father, Chester Stanley, died two years after his birth, and his mother, Lila Wright Williams, passed away two years later. Both parents died from tuberculosis. He grew up in the home of C.D. and Emily Clarkson. Paul graduated from Polytechnic High School in 1912. Known as a competent sketcher in his youth, he studied at the Los Angeles School of Art, the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, and the engineering school at the University of Southern California.

Emily Clarkson played a major role in his young life. A strong woman, she recognized his early talent. Foster mother, Emily, had a friend who was a builder. He noticed that Paul had a real gift and convinced him that he should consider going into architecture.

As a youth he was usually the only black student in elementary school. But he wasn't set apart because of his color. Instead, he was known as the class artist.



Paul R. Williams in 1951.

He always carried his pencils and sketchbooks. He may have been poor, but he lived a cosmopolitan life.

Paul learned German from newcomer kids in school from Germany. He also picked up Chinese from the neighborhood laundry man. In 1912, after graduating from Polytechnic High School, he ignored his counselor from school and took night-school classes at the Los Angeles School of Art. He then joined the New York-based Beaux Arts Institute of Design. That school had an apprenticeship-style program founded by disciples of the famous French architecture school of the same name. This school is where Paul R. Williams was introduced to European essentials of design.

During this time, at the age of about 18, Paul realized he needed to earn a living. At first, to support himself, he designed, crafted and merchandised monograms for women's purses and watch fobs. But conforming to his eventual profession, he needed to cater to his future, which Williams was astute in doing.



A private residence designed by Paul R. Williams.

By using a telephone book to search out architecture offices in the Los Angeles area, Paul divided the areas geographically. He then listed the architects within those vicinities. He visited them one by one dressed elegantly in a suit and tie, with mustache and hair clipped perfectly. (Paul Williams was known throughout his life as an impeccable dresser.) He received three job offers for an office-boy position. But the one he really wanted to work for was the prominent firm of landscape architect Wilbur D. Cooke Jr., but no salary was offered. Paul really needed money, but he bit the bullet and took the unpaid position. In time Mr. Cooke was so impressed by the lad that he gave him a salary of \$3 a week.

As an office boy by day, he continued his studying at night. At the age of 20 in 1914, Williams won a first prize in a national student competition to design a civic center for Pasadena. His plan emphasized open space, a characteristic that remained part of his architectural work for many decades, which set the central buildings back from the street and placed circles of trees toward the street. Paul won \$200 for that design. Supposedly, this strengthened his belief in himself. Within those early years, he won other student design competitions from Chicago and New York and a prestigious one, the Beaux Arts Medal.

By the time he was 22, he had become a certified architect. But one employer made him aware that architecture was much more than drawing pretty pictures; it was only one aspect of being an architect. He was told he needed to learn physics, mathematics and engineering. In 1916, he began a three-year program on engineering at the University of Southern California (USC), which was in its early years of having a full-fledged architecture program. Williams was one of eight students in USC's architecture school in 1916. Also, the university was in his neighborhood and it accepted blacks. (Paul Williams received USC's Alumni Merit Award in 1966.)

While continuing his studies, Paul worked for a major residential architect Reginald D. Johnson, who gave the young man a glimpse of how the rich and famous lived. Young Williams had never been inside a home of more than \$10,000. His assignment was a home for \$150,000. Williams was dumbfounded but learned about restraint. He soon realized that each room should have a single focal point, otherwise, no matter how much

money was spent, it could look like an expensive junkshop.

In the meantime, Paul Williams married Della Mae Givens on June 27, 1917, at the First AME Church in Los Angeles; he was 23. They had one son and two daughters. The son died at birth. Both girls survived. In 1921, Mr. Williams received his state license, and was the first African American licensed architect west of the Mississippi.

Paul's background in engineering helped him when he went to work for John C. Austin. Williams, now an associate in the firm, assisted in preparing construction drawings for major buildings like the Shrine Auditorium and the First Methodist Church. But an unbelievable gift was coming to Paul Williams.

His Own Company

Williams was still months away from receiving his state license in 1921. But he received an incredible offering from an old classmate from Polytechnic High School, Louis Cass. Cass wanted to build a home in the Flintridge hills. Cass gave his old friend a \$90,000 contract, and encouraged Williams to use the commission and start up his own firm. This opportunity gave Williams the cash and security to start out on his own. He chose a space in the Stock Exchange Building in Los Angeles. He hung a sign out front that read "Paul Williams & Associates." He was 28.

In the early years of his career, prospective homebuilders would visit his office drawn to him because of his reputation without realizing he was black. Sometimes it mattered to patrons, who then left; others remained. Paul Williams had an internal belief that people were intrinsically tolerant, no matter how much prejudice there was in life. His instinct told him that patient and fair-minded individuals would honor his resourcefulness, courage and honest effort. Because of his talents, and his being forthright, he was soon proven correct.

As the prosperous 1920s roared on, the homebuilding industry continued to boom in Southern California. Williams was able, at that time, to score many commissions from wealthy and high-end middle class white patrons. In 1929, he won a contract from a horse breeder Jack P. Atkin. It was for a very large \$500,000 hilltop estate in Pasadena. To date, that was Paul Williams' largest contract. When it sold a few decades later, the home



The Second Baptist Church, designed by Paul R. Williams, was built in 1924.

was almost in the same condition as when built. It was listed for \$8 million.

In 1927, *PRW*, as he would become better known in his more prolific years, moved his office from the Stock Exchange Building to the Wilshire Arts Building, at Wilshire and Manhattan in Los Angeles.

Of interest to our readership, Paul R. Williams was appointed to the first Planning Commission in 1920, where he remained for eight years. Later, Mayor Frank Shaw appointed Paul to the first Los Angeles Housing Commission in 1933, where he also remained for eight years.

This incredible story will be continued in future months.

Note to Readers

Due to a production problem, there was missing text in last month's column, the conclusion of our three-part story on LAPD Chief William Parker and mobster Mickey Cohen, written by excellent guest columnist John Buntin. The last paragraph should have read:

In September 1975, Mickey checked into UCLA Medical Center, complaining of pain from an ulcer. It turned out he had stomach cancer. His doctors informed him that he had only months to live. Mickey used the time to relate his biography to the writer John Peer Nugent. The highly idiosyncratic result was *Mickey Cohen: In My Own Words*. The following summer, Mickey Cohen died at home in his sleep, leaving \$3,000 in cash, which the IRS promptly took. With back taxes, penalties, and interest, he still owed the U.S. government \$496,535.23.



Mickey Cohen and a bulletproof car, 1950.

Alive! apologizes for the error and hopes you enjoyed the story on Parker and Cohen.

—Ed.