

It would be a major shame if we lost the house where architect Paul Revere Williams lived and raised his family for THREE decades (c. 1921-1951).

I can easily document (and have downloaded the documents) that Paul Williams was living on the Eastside at the time of the 1920 Census (and that is the address that also shows in City Directories) but by 1921 he had moved to 1271 West 35th Street (thru line on the City Directories starting in 1921 and I checked through 1927). 1930 and 1940 Censuses have him and his family living there, and the 1950 Census won't be available for another year or two (or three).

1950 Passenger ship list has Paul and Della showing a Wilshire Boulevard address (his own offices) but Norma Williams is still at 1271 West 35th. Reminder that she married soon afterwards and moved to the now-demolished 1509 S. Gramercy Place.

The house in question was built in 1905, and was last sold in 1959 or so (it says \$0, which means there was an in-family transfer but that could be more recently.)

The Lafayette Square house is a "1951" in the Assessor records, with the permit applied for in 1950.

Essay about Paul Williams:

Paul Revere Williams (1894-1980) was one of the most admired and successful architects of the 20th century, designing more than 3,000 single family residences (modest homes and mansions alike), commercial buildings, and notable civic and religious institutions over a 60-year career. In 1923 he became the first documented African American member of AIA, and, in 1957, Williams was also the first to become a Fellow (FAIA).

His work made a significant impact on the architecture of his time, especially on the image of Los Angeles in the popular imagination. Williams' portfolio is remarkably diverse in building type, style and client. He designed buildings for businesses and institutions, large and small, and designed numerous private homes. He was proficient in architectural styles spanning traditional to modernist, was adept at designing a host of building types, and designed public housing and postwar-era tract homes in addition to large estates. Some of his famous Los Angeles commissions include the 28th Street YMCA (1926), Second Baptist Church (1924), the Barbara Stanwyck Residence/Oakridge (1937), the Church of Religious Science (1959), and in his collaborations on the design of prominent civic buildings, including the Los Angeles County Courthouse (1958—with Stanton & Stockwell, Adrian Wilson, and Austin, Field & Fry), and the Theme Building (1961) at Los Angeles International Airport (with William L. Pereira, Charles Luckman, and Welton Becket & Associates).

Williams also spent a lifetime linked to the Historic West Adams District, designing at least a dozen homes and other buildings in West Adams' boundaries, including a residence for Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, both Trinity Baptist and First AME churches,

the headquarters building of Golden State Mutual Life Insurance, and his own home in Lafayette Square.

Born in Los Angeles at a time when Southern California offered seemingly limitless opportunities, young Williams lost his father at age two and his mother at age four. The toddler was placed in foster care—luckily, a loving home—and attended local public schools, including Polytechnic High School at Washington near Figueroa. Polytechnic was the city's technical high school, and in 1912, when Williams graduated, it offered strong courses in electricity, mechanical engineering, architectural drafting, assaying and commerce. Polytechnic was an integrated school; among its notable graduates was J. Paul Getty, who graduated in 1909. Williams was an excellent student with high aspirations—but he was not always supported by those around him.

Years later, he wrote an essay for *Ebony* magazine in which he recounted the reaction of a Polytechnic High School guidance counselor upon discovering his career goal.

“He stared at me with as much astonishment as he would have had I proposed a rocket flight to Mars,” Williams wrote. “Whoever heard of a Negro being an architect?” the counselor demanded. Williams called this episode, this “blank discouragement,” the turning point of his life. “If I allow the fact that I am a Negro to checkmate my will to do now, I will inevitably form the habit of being defeated,” he later wrote. And if “prejudice is ever to be overcome it must be through the efforts of individual Negroes to rise above the average cultural level of their kind. Therefore, I owe it to myself and to my people to accept this challenge.”

In 1914, he entered a contest to develop a cohesive design for an intersection sponsored by the Throop Polytechnic Institute (now Cal Tech) of Pasadena. Williams' entry took first place in the “Four Corners Competition” over architects from as far away as Boston. The judging committee consisted of John C. Austin, Elmer Grey and Albert R. Walker. This was to be the first of many awards that Williams was to receive.

After Polytechnic, Williams studied at the Los Angeles atelier of the Beaux Arts Institute of New York, and then he went on to study architectural engineering at the University of Southern California. Williams was hired by famed Reginald Johnson, who helped put Period Revival residential styles back on the design map, and then he won a job with the prestigious John C. Austin architecture firm, where he stayed for three years.

In 1922, Williams established his own firm. He gained commissions for Roosevelt Naval Base (Long Beach, CA), Los Angeles County Court House, Los Angeles International Airport, the Beverly Hills Hotel, Saks Fifth Avenue (Beverly Hills), Howard University (Washington, D.C.) and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital (Memphis, TN).

His reputation as the “Architect to the Stars” began a few years later when he met E.L. Cord, the wealthy auto manufacturer who wanted to build a huge mansion. Williams sized Cord up as a man who appreciated immediate action, so he promised Cord preliminary plans in 24 hours. Working without break, Williams delivered plans for a 16-

bedroom, 22-bathroom Southern Colonial home in Beverly Hills the next day. He won that job and later would build homes for Golden Age Hollywood stars and media moguls, including Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Tyrone Powers, Lon Chaney, Humphrey Bogart, Jay Paley, Groucho Marx, Anthony Quinn, Danny Thomas, and Zsa Zsa Gabor.

Still, as he wrote in a 1937 *American Magazine* article, the color of his skin remained an unalterable component of his career.

“Today I sketched the preliminary plans for a large country house which will be erected in one of the most beautiful residential districts in the world,” Williams wrote. “Sometimes I have dreamed of living there. I could afford such a home. But this evening...I returned to my own small, inexpensive home...in a comparatively undesirable section of Los Angeles. Dreams cannot alter facts; I know...I must always live in that locality, or in another like it, because... I am a Negro.”

Focusing only on Williams’ famous movie star homes and big-dollar commissions would, indeed, do an injustice to the architect’s varied body of work. He designed churches, banks, office buildings, mortuaries, apartment buildings, and centers of civic life in black neighborhoods and in every corner of Los Angeles. Though Williams enjoyed a career that afforded him close association with many prominent figures of all races, his granddaughter Karen E. Hudson noted: *“nothing would deter him from addressing the needs of the growing African American community. He took genuine pride in being able to influence the look and environment of his own community. From churches to mortuaries, youth centers to financial institutions, Williams believed that the visibility of his designs in the community where he lived and socialized was immensely important.”*