

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Paul Revere Williams

(February 18, 1894 – January 23, 1980)
"Architect Pioneer"

Paul Revere Williams was born on February 18, 1894, in Los Angeles, California to Chester and Lila Wright Williams. His parents had just relocated to Los Angeles from Memphis, TN and had dreams of starting a fruit business, but their failing health limited their abilities. Paul's father died in 1896 from tuberculosis and his mother died in 1898 from the same illness. Paul and his older brother, Chester, were sent to live in foster care. Paul was placed in the home of C.D. and Emily Clarkston, which afforded Paul the opportunity to attend Polytechnic High School and study at the Los Angeles School of Art, the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, and the engineering school at the University of Southern California. Even though his teachers discouraged him from considering a career in architecture, noting that he wouldn't attract the white wealthy clients to make his business a success and he wouldn't have enough Black clients to sustain a profit, Paul was not discouraged. He married Della Mae Givens in 1917, at the First AME church. The couple had three children with one dying in childbirth. At the age of 25, Paul won an architectural competition.

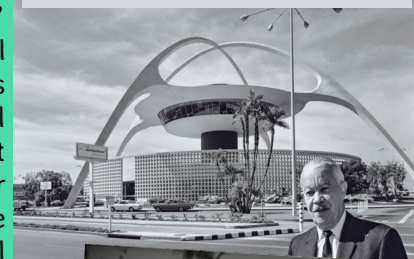
Paul became a licensed architect in 1921, making him the first black architect west of the Mississippi. That next year, Paul opened his own office. In 1923 he became the first black member of the Southern California chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Paul perfected an exclusive skill of drafting and rendering home drawings "upside down" - mainly because in the 1920s, many of his white clients felt uncomfortable sitting directly next to a Black man. In the late 1930s Paul received some important nonresidential commissions, most notably the Music Corporation of America building (1937) and the Saks Fifth Avenue store (1939), both in Beverly Hills. During World War II Paul worked for the Navy Department as an architect to design public housing for war workers.

After the war, Paul continued designing homes. His unique style of "conservative modern" captured the attention of wealthy European Americans including William Barron Hilton. Paul soon became known as "The Architect to the Stars," designing homes for Hollywood elites, including Carey Grant, Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Barbara Stanwick, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Bert Lahr, and Danny Thomas. His work has come to signify the glamour of Southern California living to the rest of the country — and to the world. Paul also designed numerous public and commercial buildings that shaped L.A., including the Los Angeles County Courthouse. He worked with Pereira & Luckman on the Theme Building at LAX airport, as well as the buildings of landmark black-owned Los Angeles businesses such as the Angelus Funeral Home, Golden State Mutual Life Insurance, and Broadway Federal Savings and Loan. He also designed a new home for Los Angeles's First A.M.E. Church, of which he was a member. He was a co-designer on the addition made to the Beverly Hills Hotel in 1949-50.

In 1952, Paul received an honorary degree from Howard University and another from Tuskegee in 1957. He was also the recipient of the NAACP Springarn Medal. In his life, he designed over 2000 private homes and 41 major buildings, hotels, and structures, including the final tomb of Al Jolson. In 1957 Williams, a member of Sigma Pi Phi fraternity, was the first African American honored with election to the AIA College of Fellows. Paul retired in 1973.

On January 23, 1980, Paul R. Williams at the age of 85. There is a life-size memorial just north of the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Building.

Paul Revere Williams was part of the team that designed the Theme Building at Los Angeles International Airport.



Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz House, Palm Springs, built 1954-55, Paul R. Williams (architect).

