
A House for Equal Justice

THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY COURTHOUSE AND ARCHITECT PAUL WILLIAMS

BY JUDGE ELIZABETH R. FEFFER*

JUST BEFORE 6 p.m. on March 10, 1933, the Long Beach earthquake struck Southern California. The 6.4 magnitude temblor killed 120 people and remains California's second-deadliest earthquake. Downtown Los Angeles suffered little devastation compared to the southeast area of the county. A notable exception was the Los Angeles County Courthouse, called the Red Sandstone Courthouse because of its exterior masonry, which sustained such heavy damage it could no longer be used.

Begun in 1888 and opened in 1891, the grand county courthouse was located at Temple and Broadway, where the Foltz Criminal Justice Center now stands. It was the county's first true courthouse; previous buildings had been converted from other uses.

Even before the Long Beach earthquake, the Red Sandstone Courthouse — once called “the jewel of Los Angeles” — was dramatically and rapidly deteriorating. In February 1932 a section of stone from the courthouse clock tower broke off and crashed through the roof of Judge Joseph Sproul's office. The accident fortuitously occurred at 6:25 a.m., so no one was hurt. The structure was so compromised that within a few weeks the clock tower and other ornamentation were removed and a new roof installed.

A year later, the Long Beach earthquake dealt the courthouse its final blow. Dismantling the building was such a large undertaking that demolition was not

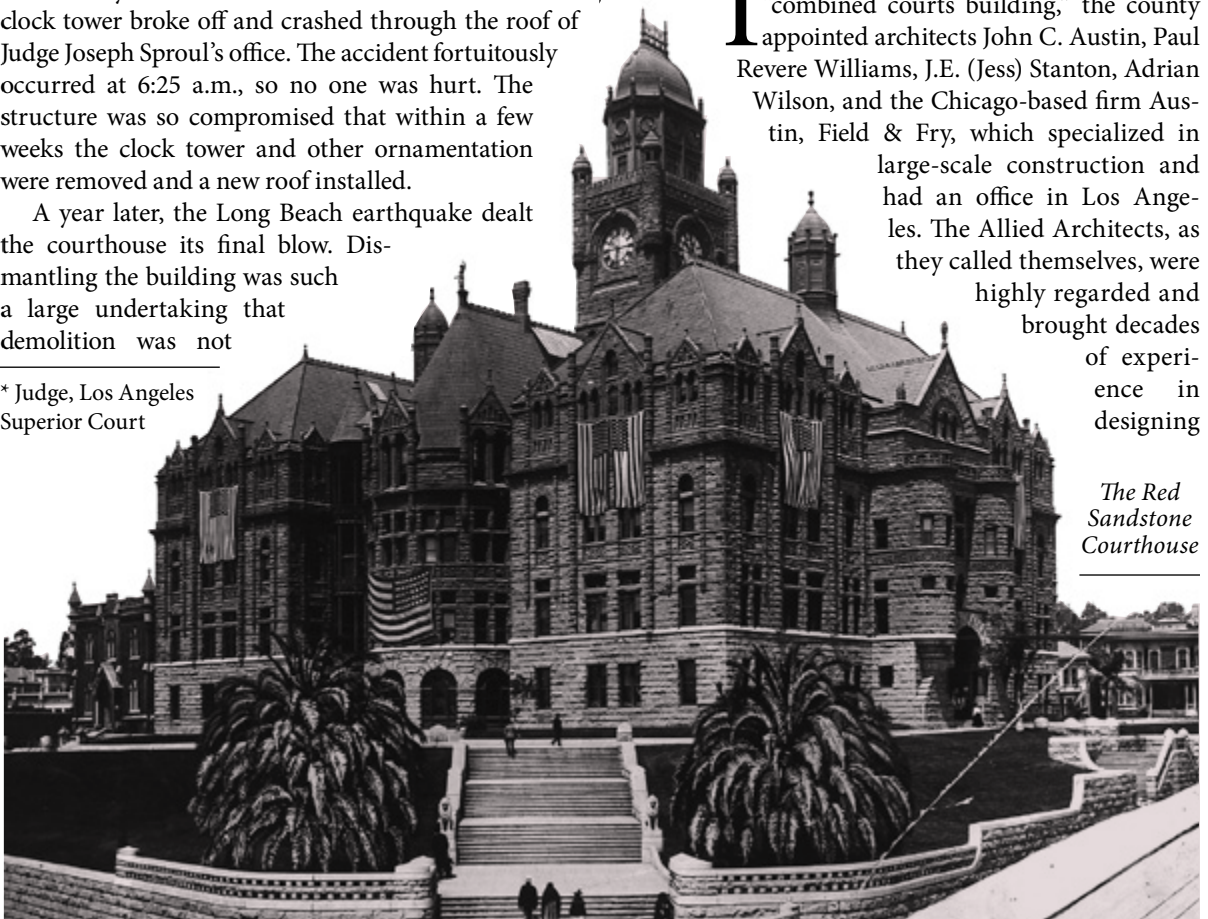
completed until 1936. For the next 25 years, the county's judges used makeshift accommodations at multiple locations downtown, including the old Hall of Records.

Meanwhile, Los Angeles had experienced unforeseen population growth. When the Red Sandstone Courthouse opened in 1891, the county's population was 108,336. When it closed in 1933, the population had surged to 2.38 million, and was expected to increase to around 5.25 million by 1970.

After World War II, the county purchased land for a new courthouse at the intersection of Grand Avenue and Temple Street. Despite the clear need for a permanent courthouse, the site was not greeted with enthusiasm. It was considered inconvenient to the downtown law offices and there was an 80-foot hill on Hill Street. Bunker Hill and the proposed courthouse site would require considerable costly grading.

IN 1951, to design what was described as a “combined courts building,” the county appointed architects John C. Austin, Paul Revere Williams, J.E. (Jess) Stanton, Adrian Wilson, and the Chicago-based firm Austin, Field & Fry, which specialized in large-scale construction and had an office in Los Angeles. The Allied Architects, as they called themselves, were highly regarded and brought decades of experience in designing

The Red Sandstone Courthouse



* Judge, Los Angeles Superior Court

LOS ANGELES COUNTY and its trial court system are remarkable for two very different reasons. The first is their immense size. The second is the surprising continuity of the county courthouse's location. Through more than 150 years the county has used at least eight buildings as its county courthouse. All have been situated within a mile of each other in downtown Los Angeles south of the original plaza in what has for the past 80 years been called the Civic Center.

The massive courthouse that now serves 10 million people a year is within a 10-minute walk of the site of the first county courthouse, the adobe Bella Union Hotel, where court was held in rented rooms from 1850 to 1852. The six other buildings used as the county courthouse were situated within the same precinct:



- ◆ From January 1852 until November 1853, the county rented the home of county attorney (and later judge) Benjamin Hayes on Main Street.

- ◆ The Roche (or Rocha) House, an adobe on the corner of Spring and Court Streets, which the county and city jointly purchased from Jonathan “Don

Juan” Temple, was used from November 1853 to March 1860.

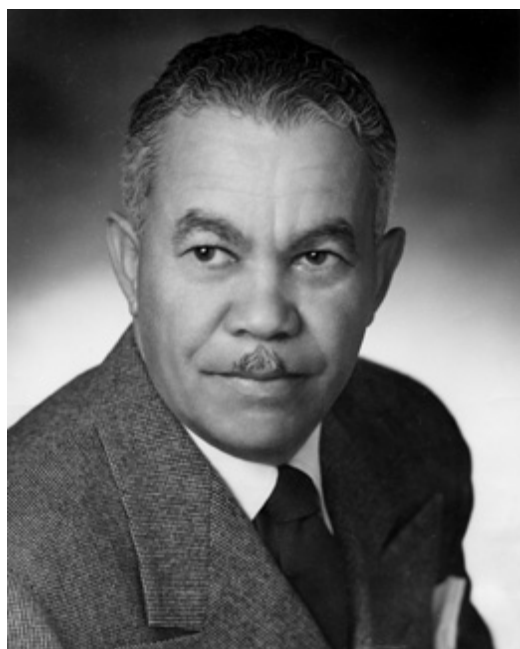
- ◆ From 1860 to 1861 the county rented a building, probably a two-story brick house on Main Street, from John Nichols, former mayor of Los Angeles.

- ◆ The Temple Market Block — where City Hall now stands — was rented by the county in May 1861, purchased in 1867 and used until 1891. This was the Clocktower Courthouse, known for its rectangular tower with a clock on all four sides.

- ◆ The Red Sandstone Courthouse on Pound Cake Hill, completed in 1891, was damaged beyond repair by the Long Beach earthquake of 1933 and demolished in 1936. It is now the site of the Foltz Criminal Justice Center, constructed in 1972.

- ◆ The Hall of Records, built next door to the Red Sandstone Courthouse in 1911, was used along with other buildings as the courthouse from 1934 until 1959, when the current courthouse was occupied. It was demolished in 1973.

TEXT & PHOTOS from *Courthouses of California*, Ray McDevitt, editor (2001)



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— PAUL WILLIAMS

public and private projects. One of the architects, Paul Revere Williams, had by then built a 30-year, well-deserved reputation for excellence and was considered one of the finest architects in Los Angeles.

Williams was born in Los Angeles on February 18, 1894, to parents who had recently relocated from Memphis, Tennessee. Both parents had died by the time he was four, and he and an older brother were placed in separate foster homes.

Los Angeles in the 1890s was a vibrant, multi-ethnic environment in which young Williams thrived. In elementary school, Williams was known as the class artist and spent endless hours drawing. He enrolled in architecture classes in high school. When an advisor questioned his ambition to pursue a career in architecture, Williams recalled later that he had responded, “I had heard of only one Negro architect in America [Booker T. Washington’s son-in-law, William S. Pittman] and I was sure this country could use at least one or two more.”

Williams studied architecture at the Los Angeles School of Art and at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design. When he was 20, he won a prestigious design award. As he continued to excel in competitions, other architects took notice. In 1916, Williams was hired by noted architect Reginald D. Johnson. Then in 1919 he was hired by another prominent Los Angeles architect, John C.



A CLOCK ON THREE COURTHOUSES

The clock on its eastern facade links the current courthouse to its predecessors. The hands and numerals of the clock were also on the Clocktower Courthouse (ABOVE LEFT), which was used from 1861 to 1891, and the Red Sandstone Courthouse (ABOVE RIGHT), in use from 1891 to 1933. When the Red Sandstone Courthouse was demolished, the clock was preserved and later incorporated into the current courthouse (LEFT), which opened in 1959.

Austin, his future collaborator on the county courthouse. Austin's firm provided Williams with valuable experience and allowed him to design large-scale projects and work in a wider range of architectural styles.

Williams obtained his architect's license in 1921, struck out on his own in 1922, and became the first black member of the American Institute of Architects in 1923. Williams earned a reputation for never settling for less than perfection in his work and for dignity in his relationships with clients and colleagues.

Although quite successful, Williams remained mindful he had to overcome racial prejudice and "devote as much thought and ingenuity to winning an adequate first hearing as to the execution of the detailed drawings." He spent hours learning to draw upside-down as he sat across the table from prospective clients. Williams later wrote that in his early years of practice he was determined to "force white people to consider me as an individual rather than as a member of a race." He added: "Occasionally, I encountered irreconcilables who simply refused to give me a hearing, but, on the whole, I have been treated with an amazing fairness."

HE BECAME AN architect to the stars, with clients including Tyrone Power, Barbara Stanwyck, Lon Chaney, Lucille Ball, and many

others. But the project that propelled Williams into the category of elite architects was Cordhaven, the Beverly Hills estate he designed in 1933 for automobile magnate E.L. Cord. Although Cord lacked formal higher education, he knew and appreciated quality of workmanship and design. Automotive enthusiasts consider the 1936 Cord to be among the most beautiful automobiles ever made.

Williams recalled that Cord telephoned and asked Williams to meet him immediately at a site in Beverly Hills to discuss building a new home. Williams tried to defer the appointment to the following day, but Cord insisted, and they met later that day at the site. Cord told Williams he had already discussed plans with a number of other architects and demanded to know how soon Williams could submit preliminary drawings.

Sensing that Cord valued prompt action, Williams answered, "By four o'clock tomorrow afternoon." Cord thought that was impossible, since every other architect had asked for two or three weeks, but he gave Williams the go-ahead. Williams delivered the preliminary plans as promised. He did not tell Cord he had worked for 22 hours without sleeping or eating. Williams was hired and created Cordhaven, a 32,000-square-foot home with 16 bedrooms and 22 bathrooms. In the 1960s, Cordhaven was torn down



The “symbolic embellishment” that ultimately graced the Grand Avenue and Hill Street elevations of the County Courthouse consists of terra cotta creations by two noted artists. Albert Stewart created the three “Foundations of the Law” figures (ABOVE) on the Grand Avenue side, to represent the legal traditions upon which America was founded. Donal Hood designed the “Justice” sculpture on the Hill Street facade (ABOVE RIGHT). The terra cotta work was manufactured by Gladding McBean at its Lincoln, California, factory.

PHOTOS: LOS ANGELES SUPERIOR COURT

and the property subdivided into 13 parcels. It is now a cul-de-sac called Cord Circle.

By the time of the Los Angeles County Courthouse project two decades later, Williams’ portfolio included noted residential, commercial, and public buildings. Williams was involved with approximately 3,000 projects during his career, which spanned from the 1920s through the 1970s. As one of the designers of the Los Angeles International Airport, with its iconic space-age LAX Theme Building, Williams helped shape the growth and look of Los Angeles. He retired in 1973 and died in 1980 at the age of 85.

WILLIAMS BELIEVED PUBLIC buildings should be conservative in design. He and his colleagues adhered to that principle when designing the Los Angeles County Courthouse. When the architects submitted the preliminary plans in October 1952, they described the courthouse design as a “conservative version of contemporary architecture.” The approaches and entrances were designed in “a manner expressing the dignity requisite in a courthouse, the principal embellishment consisting of symbolic structure.”

Chief Justice Earl Warren was the honored guest at the groundbreaking ceremony on March 26, 1954, at the once-controversial site. The formidable grading and excavation project commenced and, ultimately, the



80-foot hill was leveled. Construction of the building began in 1956.

The \$24 million Los Angeles County Courthouse was dedicated on October 31, 1958, and opened for public business at 9 a.m. on January 5, 1959. With 850,000 square feet of space, it was the largest courthouse in the United States. Its entrances featured mosaic tile columns. The marble floors were quarried in Italy and polished in Vermont. White oak paneling lined the 110 courtrooms.

The courthouse included eight large courtrooms, with prominent slabs of Tennessee Rosemont marble on the walls behind each bench. These courtrooms would accommodate cases of great public interest — this was Los Angeles, after all — as well as the presiding judge’s courtroom and chambers and the headquarters of the various court departments.

In 2002 the courthouse was named for California Supreme Court Justice Stanley Mosk. It remains, more than a half century after it opened, the largest courthouse in the United States. ★

SOURCES

The Paul Revere Williams Project, Art Museum at the University of Memphis, Tennessee.

Karen E. Hudson (with David Gebhard), *Paul R. Williams, Architect* (1993).

Paul R. Williams, “I Am a Negro,” in *The American Magazine* (July 1937).

Paul R. Williams, “If I Were Young Today,” in *Ebony* (Aug. 1963).