



**Image.** JD & Ethel Williams (Source: Williams Family Photo Archives).

**Image.** JD Williams throughout his life. (Source: Roger & Ernestine Williams Family Photo Archives).

**Image.** JD Williams throughout his life. (Source: Roger & Ernestine Williams Family Photo Archives).

## Joseph D. and Ethel Williams; Willie Mae Williams

Bishop J.D. Williams and his family owned a one-acre hog farm in Brownsville from at least 1923 until his death in 1966, located at 5188 NW 27th Avenue. He was a Black farmer in Brownsville, but he is best remembered as the patriarch of a large and prosperous family and for his role as a spiritual and civic leader in his community. He is also recognized for "farming" the real estate of his neighborhood and for partnering with Welsey Garrison to develop and sell residential lots in Home Owner's Paradise in the 1950s.

J.D. Williams was born in Cat Island, Bahamas in 1883.<sup>1</sup> He immigrated to the United States in 1903,<sup>2</sup> after working on a mail boat between Nassau and Key West with his brother Alexander.<sup>3</sup> In 1916, J.D. Williams married his first wife, Ethel.<sup>4</sup> They lived at 13 Roosevelt Avenue (today's 7th Avenue) in the Northwest section of Colored Town (Overtown).<sup>5</sup> They owned their own home without a mortgage, and J.D. Williams owned and operated a grocery store while Ethel stayed home to raise the children.<sup>6</sup> Their five children were Inez, Matthew, Roger, Carl and Irma Lee.

J.D. Williams served in the first Black Church of God congregation in the United States.<sup>7</sup> The Church began in his native Bahamas and was established in 1911 in Overtown. He began as the clerk of the church at its beginnings.<sup>8</sup> He was one of the earliest ordained ministers in the Black Church of God in the United States.<sup>9</sup> He is remembered for being instrumental both spiritually and financially in the building of several Church of God churches, serving as a pastor in Hallandale, Key West, Hollywood, Liberty City and Brownsville. He also served as the Church of God Field Secretary for the State of Florida and as State Designer for the church.<sup>10</sup>

1 Interview, Karen Williams, descendants of Alexander Williams, with Megan McLaughlin, telephone, June 3, 2022

2 "United States Census, 1920," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GR68-4Z3?cc=1488411&wc=QZJP-HK1%3A1036469901%2C1036886101%2C1036871901%2C1589332508> : 10 September 2019), Florida > Dade > Miami > ED 24 > image 81 of 88; citing NARA microfilm publication T625 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

3 Interview, Ernestine Williams and daughters Willareena, Roneice, and Althea, descendants of J.D. Williams, with Megan McLaughlin, telephone, April 22, 2022

4 "United States Census, 1930," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9R46-6SZ?cc=1810731&wc=QZF9-531%3A648804501%2C649213201%2C649394401%2C1589282419> : 9 December 2015), Florida > Dade > Hialeah > ED 92 > image 44 of 54; citing NARA microfilm publication T626 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2002).

5 "United States Census, 1920," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GR68-4Z3?cc=1488411&wc=QZJP-HK1%3A1036469901%2C1036886101%2C1036871901%2C1589332508> : 10 September 2019), Florida > Dade > Miami > ED 24 > image 81 of 88; citing NARA microfilm publication T625 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

6 Ibid, "United States Census, 1920"

7 Swann, Michael S. *The Holy Jumpers: A Concise History of the Church of God of Prophecy in The Bahamas 1909-1974*, Xulon Press, Maitland, FL c.2018, p659-661

8 Ibid, Swann, Michael S.

9 Ibid, Swann, Michael S.

10 "Obituary - J.D. Williams" *The Miami Herald*, October 8, 1966, p45 [www.newspapers.com/image/621084767](http://www.newspapers.com/image/621084767) Accessed July 10, 2023.

*“One of his mantras was always, we can give a man a fish, he’ll eat for a day but if we teach him how to fish, he’ll live for a lifetime. And that is how our father and mother raised us. I think my dad was like: our grandparents give us the knowledge to learn how to live and take care of ourselves, and if they gave us a piece of property, it wasn’t meant for them to go sell it to somebody to spend the profits from that, but teach your children how to do that same thing so for generations you can pass down generational wealth”*

Rojean Williams, Brownsville Oral History Project.

In 1923, J.D. Williams purchased an acre of land from Issac T. Bawl<sup>11</sup> in the Brownsville area at today’s 5188 NW 27th Avenue.<sup>12</sup> He moved his family there and established a small hog farm.<sup>13</sup> He built a Coral Rock house on his property in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> The rock was collected from loose stones that the hogs dug up, and a mason from Nassau was brought in to work the rock and build the house.<sup>15</sup> By 1930, J.D. Williams’ official profession had shifted to the church and he was listed as a full-time pastor.<sup>16</sup> For the remainder of his life he was a church leader at the Liberty City Church of God of Prophecy.

In 1939, Ethel Williams died.<sup>17</sup> In 1941, J. D. Williams remarried a widow from Coconut Grove, Mrs. Willie Mae Williams (her first husband was Mr. Dan Williams, of 3920 Florida Avenue in Coconut Grove), who had five children of her own, Daniel, Eugenie, Rodney, Hazel and Emmett J. The five children and five stepchildren lived at home until they were able to create their own households, and they formed a tight knit blended family.

J.D. Williams became friends and business partners with a Jewish developer, civil rights activist, and millionaire, Wesley Garrison.<sup>18</sup> Garrison was considered a friend to the Black community and helped them to learn the real estate business.<sup>19</sup> Garrison taught Williams how to become a developer, and how to buy and sell real estate.<sup>20</sup> J.D. Williams served as the

11 1925 Hopkins Map, Accessed from Miami-Dade County Office of Historic Preservation

12 “United States Census, 1930,” database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9R46-6SZ?cc=1810731&wc=QZF9-531%3A648804501%2C649213201%2C649394401%2C1589282419> : 9 December 2015), Florida > Dade > Hialeah > ED 92 > image 44 of 54; citing NARA microfilm publication T626 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2002).

13 Interview, Ernestine Williams and daughters Willareena, Roneice, and Althea, descendants of J.D. Williams, with Megan McLaughlin, telephone, April 22, 2022

14 Ibid, Interview, Ernestine Williams and daughters...

15 Ibid, Interview, Ernestine Williams and daughters...

16 “United States Census, 1930,”

17 “Florida Deaths, 1877-1939,” database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-DC74-348?cc=1595003> : 8 August 2019), > image 1 of 1.

18 Interview, Enid Pinkney, historian, Brownsville resident, and Williams family neighbor, with Megan McLaughlin, telephone, March 30, 2022

19 Ibid, Interview, Enid Pinkney...

20 Ibid, Interview, Enid Pinkney...

**Image.** JD Williams coral rock house c. 1960s. (Source: Roniece Williams, Williams Family Photo Archives).





**Image.** Original JD Williams Building, 2707 NW 50 Street, built in 1948. (Source: Roniece Williams, Williams Family Photo Archives).

sales agent for lots in Garrison's subdivision Home Owners Paradise in the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> Williams also built two different mixed-use buildings during this time: the two-story Hollywood Shoppes at 5004 NW 27th Avenue in 1948, and the two-story J.D. Williams & Sons Building at 4840 NW 27th Avenue in 1955.

The legacy of J.D. Williams in Brownsville was amplified by his five children and five stepchildren. He took his role as the family patriarch very seriously, and he is affectionately remembered as "Papa" to the many children and grandchildren who knew him. He raised these ten children and his grandchildren to value faith and family as the means to a fulfilling life. He also taught them that education, property ownership, and business ownership were a means to economic self-sufficiency and a way to overcome the effects of racial discrimination in the United States. Although J.D. Williams did not attend university, he understood the importance of a college degree, and he sent all ten children to college, many of them attending Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. All of the sons later served in the military during World War II. He was able to provide land and a home to each of his ten children,<sup>22</sup> and he also provided support for each child to be an entrepreneur and own their own business. His children and grandchildren became historic figures in their own right.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Ernestine Williams with daughters Roneice, Willareena and Althea, with Megan McLaughlin, telephone, April 22, 2022

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, Interview, Ernestine Williams and daughters...