



Image. Neal Adams Sr. representing the Brownsville Improvement Association. (Source: Adams Family Collection Donna Adams).

Image. Ora Lee Adams. (Source: Adams Family Collection Donna Adams).

Neal Fredrick Sr. and Ora Lee Adams

Neal Adams Sr. Neal Adams Sr. and was a grocery store owner, politician, and a tireless community organizer for Brownsville and Miami's Black community as a whole. He served as the president of the Brownsville Improvement Association for over thirty years, from 1947 until 1979. He was an instrumental Civil Rights leader because he organized the Brownsville community to become a powerful voting bloc, resulting in the election of the first Black legislators in State government since Reconstruction. Neal Adams Sr. served as a Dade County Commissioner from 1969 to 1979.

Neal Adams Sr. was the son of John Howard Adams and Deborah Frinks. John Howard Adams and Isaac Frinks, Neal Adams' father and maternal grandfather, worked for Henry Flagler's F.E.C. Railroad in the 1800s and early 1900s. While they worked there, they would have witnessed the power of the Black vote, which was used extensively by Flagler's interests between 1896 and 1908. Flagler's companies would organize Black voters to vote together to accomplish important infrastructure projects or community development goals in Miami's early years. Their families raised Neal Adams to be an astute political organizer in Brownsville from the 1930s through the 1970s. Neal Adams' civic and political efforts in Brownsville made history when he turned the neighborhood into a powerful voting bloc in the 1950s. Through his political organizing, he changed the course of civil rights in Miami, elected many of the first Black leaders into political office, and raised up a generation of Black leaders and entrepreneurs.

Neal Adams Sr. was born in 1916 and grew up in Amos Town (located on the current site of Marva Y Bannerman Park) and Brown's Subdivision. He attended Allapattah Primary School for Colored Children, located in Amos Town. In the early 1940s, Neal Adams Sr. married Ora Lee Adams. They had a son, Neal Frederick Adams Jr. who was born around 1941, and a daughter Earlena Donna, who was born around 1943.¹ In the early years of their marriage, they decided to self-finance and build a house for themselves on NW 48th Street in Brownsville. By 1945, the family resided in their new home that they built out of war scraps and with the assistance of neighbor and master carpenter Theodore Amos.² Neal Adams Sr. was a member of Antioch Baptist Church.³

From his home on NW 48th Street, and his grocery store at 4825 NW 27th Avenue, Neal Adams' Sr. launched his career as a community organizer and a politician. His initial motivation for getting politically involved stemmed

¹ "Florida State Census, 1945," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33HY-DZNS-JNH?cc=1457855&wc=M6GS-X6J%3A41861601%2C42093001> : 20 May 2014), Dade > 037, Miami > image 71 of 104; State Archives, Tallahassee.

² Adams, Donna, conversation with Megan McLaughlin, May 2024.

³ Community conversation with residents, Brownsville Historic Survey Community Meeting, Antioch Baptist Church, March 19, 2022.

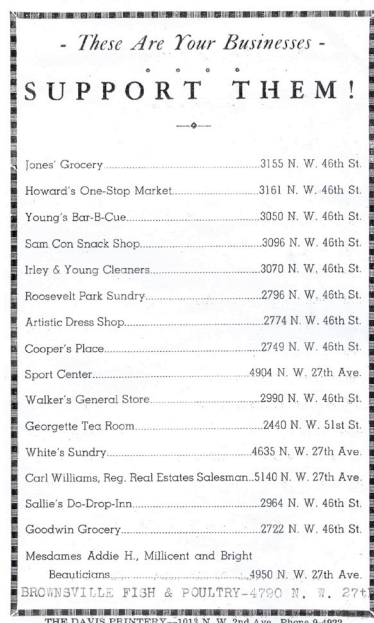
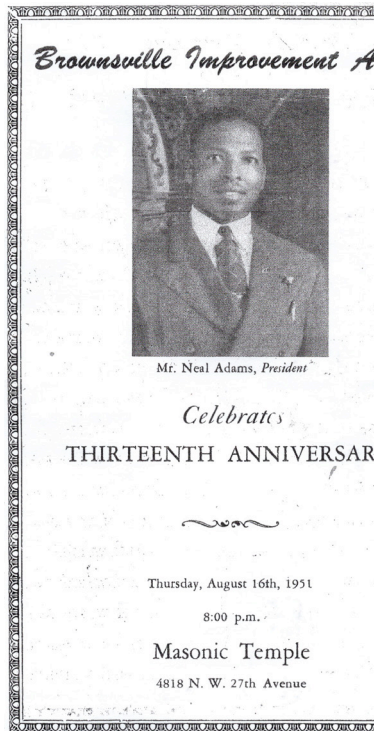


Image. Exceptrs from a 1951 program from a Brownsville Improvement Association anniversary party, hosted by Neal Adams Sr., president. (Source: Adams Family Collection Donna Adams)

from the obstacles faced in running his businesses. Prior to 1947, Neal and Ora Lee Adams owned a grocery store in the Railroad Shops Colored Addition neighborhood, at 4801 NW 13th Avenue.⁴ In the 1930s and 1940s, there was pressure from the white residents around the Railroad Shops neighborhood to relocate their Black neighbors and make the area more homogenously white. In 1947 and 1948, after years of attempts, the Dade County School Board and the City of Miami took the Adams' property and all of their neighbors' property in Railroad Shops Colored Addition and forced them to leave by eminent domain.⁵ This was a very traumatic experience for the residents and property owners in Railroad Shops. Neal Adams Sr. hired an attorney during this process and fought for more fair compensation for his property and those of his neighbors. He was warned by his neighbors that he could be killed for speaking out, but he did not back down. Perhaps as a result of his leadership in this event, he learned that he could advocate for his community and get tangible results. His civic career as the President of the Brownsville Improvement Association began the following year.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Neal Adams Sr. owned a movie theater in Brownsville called Neal's Sepian Theater. The family would rent or purchase the movie reels from a white man. When that man died, the family tried to contract with a different white provider to obtain the movie reels, but that provider refused to do business with them. As a result, the family was forced to close the movie theater.⁶

In the early 1950s, Neal Adams, the grocer, and George Kilpatrick, the local butcher, both of whom had been evicted from their properties in Railroad Shops in 1947 and 1948, joined forces and opened a large meat market in a newly constructed two-story concrete building at 4952 NW 27th Avenue. By 1952, they parted ways; meanwhile Neal's Sepian Theater building was empty after the movie theater business closed. Neal Adams relocated his grocery store, Neal's Super Market, to his Sepian Theater building at 4825 NW 27th Avenue. His customers complained that the prices were too high but he was barred from joining the Independent Grocer's Association (IGA) because of racial discrimination. Neal Adams Sr. decided to get involved in politics because he saw that the current racist system was limiting his business, and he wanted to make a change.⁷

Neal Adams Sr. was one of the founding members of the Brownsville Improvement Association in 1938, where he grew in his role as a powerful community organizer. He served as president of the organization for over thirty years, from 1947 until 1979. He had many achievements as a Brownsville Improvement Association leader, including voter registration,

⁴ Legal Notice" The Miami News September 30, 1947 p17 www.newspapers.com/image/298642391 Accessed 12 April 2023.

⁵ Ibid, "Legal Notice"

⁶ Interview, Donna Adams, daughter of Neal Adams Sr., with Megan McLaughlin, telephone, March 14, 2022

⁷ Ibid, Interview, Donna Adams, daughter of Neal Adams Sr.

Brownsville Protest On Housing Due

A meeting to organize a protest against construction of a public housing project for Negroes in the Brownsville section has been called for 8 tonight by the Brownsville Improvement Association.

The Negro group will meet at the Sepian Theater. President Neal Adams said the association is opposed to building the housing in the Brownsville area because that would involve razing existing homes, many owned by their occupants.

The county zoning board has recommended to the county commission that an area bounded by NW 46th and 54th sts. and 23rd and 27th aves. be rezoned to permit construction of the project there. The Miami Housing Authority is planning to establish a federally financed project numbering 500 to 1,000 units.

Transportation For Negro Voters

The Brownsville Improvement Association is providing free transportation for Negro residents of the Brown's Subdivision area who want to register to vote in the May primaries, President Neal Adams announced. He said cars would leave the Sepian Theater, NW 49th st. and 27th ave., every hour from 9 a. m. to 5 p. m. until further notice.

Adams said the group is trying to get some 2,700 eligible voters who live in the area to register. He estimated that only 300 persons living in that section now are on the registration roll.

Image. 1951 article about the Improvement Association fighting a public housing project that would displace some residents. (Source: The Miami Herald).

Image. 1950 article announcing free transportation for people who want to register to vote. (Source: The Miami Herald).

creating a powerful voting bloc, and through that electoral power, obtaining neighborhood improvements such as new schools, paved streets, street lights, park improvements, and some measure of neighborhood protection from incompatible zoning and development. Under his leadership, the BIA constructed the Brownsville Community Center at 2741 NW 49 Street. Community fundraising began in 1956 and the construction of the building was completed in 1965. It was used as an election polling location and an after-school club. It was also a destination for Black celebrities; the BIA hosted singer Sammy Davis Jr. and boxer Jimmy Ellis here, among others. Neal Adams Sr.'s political career culminated in his service as a Dade County Commissioner from 1969-1979.



Image. 1954 article, Neal Adams serves in Dade Grand Jury. (Source: The Miami News).

Image. 1965 image of the completed Community Center. (Source: Historic Tax Card Photo).

Image. 4825 NW 27th Avenue today. (Source: Plusurbia Design).

Image. Neal's Market and Grocery Store at 4825 NW 27th Avenue. (Source: The Miami News).

