

Rediscovering a Las Vegas Neighborhood's African American Roots

by Courtney Mooney



FIGURE 1
Articles appearing in the December 14, 1949 edition of the Las Vegas Review-Journal announced the Westside Park subdivision.

Survey and inventory of historic resources should be an integral part of every city's redevelopment process. This type of research is not only a valuable economic planning tool but also an exciting opportunity to unearth valuable gems, as was the case with a study of West Las Vegas, a historic, predominantly African American, area of Las Vegas, Nevada. The City of Las Vegas's Historic Preservation Plan calls for the ongoing documentation of historic neighborhoods and properties. Each year, the City of Las Vegas Planning and Development Department applies for grant money from the National Park Service's Historic Preservation Fund for survey and inventory through the State Historic Preservation Office. In 2002, the award funded the research of the "Historic Westside" area.

The rediscovery of the origins of the Berkley Square neighborhood in West Las Vegas, a post-World War II subdivision marketed to African Americans, began with a chance newspaper research find during this 2002 survey.

(Figure 1) Two newspaper articles published in December 1949 announced the opening of a new subdivision named "Westside Park," with 155 tract houses designed by a "famed" African American architect, Paul Revere Williams.¹ Because the development site was outside the 2002 survey boundaries in an area now called Berkley Square, this information became a side note in the historic context statement.

In 2004, discussions about moving the La Concha Motel's mid-century, free-form concrete lobby again raised the name of architect Paul R. Williams. (Figure 2) Williams was well known for his movie-star homes and public buildings in Los Angeles, such as Frank Sinatra's Trousdale estate and the Los Angeles County Courthouse. With the potential connection to the West Las Vegas subdivision in mind, the City of Las Vegas Historic Preservation Commission began discussing Berkley Square as a possible survey area for the 2004 National Park Service grant.

Several issues complicated the decision to survey this area. The 1949 articles referred to a development called Westside Park, but the subdivision was now called Berkley Square, with county assessor information showing construction dates of 1954-55. What happened between 1949 and 1954? Were the Berkley Square homes actually designed by Williams? All the Historic Preservation Commission had to go by were documents describing a land sale and a current

photograph of a house that resembled the architect's sketch accompanying the 1949 articles. The Commission voted to include Berkley Square in the 2004 survey and hired a historic preservation consultant, Diana Painter of Painter Preservation and Planning, to document the neighborhood and solve the mystery.

Painter began by documenting and photographing all buildings within the neighborhood, providing a Nevada State Historic Resource Inventory Form for each. A historic context statement was prepared to help assess the importance of the properties within the contexts of Las Vegas history and mid-century residential design. In addition, research was conducted at the historical society, local libraries and museums, and the Environmental Design Library at the University of California at Berkeley. Painter also used information from a previous interview with Karen Hudson, Williams's granddaughter. From this research, she was able to stitch together compelling arguments for a probable link to the Los Angeles architect as well as for eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.



FIGURE 2
This circa-1930s photograph is of architect Paul Revere Williams. (Courtesy of Paul R. Williams Collection)

Besides attracting a famous clientele and important public commissions, Williams was the first black architect to become a member of the American Institute of Architects and served on the California Housing Commission and the California Redevelopment Commission. He published two pattern books on small houses, *Small Home of Tomorrow* (1945) and *New Homes for Today* (1946).² By 1949, he had won three national competitions for small home design, and he would eventually design military housing and other housing stock for subdivisions. According to his granddaughter, the modernized ranch house became his specialty.

Williams's design for Berkley Square filled a desperate need for adequate housing in West Las Vegas. Platted by surveyor J.T. McWilliams in 1905, settlement began as a wayside for miners. It was hoped that the arrival of the railroad would bring prosperity, but these hopes were unrealized. The railroad company owned most of the land east of the completed tracks, as well as all of the water rights, effectively controlling development for decades.

During the 1930s, McWilliams's Townsite, now called "the Westside," had few permanent buildings, but blacks were free to own businesses and live on the east side of town. Subsequent segregation practices in Las Vegas forced most of the black families to relocate to the Westside. Well into the 1940s, the area lacked basic amenities such as sewer and paved streets, with sometimes two or more families living in small, one-room wood shacks. Low-income minorities and whites continued to find refuge here, with the black population having the strongest cultural presence. A community of churches, businesses, and night-clubs was formed using the residents' own resources and ingenuity. Adequate housing lagged far behind, however, especially during and after World War II,

FIGURE 3

This recent view shows a ranch house in the proposed Berkley Square historic district. (Courtesy of Diana Painter)



when many black soldiers returned home or residents lost their jobs at the local Air Force base or military industrial plants.

Westside Park/Berkley Square was the result of “four years of planning, designing and negotiating with government officials, by a group of local businessmen endeavoring to make the first real contribution to improvement of conditions on the city’s Westside.”³ It was sorely needed in 1947, when the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) began discussions with the City of Las Vegas to develop a “new 2-bedroom project for colored people...with Federal Housing insured loans.”⁴ The property changed hands several times, but finally in 1954 with new owners, Edward A. Freeman and J.J. Byrnes, the subdivision was recorded as Berkley Square with 148 lots on 22 acres.

The new “Berkley Square” name came from Thomas L. Berkley, of Oakland, California. Berkley was a distinguished African American attorney, media owner, developer, civil rights advocate, and a frequent guest at the White House during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. It was in his civil rights capacity that he became partial financier of Berkley Square. An article in the *Las Vegas Review Journal* from April 1954 stated that Berkley Square was “the first minority group subdivision to be approved for construction in the state of Nevada.”⁵

Painter’s report established Berkley Square’s eligibility for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places as the first subdivision in Nevada built by and for African Americans. The subdivision contributed to improved living conditions for the community and represented the progress of local civil rights

activism. In addition, Berkley Square is significant for its association with attorney Berkley and architect Williams. The neighborhood of suburban one-story ranch houses also retains much of its architectural integrity.(Figure 3)

The City of Las Vegas Historic Preservation Commission will review the report and cooperate with the Neighborhood Services Department on an educational brochure for the residents of the area that describes the historic importance of Berkley Square and provides information on the local and National Registers. Should the Berkley Square neighborhood representatives be interested in pursuing designation, they can initiate the neighborhood plan process offered through the City's Neighborhood Services Department, a component of which can be a request to complete the listing process. The community has expressed much interest in its past, and the Historic Preservation Commission is excited about the prospect of designating this historically rich African American neighborhood.

Courtney Mooney is the Historic Preservation Officer and Urban Design Coordinator for the City of Las Vegas.

Notes

1. "New Westside Homes Project Gets Under Way," and "Famed Architect Designs Homes for Westside Park," *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (December 14, 1949).
2. See Painter Preservation and Planning, "Berkley Square Historic Resource Survey and Inventory" (August 2005), on file at the City of Las Vegas Planning and Development Department and Nevada State Historic Preservation Office.
3. "New Subdivision Work Underway," *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (April 26, 1954).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship

Volume 3 Number 1 Winter 2006



CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship
Winter 2006
ISSN 1068-4999

CRM = cultural resource management

CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship is published twice each year by the National Park Service to address the history and development of and trends and emerging issues in cultural resource management in the United States and abroad. Its purpose is to broaden the intellectual foundation of the management of cultural resources.

The online version of *CRM Journal* is available at www.cr.nps.gov/CRMJournal. Back issues of *CRM* magazine (1978–2002) are available online at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/crm>.

Guidance for authors is available online at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/CRMJournal>.

Manuscripts, letters to the editor, and all questions and recommendations of an editorial nature should be addressed to Martin Perschler, Editor, email martin_perschler@nps.gov, telephone (202) 354-2165, or fax (202) 371-2422. Incoming mail to the Federal Government is irradiated, which damages computer disks, CDs, and paper products. These materials should be sent by a commercial delivery service to Editor, *CRM Journal*, National Park Service, 1201 Eye Street, NW (2286), Washington, DC 20005.

Views and conclusions in *CRM Journal* are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing the opinions or policies of the U.S. Government. Acceptance of material for publication does not necessarily reflect an opinion or endorsement on the part of the *CRM Journal* staff or the National Park Service.

CRM Journal is produced under a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers.

To subscribe to *CRM Journal*—

Online <http://www.cr.nps.gov/CRMJournal>
email NPS_CRMJournal@nps.gov
Facsimile (202) 371-2422

U.S. Mail—
CRM Journal
National Park Service
1849 C Street, NW (2286)
Washington, DC 20240-0001