

**Biography of Shirley Carter Williams, 1866-1935**  
**Buried in the historic African American Cemetery, Evergreen, in Richmond Virginia**

By Lee Ann Timreck<sup>1</sup>

In August 1935, a small obituary in the Richmond Planet entitled “Old Resident of Richmond Dies” noted the passing of Shirley Carter Williams at the home of his son, Dr. Stanley Williams. Shirley Williams certainly qualified as an “old resident,” having lived most of his life in and around the Jackson Ward area. Born around 1866,<sup>2</sup> Shirley Williams was raised by a single mother in post-Civil War Richmond; married Louisa Jones in 1891, worked and raised a family against the backdrop of Jim Crow; and in 1917, saw his sons enlist to fight for a country still divided into black and white. Upon his death in 1935, he must have been proud of his family legacy of three sons, all married and pursuing professional careers, raising the next generation of Carters. However, it was a life dedicated to Freemasonry – memorialized on his headstone with the words “1st Worshipful Master of the L’overture Lodge -156” – that seems his greatest achievement.



The earliest record of Shirley Williams is in the 1880 Richmond city census, where he is listed as the fourteen year old son of Susan Williams (1845-?) and living at 23 West Jackson Street. Susan Williams, widowed and unable to read or write, raised two boys – Shirley and his brother, Lamar – by working as a washerwoman. Based on the 1880 census, Shirley Williams was born about 1866, and his brother Lamar was born around 1869. All that is known of their

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<sup>1</sup> Questions, comments, clarifications, and other information about Shirley Carter Williams and his family are welcome. The author can be reached at leetimreck@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup> Shirley Williams was possibly born sometime between 1864 and 1866; no birth certificate is available to confirm.

father is that his name was Abner Williams, but no other details are available about the cause or date of his death.<sup>3</sup> Since he is not listed on the 1880 census, it is likely he passed away sometime between 1869 and 1880.

Sometime after 1880 the Williams family moved to 710 St. James Street in the Jackson Ward area of Richmond. The Williams family, with Susan Williams as head of household, is listed in the Richmond City Directory as living at this address until 1883. In the 1884 Richmond City Directory, Shirley Williams is listed as living at 709 St. James Street and working as a porter, and there is no entry for Susan Williams. Unless his mother passed away in 1884, it is likely that his mother and brother continued to live there as well. Perhaps given Shirley's male adult status, he was listed as head of household rather than Susan Williams.

For the next five years, Shirley Williams worked as a porter.<sup>4</sup> But what, exactly, was the job of a porter in nineteenth century Richmond? For African Americans, it was either someone who carried baggage and packages for hotel patrons, or a parlor or sleeping car attendant for railroad passengers. Richmond was an opportune place for both types of positions. The 1880's was the beginning of tremendous economic prosperity in Jackson Ward, which by the turn of the century would be known as the "Black Entrepreneurial Capitol." The area bustled with businesses, banks, theatres, meeting halls, and restaurants, as well as four hotels (Buck Miller's, Murphy's, Apollo and Slaughters). Additionally, the western expansion of the railroads, the popularity of luxurious sleeping cars, and Richmond's position as a transportation hub all led to increased demand for railroad porters.

While there is no evidence as to what kind of porter Shirley Williams was, I contend that he worked as a railroad porter, and possibly a Pullman porter, for the Richmond and Alleghany Railroad. Pullman porters were highly-sought after positions, despite the hard work required to haul luggage, clean the sleeping berths, and serve meals to the wealthy traveling public. As a Pullman porter, Shirley would have gained experience serving the cream of American society, making him a well-qualified candidate to serve customers in fine Richmond restaurants or take care of the personal needs of Richmond's elite. Given that Shirley Williams worked as a waiter from 1889 until 1892, and then worked as a private butler until 1902, he undoubtedly had desirable service skills. Additionally, Shirley's ability to purchase two houses, in 1892 and then in 1898, suggests he was able to accrue some degree of wealth.<sup>5</sup> Although black Pullman

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<sup>3</sup> On Shirley Williams' marriage certificate, Abner Williams is cited as his father. No other documentation was located on Abner Williams.

<sup>4</sup> Occupation data from Richmond City Directories 1884-1889.

<sup>5</sup> A deed of record was found only for Shirley Williams' purchase of the property at 1422 West Leigh Street in 1898; although no deed was located for Shirley Williams' purchase of the property at 1338 Boyd Street in 1892, he is listed in the 1892 Richmond City Directory as the owner and residing at this address.

porters were paid low wages, it was a consistent paycheck, perhaps allowing him to save enough money to secure a mortgage.

Shirley Williams' wife, the former Louisa Jones, was possibly born in Pittsylvania, Virginia; the 1870 census lists a Samuel Jones and an eight year old daughter, Louisa Jones. In 1891, Shirley Williams married Louisa Jones in Manchester, Virginia, and their wedding certificate lists Louisa's parents as Samuel and Hannah Jones, and Shirley's parents as Abner and Susan Williams. There is no information on how Louisa came to be in Richmond, or how she and Shirley met; but on 3 June 1891 the two were married, and by 1892 their first child, Ellen Williams was born. The same year that Ellen was born, the Williams purchased a house at 1338 Boyd Street, which would be the Williams home for the next eighteen years. During this time, Shirley enjoyed steady work as a private butler, and Louisa managed a growing family. A son, Shirley Carter Williams Jr, was born on 1 January 1895, a second son, Stanley Page Williams was born on 22 June 1897, and a third son, Russell Antonio Williams, was born in 1905. Sadly, Ellen Williams passed away at a young age; the exact date is unknown, but she is listed as deceased on the 1900 census, suggesting she did not survive beyond her eighth birthday.

The early nineteen hundreds must have been a wonderful period in the lives of Shirley and Louisa Williams, as they raised their three sons in the rich, cultural environment of Jackson Ward. Family life possibly included attendance at St. Philips Episcopal Church; and sometime during this period, Shirley Williams became a member of the Prince Hall freemasons. But in 1917, the shadow of World War I fell over the Williams' family, and Shirley watched his two sons, Shirley Jr. and Stanley, march off to war; fortunately, both would return safely. Shirley Jr. graduated from Howard University with a law degree, ultimately working in New York city for the American National Bank. He married Wilhelmina Curtis, and in 1926 the local paper announced that "Attorney and Mrs. Shirley C. Williams Jr, of 203 Edgecombe Avenue (New York) were the proud parents of an 8 pound baby boy named Shirley C[arter] Williams the third." Stanley completed a doctorate in pharmacy, married Annie Matley, and worked his entire life as a pharmacist in Richmond.

Per the 1920 census, Shirley, Louisa, and their youngest son Russell, as well as four additional lodgers, all lived at 1422 West Leigh Avenue. Shirley lists his occupation as a paper hanger working from home, which may reflect work he was doing related to the necessary maintenance and repairs to the house. Now fifty six years of age, perhaps Shirley was beginning to slow down, with all three sons grown and starting their own careers. When Shirley Williams Jr. moved to New York City to pursue his law career, the entire family moved to New York as well, suggesting the importance of family to Shirley and Louisa.<sup>6</sup> How and when Shirley Williams disposed of his Richmond properties is unknown.

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<sup>6</sup> Shirley Carter Williams Jr. is listed in the 1928 Richmond City Directory as working for the American National Bank of New York.

Shirley Williams' obituary suggests he moved to New York around 1925, but the first evidence of the Williams' family residence in New York City is in the 1930 census. Louisa, her son Shirley Williams Jr., his wife and two children, Stanley and Russell Williams, as well as seven lodgers, are all listed as residing at 203 Edgecombe Avenue in the Harlem section of New York City. Interestingly, Louisa is listed as both owner and head of household, and Shirley Williams himself is not listed at all. Where was he? If Shirley still owned property and was paying property taxes in Richmond, perhaps he was still considered to be a Richmond resident; conversely, given that he died at a fairly young age, perhaps he was in poor health and living in some kind of medical facility. Whatever his health, Shirley was able to travel to Richmond in 1935 to visit his son Stanley; sadly, during this visit he experienced a cerebral hemorrhage and passed away on August 27, 1935.<sup>7</sup>

Shirley Williams was a long, faithful member of the Freemason L'Overture Lodge #156, A.F. & A.M. (Ancient Free and Accepted Masons). He was likely one of the founding members, as his headstone states that he was the lodge's first Worshipful Master – the highest position and honor within the individual Lodge's organization. The stated purpose of Freemasonry is “to make better men out of good men, better fathers, better husbands, better brothers and better sons...[emphasizing] the individual man by strengthening his character, improving his moral and spiritual outlook and broadening his mental horizons.” This speaks volumes about Shirley Carter Williams; not only does this reflect his commitment to personal growth and family values, but to be selected as Worshipful Master suggests he also demonstrated leadership to his fellow Freemasons and to his community.<sup>8</sup>

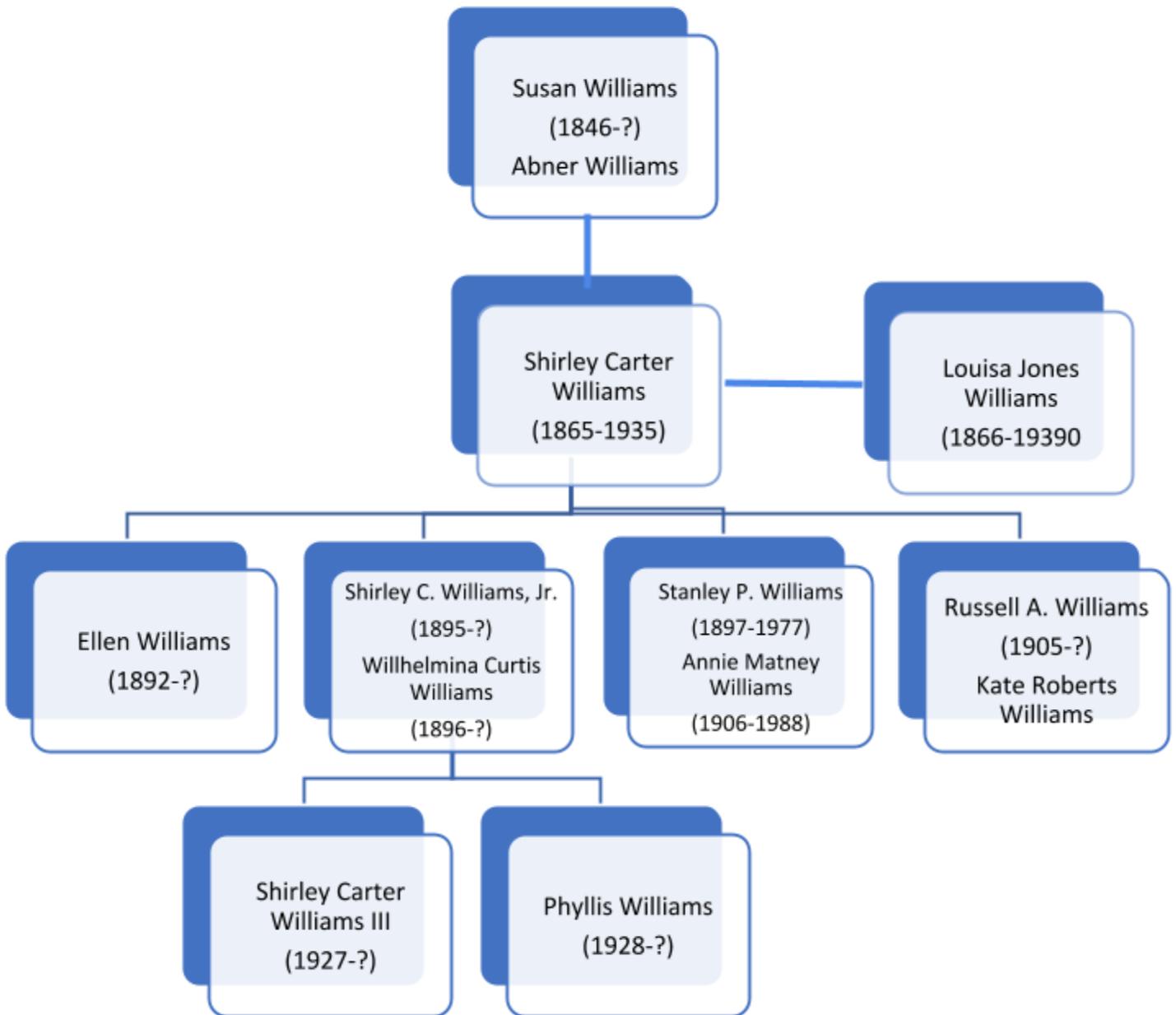
When Reverend Junius Taylor of St. Philips Episcopal Church conducted the funeral services for Shirley Williams on August 30, 1935, I'd like to think that the church was filled with his family, neighbors, friends and Freemason brothers, all gathered to honor the life of Shirley Carter Williams. The stories they could tell – Shirley's humble beginnings, his battles against racial discrimination to work and raise a family, his contributions throughout the community. Laid to rest in Evergreen Cemetery, and almost lost to the ravages of time, I hope his legacy lives on in the hearts and minds of later generations of the Williams family.

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<sup>7</sup>Stanley Williams is listed in the 1931 Richmond City Directory as living at 1206 West Leigh Street; however, Stanley Williams signed Shirley Williams' death certificate in August 1935, stating his address as 1401 West Leigh Street.

<sup>8</sup> The L'Overture Lodge, subordinate to the Virginia Prince Hall Freemason Organization, ceased operations in the late 1990s; I have been unsuccessful in finding any additional details on Williams' involvement with the Freemasons.

## Shirley Carter Williams Family Tree



**For Further Research:**

An obituary in the Richmond Times-Dispatch (VA), dated 17 August 1988, announced the passing of Mrs. Annie Matney Williams, a retired Richmond school teacher. Mrs. Williams was the wife of Stanley Williams, as well as the daughter-in-law of Shirley Williams. The article mentions a niece, Dr. Laverne Spurlock, also of Richmond; although recently retired, Dr. Spurlock is still living in the city of Richmond. To date, I have been unable to find contact information for Dr. Spurlock, but I am sure she would want to learn about this piece of her family history.

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