

## Black History Month Series

*For the month of February, we will be sharing insight into the historic buildings of South LA where CRCD has invested in preserving their cultural heritage and nurturing the future.*

# Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Building

Designed by renowned African American architect Paul R. Williams, the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Building has been one of the most well-known landmarks in South LA since 1949. However, the building was more than just a structural landmark and in 1978 company history described the home office as “a symbol of black enterprise and of loyal service to many thousands.” It represented hope, pride, and a sense of belonging for African Americans in Los Angeles and across the country.

As the largest black-owned business west of the Mississippi River, Golden State Mutual Insurance was founded in 1925 by William Nickerson, Jr., Norman Oliver Houston, and George Allen Beavers. It was one of the first businesses of its kind to provide life insurance to African Americans, who were typically denied this service. In California specifically, many African Americans were not allowed to purchase homes based on racially restrictive covenants that were written into the deeds of homes stating non-whites could not live on or own the property.

This pushed the African American community into what is now known as Historic South LA. The company was able to expand rapidly by offering industrial policies and whole life insurance policies to California’s highly underserved African American community of approximately 40,000.





VINTAGE IMAGE OF  
THE GOLDEN MUTUAL  
LIFE INSURANCE BLDG

In the 1940s Golden Mutual Life Insurance expanded and moved its headquarters from Central Avenue to the newly bustling West Adams District, which at the time was home to many African American luminaries. To add to the boldness of the building's Late Moderne design, Williams commissioned visionary artists Hale Woodruff and Charles Alston to create large scale Social Realist style murals to be displayed at the entrance in the building's lobby. The murals titled "The Negro History in California" create a panoramic illustration of African American history in California from 1527 through 1949. During the week of celebrations leading up to the dedication more than 10,000 people of the community would tour the building including church groups and social clubs.



**THE NEGRO IN  
CALIFORNIA HISTORY—  
EXPLORATION AND  
COLONIZATION  
ARTIST:  
CHARLES ALSTON**



In 2009, the company was closed unfortunately due to poor management and many of its policyholders moving over to other companies. The building was purchased by Community Impact Development which formed a partnership to provide a new home for the South Central Los Angeles Regional Center (SCLARC), an agency that provides services to people with developmental disabilities.



**THE NEGRO IN  
CALIFORNIA HISTORY—  
SETTLEMENT AND  
DEVELOPMENT  
ARTIST: HALE WOODRUFF**

By 2011, due to lack of maintenance, the building had become decrepit. The new owners partnered with the Los Angeles Conservancy, West Adams Heritage Association, and other community advocates to rehabilitate the building's facade and interior so that it could remain a staple in the community. It was designed by an African-American architect for an African-American business that catered to the African-American community, and had artists telling the African-American story," Adrian Scott Fine, director of advocacy at the Los Angeles Conservancy summed up the impact of both the business and the building.

The legendary building is still at 1999 W. Adams Boulevard and was designated a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument in 2011.





## **Ralph J. Bunche House**

Ralph J. Bunche, the first African American to receive the Nobel peace prize, the first African American to gain a Ph.D. in political science from an American university and the first Black member to be inducted into the American Philosophical Society, was a resident of South Los Angeles. Ralph Bunche began his journey to excellence in Detroit but moved to Los Angeles to be raised by his grandmother at a very young age. He grew up with his sister, uncle, and two aunts in a Victorian-style bungalow.

Known to be a scholar from the time he was in high school, Ralph had his eyes set on continuing his education and attending UCLA. He graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in 1927 as the valedictorian of his class. Along with a scholarship and the financial support of his African American neighborhood in South LA, Ralph was able to study and receive his doctorate in political science at Harvard University.



Education continued to be forefront in Bunche's life. He was Chair of the Department of Political Science at Howard University, taught at Harvard University, served as a member of the New York City Board of Education, and was as a member of the Board of Overseers of Harvard.

Most notably, in 1947 Bunche was appointed as assistant to the UN Special Committee on trying to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict in Palestine. He was then named acting UN mediator after the assassination of Sweden's Count Folke Bernadotte, who had originally been appointed by the UN to mediate the conflict. After eleven months of negotiating, Bunche obtained signatures on armistice agreements between Israel and the Arab States. This led him to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950.





In 1996, the Dunbar Economic Development Corporation acquired the home with plans to restore it from dilapidation due to vacancy and vandalism. After securing funding from various sources, including a \$100,000 interest-free loan from California Community Foundation, the home was restored and in 1999 the home was converted into the **Ralph J. Bunche Peace and Heritage Center**. Decorated with photographs and memorabilia from and about Bunche's life, the Ralph J. Bunche Peace & Heritage Center, was essentially a museum and community center used to promote peaceful interaction among all groups within South Central Los Angeles.

The home was leased by Coalition for Responsible Community Development as a community meeting place and the site of a youth leadership academy. The home earned a Conservancy Preservation Award in 2006 and is currently a residential property.