Martin, Senior
Jacksonville Beach was not founded for agriculture, industry, or mining. It was not founded as part of a transportation network. Instead, it was a place to find pleasure, be it for those wealthy enough to have a summer cottage or for tourists, mostly from nearby. The ocean was the biggest draw, of course, but the amusement or entertainment strip fueled the town’s economy, for people came to eat, drink, and be merry. One of the men who developed the amusement district was Martin G. Williams, Sr. When the boardwalk faded in importance, his son, Martin G. Williams, Jr., helped the city redevelop itself. This essay is about these two men.

Martin Sr. did not start the amusement businesses but he played a very important role in developing it along the six city blocks from Pablo Avenue north to 5th Avenue North. This oceanfront strip contained businesses characteristic of
carnivals or state fairs. Local people, including Martin Sr., owned them. Part of the entertainment complex (including bars and restaurants) were on 1st Street North paralleling the boardwalk. Martin Sr. owned businesses there as well.

The Williams family of Macclenny in Baker County, Florida was large and important to Macclenny. Frank G. Williams, the patriarch, was a medical doctor in the tiny town. Eulalia Macclenny married him in September 18, 1884. Macclenny was first called Darbyville, but Carr Bowers McClenny, a prominent timber salesman, married into the Darby family, bought most of the land in town. Citizens renamed it Macclenny and it was incorporated on April 11, 1887. Because the Postal Service refused to allow capital letters in the middle of a post office name, the name of the post office was changed Macclenny. The Williams parented seven children: Frank G. Williams, Junior (born 1885); Martin G. Williams (born August 22, 1887); Lucille B. (born 1889); Annie M. (born 1891), Charles G. (born 1894), Eulia B. (born 1896), and Arthur Darby Williams (born 1898). Dr. Frank, Sr. died in 1899 and the family moved to Jacksonville that same year.

We know bits and pieces of Martin G. Williams’ life before he moved to Jacksonville Beach and started developing its oceanfront entertainment industry. The family moved east to Jacksonville in 1899, and twelve year old Martin went to work to help support the large family. He was an office boy and then a clerk at H & W. B. Drew Company during the day and worked for American Telephone Company during the night. He worked hard. In 1905, he lived with his older brother, Frank Jr., at 447 Winter Street near Lackawanna Park.

He married Margaret Wilemena Schulenberg in St. Johns County on August 7, 1913. She was born September 12, 1888 in Brockton, New York. By 1916, according to the Jacksonville City Directory, they lived at 419 West Ashley Street, and he owned the Martin G. Williams Tailoring Company at 220 West Forsyth Street. He worked as a tailor for the U.S. Army in 1917-18 at Camp Johnston, learning much about clothing, uniforms, and fitting. He also made contacts with Schaefer Tailoring Company of Cincinnati, Ohio. Cincinnati was the premier men’s clothing center at the time. After his discharge, he bought supplies from Schaefer for his shop in Jacksonville. His company “became one of the largest single-owned shops for tailored suits in the South.”1

According the Jacksonville city directories, both his business and his home changed location in the 1920s. We can track his movements in the online Jacksonville city directories held by the Jacksonville City Library. The directories show several addresses on West Forsyth but, in 1926, the store was located at 325 Laura Street across from Hemming Park. The store was always downtown but
their home was not. As noted they lived at 419 West Ashley Street in 1916 but had moved to 129 Schofield Street (near Hubbard and Liberty) by 1920. Four years later in 1924, the lived at 25 Cottage Avenue in Springfield. By January, 1926, they had moved; Martin G. Williams still lived in Jacksonville but at 3331 Old Orange Park Road near Blanding Boulevard and the Cedar River. Although he had business interests and property at the beach, he had not moved there.²

Williams succeeded as a businessman not only because he was a good tailor who used first class materials but also because he was a good salesman. He instituted a “Suit Club”, an arrangement whereby men would get suits at a discount if they joined the club and bought suits on a regular basis. Good salesmen read people very well, understanding their needs and wants. His affability stood him in good stead.

With two other Jacksonville businessmen, Charles H. Shad and Charles W. Hawkins, he began investing in Pablo Beach in 1919, the year World War I officially ended. The economic boom of the 1920s was about to start.

Shad, a jeweler, was older than Williams, having been born in 1874. Family tragedy marked his life. He married his wife, Clyde Kressel, on November 27, 1900. In 1905, he and his brother Ernest owned Shad Brothers and lived within blocks of each other on West Monroe Street. Charles and Clyde’s first child died in Pablo Beach on June 1, 1907, a few days short of his second birthday. The couple had two more children, Charles, Junior (born 1905) and Mary (born 1908). The 1910 U.S. Census identified Charles, Senior as a widower living at 311 West Bay Street with his two children, his brother-in-law Frank Kressel, a forty-seven year old housekeeper, Katherine Tyler, and a sixteen year old nurse. Mary Castillo. Williams and Shad began to work together in 1917, acquiring patent rights to a sprinkler from Hugh Partridge; they renewed the rights in 1919. As store owners, they had a keen interest in fire suppression.³

Hawkins made the Duval Hotel his home; he owned the Dye Works, a dry cleaning and pressing store at 231 W. Adams Street. Born in 1872, he was the oldest of the three partners. He and Williams often partnered in businesses. He later married and had children.⁴

The partners enjoyed Pablo Beach so much that they invested capital there. Its smallness meant a little money could go a long way. In 1920, Pablo Beach contained only 357 people, 442 people if you included those living outside the city limits.

Its population exploded during the tourist season which ran from late April until just after Labor Day in September. Weekends were the busiest. Tourists took
the train from Jacksonville or, if they were wealthy enough, drove on the one lane brick Atlantic Boulevard to the shores and then south to Pablo. The little town had bath houses for those who wanted to rent swim suits or a place to change into ones they brought. Towels were available as well as showers to rid the body of sand before wearing street clothes again. Restaurants of various types served food and drink. Bars were plentiful. Little Coney Island was the main amusement center; it covered the city block formed by Pablo and Railroad Avenues, north to south, and First to Second Street, east to west. One could get off the train about where Third Street North is now and walk (or take a carriage) east on Pablo Avenue to bars, restaurants, bath houses, Little Coney Island, and the Ocean View Hotel. North of Pablo on the oceanfront were the Perkins Hotel and bathhouse, dance halls, and places to sleep.

Pre-1926. Little Coney Island is on the left. The Ocean View bath house is on the right. Courtesy of the Beaches Museum
Little Coney Island contained a skating rink, a dance floor, a bowling alley, a pool hall, concession booths, and a drug store. Railroad Avenue is Beach Boulevard today. The building was between Railroad and Pablo Avenues and South 12th and 2nd Streets.

Shad, Hawkins, and Williams thought that the tourist business could be increased if the amusement strip stretched along the ocean front instead of being centered on Pablo Avenue between the railroad terminal and the ocean. After all, people came to enjoy the ocean. That Shad owned some oceanfront property influenced his views but owning that property demonstrated foresight. All three men realized that the tourist business was about to expand. One sign was the opening of the St. Johns River Bridge in 1921. People needed to be amused and fed once they arrived. They decided to build a pier, a large, highly visible structure. “Shad’s Pier,” as it became known, enabled people to walk over the sea without getting wet, dance in the pier pavilion called “La Brisa,” or fish in the ocean. When he and his partners constructed the pier and bathhouse, the city electric plant was too small to
provide them with adequate electricity. Shad installed a generator to power the pier’s electric lights. It could be seen for miles.\textsuperscript{5}

Building “Shad’s Pier” had a hitch on two. Shad, Hawkins, and Williams had to convince the Pablo Beach city council to allow them to build a pier constructed from palmetto pilings and timber and not steel as the council wanted. They were convinced that local materials would suffice. The project drew national attention for Boston’ Stone & Webster Journal announced in January, 1922 that “A large pier is being built at the beach, to be completed by May 1. It will extend over the water 450 feet and be 25 feet wide. There will be amusement booths and a special place for fishing.”\textsuperscript{6}

Few people, if any, foresaw possible damage to the pier when it formally opened at 5 PM on June 8, 1922, a milestone date in Jacksonville Beach history. Shad’s daughter Mary christened it with sea water. Jacksonville City Councilman St. Elmo “Chick” Acosta, H. R. Hebb, Charles Hawkins, and Martin G. Williams spoke. The pier and the stores ashore were lighted with electricity. On the 9\textsuperscript{th}, Hawkins asked the town council for the exact hours the garbage from the concessions would be collected. He promised that the pier would use closed containers. He also asked the city to provide lights under the pier until the pier company could do it.\textsuperscript{7}
Shad’s Pier, early 1920s. Railroad tracks in the foreground.  Courtesy of the Beaches Museum

Shad had let a contract to build a swimming pool and concrete bath houses on his property on Stevens [3rd] Avenue and the oceanfront. It never happened because he died on October 16, 1922, a week short of his forty-eighth birthday. Within a few years, Williams and Hawkins sold their stake in the pier, apparently before it ran into trouble.

Williams and Hawkins owned the new bath house at the foot of the pier for a few years. It was a much needed business for people who went into the surf. They sold it in May, 1925 to W. F. Craig., who planned to renovate it after the 1925 season.

Williams ran his tailor shop in downtown Jacksonville while he was devoting more and more time to Pablo Beach. He created Martin G. Williams Enterprises in 1922 to buy or build properties in the amusement area and manage them. The beach season was only five months long, late April to early September, and he didn’t have to be there every day. As he expanded his business at the beach, he had to make a decision about where he would put his energy.

Around 1922, Williams bought the building between 2nd and 3rd Avenues on the north side of the block. Frank Griffen owned the south half with a small building for a small restaurant and other amusements; it became Griffen
Amusement Park about 1935. Williams turned his building into a large successful bathhouse and operated it every summer while still operating his Jacksonville tailoring shop. He speculated with several lots on the boardwalk and on First Street North, buying and selling one or two each year.\textsuperscript{10}

Williams and Hawkins bought several lots in Block 171 on the oceanfront through Trimble & Rydholm as an investment. The Block was in north Jacksonville Beach where 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} Avenues are.\textsuperscript{11}

Williams was not the only one promoting the amusement area along the shore. The president of the United Amusement Company, on April 16, 1922, proposed two or more riding devices; tented attractions of an amusement nature; free seats for the public; and free admissions to Oceanside Park at Pablo Beach. Further, he offered to fill the plot used to the level of First Street; to maintain at all times an orderly and credible amusement park, and to cooperate with the town government.\textsuperscript{12}

“Jimmy” Trotter’s dance pavilion on the boardwalk began in 1915. He employed union musicians who played the latest music. By April 4, 1925, Trotter was holding dances on the pier.\textsuperscript{13} Williams would convert the former dance pavilion into an arcade. Theodore O. Birks completed an addition to his restaurant and lunch stand on the boardwalk between Willard \textsuperscript{2}\textsuperscript{nd} Avenue North] and Dickerson \textsuperscript{1}\textsuperscript{st} Avenue North\textsuperscript{1} in 1924. He acquired the Perkins lunch stands and the stands of W. Streeter at the Fox property. He then owned half the block.\textsuperscript{14} The front page of the \textit{Pablo Beach News} of April 28, 1923 had a big spread welcoming people to the 1923 summer season and advertising the events of April 29\textsuperscript{th}. The newspaper thought hundreds of thousands will come during the season.
By 1925, the oceanfront boardwalk with its amusements rides, attractions, and food and drink places drew more business than Little Coney Island. The Pablo Beach Development Company sold Little Coney Island property to a New York investor group represented by J. D. Penman, a local realtor. The next year, it was demolished.\footnote{\textsuperscript{15}}

Businesses boomed in the Twenties as did investor confidence and tax revenue. Entrepreneurs believed that Jacksonville Beach would grow rapidly. In 1925, real estate broker J. D. Penman predicted 100,000 people would be living in Jacksonville Beach within 10 years but remarked that the city needed to repair and paint homes, businesses, and other buildings because, at present, the town was too “shacky” looking. Newspaper editor Koehler rejoiced in 1926 that modern and permanent buildings were built instead of the “this will do” buildings which characterized the community.\footnote{\textsuperscript{16}}
The $150,000 modern, fireproof Casa Marina Hotel opened June 6, 1925. It had sixty guest rooms as well as public rooms. The local newspaper praised the construction of more permanent buildings such as the Fuqua Building, the Casa Marina, a $50,000 school, a post office building as well as the $50,000 rebuilding of the pier. When a fire destroyed the Ocean View Hotel in July, 1926, its land became an oceanfront amusement park from Pablo Avenue to Dickerson Avenue [First Avenue North].

Jumping a little ahead of the story’s chronology, this Ocean View amusement park became the Coaster Block when a giant wooden roller coaster was built in 1928 on the south end. It was 93-feet high and its trains reached speeds of 50 miles per hour along its 3,168 foot length. Its two trains carried twelve people; the riders sat two across and three deep. The total circuit was a minute and one-half. The coaster was huge, at 93 feet in height, and it dominated the skyline where it could be seen for miles.

The growth in business encouraged city officials to hold a successful bond issue in 1925 to improve the city’s infrastructure. The May 5th vote provided money for paving streets, building cement sidewalks, improving the sewage and water system, providing additional much needed fire protection in a town of wooden buildings, drainage, closing the Third Street ditch by piping and sealing it forever, and erecting municipal buildings. In a somewhat related matter, Trustee Tom Keller proposed that a lighted boardwalk be built from one end of the city to the other. He wanted people to be able to walk from Pablo Avenue north to the Casa Marina Hotel. The idea soon came to fruition.

The term boardwalk in Pablo/Jacksonville Beach history demands some explanation because its meaning has changed. Boardwalk is, of course, a walkway made of boards. These walkways were sidewalks when built along the sides of streets and served pedestrians by allowing them to avoid vehicular traffic, mud holes, etc. The issue of building boardwalks arose in the 1920s when people demanded more of them because they preferred not to walk on unpaved roads or in the sand as they frequented the amusements and eateries on the oceanfront from Pablo Avenue northward. In order to increase business in the amusement corridor on the oceanfront, the city had to make walking north and south along the shore or walking to that corridor as easy as possible. So building a walk way of boards in front of the businesses between Pablo Avenue and the Casa Marina Hotel became an issue. As people are wont to do, this became known as the boardwalk even after it was no longer wooden.
City commission advocated a fifty foot boardwalk. The bill proposed creating a boardwalk zone of 50 feet from the Casa Marina Hotel to Pablo Ave. This would add 35 feet to a uniform walkway.\textsuperscript{20}

In 1927, Williams announced his own renovations to his bath house at the foot of the pier. He added a women’s restroom and enlarged the men’s restroom. The facility was put in first class condition.\textsuperscript{21} Being near the pier, the most visible structure in Pablo Beach, generated profits for Williams during the tourist season.

In these last years of the 1920s, the amusement boardwalk was not uniform in appearance. Sometimes, business men would build a platform out onto the beach.
Williams’ personal life changed dramatically when his wife Margaret died in Jacksonville on July 26, 1926. They had been married for thirteen years, and she had supported his business efforts in Jacksonville and the beach. The 39-year-old man threw himself into his businesses even more, spending more time at the beach.

Williams married thirty-two year old divorcee Marguerite Haile in Jacksonville on May 21, 1928. Martin G. Williams, Jr. would be born the next year in Jacksonville. The three would move to the beach in 1929. They built one of the more substantial houses in Jacksonville Beach and lived in it until their deaths.22
Williams decided that he needed more influence in the direction of the city so he ran for mayor in 1929. He beat perennial mayor Joe Bussey by ten
votes in a three-man contest, winning a plurality. All three men were friendly and the election was clean

1929 Mayoralty Election Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Martin G. Williams</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. A. Bussey</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. A. Stoddard</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Jacksonville Beach News* (1929)

Williams would serve two terms as mayor, 1929-31 and 1931-33.

The stock market collapse in 1929 and the subsequent economic depression seemed not to hurt his mayoralty at all. People moved to Jacksonville Beach in larger numbers than ever before, rising from 409 people in 1930 to 1,049 in 1935 to 3,556 people in 1940. Land prices dropped. The Franklin Roosevelt government in Washington started its New Deal program and Jacksonville Beach benefited by the influx of federal money. People wanted to forget this troubles and tourism to the beach grew. He emerged as the undisputed leader of the boardwalk, the principal enterprise of Jacksonville Beach.

Williams understood that the boardwalk and the beach had to be merchandized through advertisements, sales, gimmicks, and free publicity. He was successful selling suits in his downtown Jacksonville store, and businessmen trusted him. He persuaded many to let their employees go to the beach on Thursday afternoons. Beach merchants, including those on the boardwalk, gave them discounts; he promoted these Thursdays via newspaper ads and flyers. He worked nights and weekends at his boardwalk businesses from May to September.

In cooperation with other boardwalk owners, he founded the Boardwalk Association in the late 1930s and the Beaches Chamber of Commerce in 1941. The Chamber was created because Williams saw a problem and fixed it. The city clerk, Carl U. Smith, dumped letters of inquiry about the beaches into a waste basket. Williams saw this one day and read some of the letters. People wanted information about living there or recreational activities and amusement facilities. So he organized the Chamber to promote the beach communities. He was Chamber president for six terms.

The Boardwalk Association issued scrip which was buried in the sand; finders redeemed it for rides, games, and food. Bathing beauty contests, started in the 1920s, became common after World War II as sexual mores changed. In 1946, the “season” was begun with an Opening Day Parade to draw crowds.
and to get newspaper coverage. Whenever possible, officials and groups from other towns, particular in Georgia, would be invited to participate. He got the Florida State Firemen's Sixth Annual convention to come to Jacksonville Beach by going to the 1930 convention and handing out photos of bathing beauties; it worked.\textsuperscript{23} Efforts to attract people to Jacksonville Beach and its boardwalk not only occurred before and during the summer season but also at the end as merchants sought to earn a bit more before the long eight-month idle period. The Florida Times-Union on September 9, 1935 published photographs of end of the season festivities such as the one below of the crowd attending a baby parade contest.

On October 30, 1933, fire consumed the wooden walkway and most of the buildings that lined it. Fortunately, many of the businesses were closed, it being off season. Nevertheless, it was a stunning financial blow to the owners.
Looking northeast from west side of First Street North. Pier in background.

Looking south toward the roller coaster
Williams lost his bath houses and most of his capital. He was left with only $13 and a mortgage. Undaunted, he turned this catastrophe into an opportunity. He borrowed money from several people and a Jacksonville bank, using his reputation as collateral. He purchased another lot at the Southeast corner of 2nd Avenue North and the boardwalk all the way to 1st Street North. He erected a $25,000 building and furnished it with $15,000 worth of equipment. The building included his restaurant, Martin’s Grill, a bowling alley, soda fountain, and luncheonette. Within a few years, he closed Martin’s Grill, regretting that he had ever entered restaurant business. He converted the building into a dance hall which he leased to Jimmy Trotter and the adjoining parts to amusement parlors. In the photo below, one can see the Martin G. Williams Building. In time, the building house Playland Arcade owned by Gus Leisegang. As his son described this property:

The west part of this lot became the stores, a restaurant, etc. facing 1st St. and, for several years, contained a small 8 lane non-standard bowling alley from 1935 to 1938. This was the beginning idea for the bowling alley building that was built in 1939. It was built on the rear or west half of the old bathhouse site. The front portion was a building facing the Boardwalk containing a restaurant, gift shop, Art’s Mouse Game, etc. The bowling alley contained 18 regulation
alleys, 9 up and 9 down with a small soda fountain area. It was very successful until about 1955 when it closed and the alleys were sold. It became a small skating rink upstairs and an indoor carpet golf game downstairs. 24

Fortunately, Roosevelt’s New Deal replaced the wooden walkway (boardwalk) with a broad concrete surface and built concrete bulkheads. It would also spend other monies to improve the infrastructure of Jacksonville Beach. People came for jobs, stayed, and, thus, created more jobs and business.

Williams also owned an ice and coal company, a valuable businesses since the restaurants, hamburger and hot dogs stands, and bars consumed enormous
amounts of ice. In the US Census of 1940, he is identified as an operator of a bowling alley. His Bowling Center of Jacksonville Beach, Inc. was incorporated on November 2, 1936 and dissolved on April 25, 1958. By 1945, Martin G. Williams Enterprises employed 100 people who worked in his bowling alleys, penny arcade, billiard parlor, snow ball stand, popcorn concession, shooting galleries, Pokerino arcade, ice, oil, and coal Company, soda fountain, Ladies Dip, frosted malted, and bingo parlor. Later, he had a miniature golf course on First Street North.

Williams was not parochial in promoting the beaches; he attended national meetings as well. He and Art Alexander are pictured in “It’s Operator’s Music Fair with Music Machine Makers and Disk Firms at CMI Show,” *Billboard*, January 31, 1948. Senior and Art Alexander, who had several games on the boardwalk. In the November 25, 1950 issue of *Billboard Magazine*, he ran an advertisement for boardwalk locations:

Arcade, Skee Ball, Skill Games or any other legitimate Amusement Devices for 1951 summer season. No gambling, no grift, and no games of chance.

Just below this ad was one for the Griffen Amusement Park. Frank A. Griffen said he was expanding and had 200x200 feet of space on a 30-foot wide concrete boardwalk. He wanted to lease to a skating rink (portable or permanent), fun house, archery, miniature golf, concession trailers, or rides that did not conflict with his. He had no interest in kiddie rides.

Martin Sr. stayed active in Jacksonville Beach affairs as a Chamber member and as a city councilman in 1950 and 1951. He and other prominent businessmen created the Greater Beaches Stadium Corporation in 1949 and built a stadium just off newly-opened Beach Boulevard about 14 blocks from the ocean. As a councilman in 1951, he supported the city buying the stadium in order to attract the *Jacksonville Beach Sea Birds* baseball team. Williams believed that a professional baseball team would bring more business to his city. He was friends with his fellow movers and shakers of the beach cities such as Arthur G. Penman, a noted real estate developer, Chamber member, and avid fisherman. As a former mayor, city councilman and a key businessman, his views carried weight.
Mayors 1929-1949  
L to R: Martin G. Williams, Harold A. Prather, I. D. Sams, W. D. Montgomery  
Courtesy of the Beaches Museum
He was unable to convince fellow businessmen, particularly in Jacksonville Beach, to upgrade their motels, restaurants, and amusement parks. The Boardwalk was declining after 1950. My “Carnival on the Boardwalk” discusses the ups and downs of the boardwalk. Most of the Coaster Block at the south end of the Boardwalk went up in flames on March 9, 1961. The pier which he helped build in 1922 was destroyed by fire on October 13, 1962. It was the heart of the Boardwalk; the new pier which opened in 1960 was in a more residential area. City officials wanted to redevelop downtown Jacksonville Beach and remove the carnival-like businesses and would do so over time.

Before Williams Senior died in 1977, he said he was sad that Jacksonville Beach had not modernized its tourist facilities. In the Seventies, he lamented the decline of the boardwalk, high taxes and insurance, and the lack of interest by beach merchants in anything but grumbling about how slow business was. In an, people who just “grumble”. The US Navy had taken up most of the better accommodations and the rest had not been upgraded. The erection of a
Holiday Inn in 1969 made a difference, for Jacksonville Beach began getting modern, nationally-known chain motels and restaurants.26

His namesake, Martin G. Williams, Junior (henceforth referred to as Williams, Jr.) had fond memories of growing up on the Boardwalk, working there in the summers along with childhood friends such as John “Wimpy” Sutton, also a “Boardwalk brat.” Williams, Jr. wrote me that “what is vivid in my mind as a kid (1930-40) were the images of men in shirts and ties, panama straw hats and ladies wearing dresses and gloves seated on the Boardwalk benches enjoying the cool ocean breezes in the evening and the strollers walking in similar dress.” He liked the bathing beauty contests, motorcycle races, Opening Day Parades, fireworks displays, and stunts such as Dynamite Jones who was shot from a cannon. In the immediate post World War II years, amphibian vehicles (ducks) became a popular ride because it took people out beyond the sight of land allowing passengers to see sea life.27 He belonged to the American Red Cross Volunteer Life Saving Corps as did Sutton and many other beach boys.

Martin G. Williams, Jr.

One memory, the sinking of the SS GulfAmerica, on April 10, 1942, stayed with him all his life. He shared his remembrance that he had written for an Englishman who was writing about ships being sunk off coasts.
An Account of the Submarine Attack
April 10th, 1942
By Martin G. Williams, Jr.
14 years old on this date

On April 10th, 1942, an astonishing event for a young 14-year old took place. Between approximately 9:00-10:00 p.m., while I was at my father’s Bingo Parlor on the Boardwalk on the oceanfront at Jacksonville Beach, Florida, I heard a strange thudding noise. I looked out in the ocean and noticed a red glow to the southeast, far out in the ocean. Shortly thereafter, another noise occurred and a bright yellow flame appeared to rise upward. Then people gathered on the boardwalk.

In front of the Bingo Parlor was located the Jacksonville Beach Pier. On the pier there was a dance going on, the Fireman’s Ball, which was held annually. People attending the dance ran to the railings and out on the fishing pier to get a better look.

After much shouting and confusion the word was passed that a German submarine had torpedoed a freighter off the coast. In the glow you could see the sub had surfaced and was shooting from its deck gun. It fired approximately 12 to 13 shells before it began to shoot tracer bullets from its machine gun. These tracers were aimed at the crew and lifeboats as the abandoned ship. With binoculars some could see the flaming ship and water and the poor crew struggling with the lifeboats.

Shortly, the city officials cut off all electric power in order quench all light sources. The sub had already used the light to its advantage by putting the ship in between it and the lighted coast which created a fine silhouette target. Of course, the damage was already done.

Within the hour you could see ships, assumed to be patrol craft or coast guard vessels from Mayport Naval Station, heading toward the disaster. They were blinking their code lights between the various vessels.

Military personnel were ordered back to their bases, especially naval personnel stationed at Mayport Naval Station 10 miles away at the mouth of the St. Johns River. Special buses and taxis were offering free rides to the base. The city was in the dark and there was general chaos with people trying to drive home in the dark.

The next morning more details were in the newspaper and there were many rumors. It was learned the Coast Guard or Navy vessels were able to rescue a few of the survivors, but many were dead and missing. Over the next few days a few of the bodies washed ashore and, along with some of my young friends, we began to see what happens when you are at war. After that night there was complete blackout at Jacksonville Beach and we knew the war had come to our coast. For the next three years there were many more sinkings. It was a night that I never forgot.

Martin G. Williams
P.O. Box 1855
West Jefferson, NC 28694

In 2009, he sketched a map of the Boardwalk for me based on his memory of it in decades past.
Williams Jr. was an only child on whom his mother doted. The family could afford to give him a private school education at The Bolles School in Jacksonville. After graduation in 1947, he attended Duke University, where he was in the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity. He graduated in 1952. Then he served in the Air Force from 1952 until 1956. He went to law school at the University of Florida in 1954 to learn real estate law because he wanted to be better grounded in the booming real estate business; he had no intention of becoming a lawyer.

While at the University of Florida, he met his future wife, Carol Miller, an undergraduate student from Virginia. She was five years younger than he. They married in 1953. They moved into a small apartment on 16th Avenue North in Jacksonville Beach. Their first child, Stephen, was born in 1956, followed by their daughter Diana Williams in 1958, and their second son Kenneth in 1961. Carol taught high school at Sandalwood, Episcopal, and Stanton for 18 years.

Working for his father in the amusement business as a youngster provided the opportunity to understand the workings of the Jacksonville Beach
boardwalk and a taste of the leasing of property. Although his father was 68 years old in 1955, he was still in charge of his businesses. Martin Sr. saw that the Boardwalk was declining and Martin Jr. must have heard his father lament the situation. Martin Jr. needed to establish his own identity. More and more people moved to the beaches each year not because they wanted to be part of the tourist industry but because they sought the relaxed atmosphere of the beach communities. Heads of families were willing to commute to Jacksonville. Others moved to the beaches because of the Navy base in nearby Mayport. Whether they were commuters, worked at the beaches, or connected to the Navy, they needed a place to live. The beaches were growing and Martin Jr., as a realtor, was able to help them. He became conscious of the need for economic development and an ambience which would attract families.

He enjoyed an outstanding career in real estate and development. In 1957, he was appointed to the Jacksonville Beach Planning and Zoning Board. His colleagues on the Board of Realtors named him President in 1959 and again in 1979. He incorporated himself as Martin G. Williams, Jr, Inc. on January 1, 1958 for business purposes and dissolved the corporation on August 25, 1995, two years after he retired. He was so well known that the local newspaper reported a family vacation in 1958. He and his wife, enjoyed a vacation in the Bahamas. He was associated with Florida Properties, Inc. In 1967 and 1970, the Beaches Board of Realtors named him Realtor of the Year. He co-founded the Beaches Multiple Listing Service and served as its president. He rose to the positon of District Vice President of the Florida Board of Realtors.

Martin Jr. expanded his interests. In 1960, he got involved in real estate development and investing. Long a member of the Chamber of Commerce, he was elected president for the 1963-64 term. Hurricane Dora struck the Jacksonville area on September 19, 1964, destroying forty-three homes and damaging many more. For a few years afterwards, oceanfront property lost value. Martin Jr. added real estate appraising to his expertise.

His life was more than just business. He valued his family and church. He and Carol bought an oceanfront home on Duval Drive in south Jacksonville Beach in 1969. The family of five were members of St. Paul’s by-The-Sea Episcopal Church. Martin Jr. was very active in leadership positions becoming Senior Warden. He helped plan the construction of a new sanctuary, one with a soaring roof that he had to persuade parishioners was a good idea. Ground breaking was on February 20, 1966; the first service was held on April 30, 1967.

Martin Jr. understood that the resort town his father helped build was becoming a place to reside instead of a place to play, that Jacksonville Beach
was in a state of transition, one that city leaders wanted to speed up. By 1960, they wanted the carnival on the cheesy boardwalk to disappear. Fires helped them. Morgan’s Department Store and the skating rink (once William’s bowling alley) burned in 1959. It was on the south east corner of 1st Street North and 3rd Avenue North across from the Beach Theatre. Behind it was the boardwalk. When the remains of Coaster block were removed after the 1961 fire, the city government tried but failed to get a modern hotel built by private enterprise. The downtown pier, a landmark that anchored the boardwalk, was in disrepair by 1959; no one wanted to rebuild it. That the city council authorized the building of a fishing pier at 6th Avenue South in 1959, away from downtown, clearly meant that the boardwalk’s days were numbered. The Sixth Avenue South pier (known eventually as Bone’s Pier) had no dance floor. There would no dancing to rock ‘n roll music on this pier! The downtown pier went up in flames in 1962; firemen let it burn. Many residents were overjoyed. Its demise was the death knell of the boardwalk according to Bill Foley, the astute Florida Times-Union columnist.30

Downtown Jacksonville Beach, not just the boardwalk, deteriorated by the 1960s. Even before the opening of Regency Square Mall in Arlington in 1967, businesses were moving to Beach Boulevard. Regency Square marked the beginning of the end for downtown Jacksonville and for downtown Jacksonville Beach. Shopping in a mall with its free parking, climate control, wide variety of stores, and wonderful lighting was easier than paying to park and trudging in the weather from store to store. Most shoppers quit going downtown. The city centers, both in Jacksonville and in Jacksonville Beach, became hollow. Out of state tourists sped down the principal roads, passing through Jacksonville to more exciting and modern tourist facilities in central and southern Florida. Walt Disney World and similar tourist destinations appealed much more than Jacksonville Beach. Owners of rides, amusements, and eateries could still make a living but not enough to keep their children in the family business. The boardwalk needed to modernize to survive. Too much of it was tawdry or burned out.

City leaders had decided to redevelop downtown, buying and destroying existing buildings to erect a new civic center, a new city hall building, departments, a new police headquarters and jail, and a large public plaza/park. The bond issue of $1.2 million of December, 1962 provided the funds and the City Council began acquiring land on which to build. Landmark buildings such as Arnot’s Bakery & Restaurant and Bennett’s Drug Store would disappear. The city government proceeded buying downtown property. Nature helped when Hurricane Dora hit on September 9, 1964. The city government
found it easier to acquire property in the first three blocks of Pablo Avenue. Some private owners such as Pete Dickinson had his wooden bathhouse on the boardwalk torn down on December 21, 1964. He planned to spend more than $150,000 to build a restaurant and concession area with an eighteen room hotel above them and a private side deck. He also planned to raze the adjoining 30-year old Perkins Hotel and several concession stands will be razed. As it turned out, his plans changed. His eldest son owns the Perkins Hotel.

Some of the carnival rides and restaurants survived on the much smaller boardwalk, but the focal point was the newly-constructed public buildings and the government plaza of which they sat. In 1966, the Flag Pavilion opened; this meeting place lasted about twenty-six years until the city government tried something else in the early nineties. In 1967, the city built 90-By-The-Sea Restaurant on the oceanfront as a fancy restaurant. It failed as did 12 North. The Crab Pot Restaurant then occupied the space but, by the nineties, the clientele was not upscale as the city government had hoped when it had the building built. It would be demolished to make room for a 10-story chain motel.
At age 36, Martin Jr. decided that he needed to become more involved in civic affairs. He had been on the Planning and Zoning Board since 1957. As a Realtor and real estate appraiser, he knew the value of property now and in the near future. His real estate business gave him constant feedback as to why people were buying at the beaches. He saw the future of the beaches as bedroom communities for commuters to Jacksonville and for those who worked at Mayport naval base. So he ran for Seat 2 on the City Council in October, 1965. His first ad appeared in the October 1, 1965 edition of the Beaches Leader. He emphasized erosion control, beautification, good zoning practices to attract business, better cooperation with the Duval County government particularly in reference the beach, and more recreational and youth facilities. To show that he was a family man, the ad featured a photo of his young family.
His opponents were T. N. Abood and Robert J. Evans in the October 12\textsuperscript{th} election. He led the field of three with 1,058 votes and faced a runoff election against Robert J. Evans who received 1,010 votes. T. N. Abood finished third with 491 votes. For the October 19\textsuperscript{th} runoff election against Evans, he said he was in favor of the following: “Continue Progress, Keep Cost of Government Down, Beautify the City, and Improve Zoning”.\textsuperscript{33} Evans won but Martin Jr. was appointed to fill a vacancy on the City Council in 1966. He served six years having won the seat in a second election. He successfully opposed Miami developers in the late sixties who wanted to build condos.
We must maintain good zoning practices to promote sound residential and business growth. Martin G. Williams Jr. has worked hard as a member of our Planning Commission and knows firsthand what needs to be done.

The problems of beach erosion, which affects all citizens, must be solved. Martin G. Williams Jr. has worked frequently with the corps of Engineers, Duval County Officials and federal officials to plan ways to save our Beach, and he can be more effective as a City Councilman.

Our relations with Duval County must be improved for our own benefit. Martin G. Williams Jr. has worked to secure county financial aid for lifeguard protection, policing and Beach clean-up. After all, we at the Beaches pay county taxes too.

Our recreation and youth facilities need to be expanded to keep pace with our growing population. Martin G. Williams Jr. proposes more tennis courts, more supervised play grounds and greater emphasis on youth in all recreational programs. Martin G. Williams Jr. was chairman of the Jaycee Invitational Tennis Tournament which has become an annual affair in cooperation with the Jacksonville Beach Department of Recreation.

Our city needs more beautification of our public streets and parks. A massive program of tree and shrub planting will make our city the garden spot of the North Florida coast.

Elec a Proven Community Leader
Seat 2
To City Council
He was a councilman during a period of social upheaval. The United States increased its involvement in the war in Vietnam, a move that some protested. President Lyndon B. Johnson declined to seek a second full term in 1968 as a result. The Baby Boomer generation wanted its own way and, generally, got it. They changed popular music, clothing, sexual mores, and schools.
Complicating the city government’s efforts to revitalize downtown was racial integration after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. African Americans began coming to the beach and its boardwalk in the mid- to late sixties. Some whites avoided the boardwalk and the rest of downtown as a result.

Few wanted to invest in downtown because the future was too uncertain. Would the city take their property? Would there be enough customers to generate a good profit? When would the newly vacant land be put to productive use? The new public facilities were attractive but generated no income.

The City of Jacksonville gained influence on Jacksonville Beach governmental affairs when Jacksonville and Duval County became one in 1968. Although Jacksonville Beach and the two other beach communities in Duval County retained a lot of autonomy as cities, a person living in one was also a citizen of Jacksonville who could vote in Jacksonville elections and hold office in Jacksonville’s city government. It was, in essence, a federal system.

Martin Sr., who died on August 15, 1977, one week short of his ninetieth birthday, made pointed remarks in the last years of his life. He lamented the decline of the boardwalk he helped build and the other tourist facilities in Jacksonville Beach, blaming high taxes and high insurance rates. He was especially critical of some merchants, grumblers, he called them. They complained about the decline in business but did not take the initiative to attract tourists. He said that Jacksonville Beach had not modernized its tourist facilities, but the coming of Holiday Inn in 1969 made a difference, even though it was far from downtown.34

The solution of the Jacksonville Beach city council was not to encourage or build new amusement parks but to build new municipal businesses and parks downtown in hopes that doing so would encourage the investment of private capital.

Martin Jr. left the council in 1973; family matters occupied his time for the next few years. They remodeled their Duval Drive home in 1975 but then the television set exploded and the house burned down. Only their daughter was home and she escaped. After the usual hassles, the Williams built it back. Much more serious was their son Kenneth’s health. When his second kidney failed in 1976, Martin Jr. donated one of his. The operations saved Kenneth; he is alive and well in 2016. His father required more recovery time but he managed the family business and watched local politics.

In spite of governmental efforts, downtown continued to decline in the 1970s and early 1980s. The Guy Craig administration (1973-81) created the Community Redevelopment Agency in 1978 “with the power to condemn and buy land in blighted areas, relocate residents and businesses and sell or lease the land to developers, subject to council approval.” That unnerved some property owners who feared arbitrary city action. Nevertheless, in 1979, the Sandpiper Hotel and its swimming pool, closed since 1960, were demolished.
truncating the boardwalk even more. The Casa Marina Hotel, barely surviving, was isolated from the boardwalk. More and more buildings were boarded up. Transients moved in. As Robin Clark noted in 1978, two buildings were condemned as health hazards, other were run down, four topless bars and crime thrived.35

Martin Jr. was elected to his four year term in 1981 and again faced the decline of downtown. The council wrestled with redevelopment issues. As he said, people knew what they didn’t want but not what they wanted.

The definition of downtown had been expended to Third Street, Ninth Avenue North, the Atlantic Ocean and 13th Avenue South. By the end of his term in 1985, the city had declared downtown to be a blighted area. “The designation allowed them access to redevelopment funds by keeping tax money in the district, and the city began trying to shape the waterfront into a more appealing area,” said Ray Fisher, who has been on the Jacksonville Beach
Community Redevelopment Agency for nearly 20 years.” The council bought downtown properties with tax increment money. That is, they were “borrowing” future tax revenues which would occur because redeveloped properties would yield more taxes as more successful businesses occupied them. Making it a sweeter deal, they could spend the real estate monies due to the Jacksonville government to redevelop blighted areas. The redevelopment agency and city council made slow progress. Redevelopment issues were debated and projects continued into the 21st century.

Martin Jr. retired in 1993. He remained active in the Beaches Area Historical Society. He and Carol traveled. She wrote a book about seashells. After visiting friends there, they bought a retirement home in West Jefferson, Ashe County, in the North Carolina mountains. He was actively involved in the Ashe County Historical Society, the Museum of Ashe County History, and the Episcopal Parish of the Holy Communion. He and Carol often returned to Jacksonville Beach to visit family and friends. Eventually, those trips also involved a trip to the Mayo Clinic where he treated for gastrointestinal problems. He took the time to conduct an email correspondence with me about boardwalk and Beaches history from North Carolina in 2009 and then met with me for breakfast and a fascinating conversation that June. His health problems had called him back to the Mayo Clinic. We met again in May, 2010 when I was signing copies of my little book, World’s Finest Beach: A Brief History of the Jacksonville Beaches. He, Carol, and I chatted. He loved the Beaches and was so pleased that a historian had done a book and would continue to write beach history. He loved his family and life but he did not reveal how very sick he was. He died on June 30, 2010.
Conclusion

The lives of the two Martin G. Williams parallel that of Jacksonville Beach in many ways, illustrating how this seaside city changed dramatically. The first Martin G. Williams was born in the nineteenth century; his son died in the twenty-first century. Each man lived in a different Jacksonville Beach. Ninety-one years passed between Martin Sr.’s first involvement in 1919 and Martin Jr.’s death in 2010. The father wrestled with quite different issues than his son.

Pablo Beach, as Jacksonville Beach was then called, was tiny in 1920. Its 357 inhabitants clustered around Pablo Avenue where people came to play during five months of the year. There were no paved roads, no sewers, and few lights; a decade later, Jacksonville Beach contained only 409 people with the “metropolitan area” having 882 people. In 1930, the year after Martin Jr. was born, the beach town still lived off tourists for only five months of the year and summer cottagers. People came in warm weather to see and play in the ocean and in its amusement facilities. Tourism was limited because it was not on a major traffic artery. One had to make a special effort to go there. Beach residents had to entice them. A tourist could take train of the Florida East Coast Railway’s Mayport Branch, or, if one had access to an automobile, by driving down the narrow, brick Atlantic Boulevard and then to Jacksonville Beach.
Martin Sr. built and nurtured the amusement facilities by creating new ones and encouraging his fellow businessmen to do the same. Together, they provided their customers the opportunity to rent swim suits and shower the sand from their bodies after going into the surf, to drink non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages, to sleep, to play games and gamble, and to enjoy carnival rides. He also understood that advertising and merchandising were keys to a steady stream of customers during the tourist season. He reached out beyond Jacksonville to other parts of Florida and the South and sought to attract people from outside the South. Under his leadership, Jacksonville Beach grew into a major tourist destination with its carnival on the boardwalk being the major draw.

By the time Martin Jr. came of age, Jacksonville Beach was a bedroom community with only remnants of its resort past. The 1950 US Census showed 6,430 people living in Jacksonville Beach; by 1960, it showed 12,053 people. In 1960, the beach cities together contained about 30,000. The Navy brought people and billions of dollars to Duval County. Jacksonville Beach benefitted. The other beach communities—Atlantic Beach, Neptune Beach, and Ponte Vedra grew as well. The Naval Station Mayport expanded. The city population kept increasing while the boardwalk and downtown floundered. Martin Jr. and his peers tried to solve the problems generated by this growth. Thorniest was what to do with downtown and the boardwalk, for the city did not agree on a vision for the future. Some yearned for what they believed to have been a simpler past with a thriving tourist trade while the majority wanted a family-oriented, quiet town.

By 2010, the Seawalk Pavilion and the walkway which ran north of it had replaced the boardwalk; there were no carnival rides nor penny arcades nor other amusement parlors, but hotels, condos, and the Perkins Bath House and Hotel and the building that Martin Sr. built in 1939. The Perkins building (owned by the Dickinson family since 1945) remains but the second floor is vacant. The bath house is long gone. Downtown 1st Street is a mixture of bars, hotels, gift shops, the eastern end of Latham Plaza, and the Seawalk Pavilion. The City of Jacksonville built a fishing pier at 5th Avenue North. The life guard station remains as an icon of the past but a vibrant part of the present.
American Red Cross life guard station condos to the left and a hotel to the right
Photo by Don Mabry
Seawalk, the old Boardwalk

Photo by Don Mabry
L – R: Perkins Bath House, former Williams building which housed the penny arcade
Photo by Don Mabry
The former Williams building

Photo by Don Mabry
Looking north along 1st Street North. Stage for the Seawalk Pavilion. Photo by Don Mabry
Looking south on 1st Street North

Photo by Don Mabry
The senior Martin Williams understood that downtown Jacksonville Beach had to modernize and saw the process when the city closed the historic first three blocks on Pablo Avenue, once the core of the city and its first entertainment district. The junior Martin Williams was part of the group who changed downtown. He did not agree with every decision. He did not want the ramps to the beach closed nor condominiums on the oceanfront, but he wanted a more modern looking city which would attract families. The lives of the two men reflect the changes from Pablo Beach in 1919 to Jacksonville Beach in 2010. Martin Jr. had to help undo what his father had built.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to the staff of the Beaches Museum & History Park for allowing me to use their archives, helping me find things, and allowing me to use photographs from the Museum’s collection. I especially want to thank Sarah Jackson, archivist, and her intern, Allison Gordon, for their help.

Martin G. Williams, Jr. has been most gracious to me. Martin and I talked and wrote about the boardwalk, his father’s role, and his life in Jacksonville Beach. His widow Carol and eldest child, Steve, met with me and Carol answered my follow-up questions.

1 Correspondence, Martin G. Williams, Jr. to Don Mabry, 2009.
2 Bell Telephone Directory, January Issue 1926. An undated business card shows that the tailoring company was located at 325 Laura Street before it moved to 108 E. Forsyth Street. The Laura address is crossed out and the West Forsyth address is written by hand. The card is in the Martin G. Williams folder in the Beaches Museum. Address data came from the Jacksonville City Directories of 1916, 1920, and 1924 available online at http://jpl.coj.net/coll/florida/cdindex.html.
4 Jacksonville City Directory of 1924.
“The Leader Salutes: Martin G. Williams, Sr., Grand Old Man of the Boardwalk,” Beaches Leader (March 6, 1969).
7 Pablo Beach News, June 10, 1922.
8 Pablo Beach News, January 21, 1922.
9 Pablo Beach News, May 9, 1925.
10 Martin G. Williams, Jr. to Don Mabry, 2009.
11 Pablo Beach News, January 17, 1924.
12 Letter, President, United Amusement Company, April 16, 1923 to Mayor of Pablo Beach, BAHS collection.
14 Pablo News, January 17, 1924.

15 Pablo Beach News, January 24, 1925. “Last of Coney Island Building to be Razed.” Pablo Beach News, January 25, 1926.


19 “Promoters of Amusement Park at Jacksonville Beach to Meet with City Council Wednesday Evening,” Jacksonville Beach News, June 6, 1927. Telegrams received by H. D. McDaniel said that amusement park builders would arrive on Wednesday to speak to the Council that night. The company had a tentative lease on the Coney Island block and on the property owned by Rustin and associates bounded by First to Second Streets and Railroad Avenue to Shockley Avenue. It wants Railroad Avenue [now Beach Boulevard] closed between First and Second Streets and a 40-foot passageway through the city park. A week later, the Jacksonville Beach News reported that Miller and Rose asked the Council for a lease on Railroad Avenue from First to Second Street as well as permission to cross First Street between Pablo and Railroad Avenues with two arches, one at Pablo Avenue, and the other about the middle of the block. Cars and trucks would be able to pass. Miller and Rose also wanted to erect a 20-foot marquis awning from oceanfront to Second Street on Pablo Avenue and forty feet ocean frontage at the city park.


21 Jacksonville Beach News, December, 17, 1928.

22 She died in October 8, 1963. Her obituary in the local newspaper says she had lived at the beach 34 years which means she moved there in 1929.


24 Email of Martin G. Williams, Jr. to Don Mabry, June 17, 2009.

25 Williams’s advertisement, Polk City Directory, 1945.


28 Ocean Beach Reporter, November 7, 1958.


32 Beach Boardwalk Due Face-Lifting,” Florida Times-Union, December 22, 1964.

33 “Candidates in Search Drive Election Nears,” The Beaches Leader, October 1, 1965; He lost, but was appointed to fill a vacancy on the City Council in 1966. He served six years having won the seat in a second election. After a hiatus, he was elected again in 1981 and served four years.

