

## for Palm Beach County History Online

**Ethel E. Sterling Williams** (1891-1987) was born in Pennsylvania to **Mary Elizabeth Tucker Sterling** and **Henry Joseph Sterling**. At the age of five, she moved to Linton, which would become Delray Beach, when her father bought land from Henry Flagler's Model Land Company. After learning that Flagler was extending his Florida East Coast Railway south from West Palm Beach to Fort Dallas (Miami), Henry Sterling envisioned his family helping to build a new community.

Ethel Sterling attended a one-room schoolhouse on Atlantic Avenue and earned a degree in education from Wesleyan College for Women in Macon, Georgia. By the time she was 19, she was teaching the settlers' children at the same schoolhouse, which would become the site of Old School Square.

In the early days, during the season, Ethel took the train to Palm Beach for music lessons at the Royal Poinciana Hotel and attended concerts. Being very close to her father, she quickly developed and acquired his business skills. She was involved in his farms and commercial and residential real estate. At his Sterling Commissary, she observed trade with local pioneers and the Seminoles from the Everglades, who paid with fresh venison and bird plumes.

After living for a time in Chicago and Baltimore, her mother's birthplace, Ethel returned to Florida to manage the family business interests. She managed the Casa Del Rey Hotel, built by her father in 1926, until hurricanes and the Depression closed it down. She was very active in the Episcopal church and other organizations in South Florida. Highly respected in the community, she was chosen to place the cornerstone when the first jail was constructed in Delray Beach.

Ethel married Dr. William Charles Williams Jr. (1887-1961), the second physician in Delray Beach, whose ancestors included William Williams (1731-1811), a signatory to the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and those who founded the Free School in Williamstown, Massachusetts, in 1791, that became Williams College. Dr. Williams Jr. served in the Georgia Legislature and was a founder of Bethesda Memorial Hospital. Their son, William C. Williams III (1930-1995), became one of Florida's youngest circuit court judges when Gov. Reubin Askew appointed him to the 15<sup>th</sup> Circuit in 1965.

Ethel Sterling Williams was co-founder and the first president of the Delray Beach Historical Society in 1964 and was instrumental in developing Atlantic Avenue and preserving Delray Beach's village-by-the-sea charm. She served as president of the Medical Auxiliary of the State of Florida, Organizing President for the State Council of Church Women (Church Women United), Diocesan President of the Episcopal Church, and Chairman of Arrangements for the Episcopal Church's Triennial when it met in Miami Beach in 1958.

In an interview at eighty-two years of age, Williams said, "Don't forget those first citizens who, through courage and vision and in spite of adversity and overwhelming odds, stood fast! God grant that America keep this same spirit."