

## Willis Mortuary

Founded: 1890

Location: 103 Indiana Avenue (1890– ); 184 Indiana Avenue ( –1897); 534–536 Indiana Avenue (1898–1913); 632–634 North West Street (street name changed to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Street in 1980s) (1914– )

Cassius M. Clay Willis, the first African-American undertaker and funeral director in the state, established his own undertaking firm in 1890. With the financial support of Frank Flanner, partowner of the Flanner & Buchanan mortuary, Willis graduated from the Massachusetts School of Embalming in 1895. Willis opened his undertaking establishment at 103 Indiana Avenue but moved quickly to 184 Indiana Avenue. Between 1897 and 1898 he moved to 536 Indiana Avenue. Willis was active in the African-American community, took charge of paroled African-American prisoners from state institutions, and became a charter member of the local chapter of Booker T. Washington’s National Negro Business League. He served as president of the Afro-American Realty Company of Indiana, an organization that attempted to counteract the effects of racial prejudice by promoting black homeownership. The Afro-American Realty Company reflected the philosophy of Washington—the sure way to the “much-coveted ‘Pot of Gold’” for African Americans, a prospectus for the company declared, “is not in finding the end of the rainbow, but in opening and harboring a savings account.” Willis also owned and published a weekly newspaper, *Indianapolis Plaindealer*, for several years. He gave it up when it began to interfere with running the funeral home.

Willis’s son Herbert C. Willis joined the firm in 1912 as an embalmer. (Willis’s daughter Beulah also worked at the company, but she died in 1905.) Between 1913 and 1914 the firm became C. M. C. Willis & Son and moved to 632–634 North West Street.

Herbert, who graduated from the Askin School of Embalming (later the Indiana School of Embalming), took over management of the funeral home upon his father's death in 1920. After Herbert's death in 1952, Paul H. Haizlip, an employee, purchased the firm, retaining the Willis name. At Haizlip's death, his wife, Edna, succeeded to ownership of Willis Mortuary. When Edna died in the early 1990s, George Green bought the business. Green continues to preside over the firm.