

# The First African-American Radio

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## The First African-American Radio Station Owner: Jesse B. Blayton Sr.

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Black entrepreneurs had tried since 1930 to buy a radio station, but they remained unsuccessful till 1949, when Jesse B. Blayton, an Atlanta accountant and professor, made history with the purchase of station WERD. Blayton had no radio background, but in a segregated society, he had still managed to become a successful businessman. Born in Oklahoma on 6 December 1897, he received his business education in Chicago at the Walton School of Commerce. He then attended the University of Chicago, studying Business Administration in their graduate school. In the early 1920s, Blayton moved to Atlanta, where in 1928, he became the first black Certified Public Accountant in the State of Georgia. He was hired as a professor of accounting at historically-black Morehouse College, and he mentored many young African-Americans who wanted to become accountants. He also wrote articles for scholarly journals. But one of his most important achievements occurred in the banking field. In October 1925, he was one of a group of fifteen black businessmen who founded the Mutual Federal Savings and Loan Association; he later became its president. This institution would make millions of dollars in loans to black businesses over the years. Blayton was also a founder of another bank, Citizens Trust, and he served on its board of directors. And in addition to that, he founded his own accounting firm, which later became a business college.

In late October 1948, WDIA in Memphis became the first station to broadcast programming specifically aimed at what was still called the

Negro audience. But while WDIA's most popular announcers were African-American, the owners were two white men. Jesse Blayton believed that Atlanta would be an excellent place for a black-formatted radio station, and that such a venture could be a financial success. He decided to purchase a local white-owned station that was losing money, and he asked his son, Jesse Jr., to be its new manager. In early October 1949, WERD became Blayton's first station. WERD had only 1000 watts and was a "daytimer," on the air only from sunrise to sunset. But it became the home of some of black radio's most famous radio announcers, most notably "Jockey Jack" Gibson. Not only did WERD serve a 14-county area, providing news, music, and community service to Atlanta's black population, but as Blayton had thought it would, the station made money. As one black newspaper explained, this was an impressive achievement. "As a white station, it had gone \$18,000 into the red. As WERD, the Negro station, it grossed more than that sum in its first six months of operation!" And it continued to be profitable, despite the limited hours it was allowed to be on the air.

WERD played a mix of the popular black music of that era: some jazz, rhythm-and-blues, and gospel. When black recording artists came to town, they would stop by the station to say hello and do an interview. WERD also offered public service programs, educational shows, church services for shut-ins, radio plays, and news the black audience couldn't get anywhere else. The public admired the station's announcers and regarded them as friends. In an era where listeners relied on their favorite station, what the DJ's said was taken very seriously, whether they were doing a commercial or giving information about an up-coming station event.

And while father and son were well-known for their involvement with the station, WERD was a family affair: Jesse Sr.'s wife Willa was on the station's board of directors, as was his daughter Doris, an attorney. Later, Willa and Doris operated the Blayton Business College.

The WERD venture was so successful that in June of 1954, the Blaytons purchased a second AM radio station, KREL in Baytown TX, part of the Houston market. During the turbulent times of the Civil

Rights era, black radio stations like the Blaytons kept the community informed in a way that southern white stations often did not. In fact, during the 60s, WERD's offices were in the same building as the Southern Christian Leadership Council, and speakers from that group were able to communicate with a very large audience thanks to the Blaytons on-going commitment to racial equality.

Jesse Sr. did not keep KREL for very long; it was in new hands by 1958. But he continued to own WERD, and his son Jesse Jr. continued to manage it, till 1968. During the time that it belonged to the Blayton family, WERD became a profitable and influential black-formatted station.

Even after his involvement with radio ended, Jesse Blayton Sr. maintained his focus on helping the black community. He was very active in the United Negro College Fund, and served as board chairman of the Atlanta Urban League. He also continued his work as a college professor, teaching courses in Accounting, Business Administration, and Economics. He died on 7 September 1977. His son Jesse Blayton Jr., who had done such a commendable job managing WERD, died on 5 November 1986. In 1995, Jesse B. Blayton Sr., the first African-American to own a radio station, was posthumously inducted into Museum of Broadcasting's Radio Hall of Fame.

Jesse Blayton, who had been raised in poverty, became one of Atlanta's most powerful and respected businessmen, even during the time when segregation limited the opportunities many African-Americans had. He encouraged young people to do as he had done, and he served as a role model for many. Yet despite his fame and his influence, it was said about him that "he remain[ed] unassuming and unpretentious. In spite of his meteoric success over the years he [was] still like "one of the boys.'"

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