

John Millard Stemmons

“He showed how to build a better city”¹

Stemmons is a familiar name to Dallas residents and to those passing through, due to the portion of IH 35 named for the family that contributed to the growth of Dallas and the development of the Trinity River area. The patriarch of the Stemmons family, John Martin Stemmons, was born in Kentucky, in 1830. An attorney, farmer, and Civil War veteran he brought his wife, Rebecca Serena Allison, and three children to Dallas in 1869 where he and Rebecca had seven additional children including his son Leslie Allison Stemmons.

Leslie Allison Stemmons was born in Dallas on 8 Nov 1876 and died 15 October 1939 Dallas. He married Elizabeth Vinson Storey who was born 24 Sep 1882 and died 3 Jan 1910. They had three children: Leslie Storey Stemmons, Elizabeth Storey Stemmons and the subject of this biography, John Millard Stemmons, Sr. John Millard Stemmons was born 10 July 1909 and died 20 July 2001. After his wife’s death, Leslie A. Stemmons married Elizabeth Proctor Howell in 1915 and had one son Leslie Allison Stemmons, Jr. He settled his family in Oak Cliff.

Dallas suffered from Trinity River flooding through much of its early history.² Living in Oak Cliff, L. A. Stemmons described what he saw and had experienced in Trinity River flooding in the *Dallas Morning News*.³ A *Dallas Morning News* writer later described the flood of 1908 as a turning point in the development of Dallas and the beginning of the Stemmons’ family civic dedication.⁴

It was John M. Stemmons father, Leslie A. Stemmons, who dreamed of harnessing the Trinity, and John who made his father’s dream a reality by working with city, county, and state governments and Dallas business leaders. The Trinity reached a high level the year before John’s

birth. His mother passed away six months after John's birth. When he was six years old his father remarried.

Early Life. According to available school yearbooks, John M. Stemmons attended Oak Cliff High School and graduated from Sunset High School in 1927⁵. He was named to the Sunset High School Hall of Fame in 2000 in recognition of his donation of land for Stemmons Freeway and involvement with various Dallas civic organizations.⁶ He participated in the ROTC at Sunset.⁷ Following in the footsteps of his older brother, Leslie Storey Stemmons, John attended Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, a small men's private college, where he was in the School of Commerce. He was a tackle on the university football team from 1928 to 1931.⁸ He left Washington and Lee in 1931 to join his father in Industrial Properties Corporation.

Family. John married his college roommate's sister, Ruth Trueheart Thomas, on June 3, 1932, in Bedford, Virginia⁹. They had two children: Ruth Allison Stemmons Simon and John M. Stemmons, Jr. In addition to working with his father, his brother, Leslie Storey Stemmons, his half-brother, Leslie Allison Stemmons, Jr. and his son, John Milliard Stemmons, Jr., were involved in the various Stemmons family businesses. The Dallas City Council named a portion of U. S. Highway 77, now part of IH35 for his father, Leslie A. Stemmons, in recognition of his development of the Trinity Industrial District.¹⁰ Thirty years later, John M. Stemmons, being concerned about the traffic on Stemmons Freeway proposed a new freeway parallel to Stemmons Freeway running inside the Trinity Levee parallel to Stemmons Freeway.¹¹ This was one of his goal that was not achieved.

With the help of his family John continued to build Dallas. His half-brother, Leslie A. Stemmons, Jr. died in 1982; his brother Storey died in 1970 and his son, John, Jr. died in 1991.¹²

Career. When he returned to Dallas from college Stemmons began working as a salesman for Southwestern Land & Loan Company and with his father's firm Industrial

Properties Corporation, an industrial real estate organization.¹³ He is often listed as an industrialist owning and/or managing an industrial enterprise .He was president of Industrial Properties Corporation following his father’s death until 1939. ¹⁴ He retired in 1994. Of his involvement with the Trinity River he said,

“Dad died in 1939, and he just wore himself out trying to figure out how to put the thing back in shape. He never got to see all of his dreams come true. But he never quit trying, never gave up. He fought like a tiger. And I guess some of that fight rubbed off on Storey and me.”¹⁵

He never forgot his father’s work to tame the Trinity. In 1963, Stemmons in an article for the *Dallas Morning News* described the advantages of a proposed barge canal within the Trinity watershed for communities from Fort Worth to Houston.¹⁶ Steve Brown fully summarized work of John Stemmons and his brother in his article “John Stemmons: Land patriarch” in 1981.¹⁷

Civic Life. One of his early civic engagements was when the Dallas County Commissioners appointed him supervisor of the Dallas City and County Levee Improvement District in 1939 succeeding his father. He donated 105 acres for the building of Stemmons Freeway.¹⁸

His active civic work during the 1960s through 1980s is documented by the awards and recognitions he received from various organizations. In 1964 Stemmons was elected president of the Dallas Citizens Council following Erik Jonsson, chairman of the board of Texas Instruments.¹⁹ He was appointed chairman for the annual fundraising dinner honoring Louis Tobin for the Dallas Friends of the National Jewish hospital in Denver. He was outgoing

president of the Greater Dallas Council of Churches.²⁰ He was elected president of the Dallas Rotary Club.²¹

He began working with Peter Stewart, Joe O. Neuhoff and Julius Schepps on Thanks-Giving Square in 1965 with the groundbreaking occurring in 1973.²² In announcing John Stemmons appointment to head the 1965 United Fund Drive, the *Dallas Morning News* noted that he served on boards of Republic National Bank, Southwestern Life Insurance Co., Dallas Power & Light Co., State Fair of Texas, and Dallas Market Center.²³ He was also named to the Board of Washington and Lee University.²⁴

In September 1965 the Thanks-Giving Square project was announced to 60 business and civic leaders. The project was proposed by Peter Stewart in 1962, who with Joe Neuhoff, Julius Shepps and John Stemmons formed the Thanks-Giving Square Foundation.²⁵

He was elected president of the Better Business Bureau in 1967. Stemmons received the prestigious Linz Award presented by Linz Jewelers, recognizing his efforts to “secure the manpower and financial support for the largest capital improvements campaign in Dallas history.”²⁶ Sales and Marketing Executives named John Stemmons “Dallas’ Distinguished Salesman for 1971. Bob Stone said that “Stemmons was ‘filled with an absolutely unquenchable for the City of Dallas’.”²⁷ Stemmons was known for being able to obtain funding for various projects benefiting the city. Journalist Carolyn Barta wrote that one year the United Fund was short of its goal. “Stemmons got on the telephone, called men off the golf course and raised the money.” She goes on to comment that one of the reasons, he could raise the funds is that he had contributed to other projects and causes of the years. He was one of four executives honored by the Chamber of Commerce for his efforts on organizing the Bicentennial Commission in Dallas.²⁸

He served on the Greater Dallas Planning Council, “a private non-partisan organization of business leaders including industrialists and real estate developers Trammel Crow, Henry S. Miller, Jr., and Roger Staubach.”²⁹ John supported political candidates and work against those that supported political arrangements contrary to his beliefs for a successful Dallas.³⁰

He also supported efforts of various groups to encourage a transit system that would run a line from Dallas/Fort Worth Airport through the Stemmons Industrial District to Fair Park. Five major developers, including John Stemmons agreed to help finance a 28-mile light rail line through their property.³¹

In 1995 Senior Citizens of Greater Dallas honored developer and city father John Stemmons. He is “one of the most influential civic leaders over a period of decades, exemplifies the ‘Spirit of Generations’ because of his contributions have transcended generational divides.”³² The *Dallas Morning News*, recognizing his achievements gave a summary of his lifelong work for the city of Dallas.³³ Greenway Park (Dallas) residents honored John Stemmons by dedicating a park on Wenonah Drive in his honor July 4, 1999. He and his wife had lived at 5549 Wenonah Drive since the early 1950s.³⁴

John Stemmons’ attitude about his active involvement Dallas can be summarized by a comment he made at a United Fund kick-off dinner in Sherman in 1966. “*I believe a minimum of 10 per cent of a man’s time should be spent on his community. This is not a service but a debt we all owe.*”³⁵

The Stemmons of Dallas

The Trinity, the Work and, The City

1. Leslie Allison STEMMONS Sr., son of **Col. John Martin STEMMONS & Rebecca Serena ALLISON** was born on 8 Nov 1876 in Dallas, Dallas, Texas. He died in Dallas, Dallas, Texas, on 15 Oct 1939 and was buried on 17 Oct 1939 in Oak Cliff Cemetery, Dallas, Dallas, Texas. He was one of the ten children born to John M. Stemmons and Rebecca Serena Allison Stemmons: Walter Eugene (1858-1932); Beverly Servis (1860-1890); Harriet Ann (1863-1888); Mary Bell (1867-1868); Lillian Belsterling (1869-1875); Cora Lucille (1872-1962); Leslie (1876-1939); John Jacquillian (1878-1878); Sidney Allen (1879-1932); Sidney Allen (1879-1932); and Robert Lee (1882-1952). Occupation: Farmer, Attorney, Industrialist. FamilySearch ID#: KHZY-23F.

On 16 Jun 1902 when Leslie Allison he married **Elizabeth Vinson Storey**, daughter of **Milliard STOREY & Elizabeth Vinson WINGFIELD**.³⁶ She was born on 24 Sep 1882 in Mexia, Limestone, Texas; died in Dallas, Dallas, Texas, on 3 Jan 1910 and was buried on 5 Jan 1910 in Oak Cliff Cemetery, Dallas, Dallas, Texas. FamilySearch ID#: K8Y4-HLW.

They had the following children:

- i. **Leslie Storey**. He was born on 12 Aug 1904 in Dallas, Dallas, Texas and died in Dallas, Dallas, Texas, on 14 Apr 1970; he was 65. He was buried in Grove Hill Cemetery, Dallas, Dallas, Texas. FamilySearch ID#: K4LK-C34. Leslie Storey married **Alby Grace CRAMPTON** She was born on 28 Sep 1901 in Jackson, Madison, Tennessee. Alby Grace died on 28 Aug 1985; she was 83. FamilySearch ID#: LTNV-ZPG.
- ii. **Elizabeth Storey**. Born on 13 Sep 1906 in Dallas, Dallas, Texas. Elizabeth Storey died in University Park, Dallas, Texas, on 5 Nov 1979 and was buried on 7 Nov 1979 at Sparkman-Hillcrest Cemetery. FamilySearch ID#: K86X-N77. On 11 Dec 1954 when

Elizabeth Storey was 48, she married **Raphael Kinard BISHOP** in Dallas, Dallas, Texas. Born in 1905. Raphael Kinard died 15 Oct 1961; he was 49. FamilySearch ID#: (MNN-DKZ).

2 iii. **John Millard Sr. (1909-2001)**

After his first wife's death Leslie Allison married **Sarah Elizabeth Proctor HOWELL** in 1915.³⁷ Sarah was born on 29 Jun 1896 in Wills Point, Van Zandt, Texas and died in Irving, Dallas, Texas, on 18 Mar 1993 at age 96 years. She was buried in Grove Hill Cemetery. FamilySearch ID#: LTNV-84H.

They had one child:

- i. **Leslie Allison Jr.** Born on 8 Jul 1917; died on 12 Feb 1982 at age 65 years. He was buried in Grove Hill Cemetery, Dallas, Texas. Occupation: Industrialist FamilySearch ID#: L21W-DXN.

2. John Millard STEMMONS Sr. Born in 1909 in Dallas, Dallas, Texas. John Millard died in Dallas, Dallas, Texas, in 2001; he was 92. FamilySearch ID#: MZ97-QTT. John Millard married **Ruth Trueheart THOMAS**. Born in 1906. Ruth Trueheart died in 1998; she was 92.

They had the following children:

- i. **John Milliard Jr.** Born in 1944. John Milliard died in 1991; he was 47. FamilySearch ID#: GGBS-JDZ. John Milliard married **Jean Marie HOGABOOM**. Born in 1938. Jean Marie died in 2021; she was 83. FamilySearch ID#: GGB9-722.
- ii. **living daughter.**

Note: The FamilySearch ID# listed for each person links that individual to FamilySearch.org family tree. Living individuals are not named.

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- ¹ “John M. Stemmons – He showed how to build a better city.” *Dallas Morning News*, 24 Jan 2001.
- ² John N. Furlong, Greg Ajemian, Tommie McPherson. *History of the Dallas Floodway*. Fall, 2003 ASCE Meeting. <https://www.swf.usace.army.mil/Portals/47/docs/PAO/DF/DallasFloodwayHistoryPaper.pdf>
- ³ “Not So High as in 1890. Lester (sic) Stemmons Says It Lacks Many Feet of it.” *Dallas Morning News*, 19 Apr 1908, page 2.
- ⁴ “Dallas Yesterday. The Stemmons’ Civic Dedication,” *Dallas Morning News*, 13 Sept 1971, page 2.
- ⁵ Sunset High School opened in 1926 due to the overcrowding of Oak Cliff High School, the only high school in Oak Cliff.
- ⁶ Sunset High School Alumni Association, Oak Cliff, Texas, Est. 2000. <http://www.sunsetalumni.com/2012.html>
- ⁷ *The Oak*, Oak Cliff High School yearbook, 1926. ROTC Co. B, page 105. *The Oak*, 1927, Oak Cliff High School yearbook, p. 61
- ⁸ Mame Warren. “Oral Interview with John M. Stemmons. 10 Feb 1997.” Washington and Lee University. <https://dspace.wlu.edu/handle/11021/34514>
- ⁹ “Stemmons - Thomas,” *World-News*, Roanoke, Virginia, Friday, 3 June 1932, page 10. Newspapers.com
- ¹⁰ “New Expressway Named Stemmons.” *Dallas Morning News*, 9 Nov 1954, page 1.
- ¹¹ Terry Maxon. “Parallel Stemmons Freeway Proposed,” *Dallas Morning News*, 25 Nov 1985, page 13A.
- ¹² “Services Friday for John M. Stemmons Jr.” *Dallas Morning News*, 12 Sept 1991, page 33A.
- ¹³ Dallas City Directory, 1931, page 1713; Dallas City Directory 1932, page 1494; Dallas City Directory, 1933, page 1356.
- ¹⁴ Dallas City Directory, 1978, page 1220
- ¹⁵ John N. Furlong, Greg Ajemian, and Tommie McPherson. “History of Dallas Floodway,” op. cit. , page 6.
- ¹⁶ John M. Stemmons. “Canal to Increase Growth Potential,” *Dallas Morning News*, 20 Jan 1963, page 7.
- ¹⁷ Steve Brown. “John Stemmons: Land patriarch,” *Dallas Morning News*, 10 May 1981, page 198.
- ¹⁸ “3 Developers Donate Land for Expressway,” *Dallas Morning News*, 5 May 1956, page 1, 17. “Plaques Given to Land Donors.” *Dallas Morning News*, 5 Dec 1959, page 8.
- ¹⁹ “Stemmons Will Head Civic Panel,” *Dallas Morning News*, 8 Jan 1964, page 1.
- ²⁰ “Stemmons to Head Hospital Dinner,” *Dallas Morning News*, 31 Jan 1964, page 16.
- ²¹ “Stemmons Named Rotary President,” *Dallas Morning News*, 14 Mar 1964, page 9.
- ²² “Thanksgiving Symbol. Downtown Square Described. *Dallas Morning News*, 30 Sept 1965, page 20. Carolyn Barta. “Viewpoint Park Groundbreaking Welcome”. *Dallas Morning News*, 8 Jan 1973, page 27.
- ²³ “Stemmons to Head UF Drive.” *Dallas Morning News*, 23 Mar 1965, page 1.
- ²⁴ “Stemmons Named to College Board,” *Dallas Morning News*, 3 Sep 1965, page 3.
- ²⁵ “Downtown Square Described,” *Dallas Morning News*, Sep 30, 1965, page 20.
- ²⁶ John M. Stemmons Receives Linz Award for Civic Work,” *Dallas Morning News*, 22 Feb 1968, page 1.
- ²⁷ “Stemmons Named As Top Salesman.” *Dallas Morning News*, 26 Feb 1972, page 10.
- ²⁸ “Chamber Honors Dallas Executives”, *Dallas Morning News*, 8 Dec 1976, page 7
- ²⁹ Bruce Tomaso. “Experts criticizes water proposal,” *Dallas Morning News*, 21 Nov 1984, page 17A.
- ³⁰ Mark Nelson. “Gramm campaign fund hits \$409,765.” *Dallas Morning News*, 2 Feb 1982, page 18
- ³¹ Mary C. Bounds. “Developer touts light-rail plan.” *Dallas Morning News*, 19 Jun 1982, page 31. Allen R. Myerson. “Businessmen give heavily in transit vote,” *Dallas Morning News*, 20 Feb 1983., page 33. “DART chief rejects developers’ deadline.” *Dallas Morning News*, 16 Feb 1983, page 55.
- ³² Robert Miller. “John Stemmons to receive honor -Senior, Citizens group to present him award for civic leadership.” *Dallas Morning News*, Nov 21, 1995, page 5D. DALLAS DIARY: Stemmons is last of a special generation,” *Dallas Morning News (online)*, Nov 27, 1995, page 10A.
- ³³ Dallas Diary – Stemmons is last of a special generation.” *Dallas Morning News (online)*, 27 Nov 1995, 10A. David Flick. “Honoring a builder of Dallas – John Stemmons gratefully accepts Spirit of Generations Award, *Dallas Morning News (online)* Nov. 30, 1995, page 38A.
- ³⁴ Kim Horner, “Dallas patriarch Stemmons honored in park dedication.” *Dallas Morning News (online)* 4 Jul 1999, page 28A. *Polk’s Greater Dallas City Directory Dallas 1975*, page 1354.
- ³⁵ *John J. Stemmons Collection*. MA 2020.02. John M. Stemmons Manuscript Collection, Dallas History & Archives, J. Erik Jonsson Central Library, Dallas, Texas.
- ³⁶ “Marriage Licenses.” *Dallas Morning News*, 5 Oct 1915, page 14.