

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT ASHEVILLE

‘A COUPLE OF YEARS AHEAD OF HIS TIME’
ROBERT F. WILLIAMS AND THE TACTIC OF SELF-DEFENSE
IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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Mounting the pulpit of a church in Monroe, North Carolina, on October 22, 1996,

Rosa Parks, whose refusal to surrender a bus seat in Montgomery in 1955 had come to symbolize the nonviolent civil rights movement, spoke of Robert F. Williams. “I am delighted to find myself at the funeral of a black leader who had died peacefully in his bed.”¹ She told the congregation that she and those who walked alongside Martin Luther King Jr. in Alabama had “always admired Robert Williams for his courage and his commitment to freedom. The work that he did should go down in history and never be forgotten.”² Her presence in that pulpit, nearly inexplicable when viewed through the traditional narrative of the civil rights movement, demonstrates the full complexity of racial politics characterized solely by the moral choice of nonviolent direct action. Ironically, these words were spoken at the funeral of Robert F. Williams, the highly controversial political activist who once presided over the Monroe, North Carolina chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Williams, who seriously questioned the importance of non-violence as a strategy for black survival in the United States, advocated for the rights of self-defense as a means of self-preservation when law and order broke down.

Thankfully, largely through the nonviolent methods of such groups as the NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), minorities won increased civil rights. Robert Williams also played a substantial role in the fight for equal rights, yet civil rights historians often overlook him because he advocated violence in self-defense and continued his career in Cuba and China after his exile from the United States in 1961. This paper seeks to

¹ Rosa Parks, eulogy for Robert F. Williams, November 22, 1996, Central Methodist Church, Monroe, NC; videotape in Williams Family Collection, Baldwin, Michigan.

² Ibid.

explore the dynamics of the conflicting ideologies between Robert F. Williams and such organizations. My intent is to examine conventional histories of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and to restore Williams as a significant figure of African American resistance. The NAACP, like most mainstream civil rights organizations, advocated non-violent protest and this conflict eventually led to Williams' suspension and later removal as president of the Monroe, North Carolina chapter. However, he continued to influence and reflect the concerns of Monroe community members, speaking for grassroots in ways that the NAACP did not.³

Few historians have explored Robert Williams' early political work in Monroe, North Carolina. This study has particular relevance because the vast majority of civil rights literature has not been written from a local perspective.⁴ Instead, historians tend to focus on the goals and motivations of national non-violent organizations, histories of illustrious leaders, and their ideologies. The philosophy of Robert F. Williams, advocating one to "meet violence with violence" in self-defense a decade before Black Power, provided the intellectual foundation for America's most militant advocates of racial and social justice.⁵ His actions, speeches, and writings inspired Huey P. Newton who drew heavily on Williams' work while drafting the original constitution of the Black

³ I will base my study of Robert Williams on the understanding of his autobiography *Negroes with Guns*, NAACP Archives, and various papers and transcripts housed at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Special Collections Room and the Library of Congress.

⁴ In fact, much of the existing literature on civil rights has been written from a national perspective. For instance, Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, Sixth Edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), and Fred Powledge's *Free at Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People who Made It* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), all deal with the nationwide struggle for civil rights.

⁵ Robert Franklin Williams Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Panther Party. As Malcolm X would later write about Williams, “he is a couple of years ahead of his time.”⁶

In the 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement, with such notable figure as A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and Melba Patillo-Beals, developed a nonviolent leadership ethic. Yet, to quote H. Rap Brown of SNCC, “violence is as American as cherry pie,” and the white’s force that met nonviolent protests through the use of violence produced martyrs, strengthened the camaraderie between members of the movement, and won outside support, though at a great human price.⁷ With the dedication to the Bible, and the support of the black church, southern blacks readily grasped the idea of nonviolence and as they were so heavily outnumbered, and even outgunned, nonviolence was the obvious response. Defying this (American) precept, historian William O’Neill described it as “what the weak used to turn the oppressor’s strength against them.”⁸ The method of nonviolent resistance is effective in that it had a way of disarming the opponent; nonviolent resistance provides a creative force through which people can channel their discontent. In the history of the movement for racial advancement, many creative forms of protest have been developed such as the mass boycott, sit-down protests and strikes, sit-ins, refusal to pay fines and bail for unjust arrests, mass marches and meetings, prayer pilgrimages, etc.⁹

While Williams did not advocate violence for its own sake, or for the sake of

⁶ Malcolm X quoted by Stephen Millies, “Robert Williams 1925-1995,” *Workers World Newspaper*, reprinted 21 November 1996.

⁷ Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) 422.

⁸ William O’Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1972) 159.

⁹ Ibid.

reprisals against whites, tactics Martin Luther King coined as “second-class methods,” he also did not recognize nonviolent protest as an effective means of resistance.¹⁰ Williams argued, “those who adhere to the method of nonviolent direct action recognize that legislation and court orders tend only to declare rights; they can never thoroughly deliver them.”¹¹ Williams never spoke against the passive resistance advocated by Reverend King and believed it should be used where feasible, acknowledging civil disobedience to be a “powerful weapon under civilized conditions, where the law safeguards the citizens’ rights of peaceful demonstrations.”¹² Though one of Williams’ major critiques of the democratic process was how state and local police control were quick to enforce law and order when blacks defended themselves with arms against whites, but were reluctant to protect blacks from lawless mobs. In his autobiography, Williams illustrates the violence with which “blacks in the South were treated daily—nay hourly. This violence is deliberate, conscious, condoned by the authorities.”¹³ The force of white supremacy proved to be too determined for nonviolence to be effective and without redeeming qualities as Casey Hayden, former member of the SNCC, illustrates:

Nonviolence is both the creation and the activity of the redemptive community. To redeem means to rehabilitate, to heal, to reconcile rather than gain power. Truth and love are both ends and means. There is no separation of ends and means. Everything is just a series of means. The enemy is never personal. The enemy is always systems, attitudes, as in racism, sexism. The oppression of these systems always depends on the cooperation of the oppressed. The activity of nonviolent direct action is withdrawal of cooperation with injustice, the refusal to support oppression.¹⁴

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Hate is Always Tragic,” from an address to the National Press Club, Washington, DC, July, 1962.

¹¹ Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962) 9.

¹² *Ibid*, 40.

¹³ *Ibid*, 41.

¹⁴ Casey Hayden quoted in Constance Curry, *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the*

The power of white skin in the Jim Crow South was both stark and subtle. White supremacy permeated daily life and racial etiquette was less than arbitrary. W.E.B. Du

Bois depicts an all too common view of African Americans in the south:

A white man who would never shake hands with a black man would refuse to permit anyone *but* a black man to shave his face, cut his hair, or give him a shampoo. A white man might share his bed with a black woman, but never his table. Black breasts could suckle with babies, black hands would pat out biscuit dough for white mouths, but black heads must not try on a hat in a department store, lest it be rendered unfit for sale to white people. Black maids washed the bodies of the aged and infirm, but the uniforms that they were required to wear could never be laundered in the same washing machines that white people used.¹⁵

While whites regarded blacks as inherently lazy and shiftless, a white man would not hesitate to say he had “worked like a nigger,” meaning that he had engaged in dirty, backbreaking labor to the point of exhaustion.¹⁶ White Monroe citizens echoed this sentiment of black inferiority. “God did not create all men equal,” Bunyan Simpson of Monroe declared. “If that is not true we would all be the same color.”¹⁷ Even those who considered themselves liberal to racial issues cannot deny the existence of white privilege. “There were no social problems that were of any significance,” Ray Shute, a white local business man, recalled, “...Everybody knew everybody, and life was good.”¹⁸ The oldest building in Monroe, the Town Hall was a proud landmark for white residents, depicted in civic memorabilia and featured in historical presentations. Jesse Helms,

Freedom Movement (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000) 342.

¹⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Fifty Years After,” reprinted in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Faucett, 1961) xiv.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Monroe Enquirer*, July 19, 1956; July 7, September 1, 1955 in box 5, James William Cole Papers, East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC.

¹⁸ Ray Shute quoted in Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: University Of North Carolina Press, 1999) 5.

Ray Shute grew up in one of the finest white homes in Monroe, but spent time in the homes of his

future state senator, wrote in one of his 1956 newspaper columns, “I don’t believe I could ever be dissatisfied with Monroe. I shall always remember the shady streets, the quiet Sundays, the cotton wagons, the Fourth of July parades.”¹⁹ As Helms reminisced about the tranquillity of life in Monroe, NC, this nostalgia could only rest on the understanding that a racial hierarchy reflected the social order of daily life.

Political arrangements in Union County also reflected a white supremacist regime.

The KKK was “a political organization of the Conservative party, in the interest of the Conservative party. It was understood that on the night before the election the Ku Klux would turn out *en masse* and visit the houses of colored people” to let them know that “if [black citizens] went to the election they would meet them on the way.”²⁰

The Klan acted as both a terrorist wing and political force of the Democratic party in the South. Confronted by a formidable enemy espousing a social vision far more democratic than their own, white conservatives turned to violence to preserve remnants of an antebellum social order rooted in white dominance and aristocratic privilege; the rope and fagot a prominent part of the “Arsenal of Democracy.”²¹ When Williams was a small boy in the 1920s, membership in the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), widely known as one of the strongest organized forces to hold this racial regime, escalated into the millions across the United States. In North Carolina, Klan rolls grew to around 50,000 and included the state’s “best people,” according to the *News and Observers* Josephus Daniels.²²

family’s cooks and servants because they had boys the same age as Shute.

¹⁹ Jesse Helms, *Monroe Enquirer*, 7 May 1956.

²⁰ Tyson, 14.

²¹ Langston Hughes, *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1962) 87.

²² Josephus Daniel quoted in David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* 3rd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1981) 3, 93, 96-97.

Robert Williams grew up in this portrait of Monroe. His most vivid memory was a stark example of white dominance that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Williams would retell this searing story from his childhood to friends, readers, listeners, reporters, and historians. In September of 1936, shortly after one of the regular Friday prayer meetings that met at their home, Emma Williams sent her son Robert to the post office downtown. With the words to “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” echoing in his ears, Robert continued down Main Street, headed on toward the courthouse square in the middle of Monroe, only to witness a white police officer accost a black woman. The ten-year-old boy looked on in terror as Jesse Alexander Helms, Sr., assaulted the black woman “...with his huge fists,” then “dragged her off to the nearby jailhouse, her dress up over her head, the same way that a cave man would club and drag his sexual prey.”²³ Williams would later recall “her tortured screams as the flesh was ground away from the friction of the concrete.”²⁴ The memory of this violent spectacle and the laughter of white bystanders, and even more disturbing, the deferential response by black men, vividly illustrated for Williams the disempowered nature of black life in the South.

While Williams’s mother was a deeply devout Christian, his father only occasionally attended church. Williams’ uncle Charlie, accused of being an atheist, spoke more bluntly about the realities faced by the black church in the Jim Crow South. “You niggers are always on your knees praying...if you believe in God, and God is so good,

²³ Robert Williams, *While God Lay Sleeping* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1973) 5-6.

²⁴ Robert F. Williams, “Revolution Without Violence.” *The Crusader*. 9, no. 3, December 1967: 3.

The events depicted here reflect a persistent pattern in stories about Officer Helms. See, for example, Juan Williams, “Carolina Gothic” *Washington Post*, October 28, 1990. See also, Ernest Furguson, *Hard Right: The Rise of Jesse Helms* (New York: Norton, 1986) 30-40.

why don't you pray to God to free us?"²⁵ At an early age, Williams was faced with the fact that faith could not always save him. Williams never attempted to make the black church the cornerstone of his social activism, not because he rejected its moral teachings, but because the church did not live up to its own ideals.

Williams' firsthand experience with violence and white supremacy during his childhood undoubtedly influenced his views of self-defense and direct action. John Williams, Robert's father, worked as a boiler washer aboard the Seaboard AirLine, the highest skilled position a black man could hold. Despite racial discrimination, railroad work provided employment that did not depend entirely on the local white power structure. The young Robert Williams observed the racial politics of the railroad yard while often accompanying his father to work in the evenings, hearing white men talk of their attraction to black women; the power of white skin as deliberate humiliation to black men. Williams organized a secret group with friends called X-32 "to make war on white philanders who fancied black women after dark."²⁶ One night a distinctive car drove through a dark, isolated section of town to pick up a local black woman for sex. Williams and his cohorts unleashed a broadside of bricks and stones, smashing all of the car's windows and sending their enemy screeching off. It was Williams's first direct confrontation with white supremacy and he remembered it "in a seizure of laughter and satisfaction."²⁷ Williams used violence from an early age to protect black citizens from the exploitation of whites.

²⁵ Robert F. Williams, interview with Cohen quoted in Tyson, 8.

²⁶ Williams, *While God Lay Sleeping*, 14-17.

²⁷ Ibid.

The driver of the car attacked was a man named Clarkston, who also worked for Seaboard AirLine, known to have "a notorious reputation for lauding his interracial exploits over black men."

Williams's Uncle Charlie, a veteran of the First World War, had returned disillusioned that the war to make the world safe for democracy had done nothing to expand democracy for the black citizens of Monroe. The constant ear to such criticisms, Robert Williams began his service with the US government in 1941 when he enrolled in a National Youth Administration (NYA) job-training program near Monroe "because at that time they were training youth for defense work...because of the manpower shortage."²⁸ Faced with blatant racial discrimination, Williams organized the protest that launched his FBI subject file, marked "Security-C," meaning that the FBI thought he might be a Communist.²⁹ Williams's growing racial militancy mirrored that of African Americans across North Carolina, many of whom were newly minted soldiers. However, the difference that set Robert Williams apart, was that his irritated stance of the government was paralleled with proactive resistance, where others adopted nonviolent protest. Once conscripted, he boarded a segregated Greyhound bus bound for Detroit and spent the next summer working for Ford Motor Company in the defense plant and witnessed one of the worst race riots in U.S. history.³⁰ Drafted into the U.S. Army for

²⁸ Robert F. Williams, interview with Cohen quoted in Tyson, 36.

²⁹ ²⁹ Robert F. Williams file, Union County, Record of Military Discharges, 7:99, memorandum, August 8, 1961, Federal Bureau of Investigation Subject File.

Williams's own recollections thoroughly correspond to the account that opens his FBI subject file.

³⁰ "Detroit Race Riots 1943, n.d.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eleanor/peopleevents/pande10.html> (20 November 2003).

The Detroit riot began at a popular and integrated amusement park known as Belle Isle. On the evening of June 20, 1943, the playground was ablaze with activity. Several incidents occurred that night including multiple fights between teenagers of both races. Sailors who were stationed at the Naval Armory nearby often aided white teenagers. As people began leaving the island for home, major traffic jams and congestion at the ferry docks spurred more violence. On the bridge, which led back to the mainland, a fight erupted between a total of two hundred African Americans and white sailors. Soon, a crowd of five thousand white residents gathered at the mainland entrance to the bridge ready to attack black vacationers wishing to cross. By midnight, an understaffed police force attempted to retain the situation, but the rioting had already spread too far into the city. By mid morning, black leaders in the community had asked Mayor Edward J. Jeffries to call in federal troops to quell the fighting. More than 6,000 federal troops had been strategically stationed throughout the city. Detroit, under armed occupation, virtually shut down. The days

eighteen months at the end of the war, Williams returned to North Carolina in 1946 from service, honorably discharged actually for “convenience to the government.”³¹ His wartime agonies and achievements transformed Williams understanding of white supremacy. “Before then, it appeared that [whites] were so well-organized and so powerful,” he recalled, “it seemed that they really might be superior.” Even in the exercise of power, Williams detected a fragility. “I also realized that they are afraid, and that they had certain weaknesses,” he said, “and this is why they had to react so violently and so swiftly in stamping out anything they figured to be contrary to their interest.”³² Like many of his compatriots, Williams came home unable to accommodate himself to the traditional racial etiquette that prevailed in the South.

Williams’s revitalized resolve to resist white supremacy reflected a transformation that was not merely personal but marked a change in African American political life. At the national level, A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters organized the all-black March on Washington Movement (MOWM) of 1941, threatening to bring thousands of black Americans to the nation’s capital, an influential factor in President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s issuance of Executive Order 8802, which banned racial discrimination in the defense industries and created the Fair Employment Practices Commission. Organized by black people, to overcome white resistance, and for black

of rioting had been severe. Twenty-five black residents and nine white residents had been killed. Of the twenty-five African Americans, white policemen had killed seventeen. The number injured, including police, approached seven hundred while the property damage, including looted merchandise, destroyed stores, and burned automobiles, amounted to \$2 million.

³¹ Robert F. Williams file, Union County, Record of Military Discharges, 7:99, memorandum, August 8, 1961, Federal Bureau of Investigation Subject File.

“Although he received an honorable discharge,” Williams’s FBI file noted, “in the army he was the subject of considerable controversy for failure to obey orders, disrespect toward and office, and because he went absent without leave on several occasions.”

³² Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 40-41.

people, to affirm a black sense of self, Randolph explained that a militant campaign organized in such a manner could have a galvanizing psychological effect, helping to create “faith by Negroes in Negroes.”³³ While white allies would be helpful in the fight for equality, history had demonstrated that no oppressed group had achieved its deliverance without taking “a prominent part in the conflict,” rather than being used to “do all the incidental drudgery of the warfare.”³⁴

In his book, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970, social theorist Doug McAdam suggests that the political process of social movements emerge from the cognitive liberation most likely found within well-established networks. The very occurrence of social movements indicates that deprived groups are able to generate and sustain mass organized mass action. “Protest is a sign that the opportunity structure is flexible and vulnerable enough to the political assaults of excluded groups.”³⁵ This logic reflected the thinking of black activists across North Carolina. From 1941 to 1945 the number of NAACP branches in the state more than doubled. Madison S. Jones Jr., field spokesperson for the NAACP, stated, “Our drives are all shaping up well in North Carolina,” and continued, “In fact, they are progressing much better than anticipated.”³⁶ Statewide efforts resonated with black citizens’ determination to end second-class citizenship.

World War II provided black southerners unprecedented leverage to redeem or

³³ Taylor Branch, *Parting Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) 171, 366.

³⁴ August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970) 147.

³⁵ Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 37, 51.

³⁶ Madison S. Jones Jr. to Lucille Black, February 19, 1942, box C136, group 2, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

repudiate democracy. Bennie Montgomery, a friend of Williams, returned from the war as a sharecropper and later, after a brawl, killed W.W. Magnum, his white landlord. Arrested by Monroe police, the KKK wanted to lynch Montgomery, but state authorities quickly removed him from the Monroe jail for safekeeping. Later sentenced and executed by lethal injection, Montgomery's body was sent back to Monroe for burial. The KKK, deprived of their lynching, warned that the body belonged not to the Montgomery family, but to the "invisible empire."³⁷ Standing in front of the Harris Funeral Home, Williams met a group of former soldiers and as the Klan motorcade drove up, forty rifles were aimed at the line of cars. "That was one of the first incidents that really started us to understanding that we had to resist, and that resistance could be effective if we resisted in groups, and if we resisted with guns."³⁸ This confrontation, along with the changing postwar political economy, led to the formation of Williams black militia dedicated to the rising wind of racial possibility.³⁹

Even the most startling structural changes would have meant little if black Southerners had not been willing to risk everything to challenge white supremacy. Charles McLean, NAACP field secretary for North Carolina, had written to the national office in 1952 that prominent local blacks in Monroe "were not enthusiastic about supporting the branch. I expect I will have to completely reorganize this branch before it becomes active again."⁴⁰ The group later dwindled to six members who contemplated

³⁷ Tyson, 50.

³⁸ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 77.

³⁹ For example, the migration of millions of rural black Southerners to places where they could vote; the political opportunities presented by World War II; the mechanization of Southern agriculture, which eliminated many "black jobs" in the rural South; and the emergence of the Cold War, forever altered the landscape of African American possibilities.

⁴⁰ Charles McLean to Gloster Current, November 30, 1953, NAACP State Correspondence, 1953, Kelly Alexander Papers, Special Collections, Atkins Library, UNC Charlotte, Charlotte.

disbanding. “I became active,” Robert Williams said, “at the behest of some of the local people in the NAACP, and I started to attend meetings.”⁴¹ Strenuously objecting to dissolving the branch, president Edward Belton nominated Williams to lead the chapter. A majority of the former leadership declined to participate after Williams was elected, his participation deemed too controversial; due to his radical assertion, Williams found himself, virtually, a one-man NAACP chapter.⁴²

Williams began a membership drive among the domestic working class, farmers, and unemployed of Monroe, recruiting individuals from pool halls, beauty parlors, street corners, and tenant farms. He also turned to black veterans, such as Dr. Robert Perry, Woodrow Wilson, and John W. McDow, with whom he had stood against the Klan in 1947. These members were mostly independent entrepreneurs and fiercely loyal to Williams. These members echoed Williams’s sentiment about the ability and insistence on public visibility. “In this section of the South today,” Williams wrote to the national office in 1957, “many people are willing to support the NAACP financially, but are in no

⁴¹ Robert F. Williams to NAACP, March 11, 1957, Oversized, box 113A, group 3, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

⁴² Founded in 1909, the NAACP defined itself as an organization seeking “to end racial discrimination and segregation in all public aspects of life.” A major concern, the NAACP sought to inform all of America of the “un-American difficulties its Negro citizens have experienced, and to make clear that these continuing difficulties are...a hindrance to the development of a large segment of its human potential America can ill afford to neglect.” Through its legal defense work, the NAACP sought court rulings to uphold constitutional rights so often breached by state or local laws and to prevent the unfair enforcement of local statutes in regard to Negroes, seeking new civil-rights legislation where needed. In every way possible, its attempt were to “...create a climate of public opinion in favor of equal rights...” The Monroe chapter of the NAACP was founded during the war and membership rose to 163 members in 1946. Williams described the chapter as a “social club” and created the Monroe-Union County Civic League organizing an aggressive door-to-door campaign to register voters. Langston Hughes, *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962), 12-13.

position to expose themselves. For some people, public gatherings have become too open and I find it necessary to visit homes and appeal directly to individuals.”⁴³ Williams used the story from his childhood to help inspire and with this grassroots approach built a membership that breached three hundred by the late 1950s. It was the consciousness that they were citizens and men that Williams tried to implant in his community. If the government would not protect their rights by due process, then they must do it themselves. But national record books indicate that large number of Monroe branch supporters declined to record memberships to avoid the perils of white reprisals.⁴⁴ “The local branch of the national organization has rededicated itself to the cause of democracy and social justice in Union County, the state, and the nation,” Williams announced in the *Monroe Enquirer*. “All citizens who believe in democracy, the rights of man, and brotherhood are urged to join and support the NAACP. This organization is open to all people, irrespective of race, who support the American cause as embodied in the United States Constitution.”⁴⁵

Where Williams was sincere in his openness to white participation in the freedom struggle, the fight against racism and the consensus among well-meaning white and blacks began to break down with the drowning death of a young black boy in a nearby lake in the summer of 1957. White children swam at the Monroe Country Club that provided safety instruction and swimming lessons each summer.⁴⁶ Dr. Perry’s pleas to

⁴³ Robert F. Williams to NAACP, March 11, 1957, box 113A, group 3, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

⁴⁴ “Total Memberships Received from Branches in North Carolina,” October 31, 1959, 2, box C113, and typescript of telephone conversation between Conrad Lynn and Charles A. MacLean, June 16, 1959, box A333, both in group 3, NAACP Papers.

⁴⁵ *Monroe Enquirer*, February 5, 1958.

⁴⁶ Tyson, 83.

Built in 1935 with \$200,000 in federal funds from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and

the Parks and Recreation Commission, both as a member of the NAACP and as a representative of the interracial Human Relations Council, were met with commissioners who objected “on the grounds that to allow Negroes to swim even once a week would be too expensive because the water would have to be changed after the colored people had used it.” The chair of the commission, Harvey Morrison assured “that he would not recommend that Negroes be allowed to use the pool under any circumstances.”⁴⁷

When black activists pressed the issues of the swimming pool, white liberals backed off quickly; some undoubtedly felt authentic revulsion at the thought of interracial swimming, while others found the campaign impolitic and untimely.⁴⁸ It became obvious that white liberals considered themselves the most appropriated strategists for the black freedom movement and conceded that the Negro leadership had made mistakes. Harry Golden, a white Jewish liberal from Charlotte, criticized the crusade as “unwise and unrealistic” and Williams’s “naïve...need for publicity” and his “stupid statement about the swimming pool. Let’s fight this school battle first.”⁴⁹ White liberals believed the swimming pool campaign to be a terrible political error, criticizing the branch leadership for not focusing on projects deemed more important and that could be more easily won, such as school integration. Unfortunately, Golden or any of the supposed white liberals showed no sign of understanding that black children were dying because they had no safe place to swim.

\$31,000 in local tax dollars, the Monroe Country Club offered league basketball, television, badminton, ping-pong, shuffleboard, volleyball, and boxing lessons—all funded by city tax dollars and all closed to African American children.

⁴⁷ Robert F. Williams statement, June 26, 1969, typescript in RFW/FBI; *Crusader* I, no. 2 (July 4, 1959): 2.

⁴⁸ Tyson, 85.

⁴⁹ Harry Golden, “Monroe, North Carolina, and the ‘Kissing Case,’” *Carolina Israelite*, January-February 1959, 2; Harry Golden to Kelly Alexander, December 18, 1958, box A92, group 3, NAACP

Almost immediately, Dr. Perry and Robert Williams led a contingent of eight black youths with bathing suits and towels to the country club swimming pool, where they demanded to swim. Refused admission, they conducted a brief “stand-in” protest near the gate, repeating the process several times. Angry whites immediately drew up a petition “asking that local Negro integrationists be forced to leave Monroe... The petition is aimed at Robert F. Williams, president, and Dr. A.E. Perry, vice president of the Monroe NAACP.”⁵⁰ The effort to drive the NAACP out of Monroe went well beyond petitions as James “Catfish” Cole led a KKK revival in nearby Salisbury. “A nigger who wants to go to a white swimming pool is not looking for a bath,” Cole told a crowd of 2,000 whites, “he is looking for a funeral.”⁵¹

Williams, Perry, and others were deluged with death threats and Williams began to strap his .45 automatic pistol, which was legal, making it clear that anyone who acted

Papers.

⁵⁰ *Monroe Enquirer*, November 11, 1957. Isaac S. London Collection, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.

⁵¹ Southern Regional Council, “North Carolina Ku Klux Klan Revival,” appendix, 1957, box 131, Fred Alexander Papers, Special Collections, Atkins Library, UNC Charlotte, Charlotte.

James “Catfish” Cole, a former Free Will Baptist tent evangelist from Marion, South Carolina, was leading a KKK revival in the Carolina piedmont. In a series of twenty rallies, beginning in 1956, several in Monroe and a dozen more within forty miles, Cole drew in crowds as many as 15,000 whites. After each rally and cross burning, dozens of carloads of Klansmen rode through the black community of Monroe, blowing their horns, throwing rocks and bottles, and firing pistol shots into the air. Chief of Police A.A. Mauney acknowledged to reporters that he led Ku Klux Klan motorcades through the black community, although he maintained that his squad car only accompanied the Klan to keep order.

On October 5, 1957, Catfish Cole’s Klan held a huge rally and afterwards a large, heavily armed motorcade roared to Dr. Perry’s place firing their guns at the house, but was met with disciplined gunfire from Williams and his men, who fired their weapons low, shooting from behind sandbag fortifications and earthen entrenchments. The Klan “hailed it and never did come back,” Woodrow Wilson recalled. “The Klans was low-down people what would do dirty things. But if they found out that you would do dirty things, too, then they’d let you alone. We shot it out with the Klan and repelled their

on those threats did so at his own peril.⁵² If the swimming pool incident had put off liberal whites, the necessity of what Williams called “armed self-reliance” sent them scampering. Williams constituency of working-class and retired veterans as NAACP members proved to be a pugnacious force, and unwilling to compromise equal protection under the law. “As long as I was talking, just merely talking,” Williams said, “I had lots of white liberal support, but when I actually started arming people and picking up guns, they said I had gone too far.”⁵³ Though, in truth, there were other reasons for the collapse of interracial liberalism in Union County. Steeped in racial prejudice, there seemed to be a backlash against those who organized and who participated alongside Williams. Mabel Williams, Robert’s wife, was sympathetic to the predicament of Ray Shute and the other white liberals who backed off when blacks prepared to fight back, but she did not hold them blameless. “It is now quite clear,” she wrote in 1959, that “many people in Monroe posed as liberals for the sake of appearing lettered.”⁵⁴

At the height of this moment, local events vaulted Williams into the national

attack.”

⁵² Harry G. Boyte to Truman Nelson, August 23, 1962, box 26, Boyte Family Papers, Special Collections, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

Harry G. Boyte, a white liberal who lived in nearby Matthews, North Carolina, wrote to a friend that had personally observed on several occasions cars full of young white “hoodlums” pass by Robert’s house and fire guns as they passed.

At first, Dr. Perry became the centralized focus of the white supremacist anger. The Klan, assuming that Perry had financed the chapter, blamed its resurgence on him and objected to the fact that Perry was Catholic. One night, while at a NAACP meeting, Perry’s wife called and told him that the Ku Klux Klan had threatened to blow up their house. While death threats were hardly unusual among black activists, “most of the guys left the meeting and went home and got their guns and went to his house,” Williams recalled. Defending the Perry family became a mission; building their own rifle range, accumulating ammunition, and training even his children how to use a gun, Williams organized the *Guard*, a rifle club of sixty men. Williams, interview with Cohen quoted in Tyson, 88.

⁵³ Harry Golden to Burton Wolfe, August 30, 1961, Robert Williams File, Harry Golden Papers,

spotlight. Williams accompanied a crowd of black women to the Union County courthouse where Lewis Medlin, a white mechanic, stood before the court accused of assault with intent to rape. Mary Ruth Reed, a black woman several months pregnant, “testified that Medlin came to the small sharecropper’s cabin while her husband was at work and tried to rape her in the presence of her five children.” Bribed with one-hundred dollars to drop the charges “...after my husband and I said we were going through with it,” she told Ted Poston of the *New York Post*, “we received threats that we would be forced to move out of our house and my husband would be fired from his job.”⁵⁵ Apparently, through a wiretap on Williams’s telephone, the FBI monitored the local NAACP’s branch president’s contact with the press. Local officials feared, according to the *Monroe Enquirer*, that Williams would somehow turn the case into “another cause celebre for exploitation by the Committee to Combat Racial Injustice (CCRI) and the NAACP.”⁵⁶ On May 5, 1959, after only a forty-five minute deliberation, the jury foreman announced that the jury, all twelve white men, had found Medlin not guilty of aggravated assault. The powerless fury of the moment resonated in William’s mind, perhaps the echo of a ten-year-old black boy helpless to intervene, and he turned to the UPI reporters who were present and declared that it was time to “meet violence with violence.”⁵⁷

Williams controversial outburst set in motion a political firestorm as his tirade continued,

Special Collections, Atkins Library, UNC Charlotte, Charlotte.

⁵⁴ Mabel Williams, “Looking Back,” *Crusader* I, no. 9 (August 22, 1959): 5.

⁵⁵ Ted Poston, “‘Equal Protection to the Law’ in a Carolina Town,” *New York Post*, 11 November 1958.

⁵⁶ State Bureau of investigation director Walter F. Anderson to Oscar L. Richardson, Attorney at Law, Monroe, N.C., April 1, 1959, “RE: State v. B.F. Shaw,” box 423, Hodges Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.

⁵⁷ U.S. Senate, *Testimony of Robert F. Williams*, pt. 2, 89-90.

“We must be willing to kill if necessary. We cannot take these people who do us injustice to the court and it become necessary to punish them ourselves. In the future we are going to have to try and convict these people on the spot. [These court decisions] open the way to real violence. We cannot rely on the law. We get no justice under the present system. If we feel that injustice is done, we must right them and there on the spot be prepared to inflict punishment on these people. I feel this is the only way of survival.”⁵⁸

When the words “meet violence with violence” arrived by courier at national NAACP headquarters in New York, Roy Wilkins, executive secretary for the national office, immediately telephoned Robert Williams and recorded their conversation. Before the day was over, Wilkins dispatched a telegram to Williams suspending the branch president from his post as an official of the NAACP.⁵⁹ The fact that many black Monroe citizens were already prepared to meet violence with violence does not mean, however, that it was popular or prudent for Williams to proclaim so. His declaration alienated many of his allies, some of who made the point that it was the political effect of such remarks, not their practical or philosophical merit that concerned them.

Williams, quickly scrutinized by national NAACP leaders for his statements that were broadcast through newspapers, radio, and television, seemed unsympathetic to the concerns of his defiance. While Williams spoke, and was identified, as president of the Union County chapter of the NAACP, there was little hope of conveying the distinction

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “Text of telegram from NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins to Robert Williams, president of branch in Monroe, North Carolina, May 6, 1959,” box A333, group 3, NAACP Papers.

Operating for principle, not profit, Roy Wilkins declared, “What the Negro in America wants is to establish his status as a citizen... We don’t hate the Southern white people. There’s no malice. But the Negro has taken all he can. Now he wants what’s due to him.” Reflecting the mission of the NAACP that staunchly went against Williams’ ideology of self-defense, the tone in Mr. Wilkin’s voice clearly illustrates the frustration, rage, and yearning held by even the most passive of African Americans. Finch, *The NAACP, Its Fight for Justice*, 171.

that he was not speaking for the NAACP. Roy Wilkins declared, “You know, of course, that it is not the policy of the NAACP to advocate meeting lynching with lynching.” Williams declared his sentiment once more, “This is not an organization speaking...I am giving my opinion and the opinion of other people I know—people in the community and the feelings of the community. I am speaking for Robert Williams. I will do my best to clarify it.”⁶⁰ While several black newspaper editors in the south supported Williams without endorsing his rhetoric, Thurgood Marshall encouraged the FBI to investigate Williams because he “will seek to arouse the people in the North Carolina area to take action which could become violent and cause racial unrest and tension.”⁶¹ The controversy revealed considerable support for Williams and his sense of truth that the brutal realities and frustrated hopes of the late 1950s drove many black Southerners to ponder both defensive and sometimes even retaliatory violence.

The changing tactics advocated by Williams and increasingly radical insurgents during the late 1950s came to be viewed as threatening by the nation’s political elite as local branches across the United States began to defend the substance of Williams’s statements.⁶² The NAACP suspended Williams for advocating violence because this was not seen as a means for the solution of the race problem and that the NAACP was against Negroes using violence as a means of self-defense. Moving from a position of strict adherence to nonviolence, to the justification of self-defense, many prominent activists ultimately came in conflict with whether violent insurrection was a viable tactic in the ongoing struggle. Williams’s militant philosophy and the momentum for the rights of

⁶⁰ “Telephone conversation between Mr. Roy Wilkins in New York, New York and Mr. Robert Williams in Monroe, North Carolina, May 6, 1959, 11:04am,” *ibid.*

⁶¹ Thurgood Marshall, Federal Bureau of Investigation Subject File, no. 100-111437.

racial equality, however, “evoked the enmity of most of the so-called black establishment.”

Robert Williams was suspended from his position as president on May 5, 1959 and six months later was removed from the branch entirely. Developing into a national debate, Williams departed from his post with these last words,

“I don’t want to leave the impression that I am against the NACCP; on the contrary I think it’s an important weapon in the freedom struggle and I want to strengthen it. I don’t think they should be worrying about Cuba when there is plenty to worry about in our country. They know, as I know, the extent to which the state governments and the Federal government ignored our appeals for help and protection.”⁶³

Though Williams removal did not detour him from active protest in Monroe, leading student sit-in protests, a national debate against Reverend King and his passive resistance to violence, and an ongoing battle with the KKK. This continuing conflict included another attack by the KKK on the black community in Monroe. The tables had once turned and in the streets an angry mob of blacks “had this white couple and they had them surrounded.” Williams began fighting the crowd and made it clear that he would not permit violence against the Stegalls.⁶⁴ It is not clear why Williams saved this couple from the mob, but his act of compassion would permit accusations of kidnapping. As sporadic assaults in the streets continued through the night, National Guard caravans and state troopers with machine guns surrounded Williams’ home. Williams escaped and

⁶² Tyson, 153.

⁶³ Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 72.

⁶⁴ Andrew Myers, “When Violence Met Violence: Facts and Images of Robert F. Williams and the Black Freedom Struggle in Monroe, North Carolina.” M.A. thesis, University of Virginia, 1993.

The Stegalls, like most white Southerners, felt at ease with their black neighbors only in paternalistic relationships of black deference and white supremacy. Their only other easily imaginable cross-racial encounters evoked frightening images of black savagery. “It was terrible,” Mrs. Stegall said later. “They were like a bunch of wild animals.” Ibid.

was soon wanted for interstate flight to avoid kidnapping charges.⁶⁵

“Why do I speak to you from exile,” Williams wrote from Cuba, “because a Negro community in the South took up guns in self-defense against racist violence—and used them. I am held responsible for this action, that for the first time in history American Negroes have armed themselves as a group, to defend their homes, their wives, their children, in a situation where law and order had broken down, where the authorities could not, or rather would not, enforce their duty to protect Americans from a lawless mob.”⁶⁶ Williams, pictured on F.B.I most wanted flyers, accepted this responsibility and was proud of it. He asserted the rights of Negroes with his dramatic confrontation with white supremacy, (to not only meet the violence of such groups as the Ku Klux Klan by armed self-defense, but act upon it.) “It has always been an accepted right of Americans...that where the law is unable, or unwilling, to enforce order, the citizens can, and must, act in self-defense against lawless violence. I believe this right holds for black Americans as well as whites.”⁶⁷ His defiance and that of Monroe citizens turned activists, testifies to the fact that throughout the civil rights era black Southerners stood prepared to defend home and family by force.

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⁶⁵ Tyson, 282-286.

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