

Robert F. Williams and Black Power in North Carolina ^[1]

Leadership and Sacrifice

By Sarajane Davis, North Carolina Government & Heritage Library, 2020

How did Robert F. Williams's childhood in Monroe, North Carolina shape his political beliefs? How did Williams time in Detroit and the military impact his political activism?

Robert F. Williams was born in 1925 about 30 miles south of Charlotte in Monroe, North Carolina. His family had a legacy of political activism and a strong belief in self-defense. When he was eleven years old, Williams witnessed racial violence and police brutality. His family background and childhood experiences shaped his life-long political beliefs and activism. Williams grew up hearing stories of how African Americans fought for freedom and dignity.

The Great Migration refers to the mass movement of African Americans away from the South. Many of the people who left went to California, the Midwest, and northern cities for better jobs. Some were also looking for more educational opportunities. All were ready to escape Jim Crow segregation and racial violence. Robert Williams was one of these people. He moved to Detroit during World War II. He worked at the Ford Motor Company while he lived there. In 1944 he was drafted into the military. He served in the Marines for a year and a half before returning to North Carolina.

Back in North Carolina, Williams resumed his political activity. He participated in the armed self-defense movement. His military training shaped his belief that Black veterans had a special role to play in the African American freedom struggle. By 1949 Williams was back in the North. For the next few years, Williams used his GI Bill benefits to pay for college. Williams studied poetry and psychology at multiple universities. He moved around from West Virginia State University to Johnson C. Smith College until 1953. When his benefits ran out that year he re-enlisted in the military. The Marines discharged Williams in 1955.

Why did Williams stop working with the NAACP? What was the main goal Williams sought? Who resisted the movement Williams was leading and why? Where did Williams seek refuge after leaving North Carolina?

The media coverage created tension between Williams and the national NAACP leadership. The tension stemmed from concern over Williams's international supporters and his advocacy of armed self-defense. Williams's personal experiences of racial violence led him to believe that non-violence was not an effective strategy. By the early 1960s Williams was no longer working with the NAACP and focused on building the local movement in Monroe. He even restarted the newspaper his grandfather published before he was born. *The Crusader*, was an African American political newspaper. The primary goal that motivated Williams was to end all forms of racial discrimination.

In 1961 the Freedom Rides came to Monroe, North Carolina. Violence broke out when a white mob attacked the Freedom Riders. Williams was falsely accused of kidnapping a white couple who sought protection in his home as threats of violence spread across Monroe. He was forced to flee with his family to New York City, then Canada, before landing in Cuba.

In Cuba, Williams launched his "Radio Free Dixie" show. The radio program ran from 1961 to 1964 and was broadcast across the United States. Williams continued to advocate for armed self-defense. And he encouraged people to get more involved with the freedom struggle. He greatly influenced the next generation of activists. He also contributed to the freedom movement by bringing increased international attention. He affirmed African Americans' right to physical protection. And he added a sense of urgency to the freedom movement.

Concluding questions:

- *How are Williams's political beliefs similar or different from other Civil Rights and Black Power figures who are more well known?*
- *What kind of podcast or radio program would you create and what issues would you discuss?*

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Telegram from Robert F. Williams to Martin Luther, King, Jr. on May 31, 1961^[15]
The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University

Black Power^[16]
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Primary Sources Related to the Black Power Movement^[17]
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