

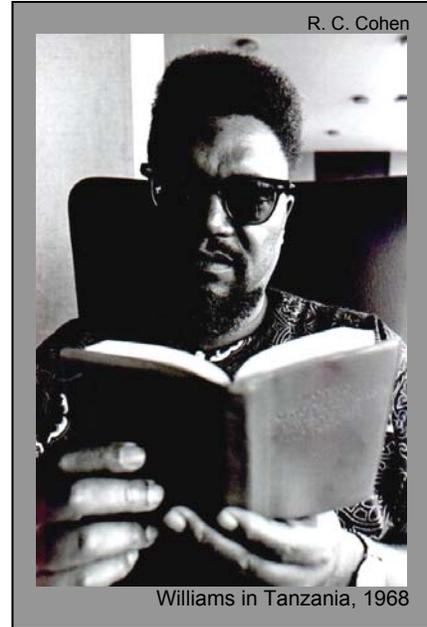


# Robert F. Williams

## Negroes With Guns

### 1962, Ch. 3-5

Robert F. Williams was born and raised in Monroe, North Carolina. After serving in the Marine Corps in the 1950s, he returned to Monroe and in 1956 assumed leadership of the nearly defunct local NAACP chapter; within six months its membership grew from six to two-hundred. Many of the new members were, like him, military veterans trained in the use of arms. In the late 1950s the unwillingness of Southern officials to address white violence against blacks made it increasingly difficult for the NAACP to keep all of its local chapters committed to non-violence. In 1959, after three white men were acquitted of assaulting black women in Monroe, Williams publicly proclaimed the right of African Americans to armed self-defense. The torrent of criticism this statement brought down on the NAACP prompted its leaders — including Thurgood Marshall, Roy Wilkins, and Martin Luther King, Jr. — to denounce Williams. The NAACP eventually suspended him, but he continued to make his case for self-defense.



### Chapter 3: The Struggle for Militancy in the NAACP

Until my statement hit the national newspapers the national office of the NAACP had paid little attention to us. We had received little help from them in our struggles and our hour of need. Now they lost no time. The very next morning I received a long distance telephone call from the national office wanting to know if I had been quoted correctly. I told them that I had. They said the NAACP was not an organization of violence. I explained that I knew that it was not an organization of violence. They said that I had made violent statements. I replied that I made these statements as Robert Williams, not as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They said that because I was an official of the organization anything that I said would be considered NAACP policy, that we were too close together. I asked them why if we were so close together they hadn't come to my rescue all this time when I had been the unemployed victim of the Klan's economic pressure and when I had had all of my insurance canceled as a poor insurance risk. I asked them why they didn't then consider our closeness.

#### Suspension, Distortion and Re-election

In the next few hours Roy Wilkins of the NAACP suspended me from office. I didn't learn about it from the national office. I first heard of it when Southern radio stations announced and kept repeating every thirty minutes that the NAACP had suspended me for advocating violence because this was not a means for the solution of the race problem and that the NAACP was against Negroes using violence as a means of self-defense.

Our Union County NAACP was one of the few interracial branches in the South. We had some white pacifist members, and when I was suspended they sent a telegram to the national office stating that they were white Southerners and that they were pacifists, but they protested my suspension on the ground that they understood the problems in the community and that the national office did not. This telegram was never made public by the NAACP. And not a single paper ever printed the fact that ours was an interracial branch and that even Southern white pacifists supported my position.

Nevertheless, this all developed into a national debate. We found out that there was no provision in the NAACP constitution to justify or authorize this hypocritical action by Roy Wilkins. I demanded some sort of hearing. Wilkins turned the matter over to the NAACP's paternalistic Committee on Branches, and in New York City on June 3, 1959, they conducted what turned out to be a trial where I fought the suspension. The committee ruled that I was to be suspended for six months' time, after which I would automatically be reinstated.

I didn't think of doing anything more about the suspension; there was a more important matter at hand. As a result of the trial I was more convinced than ever that one of our greatest and most immediate needs was better communication within the race. The real Afro-American struggle was merely a disjointed network of pockets of resistance and the shameful thing about it was that Negroes were relying upon the white man's inaccurate reports as their sources of information about these isolated struggles. I went home and concentrated all of my efforts into developing a newsletter that would in accurate and no uncertain terms inform both Negroes and whites of Afro-American liberation struggles taking place in the United States and about the particular struggle we were constantly fighting in Monroe. The first Issue of *The Crusader* came off the mimeograph machine June 26, 1959.

Then at the last minute I decided to appeal the committee's decision to the NAACP's 50th National Convention which was meeting in New York that July. The national office found it necessary to issue a special convention pamphlet attacking me. This pamphlet tried to confuse my demand that Negroes meet violence with violence as a means of self-defense with the advocacy of lynch law. In its own way the national office contributed to the erroneous impression played up by the racist press that I was agitating for race war and the indiscriminate slaughter of white people.

My suspension was upheld by the convention delegates, many of whom either felt or were pressured into seeing the vote as a question of publicly supporting or disavowing the NAACP national leadership. But on the real issue at hand, delegate sentiment forced the national leadership to support the concept of self-defense. The preamble to the resolutions passed by that convention read, ". . . we do not deny but reaffirm the right of an individual and collective self-defense against unlawful assaults."

While I was suspended, the people in my branch voted to make my wife president to serve in my place. And at the end of the six months, instead of going back into office automatically, I held an election because I didn't want the NAACP national office to think that they were doing me any special favor. We had the election and I was re-elected unanimously.

The national office of the NAACP was determined to keep within the good graces of a lot of the influential Northern whites who were disturbed by our militancy. They maintained an indifferent attitude to our branch. We had a charter and that was all. We were unable to secure assistance from them in any of our school integration cases and our sit-in cases.

In 1960 we started a sit-in campaign. We became the thirteenth town in North Carolina to start sit-in demonstrations. Though the NAACP wasn't taking notice, our sit-ins proved that self-defense and non-violence could be successfully combined. There was less violence in the Monroe sit-ins than in any other sit-ins in the South. In other communities there were Negroes who had their skulls fractured, but not a single demonstrator was even spat upon during our sit-ins. We had less violence because we had shown the willingness and readiness to fight and defend ourselves. We didn't appear on the streets of Monroe as beggars depending upon the charity and generosity of white supremacists. We appeared as people with strength, and it was to the *mutual* advantage of all parties concerned that peaceful relations be maintained.

While the demonstrations were taking place I was arrested and finally sentenced to serve thirty days on the chain gang. The NAACP was supposed to handle my case. They handled it up to the State Supreme Court, but then they dropped my case from appeal without telling me and with only a few days left in which to file an appeal. I discovered this through the newspapers because my case had been consolidated with that of seven students from Chapel Hill, N.C. The newspapers listed the names of the defendants whose NAACP lawyers had filed appeals and I was the only one in the group whose name did not appear.

I appealed to the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. They took my case up and filed an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

#### “A Letter from De Boss”

All this did not mean that the NAACP national office was short on advice. While they did not feel responsible enough to take the appeal to higher courts, they did feel responsible enough to send me a letter upon my return from Cuba in the summer of 1960. I subsequently made two trips to Cuba.

My experiences in Monroe and with the NAACP which had resulted in launching *The Crusader* were also sharpening my awareness of the struggles of Negroes in every part of the world, how they were treated, their victories and their defeats. It was clear from the first days that Afro-Cubans were part of the Cuban revolution on a basis of complete equality and my trips confirmed this fact. A Negro, for example, was head of the Cuban armed forces and no one could hide that fact from us here in America. To me this revolution was a real thing, not one of those phony South American palace revolutions. There was a real drive to bring social justice to all the Cubans, including the black ones. Beginning late in 1959 I had begun to run factual articles about Cuba in *The Crusader*, pointing up the racial equality that existed there. The articles seem to have stirred up the national office for they sent me a letter which included statements such as these:

“. . . I wonder, however, whether you are fully aware of the dangers and disadvantages of the course of action you seem to favor. I have followed closely the events in Cuba in recent months and in particular, Dr. Castro’s visit to the United Nations this fall. Regardless of the merits of the Cuban cause I was greatly disturbed by the frequent show of insincerity which, I believe, should give you food for thought before you find yourself used as just another pawn in the present unfortunate feud between Cuba and our country.

“. . . It is a callous interference in a native American problem and should be recognized as such by anyone in a responsible position of leadership in the American Negro movement.

“. . . the present Cuban attempts to endear themselves to American Negroes are obviously caused by ulterior motives. (Let me just ask you how the American Negro tourist would feel in Cuba at the constant chant of ‘Cuba si, Yanqui no!’)

“. . . Are you willing to forsake the important support of that section of the people who are equally opposed to suppression of Negro rights in our country?

“. . . Does not the unfortunate example of the great American Negro singer Paul Robeson<sup>1</sup> show you the dangers and mistakes of the road which you seem to be choosing? What has Paul Robeson with all his greatness done for the American Negro in his present struggle for equality: The answer, regrettable as it is, must be: Nothing.”

These excerpts were reprinted in *The Crusader* and replied to in this way:

“Only a fool or a mercenary hypocrite could muster the gall to call a nation and its great leader insincere in dealing with the captive blacks of North America when in the course of their daily lives they display the greatest measure of racial equality and social justice in the world today. It is certainly a first magnitude truism that social justice starts at home and spreads abroad. In past months I have twice been to Cuba and there is nothing insincere about my being made to feel that I was a member of the human race for the first time in my life. If this is America’s idea of insincerity, then heaven help this nation to become insincere like Fidel Castro and Free Cuba in granting persons of African descent entrance into the human race.

“As for my being ‘used as a pawn in the struggle of Cuba’ against imperialist and racist North

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Robeson (1898-1976): an African American actor, professional athlete, international concert singer, and later civil rights activist. Robeson travelled to Soviet Russia and other nations in the 1930s and 1940s, often speaking against segregation and the treatment of blacks in America. White politicians and officials, including Sen. Joseph McCarthy, sought to limit his activism, and in 1950 the U.S. government revoked his passport, thereby forbidding him to travel outside the U.S. In 1958 the U.S. Supreme Court decided (in *Kent v. Dulles*, a case unrelated to Robeson) that the U.S. State Department could not restrict a citizen’s right to travel based on his or her political views. Robeson’s career, however, had been permanently damaged by the campaign against his activism.

America, I prefer to be on the side of right than on the side of Jim Crow and oppression. I prefer to be used as an instrument to convey the truth of a people who respect the rights of man, rather than to be used as an Uncle Tom whitewasher of black oppression and injustice and an apologist for America's hypocrisy. Cuba's aversion for America's inhumanity to man is not an interference in a 'native American problem.' It is common knowledge that the master race of the 'free world' is out to export North American manufactured racism. Racism in the U.S.A. is as much a world problem as was Nazism. If the U.S.A. is to be the only nation exempt from the Human Rights Charter of the United Nations, then that august body is a party to the great transgressions against America's captive people. I, for one, refuse to remain silent and cooperate with the very force that is seeking after my destruction.

"The racists in America are the most brutal people on earth. It is foolhardy for an oppressed Afro-American to take the attitude that we should keep this life-death struggle a family affair. We are the oppressed, it is only natural for us to air our grievances at home and abroad. This race fight in the U.S.A. is no more a fight to be fought just by Americans than is the fight for black liberation to be conducted by colored only. Any struggle for freedom in the world today affects the stability of the whole society of man. Why would you make our struggle an exception?"

"I am not afraid of alienating white friends of our liberation movement. If they really believe in freedom they will not resent deviation from the old worn path that has led us in fruitless circles. If they are insincere they are no more than Trojan horses infiltrating our ranks to strike us a treacherous, nefarious blow on behalf of those and that which they pretend to detest. For if they resent our becoming truly liberated, they will detest us for not following their misguidance and skillful subterfuge designed to prevent our arrival to the promised land. They speak much of tolerance, but they display unlimited intolerance toward those Afro-Americans who refuse to become their puppets and yes-man Uncle Toms.

"It is strange that I am asked how a 'Negro' American tourist would feel in Cuba hearing the constant chant of 'Cuba Si, Yanqui No!' No one has bothered to ask how it feels to constantly face 'White Only' signs. These signs mean 'White yes, Colored no!' No one has asked me how it feels to be marched under guard with felons along a public street to jail for sitting on a 'white only' stool. On hearing, 'Cuba Si, Yanqui No!' and having lived all of my life under American oppression, I was emotionally moved to join the liberation chorus. I knew it didn't apply to me because the white Christians of the 'free world' have excluded me from everything 'yanqui.'

"You make a cardinal mistake when you fail to give the great Paul Robeson credit for making a great contribution to the American 'Negro' struggle. Paul Robeson is living proof that the Afro-American need not look upon the United States as 'Nigger heaven' and the last stop for us on this earth. Paul is living proof that other civilized societies honor and respect black people for the things that 'Free America' curses, oppresses and starves for. Paul has proven that all black men are not for sale for thirty pieces of silver. He has lit a candle that many of the new generation will follow.

"Yes, wherever there is oppression in the world today, it is the concern of the entire race. My cause is the same as the Asians against the imperialist. It is the same as the African against the white savage. It is the same as Cuba against the white supremacist imperialist. When I become a part of the mainstream of American life, based on universal justice, then and then only can I see a possible mutual cause for unity against outside interference."

I don't want to leave the impression that I am against the NAACP; 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.

### **Hypocrisy and Run-around**

After we closed the pool, as I've already described, the racists in Monroe went wild. On that same day, after we had gone home, a mob dragged a colored man from his car and took him out into the woods



meaningful as possible. We felt that the single issue of the swimming pool was too narrow for our needs, that what we needed was a broad program with special attention to jobs, welfare, and other economic needs.

I think this was an important step forward. The struggles of the Freedom Riders and the Sit-in Movements have concentrated on a single goal: the right to eat at a lunch counter, the right to sit anywhere on a bus. These are important rights because their denial is a direct personal assault on a Negro's dignity. It is important for the racists to maintain these peripheral forms of segregation. They establish an atmosphere that supports a system. By debasing and demoralizing the black man in small personal matters, the system eats away the sense of dignity and pride which are necessary to challenge a racist system. But the fundamental core of racism is more than atmosphere — it can be measured in dollars and cents and unemployment percentages. We therefore decided to present a program that ranged from the swimming pool to jobs.

### **The Monroe Program**

On Aug. 15, 1961, on behalf of our Chapter I presented to the Monroe Board of Aldermen a ten point program that read as follows:

#### *PETITION*

We, the undersigned citizens of Monroe, petition the City Board of Aldermen to use its influence to endeavor to:

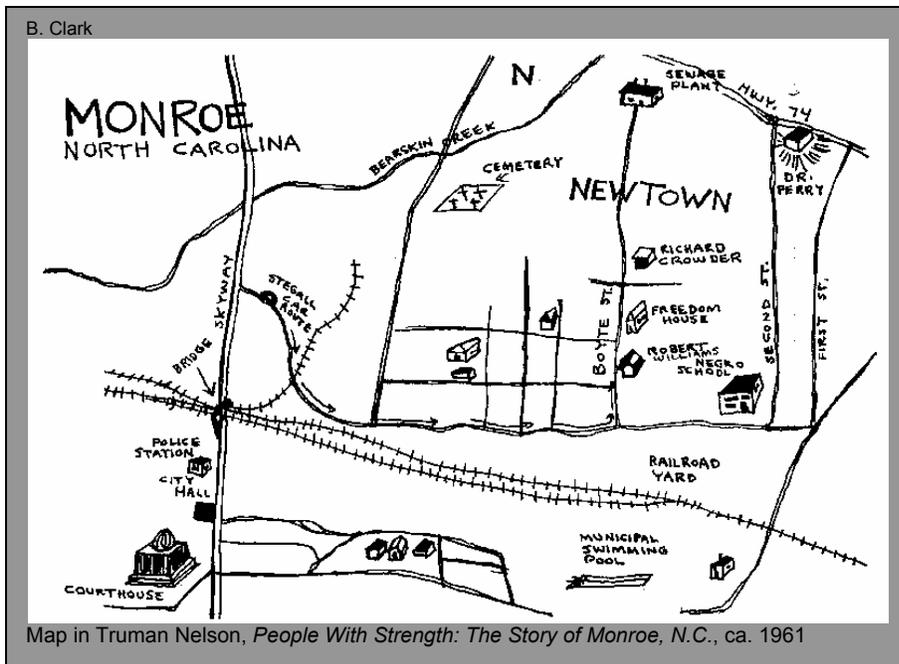
1. Induce factories in this county to hire without discrimination.
2. Induce the local employment agency to grant non-whites the same privileges given to whites.
3. Instruct the Welfare Agency that non-whites are entitled to the same privileges, courtesies and consideration given to whites.
4. Construct a swimming pool in the Winchester Avenue area of Monroe.
5. Remove all signs in the city of Monroe designating one area for colored and another for whites.
6. Instruct the Superintendent of Schools that he must prepare to desegregate the city school no later than 1962.
7. Provide adequate transportation for all school children.
8. Formally request the State Medical Board to permit Dr. Albert E. Perry, Jr., to practice medicine in Monroe and Union County.
9. Employ Negroes in skilled or supervisory capacities in the City Government.
10. ACT IMMEDIATELY on all of these proposals and inform the committee and the public of your actions.

(signed)

Robert F. Williams  
Albert E. Perry, Jr., M.D.  
John W. McDow

Our demands for equal employment rights were the most important of the ten points. Many plants were moving in from the North — runaway industry from the North moving to avoid labor unions, seeking low-priced workers in the South. They received considerable tax-supported concessions from the local Industrial Development Commission and they didn't hire any Negroes. In fact, local bigoted officials had done everything in their power to prevent Negroes from obtaining employment. They had even gone so far as to stipulate that the new industries could not hire Afro-Americans if they expected the special concessions made possible through the taxation of us all. This amounted to taxation without representation and it was one of our biggest complaints.

As a result of this racist policy, out of approximately 3,000 Afro-Americans in Monroe, there are 1,000 unemployed — persons unable to obtain jobs even as janitors, maids and porters. And maids and porters, when employed, earn at most \$15 for a six-day week. One of the few kinds of work available, cotton picking, pays all of \$2.50 for 100 pounds of picked cotton; at breakneck speed it takes a long day,



much more than eight hours, to pick 150 pounds. Virtually every Negro high school and college graduate in Monroe has to leave to find employment. This is not true of the white graduates. Negroes are even laid off in the summer so white college youth can work at home. Meanwhile, each summer our street corners are crowded with colored youths just out of school. They have no means of gainful employment or wholesome recreation.

For reasons such as these we believe that the

basic ill is an economic ill, our being denied the right to have a decent standard of living.

### The Freedom Riders Come to Monroe

We had planned to put picket lines around the county courthouse to draw attention to our program and to apply pressure for its achievement. At this time seventeen Freedom Riders came to our support, perhaps the first time that they engaged in a struggle over such fundamental demands as our program presented. Hitherto, as I've said, the goals were peripheral and while important, amenable to small compromises. For example, we had won integration in the public library. On these peripheral matters, leaders of the Sit-In Movements can meet with city and state officials and win concessions. I believe this is an important part of the overall Negro struggle. But when these concessions are used for propaganda by negro "leaders" as examples of the marvelous progress the Afro-American is supposedly making, thereby shifting attention from the basic evils, such victories cease to be even peripheral and become self-defeating. When we tackle basic evils, however, the racists won't give an inch. This, I think, is why the Freedom Riders who came to Monroe met with such naked violence and brutality. That and the pledge of non-violence.

The Freedom Riders reflected an attitude of certain Negro leaders who said that I had mishandled the situation and that they would show us how to get victory without violence. With them came the Reverend Paul Brooks, sent by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., to act as a "trouble-shooter" for the Freedom Riders, should the need arise, and to work with the community, helping it to develop non-violence techniques and tactics. I disagreed with their position but was more than willing to cooperate. The community rented a house for them which was christened "Freedom House" in their honor. They were joined by some of our militant youth who had participated in the picket lines around the swimming pool the previous month. Together they formed the Monroe Non-Violent Action Committee.

Although I myself would not take the non-violent oath, I asked the people of the community to support them and their non-violent campaign. Monroe students took the non-violent oath, promising to adhere to the non-violent discipline, which, along with other principles, prohibited self-defense. I also stated that if they could show me any gains won from the racists by non-violent methods, I too would become a pacifist.

At the same time, several observers were in Monroe to see for themselves what so-called democracy was like in Union County. We knew that people living in other sections of the country and other countries

of the world would find it hard to believe that such vicious racist conditions, such brutality and ruthlessness, existed in the United States especially in such a “progressive” Southern state as North Carolina was supposed to be. So we encouraged these visits. Julian Mayfield, the young Afro-American novelist and an old friend of Monroe, was there. A young exchange student, Constance Lever of Durham, England, was a guest at our house along with Mrs. Mae Mallory, who had been active in the movement for true integration in her own city, New York.

When the Monroe Non-Violent Action Committee set up its picket line on the first day, the Freedom Riders seemed convinced they were making real progress. One Freedom Rider even returned from the line overjoyed. He said, “You know, a policeman smiled at me in town today while I was on the line.” I laughed and told him not to pay that any attention because the policeman was probably smiling at the thought of how best to kill him. Constance, the English exchange student, had joined the picket line. She said, “Oh, I don’t think these people are so bad. I just think you don’t know how to approach them. I noticed that they looked at me in a friendly way in town today. I tried to explain to her that these people were trying to win her and the others over in the hope that they would leave Monroe. The day that these people realized that they couldn’t win the Freedom Riders over, they would show their true nature. A few days later, Constance Lever was arrested by the Monroe police and charged with “incitement to riot.”

### **The Racists Act by Violence**

It was on the third day that the townspeople started insulting the pickets and their politeness turned to viciousness. A policeman knocked one picket to the ground and threatened to break his camera. Another was arrested and all the time the white crowd heckled. When one of the white Freedom Riders smiled back at the hecklers, two of Monroe’s “pure white flowers” spit in his face. Tensions continued to mount.

On the fourth day a white Freedom Rider was attacked on the street in town and beaten by three whites. The police broke this up and promised to arrest the white people who had attacked this Freedom Rider. So the Freedom Riders kept on thinking there was a possibility that the law would be on their side because they had publicly proclaimed themselves to be non-violent. I told them it was all right for them to be pacifists but they shouldn’t proclaim this to the world because they were just inviting full-scale violent attack. In the past we hadn’t had any victims of the type of violence they were beginning to experience because we had shown a willingness to fight. We had had picket lines and sit-ins and nobody had successfully attacked our lines. But they said they were struggling from a moral point of view.

### **“Ain’t You Dead Yet?”**

That night the Freedom Riders went for a ride into Mecklenburg County across the line and stopped at a restaurant. There they were recognized and attacked by white racists. In the scramble one of the Freedom Riders could escape only by running into the woods; the others had to flee in the car, leaving him behind. We notified the Monroe city police, our county police, the Charlotte police, and the Mecklenburg County police that a Freedom Rider was in the woods, missing, and the racists were trying to catch him. We were afraid he would be lynched. We asked them to intercede. The Monroe police refused. The Union County police refused.

Rev. Brooks called the Governor’s office. Governor Terry Sanford was out, they said. But Rev. Brooks got an opportunity to speak to the Governor’s chief aide, Hugh B. Cannon, and complained to him about the lack of police protection for the Freedom Riders. The Governor’s aide kept talking about Robert Williams. Rev. Brooks said he was not calling about Robert Williams; he was calling about a missing Freedom Rider. He said that they were pacifists, non-violent people, and wanted police protection. The Governor’s aide, Hugh B. Cannon, replied, ‘If you’re a real pacifist you had better get the hell out of Monroe, man, because there’s going to be plenty of violence there.’

Rev. Brooks kept trying to appeal to him for police protection but finally gave up. He said, “Since you’re talking about Robert Williams so much, he’s right here. Do you want to talk to him?” The Governor’s aide said, Yes.

Cannon and I had talked about two weeks before when I had asked for state police protection. Instead

the Governor had sent an Uncle Tom representative named Dr. Larkins, who is supposed to be the Governor's troubleshooter. He came and held a secret meeting with me to find out what it would take to quiet things down. I gave him the ten-point program and it shocked him. He said that it was too much, that the demands were too high, but he would take it up with the Governor anyway. And he said that, well, he understood I had been undergoing economic pressure and that this was wrong and that maybe I could get a job, that maybe the state could help me if we just didn't start any trouble around here.

When I called back the Governor's office and told Hugh B. Cannon about this bribe attempt, he replied, "You mean to tell me that you're not dead yet?" And I told him, "No, I'm not dead, not yet, but when I die a lot of people may die with me." So he said, "Well, you may not be dead, but you're going to get killed." I kept telling him that we wanted protection, trying to avoid bloodshed. He said, "If you're trying to avoid bloodshed you shouldn't be agitating."

### **The Governor and the FBI**

So this Friday night, when Rev. Paul Brooks finished talking to Hugh B. Cannon and he said he wanted to talk to me, I got on the phone and told him what had happened. He said, "Well, you're getting just what you deserve down there. You've been asking for violence, now you're getting it." I told him that I wasn't appealing to him for myself. I was appealing to him for a pacifist. And I told him, "Besides, I'm not appealing to you for a Negro; this happens to be a white boy who's lost in the woods." He said, "I don't give a damn who he is. You asked for violence and now you're getting it, see; you're getting just what you deserved." So I told him, "Do you know one thing . . . you are the biggest fool in the whole world!" [Ellipsis in original] He became infuriated and started raging on the telephone and told me to shut up. I told him that he may be the Governor's assistant but he couldn't tell me to shut up. He said, "If you don't stop talking to me like that I'll hang up." And he finally hung up. No protection came.

Each time the Freedom Riders would get ready to go on the picket line they would call the FBI in Charlotte and ask for protection. The FBI would say, "We're on our way." But they would never be there when anything happened. On Saturday when the Freedom Riders were picketing in town and the taxicabs that had been transporting them to the line had started out to pick them up, the local white racists gathered together and blocked the road. This meant the Freedom Riders had to walk back to the colored community which was almost a mile away. The mob followed the Freedom Riders along the streets, throwing stones at them and threatening to kill them. When they came into the colored community, the colored people who were not participating in the picket line became very upset that our community had been invaded by a mob chasing Freedom Riders. Many of the colored people started stoning cars and beating back the white racists.



## **Chapter 5: Self-Defense Prevents a Pogrom:<sup>2</sup> Racists Engineer a Kidnapping Frameup**



Sunday morning the chief of police and his men drove through the county urging whites to come to town to fight the Freedom Riders. In addition, people were coming in from other counties and from South Carolina. An organization called the Minute Men had brought people in.

By afternoon thousands of white racists had gathered in town, concentrating at the courthouse square. At 4 o'clock James Forman, one of the picket captains, called my home requesting four taxicabs within the hour. He said that the racists were threatening to assault the line and complained of police indifference. Forman was to end up in jail with a split head one hour later.

At 4:30 the Negro cab company called to report that they couldn't get through to the picketers because

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<sup>2</sup> Pogrom: organized persecution and massacre of a minority group (especially applied to massacres of Jews in Tsarist Russia before 1917).

every entrance into town was blocked off. Minutes later a couple of cars driven by our people came racing into the neighborhood. They had just made it in from town to report that the mob had started to attack the picket line, shots had been fired and the town was in the grip of a full-scale riot.

When the self-defense guard, which up to now had stayed away from the courthouse square, heard that the lives of the Freedom Riders and local non-violent youth were in danger, they jumped into their cars and rode into town, breaking through the mob's blockade to rescue the picketers. Julian Mayfield went with them.

The white mob was already armed. The police disarmed some of the men attempting to rescue the Freedom Riders and turned these additional weapons over to the mob. Firing broke out at the picket line when the police and the mob tried to prevent the English exchange student from getting into one of the rescue cars driven by three armed Negroes. The police held Negroes while white racists beat them up. At first the victims were all Freedom Riders and the local non-violent students, but soon Negroes were attacked indiscriminately as the mob fanned out all over town. They were massing for an attack against our community.

### We Aim for Self-Defense

So many Freedom Riders and Negroes were arrested that many prisoners with legitimate charges against them were released from jail to make room. Many of these people who came out of jail reported to me that students were bleeding to death there without any medical attention. I called the chief of police and told him that I had reports that the students were not getting medical attention and that their lives were in danger. I told him I would give him just thirty

minutes to get medical attention for them and that if they didn't receive medical aid within thirty minutes, we would march on the jail. About fifteen minutes later James Forman called from the hospital to let me know that they were receiving medical care. Just after that, Julian Mayfield returned and reported that members of the white mob, which now included some uniformed police, were near the railroad tracks and firing down at Negroes who had fled town. At the approach of darkness, white people started driving through our community,

shouting and screaming. Some fired out of their cars and threw objects at people on the streets. Many of the colored people started arming, exchanging guns, borrowing ammunition and forming guards for the night to defend the community from the mob massing in town. On the block where I live there were about 300 people milling around the street.

About 6 o'clock in the evening a white couple, Mr. And Mrs. Bruce Stegall, came riding through our neighborhood. They were recognized as people who had driven through town the day before with a banner on their car announcing an "Open Season On Coons." It meant that this was killing time.



John H. Williams, Lorraine Williams Garlington, Edward Williams, and Dr. Albert E. Perry in the Perry living room, Monroe, North Carolina

People have asked why a racist would take his wife into a riot-torn community like ours on that Sunday. But this is nothing new to those who know the nature of Klan raiding. Many Southern racists consider white women a form of insulation because of the old tradition that a Negro is supposed to be intimidated by a white woman and will not dare to offend her. White women are taken along on Klan raids so that if anything develops into a fight it will appear that the Negro attacked a woman and the Klansman will of course be her protector. Mrs. Stegall was brought along as insulation by her husband. They were trying to see what defenses we were preparing for that night.

The Negroes out on the street were raging. Some of them had been beaten in town. Some of their children were missing and some children were in jail. As soon as the Stegalls' car entered our street it was recognized and stopped at gunpoint less than a block away from my house. I was in the house at the time receiving telephone calls from all over town: calls from parents crying about their children who had participated in this demonstration; calls from Negroes reporting that they were beaten and asking what should be done, what action to take; calls from Negroes volunteering to fight, Negroes offering to join in armed groups so they defend the community. When I wasn't on the phone I was out in the back of my house setting up a defense line before nightfall.

When the Stegalls were stopped, they were taken out of their car and brought into my yard. Someone called me out of the house and I came out and saw all these people milling around the Stegalls. I realized how angry these people were and I saw the circle closing in around the Stegalls. I knew that if just one person lost control of himself the Stegalls would be killed. I started driving the crowd away from them, forcing the crowd out of reach.

Then Mrs. Stegall said, "We've been kidnapped!" She kept repeating this. I said, "Lady, you're not kidnapped. You can leave when you get ready but you got to go through this crowd and people are angry." She stood up and looked at the crowd and she said, "You should take us out of here. You could take us out. If you took us out of here they wouldn't bother us." I said, "Lady, I didn't bring you here and I'm not going to take you away. You knew that all these people would be here; you know how rioting has been going on in the town and you should have known better than to come into a place like this where the people are angry and upset like this. We are too busy now trying to defend our homes. I'm trying to set up a defense line and I don't have time to bother with you. That's your problem."

While we were standing there talking, an airplane flew over us. The airplane probably was either from the Klan or the Sheriff's Department. They use plenty of light planes and we were constantly getting calls threatening to bomb us from the air since my house was too well guarded to get us from the ground. So when this plane swooped over the house about fifteen men armed with high-powered .30-caliber rifles opened fire. Mrs. Stegall had been very indignant and arrogant, but as soon as she saw this she realized how serious the situation was, that these people were angry and really meant business. She started shaking all over and almost became hysterical. Then a car with white men drove by, firing, and about twenty fellows fired back and you could see flames where the bullets struck the car. Mrs. Stegall could see this.

I started into the house and the crowd began screaming that the Stegalls should be killed. When I started walking up the front steps Mrs. Stegall was right up against me, walking right up against my body and her husband was right up against her. They followed me on into the house while all these people were still screaming that they should be killed. One man was begging for somebody to give him a gun and let him, please, let him kill them.

Some of the people in this crowd I had never seen before. Negroes were coming from out of the county, they were coming from other towns or calling long-distance on the telephone offering to join in the defense group that was being formed. But all the people who had been regularly affiliated with me and in the guard were in the back of my house because that was where we were assembling and checking out our weapons and ammunition for the night. The street crowd consisted of Negroes who had become angry and involved. They didn't belong to any organization, to any one group. They were just armed private citizens who were fed up with oppression.

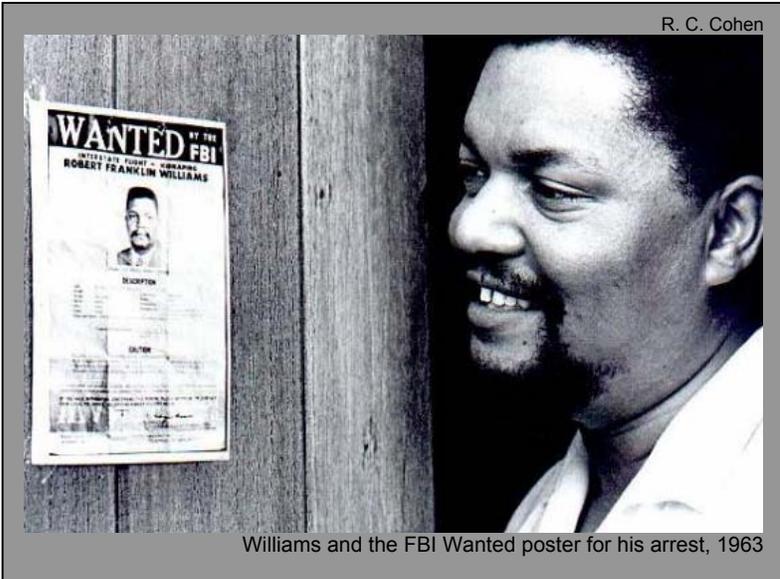
I went to the telephone and my wife gave the Stegalls a seat. When I came back the woman kept

repeating, "If you'll take us out of here we'll be all right." And I told her again that I didn't have time to take her out. I told her that if I had been caught in her community under similar conditions I would already be dead. I said, "You see, we are not half as cruel as your people." And she admitted that I was right. She told me that she was a church-going Christian and that she wanted to help us and she wished there was something she could do. And I told her that her husband could help us. And he said he didn't know what he could do since he wasn't well known around Monroe, that they lived in Marshville. She kept saying, "You're Robert Williams!" and I told her, "Yes." She said, "Well, I never met you before, but I heard a lot of talk about you." And I said, "It was all bad." And she said, "Yes, I must admit that it was all bad, but you're not the type of fellow they say you are. You seem to be a good fellow. You're much better than I thought."

The telephone rang again. It was the chief of police, A. A. Mauney. He said, "Robert, you've caused a lot of race trouble in this town, but state troopers are coming. In thirty minutes you'll be hanging in the courthouse square."

He hung up. Someone else called and said there was a news flash on television that troops were being sent to surround the town. Another woman called and said that she saw troops moving in and that the highway patrol was parking its cars behind the jailhouse. This was confirmed by a radio flash. Then one of our fellows called me to the door. I went out into the street and looked

around. Both ends were being blocked off by police cars. I realized they were trying to trap me into waiting until the state troopers got there. I told Mabel, my wife, that we had to leave. I said she didn't have time to take anything, just to get the children. I called Julian Mayfield who had left just after the Stegalls followed me in, and told him about the state troopers moving in around my area, advising him to leave Monroe immediately so that if something happened to me, someone would be free to tell the world the story. Then we left.



Williams and the FBI Wanted poster for his arrest, 1963

### In Flight But Not a Fugitive

Most people think that we left because we were fleeing an indictment. But the possibility of an indictment hadn't even occurred to me at that time. Remember, I left Monroe knowing I had *saved* the lives of the Stegalls. We were fleeing because of the attitude of the state, because of the attitude of the chief of police, because of the *lack* of law. We didn't learn about the indictment until we were in New York and heard it flashed on radio and television. When we left North Carolina we headed directly for New York. In the beginning I thought that we would stay there; that we would stop over in Harlem and from there we would immediately start a campaign to tell the world about the ruthless racist oppression that was taking place in Monroe. It was for this reason that I had left North Carolina. Only from outside the state could I organize a publicity campaign that would bring help to the Negroes and Freedom Riders so hopelessly outnumbered in Monroe. I had left North Carolina only after the chief of police had called me and told me that the state troopers were coming and that in thirty minutes I would be hanging in the court house square. I remembered the words of Hugh B. Cannon when I had appealed to him for protection under law for the missing Freedom Rider. The Governor's aide told me that he didn't give a damn about anyone, that we had asked for violence and now we were going to get it. He wanted to know then "why I wasn't dead yet!" I didn't think then that anything legal was involved.

The first I knew of the indictment was in New York when I heard over the radio that there was an all-points alarm out for me and that I had been indicted for kidnapping the Stegalls by the Union County Grand Jury.

The FBI claims that it entered the case because I was an indicted fugitive from justice in interstate flight to avoid prosecution. But technically the FBI is wrong, because I left Monroe early that night about 9 o'clock. When the grand jury indicted me sometime late the next day, I was already in New York. I certainly didn't cross the North Carolina state line as an indicted fugitive.

But this technical error in the Federal charge that was made against me so that I might be "legally" hounded throughout the whole United States is not at all surprising when one thinks of the complete falsity of the state kidnapping charge. It is very important to note what happened immediately after I left Monroe. I was indicted on the testimony of two policemen (there is no court record that the Stegalls ever appeared before the grand jury). Then, with the warrant issued, my house was raided by about a hundred officials of the state, the Federal government, and the local police armed with machine guns, rifles, riot-guns and tear gas. They didn't know that I had already left. They couldn't believe that I had got away.

When I read about the grand jury indictment in the New York papers, it was accompanied by interviews of reporters with Mrs. Stegall. I don't know what Mrs. Stegall finally told the grand jury, if she ever did appear before them. But I do know she couldn't keep her story straight for the reporters and she never told the same version twice.

I read stories in *The New York Post* and *The New York Times* the following day reporting that when they had questioned Mrs. Stegall she said that I had chided the crowd for kidnapping her and her husband. Yet she turned around in the next paragraph and said that I was responsible because I was the ringleader of these people. Next I read that she claimed that they had been tied up in my house and held at gunpoint and that when I left the house they were still there. But after saying that they were tied up, then she turned around and said that they were released by me unharmed and left an hour and a half later.

Meanwhile, she was claiming various reasons for being in the colored community in the first place. In one paper she said they were taking a short cut. For another paper she said that they were lost, that they didn't know where they were going. But no highway runs through our community. This was a dead-end street almost a mile from the highway that the Stegalls would use to get back to Marshville. Any person who knew the county could not possibly get lost there. The Stegall woman also told one reporter that the house I lived in, the house that I was born in, had been sold to my father by her father and that she had once lived there herself. In all these stories it was always Mrs. Stegall doing the talking and Mrs. Stegall's picture that you saw. They never had Mr. Stegall, who was a known Klansman, saying anything.

I also read a report where Mrs. Stegall was quoted by the *Charlotte Observer* as saying "that Williams only pretended that he was trying to help us." Well, how would she know? One of the best proofs that I was helping them is the fact that they were unharmed and still alive. And they know this.

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