

**Prophet Without Honor:
Hosea Williams and the Anomalies of the Black Freedom Struggle**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
May 10, 2015

Keywords: Hosea Williams, civil rights,
Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SCLC

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Abstract

Examining the life of civil rights activist Hosea Lorenzo Williams's life illuminates the entire landscape of the civil rights movement from a different vantage point, broadening the familiar geography and chronology of the black freedom struggle even as it complicates understanding of better-chronicled events and civil rights campaigns. By any measure Hosea Williams's activism in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was of central importance to the success of the larger movement, but for complicated reasons that might be boiled down to a question of historical "palatability" his role has for too long been eclipsed in the historiography of the movement. Williams's role in pressuring municipal, state, and federal government officials to ensure that African Americans' social, political and economic rights were fully guaranteed yielded notable victories in Savannah, Georgia, St. Augustine, Florida, Selma, Alabama, and elsewhere. His tactical innovations, most notably the pioneering use of night marches, were vital to the success of several local campaigns. Williams's reputation as SCLC leader Martin Luther King Jr.'s "kamikaze" made him the SCLC's most effective leveraging tool during the 1960s. Hostile southern whites resistant to change grudgingly made concessions to the SCLC if the organization agreed to withdraw Williams from their embattled cities. This paved the way for Andrew Young, King's soft-spoken diplomat, and others like him, to negotiate favorable settlements with city officials.

Williams's grit and tactical genius, his motivational skills and ability to cultivate a reputation as one "unbossed and unbought" were critical to the success of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the broader civil rights movement. Peering through the biographical prism of a subaltern who moved from the obscure periphery to the vital center of the most successful nonviolent revolution in human history – only to be effectively erased historically from collective memory of that movement – affords valuable insights into the long civil rights movement and the profound challenges of racism and economic inequality that still remain to be overcome.

Acknowledgments

The completion of my dissertation and subsequent Ph.D. program has been a long and trying journey. While navigating the many rigors of the program, I was, at times, simultaneously working several jobs and raising an infant daughter, Madison. Obviously it would have been impossible for me to conduct this very delicate balancing act without the selfless support from so many people from various circles.

To this select group, I must give special thanks to my wife, Dana Lee Rice. We met when I was sixteen-years-old. Since that cold December day at the Lithonia High School, I have always attempted to gain her approval. After dropping out of high school in 2000, I received a GED and enrolled in college, not necessarily because I believed that I could earn a degree; I simply wanted her to see that I at least tried to do something with my life, even after circumstances drove us in different directions apart from one another. Although we went our separate ways, destiny, I believe, brought us back together while I was enrolled in the program at Auburn University. Dana has since been an unwavering source of strength and support. She has encouraged me to reach every milestone phase in the program: the completion of coursework, passing the foreign language proficiency exam (which I struggled with), studying for and passing the qualifying examinations, preparing the dissertation prospectus, and, finally, completing the research, writing, and revising of the draft. Without her grace, patience, and forbearance, I would not have been able to devote fifteen-eighteen hours every day to the dissertation.

I also have to acknowledge my oldest daughter, Madison Renee Rice. At the time of the submission of this dissertation in late April, 2015, her younger sister, Marley Aubrielle Rice, has not yet been born, but Marley is scheduled to make her grand appearance in approximately forty-five days. My dear, sweet Madison and I have to grapple with some significant challenges during her five years of life. Her biological mother, Julia Player, passed away unexpectedly on May 22, 2010. She had yet to reach her twenty-third birthday. Madison had yet to turn four-months-old. Because of this loss, Madison and I forged an inseparable bond, in spite of the fact that she had to unknowingly make so many sacrifices. She was forced to accompany me to class while I was serving as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) in the Auburn Department of History. Madison was also a trooper when she had to sit through my lectures on World History when I was on the faculty at Tuskegee University. She even had to sacrifice her Saturdays and Sundays. She spent many of her weekends with me at Alabama State University for various programs as I was working with the University's cultural arm—The National Center for the Study of Civil Rights And African-American Culture. Yet, she has still loved me without conditions.

I would be remiss if failed to recognize my very first teachers. My mother, Felicia Clark; and grandmother, Gloria Faye Hill, have been important members of my support system for my entire life. Their collective sacrifices are innumerable. Growing up without my father presented many challenges for the both of them. I readily concede that my mischievous behavior as a child only amplified these challenges. Yet, they never gave up on me. They kept me involved in religious activities, primarily at the First Norman Grove Baptist Church -- the very house of worship that was built by my great grandfather, Joe

Hill Sr. I believe that this religious foundation provided me with the understanding and tools to grapple with some of the roughest experiences of my life.

Other members of my family, including my brother, Randall E. Rice; aunt, Cherrica Swindle; and cousin, Garland D. Miller II, have offered guidance and many words of support throughout my life. They have succeeded in keeping me level-headed and humble. My brother, whom I love, has always stood with me during the most devastating times of my life. He has proven that he is always one call away. My aunt is equally reliable. I will always remember her sending me unexpected care packages while I was away in graduate school. She always wanted to ensure that I had the necessities of my life. My cousin, though ten years my junior, reminds me that I am not as young as I used to be.

My wife's family was extremely influential in my life long before we married in 2012. Before meeting and spending a lot of time with members of the Lee family, I had not been exposed to upwardly-mobile African Americans who had labored in the academic vineyard and did not see the benefit in making the sacrifice to attend college or graduate school. My father-in-law, William S. Lee, I, and all four of his siblings, attended college. Three of them earned graduate degrees. One of his sisters earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree. His brother earned a Doctor of Pharmacy degree. Two sisters earned the Masters of Education degree. Even more impressive, all five of the siblings' fourteen children earned at least Bachelors degrees. Of this number, two earned the Doctor of Medicine degree; two earned the Doctor of Pharmacy degree; one earned the Doctor of Dental Surgery degree; one earned the Doctor of Education degree; and not least, one earned the Master of Business Administration degree.

My in-laws showed me more than the benefit of pursuing an education. They reinforced to me the values that I was taught by my mother and grandmother about the importance of family. I have always admired my father-in-law. In my opinion he is the shining symbol of what every son and husband should seek to emulate. My mother-in-law, Linda Lee, is the glue that holds the family together. Beyond her being the consummate educator who has taught my daughter how to read before reaching her fifth birthday, she is also one who has loved me as if I were her own son. My wife's siblings, Williams S. Lee II and Neena Lee Weans, have also been wonderful siblings to me since I was a teenager. Both have been unrelenting advocates for me to my eventual wife, even when I was young and immature. I must also mention my wife's sister-in-law, Sangima Lee. She, too, has supported me along this long and tedious journey.

I am also grateful to my major professor, Dr. David C. Carter. He has been a gracious and encouraging advisor since I received an e-mail from him on April 25, 2009, officially notifying me that I had been accepted into the Ph.D. program. He has mentored me on both professional and personal levels. He, too, has shown limitless patience with me throughout this long and meandering sojourn. He has willingly aided me in sidestepping the proverbial landmines that could have prevented me from making it through to this phase in the doctoral odyssey. Dr. Carter's unique talent in pushing me to my intellectual limits, without making me question my worthiness to be in the program, when many people around me did, is a testament to him being able to see in me and many of his students what we sometimes did not see in ourselves.

The remaining members of my committee were also vitally important to my success in the program. Professors Charles Israel, Reagan Grimsley, and Adam Jortner

also motivated me in ways that I will forever appreciate. They, too, mentored and shaped my thinking during critical phases throughout the program. I had the good fortune of having Dr.'s Israel and Jortner during my first semester for Seminar in the New South and The Early American Republic, respectively. I quickly discovered that both men were brilliant and insightful. Both were always willing to travel the extra mile, in several cases, literally, to assist me when needed. Dr. Jortner drove to Montgomery where I was living throughout most of my time in the program at least twice to discuss recommendation letters that he would submit on my behalf. He also traveled to the "Cradle of the Confederacy" with his very young son to consume smoothies while preparing me for the qualifying exam.

I am also indebted to my mentors and professors at Alabama State University who gave me the foundation in history before I attended Auburn. Dr.'s Dorothy Autrey, Janice Franklin, Bertis English and Howard Robinson spent countless hours instilling into me the importance of not losing myself in unfamiliar and often hostile environments. They also taught me the importance of following my moral compass even when making the right decisions posed immediate and long-term discomfort. To this day, I still have strong and unique relationships with each of them. Without these four caring and wise individuals, I would have likely chosen another career trajectory that would have ultimately proved unrewarding.

I am thankful for the support provided to me through several agencies, namely, the Auburn University Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs (ODMA) and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). The ODMA, under the direction of Dr. Overtoun Jenda, was very supportive of me. Dr. Jenda and the evaluating committee were

gracious enough to award me the President's Graduate Opportunities Program (PGOP) Fellowship in 2010. This fellowship provided me with \$30,000 over a three-year-course. Managing the many responsibilities that accompanied my life as a graduate student would have been far more difficult without this assistance. I was also the beneficiary of a \$20,000 fellowship awarded by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). The SREB's Dissertation Award supported my travel and other dissertation-related expenses during the past year. Without this support, the journey to write and finalize the dissertation would have been substantially longer.

Last, I am grateful to the respective staffs at the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture in Atlanta, Georgia; Emory University's Manuscript, Archive and Rare Book Library in Atlanta, Georgia; and the Savannah State University library in Savannah, Georgia. Each of these repositories provided me access to the files that I needed to write this dissertation, and the generous help of archivists and librarians at all three facilities greatly enriched this dissertation.

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Introduction

Hosea Williams “had fire in his bones.” That was how Andrew Young, Williams’s immediate supervisor and Executive Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, would later remember his subordinate with fulsome praise. But in early June of 1964 Williams and Young were at odds. Young had made several visits to St. Augustine, Florida, site of the SCLC’s most active campaign, and he was determined to withdraw all national SCLC staff members from the city. “Andy came down there to kill the movement,” Hosea Williams remembered. Young, as one of Martin Luther King Jr.’s closest confidants, feared that violence in St. Augustine would threaten the passage of the civil rights legislation pending in Congress that was still stalled by a bloc of southern senators. Williams knew that Young, King’s voice of reason and moderation, had the ability to persuade King to either double down or pull the plug on a major SCLC campaign. Believing in the critical importance of an SCLC-led assault on segregation in St. Augustine, Williams went for broke.

On June 9, Young arrived in St. Augustine and attended a mass meeting at the Shiloh Baptist Church, which was located in the heart of the city. After seeing his boss in the church, Williams announced the presence of the handsome SCLC leader to the audience and spoke directly to the females in attendance. “Now, I want one of you beautiful young ladies to lead the march tonight, walking beside the Rev. Andrew Young, our executive director, who has just arrived from Atlanta.” “There was no way I could

back out of leading” the march after “Williams had set me up so beautifully,” Young later admitted in his memoirs. In spite of having used his trademark chicanery to achieve his desired ends, Williams realized that Young would be exposed to imminent danger. “I knew the Klansmen,” particularly Holstead “Hoss” Manucy and his “Ancient City Gun Club,” which was composed of members of the local Ku Klux Klan (KKK), “was going to whoop us.” Young, who admitted that he had not yet been assaulted in any civil rights march, would be compelled to advocate for the SCLC to mount a major civil rights initiative in the city if he were to suffer a beating. His pride was at stake, and the hard-won lessons of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the sit-in movement, the Freedom Rides, and Birmingham’s “Children’s Crusade” dictated that foot soldiers in the civil rights movement could not afford to retreat in the face of white violence.

Hosea Williams, Andrew Young, and fellow veteran SCLC activist C.T. Vivian began marching, and as Williams correctly predicted, Manucy and his henchmen from the Klan viciously attacked the civil rights demonstrators near the old slave market. Following the beating, Young later recalled in his memoir, “I went behind the church and cried. . . . After that night I became Williams’s strongest advocate for a major campaign in St. Augustine.” “It also dawned on me,” said Young, “as it had on Williams, that the country should be reminded why we needed the rapid passage of the civil rights bill. Birmingham was a year in the past and Americans have short memories.”¹

Williams’s calculations had paid off. The St. Augustine campaign became the SCLC’s top priority, and headlines from Florida served as a vital media counterpoint to

¹ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 291-293.

“the longest debate” over the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Within hours of the attack on the night marchers in St. Augustine West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd completed a fourteen hour filibuster, one of the last to follow the record filibustering efforts of his race-baiting colleague Strom Thurmond, the Democratic Senator from South Carolina. Protests raged on in St. Augustine and elsewhere, and it was grassroots activism in a “call and response” pattern with high politics in the White House and on Capitol Hill that ultimately sealed the victory of President Lyndon Johnson and Congressional allies as they finally broke the back of white southern Congressional opposition to landmark civil rights reform.

This dissertation is the first scholarly treatment to examine the colorful, controversial life of Hosea Lorenzo Williams and his contributions to the black freedom struggle in the United States. The manuscript explores how Williams’s legacy and undeniable talent for organizing working-class African Americans as a civil rights activist and elected representative have been overshadowed by defects in his personal decision-making, not by deficiencies of courage. This includes a thorough examination of Williams as a leader within the Savannah, Georgia, Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a political organizer with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and one of the four top lieutenants to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the peak years of the movement for equality in the middle of the twentieth century during the prime of his professional career. C.T. Vivian, an aide to Dr. King who was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013, maintained that “Hosea achieved status but it didn’t satisfy him. He gave up more than any of us ever had.” Hosea, the only aide to Dr. King with a degree and graduate

coursework in chemistry, gave up a lucrative career as a research chemist with the United States Department of Agriculture to work full-time for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Elizabeth Williams Omilani, Hosea's second-oldest daughter, claimed that her father, who had sacrificed so much, was simply a "prophet without honor."²

Hosea Williams is an anomalous figure, at once both known and unknown in the historiography of the black freedom struggle. Historians have far too often relegated Hosea Williams to a few paragraphs or to a footnote in the pages of what have been otherwise solid treatments examining civil rights agitation in the United States in the years following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, what many scholars have referred to as the "classical phase" of the civil rights movement. Within the last forty years, academics from a variety of disciplines have been joined by journalists and historical participants themselves in generating a proliferation of monographs, memoirs, and biographies. Some of the most acclaimed historians of the period have afforded only scant and fragmentary attention to Williams's contributions to civil rights, and the historiographical silence is nearly absolute for the years preceding and following his fifteen-year career with the local Savannah affiliate and national SCLC from 1963-1979. No author has attempted a biographical treatment of his life despite the fact that some scholars have recognized Hosea's pivotal role in the 1960s. According to David Garrow, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, "In the 1964-1965 timeframe, Hosea was as valuable as anyone in SCLC to Dr. King because of his courage and willingness to lead dangerous demonstrations. . . . People may remember Andy Young and John Lewis,

² Suggs, "Farewell to a True Hero, a True Warrior: Advocate for Poor Helped Ignite Nation," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 21, 2000.

but . . . Hosea was just as important to the movement.”³ John Lewis himself, a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who participated in the Freedom Rides and marched shoulder-to-shoulder with Williams on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama on “Bloody Sunday,” called the fiery activist an authentic hero. “Hosea Williams must be looked upon as one of the founding fathers of the new America,” he said. “Through his actions, he helped liberate all of us.”⁴ Joseph Lowery, a founder of the SCLC and Williams’s former boss who fired him as Executive Director of the SCLC in 1979, portrayed the old warhorse of the movement as fearless. “Hosea wasn't afraid of Goliath,” he said. “In fact, I was thinking about it, and I don't think there anything he was scared of.” He remembered Williams as someone who tackled “the Goliaths of greed and indifference” that created a permanent underclass.⁵ Although Williams has been universally portrayed as courageous, fearless, and integral to the modern Civil Rights Movement by the activists who marched alongside and strategized with him during some of the most dangerous protests during the 1950s and 1960s, only a few scholars recognized that Williams was actively engaged in civil and voting rights activism prior to meeting King and his subsequent full-time employment with the SCLC.

Chroniclers of the civil rights era have consistently downplayed the significance of Hosea Williams – were it not for his presence at the front of the line on “Bloody Sunday” he might have been virtually consigned to the dustbin of history – but as this

³ Ernie Suggs, “He Never Let Things Get In His Way,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, November 17, 2000.

⁴ “Hosea Williams /Civil Rights Activist / 1926-2000 'His Actions Helped Liberate All of Us' Lieutenant to Martin Luther King, Jr. Succumbs,” *Savannah Morning News*, November 17, 2000.

⁵ “Thousands Pay Respects to Civil Rights Leader. The Rev. Jesse Jackson is among those Paying Their Respects to Hosea Williams,” *Savannah Morning News*, November 21, 2000.

dissertation demonstrates, he was an integral member of the brain trust of the SCLC. Overall, there remains a dearth of full-length biographical treatments of civil rights activists who were at the epicenter of the classical, or what Peniel Joseph refers to as the “heroic” phase of the modern civil rights movement which began in 1954 with the banning of segregation in the public school system and culminated with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.⁶ After the critical success of recent biographies written on Septima Poinsette Clark and Ella Baker, the literature is begging for scholarly portraits of other activists involved with SCLC and SNCC during the high tide of the modern black freedom struggle. (And it is worth noting that both Septima Clark and Ella Baker worked extensively with Hosea Williams throughout the 1960s.)⁷

This dissertation examines a number of important issues, seeking to explore through the lens of biography the magnetic leadership of Hosea Williams. What were the sources of his anxiety, and how did he manage to preserve his sense of humor at the core of his personality in very serious, life-threatening situations? What were his vulnerabilities? What led him to cast his lot with the modern freedom struggle when he was enjoying a comfortable middle-class life in Savannah, Georgia, and had professional opportunities available to only a tiny minority of African Americans in the Deep South? He had secured a comfortable job with the United States Department of Agriculture and was being steadily promoted when other blacks could not even secure an interview. Yet,

⁶ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), xvii.

⁷ See for example, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

he knowingly drew the ire of his colleagues and supervisors by leading boycotts and voting rights initiatives against the local and federal governments in that city.

Hosea Williams demonstrated a remarkable capacity to transcend class and educational divisions within Savannah's African American community, and that ability served him admirably throughout the remainder of his career as a proud "civil rights agitator" in a host of other cities in and beyond the South. One might reasonably expect that Williams's academic training as a chemist at Morris Brown and Atlanta University would have hindered him in relating to the masses of under-educated American Americans, some of whom were still unable to read and write in the decades following World War II. But like Martin Luther King Jr., Williams had an uncanny ability to connect with the poorest of the poor, many of whom had never traveled outside of their home states.

The dissertation also situates Williams's organizational talents and background within the larger group of King's colleagues, including Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, James Bevel, and later Jesse Jackson. It is widely known that Hosea Williams and the remainder of King's inner circle of lieutenants were constantly jockeying for favor and proximity to the president of the SCLC because of his influence and appeal to wider audiences. Examining Williams and his fellow SCLC lieutenants as they sought to advance the civil rights agenda in spite of these obstacles suggests that ultimately Dr. King was the glue that kept their egos in check. The dissertation's exploration of these dynamics is modeled on Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. Goodwin's prize-winning work focuses on Lincoln's ability to balance the conservative and radical factions in his cabinet by shrewdly and subtly

manipulating his various secretaries to push his agenda. The following chapters demonstrate that King employed a similar method with his own inner cabinet of advisers. Goodwin analyzed the lives of Salmon P. Chase, William Seward, Edward Bates and Edward Stanton, dissecting their respective backgrounds, personality traits and career ambitions as a contrast to Lincoln's. A similar approach to King's five lieutenants – Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, James Bevel, Jesse Jackson and Hosea Williams – can also bear analytical fruit. Observers often contend that Williams, and to a lesser degree, James Bevel, were the most contentious lieutenants in King's circle.⁸ This dissertation sheds critical light on the question of how the internal politics of the SCLC shaped its organizational strategy and tactics.

Beyond the questions of biography and personal motivation, the dissertation also demonstrates Williams's notable impact on landmark federal civil rights legislation that many see as the high-water mark of the black freedom struggle. His ability to organize marches and civil rights campaigns under inauspicious circumstances in St. Augustine, Florida, and Selma, Alabama, was instrumental in facilitating the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights of 1965. His organizational successes in both cities are all the more noteworthy because at critical points in both campaigns he defied his superiors in planning and organizing protests. President Lyndon B. Johnson's ability to secure passage of a comprehensive voting rights bill in 1965 might not have occurred had it not been for the persistent efforts of the SCLC at the grass roots, and it was the grass roots where Hosea Williams was such a formidable organizer. And while historians regularly posit a causal relationship between Selma and the Voting Rights Act in 1965,

⁸ See Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

this dissertation demonstrates that the St. Augustine, Florida campaign should be seen as an essential part of the backdrop for successful passage of the Civil Rights Act one year earlier. To be sure, the iconic events of Birmingham and the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, as well as the horrific violence on the eve of Mississippi's Freedom Summer in 1964, played a major role in paving the way for the most sweeping civil rights legislation since the Reconstruction Era. But as Andrew Young would later reflect, "We would not have had a Civil Rights Act without St. Augustine." In singling out the role of the Florida campaign in galvanizing national support for legislation Young was quick to appreciate the central role of Williams's organizational efforts and media savvy in keeping the nation's eyes riveted on the injustices of Jim Crow.

Williams's strategic and tactical abilities are also

The dissertation spans Hosea Williams's life from his birth in 1926 until the end of the classical phase of the modern civil rights movement in 1968, with a brief epilogue examining the closing decades of Williams's career. The following narrative attempts to weave many disparate events and psychological analysis into a concise chronological framework. The chapters of the manuscript enter into Williams's world and analyze how he moved through it, directly addressing his complex, and at times, conflicting personality traits. In addition to his own self-examination, the chapters rely on the perspectives of family members, friends, enemies and colleagues. As contemporaries of Williams, their written and oral testimonies, in combination with his own accounts, help to paint a rich portrait of an underappreciated civil rights activist.

The first chapter, entitled "'Little Turner,' World War II and Atlanta," examines Hosea Williams's early life and the circumstances that helped to shape his commitment

to the poor and disinherited. Williams was born to blind, unwed parents, Laceria Williams and Willie “Blind Willie” Wiggins on January 5, 1926 on a white-owned plantation in Vilence, Florida, a small town in the northwest corner of the state. But he grew up in Attapulcus, Georgia, reared by his maternal grandmother and grandfather, Turner and Lelar Williams. The younger Williams, known as “Little Turner,” was never referred to as Hosea in this small city in the far southwest corner of the state because he exhibited many of the characteristics of his strong and domineering grandfather, who he affectionately referred to as “Papa.” Though illiterate, “Papa” instilled into Hosea a sense of toughness and courage that enabled his grandson to survive in hostile environments. The first chapter concludes with a discussion of conflicting accounts of Williams’s experiences in the United States Army as an enlisted soldier in Europe at the conclusion of World War II and his return to the U.S. after he was honorably discharged.⁹

Chapter two, entitled “Head House Nigger,” explores Hosea Williams’s employment with the United States Department of Agriculture. Williams’s experiences in the Army and earning of a degree in chemistry placed him on a trajectory that would ultimately lead him into civil and voting rights activism. In 1952 Williams moved to Savannah to accept a job as a research chemist with the United States Department of Agriculture. He worked at the Department’s Bureau of Anemology and Plant Quarantine, Chemical Division. He recalled being offered the job after he earned a near perfect score on the screening exam. According to Williams, he was the first person of African descent

⁹ Barbara Emerson, e-mail message to author, November 7, 2013. Emerson, born on March 3, 1948, is the eldest daughter of Hosea and Carrie Mae Pugh. She states that her paternal grandparents met at the Macon School for the Colored Blind.. Hosea Williams, interview by Lake Tambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, (nd). Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System; Williams, Series 2, Subseries C, Box 4, Folder 2., Auburn Avenue Research Library.

to be employed as a research chemist with the federal government south of the Mason-Dixon Line. He started at the GS-5 pay rate and saw his compensation rise steadily, quickly reaching the status of a GS-9. He even had a white woman working for him as his personal secretary when other African-Americans could not even secure a job with the Department of Agriculture in Savannah. Williams began to realize that the Department was unwilling to hire other African-American chemists and was using him as a token employee to avoid complaints of desegregation. Williams worked out of an office that was visible to anyone who entered the area. He reached the conclusion that he was falsely secure in his position because he was being used as the “head house nigger.” He was using this charged phrase to compare his position with that of the slave in an antebellum plantation household who held the highest-rank and did not perform grueling physical labor in the fields, but worked instead in the relative comfort of the master’s house.¹⁰ Williams’s pioneering use of the tactic of “night marches” in Savannah resulted in consternation on the part of whites and African Americans alike, and the activist’s willingness to use the tactic throughout his career helped him earn the nickname of “King’s kamikaze.”

Chapters three, four, five and six examine Williams’s role as project director and SCLC’s Director of Voter Registration and Political Education from 1964-1968. By late 1964, Williams had worked his way into Martin Luther King’s contentious inner circle of advisors that consisted of Ralph D. Abernathy, Andrew Young, James Bevel, and Jesse

¹⁰ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, transcription, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 1, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African- American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System; Williams, interview by Lake Tambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, (nd), Series 2, Subseries C, Box 4, Folder 2., Auburn Avenue Research Library.

Jackson. Williams, often at odds with his colleagues, organized and led multiple highly-publicized movements in St. Augustine, Florida, Selma, Alabama, Jackson, Mississippi, and Washington, D.C. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965, and to a limited extent, the Civil Rights Act of 1968, cannot be understood without exploring Williams's function as the militant and strategizing advance man ahead of SCLC's moderate faction in hostile cities in the South and North, respectively. More pointedly, these four chapters demonstrate conclusively that Hosea, despite having been overlooked historically, came to play just as valuable a role as an advisor to Martin Luther King Jr. as Andrew Young and Ralph Abernathy.¹¹

Manuscript sources for this study include the collections of Hosea Lorenzo Williams and to a lesser extent those of C.T. Vivian and Andrew Young. The three collections are deposited at the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History and the Emory University Library in Atlanta, Georgia. The papers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference housed at the Robert Woodruff Library at Emory University yielded important insights. The papers of Martin Luther King Jr. which are located at the Robert Woodruff Library at the Atlanta University Center in Atlanta, Georgia, furnished a rich documentary trail. In addition to these manuscript collections, the personal effects and papers of Williams's family members as well as those of his contemporaries in the activist and political arenas were invaluable. Many of these library collections also house significant oral history collections, and these have been buttressed

¹¹ Hosea L. Williams, Biographical Sketch of the Rev. Dr. Hosea Williams, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 1, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America During the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), pp. 589, 742, 834.; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

by my own interviews with Williams's contemporaries to flesh out the narrative of the remarkable leader's life. Newspaper articles were important to this narrative since accounts of the events under examination provided valuable context. The *Bainbridge Post Searchlight*, *Savannah Morning and Evening News*, *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Times* were just a few of the newspapers that provided coverage of the people, places, and campaigns central to Williams's career as an activist.

Analyzing Hosea Lorenzo Williams's life illuminates the entire landscape of the civil rights movement from a different vantage point, broadening the familiar geography and chronology of the black freedom struggle even as it complicates our understanding of better-chronicled events and civil rights campaigns. By any measure Hosea Williams's activism was of central importance to the success of the movement, but for complicated reasons that might be boiled down to a question of historical "palatability" his role has for too long been eclipsed in the historiography of the movement. Williams's role in pressuring municipal, state, and federal government officials to ensure that African Americans' social, political and economic rights were fully guaranteed yielded notable victories in Savannah, St. Augustine, Selma, and elsewhere. His campaigns helped to create and maintain pressure on the White House, Congress, and the federal courts, and the resulting legislation and court rulings did more to topple the barriers of Jim Crow in a relatively brief period than anything in the century since emancipation and Reconstruction. Williams's grit and tactical genius, his motivational skills and ability to cultivate a reputation as one "unbossed and unbought" were critical to the success of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the broader civil rights movement.

Understanding his activist trajectory enables us to view the long civil rights movement through the biographical prism of a subaltern who moved from the obscure periphery to the vital center of the most successful nonviolent revolution in human history.

Chapter 1

“Little Turner,” World War II, and Atlanta, 1926-1951

Hosea Lorenzo Williams was born in an era when Georgia was a one-party state dominated politically by the Democratic Party and its elected officials who fought to preserve segregation through fear and intimidation, as well as through ingenious legal sophistry. During the first eighteen years of Williams’s life, many citizens of Georgia routinely elected staunch defenders of states’ rights and the status quo who wittingly appealed to white racial fears of Negro equality. Nearly every state and local officeholder from governors, to United States senators, as well as mayors and sheriffs, knew by an instinct tempered by history and experience that espousing campaign rhetoric or advocating policies that granted a semblance of the rights to blacks already enjoyed by whites would be political suicide. Richard B. Russell, who after a brief stint as the governor of Georgia from 1931-1933, served in the United States Senate for thirty-eight years until his death in 1971, represents only one example of how an elected official’s shrewd political pragmatism in Georgia was influenced by race. Russell’s predecessor in the governor’s mansion was Democrat Eugene Talmadge, who was elected four times to the state’s highest office (he died shortly before being inaugurated for his fourth term). Talmadge’s political success was rooted in his ability to appeal to poor whites by offering voters a hybrid version of populism and racism, even as his policies did very little for the

“common man” and favored political and economic elites. Both Russell and Talmadge popularized a strategy that Williams would work tirelessly to topple as a top lieutenant to Martin Luther King Jr. during the modern civil rights movement and later as an elected representative in the state of Georgia.¹

While Hosea Williams’s path never directly intersected that of Richard B. Russell during his early life, Russell’s influence over Georgia’s political terrain for nearly fifty years was unmistakable and invariably affected Williams as a resident of the state. Russell was elected to the Georgia General Assembly in 1921, serving in the state’s legislature for ten years, the last four years as Speaker of the House. He was elected Georgia’s sixty-sixth governor in 1930 but moved on to the United States Senate in 1933. His influence in the upper house of Congress until his death in 1971, three years after the end of what Peniel Joseph identified as the “heroic phase” of the modern civil rights movement, allowed him to preserve the “old way.” Russell was a calculating and judicious politician who was adept at avoiding divisive political issues, while effectively exploiting “safe” policies that were accepted in law and practice and were well within the norms and mores of Georgia and throughout the South. As a state legislator from Barrow County and governor of Georgia, he sidestepped confronting lynching and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). As a United States Senator, Russell was a vocal opponent of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that outlawed segregation in the public school system—a United States Supreme Court decision that Williams, as a member of the Savannah, Georgia branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) would later fight to implement in Chatham County, Georgia. Russell’s guiding

¹ For a still-influential analysis on the Democratic Party in Georgia and throughout the South, see V.O. Key Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).

political principal of “conservative progress” included fierce advocacy of a firm color barrier between blacks and whites. He rose to power because of his ability to compromise on tough issues in the state and national legislature, but according to his biographer, Senator Russell was “absolutely unbending” when considering legislation that would bring about integration or social equality.

Whereas Russell was a “respectable” and refined racist, never uttering the word “nigger” in public or in polite company, his successor, Eugene Talmadge, outwardly represented the worst of southern bigotry and backwardness.² Eugene “Ol’ Gene” Talmadge, referred to by V.O. Key as Georgia’s “demagogue,” was perhaps the most polarizing and controversial figure in the history of his state’s politics. Talmadge was a candidate in nearly every statewide Democratic primary during the first eighteen years of Hosea Williams’s life. The career politician sought the office of commissioner of agriculture three times, ran for the United States Senate twice, and ran for the governorship six times — losing twice to Richard Russell. Talmadge was elected three times for Georgia’s top agriculture post and four times as the state’s chief executive (the governor-elect passed away before he could begin his fourth term in office). Even when the “Wild Man from Sugar Creek” was not seeking an elective office, particularly in 1936, he held enough cache to transfer, literally, his vote to an ally of his choosing who, with blind loyalty, subscribed to the Talmadge platform. Key identified this phenomenon as “Talmadgeism,” recognizing that the ideals exploited by Talmadge – chiefly, aid to the “poor dirt farmer” and the maintenance of white supremacy – transcended the man at the

²Gilbert Fite, *Richard B. Russell: Senator from Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 43, 61, 348.; For a detailed treatment on the timetable of the modern Black freedom struggle, see Peniel Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006).

state level. His “loyalty” to the forgotten white man is illustrated here: “The poor dirt farmer ain’t got but three friends on this earth: God Almighty, Sears Roebuck and Gene Talmadge.” His perception of African Americans is equally clear. His biographer sums it up succinctly: “Talmadge’s attitude toward blacks was that they were childlike, basically stupid, barely removed from savage ancestry, and should be closely controlled. He did not hate the race, but he had very little respect for blacks as human beings.” Although Talmadge, a rabid racist and staunch opponent of the New Deal (though a vociferous ally of farmers) and integration, likely never entered the same circle as Hosea, the governor’s policies and ideals directly impacted the conditions that Williams and his family confronted daily in Southwest Georgia. The fact that Georgia’s white voters returned politicians like Richard Russell and two generations of Talmadges to office over and over again was not lost on African Americans as they “grew up Jim Crow.”³

Life and politics at the local level in Attapulgus, Georgia, where Williams was reared, were controlled by mayors and sheriffs whose governing philosophy was in the same vein as Talmadge and Russell. From 1929 through 1944, five mayors, J.L. Donalson, S.A.V. Christophine, M.M. Robinson, O.B. Thomas, and Carl Welch, ran City Hall employing to the same political rhetoric and calculus as the state politicians. Low taxes and the subordination of the African Americans to membership in a permanent underclass were “safe” political strategies. These local chief executives keenly understood that with blacks disfranchised in Attapulgus because of the white primary, poll taxes, and literacy tests, African Americans’ influence on political matters remained

³ Key, *Southern Politics*, 106, 108; William Anderson, *The Wild Man from Sugar Creek: The Political Career of Eugene Talmadge* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), vii, 21-22.

negligible since their voting interests did not have to be considered.⁴

Hosea, named after his mother's blind brother, grappled with formidable odds from birth. Evidence suggests that predetermined circumstances and the penetrating pain and poverty he witnessed around him during his formative years invariably shaped his enduring commitment to the poor and the disinherited. He was the only child born to Larcenia Williams and Willie "Blind Willie" Wiggins, both of whom were students at the Macon, Georgia School for the Colored Blind in 1925 when Williams was conceived.⁵ Larcenia Williams, without informing anyone of her pregnancy, including Williams's father, wrapped her petite frame in sheets to avoid detection and abruptly fled the school in December a few weeks prior to delivering her first child. On Tuesday, January 5, 1926, only three years before the beginning of the Great Depression, Hosea Lorenzo Williams was born on a white plantation in Vilence, Florida, a small city in Jackson County that is geographically situated near the boundary line that divided the Sunshine State and Georgia. Williams later recalled the first year of his life as it had been relayed to him:

She left the baby with a family and told em' she would be back to claim the baby in two weeks...was an old friend of her father's down in the turpentine stills. She didn't get back until three and a half weeks. The family would not give up the kid. She had to leave the kid. About a year later, the gentleman was killed and the kid ended up in an orphanage for the next year.⁶

Both Williams and his mother returned to Georgia to reside with her parents in

⁴ Decatur County Historical Society, *Decatur County Georgia: Past and Present, 1823-1991* (Roswell, Georgia: W.H. Wolfe Associates, 1991), 31.

⁵ Hosea Williams's parents were both blind. He did not meet his father until he was twenty-eight years-old.

⁶ Hosea L. Williams, interview with unnamed interviewer, no date, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.

Attapulgus before he reached his second birthday.⁷

Life in the South prior to the New Deal, particularly during the late 1920s and early 1930s, did not present many opportunities for the Williams's and other similarly-situated Negroes to climb the ladder of upward mobility since the overwhelmingly rural region was still heavily reliant on agriculture for its subsistence. In 1930 the South was almost sixty-eight percent rural. Nearly forty-three percent of its work force labored on farms, collectively earning a per capita income of \$189 vis-a-vis \$484 for jobs unrelated to the farming industry. Historian James C. Cobb, who has written extensively about the social and cultural conditions of Georgia, cites H.L. Mencken, the leading literary luminary of the first half of the twentieth-century and his 1931 study to identify the "worst American state." Measuring by Mencken's benchmarks, Georgia, of the forty-eight states in the Union at the time, ranked forty-fifth in wealth, forty-sixth in education, and forty-third in health.⁸

The National Emergency Council, which included the Cabinet Secretaries of Labor, Commerce, and Agriculture, respectively, published a more detailed study relative to the financial outlook of the South in 1938 at the request of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The committee that prepared the report on the thirteen southern states was composed of governors, university presidents, professors, and attorneys—all of whom lived and worked in the South. Submitted to Roosevelt on July 25, 1938, the report was

⁷ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, transcription, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African- American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System; Barbara Emerson, e-mail message to author, November 7, 2013. Emerson, born on March 3, 1948, is the eldest daughter of Hosea and Carrie Smith. She states that her paternal grandparents met at the Macon School for the Colored Blind.

⁸ George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 111.; James C. Cobb, *Georgia Odyssey: A Short History of the State* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 51.

entitled “The Economic Conditions of the South.” The document can be viewed as a political attack on one of Roosevelt’s most vocal opponents, Senator Walter George of Georgia. Along with implicitly discrediting George, the report examined fifteen components that retarded the growth of the southern economy. The sections covered in the report, to cite a few, included education, health, economic resources, labor, purchasing power, industry, and women and children, and highlighted barriers that prevented the region from effectively exploiting its natural resources. The study concluded that the South’s dismal economy was rooted in abysmally low wages and the planter elite’s continued domination of politics and an outdated agricultural industry.⁹

Williams’s desires and later pursuit of undergraduate and graduate degrees in chemistry, as well as a career with the United States Department of Agriculture as a research chemist analyzing the chemical compounds of insecticides, had deep roots in the red soil of Attapulgus, Georgia. Attapulgus, located in the deep southwestern corner of the state in Decatur County, is named after a Creek Indian word meaning “dogwood grove.” The city is about five miles north of the Georgia-Florida line. Incorporated in 1866, the area has always been known for its high concentration of Attapulgitic, a type of Fuller’s Earth clay that can only be found in one additional county in the United States—Gadsden County, Florida. The mineral has various commercial uses as a pesticide, paint thickener, and as a purifier of hydrocarbons. Notwithstanding the potential for economic gain in the area because of its mineral wealth, life for Williams and his family appeared bleak as the prospect of being upwardly mobile was constrained by race, class and a near-

⁹ National Emergency Council, *Report on Economic Conditions of the South* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1938).

primitive educational system.¹⁰

Decatur County played a crucial role in the production of tobacco in the state of Georgia during the first thirty years of the twentieth century. In 1891, A. Cohn and Company purchased 14,000 of the nearly one million acres of arable land for the cultivation of tobacco. Naming the area Amsterdam, approximately two miles from where Williams was reared, Cohn owned the largest tobacco plantation in the world in the possession of an individual owner. In 1907, some of the other tobacco producers merged and created the American Sumatra Company, creating a division in Amsterdam. The company's central focus was the production of shade grown tobacco, also recognized on the market at the time as cigar wrapper tobacco. By August 5, 1926, at one of the company's warehouse openings in Bainbridge, which was about twelve miles from Amsterdam, industrious businessmen were selling "high quality" tobacco to major buyers. Some purchasers, including J.F. Hagerty, representing the R.J. Reynolds Company, purchased 10,000 pounds from Sumatra. According to press reports, Hagerty and other buyers were "exceedingly well pleased...and expressed great satisfaction" with the product. At this particular sale, the company sold 42,174 pounds of tobacco at an average rate of \$21.02 per pound.¹¹

Evidence suggests that Williams was reared in a family where grandfathers, in

¹⁰ Friends of Attapulgus High School, "Attapulgus" (Attapulgus, Georgia: Highway Marker, 2006) Location: North Main Street, Attapulgus, Georgia.; K. Rödelberger, B. Brückel, J. Manke, H-J. Woitowitz and F. Pott, "Potential Health Risks from the Use of Fibrous Mineral Absorption Granulates," *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (May, 1987), 37-343.

¹¹ Historic Chattahoochee Commission, Decatur County Commission and the Decatur County Historical Society, "Amsterdam, Georgia" (Attapulgus, Georgia: Highway Marker, 1986) Location: US 27 median at Amsterdam, SE of Bainbridge.; Scott E. Buchanan, *Some of the People Who ate My Barbeque Didn't Vote for Me* (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), 8.; E.H. Griffin, "Bainbridge Tobacco Warehouse Opening Sales Amount to 42, 174 Pounds Which Average \$21.02," *Post-Search Light*, August 5, 1926.

spite of deficiencies with reading and writing, were instrumental in providing structure, stability, and instilling into the male family members the importance of home ownership. Hosea, affectionately referred to as “Little Turner” because of his “aggressive spirit...and ability to solve problems and make injustices right,” like his grandfather, came of age in the home of his maternal grandparents, Turner and Lelia Williams.¹² Turner Williams, also raised by his grandfather, Alfred Williams, was born on July 4, 1880, in Atlanta, Georgia. Alfred Williams, a drayman by profession, was illiterate and unable to read, but understood the value of a dollar and the virtue of hard work — convictions that would be inherited by his grandson and great-great-grandson. Alfred was a homeowner when many black and white Georgians were caught in the pernicious cycle of sharecropping which developed throughout the South after the Civil War. One historian posits that the

¹² Arlene Montgomery, interview by author, telephone, Bainbridge, Georgia, April 2, 2014. Arlene Montgomery is the daughter of Ethel Jackson, the fifth child of Turner and Leila Williams. Montgomery holds the Ph.D and is a professor at Hampton University in Virginia. She is also a retired nurse with the United States Army. The author has observed Hosea’s maternal grandmother’s name spelled different ways. Hosea, himself, does not mention her by name in the records. He simply refers to her as “mama.” Interviews with some surviving family members revealed that she is referred to as “Lelar.” Her tombstone at Bethel A.M.E Church in Attapulcus has her name spelled as “Leilar.” She will be referred to throughout this document as “Lelia.” The author will use this spelling since it is clear from census data that the four different enumerators of the federal census over the course of forty years spelled her name as it sounded to them when completing paperwork. More pointedly, the only document that mentions her name and edited by the Williams family, a funeral obituary for her seventh child, John Williams, uses the spelling that will be repeated here. However, she is listed in the 1910 United States Federal Census as “Lila.” See Ancestry.com. *1910 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006. Original data: Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (NARA microfilm publication T624, 1,178 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C. The 1920 United States Federal Census lists her as “Lelia.” See Ancestry.com. *1920 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920. (NARA microfilm publication T625, 2076 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C. The 1930 United States Federal Census identifies her as “Leela.” See Ancestry.com. *1930 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2002. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1930. T626, 2,667 rolls. The 1940 United States Federal Census lists her as “Lela.” See Ancestry.com. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1940. T627, 4,643 rolls.

overwhelming majority of tenants wedded to the farm in Georgia were “fifty-fifty” sharecroppers, tenant farmers who relied on the landlord to provide living quarters, food, a mule, and, of course, the necessary seed to plant the crops. The head-of-household and his family provided the labor. At “settlin’ time,” the crop would be divided fifty-fifty, with the landlord, who was indebted to a supply merchant, managing the balance sheet and determining what constituted an equal distribution of the final crop. Constrained by the merchant’s crop lien, the landlord was often motivated to employ nefarious and mysterious mathematical computations to cover his debt, often resulting in the multiplication of the sharecropper’s financial obligation since he was the most vulnerable obligee whose collateral determined the “payout” for each person bound by the crop agreement each season. Alfred Williams’s ability to escape, or altogether avoid this cyclical poverty and degeneracy that often impacted multiple generations, is a testament to his desire to ensure his family’s independence. Being free from the fetters that restricted many of Williams’s neighbors allowed him to provide an example to his grandchildren, and subsequently, his great-children, to emulate regarding a man’s role in providing for his family.¹³

Alfred Williams’s household on East Harris Street in Atlanta, Georgia’s, Fourth Ward was populated with four grandchildren: Daisy, Willie, Allina and Turner. Turner, the youngest grandson, was apparently orphaned by both parents shortly before reaching his first birthday. Turner’s circumstances as a child were eerily similar to what Hosea

¹³ Charles E. Wynes, “Postwar Economic Development,” in *A History of Georgia*, ed. Kenneth Coleman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 227-229.; Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *1880 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2010. 1880 U.S. Census Index provided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Original data: Tenth Census of the United States, 1880. (NARA microfilm publication T9, 1,454 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

would later experience after his own mother, Larcenia, died during childbirth when he was ten years old. It is likely that the unfortunate and untimely deaths of Turner's parents prepared him to assume an elevated role in Williams's life from a very early age. By the turn of the twentieth-century, Turner Williams had started his own family in Harrison, Mississippi.¹⁴

Turner Williams, whom Hosea always called "Papa," by appearance, was not an imposing figure. Visual inspection of an image gives credence to the assertions of family members that Williams inherited some physical features from his maternal grandfather. He was about five feet, six inches in height. He could be described as relatively handsome, with smooth, sun-bronzed, blemish-less skin, with pretty white teeth. Williams had high cheekbones that had not sunk even under the weight of time. He had fairly round eyes that were light brown in color. His nose was rather large. His lips were full and did not indicate any usage of tobacco although he worked in environments where the crop was plentiful. His ears were fairly small, with his right ear protruding from the face about three-quarters of an inch farther than his left ear. Overall, he maintained a low haircut and did not wear a beard or a goatee, further accentuating his facial features. Turner's wife, and Williams's grandmother, Leila, possessed equally attractive facial features.¹⁵

¹⁴ Year: 1880; Census Place: Atlanta, Fulton, Georgia; Roll: 148; Family History Film: 1254148; Page: 420B; Enumeration District: 100; Image: 0482. Ancestry.com. 1910 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006. Original data: Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (NARA microfilm publication T624, 1,178 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ Barbara Williams Emerson, e-mailed personal picture to author, March 15, 2014. Barbara Williams is the eldest child of Hosea Williams and Carrie Mae Pugh. She holds a Ph.D. and is an education consultant; Leopold Wise, interview by author, in person, Attapulgus, Georgia, March 31, 2014. Wise resides in Attapulgus, Georgia and is Turner William's nephew.

Leila Williams, whom Williams affectionately referred to as “Mama,” had a very soft and supple appearance. Born in Georgia on May 17, 1878, she was one year older than her husband, Turner, when the couple married in 1899. Census records suggest that Turner was her second husband and that she had given birth to nine children, only three of which were still living in 1910. By many standards of measurement, she was a beautiful woman whose exterior contradicted the effects of the physiological and psychological effects of burying six children before her thirty-second birthday. Her oldest living daughter, Williams’s mother, Larcenia, would die in 1936. Attempting to describe the most prominent physical features of members in his family, Williams stated that “most of my family was black and olive brown people with kind of long hair.” He was likely thinking of his grandmother when giving this description. Leila was about five feet in height. Her hair was long and silky, worn mostly up and in a bun. Her skin was soft and flawless as a result of her probable use of petroleum jelly and cocoa butter to keep her body moisturized after working long days as a “dipper” in the turpentine industry. She had a petite frame, likely toned over the many years she performed laborious jobs on various plantations before her husband reached a point of relative financial security in the late 1930s.¹⁶

Turner and Leila Williams, Williams’s maternal grandparents, were hard workers and had lived in northern Florida and Mississippi before settling down in Attapulgus, Georgia — both states known for their commercial production of turpentine. Evidence

¹⁶ Ibid., Year: 1910; Census Place: Beat 5, Harrison, Mississippi; Roll: T624_741; Page: 3B; Enumeration District: 0051; FHL microfilm: 1374754. Ancestry.com. 1910 United States Federal Census [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2006. Original data: Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (NARA microfilm publication T624, 1,178 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

suggests that prior to 1919, the couple had worked in the turpentine industry for nearly twenty years. Turner had worked as a “chopper,” while Leila worked in the woods as a “dipper.” It is likely that the Williams family chose to migrate to Attapulgus in the late 1920s because of their previous experience working in the turpentine industry during World War I. The area was emerging as a hub for the industry in Southwest Georgia. The county was first introduced to turpentine as an economic engine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries by E.R. and Mid Powell -- likely the owners of the first turpentine still in Decatur. Turpentine in Decatur County, also referred to as “green gold” by one author, was used in the production of shingles, poles, boxes, and gum naval stores. By 1920, after the closing of the Stuart Lumber Company, Lindsay Ball and P.S. Cumings purchased nearly 40,000 acres for the value they saw in the longleaf pines. This large land acquisition, as well as a reliable supply of labor and an abundance of trees, created many jobs in the small town.¹⁷

Evidence suggests that Little Turner’s industriousness and compassion for the less fortunate was inculcated to him by Papa. By 1930, four years after Williams’s birth, Turner Williams had settled down in Attapulgus and had accumulated property valued at \$400 along State Highway No. 1 on Amsterdam Road, an area where large plantations were cultivated for tobacco farming. Papa was a self-sustaining man who provided for his ten-member household by raising hogs, cows and peanuts. His seven surviving children – Hosea, Essie Mae, Azzie, Ethel, Turner, Jr., John, and Bernice – saw that their father,

¹⁷ Year: 1910; Census Place: Beat 5, Harrison, Mississippi; Roll: T624_741; Page: 3B; Enumeration District: 0051; FHL microfilm: 1374754. Ancestry.com. 1910 United States Federal Census [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006. Original data: Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910 (NARA microfilm publication T624, 1,178 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Mayo Livingston, Jr., *The Story of Decatur County’s Carpet of Green and Gold: Turpentine, 1889-1968* (Bainbridge, Georgia: Post Printing, 1996), 2, 3.

though unable to read and write, was an intelligent man “who could never be cheated.” The children also witnessed him assume the responsibilities of his grandchildren: Little Turner, Reaine, Clarence, and Charlotte. Although Papa made an honest living by farming, he supplemented his income by cutting hair in his two-room structure in Attapulcus on the weekends, even on Sunday morning before church for neighbors and church members who worked extended hours on Saturday night. The elder Williams also owned and operated a café on US-27, five miles south of the street that currently bears his name. He sold snacks, sodas, beer, and prepackaged sandwiches that were likely made from the animals and produce that he raised on his own land. People in the community obviously realized that Turner was an ambitious man who lived in relative comfort, especially for an illiterate African American in the Deep South who lacked any formal education. According to one informed family member, he was “very philanthropic” and willing to assist neighbors and visitors who approached him for money and food.¹⁸

Attapulcus in 1930 was in many respects a microcosm of the Deep South. According to the census for that year, 1,900 people lived in this section of Decatur County, Georgia—1,276 were classified as “Negroes” while the remaining 624 people were identified as “White.” As with many counties in the South and throughout the United States in the 1930s, Decatur County was sharply divided along racial and class lines. Williams later bitterly recalled how the white family of Walter “Bear” Chester would refuse to ride on a bus with African Americans or interact with blacks generally,

¹⁸ Year: 1930; Census Place: *Attapulcus, Decatur, Georgia*; Roll: 350; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 0006; Image: 720.0; FHL microfilm: 2340085. Arlene Montgomery, interview by author, telephone, Bainbridge, Georgia, April 2, 2014. Arlene Montgomery is the daughter of Ethel Jackson, the fifth child of Turner and Leila Williams.

regardless of the fact that the Chester family was held in very low regard in white circles because of their educational level and lack of social refinement. Describing the family's attitude toward blacks, Williams stated that the Chester family was not allowed to ride the bus. "Ever since I can remember the Chester family walked. But they had that white pride. Even though they were poorer than us, they had to walk to school, they walked on the opposite side or they walked ahead or behind us." The family's disdain for African Americans was inculcated into the younger children, Laura, Robert, and Maxwell Chester. Williams recalled how the three children were reprimanded for playing with blacks: "And when some of the little ones would try to play with us, the [older] ones would spank 'em, make 'em get back over there cause you white." Although this is an analysis of one particular poor, southern white family, this example is arguably symptomatic of the general racial mores among children that pervaded Attapulgus and other rural communities in the United States, especially in the Deep South.¹⁹

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK), because of its numerical strength and ability to maintain the status quo, played a prominent role on the religious, political and social scenes in Decatur County during Little Turner's formative years. The hooded order influenced ministers, politicians, and educators. The Klan, for example, financed Baptist revivals in the county seat in Bainbridge. One attendee observed that nearly two hundred members of the terrorist group "gave a very touching testimonial" one particular Friday night. The Klan was so impressed with how the ministers conducted the revival that

¹⁹ Year: 1930; Census Place: Attapulgus, Decatur, Georgia; Roll: 350; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 0006; Image: 720.0; FHL microfilm: 2340085. Ancestry.com. 1930 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2002. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1930. T626, 2,667 rolls.; Hosea L. Williams, Unpublished Fragmented Manuscript Transcript, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.

“right before the sermon . . . six Klansmen in robes marched down to the altar and gave the preacher \$100 . . . and a most earnest letter assuring the preachers of their most hearty cooperation” in fulfilling their obligation to Christ and the church in the area, or what the historian Nancy MacLean in her examination of the Klan in Georgia describes as “old time” religion. The nightriders also held large meetings at the Decatur County courthouse which leads one to infer that the group held influence over judges, juries, and police officers. One specific “educational” meeting in 1930 is worth mentioning. Men who were held in high esteem, for example, Dr. H.W. Evans, Imperial Wizard and head of the organization; Dr. Samuel Green, Grand Dragon of the state of Georgia; and Georgia State Senator, Eurith “Ed” Rivers (Rivers would be elected the 68th Governor of Georgia three years later) were all in attendance. The organization had expressed a “deep interest” in the education of the white students in the area and wanted to discuss “recent activities” of some organizations seeking to address years of inferior academic preparation of African American pupils. The Klan was likely referring to the fact that a small, one-room school had been recently erected to educate Black students just north of Attapulgus on US-27, a result of tax revenue that the organization thought should be utilized in support of the education of White students. Although verifiable accounts of the organization’s violence toward “uppity” blacks and dishonorable whites in the area are nonexistent for the period under examination, the records suggests that the Klan’s presence was effective enough without violence in keeping blacks “in their place,” subordinate to local whites.²⁰

²⁰ “Klan Helps Revival,” *The Post-Search Light*, April 22, 1926.; “Educational Meeting of the Ku Klux Klan,” *Post-Search Light*, February 20, 1930; Decatur County Historical Society, *Decatur County Georgia: Past and Present, 1823-1991* (Roswell, Georgia: W.H. Wolfe Associates, 1991), 36.; Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.

School attendance in Decatur County was mandatory by the time Little Turner reached age six. The county administrators and educators took great pains to ensure that pupils regularly attended school since appropriations were inextricably bound with student turnout. County officials placed a lengthy article on the front page of the local newspaper imploring fathers to allow their children to attend school because “Men who keep their children out of school do not only hamper their own children but they hamstring the children that do go.” The contributors posited that 350 “colored” children and 250 white children were routinely kept home due to parental “indifference,” or because parents “claimed” that they were unable to buy books, potentially resulting in an \$8,000 loss of tax-supported funding. The editorial continued: “It seems that pleading and begging men to do their duty by their children doesn't get anywhere... The man that is guilty of this neglect better get busy and get his child in school... We mean business.” The author concluded the article with a final admonition: “This effort is by determined men and it means that every child in Decatur County must be must be in school or some folks will smell the patching.” The irony inherent in the committee’s desires to fill the desks should be viewed in contrast to the conditions under which the “colored” children learned.²¹

Little Turner’s academic journey began in Decatur County, Georgia, during a period when white stakeholders wanted to ensure the success of its white pupils while county and city administrators neglected the educational needs of its black students — in spite of the rhetoric that permeated the aforementioned news article. The historian James D. Anderson suggested in *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* that there are

²¹ “Children Must Be In School,” *Post-Search Light*, January 16, 1930.

“essential relationships between popular education and the politics of oppression.” Little Turner, likely unaware of the oppressive nature of his schooling, enrolled in Attapulgus Colored School around 1932 at age six. The school burned down two years later in 1934 and was later renamed the Attapulgus Vocational School. Located North of Attapulgus on US-27, adjacent to the Second Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church, the new structure was still indicative of the city’s and county’s attitude insofar as its colored children were concerned. The building suffered from primitive construction techniques, poor supplies and overall disinterest in the welfare of black pupils. In terms of its faculty, Attapulgus Vocational School would have likely been staffed by black female teachers whose formal education was not equal to the training of the white teachers at neighboring all-white Bainbridge Elementary School, located less than five miles away. By 1934, presumably because of budgetary constraints, the terms of local white and “colored” schools were cut. White school administrators cut the terms of the “colored” schools to six months, but the white students, even in times of economic peril caused by the Great Depression, still attended school for eight months — ensuring that the latter were given a chance to be better prepared academically than their black counterparts and simultaneously saving on overall school expenditures. Notwithstanding these challenges, Little Turner displayed a capacious intellect and keen interest in mathematics and science through his seventh grade year. He would not complete his high-school education until returning from fighting in Europe during the Second World War. Before leaving to fight tyranny abroad, Little Turner had to grapple with a family tragedy that devastated him and irrevocably changed his life.²²

²² James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 1.; Decatur County Historical Society, *Decatur County Georgia: Past and*

On October 17, 1941, less than two months before the Japanese sneak attack on the United States' Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor, Little Turner and the rest of the Williams family was rocked by tragedy after the sudden death of the family's matriarch, Lelia Williams. Evidence suggests that her passing was due to blood poisoning as the result of a decayed tooth. Her death was "devastating." "Mama" was a welcomed contrast to the stoic and stern patriarch of the family. She has been described as "warm, caring and fun-loving...she was the 'go-to' person" who everyone in the family could approach in moments of trial and triumph. Her passing seemed to have had a spiritual impact on the entire family, including her normally reserved widower. According to Lelia's daughter, Little Turner's aunt, Ethel, Lelia had been persuading her husband for years to join the membership at the Second Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church in Attapulcus. Although he frequently attended church with his family, he always stopped shy of walking down the aisle during the "invitation to discipleship." After the eulogy, likely being faced with his own mortality, Turner finally joined the church. Accounts of the event reported that the church "went wild." From that cool October day, Turner remained a devoted member as a church trustee and leader of the religious body's board of ushers. His unceasing devotion to the church obviously meant that an emphasis on church attendance and participation in various auxiliary ministries would be now be required for Little Turner.²³

Religion and spiritual worship became an integral component of Little Turner's life after October 17, 1941. Church attendance was now required for him and the

Present, 73.; Hosea L. Williams, Resume, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers.

²³ Arlene Montgomery, e-mail message to author, April 4, 2014.

remainder of the Williams household. Evidence suggests that that he may have joined the church shortly after Mama's funeral. One can also infer that he likely became a member of the board of ushers while Papa was the president of this particular church auxiliary. In church matters, Papa's stern demeanor was witnessed at the church. "Uncle Doc" ran a "tight ship," says nephew and fellow church member, Deacon Leopold Wise. He continued, "Your kids didn't go in the church chewing gum and crying. You and your kids had to go outside...The church ran smooth, then." Although he was a religious man, he was also a "mean" man, said Wise. "If you mess wit' him, you had problems, didn't care if you was white or black...white folks respected him" around the church and local community. Little Turner invariably witnessed Papa's authoritative leadership style and would assume many of his characteristics as an adult. Although whites respected Papa to a limited degree, he, too, still had to "behave" within the societal parameters determined by race.²⁴

Little Turner experienced the deep-seated racism and whites' false sense of superiority when witnessing the humiliation adult African Americans routinely experienced when interacting with those of the dominant culture. Most African Americans, regardless of age, education, and cultural refinement were only permitted to enter a white person's home through the back door. Eugene Talmadge, the controversial and colorful three-term governor of Georgia, held sentiments that were closely aligned with those of the majority of white Georgians: "I want to deal with the nigger this way;

²⁴ Leopold Wise, interview by author, in person, Attapulcus, Georgia, March 31, 2014.; Annie Rae Washington, interview by author, in person, Attapulcus, Georgia, April 1, 2014. Annie Rae Washington was a contemporary of Azzie and Ethel Williams, Little Turner's aunts. Washington met the Williams family in 1948 when she lodged with them for one week before she started teaching in the Decatur County School System. She arrived the week the Williams family home was fitted with electricity. She retired from the Decatur County School System.

he must come to my back door, take off his hat, and say, yes, sir.” Williams witnessed how Talmadge’s convictions played out in Attapulcus: “Back in those days black people were not allowed to go up to the front door of any white folk. Not even was ‘leading niggers’ like Papa was allowed to go up to the front door of even the home of ‘red-neck’ white trash.” He continued, “All white people look upon this as just about the most disrespectful thing a black person could do. I mean any [b]lack male, female, little child, or old senior citizen” were held in the lowest regard simply because of the hue of their skin color. Little Turner, though very young, was a perceptive observer of the backward racial mores of his hometown and understood early in his formative years that race, not gender or class, was the pivot upon which southern society turned. He would experience the racial societal rigidity on a very personal level in early 1942.²⁵

Little Turner’s knowledge of, but blatant defiance of, the rigid societal barriers that had been erected between blacks and whites, especially black males and white females, which would become a hallmark during his later career as a civil rights activist, nearly cost him his life before he reached adulthood. Little Turner was something of a dandy. He was handsome, charismatic, and witty — physical and personality traits that were bound to attract many women, regardless of the female’s race. One such white girl was his neighbor and member of the “low-breed” white family who had what he referred to as “cracker pride.” Laura Chester was the youngest daughter and fourth child of William “Bear” Chester. Evidence suggests that Laura was born in 1922, making her approximately four years younger than Little Turner. One can infer that Laura was the one responsible for first crossing the racial boundaries that had hitherto segregated blacks

²⁵ Anderson, *Wild Man From Sugar Creek*, 230; Hosea L. Williams, Unpublished Fragmented Manuscript Transcript, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers.

and whites. Little Turner vividly recalled how the illicit association began as she frequented the Williams property: “So every year I could remember ole’ Laura getting over our fence—her old daddy was so sorry, he didn’t care—but ‘Momma’ let her come out there and pick blackberries, plums and grapes for as long as I could remember.” He continued: “We had a large orchard...about thirty feet long and about thirty feet wide. And Laura and I used to go, we used to climb—I used to get her ass up in them bushes.” Laura, although younger than Little Turner, was also acutely aware how the power dynamics, invariably strengthened by law and custom, extended to their sexual relationship. Though Laura engaged in, and likely enjoyed Little Turner’s company and sensuality, she degraded and dehumanized him. “Come over here, nigger—come here. Fuck me, nigger,” stated Laura on several occasions. Little Turner obviously felt some affection for her. When describing the relationship, he stated that “It was really low,” and hindsight allowed him to classify Laura as the “epitome of white trash.”²⁶

News of Little Turner’s illicit relationship with Laura Chester spread quickly around the small South Georgia town one Sunday afternoon in 1942 after Clara Mae, a jealous suitor of Little Turner, revealed details of the relationship at Lavonia’s Confectionary—a gathering hub where many of Attapulcus’s youth gathered after church services to socialize and drink sodas. “Laura going with Hosea,” said Clara Mae. Little Turner’s male friends started to tease Laura. Ashamed, likely feeling used and taken

²⁶ Year: 1930; Census Place: *Attapulcus, Decatur, Georgia*; Roll: 350; Page: 2A; Enumeration District: 0006; Image: 720.0; FHL microfilm: 2340085. Ancestry.com. *1930 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2002. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1930. T626, 2,667 rolls. Hosea L. Williams, Unpublished Fragmented Transcript, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 1, Auburn Avenue Research Library. His account fails to mention the exact year when they became intimate, but one can infer that the two began a sexual relationship before he reached his sixteenth birthday since he was forced to leave town shortly after his grandmother’s passing as a result of the illicit association.

advantage of, Laura began to cry. She ran home and relayed the day's events to her mother. Enraged, Sarah Chester relayed the information to her husband, "Bear" Chester. Hitherto described by Little Turner as "sorry" and disinterested in the everyday affairs of his own eight-year-old daughter Laura, "Bear" immediately devised a plan to defend his youngest daughter's honor. According to Little Turner, "He went out and organized crackers—organized a lynch mob." The gang of rag-tag, similarly situated whites, first approached George Smith, Clara Mae's father. Described by Little Turner as being "a great big old man," stretching nearly six feet in height and weighing almost 300 pounds, the mob forced Smith to beat his daughter until she was incoherent and unresponsive — presumably for publicly giving voice to the lynchable offense. "And George Smith beat that girl so. They let him rest, his arm would get tired, but he beat his own daughter until she was unconscious," recalled Little Turner.²⁷

The lynch mob, regardless of the fulfillment it derived from forcing George Smith to nearly kill his daughter for uttering the taboo in public, would not be satisfied until Little Turner was hanging lifeless from a tree. Tipped off by a friend regarding the mob's plans for his grandson, the normally stoic, yet always fearless patriarch, prepared anxiously to defend Little Turner with an arsenal of weaponry that included twelve-gauge and pump automatic shotguns. At almost fifty years old, he had keen eyesight and had a reputation for his marksmanship. "Papa was supposed to be so good. He wouldn't shoot a squirrel on a limb – he'd make a noise and when that squirrel would jump and head for another limb, they'd catch him in the air. . . . It was a disgrace to shoot a squirrel sitting." Apparently emboldened by his skill with a gun, and determined to prevent his grandson

²⁷ Hosea L. Williams, Unpublished Fragmented Transcript, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 1, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

from being lynched, Papa's anxiety was subordinated to his parental instincts to protect his deceased daughter's only son. Little Turner's recollection of the morning of the incident merits extensive quotation:

My granddaddy said, 'get up, here they come.' . . . He got up and he had all those guns loaded. All those guns on the sofa — he had six or seven guns, including two or three pistols. 'You get you a gun and don't any of you shoot until I shoot. And when I shoot you try to kill those son of a bitches.' And they was coming up, and they all had guns. When they came about five feet, walking, kind of rushing . . . walking real fast. Papa yelled, what you want?' And they said, we want to see Little Turner. . . . My granddaddy said 'NO, not today. Little Turner is a minor, and I'm his father and whatever he's done you hold me guilty of. . . . You can't get Little Turner. He's my son.'"²⁸

Aware that Papa would not sit by idly and surrender his son, the mob eventually retreated, vowing to return: "we gonna get you nigger, goddammit, nigger. We gonna get you and your goddamn bastard son," screamed one member of the blood-thirsty gang.²⁹

Papa, known for his wisdom and characteristic clear-headedness, was keenly aware that his and Little Turner's lives were in greater danger than before his initial confrontation with the gang. He knew that he had to seek the assistance of a revered white male who could provide an impregnable heat shield against subsequent attacks. Papa, Little Turner, and his sister, Teresa, fled to safety in the home of Warner Miller. Miller, a large white weighing approximately 275 pounds, was the wealthy owner of three plantations. Referred to as "The Boss" by Little Turner, he lorded over Attapulcus in the 1930s as if the city was his personal fiefdom. "You see," said Little Turner, "Mr. Miller was not only the big white boss that all nigger people in our town looked up to, he was just as big a boss over the white crackers, if not a bigger boss over the crackers. . . . He

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

was the undisputed big boss over that entire tobacco belt.” He had amassed a relatively hefty fortune by exploiting black sharecroppers. Describing Miller’s exploitative techniques, Little Turner posited that:

He [Miller] was a big tobacco grower. I seen that man in his office, in his safe one day — it looked like a million dollars—money he paid no taxes on, money he took in. And the way he had those Negroes was to give you a house. He’d give you and your wife a house, ‘mmmm, John, this your house, son mmmm. You can pay me later on, hear partner.’ . . . He worked them for a low salary but he looked out for them like people look out for cattle.³⁰

After a hasty flight from the zealous mob, Papa and Little Turner arrived at the “Big House,” Warner Miller’s primary residence. Little Turner felt an overwhelming sense of safety once there: “safe at last, safe at last, thank God.” After entering through the back door, Turner informed Miller of what had just occurred only a few minutes prior: “Mr. Miller, I got to see you, something very bad has happened.” Miller sat down in his big rocking chair, crossed his legs and grabbed a jug of homemade moonshine. “Mr. Miller, a lot of whites came to kill Little Turner,” the elder Turner said. Miller asked why Little Turner was in danger. The elder Turner responded, “Word’s out that Little Turner has been messing with Bear Chester’s gal [Laura].” After hearing the reasoning behind the mob’s desire to kill Little Turner, Miller responded: “Don’t worry, Turner, goddammit, they ain’t going to mess with your boy. I ain’t gonna let them, Turner.” After seeing Miller’s car, the mob “scattered,” only to be chased down by “The Boss.” Confronting the leader of the mob, Miller issued a warning: “You son of a bitch, don’t you ever go to Turner’s house again...If another son of a bitch goes to Turner’s house, I’m going to blow his muthafuckin brains out.” Members of the mob obviously had no

³⁰ Ibid.

avenues of redress. According to Little Turner, “Miller was so powerful they hardly never had an election. He’d just say, mmmmm partner, ‘I’m going to make you the police this year, and you’d be the police, too.’” After the incident, Little Turner decided that he should leave Attapulugus under the cover of darkness to spare his grandfather the burden of having to worry about him. He reasoned that he might be killed if he was sighted outside the presence of his grandfather or Miller. The fugitive from vigilante justice, likely in a panic, took sixty-nine dollars from a fund that had been entrusted to Papa – the treasurer of the trustee board at church. He then enlisted the assistance of Leroy Wise, a cousin who was sympathetic to his circumstances. Wise transported him to Tallahassee, Florida.³¹

Little Turner’s insistence on leaving town may have been the result of his recollection of, or his grandfather informing him of a lynching a few years prior. It is unlikely that both would not have known of the 1937 lynching that happened just a few miles from their home in Attapulugus in the county seat of Bainbridge. Willie Reed, an African American male, who had been in the employ of a turpentine firm, raped and stabbed to death two white Bainbridge women with a hack-sharpener — a sharp object used to chip bark from trees. Reed fled to Dothan, Alabama, where he was apprehended by deputies from Decatur County. Once they returned, Reed, who was unarmed, handcuffed and shackled, according to four white deputies, tried to escape confinement. He was shot by a deputy. Once he was pronounced dead, Reed’s body was transported to

³¹ Ibid. Leopold Wise, interview, in person, Attapulugus, Georgia, March 31, 2014. Hosea stated that he was around thirteen-years-old around the time he fled Attapulugus, Georgia for Tallahassee, Florida. Family members also argue that he was around twelve years of age. However, in his own words, he is adamant that his grandmother was already deceased. Solid evidence proves that she died in 1941, which would have made Hosea at least fifteen years of age when he left for Florida. It is likely that the passage of time caused him to confuse events at age 13 with occurrences at age 15.

the Tom Bynes Funeral Home. According to F.C. Clements, a local cotton merchant, and Monroe Parker, they observed that a mob of “several hundred men, women and children” had forced their way inside the funeral home and stolen Reed’s lifeless body. The mob dragged the body to a black ballpark where they tarred and feathered the remains before stringing it up over a bonfire. In a grisly manner typical of “spectacle lynchings” in the South, those in attendance gathered “relics” from the scene. This particular episode of extralegal violence shows that mere death was not an acceptable form of punishment for assaulting white women. In the eyes of some whites, only the desecration of a black man’s remains in the most brutal manner would satisfy the mob’s twisted sense of “justice.” More pointedly, the deputy who boasted of shooting Reed was subsequently elected county sheriff with the popular support of Bainbridge locals.³²

Many African Americans in the South were not as fortunate in fleeing from the lynch mob as Little Turner, especially in Georgia. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, the eminent historian who specializes in historical memory and lynching, argues that 426 African Americans were lynched in Georgia from 1880-1930; 176 of this total were lynched in South Georgia. It is true that white men were also lynched, albeit at a rate far less than blacks. During the same fifty-year period only nineteen whites were killed at the hands of the mob, usually for spousal or child abuse, or, practicing in what Brundage calls “unorthodox moral, social, or political beliefs.” Brundage argues that blacks were lynched for seemingly insignificant offenses: insulting a white, petty theft, or refusing to accept defeat in an argument with a white, regardless of the facts and circumstances

³² “Cullman Men See Mob Burn Georgia Negro,” *Cullman Democrat*, May 27, 1937.; Paul Kwilecki, *One Place and Four Decades of Photographs from Decatur County, Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 238.

supporting the black's reasoning. Murder of, and sexual relations with whites, real or imagined, were reasons to incite mob violence where lynching was explicitly or tacitly accepted.³³

The white mob's attempt to lynch Little Turner is telling for a variety of reasons. The near-tragedy showed the depths of love and affection that Turner, the normally stern and reserved grandfather, had for his only grandson. This threat of mob violence also displayed the relationship that Turner had with the white propertied elite, proving that the Williams' s enjoyed the favor of whites when the majority of blacks in Attapulugus had precious few allies among whites, especially relationships with whites on a level where they could be considered friends. Little Turner witnessed how having money and owning property, in a sense, gave him and his family special privileges that other blacks simply did not enjoy. Little Turner did not always get along with his grandfather because they shared many of the same personality traits: both were boisterous, ambitious, industrious, and were unwilling to conform. Although Little Turner and his grandfather had what was at times a problematic relationship, the grandson had a high degree of respect and admiration for his grandfather.

Turner Williams, described by his grandson as one of three "leading niggers" in Attapulugus, along with the black doctor and black superintendent who lived in Bainbridge, was one of the most respected black men to ever live in the small city. Referring to his grandfather and the power he wielded, Little Turner glowingly reflected: "That Turner Williams was something, brother." Williams often cited various civic and residential advantages that his grandfather routinely enjoyed that were primarily reserved

³³ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 50, 53, 107.

for whites, and almost always eluded blacks. For example, Turner was “completely illiterate,” unable to read and write, but was voting during a time when many blacks and poor whites were disfranchised because of a cumulative poll tax, literacy tests and blatant and vicious intimidation. Little Turner suggested that his grandfather’s privileges were rooted in the fact that the Williams family was viewed differently than other blacks in the area: “I bet if you go down there right now...they really looked at us different from niggers, now that’s the truth...My grandfather was registered to vote while hardly nobody else in that county [Decatur] was hardly registered to vote” if they were not one of the aforementioned three “leading niggers.” Not only was Turner voting in local elections, the Williams family’s patriarch also carried favor with state highway department officials as evidenced by this division’s willingness to circumvent bureaucratic and budgetary constraints to pave his driveway. Reflecting as an adult on his grandfather’s clout in the community, Little Turner suggested that the state highway department had constructed the “half of block” driveway “as a favor to my granddaddy.” This assertion is particularly interesting since the historian Gilbert Fite suggests that the 1930 gubernatorial campaign which pitted lawyer and Speaker of the Georgia General Assembly Richard Russell against John N. Holder, identified paved roads, along with tax reform, fiscal responsibility, and improved education at the elementary, high school and collegiate levels, as Georgia’s most urgent needs.³⁴

³⁴ Hosea L. Williams, Unpublished Fragmented Manuscript Transcript, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 1, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.; Fite, *Richard B. Russell: Senator from Georgia*, 61.; Although it is difficult to identify verifiable records that document whether or not the state department paved the driveway as a favor to Turner, a newspaper article from 1935 does indicate that the Department presented a check for \$100,000 to the Board of Commissions of Roads and Revenues of Decatur County to “pay the balance of said contract when the balance of State Road No. 1 from Bainbridge South to Tallahassee, Florida is graded, graveled, and paved.” The streets mentioned in this article do pass

Little Turner grew up in relative privilege and invariably benefitted from the fact that Turner Williams, like his father, Alfred, before him, understood the value of a dollar and the virtue of hard work. When referring to his grandfather's financial security, Little Turner posited that "Papa" was the wealthiest black person in that part of the county when it came to land and finance." It is difficult to gauge whether or not a doting grandson's recollection of his grandfather's assets can be verified. What can be authenticated, however, is that by 1940 Turner had accumulated nearly 100 acres of land. According to the 1940 United States Census, Little Turner's grandfather was "working on his own account" which allowed him and his family to enjoy a level of independence that proved elusive to so many southerners and Georgians, especially illiterate African Americans. According to the same census data, Turner's property along State Highway No. 1 on Amsterdam Road was valued at \$1500 when many blacks and whites in the area were manacled by the shackles of sharecropping which prevented them from earning enough disposable income to purchase land for themselves. Little Turner inherited his industrious grandfather's ability to generate revenue streams to ensure a degree of economic independence by working hard. In a moment of reflection, Little Turner recalled that "He'd work me like hell all day, keep me out of school to work me. . . . I always had money; I never was broke. I ain't never been broke in my life. . . . I always was wise, wise with money."³⁵

The independence that accompanied financial security was a major motivational factor for Little Turner after he fled to Tallahassee, Florida in 1942. He had witnessed

by the 131 acres that Turner Williams owned. See "Pictured Below is the Check for \$100,000 Received From the State Highway Dept., *Post-Search Light*, February 7, 1935.

³⁵ Ibid.

how his grandfather had prospered and managed to exercise some rights that were generally restricted to whites in Attapulgus. While in Florida over the next eight weeks Williams held a series of jobs until the circumstances calmed down at home, including the pimping of prostitutes, working in a coal mine where he was on the clock five and one-half days per week, earning twenty dollars weekly for loading coal. Little Turner also worked in the kitchen at a train station washing dishes. Reflecting on the wages that he earned, he stated that he washed “dishes from 6:00 a.m. in the morning ‘til 6:00 in the evening, at \$12.00 each week.” He also saw the dark side of life while on the road.³⁶

Little Turner and two of his friends, “Buddy” and “Rooster,” lived in what Little Turner identified as a “whore house.” He was the one most prepared to adapt to changing circumstances. He recalled how “the other boys used to get paid off on Saturday and by the time I’s get there at 7:00 p.m., them niggers would be broke . . . the whores done beat them out of their money. . . . They just couldn't make it; they wasn't smart enough to adapt.” His friends did not have the hustler instincts that would be so critical to Little Turner’s survival as a soldier in the United States Army; community leader in Savannah, Georgia; with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Savannah, Georgia; and ultimately as a lieutenant to Martin Luther King Jr., activist, and politician in the state of Georgia.

Little Turner decided to return home in 1943. However, he faced a stern Papa who told him one Saturday night: “If you’re going to stay, face it [the lynch mob], you ought to stay. And if you’re going to leave, you ought to go ahead and leave. They’re going to hear about you coming back here, and they’re going to catch you.” After this

³⁶ Ibid.

conversation, Little Turner thought to himself, “If I leave this time, it would be a long time before I could come back. . . . But I thought it was best.” He again went to Tallahassee, Florida — this time on his own. He found a job working at Superior Dry Cleaners in Florida’s capital city. Although the money was less than what he was used to earning, he was able to survive for the next few years because he kept his daily and monthly expenses low. Little Turner was only paying \$2.50 per week for rent. While on the road and away from home, he constantly worked to improve his lot, trying his hand as an electrician with the NYA, a trade association housed at historically-black Florida Agricultural & Mechanical College. He changed his mind when he was almost fatally electrocuted after touching a rail that had been wired with electricity. “It knocked me out cold. I was unconscious,” he remembered. His life would be quite unremarkable until he left Tallahassee to serve in the United States Army in World War II.³⁷

The United States officially entered World War II on December 8, 1941, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt requested that Congress declare war on Japan after the latter bombed the United States’ naval fleet at Pearl Harbor. The historian David Kennedy maintains that Japan’s desire to control China and to strengthen its hold on Southeast Asia, as well as secure the preeminent status of its navy, were three of the principal reasons for the empire’s surprise attack on the United States. Japanese air forces killed 2,403 servicemen, 1,103 permanently entombed within the USS *Arizona* when the battleship sank after being hit at least four times by bombs dropped from Japanese aircraft. The loss of American ships and planes was also devastating. Eighteen of the American vessels, including eight battleships, were either sunk or required extensive

³⁷ Ibid.

repairs to ensure sea-worthiness. At least three hundred aircraft suffered severe damage. Out of three hundred planes, approximately one-hundred and eighty were completely destroyed. However, Isokoru Yamato, the esteemed Japanese admiral and primary architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor, was right when he stressed his fear that all the Japanese did was “awaken the sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve.”³⁸

Anticipating a war in Europe long before the attack on Pearl Harbor, U.S. leaders sought to increase America’s military prowess through numerical strength and industrial capacity by selecting, recruiting, and training African Americans for service in the military and defense industries. First, the Selective Service and Training Act, enacted on September 16, 1940, provided that all men between the ages of 18 and 36, regardless of color, were allowed to serve in the armed forces. Another clause in the Act declared that discrimination based on race and color was prohibited in the training of soldiers. However, there was one caveat: the War Department was still given the discretion to admit or reject prospective volunteers for service if evaluators desired.

Whether from a sense of a higher purpose or in some instances a desire to leave the United States where many blacks were still relegated to the status of second-class citizenship, African Americans rallied to the Allied cause. As part of the “Double V” campaign, which represented victory over racism at home and victory over fascism abroad, blacks joined the military effort and fought in defense of rights and freedoms abroad that they were denied at home. Ten months after the enactment of the Selective Service and Training Act, President Franklin Roosevelt, facing pressure from African

³⁸ David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 518, 522; John J. Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun: Japan’s Plans for Conquest after Pearl Harbor*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 17.

American labor leader A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters -- who was threatening to lead a march of tens of thousands of African Americans on the nation's capital, issued Executive Order 8802. The Order prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color, creed, or national origin, in the defense industries and within the government and created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). While the creation of the FEPC was criticized both at the time and by historians in the years since as relatively "toothless" -- it let enforcement of nondiscrimination in federal contracts take a backseat to the imperative of winning the war -- it nevertheless represented an important symbolic victory and was a sign of the increasingly restive African American population in the U.S.³⁹

The Selective Service Act and Executive Order 8802 were crucial factors that led to more African-American participation in the overall war effort. Under the 1940 Act, more than three million blacks registered to serve in the United States Armed Forces. Draft boards, however, rejected black applicants at a rate of 18.2 percent compared with 8.5 percent of whites. Although illiteracy and other deficiencies that resulted from a lack of a quality formal education and access to healthcare influenced some of the board's decisions to reject potential draftees, many of the black applicants were prevented from joining the military because of their skin color. Due to the growing threat of Adolf Hitler and the Axis Powers, draft boards received pressure from the federal government to induct more African Americans. Only 2,069 blacks were selected for service in the military in 1940, but the following year saw explosive growth. In 1941, more than

³⁹ Philip McGuire, "Desegregation of the Armed Forces: Black Leadership, Protest and World War II," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Spring, 1983), 147; Lee Finkle, "The Conservative Aims of Militant Rhetoric: Black Protest During World War II," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Dec. 1973), 692

100,000 African Americans qualified and were accepted into the armed services. Three years later approximately 701,678 African Americans were serving in some capacity in the U.S. Army alone.⁴⁰

Williams watched most of the war unfold as a teenager. By the spring of 1945 he was nineteen-years old and professed to have been eager, at least initially, to join the war effort. He took a physical as a prerequisite for service in the United States Army in April. “It meant all in the world for me to pass that exam,” he said, and its importance in his mind led him to choose not to inform the evaluating physician that he had been diagnosed with rheumatic fever three years earlier. His condition prevented him from riding a bike, swimming, or enjoying other recreational activities. Since he failed to disclose his past medical history, he passed the physical without much difficulty. “I whipped through, and I passed the exam and entered the Army,” said Williams.⁴¹

Even in his own recollection, however, his induction into the military was a more complicated affair. After a brief period, he evidently had second thoughts about joining the Army and wanted to change his mind. Williams recalled that one of the last officials he needed to see before formal induction into the service was a medical official. He witnessed others offer excuses and fabricate life circumstances in futile attempts to avoid service in the Army. The man in front of him, Williams said, told Army personnel that his father was a carpenter and the house fell on him—requiring the war-dodger to stay home and care for the family’s immobile patriarch. Williams referred to this story as a

⁴⁰ John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* 8th Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 481.

⁴¹ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

“fairy tale.” “So when I finally confessed that I had rheumatic fever, it also sounded like a fairy tale,” Williams recalled. Medical personnel were obviously skeptical about Williams’s reported health condition. “If you are telling the truth,” the Army official stated, “you go back home, and you get a letter from a licensed physician verifying the stuff you have told me because if you are telling the truth, we don’t want you in the Army.” Williams went home to Attapulgus on a furlough to obtain the necessary paperwork and returned to Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia, on the day he was to be sworn in. Williams submitted his medical records to someone he referred to as the “top man.” The gentleman, whose rank and title are unknown, asked him what was the result of rheumatic fever? “It gives you a bad heart,” Williams responded. The Army official, then, proceeded, to tear up the medical recommendation. “Goddamn, boy,” said the officer in Williams’s recollection. “You’re in the right place. This place will get your heart right. Get your ass in that line.” Williams, expecting sympathy for his medical condition, was shocked at this response. “Lord, have mercy,” he said as he promptly assumed his place in the drill line.⁴²

Williams was officially inducted into the United States Army with the rank of private at Fort Benning, Georgia, on May 16, 1945.⁴³ His enlistment papers listed his race as “Negro.” His height was measured at “69” inches and his weight topped off at 147 pounds. His eye color and hair color were identified as “Brown,” and “Black,” respectively. Williams listed his civilian occupation as “Farm hand.” Since his service records indicate that his education level did not exceed high school, he was unable to

⁴² Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

⁴³ See below for discussion of the complicated chronology and contradictory evidence related to Hosea’s experiences in the European Theater of Operations.

qualify for a Military Occupational Specialty classification beyond “cargo checker.” Private Williams and his company left Fort Benning for Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Once he arrived and settled into his barracks, one of Williams’s first responsibilities was to learn how to drill and march in accord with the instructor’s commands. He acknowledged he had some difficulty in following orders. During one drill, Private Williams recalled that his failure to follow a command had dire consequences. “I made a wrong turn . . . and the sergeant made me run around with two big boxes of rocks five times. The next morning, that stuff [rheumatic fever] came down on me,” he said. After a thorough examination, a nonplussed physician asked Private Williams pointedly: “How in the hell did you ever get in the Army?” Williams required around-the-clock medical attention. Hospitalized for approximately four months, the ailing soldier was soon taking eighteen pills per day as part of his daily dosage of medication. He credited the Army with saving his life. “That’s why I’m here today,” he recalled in an interview nearly a half-century later. “I tell you the truth. That’s the best thing that ever happened to me.”⁴⁴

Private Williams ultimately recovered from the flare-up of his rheumatic fever and was scheduled to be honorably discharged because of the recurring medical condition that had intensified due to the physical demands of military service. But in a mysterious turn of events he was inexplicably ordered to go through basic training again at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, since his recent convalescence kept him from the learning the rudiments of military life with the soldiers he had enlisted alongside several months earlier. After Private Williams completed basic training without serious incident, he was

⁴⁴ United States Army, Enlisted Record and Report of Separation No. 10816675, No date, The Personal Papers of Barbara Williams Emerson, Stone Mountain, Georgia; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

transported to Camp Plauche, once an Army staging area in Harahan, Louisiana, for his technical training. After successfully completing this course, he was transferred to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, for infantry training which would prepare him for service in the European Theater of Operations.⁴⁵

In later years Williams would vividly relate stories of his service during his deployment in Germany. The actual details of his months in Europe are far cloudier, and the documentary record of his service record is regrettably incomplete. Williams was closely connected with twelve African American soldiers in his segregated Army unit. “We were just like blood brothers . . . no way anybody could have been closer,” Williams said. He would later claim in a compelling narrative that his life had been forever changed when he was faced with the imminent threat of death in Europe. Williams asserted in a 1991 interview with historian Taylor Branch that his company had been given an assignment to rescue a group of British prisoners of war who had been captured earlier. During his company’s attempt to liberate the soldiers in Einbeck, Germany, a small town not far from Hanover., all twelve of the soldiers he had bonded with as “brothers” were killed in action, he claimed. Williams indicated he had been wounded by flying shrapnel in the upper and lower torso but had survived, only to be discovered by other allied soldiers. As he was being carried away, Private Williams would later relate that a German grenade had exploded under his stretcher, killing two emergency medical personnel. In his version of events he was soon found and admitted into what he described as a “little Army hospital . . . a British hospital. Underground.” He was struck by the fact that it was the first time he had encountered female physicians; there was

⁴⁵ Ibid.

“nothing but women doctors,” he noted. He remained in Europe for several months recovering and receiving misinformation from his platoon and battalion commanders regarding his return to the United States. “I spent three or four months before I got everything straight” and “found out my company had de-evacuated and returned home,” he said many years later. Recalling his return to civilian life late in 1946 an even forty-five years later, Williams told interviewer Taylor Branch in 1991 that he had left the Army with extensive dental bridgework, a leg damaged by many scars, and “a chest full of medals.”⁴⁶

Williams’s accounts of the attack on his company are impossible to authenticate. That he served in the Army and was part of the occupation forces deployed to Europe late in 1945 is beyond dispute, but beyond that the evidence grows murky. In an interview in 1991, he appears to have misidentified his infantry unit and initially told Taylor Branch that the alleged attack had occurred in April 1945, then backtracked and supplied the specific date of February 5, 1945. However, his enlistment records show that he was not inducted into the Army until May 16, 1945, just over a week *after* the German forces had unconditionally surrendered to the Allied Forces in the aftermath of Hitler’s April 30 suicide. Compounding the problems with the time line of his enlistment and deployment in the written record as opposed to his oral reminiscences, he was stricken with rheumatic fever shortly after he was sworn in and was forced to spend several months recovering in

⁴⁶ Ibid., David Morrison, “The Pro and Con of Hosea Williams,” *Atlanta Weekly*, May 24, 1981. The author, attempting to secure additional service records from the National Personnel Records Center, was informed in a letter dated August 6, 2014, that “The record needed to answer your inquiry was in the area that suffered the most damage in the July 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center. Lindsay Schuller to Rolundus Rice, August 6, 2014, letter in author’s possession.

a Stateside Army hospital. This prevented him from deploying to Europe until November of 1945.⁴⁷

Williams later claimed that he had been awarded a Purple Heart for being wounded, and various sources, some perhaps based on the civil rights veteran's own claims, reference this decoration. His official Enlisted Record and Report of Separation documenting his Honorable Discharge on October 30, 1946, however, only indicates that he was awarded a World War II Victory Medal and an Occupation Ribbon for his service in Germany.⁴⁸ Moreover, both Box 32 "Battles and Campaigns" and Box 34 "Wounds Received in Action" on his discharge report read "None."

Thus the chronology of Williams's deployment and available evidence strongly suggest that his recollection of his wartime service was adversely affected by time. Having noted these many caveats, it is important to note that his Standard Form (SF-50), Notice of Personnel Action Form dated July 21, 1960, shows that he was given a ten-point veteran disability preference. Other primary source evidence reaffirms that he suffered some form of injury or incurred a disability while serving his country in World War II. And he later received disability compensation for "service connected disability" while in the U.S. Army. If in fact Williams's accounts of the military action and injuries

⁴⁷ In the 1991 interview with Taylor Branch, assuming it is transcribed accurately, Hosea indicated he had served "in infantry, 41st infantry." That unit, however, appears to have served in the Pacific Theater of Operations. Hosea's Report of Separation paperwork indicates he was assigned to the 4257th Quartermaster Trucking Company, likely an all-African American unit charged with providing transportation for troops and cargo during the Allied Occupation. But Report of Separation documents show the last unit a soldier was assigned to at the time of discharge, and often servicemen leaving the Army might be briefly assigned to other units while awaiting return from the European Theater.

⁴⁸ While no Purple Heart is referenced on this notice of separation, there are examples of World War II veterans receiving the decoration and not having it included on their "Report of Separation." While the qualifications of the Purple Heart do allow for its being awarded as the result of wounds received from "friendly fire," the context for the injury must include engagement with "enemies" or "opposing armed forces."

he described in later interviews in the 1980s and early 1990s did not occur as he claimed to remember them, one could reasonably infer that the disability might have been related to flare-ups of his rheumatic fever.⁴⁹

The recently-promoted Sergeant Williams was honorably discharged from the United States Army on October 30, 1946, only to return home to the same racially-charged environment that had defined his existence when he donned a U.S. Army uniform a year-and-a-half earlier. He flew into Fort Bragg, South Carolina, from Europe in early November. His travel arrangements called for him to catch a bus from the military installation to Atlanta and then to Americus, Georgia, before riding the final leg of the trip to Bainbridge. While waiting to change buses in Americus, Williams was again reminded of his second-class status as an African American in the South. One of countless exemplars of the “Double V” campaign, he had joined the Army to risk his life fighting against fascist tyranny abroad, but upon returning to the United States he could not enjoy the basic liberties undergirding a democratic society.

Williams had been advised to drink copious amounts of water as a prophylactic measure to thwart any subsequent bouts with rheumatic fever. He realized that the segregated black section of the bus station where he was waiting contained an area for dispensing coffee, but lacked a water fountain. He did not consume the caffeinated beverage because of a long-held folk belief: “They used to tell us little children, when we went to the white folks’ house, that drinking coffee will make you black,” recalled

⁴⁹ See Notice of Personal Action, July 11, 1960. Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library. In a letter from the Veteran’s Administration Regional Office in Atlanta, dated August 7, 1961, Hosea was notified that his records had been certified by the Veteran’s Administration and that he was justly entitled to receive “disability compensation on account of his service connected disability.” See Letter, Elbert B. Anderson to Hosea L. Williams, August 7, 1961, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

Williams. Thirsty, he pleaded with the white female attendant to grant him access to the “whites only” water fountain. Hewing to southern customs, she flatly refused. He bought some coffee and disposed of the beverage so that he could use the cup to drink some water. “I hobbled around to the front door; I didn’t try to go in. I just leaned in and put the cup up to the dispenser to get me some water.” When a group of whites present at a nearby gas station realized that Williams was disregarding southern norms and mores, they attacked him, punching and kicking the uniformed Army veteran until he lay motionless. In Williams’s vivid recollection, “They beat me up and left me on the sidewalk. They thought I was dead.”⁵⁰

The injuries Williams sustained at the hands of the white mob were so serious that many white onlookers believed that they had witnessed a brutal, yet in their minds justifiable, homicide. Someone called Mama’s Funeral Home to retrieve Williams’s body, which appeared lifeless. Reflecting many years later, Williams referred to the black-owned and operated mortuary as “one of the finest, largest, and most beautiful funeral homes in any little rural county in America.” The driver was placing Williams’s body in the ambulance when he felt a very faint pulse and noticed Hosea’s chest slowly moving. The funeral parlor employee transported the badly-wounded veteran to an Army hospital almost ninety miles away in Thomasville, Georgia. He spent approximately two months recovering from injuries not related to wartime combat. Immobile and mentally broken, Hosea spent hours reflecting on the previous two years of his life. In one moment

⁵⁰ United States Army, Enlisted Record and Report of Separation No. 10816675, No date, The Personal Papers of Barbara Williams Emerson, Stone Mountain, Georgia; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Hosea L. Williams, interview by George King, Southern Regional Council, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" Program Files, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

of sobering reflection, he reached the despairing conclusion: “Goddamn it. I fought on the wrong side.”⁵¹

Hosea finally arrived home in Attapulugus after his eight-week convalescence. His homecoming was another bitter reminder for African Americans in the Deep South that their skin color was a badge of inferiority. One evening in January, 1947, Hosea, now twenty-one-years old, was longing for one of his favorite dishes: pork chops with a lot of black pepper. His aunt, Azzie Mae, volunteered to fry the pork chops if he picked the meat up from the store. “I drove her car up the store,” Hosea said. He went into the only supermarket in town and encountered a Mr. Boyd, the white proprietor. Hosea, in his Army uniform, told Boyd that he wanted two pounds of pork chops. While he was reaching for the pork chops, Boyd recognized Williams and asked if he was “Little Turner.” “Yes,” Hosea said. “Nigger,” said Boyd, “don’t you say yes to me. You say, yes sir to me, goddamn it.” Boyd continued on his racist rant: “All the other nigger boys come back from the Army and come in this store and say, ‘How you doing, Mr. Boyd?’” Williams, likely still upset and grappling with the injuries from his shellacking in Americus, told Boyd: “I don’t give a damn how you doin’!” Boyd reached for his shotgun, undoubtedly with lethal intent. Fortunately the white store proprietor’s wife intervened and Williams fled unscathed. Papa and Hosea’s aunt, Azzie Mae, encouraged him to leave home again since many whites in the town were eager to finally carry out the lynching that had almost occurred a few years earlier after his relationship with Laura

⁵¹ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Hosea L. Williams, interview by George King, Southern Regional Council, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" Program Files, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Chester had been made public. For the second time Hosea was forced to abandon his family and home to avoid imminent death at the hands of vigilante whites.⁵²

Hosea left Attapulgus for Bainbridge in February, 1947. “My granddaddy told me to go away and get some learnin’,” Hosea remembered. At some point in early 1947, he decided to resume the education he had abandoned after he left school in either his eighth or ninth grade year. “I realized the need for education so I went and convinced the principal in Bainbridge to let me into school,” said Hosea. She agreed to let him register for school if he would make a concerted commitment to his schoolwork. The twenty-one year-old Hosea was obviously uneasy about the prospect of sitting in class with younger classmates. “It was embarrassing to sit up in class with kids who were sixteen year-olds,” lamented Hosea. Nevertheless, he enrolled in Hutto High School. Hutto was originally known as the Whittier School and Tabernacle for Colored Children, the first school organized by former slaves in 1869 Decatur County. Named for longtime principal, George Hutto, the school had a long tradition of educating the community’s black pupils despite its meager resources, leaky roofs, and cramped quarters — hallmarks of black schools at the time. Hutto would have likely been staffed at that time by black female teachers whose formal education was not equal to the training of the white teachers at neighboring all-white Bainbridge High School less than five miles away. In spite of these deficiencies, Hosea graduated at the end of the academic school year.⁵³

⁵² Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Hosea L. Williams, interview by George King, Southern Regional Council, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” Program Files, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

⁵³ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Ralph McGill, Atlanta, GA, September 15, 1986, Ralph McGill Papers, 1853-1971, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia; Decatur County Historical Society, *Decatur County Georgia: Past and Present*, 73; James D. Anderson, *The*

Although Hosea had been steadfastly committed to graduating from high school, he still found time for involvement with the ladies. He was particularly fond of Carrie Mae Pugh. Pugh, three years his junior, was a native of Bainbridge and the daughter of Gordie Pugh Sr. and Virgilene C. Beard. Carrie was extraordinarily beautiful; Hosea recalled having practically “melted” after seeing her for the first time. Carrie, for her part, found Hosea to be handsome and charismatic. The two began dating during their senior year at Hutto High. Carrie became pregnant around May, 1947 — shortly after she and Hosea graduated. They were married four months later in a quiet ceremony performed by Reverend J.C. Hamilton on September 15 of that same year. After the nuptial exchange, Carrie left Bainbridge to begin college at Fort Valley College, an historically Black institution in Fort Valley, Georgia.⁵⁴

During this period of his life Hosea entered into an unlikely friendship with the younger brother of Marvin Griffin, who in 1955 would succeed Herman Talmadge as Georgia governor running on a staunchly segregationist platform. The relationship between Hosea and Cheney played a critical role in the young veteran’s and father-to-be’s decision to attend college. Although the origins of the relationship are somewhat unclear, Hosea forged a strong, nearly fraternal relationship with Cheney, who was about a decade older. Marvin Griffin would go on to serve as a rabidly segregationist Georgia governor, but Williams thought his younger brother was cut from a different cloth: “There was never two brothers more different,” Williams said. “Marvin Griffin was a

Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 1.

⁵⁴ Barbara Williams Emerson, interview by author, September 2, 2014, Stone Mountain, Georgia; Obituary of Carrie Mae Smith, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

racist to the core. White superiority was an obsession with him. . . . Cheney was more like Lester Maddox and George Wallace. Cheney was much more willing to accept a person for who he was,” Hosea remembered. Whatever their underlying motivations, the two white brothers embraced segregationist positions out of political expediency. The Griffin family owned the *Bainbridge Searchlight*, the city’s conservative newspaper. By age twenty-six, Cheney had been elected mayor of Bainbridge. At the same time, Marvin Griffin was making a name for himself in the Georgia General Assembly as a state representative and establishing statewide political credentials. In Williams’s recollection, whatever segregationist views Cheney espoused publicly, they did little to deter him from befriending Williams. “We were doing everything that two men could do other than have a sexual relationship,” Hosea jovially remembered. The two of them did have sexual relationships with white women and black women and shared moonshine-fueled drunken escapades together. According to Hosea, they even scammed white patrons at a venue where Hosea served as the head black waiter. “We would beat them rednecks out of their money. . . . When time come to pay the bill . . . Cheney would start rantin’ and ravin’ to bring attention when the bill was due. . . . The whites would say, what’s the bill, boy?” Hosea and Cheney would collude to pad the bill and thus have the whites to pay an inflated cost, with the ill-gained overage then split between the two unlikely friends.

Ultimately, the friendship took an unexpected turn. “Cheney was red as a beet when he walked up to me [one day] and said very angrily, ‘I’m WHITE and you’re BLACK. . . . I can make it in this town because I’m white. . . . You’ll never make it here because you’re black.’” Cheney pleaded with his friend to leave Decatur County to seek a college education. “You know I’m broke, don’t have no money,” said Hosea. Cheney

smiled and made a deal with Hosea. “You go to college and I’ll pay the bill,” Cheney promised. The two shook hands. “He gave me seventy-five dollars” toward tuition, said Hosea. This unexpected donation, along with his GI Bill benefits, would defray some of his collegiate expenses. However, he still had to be admitted into an institution.⁵⁵

Hosea initially wanted to study at Morehouse College in Atlanta after one of his friends from Bainbridge had convinced him that he could get Hosea admitted into the Atlanta University Center’s flagship institution in spite of his lack of high-school credit hours. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, Morehouse rejected Williams’s application for admission. Undeterred, Williams’s friend continued to search for colleges for Hosea to attend. “I know damned well I can get you in at Clark [College],” said the buddy from Bainbridge, in Williams’s recollection. But Clark also rejected the aspiring collegian. Williams’s friend and advocate had another trump card that he was willing to use as a last resort—his father was an officer in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. “His father called an AME Bishop at Morris Brown College for me . . . the bishop was willing to give me a chance because he knew the boy’s father,” said Hosea. The bishop agreed to admit Hosea under two conditions: if he agreed to “keep his nose clean and get his lessons,” remembered the anxious student. Hosea had gained admission and he knew that his financial assistance from his veteran’s G.I. Bill would help to cover many of the expenses associated with tuition, books, and room and board.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Hosea L. Williams, interview by George King, Southern Regional Council, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" Program Files, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia; Tyrone Brooks, interview by author, Atlanta, Georgia, April 17, 2014; David Morrison, “The Pro and Con of Hosea Williams,” *Atlanta Weekly*, May 24, 1981.

⁵⁶ Hosea L. Williams, interview by George King, Southern Regional Council, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" Program Files, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Hosea began his studies at Morris Brown College in September 1947 and soon selected a major in chemistry and a minor in biology. During Williams's second semester, his and Carrie's first and only child, Barbara Jean Williams, was born in Bainbridge on March 7. He was unable to be present for the birth since he was in school and did not have a car. More pointedly, he was likely too afraid to miss classes fearing that he might fall behind in his coursework — an attitude that was invariably tempered by his age and maturity. He even dressed the part. Hosea was a sharp dresser, claimed fellow chemistry major, Emmogene Williams. "He wore bowties to class all the time," she said. Victoria Jenkins, a cheerleader and classmate of Hosea, claimed that he was a "very serious student." Jenkins continued, "We took a religion course together from Dean Edward C. Mitchell during our freshman year and he spent a lot of time in the library" doing schoolwork. He was a "serious" pupil who apparently possessed the ability to navigate through a course of study that required him to be analytical and deliberate.⁵⁷

Evidence suggests that he was not particularly fond of the humanities or other subjects that required a lot of writing, which was reflected in his performance in these areas. "I got all the good grades" in the classes that I enjoyed. "I was a hell of a chemist at Morris Brown. I flunked English and history, but math and calculus, oh, man, I made some grades, said Hosea." Emmogene Williams recalled Hosea as "a very gifted student." Her observations were shaped during the science classes they both took from brothers and West Virginia natives, Drs. Artis and Lemwood Grays. She asserted that her former classmate was "one of the best chemistry students who came out of Morris

⁵⁷ Hosea L. Williams, One Page Autobiographical Blurb, 1959, The Personal Papers of Barbara Williams Emerson, Stone Mountain, Georgia; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991; Emmogene Williams, interview by the author, telephone, Lithonia, Georgia, September 14, 2014; Victoria Jenkins, interview by author, telephone, Lithonia, Georgia, September 14, 2014.

Brown.” Williams remembered that his abilities as a budding chemist enabled him to work in a student program in the Emory University science lab, a segregated white institution in Atlanta, while immersed in the science program at Morris Brown.

Williams’s formative experiences in South Georgia and Florida and in Europe as soldier in a segregated unit in the United States Army during World War II had made him a socially conscious student while at Morris Brown. Like many African American college students in the late 1940s, Hosea was frustrated with race-based discrimination and wanted to join organizations that addressed issues relative to blacks’ attainment of full citizenship rights.⁵⁸ Seeking affiliations with groups that had as their mission bringing about meaningful change, Hosea joined the Atlanta Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the late 1940s during a time when the state organization was headed by John Wesley Dobbs. (Dobbs’s grandson was Maynard Jackson, who would go on to become the first African American elected mayor of any major city in the Deep South almost thirty years later when he won office in Atlanta.) Although Dobbs was a visionary and a leader in the African American community as Grand Master of the Prince Hall Masons of Georgia and the founder of the Atlanta Civic and Political League, Hosea remembered that Dobbs and other influential African American activists did not have a lot of contact with students in the capital. Hosea remained abreast of the social issues impacting blacks in Atlanta and in the country by attending some of the state chapter meetings. He contended that some of the students at Morris Brown were not yet heavily engaged in protests. “Basically during that time,” Hosea remembered, “we were only having meetings in our community since the only

⁵⁸ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, The Papers of Reverend Hosea L. Williams, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Emmogene Williams, interview by the author, telephone, Lithonia, Georgia, September 14, 2014.

major resistance to racism was through the courts.” Nevertheless, Williams’s budding curiosity relative to how he could strategically address the inequities that he and other blacks had to grapple with was heightened during the NAACP meetings he attended while working toward his Bachelor of Science degree.⁵⁹

Williams’s relationship with his wife Carrie had suffered because of the distance and his inability, or unwillingness, to travel home to South Georgia. They divorced after only a few years of marriage, and despite his garrulous nature Hosea subsequently would never reference his first wife. While in Atlanta in 1950, he met Juanita “Nit” Terry. Juanita, born in Atlanta on January 3, 1925, was the only child of Elizabeth Virginia Terry and Jesse Brown. She was raised by her grandmother, Elizabeth Golden Terry. Juanita described her grandmother as a “very proud Black woman, determined to give me the very best” out of life. Juanita graduated from Atlanta’s Booker T. Washington High School and subsequently, from Reid’s Business College. She moved to Washington, D.C. during World War II to work as a civilian clerk typist with the United States Department of the Army. She resigned from this position after the job became emotionally overwhelming. “It broke my heart to send out letters to parents telling them about the death of their children in the war. I could not take it anymore,” she said. After leaving the nation’s capital, she found a job in Atlanta as a stenographer at one of the city’s leading black financial institutions, Citizen’s Trust Bank. She recalled meeting Hosea while working one day in 1950. “He came into the bank just being his own self,” she

⁵⁹ Hosea L. Williams, interview by George King, Southern Regional Council, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" Program Files, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia; John Wesley Dobbs’ Obituary, September 2, 1961, The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia. For more on John Wesley Dobbs and his family, see Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) and Gary M. Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn: The Saga of Two Families and the Making of Atlanta* (New York: Scribner, 1996).

remembered. “Just flirtin’ and carrying on. . . . I thought [he] was something since he was going to college.” After a courtship that lasted a little more than a year, Hosea married Juanita shortly after he graduated with his Bachelor of Science degree in Chemistry from Morris Brown on June 6, 1951.⁶⁰

Williams’s responsibilities and ambition for upward mobility convinced him that an advanced degree would strengthen his chances to provide a life of luxury for his family. In the summer of 1951 he was admitted into the graduate school at Atlanta University to pursue a master’s degree in chemistry. To make ends meet, he withdrew from his degree program to take a job teaching high school science in the Douglas County, Georgia, school system for the 1951-1952 academic year for an annual salary of \$1,900. “We needed the money,” said Juanita. “It wasn't just that. He had all this energy that had to be put in some direction. He never could just relax. At that time of his life, he just put it into work.” He ultimately resigned from the school after a heated dispute with the county superintendent over the limited budget that he was given to purchase supplies for his students. Hosea then resumed his coursework toward the master’s degree at Atlanta University during the summer of 1952. His life revolved around school work, studying between classes during the day and work at night and over the weekends sorting parcels with the Railway Mail Service, a division of the United States Post Office. Hosea constantly sought a more secure standard of living and the prestige of a white-collar position. In September 1952, he returned to public school work as a science teacher at the

⁶⁰ Obituary for Juanita Terry Williams, August 28, 2000, C.T. and Octavia Vivian Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia; Morrison, “The Pro and Con of Hosea Williams,” *Atlanta Weekly*, May 24, 1981; Hosea L. Williams Bachelor of Science Diploma from Morris Brown College, June 6, 1951, The Personal Papers of Barbara Williams Emerson, Stone Mountain, Georgia.

all-black J.P. Carr High School in Rockdale County, Georgia, at an annual salary of \$2,400—five hundred dollars more than his previous teaching job in Douglassville, Georgia. Although he enjoyed the increase in salary, he was not content with the way that he and other black teachers were treated by the local school system and he encouraged his colleagues to collectively express their disdain with the county’s Jim Crow policies through meetings and protests at the county headquarters. “The white folks basically ran Hosea away from that place,” recalled Tyrone Brooks, a mentee who viewed Hosea as a father figure. Left with few options in the school system because of his growing reputation as one who disturbed the status quo, he left J.P. Carr High School on December 1, 1952, after he was granted a transfer from his federal job as a mail sorter with the United States Post Office to the United States Department of Agriculture’s division in Savannah, Georgia. This job transfer and change of scenery placed Hosea on a trajectory that would change the course of his and Juanita’s life.⁶¹

⁶¹Barry King, “Williams: A Man of Many Roles and Vocations,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 3, 1979; Hosea L. Williams, One Page Autobiographical Blurb, 1959, The Personal Papers of Barbara Williams Emerson, Stone Mountain, Georgia; Tyrone Brooks, interview by author, Atlanta, Georgia, April 17, 2014; Morrison, “The Pro and Con of Hosea Williams,” *Atlanta Weekly*, May 24, 1981.

Chapter 2

“Head House Nigger,” 1952-1963

In January, 1952, shortly after his twenty-sixth birthday, Hosea Williams moved to Savannah, Georgia, to accept a job as one of the first African-American research chemists with the United States Department of Agriculture in the Deep South. His transition from graduate student at Atlanta University in the state’s largest metropolis to middle-class professional in the small Atlantic port city of Savannah during the Cold War occurred only two years before the beginning of the classical phase of the modern black freedom struggle in 1954. His new posting reminded him that the reality of his status as a decorated World War II veteran and holder of a college degree in chemistry with additional graduate-level work did not shield him from the racism and bigotry in a city known for its “moderate” race relations. This revelation thrust Williams to the forefront of the city’s civil rights leadership as chief apprentice to Westley Wallace “W.W.” Law, the domineering president of the Savannah Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Williams’s talent at organizing African American students and working-class adults to unite in one common cause was cultivated and refined while occupying various positions of leadership within the Savannah Branch of the NAACP which had been functioning, though not always continuously, since 1917.

Hosea did not make the local NAACP chapter in Savannah; the local branch, which had organized over several decades, made him.¹

Between 1954 and 1963, Williams chaired the branch's Membership, Education, Legal Redress and Negotiating Committees, respectively. Although he was effective in each of these demanding capacities, his role as president of the NAACP's political arm, the Chatham County Crusade for Voters (CCCV), would later capture the attention of Martin Luther King Jr., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) president and arguably, the most celebrated figure of the modern civil rights movement. The NAACP's pressure on moderate politicians and white business leaders and religious leaders brought about the collapse of segregation in public accommodations in Savannah in October 1963 — almost a full year ahead of President Lyndon B. Johnson's signing of the landmark Civil Rights Act into law in the summer of 1964. By January 1964, in large measure because of the diligent labor of Williams and Law, Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed Savannah "as the most desegregated city south of the Mason-Dixon Line." Williams's growing commitment to the cause of civil and human rights was, in no small part, the result of the race-based discrimination he experienced on the job as an employee of the United States government.²

Savannah, named for the neighboring Savannah River, is Georgia's oldest city and was settled in May 1733 by James Edward Oglethorpe. An Englishman by birth, Oglethorpe came from an affluent family in England and was elected to the British Parliament in 1722. As a Member of Parliament, he chaired a committee that investigated

¹ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991.

² Martin Luther King Jr., quoted in Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 127.

the conditions of English jails and the inmates who had been imprisoned for being unable to discharge their debts. His findings led to the release of a number of prisoners, who would comprise the population of a new American colony that could protect British land and interests from France and Spain. Upon an initial survey of the land in close proximity to the colony of South Carolina, Oglethorpe chose an area that was easy to defend and had an adequate supply of fresh water. Comfortable with the land advantages, he built a positive working relationship with Tomochichi, a “man of unalterable fidelity” and chief of the Yamacraw Indians. Nearly 233 years later, Williams would hold mass rallies in the square named for Tomochichi, who had commanded a small tribe near Yamacraw Bluff.³

Williams’s visual inspection of Savannah in 1952 would have revealed the city’s genteel southern character. Parts of Savannah were picturesque and charming. The urban landscape was defined by long stretches of green space and numerous park-like public squares, reminiscent of Oglethorpe’s vision to foster in each neighborhood a sense of individual community. Suburban Savannah included monuments and quaint nineteenth- and early twentieth-century homes. The city’s downtown streets were lined with centuries-old live oaks. Their branches stretched out in all directions to provide pedestrians shade from the sub-tropical climate of Savannah’s sweltering summers. Spanish moss draped the telephone lines and trees alike, drifting and swaying in the damp air, adding to the ambiance of the city. The Savannah landscape was also sprinkled with palmetto trees and azalea bushes. In spite of its undeniable beauty, Savannah had a dark and ugly side. Its wealth and beauty were inextricably tied to the Peculiar Institution, and

³ Phinzy Spaulding, “Oglethorpe and the Founding of Georgia,” in *A History of Georgia*, ed. Kenneth Coleman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 16, 19; “An Early Description of Georgia: From the Gentleman’s Magazine,” January, 1756. Volume 26. *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March, 1918), 37, 39.

despite the efforts of African Americans to assert themselves the shadow of slavery endured in the form of Jim Crow.⁴

The system of discrimination that Williams would tirelessly fight to destroy had been inextricably tied to southern law and custom for many decades by the time he arrived in Savannah. At the end of the Civil War in 1865, blacks, by custom, had already been excluded from schools, many hospitals, insane asylums and public accommodations. Historian Howard Rabinowitz notes that “before the resort to widespread de jure segregation—de facto segregation had replaced exclusion as the norm in southern race relations.” Even before voter disfranchisement began in earnest in 1890, however, states in the former Confederacy had begun to codify laws that systematically segregated the races. Southern historian C. Vann Woodward documents that Florida was the first state to adopt such a law in 1887. Mississippi, Texas, and Louisiana followed suit in 1888, 1889, and 1890, respectively. The following year, Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky and Georgia enacted versions of the discriminatory statutes in their respective states. Georgia became the first state to adopt a law requiring segregation on streetcars in 1891. Georgia’s segregation ordinance was passed with the disclaimer that it be enforced “as much as practicable.” By 1899, the state expanded race-based discrimination to cover railroad sleeping cars. Blacks in Georgia, particularly Savannah, vigorously protested the passage of the 1899 statute, but to no avail.⁵

⁴ Spaulding, “Oglethorpe and the Founding of Georgia,” 19.

⁵ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 211-212; Howard N. Rabinowitz, “From Exclusion to Segregation: Southern Race Relations, 1865-1890,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Sep., 1976), 326; August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, “The Boycott Movement Against Jim Crow Streetcars, 1900-1906,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Mar. 1969), 756; William F. Holmes, “Civil Rights, 1890-1940,” in *A History of Georgia*, ed. Kenneth Coleman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 277.

Although various protests broke out in other cities in Georgia during the flurry of segregation legislation, one historian argues that “the most sustained protest occurred in Savannah” after a fight between black and white commuters led the Georgia General Assembly to pass an ordinance in 1906 requiring streetcar companies to enforce segregation between the races. Other historians, particularly August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, conclude that in many cities throughout the South, streetcar companies opposed such legislation because the policy was both problematic and expensive to enforce. Moreover, the companies were reluctant to implement race-based discrimination out of fear of losing black patronage. Blacks in Savannah proved that the streetcar companies’ reservations about segregation were prophetic as they initiated a boycott almost immediately after the passage of the discriminatory legislation. With this protest, Blacks, under the banner of the Chatham County Emancipation Association, began a tradition of boycotting Savannah businesses that endorsed segregation by withholding their patronage from the streetcars operated by the Savannah Electric and Power Company. The boycott continued through 1907, ultimately costing the company \$50,000 in revenue (approximately \$1,250,000 adjusted for inflation). Internal dissension within the black professional community, including among the instructors at Georgia State Industrial College, a black institution, caused the protesting spirit to weaken before the black community could negotiate a favorable compromise. However, the protest showed that Savannah Blacks would not sit by idly when discriminated against — a tradition that Williams would continue as a member of the Savannah Branch of the NAACP.⁶

⁶ “100-year-old Former Teacher, Schools Improving-Veteran Educator.” *Savannah Morning News*, May 1, 1974; Holmes, *Civil Rights, 1890-1940*, 277-278; Meier and Rudwick, “The Boycott Movement Against Jim Crow Streetcars, 1900-1906,” 757; John Dittmer, *Black Progressives in Georgia, 1900-1920* (Chicago:

The Savannah Branch of the NAACP was one of the strongest and most powerful chapters in the Deep South at the time Williams joined its ranks upon moving to the city. The chapter had long benefitted from politically-astute and dynamic branch presidents who worked well within the conservative national organization. The history of the Savannah Branch of the NAACP can be traced back as early as 1915, six years after the national organization was founded in New York in 1909. Georgia State College (later Savannah State University) professor, Miken L. Pope, wrote to then Director of Publications and Research and co-founder of the organization, William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois, inquiring about the necessary steps required to form a branch in Georgia's oldest city. The initial inquiry within itself was a bold, some would argue, imprudent, move since fewer than five of the national organization's seventy branches existed in the former Confederacy, a region that Archibald Grimke aptly identified as "enemy territory." Professor Pope, motivated by the plight of African Americans and their woeful ignorance of the implications of racial segregation in Savannah, had already established a club of activist-minded men and women who were eager to tackle the ills of racism and discrimination in Savannah. Pope, the catalyst, hoped to transform this already-functioning unit into a local branch of the NAACP. Although a branch was not founded in Savannah as a result of Pope's efforts, African Americans' sensitivity to the significance of the race problem was heightened. Within two years, a branch would be chartered in the city.⁷

University of Illinois Press, 1980) 17, 18; Howard O. Robinson, "W.W. Law and The Savannah Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People." Draft of unpublished manuscript, 18.

⁷ Howard O. Robinson, "W.W. Law and The Savannah Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People." Draft of unpublished manuscript.; Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), p. 41; *Savannah Tribune*, March 10, 1917.

On March 7, 1917, James Weldon Johnson, the NAACP's new National Field Secretary, addressed a modest crowd at the St. Paul Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Included among the 120 attendees were leaders of the black business community in Savannah. From the pulpit, Johnson proclaimed "Our race is moving forward and leaving the leaders in the rear." For him, the Savannah event demonstrated that with strong and effective leadership from an influential core group, local organizers would be able to create and sustain a vigorous branch in the port city. Four months later, the NAACP chartered a Savannah Branch with seventy-nine members. The Branch's inaugural officers represented the elite tier of black society. The new branch elected as president Fannin S. Belcher, one of Savannah's few black physicians. His friend, James Garfield Lemon, a local attorney and insurance salesman for the Pilgrim Life Insurance Company, was chosen to serve as the Branch's first secretary. Equally respected in the area was the Branch's first-elected treasurer, Albert B. Singfield. This core group of officers would remain in place for the next two years.⁸

The Savannah Branch of the NAACP actively waged the fight against racism in and around the city. During this period, the Branch championed various cases where blacks had been unduly administered harsh southern injustice in the courts. For example, the national office asked the branch to investigate the circumstances surrounding the arrest and conviction of James Harvey and Joe Jordan after both black men were found guilty of assaulting and raping a white woman in September, 1921. With nearly \$1,000 in financial assistance from the national office and the Atlanta Branch, The Savannah Branch concluded that the defendants had been denied their basic constitutional

⁸ Robinson, "W.W. Law and the Savannah Branch of the NAACP," 5.; Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, p. 62.

privileges. They had not been permitted to call any witnesses, nor were they allowed to participate in procedures insofar as jury selection was concerned. Harvey and Jordan were also denied competent counsel. The two were sentenced to die on three separate occasions after a series of Georgia Supreme Court rulings and execution stays from Governor Thomas Hardwick. Although the trial had been held in Jessup, Georgia, less than fifty miles southwest of Savannah, the court ordered that both defendants be transported to the coastal city for “safekeeping.” On July 1, 1922, while en route to Savannah in the custody of the sheriff’s deputies, Harvey and Jordan were kidnapped and hanged by a mob of angry whites. The Savannah NAACP collected evidence against five perpetrators but no one was ever convicted of the crime.⁹

The acquittal of the defendants accused of participating in the lynching of Harvey and Jordan dampened the enthusiasm of the local NAACP and the black community in Savannah. The branch was inactive from 1925-1930. After a brief revival in 1930, the national office sent a duplicate charter to a newly-reactivated branch with 266 members, but the local chapter proved unable to sustain the necessary momentum to keep blacks in the city motivated enough to stand with and actively support an organization that was perceived by most whites to be a threat to maintaining traditional white dominance. The branch was once again classified as “inactive” from 1938-1942. On March 7, 1942, Rev. Dr. Mark Gilbert, pastor of the First African Baptist Church, one of the oldest black churches in the United States, wrote a letter to E. Frederick Morrow, National Branch Coordinator for the NAACP. Gilbert informed him that he had “secured the fifty

⁹ The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, “Fifteenth Annual Report of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” (New York: NAACP National Office, 1922), 29.; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia 1880-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 232.

members necessary to start a branch” and that a “committee on permanent organization” had been formed to avoid the branch’s earlier tendencies to lapse into inactivity and ensure that the branch would survive in perpetuity. On April 13, only five weeks later, the branch was rechartered with three-hundred members.¹⁰

By January 1943, nine years before Williams arrived in Savannah, the local branch had emerged as the operational nucleus for the NAACP in Georgia. Gilbert and the Savannah Branch “took the initiative” and formed a statewide NAACP Conference “for the purposes of more effectively making the NAACP articulate on matters affecting the Negroes in the state of Georgia.” Of the state’s eleven branches, seven sent delegates to the three-day meeting held at Gilbert’s church. Gilbert, the organizer of the meeting, was elected president, a position he would hold until 1950. His fellow member in the Savannah Branch, Stella J. Reeves, was elected chairman of the youth council. He championed a platform mutually agreed upon by the delegates that included attacking the poll tax, supporting a retirement fund for Negro teachers, and agreeing to embark on a rigorous program to get members registered and voting in elections. By the time the meetings concluded on January 17 over a turkey dinner at First African Baptist Church, the Savannah Branch had emerged as the only branch with two members occupying leadership positions. The delegates elected Professor C.L. Harper of the Atlanta Branch vice president, N.M. Tomas of Columbus as secretary, and Rev. M.F. Adams of Albany

¹⁰Letter, Ralph Mark Gilbert to E. Frederick Morrow, March 7, 1942, Selected Branch Files, 1940-1955. Branch Department Files Geographical File Savannah, Georgia, [1942-1955] (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1999) Group II, Box C-40; The First African Baptist Church was organized in 1778 by George Leisle (variously spelled), a black slave. Various historians have debated the authenticity of the claim that First African Baptist was the first independent black church in America. See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903, p. 10; Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1973), 110; Carter G. Woodson, *History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1921), pp.87-89.

as treasurer. The state and local Branches would enjoy relative success in registering African Americans to vote during the next five years. By 1949, the Savannah Branch, however, was one again on the precipice of dissolution until the emergence of W.W. Law.¹¹

W.W. Law, Williams's mentor in the NAACP, became branch president in 1950. Law told the National Director of Branches, Ruby Hurly, that "Dr. Ralph Mark Gilbert and just about all of his crew ran out on me...it was like seeing the rats leaving a sinking ship...they willed the branch presidency to me." Law was twenty-seven-years old at the time and was to be employed as a postal worker with the United States Post Office. He worked with previous and current members to rebuild the branch, but was forced to grapple with the same issues that had previously plagued the local NAACP. In a letter to Lucille Black, National Membership Secretary, Law outlined an ambitious campaign to meet and exceed the 750-member quota prearranged by the national organization. However, he also lamented that "many of the preachers, teachers, and professional people (like the doctors and whatnots) have a million excuses for not working in the membership drive." Although he referred to this situation as "disgusting," he optimistically concluded that "If we can get enough help in the membership drive we can and will do well." It was this attitude and commitment to civil rights activism that enabled him to be elected as the youngest member of the NAACP National Board of Directors at age 32.¹²

¹¹ Letter, Ralph Mark Gilbert to Editor of *Crisis*, January 22, 1943. Selected Branch Files, 1940-1955. Branch Department Files Geographical File Savannah, Georgia, [1942-1955]

¹²Letter, W.W. Law to Lucille Black, April 2, 1953, Selected Branch Files, 1940-1955. Branch Department Files Geographical File Savannah, Georgia, [1942-1955]

Williams's service in the United States Army and satisfactory performance rating on the General Service exam earned him a job with the United States Department of Agriculture's Chemical Division of the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine. His score on the civil service exam ranked in the ninetieth percentile, which was augmented by a ten-point bonus because of the disabled veteran's status.¹³ Getting this job "was like going to heaven," he later said. However, Williams's initial enthusiasm over the appointment was dampened after Ciprian Cueto, the Cuban-American head chemist, gave him an initial tour of the chemistry lab. Feeling an overwhelming sense of inadequacy, the new hire began to tear up after seeing certain pieces of scientific equipment for the first time. "I was about to bust out and start crying," he recalled. Startled by Williams's reaction, Cueto began to question why his new employee's demeanor had changed from happiness to dread. "What's the matter? You don't want the job?" Williams replied: "Mister, I have to be honest with you. I ain't never seen nothing like this on earth. . . . You know all those instruments you just showed me. . . . I ain't even seen them in a book." The meager resources available to the students at Morris Brown and Atlanta University were in stark comparison to the equipment at the disposal of the students and some of Williams's colleagues who had attended the state's flagship institution. According to Williams, "The white boys from a school like the University of Georgia had not only seen the instrument and worked with it in college, they'd had a course called echelon maintenance . . . where they learned to take the damn thing apart and put it back together again." Cueto, who Williams remembered as "a chemical nut," offered his

¹³ See Chapter 1 above for discussion of Hosea's service during the Second World War and subsequent classification as a disabled veteran.

colleague a proposition: “I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll teach you if you are willing to learn.”¹⁴

Williams formally accepted the job and began a rigorous routine that acclimated him to the complexities of his new position as a research chemist. Cueto, who often felt marginalized in the United States because of his own ethnic heritage, did not have many friends and, according to Williams, “just wanted some company.” Through the middle of 1953, both men went to their offices in the stored-product Insects Section at the Savannah station each morning around 8:00 a.m. and worked until 10:00 p.m. each night. During these thirteen-hour days, according to Williams’s job description, he assisted in the conducting and planning of experiments to “correlate with the entomological research” of the section. He was also tasked with “modifying existing chemical analytical methods and laboratory techniques for the determination of various insecticide concentrates and residues,” which required “independent judgment and skill in several phases of chemistry.” By the end of 1953 and under the expert tutelage of Cueto, Williams was “developing special insecticide formulations prescribed by entomologists . . . while also conducting complicated analyses involving volumetric, gravimetric and spectrophotometric methods for insecticide determinations.” In laymen’s terms, Williams became proficient in examining volume and applying the techniques and procedures pioneered by Theodore R. Richards, a Professor of Chemistry at Harvard University and

¹⁴ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991.; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, No Date, transcription, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African- American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.

the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, to determine various formulas for insecticides.¹⁵

By the end of 1954 Williams's development as a professional analytical research chemist was being noticed by his peers — all of whom were non-African Americans. “I was finally matching brains with the boys from Yale, Princeton and Harvard,” he claimed. Williams, in his characteristic brashness, continued: “I kicked their ass and called names.” His bold declarations have some merit. That year, he co-wrote an article entitled “Insect Control on Feathers” with Hamilton Laudani, P.H. Clark and W.E. Dale. The article appeared in *Soap and Chemical Specialties*, a professional journal that circulated amongst chemists and physicists. His first academic publication would not appear until August 1956 when his article entitled “A New Colorimetric Method for Pyrethrins” was published in the *Journal of the Association of Official Agricultural Chemists*. However, he was a chemist on the rise within the Department of Agriculture. “I worked and studied hard so I went right up the ladder. . . . I'd go top of the GS grade five and top of grade seven,” Williams said. In another recollection of his rapid rise within the government's ranks, he stated “I was really treated like a king. . . . I even had a white secretary, which was the epitome of success” for a black man in the state of Georgia.

In spite of his “success,” Williams was routinely reminded that his intellect and expertise as a chemist did not shield him from the racism and segregation that plagued

¹⁵ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991; Hosea Williams, Job Description, Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.; James Bryant Connan, *Theodore William Richards: January 31, 1868-April 2, 1928* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 1974), 257.

the South and its institutions.¹⁶ He was unable to receive just recognition from the wider scientific community because he was prevented from presenting his research at the meetings and conferences of the American Chemical Society. He recalled that he was barred from attending many of the regional meetings because they were held at land-grant colleges in the South. He was prohibited from going to one particular meeting at the University of Mississippi—thwarting his attempt to share his “greatest work” which was a “quantitative chemical analysis for pyrethrum.” Pyrethrum was one of the most effective insecticides in the world. However, the chemical’s instability forced the United States government to spend, “at the time, millions of dollars” buying the insecticide from India and Africa. Williams suggested that his new method specifically analyzed the chemical’s parent compound which allowed a scientist to use only seven to fifteen micrograms, which are equivalent in the metric system as one millionth of a gram. The method Williams devised as a result of his pioneering research made his procedure yield results that were “thousands of times more sensitive and specific,” ultimately saving the federal government money while conferring prestige and professional respectability on the chemist who would have been given credit for the research. According to Williams, “this was the finest pieces of research I’d ever done.” However, Dr. John F. Sweeney, a white chemist with the Department of Agriculture, presented the paper at the University of Mississippi in 1954 and was credited with being the “chief author.” Sweeney “got one

¹⁶ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991.; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, No Date. Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers.

of the finest jobs in his life . . . and left the Department of Agriculture with my work,” lamented Williams.¹⁷

Williams was an advocate of the self-help advice prescribed by Booker T. Washington to impoverished and uneducated African Americans in the early 1900s. Washington, born into slavery, went on to found Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and to serve as an advisor to several U.S. presidents. He challenged Negroes to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” if they desired to improve their respective lots. Williams echoed this Washingtonian adage to blacks in Savannah. The middle-class Williams remembered telling other Negroes: “You can make it because I made it. . . You are not trying to make it. . . You want someone to give it to you. . . But if you work like I work,” you, too, can be upwardly mobile and will be accepted by well-meaning whites. For a brief period while he was living comfortably within the social parameters controlled by whites in Savannah, Williams was slowly becoming culturally isolated and unable to relate with the masses of Negroes. E. Franklin Frazier, the eminent African American sociologist and professor, would, in his seminal study, *Black Bourgeoisie*, assert that middle-class blacks like Williams who embraced similar admonishments unknowingly “lived in a world of make-believe,” which divorced them from the painful reality that racism and all of its vestiges influenced on nearly every aspect of southern society.¹⁸

¹⁷ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991; Hosea’s Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library; “Hosea Williams, Former Chemist Speaks Out,” *Chemical & Engineering News Archive*, from the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, June 17, 1968 46 (26), 21.

¹⁸ For a detailed treatment of the life and philosophy of Booker T. Washington, see Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1901); William Edward Burkhardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co, 1903); Robert J. Norrell, *Up From History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1957), 50.

Williams, an avid reader, likely read *Black Bourgeoisie* while working for the Department of Agriculture. He soon realized that African Americans, regardless of intellect and the necessary scientific aptitude, were not being considered for white-collar positions. A recent graduate with honors from Savannah State University, who eventually became a medical doctor, applied for a position as a biological aide, an entry-level position in the Bureau of Anemology and Plant Quarantine, but was not hired because of his color. Upon further investigation, Williams discovered that “Blacks used to come out there downtown where they [Department of Agriculture] had employment offices. The employment office was segregated. Blacks would go upstairs and the whites downstairs. So when a job was out there they would never register it upstairs.” The jobs were only posted where they would be available to the “white boys,” Williams said. These same “white boys” would come out there for interviews and were frequently hired. He reached the conclusion that the Department was using him as a “token Negro” in an effort to systematically bar additional blacks from gaining federal employment. Williams ruefully concluded that just as Booker T. Washington had been tokenized a generation earlier, he now was being used as the “head house nigger.” With this reality check, and the recollection of his having being prevented from sharing his research at the meetings of the American Chemical Society, the young chemist’s interest in the local NAACP increased markedly.¹⁹

¹⁹Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggert, Atlanta, GA, No Date. Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; The term “house nigger” was a term that originated during the enslavement of blacks in the America. The “house nigger” was generally the most attractive slave by virtue of their complexion or other physical similarities that were thought to appeal to their masters. Frederick Douglass in his narrative account of his enslavement and subsequent escape from that institution, posits that the “favored few” who lived and worked in the master’s house were privileged in the sense that they ate better and enjoyed the finer qualities of slave life vis-à-vis the slaves who labored in the field and lodged in the slave huts. Yet, they could never enjoy the full freedoms that they saw on a daily basis. Although Douglass was a house slave, he was psychologically tormented because was so close to freedom because he saw how his masters

Williams's introduction to the Savannah Branch of the NAACP was the direct result of his relationship with local dentist, Dr. John William Jamerson Jr. Williams, upon moving to Savannah, was introduced to Jamerson by Anna Spikes, a young lady who previously worked in Jamerson's dental office as a dentistry aide. Jamerson was a tall man of mixed ancestry. His mother was black and his father was white. According to Williams, Dr. Jamerson "looked like a white man." Since he lived alone, the new chemist moved in with the dentist, who, at this time, was estimated by Williams to be near seventy years of age. Both men had a passion for science as evidenced by their professional backgrounds and often engaged in intellectual sparring at Jamerson's home on 458 West Broad Street. Jamerson had been affiliated with the local NAACP as early as 1924, spearheading many membership drives as chairman of the Branch's Membership Committee for several years — a position that Williams later assumed.²⁰

His landlord's religious affiliation was also decisive in getting Williams involved with the NAACP. Jamerson attended the Butler Presbyterian Church and was responsible for encouraging Williams to join the church where the Rev. Pickens A. Patterson served as pastor. Reverend Patterson moved to the city in 1948 and "was the most outspoken minister in the town," according to Williams. He continued, "All the ministers used to meet and would do all their griping and militarizing in the black community, but always when they wanted someone to get on radio or go downtown, they always chose P.A.

and their white guests enjoyed it. Hosea lived well and made more money than many of the blacks he knew, but he came to understand that he would never experience the freedom to do as white colleagues because he was black. For a detailed description of the "house-nigger" concept, see Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), 92.

²⁰ Hosea's Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African- American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System; Ralph Lane Polk, *Polk's City of Savannah Directory*, (Detroit: R.L. Polk & Co. Publishers, 1952), 343.

Patterson.” Patterson also chaired the Legal Redress Committee of the Savannah Branch of the NAACP. “He won my admiration,” Williams declared. “I started going to the NAACP meetings, really because of Dr. Jamerson and Reverend Patterson’s influence.”²¹

However, it was the influence of W.W. Law, president of the NAACP branch in Savannah, and the senseless killing of a black man in town that proved to be the most important factors in driving Williams to take a proactive role in civil rights agitation. Law and Williams started working together in 1953 after white Chatham County policeman murdered an unarmed black man named “Party Arty” after he physically evaded a few of the armed officers outside of a Savannah nightclub. He fled from the officers into the nightclub. Once the policemen cornered him, he followed their orders and placed both of his hands in the air. The officers then fired two bullets into the man’s chest, killing him instantly. The NAACP hastily called a meeting. “We went to the NAACP meeting, and that night,” Williams said, “I was very disgusted that this man had been murdered.” He was also perturbed by other members’ ambivalence and seeming willingness to make excuses when Law challenged them to protest this senseless killing. Williams stood upright and made a firm commitment before everyone in attendance: “I work in the chemistry lab from 8:00 a.m. in the morning til 5:00 p.m. in the evening, so I’m free from 5:00 in the evening til 8:00 the next morning to do whatever you want me to do.” Law, seeing Williams’s desire to set an example by taking a decisive stance, began assigning him tasks including fundraising for the decedent’s funeral and serving as a liaison between the branch and the Chatham County Board of Commissioners and the Savannah Police Department. “This was my first venture out into civil rights,” Williams recalled.

²¹ Hosea’s Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

Although the police officers did not face any criminal charges, Law, the veteran activist, and Williams, the willing apprentice, forged a bond so strong that they became identified by their contemporaries as the “civil rights twins” because of their symmetrical philosophies regarding black oppression and the means by which African Americans in Savannah could defeat hatred and injustice.²²

Described by Williams as “astute, scholarly, and well-read,” Law had an indelible impact on the budding activist Williams’s views toward race-based injustices. “I learned a lot from Westley,” said Williams. “Westley taught me a hell of a lot about dignity and about human rights, about self-respect and about repression.” Although Law was three years older than Williams, they shared much in common. Both were born in the 1920s, Law in Savannah in 1923, Williams in 1926. Law and Williams served in the Army during World War II and attended black colleges with the financial benefits provided through the G.I. Bill. Both men graduated with bachelors degrees in science-related disciplines; Williams graduated with a degree in chemistry from Morris Brown College in Atlanta, and Law graduated with a baccalaureate degree in biology from Savannah State College. After college, both men were eventually hired as civil servants with the United States federal government. Law was hired in 1950 as a letter carrier with the United States Postal Service; Williams was hired as a chemist with the United States Department of Agriculture. Both men were fired from their government jobs after assuming leadership roles in the civil rights protests in Savannah, only to successfully appeal their terminations and win reinstatement to their former positions. Law and Williams also came of age without their fathers. West Law died of congestive heart

²² Hosea’s Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library;

failure in 1933 when his son was only nine-years-old. Williams, on the other hand, did not meet his father, Willie Wiggins, until he was twenty-eight-years-old.²³

Williams met his father for the first time in October, 1954. Their initial face-to-face meeting was a matter of happenstance. Williams and Juanita, who was six months pregnant, along with his two daughters, Barbara Jean, age six, and Elisabeth, age two, traveled to Jacksonville, Florida, in his Cadillac to watch a football game between his alma mater, Morris Brown College, and one of the school's biggest rivals, Bethune-Cookman College. While en route, he decided to stop to grab a snack. "I saw this beautiful fruit right in front of the little black college there . . . so I parked my car . . . and I went in the store," Williams later remembered. Already suspecting that his father lived in Jacksonville, Florida, he asked the female cashier if she knew Willie Wiggins. She responded, "you mean 'Blind Willie?'" Yes, "I mean 'Blind Willie,'" said Williams. The cashier knew where Wiggins lived and she gave Williams directions to his father's home. "I got the fruit and I got all nervous," said an anxious Williams. Refusing to answer an inquiry from Juanita, he directed his family to wait in the car until he returned from the residence. "I just stood in front of that house . . . and I finally knocked on the door," he recalled. Florence Wiggins, "a heavy black woman," came to the door. Although she had never seen her husband's first-born son, she said, "You got to be Williams." After he responded in the affirmative, in shock, his stepmother "turned white," Williams said. He shared a striking resemblance with his father. "I looked so much like him. I looked more like him [his father] than any child she'd birthed," recalled Williams. His father, obviously unable to see, walked in the room and started to touch Williams's face. "Blind

²³ Ibid.; Robinson, "W.W. Law and The Savannah Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People." Draft of unpublished manuscript, 175, 176, 190, 276.

Willie,” likely experiencing joy and anxiety, started to cry. Although there is no documentary record of the pair’s relationship after this meeting, it appears that Williams never harbored any ill feelings toward his father for being absent since his mother did not reveal his existence for several years. This visit to Jacksonville, Florida, in the fall of 1954 would be one of the last respites Williams could enjoy with his family. Within a fourteen-day period the following January, his first son, Hosea Lorenzo Williams II, would be born, followed by the elder Williams’s election to an influential position with the Savannah Branch of the NAACP.²⁴

Williams assumed his first leadership position in the Savannah Branch of the NAACP when he was elected chairman of its Membership Committee in January, 1955. The Branch president, W.W. Law, obviously had high expectations for his new recruiting chief. Law wrote to National Membership Secretary, Lucille Black, requesting that 1,000 membership receipt envelopes, buttons, and posters be mailed to Williams as quickly as possible. Two months later, Williams began a membership campaign on Tuesday, March 28, at the West Broad Street YMCA to reach the 1,000 new-member quota set by the local branch. Williams invited Dr. L.A. Pinkston to deliver the keynote address at the kickoff program. Kingston was the former president of the State Baptist Convention of Georgia, and, coincidentally, served with Morehouse College president, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, on the ministerial council that had ordained the young Martin Luther King Jr. for the Baptist ministry eight years prior. Pinkston, using the recent United States Supreme

²⁴ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991; Barbara Emerson, e-mail message to author, November 7, 2013; Obituary of William James Wiggins, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library. Willie James Wiggins was born in Metter, Georgia, on October 7, 1907. He died in Jacksonville, Florida, on June 3, 1983. He had lived in Jacksonville since 1930. He and his wife had three daughters: Eva M. Anderson, Betty J. McNair and Florence Wiggins-Jackson. The union also produced two sons: William C. Wiggins and John A. Wiggins; Hosea’s first-born son, Hosea Lorenzo Williams II, was born on January 6, 1955, in Savannah, Georgia.

Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* as a recruiting tool, told the attendees that the ruling on May 17, 1954, “gave the United States its proper place in the world, bringing vindication for the wrong so long imposed on a large segment of its citizens” and that a continued fight against racial oppression would be costly, requiring many “dimes and dollars” to win. Evidently, the speech resonated with the black community in Savannah. By May, 1955, Williams had reported to the national membership secretary that his branch had produced 478 new memberships; he had remitted \$587.75 to the national office to cover its share of the membership fees. He was able to recruit 377 more members during the next seven months, adding a total of 855 new members for the year. Although he was unsuccessful in reaching his first-year goal of 1,000 new members, he had come within striking distance. Law recognized that Williams was driven by a dogged determination to expand the reach of the Savannah Branch. Williams’s sensitivity to the need for a strong local branch was likely heightened by the killing of Emmett Till, a fourteen year-old black boy near Money, Mississippi.²⁵

Williams and other African-Americans in Savannah, Georgia, and throughout the United States, were horrified by the brutal murder of Emmett Till in August, 1955, for allegedly whistling at Carolyn Bryant — a twenty-one year old white woman. The *Savannah Tribune’s* vivid synopsis of the killing and description of Till’s mutilated body confirmed to Williams and the NAACP the need for increased civil rights reform in the

²⁵ “NAACP Drive Gets Going,” *Savannah Tribune*, March 31, 1955; Letter, Lucille Black to W.W. Law, January 20, 1955, Selected Branch Files, 1940-1955. Branch Department Files Geographical File Savannah, Georgia, [1942-1955], Reel 6 (Pt. 27, Series A), Auburn University Archives, Auburn, Alabama; Letter, Martin Luther King Sr. to Charles E. Batten, March 5, 1948, Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection, 1944-1968, Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center; Letter, Lucille Black to Hosea Williams, May 24, 1955, Branch Department Files, Reel 6 (Pt. 27, Series A), Auburn University Archives, Auburn, Alabama; Letter, Lucille Black to Hosea Williams, November 30, 1955, Branch Department Files, Reel 6 (Pt. 27, Series A), Auburn University Archives.

South. According to the *Tribune*, the “entire right side of his face had been caved in... almost all of his teeth had been knocked out” and he had a small bullet hole through the temple. Capturing Mamie Till’s first look at her deceased son after his body had been transported to the Rayner & Sons Funeral Home in Chicago, Illinois, the *Tribune* reported to Black Savannahians the heart-wrenching comments that a broken mother made to her son’s unembalmed and badly decomposed remains: “My darling, my darling, I would have gone through a world of fire to get to you.” Till then informed the funeral directors to plan for an open-casket service: “Let the people see what they did to my boy,” she said. An estimated 10,000 mourners crowded into and around the St. Paul’s Church of God in Christ in Chicago to hear Bishop Louis H. Ford deliver the eulogy. Till’s senseless murder for violating the southern taboo of showing interest to a white woman reminded Williams that he had almost suffered a similar fate almost eleven years earlier after a mob attempted to murder him for having an intimate relationship with Laura Chester — a white girl who lived near his grandfather’s home in Attapaulgus, Georgia. This reality and a non-violent protest in Montgomery, Alabama, were two major episodes in the 1950s that hardened his resolve to agitate for civil rights.²⁶

An arrest nearly four-hundred miles away from Williams’s middle-class neighborhood in Savannah would unalterably change his life and solidify his commitment to civil and human rights. On December 1, 1955, Montgomery, Alabama police arrested Rosa Parks, a forty-two year old seamstress and longtime civil rights activist with the Montgomery Branch of the NAACP, after she refused to surrender her

²⁶ “Chicago Boy who was Lynched in Mississippi,” *Savannah Tribune*, September 8, 1955; Hosea L. Williams, Unpublished Fragmented Manuscript Transcript, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 1, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers.

seat to a white man on a city bus. Parks's dignified act of defiance as a protest to segregation on a bus owned and operated by the Montgomery City Lines outraged the black community in the state's capital. Shortly after the arrest, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, an English professor at the all-black Alabama State College, along with two reliable students, duplicated 50,000 leaflets on the College's mimeograph machine announcing Parks's arrest and calling for a one-day boycott of the buses on December 5 – the day of Parks's trial. After Parks was found guilty of violating the city's segregation ordinance, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., a freshly-minted Ph.D. and the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, was asked to lead a new organization, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA).

The MIA would spearhead a prolonged boycott of the buses until the city and the bus company came to the negotiating table; King and other local leaders initially merely wanted to ensure that blacks would be treated fairly on the buses, including being allowed to ride the coaches on a first-come-first-serve basis, but when Montgomery's white powerbrokers refused any compromise the MIA sought the outright abolition of segregated seating practices. Boycott participants developed a sophisticated car-pooling service, requiring the wealthy to loan their cars to the boycott in what was, according to one author, "a radical act of togetherness." Almost 200 sedans shuttled between 30,000-40,000 protesting blacks to work, school and on shopping trips for over a year. The 381-day nonviolent protest ended on December 20, 1956, nearly one-month after the United States Supreme Court upheld Alabama's Middle District Court ruling in *Browder v. Gayle* that segregation on the city buses was unconstitutional. The successful protest placed Martin Luther King Jr. on a path toward immortality, but it also provided a

template for other cities and local leaders throughout the South, including Savannah, Georgia, to incorporate, with appropriate modifications, to their respective locales in opposition to Jim Crow.²⁷

Williams, acutely aware of the significance of the boycott in Montgomery and the mounting racial anxiety in Savannah, traveled with three members of the NAACP Youth Council to Montgomery, Alabama, in December, 1955 for a three-day trip. They heard Martin Luther King Jr. speak at one of the weekly mass meetings that was held to communicate the goals and objectives of the boycott to the city's nearly 50,000 protesting blacks. Evidence suggests that the encounter had a profound impact on Williams, compelling him to rethink his approach to, and appraisal of, race-centered discrimination. In a sense, hearing King preach to a packed audience with standing-room-only transformed Williams's flickering fire for activism into a full-scale firestorm that would not be extinguished for the next forty-five years. "I had never met God until I met Martin Luther King Jr. . . . King was not my God, but I saw God within King," Williams said. He continued, "I watched him teach. I watched him inspire. And I said to myself, if he can do it in Montgomery, Alabama, I can do it in Savannah." Although he did not have the opportunity to formally introduce himself to King during this visit to the capital known as "the cradle of the Confederacy," he felt as if he and King had somehow

²⁷ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 146.; *Montgomery Improvement Association Newsletter*. ed. Jo Ann Robinson. July 26, 1956, Vol.1, No. 3. Papers of Arthur D. Shores, Box 17, folder 3. Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Archives, Birmingham, Alabama.; Robert S. Graetz, interview by author, telephone interview, Montgomery, AL, July 8, 2011. Graetz was the only white minister who actively participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, driving blacks to home and work using his personal vehicle. He was senior pastor of the all-black Trinity Lutheran Church in Montgomery, the church where Rosa Parks was attending when she refused to surrender her seat at the request of white bus driver, J.F. Blake. Graetz was also a charter member of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). As a result of his courage during the 381-day boycott, his home was bombed and he and his family were constantly threatened by whites in the city who viewed the minister as a traitor to the race.

connected through King's passionate rhetoric about freedom and equality. Anxious to assume a more "militant" role as an activist with the NAACP, an organization he had first joined while studying for his baccalaureate degree in chemistry at Morris Brown College, Williams sped away from Montgomery in his new Cadillac at 100 miles per hour, headed for Savannah. He was determined to be the King-like figure in the city within the civil rights leadership structure that was firmly under the control of Savannah NAACP Branch president, W.W. Law.²⁸

By 1956, Williams had assumed the vice-chairmanship of the Savannah NAACP Branch's Arrangement Committee. The office, on its face, seemed undistinguished and limited in scope. However, this position within the Branch allowed him to interact with other African-American power brokers within the Georgia State Conference of NAACP Branches. His first opportunity to meet with influential black leaders from the state and throughout the country occurred during the Arrangement Committee's planning for the Fourteenth Annual Convention for the Georgia NAACP Conference, held at Savannah's Bryant Baptist Church. Fifteen of the state's thirty-one branches were in attendance. The business meetings were delineated into five sections: "Branch Administration and Membership Campaigns," "Desegregation and Integration," "Registration, Voting and Political Action," "Role of the Church in Desegregating the Community," and "How to Get Youth on the Team," respectively. Williams's later chairmanship of committees that incorporated each of these objectives with the respective agendas within NAACP and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) can be traced back to this meeting on

²⁸ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, No Date. Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Hosea L. Williams, video interview with unnamed interviewer, No Date, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African- American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.

December 1, 1956. He discussed strategy with various luminaries who attended the conference, including: Gloster Current, NAACP National Director of Branches; Constance Baker Motley, Assistant Special Council to Thurgood Marshall; A.T. Walden, the attorney who later argued the case that desegregated the University of Georgia; and keynote speaker, John Wesley Dobbs, Grand Master of the Prince Hall Masons of Georgia, and co-founder of the Atlanta Civic and Political League and the Atlanta Negro Voter's League, respectively.²⁹

The Fourteenth Annual Convention of the Georgia State Conference of the NAACP in 1956 was also important to Williams's grooming for large roles as a civil rights activist because his mentor, W.W. Law, at age thirty-three, was elected president of the organization. Law succeeded an ailing Dr. William Madison Boyd in the very organization that had coalesced around fellow Savannah activist Dr. Ralph Mark Gilbert's leadership thirteen years earlier. With Law's ascendancy to the presidency over the conference encompassing thirty-one branches, the Savannah NAACP was again at the epicenter of civil rights activism in the state of Georgia. With his election, Law's "civil rights twin" stood poised to learn strategy, logistics, and mass organizing from the activists, attorneys, and other professionals who had been fighting southern racism for several decades. Williams was finally finding his niche within the civil rights struggle in Savannah. A family tragedy the summer of the following year, however, would briefly slow him down.³⁰

²⁹ Samuel L. Brown, "Local Man Selected as President of State NAACP Conference," *Savannah Tribune*, December 8, 1956.

³⁰ Madison Boyd's Biography, William M. Boyd Collection, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System; Brown, "Local Man Selected as President," *Savannah Tribune*, December 8, 1956.

Turner Williams, Williams's maternal grandfather, died on July 4, 1957. The elder Williams had raised Williams and played a pivotal role in rearing "Little Turner" to be tough, bold, ambitious, and outspoken. The personality traits between the two were strikingly similar. "Papa," as he was referred to by Williams, suffered from the "dropsies," a colloquial name for edema, the swelling of soft tissues, and probably caused by congestive heart failure. The long-term illness caused "Papa" unbearable discomfort. "His feet would swell up and his legs [would get] real large. . . . We would have to lay him down and kind of raise his feet above his heart" to minimize his pain, said Williams. The disease had impaired his grandfather's mobility to the point that Williams compared him to an "invalid"; death represented an escape from that suffering. Williams later admitted "I was kind of glad when he died. I remember the day; I smiled." His grandfather's death unquestionably strengthened his resolve to stand with the NAACP in its fight for equality for the oppressed and disinherited. He recalled the many instances as a child when "Papa" defended himself and his family against whites and the systemic racism that plagued blacks in southwest Georgia. He was committed now, more than ever, to combat racism and segregation in Savannah as a tribute to "Papa."³¹

Williams returned from the funeral in Attapulgus with Juanita, Elisabeth and Williams Jr. and turned his attention to the Savannah NAACP Branch's campaign to

³¹ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991. The author was confused after conducting several interviews in Attapulgus with individuals who knew Turner Williams and his son, Turner Williams Jr. The author could not understand why Hosea, and not Turner's son, was known as "Little Turner." The confusion was settled after the author spoke with Arlene Montgomery, the daughter of Ethel Jackson, the fifth child of Turner and Leila Williams. Montgomery suggested that whereas Turner Jr. was much "softer" and "easy-going," Hosea was a "go-getter" and was rebellious just like Turner Sr. Arlene Montgomery, interview by author, telephone, Bainbridge, Georgia, April 2, 2014; Dropsy, commonly referred to in the medical field as edema, is a condition that causes fluid to accumulate in the tissue in the body. Williams referred to this as a "leaking heart" that caused his grandfather's feet and legs to swell so much that he was unable to walk. Turner Williams's funeral was held at the Second Morning Star Baptist Church, the religious institution where he had served as the chief usher and later as a church trustee. His remains are interred in the Williams family plot on the grounds of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

integrate public housing in that city. The Branch had been involved with securing fair and equitable treatment for blacks in low-rent housing with the Savannah Housing Authority since 1942. Then Branch president, Dr. Ralph Mark Gilbert, wrote to W.H. Stillwell, Executive Director of the Savannah Housing Authority, complaining that the Garden Homes Estate and Yamacraw Village Housing Projects had systematically excluded blacks from working within these all-black public developments. Gilbert maintained that “we have men adequate to the task if they are given a chance to perform in the only place they can perform, in projects set aside for our race.” Gilbert continued: “As the project now stands, Negroes are given a right to live in them but they are barred the right to draw a salary in connection with them.” Stillwell failed to respond to this letter, and subsequently received correspondence from Gilbert regarding the number of units designated for Negroes. Gilbert petitioned Stillwell and the Housing Authority to designate a number of houses for blacks in proportion to the black population in Savannah. According to Gilbert, 714 family units had been completed for whites while only 656 houses had been completed for black occupancy. Even worse, the Housing Authority was in the process of constructing 2,895 units, while no additional units were being designated for blacks. Stillwell responded with a letter saying that the properties were being “efficiently and effectively managed” and that record did not “warrant any changes.” The allotment for spaces and employment opportunities for blacks remained relatively unchanged by the time Williams and the Branch resumed their protests and petitioning in 1958.³²

³² Letter, Ralph Mark Gilbert to H.W. Stillwell, November 1, 1942, Selected Branch Files, 1940-1955. Branch Department Files Geographical File Savannah, Georgia, [1942-1955], Reel 6 (Pt. 27, Series A), Auburn University Archives; Letter, Ralph Mark Gilbert to H.W. Stillwell, November 23, 1942, Selected Branch Files, Branch Department Files, [1942-1955], Reel 6 (Pt. 27, Series A), Auburn University

The Savannah Branch of the NAACP brought a federal suit against the Savannah Public Housing Administration in 1958. Constance Baker Motley, A.T. Walden, (both of whom Williams knew as early as 1956) and Thurgood Marshall represented Queen Cohen against the public housing department in Savannah, which was still administered, sixteen years later, by the same H.W. Stillwell. Cohen argued that she had been denied admission to the all-white Fred Wessels Homes because of her race. Attempting to avoid federal intervention, the Authority had offered to build the Robert Hitch Homes as a suitable, yet, still-segregated, all-black substitute. During the oral argument before the Fifth Circuit of the United States Court of Appeals, Stillwell posited that “segregation is essential to the success of public housing” so that the program could avoid the phenomenon of “white flight.”

Cohen, after several hearings before the district and federal courts, eventually became the sole plaintiff after seventeen of her co-plaintiffs voluntarily removed themselves from the court case that became known as *Cohen v. Public Housing Administration*. “They got it where those people got in court and would withdraw their petition; every single client we had,” recalled Williams. Plaintiffs were afraid of losing their jobs for participating in the case. “But we had to go out and get other clients, and I went and guaranteed jokers their salaries...I did some of everything that was possible, ethical, or unethical to get folks to sign that thing [petition],” Williams said. Determined to integrate the low-income housing, Williams even attempted to move into the projects himself, only to be denied consideration because his \$8,000 annual salary as a research chemist with the United States Department of Agriculture exceeded the maximum

Archives; Letter, H.W. Stillwell to Ralph Mark Gilbert, November 26, 1942, Selected Branch Files, Branch Department Files, [1942-1955], Reel 6 (Pt. 27, Series A), Auburn University Archives.

income requirements. The NAACP took the suit to the United States Supreme Court, ultimately winning the right to integrate public housing in Savannah in 1959. The victory, however, increased the already-simmering tension between Williams and the Department of Agriculture.³³

Williams's visibility during the Savannah NAACP Branch's successful lawsuit against the public housing administration led to the Department of Agriculture's sustained and unrelenting efforts to fire Williams from his job as a research chemist. "They wanted to run me away from there out of my job," Williams said. In a letter to Williams from G.V. Wells, an arbitrator with the Biological Services Branch, dated November 1, 1958, Wells responded to a set of complaints submitted by Williams in May of that same year. Williams accused Dr. Randall Latta, Branch Chief, and Dr. C.V. Bowen, his laboratory head, for failing to treat him fairly in comparison to his white colleagues. He grouped grievances into two categories: "Dissatisfaction with the disposition of manuscripts which [he] submitted for possible publication; and dissatisfaction with the selection for promotion over [him] for another employee in the laboratory who [he] considered to be less qualified for the promotion than him." Williams had submitted manuscripts relating to a "colormetric method for determination of P-Dichlorobenzene," as well as an improved procedure for the "separation of pyrethrins and piperonyl butoxide." Wells admitted in this correspondence he viewed neither submission

³³ Hosea's Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers; Robinson, "W.W. Law and the Savannah Branch of the NAACP," 196; Constance B. Motley, *Equal Justice Under Law: An Autobiography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 253, 258; *Cohen v. Public Housing Administration*, 257, F. 2d 73 (5th Cir. (Ga.) 1958); *Cohen v. Public Housing Administration*, 358 US 928, 79 S.Ct 315, 3 L.ED.2d 302 (1959). For a detailed examination of "White Flight," see Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

in an “unfavorable” manner insofar as possible publications were concerned. However, the arbitrator mysteriously concluded, “the primary purpose of the Savannah laboratory was not to conduct methodical research seeking to develop new or improved chemical techniques.” Rather, Williams’s role in the laboratory should be that of “working with known techniques.” It is clear from this communication that Williams, in spite of his ability to pioneer new methods for chemical analysis, was not expected to improve the efficiency of the branch.³⁴

Wells’ memo also addressed accusations leveled by Williams’s direct supervisor, Dr. C.V. Bowen. Bowen, whom Williams referred to with handwritten notes in the margins of the memo as a “lying man,” indicated that Williams had, on “several” occasions, failed to follow the proper procedures in using annual and sick leave. Wells’ investigation concluded that “the facts did not produce the existence of substantive facts to support a statement that [he] had failed ‘on several occasions’ to use both types of leave in accordance with governmental policy. One can conclude with a reasonable degree of certainty that the sick and annual leave days Williams requested facilitated his participation in the well-publicized protests against the Savannah Public Housing Administration when he was guaranteeing the salaries of potential plaintiffs to encourage them to participate in the NAACP-sponsored lawsuit. The Department of Agriculture attempted to intimidate Williams in the same manner that other white employers in Savannah used to discourage other blacks from protesting the city’s discriminatory practices. Unsuccessful, the Department employed another method.”³⁵

³⁴ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991; Letter, G.V. Wells to Hosea Williams, November 7, 1958, Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

³⁵Ibid.

The Department of Agriculture in Savannah was committed to firing Williams for his participation in civil rights demonstrations in the city. The laboratory supervisors started assigning Williams nearly three times as many samples to analyze as his white colleagues. “They’d be like fifteen or twenty samples behind. I would be like eighty or ninety behind. And I knew a batch would come in, they’d assign them to me. Many days, I worked, and those other boys were sitting down, reading books at the desk,” Williams said. After the strategy to overwork him failed, the supervisors, according to Williams, stopped assigning any samples so that they could make a case to fire him for not producing. Dr. Bowen, Williams’s immediate supervisor, was eventually able to remove him from his job in early 1959. However, Williams appealed the firing which led to a hearing in Washington, D.C. Clarence Mitchell, an NAACP attorney, defended Williams against what appeared to be trumped-up charges of insubordination and lack of productivity. Williams, prepared for the charges, presented a certificate of appreciation that he was awarded from his supervisor only twelve months prior to the beginning of the NAACP’s lawsuit against the Savannah Public Housing Authority, effectively showing his ability and willingness to produce 600 samples while his white colleagues were only producing 100 samples. The hearing officer cited nearly twenty infractions that Dr. Bowen had alleged Williams had committed. “Not a single item on the bill had been able to stand challenges,” Williams said after the hearing. “Unbossed,” and refusing to be bullied by his employer’s unspoken warning for participating in the desegregation

protests in Savannah, Williams assumed an even larger role in organizing African Americans to register to vote.³⁶

The year 1959 signaled the beginning of Williams's involvement in encouraging and preparing African Americans to participate in the political process. Williams, along with his pastor and fellow NAACP member, Rev. P.A. Patterson, formed the First Congressional District's Council on Registration and Voting to "double the Negro vote" in the district's eighteen counties. Williams was elected by the Council's delegates to serve as the First Congressional District Chairman. Patterson was elected County Chairman. As part of the statewide effort led by John Wesley Dobbs, the Council adopted two objectives that would govern their operation: "Registering all unregistered eligible voters, and seeing that all registered voters vote." The non-partisan Council's long-term mission was to exert African-American political influence from the state level down to the highway levels of every district, county, city and town. This strategy was especially important since the number of registered African-American voters was so volatile as a result of the pernicious practices exercised by county registrars to keep blacks off the voter rolls. Three years prior to the Council's founding, 9,720 Africans were registered to vote in Chatham County. By 1957, the number of registered voters had escalated to 10,090. The next year, the Commission on Civil Rights concluded that blacks in Chatham County only accounted for 12.5 percent of all registered voters — not enough to make a significant shift in state electoral power. Since the Council was not formed in an election year, the organization had ample time to sway the votes in the First District's

³⁶ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers.

Congressional election the following year as a result of sustained registration efforts in the wake of spontaneous student protests.³⁷

On February 1, 1960, Ezell Blair Jr., Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain and David Richmond, four freshmen at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, sat, immovably, in at an L-shaped, “whites only” lunch counter at Woolworth’s in protest of the Jim Crow practices that had long governed that city’s social relationship between its black and white residents. The historian William Chafe agreed with one observer that the “Greensboro Coffee Party” was the twentieth-century equivalent to the Boston Tea Party as a “harbinger of revolutionary shifts in the social order.” The Greensboro demonstration gave rise to a new era in which African Americans throughout the United States, especially in its southern region where segregation and race-based discrimination were more pronounced, would no longer allow whites, regardless of their moderate or liberal leanings, to determine the scope or scale of what it meant to be a first-class citizen. The Greensboro sit-ins spurred a wave of student-led protests, first throughout the state of North Carolina, and within days, throughout the nation, that proved to be nothing less than a full frontal assault on segregation. More pointedly, as argued by sociologist Aldon Morris, the sit-ins provided the tactical template and strategy that would be emulated by various organizations during the 1960s, most notably, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Savannah, Georgia, home of the Savannah State College, joined other colleges, black and white, in over 100 cities voicing in unison their festering frustration with the grip of segregation in their respective locales.³⁸

³⁷ “Registration Council Formed to Help Get More Voters,” *Savannah Tribune*, February 28, 1959.

³⁸ William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Struggle for Black Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 71-72, 85-86; Aldon Morris, “Black Southern Sit-In

Students affiliated with the NAACP Youth Council in Savannah, Georgia, launched the first wave of student-led protests in that city on Wednesday, March 16, 1960, when Ernest Robinson, a twenty-year-old social science major at Savannah State College; Joan Tyson, a seventeen-year-old senior at Alfred E. Beach High School; and Carolyn Quilloin, also seventeen years of age and a senior at Beach High, sat down at the “whites only” downtown lunch counter in Levy’s Department Store. The trio was told by the manager that they had two minutes to leave before he called the police. Robinson, Tyson, and Quilloin remained seated, unfazed by the manager’s threat. They were arrested around 4:00 p.m. for violating the recently passed law requiring potential patrons to vacate the premises of an establishment when asked to do so by the owner or any employee. Mayor W. Lee Mingledorff Jr. echoed other white mayors of cities whose power structures were committed to maintaining the status quo: “I regret that such an incident had to take place in Savannah where our race relations had been so excellent.” County Commissioner Chairman H. Lee Fulton Jr. referred in very simple terms to the sit-in as a “bad situation.” Two days later, a contributor to the *Savannah Evening Press*, the city’s conservative newspaper, called the protest “irresponsible” and “ill advised,” and asserted that African Americans in the city did not have legal standing to dine at “whites only” restaurants. While this initial protest had not at the time been sanctioned by the local NAACP, Williams, now the vice chairman of the branch’s Legal Redress Committee, said that “We are proud that Negroes in general, with or without the support of the NAACP, are ready to do something within the bounds of the U.S. Constitution to bring about full equality and full citizenship.” Although the branch had not prepared the

Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 46, No. 6 (Dec., 1981), 744.; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 237.

students for this demonstration, Williams and the remainder of the leadership within the organization saw the protest as a vehicle by which to incorporate Savannah's youth into the NAACP's larger mission of ensuring first-class citizenship for African Americans in Chatham County.³⁹

The 1960 student movement in Savannah gave Williams an opportunity to expand his role within the local NAACP and to cultivate a following among the students who were drawn to his rebellious, charismatic personality. Within ten days after the initial sit-down protest at Levy's Department Store on Broughton Street, the city's main thoroughfare, twenty-five students were arrested for sitting down at the Greyhound, Trailways, and Union Stations, respectively. On March 27, 1960, 2,500 people gathered for a two-hour mass meeting at the Greater St. James A.M.E. Church to endorse a multi-pronged boycott of Levy's, Woolworth's, Kress, McCrory's, and Silver's—department stores in Savannah that discriminated against African Americans. The attendees demanded nothing less than total desegregation of all lunch counters, and better jobs for African Americans, specifically in the stores' clerical and supervisory ranks. The crowd also agreed that establishment owners and employees must use appropriate and courteous titles when addressing blacks, instead of nicknames like "preacha," "boy," "girl," and "auntie." Protesters unanimously agreed not to cross the picket lines at the targeted stores. And at the urging of Williams, those in attendance pledged to withhold their patronage when shopping for the Easter holiday that was one week away. The group later identified the holiday as "Black Easter." African Americans were discouraged from

³⁹ Harry Murphy, "Three Negro Students Arrested for Sit-Down," *Savannah Morning News*, March 17, 1960; "The Need for the Hour: Responsibility," *Savannah Evening Press*, March 18, 1960; Robinson, "W.W. Law and The Savannah Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People." Draft of unpublished manuscript, 259.

buying new clothes as was the tradition. Instead, kids would wear overalls and dungarees. Williams, in his characteristically combative voice, told the “gregarious” crowd: “We have two great allies in our fight for equal rights. These are our money and our vote.” Within one month, downtown businessmen would lose over \$1 million dollars in revenue. Due to the response Williams received at this meeting, he was assigned to work with the 650-member NAACP Youth Council to train the students for future demonstrations.⁴⁰

Mayor Mingledorff and the city administrators acted swiftly after the initial sit-ins in a futile attempt to halt the student demonstrators. The mayor formed a biracial committee with an objective to divide the black community. He declined to consider anyone from The Committee for Withholding Retail Patronage, the official NAACP steering team that organized the boycott. Mingledorff also neglected to include Williams, P.A. Patterson, and Dr. J.W. Jamerson as part of the committee to resolve the racial discord in the city. W.W. Law, the branch and state NAACP president, warned Negroes to not be fooled by the mayor’s halfhearted efforts. He told blacks, “don’t hitch your wagon to a star that will never go into orbit.” William B. Hartsfield, in his sixth term as mayor of Atlanta, denounced the idea of the biracial committee for a different reason. Hartsfield, an old hand at dealing with the race issue in Georgia’s largest city, argued that the committee was just “a face-saving gesture by people new to the subject. The people who would be listened to will not serve. The people who will serve are resented by most of the people,” said Hartsfield. Williams did not idly sit by after realizing that the idea of

⁴⁰ “Local Lunch Counter Sit Downs Continue,” *Savannah Tribune*, March 26, 1960; NAACP Sunday Mass Meeting Attracts Overflow Audience, *Savannah Tribune*, April 2, 1960; “NAACP Slaps Easter Bunny at Mass Meeting,” *Savannah Herald*, April 2, 1960; Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 128, 134.

a biracial committee was untenable. He instead channeled his attention to the segment of people who ultimately become his most fervent disciples — college and high school students – even if it meant risking the loss of his job and middle-class status and income.⁴¹

By May 1960, two months into the boycott, Williams still failed to heed the coded warnings that he received from the Department of Agriculture. The hardheaded chemist continued to take a very visible role in the civil and voting rights demonstrations in the city. Tensions remained high between him and his laboratory head, Dr. C.V. Bowen, who Williams referred to as a “squirt.” According to Andrew Young, Williams’s future colleague with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Department of Agriculture “viewed his militancy and activism with extreme disfavor.” On May 1, 1960, he was transferred from the Marketing Research Division of the Biological Sciences Branch within the Stored-Product Insect Section to the Market Quality Research Division. At the time of the reassignment, Williams was classified as GS-9 on the civil service pay scale, grossing \$6,885 per year as an analytical chemist at a time when the median family income in Savannah was \$4,761. He was keenly aware that the Department of Agriculture would continue in its effort to terminate his employment with the federal government. However, he remained steadfast in his commitment to train and prepare students for subsequent protests.⁴²

⁴¹ “Mayor’s Bi-Racial Committee Denounced by NAACP, *Savannah Tribune*, April 2, 1960; “Hartsfield Balks at Bi-Racial Panel,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 6, 1960.

⁴² Standard Form (SF-50), Notice of Personal Action, Reassignment, The Papers of Reverend Hosea L. Williams, Auburn Avenue Research Library Archives Division; Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 259; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 280.

Although Williams had forged a strong relationship with the students, he may not have initially been the best choice to train pupils in nonviolent techniques. He had no training in nonviolence. Evidence does not reveal that he met or knew of Bayard Rustin or Glen Smiley, both of whom were experts in the philosophy. Moreover, Williams readily admitted that “[He] knew very little about Gandhi.” He researched the Indian independence leader and the impact of his philosophy on Martin Luther King Jr. in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. After many hours of self-reflection and meditation, Williams recalled that “I formulated my own nonviolent strategy and technique . . . my method was a means of escape; it was an instrument; it was a means to an end.” He admitted that his philosophy had nothing to do with love, as was taught by Martin Luther King Jr. In a candid revelation, Williams posited that “I probably learned to hate more” while exposing the students to a preparatory course in nonviolent civil disobedience. He held the training sessions upstairs in the West Broad Street YMCA. The sessions simulated a live sit-in protest, complete with a counter and stools. Williams even replicated scenarios where a white girl would stand behind the counter and encourage other whites to participate in the verbal and physical abuse of the demonstrators. “We actually spit in those kids faces. We’d go along and say, you god damn Nigger, . . . and slapping the shit out of them” in the process. By the time the students staged the next protest, they were prepared for almost any assault they would likely encounter, even death. The psychological bond that was born in what Williams called “horrible sessions” had an unintended effect: the students had shifted their loyalties. “These kids now looked at me as their leader, not Westley any longer, but me, because I trained them” in a technique that could be used as the battering ram to destroy the system that had oppressed them and

their families. In a sense, he gave them power in a community where their voices had hitherto been muted.⁴³

Being completely stripped of his defense mechanisms and the ability to defend himself against angry white men and women placed Williams in a state of psychological nakedness. The protests exposed him and the students to what appeared to be whites' innate animosity toward blacks. He was unable to comprehend the notion of loving one's enemies as articulated by Martin Luther King Jr. "I didn't find the love that Dr. King talked about. I found more distrust for white men," Williams said. He was studying nonviolence daily and was drawn to an approach that did not embrace hurting or killing his enemy. However, Williams found himself somewhat of a hybrid in the middle between the polar-opposite philosophies advocated by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, the charismatic minister of the Nation of Islam. However, the 1960 demonstrations were, according to Williams, "the first time I became revolutionary-minded." For a revolution to be successful, he understood now, more than anytime in his life, that the oppressed must demand to be free, and this freedom would always be a hollow concept without unrestricted access to the ballot because it was the pivot upon which society turned.⁴⁴

Williams continuously admonished the students and the community that boycotting the stores and withstanding brutal beatings while sitting in at lunch counters were important, but sit-ins needed to be paired with an emphasis on winning the right to vote. On April 3, 1960, three weeks after the first sit-in demonstration at Levy's

⁴³ Hosea's Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Department Store, the NAACP launched the Chatham County Crusade for Voters (CCCV) with Williams as its founding president. According to the *Savannah Morning News*, Williams gave his usual “spirited” report of the progress of the demonstrations to the 2500 “hymn-singing Negroes” in attendance at the First Tabernacle Baptist Church on 310 Alice Street. Many of the attendees were students from nearby Savannah State College and the all-black Alfred Beech High School. The stated goal of the organization was to ensure that every qualified Negro in the county was registered to vote. Rev. L.S. Stell, pastor of the Bethlehem Baptist Church, and Cody Thomas, chairman of the CCCV, also appealed to the audience for their continued support of the three-week-old boycott against all establishments in the city that discriminated against blacks in any way. J.L. Hightower, pastor of the St. Paul C.M.E Church, followed Stell and gave remarks, which, on their face, appeared to take a shot at W.W. Law while subtly giving an endorsement of Williams. “The children of Israel took 40 years to make a 40-day trip. What they lacked was leadership,” said Hightower. The appeals yielded \$1030 in donations that would be used to finance continued picketing activities. Portions of the donation would also be placed in the start-up treasury of the CCCV.⁴⁵

Williams and the CCCV obviously lacked start-up capital and did not have a facility to house the operation. However, Sidney Jones, a local mortician and businessman, donated the old Monroe Funeral Home building on 611 West Broad Street to the CCCV. Jones told the Crusade for Voters that, “You hold the keys to more than just a building, but to the freedom of Negroes now and generations unborn, the almighty vote.” Williams responded to the donation as the “answer to our largest prayer yet.” The

⁴⁵ “NAACP Launches ‘Crusades for Votes,’” *The Savannah Tribune*, April 9, 1960; Patrick Kelly, “Negro Vote Drives Open,” *Savannah Morning News*, April 3, 1960.

Crusade's headquarters were "open all day, six days a week," reported the *Herald*.

Williams, now with a building and a secretary, was poised to upset the political balance in Savannah.⁴⁶

Williams's role as president of the CCCV gave him a powerful platform as a voting rights activist in a general election year in a city still in the midst of the boycott of the downtown stores. "It was the transition from the NAACP to the Crusade for Voters when I became the real leader of our outfit," he said. Williams referred to the CCCV as the "undercover political arm of the NAACP" because the brass in New York, where the organization was headquartered, did not want to engage in political activities beyond voter registration. Law, a member of the NAACP's National Board of Directors, was cautiously receptive of his apprentice's new role within the organization. Within one month of the CCCV's founding, the local branch's Executive Committee granted Williams's request for aid to assist in defraying the CCCV's operational expenses for the next three months. The money was granted under the condition that funds not be used for salaries, but for expenses directly associated with voter registration, such as transportation, night classes, advertisements and block workers. The CCCV, under Williams's leadership, evolved into a well-oiled political machine in a short period of time.⁴⁷

The CCCV invariably benefitted from what the historian Adam Fairclough calls Williams's "marked organizational talent," a skill he likely acquired while serving in the European Theater during World War II. The internally-circulated "Get-Out-The-Vote-

⁴⁶ "Free Shelter from Mr. Jones," *Savannah Herald*, June 11, 1960.

⁴⁷ "\$500 Check Answers Prayer of CV," *Savannah Tribune*, May 23, 1960; Hosea's Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers.

Guideline” diagram called for local leaders and ministers to “accept some responsibility” to inform and organize the “ineligibles.” As for geography, each county was dissected into districts. For example, in 1960, Rev. Oliver W. Holmes, the uncle of Hamilton E. Holmes, the first African American to be admitted to the University of Georgia and pastor of the 1,000-member First Congregational Church on Habersham Street, chaired the first district. Pastors were chosen as leaders because they were only accountable to their members and could not be subjected to the harassment of a hostile employer. Their churches served as available venues to house events associated with voter registration. Within each district, precincts were established in the northern, southern, eastern and western precincts of each city. Each precinct was organized down to the block level. The CCCV required each candidate to meet with the organization in person before they would issue a public endorsement of that candidate. The voting rights group also furnished copies of questions voters would likely encounter at the county registrar’s office. Some questions on the thirty-question exam included: “What is the definition of a felony in Georgia?” “What are the names of the three branches of government?” Another question was “What is the seat of your county?” If a person could not read or write, they had to correctly answer at least twenty of the thirty questions when registering to vote.⁴⁸

The effectiveness of the CCCV could be gauged as early as June 23, three months before the next election. Within the previous week, twenty-nine Negroes were added to the county voting rolls as CCCV workers transported potential voters to from the

⁴⁸ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 94; “\$500 Check Answers Prayer of CV,” *Savannah Tribune*, May 23, 1960; “Get-Out-The-Vote Diagram, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Sample Literacy Test Used by the Chatham County Crusade for Voters, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

organizations headquarters at 611 West Broad Street to the county courthouse. Four months later and twenty-seven weeks into the boycott of the city's stores that discriminated against blacks, Savannah held its first election since the organization's founding. At the time of the election, Savannah was estimated to have just shy of 150,000 persons, 54,000 of which were African Americans. Nearly 7,000 of the 9,000 registered African Americans voted in a referendum against the city fathers. Of the nineteen candidates endorsed by the CCCV, eleven of them won their respective office. Specifically, of the seven county commissioners endorsed by the CCCV's Political Guidance Committee, six were elected. The 7,000 African Americans also sent another message by defeating the city's conservative chief executive, W. Lee Mingledorff Jr. The incumbent mayor lost his bid for reelection in large measure because of the way he had managed the sit-ins and his appointment of a token biracial committee which failed to include key leaders of the local NAACP to negotiate the end of desegregation in Savannah. A change in law enforcement in Savannah was also at hand. Sheriff William C. Harris, an advocate of segregation, was defeated. "These White people would have preferred losing rather than seeing the Negro united politically," Williams said to a reporter of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He continued, "We are united in our efforts to destroy segregation."⁴⁹

The CCCV's power and ability to harness the black vote was evidenced in the defeat of four-term United States Representative for Georgia's eighteen-county First Congressional District, Prince H. Preston Jr. Preston, a staunch segregationist and avid

⁴⁹ "Negroes Controlled Savannah Election, *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 1, 1960; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 129; "Mayor's Bi-Racial Committee Denounced by NAACP, *Savannah Tribune*, April 2, 1960; "Voters' Registration Increased," *Savannah Tribune*, June 25, 1960; "Negro Vote In Chatham Heavy One," *Savannah Morning News*, September 15, 1960.

supporter of Georgia Governor Marvin Griffin, and also an advocate of the innate inferiority of African Americans, was barely defeated by Elliot Hagan, a moderate, in his bid for reelection. After the September 14 primary, Preston demanded a recount on the grounds that voting irregularities might have occurred in Chatham County—the heartbeat and headquarters of the Crusade for Voters. The recount proved that Hagan had won by 400 popular votes, allowing him to claim twenty-six county unit votes to eighteen county unit votes for Preston. Georgia’s county unit system, in itself a discriminatory device to limit the voice of minority voters, gave two unit votes for each elected representative of the lower house of the Georgia General Assembly. Each of Georgia’s six most populated counties had three representatives. The next twenty-six most populous counties had two representatives. The smallest 127 counties received one representative each in the county unit system. Hence, the CCCV’s ability to effectively organize in spite of the inherent disadvantages of this system was a testament to unyielding dedication of the organization’s leadership. Andrew Young, Williams’s future colleague in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, soon informed his colleagues in the civil rights organization that the SCLC should be identified with it [CCCV]...it is the best in the South.”⁵⁰

Williams and the CCCV had shown the white community in Savannah that the African-American community could organize with effective and charismatic leadership on a mass scale to sway the local elections. Williams intuitively grasped that continued success in subsequent elections depended on adding qualified voters to the registration

⁵⁰“Rep. Preston Concedes: Businessman-Farmer Wins on Recount in Georgia,” *New York Times*, September 21, 1960; William F. Holmes, “Populism and Progressivism, 1890-1920” in *A History of Georgia*, 295; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 94.

rolls. Illiteracy was one of the biggest problems the CCCV had to grapple with while trying to register people to vote. Williams appealed to Septima Poinsette Clark of Monteagle, Tennessee's Highlander Folk School, and he and Juanita visited the school in early 1961 during the boycott to observe the school's pedagogical approach to teaching illiterates. Clark and the school were known for the citizenship-schooling program that incorporated what the historian Barbara Ransby referred to as "practical literacy with political and economic literacy." Ransby, Septima Poinsette Clark's biographer, posits that the renowned citizenship teacher knew that "grassroots civil rights activism remained inseparable from grassroots education" and that this theory undergirded her teaching methods. After Williams's observation of Clark in the classroom, he later admitted that she had taught him a lot insofar as teaching adults were concerned. He subsequently wrote her: "I want you to know my wife was over inspired. She has not stopped talking about the things we have been doing wrong yet."⁵¹

Williams returned to Savannah and incorporated what he had obtained from Septima Clark into his citizenship program. One lesson he learned from Clark was to make white people feel at ease with the programs. "We were telling the white people we were just teaching the people how to read and write" so they could "drive the trucks better, so they could send them to town, you know, so they could read the signs going to town...so they could buy stuff for them like groceries or fertilizer or plow lines," Williams said. He witnessed how an older man in Charleston, South Carolina, went

⁵¹ Highlander Folk School was founded in 1932 by Myles Horton. Horton was a graduate of New York University who ad studied under famed theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. For an in-depth analysis of the history of the school, see Myles Horton, Judith Kohl, Herbert Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Teacher's College Press of Columbia University, 1998); Barbara Ransby, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Poinsette Clark* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 5, 275-276.

through a crash course in Septima's adult citizenship school which enabled him to read the King James Version of the Bible. However, the man could not read anything else, including a newspaper. With the help of Juanita, who was an educator and former instructor at Savannah State College, he figured out a way to teach people how to read any type of literature through directly appealing to one's interest. This technique fostered a healthy environment that was conducive to teaching an illiterate how to read and to increasing the number of eligible voters in Chatham County.⁵²

"The adult citizenship schools turned out to be the real thing that built the Crusade for Voters," Williams said. He personally worked with a man in Savannah who attended a small church that perfunctorily passed the Bible around during Sunday School so that everyone could read a verse. One individual was passed over every Sunday because he could not read. After a few months of working with this senior citizen, the man supposedly "stopped the book in church and said: 'I'm reading today.'" To teach women, Williams used grocery advertisements, because many of the women wanted to shop like other ladies. This method yielded the same results. Williams suggested that Clark would have been more effective if she had not used educated teachers because they were less able to keep the attention of the class. He used the same people his school had taught to read to instruct others. "The best teachers were always the uneducated teachers...because they had a better understanding." This was just another example of how Williams's ingenuity and ability to adapt to the circumstances allowed him to reach and teach those who were willing to follow him.⁵³

⁵² Hosea's Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division

⁵³ Ibid.

On March 17, 1961, the local NAACP and the African-American community celebrated the one-year anniversary of the boycott of the Broughton Street stores at the St. James Baptist Church. Although the economic embargo of the stores was the crux of the campaign, the black community was also effective in using the boycott as leverage to force concessions from Malcolm Maclean, the moderate mayor that the Williams-led CCCV helped to elect six months earlier. Daisy Bates, one of the first African-American students to enroll at Little Rock's Central High School in 1957, was the guest speaker at the 53rd consecutive weekly mass meeting that commemorated the withholding campaign. The success of the campaign had resulted in the removal of "Whites Only" signs on buses; the NAACP had launched a campaign to have blacks hired as bus drivers; Rev. William Oliver Holmes, the uncle of the first African-American to enroll at the University of Georgia, was named by the all-white city council to a five-man commission; city parks had been opened on a non-segregated basis and two store owners had been forced to relocate their businesses from the Broughton Street shopping district. Roy Wilkins, the NAACP National Secretary sent a wire to the mass meeting that read: "You have noticed to the South that the Negro dollar's can be a force of dignity." Williams was at the vital center of both the Savannah Branch of the NAACP and the Chatham County Crusade for Voters, the two organizations responsible for organizing and spearheading the boycott and harnessing the black voting bloc which elected the officials at the city level who were taking a proactive posture in eliminating segregation in Savannah.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Press Release, Savannah NAACP Marks Year-Long Withholding of Patronage Campaign, March 19, 1961, Selected Branch Files, 1940-1955. Branch Department Files Geographical File Savannah, Georgia, [1942-1955], Reel 6 (Pt. 27, Series A), Auburn University Archives, Auburn, Alabama.

Five days after the NAACP marked the one year anniversary of its boycott of the stores, sixteen-hundred students under the direction of Williams boycotted their local area schools after the abrupt firing of Sol C. Johnson High School principal, Alforance Chetham. The black principal was relieved of his duty for allegedly supporting a drive to register African-Americans as voters. One thousand students from Johnson High and 103 of the 1,000 students enrolled at Beech High refrained from attending the all-black high schools. The protest even extended to Beach Junior High where 239 of the nearly 700-member student body boycotted classes. Within forty-eight hours, Williams, now the Second Vice President of the NAACP, spoke up at a meeting requesting that the state allocate additional funds to establish private schools for blacks. E.H. Gadsden, a black attorney who had defended almost eighty blacks over the past year in integration lawsuits, and a vociferous opponent of the school boycott, informed Williams that the plan was legally untenable. Gadsden and fellow attorney, B. Clarence Mayfield, were both a part of Hub, a civic organization of black businessmen and other professionals. The coterie issued a statement calling the boycott “ill-advised and irresponsible” when it was learned that Cheatham had resigned in anger after he was told that his contract would not be renewed the following year.⁵⁵

The local newspaper joined the chorus of dissent. An article in the *Morning News* called the protest “shameful” because it impeded the progress for the students who “so desperately” needed a firm education. The conservative elements in the community claimed to support black education, but rallied against an administrator who supported the right of blacks to vote. The article also stated that the NAACP “feeds on agitation”

⁵⁵ “Savannah Negroes Boycott Schools,” *Atlanta Journal*, March 23, 1961.

and uses it as a means to “create further disunity with whites and Negroes in Savannah.” Undeterred, Williams addressed a crowd of about 2,000 students and adults at a mass meeting at the St. James Baptist Church. Although the principal had resigned, the fact still remained that his contract was not renewable because of his support of the voter registration drive. Williams rallied the crowd and called for the firing of school superintendent, D. Leon McCormack. “We should make McCormack realize that we fired Mayor Mingledorff, and we can fire McCormack, too,” Williams said. Although the boycott ended on March 29, six days after the initial protest began against the school system – and notably without Cheatham’s contract being renewed – Williams’s hold over his near cult-like following was unquestioned and his reputation as the most militant member of the local NAACP was now secure.⁵⁶

The white community in Savannah had begun slowly, but steadily, to capitulate to the NAACP’s demands. By June, 1961, sixty-six weeks into the boycott, Hadley B. Cammack, a manager at the Savannah Transit Authority, informed the city that the company had begun a program to train blacks as bus drivers on certain routes. By June 15, Roger Shank, a former student at Savannah State College, had been hired as the first black bus driver in the city and would be driving the 52nd Street Extension route. Joining the Transit Authority, the Savannah Public Library Board also gave up its fight to preserve segregation in its facilities; eight blacks had filed suit a year earlier. Williams, who was then the NAACP Education Chair, and seven other plaintiffs were represented by Attorneys A.T. Walden, D.L. Hollowell and Constance Baker Motley who argued that

⁵⁶ “A Shameful Situation,” *Savannah Morning News*, March 23, 1961; “Clash with NAACP: Negro Leaders Attack Boycott,” *Savannah Morning News*, March 24, 1961; “School Boycott Apparently at End Here Today,” *Savannah Evening Press*, March 29, 1961.

their clients' rights had been deprived under the Fourteenth Amendment. Mayor Maclean, in need of the CCCV's endorsement in the next election, was eager to avoid another public relations nightmare, and quietly issued a statement on June 20 declaring that the public library was "now open for use by both the Negro and White races." Savannah may have followed Atlanta and Macon in integrating its public libraries, but the local NAACP and the black community had shown the coastal city and the country that Williams's statement, which had ignited the boycott over a year earlier, still resonated: "We have two great allies in our fight for equal rights. These are our money and our vote."⁵⁷

After fifteen months and seventy-one mass meetings in local black churches, the NAACP voted to end the Broughton Street Boycott. Savannah had become the first city in Georgia to desegregate its lunch counters. W.W. Law told the 1,000 African Americans who had assembled for the 4:00 p.m. meeting at the St. Phillip Church A.M.E Church that "in the spirit of goodwill and cooperation" the blacks who tirelessly negotiated with the citizen's committee "recommend that the fifteen-month-old boycott" be lifted since black patrons could now "shop with dignity and self-respect. Those who had gathered at the historic house of worship gave a voice vote by saying "thank God" in unison. Shortly after the announcement was made, Broughton Street stores began to remove "whites only" and "colored" signs from water fountains, rest rooms and powder rooms. Law also stated that store owners and operators were beginning to address black

⁵⁷ "Negroes Seek to Get Into Library Here," *Savannah Evening News*, May 23, 1960; "Mayor Says Library Open to all Races," *Savannah Morning News*, 21 June 1961. "Negro-Driven City Buses are Planned," *Savannah News*, June 15, 1961; *Negro Bus Driver Hired*, *Savannah Evening Press*, June 16, 1961; *First Negro Bus Driver on Duty*, July 1, 1961; "First Negro Bus Driver on Duty," *Savannah Herald*, July 1, 1961.

patrons as “Mr.,” Mrs.,” and “Miss,” respectively. The results of this boycott had proven to the NAACP and the community that African Americans could organize in Savannah to spearhead meaningful change. The NAACP had even been accused by the *Savannah Morning News* of employing tactics that were “indefensible” after the local branch began a one-day boycott of Alex’s Super Duper Market to pressure the owner, Alex Kaplan, to hire blacks as cashiers, even though store needs did not merit additional personnel. After Kaplan gave in to the NAACP’s demands, the *Morning News* unwittingly complemented Williams’s and the organization’s effectiveness: “Local NAACP leaders are apparently interested more in showing their power . . . and flexing their muscle” to strong-arm the white community.⁵⁸

The boycott of the downtown stores also affected Williams in ways unrelated to civil rights and equitable treatment for blacks. Since 1952 he had wrestled with his inability to wisely manage his finances. “It’s amazing how much money I was making and I was really living to rob Peter to pay Paul,” said Williams. His unyielding compulsion to shop had thrust him and his family into a considerable amount of debt. By all accounts, he was a sharp dresser, but to maintain that reputation he had to spend a lot of money. Shopping “was like a disease,” he said. “I could not pass those stores downtown unless I bought something. I was always buying scarves, ties, jackets and shirts.” By the beginning of 1960, he was in debt to the bank, his doctor, dentist, several clothing stores and a jewelry store. Once the boycott commenced, he restrained his desire to shop. “I didn’t even buy a pocket handkerchief,” said Williams. He was a “free man,”

⁵⁸ “15-Month Battle for Dignity: Savannah Boycott Smashes Lunchroom Bias in Stores,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 22, 1961; “Savannah Market Bows to Boycott,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 22, 1961; “Grocer’s Hiring Plan Accepted,” *Savannah Evening News*, August 10, 1961; “These Tactics Defensible,” *Savannah Morning News*, August 11, 1961.

he recalled. “I didn’t owe any of those white folks downtown. It was really like being liberated. I was getting my freedom like white folks get. And ever since then, I vowed that as long as I live, that’s one damn trick bag I will never fall into again,” said the debtless Williams. Besides saving money, the boycott also demanded an inner strength to abstain from a behavior that Williams had thought was beyond his control. More pointedly, the boycott showed how committed he was to the cause that he helped to lead. This was Williams’s first of many subsequent lessons and tests of leadership.⁵⁹

After the boycott ended in July, 1961, Williams’s proven leadership within the administrative hierarchy of the local NAACP lent him a relative degree of credibility with the community insofar as his organizational skills were concerned. Refusing to rest on his laurels, he led a lawsuit in June, 1962, with thirty-five other parents who sought legal remedy on their children’s behalf to desegregate the Chatham County School System. Eight years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, schools in the South had yet to completely desegregate its school systems. *Brown* became a campaign platform in every southern state. The historian Numan Bartley asserts that the landmark United States Supreme Court directive was “the issue” in Georgia, “inundating all others, as politicians maneuvered frantically to occupy the extreme segregationist position.” The Chatham County School System at the time of the suit was operating thirty-five white schools and twenty schools for blacks. The suit against the Chatham County School System mentioned county superintendent, D. Leon McCormack, and twelve Board of

⁵⁹ Hosea’s Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division; According to Hosea, singing played an integral part during the boycott. He mentioned one song that they sang while picketing: “Take my Charge Card and throw It in the Trash Can. The lyrics were “Yea, gonna take my charge card, throw it in the trash can...throw it in the trash can. Gonna take my charge card, throw it in the trash can and get in debt no more.”

Education members as defendants. Williams and his co-plaintiffs asked that the defendants be enjoined from perpetuating a segregated school system that assigned teachers and pupils to certain schools based solely on race. The trial and deliberation lasted for nearly one year before the Fifth Circuit of the United States Court of Appeals ordered the desegregation of the school system. As part of the decree, Chatham County was ordered to “completely” desegregate at least one grade during the 1963 school year, and to desegregate at the very least, one grade every year after 1963 until all segregation no longer existed in the county schools. The plan by which the school would implement the decision had to be submitted by July 5, 1963. The quick implementation of a proposed plan was the result of Chatham County’s strategy to ignore the decision in *Brown*. Freeman Levert, an attorney for the state of Georgia, had claimed that a plan of this magnitude could only be produced after many months of preparation. Elbert Tuttle, Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals, informed Levert that the schools had “nine years to cogitate and think about this thing... Your board has done nothing in the nature of providing a plan.” Williams and his co-plaintiffs were now able to claim another sweet victory in their pursuit to end segregation in Savannah. However, Williams would suffer a bitter defeat at the hands of the local NAACP as he sought election to the organization’s National Board of Directors.⁶⁰

Williams’s failure to be elected to the NAACP’s executive board was the result of Roy Wilkins’s jealousy of, and ideological differences with, Martin Luther King Jr.

Williams’s calculated decision to work concurrently with the NAACP and the Southern

⁶⁰ Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950’s* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 68; Harry Murphy, “Seek Integration: Negroes File School Suit,” *Savannah Morning News*, June 19, 1962; “Appeals Court Orders to Desegregate Public Schools,” *Savannah Morning News*, May 25, 1963.

Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by King, placed him in a precarious predicament with Wilkins. Wilkins's frustration with King and the latter's direct-action strategies had its origin in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The boycott of the city buses in Montgomery, which began seventeen months after the 1954 *Brown* decision, represented an "ocean shift in black attitudes toward segregation and racism. As a consequence of this shift, King became the best known Negro in the United States," said James Lawson. The Montgomery Branch of the NAACP, particularly E.D. Nixon and Rosa Parks, were "deeply involved" in that protest during a time when NAACP National Executive Secretary, Roy Wilkins, "operating in the North, did not understand the new direct-action phase of the movement and did not want to catch up with it," Lawson said. Yvonne Ryan, Wilkins's biographer, posits that he had a "discomfort with direct action...and boycotts in particular" because they "were at best pointless and at worst dangerous." His beliefs came as a result of his feeling that African Americans did not have the numerical, economic, or political leverage to apply the required pressure to the system they despised. Williams's philosophy was diametrically opposed to that of Wilkins's as evidenced by the former's visible and vocal support of direct action tactics in Savannah.⁶¹

Williams was also responsible for contributing to one of Wilkins's greatest fears: the NAACP might lose its prominence as the eminent civil rights organization in the United States. Wilkins and other NAACP national leaders felt threatened by King and the

⁶¹ James Lawson, interview by author, telephone, Lithonia, Georgia, May 7, 2014; Rev. James Lawson met Martin Luther King Jr. in 1957. The former was an expert in Gandhian nonviolence and helped to organize the student sit-in campaign in Nashville, Tennessee in 1960. He personally trained activists who later became renowned leaders in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, including Diane Nash, James Bevel, and Bernard Lafayette — all three were founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Lawson worked with SNCC from 1960-1964. He also worked with the SCLC from 1960-1964; Yvonne Ryan, *Roy Wilkins: The Quiet Revolutionary and the NAACP* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 56, 75.

SCLC because of the Baptist minister's appeal to the youth movement prior to 1961. Compounding Wilkins' disdain for the more militant SCLC was his belief that King and his organization were gaining an operational and financial advantage in southern states where the older organization had been banned from operating. The SCLC, in the NAACP's absence, set up local affiliates in these states which prevented the NAACP from rebuilding its brand and presence after the federal courts enjoined the states, for example, Alabama and Louisiana, from outlawing the organization. Although King was adamant that the SCLC had no intentions of interfering with NAACP activities and objectives, both organs courted the support of the same group of local community organizers and member pool. Williams's successful work with the SCLC's Citizenship Education Program (CEP) spoke to Wilkins's fears.⁶²

The SCLC established the CEP in 1962 to train adults in literacy, voting rights, community organization, and economic development. Andrew Young suggested that the goal of the CEP was to find the "natural leaders" with "Ph.D. minds [and] third-grade educations" to train for service in their respective communities. Williams worked at CEP's Dorchester Center, located approximately thirty miles south of his home and headquarters in Savannah. Speaking of his workload with the program, Williams said "I had a third of the classes nationally. I had one or two classes in eleven counties" throughout Georgia and South Carolina. He "brought many of the Savannah youth into the Dorchester Citizenship Program," said Andrew Young. Williams was diverting the same youth that Roy Wilkins coveted for the NAACP programs to the SCLC. W.W. Law was also unhappy with Williams working with the SCLC. "We [Roy Wilkins] don't want

⁶² Ryan, *Roy Wilkins*, 75.

King nowhere down here. We don't want him in this territory," fumed Law. Williams asserted later that it was after his refusal to cease his work with CEP that Wilkins and Law "turned their backs on me." In exchange for Williams's commitment to recruit the youth in Savannah, the SCLC assisted him in his ongoing legal fight with the Department of Agriculture to keep his job after Law, according to Williams, "tried to get Clarence Mitchell," an NAACP attorney, from "representing me." The relationship between Williams and the local and national branches of the NAACP would be irretrievably broken in 1962.⁶³

During July, 1962, Williams ran for a position on the NAACP's National Board of Directors at the organization's national convention at the Atlanta Municipal Auditorium. At the time of the convention, he was serving as the vice president for both the Georgia State Conference of Branches and the Savannah Branch of the NAACP. He had convinced various states within the southern region of the NAACP to vote for him, including the delegations from South Carolina and Alabama. Williams felt confident that he would be elected until a member of the Mississippi delegation told him that he would not receive their vote because W. W. Law had persuaded them to vote for Father T. Gibson of Miami, Florida. Williams found and confronted Law: "Westley, what is this about the Georgia delegation not going to vote for me?" Law responded, "That's right. We can't support you . . . because of Mr. Wilkins." Stunned, his adrenaline pumping, Williams walked directly into Wilkins's office and asked why was he campaigning to keep him off the Board. Wilkins told Williams that "you are too militant and that your

⁶³ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 141, 144, 258; "History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference produced by the SCLC's Department of Information, Southern Christian Leadership Conference Records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991. The Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers.

loyalty to this organization is in question.” “My loyalty,” Williams asked. “Yes, what program were you involved with in SCLC,” said Wilkins. Williams asked to him to reconsider. Wilkins said that he had made a “definite decision.” After the votes were counted, Georgia had cast fourteen votes against Williams. Williams was at an all-time low after this perceived betrayal. “I don’t know anything that hurt me worse. The way I laid my job on the line, my life on the line. . . . I was a big ass fool for the NAACP,” he bitterly recalled. Williams soon found out that Wilkins and the NAACP had treated other civil rights activist the same way.⁶⁴

The Georgia Branch’s failure to support Williams was a watershed moment in his life. His confusion was surpassed only by his sense of betrayal by the organization and the people that he cared for on a very personal basis. He began searching for guidance. He looked in the Georgia Yellow Pages and found the telephone number to the SCLC’s headquarters and called the office of Martin Luther King Jr., the president of the SCLC. He then walked to King’s office at 41 Exchange Place in the city of Atlanta, only a few blocks from where the convention was held. Never having met King face-to-face, Williams hastily arranged a meeting through the leader’s secretary, Dora McDonald. After sitting down in King’s office with teary eyes, Williams explained to him what had occurred less than sixty minutes earlier. Ralph Abernathy, Treasurer of the SCLC and King’s best friend and confidant since the Montgomery Bus Boycott, walked into the office while King and Williams were talking. Williams, casting his lot fully with the black freedom struggle, asked King if he could work for the SCLC on a full-time basis. If

⁶⁴ Hosea’s Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division; “H.L. Williams Loyal to NAACP Questioned,” *Herald*, July 14, 1962; “Hosea Williams to Withdraw Nomination to National NAACP,” *Herald*, July 14, 1962.

hired, he pledged to King that he would bring “all of his loyalties” to him and the SCLC. After informing Williams that he would hire him, King offered some words of consolation: “You ought not to feel bad, Mr. Williams, because you’ve gotten further than I’ve ever gotten — at least you had a chance to run for the Board; they blocked me before I ever had a chance to run.”⁶⁵

Williams returned to Savannah after the convention knowing that he had reached his proverbial fork in the road with the NAACP. He took solace knowing that he would soon be working out of Atlanta with King and the SCLC once he established a time line to move to the state’s capital city. Although his prospects as an activist were brighter after the convention, he was still embittered by the state conference’s betrayal. According to Adam Fairclough, the defiant Williams “turned the crusade (CCCV) into his own, autonomous power base.” By March 1963, nearly 13,000 African Americans were registered to vote in Chatham County in large measure because of the CCCV’s efforts. John Calhoun, a member of a voter’s league in Dorchester County, called the CCCV “the most effective political action group in the state.” On March 7, Williams announced that the CCCV would start raising its own finances after the Savannah NAACP informed him that the Crusade would no longer receive financial assistance from the local branch because of a “shortage of funds,” according to the *Savannah Evening Press*. Williams’s limitless ego and his determination to succeed in the face of yet another slight by the NAACP immediately stirred him to expand the CCCV’s activities to include fifteen citizenship classes which aimed to teach blacks how to read and write so that they could

⁶⁵ Hosea’s Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991. The Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers.

register to vote. Williams also began a program to conduct sophisticated surveys to determine the problematic areas where the number of black registered voters was low. Although the voting rights group could no longer rely on the NAACP to defray operating expenses, Williams was confident that the CCCV could still thrive. “We have now become of age and have won the respect of Chatham County. . . . We have become productive enough to become financially separate,” Williams said. Within three months, Williams and the CCCV would initiate an ultra-militant protest that ultimately led to the wholesale desegregation of Savannah.⁶⁶

Williams’s plans for the protest began on a warm Sunday night in May, 1963, during a conversation with his youth lieutenant, Benjamin Van Clark. Clark, about nineteen years old, was about five feet, six inches tall, and was known in Savannah as the “Little General.” Williams and Clark left the office after a long evening at the CCCV’s office on West Broad Street and stopped at the same drug store where one year earlier, Williams had shopped with Williams Jr. and Andre, his youngest son, to buy an extension hose to water his Zoysia lawn. The two children, ages six and seven, respectively, asked Williams to buy them a hot dog and a cold Coke, but the lunch counter was by custom for “whites only.” After he told them “no,” they began crying controllably. “And I remember stoopin’ down and I started crying because I realized I couldn’t tell ’em the truth,” Williams said. The recollection of this incident, as well as continuing competition with the local NAACP and W.W. Law to remain the most visible

⁶⁶ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 95; “Crusade for Voters to Expand,” *Savannah Evening Press*, March 7, 1963.

and powerful civil rights organization in Savannah, that fueled Williams's determination to turn Savannah upside down.⁶⁷

The spark that ignited the two-month protest occurred in the middle of the afternoon on Wednesday, June 5, 1963, when nine teenagers, under the guidance of Williams and the CCCV, were arrested after they attempted to dine at Anton's restaurant on Broughton Street in downtown Savannah. By 5:30 p.m., Williams's wife, Juanita, and Carolyn Roberts, a leader with the CCCV, were mimeographing thousands of leaflets announcing the arrest and inviting blacks in the community to a mass meeting at the First African Baptist Church, where a large crowd agreed to continue the demonstrations protesting race-based segregation in the city's restaurants, hotels, and movie theatres. Two days later, nearly forty black youth marched from the all-black west-side of the city to Anton's restaurant and Morrison's Cafeteria. After they refused to leave, the demonstrators, including Williams and Van Clark, were arrested on trespassing charges. In the hallmark defiance that characterized his personality and approach to the white power structure, Williams loudly shouted: "We'll fill up the jails," a strategy that had been implemented in several civil rights demonstrations, including the recent SCLC-led protests in Birmingham, Alabama, which centered on direct-action protests in the city's downtown stores which invariably led to mass arrests.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Anthony Lewis, "The Right to Have a Coke," *New York Times*, October 23, 1977; Benjamin Van Clark, "The Destiny of Black Folks: The Savannah Story," Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

⁶⁸ Willie Bolden, interview by author, telephone interview, Lithonia, Georgia, May 8, 2014. Bolden worked with Hosea and the Chatham County Crusade for Voters in Savannah. He was fired from his job at the Manger Hotel for being sympathetic to the protests. He left Savannah with and began working on Hosea's staff with the SCLC. Bolden eventually attended Harvard University and returned to work as the head of personnel in the Atlanta Public School System; Clark, "The Destiny of Black Folks, Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers; "40 Negroes Arrested at Savannah," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 8, 1963; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 260; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 234, 235.

Williams in many respects followed the template used by the SCLC in the famous “Project C” 1963 spring protests in Birmingham in terms of staging rallies and marches resulting in confrontations with the city’s law enforcement under “Bull” Connor and mass arrests. Williams held mass rallies during the day while he was on lunch break from the Department of Agriculture. According to Willie Bolden, an employee at the plush, five-star, Manger Hotel, “Everyday, around 12:00 . . . you could set your clock by it, Williams would lead 200 or 300 people” to Johnson Park, which was across the street from his job, and “would climb on the rock named for Chief Tomochichi,” and talk about “white folk so bad” with such passion that listeners felt motivated to wanted to follow him. Additionally, Williams introduced a new protest strategy in Savannah: night marches. The new strategy presented challenges and rewards. “People thought the marches was too dangerous because you can’t see who is about to attack you, but his thinking was that at night people are off from work and can participate,” said Barbara Williams — Williams’s eldest daughter. W.W. Law and the NAACP, losing its primacy and already at odds with Williams and the CCCV, publicly opposed the new type of protest. “We believe that night protest marches . . . will not serve the best interests at this time in reaching our goals,” said a statement signed by Law and other branch leaders. Williams was not swayed by the NAACP’s suggestion that he refrain from leading protests at night. “Certain other Negro groups feel that the night marches are not in the best interest of the community. The only reason they feel that is they are not leading them,” said Williams. Although Williams and Law displayed a united front in public, Mercedes Wright, a longtime NAACP member, said she was “soundly convinced that

Law and Williams had a personal feud, that both have psychiatric problems and that the wounds will never be healed.”⁶⁹

Protests in Savannah continued, requiring state troopers. Thirteen days after the initial arrest of nine young men at Anton’s restaurant, the local police had arrested nearly 600 protesters and there was no sign of relief from the daytime and nighttime protests. On June 17, an estimated 500 blacks marched to the Savannah Chamber of Commerce offices after merchants were adamant in their opposition to a resolution sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce asking them to desegregate their facilities. “We have information that certain restaurants refused to integrate due to the refusal of their competitors. The hotels blamed their refusal on the restaurants, and the theaters said they couldn't go at it alone,” said Williams to the gathering crowd at the Chamber. In response to the march, Governor Carl Sanders dispatched fifty-two state patrol officers to Savannah to assist the local police force in maintaining law and order. Frustrated by the negative publicity, Mayor Malcolm Maclean scheduled a meeting to negotiate a truce.⁷⁰

Malcolm Maclean was under enormous pressure to restore order to the city after 274 out of an estimated 1,000 demonstrators were arrested outside of police headquarters on June 19. Police fired tear gas after blacks in the crowd threw bricks and bottles at the assembled officers; the melee resulted when the crowd of protesters refused to leave the new, segregated, Holiday Inn Motel. Some of the demonstrators had broken windows at the H&W Sales Company, at Davis Furniture, the Reils Seed Company, and the

⁶⁹ “Hosea Williams: The Untold Story,” DVD, prod. Dorothy Daniels (Atlanta: ABC, 2010); “Night Marches Opposed,” *Savannah Morning News*, June 24, 1963; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 135; Willie Bolden, “Fireside Chat with the Williams Family and Civil Rights Activists,” Panel discussion, Atlanta City Council, Atlanta, Georgia, February 17, 2014.

⁷⁰ “Savannah Negroes March: State Sends 52 Patrolmen,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 18, 1963.

Savannah Saw Company—all en route to the police department. Andrew Young, who was present and jailed after the march recalled the tone and tenor of the protest in this way: “As we marched along, I was distressed by the lack of discipline shown by the marchers. The mood was disorderly, there were no marshals, and no one to lead freedom songs.” Williams placed the blame on the mayor and the police chief. “They tried to arrest too many of them niggers in one night and damn near tore Savannah up.” Mayor Maclean issued a statement saying that he would attempt to meet with “responsible Negro leadership” to request that the night marches be halted. In the interim, however, he scheduled a special City Council meeting to investigate the feasibility of passing an ordinance under an emergency circumstance banning the night protests.⁷¹

Williams and some of his most loyal followers observed Independence Day by hosting an 11:00 p.m. rally, the first since June 24, against segregation on the corners of Habersham and McDonough Streets near the Chatham County Jail. Almost 350 followers gathered at a building that was once a symbol of fear but had now become an edifice of empowerment and assertion. Instead of participating in the routine activities usually associated with the Fourth of July holiday, demonstrators, according to the Savannah Morning News, “sang, chanted, and listened” to speeches for nearly an hour in the presence of policemen as the officers held their riot guns and tear gas. Williams reminded the crowd and the attending officers that night marches would not cease and that the city should expect “thousands of demonstrators” to converge on the streets of Savannah in the days and weeks ahead until the city complied with the CCCV’s demands for complete

⁷¹ Kathy Palmer, “To End Night Marches: Mayor Calls For Meeting,” *Savannah Evening Press*, June 20, 1963; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 260; Hosea’s Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers; “Tear Gas Used to Scatter Negro Mobs; 274 Arrested,” *Savannah Morning News*, June 20, 1963.

desegregation. Williams, referred to as Savannah's "Negro Chieftain," had called off marches during negotiations with the city. Whites in southern cities typically called for such "cooling off" periods before they would agree to negotiate with African American civil rights leaders. However, he was not pleased with the progress between the two sides. Mayor Maclean and other city officials were convinced that Williams was the impediment to solving the tense race situation, so they had him arrested by Deputies Fred DerBaum and John Hughes at his home at 3:00 a.m. on July 8 on a "good behavior warrant." Inell Lubeck, a middle-aged white woman, was coerced into complaining that Williams had been disturbing the peace and complained that she was unable to sleep because of the loud singing. His bond was set at \$2,500, an absurdly high amount which Municipal Court Judge, Victor Mulling, stated was the result of the integrationist leader's multiple infractions. Seven additional "good behavior warrants" were brought against Williams before he could be bonded out of jail, escalating his bail to \$30,000. When B. Clarence Mayfield protested the amount as unreasonable, the judge stated that Titles 76-101 and 76-102 of the Georgia Code had been on the books since 1863, the year of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.⁷²

The city of Savannah's plan to derail the demonstrations by jailing Williams on questionable charges backfired. Young and old African Americans alike now joined the protests that had been largely dominated by high-school and college-aged students. On the night after Williams's arrest, Ben Clark led a crowd of 900 protesters to a half-hour

⁷² "Negroes Assemble Near County Jail, *Savannah Morning News*, July 5, 1963; "Negro Leader Here is Jailed on Warrant," *Savannah Evening Press*, July 9, 1963; "Hearing Slated for Negro Leader," *Savannah Evening Press*, July 10, 1963; "Savannah Jails Negro Chieftain: Marches Disturb Peace, Woman Says," *Atlanta Journal*, July 10, 1963; "Clarke Out; Williams In: Charge Marches Cause "Lost Sleep," *Crusader*, Vol. 1 No. 1, July 12, 1963.

mass meeting around 12:30 a.m. in front of City Hall. Clark, Williams's trusted lieutenant, rallied the large crowd while standing on an empty casket which symbolized the dying system of segregation in Georgia's oldest city. Protesters had reconvened after an earlier rally at the Flamingo Recreation Center on Gwinnet Street, a short distance from City Hall, where C.T. Vivian, an aide to Martin Luther King in the SCLC, spoke of the Savannah movement in the same vein as the United States' liberation of Europe during World War II. Vivian's personal words about Williams underscore the reputation he had built outside of Savannah with King and other SCLC brass. "If Williams Williams is in jail," Vivian said, "every Negro in the nation should know about it." To further motivate the crowd, Juanita, Williams's wife, who was not new to the fight for civil and voting rights – she had run unsuccessfully for the clerk of city court in 1961 – also spoke to the large crowd.⁷³

Williams's incarceration in the county jail and the threat of a visit from Martin Luther King Jr. to Savannah to lead mass demonstrations were arguably the deciding factors that pushed white city leaders and a biracial committee to hammer out a compromise to end segregation in Savannah and stop the night marches led by the CCCV. During the time Williams was still imprisoned on a "good behavior warrant," James Bevel, another aide of Martin Luther King Jr., had been ordered to Savannah to assist with the marches and maintain an SCLC presence. At a CCCV rally on August 1, Bevel threatened to resume the night marches in Williams's stead if ongoing negotiations did not yield fruitful results. He told the crowd of an estimated 250 attendees that Martin

⁷³ "900 Negroes Gather Downtown," *Savannah Morning News*, July 10, 1963; "Savannah Negro Runs as Clerk Candidate," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 15, 1961; "Clerk Race Interest High," *Savannah Morning News*, July 24, 1961; "Integration Leader's Bond Now \$30,000," *Savannah Morning News*, July 12, 1963.

Luther King Jr. “had already bought his ticket” and was preparing to make the four-hour drive from Atlanta. Before Bevel’s meeting, members from the “Committee of 100” met at 10:30 a.m. at the Desoto Hotel. Representatives from the five hotels, two bowling lanes, the Weis and Savannah Theaters, Town Motel, Towne and Country Motel, and the Alamo Plaza met in concert with W.W. Law and other black leaders. Minutes from the meeting suggest that businesses were willing to integrate as long as their competitors did so because they feared losing white customers. For example, the Lucas and Avon Theaters would only agree to desegregate their respective facilities if the other white theaters and the four hotels and three downtown motels responded in kind. October 1 was designated as the date of desegregation. However, the stipulations were firm. For example, “there should only be two customers a day during the off hours for the first few days and none on the weekends.” Other provisions required that “Negroes agree to keep any future demonstrations away from any of the facilities in the package [deal]” and that “hotels would not serve more than four at one time in the dining room for three months.”⁷⁴

By August 3, a relative peace between the CCCV and the city of Savannah appeared to be on the horizon as word leaked that a compromise was being seriously contemplated between a committee of 100 business owners and black leaders who had been working for the previous three weeks. Martin Luther King Jr. decided to cancel his trip and issued a statement saying that he had received “authoritative information that good faith negotiations have taken place and the announcement of a just and reasonable

⁷⁴ “Negro Leader Says Protests May Resume Here, *Savannah Evening Press*, August 1, 1963; Meeting Minutes of the Committee of 100, August 1, 1963, A. Pratt Adams Jr. Papers, MS 2165, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia; Letter, Joseph M. Oliver to A. Pratt Adams, July 31, 1963, A. Pratt Adams Jr. Papers.

situation is imminent.” Exactly one week later, Williams’s bond was reduced to \$15,500 and he was released after spending exactly one month in jail. Bond was secured by eleven pieces of property, valued at \$19,000, ten of which were put up by Russell Lavender, a black preacher in the city. Although critics would agree that Williams’s absence from the biracial committee meetings led to the favorable compromise between the white businesses and the black leadership, the settlement would have been impossible without the direct action protests. The night marches had applied extraordinary pressure on the city of Savannah.⁷⁵

The civil rights movement in Savannah from 1960-1963 largely owes its success to Williams Williams and his ability to organize the black population to press for meaningful change. The irreducible common denominator of the success of the civil rights struggles during these three years proved to be the high number of registered voters. Fifty-seven percent of the black population in Savannah was registered to vote. Because of this high margin, blacks were able to form a large voting bloc which allowed them to elect a moderate municipal government. White politicians could not completely ignore black voters. Savannah did not have to grapple with the same violence as other cities in the Deep South, in particular Little Rock, Birmingham, and Jackson, Mississippi, where demagoguery in city halls was mirrored by often brutal police responses. The high number of registered voters resulted initially from the NAACP, but after April 1960, Williams and the Chatham County Crusade for Voters held an ironclad grip on the black

⁷⁵ “Race Panel Sees Savannah Peace,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 3, 1963; “Hosea Williams Out on \$15,500 Bond,” *Savannah Evening Press*, August 10, 1963. Andrew Young asserts that Hosea’s bond at one point during his imprisonment reached \$55,000. Evidence to the contrary suggests that the bond never exceeded \$30,000. Also, Hosea posited that he spent sixty-six days in jail during the protests in 1963. However, the newspaper chronicles his arrest and release within a thirty-day period.

vote. White candidates knew the effectiveness of the CCCV and knew that they needed that organization's endorsement. "We had developed enough political savvy in Savannah to get every single politician in office to speak at the Crusade meetings," Williams said. For example, Charles Debele, a candidate seeking reelection as the chairman of the Chatham County Board of Registrars, appeared before the CCCV and agreed to grant their requests to ensure that blacks would continue to be treated with dignity and respect when they attempted to register. Debele had learned from the mistakes of former mayor Lee Mingledorff, who also appeared before the CCCV and asked for its members' endorsement, but was eventually defeated. Williams was right when he brazenly boasted "It used to be said 'so the first (district) goes so the election goes.' Now they are saying 'so go the Negroes, so the election goes.'"⁷⁶

Perhaps what was most critical to the success of the Savannah movement was Williams's ability to control and motivate the large youth population in the city. The students, following the model of protesters in Greensboro, North Carolina, began a new phase of the Black freedom struggle of the 1960s. The students, naively idealistic, participated in civil rights demonstrations in Savannah because they believed they could end segregation and did not have to suffer financial reprisal from an employer. Williams was especially successful in cultivating a relationship with young African Americans, aged seventeen to twenty-five, a demographic that the NAACP had hitherto struggled to reach and incorporate in civil rights activities. Williams, twenty years senior to those he motivated, was viewed by the young activists as the cool uncle while Law was perceived

⁷⁶ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 127; "Mayor Speaks at Crusaders Meeting," *Savannah Herald*, July 3, 1960; "Candidates Quizzed by Negroes," *Savannah Morning News*, August 24, 1962; Hosea's Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers.

as an old-timer grandfather, although he was only three years older than Williams. Williams, an educated member of Savannah's middle-class, did not have the same reputation for appearing stuffy and aristocratic, traits which undercut W.W. Law and other members of the NAACP that consisted of medical doctors, dentists and formally-educated ministers. Williams was a self-proclaimed "thug" and "hustler" who was at ease when entering bars, pool halls and other areas where the youth frequented—places that middle-class, ultra-religious and conservative blacks refused to go. He was able to recruit figures, for example, "Big" Lester Hankerson, the six feet, four inch "thug" of the waterfront, to participate in demonstrations. Williams, keenly aware of the optics associated with civil rights activism, knew that many whites in Savannah were cowards who loved to attack defenseless blacks. He responded by recruiting young men like "Trash" and "Old Mama," who Williams described as "big niggers" who had no problem threatening whites and calling them "motherfuckers" during civil rights protests. Willie Bolden, who met Williams when he was twenty-two-years-old and was one of Williams's captains, succinctly summed up his mentor: "The way he talked about white people in general and segregation. . . . this guy was either crazy or he is one helluva leader; I found out that he was both."⁷⁷

Williams and the Chatham County Crusade for Voters had made a lasting impact on the city of Savannah after the 1963 summer campaign to end segregation. Williams was well aware that tensions with the Department of Agriculture were beyond repair. He also wanted to play a more meaningful role in getting people registered to vote in states throughout the South. He knew that the time was right to move from Chatham County,

⁷⁷ "Hosea Williams: The Untold Story," DVD, prod. Dorothy Daniels (Atlanta: ABC, 2010).

and he again approached Martin Luther King Jr. about joining the SCLC on a full-time basis. King had taken note of Williams's tireless commitment in recruiting and organizing blacks to vote in Savannah and knew that his contentious temperament would provide a balance within the SCLC's inner circle. King told Andrew Young "We need people who are confrontational. . . . Some of us have the tendency to become too comfortable with injustice. Not Williams. He's going to go out there and start something, and though we don't know what it might lead to, we need people like that." Based on this vote of confidence, Williams was hired as the SCLC's Coordinator of Political Action at a salary of \$12,000—the highest paid associate within the organization—which was subsidized by the Presbyterian Church at the request of Young. Williams's salary was a testament to his talents and proven record in civil and voting rights activism. Keenly aware that his salary would be resented by staff members whose work in the SCLC predated his, he knew he had to deliver once he moved to Atlanta in 1964.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 281; Hosea L. Williams's Resume, The Papers of Reverend Hosea L. Williams, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

Chapter 3

“King’s Kamikaze”: St. Augustine, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964

1964 ushered in an era of uncertainty for the black freedom movement. President John F. Kennedy, a northeastern liberal who was seen by Williams and a great many African Americans as an ally of the movement, had been assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas. President Kennedy, though prodded, had taken some politically dangerous stances against racism. As early as 1957, then Senator Kennedy told a vitriolic and venomous crowd in Jackson, Mississippi, that he supported the controversial decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. “I accept the Supreme Court decision as the law of the land. . . . We must all agree on the necessity to uphold law and order in every part of the land.” As a candidate for the presidency three years later, he was once again faced with the opportunity to show that he was sympathetic to the interests of African Americans after Martin Luther King Jr. was sentenced to four months in a Georgia state penitentiary for violating the terms of his probation after he was convicted on a technicality for driving with an Alabama driver’s license. Kennedy, a shrewd political pragmatist, called King’s wife, Coretta, after what Ted Sorensen, Kennedy’s speechwriter referred to as an “intensive hotel room debate,” to offer words of support and consolation a few weeks before the winning election which had pitted him against Republican Vice President, Richard Nixon. After Alabama Governor George C.

Wallace prevented an African-American from entering the University of Alabama by standing at the entrance to the state's flagship university, Kennedy went on national television to denounce racism and discrimination. Eight days later on June 19, 1963, he submitted to Congress what Sorensen called "the most comprehensive civil rights bill in history" with a message that "race has no place in American life or law." The tone and tenor of the president's speech and actions had given some blacks a sense of confidence in feeling that their president was, in the words of Godfrey Hodgson, "a magnificent lion slaying their enemies for them" while spearheading meaningful change in the area of civil rights legislation. This optimism faded quickly after the tragedy in Dallas for Williams and many activists who had been agitating for equality in the South.¹

Williams had personally benefitted from the Kennedy administration's calculated benevolence. The United States Department of Agriculture determined to fire Williams, the only black research chemist in the Deep South, after his release from a Savannah jail on August 10, 1963, for leading civil rights demonstrations in the city. As Williams later recalled, he was lambasted by his department head in Washington after he called to preempt his firing. "Williams, who do you think you are? You don't qualify no longer to be a part of this agency. You're a disgrace," said the administrator. Williams asked Martin Luther King Jr. to contact Robert Kennedy, the president's brother, on his behalf to influence Orville Freeman, the United States Secretary of Agriculture. The Attorney General agreed to intercede. Williams traveled to visit the same administrator in Washington who had recently ridiculed his role as the chieftain of the Savannah civil

¹ Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 251; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 151; Ted Sorensen, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008), 271, 282-283; Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1976), 105.

rights protests. Williams entered the department head's office and was greeted cordially. He told his superior that he wanted to work with the SCLC without losing his tenure and benefits with the federal government. After dinner, he was told that the Department would grant him a leave of absence for one year to engage in educational activity to help him perform his job as a scientist at a higher level. Williams used his role as an instructor in the SCLCs adult citizenship school program to justify the leave. "Those people just wanted to get me outta there" without firing me, "they knew damn well that these citizenship schools were teaching adults how to read," Williams said. The autobiographical scenario may be a mixture of fact and fable, but it is plausible that Robert Kennedy used the weight of his office to work clandestinely with King to decrease the probability of incendiary racial conflicts evolving into national issues that would force him and the president to intervene in a way that would be a political liability for the Administration. Although the embattled chemist was granted his leave of absence, he did not fulfill his end of the bargain with the Department of Agriculture to work exclusively with SCLCs adult citizenship schools.²

Williams and the Southeastern Crusade For Voters (SCFV), one of the SCLC's most productive affiliates, met at Savannah's previously segregated Manger Hotel on January 1, 1964, to launch an ambitious drive to register 6,000 African-American voters. By 1964, Georgia ranked second behind Texas among the former eleven Confederate States with 268,000 black registered voters. Fifteen thousand blacks of a total population of 55,000 registered voters were already qualified to vote in Chatham County when the

² Hosea L. Williams, interview by George King, January 24, 1992, Southern Regional Council, "Will the Circle be Unbroken?" program files, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

campaign was initiated. The SCFV still believed that 22,000 blacks of voting age remained untapped. Herman Pride, a real estate company executive and recently elected chairman of the organization, maintained that the campaign was “expected to be one of the most extensive voter registration drives staged in the Coastal Empire.” Two weeks after the campaign was launched, Williams had convinced Martin Luther King Jr., recently named *Time’s* “Man of the Year,” to address a crowd of 1,800 at Savannah’s Municipal Auditorium to encourage community participation in the drive. King told Williams at the mass meeting that the SCLC would continue to pledge its resources and manpower to ensure that the voter registration drive was a success. King also told the crowd that although “Savannah has not reached the promised land,” Williams’s leadership had “possibly pushed the city ahead of Atlanta” in the area of race relations, because Atlanta had “fallen back.” Its leaders no longer seemed so receptive to rapid racial progress. King’s praise invariably made a lasting impact on the black community in Savannah.³

Williams, now the SCLC’s Special Projects Director, and on a one-year leave of absence from the USDA, was devoted full time to securing 6,000 new African-American registered voters. He and the SCFV got off to a fast start, registering between thirty-forty voters daily. Within the first month of the four-month voter registration drive, the Crusade had successfully registered 1,435 new voters. The registration campaign’s mission was to reach the “hard core” of ineligible black voters in Chatham County who had not been participants in the political process. Williams believed that the thirty percent

³“Savannah, Georgia,” *Southern Christian Leadership Conference Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Jan., 1964), p.10, The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center; “Negroes Press Registration,” *Atlanta Journal*, January 2, 1964; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 284.

who were registered to vote were primarily of the “middle class.” He decided that the SCFV would concentrate on registering working-class and unemployed blacks in hopes of increasing the power of what already constituted into a formidable voting bloc.

Although Williams was no longer working what in essence had been two full-time jobs as a civil rights activist and research chemist, the demands on his time were still very heavy. His attention was often divided, causing him to sleep very little at night, making him irritable and sometimes erratic in behavior.⁴

This tendency was most obvious while driving one of his powerful and expensive cars. Status-conscious, his luxury automobile of choice was usually a Cadillac convertible with a strong V-8 engine. The Cadillac, built for speed and plush comfort, garnered attention from many drivers, especially the white police officers who staffed many police agencies in the Deep South during the 1960s and 1970s. Williams, a black and boisterous man who was unapologetic for the material manifestations of his hard work and hustling mentality, only exacerbated whites’ seething envy of a seemingly successful African American. Charged on March 18, 1964, for several traffic violations including passing on a yellow line, improper lane usage, and forcing a witness off of a highway, he blamed local authorities for attempting to punish him for his civil rights activism. The registration was traced back to Juanita, but Williams claimed that he while he was indeed driving the car, he was in another area of Savannah at the time that John B. Brooks, the victim, claimed that he had been run off the road near the Ogeechee Wrecking Company, located off of Ogeechee Road, approximately sixteen miles from Williams’s home at 3115 Gilbert Street.

⁴ “1435 New Voters Register in Savannah During January,” *Southern Christian Leadership Conference Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (Feb., 1964), 1.

Racially-motivated incidents in St. Augustine, Florida, required him to divert his attention from his legal problems in Savannah and channel his energies to activism in a new environment in the country's oldest city.⁵ St. Augustine had been founded in 1565 by Pedro Menendez, a Spanish naval officer, as a fortified town to protect Florida against the possibility of French invasions. Although the city had been named for a man of color, the theologian, St. Augustine of Hippo, the ancient town in northeast Florida, had an inglorious reputation for its treatment of non-whites. As Williams noted at the time, "Historically, age and time designate wisdom. This is not true in St. Augustine, Florida, a city 399 years old. St. Augustine has trapped, preserved, and perpetuated all of the prejudice, Jim Crowism and bigotry and hate to every non-white American that ever resided, even temporarily, within her boundaries."

In 1964, blacks made up just under a quarter of the city's population. African Americans had been barred from all four of the city's hotels, and its twenty-four motels, as well as from all twenty-four restaurants. Recreational facilities, including the YMCA, also prohibited blacks from enjoying its services. Only a few whites employed blacks in positions where they had contact with patrons. Although no overt pattern of segregation in the area of housing existed, the "United States Commission on Civil Rights" found that blacks were only allowed to buy homes from other blacks. St. Augustine's blacks, however, did not passively accept these conditions and anticipated working with the NAACP and the SCLC to highlight inequality during a time when the city would be

⁵ "On the Front Line: A Conversation with Andrew Young," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 13, 1996; "Motorists Complaints are Denied," *Savannah Morning News*, March 19, 1964; "Integration Leader Faces Traffic Cases," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 19, 1964. It is worth noting that Williams would later claim that he was being targeted for his activism when he was repeatedly cited for traffic and drunk-driving violations. See dissertation Conclusion below.

celebrating its founding. The federal and city governments did not take the four-hundredth anniversary lightly.⁶

President John F. Kennedy, on August 14, 1962, charged the St. Augustine Quadricentennial Commission with a mission “to develop and to execute suitable plans for the celebration, in 1965, of the four hundredth anniversary of the founding” of the city. President Kennedy appointed Herbert Wolfe as the Commission’s chairman. The Commission was composed of Florida’s Congressional delegation, including Senators Spessard L. Holland and George Smathers. John William McCormack, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, appointed Representatives D.R. Matthews and William C. Cramer to the Commission as well. Joining the lawmakers on the committee was Stewart Udall, the Secretary of the Department of Interior. House Bill S. 1411 authorized a \$350,000 appropriation to fund the commemorative activities. The government’s commitment to the anniversary created an ideal conjunction of circumstances for demonstrators to highlight the discriminatory practices that pervaded society in St. Augustine. However, local activists had been lobbying the federal government to address civil rights issues in the city before the government formally announced its plans to celebrate the milestone.⁷

By 1962, representatives of the local chapters of the NAACP and SCLC had led sustained efforts to encourage the federal government to end racial discrimination. On April 6 of that year, African American residents in the city filed suit in the federal court

⁶ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settlement of North America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 77; Southern Christian Leadership Conference, “St. Augustine, Florida: 400 Years of Bigotry and Hate,” 4, 6, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; “Staff Report on St. Augustine,” United States Commission on Civil Rights, May 18, 1964, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

⁷ Ibid.

to end desegregation in the public school system. On February 23, 1963, the St. Augustine Branch of the NAACP sent a letter to Vice President Johnson asking him to cancel his proposed speaking engagement at some restored buildings on St. George Street on March 11, 1963, for two reasons: the city government incorporated segregation in all of its affairs, and blacks had not been selected to serve on the official welcoming and planning committees. Vice President Johnson refused to renege on his promise to speak, but promised to bring city officials and the black community together to work on civil rights issues if blacks did not picket the event. Blacks upheld fulfilled their promise, but no elected officials or city administrators showed up for the meeting. The local NAACP continued to appeal to the Executive Branch. The St. Augustine Branch sent a letter in May asking President John F. Kennedy to prevent any earmarked federal funds from being used by the city in celebration of its four-hundredth anniversary in 1965. The local branch of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) also lobbied President Kennedy to use the might of his office to block federal funding for the city's Quadricentennial commemoration if blacks were not permitted to participate in a substantive way in the planning of anniversary events. CORE members sent a telegram to the nation's chief executive on June 18 asking him to deny the city's request of \$350,000 to assist in defraying expenses associated with festivities since the funding will be used to "celebrate 400 years of slavery and segregation in the nation's oldest city." Since neither of the requests was granted to their satisfaction, blacks resorted to direct action.⁸

⁸ Leo C. Jones, Richard O. Russell, William Owens, George Stallings, C.W. Young, "Racial and Civil Disorder in St. Augustine: Report of the Legislative Investigation Committee," February 1965, 29-30, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; "President Kennedy Urged to Deny Funds for St. Augustine Quadricentennial," *Florida Star*, May 11, 1963; St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Remembrance Project, *The Heroic Stories of the St. Augustine Foot Soldiers*, 4., Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 289.

Local African Americans, displeased with the Executive Branch's indifference to the simmering racial powder keg on the verge of igniting in the ancient city, staged continuous protests beginning in July 1963. On July 22, eight black high students were arrested for sitting at a downtown Woolworth's lunch counter. Willie Carl Singleton, Samuel White, Audrey Nell Edwards, and JoAnn Anderson, known as the "St. Augustine Four," begged their parents to refuse to sign a conditional document that stated that the minors' release was predicated on their pledge to refrain from protesting at local businesses. Singleton and White were remanded to the Florida International School for Boys in Marianna, Florida, and their two fellow female demonstrators were transferred to the girl's reform school in Ocala, Florida. Protests continued throughout the month of August. On August 9, nine protesters were arrested for demonstrating on private property and charged with trespassing. Three weeks later, twelve blacks were arrested for disturbing the peace at a segregated restaurant in the downtown district.⁹

The racial animus and unrest that continued to plague St. Augustine the next month were eerily reminiscent of the events Williams had experienced in Savannah. On September 3, protests throughout the city resulted in the arrest of thirty-nine blacks for demonstrating against discriminatory practices. Twenty-seven were detained on charges of holding a meeting in a public park without a city-issued permit. Another twelve blacks were arrested for sitting in at lunch counters in downtown St. Augustine. Less than one week later, the City Commission passed emergency measures allowing City Manager Charles Barrier to prohibit indefinitely all marches, demonstrations, and open meetings in

⁹ "Youths Moved from St. John's Jail Sent to Mariana and Ocala Homes, *Florida Star*, August 17, 1963; St. Augustine Foot Soldiers Remembrance Project, *The Heroic Stories of the St. Augustine Foot Soldiers*, 4, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Jones, Russell, Owens, Stallings, Young, "Racial and Civil Disorder in St. Augustine," 29-30, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida.

the city in an attempt to achieve a “cooling off” period. However, the city’s white residents, particularly those involved and interested in the local Ku Klux Klan (KKK), avoided the measure by planning a meeting three miles outside the city limits of St. Augustine. On September 18, while trying to observe the planned gathering of racists committed to maintaining the status quo through violence, Dr. Robert Hayling, an African-American dentist and member of the local NAACP and SCLC chapters, was severely beaten along with three additional black observers. The next day, the Klan held a rally with an estimated 2,500 Klansmen and women in attendance. Violence in the old city worsened over the next month.¹⁰

The racial discord that had plagued the city especially after 1962 finally climaxed in murder. On October 25, William David Kinnard, a twenty-four-year-old white male, died after he was shot in the head while he and three white associates were riding in a sedan on Central Avenue. Central Avenue was located in a predominately black neighborhood. When Kinnard was killed, policemen who arrived on the scene discovered a loaded shotgun in his vehicle. Although no shots were reported to have been fired from the car, it is plausible that the four white males, because of the ongoing racial strife, were either simply trying to protect themselves or planning to harm African Americans. The former scenario is probably closer to the truth since the victim and his companions were driving through a black neighborhood under cover of darkness. Three days later, likely as a retaliatory response to Kinnard’s murder, individuals in moving vehicles fired into two nightclubs owned by blacks and two homes owned and occupied by African-Americans. One week after the shootings, St. Augustine police arrested Goldie Eubanks Sr., an active

¹⁰ Ibid., 31.

member in the St. Augustine Branch of the NAACP, and his son. They were charged with the murder of Kinnard. However, no arrests were made as a result of the shooting incidents associated with the two black nightclubs or two black-owned homes. There were no additional racially-charged episodes in St. Augustine until someone fired shotgun shells into the home of Dr. Hayling on February 8, 1964. Although neither he nor any of his family members was injured, the shotgun blasts killed his dog.¹¹

The SCLC entered in the St. Augustine movement in March 1964. Dr. Hayling wrote a letter on March 11 to Virgil Wood, president of the Massachusetts Chapter of the SCLC, requesting that black and white college students who were planning to travel to Florida for Spring Break festivities consider joining protests in the city before going on to their destinations in Destin and Daytona Beach. The next day, nearly 175 newsmen and journalists converged on St. Augustine expecting a newsworthy story. By March 23, close to thirty students, clergymen, and faculty members from northeastern colleges had arrived in the Ancient City with plans to stage anti-segregation protests. Among the Northerners who were planning to visit St. Augustine and engage in unlawful protests was Mrs. Mary Peabody, the mother of Endicott Peabody, the governor of Massachusetts. The United States Commission on Civil Rights presented a report to President Johnson on May 18, 1964, which declared that “St. Augustine represents a potential source of continued racial unrest and agitation and of embarrassment to the federal government.” The Commission’s report proved to be prophetic. Williams and fellow SCLC board member Bernard Lee suggested that the organization stage a frontal assault in the city in

¹¹ Ibid., 32, 33.

protest of its discriminatory tactics. The Board, forever searching for opportunities to garner media attention for civil rights protests, agreed.¹²

Williams arrived in St. Augustine for his first out-of-state civil rights campaign as a full-time staff member of the SCLC on March 26, 1964 -- one week after he was issued driving citations for improperly driving in Savannah. Reflecting on the previous struggles in St. Augustine and his decision to send Williams into the city, Dr. King stated that “Dr. Hayling had waged a courageous year-long battle against the evil forces in St. Augustine.” However, Hayling and the local chapter of the NAACP and the city’s SCLC affiliate had been unable to claim any substantive gains against the city fathers. King maintained that the crusade against injustice, no matter how noble, had failed. Once Williams entered St. Augustine, “from then on we had a movement,” King recalled in September at the SCLC’s Eighth Annual Convention which met in Williams’s home turf in Savannah. According to the June, 1964, edition of the *SCLC Newsletter*, mass meeting attendance jumped from 60 to 600 attendees in a few days. Williams was ready to prove his worth as the SCLC’s highest paid staff member and at the same time to relieve his forever mounting frustration with southern cities’ insistence on relegating blacks to the status of second-class citizenship. “I was angry. I was impatient. I was militant. I wanted to go get with it,” Williams said. He remembered that the SCLC was not wholly excited about devoting manpower and resources to St. Augustine since the staff was mentally and physically exhausted after the campaigns in Birmingham, Alabama, and Albany, Georgia. “They really didn’t want a movement at that time,” Williams said. Andrew Young, who

¹² Ibid., 34; Garrow, *Bearing The Cross*, 323; Hester Campbell, “Our Trip to St. Augustine,” Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; “Staff Report on St. Augustine,” United States Commission on Civil Rights, May 18, 1964, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

had just been appointed the SCLC's Executive Director, opposed turning St. Augustine into a major SCLC initiative. "I thought all of our efforts should be concentrated on pressuring the President and Congress to pass the civil rights bill," said Young. However, Williams was determined to draw the SCLC and its top leadership into the St. Augustine struggle.¹³

Williams's first task after arriving in Florida was to assess the situation and provide some guidance to Dr. Hayling. Hayling was to the St. Augustine NAACP what Williams was to the Savannah Branch of the organization. Neither embraced the approach of the notoriously conservative NAACP. "Roy Wilkins, the Executive Secretary, called me and wanted to get us in line with the practices, philosophies and procedures with the national organization," Hayling recalled. Williams and Hayling were both employed in positions outside of the civil rights struggle. Hayling earned approximately \$6,000 of his \$9,000 annual salary from his white clientele. Williams's salary stood around \$9,000 while he was employed full-time with the USDA. Although both men were equally committed, they fought injustice very differently. Williams chose militant nonviolent direct action; Hayling's militancy permitted the use of weapons, which ultimately turned out to be counterproductive. The dentist had maintained that "passive resistance is no good in the face of violence." He continued, "I and others of the NAACP have armed ourselves and we will shoot first and ask questions later." In Williams's analysis Hayling "had just messed up their movement" in St. Augustine with

¹³ Martin Luther King Jr., 1964 "Annual Report," The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; C.T. Vivian, interview by author, telephone, Lithonia, Georgia, May 14, 2014; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 290; "Mobilize Community," *Southern Christian Leadership Conference Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (Jun., 1964), 3, The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center.

his tactical error. “He had gone out to confront them white folks with violence and had nothing but a few pistols. . . . So he got everybody beat up and put in jail,” Williams said. He eventually confronted Hayling and bluntly informed him that he had erred while leading the movement. He was losing the moral high ground and public sympathy by resorting to violence. Hayling, just as egotistical and defiant as Williams, did not receive this chiding in a positive manner. However, “we eventually came to terms, we battled and battled. I drove that sucker crazy,” said Williams. King’s lieutenant told the dentist that if they had any chance of forcing meaningful concessions from the city fathers, they would have to wholeheartedly embrace nonviolence and face jail time. He advised Hayling that “we’ve got to prove that we can take a beating. Let them beat us. We’ve got to take that away from them.” Nonviolent direct action was not only a prudent approach in St. Augustine; it was also critical to the passage of the Civil Rights Act that was currently being filibustered in the United States Senate. Williams and the SCLC understood intuitively that the southern Congressmen would use any ammunition to derail the passage of the landmark act that was being pushed through the halls of Congress by President Lyndon B. Johnson.¹⁴

The ascension of Kennedy’s vice president and successor, southerner LBJ, to the Oval Office, gave new urgency to the mounting concern of African Americans sensitive to the need for substantive civil and voting rights legislation at the federal level. Kennedy had advocated a gradual strategy in dealing with the civil rights question that was

¹⁴ Robert Hayling, interview by Andrew Young, St. Augustine, Florida, No Date, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Jones, Russell, Owens, Stallings, Young, “Racial and Civil Disorder in St. Augustine,” 29, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Hester Campbell, “Our Trip to St. Augustine,” Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida.

simultaneously simple and complex: dependence on an expanding black electorate to outmaneuver and depose resistant federal lawmakers, which would eventually enable blacks to secure what they believed to be first-class citizenship. Johnson quickly embraced a strategy emphasizing immediate redress of blacks' complaints with the state and federal governments. Although Johnson was ambitious, sometimes dishonest, and coarse, he sincerely believed that racism and poverty should be eradicated in the United States, if not for moral purposes then certainly to appear favorable in the court of world opinion during the height of the Cold War. Johnson's actions prior to Kennedy's assassination had already provided a window into his thinking on the civil rights question. As early as 1957, as Senate Majority Leader, he had steered the first Civil Rights Act through Congress since 1875. Six years later, he spoke at a commemoration service as Vice President in Gettysburg on May 20, 1963, and told those who had gathered on that symbolically sacred ground that "We do not answer those who lie beneath this soil – when we reply to the Negro by asking, patience." These bold stances at the expense of valuable political capital with southerners led Martin Luther King Jr. to assert shortly before the SCLC's entrance into the St. Augustine movement that Johnson "might do more than any other president before him" in employing political adeptness to counter all opposition in ensuring a civil rights bill. Hence, King and other executives in the SCLC did not want to risk passage of the bill by exposing Johnson to unnecessary obstacles while he was making deals and accumulating additional political debts to shepherd the bill to signing. Although King had pressed the president for federal intervention in St. Augustine, Lee White, an aide to Johnson, advised the nation's chief

executive to avoid King's request because "the situation could be used in showing the need for a civil rights bill."¹⁵

Williams sensed that the stakes were high at the beginning of the crusade in St. Augustine and knew how deep racism penetrated the culture of the oldest city in the United States. Williams, King, and the Johnson White House received a much-needed proverbial shot in the arm when journalists reported that Mary Peabody, the mother of Endicott Peabody, the governor of Massachusetts, and two of her companions, Mrs. Esther Burgess, a fair-skinned African American and wife of Episcopal Bishop John Burgess, and Mrs. Hester Campbell, wife of Bishop Donald Campbell, had traveled to Florida and wished to participate in the "Florida Spring Project." Williams became the bridge to usher these prominent women into the demonstrations. He met the trio of northerners in Jacksonville on Sunday, March 29, and drove them forty-two miles to St. Augustine. Upon arriving in the oldest segregated city in the South, the three women, all over sixty-years-old, attended a mass meeting and remained until eleven o'clock that night. They retired into two separate homes, both owned and occupied by African Americans. Their first night in the city was uneventful. However, their protests over the next two days and Williams's insistence that they go to jail would elevate the nation's interest in demonstrations in St. Augustine.¹⁶

Williams's nonviolent teaching techniques and lectures on the severity of the civil rights crusade in St. Augustine impressed each member of the northern trio but had a

¹⁵ Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, 156, 171; "Dr. King Speaks Here: Negroes May Bring Pressure for Rights, *Savannah Morning News*, January 17, 1964; Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr. and The Laws* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 126.

¹⁶ Gardner H. Shattuck, *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 200), 138; Mary Peabody, "Journal of Trip to St. Augustine," Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida.

different resonance with Burgess. Reflecting on Williams's ability and passionate teaching approach, Hester Campbell maintained that "The teaching is remarkable. . . . Mr. Williams Williams is a person of extraordinary spiritual quality." On March 30, Peabody, Campbell, and Burgess entered the plush, twenty-two dollar per-day Ponce de Leon Motor Lodge to have lunch. The manager asked them to leave. Peabody asked, "Why must we leave?" The manager responded, "You have Negroes in your company. We will be happy to serve them in the kitchen and we will serve you here." Burgess, the lone African American, remained seated and was adamant about being arrested, according to Peabody, to "show her people what she was doing for them." She was arrested for "trespassing and being an undesirable guest" and placed in a police cruiser next to a big police dog. Burgess was not disturbed by a tactic clearly intended to intimidate her; she loved dogs.¹⁷

Williams's raw gifts and passionate powers of persuasion were in evidence the next day when he convinced the seventy-two year-old Peabody, referred to as the "indomitable grand dame of an old New England dynasty," and sixty-five year-old Campbell to risk arrest and incarceration overnight in jail. Peabody and Campbell had insisted that their plans in St. Augustine did not include being arrested since the implications could have dire consequences for their families' reputations. However, Williams knew that their arrest was of paramount importance. Their detention would invariably spark outrage across the country and ratchet up pressure on the legislators, including Senators Richard Russell and Robert Byrd, who were holding firm in their

¹⁷ Hester Campbell, "Our Trip to St. Augustine," Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Mary Peabody, "Journal of Trip to St. Augustine," Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Shattuck, *Episcopalians and Race*, 138.

opposition to the pending Civil Rights Act in Congress. Williams approached Campbell on the morning of March 31 and told her, “You know, our Negro community is very distressed that of your three ladies that came down from Massachusetts, the Negro woman has gone to jail willingly and none of you have.” Campbell and Peabody discussed the possible consequences with their husbands, both Episcopal bishops and respected in and beyond ecclesiastical circles. Peabody also conferred with her son, Endicott, the sitting governor of Massachusetts, as she did not want to harm his political future. The ladies received unmistakable assurance from their family members that they would be supported regardless of the consequences. After deciding to go to jail, Campbell said, “Williams was absolutely delighted. In fact, he was quite overcome when we told him we were going to do it.”¹⁸

Peabody and Campbell, along with Dr. J. Lawrence Burkholder of the Harvard Divinity School, as well as five black females: Nellie Mitchell, Lillian Robinson, Georgia Ann Reed, Kuter Ubanks, and Rosa Lee Phelps, were arrested around 2:00 p.m. on March 31 after the biracial group attempted to dine together in the Ponce de Leon Motor Lodge’s segregated dining facility. Each individual was subsequently fingerprinted and booked on a \$100 bond in the St. John’s County Jail and charged with trespassing. Peabody, dressed in a pink suit, told a reporter in a jailhouse interview that she wanted to fight for a “better deal” for Negroes. She was disturbed that only young people were committing themselves to the struggle for civil rights in St. Augustine. “We need some old people in this thing. . . . We are what they say we are, do-gooders,” Peabody said. She continued, “I want the experience of staying in jail.” Her change of heart was the direct

¹⁸ Hester Campbell, “Our Trip to St. Augustine,” Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine.

result of Williams's urging that that they needed to "make their witness." Peabody and Campbell remained in the county jail until posting bond on April 2. They boarded a plane in Jacksonville and returned to Boston later that evening. "I think what we have done has brought the community's attention to the situation here," said Peabody before she left. The governor's mother was correct. The arrests of three elderly and prominent women – two of them white – for peacefully agitating for the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution had indeed garnered the needed publicity that Williams and King had hoped for. However, the incident only stiffened white resolve in St. Augustine to maintain the social status quo.¹⁹

March 31 was a very busy day for Williams. He had convinced three women of high New England society to go to jail — a tactic identified in the "Report of the Legislative Committee on the Racial and Civil Disorder in St. Augustine" as a "Communist and radical technique." He also led a march of 300 youth to the thoroughfare in St. Augustine where slaves had once been auctioned during the antebellum era. To ensure a nonviolent protest, Williams remembered that they confiscated all "their knives, and anything else that may cause trouble, even the youth's pencils." Half of the marchers separated to protest the discriminatory practices at the Ponce de Leon Hotel. The police, carrying cattle prods and accompanied by five German Shepherds, quickly entered the premises and arrested each demonstrator for trespassing and violating the "unwanted guest" statute that was passed to discourage protests against segregation. Later that night, with Hayling and Williams in jail, the St. Augustine

¹⁹ Ibid., "Mother of Massachusetts Governor Jailed in Florida," *New York Times*, April 1, 1964; Mary Peabody, "Journal of Trip to St. Augustine," Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Kotz, *Judgment Days*, 127; Jones, Russell, Owens, Stallings, Young, "Racial and Civil Disorder in St. Augustine," 35, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 318.

Chapter of the SCLC, held a mass meeting and agreed on a set of demands, including the integration of all public facilities and accommodations, the establishment of an interracial committee to negotiate a compromise, and the release of all protesters immediately.²⁰

Williams's arrest did little to deter him from initiating another protest five days later. The flamboyant rabble-rouser knew that national attention on the movement in St. Augustine had ebbed once the northern college students and the most prominent duo of the New England delegation, Peabody and Campbell, had left to resume their privileged lives in the Northeast. On April 5, 1964, Williams planned a mass meeting at First Baptist Church. Two hundred people gathered for a briefing on the next steps but only twenty agreed to volunteer for a sit-in and invariably face arrest. It was clear to Williams that the fear of physical danger and economic reprisal were crippling the black community's response. Williams told the crowd that "If segregation barriers remain up in St. Augustine, it will be because Negroes here did not support the movement." He soon turned to the battle-tested strategy that had galvanized his constituency in Savannah the previous summer — the night march.²¹

Williams's decision to incorporate the dreaded night march into the St. Augustine movement had a twofold purpose: to place the city authorities into an uncomfortable position and to pressure Andrew Young, Executive Director of the SCLC, to impress upon Martin Luther King Jr. that the organization needed to lay siege to the city employing a sweeping nonviolent direct action campaign. Rev. C.T. Vivian, the SCLC's Director of Affiliates and colleague of Williams in St. Augustine, concluded that "the

²⁰ "300 Youths in March," *New York Times*, April 1, 1964; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 318.

²¹ Jones, Russell, Owens, Stallings, Young, "Racial and Civil Disorder in St. Augustine," 9, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida.

night marches which were inspired and led by Williams rocked the city and increased the participation of the youth.” According to Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, leader of the Birmingham movement a year earlier and a member of the SCLC’s Executive Board who took direction from Williams in planning protests in St. Augustine, “the daytime marches had special value, but to do it at night would create more attention.” The night marches, the fearless Shuttlesworth maintained, would keep the community “in a state of unrest,” especially the “police even though they had guns and dogs” for protection.

King had arrived in St. Augustine on May 18 to personally observe the ongoing racial crisis but was convinced by Andrew Young not to participate in the night marches because his presence posed a safety concern for everyone involved. “I was determined to keep Martin from demonstrating at night,” said Young, admonishing King by suggesting that “If you’re out there and they’re shooting at you, they’re liable to miss you and hit some of us.” King heeded his confidant’s advice and refrained from protesting at night. Although there for only one day, King believed that the city was a “small Birmingham” because of the hatred its city fathers harbored for blacks seeking to be treated as first-class citizens. King returned on May 26 and proclaimed that a “long, hot summer” would grip the city if substantive steps to completely desegregate St. Augustine were not made immediately. Despite the extent of his sway in the SCLC King still made decisions by committee before committing the organization’s might and resources to a respective city. In that process of deliberation he relied heavily on the counsel of Andrew Young, the conciliating moderate who was later appointed by President Jimmy Carter as Ambassador to the United Nations.²²

²² Fred Shuttlesworth, interview by David Colburn, No Date, Gainesville, Florida, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; C.T. Vivian, interview by author, telephone, Lithonia, Georgia, May 14, 2014;

As related in the Introduction above, it was at this juncture that Young visited St. Augustine, and in Williams's opinion he was there "to kill the movement." Williams brilliantly outmaneuvered the SCLC's Executive Director into participating in the dangerous night march on June 9, and Young made an abrupt about-face after the vicious beatings he and other civil rights marchers received at the hands of Holstead "Hoss" Manucy and members of the local Ku Klux Klan organized in Manucy's "Ancient City Gun Club." "After that night I became Williams's strongest advocate for a major campaign in St. Augustine." "It also dawned on me," said Young, "as it had on Williams, that the country should be reminded why we needed the rapid passage of the civil rights bill. Birmingham was a year in the past and Americans have short memories."²³

Williams had won his battle to persuade the SCLC's executive leadership to launch a large-scale offensive against segregation in St. Augustine. Less than one week after whites beat three members of the SCLC's Board of Directors during a night march, the organization shifted its staff and resources to the city. On June 11, 1964 – on the first anniversary of George Wallace's "Stand in the Schoolhouse Door, Kennedy's nationally-televised address to the nation on civil rights, and Medgar Evers's assassination in Jackson, Mississippi – Williams was arrested along with Martin Luther King Jr., SCLC treasurer Ralph Abernathy, and Bernard Lee, an aide to King, after they attempted to eat in the segregated Monson Motor Lodge. The four had been released by the morning of June 15 in time to attend a mass meeting at the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church at which Jackie Robinson addressed a crowd of four hundred.

Young, *An Easy Burden*, 295; Jones, Russell, Owens, Stallings, Young, "Racial and Civil Disorder in St. Augustine," 9, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida.

²³ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 291-293.

Robinson, who had integrated Major League Baseball in 1947, admonished the crowd that “now is the time for action.” The former second baseman for the Brooklyn Dodgers also encouraged attendees to register to vote. “I ask you to register so we can vote Democratic . . . because if the Republicans nominate Barry Goldwater, they will say to the Negroes: ‘we don't want your vote.’” Robinson, a former supporter of Vice President Richard M. Nixon during the 1960 presidential election and traditionally a supporter of the Republican Party, was convinced that a Goldwater presidency would be a major setback to the civil rights crusade; the Arizona senator had cast his lot with southern Democrats in opposing the Civil Rights Act. Robinson continued candidly: “I don't believe that we ought to allow Democrats or Republicans to take us for granted. We should keep them guessing.” Robinson's words resonated with the African American audience, but they were not the only ones listening to the Hall of Famer who had courageously crossed baseball's color line. An internal memo to J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, reported that “enthusiasm was high” in St. Augustine. Although the African American community's commitment to the movement in the city had intensified, Williams did not relent in his efforts to make the campaign in St. Augustine a total war on discrimination.²⁴

On June 18, only forty-eight hours after Jackie Robinson addressed civil rights supporters, Williams initiated what the *New York Times* identified as a “swimming pool dive in” around noon at the Monson Motor Lodge. Police arrested forty-one demonstrators, including sixteen rabbis, for trespassing after five blacks and two whites

²⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation Internal Memo, Agent 105-83 to J. Edgar Hoover, June 16, 1964, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; “In St. Augustine: Jackie Robinson Urges Action,” *Daytona Beach News Journal*, June 16, 1964.

who were registered guests at the motel dove into the pool. One of the patrons, after being told to leave, informed members of management that “these [blacks] are our guests. We are registered guests and we want them to swim with us.” According to the *Times*, Williams’s strategic planning had yielded a “ruse that caught authorities and the enraged motel owner by surprise.” The protest was led by Martin Luther King Jr., Williams, Fred Shuttlesworth and C.T. Vivian. King, who watched the melee from across the street, spoke of how the demonstration had provoked “raw police brutality. . . . Cattle prods were used on our demonstrators and people were actually beaten” by law enforcement officers. But it was the action of James Brock, the manager of the motel, that has gone down in history. Furious about the protest at his establishment, he poured two containers of muriatic acid, a chemical cleaning agent, into the pool in attempt to force the protesting swimmers out of the water. Brock, according to an FBI memorandum, allegedly yelled out that he was “cleaning the pool right now.” The highly-publicized incident compelled a grand jury, after hearing testimony from King and approximately twenty-five additional witnesses, to beseech King to make a good faith effort to halt all demonstrations, including “wade-ins, “pray-ins,” and night marches in the city for thirty days and for the SCLC president to leave St. Augustine during this “cooling off” period. After the thirty-day period, the grand jury, composed of two African Americans, would reassemble and convene a ten-member biracial group to address some of the racially charged issues that had fueled the protests. King promptly rejected the proposal, announcing that demonstrations would continue indefinitely. Why should black protesters concede their right to peaceably assemble, he reasoned, while members of the Ku Klux Klan were not asked to make any concessions?²⁵

²⁵ John Herbers, “16 Rabbis Arrested as Pool Dive-In Sets Off St. Augustine Rights Clash,” *New York*

Although Williams orchestrated and led the protest march that led to the dive-in, he did not dive into the pool for two reasons: he did not know how to swim, and he could not afford to be arrested since he was scheduled to lead another protest that same night. Around 9:10 p.m., Williams and approximately 168 demonstrators, including six whites, marched in orderly fashion through an all-white community. When Williams called the marchers to a halt, white law officers insisted the marchers proceed. “You came out here to march, so march,” growled Sheriff L.O. Davis. Williams, for whom rebellion was second nature, ignored the sheriff’s orders and was arrested for disobeying an officer. Although their leader was carried away from the scene, the protesters continued their predetermined march route toward the old slave market in downtown St. Augustine. The next day Florida Governor C. Farris Bryant issued an executive order prohibiting any night marches between the hours of 8:30 p.m. and daybreak.²⁶

With night marches off the table, Williams and the SCLC delegation continued to devise innovative methods of protest since previous demonstrations had proved that defying statewide directives ran the risk of alienating the sympathy and goodwill of moderate whites. On the afternoon of June 21, Williams, C.T. Vivian, and Birmingham campaign veteran and civil rights firebrand Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth led a series of “wade-ins” at St. Augustine’s all-white beaches. Evidence suggests that Williams was behind this latest tactic; he had conducted “wade ins” during the Savannah movement in 1963. His colleagues, Vivian and Shuttlesworth, had not taken part in similar protests as

Times, June 19, 1964; Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Racial Situation: St. Johns County, Florida, June 19, 1964, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Leo C. Jones, “Report of the Legislative Investigation Committee,” 16.

²⁶ John Herbers, “16 Rabbis Seized in St. Augustine,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1964; “Racial Situation: St. Johns County, Florida, June 19, 1964, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida.

activists in Alabama and Tennessee, nor as staff members with the SCLC since this was the organization's first major campaign in a city with beaches and a coastline. The wade-ins, which occurred several miles east of St. Augustine proper, lasted through June 29. They were at times peaceful, but on other occasions provoked violence orchestrated by the Ku Klux Klan and its leader, Hoss Manucy. During one wade-in Shuttlesworth, who could not swim, recalls how one Klansman who was already in the water told the demonstrators to "Come on in, niggers. . . . You all got the right to swim, so dammit, come in." Shuttlesworth turned to Vivian and Williams and said, "we must go into the water, but not as far as they are, because I can't swim and I am sure not going to take responsibility for drowning these kids." It is clear from Shuttlesworth's account that the Klansmen were attempting to lure the marchers deeper into the water to injure or possibly submerge them under the waves until they drowned. When demonstrators waded into the ocean to a point where the water reached their ankles, St. Augustine police, seeking to avoid what was already a public relations nightmare becoming an even greater black eye for the city's white power structure, intervened and dispersed the protest after several of the angry whites assaulted the protesters.²⁷

The protests in St. Augustine caused significant damage to the city's principal revenue-generating industry — tourism. Prior to the demonstrations, nearly two million visitors vacationed yearly, providing eighty-five percent of St. Augustine's income according to one estimate. By the last week of June, commerce was down as much as

²⁷ Jones, Russell, Owens, Stallings, Young, "Racial and Civil Disorder in St. Augustine," 20, 21 22, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Fred Shuttlesworth, interview by David Colburn, No Date, Gainesville, Florida, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 334.

fifty percent for some businesses. For example, the *Victory II*, a popular sightseeing vessel, reported a fifty percent decrease in revenue from the previous year. The Patisserie Parisienne, a pastry shop popular with visitors, also suffered a fifty percent loss in business after it was forced to close each evening at 6:00 p.m. instead of 8:00 p.m. Two other tourist attractions, the City Museum and Spanish Fort Castillo de San Marcos, saw thirty percent decreases in sales. Hotels and motels were not immune to the effects of the frequent demonstrations. One proprietor was quoted as saying that he had as “many cancellations as reservations” during one particular week. Another hotel manager declared that if “Martin Luther King does not stay away, the whole summer will be lost.” By the end of 1964, a study commissioned by the State of Florida estimated that St. Augustine lost nearly \$5 million dollars in revenue.²⁸

By Tuesday, June 29, Williams’s and the SCLC’s unrelenting efforts to end segregation in St. Augustine had worn down lawmakers’ preference for maintaining the status quo. Governor Bryant announced the formation of an anonymous biracial committee of four individuals to negotiate an acceptable compromise between the city fathers and representatives of the SCLC. King announced a fifteen-day moratorium on all demonstrations in the city with the expectation that an agreement would be reached within a relatively short period of time. The SCLC was acting in good faith, but Bryant admitted to St. Augustine’s mayor, Dr. Joseph Shelley, that he had not yet appointed the committee that was promised in exchange for a “cooling off” period by civil rights activists. On July 1, King told a reporter from the Associated Press that “The purpose of

²⁸ “Business Slump Hits St. Augustine,” *Southern Christian Leadership Conference Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (Jun., 1964), 1; Jones, Russell, Owens, Stallings, Young, “Racial and Civil Disorder in St. Augustine,” 1, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida.

our direct action was to create a crisis” to apply pressure on the U.S. Congress to pass the civil rights legislation. Lawmakers in Washington had finally broken the southern filibuster. King left that night for Washington D.C., to attend President Johnson’s ceremonial signing of the Civil Rights Act the following day at the White House.²⁹

With the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, African Americans were finally able to begin enjoying the rights promised them by the Constitution’s Fourteenth Amendment. Historian Alan Matusow, a strong critic of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, called the signing of the act “the greatest liberal achievement of the decade . . . because it accomplished legal equality in a region where it did not exist.” Another historian, Steven F. Lawson, called the act “the most far-reaching civil rights statute since Reconstruction.” The Civil Rights Act was crucial to southern equality because its statutory reach not only ended legal segregation in public accommodations but the legislation, in the words of Gavin Wright, an economic historian, also made “genuine progress in employment and school desegregation.” Blacks could be treated, at least before the courts, as American citizens with the same rights as whites in the public sphere. The federal government’s role in passing and implementing these changes was, according to Lawson, “indispensable.” While the role of the judicial and executive branches in bringing about sweeping social reform had expanded dramatically in the decade from 1954 to 1964, federal activism from above almost always came in direct

²⁹ Jones, Russell, Owens, Stallings, Young, “Racial and Civil Disorder in St. Augustine,” 44-45, Civil Rights Library of St. Augustine, Florida; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 336-337; Holstead “Hoss” Manucy was a rabid segregationist whose brutality was comparable to that of a celebrated villain of the modern Black freedom struggle. According to Hosea, “Manucy was terrible. Hoss had the mentality of Sherriff Jim Clark in Selma, Alabama. Selma would be the site of the SCLC’s next major campaign the following year. See Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

response to constant grassroots pressure from below by civil rights organizations.³⁰

No single individual or organization was responsible for this landmark legislation. Gavin Wright was correct when he argued that the act was not just the result of “pure historical accidents.” But it can be argued that Williams Williams was among the principal protagonists in the last act of a drama that aired in the national and international media and displayed the gross injustices encountered by blacks in America’s oldest city during the debate, filibuster and passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The bill had been introduced by President Kennedy before his assassination, but it took President Johnson, a former Senate Majority Leader and skillful parliamentarian, to woo Republicans like Illinois Senator Everett Dirksen and break the back of southern opposition that had stalled the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Biographer Robert Caro anointed Johnson as the “greatest champion that the liberal senators . . . and millions of black Americans” had working on their behalf in the federal government since Abraham Lincoln. But the federal government did not operate in a vacuum. It had to be pressured by civil rights groups to guarantee the rights that were already promised in the amended Constitution. Williams, with his brashness and cold calculations, helped to bring the movement in St. Augustine to a boil at just the right time to show the world during the height of the Cold War that his country’s self-professed image as a “beacon of democracy” was a veneer concealing the ugly rot of racism beneath. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., Senator Everett Dirksen, and other individuals have

³⁰Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), 95; Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 3, 29; Gavin Wright, *Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the South* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 22.

routinely drawn praise for their roles in winning passage of the Civil Rights Act, and historians have often drawn a straight line of causality between SCLC-led protests in Birmingham in 1963 and legislative victory. In Andrew Young's estimation, however, it was several months of continuous marching and demonstrations in St. Augustine that ultimately guaranteed passage of the bill. "We would not have had a Civil Rights Act without St. Augustine," he asserted, for protests in that Florida city provided a "vivid reminder of the injustices the bill was designed to address."³¹

On August 9, 1964, Williams was arrested back in Savannah on a contempt of court charge for failing to appear in court to answer for a speeding citation. Grady Braddock, Savannah's chief of police, arrived at Williams's home on Gilbert Street and arrested him around 11:15 a.m. while he was sitting in his car scribbling ideas on a piece of paper for the SCLC convention that was going to be held in Savannah the following month. Williams was a national celebrity by now. He was recognized throughout the United States as Martin Luther King Jr.'s rabble-rousing lieutenant who had just turned St. Augustine upside down in the same manner as he had in Savannah the previous summer. He had officially become one of the most recognizable faces of the black freedom struggle of the 1960s, but that notoriety made him an easy mark for law enforcement to target. Throughout his activist trajectory he would face arrests, often on trumped-up charges. By September, 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC were

³¹ Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, 23; Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Random House, 2002), xvi; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 297.

convinced that Williams's organizational and motivational skills, honed in some of the most brutal environments in the South, were worthy of recognition and promotion.³²

After the St. Augustine campaign Hosea Williams was well on his way to earning a reputation as King's "kamikaze." The explosive nickname was inspired by the kamikaze ("Divine Wind") suicide pilots of the Japanese Empire in the closing months of World War II. Dubbing Williams a "kamikaze" evoked the fear the doomed military aviators had caused, wreaking havoc as they crashed their planes into American navy ships in 1944 and 1945. With Williams seemingly willing to risk everything, including his own immolation, with his style of daring activism and willingness to embrace provocative tactics like the night marches, it would be left to King's other lieutenants to offer a more moderate alternative. Whites alarmed by Williams might be more receptive to overtures from less incendiary SCLC leaders like Andrew Young, and perhaps even willing to give ground in their defense of white supremacy if given a choice between the incendiary Williams and the soft-spoken diplomacy of Andrew Young. Williams became the SCLC's most effective leveraging tool during the 1960s, and in several instances hostile southern cities resistant to change would grudgingly make concessions to the SCLC if the organization agreed to withdraw Williams from the protests.

Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC arrived in Savannah on September 29, 1964, to hold the organization's Eighth Annual Convention. The landscape of America's civil rights struggle had shifted profoundly since the Montgomery Bus Boycott that had given birth to the SCLC. Williams and the Southeastern Georgia Crusade for Voters were designated as hosts. C.T. Vivian, who had forged a bond with Williams during the St.

³²"Civil Rights Leader Arrested," *Savannah Evening News*, August 10, 1964.

Augustine movement, served as the convention coordinator. The Tennessee native announced that five-hundred delegates were scheduled to attend as well as an additional 1,000 representatives from the organization's 217 affiliates, from twenty-five states and Washington, D.C. The SCLC honored Williams as the organization's "Man of the Year" and recognized the Crusade for Voters as "Affiliate of the Year." Williams and the Crusade, according to King in his Annual Report, had registered 8,000 voters during the previous fiscal year. King also hinted to attendees who filled to capacity the Butler Presbyterian Church that the SCLC would devote more direct action techniques to securing the right to vote in the year ahead. King noted the recent departure of Wyatt Tee Walker, his former Executive Assistant who had served in the position since 1960. Walker's leadership style led historian Adam Fairclough to identify the executive as an "intolerant martinet." SCLC lieutenants and staff members, many of them ego-driven themselves, harbored a deep dislike for Walker due to his seeming inability to work peacefully with those directly under his supervision.³³

Walker's resignation precipitated an organizational shake-up of the SCLC executive staff that ultimately created space for Williams within King's intimate inner circle. King promoted Andrew Young and Williams Williams. Young, a shrewd and affable diplomat, assumed the position vacated by Walker. On December 18, Williams was elevated to Young's former position as SCLC's chief political organizer with the title Director of Political Education and Voter Registration. Williams knew that his promotion

³³ "King will Talk Here Thursday," *Savannah Morning News*, September 29, 1964; Eighth Annual Southern Christian Leadership Program Booklet, The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library; Martin Luther King Jr., "Annual Report to the Southern Christian Leadership Convention," The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 165.

held special significance and potential. What Williams identified as the SCLC “Executive Planning Committee” had convened a few weeks earlier and had decided the next major SCLC-led campaign would focus on the right to vote. Before the end of the year, Williams had left his wife and four children in Savannah for Atlanta. Whites in Chatham County likely breathed a collective sigh of relief that the boisterous and arrogant agitator was now Atlanta’s headache.³⁴

After passage of the Civil Rights Act, the fight to secure African-Americans’ unrestricted access to the ballot became the SCLC’s driving force. On November 10, King and the SCLC staff gathered for a retreat at Birmingham, Alabama’s, Gaston Motel to develop the organization’s programming initiatives through the middle of 1965. Williams, as SCLC’s Director of Voter Registration and Political Education, was asked to submit to the executive staff a proposed departmental budget and program on November 30 covering the period from January 1-June 30, 1965. Any subsequent campaigns relative to voting rights would fall under his direction. Although the SCLC’s president professed his burning commitment to “instill the philosophy of nonviolence in the North,” King conceded that voting rights and black political empowerment would be the focus of the organization’s agenda in 1965. As the group met in Room 13 on the second floor in what Williams suggests that King referred to as the “upper room,” the SCLC’s executive leadership mulled over the choice of cities in which to stage the next major protest. Hard-won lessons from Albany, Georgia; Birmingham; and St. Augustine had impressed upon King and his lieutenants the importance of selecting municipal targets with care. “Selma was not at the top of the list at that time,” recalled Williams. As the foremost-experienced

³⁴ “Named King Aide,” *Baltimore African American*, December 19, 1964; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

organizer in the area of voting rights based on his campaign in Savannah, he believed that the SCLC should channel its resources to larger cities where whites were unlikely to mount staunch opposition to the registration of black voters.³⁵

The next day, Mrs. Amelia Boynton, a civil rights activist in Selma whom Andy Young described as a “steel magnolia,” spoke to those gathered in Birmingham and shared her impression that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), reeling from the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the hands of President Johnson at the Democratic National Convention in 1964 in Atlantic City, was experiencing heightened internal dissension. SNCC, she asserted, had practically ceased to operate in Selma. Due to an organizational void in a city that had all of the necessary elements in place for a sustained and successful protest, Boynton highlighted the need for SCLC to tackle the issue of voting rights in Selma since Jim Clark had, in Williams’s words, “beat SNCC out of Selma.” With these conclusions, Williams and the SCLC were heading into Selma, and, as a result, into history.³⁶

³⁵ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 358-359; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

³⁶ Hosea L. Williams, “The Department of Voter Registration and Political Education Proposed Budget: January 1, 1965-June 30, 1965,” Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 338.

Chapter 4

Selma and the Voting Rights Act, 1965

Selma, the seat of Dallas County, is located along Highway 80 west of Montgomery, Alabama. SNCC had held a presence in the city since the fall of 1963. After a series of protests to desegregate movie theaters that failed to comply with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, James Hare, a local circuit court judge, issued an injunction barring more than three people at a time from assembling in the city. According to then SNCC Chairman, John Lewis, Hare's ruling, coupled with the organization's commitment in Mississippi, led virtually all protest activity to reach a "standstill." Hosea Williams, in his candid and biting description of SNCC's diminishing presence in its own territory put it more bluntly: "Jim Clark had beat SNCC and run them out of Selma. SNCC did not even have an office in Selma." Clark, the rabidly segregationist sheriff, "would let the deputies go in churches and spy to see whether they was talking about going to Heaven or civil rights," recalled Williams. Since SNCC had been "whipped" in Selma, Ralph Abernathy and the remainder of the committee agreed that this city would be the organization's rallying point to dismantle voting inequality in the South.¹

Selma, Alabama, was an ideal city to launch a movement to secure access to the ballot. The city had all the key elements for what Adam Fairclough described as a

¹ John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 312.

“sociodrama” and could therefore draw a large press presence. The leading actor was Sheriff Jim Clark. Williams described Clark as a “role model racist” who was physically a “big, muscular, and handsome” man. Williams suggests that Clark carried an aura of distinction that epitomized a heroic, respectable government official. “Whether he had on a suit and tie or whether he had on his uniform, he looked like a general out of Washington,” Williams said. But Sheriff Clark had serious psychological shortcomings. “His mind would snap. He could be talking with you and just all at once he would go berserk. He would lose control. He tried to play sane because the press was out there,” but he was ultimately unable to control his fury and hatred for blacks, said Williams. Selma whites embraced Clark as their defender, a sheriff who would protect them from what they saw as the threat posed by outsiders and impressionable local blacks. For Williams and SCLC, however, the city was chosen as an ideal protest site because of its ruthless suppression of the democratic rights of its black citizens.²

On November 30, 1964, while the SCLC was still drafting its tactical approach to dismantling the barriers to vote in Selma, Williams submitted his budget and programming outline to the executive staff. The position paper would provide the SCLC’s roadmap for its voting rights initiatives and the template for the Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) program. The report covered the operational cost of a sustained voter registration program and political education program in sixty southern counties that had a black population of at least fifty percent. The report also identified six southern counties with large cities where there was potential for a doubling of the black vote. Williams’s analysis of the discriminatory voting

² Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 228; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991.

conditions was informed by a comprehensive statistical survey of 910 counties within ten southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. He and his staff employed twenty-four criteria when selecting the “Project Counties” that were ripe for purposeful protests. Williams identified the most significant criteria as: “Percent of Negroes Registered,” “Negro Percentage of Voting Population,” “Facility of Registration,” “Size and Geographical Location of County,” “Degree of Cooperation of Local Negroes and Existence of Active (SCLC) Affiliates.” Williams emphasized to the executive staff that “all of the counties selected lie in the Black Belt of the South” because these areas were most vulnerable to “illiteracy, poverty and disease.” In addition, the African Americans in the Black Belt southern counties had to contend with “frequent police brutality...trickery, dishonesty and open intimidation from registrars.” If the SCLC desired to be successful in their ambitious effort to alter the political landscape, Williams argued, the organization must give him the flexibility to incorporate his program that entailed a “vigorous registration campaign which will be carried out simultaneously with political education.”³

The SCLC needed to remedy the lack of political education in the Black Belt counties. “Numerous counties across the South do not have an acute registration problem but desperately need political education,” he wrote.” Blacks’ needed to understand the necessity of their participation in the political process because without it, any subsequent victories at the ballot box would prove hollow. He cited the black community’s tendency to elect “Negro ‘Uncle Toms’” instead of electing “many qualified candidates,” to further their interests, including “white liberals.” It was vital to educate the “uninformed

³ Hosea L. Williams, “The Department of Voter Registration and Political Education Proposed Budget: January 1, 1965-June 30, 1965,” Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

electorate” even in those areas where white hostility to black voting was not as intense as counties in Alabama and Mississippi. Williams also blamed the lack of political education for “many qualified Negro candidates” and “right-thinking white candidates” opting not to seek public office. The ultimate result of an “uninformed electorate” was “Negroes not receiving their fair, just, and equal share of education, jobs, decent salaries and justice in the courts,” Williams wrote. Selma, Alabama, needed a strong direct-action and political education and voter registration program, he concluded.⁴

The city of Selma along with the rest of Alabama and the Deep South fit what the esteemed political scientist, Vernon Orlando (V.O.) Key, described in his seminal study, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. Key posited that “the coin of southern politics has two sides: on one is seen the relations of the South as a whole with the rest of the nation; on the other, the political battle within each state. And the two aspects are, like the faces of a coin, closely connected.” In a similar vein, the historian Numan V. Bartley has written that “the region has its own traditions, its own myths and symbols, its own images vis-a-vis the rest of the nation.” Key and Bartley both described a region dominated by whites and firmly committed to perpetuating its relegation of all people of African ancestry to the lower rungs of society. The South, and certainly, the state of Alabama, had perfected, by 1965, a system that kept blacks from asserting their rights as citizens through rigid and brutal repression.⁵

Race and its interconnectedness to politics in Alabama since the end of Reconstruction provide a framework for understanding the challenges that Williams and

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Vernon Orlando Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, (New York: Random House, 1949), 11; Numan V. Bartley, “Social Change and Sectional Identity,” *The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 1 (February 1995): 4.

the SCLC faced when focusing on Selma and the state of Alabama in 1965. African Americans' voices and presence in the political process in Alabama had long been muted by the cries of white supremacy as well as crafty techniques used to exclude them from voting, as well as seeking and holding elected office. Beyond threats and physical intimidation, the "Big Mules" and planters in the state used various mechanisms to subordinate blacks and render them voiceless and powerless in the governance of municipal and statewide policies. The Big Mules promoted the interests of the state's banking institutions, railroads, and large-scale industry from their positions of unchecked power from Birmingham, the state's commercial epicenter. Together with white planters they controlled the politics of Alabama.

Of all the nefarious schemes adopted by Alabama's ruling elite, none were as effective as the 1901 Constitution, a document that has yet to be revised to reflect the modernizing trends embraced by most other states in the former Confederacy. According to John B. Knox, lawyer from Anniston, Alabama, and president of the convention that drafted the state's governing charter, the primary aim of the conference was to codify white supremacy and remove the socially undesirable and intellectually inferior Negro from any participatory role in state politics through disfranchisement. The convention president's words merit quotation at length:

The Negro is not discriminated against on account of his race, but on the account of his intelligence and his moral condition. There is a difference between the uneducated white man and the ignorant Negro. There is in the white man an inherited capacity for government, which is wholly wanting in the Negro. Before the art of reading and writing was known, the Anglo-Saxon had established an orderly system of government. The Negro on the other hand is descended from a race lowest in intelligence and moral perceptions of all races of man.⁶

⁶ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 3; Malcolm C. McMillan, *Constitutional Development in Alabama, 1798-1901: A Study in Politics, The Negro, and Sectionalism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 268.

John Knox's prose captures the tone, tenor, and spirit of the pervading attitude toward Negroes amongst the white citizenry in Alabama, especially the 155 delegates that had gathered to etch into the Constitution the most ingenious and insidious suffrage limitations in any modern democratic society. The cumulative poll tax, literacy test, residency requirements, and the white primary -- the latter being more pernicious to black voters until it was struck down by the United States Supreme Court in its landmark decision in *Smith v. Allwright* on April 3, 1944--were the collective handiwork of the 96 lawyers, two former governors, and two ex state attorneys generals, who crafted the restrictions within the state's governing charter. Together these provisions removed blacks from the body politic in Alabama for the next sixty plus years. The voting restrictions imposed on African Americans by the 1901 Constitution nullified the first Reconstruction Act of 1867 which had granted 104,517 Alabama blacks the right to vote. By 1903, only 2,980 blacks had access to the ballot in the entire state. By the middle of the 1960s, the statistics of black voter registration had barely improved even where African Americans made up the bulk of the population.⁷

Alabama's seventeen-county Black Belt, which comprised seventy percent of the state's black population, was particularly affected by the state's constitutional restrictions. As the movement kicked off in Selma, no blacks were registered to vote in Wilcox County. Hale County had registered less than four percent of the black voting age population on its rolls. Both Perry and Choctaw Counties could claim no more than seven percent of its black residents were registered. By December 1964, less than 350 blacks

⁷ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, (Philadelphia: 1935; Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 14.

were registered in Dallas County. Although blacks made up half of Selma's 28,000 residents, only 156 African Americans were registered to vote. Statistics from Dallas' neighboring county, Lowndes, were even worse. In the county known as "Bloody Lowndes" because of whites' unpunished and unabated violence toward blacks since the end of Reconstruction, none of the county's five-thousand blacks of voting age were registered to exercise the suffrage. Any suggestion that poor whites in these counties were apathetic insofar as voting was concerned loses credibility when considering that each of these counties, with the exception of Dallas, had a white registration of at least ninety percent. Andrew Young suggests that the number of registered white voters in Wilcox County surpassed other counties in the Black Belt as their registration of its white citizens surpassed one hundred percent since it registered voters who were no longer alive.⁸

The SCLC entered Selma in 1964 with two goals: heightening the awareness of the voting inequities that existed in the city and ultimately expanding voting rights to all African Americans within Dallas County and beyond. C.T. Vivian, SCLC's Director of Affiliates, said "We wanted to raise the issue of voting to the point where we could take it outside the Black Belt...We were using Selma as a way to shake Alabama...so that it would be no longer a Selma issue or even an Alabama issue but a national issue." Before the year concluded, King had tapped James Bevel, a former member of SNCC and an advocate of a statewide campaign in Alabama, to develop a plan of direct action to implement throughout the state. Bevel, described by the historian Adam Fairclough as

⁸ Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 89; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 312; Hasan Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1-2; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 337.

“Arrogant, argumentative, and insubordinate,” was the highest-ranking SCLC staff member in Alabama. He supervised the field staff for the campaign, including Williams. Bevel’s initial job, was, according to Williams, to “meet with the black preachers and other religious folk” to rally support for the campaign scheduled to begin on January 2, 1965.⁹

Martin Luther King Jr. and members of the SCLC’s executive committee officially launched the Selma campaign on January 2 at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church. Under the leadership of its pastor, P.H. Lewis, the Chapel would house many mass meetings over the next few months. The kickoff meeting, unlawful under Judge Hare’s order, attracted an overflow audience. “You couldn’t get near the church, you couldn’t get in and out of the church,” said Williams about the first meeting. King took pains to remind the congregation that only three hundred blacks were registered to vote throughout the county. The recent Nobel laureate argued that the tactics used to disfranchise blacks were nothing less than “deliberate attempts to freeze voter registration at their present undemocratic levels.” This initial meeting, King continued, was the commencement of a “determined, organized, mobilized campaign to get the right to vote everywhere in Alabama.” He hinted to the 700 people in attendance that imminent appeals to Governor George C. Wallace would likely fail to yield any substantive results. Even if Wallace failed to remedy the injustices, however, “we will appeal to the legislature. If the legislature does not listen we will seek to arouse the federal government

⁹ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 359-360; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 167; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, September 6, 1991. Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers.

by marching by the thousands to the places of registration,” shouted King from the pulpit that cold night.¹⁰

Williams, James Bevel and Andrew Young were King’s top lieutenants who had a sustained presence in Selma from the beginning of the Selma campaign. “The SCLC people—Williams, Bevel and Young—mainly were essentially calling the shots,” wrote John Lewis. By 1965, the three were all battle-tested activists who had faced death while agitating for black equality. Williams, who turned thirty-nine three days after King’s kickoff speech, was the oldest and most experienced civil rights activist of the three men. He was the only one of the three men to have led a major civil rights campaign prior to arriving in Selma. Young, six years older than Williams, four years older than Bevel, did not begin participating in organized civil rights protests until joining SNCC in 1960. The 28 year old Bevel had played a crucial role in the Birmingham campaign in 1963. The three had also attended college prior to 1965. All three were college graduates with four academic degrees among them. Williams had earned both the bachelors of science degree in chemistry and had completed graduate coursework in the same discipline. Young had earned a bachelor’s degree in biology from Howard University in 1951 and a bachelor of divinity degree from Hartford Theological Seminary in 1955. Bevel received his B.A. degree from American Baptist Theological Seminary in 1961. Bevel and Young were also ministers, ordained in 1955 and 1959, respectively. All possessed towering egos which resulted in constant discord and ideological differences. “You have to have ego to stay in

¹⁰ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 229; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 371; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, No Date. Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers.

the movement,” Williams observed, “Ain’t no money out there, ain’t no nothing—you’ve got to have an ego to stay in the movement.”¹¹

The most contentious relationship existed between Williams and Bevel. According to Andrew Young, “each felt that the other was a menace to the movement, each was prone to let his own personal competition and his own ‘movement image’ interfere” with the ultimate goals of the civil rights struggle. Their relationship got off to a bad start in 1964, Williams later recalled. “Bevel tried to kill the movement in Savannah...that’s when we really hit heads.” Bevel felt that “I was too militant” and that “I was careless with the lives of people,” said Williams. The disdain was certainly mutual. Bevel constantly spoke of Williams in a derisive and condescending manner. “Bevel thought of Williams only as a pesticide chemist who had no real understanding of nonviolence other than ‘putting niggers in jail to get on television,’” writes Taylor Branch. Conversely, Williams viewed Bevel as a conning trickster who, at vital moments during the movement, lacked courage. “Bevel didn’t really believe in exposing himself to danger. Bevel didn’t go to jail but one time and he got tricked that time...Bevel liked to get up at the mass rallies and was great at it...He’d preach like hell and get the people inspired, but when we had to face Jim Clark and hit them streets, Bevel wasn’t there,” said Williams.¹²

The Director of Voter Registration and Political Education also viewed Andrew Young, the SCLC’s Executive Director, with a similar disdain that led to numerous

¹¹ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 329; Helen L. Bevel, *James Bevel and the Nonviolent Right to Vote Movement* (Chicago: The Institute for the Study and Advancement of Nonviolence, 2009), 102; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 45.

¹² Young, *An Easy Burden*, 399; Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 45; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers.

disagreements. Williams and Young had worked together in both the Savannah and St. Augustine movements. By Young's own admission "I was always looking for the easiest way to freedom." Williams reached the conclusion that Young was a soft "Uncle Tom" because of his designated role as King's chief compromiser and diplomat which often required him to take a moderate approach when dealing with the white power structure in cities where the SCLC demonstrated. "I depend on you to bring a certain kind of common sense to staff meetings, and you know it," King told Young in one meeting. King continued: "I need you to take as conservative a position as possible, then I can have plenty of room to come down in the middle." Tom Houck, a white northerner and personal driver to King, recalled that "Williams was always on one side, Andy was on the other. And they would cuss each other out." Houck agreed with Williams. "In SCLC, you had two major factions—the Williams Williams faction, which is the real militant faction, and the Andy Young faction, which is real conservative and only wants to pray and do nothing," Williams said when describing the often tense personal dynamics in the civil rights organization. Young, reflecting on his and Williams's conflicted relationship remembered that "Williams and I used to always clash. We were the opposites in SCLC. Williams was always confrontational" with colleagues and just about anyone else who did not share his opinion. Although the two were diametrically opposed in their approaches to alleviating all of the vestiges of slavery and segregation, King skillfully harnessed their respective talents. White city leaders' willingness to negotiate with Young and to make concessions did not come about because they had a change of heart and embraced black equality. They were often more intent on ridding their cities of Williams's unrelenting protests and dreaded night marches.¹³

¹³ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 285, 298; Andrew Young, interview by Jovita Moore, "Hosea Williams: The

King appointed Williams, Young, and Bevel to lead the protests effort in Selma in early 1965, but the evidence suggests that Williams, in theory a subordinate to Young and an organizational equal with Bevel, became the de facto man in charge. As John Lewis observed, Williams became the “ringmaster” of the voting rights campaign. Taking a shot at Bevel and Young, Williams maintained that “People ain’t dumb. They want a leader that’s going to lead, going to get out front.” He continued, “They don’t want you to stand in that church and preach to them and tell them how to march downtown and face Jim Clark. They want you to get up there and say, ‘You come on, we’ll show you how to face Jim Clark.’” Since the black citizens in Selma had witnessed Williams’s willingness to be stand with them in battle, he had, in his words, “unspokenly become the leader of the Selma movement.”¹⁴

On Monday, January 18, Williams registered at Selma’s historic Albert Hotel, only recently desegregated under the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Within 24 hours he had been arrested after leading a voter registration drive march on the Dallas County Courthouse. Selma police detained Williams, and seventy fellow protesters after they refused to move from in front of the courthouse and into a nearby alley until they were allowed to attempt to take the un-passable literacy test — a requirement for black applicants. Along with Williams and Boynton, John Lewis was also carried away to the county jail for protesting to register to vote. During this particular protest, Dr. King, who was across the street from the courthouse, watched Sherriff Jim Clark roughly handle Amelia Boynton, the

Untold Story,” DVD, prod. Dorothy Daniels (Atlanta: ABC, 2010); Tom Houck, interview, “Hosea Williams: The Untold Story,” DVD, prod. Dorothy Daniels (Atlanta: ABC, 2010).

¹⁴ John Lewis, interview, by Jovita Moore, “Hosea Williams: The Untold Story,” DVD, prod. Dorothy Daniels (Atlanta: ABC, 2010); Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers.

activist who had persuaded the SCLC to campaign in Selma the previous November. Clark roughly grabbed her by the collar of her fur coat and pushed her toward one of his deputies before shoving her into a waiting police vehicle. The treatment of Boynton led King to tell reporters that her arrest was “one of the most inhumane things I have ever seen.” Although Clark was known for mistreating black men and women in public, Williams insisted that he was far more brutal toward black prisoners while inside the jail. “They used to arrest us.... The jail was on the third or fourth floor, and they would stop the elevator between floors and actually stuck cattle prods in the women’s vaginas and cattle prods in our rectums, while constantly beating us between floors,” recalled Williams.¹⁵

After the mass arrest on January 19, a period of relative quiet existed in Selma until February 1. The next three weeks were not as tranquil. Authorities arrested King and his most trusted confidant, Ralph Abernathy, on the first day of February after they led 263 other protesters in refusing to adhere to the parade ordinance that had been issued by Judge Hare in 1964 in his attempt to rid Selma of SNCC. Later that evening, Sheriff Clark arrested an additional 700 demonstrators as they sought to register at the Dallas County Courthouse. Williams was not among the demonstrators arrested; he was still actively involved in protests to secure the right to vote. He was leading nearly 600 marchers in adjacent Perry County where less than eight percent of its black residents were registered.

Two days later, Malcolm X, a former firebrand within the militant Nation of Islam, arrived in Selma to observe the conditions of blacks in Selma. It is inaccurate to

¹⁵ “71 Arrested in Selma Alabama Voter Drive,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 20 1965; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 379; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, September 6, 1991, Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers

assume that Malcolm X did not respect King and his nonviolent philosophy. “Malcolm liked King, and King liked Malcolm, but there was no association,” Williams said. The two did meet in Selma and both “came out of the meeting tickled to death,” recalled Williams. After the conversation, Williams said that it was evident that the former disciple of Elijah Muhammad had “made a tremendous impact on King.” Speaking of his own respect for perhaps the only figure who was more revered than him in certain African-American communities for his militancy prior to 1966, Williams stated that “I was quite a Malcolm X fan and to classify me as nonviolent was sort of overbearing because I was bent the other way.” Malcolm X had evidently impressed more than Williams and King. After the meeting the staff persuaded the Malcolm X to address a crowd at Brown Chapel. He told Williams and other staffers that after his message, “You should usher me to the car and let me leave because if one of those crackers hit me, I’m going to try to kill him.” This was Williams’s first and last time to meet the Muslim minister. Malcolm X and King met again on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia, several weeks later, shortly before black Muslims assassinated the 39 year old Malcolm on February 22 in Harlem’s Audubon Ballroom.¹⁶

Williams’s participation in events in Dallas County and surrounding areas throughout the rest of February exposed him to the further violence that would climax on March 7. “We began demonstrating in six or seven surrounding counties” to confuse law enforcement, said Williams. On February 17, he was standing behind his colleague, C.T. Vivian, when Vivian angrily attacked Sheriff Clark and compared him to Adolf Hitler.

¹⁶ Hosea L. Williams, “Chronology of Events in Selma,” Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 382; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, September 6, 1991, Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 337.

“Before I knew it, Clark hauls off and hits C.T. in the mouth,” Williams recalled. Vivian had studied Clark and knew that he could bait the demented lawman to assault him with the television cameras rolling. Later that evening, news stations showed the footage across the nation, and the newspapers headlined “Taunted Sheriff Hits Rights Aide.” Once again, a brutal Alabama lawman attracted national attention to the plight of black Americans in the state.

Violence escalated two days later when Williams, Vivian, and James Orange led a night-time march of 400 protesters in Marion, Alabama. After lawmen and local vigilantes attacked the marchers, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a twenty-six year old African American, and his mother fled into a local café. When state police charged into Mac’s Café and began shoving Jackson’s mother. Williams recalled Jackson telling the officers, “that if you got to beat somebody, beat me. Please don’t beat my mother.” Highway patrolman James Bonard Fowler pulled out his pistol and shot Jackson in the stomach. The young man was not “known as a civil rights leader or a person who outright opposed the power structure. He wasn’t known as a bad guy, a thug, or a criminal,” Williams recalled. Along with Jackson, city police and a mob of club-swinging hastily deputized whites injured more than a dozen of the marchers including Richard Valeriani, an NBC correspondent covering the demonstration. The white cameraman was struck in the head with an ax-handle. The network aired footage of him recuperating in the hospital the next day. Jackson suffered the most serious injury, however. After Jackson was wounded he was taken to a nearby white hospital in Marion but denied medical assistance because he was black. “We brought him back to the hospital in Selma,” remembered Williams. At Good Samaritan Hospital, Dr. William Dinkins, a black physician, performed an

exploratory laparotomy, a procedure that required a large incision to gain access into the abdominal cavity. Dr. Dinkins traced the bullet's path down the intestinal tract, sewing up any wounds and removing bullet fragments in the process. The operation was "successful," Dinkins recalled. Over the next few days, Jackson seemed to be recovering and, according to a hospital spokesman, "making encouraging" progress. A week after the shooting, however, he suddenly developed a high fever and Dr. Dinkins detected a severe infection in his abdomen. Doctors began performing surgery to remove the infection around 2:30 a.m. on February 26. Jackson was pronounced dead seven hours later. Jackson's death outraged blacks, including a local activist, Mrs. Lucy Foster, who discussed marching to Montgomery with Jackson's lifeless body and delivering the remains to George Wallace at the Governor's Mansion. Bevel, who was recovering from pneumonia at the time of the shooting, also recommended marching to the state's capital city. "I," said Bevel, "recommended that people walk from Marion to Montgomery, which would give them time to work out in terms of what energy and thinking through their hostility and resentments, and get back focus on the issue."¹⁷

A series of legal exchanges between the SCLC and Alabama's Governor Wallace followed the February 18 police assault on marchers in Marion. Wallace, who had angrily denounced the Marion protestors and defended local authorities, was adamant in public statements and in conversation with his advisers that the civil rights organization would

¹⁷ Carter, *Politics of Rage*, 243-46. Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, September 6, 1991, Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Hosea L. Williams, "Chronology of Events in Selma," Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 391, 394; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 328; "Man, 26, Injured by Ala. Troopers, Dies of Wounds," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 27, 1965; James Bevel, interview by James A. DeVinney, November 13, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection; William Dinkins, interview by Blackside, Inc., September 17, 1979, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

not be allowed to make the eighty-mile march from the city where Jackson was shot to Montgomery, Alabama. Shortly after Jackson's shooting, King hurriedly sent a telegram to Nicholas Katzenbach, the Attorney General of the United States. The SCLC president wrote that black demonstrators were "literally under house arrest in Zion Methodist Church" under "the threat of death or further brutality." King implored the country's chief judicial officer to provide federal protection as the marchers sought the basic right to vote. The Attorney General issued a brief reply to King later that afternoon.

"Department attorneys," Katzenbach said, "and agents of the FBI have been on the scene in both Selma and Marion" investigating the incidents that he mentioned. George Wallace, on the other hand, continued to refer to the marchers as "professional agitators" and subsequently banned all nighttime marchers — the very demonstrations that Williams had devised and utilized as leverage to force the cities of Savannah and St. Augustine into making political concessions. At Jackson's memorial service on March 3, Bevel, with King's acquiescence, announced to the mourners that a march had been scheduled for Sunday, March 7, to protest not only the murder of Jackson, but also for the right to vote. The night before the march to Montgomery was to take place, Governor Wallace banned the trek to Montgomery. Wallace's political instincts to keep the marchers in Selma undergirded his logic for the eleventh-hour decree. "His best bet," said Ralph Abernathy, "would be to use his power as governor" to ensure that the protesters would never reach the capital city. "That way, any violence would be attributed to Sheriff Clark and his hometown boys rather than to Wallace's Montgomery-based state troopers."

Wallace, far from a political novice, was torn by conflicting emotions. He knew intuitively that if the marchers were stopped for any reason, especially by violence, that he and his state would be the subjects of national abhorrence for obstructing blacks from practicing both their First and Fifteenth Amendment rights. But he was also intent on avoiding the appearance that he had capitulated to the demands of King and his followers. The death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, along with the SCLC's overriding goal to bring national attention to Selma and Alabama's denial of blacks' right to vote, would ultimately set the stage for what would become Williams's defining hour as a civil rights activist.¹⁸

On Saturday March 6, while Governor Wallace was meeting with his advisers and with state law enforcement officials in an attempt to halt the march on Montgomery, the defiant Williams employed the logistical skills he had acquired as a World War II infantryman to ensure that his nonviolent troops had supplies on their civil rights excursion to the Cradle of the Confederacy. "I got in my car that Saturday and drove to Montgomery measuring miles," the former soldier said. Determining the mileage was only one component of the preparation for the march. He also had to make a decision as to "where we can stop and have lunch, where we could stop for breaks, and where we could spend the night. . . . I also had to figure out what bushes would make a good bathroom area," Williams said. After carefully examining the route from Selma, Williams arrived at the Montgomery Improvement Association's (MIA) office on Dorsey Street on

¹⁸ Carter, *Politics of Rage*, 246-49; Telegram, Martin Luther King Jr. to Nicholas Katzenbach, February 18, 2014. The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center; Telegram, Nicholas Katzenbach to Martin Luther King Jr. The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center; Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 325-326.

the West Side of Montgomery, a space that had been secured by E.D. Nixon ten years earlier during the bus boycott. There Williams was informed that Dr. King had been trying to contact him. Once Williams spoke with the SCLC's president that evening, he was informed that "Daddy King," Martin Luther King Jr.'s father and co-pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, was ill and unable to preach the next day, making it impossible for the younger King to lead the march the next as previously planned. "Call the march off today, Williams," King said while on a conference call with Bayard Rustin, C.T. Vivian, Ralph Abernathy, Andy Young, Dorothy Cotton, and Pastor P.H. Lewis of Brown Chapel. King, a leader who made decisions based on consensus, toward the end of the conversation said, "I won't" stay in Atlanta and preach "if you all said I shouldn't." King then called for a vote. Each caller, with the exception of Williams, supported King's initial decision not to proceed with the march. "No, Doc, I can't support you.... You don't know how well organized we are," Williams told the SCLC president. Disturbed by his subordinate's persistence to proceed without him, King, very sternly, told Williams: "You're not with me, son. Williams, you need to pray. You need to get with me." Still trying to persuade King to allow the march, Williams said, "I'm telling you now. We'd better lead that march or they're going without us." King finally ended the debate. "No," he told Williams. "Go down there and tell them that the march is off. Ordered!" By 9:00 p.m. that evening, the principals had agreed not to march; or so most participants thought. An angry Williams "drove back to Selma [from Montgomery] in twenty minutes... thinking how I can outsmart them, how I can trick them to do what I want."¹⁹

¹⁹ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, September 6,

After arriving in Selma around 9:30 p.m. on the night of March 6, Williams realized that his best and only chance to sway King was to rely on his colleague, co-organizer and archenemy, James Bevel. Williams believed that he had an unlikely ally in Bevel since the march on Montgomery was the latter's brainchild. Williams's reliance on Bevel was out of desperation. "Lord, how can I get out of this since I promised to get the people back to work on Monday?" Williams thought to himself. Another factor that gave rise to his increasing anxiety was the level of participation. "We see the people coming in from the counties...and we ain't got nowhere to put them, nowhere," Williams recalled. If the march was postponed until Monday, Williams reasoned, he and the SCLC would lose vital support and momentum. Aware of the stakes, Bevel, Williams's unlikely ally, decided to call King hoping to change the latter's perspective on the import of marching the next day. Standing outside of the closed office door, Williams recalled, "I could hear Bevel and King arguing. Bevel got loud with King. Then he quiets down." Bevel walks out of the office and says to Williams, "Okay, you got it. Go ahead and march." Jubilant, "I kissed Bevel on the cheek," said Williams. He used the rest of the night to gather those willing to march the next day. While Williams was finalizing logistics, Bevel, as both men had agreed after the call with King, was designated to inform Pastor Harris about King's change of heart. Bevel neglected to follow up with Harris. Williams's nemesis knew that King had not consented to the march and did not want to be held responsible

1991. Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Charles Varner, interview by author, telephone, Lithonia, Georgia, June 15, 2014. The MIA office, along with over 400 business, churches, schools, and black residents were displaced as a result of the city of Montgomery's demolition of the neighborhood to construct the Interstate 65 corridor, primarily due to the area's role in facilitating civil rights protests. For example, Mt. Zion AME Church, the house of worship where the MIA was formed, was one such casualty. Loveless, built in 1922, was the first black public high school in the city of Montgomery, was also demolished. One block from Loveless High in an area known as "Peacock's Track" was Jimmy Low's adult school for veterans. Approximately 70%-90% of black veterans returning from to Montgomery after serving in the Korean War went to this school with their G.I. Bill assistance.

for disobeying King—ultimately leaving Williams to carry the blame and plausibly face termination as a consequence for insubordination.²⁰

Early Sunday morning, March 7, after working on march logistics through the night, Williams, unknowingly defying King, proceeded to prepare his followers for the fifty-four mile journey to Montgomery. Pastor Harris allowed Williams to address a crowd of nearly 500 people during Brown Chapel's Sunday morning worship service. "I had people jumping all over the benches that morning," Williams told one interviewer. In another recollection, Williams remembered that "I just really went wild in that pulpit...people were jumping all upside the wall." After firing up the crowd with a song and brief sermon, Williams told his audience that the march would commence at 3:00 p.m. Harris, shocked by Williams's announcement (Harris was still under the impression that there would be no march), questioned the anxious activist about his plans to lead the march. After Williams assured the pastor that King had given his permission, the preacher responded by saying, "You crazy. You crazy. You know King done called that march off." After calling Williams a "liar," Harris quickly called King in Atlanta to seek confirmation regarding Williams's claims. King hung up with Harris and then called Ralph Abernathy; both were shocked that Williams had seemingly disobeyed a top-down directive.²¹

²⁰ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers.

²¹ Some of Ralph Abernathy's accounts of events in Selma have been disproven. For example, Abernathy tells a very different account of these events that Sunday morning. He maintains that Hosea called him while he was in his office at West Hunter Street Baptist Church. Abernathy suggested that Hosea pressured him to call King to get approval to march. Abernathy said that he explained the situation to King and after thirty seconds, King agreed for Hosea to proceed with the march. After this conversation, Abernathy, according to his memory, told Hosea to move forward with the march. Abernathy's account is not consistent with either Hosea's or Young's account. If King had agreed to proceed with the protest, Young would not have been dispatched on a chartered plane that morning to stop the march. Also, Abernathy says

King and Abernathy contacted Andy Young, the Executive Director, to intervene in a futile attempt to halt the march. “I received a call from Martin instructing me to rush over to Selma and postpone the march until Monday,” said Young. Young left Atlanta on an 8:00 a.m. chartered plane to Montgomery. Williams met an angry and frustrated Young at the airport in Selma. “We are going to deal with you, Williams. This is one time you have overstepped your boundaries,” said Young. Williams was befuddled by the accusation. He told Young that Bevel had assured him that King had authorized the march. Williams and Young confronted Bevel to see who was at fault. “Shit,” Bevel said, “I ain’t told Williams nothing like that.” Young, then, called King and briefed him on the state of affairs: “We can’t stop it. He got them too fired up. They will go without us,” Young said to King. Young also warned his boss that a press corps had assembled around Brown Chapel. Reneging on leading the march would damage crucial relationships with the media whom they relied on to disseminate barbaric injustices to the rest of the nation. After hearing the details from Young, who King trusted to give wise and prudent counsel, the latter “reluctantly gave his assent,” recalled Young.²²

King’s acquiescence to allow what had evolved into an inevitable march led to an extraordinary train of events that altered the history of the United States relative to African Americans’ rights to vote. John Lewis, the chairman of SNCC, who had not had a major role in planning this particular march, agreed to lead the protest alongside a representative from the SCLC. Williams, Bevel, and Young were told by King to choose

that Jimmie Lee Jackson was seventeen-years-old when he died. Records show that Jackson was twenty-six. See Abernathy, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 325, 327-329.

²²Ibid.; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, September 6, 1991. Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 354-355; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 336; Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 44.

amongst themselves who would represent the organization since the other two needed to be able to lead any crisis management initiative that may arise as a result. The trio conducted a coin flip — heads determining who would replace King at the front of the line. “I knew that I had won. They knew I knew,” said Williams after the second coin flip. Although Bevel and Young knew that Williams wanted the limelight, especially since the media had gathered in Selma, Williams felt that neither wanted to lead the march in the first place. “Andy knew damn well he wasn't going to lead that march. Bevel certainly was not going to lead it either,” Williams said. The date of the march had approached so quickly since the idea was conceived only a few days prior. “The march came up on us so fast. I had two trucks, about ten to fifteen sleeping bags...and only four cases of boiled eggs” for over four hundred people, remembered Williams. None of the prepared items would be utilized.²³

Shortly before 4:00 p.m., Williams, John Lewis and Bevel assembled nearly five hundred and twenty-five marchers at Brown Chapel. Lewis read a statement to the press expressing why the marchers were protesting the injustices that dominated the lives of blacks in Alabama. Everyone in the delegation bent their knees while Young prayed for God’s mercies. Williams and Lewis, both dressed in dark slacks, neckties, black dress shoes, and wearing full-length raincoats to protect themselves from the cold wind that swept in from the Alabama River, led a double column followed by Amelia Boynton, Albert Turner, Bob Mants, Marie Foster, and hundreds of teenagers, teachers, and other professionals. After a nearly silent walk six blocks over to Selma’s Broad Street the marchers turned South toward the Selma bridge spanning the Alabama River. And there

²³Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 336; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 355; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Lake Lambert and Barbara Taggart, Atlanta, GA, September 6, 1991. Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers.

they encountered fifty Alabama State Troopers, dressed in glistening blue uniforms, who were stationed at the end of the Edmund Pettus Bridge and armed with handguns, billy clubs and cattle prods. Approximately thirty-six volunteer “posse men,” fifteen mounted on horseback, flanked the troopers from the side and the back. The troopers put on their gas masks. Williams and Lewis, still at the front of the line, stopped within fifty feet of the officers. “John, they are going to gas us,” Williams said to his co-leader. With a kind of gallows humor, he glanced at the Alabama River flowing under the bridge and softly added, “John, can you swim?”

As they halted, Major John Cloud lifted his megaphone. “Your march,” said Cloud, “is not conducive to the public safety. You are ordered to disperse and go back to your church or to your homes.” Williams was the only marcher who spoke and directed comments to Cloud. “May we have a word with the Major?” said Williams. Cloud responded, “There is no word to be had.” Williams and Major Cloud repeated the lines two more times. “You have two minutes to turn around and go back to your church,” concluded Cloud. But in less than one minute the Major shouted, “Troopers advance.” Williams then clinched his nostrils with his right thumb and index finger as the troopers dashed forward and plowed through the first ten rows of marchers. “Some of the troopers had even tried to push people off the bridge and into the ravine and water,” recalled Williams. Shortly after the shoving began, the troopers released their first round of tear gas which was composed of a chemical named C-4—an agent effective in causing nausea. “It was so thick you absolutely couldn't see anything,” Williams said. Marchers began coughing and screaming. Women and kids were weeping uncontrollably. A second gas attack followed almost immediately after the first round. Ben Clark, Williams’s

lieutenant from Savannah, was carrying a little girl named Sheyann Webb (later Webb-Christburg) who was barely nine years old. Clark, only 5'3", weighing one-hundred and thirty-five pounds, could not move fast enough with the child. Williams grabbed the girl as he heard the horses' hooves pounding on the pavement. Sheyann yelled to the veteran SCLC activist "put me down!" As she later remembered ruefully, "He wasn't running fast enough." She ran all the way to the relative safety of her home in the George Washington Carver housing project. A woman rushed toward Williams and threw a blanket so that he could cover his head. "Williams," she screamed, "they're going to kill you—you're the one they want." He fled into the nearby home of a black family where he hid for almost an hour. By the time the eleven minute attack had ended, some of the marchers had scattered throughout the nearby Carver project homes while others sought refuge at Brown Chapel and neighboring First Baptist Church. The latter's parsonage resembled a "MASH unit," recalled Lewis who suffered from a fractured skull as did Amelia Boynton. (Both temporarily lost consciousness.) Other demonstrators with fractured legs, arms, ribs and bloodied heads were carried to the Good Samaritan Hospital, the largest black medical facility in Selma and to Burwell Infirmary, a smaller black healthcare facility.²⁴

As injuries were being documented to ensure that there were no fatalities, Williams, Bevel, and Young telephoned King who was still at Ebenezer Baptist Church where he had preached that morning. King was "horrified" at what he heard, Young

²⁴ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 337, 340; Roy Reed, "Alabama Police Use Gas and Clubs to Rout Negroes," *New York Times*, March 8, 1965; "Use Bullwhips, Tear Gas: Beat Negroes at Selma," *Chicago Defender*, March 8, 1965; John Lewis, interview by Jovita Moore, "Hosea Williams: The Untold Story," DVD, prod. Dorothy Daniels (Atlanta: ABC, 2010); Hosea L. Williams, "My Account of Selma," The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers.

recalled. Williams, King, Young, and Bevel decided that they should seek federal protection and immediately begin planning for the march from Selma to Montgomery. Later that evening, Williams spoke at a mass meeting that he, Lewis and others convened at Brown Chapel. Williams, according to the *New York Times*, yelled from the same pulpit where he had announced the march that morning: “I fought in World War II, and I was once captured by the German Army, and I want to tell you that the Germans never were inhuman as the state troopers of Alabama.” While participants milled around the church, ABC aired fifteen minutes of footage showing beatings from the march during its showing of *Judgment at Nuremberg*, a documentary highlighting the atrocities sanctioned by Nazi Germany during World War II. Some viewers undoubtedly saw parallels between the events in Selma and those of Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich. Once again, the SCLC succeeded in dramatizing the conditions in Alabama to the nation, launching a wave of sympathy and support throughout the United States. The country, including members of Congress, were horrified at what had flashed across their television screens that Sunday night. “I think their attitude was, ‘Oh, my God, we’ve just got to, got to get on top of this problem, we can’t continue to... be distracted by race... we’ve got to solve the problem,’” Attorney General Katzenbach recalled.²⁵

Williams described the next two weeks as “crisis-packed.” “We immediately set to work preparing for a second Selma-to-Montgomery march...” Williams, Young said, “assumed responsibility for logistics.” According to John Lewis, “Williams never stopped. Apparently he started planning for the continuation of the march” as soon as the

²⁵ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 357-358; Reed, “Alabama Police Use Gas and Clubs to Rout Negroes,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1965; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 343-344; Nicholas Katzenbach, interview by Blackside, Inc., December 10, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

chaos ended on Sunday. “He,” Lewis continued, “became the leader and ringmaster more than anyone else.” Early on the morning of March 8, Williams, as the lead plaintiff, filed suit in the United States District Court Middle District of Alabama against Governor George Wallace, Al Lingo, the Director of Alabama’s Public Safety Department and Sheriff Jim Clark. Seasoned civil rights attorneys Fred D. Gray, Solomon Seay, James Nabrit III, and Jack Greenberg served as counsel. In *Williams v. Wallace*, the plaintiffs filed motions for a temporary restraining order and a preliminary injunction to nullify Governor Wallace’s March 6 proclamation banning any marches in Selma—an act that Judge Johnson would later declare crossed the “constitutional boundary line.” Initially, however, Judge Johnson told the plaintiffs that he would not immediately enjoin the defendants from blocking any subsequent marches until he held hearings later that week. Pointedly, Johnson strongly recommended that the SCLC postpone the march scheduled for Tuesday. After filing the motion at the federal courthouse in Montgomery, Williams traveled a few miles to the MIA’s headquarters on Dorsey Street to plan strategy for new demonstrations to demand the right to vote and a redress of grievances.²⁶

On Monday evening, after spending Sunday night sleeping on the kitchen floor in the Brown Chapel parsonage, Williams met with King, Young, Bevel and SNCC members, Lewis, Willie Ricks, and Fay Bellamy, to discuss how to channel the momentum that had reached a crescendo only twenty-four hours earlier. Engaged in the teleconference meeting from Washington, D.C., was United States Attorney General,

²⁶ Hosea L. Williams, “My Account of Selma,” 1985, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; John Lewis, interview by Jovita Moore, “Hosea Williams: The Untold Story,” DVD, prod. Dorothy Daniels (Atlanta: ABC, 2010); Young, *An Easy Burden*, 358-359; John Lewis and Amelia Boynton were Hosea’s co-plaintiffs. See *WILLIAMS v. WALLACE*, 240 F.Supp. 100 (1965), United States District Court M. D. Alabama, N. D., March 17, 1965.

Nicholas Katzenbach. With Katzenbach dissenting the meeting participants initially decided to march to Montgomery the following day until they realize the logistical nightmares that would follow a hastily-planned fifty-four-mile march that could easily span four or five days. Planning was complicated by the fact that over four-hundred priests, ministers and rabbis had already arrived from throughout the country in Selma in response to King's plea to support the demonstration. For example, "We had to find places for them, and figure out how to feed them," Williams said. Moreover, Johnson, whom the SCLC needed as an impartial ally, had cautioned them against marching until he could hear testimony later in the week and, as Katzenbach made clear, the Johnson Administration vehemently opposed a march the next day. As a compromise with the White House and the Justice Department, King, with the counsel of his senior leadership, including Williams, agreed to lead a symbolic march close to Haistens Mattress and Awning Company on Tuesday. Haistens was located just before the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Once the 1,500 marchers, one third of whom were clergymen, reached the bridge, they knelt in prayer and marched back to Brown Chapel. With the exception of King and the leadership team, marchers believed that the march would proceed to Montgomery. Many, according to Williams, "felt betrayed." Others, including SNCC's Jim Forman, were "livid," according to Lewis. Although the demonstrators were visibly frustrated with King and the SCLC, some officials with the Justice Department claimed that King's actions were unpredictable. "We really didn't know whether Dr. King would turn around and go back or whether there would be another outbreak of violence," Nicholas Katzenbach later recalled.²⁷

²⁷ Betty Washington, "The Men Behind Martin Luther King: Subject: Hosea Williams," *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 26, 1965; Hosea L. Williams, "My Account of Selma," 1985, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams

Although the march on Tuesday, March 9, was a brief and peaceful exercise of the protesters' constitutional right to assemble, violence befell an unexpected victim in Rev. James Reeb, a thirty-eight-year-old, white Unitarian minister from Boston, Massachusetts. After the march, Reeb had dinner around 7:00 p.m. with Williams and other SCLC staff members at Walker's Café, a black-owned restaurant specializing in soul food on Selma's Washington Street. "The place was jammed," Williams remembered. After eating, Reeb and two additional Unitarian ministers left and walked toward the Silver Moon Café—a place Williams identified as a "real redneck" establishment. Four white men approached the holy trio as they walked down Washington Street. One of the white toughs hit Reeb in the head with what Williams described as a "huge wrench." (The two ministers accompanying Reeb later said it was a three foot long pipe, or perhaps a wooden club). The men also attacked Reeb's friends. "One lost his glasses and couldn't see a damn thing," remembered Williams. The culprits quickly ran away after the attack and, shortly afterwards, Reeb slipped into a coma. Dr. William Dinkins, the same black physician who treated Jimmie Lee Jackson on February 18, ordered Reeb transported to the University Medical Center in Birmingham, but transportation problems, including mechanical failure with one ambulance, prevented Reeb from promptly receiving the medical care for his severe injury and the ambulance did not arrive until 11:00 p.m. In Birmingham, Reeb underwent emergency surgery to treat several skull fractures that precipitated a blood clot on the left side of his brain. He

Papers; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 359; Jack Bass, *Taming the Storm: The Life and Times of Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. and the South's Fight Over Civil Rights* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 35; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 358; Nicholas Katzenbach, interview by Blackside, Inc., December 10, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

died two days later at 7:55 p.m. Reeb's death further galvanized support for the conditions in Selma. "The national outcry was incredible. . . . There was a lot more fuss over Rev. Reeb's death than over the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson," Williams acidly noted. The White House did not officially acknowledge Jackson's death. President Johnson authorized a military aircraft to transport Rev. Reeb's wife to Birmingham, said Williams, while "Jimmie Lee's mama and his granddaddy were back on their 'little nothing' farm," already practically forgotten.²⁸

The next week was arguably one of the most hectic and demanding seven days of Williams's tenure in SCLC. King instructed him to formulate a logistical plan to be submitted to Judge Frank Johnson for the latter's consideration when deciding to permit the march to Montgomery. "What a job," he told King. But his military training from his days with a quartermaster truck company during the Allied Occupation of Europe and his experiences in leading highly-publicized civil rights demonstrations during the previous three years in Savannah and St. Augustine gave him the background needed to create a logistical plan that could pass judiciary muster. That plan was also important in shaping Lyndon Johnson's deliberations because Alabama officials had insisted in hearings on March 16 and 17 that a march from Selma to Montgomery was not conducive to the safety of the public. Thousands of marchers presented one problem; protecting, feeding and providing toilet facilities presented other obstacles. Moreover, Williams had to construct a plan that not only conformed to state and county parade procedures, he also had to anticipate and preempt Wallace's and Lingo's arguments while devising a proposal within a very short window of time. Williams solicited the assistance of

²⁸ Hosea L. Williams, "My Account of Selma," 1985, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; John Herbers, "Clergyman Dies of Selma Beating," *New York Times*, March 11, 1965; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 361-362.

Attorneys Greenberg and Nabrit to ensure that his proposal, which was submitted to Judge Johnson on March 17, did not break any laws, a misstep which would have been used by the defendants to halt any plans for the march and thereby bring the movement's momentum to a halt.²⁹

Over the next few days, Williams devised a detailed logistical plan that included the dates, times, routes and the mileage that would be covered each day of the march. He also laid out the support services that would be available to the marchers: food, truck-borne washing and toilet facilities, litter and garbage pickup by truck along the route, ambulance and first-aid service, and communication services via "walkie-talkie." Lastly, Williams spelled out what would happen once the marchers reached the state capitol in Montgomery.

His logistical plan, as outlined below, is worth quoting at length:

- The march will commence on Friday, March 19, 1965 at 10:30 a. m. or any day thereafter provided that plaintiffs will provide at least 48 hours advance notice of the march to Defendants, the United States, and the Court.
- The number of persons marching will be as follows:
 - There will be no limitation on the number of marchers within the Cities of Selma and Montgomery and along the 4-lane portions of Route 80-East between Selma and Montgomery.
 - The number of marchers will not exceed 300 persons on the 2-lane portion of Route 80.

²⁹ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 358; WILLIAMS v. WALLACE, 240 F.Supp. 100 (1965), United States District Court M. D. Alabama, N. D., March 17, 1965.

- Approximate distances covered each day:
 - First day-march approximately 11 miles stopping at a designated private field with permission of owner which has already been granted;
 - Second day-march approximately 11 miles stopping at a designated field with permission of the owner which already has been granted;
 - Third day-march approximately 17 miles stopping at a designated building and adjoining field with permission of owners which has already been granted;
 - Fourth day-march 8 miles to the western part of Montgomery stopping at an area tentatively selected and to be designated;
 - Fifth day-march from western part of Montgomery to the Capitol;
 - Large tents will be erected at the campsites by professionals. Meetings and song festivals may be held at campsites.
- March routes:
 - Route of march in the City of Selma: Starting at Brown's Chapel A.M.E. Church on Sylvan Street proceeding South on Sylvan to Alabama, then West on Alabama to
 - Broad (Highway 80-East), then South on Broad Street across Edmund Pettus Bridge along Highway 80-East to Montgomery. The march in the City will be conducted in the streets.
 - Route in the City of Montgomery: Marchers will enter the City

following Route 80 until it becomes Fairview Avenue and continue on Fairview to Oak Street turning North on Oak Street to Jeff Davis Avenue; then East on Jeff Davis to Holt Street; then North on Holt to Mobile Street; then on Mobile to Montgomery; then Northeast on Montgomery to Court Square then up Dexter Avenue to Capitol. The March in the City will be in the streets.

- On the highway, the marchers will proceed on shoulders of the road walking on the left side facing automobile traffic. They will march along road shoulders two abreast and employ single files at places where the shoulder is narrow and on bridges without sidewalks. The marchers will be organized in separate groups of approximately 50 persons (or less) and each group will be under the supervision of a designated group leader.
- Upon reaching Montgomery: A mass meeting will be held in front of the Alabama State Capitol on the day the marchers enter Montgomery. There will be a speakers' stand with loud speakers in the street in front of the Capitol. The audience will be on the sidewalks and in the street in front of the Capitol as well as on the Capitol steps. The audience will be directed not to walk on the grass around the Capitol unless the state permits this. The formal program will be conducted between approximately 12 noon and 3:00 p. m.
- Following the completion of the outdoor program:

- Not more than 20 persons will enter the Capitol Building, proceed to the Governor's office, seek an audience with the Governor and present a petition.
- Transportation away from the Capitol grounds will be provided by leaders of the march to various destinations including transportation terminals.³⁰

Williams's detailed plan won the approval of Judge Johnson. On March 18, 1965, at approximately 4:42 p.m., Judge Johnson signed the order declaring that the march could proceed. Williams's plan called for the march to commence Sunday, March 21. Late Friday night, Governor Wallace, who had exhausted his appeals to enjoin the march, wired President Johnson at his Johnson City, Texas, ranch, informing him that the state of Alabama could not afford to pay the costs associated with providing 6,171 men, 480 vehicles, and eighteen buses to provide "maximum security" for the five-day march. "This was just what Johnson was waiting for," said Williams. Judge Frank Johnson responded that Wallace was shirking his "solemn responsibility" to protect the marchers and President Johnson immediately federalized 1,900 Alabama National Guardsmen. The president also directed 1,000 full-time United States Army personnel to be distributed along the fifty-four mile route from Selma to Montgomery. To ensure that trained investigators were present, Johnson also dispatched one-hundred Federal Bureau of Investigation agents and one-hundred United States marshals to be on duty throughout

³⁰ WILLIAMS v. WALLACE, 240 F.Supp. 100 (1965), United States District Court M. D. Alabama, N. D., March 17, 1965.

the duration of the protest.³¹

On Sunday morning, March 21, exactly two weeks to the minute since Williams had delivered his impassioned speech to congregants at Brown Chapel AME, he and a diverse group of approximately 4,000 demonstrators prepared to leave for the first-leg of the four-day march. “When it finally got started, it was pretty tame. I was so busy, I probably missed a lot,” Williams said. The huge number of out-of-town participants strained even the best laid plans. Alexander Aldrich, chairman of the Special Cabinet Committee on Civil Rights in the administration of New York Governor, Nelson Rockefeller, described the events at Brown Chapel as “chaotic.” “Nobody seemed to know what was happening,” said Aldrich. “A group of Rabbis were sitting in folding undertaker’s chairs beside the pulpit.” Sitting next to the clergymen was prominent NAACP attorney, Constance Baker Motley while Movement supporter and renowned entertainer, Harry Belafonte, gave an interview to reporters a few steps away from Motley. “Lots and Lots,” Aldrich said, “of other brass, and hundreds of kids, plain folks, white and Negro,” came to support the epic protest.³²

Three hours behind schedule, Williams and the estimated 4,000 marchers stepped off from the steps of Brown Chapel. “It was a perfect day to walk: cool and sunny, without a single bug, and just enough breeze,” said one observer. Williams had little opportunity to enjoy the beautiful weather. Although he realized that “excitement was in the air,” his job was to ensure that the march proceeded smoothly. Despite the delayed

³¹ Ibid., “President Accuses Wallace of Shirking,” *Atlanta Journal*, March 20, 1965; Hosea L. Williams, “My Account of Selma,” 1985, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Alvin Spivak, “President Requested to Supply Guards for Montgomery March,” *United Press International*, March 20, 1965.

³² Hosea L. Williams, “My Account of Selma,” 1985, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Alexander Aldrich, Personal Journal of Selma-to-Montgomery March, April 7, 1965, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Roy Reed, “Freedom March Begins at Selma,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1965.

start, the *New York Times* called Williams's logistical arrangements "elaborate." What was elaborate also proved to be expensive. As Williams told a reporter, the four day march would cost the SCLC at least \$30,000. These funds would ensure that marchers were afforded suitable accommodations. Food was one of the largest expenditures. Lunch consisted of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, oranges, and a protein-filled energy bar — for thousands of people. "It really was like a military operation," the march director proudly recalled. Marchers eligible for support had SCLC-issued credentials. "The badge of honor was a red arm-band. This signified that you had been selected to march the whole way and it entitled you to supper and bedding, said Aldrich. White ministers from across the country were pressed into service as mess sergeants, wearing name tags that read "Fishes and Loaves." To accommodate the large crowd, Williams had arranged for meals such as spaghetti and meatballs, applesauce, green beans and coffee to be cooked and prepared in Selma and brought out "hot" to the marchers on Yellow Hertz trucks. "The lines moved surprisingly fast. More importantly, one observer commented, "They never ran out of food, and it was always on time." Williams did not discriminate in assigning jobs in any area where there was a need. "I had a bunch of upper class white folks and some priests and nuns that I gave the shittiest jobs to — the worse jobs of the march, taking care of the sanitary facilities and emptying slop buckets and garbage cans," said Williams.³³

³³ Alexander Aldrich, "Personal Journal of Selma-to-Montgomery March," April 7, 1965, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Roy Reed, "Hundreds Pour into Selma for March to Montgomery," *New York Times*, March 21, 1965; Hosea L. Williams, "My Account of Selma," 1985, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers. The author was not privy to an itemized list of items and deductions associated with materials required to host the march. John Lewis posits that 700 hundred mattresses were purchased at \$1.45 each; 700 blankets were donated by churches and schools; four carnival-size tents were rented at \$430 each; 17,000 square feet of polyethylene for ground cloth, costing \$187; 700 rain ponchos; two 2500 watt generators and 2,000 feet of electrical wiring. See Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 356.

The first day ended at 6:00 p.m. after the “mile long line” of demonstrators had marched eight miles under the protection of what reporters called “carbine-carrying” soldiers. Judge Johnson had decreed that no more than three hundred individuals could march on the two lane highway. During this section of the march, the three hundred of the 4,000 marchers slept in four, eight-foot long tents on a cow pasture owned by black farmer David Hall. The forty to fifty volunteers from San Francisco Theological Seminary, had, in Williams’s words, “the most strenuous job of all,” moving and erecting the tents each day. In the near-freezing temperature, trucks shuttled the remainder of the marchers back to Selma while the group that Williams called the “special 300” retired to sleep on air mattresses and Sears Roebuck sleeping bags in tents illuminated by one bulb and heated by two kerosene heaters. Most marchers felt confident knowing that they were protected by troops and federal agents. But Gov. Wallace had warned that he would do nothing to protect the “outside agitators” and there were disturbing instances along the route the first day. Some whites drove by with signs saying “Too bad, Reeb,” a reference to the white Unitarian minister who died on March 11. Another group of angry whites shouted out to a group of nuns “Go back where you came from. You are going to burn in hell with the rest of them goddamn niggers.”³⁴

The next three days presented challenges testing the marchers’ commitment and resolve to finish the march. The marchers had walked fourteen miles on the second day compared to eight miles on the first leg. The dinner of chili beans and sauce, saltines, fruit and bread arrived “rather cold,” said Alexander Aldrich, since they camped out

³⁴ Al Kuttener, “Troops Line Road, Ring Campsite,” *United Press International*, March 22, 1965; Hosea L. Williams, “My Account of Selma,” 1985, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Alexander Aldrich, “Personal Journal of Selma-to-Montgomery March,” April 7, 1965, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers.

much father than the kitchen in Selma. If the food was not as tasty, one marcher maintained that “everything was beautifully organized.” The third day, Tuesday, March 23, a pouring rain made the march and sleeping uncomfortable for the 300 marchers. Resting in Lowndesboro, Alabama, after walking eleven miles, the “soggy” but “spirited” demonstrators, as one commentator described them, pressed on and camped within twenty miles of their final destination. Harris Wofford, a former aide to President John F. Kennedy and then assistant to President Johnson, was present; he helped Marie Foster, a Selma activist, carry her bags throughout the rainy day. The rain had transformed the dirt into mud six inches deep. Before sleeping under two tents, the marchers ate pork and beans and spiced tea. Although King and Abernathy had left to raise money for the campaign, Williams displayed his ability to lead independently. He kept the march moving smoothly, in spite of the weather. March 24 was “very hot,” compelling marchers to begin each day by coating their faces with zinc oxide, a sun-blocking agent. For breakfast, marchers consumed cereal and coffee. On the fourth day the 300 marchers reached the four-lane highway where, under Judge Johnson’s decree, additional marchers could peacefully participate.³⁵

Marchers who had participated in the march since the delegation left Brown Chapel on Sunday morning sometimes met additional marchers with scorn. Once the original marchers got on the four-lane road, they were joined by protesters who were viewed as “comfort-loving dilettantes who were attempting to use the march to for their own show-business reasons,” one marcher recalled. “It took a real effort of will to remember that we our ourselves must look the same way to the ‘Bloody Sunday’ veterans

³⁵ Rex Thomas, “300 Marchers Camps in Mud 20 Miles from Goal,” *Atlanta Journal*, March 24, 1965; Hosea L. Williams, “My Account of Selma,” 1985, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers.

and all of the SCLC regulars,” Aldrich said. Approximately 15,000 marchers reached the last campsite at the City of St. Jude, a Catholic school and hospital in Montgomery that Williams described as “forbidding looking.” They enjoyed a variety show sponsored by Harry Belafonte, Gospel-music legend Mahalia Jackson, actor Nipsey Russell, and singing trio Peter, Paul and Mary — providing an experience Williams compared to the entertainment military soldiers received abroad — using coffins as a stage. “With all the newcomers,” Williams said, “this night was the first time we were really swamped...the crunch of all these new people was too much to handle.”³⁶

The fifty-four mile protest reached its climax after more than 30,000 marchers, including two Nobel Peace Prize winners, several United States Congressmen and entertainers, made the three and one half mile walk from St. Jude to the Alabama State Capitol on Dexter Avenue, less than one hundred yards from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church — the only church that King pastored a decade earlier. Marchers started out that morning eight abreast, fighting to keep the lines organized until they made it to the capitol. Williams, Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta, took the lead with Ralph and Juanita Abernathy. Marchers knew they were witnessing a historic moment in the history of the United States as they saw the stars and bars of the Confederate flag atop the dome of the capitol building—with a spot on its portico identifying where Jefferson Davis had taken his oath as the president of the Confederacy in 1861. As the huge procession reached the capitol, Williams had little time to reflect on his achievement; he

³⁶ WILLIAMS v. WALLACE, 240 F.Supp. 100 (1965), United States District Court M. D. Alabama, N. D., March 17, 1965; Hosea L. Williams, “My Account of Selma,” 1985, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Alexander Aldrich, “Personal Journal of Selma-to-Montgomery March,” April 7, 1965, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 359.

was still busy ensuring that the march remained orderly when the demonstrators reached the capitol around 2:00 p.m.

King spoke from a podium that had been erected on a flatbed truck since state officials had denied him permission to address the crowd from the steps of the capitol. As King had done so many times before, he used the gift of oratory that had produced his “I Have a Dream” speech two years earlier to prophesize to blacks that “no lie can live forever” and that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” “How long,” King asked his listeners, would it be before they received a redress of their grievances. “Not long,” he promised the marchers in a call and response that rang out over the vast crowd.

With this speech, King ended what Andrew Young called the “strongest single dramatization of the need for new legislation protecting the right to the ballot for all citizens.” Young neglected to mention that the march was also the most expensive demonstration relative to the expenses incurred by the SCLC and the federal government. Once the costs had been itemized, the SCLC had accumulated a \$50,000 bill. The organization’s financial obligation was miniscule compared to the cost incurred by the Department of Defense. Sources from the Pentagon reported two months after the march ended that the defense department paid \$510,000 to protect the marchers. The bulk of the bill covered the pay and allowances of the Alabama National Guardsmen and United States Army soldiers.³⁷

³⁷ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 366; “How Long Will it Be: Not Long,” *Chicago Defender*, March 27, 1965; Alexander Aldrich, “Personal Journal of Selma-to-Montgomery March,” April 7, 1965, The Rev. Hosea L. Williams Papers; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 321; James R. Wargo, “Montgomery March is Costing \$50,000 King tells Cleveland,” *United Press International*, March 24, 1965; “Selma March Cost Pentagon \$510,000,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 9, 1965.

John Lewis was right when he said that it was Williams, more than anyone else, who made the march a success. While other SCLC and SNCC staff had a hand in the Selma campaign, Williams had been a constant presence in Selma since he entered the city as King's advance man in January 1965 at a time when SNCC had virtually no operations in the city. He had been the moving force in orchestrating every major episode of the 1965 campaign, particularly "Bloody Sunday" and the actual march from Selma. He could justly claim that he was not only beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, he had rallied to prepare the proposal that gave Judge Frank Johnson the confidence to permit the march to go forward. It was Bloody Sunday and the Selma to Montgomery march that galvanized support in the judiciary, legislative, and executive branches of the federal government for a voting rights bill — landmark legislation that was signed by President Johnson on August 6, 1965. The Voting Rights Act made literacy tests illegal as a prerequisite to vote and it also authorized the United States Attorney General to block state and local authorities from using the poll tax, the white voucher system and other subjective measures that were arbitrarily applied to aspiring black voters. In spite of the promises of fair voting practices that had been codified by the new legislation, Williams and the SCLC did not rest on their laurels.³⁸

³⁸ John Lewis, interview by Jovita Moore, "Hosea Williams: The Untold Story," DVD, prod. Dorothy Daniels (Atlanta: ABC, 2010); Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 361;

Chapter 5

SCOPE, SNCC, and Black Power, 1965-1966

The success of the Selma to Montgomery March had given Hosea Williams justly deserved cache and credibility. As the SCLC's Director of Voter Education and Political Education, he was determined to use his prominence to lead an ambitious effort to increase black political participation. Although many of the barriers to the ballot would be eliminated by passage of the Voting Rights Act, many blacks, observed Andrew Young, "had gotten used to not having a vote and often could not believe that their vote would mean anything." On March 31, six days after the Selma-to-Montgomery March concluded, Williams pitched the idea of the Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) initiative at an SCLC meeting at Maryland's Lord Baltimore Hotel. Operation SCOPE, said Williams, would be a region-wide push to register black voters in one-hundred and twenty rural southern counties and ten southeastern cities with the help of five hundred northern college students screened by their own colleges and universities. SCOPE, Williams remarked, had three goals: mass voter registration; community organization; and political education. "It is my pet project and first love...if we could get people educated politically" we would not have to devote so many resources to voter registration campaigns because "an educated electorate would respond to issues" without having to be instructed to do so. "Organizing our people" for

political purposes is important, Williams said, “but to eradicate evil and accomplish the good that come from our communities” is the key goal with the community organization phase of SCOPE.¹

Operation SCOPE, a bold and ambitious endeavor, gave Williams operational latitude and a very large budget — much to the chagrin of other executive staff members and program directors. Although King was a vocal supporter of the project, some members of the SCLC’s executive staff shuddered at the possibility of Williams becoming too powerful. The Deep South personnel would be transferred from the supervision of “the mercurial Bevel to the explosive Williams,” writes David Garrow. Bevel felt that King’s endorsement of SCOPE might prove detrimental not just to the SCLC but to southern blacks as well. Bevel called SCOPE a “scheme” that caused a naive Dr. King to divert over \$500,000 to a project that “threw the movement off because,” he believed, SCLC “should have pursued the educating of people so that they could functionally carry out good government from the precinct, through the beats on up to the legislative districts, to the counties.” Williams maintained that jealousy on behalf of his colleagues was the true source of the tension amongst SCLC staff members, especially Bevel. “King gave me the leeway, and that’s when the executive staff basically turned out against me. They accused King of giving me much more than my rightful share of the income of the organization,” said Williams. Randolph Blackwell, SCLC’s Program Director, and Stanley Levinson, a white northern businessman and trusted advisor to King, warned in May, 1965, that SCOPE’s \$100,000 per month budget was

¹ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 372; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 415-416; Hosea L. Williams, interview by unknown person, Atlanta, GA, 1965 Southern Regional Council, “Will the Circle be Unbroken,” program files, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

exorbitant. King may have been pressured to defend Williams's programs because he believed that increasing the black electorate would invariably lead to an increase in the election of moderate representation on the local, state, and federal levels. King was also well aware that SCLC's fortuitous financial circumstances were in large measure due to the Selma campaign that Williams had organized. SCLC had generated more than \$1.5 million in contributions during the previous ten months, with the bulk of the donations coming in response to the campaign in Dallas County.²

Operation SCOPE got off to a fast start in Chicago, Illinois, in April 1965.

Williams landed at O'Hare International Airport at noon on Saturday, April 17, to fulfill a twofold mission: to register some of the five hundred students chosen to participate in the ten-week SCOPE initiative that was scheduled to begin the next month, and to highlight the correlation between southern and northern race-based discrimination at the Good Friday-Passover "Witness against Willis" rally. The demonstration targeted Superintendent of Chicago Schools Dr. Benjamin Coppage Willis. Willis was accused of perpetuating segregation in the city's public schools eleven years after *Brown v. Board of Education* by keeping black schools in Chicago's inner city overcrowded while holding white schools well below capacity levels. Adamant about keeping the races separated, Willis reduced the overcrowding of inner city schools by using 625 mobile classrooms, known as "Willis Wagons," instead of busing black students to white neighborhoods. At the march, Williams told a large crowd: "Ben Willis is as big a racist as Governor George C. Wallace, he is just more sophisticated." Williams used his oratory to recruit students

² Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 416, 426-429; James Bevel, interview by James A. DeVinney, November 13, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 259.

and to publicize his ambition to add one million blacks to the voter rolls in South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Florida and Virginia. By the next month, Williams had recruited the desired number of volunteers to kick off the inaugural SCOPE.³

On Tuesday, June 14, nearly five hundred students from approximately sixty colleges and universities throughout the United States arrived in the downtown district of Atlanta, Georgia, to attend orientation. The students, mostly white, began a six-day seminar in the Atlanta University Center, a consortium of historically black colleges and universities, including Spelman College, Morehouse College, Morris Brown, Clark College and Atlanta University. Nuns and college professors, from the University of Chicago, were also present — including Dr. John Hope Franklin. Franklin, the noted black historian who, by 1965, had authored *The Militant South: 1800-1861* and within two years would publish his seminal work, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, was the keynote speaker. Franklin spoke about his graduate level seminars emphasizing the mythical horrors of Reconstruction and the perpetuation of the planter oligarchy. The narrative that projected the South as battered and unable to perpetuate their dominance in the region was false. The notion that the “South was under the foot of a foreign power” was untenable, Franklin told the 500 collegians.⁴

³ “King Aide Here for March,” *Chicago Defender*, April 17, 1965; Sarah Lyall, “B.C. Willis, 86; Led Chicago Schools for Thirteen Years,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1988; Hosea L. Williams, “The Department of Voter Registration and Political Education Proposed Budget: January 1, 1965-June 30, 1965,” Hosea L. Williams Papers.

⁴ Ted Simmons, “500 Collegians Start Seminar Here,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 15, 1965; John Hope Franklin was referring to the continuity versus change arguments in the historiography of Reconstruction. The argument was started by William A. Dunning of Columbia University when he argued in *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877*, that blacks were unfit for civilization and that the race of people were puppets in the hand of the Republican Party. His principal argument was that by the end of Reconstruction, the planter class was ruined. Dunning’s findings, which he claimed to be “scholarly and scientific,” lacked verifiable evidence. See William Archibald Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907). Seventeen years later, Claude Bowers argued that Andrew Johnson was given a hard time as president and that Reconstruction was filled with

Dr. King addressed the SCOPE workers two days later in the gymnasium of Morris Brown College, Williams's undergraduate alma mater. King's speech, which was the highlight of the orientation, addressed a variety of issues during the question and answer period. King spoke about the importance of the labor movement, specifically the need for the minimum wage to be raised to at least two dollars an hour. "Labor and the civil rights movement go hand in hand," said the SCLC president. King also encouraged the students not to be discouraged by the "outside" status that they would encounter while working in the rural southern communities. "Don't pay any attention to this outsider business. Anyone who lives in the United States cannot be considered an outsider in any section of the United States," claimed King. He spoke of the significance of SCOPE and the students' role in making history. SCOPE, he maintained, was "one of the most significant developments in our struggle" for equality. He told the students, "You are here because history is being made and this generation of students" is poised to lead the

corruption. President Ulysses S. Grant was "stupid" and "inept," Bowers said. See Claude Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* (New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1929). Dunning's argument did not encounter any serious challenges until the 1930s when W.E.B. Du Bois, the first African-American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard, argued that "One fact and one alone explains the attitude of most writers toward Reconstruction. They could not perceive Negroes as men." Du Bois systematically addressed the three major theses advanced before his book was published in 1935: All Negroes were ignorant; All Negroes were lazy and dishonest and that Negroes were chiefly responsible for bad government during Reconstruction. See W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1935). Six years later, William J. Cash argued in favor of continuity in that that a unity of cultural values kept economic, social and political conflict in check despite the discord in Southern institutions. See Wilbur J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941). Ten years later, C. Vann Woodward, the Dean of southern historians, suggested that the South and the planter class were thoroughly decimated after the Civil War. His argument gave rise to several retorts from historians. See C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1951). Gavin Wright argued that Plantation owners in most cases were able to accomplish the transition from slavery to free labor from what Gavin Wright calls "laborlords" to landlords, and in the process continued in their role as the dominant class in society. See Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

civil rights revolution. Williams concluded the program by reminding the students of the special currency of voter registration and political education.⁵

Williams officially announced tentative assignments to thirty-seven southern counties for twenty-eight SCOPE college chapters at the David T. Howard High School in Atlanta, Georgia. Although forty-two colleges were represented, only twenty-eight actually had established chapters on campus. Some of the colleges and universities represented included: the University of Missouri, the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), Cornell University, Indiana University, University of California-Berkley, and Marquette University. Johnson C. Smith University was the only participating black institution. Law enforcement officers in Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Florida, would be more tolerant of northern white students canvassing their cities to register voters than of black students. Black students were more likely to be harmed than white pupils. The pupils got a chance to see Williams's "explosive" side when Stoney Cooks, one of the key staff members who had recruited many of the students for the project, attempted to assign the students to their respective counties. Most of them had made arrangements to work in areas where they had friends or family connections. Williams, likely affronted by Cooks' zeal, told the young staffer, "Little nigger, who put you in charge? You just got here. . . . You don't know any more than these other kids." Nevertheless, Cooks stayed on board with Operation SCOPE and made a meaningful impact once he was transferred to Alabama.⁶

⁵ Ted Simmons, "Rights, Labor Merger Vital, King Tells Students Here," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 16, 1965.

⁶ "28 U.S. Colleges Join SCLC's SCOPE Project," *Chicago Defender*, June 22, 1965; Hosea Williams, quoted in Young, *An Easy Burden*, 374.

The first two months of the SCOPE project saw beatings and instances of intimidation in Alabama, Georgia and Virginia. Three SCOPE workers were seriously injured before the end of June, including Jimmie Lee Jones, who sustained permanent damage to his eyes after he was assaulted in Liberty County, Georgia. On June 28, white SCOPE worker Mike Farley was beaten in jail after a correctional officer bribed a white inmate. In Alabama's Wilcox County, the mayor threatened to arrest any SCOPE workers who were seen at the Antioch Baptist Church after dark and to charge them with being a public nuisance. Sherriff Jenkins threatened to permanently shut down the church if the pastor continued to allow civil rights meetings. Tactics aimed to intimidate SCOPE workers intensified the following month. On July 6, a SCOPE worker was choked in Marengo County, Alabama, by a deputy for taking pictures. Two days later in Wilcox County, Alabama, whites shot at three SCOPE workers who escaped unwounded. Hatred for SCOPE workers reached the Chesapeake. On July 21, one Sussex County, Virginia, restaurant placed a sign on its door with the words "Closed on Account of Niggers." Local officials deplored the presence of SCOPE workers. In Marengo County, Alabama, local officials filed an injunction preventing assembly at the Morning Star Baptist Church on any day except Sunday. Even on Sunday, the church was required to submit a list of the names, addresses and the amount of money each person contributed to the collection. The county endorsed of an ordinance barring people from clapping their hands or singing in streets to discourage protest marches. Patrons or protesters, officials decreed, would be arrested in the downtown shopping district if they carried less than three dollars in their pockets.⁷

⁷ "The SCOPE of Freedom July Incident Report," The Papers of Rev. Hosea Williams, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

Operation SCOPE continued to suffer setbacks in August, its workers encountering threats and beatings. Before the month concluded, SCOPE's internal files recorded over twenty incidents of brutality and intimidation. On August 2, 1965, four days before LBJ signed the Voting Rights Act and five days before riots erupted in Los Angeles, four SCOPE workers were beaten in Luverne, Alabama. A gang of white toughs attacked black Bruce Hartford, SCOPE director for Crenshaw, Alabama, and Dunbar Reed when Hartford attempted to obtain information on his colleague at the sheriff's office after the latter had been arrested and transported to the city jail for protesting at a restaurant. Reed was testing the restaurant's compliance with the Civil Rights Act that had been passed the previous year. He was subsequently released. Although the two African-Americans were arrested, the whites who initiated the assault were not detained. Later that same day in Athens, Georgia, Chris Clark, the director of SCOPE in Clarke County, reported to local authorities that Howard Sims, a North Georgian Klansman who had previously been indicted for the murder of an educator from Washington, D.C., had followed and threatened to kill him for shuttling African Americans to the county courthouse to register. Seven SCOPE workers and 200 local blacks were arrested after they attempted to register in Allendale, South Carolina, on August 2. The protesters arrived at the courthouse at 9:00 a.m. in the morning, but by the end of the day, only fifty-five applications had been processed. The registrar's office was only opened once every thirty calendar days. In Georgia two SCOPE workers were also hospitalized after being beaten by state troopers. Two days later on August 4, SCOPE workers William Rau

and Darb Wiggins were beaten by J.W. Sewell, a representative in the Georgia General Assembly, and Dr. Don Holloway, a physician who resided in Plains, Georgia.⁸

By the end of August, SCOPE's visibility in its targeted locales was undeniable. However, several members of SCLC's executive staff questioned the results of the program. Mismanagement only fueled James Bevel's and other staff members' perceptions that the project was a "scheme." Accusations that the initiative was a failure are difficult to prove even fifty years later. Demonstrating that SCOPE needed more oversight is not as challenging to authenticate. From June through August, five SCOPE workers were arrested on charges ranging from reckless driving, driving without a license, and writing bad checks. Although the number of arrests was miniscule in relation to the number of volunteers, opponents used these statistics as ammunition to kill the program. These misdemeanors were trumped in late August when Leon Hall and Richard Smith were arrested and accused of stealing a 2x4 foot safe containing \$202,545 in checks. Hall and Smith resided in the SCOPE branch office at 563 Johnson Avenue in Atlanta (coincidentally a home that was previously rented by Martin Luther King Jr.). Their arrest confirmed to some critics that Williams, as director of the project, had not used effective screening methods when recruiting SCOPE workers.⁹

By the autumn of 1965, Williams and the SCOPE program faced serious criticism. Helped by five secretaries, he was managing 180 staff members and had seventy-six projects going on simultaneously. Williams had failed to meet the

⁸ The SCOPE of Freedom August Incident Report," The Papers of Rev. Hosea Williams, Auburn Avenue Research Library; "Atlanta Scope Workers Beaten," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 3, 1965.

⁹ The SCOPE of Freedom August Incident Report," The Papers of Rev. Hosea Williams, Auburn Avenue Research Library; "202,545 SCLC Theft Laid to Workers," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 1, 1965.

benchmarks he outlined to the board when he formally proposed the program at the Lord Baltimore Hotel on March 31. He maintained that 650 students participated during the inaugural summer, yet evidence suggests that approximately 300 students actually committed to the effort. Williams also fell shy of his goal of registering voters. SCOPE and SCLC suggested that close to 26,000 voters were added throughout Georgia, Alabama, Virginia, and South and North Carolina. These numbers must be seen in perspective with the delayed passage of the Voting Rights Act, which, according to Williams's pre-launch projection, would have been critical to the success of the program. Without the legislation, many prospective black voters were still barred from voting because federal examiners had yet to be disbursed to the southern counties falling under the jurisdiction of the Voting Rights Act. The late passage of the landmark legislation caused another problem for Williams — the volunteers did not have much they could do. “So I had all these kids going South...demonstrating around other things, which I had to do to keep them busy,” Williams said.¹⁰

Once the first summer of Operation SCOPE concluded in September 1965, the SCLC convened for a two-day executive staff meeting at the Atlanta Airport Hilton Inn to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of attempting to launch civil rights protests in the North. Dr. King had strongly considered taking the movement to Chicago, Illinois. Andrew Young argued that no one involved in the discussion could “claim purity of motive.” He suggested that Williams initially favored a move to Chicago to remove Bevel, his chief rival, from the South. Given the competition between the two lieutenants, it is plausible that Young correctly remembered the deliberations. But even he and

¹⁰Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 263; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers.

Bayard Rustin believed that a move to Chicago would be disastrous and echoed the sentiments later voiced by Williams. Williams believed that the SCLC was making a tactical error in relocating civil rights demonstrations to a northern geography. “I remember when King decided to go to Chicago. He was pressured by Jim Bevel and Jesse Jackson,” said Williams. Bevel and Jackson, Williams thought, were anxious to break away from SCLC and begin their own national movement. Both men “just about forced King into Chicago to protect his flanks or SCLC’s flanks,” Williams recalled.¹¹

The Director of Voter Education and Political Education also grumbled that a sustained northern movement might compromise future contributions. “Much of the money we received to carry on the civil rights movement was from the North. Just about eighty-five to ninety percent of our white volunteers came from the North.” Williams made a grim prediction: “Now when you take the struggle to their back door,” he told King at an SCLC strategy meeting, “they are going to desert you.” Williams was also against taking the movement to Chicago prematurely because of fears for the communities SCLC was leaving behind. He knew firsthand the negative views whites in southern towns harbored against King and his followers. “Most of those towns we went into,” most recently, Selma, Alabama, “the blacks really stood up with us. . . . The whites would wait until we leave town” and then exact physical brutality and economic reprisals against local African Americans, Williams said. He urged the SCLC executive committee to have the organization maintain a presence in the towns where they led campaigns, arguing that it was morally incumbent upon them to remain “until things sizzled down.” Only then, Williams maintained, would the organization “reach a level of

¹¹ Ibid.

respectability in the community.” The SCLC officially kicked off its Chicago campaign on January 6, 1966—one day after Williams’s fortieth birthday. True to his convictions, Williams initially remained in Alabama.¹²

Williams’s commitment to realizing black political equality through the expansion of an intelligent African American electorate ensured that he would continue to administer the organization’s voter registration and political education projects in Alabama’s Black Belt in 1966. He kicked off the year in Jefferson County, Alabama, as a continuation of SCLC’s “Christmas Project” that had been initiated on December 20, 1965. No federal registrars had been sent to the county surrounding Birmingham in accord with provisions of the Voting Rights Act. Since there was no federal oversight, Williams contended that local officials continued to erect barriers to keep blacks from exercising the franchise during the recently-renewed voting rights drive in Bessemer, a city eighteen miles southwest of Birmingham. “Bessemer officials,” Williams claimed, “are purposely sabotaging our drive. When you make someone wait in line for five hours, they may not want to come back and vote again.” During the first week of January, Williams estimated that the voter registration drive had encouraged 4,000 prospective voters to attempt to register in Bessemer, but only 2,425 had been successfully added to the voter rolls because of the Board of Registrar’s “delaying tactics and inadequate facilities.” Although more than two thousand black voters had been registered to vote because of the efforts of Williams’s Department of Voter Registration and Education, Jefferson County still had almost 90,000 unregistered African Americans. This large

¹² Young, *An Easy Burden*, 381-383. Hosea L. Williams, interview by Steve Estes, Atlanta, GA, February 9, 1996, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 440-444.

number of potential black voters, Williams asserted, “could be a deciding factor in whether Alabama will have a fruitful or detrimental future.”¹³

Williams and the SCLC responded to the city’s stalling tactics by leading a series of demonstrations in Birmingham. Known pejoratively as “Bombingham” because of local Klansmen’s efforts to bomb the homes of protesting blacks, the city had long had an active population of blacks who had opposed the discriminatory devices used by its city fathers long before Williams and the SCLC became involved in the city’s fight for civil and voting rights. The historian and Alabama native Glenn T. Eskew argues in *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* that an assertive group of black attorneys and civil rights activists, including lawyer and friend of NAACP General Counsel Arthur D. Shores and civil rights warrior Fred Shuttlesworth, were among those who “organized new indigenous protest groups in the 1950s and 1960s that demanded equal and immediate access to the system.” Rev. Shuttlesworth, who had aligned himself with the SCLC in 1963 and worked with Williams in 1964 during the St. Augustine movement, was now continuing to work with Williams to implement fair voting practices in the city.¹⁴

Williams and Shuttlesworth opted to employ the former’s preferred tactic on January 4, 1966, staging a night march. More than one-hundred “hand-clapping, hymn-singing Negroes,” according to *The New York Times*, marched in “chilling” rain and temperatures to protest the Birmingham’s continued defiance of the Voting Rights Act.

¹³ “Negro Voter Registration Drive Renewed,” *Chicago Defender*, January 4, 1966; “Dr. King to Lead Vote Drive in Birmingham,” *Chicago Defender*, January 6, 1966.

¹⁴ Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 15, 83.

This demonstration, the first nighttime mass protest in Birmingham since the “powerful days” of the spring 1963 demonstrations, began at the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, and followed on the heels of a demonstration earlier in the day. Williams urged those in attendance at the mass meeting to stand up against the city until they had been granted full access to the ballot. The demonstrators left the church and marched to the Jefferson County Courthouse, where Williams led them in songs and a prayer. “We want six-day registration sessions and nighttime neighborhood registration,” Shuttlesworth yelled to the one-hundred and twenty blacks who had gathered at the courthouse. “If we don’t get it, we may have all night vigils at the courthouse and might pull children out of school to help us demonstrate.” The latter option, resurrecting the specter of the “children’s crusade” from 1963, would soon stir controversy between Williams and the wealthiest African American in the city, businessman A.G. Gaston.¹⁵

Williams led a demonstration one week later involving several hundred black students since the city fathers refused to grant the demands voiced by Shuttlesworth at the January 4 demonstration. Police became involved after they claimed Black students from Birmingham’s Parker High School destroyed a chain-link fence around the school’s perimeter so that they could join an ongoing demonstration for voter rights. According to the school’s principal, Robert C. Johnson, five civil rights workers entered the school building and began opening the doors to the classrooms and urging students to leave the premises to protest. Police fired shots in the air, citing as the pretext for their escalation claims that blacks were throwing rocks and pieces of iron. Williams demurred. “The students did not throw rocks at the police. . . . The students began running because the

¹⁵ “100 Negroes Stage a March in Birmingham, Alabama,” *New York Times*, January 5, 1966.

police came out their cars waving billy clubs,” said Williams. Williams led two more separate protests later that afternoon which saw seven hundred demonstrators marching to the Birmingham City Hall in the afternoon and to the Jefferson County Courthouse that same night. During the night demonstration, he encouraged the students to refrain from going to school the following day. “Don’t go in the schools. Turn the schools inside out from the outside—make tomorrow a school holiday,” Williams told the pupils.

Williams’s unabashed militancy in using children to demonstrate against local authorities had the same effect as it had during the Savannah movement in 1963 and in Birmingham in April and May of that same year — some members of the black elite condemned the tactics.¹⁶

Williams, as the SCLC’s Director of Voter Registration and Political Education, was fighting battles on multiple fronts in Alabama’s Black Belt with other civil rights organizations, particularly the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC’s presence had grown stronger after the Selma-to-Montgomery March one year earlier. SCLC, composed primarily of middle-class preachers and other professionals, stood philosophically to the right of SNCC. Most SNCC activists had yet to turn thirty and, as their adviser, Ella Baker, opposed traditional leadership hierarchies.

SNCC’s Alabama operation, particularly in the Black Belt, cannot be discussed separately from Stokely Carmichael. Historian Peniel Joseph referred to Carmichael as the “hipster hero” whose telegenic smile and charisma enabled him to hypnotize the high and the humble. Another historian, Hassan Jeffries, writes that Carmichael “was as comfortable breaking bread with black sharecroppers as he was with the white elite.” By

¹⁶ Gene Roberts, “Alabama Police Combat Disorder,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1966.

early 1966, the twenty-four-year-old native Trinidadian and Howard University graduate had become a civil rights veteran after serving in Mississippi as one of SNCC's field secretaries in 1962 and 1963, and in 1964, SNCC's project director in the Mississippi Delta. Carmichael shared the philosophy of many of the SNCC cohort. Meaningful and sustainable progress for blacks could only be a reality if African Americans secured political power outside of the Democratic Party — which he asserted was “the most treacherous enemy of the Negro people.” Blacks had run a hard campaign in Lowndes County to get African Americans elected to the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service Committee. Black farmers appeared to be in the majority, yet they were unable to elect their candidates to four of the five committee seats. “We don't know, but we feel sure that we were cheated at the ballot box,” said local activist John Hulett. “We did it fair and square. We believed in them [white democrats in Lowndes County] and they cheated us.” The leader continued: “They step on us, they take us for granted and we're completely irrelevant.” Carmichael's appraisal of the political milieu in Alabama was clear: “There's no room for Negroes in the same party as Wallace.”¹⁷

Williams and the SCLC were diametrically opposed to the idea of a third party in Alabama. Williams wanted to work from within the Democratic and Republican Parties to secure gains for African Americans by electing white moderates. On January 15, 1966, forty-eight hours after the protests at Jefferson County's Parker High School, Williams made the one hundred and eighty mile journey from Birmingham to attend a meeting at the St. Paul Christian Methodist Episcopal Church that had been hastily called by the

¹⁷ Peniel Joseph, *Stokely: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2014), ix; Hassan Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 58-59, 147; Edward M. Rudd, “New Political Group in Lowndes to Name Own Negro Candidates,” *Southern Courier*, Vol. II, No. 1, January 1-2, 1966.

SCLC affiliate in Lowndes County after hearing about SNCC's role in organizing the recently established Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). LCFO, a third political party, had organized locals in Lowndes County. They chose as its ballot symbol a grimacing black panther obviously influenced by the mascot of Clark College — the sister school of Williams's alma mater in the Atlanta University Center.¹⁸

Williams confronted Carmichael as the latter encouraged those in attendance to launch similar independent parties similar to the LCFO. At the meeting, Williams called Carmichael's idea a "bed for the black nationalist or the Black Muslim" that would force even moderate whites to align with the extreme right wing of any party opposing black advancement. Carmichael responded: The Democratic Party is "not a black man's party, but white people aren't going to come over before they think they can get something out of it." He displayed the Alabama Democratic Party's logo – a crowing rooster with the slogan "White Supremacy for the Right." "If you're registered in the Democratic Party," said Carmichael, "you back this!" As Carmichael passed out LCFO literature with a grin on his face, he held up the black panther emblem and unapologetically told those in attendance that the panther "can't be tamed. Once he gets going, ain't nothing going to stop him. He's one MEAN cat!" SNCC and the LCFO reasoned that the logo was appropriate since the black panther only defends itself when its life its endangered by hostile forces. Once threatened, it uses all of its strength to fight for its survival.¹⁹

¹⁸ John Klein, "Civil Rights Leaders Disagree on Using Votes in the Black Belt," *Southern Courier*, Vol. II, No. 4, January 22-23, 1966; Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 152; Hosea was extremely busy and continuously driving long distances. He was found guilty of reckless driving on January 24, 1966. He was fined \$100 and given thirty-day suspended sentence. See "Williams Fined," *Southern Courier*, Vol. II, No. 5, January 29-30, 1966.

¹⁹ John Klein, "Civil Rights Leaders Disagree on Using Votes in the Black Belt," *Southern Courier*, Vol. II, No. 4, January 22-23, 1966; Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 152.

Williams and the SCLC believed that the LCFO was jeopardizing the gains of the Voting Rights Act and blacks' chances of electing moderate whites. A non-white government dredged up fears created during Reconstruction when the threat of "Negro domination" terrified white southerners. Williams wondered what might happen if Carmichael and SNCC saw their vision of localized African American political dominance realized: "Will they treat white folks like the white folks treated them? Will they hate the white folks the way white folks hated them?" Williams attacked SNCC's mathematics. "We are only thirty-five percent of the people in Alabama, and ten percent in the nation," he said. "We can't go pitting race against race." In a manner uncharacteristic, Williams willingly revealed his concern: "There ain't no Negro in Alabama, including ourselves, that knows one iota about politics. "Politics is a science" that whites invented and blacks had not had sufficient time to truly understand. Carmichael and SNCC were unknowingly, Williams believed, "[creating] a monster in Alabama...that will be detrimental to generations of Negroes unborn."²⁰

Each approach had merit. Historian Susan Youngblood Ashmore argues that although SNCC's approach could yield positive results in the Alabama Black Belt counties because of the high black population, SCLC's strategy was more appealing on the state and national levels because it called for more inclusion. "We must let the Negro vote hang there like a ripe fruit, and whoever is willing to give the Negro the most freedom can pick it," Williams said. "We may not be able to elect a black man, but God knows we can say what white man," he continued. Unwilling to lose the gains as a result of the Voting Rights, Hassan Jefferies suggests Williams and the SCLC deplored the

²⁰ John Klein, "Civil Rights Leaders Disagree on Using Votes in the Black Belt," *Southern Courier*, Vol. II, No. 4, January 22-23, 1966; Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 152.

third party initiative because they themselves wanted to chart the course of the black electorate in the wake of the Voting Rights Act. The organization moved quickly to checkmate more militant and estranged idealists. Williams and the SCLC aligned themselves with the conservative Alabama Democratic Conference (ADC). The ADC, the state's first black political caucus, had been founded in 1960 to ensure that John F. Kennedy received Alabama's black vote for the presidency. According to Joe Reed, a protégé of Rufus Lewis, chairman of the organization in 1966, the "ADC may have been partisan as hell" but we knew that whites still had the numerical majority in the state and it was practical to align with whites on the moderate end of the Democratic Party spectrum.²¹

Williams was well aware of the potential in organizing a black voting bloc appealing to blacks uncomfortable in embracing the militant LCFO. On March 5, 1966, Williams left his work in Birmingham, leading what Dr. King called the "most significant voting drive in the South," to preside over a major political organizing meeting at the St. Paul Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Selma. Over 150 leaders from nineteen counties (including fifteen from the Black Belt) and several large cities assembled for over four hours to discuss the most efficient method to unify the black vote in Alabama. Representatives claimed that their fiefdoms could deliver between 120,000-130,000 black votes in the upcoming May 3 primary. However, representatives from Mobile and Montgomery, the second and third largest cities in terms of black voting strength after Birmingham, did not attend. The state's three largest cities, bases for Isom Clemon,

²¹ Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry it On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 154; Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 167-168; Joe L. Reed, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, Alabama, March 8, 2011.

Rufus Lewis, and Orzell Billingsley, founders and officers of the ADC, did not show up for the meeting. The ADC was not the only organization that opted not to participate. “I talked to John Patton, head of NAACP voter registration in Alabama,” said Williams. “Patton’s response was, ‘We’ve already got a statewide organization.’” Although Williams organized what would become known as the Confederation of Alabama Political Organizations, he insisted that the COAPO would be a statewide effort administered by blacks in Alabama. “This is not an SCLC organization,” Williams declared; “We invited every organization in the state that we knew about.” Williams believed that all of the disparate groups held potential for considerable sway in their respective counties. “We must bring them all together,” he said. Williams intended using COAPO to strike bargains with moderate white democrats in exchange for support from the black voting bloc. Once the candidate was elected, he or she would express the proper gratitude by distributing jobs and political favors to loyal African American groups. “We’ve got to say, ‘White Folks, what you going to give us?’ We’ve been selling our votes all along,” said Williams. Now we’ve got to sell it for freedom.”²²

The COAPO worked to realize three goals. First, the organization sought “to rid Alabama’s body politic of racism, whereby an electorate could vote for a candidate on the basis of how he deals with issues involving human dignity rather than emotions,” Williams said. To counter the rhetoric of SNCC and the LCFO and at the same time to appease moderate whites, Williams promised that the organization did not intend to “take the government away from the white folks, but we do intend to prove to them that black

²² John Klein, “Leaders in Fifteen Counties Meet to Plan Bloc Vote,” *Southern Courier*,” Vol. II, No. II, March 12-13, 1966. Rev. T.Y. Rogers was the first president of COAPO. He graduated from Alabama State College and Crozer Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. At the time of his election in 1966 as COAPO’s first president, he was serving as pastor of the First African Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

folks can't mess it up any more than they already have." Second, COAPO wanted to use the strength of its bloc vote to elect Attorney General Richmond Flowers to succeed George Wallace as governor of Alabama since the incumbent was constitutionally barred from running in three successive elections. Flowers, a white moderate by standards of the times, had vocally supported the removal of the "White Supremacy for the Right" slogan from the Alabama Democratic Party's logo. Blacks had to vote together to oust Wallace, Dr. King said. "For all these years whites have bloc-voted to keep us down. Now we got to bloc vote to get ourselves out of this dilemma." Finally, the organization committed to support black candidates in Black Belt counties where the numerical majority favored African Americans, and where the SCLC had strong organizational roots.²³

Although Williams protested that COAPO was not an SCLC effort, the former bore a striking organizational resemblance to the Chatham County Crusade for Voters (CCCV) he had begun in Savannah. COAPO was structured on five levels: county, state representative, United States Senate and Congressional districts, and other statewide elective offices. Each county unit had three divisions: an interview committee, a political guidance committee and a patronage committee composed of black business professionals, organized labor, the religious sector, political and civic forces, and youth. The interview committee was responsible for gauging the political thinking of the constituents in the county and then interviewing the office seekers to determine if the candidate would represent voters' interests. The political guidance committee, after

²³ "Confederation of Alabama Political Organizations," *Southern Christian Leadership Conference Newsletter*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (March-April, 1966), p.1, The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center; "Rights Workers Disagree: SCLC Raps SNCC on Alabama Vote Drive," *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 25, 1966; Martin Luther King Jr. quoted in Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 168-169.

consulting with the interview committee, was responsible for making an official recommendation to the patronage committee based on the candidate's ability to win and honor his campaign promises. The patronage committee's task was to inform the candidate of the organization's willingness not only to provide an official endorsement, but also to ensure that the politician remained true to the pledges made on the campaign stump. The ADC was "partisan as hell," Williams said, but the COAPO was non-partisan, which, he hoped, would "prevent the greatest mistake Negro politicians made...when they were duped into the party of Abraham Lincoln, thereby allowing all whites to rush into the Democratic Party." Williams's fear of blacks "being duped" affected how he viewed successful black businessmen who opposed the methods he believed were necessary to achieve full freedom.²⁴

The months prior to the May 3 primary were hectic for Williams as he traveled continuously from Lowndes and Dallas Counties to Birmingham to lead voter registration drives. Accompanying demonstrations often demanded the use of high school students in Jefferson County. Williams and black Birmingham millionaire businessman A.G. Gaston were opposed to each other's methods of pursuing full equality for African Americans in Birmingham. Gaston had been born in a log cabin in 1892 in Demopolis, Alabama. He moved to Birmingham and began working at United States Steel for \$3.10 a day. He later built his wealth by starting burial societies for Birmingham blacks. By the 1960s, Gaston

²⁴ "Confederation of Alabama Political Organizations," *Southern Christian Leadership Conference Newsletter*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (March-April, 1966), p.3, The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection. Albert Turner, SCLC Field Secretary of Alabama, was Assistant Chairman of all COAPO Standing Committees. Lewis Black, Chairman of the Alabama Human Relations Council, served as treasurer. Williams Harrison, a teacher in Choctaw County and spokesman for the Choctaw County Voters League, served as COAPO's Chairman of the Political Guidance Committee. Mildred Black, the only chairperson of COAPO, was a treasurer of the Federal Credit Union in Greensboro, Alabama, and the first chairperson of the Interview Committee. Lastly, Samson Crum, a longtime employee of the United States Postal Service, was Chairman of the Patronage Committee.

owned thirteen funeral homes and a string of motels. The entrepreneur was conservative politically, but strategically used his wealth to quell racial discord in Birmingham. He had bailed King and SCLC staff members out of jail in 1966 and allowed them to lodge for free in his hotel while they conducted civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham. Gaston, a powerful figure who had a relationship with city officials because of his wealth, was adamantly opposed to using children in demonstrations. Williams was taking the kids out of school, “you know, marching,” said Gaston. “I thought that was unnecessary. In fact, my idea was the kids, many of them, didn't know what it was all about to start with,” Gaston remembered. Williams viewed Gaston as a typical “head house nigger” afraid of losing his prestige and community standing with the white power structure. Williams, Gaston said, called him a “Super Uncle Tom” for opposing the student demonstrations. Gaston, recalled Williams, “is running off at his mouth too much.” Williams placed the black millionaire in the same category as whites who delayed the progress of black equality. “If we have to work on brother Gaston, I’m going to work on him just like I work on the fat cat white man downtown,” Williams grumbled. Gaston believed that Williams was ungrateful for his generosity. “The guys couldn't eat, they had no place to stay and eat, other than [me], they couldn't do nothing but get up, cause I was feeding them and putting them up down there,” Gaston said in 1985.²⁵

In spite of the tension between Williams and Gaston, the voter registration drives in Birmingham yielded promising results. Although Gaston disagreed with the tactics

²⁵ For more on A.G. Gaston, see Suzanne Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010); “Birmingham Vote Drive Nets 20,000,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, March 3, 1966; “Gaston Runs off at Mouth: King Aide,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 18, 1966; “Civil Rights Roundup,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 12, 1966; A.G. Gaston, interview by Production Team C, November 1, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

employed by Williams, he admitted that the SCLC's Director of Voter Registration and Political Education used the students "very effectively." Dr. King maintained that "The voter registration drive was the most significant ever to take place in the South." The drive's success was the result of two factors: Williams's no-holds-barred approach and the assistance of the federal government. Federal registrars finally arrived in Jefferson County on January 24. By February 8, fifteen thousand additional voters had added their names to the voter rolls in the county — eight thousand more voters than the 7,312 voters that had been added during the four months from August-November 1965. By the time Williams and the SCLC left Jefferson County in the middle of March, the SCLC claimed to have registered 39,040 blacks. In total, 59,000 blacks were now registered to cast their ballots in Jefferson County prior to the March 15 deadline for the May 3 primary. In spite of the surge in registered black voters since the SCLC began the "Christmas Project" on December 22, 1965, Williams coveted not just the tail of the proverbial pig, but the whole hog. He was displeased with the fact that thousands of blacks were still not registered. "Most unregistered negroes cannot afford to leave their jobs in order to register during normal working hours," Williams said, "and those who can, could not afford to pay for transportation to distant registration places." But the drive was far from a failure. Success had come at a price that was not as steep as anticipated. There were only nineteen arrests and twenty injuries associated with this particular voter registration drive. Williams was hoping that his laborious canvassing and leading voter registration drives prior to the May 3 primary would yield substantive political gains.²⁶

²⁶ Ibid., "58,000 Negroes Still Unregistered in B'ham," *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 8, 1966; Hosea L. Williams, "Report to the Board of Directors, 1966," Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Alabama Blacks were dealt a devastating blow when the votes were tallied after the primary. Pundits had suggested that blacks could be victorious in almost twenty-five contests in the Black Belt because of the record number of registered black voters. Despite the addition of 122,000 blacks to the voter rolls which now totaled 235,000, no black candidate was elected to office. Moderate candidates for statewide office were defeated by large margins and white voters who might not ordinarily have voted rallied around the segregationist cause. Lurleen Wallace, the wife of the incumbent governor, stood in as gubernatorial candidate for her husband and won a landslide victory over her opponents, United States Representative James D. Martin and Alabama Attorney General Richmond M. Flowers. A tally of 3,371 of the state's 3,654 voting precincts revealed that Wallace received 399,024 votes while her opponents collectively received 364, 176 votes. She would not even have to face a runoff election. The shellacking was attributed to two factors: voter suppression tactics, including the disqualification of eligible black voters and permitting whites who were not authorized to vote to cast ballots. Polling places were also switched without adequate notification to blacks. And white backlash and fear of a black voting bloc in the wake of the Voting Rights Act had caused 110,000 new white voters to register during the previous year. The implications from the race were clear: blacks' hope of an alliance with moderate white candidates in exchange for votes and political patronage were trumped because moderate candidates believed that a close link with the black cause would result in political suicide. Commenting on the election, Dr. King said, "It seems obvious that white Alabamians are desperately grasping for a way to return to the old days of white supremacy." Williams was quoted in the *New*

York Times, saying blacks “probably would go fishing” at election time in November if white candidates chose not to make concessions to receive the black votes.²⁷

On June 6, 1966, news that James Meredith had been shot in Mississippi during what he identified as his “March Against Fear” interrupted an SCLC staff meeting at the organization’s headquarters on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta. Meredith, described as a “loner” by historian John Dittmer, was the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi almost four years earlier. Three days after attending the White House Conference on Civil Rights, he embarked on a one-man march “to challenge the overriding and overriding fear” and to encourage Black Mississippians to remove the psychological fetters that straitjacketed them while fighting against the state’s discriminatory tactics. SCLC staffers first assumed that Meredith had been fatally wounded on the second of his planned sixteen-day, 220-mile pilgrimage from Memphis to Jackson, Mississippi. “If they killed James Meredith we gotta do something,” Williams said to Dr. King and Andrew Young. Young, whom King always relied on to take the conservative route, wanted to ponder the best course of action since he believed that initiating another campaign while still involved in the fight against poverty in Chicago would be too demanding. Williams was vehemently opposed to waiting on anything. The SCLC should board a plane immediately and “decide what to do on the way to Memphis,” he said to Young. Williams, King, Bernard Lee and Ralph Abernathy left Atlanta the next morning on a rocky flight for Memphis. The pilot cautioned that the

²⁷ Gene Roberts, “Alabama Negroes and G.O.P. Jolted,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1966; Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 176.

flight would be turbulent. Williams remarked, “it’ll be a lot more turbulent on the ground” once we arrive in the Magnolia State.²⁸

Williams hoped to play the same pivotal role in the Meredith March as he had while organizing the trek from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. Andrew Young suggests that Williams was eager to take a leading role in Mississippi to eclipse Bevel who was handling the SCLC campaign in Chicago. “I felt Williams saw the Meredith March as a perfect opportunity to get something dramatic going in the South accompanied by an army of reporters,” said Young. “Hosea would have much of the limelight to himself.” Williams readily admitted that he thrived on the attention afforded to him. “I did find a lot of satisfaction...I liked the limelight. It was appealing to me. I found out that civil rights leaders were about as attractive to women as playboys were,” said Williams. Egotistical motives aside, he began working on the logistics of the march on June 7 after King received permission from Meredith to continue his trek after visiting with Meredith in his room at Bowld Hospital in Hernando, Mississippi. The SCLC delegation, along with SNCC and CORE, agreed to resume Meredith’s march at the point where he had been gunned down by buckshot. Williams rented a car, and just as he did in Selma in preparation for the march to Montgomery, drove along U.S. Route 51 to Jackson, appraising the possible locations for camping grounds. King, who was staying at the

²⁸ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 395; David Carter, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement: Civil Rights and the Johnson Administration, 1965-1968* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 104-105; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1994), 389; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 475; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 310; Aram Goudsouzian, *Down the Crossroads: Civil Rights Black Power and the Meredith March Against Fear* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014), 39.

black-owned Lorraine motel in Memphis, reached out to contacts from around the country and asked SCLC loyalists to descend upon Mississippi.²⁹

Williams, King and other staff members did not waste any time. Joining SCLC were the recently elected chairman of SNCC, Stokely Carmichael, and Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). They began the march near the Tennessee state line in sweltering sub-tropical heat on Highway 51, the road Meredith identified as “the classic route of the Mississippi Negro, a concrete river heading away from home” when blacks were scrambling to head North and leave Mississippi. As Williams, King, James Lawson, Abernathy and sixteen others marched through Desoto County, they stopped for lunch at the black-owned “Hole-In-The Ground” restaurant, recalled Leroy Johnson, a high-school junior in 1966. The marchers, numbering about twenty on the first day, covered approximately six miles before stopping near Coldwater, Mississippi. Williams, with his deep baritone voice, led the marchers in the movement anthem, “We Shall Overcome” and Lawson gave the benediction before the leaders reassembled later for a mass meeting at Centenary Methodist Church back in Memphis. “Pray that our feet may never turn back. We will see a thousand, yea ten thousand of feet, marching toward Jackson, Mississippi,” Lawson prayed.³⁰

The leaders of the five major civil rights organizations gathered in King’s room at the Lorraine Motel to discuss strategy and possible objectives for the march. King, Roy

²⁹ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 394; Hosea’s Book Tape, Number 3, Recording, December 10, 1973. Reverend Hosea L. Williams Papers, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 310; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 475; Aram Goudsouzian, *Down the Crossroads*, 42, 44; Michael S. Lottman, “Leaders Join for Miss. March: Bigger than Selma They Say,” *Southern Courier*, Vol. II, No. 24, June 11-12, 1966.

³⁰ Carter, *The Music has Gone out of the Movement*, 104; Robert Lee Long, “Long Journey to Justice: Residents Recall Day King Came to Town,” *Desoto Times Tribune*, January 17, 2012; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 476.

Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the National Urban League, Carmichael and McKissick grouped themselves around the table. Though Williams was only a lieutenant to King, he, too, was invited in the meeting to discuss tactics. "I was always suspicious of what was going to happen, so I watched them," said Williams. He still resented Wilkins for the latter's role in keeping him off the NAACP National Board of Directors in 1963 for his allegiance to King and the SCLC. Wilkins suggested that each organization should have one vote on major issues and argued that the march should be squarely focused on passage of the pending civil rights legislation. Whitney Young agreed and requested that a voter registration campaign or direct action techniques be mandated during the march. When Carmichael drafted a manifesto that portrayed President Johnson as an opponent of the civil rights movement, Wilkins and Young refused to sign the document. Carmichael intended to upset the movement's elder statesmen so they would refuse to participate.

Carmichael outlined his strategy:

SNCC and CORE goes to the left. NAACP and Urban League goes to the right. And then King is allowed to walk down the middle. So we recognized from the beginning if we eliminate from this march, NAACP and Urban League and if you have SNCC and CORE and King, if SNCC and CORE is on the left, King cannot stay on the right. He will be forced to move closer to SNCC and CORE.³¹

Carmichael insulted Wilkins and Young and even hurled curse words at the venerable leaders. Both packed up their briefcases and left for New York, vowing not to work with Carmichael and SNCC again. King, according to Carmichael, did little to halt their

³¹ Stokely Carmichael, interview by Judy Richardson, November 7, 1988, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive.

departure. Carmichael asserted that King was happy because “he would in fact have the limelight over myself and McKissick.”³²

The SCLC, particularly Andrew Young and Williams, distrusted Carmichael and felt that he would attempt to undermine King and his leadership. Prior to the Meredith March Carmichael was largely unknown to the national media, since the recently-ousted John Lewis had been the chairman of SNCC. “He went right to work attempting to establish a more militant image for himself and SNCC,” said Andrew Young of the upstart. “We felt a lot of the focus on his distinct image had to do with his resentment of Martin’s preeminence and of the overwhelming media focus on Martin.” Williams confirmed Young’s thoughts shortly after the initial meeting concluded with Wilkins and Whitney Young. He stumbled upon a closed-door conversation between Carmichael and McKissick. He heard the former say, “We got him...Now, let me tell you. We’ve got to keep King. If we lose King, we lose the press.” Carmichael, according to Williams, then referred to King as a “son of a bitch” who he would “make look like the greatest Uncle Tom in the world and make him denounce nonviolence” when the delegation arrive at the conclusion of the march in Jackson. “I knew what we had on our hands, so I went to work,” said Williams.³³

As march coordinator, Williams managed the campaign headquarters at Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis where Lawson served as pastor. Almost immediately the sponsors found themselves \$4,700 in the red. Large tents and portable

³² Goudsouzian, *Down the Crossroads*, 48-49; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

³³ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 395-396; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

toilets represented the largest expenditures at \$600 per day. Another major expense of \$2,000 was the installation and usage of unlimited AT&T long distance service. Williams was relentless at soliciting donations and financial advances. Costs for items needed to mount protests invariably escalated because of rights activity. Williams had to “bully, beg and persuade” the right donors, according to one observer.³⁴

The second week of the march would radically alter the course of the black freedom struggle. Williams was at the center of the planning and implementation. By June 14, Flag Day, the marchers had arrived in Grenada, Mississippi. The night before, “I found about a thousand American flags,” Williams recalled. Mississippian James Eastland, the staunch segregationist and powerful United States Senator and chairman of the Senate’s Judiciary Committee, called the march a “circus.” Although the marchers did camp under circus tents, the march had very serious civil rights goals. Voters registered in numbers unheard of in the state. Over 700 new black voters were added to the voting rolls during the delegation’s trek through Grenada alone. Williams was at the forefront of the protests. He led 300 demonstrators during one of his infamous night marches to the Grenada County Courthouse. One reporter observed that Williams’s “voice could be heard for blocks” prior to the group’s arrival at the courthouse just after 9:00 p.m. Robert Green of SCLC joined a crowd of demonstrators who had surrounded a memorial to Confederate President Jefferson Davis and yelled, “We’re tired of seeing the rebel flags. Give me the flag of the United States, the flag of freedom.” Although historian Peniel Joseph suggests that Grenada was a “feel good story” of the Meredith March, any good feelings that existed between Williams and the rival organizations were slowly eroding.

³⁴ Goudsouzian, *Down the Crossroads*, 67.

Williams asserts that SCLC and SNCC openly quarreled during the demonstration.

“Grenada’s where it really broke, that’s where we really clashed...SNCC tried to take over the courthouse there.” Willie Ricks, SNCC’s advance man, had confiscated some of the flags that Williams had given to the marchers in celebration of Flag Day. “They went over there and built a fire and burned the flags. And they looked around, every damn person still had a flag,” Williams recalled, “Goddamn, you got me,” Ricks told Williams. It was evident that the rift was widening.³⁵

On Thursday, June 16, the tenth day of the Meredith March, Carmichael had been arrested for trespassing at the Stone Street Negro Elementary School. The school had been declared ineligible as a campsite for the marchers. Willie Ricks, who Williams claimed was “to Stokely what I was to King,” assumed leadership of SNCC staffers while Greenwood police detained his leader. Ricks’ role was to manage from twenty to forty people and to travel to plantations, to speak to sharecroppers “and to throw out Black Power and to give little Black Power speeches to get the reaction,” Carmichael recalled. Ricks had determined that the time was ripe to “drop it [Black Power] now,” Carmichael remembered. After Carmichael was released from jail, he made his way to Broad Street Park, and in the words of his biographer, “into history.” Ricks had already primed the crowd. Carmichael stepped before those who had gathered and reminded them of his dedication to the city of Greenwood and the states’ Second Congressional District. He told them that he had been arrested multiple times and would not be incarcerated again. “The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin’ us is to take over. What

³⁵ David Underhill, “March Doubles Vote Registration Along Route Mississippi,” *Southern Courier*, Vol. II, No. 25, June 18-19, 1966; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

we gonna start saying now is Black Power!” Reminiscent of the black church’s call and response dialogue between minister and congregants, Carmichael called whites in Mississippi unrepentant racists who refused to treat black as citizens. When he asked “What do we want?” the blacks fervently responded, “Black Power!” Although Carmichael did not invent the phrase or do Ricks’ laborious leg work of introducing the slogan to black Mississippians, he became an instant media sensation with the national news media. “Black Power,” Carmichael declared meant “negroes taking over the governments in the counties where Negroes have a majority.” Ricks argued that the phrase was “a more specific way of saying what we mean. When we say we want freedom, we mean we want black power.” Williams concluded: “I don't think you’d ever heard talk of Stokely Carmichael if it hadn’t been for Willie Ricks.”³⁶

After walking twelve miles Williams and the SCLC held a joint rally with SNCC the following day at the Leflore County Courthouse in Greenwood, Mississippi. With more than 800 marchers in attendance, Williams became increasingly vocal about Black Power without directly using the phrase. “We want what God wants everyone to have. The movement is not taking the sword from one man’s hand and putting it in his own hand,” Williams told a *Southern Courier* reporter before the rally. The demonstration almost reached a violent climax after a white service station attendant turned a high-pressured water hose on unsuspecting marchers. A white ally of the march wrested the hose away and drenched the attendant. Angered, he ran and returned with a pistol and

³⁶ Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2006), 141-142; David Underhill, “The Cry Changes to Black Power,” *Southern Courier*, No. II, No. 26, June 25-26, 1966; Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition of the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 376-377; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

billy club. Andrew Young quickly intervened and restored order. The presence of Medgar Evers' accused assassin, Byron de la Beckwith, also heightened tension at the rally. Beckwith wandered around the courthouse grounds inquiring about the presence of the slain activists' brother, Charles Evers. Carmichael, unfazed by the white supremacist, continued to build on the momentum from the preceding night. "The only way we can change things is with the ballot. That's black power," he said. Ricks and Williams continued to yell competing chants: "Black Power" and "Freedom Now" to the hundreds who had gathered at the park. Williams, a fierce advocate for blacks' unrestricted access to the ballot promised "Once we get that vote and put black faces in those uniforms... we will whip those policemen across the head with it." SCLC and SNCC leaders attempted to downplay the longstanding discord between the two organizations.³⁷

The marchers, estimated by journalists of the *Southern Courier* to be between 15,000-20,000, finally entered Jackson, Mississippi, on June 26 for a rally at the Mississippi State Capitol Building. Leading the eight-mile procession from Tougaloo College were Williams, Dr. King, James Meredith, Floyd McKissick, and other civil rights activists--each donning hats and short-sleeved white shirts in a futile attempt to moderate the hot and hazy Mississippi climate. Factionalism continued to determine the role of each organization at the Mississippi State Capitol. Charles Evers, the state's NAACP field secretary and brother of slain civil rights worker Medgar Evers, was barred from speaking at the final rally because the NAACP refused to sign the "march manifesto" that had been authored by Carmichael a few weeks prior. Meredith did not

³⁷ David Underhill, "The Cry Changes to Black Power," *Southern Courier*, No. II, No. 26, June 25-26, 1966; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 143; Gene Roberts, "Marchers Stage Mississippi Rally," *New York Times*, June 18, 1966.

minimize the contentious relationship when he addressed the crowd. “From what you’ve seen on television and what you have read in the newspaper, you might assume that I had been shot by a Negro,” said Meredith. Williams did not address the crowd, but King spoke with a profound sense of pessimism. The “Dream” he spoke of in Washington, D.C., three years earlier “had become a nightmare.” Although blacks were still poor and treated as second-class citizens, King said, he still believed that “even here in Mississippi, justice will come to all of God’s children.” Carmichael also spoke. Although he did not use the term “Black Power,” he forcefully reasserted that “blacks must build a power base in this country so strong that we will bring them [whites] to their knees every time they mess with us.” Although the intrusion of Black Power and discord between the organizations led the media and hostile politicians to paint the two-week-long protest as a failure, 2,877 blacks were registered by county registrars, and federal examining officers registered an additional 1,200 black voters. In total, the march led to the registration of 4,077 new African-American voters — the highest two-week total in the twentieth century Mississippi.³⁸

The confusion and lack of solidarity that plagued the major civil rights organizations after the march climaxed at the Mississippi State Capitol. Later that evening at a meeting at Pratt Memorial Methodist Church, Bob Smith, a SNCC staffer, hit Williams and four of his colleagues continued the assault. The disagreement apparently began after contributions totaling more than \$800 were stolen from a collection at the church which Williams vehemently denied was the work of angry SCLC

³⁸ David R. Underhill, “Civil Rights Groups to Push Through in Areas March Passed Through,” *Southern Courier*, Vol. 11, No. 27, July 2-3, 1966; Goudsouzian, *Down the Crossroads*, 290; Gene Roberts, “12,000 End Rights March to Jackson: Meredith Hailed at Rally at Mississippi Capitol,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1966.

staffers. Within two days, Dr. King announced the SCLC would “go it alone” during the duration of the summer-long campaign in Mississippi that had initially been a joint effort between SCLC, SNCC and CORE. The ideological disagreements over “Black Power” represented only one component of the dissension. Neither SCLC and SNCC, nor CORE (NAACP and the National Urban League did not play a significant role in the march after the meeting at the Lorraine) could agree on which organization would assume certain expenses that accompanied the march. Andrew Young maintained that SCLC had agreed to handle the bulk of the expenses, but “ended up having to pay practically all of them.” SNCC and CORE, vying for the attention which ultimately overshadowed SCLC’s presence on the march after the Black Power Speech, were unable to “pay a share” of the expenses “because of a shortage of funds,” said Young. The \$1,400 collected in oversized liquor boxes was only a fraction of expenses estimated to be near \$25,000. Williams said that he was “burned up” over the many disagreements during the march and vowed never to work with SNCC and CORE again.³⁹

The historian Aram Goudsouzian summed up the five-fold effect of the march: “In popular memory the Meredith march won resonance for the rise of Stokely Carmichael, the evolution of Martin Luther King, the bizarre crusade of James Meredith, the alienation of Lyndon Johnson and the rage of black militants.” Though Carmichael had paid his dues by working tirelessly in Mississippi and Alabama, his rise in the public conscience had at least two results. Known to some SNCC staffers as Stokely “Starmichael,” his celebrity generated desperately needed funds for the organization

³⁹ “Dr. King’s Group Plans Solo Drive, *New York Times*, June 29, 1966; Goudsouzian, *Down the Crossroads*, 277; Al Kuettner, “SCLC in Decision to Go it Alone,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 30, 1966.

while at the same time causing internal discord because of his short temperament and unilateral decision-making on organizational policy. Although the media offered varying interpretations of Black Power, Richard Bone of the *Times* suggested that the phrase had “Nothing to do with black supremacy, but much to do with manhood and self-reliance.” Other media outlets were not as accepting.⁴⁰

Williams was tapped by Dr. King to remain in Grenada, Mississippi, throughout the summer to direct the Mississippi Summer Project, a program of direct action aimed at making sure the state enforced the Civil and Voting Rights Acts. Grenada had a population of 8,000, forty-eight percent of which was black. Williams argued that, “Grenada could easily become the nation’s number one civil rights problem.” However, he and the ten SCLC staffers and four volunteers realized that organization and political mobilization would pose significant challenges. Local authorities were firmly committed to prohibiting blacks from exercising basic rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the new legislation. After the Meredith March, officials in Grenada had promised march leaders that demonstrators would be allowed to assemble peaceably as long as no one ran afoul of the laws. However, sixty-six people were arrested within the first seven days of the campaign. King accused the city fathers of renegeing on their pledges to lengthen voter registration hours, desegregate facilities in the courthouse, and extend police protection to blacks seeking to vote and demonstrate. They have “gone back on every promise,” King said. He threatened to return to Grenada after Williams and one hundred other demonstrators were beaten and jailed for marching to the county

⁴⁰ Goudsouzian, *Down the Crossroads*, 289; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 378; Richard Bone, “A Black Man’s Quarrel With the Christian God,” *New York Times Book Review*, September 11, 1966.

courthouse on July 7, less than two weeks after the Meredith March concluded on June 26.⁴¹

The city of Grenada had made a 360-degree turn. City fathers flatly refused to compromise with Williams. “There will be no concessions of any type or degree made to anyone anywhere,” said Sheriff Suggs Ingram. He was particularly hostile to Williams and his staff since Ingram felt that “they had it easy” during the two-week Meredith March. Williams, as King’s “kamikaze,” was willing to engage in dangerous direct-action tactics, including the night march. However, the promise of the publicity that had followed previous demonstrations was not enough to convince his ten staff workers to subject themselves to the brutality that seemed almost inevitable. Williams accordingly altered his strategy and incorporated tactics that were not as dangerous as after-dark demonstrations.⁴²

On July 13, Williams orchestrated a “Swim In” at Grenada Lake. Williams decided to transform a street march into a splash party since the temperatures in the Mississippi heat reached 101 degrees. Approximately fifty blacks swam in a lake which was being managed by the United States Corps of Army Engineers. The lake was technically open to both blacks and whites; however, intimidation from local whites had ensured that African Americans stayed away from the technically integrated body of water. Although no violence occurred, twenty whites appeared willing to stand at the side of the lake in the blazing Mississippi heat rather than swim. At the conclusion of the

⁴¹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 403; “Grenada Rescinds Open Door Policy,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 16, 1966; Gene Roberts, “Dr. King Declares Rights Movement is Close to a Split,” *New York Times*, July 9, 1966.

⁴² Dittmer, *Local People*, 404.

hour-long protest, Williams next proposed a boycott of all white stores in Grenada. He told approximately 130 blacks at the Bell Flower Baptist Church that, “Clothes don’t make the man.” He challenged all blacks to cancel their credit accounts with all white stores until Grenada became an “open city.” Unlike SNCC, SCLC welcomed participation from liberal whites. Before the conclusion of the mass meeting, Williams publicly acknowledged the presence of Ron Gordon, a white eighteen-year-old freshman at the University of California. In an apparent rebuff to SNCC, which had all but expelled many of its white volunteers, Williams said “I am glad to see these young white civil rights workers down here.”⁴³

Carmichael and the rest of SNCC’s delegation were also in Grenada, but were not invited to attend the rally at Bell Flower Baptist Church. Observers speculated that the radical adherents of Black Power were barred from SCLC events because both organizations were still vying for control of the freedom campaign in Grenada. Williams and Carmichael had spoken before the rally, but Stokely was told that he would not be permitted to speak because he planned to encourage blacks in attendance not to march. “I’ve had it all with the marching just to get your head beat in,” Carmichael told reporters as he stood outside of the church. Williams articulated a very different philosophy from the pulpit: “As long as there’s man, there’s going to be a need to dramatize the injustices.” He promised the crowd, which had grown to approximately 300, “We’re going to turn Grenada upside down and then set it right-side up.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Roy Reed, “At 101 degrees, Protest Becomes Swim In: Negroes at Grenada, Miss., Splash Instead of March,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1966.

⁴⁴ “SNCC Head Barred from SCLC Rally: Carmichael Told No on ‘No March’ Message,” *Chicago Defender*, July 13, 1966.

On August 8, Williams and an estimated 350 demonstrators were violently attacked by a gang of young white toughs after beginning their march from the Chat and Chew Café on Union Street. The mob of whites, either sanctioned or tolerated by Grenada's city fathers, hurled bricks, bottles and pipes at the defenseless marchers as they gathered at the courthouse square. Williams was injured after he was struck on the knee with a canister of tear gas. Sheriff Ingram was under a court injunction to provide reasonable protection at the demonstration. He opted to disregard the order. In a statement to the press, Dr. King condemned Governor Paul Johnson and Senator James Eastland for permitting the police to sit idly by while protesters were assaulted. "If such an atrocity had been committed against white persons," King said from the SCLC's convention in Jackson, Mississippi, "the state authorities would have crushed the oppressors with National Guardsmen." Williams, though badly injured, cautioned protesters leaning toward Carmichael's more militant crusade. "The only chance whites got is for Negroes to turn violent," he said. "The minute the police start throwing tear gas on us and the Negroes start throwing bottles, rocks and bricks, you gonna end up in slavery for a century." Williams's warning exhibited the same common sense he had shown to civil rights activists in Lowndes County in January after the LCFO chose the snarling black panther as its symbol. Black demonstrators in the northern Mississippi town continued their advocacy of nonviolence, and the Grenada police still refused to protect them or their children.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., "Statement on Violence in Grenada, Mississippi," June 9, 1966, Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University; "Negroes Attacked in Mississippi Civil Rights Protest: 350 Battered by Bricks, Bottles in Racial Clash," Chicago Daily Defender, August 11, 1966.

By 1966, twelve years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, black and white schools in Mississippi and most of the South remained segregated. However, in the summer of 1966, United States District Judge Claude Clayton authorized a “freedom of choice” proposal designed to allow black students in Grenada to attend John Rundle High School and the Lizzie Horn Elementary School. The number of students expected to exercise the option to attend the two schools exceeded the total that school and county officials had expected. When the school year officially began on September 12, ten days after the schools had been scheduled to open, approximately 150 black students entered the schools without incident. However, another fifty students were not permitted to attend classes. Anticipating trouble, school officials authorized both schools to close at 12:00 noon. Approximately sixty black pupils under the age of eighteen were brutally beaten by a white mob as they attempted to leave the campuses. Thirty-three children suffered serious injuries. UPI reporter Robert Gordon later testified in Clayton’s court, that “white men were beating people with ax handles, chains, and whatever” until police intervened and said “okay boys...they’ve had enough.” A doctor testified that one student had a skull fracture. Even the conservative Judge Clayton was disheartened by the attacks on the children. He referred to the event as “senseless” and savage.” “I am astonished that such violence could have happened once,” said Clayton. “I am absolutely amazed that it could have happened as many times as it did with no greater reaction [from law enforcement] than was shown by the record.” Police chief Pat Ray testified that he was in his cruiser without a radio for almost two hours and was unaware of the attack. He proposed that the Mississippi Highway Patrol should assume responsibility for the protection of the students until the tension subsided. Evidently the threat of the MHP was

effective since one man shouted at a city council meeting “You get the highway patrol out of here and in twenty-four hours there won’t be a nigger left.”⁴⁶

On September 20, one week after the students were beaten, Williams led a delegation of approximately 162 students to the Rundle High School and Lizzie Horn Elementary School under the guard of FBI agents and the Mississippi Highway Patrol. The number of students enrolled represented approximately ten percent of the student population at both schools. Once the students arrived, they were shocked to discover that they were assigned to classes based on gender, but the integration of both schools was seen as a momentary victory for Williams and the SCLC. During the next two years, historian John Dittmer suggests that fewer than 8,000 pupils were enrolled in Mississippi schools previously reserved for white students — less than four percent of the black students between the ages of six and eighteen in the Magnolia State.⁴⁷

Williams seldom employed only one method of direct action when leading major civil rights campaigns in southern cities. Although protest marches were crucial, he also masterminded a series of successful boycotts to cripple the white establishment. Grenada, Mississippi, was no different. The Southern Courier called the boycott “very effective.” Many black patrons refused to shop in stores that did not have the “Grenada County Freedom Movement Approves” sign in its window. During the two-month boycott of some white and black establishments, at least three stores were forced to close down. One storeowner lamented that before the boycott his establishment brought in close to \$1,500

⁴⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 404-405; “Tough Miss. U.S. Judge Warns Grenada Cops He Means Business: Attack on 33 Children Amazes Him,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 24, 1966; Gail Falk, “Trouble in Grenada: Court Orders Protection for Negro Pupils,” *Southern Courier*, Vol. II, No. 39, September 24-25, 1966.

⁴⁷ Dittmer, *Local People*, 406; Edward C. Burks, “Dr. King Arrives in Grenada, Miss.: He Tells 1,000 at Meeting We’re Going to Remain,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1966.

per week. By the end of September, his weekly sales barely reached \$500. However, the success of the boycott could not be sustained since SCLC staff was unable to remain in the northern Mississippi town beyond October.⁴⁸

As Williams and his staff left Mississippi, they could claim a few victories. During one of the last mass meetings, one staffer maintained that “We’ve gotten hundreds of people registered in [Grenada], we’ve done integrated every school in the county, and the boycott has almost broken whitey down.” However, local activists were not prepared to assume the responsibility of the campaign without Williams and the support of the SCLC. One Grenada attorney suggested that the SCLC did not permit local blacks to have a voice when critical decisions were made about the objectives of the campaign. Dittmer suggests that Mississippi did not differ that much after the Meredith March. Segregation, oppression and depression still characterized every aspect of black life. Once again, the SCLC appeared to have excited a community that longed for social change only to be reminded of the bleak prospects for meaningful change.⁴⁹

Williams was tired and desperately wanted to spend time with his wife and four children. Barbara, his eldest daughter, was eighteen and preparing to go off to college by the end of the year. Elisabeth, his second eldest child, was now fourteen-years-old and eager to make plans for her fifteenth birthday party the following February. Hosea Williams Jr. and Andre, born in 1955 and 1956, respectively, were now eleven and ten-years-old. Williams’s youngest daughter, Yolanda, was only six and in her first quarter as a first grader. Williams realized that his children were growing up without him since he

⁴⁸ Gail Falk, “New Freedom Movement Fights for an Open City,” *Southern Courier*, Vol. II, No. 39, September 24-25, 1966.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

spent more time on the road than at home. However, when King decided to appoint Williams to lead a major voting rights drive in very hostile territory, he accepted his first long-term northern assignment.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Hosea L. Williams, "Biographical Sketch," Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

Chapter 6

Chicago, the Kentucky Derby, and the Poor People's Campaign, 1966-1968

On December 2, 1966, Dr. King announced that the Chicago Freedom Movement was mobilizing to launch an “intensive” voter registration and voter motivation campaign as part of an overall strategy to improve the poverty and inadequate housing on Chicago’s predominately black Southside. King emphasized that registration and education of voters were the hallmarks of an informed electorate. King asserted that although the freedom movement was “staunchly-non partisan,” it “never claimed to be nonpolitical.” The SCLC president tapped Hosea to lead the effort. “Mr. Williams...has been responsible for registering hundreds of thousands of Negroes throughout the South,” said King. “We are grateful that he has consented to leading our voter drive here.” Williams had previously expressed his disagreement to King and other SCLC executives about a campaign in Chicago since such an effort would lead to the erosion of northern support. “King came and pleaded with me,” remembered Williams. “I had not been in Chicago. I’d go there for a march, speech, but I had not been considered part of the Chicago movement.” SCLC had not been successful in Chicago prior to Williams’s arrival in late 1966 because the whole situation was a “tightrope,” recalled Andrew Young.¹

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “Statement on Chicago Freedom Movement,” December 2, 1966, Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

Soon-to-be four-term mayor, Richard Daley, presented the most formidable obstacle to reform in Chicago. “Daley resented King” and the SCLC coming to town, said longtime Chicago activist John McDermott. “He was angry at the notion that Chicago was just like Mobile or Montgomery or Birmingham. He saw this as a progressive northern city that had progressive policies. He [Daley] thought of himself as a northern Democrat.” He even persuaded certain vendors to defray costs for SCLC events. However, the Coordinating Council of Community Organization (CCCCO), a coalition of nearly seventy-five civil rights organizations, believed that substantive change in Chicago could not be achieved unless Daley was defeated. “SCLC could not take on the responsibility of running Daley out of Chicago,” protested Young. SCLC was unable to untie the proverbial Gordian knot. “I was to go up there and really bail them out” because “SCLC was leaving Chicago in really sad shape,” said Williams. In spite of Williams’s successful record of creating meaningful change in hostile cities, he could not have realized that his initiative to educate and empower Chicago’s black electorate would be stillborn.²

Williams’s mission in the Chicago Freedom Movement was to focus on key elections of aldermen scheduled to be held in February. He would need to rely on his quick wit and understanding of the criminal element to maneuver around the underbelly of Chicago’s more confrontational splinter groups. He would need to contend with a militant black Muslim faction in the city that was determined to rid Chicago of King and

²John McDermott, interview by Shelia C. Bernard, October 25, 1988, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection; Harvard Sitkoff, *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 166; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 381, 406.

his nonviolent philosophy. He also had to work around the second-tier of semi-organized crime syndicates. “Only a fool would take the gangs on in Chicago — which I did,” said Williams. “I had an army with me. A very, could-be violent army,” he remembered. Although he believed in nonviolence, “I had gangsters” by my side in Chicago, said Williams. His chief enforcer was Lester “Big Lester” Hankerson, who had worked to keep hustlers in check in seaports near Savannah, Georgia. “Big Lester,” Williams said, “was known for grabbing you by the head and kicking all your teeth out with his knee.” Williams’s inner circle also included Willie Bolden, another one of his captains from the campaign in Savannah. Although Williams did worry that the radical black elements could jeopardize his safety, he still prepared to grapple with unforeseen obstacles.³

Williams and twelve SCLC staff members kicked off the citywide voter registration drive at a mass meeting on December 20 at the Bethel Baptist Church. He started off at a significant disadvantage because SCLC and CCCO had been unable to produce the \$45,000 budget needed to finance Williams’s strategy of creating a vibrant presence in eighteen of the city’s fifty wards, then devoting significant energy and resources to two-thirds of these wards, and finally whittle down the number to five or six that evidenced the most promise. Williams advised attendees at a steering committee meeting that the approach they had formulated to organize potential voters around certain issues should be revised. Williams’s experiences in Savannah, St. Augustine, Selma, Birmingham, and Grenada, suggested that “people vote against before they vote for — urban renewal, welfare, education and economic exploitation.” The issue most likely to

³ “Rev. Williams Named Leader of SCLC Voter Campaign,” *Chicago Defender*, December 3, 1966.

rally black voters and get them to the polls was the prospect of electing alderman more sympathetic to their interests in the administration of the city.⁴

On December 20, Williams's skills were tested just before the beginning of the first major rally at Bethel Baptist Church. An unnamed leader of the local Black Nationalist faction interrupted Williams at the church and told him that they would not be allowed to hold the meeting. "You've got to be kidding me," Williams said to the young radical. "No, Hosea," he said. "I'm not kidding. No bullshit at all. We're going to tear this meeting up." Immediately, Williams recalled, about twenty-five or thirty allies of the Black Nationalist movement stood up. "There's going to be blood. Everyone of them got loaded guns," said the young thug. "Every goddamn one of them is ready to die." Williams held both hands up to quell the discord. After a prolonged discussion between Williams and the young nationalist in the church's basement, both sides resolved their issues for the time, and Congressman John Conyers, the young African American representative from Detroit, Michigan, addressed the crowd about the importance of voting.⁵

Shortly after the mass meeting concluded, Williams flew to Atlanta to spend time with family and celebrate his forty-first birthday. Upon his return to Chicago he teamed with Albert Raby of the CCCO and worked out of that organization's headquarters at 366 E. 47th Street on Chicago's Southside. The initiative honed in on young people from ages twelve to twenty to motivate older members of the community to vote in the upcoming

⁴Alan B. Anderson and George Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 306.

⁵Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

elections. Williams created the themes for the campaign: “Register and Vote...For me!” and “I’m too Young to go and Vote. . . . What’s Your Excuse?” The first voting registration drive, dubbed the “Vote-A-Baloo,” took place at Orchestra Hall on January 13. The “Vote-A-Baloo” was actually a rally to encourage approximately 2,000 youth to “pledge themselves to carry the voter registration campaign to adults in their various communities,” said Williams. Popular singers, most notably Jean Pace of the Staple Singers, entertained. Williams acknowledged that black Chicagoans carried significant untapped electoral power, but he was concerned about their willingness to actively participate in the political process. “The Negroes’ desire for better political representation must be reckoned with,” said Williams. “But this will not happen until the Negro voters become aware” of the collective control they possess in local affairs. Approximately one million of the city’s one and a half-million residents were black. A National Urban League study revealed that four years earlier only 630,000 eligible blacks to vote were registered. Only forty-seven percent, or 296,100, had actually voted compared to seventy-eight percent of whites who cast ballots. His guarded optimism turned into vocal pessimism after disappointing results from the “Vote-A-Baloo.”⁶

Williams’s displeasure with Chicago’s African American electorate and the overall conditions of the “Windy City” made him lambast local blacks in the media. “It’s cold here,” he said. He expressed a deep dissatisfaction for black apathy and the lack of efficient organization. “I don’t like Chicago,” he said. “We’re [SCLC] used to working with people who want to be freed. The Chicago Negro,” Williams lamented, “isn’t

⁶ “Vote-A-Baloo Set: Registration Drive to Involve Youths,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, January 13, 1967.

concerned about what the power structure is doing to him.” Williams was not the only SCLC staff member to experience mounting frustration at the unwillingness to cooperate.

Leon Hall, a staffer from Montgomery, Alabama, reported that a black woman attacked him with an icepick as he canvassed for voters in one of the Southside’s dilapidated tenements. Williams’s chief enforcer, “Big Lester” Hankersen, maintained that black “people won’t even talk to us.” Although Hankersen had been assaulted in Grenada and in Alabama while working with Williams, he suggested he would “rather be working there” because “people in Chicago are not interested in first-class citizenship.” After observing Daley’s operation and the apathy of blacks, Williams concluded that “There is no difference between the Daley Machine in Chicago and the Wallace machine in Alabama.” Blacks in Alabama expressed a greater desire to be free of restrictions than Chicagoans who appeared beaten down and unwilling to fight. Williams asserted that he had “never seen such hopelessness. The Negroes of Chicago have a greater feeling of powerlessness than any I ever saw,” said Williams. “They don’t participate in the governmental process because they are beaten down psychologically.”⁷

Rev. Delton W. Franz, the thirty-five-year-old white pastor of the Woodlawn Mennonite Church on Chicago’s Southside, argued that the perceived black apathy amongst blacks reliant on some form of governmental assistance resulted from fear. “Every welfare recipient is afraid to oppose the wishes of the precinct captain,” said Rev. Franz. Blacks who received housing assistance also chose to remain apolitical. “Everyone living in public housing is afraid,” Rev. Franz recalled. “They have been told that the

⁷ Donald Janson, “Dr. King Plagued by Apathy and Resistance in Chicago Slums: Rights Leaders Cite Some Gains, but Find Problems of Northern Ghetto Tougher than Those in the South,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 1967.

machine alderman is the one who insures them living quarters.” Williams’s remarks drew the ire of the SCLC’s executive leadership and movement supporters. Andrew Young and Stanley Levinson, one of King’s closest northern confidants, called King while he was vacationing in the Caribbean to consider the best way to repair the breach caused by Williams’s candor. Levinson suggested Williams be terminated. King, though furious with his wayward lieutenant, balked at taking such a draconian measure. In a meeting in Chicago, “they [Young and Levinson] demanded that King fire me, and I got so angry. I wanted to fight so bad...I’m up here giving my life, putting my life on the line,” and I was not appreciated for being willing to make the ultimate sacrifice, Williams recalled. Although he had a tough exterior, he could still be hurt. Talk of his being fired reminded him of Roy Wilkins refusing to seat him on the NAACP’s National Board of Directors. “I got so crazy. I ran out...ran down the street crying,” said Williams. Abernathy ran after him and told him, “‘King will stick with you.’” In a futile attempt to register as many blacks as possible before the January 30 deadline, Williams, Abernathy and Young lobbied Daley and the Cook County Registrar for off-site voter registration with the assistance of deputy registrars, recalled Young.⁸

The last minute efforts to expand Chicago’s black electorate were derailed by the Chicago Blizzard of 1967. The snow affected northeast Illinois and the northwest section of Indiana. SCLC had set a goal of raising \$30,000 to finance the Chicago Freedom Movement. On January 26, the day of the fundraiser, Williams recalled that city was blanketed with snow by 3:00 p.m. “I ain’t never seen so much snow...with the exception

⁸ Ibid., For more on the Mennonite’s participation in the Chicago campaign, please see Todd Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 20010); Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 544.

of what I had seen in Germany,” Williams said. “We nearly froze to death.” Daley ordered city workers to work around the clock to clear the streets. By the end of January, the two-month voter registration drive had succeeded in registering only several hundred new voters.⁹

The election took place on February 28, 1967. Williams, in one last effort to encourage local blacks to elect new aldermen, encouraged black voters to shun the Chicago’s Democratic Party and vote for independent candidates. “I urge every Negro with a view toward the future to vote for the full slate of independent candidates,” said Williams. The *Chicago Defender* quoted his characterization of the city government as a “dictatorship” reinforced by black aldermen whose allegiance to the political machine prevented them from ably and honestly representing the interests of constituents. Williams maintained that voters had elected an “undue” number of white councilmen since blacks represented thirty-two percent of the city’s population but were only represented by twelve percent of the city councilmen. Young disagreed with Williams’s directive that blacks abandon the Democratic Party. “It would have been far better for Chicago if blacks had been encouraged to register in large numbers and vote Democratic,” said Young many years later. On the whole, the Chicago Freedom Movement campaign met with little success. The aldermen elected were part of Mayor Daley’s political machine.¹⁰

⁹ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 418; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 536.

¹⁰ “Democrats Blasted: Back Independents Says SCLC Aide,” *Chicago Defender*, February 28, 1967; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 419.

Shortly after the disappointing elections, Williams and his staff abandoned Chicago and made the five-hour drive to Louisville, Kentucky, at the request of Rev. A.D. King, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s younger brother. They were charged with assisting the SCLC's Kentucky affiliate in its protest of the city council's reluctance to eliminate discriminatory tactics in housing. The open housing movement in Louisville had its origins in 1963 when the West End Community Council (WECC), a local mix of black and white residents, formed a coalition to stop the pernicious practices of "blockbusting" and "white flight." Both phenomena adversely impacted property values and the overall community climate. In 1964 the white population in Louisville was 310,717. The city's black population numbered 78,327, a mere eighteen percent of the city's residents. A.D. King, who was simultaneously serving as pastor of the Zion Baptist Church and chair of the Kentucky Christian Leadership Conference (KCLC), requested the SCLC's assistance in early 1967. Tensions had heightened between the African American leadership and the city leadership over a bill presented to the Board of Aldermen in September, 1966. The legislation called for fines and jail sentences for any individual or entity discriminating "because of race, color, creed, or national origin in the sale, rental, or financing of housing by salesmen, lenders, or mortgage bankers." The Louisville Real Estate Board and the county's board of aldermen led the opposition to the penalty mandating jail sentences.¹¹

Back and forth proposals between the black leadership and the city fathers finally precipitated the demonstrations that Mayor Kenneth Schmied, the county board of

¹¹ Tracy E. K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway of the South: Louisville, Kentucky, 1945-1980* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2009,) 113, 117; Louisville Metropolitan Human Relations Commission, "Facts for Action," Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

aldermen and business owners dreaded. On March 7, exactly one year after “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, Williams led the first march of the Louisville fair housing campaign to Mayor Schmied’s furniture store, the American Home Supply Company. At the conclusion of the demonstration, Williams left Kentucky and drove to Atlanta for an SCLC staff meeting to address lingering personnel issues. In his absence, the local African American leadership, including Reverends Fred Sampson, Leo Lessor and A.D. King, picked up where Williams left off by leading marches to the homes of Schmied and the Board of Aldermen. The protests showed that blacks in Louisville were committed to pressuring the city fathers through nonviolent direct action.¹²

Williams and other members of the executive staff were summoned by King to a meeting to discuss the discord amongst the leadership and the rank and file. Williams outlined the problems he saw with the organization in a memo to King dated March 8, 1967. The SCLC’s “volunteers and followers” were dwindling primarily because of the organization’s blemished reputation in southern black communities. After they organized, staff mobilized and motivated blacks “to forthrightly confront their oppressors and then run and leave the same negroes at the mercy of their oppressors,” wrote Williams. “People” feel as if they are “secondary to our primary objectives--building images, getting publicity and raising funds.” The SCLC “failed to bring about meaningful change,” continued Williams, because the leadership in the previous “battle fronts and campaign grounds...seriously question whether or not their communities were better or worsened by our presence.” Williams respectfully suggested that King was out of touch

¹² K’Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway of the South*, 124; John A. Kleber (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 789.

with what was happening. Leaders hesitated to voice true feelings of communities about SCLC in large measure because of the “fascination” of King’s “mere presence.”¹³

In the same memo, Williams addressed the issues relative to staff problems, which he described as “unbelievable.” The organization was wasting approximately \$23,000 in “salaries and subsistence” on people who had not been involved with SCLC’s functions in almost three months. He also enumerated what he thought to be the most pressing personnel issues that hindered the SCLC’s operational efficiency and effectiveness in the North and South:

One of the first problems we must eliminate, is the feeling of the “Northern” (Bevel) and “Southern” (Hosea) staff. Our entire staff must unquestionably understand that all of us are a part of SCLC's staff, period. You must make it crystal clear that every SCLC staff member must respect responsibilities assigned. Some say that I have gone too far in this area, but I still can demand a fair amount of respect from the Southern Field Staff. At least, I have not lost them completely. There is proof that other executives have gone much too far in the opposite direction. An example is Rev. Bevel and how he relates to the staff working with him in Chicago. Bevel allowed this question of staff independence and staff choice to get out of hand. He got himself in a position of not being able to require anything from the vast majority of the staff assigned to him. Another example is Rev. Young who has allowed the staff to question his authority and his position on staff independence to the point that he is unable to require many staff members to function to the degree which is necessary if SCLC is going to bring about meaningful change. Remember, one of our greatest problems in the Chicago Voter registration drive was the fact that regular Chicago staff (definitely including Debbie) had been taught indirectly to disrespect my position and authority just as the staff working in the South had been unintentionally taught indirectly to disrespect the position and authority of certain other executive members.¹⁴

As a possible remedy, Williams asked if someone could devise an “efficient

¹³ Memorandum, Hosea Williams to Martin Luther King Jr., Re: SCLC, March 8, 1967. The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center.

¹⁴ Ibid.

means of appraising [King] of the total scope of operations.” King agreed that Williams had made several valid points. He also informed SCLC executives during the two day-meeting on March 9-10 that a series of candidates should be considered to serve as Executive Director. Williams warned King that the “field staff is retired” and that a sixty-day “rest and study” break would go a long way in rejuvenating the staff’s depleted energy. King did not embrace this last suggestion since he and other members of the executive staff, after due consideration, had decided to initiate a major SCLC campaign in Louisville, Kentucky, as the date loomed for the annual Kentucky Derby.¹⁵

As King’s “kamikaze,” Williams was eager to force the city of Louisville into a compromise on the housing issue by using the threat of demonstrations at the nation’s most celebrated horse race at Churchill Downs. As part of a series of nonviolent direct-action demonstrations, Williams, Rev. A.D. King and other SCLC staffers including J.T. Johnson, Henry Brownlee, Phil Goober, Mike Whitman, Mike Bibler and Winters Knott, led a sit-in at the City Council’s meeting room on March 14. The demonstrators were dragged away and some were beaten. After the protest at City Hall Williams thoroughly re-examined the housing situation in Louisville and developed a plan to force the city to adopt a strong housing legislative agenda.¹⁶

Williams’s five-point plan, modeled on the civil and voting rights protest campaigns he had organized since the 1950s, outlined the most specific details of the Louisville strategy. Tactics demanded revolved around an organized field office and a

¹⁵ Ibid., Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 548; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

¹⁶ Southern Christian Leadership Conference, “Southern Christian Leadership Conference Staff News,” March, 1967, The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center; K’Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway of the South*, 124.

strong staff. Williams obviously stressed the need for office supplies -- a mimeograph machine, paper cutter, and two telephone lines with one phone per line. He also called for 1,000 index cards, poster-boards, mimeograph ink and buttons with the words "Get Rid of Slums." Williams appointed J.T. Johnson, an SCLC staffer who had worked in St. Augustine and other project areas, as second-in-command. Henry Brownlee, another veteran staffer, would head the production department. Williams assigned Bibler, Whitman and Robert Sims to rally high school and college students. Knott and Lester "Big Lester" Hankerson, were assigned to work the street corners and manage the block workers.

Under the "Ideas" section of his proposal, Williams planned to have night marches throughout the city followed by mass meetings that would be publicized two days in advance. To encourage the youth to participate, Williams suggested hosting "block dances" and "street rallies." He recognized that many of Louisville's black residents might not be fully informed on the housing issue, so he planned to prepare a "master leaflet" to outline the most important points. A leaflet would be effective but the radio would be even more efficient. Williams stressed the importance of securing four radio spots that would not only highlight "yesterday's and last night's activities," but would also inform the listeners of "today's and tonight's activities." He had to grapple with the same problems that reduced the efficiency of the national SCLC. Under the "Problems" heading of his plan, he wrote "Staff does not feel free to go out and do what is necessary to get the job done." Williams also recognized that many of the men were not firmly focused because they were constantly "chasing young girls." He also cited transportation and the inability to raise funds for the campaign as impediments to success

in Louisville.¹⁷

Williams was firmly committed to assisting the local African American leadership in passing a suitable fair housing ordinance. “Derby or no derby,” Williams said, “there’s going to be some hell in Louisville until a housing bill is passed.” The specific tactics he recommended was reflected experience gained from the campaigns he had led in other southern cities hostile to fair and equitable treatment of black citizens. He proposed “drive-ins” around Churchill Downs. Cooperating drivers would drive their cars as slowly as the law allowed to prevent horse owners from arriving at their stables before the race began. As a secondary, and perhaps more dangerous, method of protest against the city’s failure to enact fair housing legislation, Williams suggested that protesters actually launch themselves onto the racetrack and “sit-in” on the final stretch of the contest, halting the race altogether.¹⁸

Although Williams and his staff were limited by a lack of resources, they were still able to galvanize enough support within Louisville to stage successive protests for the next month. The city fathers unintentionally united liberal and conservative forces within the black community after three tactical missteps. First, on April 11, the board of aldermen defeated another open ordinance proposal submitted by Mayor Schmied that shielded buildings where owners lived. The mayor’s amended version also exempted all apartment complexes for the first year after they were constructed. Second, several violent attacks against peaceful black demonstrators rallied the professional, or

¹⁷ Hosea L. Williams, “Proposed Plan for Louisville Open Housing Project,” March 14, 1967, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

¹⁸ David Hill, “Two Horses, Two Races: The Civil Rights Movement Goes to the Kentucky Derby,” *AWL*, May 5, 2011.

“responsible” elements of the black community to embrace a more direct form of protest. Finally, Jefferson County’s Circuit Judge Marvin J. Sternberg issued an injunction barring the Williams’s night marches outright and limiting the size of daytime demonstrations to one hundred and fifty persons.¹⁹

By April 29, nearly five hundred protesters had been arrested on a wide variety of charges. The most serious, “banding together to commit a felony,” a violation that carried a maximum penalty of one year in jail, was levied against forty-two demonstrators. One week before the 93rd running of the Kentucky Derby, Louisville and the city’s African American leadership were still stuck at an impasse since both sides were unable to reach a compromise on the open housing ordinance. Williams informed several hundred advocates of fair housing legislation that Stokely Carmichael of SNCC, and CORE National Director Floyd McKissick, would be in Louisville the following week to assist with demonstrations during “Derby Week.” Williams and A.D. King, with the assistance of Carmichael and McKissick, planned to protest along the Pegasus Parade route on Thursday, May 4 — an effective threat since close to two hundred thousand spectators annually attended the race.

Referred to as demonstration “technicians” by Ben A. Franklin of the *New York Times*, the four activists, in a manner reminiscent of Williams’s strategy in St. Augustine to embarrass that city as it was celebrating its Quadricentennial in 1964, planned to use the Kentucky Derby and the city’s fear of losing tourism-generated revenue to force the mayor and board of aldermen to enact a fair housing measure. Anxiety concerning the police’s ability to control both large crowds and demonstrators drove the lawmakers and

¹⁹ Ben A. Franklin, “Rights Forces Gather for Louisville Housing Drive,” *New York Times*, April 17, 1967; K’Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway of the South*, 129.

Derby organizers' decision to limit the week's activities. Local lawmakers reasoned that the threat of protests during the weeklong activities outweighed the economic advantages promised by the parade and therefore decided to cancel it. Other "Derby Week" activities continued as planned. Williams decided to conduct "trial runs." During one of the lesser races held on May 1, six of Williams's staff members, led by Robert Sims, jumped on the racetrack and bolted across the path of racing Thoroughbreds. The young demonstrators were immediately arrested, but the protest heightened tension amongst law enforcement officers and Louisville's leadership community as May 6 approached.²⁰

Williams, as well his staffers in Louisville, were firmly committed to creating a major nonviolent disturbance during the Kentucky Derby. Advocates of the radical approach had adopted as their policy "No housing, No derby." To their dismay, however, Dr. King and local moderate African American leaders in Louisville decided on the night of May 5 to cancel any demonstrations during the nation's most celebrated horserace the following day. "We were going to break up that damn Kentucky Derby" until King intervened, Williams said later. King's opposition was rooted in the fear that riots and severe injury would be the inevitable result of the protest. Although Williams did not break ranks with King, his staffers were not as willing to genuflect to the SCLC president's will. They had long anticipated disturbing the Derby. They decided to refrain from engaging in any additional demonstrations in the hope that city officials would relent and authorize a fair housing measure that both parties could accept.²¹

²⁰ Douglas Robinson, "Louisville Aides Seek Derby Peace: But Rights Leader Remain Adamant on Housing Law," *New York Times*, April 29, 1967; K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway of the South*, 136.

²¹ Douglas Robinson, "Protest at Derby is Reported Postponed: Rights Leaders Said to have Ruled Out Demonstrations," *New York Times*, May 6, 1967; K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway of the South*, 136.

The fervor for direct action waned. Local advocates for fair housing decided to turn to the ballot as a remedy for the city's reluctance to advance a satisfactory fair housing ordinance. One historian maintained that the number of nighttime demonstrators dwindled from a few hundred to between fifty and seventy-five after King decided not to protest at the Kentucky Derby. Demonstrations were soon limited to one per week while the main focus of local organizations for example, the Committee on Open Housing (COH), shifted to conducting voter registration drives to oust the current aldermen in the upcoming municipal elections and elect candidates who would push an acceptable ordinance to passage. Georgia Davis, chairman of the All Citizens Voter Registration Crusade, announced that as of July 15, 1967, more than 26,000 eligible blacks were not registered to vote in Jefferson County. She pledged in a letter to Vernon Jordan, the president of the Southern Regional Council, that she and other volunteers would commit to register no less than 20,000 blacks by September 9 — the last day to register voters in time for the November 7 state and county-wide elections. The registration efforts netted an 1,115 gain in Louisville's West End district alone.²²

The African American community used the ballot to its advantage during the November 7 election to the county board of aldermen. After the votes were tallied, Democrats occupied eleven of the twelve seats on the county board of aldermen. Louise Reynolds, an African American woman and six-term incumbent, had been the only alderman to advocate for fair housing legislation the previous spring; she became the only candidate to retain her seat. On December 13, 1967, the board finally passed an open

²² K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway of the South*, 139; Letter, Georgia Davis to Vernon Jordan, July 15, 1967, The Papers of Rev. Hosea L. Williams, Auburn Avenue Research Library. On November 7, Georgia Davis was elected as the first woman and African American to the Kentucky State Senate.

housing ordinance by a nine to three margin which declared that selling, purchasing, exchanging, renting, leasing, or withholding housing accommodations from any prospective buyer or renter was illegal and punishable by five hundred dollars per offense. With the law's passage, Louisville, Kentucky, became one of only a few southern cities to pass a fair housing ordinance before President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968 into law the following year. Dr. King called the new open housing law another example of how racial progress can be achieved through aggressive nonviolent action.”²³

Although Williams played an integral role in the planning and demonstrations in Louisville and should have enjoyed the triumph that resulted from a very demanding campaign, his pent-up frustration with the SCLC executive leadership compelled him to submit his resignation to Dr. King on the same day the ordinance passed in Kentucky. “I called Ralph [Abernathy] that night and I said ‘Ralph, I want you to take my resignation to Martin. I’ve decided that I’m going back to private life.’” Williams cited the “mental and physical requirements of his position” as the reason for his desire to leave. He emphasized his dedication to King and the causes they both held dear. “I have acted somewhat in a sacrificial manner and the assistance I have given SCLC,” he wrote, “has aided in bringing about meaningful social change in the South and throughout the world.” Evidence suggests that Williams felt as if he had been snubbed by Dr. King after the SCLC president made several personnel changes, particularly the hiring of William

²³ “Election Results in Louisville Race Still Unclear,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1967; Press Release, “Civil Rights Drive by SCLC And Other Groups Wins Open Housing Victory in Louisville,” December 30, 1967.

Rutherford.”²⁴

King appointed William Rutherford, a Ph.D., as Executive Director of the SCLC during the organization’s four-day staff retreat in late November in Frogmore, South Carolina — two-and-a-half weeks before Williams submitted his resignation. Rutherford was brought in to “serve as a manager in mounting, developing, and installing certain management systems that hadn’t existed before,” said King. Williams believed that Rutherford’s hiring had an unspoken purpose relative to his position in King’s inner circle. “I always will believe” that “one of Bill’s jobs was to get rid of me at the organization,” said Williams. After the changes were made, King polled the other staffers to gauge their support. Williams informed King of his displeasure. “You mean to tell me that you would bring a man in as executive director,” over me Williams said, “he ain’t never had one day’s experience in civil rights.” At the time of the Frogmore retreat, Williams was the director of seventy-six projects and had a combined staff of one hundred and eighty scattered throughout the South. Williams’s offices were managed by five secretaries. After the retreat, Williams’s staff was reduced to eight. Adding additional insult, Williams’s chief secretary, Terrie Randolph, had been moved to Rutherford’s office. Williams had not been “micromanaged” since he arrived in SCLC and felt that Rutherford was “juvenile” in the execution of his duties as executive director. “I was going crazy. I tried everything I could do...He stayed on my ass all the time,” Williams said.²⁵

²⁴ Letter, Hosea Williams to Martin Luther King Jr., December 13, 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. Papers, The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia.

²⁵ William Rutherford, interview by Production Team X, November 22, 1988, for *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 581.

On December 14, one day after Williams submitted his resignation, he had lunch with Abernathy and King at the Regency Hotel in downtown Atlanta. King realized that the launching of the Poor People's Campaign had not taken off as expected. The SCLC executive had announced the initiative in Atlanta on December 4. The Poor People's Campaign, he had planned, would be geared to "secure at least jobs or income for all," King said. "They ain't got the damn thing off the ground," Williams thought to himself. King likely realized that Williams's absence would create a major void in the areas of planning and mobilizing thousands of participants in ten major cities and five rural communities. King, according to Williams, practically begged to keep him on the staff. "I was wrong about you," King said to Williams. "I'm asking you not to leave me. If you leave me, I don't know what I'm going to do. I need you. This program will never work without you." King wanted to solve two significant problems at the same time: make Williams happy and move the Poor People's Campaign forward. King decided to incorporate several phases into the campaign. He placed Williams as head of Mobilization, which, in theory, placed many of the former staff members back under his supervision. "That was just to get me back in power," Williams said. "They knew if they got me back in power nobody else was going to take it away from me."²⁶

Williams entered 1968 with a renewed purpose as the SCLC's Director of Mobilization for what would be Dr. King's last campaign. On January 4, one day before Williams's forty-second birthday, Rutherford and Lafayette jointly penned a memorandum to "All SCLC Staff members" informing them that their presence was

²⁶ Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

mandatory at the organization's staff retreat from January 14-16, at the Ebenezer Baptist Church where Dr. King served as co-pastor alongside his father, Martin Luther King Sr. The retreat, according to Rutherford and Lafayette, was a "must if the Washington Poor People's Campaign [was] to be a success." Excuses other than "grave sickness" or death would not be an acceptable reason to be absent. On January 10, Williams followed up with a more specific memorandum to fifty staff members throughout eighteen cities. He informed everyone that they would receive their specific Poor People's Campaign staff assignments on Sunday, January 14. To avoid hotel expenses, Williams planned to lodge visiting staff members in private homes. Three meals would be provided on January 15 and January 16. Williams capped each break at thirty minutes during the three-day mandatory staff meeting.²⁷

Scheduled to begin in April, the campaign as King envisioned would be geared to securing "jobs or income." Williams, along with Bevel and Jesse Jackson, complained throughout the retreat that King's objective was both too ambitious and ambiguous. Bevel and Jesse were the most hostile opponents of King's strategy for two reasons: they wanted to remain in Chicago to manage "Operation Breadbasket," and they also desired to be autonomous from King and the SCLC. According to Williams, "Jesse was using Bevel. I don't think they were going in nothing else where King was going to be the leader. I think they had come to the time of challenging King's leadership. "Bevel was experienced. Jesse was not considered back then," Williams maintained. He suggested

²⁷ Memorandum, William Rutherford and Bernard Lafayette to All SCLC Staff Members Re: Special Staff Retreat January 14-16, 1968, January 4, 1968. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University; Memorandum, Hosea L. Williams to Martin Luther King Jr., Steering Committee, Executive Staff Committee and Field Staff Members Re: SCLC's Special Staff Retreat on the Washington Poor People's Campaign, January 10, 1968. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

that both men were using possible flaws in the Poor People's Campaign to expose deficiencies in King's leadership. Williams believed that their disdain for King and the campaign had more to do with their desire to lead than their contempt for King's strategy. Bevel felt the SCLC should harness all of its energies and resources to resist the Vietnam War — which King had publicly opposed for the first time in 1967. "The War was a substitute. If he [Bevel] hadn't chosen the war, he was going to choose something else. Hadn't been for Chicago [it] would have been another city...Like Stokely, they didn't believe that King deserved to be at the pinnacle." King believed that Bevel and Jackson's opposition was influenced more by their disloyalty than their analysis of the scope of the Poor People's Campaign. In spite of the internal discord, King held fast to his strategy.²⁸

Bevel and Jackson wanted the SCLC to create a lengthy list of demands on paper to present to the federal government. King demurred. The SCLC president confided to them and other staff members who had not been involved in the campaigns in Montgomery and Birmingham that specificity could be a hindrance when attempting to arouse the conscience of the nation insofar as poverty was concerned. "The people we are going to be mobilizing," King said, "are not going to be fired up on the basis of a long list of demands." "Denial and deprivation" meant the disinherited could not be motivated by lengthy proclamations. "If you go there with a demand for negative income tax, they don't know the meaning of negative, they don't know the meaning of income, they don't know the meaning of tax," King said. "But they do know that something is wrong with their lives and in their situations." King was adamant that emphasizing "jobs" and

²⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., "See You in Washington Remarks at Ebenezer Baptist Church," January 17, 1968, Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

“income” gave SCLC a strategic advantage with not only the impoverished, but also with the other hostile forces within the civil rights movement and the federal government. He truly believed that jobs and increased income were “so possible, so achievable, so pure, so simple, that even the backlash can’t do much to deny it.” Jobs and income were so “non-token and so basic to life that even the black nationalists can’t disagree with it that much.”²⁹

Williams sprang into action to galvanize support for the Poor People’s Campaign, but he saw several impediments that might slow his mobilization of staff and volunteers. Most of the issues were internal. In a four-page memorandum placed on Lafayette’s desk around 5:00 a.m. on February 11, Williams wrote he was “very disturbed” about the progress of the Campaign. He told Lafayette, the Program Administrator for the Poor People’s Campaign, that he was “hamstrung” and could not properly oversee the initiative since the staff had not yet been notified that he had been tapped to direct the mobilization phase. “None of the staff [are] keeping me informed of their activities, and many of them are not even in touch with me,” Williams wrote. He complained that staff members at the executive level, including Lafayette, Rutherford, and Young, were receiving and analyzing reports of mobilization activities, as well as “approving budgets and leave of absences,” and he “didn’t know anything about it.” Williams suggested eight recommendations to Lafayette with the hope that the Program Administrator would quickly move to remedy the lack of communication throughout SCLC and the overall lack of progress of the campaign. First, Williams asked that Rutherford and Young write

²⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., “See You in Washington Remarks at Ebenezer Baptist Church,” January 17, 1968, Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

a letter to all field staff informing them of his appointment as chief of field staff supervision. Young sent out a memo the following day which addressed Williams's request. He wrote to all staff members that "Mr. Hosea Williams will serve as Field Director and be in charge of the mobilization aspects." Young had underlined the sentence in the memorandum that indicated Williams would be "Over all Supervisory of Field Staff and Recruiting of Personnel for Washington."³⁰

Williams's seven remaining recommendations to Lafayette were focused on strengthening his own control of the project. The second recommendation called for Lafayette to approve a "minimal budget" to mobilize and recruit volunteers in eight cities where funds were scarce and local enthusiasm was low. Recommendations three and four called for a "systematic reporting system" to ensure that staff members were not exaggerating statistics from their work and the hiring of two additional secretaries to the "Department of Voter Registration and Political Education" to assist Williams in evaluating the field staff. Another recommendation called for the recruitment of "better staff and personnel in Baltimore, Maryland, and other areas surrounding Washington, D.C." Williams believed this action might influence "certain black militants" who were determined to destroy the Poor People's Campaign. The sixth recommendation called for the SCLC's office in Washington, D.C. to be staffed with a "full-time administrative secretary, typist and a clerk" within the next three days. Recommendation seven called for all executive staff members to submit their itineraries to Williams's office three

³⁰Memorandum, Hosea L. Williams to Bernard Lafayette Re: Washington Poor People's Campaign, February 11, 1968. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Memorandum, Andrew Young to All SCLC Field Staff Re: Executive Staff Assignments for Washington D.C. Campaign, February 12, 1968. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

weeks in advance so that their schedules “would not conflict with nonviolent workshops, orientation of local leaders and mass meeting speaking engagements.” Williams’s last recommendation to Lafayette suggested that all funds be made payable to the SCLC’s national office. “I feel it would be much easier for staff to raise funds to finance their projects if this is done,” wrote Williams. He believed that contributors would be more likely to contribute “respectable” amounts if they felt that the monies were written in the “care of the President, Dr. King.”³¹

The Action Committee of the Poor People’s Campaign met at Pascal’s Motor Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, on February 11. Eighteen people attended, including Williams, Dr. King, Jesse Jackson, Bevel, Bernard Lee, Dorothy Cotton, Rutherford, Young, and Rev. Joseph Lowery. “We are not doing our homework,” King said. He was “disturbed” by the fact that the groups of people important to the campaign had not been satisfactorily recruited. “We have not recruited twenty people who will go and stay with us,” King said.

Bernard Lee, a graduate of Alabama State College and confidant to King, suggested that the campaign be called off. Rutherford agreed and said that it “should be called off or call off everything else.” King said that some staff members seemed not to know where to go while others were just not being supervised and asked Williams to address this problem. According to Williams, recruitment of the poor was limited by “inadequate number[s] and quality of staff in Washington” as well as “coordination.” Williams also complained that the memo notifying the staff of his authority over the

³¹ Memorandum, Hosea L. Williams to Bernard Lafayette Re: Washington Poor People’s Campaign, February 11, 1968. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

campaign had not been sent out. After discussing the issues surrounding recruiting poor people, the debate about budget appropriations for the campaign intensified between Dr. King, Williams, and Rutherford. “Bill [Rutherford]” said King, “will have the final okay to approve requisitions.” Williams told King that he was “making a mistake...requisitions should come to my office and I in turn will submit them to Bill.” King relented. Williams kept pushing. “Could you give a certain time limit on approval?” Williams asked King. “We cannot wait to get these projects on the move.” King assured Williams that his budget would be reviewed tomorrow. “I cannot agree to this arrangement,” Rutherford said to King and Williams. King asked why. “I cannot work things out with Williams,” Rutherford said. “I can just see now hours and hours arguing over every penny. I would rather go out and raise \$10,000 than disburse it,” Rutherford said. King suggested that the budget be “tentatively approved” and then discussed at the next meeting.³²

Five days after penning the lengthy missive to Lafayette, Williams traveled with Dr. King on an SCLC tour throughout Alabama and Mississippi to galvanize support for the Poor People’s Campaign. On one stop of the tour in Montgomery, Williams flanked King as the SCLC president addressed a crowd of about seventy attendees at the Maggie Street Baptist Church. America as a country “has lost its sense of direction” as evidenced by its willingness to “spend one-half million dollars to kill every Viet Cong, and fifty-three dollars to help poor people.” Williams also traveled with King to Selma where the latter spoke at the Tabernacle Baptist Church. King recalled the struggles and triumphs in Selma and asked the congregants if they would be willing to follow him into Washington for the Poor People’s Campaign. The crowd, which included Amelia Boynton and SCLC

³² “Action Committee Meeting Minutes,” February 11, 1968. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

state field director Albert Turner, expressed their support for the organization's attack on poverty. After touring with King, Williams returned to Atlanta to stay on top of the campaign.³³

On March 5, Williams penned a memorandum to "All Project Leaders and Field Staff involved in the mobilization of Field Troops for the Washington Poor People's Campaign." He informed all recipients of the correspondence that they should tell donors to make checks payable to the SCLC's National office and address them to William Rutherford. He reminded staff members of their responsibility to organize their "ministers and churches support committee" to ensure that a "certain amount of money can be raised" and donated to SCLC. Although Williams emphasized that churches should play an active role in organizing the poor in their areas, they should also be donors. It is clear from this correspondence that Williams was firmly focused on increasing the number of contributors to enable him to effectively mobilize the initiative. "Get your business and professional people organized," he wrote. "Most of them will not march, go to jail, or to Washington, but they must furnish their money." Staff members should not just lobby professional individuals, they were exhorted to approach businesses. "Every business should make a large pledge," Williams wrote. His approach to fundraising may appear to excessively coercive, but Williams can be seen in this context as a skilled and experienced civil rights activist with the pragmatic ability to see around the proverbial corners. He knew that once a movement was launched, white merchants routinely escalated prices on items necessary to support the mobilization of

³³ V. English, B. Wilcox, and B. Labaree, "'Things are not Right in this Country'—King," *Southern Courier*, Vol. IV, No. 8, February 24-25, 1968.

thousands of individuals.³⁴

Three days later, on March 8, Williams outlined the specific staff requirements that would make Dr. King's next venture a success. The "People to People" tour, an initiative of the Poor People's Campaign, connected King with impoverished inner-city residents in hopes that his presence could not only dramatize the plight of the poor for the media but also encourage those most vulnerable to travel to Washington. Williams wrote to the staff that the tour must be "informative and educational for the haves, but much more so for the have nots." His memorandum emphasized that the agenda in big cities had to focus on ministers, businesses and professionals, youth and young adult black militants, poor people, and mass meetings. He reminded the staff that Dr. King's role was not to organize their respective communities. King's role, Hose said, was simply to "stimulate...stimulate that what you have already organized and mobilized." Although he had previously articulated that the participation of ministers and churches and the business communities was vital, he reemphasized the dire need for financial support. "Cash and checks are better," Williams wrote, "but reputable pledges are acceptable." As a shrewd publicity technique, he indicated in the memo that once King arrived in a town he would meet with business owners. During the meeting, a business should hang a sign on the establishment saying, "Closed, meeting with King, and the Washington Poor People's Campaign." Williams also understood the effectiveness of involving the youth and young adults. He instructed staff members to organize an outdoor mass meeting that would attract other local high school and college students. He suggested staff members

³⁴ Memorandum, Hosea L. Williams to All Project Leaders and Field Staff involved in the mobilization of Field Troops for the Washington Poor People's Campaign, March 5, 1968. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

should also orchestrate a “sympathy march,” which would garner much-needed publicity after King spoke in their respective city. Williams took great pains in this memo to inform the staff of the importance of the grassroots leaders.³⁵

Williams stood firm in his conviction that the “grassroots leaders and the poor were the most important” elements for the staff to engage. “This is where you must personally give your time,” Williams wrote. He encouraged the staff to gather a very large crowd of the poor who could present their “demands” to Dr. King so that he could carry them with him to Washington. This particular meeting, Williams suggested, would be the “longest and most important” assembly during the tour. After the meeting, Williams wrote, King would need to have lunch in a “real poor” neighborhood that would require him to walk on the streets and visit several houses. “See if you can find a home,” Williams wrote, “where a simple soul food dinner can be prepared for six to eight persons.” For practical purposes, those residing in the chosen home would be the only residents notified of King’s visit. Williams pointed out that the element of surprise was very important. “Do not let the other people know that Dr. King will be visiting their home. They will try to clean up and dress up. He would like to catch them in their natural habitat,” Williams wrote; whether he intended to be ironic or chose his words unwittingly, his language for an internal memorandum was troubling given the embedded zoological semantic connotations.³⁶

Williams understood the mass meeting had been a staple of the civil rights

³⁵ Memorandum, Hosea L. Williams to Staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Re: Weekly Report and Dr. King’s People to People Tour, March 8, 1968, Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

³⁶ Ibid.

movement. It enabled leaders to communicate their objectives to the attendees and also to serve as a tool to revitalize the participation in the face of intimidation. Williams wrote that “the mass meeting Must be representative and huge... Your largest church should be overcrowded.” He ordered that sections in the churches should be organized according to socioeconomic standing. Professionals, welfare mothers, and ministers should sit in their own sections. “Congregations should stand when ministers present his offering,” Williams wrote. This was an obviously an attempt to encourage the minister and congregation to give a substantial amount if they wanted to avoid being perceived as lazy or unwilling to give. He emphasized that the mass meeting should be “simple and short” and should consist of three parts: the collection, Dr. King’s speech, and a mock trial. Not only would Dr. King address the congregants, he would also serve as a judge. The objective would be to put “America on trial for robbery and exploitation of the poor,” Williams wrote. Specifically, Williams wrote in the advisory memorandum to staff members, “America will be tried for violating the Declaration of Independence . . . and be tried for stealing 4 million mules and eighty million acres of land” after the Civil War.³⁷

Williams was obviously working under very time-specific deadlines while heading up the mobilization department for a massive campaign. Circumstances often mandated that he be in several places simultaneously. The demands on his time in Atlanta led to citations – and occasionally even arrests – for reckless driving. Unlike King, Williams did not have a personal driver to ensure that he was safely and quickly transported to meetings and other obligations. On March 14, Williams was cited and

³⁷ Ibid.

arrested for driving eighty-five miles per hour in a forty-five mile per hour zone between Glenwood Avenue and Second Avenue — less than five miles from his home at 8 East Lake Avenue. Officers C.T. Bruce and C.E. Lovell also charged Williams with making an improper lane change and passing over the yellow line. After being detained for several hours he was released from the DeKalb County Jail on a \$300 bond. Williams later resolved the citation by paying a fine.³⁸

The campaign shifted to Memphis, Tennessee, after Rev. James Lawson, pastor of the Centenary Methodist Church in that city, appealed to King to support 1,300 striking sanitation workers who had been in a dispute with city fathers opposed to their desire to have a recognized union to allow collective bargaining power. At the time of the strike, black men comprised ninety percent of sanitation workers. Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb, a World War II veteran, who Andy Young referred to as “obstinate and inflexible,” agreed to offer the sanitation workers a twenty cent per hour raise in pay from \$1.60 to \$1.80. However, he refused to formally recognize the union or to allow for union dues to be withheld from workers’ paychecks. The black community, led by Lawson, initiated a boycott of the downtown stores and two of the city’s largest newspapers in an attempt to force the city into recognition of the union.

King arrived in Memphis on March 18 and spoke before a crowd of almost 10,000 people at the Mason Temple. The event was a success, and the SCLC leader returned to Tennessee’s largest city to lead a demonstration on Thursday, March 28 after a previously scheduled visit on March 22 had been derailed because of an unexpected snowstorm. The march was a disaster. Violence erupted as King led an estimated 6,000

³⁸ “Hosea Williams Arrested on Speeding Charge, *Atlanta Daily World*, March 14, 1968.

marchers from the Clayborne African Methodist Episcopal Church to City Hall in support of sanitation workers. Policemen used the chemical Mace and tear gas to disperse the crowd after a small number of teenagers who not been instructed in what to expect in the demonstrations and had little civil rights experience defied King's and Lawson's insistence on nonviolent discipline and started breaking windows. A policeman gunned down Larry Payne with a shotgun. Police claimed the sixteen-year old African American had brandished a knife after being confronted while looting, but at least one eyewitness claimed he had his hands in the air when the officer shot him fatally in the stomach. As many as fifty others were injured in the melee. Although SCLC had not organized the march and might have attempted to disassociate the organization from the riot-like atmosphere, King vowed to return to Memphis the following week. He insisted that nonviolence was the only viable strategy for confronting Memphis's white power structure.³⁹

Williams initially resisted King's request that all SCLC high-ranking staff members leave their individual projects and return with him to assist the protesting sanitation workers. Young later suggested that Williams had succumbed to his own "egomania" and was adamant about not returning to Memphis. In Andrew Young's recollection, "Williams wanted to focus on voter registration and running black candidates for state offices." Williams remembered events differently; looking back on the decision nearly a quarter-century later he insinuated that the SCLC president was having his own ego battle. "King wanted to go back to Memphis to save that King name.

³⁹ "Labor and Rights: Race Enters a Garbage Dispute," *New York Times*, March 24, 1968; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 449-450; Walter Rugaber, "A Negro is Killed in Memphis March: Violence Erupts on Route of Protest Led by Dr. King," *New York Times*, March 29, 1968.

. . . That was the only march he ever led that was not organized by his staff,” Williams recalled. But Williams swallowed his opposition to the march and left for Memphis to join King, Young and Abernathy on April 3.

They checked in to the black-owned, two-story Lorraine Motel located on Mulberry Street — a familiar place for King since he had stayed there as early as the 1950s when lodging overnight in Memphis. That night, King reluctantly agreed to speak at the Mason Temple before a crowd of approximately 3,000. The SCLC leader, looking haggard, delivered a poignant, but very gloomy speech on that cold, rainy night. He spoke of the many threats against his life and sounded fatalistic themes that he had often discussed privately over the years, seeming to suggest that his days were numbered. In his rich baritone voice with the speaking cadence that he had perfected over years as a southern Baptist minister and seasoned civil rights orator, he entered his peroration. The Bible’s Old Testament Exodus narrative of a Chosen People freed from captivity had always struck a chord with adherents of Afro-Christianity from slavery through the grim years of the Nadir and Jim Crow. King inserted himself squarely into that liberation narrative, evoking Moses’ mountaintop experience as enthusiastic members of the audience shouted out during pauses in his phrasing:

I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.

In words that eerily foreshadowed his death and have resonated with prophetic force in the decades since, he claimed he was “not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. *‘Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.’*” As his words echoed around the cavernous rafters of Mason Temple the crowd erupted in

deafening cheers in response to the same words from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” that had shaped the stirring conclusion of King’s antiphonal “How long? Not long! / Our God Is Marching On” speech at the conclusion of the Selma-to-Montgomery march at the Alabama Statehouse three years before. King collapsed into his chair assisted by Jesse Jackson and Ralph Abernathy. He was visibly exhausted. It was the last public address he would deliver.⁴⁰

After the speech, King, Young, Williams and Abernathy went to the home of Benjamin Hooks, a prominent Memphis minister and lawyer, to discuss the sanitation strike well into the morning.⁴¹ Williams began the following day, Thursday, April 4, with a 10:30 a.m. meeting in the Lorraine Motel’s room 315 with SCLC staffers Bevel, James Orange, and a group of black militants including Charles and Richard Cabbage, John Burl Smith and Milton Mack. King wanted the four militants to serve as marshals for the march that had been scheduled for Monday, April 8. Charles Cabbage, a graduate of Morehouse College, King’s alma mater, attempted to leverage his reputation with the youth in Memphis to remain nonviolent in exchange for King and SCLC’s making a large donation to the “Invaders,” a militant organization. Cabbage insisted that if law enforcement or white toughs attempted to endanger the marchers he could not rule out the use of “tactical violence,” his definition of self-defense. When Dr. King entered the meeting after being briefed by his staffers, he told Cabbage and the Invaders that SCLC could not work with the group if they refused to abide by nonviolent discipline on the march. King was torn, for he believed that Invaders’ presence would be effective in

⁴⁰ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 621.

⁴¹ Young, *An Easy Burden*, 458; Hosea L. Williams, interview by Taylor Branch, Atlanta, GA, October 29, 1991, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

quelling possible disruptions amongst the youth who had not been exposed to SCLC's nonviolent workshops. The group disbanded without reaching an acceptable resolution.

Later that afternoon, Williams proposed that Cabbage and Smith be placed on the SCLC's payroll. According to one historian, Williams believed that "exposure to Dr. King and the staff would give them the idea of being nonviolent." Ralph Abernathy recalled that King became "grim and businesslike" after being notified of Williams's idea to hire the young militants as march marshals. King remonstrated, "Hosea, no one should be on our payroll that accepts violence as a means of social change. The only way to have a world at peace is through nonviolence." Sensing that he could not persuade King to accept the hire, Williams abandoned his advocacy for the young militants.⁴²

Williams's life and the course of the modern Civil Rights Movement were irrevocably altered around 6:00 p.m. on April 4, 1968, when an assassin shot and killed King as he stood on the balcony outside room 306 of the Lorraine Motel. The high-velocity bullet, purportedly fired by James Earl Ray, struck the Nobel laureate on the right side of his face near his chin — dropping King immediately. He was likely immediately paralyzed since the bullet traveled from his jaw and severed his spinal cord before the projectile lodged in his back. Williams was putting the key into the door of his assigned motel room, 210, when he looked up and saw his leader's feet hanging over the edge of the concrete balcony above. Quickly realizing what had happened, he rushed along with other SCLC staffers to King's side. "All of his side of his face was shot off," Williams told an unnamed interviewer that evening.

Someone called emergency medical personnel at 6:03 p.m. An ambulance arrived

⁴² Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 428-429; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 622.

on the scene almost simultaneously with the first call since a police officer had already alerted the local dispatcher. The paramedics hurriedly placed King on a stretcher and loaded him into their vehicle. Abernathy, King's closest confidant, and SCLC staffer Bernard Lee rode in the back of the ambulance with King to nearby St. Joseph's Hospital. Williams remained at the hotel with A.D. King, the SCLC leader's younger brother, with whom he had recently worked in the open housing campaign in Kentucky the previous year. The two were together when they heard that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was pronounced dead at 7:05 p.m. The universally recognized leader of the modern black freedom struggle and arguably the most eloquent orator of the twentieth century had been silenced.⁴³

Riots and civil unrest plagued the city of Memphis and numerous other cities after King's assassination had been confirmed, including major disturbances in Chicago and Louisville whose racism-blighted urban geography was very familiar to Williams due to his involvement with SCLC's recent campaigns in those cities. As one of King's top aides, Williams played a critical role over the following days, working to ensure a continuity of leadership within the SCLC and assisting with plans for his fallen leader's funeral.

Around 1:00 a.m. on April 5, Williams and other top SCLC lieutenants met with R.C. Lewis, owner of the Memphis funeral home that had routinely provided King with a limousine and driver while in the city. They chose a suitable coffin to transport King back to Atlanta. After this morbid yet necessary procedure, King's top aides, including

⁴³ William F. Pepper, *Orders to Kill: The Truth Behind the Murder of Martin Luther King Jr.*, (New York: Warner Books, 1995), 26-29; Hosea Williams, interview by unnamed interviewer, April 4, 1968, Youtube Video Clip; Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Lorraine Motel Room Assignments," April 3-4, 1968, The National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, Tennessee; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 464.

Williams, met in a room at the Lorraine Motel into the early hours of the following day. In a scene that might have evoked a mafia succession had it not been for the SCLC's ethos of nonviolence, they each pledged their fealty to Abernathy as King's appointed successor as the organization's president.⁴⁴

As the meeting continued they also briefly discussed possible funeral arrangements for what would inevitably be a massive logistical operation for the City of Atlanta, the King family and the SCLC. Staffers, according to Andrew Young, wanted to recommend to King's wife, Coretta, that two services be planned: one for family and SCLC insiders and a second ceremony for the public, including heads of state and other persons of means and influence. King had died in Memphis advocating for the economic uplift of the sanitation workers – a testament to his commitment to fight for the downtrodden – and the larger Poor People's Campaign was still a work-in-progress. But in initial discussion of funeral arrangements Williams quickly came to feel that this constituency of "have nots" and the nameless poor was largely being ignored by some SCLC staffers and the King family.⁴⁵

King's death while fighting for the poor had a profound impact on Williams which drove him, from that moment on, to be the one of the most fervent supporters of the poor as a civil rights activist and humanitarian. He maintained that April 4 "was the most unforgettable day in [his] life" and that his commitment to improve the lot of poor Americans had begun with his unyielding support for the nation's underclass to have the same access to King's service as the powerful and affluent members of society. On April

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⁴⁵ Pepper, *Orders to Kill*, 30-31; Betty Washington, "Rights Leader Based Here Recalls Slaying Aftermath," *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)*, April 15, 1968; Young, *An Easy Burden*, 469.

6, Williams rode with A.D. King to the latter's parents' home in Atlanta where arrangements were being made for the funeral. Dr. King's parents, Coretta Scott King and her sister, Edythe Scott Bagley, and King's spiritual and intellectual mentor and former Morehouse College president, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, were all present.

"I sat there and they could only see this man Martin Luther King Jr. as an intellectual being in his middle class setting," Williams recalled. The group planning the funeral were wedded to the idea of dividing the church into three sections: Ebenezer Baptist Church's membership, King family members, and "VIP's," said Williams. "Where would the poor people be?" asked Williams. "Who?" asked some of those in attendance. Williams responded: "THE POOR PEOPLE! I WANT TO KNOW WHERE THEY WILL BE?" According to Williams, an unnamed attendee at the planning session said "We don't quite understand." Williams clarified his advocacy for the poor: "THE PEOPLE THAT MARTIN DIED FOR. THE PEOPLE THAT HE REALLY LOVED. THE PEOPLE THAT HE DWELT AMONG. THE PEOPLE THAT HE WORKED FOR. WHERE WILL THEY BE?" The sentiment amongst the King family and Mays was that "the church is too small and we don't have any space for them." Williams's passionate plea fell on deaf ears. The beneficiaries of King's last crusade would not be permitted to attend the service at Ebenezer.⁴⁶

Williams, then, took a different approach. "I proposed that when the funeral in the church was over that we'll take the symbol of the poor in this nation — the mule and wagon — and take his body back to Morehouse." Williams awaited a response from the small group that had assembled in "Daddy" King's living room, those he now saw as

⁴⁶ Hosea L. Williams, "Tape 12," 1973, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

elitists. “You can’t put Martin Luther King’s body on no mule and wagon,” someone responded. “I finally acted like Hosea Williams,” said the fiery rabble-rouser. “Okay, YA’LL HAVE THE FUNERAL. WHEN THAT BODY COME OUT OF THE CHURCH, IT WILL BELONG TO US. WE’LL TAKE OVER,” Hosea remembered roaring.⁴⁷

Two services were held for Dr. King in Atlanta, Georgia, on Tuesday, April 9. An estimated 50,000 mourners, including Vice President of the United States Hubert Humphrey, Senator Robert Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy, the widow of the slain thirty-fifth president of the United States, were in attendance. Two days earlier President Lyndon Johnson had declared a national day of mourning. Eastern Airlines reported that approximately thirty-three chartered planes had made arrangements to land in the city so that their passengers could attend the services. The first service, which had been planned not to exceed half an hour, took place at 10:30 a.m. in the 1,300-seat Ebenezer Baptist Church. Stretching three times as long as it was intended, the observance inside the church featured a eulogy from Ralph Abernathy in which he referred to the assassination of King and its aftermath as “one of the darkest hours of mankind.”

The voice of the SCLC’s slain leader then echoed from beyond the grave, as in a recording of one of his last sermons – “The Drum Major Instinct,” delivered at Ebenezer Baptist just two months before – King again touched on themes of mortality and asked that at his funeral there should be no discussion of his awards and honors. “And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long.”

I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I’d like for somebody to say that day that [I]

⁴⁷Ibid.

tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the [Vietnam] war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. . . . I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. . . . I just want to leave a committed life behind. . . .

Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right or your left side, not for any selfish reason. . . . not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition. . . . I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.

When the service was over, Williams, wearing blue dungarees and a white shirt, directed pall bearers to place the slain leader's body on the wagon drawn by two Georgia mules that he had procured from a black farmer and friend to Dr. King — Dan Young. His symbolic evocation of the "Poor People's Campaign" took place against the wishes of Coretta Scott King. The elites had had their funeral and now the poor people would have theirs. The procession, led by Rev. Abernathy and members of the King family, left Ebenezer around 12:00 p.m. when the temperature was around eighty degrees. Williams guided the wagon bearing the African mahogany coffin slowly along the three-and-a-half mile route from Auburn Avenue through Courtland and Hunter Streets and finally to the Morehouse Chapel, arriving nearly three hours later. Seven hundred and forty city policemen, 100 firemen, and several thousand soldiers from the Georgia National Guard lined the streets to ensure the protection of the mourners and the funeral cortege; more than 100,000 people lined the procession's route. Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, standing on the same platform as he did when King attended Tuesday morning chapel services in Sale Hall as an undergraduate, told the crowd: "I make bold to assert that it took more courage for King to practice nonviolence than it took for the assassin to fire the fatal shot. The assassin is a coward: he committed his foul act and fled. . . . When

Martin disobeyed an unjust law he accepted the consequence. He never ran away.”

After the service, King’s body was transported by a black hearse to Southview cemetery on Atlanta’s west side for a private interment ceremony. Rev. Abernathy solemnly pronounced the final benediction for his best friend: “The cemetery is too small for his spirit, but we submit his body to the ground. . . . No coffin, no crypt. No stone can hold his greatness.” King’s body was lowered into the Georgia soil. The crowd of family, SCLC staffers and a few friends dispersed.⁴⁸

Williams and the thirty-four members of the SCLC’s Board of Directors had to put their grief and disbelief aside less than two hours after the burial of their fallen leader as they assembled for the first time since February 6. Joseph Lowery, Chairman of the Board, called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. at the Mount Moriah Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Rev. Benjamin Hooks of Memphis, Tennessee, moved to officially confirm Ralph Abernathy as president. The motion was seconded and carried unanimously. The board then elected Cirilo McSween to the position of treasurer that had been occupied by Abernathy since the SCLC’s founding in 1957. The board also decided to adopt three recommendations advanced by Abernathy: the SCLC should pay all expenses associated with the burial of Martin Luther King Jr.; the SCLC should pay a salary of \$12,000 for one year to Coretta Scott King; and, likely in a strategic move to increase fundraising, the organization should suspend the rules and bylaws and elect King’s widow and Harry Belafonte to the Board. Perhaps the most important suggestion

⁴⁸ Anthony Ripley, “50,000 Expected for Funeral of Dr. King in Atlanta Today,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1968; Anthony Lucas, “Atlanta is Peaceful During the Funeral, Police Officials Praise Calm of the Crowd,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1968; Tyrone Brooks, interview by author, Atlanta, Georgia, April 17, 2014; Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1971), 358; Homer Bigart, “Leaders at Rites: High and Lowly Join in Last Tribute to Rights Champion,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1968.

for consideration was made by Board member Charles Morgan. Morgan requested that the Board not back away from the Poor People's Campaign since a decision to do so might give the perception that the SCLC's agenda can be thwarted by "shooting the leader." The meeting adjourned at 11:30 p.m.⁴⁹

After nearly three years of debate, procedural obfuscation, and delay, members of Congress, in what some historians have seen as a paroxysm of guilt, reconciled minor differences and passed the Civil Rights Bill of 1968 against the national backdrop of the King funeral. Often referred to as the Fair Housing Act, the legislation was signed into law by President Johnson on April 11. Though it was rightfully perceived to be weak by Williams and many other activists, the bill was in some respects a "symbolic victory" for movement leaders who had fought in Louisville, Chicago, and countless other communities to end discrimination in the renting and selling of homes based on race, sex, religion, color, or national origin. But in the history of the long civil rights movement the fruits of such symbolic victories typically offered a meager harvest at the grassroots. Many activists could not fully appreciate the bill since the federal government's powers of enforcement left many opportunities for the exploitation of the very people the bill was intended to protect. The bill's passage came at a time when the flames of racial unrest were still literally smoldering in the aftermath of King's assassination. Washington, D.C. had seen violence and destruction on a mammoth scale.

The Fair Housing Act certainly was not seen as substantive enough to result in calling off the Poor People's Campaign. Williams knew that effort would require their uninterrupted attention if it was to be a success — especially since the federal

⁴⁹ Southern Christian Leadership Conference, "Minutes of the Board of Directors," Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

government had to be pushed to compromise if any meaningful measures would be enacted to help the poor.⁵⁰

Williams and the organization's board had a renewed vigor to finish King's final campaign. All signs pointed to a successful protest in Washington that could poignantly dramatize the plight of the poor. SCLC's coffers were overflowing, a direct mail campaign for contributions had yielded nearly \$500,000 per month. Three thousand poor volunteers were now easily recruited to make the trek and peaceably assemble in the nation's capital. However, the internal strife surrounding the practicality of nonviolence as a philosophy and method to achieve social harmony was now tearing the very fabric of the SCLC. Its leaders, including Williams, were publicly denying that any rift existed. "There is absolutely no truth" to the rumors, Williams said. "SCLC is more united now than it has ever been in its history due to the absence and the love of Dr. King who made us what we are today," said Williams to a reporter of the *Chicago Defender* less than three weeks after King was gunned down. But Williams's words to the reporter were ominous: "There is no question in our mind that the least bit of disunity could very well destroy us." Evidence indicates that Williams was one of the lieutenants who was voicing acceptance of violence as a means to awaken America. Reporters Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson suggested to the *Chicago Defender* that Williams cited the riots in the aftermath of King's death as proof that violent eruptions in urban areas were the most successful strategies to gain attention for the nation's poor citizens. Williams maintained that Pearson's and Anderson's accusation was "the biggest lie that he had ever been told." Although Williams was adamant that he had not embraced violence, other distractions were taking a toll on the SCLC as they strategized around how to effectively

⁵⁰ Carter, *The Music Has Gone out of the Movement*, 238.

manage the Poor People's Campaign.⁵¹

The Poor People's Campaign was never quite able to capture the effectiveness of previous demonstrations in spite of Williams's undaunted optimism and his willingness to assume several demanding roles. "Elements that were dead set against us are now prone to be more cooperative," Williams said. "We find ourselves in a new position, and we hope we can make the best of it." Williams, whom one reporter identified as "bombastic," "is not only inviting trouble, but giving it a bear hug," was the director of mobilization. On May 31, while leading a mule train to Washington, he was notified that he would replace Jesse Jackson as the director of Resurrection City — a makeshift town erected on the Mall at the Lincoln Memorial to house the 3,000 poor demonstrators who had assembled to redress their grievances with the federal government. Jackson, who had replaced Bevel, was demoted by Abernathy because of the young Chicagoan's inability to subordinate his own desire for publicity. Announcing the personnel shift, Young called the move a "shifting of gears" instead of demotion in his attempt to quell any rumors that the SCLC was imploding. The move did not have an impact on the type of protests that would accompany the mass demonstration. Less than one hour after the personnel shift had been announced, Williams led a two-hour demonstration in an auditorium of a building occupied by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare after he and approximately 500 demonstrators were not allowed to meet with Department Secretary, William Cohen. Secretary Cohen was in the building but declined to meet with Williams and his delegation of poor protesters. Williams told officials that "we [will] stay here

⁵¹ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 385; Bob Hunter, "Williams Denies Split Among SCLC Policymakers," *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 24, 1968; "King's Followers Divided on Policy of Non-Violence," *Ukiah Daily Journal*, April 23, 1968.

until he comes to see us.” The crowd enthusiastically endorsed their leader’s persistence after he told representatives that “We’re ready to bleed if necessary, we’re ready to go to jail if necessary and we’re even ready to die if necessary.” Around 6:00 p.m., Secretary Cohen finally addressed the demonstrators and told them that he would support a welfare system that would evenly assist the nation’s poor regardless of race.⁵²

Williams was not pleased with the federal government’s reluctance to make meaningful changes to improve the lot of the poor. On June 2, he declared that protests would take a more militant approach. “The picnic is over,” Williams yelled to several hundred demonstrators outside the grounds of Resurrection City. Williams was not afraid of being beaten by police or going to jail. “The police want to use those billies,” he said. “We’ll give them a chance.” He emphasized that the number of demonstrators could range from ten to five hundred and the demonstrations would have a twofold purpose. “Sometimes we’ll be going to make a point,” said Williams, “and sometimes we’ll be going to jail.” After rallying the 300 protesters outside of the campsite, Williams led a march to the Department of Agriculture to demand that officials answer questions regarding the “dumping of tons food in the ocean while black people starve in Mississippi and Alabama.” Williams also wanted answers as to why James Eastland, the powerful United States senator and rabid segregationist from Mississippi, was reportedly paid to support policies that benefitted big business instead of the poor citizens who were suffering in his state from poverty and malnutrition. It was clear that Williams was firmly

⁵² “Poor People’s March is Big Challenge for Abernathy,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 27, 2014; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 386; Ethel L. Payne, “Jesse Jackson’s Exit Seen as Sign of Power Battle,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 5, 1968; Earl Caldwell, “New Chief Named to Spur Campaign of Poor in Capital,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1968.

committed to seeing the Poor People's Campaign to the end.⁵³

The rest of the month was dominated by a national tragedy that would drastically impact the SCLC's fight to achieve full equality for blacks, as well as poor whites. On June 5, Senator Bobby Kennedy, a perceived ally of the poor, was assassinated in Los Angeles, California, in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel after giving a victory speech after he had been declared the winner of the California Democratic Presidential Primary. Democrats could not hope to nominate another presidential candidate strong enough to defeat Richard Nixon in November's general election. Nixon's election to the White House in November would usher in the beginning of a neoconservative movement that owed much of its strategy to George C. Wallace. Dan T. Carter suggested in *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics*, that the former governor of Alabama was the "most influential loser in American politics." Wallace brilliantly combined racism with a rancid form of populism that articulated the fears of blue-collar Democrats: a refashioned fear of Negro domination. Nixon, far more polished than the segregationist governor, cloaked Wallace's racist rhetoric in terms such as busing, quotas, and affirmative action. Nixon's promise to "bring us together" by modifying Johnson's Great Society reforms laid the groundwork for the political realignment in 1972. Nixon, with the help of former Johnson aide, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, brought loyal Democrats into the Republican Party by placing a renewed emphasis on controlling crime and drugs, code words that stimulated

⁵³ Earl Caldwell, "More Militant Poor People's Campaign Is Pledged," *New York Times*, June 3, 1968.

the nostalgic yearnings of southern blue-collar whites willing to sacrifice their own economic interests on the altar of white supremacy.⁵⁴

The Poor People's Campaign continued on a downward spiral because of internal squabbles resulting from power struggles — with Williams often contributing to the disunion. On June 7, Bayard Rustin, the mastermind of the 1963 March on Washington, threatened to resign as campaign coordinator after Abernathy and Williams made statements to a newspaper reporter stating that Rustin did not have full authority to mobilize the protest. Rustin warned that he would abandon his efforts if the SCLC did not give him “complete authority” over the protest within twenty-four hours since the campaign's climax on June 19 was speedily approaching. Rustin was an invaluable asset; he had worked tirelessly to bring order to the chaos surrounding the campaign. On June 2, Rustin issued a report entitled “A Call to Americans of Goodwill.” The manifesto, which had so far only been approved by Andrew Young, clearly outlined a set of demands that the poor should take to Congress. The economic bill of rights called for Congress to recommit the government to the Full Employment Act of 1946 and to repeal the restrictions which limited the number of families that could receive welfare assistance. Rustin also called for President Johnson to grant several demands, including the incorporation of food distribution programs in severely impacted areas; expansion of the food stamp program; assistance to poor farmers in establishing cooperatives; incorporation of programs to assist poor mothers and children in rural areas, and halting the United States Department of Agriculture's discriminatory practices which prevented blacks from receiving just benefits.

⁵⁴ See Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 468.

Williams, according to newspaper columnist Ethel Payne, “had publicly denounced Rustin and claimed that he was the real boss of the show.” Co-workers were unsure who had the report and were happy he had neglected to address the issues surrounding Vietnam, and had not clearly identified the demands of other minorities. Rustin also failed to mention some of the proposals recommended by the Kerner Commission that had been released in February, 1968, short weeks before King’s death in Memphis. Williams referred to Rustin’s demands as “a bunch of jazz and nonsense.” Rustin resigned after Abernathy failed to give him an unqualified endorsement and latitude to direct the campaign. Abernathy appointed Sterling Tucker, Executive Director of the Washington Urban League, to replace Rustin and assume the directorship of the June 19 mass protest.⁵⁵

The Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 came to a pitiful end on June 24. The local Washington police cleared the Mall by the Lincoln Memorial and seized the mule train

⁵⁵ “Rustin Threatens to Quit as Chief of Poor March, *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 8, 1968; Ethel L. Payne, “Jesse Jackson’s Exit Seen as Sign of Power Battle, *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 5, 1968; Ethel L. Payne, “Inner Strife Threatens to End Poor Campaign,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 25, 1968, Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 387. The Johnson Administration was dealt a devastating blow in February when the bipartisan Kerner Commission published its findings after a lengthy investigation into the underlying reasons of the urban riots during the “long hot summer” of 1967. David Carter devotes an entire chapter in *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement* perceptively entitled “File Them or Get Rid of Them,” referring to Johnson’s remarks when asked by an aide regarding the proper disposition of the thank you cards that were to be presented to Gov. Otto Kerner and his ten co-laborers after the report was issued for public consumption. The report, in no uncertain terms, determined that domestic liberalism was a failure. The eleven-member body argued that the United States was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal.” The report also posited that the urban riots in the black communities resulted from white’s racial prejudices toward African Americans. The Commission also stated that whites were solely responsible for the creation and perpetuation of the black ghettos. Carter portrays Johnson as a man who is visibly disturbed by the report’s conclusions which appeared to the president as an act of betrayal. Johnson condemned the Commission for not acknowledging the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as significant achievements in the fight against the problems they found to be at the root of America’s society. See David Carter, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement*, 197-233.

that Williams had secured. The National Parks Service asked for payment of a \$71,000 bill to cover the costs associated with managing the grounds for the previous four weeks. Andrew Young appeared to rejoice that the whole ordeal was over. “Whoever cleared us out may have done us a favor,” Young said. In the end, the Poor People’s Campaign was a failure. The absence of King’s steady hand at the helm was compounded by Abernathy’s utter inability to lead effectively and to manage the “team of rivals” – SCLC’s lieutenants – as his predecessor had before him. Williams, Bevel and Jackson were at best, unable, or, at worst, unwilling, to be controlled by anyone but Dr. King. Egos, personal agendas, and the awesome burden of trying to lead in King’s place took a heavy toll. SCLC was unable to force the federal government into making any meaningful compromises that would significantly address the plight of the poor. The Executive and Legislative branches virtually ignored demands. King had been silenced, and his lieutenants would be unable to mobilize the masses as in previous campaigns.⁵⁶

Williams was a loyal lieutenant to Martin Luther King Jr. and was willing to lead dangerous demonstrations without regard to his own personal safety. He proudly wore the badge of King’s “kamikaze.” The most dangerous and effective protests from 1964 through 1968 had been organized and led by Williams. His leadership in St. Augustine, Selma, and Mississippi was a testament to his willingness to die for the cause to a degree surpassed only by Martin Luther King Jr. These experiences would guide Williams for the rest of his life as he entered the world of local and state politics. Most important, although Williams had at times grappled with poverty and dislocation, King’s assassination in Memphis was the transformative episode that had the most impact in thrusting him into a leadership position, which he often occupied alone, in a full frontal

⁵⁶ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 388.

assault on poverty in America.

Epilogue and Conclusions

The Forgotten Man's Crusader, Forgotten, 1968-2000

Nineteen sixty eight was a year of revolution that was characterized by rebellion against the policies, politics, and people that had guided America since the end of World War II. Mark Kurlansky, in *1968: The Year That Rocked the World*, suggests that the year's events sparked "a spontaneous combustion of rebellious spirits." William Chafe, in *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, puts it succinctly: "1968 witnessed a cresting of forces committed to social change that had been building since the 1950s." These forces Chafe referred to were the ideals espoused by what scholar Godfrey Hodgson has called "the liberal consensus" in his analysis of twentieth-century liberalism in *America in Our Time*.

Core maxims of that liberal consensus which Hodgson argues was most prevalent in the 1950s and early 1960s included the belief that unlike communism, American capitalism is democratic and it improves the economic conditions in society. Improving economic conditions bring about improvements in social conditions for marginalized groups, and instead of competing interest groups, class and other markers of inequality are less clearly demarcated as everyone reaps the benefits of the free enterprise system. The liberal consensus also functioned on the international stage; the biggest potential threat to this sweepingly optimistic vision of a free enterprise-fueled social utopia is the spread of communism. The United States is the true harbinger of democracy and must

ensure that the rest of the world is made safe for the cultivation of democratic governance based upon the American model. By 1968, the widespread acceptance of this underlying liberal ideology among northern liberals, the universities, organized labor, the churches and synagogues, the federal bureaucracy, and the business sector had finally fragmented and crumbled under the combined weight of poverty, racism, and the Vietnam War. Historian Allen J. Matusow employed a different metaphor of declension when he described the “unraveling” of liberalism in the second half of the 1960s. By 1968 many liberals were grappling with the fact that their optimistic beliefs in the ability of capitalism and enlightened government to eradicate poverty and alleviate social inequality had run aground on the shoals of messy political realities. In a sense, America was forced to look at herself in the mirror and admit that if its experiment in liberalism had not failed entirely, it was certainly not aging gracefully.¹

Failures can be heuristic. In the aftermath of the Poor People’s Campaign and the death of Martin Luther King Jr., Hosea Williams and the SCLC continued to try to solve the linked problems of poverty and racism in the United States, entering a period of reexamination and reassessment. Ralph David Abernathy, King’s closest ally in the modern civil rights movement struggle, had been elected president to succeed the fallen leader. Abernathy was no Martin Luther King, however. He lacked the charisma, eloquence, and the ability to “tame the wild horses” in the words of Williams’s oldest daughter, Barbara Williams Emerson. The “wild horses” included Williams, Andrew

¹ Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year that Rocked the World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), 10; William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11; Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time: From World War II to Nixon—What Happened and Why* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 67-70; Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2009, 1984).

Young, Jesse Jackson and James Bevel, and none of them felt that any one individual had earned the right to lead them in the fashion that King had. Williams maintained that each of the top lieutenants could have been worthy successors to King with the right support staff. “If the rest of them would support that person,” Williams said, “just like all of us had supported King, Abernathy would have ended up just as great a leader as Martin.” Since Abernathy was forced to lead without the executive staff’s vitally important support, the new president’s tenure was virtually stillborn. “I think Abernathy was a great leader, but I still think the executive staff deserted him soon after King was buried. . . . He was the captain of a ship without the crew,” Williams insisted. He saw himself as an exception, someone who continued to work well and very closely with Abernathy.²

King’s assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, had a profound impact on Williams and his commitment to the disinherited and downtrodden. Few understood Williams’s desire to uplift humanity through service more than Maynard Jackson, the first African American to be elected mayor of the City of Atlanta. Jackson issued a public letter of endorsement when the aspiring politician was running for one of Georgia’s seats in the U.S. Senate in 1973: “Hundreds of thousands of Georgians,” he wrote, “can now share the hope of being represented by someone who will fight for the human rights of the little man, the forgotten man.” Williams continued his work with the SCLC alongside Abernathy after 1968, spearheading or actively engaging in labor disputes on behalf of blue-collar workers as well as the unemployed. Williams assisted Abernathy in the 1969 campaign in Charleston, South Carolina, which targeted wage inequality and the demand

²Hosea L. Williams, interview by Steve Estes, Atlanta, GA, February 9, 1996, Hosea L. Williams Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library; Barbara Williams Emerson, interview by Jovita Moore, “Hosea Williams: The Untold Story,” DVD, prod. Dorothy Daniels (Atlanta: ABC, 2010).

for union recognition in the city in a dispute that labor historians Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg maintained was “one of the South’s most disruptive and bitter labor confrontations since the 1930s.” Williams had never shied away from leading protests on the biggest and brightest stages, and he was familiar with long odds.³

Williams’s unyielding assault against poverty and economic inequality, which he believed was the direct result of the federal government’s alienation of the impoverished, continued the next month as the National Aeronautical Space Association (NASA) was preparing to launch a manned spacecraft to the moon. In May 1961, as the nation continued to be riveted by the drama of the Freedom Rides, President John F. Kennedy had formally announced his vision for the United States to place a man on the moon. NASA’s budget the next year was a whopping \$1.7 billion dollars, with more than one-third of the funds being devoted to manned space programs. The following year, Congress approved an exponential increase to the space program’s budget, allocating \$3.7 billion dollars. By the time astronauts Neil Armstrong and Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin prepared for their epic lunar launch on July 15, 1969, the federal government had spent an estimated \$24 billion dollars on the space program—an absurd expenditure in the opinion of Williams, who was playing a crucial role in the second edition of the Poor People’s campaign. In protest, Williams secured a train of mules from Georgia—the forlorn symbol of the poor—and rallied twenty-five families from twenty-five United States Congressional districts to participate in “Moon Hunger” demonstrations at Cape Kennedy during the launch of Apollo 11. Lilly Belle Holt and her nine children

³ “Vice Mayor Jackson Endorses Hosea Williams,” *Atlanta Voice*, August 5, 1972; Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg. *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers’ Union, Local 1199* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 130.

comprised one of the families. “This woman, Williams said, “gets \$82 a month and lives in a one-room shack” in Social Circle, Georgia. “This demonstration,” said Williams, “was not in protest of America’s inability to explore outer space, but was to dramatize our government’s ability to choose priorities.” The United States’ willingness to perpetuate war abroad and poverty at home, Williams believed, was in large measure the fault of the legislative branch. The demonstrations at Cape Kennedy “dramatized the inequity in Congress’ appropriation to put a man on the moon in comparison to keeping him alive or allowing him to survive on earth,” Williams said. Although Williams and the twenty-five impoverished families were seen as disruptive, no one was arrested or beaten. The episode became an obscure, but important, media footnote to the drama of the first manned lunar landing. Abernathy and the SCLC determined to make the lunar launch and the protests against the fiscal appropriations for NASA a crucial component of the organization’s convention the following month in Charleston, South Carolina.⁴

Williams’s commitment to the impoverished can also be viewed through the lens of Christianity and the institutional church’s traditional role in helping those unable to provide for themselves. He had long been referred to as “Reverend” while working with the clergy-dominated SCLC. Each of King’s closest lieutenants – Abernathy, Young, Jackson, Bevel, and others – had all been ordained. While some might be tempted to view Williams’s entrance into Christian ministry as evidence of self-promotion, he apparently believed he heard the “call” from God to preach the Word. Although Williams had

⁴ James Lee Kauffman, *Selling Outer Space: Kennedy, the Media, and Funding for Project Apollo, 1961-1963* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 2; “Poor Heading for Apollo Site: Plan to Protest U.S. Priorities,” *Toledo Blade*, July 14, 1969; William Greider, “Protesters, VIPs Flood Cape Area,” *Washington Post*, July 15, 1969; Hosea L. Williams, “Annual Report to the Board of Directors Meeting during SCLC’s 12th Annual Convention, August 13-16, 1969,” The Papers of Rev. Hosea L. Williams, The Auburn Avenue Research Library.

defected to the Presbyterian denomination in the early 1960s, he returned to the Baptist roots of his childhood after he returned in 1970 from an SCLC-sponsored Goodwill Brotherhood Tour which included visits to Africa, South Vietnam, India, Japan and the People's Republic of China. On December 12, 1971, Williams preached his trial sermon at the 10:45 a.m. service at Atlanta's West Hunter Street Baptist Church from the pulpit that had been occupied by his friend and SCLC colleague, Ralph Abernathy, since 1961. The scriptural basis for his message, "Is Christianity too Important to be Left in the Hands of Today's Christians," came from Genesis 21:18: "Arise, lift up the lad and hold him fast with your hand; and I will make him a great nation." Williams's sermon was heavily influenced by his trip to communist China. "I went to China as a Christian," said Williams to the congregation, "and I have returned a better Christian. Recognizing the religious hypocrisy of America, it makes me wonder whether or not God has decided to entrust the regeneration of man into the hands of non-believers." Williams also chided members of the nation's religious establishment for turning their backs on the poor—the very people Jesus dwelled amongst.⁵

By November 1972, Williams had proven to be a committed crusader for those Maynard Jackson referred to as the "forgotten man." His triumphs against major corporations were testaments to his willingness to fight on behalf of Atlanta's disinherited. Not only did the burly warhorse wage what seemed to be unwinnable wars with Fortune 500 firms, Williams also directly attacked hunger—a more complex issue. He was originally driven to initiate a program to feed Atlanta's hungry in 1971, but

⁵Letter, Ralph D. Abernathy to Friend, December 7, 1971, The Papers of Reverend Hosea Williams. Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta, Georgia; "Hosea Williams to Preach Trial Sermon," *Atlanta Daily World*, December 12, 1971.

lacked a suitable venue. What came next would be his most enduring legacy in Atlanta. By 1972, he had built a strong relationship with Rev. Williams Holmes Borders, the longtime pastor of Atlanta's Wheat Street Baptist Church. On Friday, November 17, Williams and his SCLC chapter held a ribbon-cutting ceremony in celebration of the grand opening of the Poor People's Chow House in the Wheat Street Baptist Church's Education Building—a free food program for the city's hungry adults and children. Williams maintained that thousands of children were unnecessarily starving in the most prosperous country in the world. He argued that poverty had no respective color: “We found out there are many whites, as well as blacks, who live off what they can steal. Many women have to sell their bodies to get enough to feed their children,” lamented Williams. God, he believed, was unhappy with the country's mistreatment of the poor. His commitment and compassion to aiding the impoverished had heightened in 1968 with the initiation of the SCLC's Poor People's Campaign and King's assassination in Memphis while fighting for a living wage for garbage workers. However, he spoke of one particular incident that renewed his vigor to live up to his Christian obligation to feed those who had nothing to eat:

I came up on this idea one day when I was working in Vine City and came across two dirty, raggedy, unshaved, black drunkard looking men who asked me for a quarter. I looked down at them and asked what did they want for a quarter? They replied, ‘We want some chow, man.’ I told them they just wanted a quarter just to buy some more wine. That stuff was killing them, therefore, I was not going to give them anything. One of the men staggered up and said, ‘Man, damn, a drink? My belly hurts. I want something to eat.’ Then I noticed just a step away was a ghetto grocery store. I turned, walked in and ordered one loaf of bread and a pound of bologna. I returned to the men and said, okay, you all are so hungry, now eat. They snatched the bread out of the sack. Before I could unwrap the bologna, those men had begun devouring the dry bread. I stood watching

them cram wads of bread down their throats. Finally, it dawned on me—these men were not hungry, they were starving.⁶

Williams knew that feeding people and preaching about the right for everyone to have access to the blessing of liberty could only come about through the political process. After a series of defeats for the presidency of the Atlanta City Council and mayor for that city, he won election to the Georgia General Assembly, representing the state's 54th District, in 1974. He used his position of influence in the state's lower legislative chamber to work on various legislative programs that benefitted poor African Americans. He would never lose another election to public office. He left the state house after nine years for a bid to sit on the Atlanta City Council where he served from 1986-1990. His vocal opposition to the business class only enhanced his reputation with Metropolitan's marginalized citizens. After leaving the City Council on his own terms, he assumed his last position in politics as a DeKalb County Commissioner. He retired from politics in 1994 after serving his constituents at the state, county and local level for twenty years—the first African American in Georgia to hold elective position at all three levels.⁷

In spite of Williams's nearly fifty-year commitment to civil and human rights, his legacy was marred by a series of unfortunate encounters with law enforcement. He was arrested and jailed many times over the last twenty-five years of his life for possessing a weapon and for driving without a license as a result of his habitual problem with

⁶ "SCLC Free Food House," *Atlanta Voice*, November 25, 1972; Tyrone Brooks, interview by author, Atlanta, Georgia, April 17, 2014.

⁷ Hosea L. Williams, Biographical Sketch, No date, The Papers of Reverend Hosea L. Williams, Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta, Georgia; John H. Calhoun, "An Analysis of Last Week's 1973 City Election Voting," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 11, 1973; Bill Cutler, "Atlanta Voters Reject 'Scary Whitey' Tactics," *Atlanta Voice*, October 20, 1973; "Resounding Victories at the Polls Scored by Busbee, Miller and Young," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 7, 1974; "Hosea Williams to Leave House, may Run for Congress," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, March 24, 1984; Katheryn Harris and Nathan McCall, "Hosea Williams Ousts Councilman Finley," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 4, 1987.

speeding and alcoholism. To Williams and his supporters the arrests represented a pattern of persecution, part of a larger effort to silence him and discredit his previous service as a veteran lieutenant in Dr. King's nonviolent army. Although he was never convicted of a weapons charge and the driving-related charges were often subsequently dismissed for lack of evidence, Atlanta's white power structure that included conservative blacks and whites uncomfortable with Williams's method of bringing about meaningful social change used his brushes with the law as a way to erode his legacy; sensationalized media coverage helped to feed the perception of the long-time veteran activist as a caricature.⁸

By the mid- to late-1990s, personal tragedies and Williams's lifestyle finally caught up with the bombastic firebrand. His first son, Hosea Williams Jr., died in 1998 after a bout with a rare form of leukemia. Glenda Brown, a longtime companion to the elder Williams, remembered how his namesake's death affected him. "He was absolutely devastated because Hosea had a very loving relationship with 'Junior.' They would kiss

⁸ The bulk of Hosea's non-protest related arrests and jailings occurred after during the 1970s and 1980s in the city of Atlanta and DeKalb County. He was convicted in April, 1981, for illegally operating a motor vehicle without a license while being a habitual offender, which turned the crime into a felony. He was also convicted of leaving the scene of an accident that occurred on July 11, 1980, when another driver was injured, which was a misdemeanor. He received a one year prison sentence, which had stalled in the courts, but was allowed to leave the county jail to attend his legislative session. In 1984, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed his conviction. See Tracy Thompson, "U.S. Court Reinstates Conviction of Hosea Williams in '80 Wreck," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 8, 1984; Beau Cutts and Fran Hesser, "Conviction Won't Affect Williams's Seat in the House—For Now," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 25, 1981. The following year, he was arrested for driving under the influence in DeKalb County while out on a bond on another driving case. See G.G. Risby and T.L. Wells, "Driving Problems Pile Up for Hosea Williams," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 25, 1982. Williams was once again arrested on the suspicion of driving under the influence on January 1, 1986, one day before he was to be sworn in as an Atlanta City Councilman, after an officer noticed him driving across the center line. A breathalyzer test showed that he has a blood alcohol content of .09. At the time, a reading of .10 established automatic guilt. He later maintained that the arrest was an attempt by "rednecks," "Uncle Toms" and "sell outs" to derail his term as a councilman. He argued that he was not drunk, though. "I had three nice glasses of champagne. Had I not been a public official, I would have had at least four," Hosea said to a reporter shortly after the arrest. See Jane O. Hansen, "Hosea Williams Charged with DUI in Atlanta," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 2, 1986; John Lancaster, "Hosea Williams Says Officer Lied in His Report," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 3, 1986. In 1988, Hosea again ran afoul of the law by carrying a concealed pistol without a license. He was arrested on August 1, 1988. The charges were later dismissed. See Gary Hendricks and Susan Wells, "Councilman Williams Arrested by Clayton, Is Released on Bond," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 2, 1988.

each other all the time. It was nothing for this tough guy to tell his son that he loved him,” said Brown. Shortly after losing his son Williams was diagnosed with kidney cancer and began undergoing chemotherapy in 1999. The new millennium offered no respite from the series of devastating blows. In August, 2000, Juanita, Williams’s wife of forty-nine years, died from complications related to anemia. This loss hastened his decline, and three months later he followed Juanita in death. Williams died only three days shy of his annual “Hosea’s Feed the Hungry” dinner for Atlanta’s underprivileged. With his passing, the United States of America and the City of Atlanta lost one of its authentic heroes. Andrew Young, Williams’s former colleague within SCLC, evoking the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah as he eulogized his rival and appraised his strengths as a leader: “The fire he had him would not let him rest. He had fire in his bones.” That fire had now been extinguished.⁹

On November 21, 2000, thousands of people marched into the Ebenezer Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Georgia, to the tune of “This Little Light of Mine” to pay their final respects to the Rev. Hosea Lorenzo Williams. He was lying in a bronze casket, draped with an American flag, that had been drawn to the church by two mules. He was wearing his trademark blue denim overalls, red shirt and red Converse sneakers. As a tribute to Hosea, many of those in attendance wore the same outfit; overalls had come to be the unofficial uniform of the modern civil rights movement. The thousands of mourners, including the high and the humble, gathered together at the historic house of

⁹ “Unbossed and Unbought: We Give Thanks for All the Good Work Hosea Did,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 22, 2000; Glenda Elaine Brown, interview by author, in person, Decatur, Georgia, April 4, 2014; Ernie Suggs, “Advocate for Poor Helped Ignite Nation,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 29, 2000.

worship that was co-pastored by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from 1960 until he was assassinated in April 1968. They braved the bitter cold temperatures to honor the man that many knew simply as “Uncle Hosie.”

The mourners included Executive Cabinet-level secretaries, a former ambassador to the United Nations, a governor of a deep southern state, and a mayor of arguably the most robust city in the South. Rodney Slater, the United States Secretary of Labor in the Clinton Administration, said that Williams fought “to bring into the fold . . . those without a voice, the poor.” Dr. King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, praised the old warhorse as a “man of God.” In a playful tribute, Hosea’s good friend and confidant, Alley Pat, suggested that previous speakers were giving “highfalutin” tributes that were somewhat devoid of honesty. “I used to hang out with him after midnight. . . . Hosea always said that he was unbossed and unbought but he could be rented or leased,” joked Pat. Georgia Governor Roy Barnes recalled that “Hosea was in your face, but he was always compassionate and caring.” Barnes left the audience with a pointed observation: “Long after Hosea Williams has been dead, the results of his efforts, his struggles, his compassion and his love for human beings will be remembered.”¹⁰

On March 3, 2002, sixteen months after Williams’s death, a fundraising effort led by Evelyn Lowery, the wife of SCLC president Joseph Lowery, led to the unveiling of a marble monument on Broad Street in Selma, Alabama, in recognition of Hosea Williams’s role in the Selma to Montgomery March and his overall commitment to the fight for equality. The top inscription reads: “Leader of the Selma-Montgomery March,

¹⁰ Obituary of Rev. Hosea L. Williams, C.T. and Octavia Vivian Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia; Ernie Suggs, “Farewell to a True Hero, a True Warrior: Advocate for Poor Helped Ignite Nation,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 21, 2000

‘Bloody Sunday,’ March 7, 1965.” The bottom inscription reads: “He Fed the Hungry – ‘Unbossed and Unbought.’” With the exception of this tribute that is erected in close proximity to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and a street named after him that runs through DeKalb and Fulton Counties in Atlanta, Williams’s name and legacy have still been largely excluded from the public spaces – even in his own proverbial backyard. Williams would qualify as what the historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage identified in his treatment on historical memory as an “unwelcome participant” who could not be justly recognized because he lacked the “social permission” to be a part of the larger conversation.¹¹ After all, Metropolitan Atlanta, Williams’s home for almost forty years, was also the residence of Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, John Lewis, Joseph Lowery and C.T. Vivian – individuals perceived to be classier and more acceptable to whites as well as to powerful and affluent African Americans who controlled the levers of power in and around Atlanta. Williams, because of his bombastic nature and many legal confrontations, could never compete in a finite social geography of memory dominated by a Nobel Laureate and civil rights martyr, a United States Congressman, a U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, and well-respected clergymen with influential parishioners.

With the exception of his prominent role at the head of the “Bloody Sunday” march in Selma in the spring of 1965, Williams has largely been crowded out of a King-centric historical narrative. Williams was a polarizing figure to be sure, but the disproportionate attention to other SCLC lieutenants in the historiography of the black freedom struggle is nevertheless curious, and his near-erasure distorts the historical

¹¹ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 6.

record. Williams was central to the civil rights campaign in Savannah, Georgia, in the early 1960s that pressured the city to integrate its public accommodations even before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. After this success, Martin Luther King Jr. hired him on a full-time basis, recognizing his skills as organizer and masterful tactician. Williams assumed the leadership of the protest to end racial discrimination in St. Augustine, Florida, during the run-up to that city's 400th anniversary. Williams did not begin that movement, but despite SCLC's desire to limit the organization's activity in the nation's oldest city, evidence suggests that Williams's tenacity and innovative methods of creative tension forced the city into submission and helped maintain pressure on the federal government to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Willie Bolden, an SCLC field worker and lieutenant to Williams, insisted that the "Civil Rights Act was written in Birmingham, but it was passed in St. Augustine." Moreover, Bolden maintained that the St. Augustine movement was the most brutal SCLC-led campaign of the 1960s. "Not only did they beat us every single day, they even put alligators and lye in the segregated pools to keep us from swimming," Bolden remembered.¹²

Williams's role in the Selma campaign in 1965 to urge the federal government to pass the most comprehensive voting rights legislation since the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 is also noteworthy. Again, he defied his superior, Martin Luther King Jr., who was preaching in the Ebenezer Baptist Church pulpit in Atlanta, Georgia, on March 7, 1965, while Williams stood on the front line and attempted to lead marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on what became known as "Bloody Sunday." This protest, coupled with the fifty-four mile march that the SCLC's logistical genius organized two weeks later from Selma, Alabama, to the state's capital city, galvanized

¹² Willie Bolden, interview by author, Ferguson, Missouri, September 18, 2014.

widespread support and again prodded the federal government to enact substantive legislation to remedy many years of voting inequities with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The enduring legacy of the Selma campaign and the subsequent signing of the Voting Rights Act cannot be overestimated. Millions of African Americans were enfranchised in a Second Reconstruction, enabling them to elect officials who were more sympathetic to their interests, paving the way for the electoral success of African American officials like Andrew Young, John Lewis, and countless others. As the nation recently prepared to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery March, Congressman John Lewis, who marched and was beaten alongside Williams on “Bloody Sunday,” told Bob Schieffer on CBS’s *Face the Nation* that “If it hadn’t been for that march across Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday, there would be no Barack Obama as president of the United States of America.”¹³

In addition to Williams’s critical role in the campaigns that brought about landmark civil rights and voting rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, the SCLC organizer made critical contributions in challenging housing discrimination in 1967. He led SCLC’s campaign in Louisville, Kentucky, to protest that city council’s reluctance to eliminate tactics that buttressed residential segregation. Although Williams was a relative latecomer to a movement that had its origins in Louisville in 1963, his ability to stage sit-ins, drive-ins and night marches in the city, as well as threatening to lead a massive demonstration during the 1967 Kentucky Derby, revitalized the local campaign. His presence renewed blacks’ vigor to vote for aldermen who would pass a fair housing ordinance declaring that the selling, purchasing, exchanging, renting, leasing, or

¹³ Sam Levine, “Civil Rights Icon John Lewis: Without Selma, Obama Would Not Be President,” *Huffington Post*, February 15, 2015.

withholding of housing accommodations from any prospective buyer or renter was illegal and punishable by five hundred dollars per offense. With the ordinance's passage, Louisville, Kentucky, became one of only a few southern cities to embrace fair housing legislation at the local level before Congress passed a diluted Fair Housing bill in 1968 in the aftermath of King's assassination.

Hosea Williams was successful as a leader during these often extremely dangerous campaigns because he had a remarkable ability to motivate the disfranchised and disinherited to take direct action against the system of oppression that had forged the manacles of their second-class citizenship. His charisma and background as street hustler, gambler, even one-time pimp provided him with a sophisticated toolkit to draw on as he mobilized thousands of marchers in cities where hostile whites – leaders, law enforcement, and everyday citizens alike – were willing to adopt extreme measures, even extralegal violence, in their last-ditch defense of white supremacy. Williams also knew how to use his charisma and motivational power to hypnotize women. He was handsome, barrel-chested, and possessed an unwavering confidence in himself. Black and white women were attracted to these characteristics and were drawn to him — willing to make him happy at whatever the required cost. Whether it was their donation of time, money or engaging in sexual acts, women were eager to win his attention and approval.

Perhaps Williams's unquestioned loyalty to his staff was one of his greatest assets as a leader. Willie Bolden often compared his leader to a devoted wartime comrade. At a chilly graveside service of reflection on November 16, 2013, Bolden told a crowd of approximately sixty people that had he grown weary on a battlefield in a foreign country with Williams at his side, he “would have no problem with laying down in a foxhole to

take a nap because Williams would protect him at all costs.” Members of his staff believed that he would share in any danger they faced; throughout his time with the SCLC Williams had criticized Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, and James Bevel for hiding from danger while placing those they led in harm’s way. Williams felt instinctively that without unquestioned loyalty to a leader willing to shoulder the risk alongside them people would be unwilling to place their lives on the line.¹⁴ Williams’s championing of the controversial night march tactic and reputation as “King’s kamikaze” was emblematic of this willingness to actively court risk and potential harm.

Although Williams was a tribune of the forgotten man and saw himself as a champion of the disinherited, he also craved glory and power. He lacked both before engaging in civil rights activism in the late 1950s. Although he pulled himself up to some of the highest rungs of Jim Crow’s segregated socioeconomic ladder, acquiring graduate-level education and a comfortable home, he was not satisfied. Unlike Martin Luther King Jr., who sought a modest life and over time grew weary of the adoring attention of the crowd, Williams was completely at ease in the presence of the many dotting admirers he encountered because of his celebrity status. He craved the adulation that King came to see as a burden. Barbara Williams Emerson, Williams’s eldest daughter, recalled a period in her life when she was estranged from her father, calling attention to the needs of his ego: “I can remember him showing up to my mother’s funeral and taking away all of the attention from the occasion.”

Many years after the glory days of the “heroic phase” of the civil rights movement, Williams still yearned for the attention and affection of the masses. Williams

¹⁴ Willie Bolden, reflective speech about Hosea Williams, Lincoln Cemetery, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16, 2013.

was seldom accused of false modesty. He was intent on owning all of the items that, from his perspective, were symbols of power and prestige. He liked the fine suits and expensive shoes, and was King's only lieutenant in the top echelon of the SCLC who purchased Cadillacs, the most conspicuous luxury cars of the day. He never sought to be inconspicuous.¹⁵

Williams's insatiable thirst for the limelight and the ways in which his reputation suffered negatively in the closing decades of his life should not eclipse the sacrifices he made on the altars of freedom, justice and equality. All people are equipped with internal engines that drive them to toward their respective destinies. The prospect of wealth or status fuels some psychological motors, while others desire to be agents of meaningful social change. All are shaped by the circumstances they faced on their life's path. Hosea Williams was no different, but his own personal battles to claim dignity and respect for himself led him to champion those causes for countless others on a much larger battlefield. Because of his pivotal role in the black freedom struggle, he left the world a far better place than he found it.

¹⁵ Barbara Williams Emerson, interview by author, Stone Mountain, Georgia, September 2, 2014.

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