

The political awakening of Mabel Williams, wife of the author of 'Negroes with Guns'

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by Wanda Sabir

The America Mabel Williams knew in 1947 when she married Robert F. Williams was similar to the state of Israel young Palestinians know today, the South Africa its indigenous people knew before the ANC, and the Iraq Arabs have known since March 2003. Monroe, North Carolina, was a place where men, women and children were systematically robbed of their dignity, looked upon as less than human, and, for a man like Robert Franklin Williams, it was a place that could have cost him his life.



Robert and Mabel Williams

Married for 49 years, Mrs. Williams grew to share her husband's commitment to civil and human rights - she more a Booker T. philosophically to his Marcus Garvey. This journey, Williams says, was not always smooth, as her husband had to travel, similar to the men in South African townships, to larger cities for employment, his Johannesburg - New York and Detroit, even Mare Island in Vallejo.

Author of the pivotal document, "Negroes with Guns," which got him expelled as president of the NAACP branch in Monroe, Williams, whose library his wife says was larger than that in their high school, was a "self-educated man, who knew about world histories." Williams' book, his branch's black panther symbol and their 10-point program were highly instructive in the formation later on of Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale's Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.



Mabel Williams was honored at an event Sunday entitled "Self Respect, Self Defense and Self Determination."

Photo: Kamau Amen-Ra

Mrs. Williams says that when the Freedom of Information Act made highly sensitive FBI documents available, she and her husband saw that he'd been a target of the organization since he was 16. This included high school activities, his stint in the Korea War and reenlistment in the Marine Reserves.

The Williams family eventually fled to Cuba, where the couple continued their newspaper, The Crusader, and launched an intercontinental radio show, Radio Free Dixie, which was broadcast throughout the Atlantic. The show featured the revolutionary music of the '60s - that of musicians like Max Roach, Hugh

Masekela, Abby Lincoln and Nina Simone.



Bay View Associate Editor JR and writer Rashida talk with Kathleen Cleaver Sunday

Photo: Kamau Amen-Ra

Already a friend to Cubans prior to their exile, the family then went to China where their two sons were already in school, guests of Chairman Mao. They returned to the United States in 1969, Williams as the first president of the Republic of New Afrika.

Visit <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/rwill.htm> and www.ibiblio.org/Southern_Exposure/RFW.html.

Williams' papers are available from the University of Michigan at www.lexisnexis.com/academic/solutions.

Mrs. Williams was in town Sunday, March 14, at the First Congregational Church of Oakland, in conversation with Kathleen Cleaver, Esq., former communications secretary and the first woman on the Central Committee of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, and wife of the late Eldridge Cleaver, minister of information for the BPP. The event, titled "Self Respect, Self Defense and Self Determination," was sponsored by Freedom Archives, the EastSide Arts Alliance, Malcolm X Grass Roots Movement and Hard Knock Radio. (Photographs taken by Kamau Amen-Ra at the event accompany this story.)

In preparation for a trip to Lincoln Center in New York for a premiere of the new film, "Negroes with Guns: Rob Williams and Black Power," a project of the Documentary Institute in the Journalism Department of the University of Florida, Mrs. Williams was able to speak to me about her marriage and her political awakening. We didn't get a chance to speak about her current work in the preservation and restoration of Idlewild, Michigan, a Black town developed in the 1920s, which in the 1940s and '50s was a resort area for Black families, although we did touch on another project, her husband's unfinished memoirs, "While God Lay Sleeping: The Autobiography of Robert F. Williams."



Pierre Labossiere of the Haiti Action Committee with Kathleen Cleaver at Sunday's event

Photo: Kamau Amen-Ra

Wanda Sabir: How did you and your husband meet?

Mabel R. Williams: "He was good friends with my sister's husband. My sister and her husband were all classmates, close schoolmates. When he went off to war, my sister married his best friend and I stayed with my sister for a spell because she was having her first child. Robert came home on leave from the army to visit my brother-in-law. That's when I re-met him, or met him as a person on an equal level more or less, and we fell in love and eventually got married."



Black Panther Party veterans Emory Douglas and Kathleen Cleaver at Sunday's event honoring Cleaver and Mabel Williams

Photo: Kamau Amen-Ra

Mrs. Williams said that her husband turned her world upside down. She dropped out of high school, and they began a family. She was in the 11th grade.

WS: Where does the activism come into the picture?

MW: "After he was discharged from the army and we were already married and living with his father, I began to recognize and realize that I had married a man who was not quite as ordinary as I thought. He was a person who was not able to accept being a second-class citizen. We had been married a few months when his father said to me one night, 'Mabel, you know Robert thinks that he ought to be president of the United States.' And I said, 'What?' and he said 'Yes.' And Robert tuned in and he said, 'Why not? I'm a man like he is a man. Why shouldn't I want to be president? Why shouldn't I be president?'"

Little would she know at the time that this was the guiding principle of her husband's life.

"I realized at that time that he was a different thinking person from everybody that I knew, because most of the people that I knew were accepting the system as it existed and, as my step-father used to say, 'staying out of the way of white folks and staying in our place,' our place being the place the white folks said we needed to stay in - going to our segregated

schools and churches, staying in our segregated communities and having the least possible connection with white folks."

"You see," she continues, "I grew up in a time when segregation was accepted by my family and it was just the norm. For Robert, he had grown up in a family where his grandmother came out of slavery literate and was a teacher, and a grandfather who came out of slavery literate and was a teacher. His grandmother had a great influence on him and encouraged him to not accept second-class anything. And he had a very radical uncle - his Uncle Charlie - who had a great influence on him when he was a young boy.

"We had two different outlooks on the society as a whole in the very beginning. It took a long time for me to come around to accepting the fact that he was different and that he was going to struggle and I had to struggle as well for change."

WS: You all made that transition philosophically together?

MW: "Yes, we did. I cannot say it was not without some bumps along the way. We had bumps and confrontations ourselves while we were struggling against the racist system that was attempting to keep him down, us down as a people and him fighting against that system and my thinking if he fought against the system they were going to kill him, or crush him as they had crushed most of our Black men. So it was a real struggle, but thank God we made it."

WS: I read that even when your husband was drafted into the army, he was fighting for his rights in the segregated army. But you didn't know that then?

MW: I didn't know that, and neither did I know that he had fought when he was in high school. He was 16 years old, and he was given the opportunity to go to work in President Roosevelt's National Youth Administration program. That was a program to give job training to youth, and he and a group of kids, classmates - it was like the (Community and Economic Development Agency, or) CEDA program.

"He went, and they were supposed to be trained as stonemasons. What happened is, the Black boys were given the job of digging the stones, while the white boys were given the job of learning how to lay the stone. Well (Robert) saw that as an injustice - the fact that they weren't really being trained; they were digging up rocks. Plus they gave them dirty utensils, used buckets for their water, so he organized the boys to walk off the job at 16.

"I didn't know any of that either."

WS: But your sister and her husband did?

MW: "My sister's husband might have known that, but his family was the kind who weren't going to buck the system either. His mother and his father were just like my parents: they were trying to keep us from getting killed in the segregated South and trying to get us to get our education to get out of there to live a better life somewhere else.

"Most Black parents during that time knew that if we didn't get out of the South, we could only go so far. We could only be maybe a maid or a possibly get a job on the railroad if the fellows were obedient. You know, if you could get into the system, you could maybe get a good job. Other than that, they wanted to get us out of the South, because they figured we had no hope for the future.

"Even though Kenneth, my brother-in-law, and Robert were real close buddies growing up together when Robert was involved in Civil Rights activities, even up to the time that we left, his best buddy was not involved in it for fear of his own parents, what they would do to him if he went afoul of the



Angela Davis speaking at the March 14 event

Photo: Kamau Amen-Ra

system.

"So anyway, no, I didn't know anything about his past actions, and I didn't know about the problems he ran into in the army until after we were married and we began to talk about things and I began my re-education. He had a bigger library at his house than we had at our high school library in Monroe.

"He was well-read. He was self-educated, so he knew a lot more about ... not just our local society but world society and politics and things that I had no idea about. After our marriage, I began to get involved in activities along with him."

This involvement included joining the Catholic Church, ministered by a good friend of Robert's, while he joined the Unitarian Fellowship Church. He was the only Black member.

MW: "I did not join, because I had joined the Catholic church. I'd joined the Catholic church because Robert had another dear friend, Thomas A. McAvoy, who was a Catholic priest. After we were married, we began to take, he and I, instructions to become Catholic under the influence of this Catholic priest friend. I continued and joined the church, but Robert never did, even though he and the priest remained friends. The priest used to tease me and say if it hadn't been for me coming along, he might have gotten Robert to be a priest." She laughs.

WS: Was he Black?

MW: "No, he was a white priest who operated a Black mission called St. Joseph's Mission in our community. The white Catholic church at that time was located in the white community."

WS: Things were separate?

MW: "Everything was. I started working in the church social work programs in the community like the Clothes Closet we had for poor people to come in get clothing free or for a small donation. (Since) we were a mission, we were able to establish a day care center for working mothers, and I ran that. So I was thoroughly involved in social programs during the time I was involved in the Catholic church.

"In addition to that, we worked with the Civic League. It was made up of ministers and leaders in the Black community. They were trying to negotiate and keep good relations with the local white power structure. The Civic League was asking for streetlights and paved streets in the Black community and sidewalks in the Black community. At that time, not only were people segregated, but the living conditions were separate too. The sidewalk will come up to the Black community and stop, and street lights would come right up to the Black community and stop, and paved roads the same way.

"We had no Black policemen, and that was (another) thing the Civic League was trying to negotiate into being - those kinds of things. It's really difficult for people who did not know about our segregated conditions to understand how thoroughly life was separated in those days."

WS: You said that your parents wanted to raise their children to get educated then leave so you could have a better opportunity, but you stayed and your sister stayed. Did they have any problems with that, since the whole idea was to get you out of there?

MW: My sister, she was seven years older than me. She went to Spelman College and graduated and became a teacher and returned. She was a teacher in the segregated system. She was teaching home economics. ... And so they were happy and pleased with her position. They figured if I decided ... continued to go to college and get that kind of education and a job, then I could teach in the segregated system as well. But I fell in love and got married before that happened." She laughs again.

"There were some jobs you could still feel fairly safe in the segregated system, one if you were a teacher, two if you were a lawyer or a doctor - though our doctor was afraid to buy a Cadillac, even though he could afford to, because of the fear of economic reprisals or even the Klan should he ride around in that Cadillac.

"If you were a doctor or a lawyer, you could possibly make it in the segregated system, but as a lawyer and a doctor, as a professional Negro, you still faced retaliation if you went against the grain or challenged the white supremacist system. There were options within the system if you were compliant and willing to accept the rules of segregation and abide by them."

WS: When you were working in these various Catholic organizations and when you started working with the Civic League, was your husband doing other kinds of organizing in the Unitarian Fellowship?

MW: "No, we weren't totally involved in that. We were trying to make a living economically. We were living with his father, and he was attempting to find work, and it was very difficult for him because - well, one thing, when he came out of the army they had the 52/20 Plan - for so many weeks you could get \$20 a week for like unemployment insurance while you looked for work."

"Most of the Black veterans had come out and were looking for work. Most of them who had finished high school were being pressured by the white power structure to take the most menial of jobs that were available, sometimes for even less than the \$20 a week that was promised as one of their veterans' benefits. It was very difficult for our young Black men to get a good job in that area and keep a good job, especially if they had any rebellious spirit like my husband did."

"In the meantime, I was able to get some menial jobs. One of the jobs being, I worked at a hospital that was segregated - Black patients were in the basement of the hospital, and the basement was unfinished with the pipes running along the walls, that kind of stuff. The newborn babies were in the utility room where we sterilized the instruments - and emptied the bedpans."

"That's where I learned a lot about segregation and what it did to us as a people. That was a part of the beginning of my education."

WS: Was that before your children were born or afterwards?

MW: I had already had one child. I remember my sister having her second child born in that hospital. I was there and was able to - I think that was the first child - anyway, I was there when the child was born at the hospital. Before the child was born, they wouldn't even allow Black doctors in the hospital at all, and if you had to go to the hospital, you had to have a white doctor.

"It was just terrible, and I didn't learn until much later that there was a beautiful white nursery that was isolated from the parents and everybody else up on the second floor. I learned that probably a year later when I was switched from working in the Black ward as a nurse's aide, and I was given a job on the cleaning detail on the second floor."

"So, you know, I began to see the inequities. All of the supervisory nurses were white, and we could hear them talking all the time about what was going on, and I remember one conversation went on between two nurses. They were talking about one of the doctors - a white doctor who'd joked and said he'd as soon 'work on a dog as work on a nigger.'

"That stuck in my mind and heart about how they felt about us. I still didn't (understand) the depth of what was going on and how we as a people were being systematically mistreated medically. They didn't care whether we lived or died. I didn't realize that at the time. I didn't realize that they deliberately - they were just thinking of us as non-human beings (she sighs)."

"Later, when I looked back on this, this is when my consciousness started to develop. I began to realize what was actually going on, a systematic neglect of Black people. Those babies - at that time 75 percent of them born alive were not surviving, but how could they survive when they were being treated like that?"

Mrs. Williams said that they used what she believed was "a cyanide solution to keep the thermometers in ... in that same utility room."

"So when I read in the later years about a systematic sterilization of Black women going into the

hospital in Mississippi, then I started thinking back on my own experience and, well, that wasn't just Mississippi; that was a systematic means of keeping the numbers of our people down," she said.

WS: Did you have your children in that hospital?

MS: "I had my children at home. The only reason why my sister's child was born in the hospital is because she was having some complications. But most babies at that time -especially since we knew that the doctors couldn't go into the white hospitals - the babies were born at home with doctors or midwives."

Mrs. Williams worked at Ellen Fitzgerald Hospital, and when they tore that one down and built a new one, at Union Memorial Hospital, between 1948 and 1950.

MW: "When Union Memorial was built, it was no longer permissible to segregate by floors. The custom remained the same, though the law had changed. Black doctors were allowed to practice in the Black hospital."

WS: It must have really been tough living under those types of conditions.

MW: "Yes. I always wondered why my husband could not get a job and keep a job, but I could get jobs, small jobs but jobs nonetheless. I recognize today that that too was a part of the system to divide Black men from Black women. Black women were given a better opportunity to make a living than Black men. There was always this contention, 'I can work, but you can't.'"

"The jobs I got were menial - not being a professional person - but they were jobs nonetheless. I could get a job as a maid. I worked as a hotel maid. I worked in a turkey plant where we processed poultry - working in water almost up to your ankles, in rubber boots. There was a big contingent of women working in those plants. Very few men.

"If a man was not able to get a job working on a railroad ... the young black men didn't really have a chance to get a job that was meaningful enough to support their families. It was a very difficult time that put pressure on marriages and families."

WS: How did your marriage survive the economic tension?

MW: Robert went off to New York and got a job there working there for a while. Being Robert, he ran into the same situation and people who were struggling with racism and the political ills of the day, (yet) he was able to get an apartment in what was called York Town - that was German town at that time. He sublet an apartment complex from a German couple.

"They had no Black people there, but the white couple was progressive, and Rob became affiliated with them. And when I went to New York, we were in the apartment, but we were harassed by our neighbors, because we were the only Black people in there, and they wanted to get us out. That's when I found out that New York City was segregated and practiced racism just like North Carolina.

"We were trying to get away economically, but that didn't work out too well. And his father was ill, and we needed to be home with him anyway. We did the same thing in Detroit. He went to Detroit and got a job there. I went there, and we lived in Detroit for six or eight months, maybe even a year, and thought we were on the road to getting up.

"He was working in an aircraft factory. I don't recall what the reason was why that didn't work out, but we went back to the segregated South. I remember riding on the bus with my 2-year-old son back to Monroe, then when we got to Monroe looking at 'Colored Only' signs in the bus station. We stayed with him until (my father-in-law) passed away.

"We tried everything that we could to survive economically, but everywhere we went, Robert, seeking after first-class citizenship, allied himself with those people who were doing the same thing, fighting for rights and so forth. It never was an easy task. If we had been able to go and get a job, accept

paychecks, enjoy what the white folks were willing to give us, we might have been able to make it. And that was my mode of thinking early on - why can't we just be like other folks and accept this and let it go? Why do we always have to lash out when they aren't treating us right?"

WS: And what would he say?

MW: The same thing he said about being president. 'I'm a man just like they're men. We're people just like they're people. We pay taxes like they pay taxes. We have the right to be treated as equals.'

"That was just embedded in him - it really caused a lot of problems. However, I am so happy that he was who he was and that I grew in that and finally learned that he was right and I was wrong."

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