

## How Should Robert F. Williams Be Remembered?

“Nonviolence is a very potent weapon when the opponent is civilized, but nonviolence is no repellent for a sadist...Nowhere in the annals of history does the record show a people delivered from bondage by patience alone.”

Robert F. Williams

### Overview

Despite having a deep and vast impact on the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s-60s, as well as serving as the forefather of the Black Power Movement, the incredible life and contributions of North Carolina’s Robert F. Williams has largely been left out of history books. While this is in part due to his belief in and advocacy of self-defense (armed when necessary) against racist white terrorists, the life of Robert F. Williams illustrates that in actuality, “the civil rights movement’ and the Black Power movement,’ often portrayed in very different terms, grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom...[His story] reveals that independent black political action, black cultural pride, and what Williams called ‘armed self-reliance’ operated in the South in tension and in tandem with legal efforts and nonviolent protest.” (Dr. Tim Tyson) In this lesson, students will explore the incredible life of Robert Williams, as well as his wife and partner in all things, Mabel Robinson Williams, through oral history interview excerpts, class discussion, reading, and the examination of compelling primary and secondary sources. Students will culminate their exploration by determining how (and why) they think Robert F. Williams should be remembered today.

### Grades

8-11

### Materials

- **Teacher preparation:** While not required, it is highly recommended that teachers read Robert F. Williams, "Black Power," and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle by Dr. Tim Tyson (an online copy is available [here](#))
- Accompanying Power Point, located in Carolina K-12’s Database of K-12 Resources at <https://k12database.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2021/02/RobertWilliamsPPT.pdf>
  - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”; upon completion of presentation, hit ESC on your keyboard to exit the file
  - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to [CarolinaK12@unc.edu](mailto:CarolinaK12@unc.edu)
- Excerpts from SOHP Interview with Mabel Williams, available [here](#) (not all excerpts are used within this lesson)
  - Personality of Robert Williams – Start to 3:24
  - Realities of Life in NC Under Jim Crow & Segregation – 3:30 – 12:20
  - Choosing a Side – 12:20 – 13:40
  - President of NAACP – 13:50 – 18:40
  - Active Role of Mabel Williams – 18:50 – 22:05
  - Formation of Rifle Club for Self-Defense – 22:08 – 30:42
  - Pool Protests – 30:49 – 38:00
  - Legacy of Robert F. Williams – 38:05 – 49:00
    - The full, original interview and transcript, by David Cecelski for the Southern Oral History Program is available [here](#) and is a highly recommended listen for educators!
- How Should Robert F. Williams Be Remembered?, lesson handout attached (p. 7-11)
- Primary/Secondary Sources Set on Robert F. Williams, attached (p. 12 – 22)

### Additional Resources on Robert Williams

View Carolina K-12's program for teachers, *Rifles, Radio and Resistance: Robert F. Williams and the Black Freedom Movement*, on our YouTube playlist [here](#). (Make sure to click "Subscribe" to be notified when new programs are posted!) A list of accompanying resources from the program is available [here](#) and includes articles, books, and more.

### Duration

90 minutes (can be split over multiple class periods; teachers implementing a memorial design activity will likely need additional class/homework time)

### Preparation

- Students should have a basic understanding of the period of Jim Crow and segregation. See Carolina K-12's lessons available [here](#).
- While Jim Crow and segregation, as well as Black self-defense to the violence associated with this period, can be sensitive topics to discuss with students, it is important to explore these historical events and understand the numerous and diverse ways engaged community members fought such injustice. Tackling topics such as racism and violence, while difficult, represents a part of our state's and nation's past and present that students must learn about in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of where we have been, where we are, and where we need to go. It is also important to teach a comprehensive history of the resistance to injustice, going beyond passive non-violence and also including the study of Black power and armed self-defense, which were more common than not.
- To ensure students are able to respectfully and empathetically discuss such topics, teachers must ensure a foundation of considerate dialogue and tolerance is present in the classroom. For techniques on building such a classroom community, see Carolina K-12's classroom management activities in the Database of K-12 Resources under the "[Activities](#)" section and our [Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom](#).

### Procedure

#### Resistance

1. As a warm up, project [SLIDE 2](#) of the accompanying PowerPoint and provide students with the attached handout that they will use at various points throughout the lesson. Instruct students to take 2-minutes to free write on the term "**resistance**" at the top of their handout. What comes to mind, how do they define the word, what are examples throughout history and today, etc. After students have had a few moments to settle and write, have them report out and create a class definition, such as: the refusal to accept or comply with something; the attempt to prevent something by action or argument. Layer into the discussion the word "**self-defense**," asking students to define the concept of self-defense, as well as relate it to the term "resistance."
2. Tell students that they will be exploring these concepts as examine the struggle for civil rights in 1950s and 1960s North Carolina and America. Ask students, who should have a basic understanding of Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement prior to this lesson, what images and/or people typically come to mind when considering the struggle for civil rights in America. As students discuss, project [SLIDE 3](#) and explain that while the most attention is typically given to non-violent direct action (such as sit-ins, Freedom Rides, boycotts, etc.) and leaders in the movement such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the movement was actually much more complex and included people who believed in resisting Jim Crow through armed self-defense.
3. Move to [SLIDE 4](#) and ask students how this image differs from those they viewed on the previous slide, then share the quote from the curator of the image, Martin Berger, on [SLIDE 5](#): "The best-known images

of the civil rights struggle show black Americans as non-threatening victims of white aggression. Though this imagery helped garner the sympathy of liberal whites in the North for the plight of blacks, it did so by preserving a picture of whites as powerful and blacks as hapless victims.” Discuss:

- What message is Berger conveying, both with this image and his statement?
- While the philosophy of non-violent direct action, and the training of activists to never respond with aggression even when provoked or physically attacked, was important – why do you think we seldom learn about other philosophies and people who promoted alternative strategies, including proponents of self-defense and armed resistance?

### **The Prevalence of Self-Defense and Armed Resistance**

4. Explain to students that despite what our history text books may leave out, armed self-defense and resistance (later often associated with the movement of “Black Power”) were more common than not throughout the “long” Civil Rights Movement, including the most studied years of the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, particularly in the rural south, non-violence was more the exception than the rule of every day Black citizens. Ask students to consider what, for instance, black people in small towns in North Carolina would have been up against, leading them to consider threats of violence from hate groups such as the KKK, the realities of lawless racial violence such as lynching, etc.
5. Let students know that today, they will be exploring the role of self-defense and armed resistance by learning about Robert Williams, a civil rights activist who was born in a segregated Monroe, NC in 1925, where he lived for many years. He, along with his wife Mabel and others in Monroe (Union County, NC) spoke out about injustice and advocated for the rights of all people, while being outspoken about the fact that they would fight back if faced with violence. While Robert Williams passed away in 1996, and Mabel in 2014, they leave behind a rich – if not often misunderstood – legacy in their fight for justice and equality.

### **Introduction to Robert F. Williams & Life in Monroe**

6. To set the stage, tell students that they are going to listen to an excerpt from an interview with Mabel Robinson Williams [here](#), in which she talks about what life was like in Monroe, NC during the 1940s and 50s when she and Robert lived and grew up there. [Start the video at 3 minutes, 30 seconds and play through 12 min., 20 seconds](#). Students should answer the corresponding questions on their handout as they listen. Afterwards, take a few minutes to have students report out on what they learned.
7. Project [SLIDE 6](#), which includes images of Robert and Mabel Williams, and share a bit more background information about Robert Williams (taking questions and discussing throughout) such as:
  - Robert Williams’s family was a great influence on him. Not mentioned in the interview excerpt is that his grandfather, Sikes Williams, was born enslaved in Union County and after emancipation, attended Biddle Institute in nearby Charlotte, then became one of Union County’s first black school teachers. He was also a Republican activist (remember, this was a different Republican Party in the 1890s) who traveled around NC making speeches in support of the fusion coalition (which was unfortunately broken apart after the 1898 Wilmington Coup.) His grandmother, Ellen, was born to her enslaved mother and her mother’s owner. She was known to be an avid reader and strong proponent of education. Before dying, she gifted Robert the rifle his grandfather had used against white terrorists at the turn of the century.
  - In 1936, as a little boy, 11-year-old Robert Williams witnessed the brutal beating of a black woman by a white male police officer on the streets of Monroe. Throughout his life, he often spoke of never forgetting the laughter of white bystanders, the way powerless black men hung their heads in shame, and “her tortured screams as her flesh was ground away from the friction of the concrete.” Dr. Tim

Tyson wrote, “In the anguish of that eleven-year-old, we can find distilled the bitter history that shaped one of the South’s most dynamic race rebels, and thousands of other black insurgents. That moment marked his life, and his life marked the African American freedom movement in the United States.”

- In 1944, Robert was drafted into fighting for freedom overseas, in a segregated army. He returned to Monroe a different 21-year-old man in 1946. He had fought for democracy in a foreign country while his own country denied full rights to Black people. He had also been trained to use weapons.
- On June 19, 1947, Robert married Mabel Robinson.
- After attending 3 black colleges on GI Bill benefits, writing poetry and studying psychology (and while attending Johnson Smith college, meeting Langston Hughes, one of his literary heroes), he ran out of tuition money and enlisted in the US Marine Corps.
- He served in US Marine Corps from 1953-1955, but spent much of his time clashing with officers over discrimination; he received an undesirable discharge in 1955 and returned to Monroe
- During this time, from 1955-1957, the Klan was very active in North Carolina; their rallies around Monroe began to draw crowds in the thousands.
- It is during this time that Robert Williams comes home and he and Mabel join the NAACP, despite great risk at the time. The white community of Monroe (as was the behavior elsewhere) would often refuse to employ, or fire black workers who were known (or even thought to be) members. Thus, when Rob joined, the Monroe membership had dwindled down to 6 members.
- He began to recruit working class people, and particularly black veterans, to join. His largest group of new recruits were actually black women, many of who were able to overhear information in the various white homes or establishments in which they worked, and feed it back to Williams. By 1959, Rob’s NAACP membership grew to 200 members.

### **Formation of a Rifle Club for Self Defense**

8. Next, project SLIDE 7 and tell students that they are going to listen to more of Mabel’s interview, in which she discusses Robert’s formation of an NRA-chartered rifle club to help them in protecting themselves against white violence. Again, inform students that they should answer the corresponding questions on their handout while listening. ([Play from 22:08 – 30:42.](#))
9. Again, debrief the questions with students while discussing what they heard as a class. Remind them of the realities and dangers Mabel shared in the first excerpt they listened to, and ask students to discuss how that information might inform the move towards arming themselves. Have students return to viewing the image on SLIDE 7 and ask students to think about this image. Where/when might it have been taken? Who may have taken it? What perception does it give of Robert and Mabel? As students discuss, finally ask them to consider whether this seems to be an image caught in the moment of Robert and Mabel brandishing weapons, or if it appears to be more “staged?”

### **The Swimming Pool Protests**

10. Next, let students know they are going to listen to one more part of Mabel’s interview, in which she discusses one of Robert’s first campaigns in Monroe, an effort to convince city officials to grant access to the public swimming pool for Black people. (Despite being a public pool paid for by all people’s tax dollars, it was only open to whites. There was also no separate pool for Black people.) Again, tell students to take notes and answer the corresponding questions on their handout as they listen to the seven-minute excerpt. ([Play from 30:48 to 38:00.](#))
  - As an optional reference, teachers may want to consult, or use excerpts from “1957: Swimming Pool Show Down,” by Robert Williams; an excerpt is included as one of the documents students will review later in the lesson: <https://www.crmvet.org/info/monroe57.pdf>

11. Again, debrief the questions with students while discussing what they heard as a class. Further share with them a key piece of information regarding the protests not included in the interview:
- In an effort to intimidate and threaten the people campaigning for Black access to the public pool, the KKK organized a motorcade through Monroe. Given the lawlessness that was often exhibited by this hate group, there was naturally concern in the community regarding what would happen. However, Robert Williams and his colleagues put their belief in armed self-defense in action: “Black veterans greeted the night riders with sandbag fortifications and a hail of disciplined gunfire. The Monroe Board of Aldermen immediately passed an ordinance banning the KKK motorcades, a measure they had refused to consider before the gun battle.” This confirmed for Williams that armed self defense not only facilitates self-preservation, but could also lead to social change.

### Independent Reading & Primary/Secondary Source Evaluation

12. Instruct students to move on to the reading, which they can complete independently or in reading partners. Students should carefully read and annotate the text by jotting down questions and/or comments in the margins. They should also underline or highlight each example of resistance the article mentions that Robert Williams engaged in.
- **Teacher Note:** This reading could also be assigned for homework, and the remainder of the lesson completed the following day, if better for class pacing.
13. Once students have read the text, take some time to review together, noting all the examples of resistance Robert Williams engaged in. Note any questions students have, then tell students they are going to examine a range of sources that will further tell them more about Robert Williams, his life and belief’s.
14. Next, individually or in partners, assign students one or more of the attached primary/secondary sources to evaluate. Depending on the level of students, teachers can put all attached documents into one source packet for students to review in partners or small groups, or teachers can assign certain sources to certain students, then have them share what they reviewed with each other in a [“jigsaw” activity](#).
15. Once students have reviewed (and shared) their sources, bring the class together for a debriefing of the sources and to see what questions students may still have. Discuss:
- Which source did you find most interesting and why?
  - Which source did you find most helpful in better understanding Robert Williams, and/or the concept of self-defense in the struggle for civil rights and why?
  - Which document did you find most helpful in better understanding the “hard history” of Jim Crow, racial discrimination, injustice in the courts, etc. and why?
  - Which document do you feel most supports the concept or necessity of self-defense and why? Which document do you feel most rejects the concept of self-defense and why?
  - What lessons do you think we should learn from the life of Robert Williams?
  - Why do you think Robert Williams and the concept of self-defense is often not taught, and/or left out of history textbooks? Why is it important to learn this history, even though it does bring up difficult subjects such as racial violence and the injustices associated with Jim Crow?

### The Legacy of Robert F. Williams

16. As a culminating discussion and activity, ask students to share their understanding of the word “legacy.” As students discuss, project [SLIDE 8](#) and layer the words from the musical *Hamilton* on legacy into the conversation: “Legacy, what is a legacy? It’s planting seeds in a garden you never get to see - I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone will sing for me.” Ask students what message these lines are

conveying about the concept of “legacy.” Tell students they are going to listen to a final clip from the interview with Mabel Williams, in which she discusses what she thinks her husband’s legacy should be. ([Play from 38:05 to 49:00.](#)) Students should answer the corresponding questions while listening.

17. Allow students to report out on what they heard, and pose the culminating question to them: How should Robert F. Williams be remembered? This can be done as (or in combination of) an [exit ticket](#), a full class discussion, or a culminating project, such as:
  - In the last interview excerpt, interviewer David Cecelski and Mabel Williams joked about a statue of Robert Williams being placed in downtown Monroe, NC. As of 2021, no memorial to Robert F. Williams exists, and in many ways, his story remains hidden in our history. Imagine that you have been hired to create a memorial that honors Robert and Mabel Williams’s contributions to the civil rights movement. Using your answer to the question regarding what Robert’s legacy should be, use your creativity to conceive of and design a memorial in a location of your choice. Your memorial should provide a true and full story of the life, work and beliefs of Robert Williams, and his partner Mabel, and their impact on the struggle for civil rights. Your memorial might be literal, or abstract. It might be traditional (i.e., a statue or monument) or multidimensional (i.e., a broader site or installation.)
18. Teachers may want to reference [this lesson plan from Facing History and Ourselves](#) for further ideas and more detailed instructions to provide to students regarding creating a memorial. While this lesson is tailored to the Holocaust, the activity (with revised language) can be applied to this subject matter.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## How Should Robert F. Williams Be Remembered?

**Warm Up: What comes to mind when you consider the word RESISTANCE?**

**Definitions:**

### **LISTEN: Mabel Williams on “Life in NC Under Jim Crow & Segregation”**

1. What kind of society did Mabel and Robert Williams grow up and live in? What were some of the specific realities of life during Jim Crow that she described?
2. How does Mabel describe her husband, Robert? What is your first impression of him from what she says?
3. What was “radical” about the beliefs of the Williams family? What was risky about such beliefs at the time?
4. What does Mabel mention that likely influenced Robert’s beliefs and why? (he was a veteran, he was an avid reader, his family)

### **LISTEN: Formation of a Rifle Club for Self-Defense**

5. Why does Robert Williams lead his chapter of the NAACP to form a rifle club?
6. Why was it important to take threats very seriously in 1950s Monroe?
7. What message did Robert Williams impart to the members who were learning to use weapons?
8. Despite a classic belief in Second Amendment rights, why did white people not support Black people having guns?

## **LISTEN: Swimming Pool Protests, 1957**

9. What was Monroe city council's response to Robert's request that black people have access to at least a day of swimming at the Monroe public pool, which black tax dollars paid for?
10. How does Robert Williams and the NAACP respond to the city council's refusal?
11. What was Mabel's role during the protests? Why did she and Robert feel it was important to have a weapon?

**READ: As you read the article below, annotate the text. Write questions and comments in the margins, and underline or highlight every example of resistance that Robert Williams engaged in.**

### **A new debate over nonviolence**

Years before anyone chanted "Black Power!" or armed Black Panthers struck aggressive poses on the evening news, a small-town NAACP leader in North Carolina named Robert F. Williams said it was time for black Americans to "meet violence with violence."

Williams was a veteran, a former Marine who, who read, wrote poetry and listened to classical music. The day after he made his fiery declaration to reporters on the steps of the Monroe, N.C., courthouse, word came down from NAACP headquarters: Williams was suspended.

Over the next three years, Williams led the armed defense of Monroe's black neighborhood against Ku Klux Klan incursions; published the radical Crusader newsletter; debated nonviolence with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.; was charged with kidnapping a white couple during a Monroe riot; fled to Cuba and broadcast demands for civil rights on "Radio Free Dixie"; and wrote a book, "Negroes With Guns," that inspired future Black Panthers.

Despite - or because of - his radicalism, Williams is a footnote to civil rights history. After self-imposed exile in Cuba and China, he lived quietly for a quarter-century in the little town of Baldwin, Michigan. His death in October 1996, at age 71, received little notice.

Yet, a look at Williams' life brings into focus the brutal racial realities of his era, and it raises anew the nonviolence debate: King's fear that advocacy of violence would lead the black minority to slaughter vs. Williams' assertion that "when our people become fighters, our leaders will be able to sit at the conference table as equals."

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Williams was born in 1925 in Monroe, a town of 11,000 where almost all blacks worked as sharecroppers, laborers or domestics. Williams' family was one that whites considered "respectable." Williams' father was a railroad boiler washer, his mother a housewife and devout Baptist.

His grandfather, born enslaved, became the first black teacher in Union County, campaigned for Republicans during Reconstruction, published a Populist newspaper, and carried a rifle that was handed down to Williams.



At 16, Robert led blacks in a walkout at a National Youth Administration camp where white youths learned to lay masonry and black youths "learned" to carry things for whites. That teen-age act of rebellion was the first chapter in Williams' voluminous FBI file, historian Tim Tyson says.

After working in Detroit auto plants, being an insubordinate Army draftee, running for mayor of Monroe in 1950 and being dishonorably discharged from the Marines due to scuffles over segregation, Williams returned to Monroe in 1955. He recruited working-class veterans to rebuild the dwindling 6-member local NAACP as its new president.

In 1957, during a tense, unsuccessful campaign to desegregate Monroe's public swimming pool, a Klan motorcade attacked an NAACP member's house. Williams' troops "greeted the nightriders with sandbag fortifications and a hail of disciplined gunfire," Tyson wrote.

The next year, two black boys in Monroe, ages 8 and 10, were sent to reform school after being kissed on the cheek by a white girl while playing. Williams mobilized international outrage over the "kissing case." When challenged for speaking out against the case, and the injustice of the court system, Williams responded, "If the US government is so concerned about its image abroad, then let it create a society that will stand up under world scrutiny." The boys were finally released three months later.

The Monroe leader was becoming a cult figure in black America. He spoke at Malcolm X's temple in Harlem and raised money to buy rifles, guns, helmets, and more for the Monroe NAACP.

In 1959, when Monroe juries acquitted two white men of assaulting black women, Williams made his courthouse declaration: "Since the federal government will not stop lynching, and since the so-called courts lynch our people legally, if it's necessary to stop lynching with lynching, then we must resort to that method. We must meet violence with violence."

The next day, Williams tried to clarify: He advocated armed self-defense, not vigilantism.

He was suspended by the NAACP as the Monroe chapter president, and when he appealed his suspension at the 1959 NAACP convention, he asked members "not to come crawling to these whites on your hands and knees and make me a sacrificial lamb."

When the NAACP upheld his suspension, the chapter elected his wife, Mabel Williams, to take over in his stead, allowing Robert to still maintain a voice.

Williams continued to work to strengthen the civil rights movement in Monroe, and beyond. On June 26, 1959, he and Mabel published the first edition of their newsletter, *The Crusader*, with the tagline of "ADVANCING THE CAUSE OF RACE PRIDE AND FREEDOM"

On March 1, 1960 Robert Williams followed a dozen black youths into Gamble's Drug Store in downtown Monroe and was the only person arrested, after which he spoofed himself "the dangerous stool-sitter bandit."

Williams described a different sit-in tactic they used in Monroe. "We're using hit and run tactics. They never know when we're coming or when we're going to leave. That way we hope to wear them down." He also noted that "not a single demonstrator was even spat upon during our sit-ins."

In August 1961, a group of Freedom Riders showed up in Monroe. While Williams welcomed them, he did not participate himself given his keen understanding of the danger that would be present for a group that refused to practice self-defense. "I saw it first as a challenge," Williams recalled, "but I also saw it as an opportunity to show that what King and them were preaching was bullshit."

Two weeks of picketing at the Union County Courthouse grew progressively more dangerous for the Freedom Riders. Crowds of hostile white onlookers grew larger and larger. Finally, on Sunday afternoon, Aug. 28, a mob of several thousand furious white people attacked the approximately thirty demonstrators, badly injuring many of them; local police arrested the bleeding protesters.

During this time, a white husband and wife drove into Williams's black community, claiming to be lost. With racial tensions at a boiling point, the couple was threatened by suspicious black residents, already on high alert due to the racist violence occurring downtown. Robert Williams is said to have talked the crowd down, allowing the couple into his home to protect them from harm. Two hours later they were safely on their way. However, by night fall, Williams learned that the FBI had issued an arrest order for him on the charge of kidnapping. He and his family fled to New York City, then Canada, and finally exiled to Cuba in order to avoid the false charges.

Even while away in Cuba, Williams's voice remained strong. From 1961-1964 he and Mabel produced and presented *Radio Free Dixie*, a show on Radio Havana. In 1962 he wrote and published *Negroes with Guns*. The Williamses relocated to Beijing in 1965, and finally in 1969, were able to return home after negotiating with the US government, bartering the exclusive knowledge Robert Williams had gained of the Chinese government for a safe return and a post at the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan.

Upon returning, Williams fought extradition to North Carolina on the kidnapping charges, which ultimately were dropped. He lived out the remainder of his life in Michigan, where he lectured and was a local activist. But in the eyes of many of his admirers, he had all but disappeared. John C. Williams, Robert's son, says his father's withdrawal was a survival strategy.

"The black leaders our youth know most about -- Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers -- died young. The message is like if you choose to follow these people's path, this is what happens to you in America," Williams' son says. "My dad chose to live."

Williams never lived in Monroe again, but he was buried there. He passed away from cancer on Oct. 15, 1996. Rosa Parks attended his funeral in Monroe.

Historian Tim Tyson says Williams should be more than a footnote in history: "He challenged not only white supremacy but the civil rights establishment. He was the godfather of Black Power."

He further noted: "One of the enduring ironies of the civil rights movement is that violence and nonviolence are interdependent...If King was the carrot, people like Robert were the stick. It is not clear how much either would have done without the other."

Sources: <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1997-03-02-1997061039-story.html> and <https://history.msu.edu/files/2010/04/Timothy-Tyson.pdf>

**EXAMINE: Review the primary/secondary source related to Robert F. Williams assigned to you and answer the questions below. Be prepared to share what you learn with classmates.**

Source: \_\_\_\_\_

12. What information are you provided with in this source and by whom? Do you think the source is reliable? Why or why not?

13. What does this source offer that helps give you a more **complete picture** of Robert Williams and/or the strategy of self-defense during the Civil Rights Movement? Explain and include specific examples or details.
14. What does this source teach you about racial discrimination and/or Black self-defense? Does the source help in any way to show how racial discrimination can be overcome? Explain.
15. After examining your source, what questions do you still have about Robert F. Williams, Black self-defense, or any other topic that has come up during the lesson or your review of sources?

**LISTEN: Mabel Williams on Robert F. Williams's Legacy**

16. Mabel Williams started by saying that “the seeds he planted in my mind...I think those seeds have to be nourished.” What do you think she means?
17. What effect does Mabel say Robert had on both the civil rights movement and the Black community?
18. In what way does she say he is different than many other civil rights leaders, and why is this difference important, especially to young people?
19. Who was “the man behind the shotgun” according to Mabel? What was Robert's fundamental belief?

**Culminating Reflection: How should Robert F. Williams be remembered?**

## **Primary and Secondary Sources on Robert F. Williams**

W

410 N. BOYTE STREET  
MONROE, NORTH CAROLINA

DEAR FRIEND,

AFRO-AMERICANS ALL OVER THE UNITED STATES ARE DEEPLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE SAVAGE BRUTALITY BEING VISITED UPON OUR PEOPLE, AND ESPECIALLY THE FREEDOM RIDERS IN THE STATES OF ALABAMA AND MISSISSIPPI. THE KENNEDY BROTHERS HAVE ALREADY SURRENDERED LAW AND ORDER TO MOB VIOLENCE BY ASKING OUR PEOPLE TO FOREGO CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS SO AS NOT TO EMBARRASS KENNEDY WHILE HE IS IN EUROPE. THIS IS TOO MUCH TO ASK OF A PEOPLE WHO HAVE SUFFERED THE HUMILIATING CONDITION OF LIFE AS A SUBHUMAN FOR 400 YEARS.

IT IS OBVIOUS THAT OUR OPPRESSION IS OF NO IMPORTANCE TO WASHINGTON. JOHN KENNEDY SAYS THAT MOBS DO NOT ASK QUESTIONS, THEREFORE, WE SHOULD WAIT FOR BIGOT'S TEMPER TO COOL.

A GROUP OF AFRO-AMERICANS ARE UNITING IN AN EFFORT TO GET A NATION, PERHAPS AFRICAN, TO PRESENT A DECLARATION OF COMPLAINT TO THE UNITED NATIONS. WE ASK YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS TO JOIN US BY LENDING YOUR SIGNATURE TO THIS NOBLE UNDERTAKING. PLEASE RUSH YOUR PERMISSION TO USE YOUR NAME TO: MRS. ODESSA COX,

637 WEST 119TH STREET, LOS ANGELES 44, CALIFORNIA.

YOURS FOR FREEDOM,

Robert F. Williams  
ROBERT F. WILLIAMS

IDENTIFICATION  
ORDER NO. 3506  
August 31, 1961

# Wanted by FBI

## INTERSTATE FLIGHT - KIDNAPING

### ROBERT FRANKLIN WILLIAMS

FBI No.  
84,275 B

ALIASES: BOB WILLIAMS, ROBERT F. WILLIAMS

19 L 1 R IOO 8 Ref: T R T  
M 1 T IO A A T



Photograph taken May, 1961



*Robert Franklin Williams*

#### DESCRIPTION

AGE: 36, born February 26, 1925, Monroe, North Carolina  
HEIGHT: 6'  
WEIGHT: 240 pounds  
BUILD: heavy  
HAIR: black  
EYES: brown  
COMPLEXION: dark brown  
RACE: Negro  
NATIONALITY: American  
OCCUPATIONS: free lance  
writer, freight handler,  
janitor, machinist

SCARS AND MARKS: scar left eyelid, scar left nostril, scar on calf of right leg.

#### CAUTION

WILLIAMS ALLEGEDLY HAS POSSESSED A LARGE QUANTITY OF FIREARMS, INCLUDING A .45 CALIBER PISTOL WHICH HE CARRIES IN HIS CAR. HE HAS PREVIOUSLY BEEN DIAGNOSED AS SCHIZOPHRENIC AND HAS ADVOCATED AND THREATENED VIOLENCE. WILLIAMS SHOULD BE CONSIDERED ARMED AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS.

A Federal warrant was issued on August 28, 1961, at Charlotte, North Carolina, charging Williams with unlawful interstate flight to avoid prosecution for kidnaping (Title 18, U. S. Code, Section 1073).

IF YOU HAVE INFORMATION CONCERNING THIS PERSON, PLEASE NOTIFY ME OR CONTACT YOUR LOCAL FBI OFFICE. PHONE NUMBER IS LISTED BELOW. OTHER OFFICES ARE LISTED ON BACK.

IDENTIFICATION  
ORDER NO. 3506

*J. Edgar Hoover*  
DIRECTOR  
Federal Bureau of Investigation  
Washington 25, D. C.

CLASS OF SERVICE

This is a fast message unless its delayed character is indicated by the proper symbol.

# WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

W. F. MARSHALL, President

RF-1291 (4-60)

SYMBOLS

DL = Day Letter  
NL = Night Letter  
LT = International Letter Telegram

The time shown in the date line on domestic telegrams is LOCAL TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is LOCAL TIME at point of destination.

100A EST MAY 31 61 AA033

MAY 31 1961

RA006 R CFA029 LONG NL PD TDCF MONROE NCAR 30

REV MARTIN LUTHER KING

208 AUBURN AVE NE ATLA

THE CAUSE OF HUMAN DECENCY AND BLACK LIBERATION DEMANDS THAT YOU PHYSICALLY RIDE THE BUSES WITH OUR GALLANT FREEDOM RIDERS. NO SINCERE LEADER ASKS HIS FOLLOWERS TO MAKE SACRIFICES THAT HE HIMSELF WILL NOT ENDURE. YOU ARE A PHONY. GANDHI WAS ALWAYS IN THE FOREFRONT SUFFERING WITH HIS PEOPLE IF YOU ARE THE LEADER OF THIS NON VIOLENT MOVEMENT LEAD THE WAY BY EXAMPLE. YOU ARE BETRAYING OUR CAUSE BY ATTEMPTING TO APPEASE OUR ENEMIES RIDE THE BUSES AS THE STUDENTS HAVE ASK YOU TO. IF YOU LACK THE COURAGE, REMOVE YOURSELF FROM THE VANGUARD. I PERSONALLY CHALLENGE YOU TO RIDE FOR FREEDOM. NOW IS THE TIME FOR TRUE LEADERS TO TAKE TO THE FIELD OF BATTLE

ROBERT F WILLIAMS PRESIDENT UNION COUNTY BRANCH NAACP.

# The Story of Old Monroe

**Notes:** words by Malvina Reynolds and Pete Seeger; *Broadside* magazine reported that "The following ballad was written in April, 1962, at the request of the Committee to Aid the Monroe Defendants.

[CLICK HERE TO LISTEN TO A RECORDING.](#)

Gather 'round us you Americans, The newspapers have ignored this;	If you believe in right and wrong. I'll tell it in a song.
The papers and the TV So, listen now,	Never told the story straight, I will to you The honest facts relate.
Let me take you to a corner It's Monroe, North Carolina,	Of this world that we call free. Where the Klan rules by decree.
Maybe you thought the Klan was dead Well, in August 1961	And buried long ago. You should ha' been in old Monroe.
It's a town of about ten thousand, But there's uncertainty and fear	And could be a pretty place. To be seen on many a face.
A railroad slices through Monroe On the right, Monroe is white	It's not one town but two towns And on the left is Newtown.
Eighteen Freedom Riders came At the call of young Rob Williams	In August '61. To see what could be done.
Robert Williams was a leader, He said, let's protect our families	A giant of a man. From the violence of the Klan.
The Klansmen, they got busy; All armed with guns and pistols,	They came from everywhere, And Chief Mauney <sup>1</sup> didn't care.
They staged a bloody riot 'Cause the only ones arrested	And the deck was surely stacked, Were the ones who were attacked.
Hey, listen for the frame-up! To trap Williams and his friends	Did the Klan lay a plan? And make him flee the land?
A couple, by name of Stegall They drove right into Newtown;	Were driving in a car. That was a bit too far.
For Negroes live in Newtown, They'd set their lines of self-defense	And on that fatal day Against the K.K.K.
The Stegalls, they were frightened; And Robert Williams told the crowd	They stopped at Williams' door. To let the Stegalls go.



He said, come inside my house. And Williams let the Stegalls	You'll get hurt if you stay here. Inside his own house there.
And though this man had saved them, Nothing less than a kidnap charge:	Police got on his trail. Twenty years to life in jail.
And then the mighty F.B.I. With vicious posters tacked up	Joined in to help the Klan, In post offices through the land.
Saying Rob was armed and dangerous As though to shoot him down on sight	And schizophrenic, too, Would be the safest thing to do.
But Rob escaped to Canada, And now he stays in Cuba	And then to Mexico. Where the F.B.I. can't go.
And now a make believe trial And we are wondering if in Monroe	Comes in May of 62, That justice will come through.
Perhaps when it gets to the Supreme Ct But it's in the hearts of you and me,	They'll get a better shake. The decision must be made.
For we all are just as guilty, When Robert Williams can return	Till we make that day to come To his Union County home.
So listen, Mr. President, If you'd defend the Free World,	And listen Brother Bob: Here is a little job.
If you don't believe the words I say, Go down and visit old Monroe,	Go see it for yourself. But be careful of your health.
There's lots of good people in Monroe, Go down to old Monroe, Bob.	But they are scared to say. Tell them: this is the U.S.A.
They say the German people Well, let American people	The crimes of Hitler never knew. See what fascists here can do.
For we've had enough of murder, And the Klu Klux Klan in old Monroe	And we've had enough of lies, Is due to be surprised.
For in Washington and 'round the world Is Monroe, North Carolina,	We're being asked today, In the good old U.S.A.?
Monroe! Monroe! Is Monroe, North Carolina,	I hear those voices say: In the good old U.S.A.?

# 1957: THE SWIMMING POOL SHOWDOWN

ROBERT WILLIAMS

## Self-Defense is Born of Our Plight

Since the city officials wouldn't stop the Klan, we decided to stop the Klan ourselves. We started this action out of the need for defense, because law and order had completely vanished — because there was no such thing as a Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in Monroe, North Carolina. The local officials refused to enforce law and order and when we turned to federal and state officials to enforce law and order they either refused or ignored our appeals.

Luther Hodges, who was later Secretary of Commerce, was the Governor of North Carolina at that time. We first appealed to him. He took sides with the Klan; they had not broken any laws, they were not disorderly. Then we appealed to President Eisenhower but we never received a reply to our telegrams. There was no response at all from Washington.

So we started arming ourselves. I wrote to the National Rifle Association in Washington, which encourages veterans to keep in shape to defend their native land, and asked for a charter, which we got. In a year we had 60 members. We had bought some guns too, in stores, and later a church in the North raised money and got us better rifles. The Klan discovered we were arming and guarding our community. In the summer of 1957 they made one big attempt to stop us. An armed motorcade attacked Dr. Perry's house, which is situated on the outskirts of the colored commu-

nity. We shot it out with the Klan and repelled their attack and the Klan didn't have any more stomach for this type of fight. They stopped raiding our community. After this clash the same city officials who said the Klan had a constitutional right to organize met in an emergency session and passed a city ordinance banning the Klan from Monroe without a special permit from the police chief.

At the time of our clash with the Klan only three Negro publications — the *Afro-American*, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, and *Jet Magazine* — reported the fight. *Jet* carried some pictures of the self-defense guard. Our fight occurred two weeks before the famous clash between the Indians of Robeson County and the Klan. We had driven the Klan out of our county into the Indian territory. The national press played up the Indian-Klan fight because they didn't consider this a great threat — the Indians are a tiny minority and people could laugh at the incident as a sentimental joke — but no one wanted Negroes to get the impression that this was an accepted way to deal with the Klan. So the white press maintained a complete blackout about the Monroe fight.

After the Klan learned that violence wouldn't serve their purpose they started to use the racist courts. Dr. Perry, our vice president, was indicted on a trumped-up charge of abortion. He is a Catholic physician, and one of the doctors who had been head of the county medical department drove 40 miles to testify in Dr. Perry's behalf, declaring that when Dr. Perry had worked in the hospital he had refused to file sterilization permits for the County Welfare Department on the ground that this was contrary to his religious beliefs. But he was convicted, sentenced to five years in prison, and the loss of his medical license. □

# Robert Williams: Man Of Trouble

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

MONROE — For five years this city has been making headlines about racial strife.

Nearly every racial incident reported here can be traced to a single source. That source is Robert F. Williams.

A large, heavy set Negro with a faraway gaze in his eyes, Williams is a native of Union County. He has spent a great deal of time in the north and in recent months has visited Cuba.

\* \* \*

A LONGTIME leader in the NAACP, Williams, who wears a Castro-type beard, has been at odds with the NAACP for years because of his advocacy of meeting force with force.

On July 17, 1959, the 50th annual convention of the NAACP in New York voted 764-14 in approval of Williams' suspension as Union County chapter president for his stand advocating violence. Williams later won reelection by his chapter, of which his wife is secretary.

Williams has boasted to newsmen that he maintains a complete arms arsenal in his home in the northern section of Monroe, and that for months he has kept armed guards in and about his residence at night.

A month ago, Williams announced that the State Depart-



ROBERT WILLIAMS

ment had declined to issue him a passport to make his third trip to Cuba and declared, "I am a prisoner of the United States." He said he wanted to take his 29-year-old wife and two sons, aged 13 and 11, "with the possibility of staying permanently."

For a time, Williams flew a Cuban flag from a pole in his backyard. Last May 12, Tom Roddy, a 21-year-old Negro paratrooper home on leave, pulled the flag down.





*David Simpson (l.) and James Thompson lose freedom as their mothers (r.) leave Wadesboro courtroom in tears.*

### **N. C. NAACP To Appeal 'Kissing Kids' Case**

A Superior Court judge's refusal to free two Negro boys, who were jailed six days then sent to a reform school because one of them was kissed by a five-year-old white girl, will be appealed, the Monroe (N. C.) NAACP announced. Claiming that the boys were held because they were juvenile delinquents, the state charged David (Fuzzy) Simpson, 8, and James Hanover Thompson, 10, forced the unidentified girl to kiss Thompson. But the boys said the girl kissed one of them while they were playing cowboy with two other white boys and girls. The NAACP also relocated the boys' mothers, after they were fired from their jobs as domestics and threatened.

W

[Censorship]

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and Just Plain Music Lovers too—

You won't be disappointed

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**The Crusaders For Freedom**  
**Present A**

**BENEFIT PERFORMANCE FOR**

**ROBERT F. WILLIAMS**

PRESIDENT OF THE MONROE, N. C.

CHAPTER OF THE N. A. A. C. P.

TICKETS:  
C. DARGINS,  
MO 6-6062

**SUNDAY, MAY 7, 1961**

**4:00 to 7:00 P.M.**

**JAZZ GALLERY**  
8th STREET NEAR FIRST AVE., N. Y.

**ADMISSION \$2.00**

S. LEAKES,  
RI 9-5565

M. MALLORY,  
UN 6-0430

39-46-31

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

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

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

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