

BLACK

WILLIAMS



Some of the BSU members who researched and wrote *Black Williams*, photographed in June 2003.

Thirteen members of the Black Student Union embark on writing a history of black students at Williams—and learn about themselves in the process.

BY ALLISON TRACY & AMY LOVETT

Most students at Williams know the name of the first black man to attend the College: Gaius Charles Bolin, Class of 1889. But how many know the name of the second?

Livingsworth Wilson Bolin entered Williams a year after his brother, withdrew the semester before graduation and later established an insurance and real estate business. He was “the first of Williams’ black men to decide not to complete his course of study, and because of that he is important,” writes Sharifa Wright ‘03 in *Black Williams: A Written History*.

Black Williams is the 23,000-word, 79-page result of a Winter Study project undertaken in 2003 by Wright and 12 other members of the Black Student Union (BSU). Concerned that fellow members lacked a concrete history of the organization, the students initially approached English professor D.L. Smith with the idea of chronicling its past.

“Why stop there?” Smith recalls asking the students. “Why not do a history of black students at Williams?”

It was a daunting charge. With more than 7,500 linear feet of documents and ephemera in the College archives, none of it indexed conveniently under “black history,” the students had no idea what they would find, or where they would find it. Nevertheless, with only four weeks to complete the project, they divided among themselves the 120 years or so since the elder Bolin first arrived on campus. Relying on secondary sources, the students pored over freshman face books, yearbooks, articles in the *Williams Record* and *Alumni Review*, past

research papers and projects, and biographical tidbits culled from alumni files.

For many of the students, the project was an opportunity to explore the records of people and events they had only heard about. Toni-Ann Thomas ‘03, for example, says she had heard in passing that the “Barber Shop Incident” of 1947 was “the first racially motivated incident people can point to at Williams.” That year, juniors Wayman “Cal” Caliman Jr., who was black, and Norm Redlich, who was white, exposed a Spring Street barber-shop’s practice of charging blacks three times more than whites for a haircut.

“Caliman, who wrote for the *Record*, and Redlich, the newspaper’s editor, felt certain they could prove in court that ... the shop’s proprietor had acted illegally,” Thomas writes in *Black Williams*. “Just before the trial, Redlich, Caliman and other students organized a picket of [the] shop that would run for two days and coincide with Homecoming Weekend. Returning alumni were greeted by the sight of crowds of demonstrating students and townspeople.”

Several weeks of coverage in the *Record* and other newspapers culminated with the courts fining the barbershop \$50. But Thomas found the real story had just begun.

“Talk of the incident,” she writes, “was replaced by reports of performances by the Glee Club and swim team victories, but there is no doubt that a shift had occurred at Williams. Soon after, the fraternities’ discrimination against Jews and Negroes became the new issue hotly debated in the dormitories and hallways of Williams College. The spring of 1947 had brought with it several problems that the college community never before had to contend

For students researching *Black Williams*,
shedding light on the life stories long buried
in archives of famous and not-so-famous
black alumni was a chance, as Wright puts it,
“to reinforce my space in this place. ... I am
in awe of the people who lived here.”

with. But these were issues that would soon thrust the campus into the throes of the racial conflicts that were sweeping the nation.”

Thomas, a native of Kingston, Jamaica, says the research project taught her about the nature of advocacy at the College, namely, that “if it doesn’t threaten anyone’s safety, the administration leaves it up to us”—meaning all Williams students—to lead discourse on issues affecting campus life.

Such was the case with the well-publicized occupation of Hopkins Hall in 1969 by members of the relatively new Williams Afro-American Society—BSU’s predecessor. As Dayna Baskette ’03, who researched the mid to late 1960s writes, the students combined the “‘by any means necessary’ doctrine of Malcolm X and the nonviolent tactics espoused by Martin Luther King Jr.,” presenting to administrators a list of 15 demands ranging from adding Afro-American studies to the curriculum to creating a space for black students on campus (ultimately, Rice House).

Placing the demands in context, Baskette quotes Preston Washington, then a junior, as stating in 1969, “This year we realized that the issue was more basic. ... Black students were brought here and pushed through a white monocultural environment. They were being disenfranchised and dehumanized in an atmosphere that purported to be liberal.”

Baskette found that yearbooks of the time were one manifestation of the “white monocultural environment” Washington described. The three books published from 1966 to 1968 included “just a handful of pictures of people of color—often repeats of the same person,” the Brooklyn native says. However, whether a result of the atmosphere on campus or a reflection of

it, the 1969 yearbook had “dozens of candid shots of black students—studying, having fun, attending political rallies, reading their poetry.”

Though less visibly turbulent than it was in the mid to late 1960s, Williams in the 1920s was an equally “trying place” for the 14 black students who attended, writes Shannon Gopaul ’05 in her section of *Black Williams*. At the time, Harlem and Washington, D.C., were emerging as centers of black culture. The black students who came to Williams, mainly from Washington, were “inspired and accomplished leaders in their communities and chose prestigious colleges and universities with the goal of ‘uplifting the race,’” writes Gopaul, herself a D.C. native.

“The difficulty they felt was not their segregation at Williams—self-segregation was, after all, a defining characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance era—but rather that they had left a place where they were recognized for accomplishments to find themselves regarded as ‘nobodies’ in a rather remote area,” Gopaul writes. “Many black students ... were discouraged by the fact that the serenity and seclusion of Williams couldn’t support the cultural life and political action they craved.”

Nevertheless, a tight-knit group of black students, including Sterling Brown ’22, who would become a longtime Howard University English professor and for whom several prizes and professorships at Williams are named, and William Allison Davis ’24, who would become a noted expert on racial disparities in education and testing and a longtime professor at University of Chicago, distinguished themselves

at Williams and in fields such as education, medicine and the law.

For Gopaul and other students researching *Black Williams*, shedding light on the life stories long

buried in archives of famous and not-so-famous black alumni was a chance, as Wright puts it, “to reinforce my space in this place.”

“I am in awe of the people who lived here,” Wright, also from Kingston, Jamaica, told members of the Executive Committee of the Society of Alumni during a presentation of excerpts of *Black Williams* in March 2003. The project “was very emotional for me,” she added, as tears welled in her eyes and her voice trembled slightly.

The students also presented their research in February 2003 at the reopening of Rice House’s library, which had been renovated and renamed to honor Alana Haywood ’93, an active BSU member who died of meningitis in 1992.

Black Williams remained in relatively raw form—a “patchwork by many hands,” as Prof. Smith puts it—until last fall, when Rene Hamilton ’04, BSU’s current chairman, and Jeff Delaney ’05 took steps to secure funding from the College president’s office to hire a professional editor to copyedit the document. Hamilton says he hopes to make the piece more widely available to students, faculty and staff.

He also echoes the hope expressed in the conclusion of *Black Williams*: “that this work will be added to and improved upon, so that one day there will exist an even more detailed and extensive—and ongoing—history of Williams’ black alumni.” ■

Allison Tracy is a free-lance writer based in Stockbridge, Mass. Amy Lovett is editor of the Williams Alumni Review.