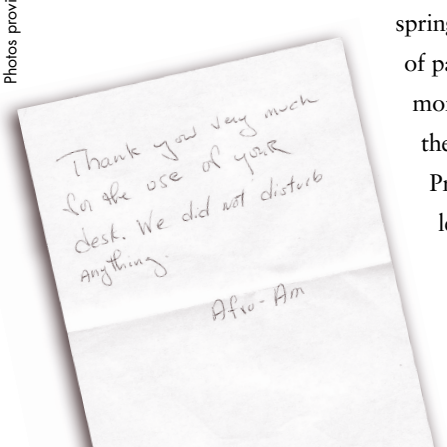
Standing with Our Brothers and Sisters

*Writer and TV producer **Jeffrey Owen Jones** '66 looks back on the Afro-American Society's takeover of Hopkins Hall 35 years ago.*

Preston Washington '70 (center)

In an old file, I recently came across a souvenir of a remarkable Williams experience—a hand-lettered note that reads: "Thank you very much for the use of your desk. We did not disturb anything. Afro-Am."

I first found the note in my Hopkins Hall office after African-American students occupied the building 35 years ago this past spring. The memories that piece of paper recalled became all the more poignant when I read in the *Review* of the death of Preston Washington '70, who led the occupation.



Photos provided by the College archives

I was at Williams in the spring of 1969, winding down a short tour as an intern in the dean's office and teaching Spanish. It was a tumultuous time. Controversy over the Vietnam War was at full boil, and, in the pall that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., black activists were increasingly vocal in demanding change. A lot of the turmoil over the war and racial justice was playing out on campuses. Confrontations between students and administrations unfolded at one college and university after another.

Then, one Saturday morning in April, the Williams campus awoke to news that 34 students from the College's Afro-American Society had taken over Hopkins during the night.

The occupation was not a complete surprise. A few weeks earlier, the society had issued a package of 15 "non-negotiable demands" that ranged from adding Afro-American studies

On the steps of Jesup Hall, Provost Stephen F. Lewis Jr. '60 (at the microphone) reads a statement regarding the occupation. Preston Washington '70 (third to the right from Lewis) looks on.

programs to setting up a cultural center as an oasis for black students who felt they had been forcibly scattered through the College like pepper in a salt shaker.

After the demands were issued, a small group of faculty and administrators met with society members to address their concerns. "(President) Jack Sawyer '39 wanted a more diverse student body and faculty," says George Marcus, then a 26-year-old assistant professor of political science, who was part of the group. "I suggested that while 'non-negotiable' could be useful as an initial stance, not to take it too seriously. If you wanted a dollar and someone offered 99 cents, would you turn it down?"

"We thought we were moving along on things," recalls Steve Lewis '60, then the 30-year-old provost, who chaired the meeting. "We talked about what we could do, what we couldn't do and what we would work on."

But many black students were impatient. "My feeling was that the intentions of the College administrators were good," says Cliff Robinson '70, "but of course good intentions are never sufficient."

On Friday evening, April 4, following a chapel service commemorating the anniversary of Dr. King's death, the black students met and decided to take action. At 4 a.m. they entered Hopkins Hall and told two startled watchmen that they were taking over the building. "Well I wish you luck," one of the watchmen said, according to a later report by the *Record*.

The decision to occupy Hopkins had not been easy. "A lot of us were incredibly ambivalent about doing it," Robinson remembers. "We were very attached to the school and had no intention of alienating anyone or making people angry. I think we all eventually did it despite our misgivings because we felt there were genuine grievances that needed to be aired."

John Hyde '56, emeritus history professor and then dean of the College, places the occupation in the context of the time: "Given what was going on in American education, students at Williams felt they had to stand with their brothers and sisters. And you did it by an act such as this. I think if they had not they would have always felt that they had sold out."

When word of the occupation reached Jack Sawyer, he convened administrators in the library of his Main Street residence. Appointed typist, I pecked out an initial statement as Jack dictated.

Left to right: Richard Jefferson '70, Preston Washington '70 and Michael Douglass '71 look out the registrar's office window, on the second floor of Hopkins Hall, during the Afro-American Society's occupation of the building.

A canny strategist, President Sawyer designated Steve Lewis to negotiate with the occupying students and to be the public spokesman during the crisis. In assigning his trusted young provost as point man, Jack kept the Dean's Office above the fray while strategically insulating himself. "You never lead with number one," observes Lewis, who later went on to serve 15 years as president of Carleton College.

"Jack wanted room to maneuver," says Hyde, "and if you're on the firing line you don't have that."

Using an ear infection as a shield, Sawyer kept out of sight and focused on external constituencies, soothing trustees and alumni. Steve quickly met with a group of young faculty to assure them—and, through them, students and the campus in general—that the administration was working seriously on the issues.

As news of the occupation spread, white students rallied in support, and some brought food. "That's the thing I remember most about the experience," says Cliff Robinson. "It was a very supportive gesture."

The College also sent food, an important signal that there would be no move to dislodge the protesters. As the weekend wore on, discussions proceeded by telephone and via papers passed through windows. Monday and Tuesday classes were cancelled, replaced by a far-ranging campus-wide teach-in.

Students and members of the campus community stand outside Hopkins Hall to show support for the Afro-American Society.

Shortly after midnight on Tuesday the protesters were ready to leave Hopkins. First, they asked that John Hyde come and inspect the building. "So I got out of bed," John recalls, "and went over and walked through with Preston, noting that everything was in perfect order."

Tuesday afternoon, standing in the sun outside Jesup Hall, Steve Lewis and Preston Washington presented an action plan that addressed the students' concerns, along with statements of mutual respect by the students and the administration.

I remember feeling fortunate to be part of Williams on that April afternoon. While confrontations on many other campuses had played out amid resentment and bitterness, the Williams experience felt like a step forward.

Among the many impressive players in the drama, the most extraordinary figure in my opinion was Preston Washington. In an era when student activists often ego-surfed on waves of campus militancy, Preston radiated seriousness of purpose and firm resolve, with the humility of a true leader.

"He was a person of strong beliefs, but not an ideologue," says Steve Lewis.

"I think Preston's goals were not personal power, but the institution and race," says John Hyde. "I don't think he played games. And I always respected him for that."

Graduating summa cum laude and the class speaker at commencement, Preston took advanced degrees, was ordained a minister and went on to lead a powerful coalition of Harlem churches whose accomplishments included building badly needed affordable housing.

"What he accomplished was just incredible," says Cliff Robinson. "And he developed a lot of his skills at Williams. I think he developed a lot of his skills in that building." ■

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