

Marshall University

Marshall Digital Scholar

Oral Histories

African American History in Huntington, WV

7-22-2018

Williams, Joe-Oral History

Markayla Moore

Follow this and additional works at: https://mds.marshall.edu/african_american_oral



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moore, Markayla, "Williams, Joe-Oral History" (2018). *Oral Histories*. 3.
https://mds.marshall.edu/african_american_oral/3

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the African American History in Huntington, WV at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu, beachgr@marshall.edu.

Oral History of Joe Williams, interviewed by Markayla Moore on 07/22/2018 in Huntington, West Virginia.

Markayla Moore: Okay. What street did you grow up on?

Joe Williams: Pardon me?

Markayla Moore: What street did you grow up on?

Joe Williams: Well, I grew up in Boone County, West Virginia, and I came to Huntington in 1963 to attend Marshall University, although we've lived on Doulton Avenue for I guess close to almost 50 years. So, most of my actual adult life has been on Doulton Avenue in Huntington, West Virginia.

Markayla Moore: What did your parents do for a living?

Joe Williams: Well, my mother was a homemaker and my father was a brick mason – worked in West Virginia and sometimes Ohio, Virginia, wherever he could find work. Back then a lot of the trade unions were segregated and consequently he couldn't belong to the unions and it made it very difficult for him to make a living for our family.

Markayla Moore: Where were your parents originally from?

Joe Williams: Well, my mother was born in our old home place, which is 101 years old up in Boone County, West Virginia. My father, he was born in Anderson, South Carolina but he spent most of his life in Richmond, Virginia. So he considered Richmond, Virginia his home.

Markayla Moore: What was your favorite place to eat?

Joe Williams: My favorite place to eat – well, I've been a vegetarian now for almost 40 years, so food doesn't excite me that much. But we like to go to Outback. I like Jim's Steak and Spaghetti House. I love the spaghetti with marinara sauce – that's one of my favorites. But other than that, I guess I'm not really – I don't have any one place that I frequent on a regular basis.

Markayla Moore: What other relatives did you have contact with growing up?

Joe Williams: Well, I have a total of five siblings. I have three brothers: John, Edward, and Jim. I have two sisters: Sandra, who lives in the old home place in Boone County, West Virginia; she's a retired schoolteacher. And a sister Joyce that lives in Florida; and she's a retired nurse.

Markayla Moore: What was your favorite place to shop?

Joe Williams: You say to stop or shop?

Markayla Moore: Shop.

Joe Williams: Well, you know I – growin’ up I didn’t have a lot of clothing and so forth, so a lot of times now I do my shopping online. I’ve never been into spending a lot of time or money on clothing and so forth. You know, I like to look neat and so forth, but I really don’t have a favorite place.

Joe Williams: Now from time to time I will go to a mall and just see what’s available. But clothing, just like food, is not one of the things that – other than shoes. I must say I don’t know how many pairs of shoes – and the reason I had ‘em, when I was growin’ up sometimes I was lucky to have shoes. And often they were worn and sometimes we’d have to put cardboard in the bottom and hope that it didn’t rain because if it did then the cardboard became very wet. [Laughter]

Joe Williams: And sometimes the soles you would use wiring and so forth, so I probably have an affinity for shoes. And that’s based on the fact that I didn’t have, you know didn’t have a lot of shoes or clothing when I was growin’ up. But I had a lot of – family had a lot of love and support, so that overcame everything.

Markayla Moore: What is your fondest memory of living here?

Joe Williams: Well, probably my fondest memory is meeting my wife of over 53 years. That’s my fondest memory. Of course, all my children were born in Huntington. And also, I was fortunate enough to help run a golf tournament for 17 years, which became very – a very popular and gained a lot of national recognition called The Ebony Golf Classic.

Joe Williams: Because of that I was encouraged to run for city council, which I did. And consequently, I became a member of council and later became the mayor of Huntington. Thus far, the only black mayor of Huntington. I hope that’s – I hope I’m not the last one in the foreseeable future, but – . So those are some of the favorite things.

Joe Williams: And as a result, you build on what you do. And I was encouraged to help form a bank in Huntington, First Century Bank. And consequently, I ended up serving on bank boards in Washington, D.C. and Richmond, Virginia. Eventually became the chairman, president, and CEO of Consolidated Bank and Trust, which was purchased by Premier Bank, which is located here in Huntington.

Joe Williams: But at the time it was formed by a lady by the name of Maggie Lena Walker. She’s probably the first woman – I know the first woman of color – who actually helped form a bank and became its president. Maggie Lena Walker. A lot of people don’t know about her. They know about Madam C.J. Walker but you need to look up Maggie Lena, L-E-N-A, Walker. She was quite a lady. Richmond, Virginia.

Joe Williams: And really, all the people, most of the people in Richmond – black and white – they really respect what Maggie Lena Walker was able to do over a hundred years ago.

Markayla Moore: What stories did you hear about your ancestors whom you never knew?

Joe Williams: Well, I learned a lot about my ancestors all the way back to – . Of course, my ancestors are both from Europe, from Africa, and Native Americans.

Joe Williams: One was [Creeseey 00:06:37], who was an indentured servant and came from Haiti and eventually she was freed. Like I said, she was an indentured servant and however, she was able to purchase her freedom. So I learned a lot about my ancestors.

Joe Williams: Just recently I learned – visited one of my white ancestors down in Leesburg, Virginia. And she gave – I have another cousin. I've never met him; I've spoken with him. He's a fourth cousin once removed, and I may show it to you but we have the – it's called a lineage of the Gore family.

Joe Williams: On the European side they came from England in I believe about 1680. And he had traced all my – on the – this is on the Gore side. Traced them all the way up – had my mother's name and all of my aunts and uncles. And he knew more about my family than my family did.

Joe Williams: And of course, a lot of times, especially during the days of slavery, they kept records of the people that, sadly, they owned. So they have – in many cases, they have records that we don't have in the black community.

Joe Williams: And a lot of times records were kept in Bibles. It's my understanding there was a Bible and somehow it got out of our family, which traced all of our ancestors. Almost all the way back to Haiti. So it was always interesting in knowing about that.

Joe Williams: In fact, here we talk about the Gore family. My grandfather was Wallace William Lawson and he was a certified teacher back then. And he taught school, he owned the grocery store, he had the first Model T Ford back in Boone County. And he died before I was born. In fact, I never got to really know any of my grandfathers. He's a grandfather. And didn't get to know one of my grandmothers who was part Cherokee, supposedly. The only grandmother that I knew was on my mother's side.

Joe Williams: So those were things where we – you know although as years went on sometimes we had very difficult times but we were proud. And my mother was an extremely, extremely proud and intelligent woman. Although she wasn't able to go beyond the eighth grade but she was extremely intelligent. As was my dad from Richmond, Virginia.

Joe Williams: His family were contractors and brick masons. And I used to love hearing about those things. And it's always inspired me. In fact, we have a family cemetery up behind the old home place. It has about maybe 70, 80 graves on it.

Joe Williams: And sometimes my brother and I, we'll go out and clean the cemetery each year. But sometimes I like to just go up and reflect on the price that my ancestors paid and the difficult times they had, but still somehow they persevered and left a great legacy.

Markayla Moore: What was school like?

Joe Williams: Well, school, my first five years I was in an all black school. First grade was in Douglas Grade School in South Madison, West Virginia. And then we moved to Carver Grade and High School. It's a combination elementary and high school.

Joe Williams: So my first five years was in an all black school. And then I have to give Boone County credit. Shortly after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, in the next year Boone County began to implement integration to a degree in Madison because that's where a lot of the black people lived. Now we were about six miles out of Madison, but the black and white they knew each other and played together and so forth.

Joe Williams: And then in the sixth grade I went to an integrated school, Madison Grade School. Now we were always told that we had hand-me-down books and so forth and so on, and were led to believe somehow that the white students were more advanced than we were.

Joe Williams: Well, the truth of the matter with me is it took me about three days to know somebody had – maybe not intentionally – lied to me. I thought, "Well, these students don't have a thing on me." And consequently, I made good grades in high school and then the National Honor Society. I graduated number 10 out of my class of 140 at Scott High School.

Joe Williams: And basically, oh we had some skirmishes and so forth, don't get me wrong. At that time, that part of Boone County was far more progressive than Huntington, West Virginia, because when I came to Huntington, West Virginia I was in for a shock.

Joe Williams: Number one, I was around more people of color than I had ever been. There were only about seven black families where I grew up within six miles of me. But number two, Huntington was definitely a very segregated city. So it took me a while to get used to living in Huntington, West Virginia.

Joe Williams: But I had – when it came to high school I was in the band. I was the head drummer and so forth. About the only travel that I ever was able to do when I was young, we went with the bands to Winchester, Virginia and Atlantic City for

the Miss America pageant, and so forth. So overall, I really enjoyed my time in school.

Markayla Moore: What is the best advice a family member gave you when you were living in the house?

Joe Williams: Well, I don't know if they actually, you know, sat us down and said, "You need to do such and such," but honor, integrity was extremely important. And what I learned – and I had to learn it from my family – was no matter what you do, do it the best that you can. I don't care if it's cutting grass, cleaning toilets, whatever. Because there are always someone watching you.

Joe Williams: I'm gonna give that advice to you. And they're making a decision about you. Now sometimes it's an unfair decision. Sometimes it's not correct. But they're always making a decision.

Joe Williams: And number two, you don't have to have everybody on your side. If you have the number of people that you can count on the fingers of one hand and a couple of them are in position to effect change, to open a door for you, to give a piece of information that will allow you to go forward, you're probably luckier than most people.

Joe Williams: Just think about it. Five people outside your family that you can go to for anything and most people when I tell them that they said, "I mean, people that I can really go to in good and bad times?" Sometimes they have a hard time to come up with four or five. [Laughter]

Joe Williams: So that was the thing that – you don't have to have everybody on your side. No matter what you do, take pride in it. And I can say this because I used to thin corn, I used to – I worked for a janitorial service in Huntington when I came to Huntington. I used to wash windows. But no matter what I did I always tried to do it to the best of my ability.

Joe Williams: And one thing, it's like a building block. You know I came to Huntington and of course I met my wife. Ended up finishing college in 1978. And got a chance to help start a company called Basic Supply Company, which we still have. It's going on 41 years.

Joe Williams: But people are always watching you and somebody said, "Well, Joe, why don't you do this?" And we started the golf tournament, which it was to promote understanding, brotherhood, and spirit of competition among all people.

Joe Williams: Now this is 1971. Now that's something that really hit a nerve with people and it became extremely popular. Like I said, we had people from 22 states, District of Columbia, Canada, Bermuda. We even had an article in a national magazine about The Ebony Golf Classic.

Joe Williams: And people liked the idea of understanding. Oh, yes – brotherhood, sisterhood – yes. And spirited competition, which means I'm gonna try to beat you when we're competing. And that kinda slipped by people, 'cause a person with understanding, that'd soften you up, and brotherhood. I really felt that way and I really feel that way.

Joe Williams: And consequently, they knew The Ebony Golf Classic and they associated my name and others with The Ebony Golf Classic. And then said, "Why don't you run for council?" I did that. Then mayor. "You want to help start a bank?" And I said, "I don't have any money to help start a bank."

Joe Williams: Well, I have a good friend by the name of Marshall Miller who's been somewhat of a mentor to me. He's opened some doors. And one thing led to another. Started the bank, then got on a bank board in D.C. And then in Richmond, Virginia. And just one thing has led to another. It was a building block. You know, you don't really plan. They say, "Well how do you – ." You just do the best you can in everything you do and God will determine which way you go in life.

Markayla Moore: What did you do on Christmas, Thanksgiving, or birthdays?

Joe Williams: Well, normally on Thanksgiving we have a family tradition and it started long before Mom died. We all go to the old home place. And normally there's anywhere – now this is a little five room house out in the country – and we'll have anywhere from 35 to 55 people. And we all – my wife, normally she tells each person what to bring. Have a pot luck and we serve dinner.

Joe Williams: And then at Christmas from time to time, the last few years my wife has actually cooked dinner and invited family members in and so forth. But both holidays are things to be with family to the extent that you can.

Joe Williams: Now our family, like other families, are all over the country now, so it's kind of difficult. Overall, it means – . Thanksgiving. I think I like Thanksgiving probably even better than Christmas. Christmas has become so commercialized and we tend to forget the reason; as they say, the "reason for the season."

Joe Williams: But Thanksgiving is just a time you don't worry about gift giving and this, that, and the other. And you just get together and you enjoy family. You have a meal. Sometimes we'll watch football, we'll just get around and talk.

Markayla Moore: Can you tell me about the race in Huntington? Was it segregated?

Joe Williams: Do you want to say that again now?

Markayla Moore: Can you tell me about the race in Huntington?

Joe Williams: The race? You mean as far as race conditions, or –

Markayla Moore: Yes.

Joe Williams: Well, it has improved. I stated in this magazine – . My wife and I were inducted into the African American Golfer's Hall of Fame the month before that down in West Palm Beach. And I said Huntington was the most segregated place I had ever been. Yes, Boone County was segregated and where I lived technically it was segregated.

Joe Williams: But most people were middle class or most people probably lower middle class. And we all had to depend on one another. Now I'm sure that some people thought that they were better than others, but – technically, maybe they thought that.

Joe Williams: But when I came to Huntington it was so, so segregated. You probably heard of the fights that people of color, I mean in just being able to go to restaurants and being able to go to the movie houses and sit anywhere you want to.

Joe Williams: And fortunately, it changed thanks to people like Professor Phil Carter, who is a professor at Marshall. And insisted that things change. And maybe when we lost the football team and the fans maybe, maybe God was sending us a message. I think things did get better. But still, to a great extent Huntington is still very segregated, especially when you look at the various communities and so forth.

Joe Williams: I think the community I live in now it's probably more integrated than just about any community in Huntington and the Huntington area, because as a rule we are very accepting people. And maybe it's because of what we've had to endure over the years. As long as you're honest and halfway decent, we're very acceptable.

Joe Williams: But that's not the case in much of Huntington. In fact, a lot of the realtors will lead even people of color away from the so-called black community. They'll definitely lead many of the white people, professionals, coming into town. They'll lead them away from school, even schools where there may be a significant number of black students.

Joe Williams: So maybe it's – well, I started to say it's hidden. It's not so hidden. So we still have a long way to go. And I think that's one reason that Huntington has not progressed to the degree that I would like because we haven't had very many progressive thinkers in Huntington. That's the reason the mall, for instance – City of Huntington – that's the reason the mall is 10 miles out of town and they call it the Huntington Mall. So it could be better. Let's put it that way.

Markayla Moore: What did people do for fun?

Joe Williams: Pardon me?

Markayla Moore: What did people do for fun?

Joe Williams: For fun?

Markayla Moore: Yeah.

Joe Williams: Well, when I first came to Huntington, as far as the social there were a lot of social clubs. 8th Avenue – there were quite a few businesses on 8th Avenue. I remember when my wife and I were dating we'd go to the Bison's Club. And it was a club that was well run and so forth. It was a nice place to go. You didn't have to worry about your safety and so forth.

Joe Williams: That has changed, unfortunately. When so-called integration came in, many of our people deserted not only our communities but deserted our businesses. There's a old saying they always felt that the white man's ice was colder. And it's really been a detriment.

Joe Williams: See, in my opinion, we've never had true integration. We had assimilation. If you're willing to assimilate in the other culture to a degree then you may be accepted to a degree. But personally, my brothers and I, we grew up on a – near a little golf course. We all learned to play golf. Some better than others. (Unfortunately, I'm one of the others.) So that has really helped us along the way.

Joe Williams: I would encourage any person, male or female, this day and time if you're gonna be out in the business world, learn the fundamentals of golf, learn the basic rules of golf. You don't have to be a professional but a lot of times they have what they call a scrambles, captain's choice, you got maybe four people on a team. Everybody hits the ball. Then you pick the best shot and from that point on you hit again.

Joe Williams: But you get to know people. And a lot of people who play golf are in corporate America. And it's really helped my brothers, especially one who became the senior vice president of Novo Nordisk, one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world. And he just retired a couple years ago.

Joe Williams: But you have to be prepared. I mean, he wanted to be a doctor. But you have to be prepared. If you prepare yourself and you meet the opportunity, then you have a chance for success. But you gotta have preparation and opportunity to have success.

Joe Williams: If you have preparation in my opinion and never get the opportunity to show what you can do, then you can't have the degree of success that you could have. Or if you have the opportunity but you didn't prepare yourself to take advantage of the opportunity, you'll never go but so far. That's in my opinion.

Markayla Moore: Do you remember at times when money was tight?

Joe Williams: Pardon me now?

Markayla Moore: Do you remember when money was tight?

Joe Williams: Yes. Now. [Laughter] No, when we were – when we first got married money was very tight. My wife worked and I have to give her all the credit in where she worked at Maidenform. And then we used to clean offices in the evenings. And money was tight. We had four children. And we were married two and a half years before we started having children.

Joe Williams: But then when we did, we had four children in 22 months. We had twins. Eleven months later we had a daughter. Eleven months later we had a son. So things were tight. Money was tight.

Joe Williams: But we always – one thing about – money never separated us as man and wife. We always been supportive of one another. So I've been blessed that I married a woman who is everything that I could have ever asked for in a wife.

Markayla Moore: What's one of your fondest memories living here in the 1950s? How was it different from the '70s or the '80s?

Joe Williams: Well, of course, I didn't live here in the 1950s. See, I didn't come till 1963. One way from what I've heard, though – and I used to come down with the band because the state band festival used to be here in Huntington, West Virginia. I don't know how we lost that. They came from all over the state.

Joe Williams: And I really enjoyed, although it was segregated, I would stay with my cousin who was a barber. Then they had little clubs for teenagers and so forth on 10th Avenue. And I really enjoyed that.

Joe Williams: But not growing up in Huntington, my wife probably could tell you more about the '50s. She spent I think half a year at Douglass. So she knows a lot of people that I don't know. I wanna say that Huntington was very, very segregated.

Markayla Moore: Is there anything else you want to speak about? Like your family or anything before time is up.

Joe Williams: Well, I'm very proud of my family. Like I said, we were poor in the sense of economic things but we were very lucky because we had loving parents. And we knew our history. You know, we knew about our grandparents and in spite of everything how they were able to succeed.

Joe Williams: So we came from a very proud and very independent family. We didn't think anybody should take care of us, and they didn't. [Laughter] Only thing I remember getting commodity – I don't know whether there was such a thing as welfare when I was growin' up or not, but if there was we didn't get any of it. [Laughter]

Joe Williams: And there were times when there was very little food to eat. And I guess the one thing that's sad to me now as a adult and a parent that when my parents couldn't give us all that they wanted to, I know how that must hurt them as a parent. And that's the one thing that is sad to me.

Joe Williams: Number two, we did not have adequate health care. And that has – I know with me, my teeth and so forth – you know, I mean we never went to the dentist. If you had a toothache you either suffered or maybe you would get it pulled. And my mother, I can remember her at night groaning and moaning with a toothache because we just didn't have money. We didn't have insurance.

Joe Williams: So I'm a advocate of national health care. I think a great nation will provide for all of its citizens. I said a great nation – not a nation that says it's great. I mean actually a great nation will provide for its citizens when it comes to health care and just the minimal needs one needs to reach his or her potential.

Joe Williams: And it's just like – you know, I guess I'm pro-life but not just pro-birth. So many people in my opinion are hypocrites. They want to insist that children be born, but then they don't want to do anything to help them have a chance to reach their potential.

Joe Williams: And also, I'm pro-life for me and mine but I'm pro-choice for a woman. If they ask me my opinion I oppose abortion, but I oppose even more men, especially, telling women what they can do with their bodies. I oppose that even more than I oppose abortion.

Markayla Moore: Are you still in contact with any of your siblings?

Joe Williams: Oh, yes. Yes. All of 'em. One brother lives in Charleston. One is in Boston. And he just came down with multiple – it's some kind of bone cancer. So we flew to Boston a month ago to be with him. He seems to be doin' better. He's takin' a treatment. I see my sister about every two weeks.

Joe Williams: In fact, my brother and I, we take care of the lawn up at the old family place. The sister in Florida, whenever we're down that way we stop to see them. And we contact all of them probably at least once or twice a month. So we have a very close family. We just came back from a family reunion up in Tappahannock, Virginia. We had about 80 people.

Joe Williams: So we're a pretty close group of people. In fact, we're goin' to my wife's [reunion] first of August. And then my family in Richmond, we started having a reunion a couple of years ago, 'cause I didn't know a lot of my people in Richmond. So we're just beginning to know them.

Joe Williams: No, we're a very close-knit family. We even have a family investment group that we started 30 years ago. God, no, more than that. 35 years ago, when we all – we bought some stock in the banks and so forth. We made some good

investments and bad investments, but we always – if something happens to one then there's some resources that other family members could help out without hurting their own households. You know, somewhat like a rainy day fund.

[Laughter]

Markayla Moore: Well, that is all the questions –