

# *George Washington Williams: The Massachusetts Years*

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

IT IS DIFFICULT ENOUGH to rehabilitate a person of whom posterity has been especially neglectful, as has been the case with untold numbers of persons who deserved a better lot. It is much more difficult to rehabilitate a person who, in addition to receiving gross mistreatment by posterity, contributed significantly to his own obscurity by filling the record with inaccurate statements about himself. This was indeed the case of George Washington Williams, soldier, clergyman, editor, lawyer, legislator, historian, diplomat, lecturer, and world traveler. Williams was born in Bedford Springs, Pennsylvania, but on at least one occasion he referred to Massachusetts as his native state. The year of his birth was 1849, but in 1863, in order to enlist in the Civil War, he insisted that he was born in 1847, a date he subsequently had to live with whenever the United States government was involved. The 1850 census manuscripts were also inaccurate, but at the age of one Williams was not responsible. He was listed as white, but that was perhaps because the enumerator was flustered to discover that his mother was almost white. He also listed her as male!<sup>1</sup> Williams succeeded in getting into the army, but under an assumed name. After more than thirty years of searching, one cannot be abso-

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<sup>1</sup> Population Schedules of the Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Bedford County, Pennsylvania, National Archives and Record Service, Washington, D.C.

lutely certain about his wartime army record.<sup>2</sup> Happily, after the war, when he enlisted in the Tenth Cavalry of the Regular United States Army, he used his own name. One can follow his postwar military activities with ease. He was mustered out of the United States Colored Troops at Fort Arbuckle in September 1868, because of a gunshot wound through the left lung—*not* in the line of duty, the records almost aggressively assert.<sup>3</sup> Even in death, Williams succeeded in practicing a bit of deception. He died in Blackpool, England, on August 2, 1891. On his death certificate the attending physician gave the cause of death as ‘phtthisis,’ resulting from a wound in the left lung ‘*sustained in the Egyptian wars.*’<sup>4</sup> Apparently, Williams had persuaded someone that he had been a soldier of fortune in Egypt, but his only visit to Egypt was on a brief trip in the late spring of 1891 en route to London, a few months before his untimely death at the age of forty-one.

The journey of George Washington Williams to Massachusetts was a long and eventful one, and it is a wonder that he ever arrived there. By the time he was one year old his parents had moved from Bedford Springs to Johnstown, Pennsylvania; and before he was six they were living in Newcastle, Lawrence County, Pennsylvania. By this time his father had deserted his mother, and George was placed in a house of refuge, where he was to learn a trade. At fourteen he perjured himself by enlisting, as a sixteen-year old, in the United States Colored Troops. He saw action in several battles and was wounded at Fort Harrison, Virginia, in October 1864.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the war he was

<sup>2</sup> The confusion about his name and age when he enlisted during the Civil War is illustrated in the application of his widow for a pension. See Record and Pension Office, 572,820, the case of George W. Williams, deceased, Jan. 13, 1900, Record Group 94, National Archives.

<sup>3</sup> See his Certificate of Disability for Discharge, Sept. 4, 1868, U.S. Army, Headquarters, Department of the Missouri, Record Group 94, National Archives.

<sup>4</sup> Register of Deaths in the Registration District, Fylde, Sub-District of Blackpool for the year 1891, The General Register Office, Somerset House, London.

<sup>5</sup> When Williams sought admission to Howard University he sent a lengthy autobiographical letter to Gen. Oliver Otis Howard, which is one of the very rare sources

mustered out and then went to Mexico, where he enlisted in the Mexican Army. Within one week he was allegedly promoted from orderly sergeant to inspector general of artillery, with the rank of lieutenant colonel.<sup>6</sup>

In 1867 he was back in the United States, where he enlisted in the Tenth Cavalry with the rank of staff sergeant. He fought in several Indian campaigns on the frontiers in Texas and the Indian Territory. One year later he was wounded and discharged and made his way up the Mississippi River. At Saint Louis he tarried long enough to be baptized in the First Baptist Church by a Rev. Henry White. Then he went on to Quincy, Illinois. He remained there for several months, became a member of a local Baptist church, and apparently began to think of what he should do with his life. It was at Quincy that he heard of a new institution for blacks in Washington, D.C. He immediately wrote to Gen. Oliver O. Howard and, in a letter that is barely literate but remarkably eloquent, he pleaded for admission to Howard University. He was accepted, spent a few months there, and then transferred to Wayland Seminary, which he attended for a few months.

It was at Wayland that Williams learned of the Newton Theological Institution in Massachusetts. He wanted to train for the ministry, and there was no need to hesitate about attending one of the very best divinity schools in the nation. In September 1870 he arrived in Boston to seek admission to Newton. Although still unable to write a decent sentence, Williams was duly examined at a faculty meeting. In the examination he told the faculty that he was a resident of Newcastle, Pennsylvania, was twenty-two years old (he would not be twenty-one until the following October), was a member of the Twelfth Baptist Church of Boston, and had been licensed to

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of information on his early life. See G. W. Williams to Gen. O. O. Howard, Mar. 1, 1869, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

<sup>6</sup> Aristides [pseud., George W. Williams], 'A Winter on the Rio Grande,' *Cincinnati Commercial*, Jan. 13, 1877.

preach by a Baptist church in Hannibal, Missouri, in 1869. He was denied admission to the theological department, but on September 9, 1870, was permitted to register in a remedial program called 'The English Course.'<sup>7</sup> From the time that he entered the remedial program at Newton, his progress was rapid. In 1872 he completed the English course and was admitted to the regular theological course, a three-year curriculum which he completed in two years. The Newton Theological Institution was one of the strongest professional schools of its kind in the country. Its president, Alvah Hovey, was professor of theology and Christian ethics and a powerful Baptist leader of national standing. His book, *Outlines of Christian Theology*, was widely used in churches and religious training institutions. The man to whom Williams was closest was Galusha Anderson, professor of church polity, homiletics, and pastoral duties. An outspoken opponent of slavery in the past, he was to have a distinguished future as president of the old University of Chicago and as a professor in the Divinity School of the new University of Chicago. Others were Prof. Ezra Palmer Gould, who tutored Williams on the life of Christ, and the professor of church history, Herman Lincoln, who exposed Williams to his first formal courses in history.<sup>8</sup>

On June 10, 1874, Williams graduated in a class of twenty-six men from the Newton Theological Institution. At the commencement exercises, he was one of twelve graduates selected to deliver an oration. Choosing as his subject 'Early Christianity in Africa,' Williams demonstrated his intimate knowledge of the historical development of Africa in the early centuries of the Christian era. After tracing the manner in which European and American Christians had robbed Africa of her sable sons,

<sup>7</sup> The Newton Theological Institution, Faculty Record Book, 9/9/70 entry. In the Library of Andover Newton Theological School, Newton, Mass. The English course had been instituted at Newton in 1869. Richard Donald Pierce, ed., *General Catalogue of the Newton Theological Institution, 1826-1943* (Newton Centre, 1943), p. xii.

<sup>8</sup> Pierce, ed., *General Catalogue*, pp. 25, 60, 63, 65, and 98. There are sketches of Anderson and Hovey in the *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1957), 1:264 and 5:270.

Williams blamed the downfall of Christianity in Africa on slavery and the slave trade. But those same sable sons would, some day, redeem Africa for Christianity, he argued. 'Their weary feet now press upon the mount of science. Their darkened intellect now sweeps, unfettered through the realms of learning and culture. With his Saxon brother, the African slakes his insatiable thirstings for knowledge at the same fountain.' Then, in a remarkable peroration, Williams declared, 'The Negro of this country can turn to his Saxon brothers, and say, as Joseph said to his brethren who wickedly sold them, "As for you, ye meant it unto evil, but God meant it unto good, that we, after learning your arts and sciences, might return to Egypt and deliver the rest of our brethren who are yet in the house of bondage." That day will come!'<sup>9</sup>

The twenty-four-year-old graduate had already won a significant prize. With the help of his mentor he had transformed himself in the short span of four years from an illiterate, uninformed raw youth into a well-educated man with a felicitous writing style, a well-trained, modulated voice, and a refinement that was reflected in his bearing and his manners. His earnest search for an education began somewhere between the time he received his military discharge and his arrival in Washington. If Howard University and Wayland Seminary did not meet his needs, Newton Theological Institution must surely have done so. With the excellent training he received there, Williams was well prepared for the several careers that he would pursue in the next few years. Already one could detect the subtlety of mind and the power of his written and spoken prose that were to be important assets in the future. Already one perceived in him a burning ambition that could move him from a modest, insecure posture to one characterized by impatient, even ruthless, striving. It appeared that by the

<sup>9</sup> On the commencement program itself the title of Williams's address was listed as 'The Early Church in Africa,' but the manuscript of the address, written in Williams's hand, is titled 'Early Christianity in Africa.' Both are in the Library of Andover Newton Theological School.

time he graduated from Newton, he was ready to take on all comers.

June 1874 was a busy month for Williams. A few days before his graduation he had journeyed to Chicago, and on June 2 he was married to twenty-one-year-old Sarah A. Sterrett, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Sterrett, early residents of Chicago. One assumes that he met the young lady the previous summer, a portion of which he spent in Chicago. On the day following his graduation, he was ordained into the ministry at the First Baptist Church of Watertown, to which he belonged. Rev. Galusha Anderson, his mentor at Newton, preached the ordination sermon. Then, on June 24, 1874, Williams became the pastor of the Twelfth Baptist Church in Boston, easily the leading church of that denomination among Boston's blacks.<sup>10</sup>

For almost a quarter of a century the Twelfth Baptist Church had been led by the Reverend Leonard Grimes, who was responsible for its remarkable growth during the late antebellum years. Its members had been active in the abolitionist movement and had provided shelter for many fugitive slaves.<sup>11</sup> When Grimes died early in 1873, the church was supplied by various visitors, until September, when Williams—then entering his senior year at Newton—was invited by the church clerk, George L. Ruffin, to serve for eight months. Apparently, his services were quite satisfactory, for upon his graduation he received the call to become the regular pastor. The invitation was a signal triumph for a young man not yet twenty-five years old. Already, Massachusetts had seen a good deal of George Washington Williams. During his years at Newton and despite his dreadfully poor background, Williams found time for numerous civic and social activities. Although a member of the Baptist church in Watertown, he early made contact with the

<sup>10</sup> These events are duly recorded in George W. Williams, *History of the Twelfth Baptist Church of Boston* (Boston, 1874), pp. 38–40.

<sup>11</sup> In his history of the church Williams gives a full account of its growth and of Grimes's leadership. See also John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace* (Boston, 1914), pp. 64n and 452.

black community in Boston. In 1875 there were only 19 blacks in Watertown and 130 in Newton, but there were 4,969 in Boston. They were a lively, progressive group, with well-organized charitable, fraternal, and religious institutions. There were outstanding black leaders such as the historian William Nell, George L. Ruffin, the lawyer, and James Still, the physician. Williams met all of them and made the most of his contacts with them. As early as his senior year at Newton, in November 1873, he attended the indignation meeting held to protest the Danville massacre and spoke against the general mistreatment of blacks in the South.

The installation of Williams on June 24 as pastor of the prestigious Twelfth Baptist Church was an elaborate affair. The Reverend George C. Lorimer, pastor of Boston's celebrated Tremont Temple, delivered the sermon. On June 26, the church tendered a reception to Williams and his bride. George L. Ruffin delivered the principal address in which he said, 'We welcome the day that brings to our pulpits an educated ministry, to lead the people in righteous ways.' Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin read a poem written for the occasion by Elijah W. Smith. In obvious reference to the recent marriage of George and Sarah Williams, the poet wrote,

Bless thou the handmaiden whose lot  
Is Woven with his own;  
Grant that the buds of love's young dream  
In perfect flowers be blown:  
And should their bark, on life's broad sea,  
By angry waves be stayed,  
Say to them, from the tempest cloud  
'Tis I, be not afraid.'

On the following Sunday, June 28, Williams delivered his introductory sermon. He was almost overcome with emotion, 'born of this hour and occasion,' he said. 'Four years ago, this very month,' he continued, 'I stood, for the first time, upon New England shores; and, for the first time, inhaled the free

air of this liberty-loving state, which, if a man breathes, it imparts a feeling of security, and a true manly dignity. The first hand I was permitted to grasp was that of our esteemed brother, Hon. George L. Ruffin, who was at the time a member of that honorable body—the Legislature of Massachusetts. And the next hand that was extended to me was that of my lamented predecessor, Rev. L. A. Grimes. I remember with distinctness, the warm welcome he gave me, and, also, the deep interest he at once took in me.’ Williams then discussed the role of the church and of the state; and he called on the members to join with him in building an institution that would be one of the most important in the community.<sup>12</sup>

Williams had great plans for the Twelfth Baptist Church and its 700 members. He wanted to improve its physical condition, and he wanted it to serve a much larger number, especially since Negroes had begun to move into Boston in considerable numbers. He said that he chose Boston rather than the South, where his mentor, the Reverend Galusha Anderson, wanted him to go, because the field in Boston was an important one, ‘full of interest, and laden with results.’ This field, ‘well cultivated, will furnish the “one that shall chase a thousand, and the two that shall put ten thousand to flight.”’ The influence and good of a well-organized church here in Boston will be co-extensive with the farthest South. A healthy, vigorous intelligent church, here in the very centre of benevolent activities, will do much to temper the giving of those who are disposed to aid our needy brethren at the South.’ To inform and impress prospective givers, as well as the members, Williams wrote and published a *History of the Twelfth Baptist Church of Boston*.

Fourteen months later Williams had resigned from the Twelfth Baptist Church and had left Boston. One can only spec-

<sup>12</sup> The account of these events is based on Williams, *History of the Twelfth Baptist Church*. For a report on his installation, see the *Boston Evening Transcript*, June 23, 25, 1874.



ulate as to why he gave up this most promising pastorate. It was surely the largest and most distinguished collection of blacks to be found anywhere in New England. And for a young man just out of school it was obviously an enviable post, but it was not for Williams. It has been suggested that his health, never robust, suffered from the rigors of the New England winter. But why, then, did he return to Boston in 1883, and again in 1888, to live? It has also been suggested that he was having difficulty with the leaders of the church. It has even been suggested that his marriage, never very stable, was already going on the rocks and that some associations (or liaisons) he had made in Boston did not do credit to a young minister of the gospel. However, upon returning to the city to live in 1883, he seems to have been quite socially acceptable and more popular than ever with leaders such as George L. Ruffin; this would hardly have been the case had he left under a cloud. A more plausible and attractive explanation for his flight from Boston is that Williams was both restless *and* ambitious. For such a person Boston was too sedate, and it seemed no place for a young man to make a real mark in the world. And Williams *was* incredibly ambitious and inordinately restless. He was doubtless disappointed when he permitted his name to be presented as a candidate for chaplain of the state legislature only to see it passed over in favor of the incumbent.<sup>13</sup> Nothing in Boston seemed to engage or excite him. He found it impossible to remain in one place more than a short period of time. It was as though he was excessively impatient to be crowned with success. If success did not come to him speedily in one place, he went to the next, in search of it.

These Massachusetts years were doubtless a valuable period in the growth of George Washington Williams. What formal training he had had been received at Newton. Early in

<sup>13</sup> Boston *Evening Transcript*, Nov. 14, 1874, Jan. 8, 1875. Perhaps Williams was a bit mollified that spring by his appointment as Chaplain of the Second Battalion of Infantry of the Massachusetts State Militia.

that experience he developed and cultivated contacts among Bostonians, black and white, such as George Lorimer and George Ruffin. He also had his first skirmish with two pursuits that would be of the greatest importance to him in later life: the writing of history and an interest in Africa. His first public essay was on Africa, and his first published work was a history of the church he had served. Boston had been good to Williams, and he knew it. Perhaps that is why he would return some day.

In Washington, where he went after leaving Boston, Williams hoped to publish a newspaper that would be the most important journal among blacks in the country. With the support of such persons as Frederick Douglass and John Mercer Langston, he began to publish the *Commoner*. He traveled extensively throughout the South to promote the paper, but after a few issues it folded. Williams worked in the Washington post office in order to earn a livelihood.<sup>14</sup> When the call came from Cincinnati to become the pastor of the Union Baptist Church there, he accepted it with alacrity; and on March 2, 1876, he was installed.<sup>15</sup> The next few years were among the busiest of his life. Ohio, in the late Reconstruction era, seemed a land of virtually unlimited opportunity for blacks, and Williams made the most of it.

Williams did several things simultaneously in Cincinnati. He was a columnist for the Cincinnati *Commercial*, writing under the pen name of 'Aristides.' He became friendly with the Taft family, and he studied law in the office of Alphonso Taft as well as at the Cincinnati Law School. Apparently, Williams was as adept in law as he was in theology. He was admitted to the Ohio bar shortly after he had completed his legal studies. Soon, he was using the law to make political and other contacts. President Hayes, whom he warmly supported, appointed him internal revenue storekeeper, and later

<sup>14</sup> The American Antiquarian Society possesses the only known complete run of the *Commoner*. I am grateful to the Society for making it available to me.

<sup>15</sup> Cincinnati *Commercial*, Mar. 3, 1876.

he joined the auditor's office of the Cincinnati Southern Railway, as secretary.<sup>16</sup> He was soon involved in so many secular activities that he relinquished the pastorate of the Union Baptist Church. He was not merely more secular, but more worldly as well. It did not make sense for him to wear the priestly mantle any longer. And the Tafts and the Fleischmanns and other Republican leaders in Cincinnati had other plans for him. He was willing.

In 1877 he ran as a Republican for the lower house of the Ohio legislature and lost; but two years later he was successful, thus becoming the first black member ever to sit in that body.<sup>17</sup> During his two-year term he served as chairman of the library committee and the special committee on railroad terminal facilities. He was also a member of the committee on universities and colleges and was instrumental in securing passage of bills relating to police power, railroads, and schools.<sup>18</sup> Williams's term in the Ohio legislature ended in 1881, and he was not interested in standing for reelection. Six years was a long time for him to remain in one place, and he was obviously restless again. While in the legislature, moreover, he incurred the displeasure of some of his black constituents, especially in his vote to support the relocation of a Negro cemetery in Cincinnati.<sup>19</sup> There were those who insisted that he could not have been reelected even if he had sought another term.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of his term, however, Williams was so deeply involved in the study and writing of history that little else seemed to matter for the moment. On July 4, 1876, he had delivered an oration at Avondale, Ohio, in connection with the

<sup>16</sup> W. J. Simmons, *Men of Mark, Eminent, Progressive, and Rising* (Cleveland, 1887), p. 377; and *Cincinnati Commercial*, May 2, 1878.

<sup>17</sup> *Cincinnati Commercial*, Oct. 17, 1879; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Oct. 16, 1879; *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Oct. 17, 1879; *People's Advocate*, Oct. 18, 1879; and *The Louisianian*, Oct. 18, 1879.

<sup>18</sup> *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Ohio for the Regular Session of the Sixty-Fourth General Assembly* (Columbus, 1880), pp. 4, 6, 34-36, 566.

<sup>19</sup> *Cincinnati Commercial*, Apr. 13, 14, 1880; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Apr. 13, 15, 1880.

<sup>20</sup> *Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 25, 1881.

centennial of American independence. In doing research for the oration, Williams became interested in the history of Negro Americans in general. In Avondale he spoke on the subject of Negroes in the nation's history. The oration was well received and later printed.<sup>21</sup> Within a short time he began work on a large project which would be published in two volumes in 1882 and 1883 under the title *A History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880; Negroes as Slaves, as Soldiers, and as Citizens*. The history was carefully researched, and work on it took its author to many of the principal libraries of the country, where he used newspapers, manuscripts, and official documents. He returned to Massachusetts to work at the American Antiquarian Society, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the Boston Athenæum. He went on from there to work in the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, and other repositories.

Never before had a black American undertaken so ambitious and so serious a literary task. Because of the nature and scope of the work and because the reputable house of Putnam had published it, critics were compelled to take it seriously, even if they raised many questions about it. Some praised it, others were lukewarm, while others were severely and adversely critical. The literary critics of Massachusetts did not neglect the new work. The Boston *Evening Transcript* called it a 'remarkable work in more than one way. . . . Its style is clear and forcible, and its statements are supported by a large army of authorities, which show that the author gave much time to his task, and that his researches were conducted with singular judgment and thoroughness.'<sup>22</sup> The reviewer in the *Atlantic Monthly* found the general plan and arrangement of the work 'excellent' and 'methodically worked out. . . . It is, in short, in all externals, a most creditable and presentable book.' He was less impressed when he examined some of the chapters on early

<sup>21</sup> George W. Williams, *The American Negro, from 1776 to 1876* (Cincinnati, 1876).

<sup>22</sup> Boston *Evening Transcript*, Apr. 2, 1883.

Africa and found them both thin and lacking in substantial research. He found Williams's handling of slavery in Massachusetts flawed by a series of unfortunate misstatements and petty hostility. 'But with whatever defects of omission and commission, the author has produced a work of great value; one that will be a treasury of facts for future students, and greatly facilitate their work, although it will inevitably be superseded in time by a history prepared with yet fuller research, more careful literary training, and a more judicial spirit.'<sup>23</sup> Williams had made his mark. He had attracted the attention of a large public on both sides of the Atlantic, and he had reason to be immensely pleased with what he had accomplished.

Meanwhile, Williams was quite ready to leave Ohio permanently. He was out of the state during much of 1882 and 1883 putting the finishing touches on his manuscript and seeing the book through the press. From New York in 1883 he wrote to a friend in Cleveland that he was 'done with Ohio, and "the Grand Old Republican Party" within its limits. I shall never make any more sacrifices for Race or Party at the expense of myself and family. . . . I find my hands full of literary work, and with application and economy I shall be able to pay the debts I now owe in a few months. I shall be able to make about \$200.00 per month, and get on nicely. The future never looked brighter for me, and I sincerely thank God, to whom belongs all praise.'<sup>24</sup>

The bright future to which Williams referred lay, once more, in Massachusetts. As early as January 1883, he was in Boston, en route from Maine where he had been visiting friends. Over the next several months he spent considerable time in Boston and in Plymouth, where he took a house. In March he spoke at a 'large and fashionable literary and musical gathering assembled at the residence of J. A. Lewis, 25 Buckingham Street.' In April he was in Boston again, and made

<sup>23</sup> *Atlantic Monthly* 51 (Apr. 1883):564-68.

<sup>24</sup> George W. Williams to John P. Green, New York, Mar. 16, 1883, John P. Green Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland.

'several fine speeches at banquets of several of Boston's leading white clubs.'<sup>25</sup> It was even rumored that he was a silent partner in a Boston publishing venture that was issuing a new paper, the Boston *Leader*. The rumor was strengthened when the *Leader* made a vigorous rejoinder to an attack on Williams by William Calvin Chase of the Washington *Bee*. Chase had characterized Williams's *History* as 'lies, all lies.' From Plymouth, Williams vigorously denied any connection with the Boston newspaper. In May he shared honors with Maj. Martin R. Delany at a banquet at Boston's Bethel Hall, where both guests of honor made speeches.<sup>26</sup>

During the summer of 1883 Williams settled down in Boston and filed papers to be admitted to practice before the Suffolk County bar. The admission was granted, and in December he was sworn in before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, with fifty of the leading lawyers of the city present.<sup>27</sup> Shortly thereafter he was engaged as counsel for the Cape Cod Canal Company. He was, by his own assertion, 'comfortably situated in his office at 28 School Street, and doing an excellent business.'<sup>28</sup> Already, Williams was in the thick of social, political, and military activities in the Hub city. In November 1883, just before the state elections in which Gen. Benjamin Butler was opposing George D. Robinson for the office of governor, Williams returned to his old post, the Twelfth Baptist Church, to speak at a large rally held by the Republican Club of the Ninth Ward. He was introduced by his old friend George L. Ruffin, and he proceeded to deliver a 'masterly speech severely criticizing Butler's war record and denouncing Independen-

<sup>25</sup> New York *Globe*, Jan. 3, Feb. 17, Mar. 3, Apr. 28, 1883.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, May 26, 1883.

<sup>27</sup> The papers of admittance, Nov. 15, 1883, are in the Clerk's Office, Supreme Judicial Court for Suffolk County, Massachusetts. These proceedings attracted considerable attention in the public press. See, for example, the New York *Globe*, Nov. 24, 1883; the Boston *Evening Transcript*, Dec. 5, 1883; the Cleveland *Gazette*, Dec. 8, 1883; and the Huntsville (Alabama) *Gazette*, Feb. 9, 1884.

<sup>28</sup> New York *Globe*, Dec. 8, 1883, and Feb. 16, 1884. See also Robert H. Farson, *The Cape Cod Canal* (Middletown, Conn., 1977), p. 22.

tism. . . . The honorable gentleman spoke for 45 minutes, and was repeatedly cheered throughout the address.'<sup>29</sup>

Apparently Williams had reestablished his Boston contacts quite well. In late November 1883, he was the host at a testimonial dinner at the Youngs Hotel in honor of George L. Ruffin, who had been appointed municipal judge of Charlestown. It was an impressive gathering attended by most of the important black men of Boston. Williams 'eloquently addressed the gathering and stated where one man was elevated to a high position as that of Judge Ruffin, it elevated the whole race.'<sup>30</sup> A few days later he attended a banquet honoring Julius C. Chappell and spoke on 'the Negro as a man of letters.' When T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the *New York Globe*, visited Boston in December 1883, Williams 'though slightly indisposed, delivered an eloquent introductory address.' He 'held up the *Globe* as the only paper that was not hampered by politics' and 'pleasantly alluded to the efforts of Editor Fortune to build up an ideal journal for the race, and of his wonderful success.'<sup>31</sup>

Among his social activities in Boston were his connections with fraternal organizations. He was a member of the Odd Fellows and was described as one of the 'unshaken pillars' of the organization. He was active in the Masons and delivered the principal address at their centennial banquet in September 1884.<sup>32</sup> In the same month he was elected captain of Company L., Sixth Regiment, of the Massachusetts militia; and in the following month he 'passed a creditable examination before the Military Board of Examiners of the State of Massachusetts.'<sup>33</sup> He led his group in the decoration of the graves of heroes at Rainsford Island on Memorial Day. At Newton on

<sup>29</sup> Boston *Evening Transcript*, Nov. 2, 5, 1883.

<sup>30</sup> See George W. Williams to George L. Ruffin, Boston, Nov. 19, 1883, George L. Ruffin Papers, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>31</sup> *New York Globe*, Dec. 29, 1883.

<sup>32</sup> Boston *Evening Transcript*, Sept. 30, 1884.

<sup>33</sup> Boston *Evening Transcript*, Apr. 26, 1884; *New York Globe*, May 3, 1884.

that same day he delivered an address on 'The Ethics of War' before the members of the Grand Army of the Republic and distinguished citizens.<sup>34</sup> It seemed that Williams was having everything his way. It was reported in the press that 'Captain Williams has created such an impression among the officers of the Sixth Regiment . . . that the Adjutancy of one of the Battalions has already been offered him. The majority of the members speak in glowing terms of their new commander, and it is evident that he can do more, far more, for its elevation than any of his predecessors.'<sup>35</sup>

These Boston years saw Williams continuing to maintain his contacts in other parts of the country and the world. In the spring of 1884, he went to Washington to testify before the Rivers and Harbors Committee of the House of Representatives. This was in the line of his duties as a member of the legal staff of the Cape Cod Canal Company.<sup>36</sup> A few weeks later he was back in Washington to give a lecture on the Civil War at Howard University, and in April he was the emancipation orator at the ceremonies in Washington.<sup>37</sup> In the summer of 1884 he went to Europe, visiting England, Belgium, Germany, France, Switzerland, and other countries.<sup>38</sup> Upon his return, he had planned to participate in the presidential campaign, but he became ill in New York and did not return to Boston until late November.

He returned, but only briefly. As a matter of fact, his Boston years were over, but his ties to Massachusetts remained. He continued to spend his summers in Plymouth, whenever pos-

<sup>34</sup> George W. Williams, *The Ethics of War* (Boston, 1884).

<sup>35</sup> *New York Globe*, June 21, 1884.

<sup>36</sup> *New York Globe*, Mar. 29, 1884.

<sup>37</sup> *Boston Evening Transcript*, Apr. 17, 1884; and the *New York Globe*, Apr. 26, 1884. Williams sent tickets to Sen. and Mrs. George F. Hoar to attend the lecture in Washington. George W. Williams to George F. Hoar, Washington, D.C., Apr. 16, 1884, George F. Hoar Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

<sup>38</sup> George W. Williams to Sarah Williams, S.S. *Egypt*, July 14, 1884, George W. Williams Papers. Last known location: in the possession of Henry P. Slaughter, Washington, D.C. See also the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Sept. 30, 1884.



sible; and in 1888 he moved to Worcester, where he remained until his departure for his final trip abroad in 1890.

This second period in Boston had given him much satisfaction and additional self-confidence, if he needed any. He had become a successful historian and lecturer, and enjoyed the plaudits of both the white and black communities. He had become a successful lawyer, matching at least his earlier Boston career as a successful pastor. But these experiences were not totally satisfying. Consequently, early in 1885 Williams relocated to Washington, where it was reported that he was 'engrossed in literary pursuits—in writing two books. The History of Reconstruction and the Life of Benjamin Lundy.'<sup>39</sup> Bostonians were as stunned as were citizens in other parts of the country when, on March 3, one day before he retired from office, President Chester A. Arthur sent to the Senate the name of George Washington Williams as Minister to Haiti. He was promptly confirmed by the Senate. Black politicians, many of whom aspired to this position—one of four or five 'Negro appointments'—felt betrayed by Williams, who apparently had been doing more research at the White House than at the Library of Congress. This 'midnight appointment' was widely regarded as a Republican trick designed to embarrass the incoming Cleveland administration; and there is reason to believe that it did embarrass the Democrats. After some equivocation, they declined to permit Williams to execute the required bond and take office.<sup>40</sup> Later, Williams brought an unsuccessful suit against the United States government to recover his salary as Minister to Haiti.<sup>41</sup>

Williams was not easily discouraged, and surely he would not permit this setback to dispirit him. He set about the task of

<sup>39</sup> New York *Freeman*, Jan. 17, 1885.

<sup>40</sup> Memoranda and correspondence related to the Williams appointment are in the George W. Williams File, Box 103, Applications and Recommendations for Public Office, Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives.

<sup>41</sup> George W. Williams v. The United States, *Cases Decided in the Court of Claims of the United States, Term 1887-1888*, vol. 23 (Washington, 1889), pp. 46-53.

writing a *History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion*, published by Harper and Brothers in 1887. Shortly after the publication of that work he moved to Worcester, living at the Hotel Adams much of the time. He had become well acquainted with Worcester resident Sen. George Frisbie Hoar.<sup>42</sup> It was Hoar who sponsored a bill by Williams for a Negro Soldiers and Sailors Monument.<sup>43</sup> Hoar had also been instrumental in facilitating Williams's use of the American Antiquarian Society, of which Hoar was president.<sup>44</sup> Williams also sought Hoar's assistance in his effort to become librarian of Clark University, but this came to nothing as President G. Stanley Hall was in Europe when Williams mounted his drive to secure that position.<sup>45</sup> Williams was also cultivating a warm relationship with the Southern writer George Washington Cable, who was living in Northampton. He joined Cable's Open Letter Club through which they hoped to make a strong case for racial justice and harmony. The club did not last very long, and Cable and Williams went their separate ways.<sup>46</sup>

It was also about this time that Williams returned to one of his earliest interests, Africa. Indeed, his interest in Africa had never flagged. In 1884 he had published a series of articles on African geography, in which he disputed the Portuguese claim to the Congo. In the same year he appeared before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, urging the passage of a resolution recognizing the International Association for the Congo

<sup>42</sup> There are numerous letters from Williams to Hoar in the George F. Hoar Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, affirming the close relationship of the two men.

<sup>43</sup> See U.S., Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, Forty-Ninth Congress, second session, Dec. 8, 1886, Senate Bills, vol. 10; and George W. Williams to George F. Hoar, Washington, D.C., Dec. 7, 1886, George F. Hoar Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>44</sup> George W. Williams to George F. Hoar, Sept. 20, 1887, AAS Records, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester.

<sup>45</sup> George W. Williams to George F. Hoar, Worcester, Dec. 24, 27, 1888, Feb. 20, 1889, George F. Hoar Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>46</sup> George W. Williams to George W. Cable, Worcester, June 11, 18, 1889, Cable Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans. I am grateful to Prof. Philip Butcher for making the Williams letters to Cable available to me.

as a friendly government. When the Senate passed such a resolution, Williams could believe that his plea had influenced some of the senators. During his European visit in the summer of 1884, he consulted with several Belgians regarding the feasibility of using Negro Americans in the development of the Congo.<sup>47</sup> The suggestions by Williams seemed to meet with some approval: perhaps it would be good for the Belgians to have the support of a Negro American in their plans for the exploitation of the Congo, so long as he did not inspect too closely just what was going on there.

In the next few years Williams gave numerous lectures in the United States and abroad in order to earn a livelihood. He also wrote many articles, some of which appeared in the *Boston Evening Transcript* and the *Worcester Gazette*.<sup>48</sup> In 1889 he was back in Brussels attending the world antislavery conference and conferring with King Leopold II and other Belgians about labor problems in the Congo and reviving his proposal of 1884.<sup>49</sup> In December he returned to Washington, consulting with President Harrison on the proceedings of the conference and receiving the blessings of the president regarding his forthcoming visit to the Congo.<sup>50</sup> That was more than he received from Leopold, who strongly advised Williams not to go. More important, he had a commission from S. S. McClure of the Associated Literary Press to write a series of articles on the Congo, and the strong backing of Collis P. Huntington, who wanted to know about the possibilities of building a railroad in the Congo.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> This information was disclosed in the course of the consideration of Williams for the post in Haiti. See Williams File, Box 103, Record Group 59, National Archives.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, George W. Williams, 'The African Slave Trade,' *Worcester Gazette*, July 27, 1889.

<sup>49</sup> Williams told of his first audience with Belgium's King Leopold II in an article appearing in the *Boston Herald*, Nov. 17, 1889.

<sup>50</sup> George W. Williams, *A Report Upon the Congo-State and Country to the President of the Republic of the United States of America* (St. Paul de Loanda, Angola, 1890).

<sup>51</sup> The commission from McClure, dated Sept. 26, 1889, was in the George W. Williams Papers, Henry P. Slaughter Collection. For Huntington's role see Collis P.

The journey of Williams to the Congo, from January 1890 to June 1891, need not detain us here, except to observe that his articles for McClure appeared in the *Boston Globe* and the *Boston Herald*. One should add that the elaborate reports that he made constitute the first adversely critical statements on King Leopold's rule in the Congo.<sup>52</sup> The poor health that had dogged Williams for many years finally overcame him during the summer of 1891, when he was working in the Public Record Office in London. When he steadily declined, a friend whom he had met en route from Alexandria to Southampton decided to take him to Blackpool where he could breathe the sea air. It was too late; he died there on August 2, 1891. Massachusetts newspapers took little notice of his death except to observe that he had visited the Congo and had written an open letter to King Leopold denouncing the king's incredibly inhumane policies there, as well as the actions of Henry M. Stanley, who had misrepresented conditions in the Congo. That was true. The newspapers claimed that he died alone without anyone to attend to his effects or burial. That was false. They claimed that his fiancée broke off their engagement after discovering in what light marriages between whites and Negroes in the United States were regarded. That was false. The young woman was with him at the time of his death and, according to official reports, was prostrate with grief for several days.

The life of George Washington Williams is a classic example of frustrated genius, incomparable charisma, and consuming drive and ambition. His Massachusetts years illustrate most graphically his unusual capacity to charm and captivate a state not one time but at two different times, separated by a period of more than seven years. That Massachusetts has for-

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Huntington to George W. Williams, New York, Jan. 7, 1890, the Collis P. Huntington Papers, Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y.

<sup>52</sup> In addition to the *Report to the President*, cited in fn. 50 above, see George W. Williams, *An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty, Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo* (Stanley Falls, 1890) and *A Report on the Proposed Congo Railway* (Stanley Falls, 1890).

gotten about Williams in the ninety-one years since his death is understandable in view of the unhappy fate of Negro American history during those years. It is high time that George Washington Williams be rehabilitated in Massachusetts, the scene of his earliest, and some of his greatest, triumphs.

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