

WALTER WILLIAMS' INTEREST IN THE CIVIL WAR

Walter Williams grew up in Atlanta, with many Civil War historic sites nearby. Peachtree Creek, site of an important 1864 battle, flowed by his back yard. In 1961, when the Civil War Centennial began, the precocious 13-year-old persuaded his grandparents to drive him to Virginia, to observe the reenactment of the First Battle of Bull Run / Manassas. His parents allowed him to plan family camping trips, and they visited many Civil War museums and battlefields, from Fort Pulaski to Gettysburg and Chattanooga to Appomattox. He became so knowledgeable about the conflict that several high school history teachers asked him to give lectures on the subject. In 1963-65 he joined a reenactment regiment, and participated in twelve battle reenactments. In six of these he was a Confederate color-bearer, followed by six more in which he was a Union soldier.

At age 17, Walter Williams' first job was working on the historic steam-locomotive railroad at Stone Mountain State Park, as an actor in the reenactment of the 1862 Great Locomotive Chase. Then while a college student at Georgia State University he was hired by the Georgia Historical Commission to be an assistant archaeologist excavating Fort King George and Fort Jackson near Savannah. The Commission later hired him to compile a detailed registry of Civil War-era buildings in Georgia that survived the war and still existed in the 1960s. In 1968 he took a class on the Civil War, taught by eminent Civil War historian Dr. Bell Wiley of Emory University. Walter received the most outstanding student award in that class. Dr. Wiley introduced Walter to Dr. John Hope Franklin, another prominent Civil War historian. Both of them became important mentors in his life.

In 1970 Walter won a prestigious Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, to attend graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His dissertation advisor, Professor Joel Williamson, was a leading historian of the Reconstruction era. In 1974, at age 25, Walter was awarded the Ph.D. degree for his dissertation on the interest in Africa expressed by African Americans who became disillusioned by the end of Reconstruction.

In 1974, Dr. Williams was chosen by the History Department faculty at the University of Cincinnati, out of 253 applicants for the job, to teach a year-long course on the Civil War and Reconstruction. He taught that class, as well as another class he originated on American Indian history, until 1984. Recognized for his innovative teaching style, in 1981 he was invited to be a visiting professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. He taught American Indian history at the UCLA American Indian Studies Center, and was invited back to teach that class for a second time, in 1984. While in Los Angeles, he was hired by the University of Southern California, and he taught there from 1984 to 1986. In that year he won a prestigious Fulbright Scholar Award, and he taught American history and culture at Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia's largest and oldest university, in 1987 and 1988. While there, he did much research gathering life histories by interviewing elderly Indonesians living on the island of Java. These

were published by Rutgers University Press as a book, *Javanese Lives: Women and Men in Modern Indonesian Society*:

As a Civil War scholar Williams published an article in *Phylon* about Black Union soldiers incarcerated at Andersonville Prison, and a more extensive article in *Civil War Times* magazine, about what happened to Black Union soldiers who were captured by Confederates. In the same magazine, he published another article on the Union army's war against the Navajo tribe 1862-64, and their forced removal and incarceration from 1862 to 1868. Knowing the value of fiction as a way of making the past come alive for many readers, Williams used this research as the basis for writing an historical novel, *Two Spirits: A Story of Life with the Navajo*. This book won an award for outstanding historical fiction.

Williams was so pleased with the positive reviews of the book that he wrote another novel *Finding Freedom: A Novel of the Civil War in the Pacific*, now available for sale at Amazon.com. This book has as its main character an African American man who escaped slavery on a ship sailing from Savannah to Boston, and from there he signed up as a crewman on a whaling ship going to Hawai'i. There he joined the Union navy, and helped sabotage the voyage of the *C.S.S. Shenandoah*, a real-life Confederate raider which attacked Northern whaling ships in the Pacific Ocean. For this book, Professor Williams did much research on Black men who served on both Union and Confederate ships, as well as reading many unpublished diaries of seamen on whaling ships, while he was a visiting scholar at the East-West Center of the University of Hawai'i.

In his retirement years Walter Williams has continued to publish essays on the Civil War, mostly in quora.com and other online sources.