

Remembering Southern Black freedom fighter Mabel Williams



Posted by: Sue Sturgis
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Mabel Williams, who with her husband Robert F. Williams called for armed self-defense against racist violence in Jim Crow North Carolina and lived in exile in Cuba and China for a time because of it, died on April 19. She was 82.

Born in Monroe, NC in 1931, Mabel married Rob, also a Monroe native and veteran of the segregated Marine Corps, in 1947. He became a leader in the local NAACP chapter, working to integrate the public library and public swimming pools. He gained national attention for the notorious "[Kissing Case](#)," defending two black boys ages seven and nine who were jailed for letting a white girl kiss them on the cheek. Embarrassed in the international press, Gov. Luther Hodges eventually pardoned the boys, though the state refused to apologize for its harsh treatment of them.

While organizing with the NAACP, Rob Williams also helped found the Union County Council on Human Relations, bringing the races together to work for black freedom. Mabel Williams served as secretary for the group, which eventually fell apart due to white supremacist backlash.

The Williamses' organizing work drew the attention of the Ku Klux Klan, which was a powerful force in Monroe. The city was the hometown of segregationist U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms, whose father served as police chief. A formative incident from Rob Williams' youth was witnessing the beating and dragging of a black woman by the senior Helms as white onlookers laughed.

In 1959, after a jury in Monroe acquitted a white man for the attempted rape of a black woman, Rob Williams stood on the courthouse steps and declared the right of black people to defend themselves. As he said later at a press conference:

I made a statement that if the law, if the United States Constitution cannot be enforced in this social jungle called Dixie, it is time that Negroes must defend themselves even if it is necessary to resort to violence.

That there is no law here, there is no need to take the white attackers to the courts because they will go free and that the federal government is not coming to the aid of people who are oppressed, and it is time for Negro men to stand up and be men and if it is necessary for us to die we must be willing to die. If it is necessary for us to kill we must be willing to kill.

Rob Williams filed for a charter from the National Rifle Association and formed the Black Guard, an armed group that protected Monroe's African-American community from racist attacks. The NAACP eventually suspended Williams for advocating violence.

When the Freedom Riders brought their nonviolent campaign to integrate interstate bus travel to Monroe in 1961, they were met by Klan violence and turned to Williams' Black Guard for protection. During the riot that ensued, Williams sheltered a white couple from an angry African-American mob only to be accused later by local and state authorities of kidnapping them. After the FBI issued a warrant for his arrest, Williams fled to Cuba with Mabel and their two sons.

"In Monroe, North Carolina we knew that the power structure in the local town was against us," Mabel Williams [recalled](#) decades later. "But we didn't know when we started fighting that the FBI was supporting the power structure."

Granted asylum in Cuba, Rob and Mabel Williams started Radio Free Dixie, broadcasting news, music and commentary throughout the eastern United States. They continued to publish The Crusader, an underground newsletter they had launched in Monroe and for which Mabel Williams drew editorial cartoons. They also collaborated on the book "[Negroes With Guns](#)," an important influence on Black Panther Party founder Huey P. Newton. In 1965, the Williams family moved to The People's Republic of China at the invitation of Mao Zedong.

Mabel Williams returned to the United States in September 1969. Rob followed soon after and was arrested on the outstanding kidnapping charge, which was eventually dropped. The Williams family settled in Michigan. Rob Williams took a research position at the University of Michigan's Institute for Chinese Studies and played a role in the opening of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and China. He died of cancer in 1996; civil rights leader Rosa Parks delivered his eulogy, hailing "his courage and for his commitment to freedom."

Mabel Williams did social work and continued to be active in her Michigan community. She was was a leader in her Catholic church, directing its senior meals program, and was involved in local economic development and philanthropic work as well as cultural preservation, according to [her obituary](#) in the Manistee News Advocate:

She was instrumental in promoting the legacy of Idlewild, the historic African American resort community -- famous



Photo of Rob and Mabel Williams from the website for the PBS film "[Negroes With Guns: Rob Williams and Black Power](#)."

for the legendary performers who graced its stages -- where in the years of segregation many black families were able to experience a level of freedom not available in the rest of the country. As President Emeritus of the Lake County Merry Makers, she championed the work of "Friends of Historic Idlewild" and supported the development of FiveCAP's Idlewild Historic & Cultural Center and Museum.

Mabel Williams, who in her writings acknowledged the double oppression faced by black women, was sometimes asked how she felt about working in the shadow of her husband. She discussed her reaction to that question during a speaking engagement that was recorded and [posted to Freedom Archives](#).

"The power structure used that, I think, to split up our movement," she said. "I feel fine. I'm fighting for my rights just like he's fighting for his. We're fighting together for the rights of our people."

Mabel Williams will be buried in Monroe, at her husband's side.

(For details about services planned for Mabel Williams in Detroit and Monroe, click [here](#).)