

William & Mary Law School Recognizes Their First African-American Graduate



Summary: During the second African-American Law Alumni Celebration, William & Mary School celebrated the first African-American graduate in 1954.

William & Mary Law School's African-American Alumni held their second celebration on February 23. During the celebration, the school honored Edward Augustus Travis, class of '54, with a portrait done by artist Connie Desaulniers, according to the *Williamsburg Yorktown Daily*.

Travis's daughter, Edwadiné Travis Whitehead, alongside William & Mary President Taylor Reveley and Law School Dean Davion M. Douglas unveiled the portrait. Douglas said, "Today is a day that we have been looking forward to for a very long time for many different reasons. Before a few years ago, we didn't know about Edward Travis."

Douglas explained that he was reading a dissertation that referenced a black law student who graduated from William & Mary in 1954. The school would go on to discover that not only was Travis the first African-American to graduate from the law school by 18 years but he was also the first African-American to graduate from the university. This discovery made Douglas want to know more about the man.

Travis was born in 1911, attending St. Paul's high school in Lawrenceville, Virginia. He attended Hampton Institute and Florida A&M University, where he graduated from in 1940. By 1951, he was living in Hampton, Virginia where he went to law school. He became a teacher at Carver High School and a member of the Newport News Teachers Association and the Dochiki Civic and Social Club. Travis died in 1960 in Newport News, Virginia.

William & Mary Board of Visitors member and co-chair of the African-American Law Alumni Celebration, Barbara L. Johnson '84, said during the ceremony, "Edward Travis was one of those hidden figures in African-American history who has now come to light in a very powerful way. He is an unsung hero we will now recognize and who will be spotlighted in the history of the Marshall-Wythe Law School, as it says in the William & Mary Charter, 'for all times coming.'"

Johnson went on to explain that since Travis was a student during the early, segregated 1950s, he was not allowed to live on campus like everyone else and there were no support groups to help him during his time at the school to feel welcomed. Despite these hardships, Travis persisted, becoming a successful businessman and life-long educator. She added, "As we have turned to the past, what are the lessons we can learn? Vision, courage, perseverance and building a legacy of being rooted in service – that's his legacy."

Travis's nephew, Harold B. Wise Jr., described his uncle as "a true family man who cared for and loved his wife, Aunt Pearly, and daughter Dean. That love also extended to those around him; his door was always open."

Wise added, "It is only fitting that William & Mary, which is committed to inclusive excellence and building on the core values of diversity as defined in your statement on diversity, recognized one of its own with this portrait, which will have its legacy live on forever."

The artist who painted the portrait, Connie Desaulniers, explained that the portrait was a struggle since she only had three photos to work off and one of the photos was an old photocopy with little detail and in shades of gray. She turned to Travis's daughter to get more details. Desaulniers said, "She was able to paint a portrait with her memories, and I would never have been able to do that without speaking with her. Her most vivid memory was that he was patient and kind, and she sat on his lap while he graded papers."

Do you think more law schools will look into their own history to honor their first African-American graduates? Share your thoughts with us in the comments below.

To learn more about the African-American first's at other law schools, read these articles:

- [UVA Law Celebrates Legacy of Its First Black Student](#)
- [Diversity Has Come a Long Way at the University of Oklahoma Law School](#)
- [Michigan Law Review Names Their First African-American Editor](#)

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