



The Death of Henry Williams

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Background on Henry Williams

Henry Williams was born on September 15, 1918 in Macon, Mississippi.¹ His father was Watt Williams and his mother was Maggie Lowere; both from Macon, Miss.² We do not have much information on Williams' young life, but his military records note that he enlisted in the war on September 23, 1941 in Alabama and was stationed at Fort McClellan.³ He had achieved the rank of Private.⁴ The military records also note that he had four years of high school, was single, without dependents, and was employed in "semiskilled warehousing, storekeeping, handling, loading, unloading, and related occupations."⁵ At his time of death, Williams resided in Birmingham, Alabama and was stationed at Brookley Field, a military base near Mobile.⁶ He was 23 years old.

The Incident

On August 15, 1942, a white 29 year-old bus driver named Grover E. Chandler shot Henry Williams three times as he was getting off of an City Lines bus at Royal and Adams Streets.⁷ He died instantly.⁸ The Pittsburgh Courier quoted Police Chief Dudley McFadyen explaining that Chandler and Williams were arguing before the shooting and that "the argument reached a climax when the soldier asked the bus driver to lift his suitcase off the bus."⁹ Chandler also claimed that Williams "cursed him and used abusive language in making the request" to

¹ Ancestry.com, Death Record for Henry Williams, *Alabama, Deaths and Burials Index, 1881-1974*. There is a military registration card we found on Ancestry.com that lists his name as "Samuel Henry Williams" and his birthdate as September 12, 1918. This card also has different family names listed, so it may not be accurate.

² Id.

³ Ancestry.com, U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946 for Henry Williams.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Military Board to Investigate Death of Negro, *Mobile Register* (August 17, 1942).

⁷ Negro Private Killed Abroad City Lines Bus, *Mobile Register* (August 16, 1942); Hearing Due Today in Negro's Death, *Mobile Register* (August 18, 1942). According to the August 16 article, William was shot one in the head, once in the neck, and once in the arm.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Soldier Slain on Bus, *The Pittsburgh Courier* (August 29, 1942).

take his suitcase off the bus and that “the soldier had been baiting me for some time.”¹⁰ At the time of the shooting, all but two passengers had left the bus.¹¹

Police Chief McFadyen, assisted by Lieutenant Tally Rollings and “other officers,” took charge of the investigation, questioning Chandler and another black person who was reported to have witnessed the shooting. This witness went unnamed and police records on this case have not yet been located. Chandler was taken into custody and held in jail for at least a few days.¹² On August 17, the commanding officer at Brookley Field, Colonel Vincent B. Dixon, appointed an army board of inquiry to conduct its own investigation into Williams’ killing. Williams’ military identification tag had a notification address of “Mary Robinson, 1106 St. Joseph Street, Birmingham.”¹³

Investigation and Legal Action

Chandler was held in jail for arraignment at least until August 18, 1942, three days after the shooting.¹⁴ The bus company, Mobile Light and Railroad Company, furnished counsel for the defense of the driver.¹⁵ This attorney was Sam Johnston, the attorney for the company.¹⁶ Johnston’s son, Samuel Johnston Jr., may currently be a partner Johnston Druhan LLP in Mobile. According to the Police Chief McFadyen, bus drivers were permitted under Alabama law to carry firearms while on duty.¹⁷

At first, Solicitor Bart B. Chamberlain requested a 10-day postponement of the preliminary hearing, but the Johnston objected “vigorously” and stated that defendant was ready

¹⁰ Id. In the article, Chief McFadyen further quotes Chandler as saying, “I asked him to quit and to take his seat, [...] however, he continued to abuse me and I stood it as long as I could.”

¹¹ Negro Private Killed, *supra* Note 7.

¹² John Gray, interviewed in the PBS documentary “The War,” Episode 3, “Segregation: Its Impact,” said that they put Chandler in jail, but “boasted that he never stayed in a cell. They let him sleep on the cot that the sheriff used. And then they let him out eventually. [...] [N]othing was done to the man actually.” Grover Chandler may have a son named Grover Allen Chandler, who was a retired Mississippi Highway Patrol and Deputy Sheriff before his death in September 2012, and grandchildren that are still alive.

¹³ No further research into this address or Ms. Robinson had been undertaken at this time.

¹⁴ Driver of Bus Allowed Bond On Slaying Charge, *Mobile Register* (August 18, 1942).

¹⁵ Letter from John LeFlore and MJ Jackson to Byron Pickering (August 26, 1942).

¹⁶ Military Board to Investigate Death of Negro, *Mobile Register* (August 17, 1942).

¹⁷ Negro Private Killed, *supra* note 7.

for the hearing.¹⁸ Acting Recorder Dan McCall “disposed of the controversy by setting the case for that day and giving Johnston permission to confer with the defendant.”¹⁹

Chandler waived his right to a preliminary hearing at the arraignment in police court on August 18, where he was charged with murder and released on \$3,500 bond until the grand jury was convened.²⁰ We suspect that the grand jury failed to indict Chandler but have not located records or specific information about the grand jury proceedings.

In addition to the local investigation there was likely an investigation by the War Department because of Pvt. Henry Williams’ military status and the pattern of violence against black soldiers in the South. Truman Gibson, Assistant Civilian Aid to the Secretary of War, communicated to John LeFlore the intention of the War Department to investigate shortly after the incident.²¹

Chandler was married at the time of the incident, and a year after the homicide he enlisted in the army. He died in 1981, but has many living relatives.²²

Context and NAACP Organizing

The homicide of Pvt. Henry Williams, one of a series of homicides of black soldiers by white bus drivers throughout the South in the early 1940s, mobilized support for the NAACP in Mobile.²³ John LeFlore was able to secure over one hundred new members for the Mobile branch in the weeks following the incident, and describe how black Mobile residents were “deeply aroused over the killing of Pvt. Henry Williams,” and “appear willing to support us as never manifested before.”²⁴ LeFlore planned a bus boycott (“walk to work, walk to church and walk to shop” campaign) and went as far as to register trucks and cars to transport workers to their jobs.²⁵ LeFlore sought support from the national NAACP office for these efforts, and received praise from the Assistant Secretary for his efforts.²⁶ An August 15th announcement of a

¹⁸ Hearing Due Today in Negro’s Death, Mobile Register (August 18, 1942).

¹⁹ Id.

²⁰ Id.; See also Hearing Due Today in Negro’s Death, Mobile Register (August 18, 1942).

²¹ Bus Drivers Disarmed: Mobile NAACP Wins Big Victory, Pittsburgh Courier (September 12, 1942).

²² Ancestry.com records on Grover Chandler.

²³ Florence Murray, Stop Soldier Killings on the Home Front!!, The People’s Voice (August 5, 1944).

²⁴ Letter from John LeFlore to Roy Wilkins (September 1, 1942).

²⁵ Letter from John LeFlore to Roy Wilkins (September 1, 1942).

²⁶ Letter from the Assistant Secretary to John LeFlore (September 10, 1942).

meeting about the boycott scheduled for August 23rd suggests plans to extend the campaign to several other cities.²⁷

Ultimately the NAACP called off the campaign when the Mobile Light and Railroad Company acquiesced to five of seven demands made by LeFlore and the Mobile branch.²⁸ The demands included:

1. Disarming of Mobile bus drivers;
2. Impartial enforcement of the law pertaining to segregation on buses;
3. Use of black bus drivers on lines where patronage is overwhelmingly black;
4. Requirement that bus drivers be courteous and considerate to all patrons;
5. Demand for discontinuance of abuse and unprovoked insults to black patrons;
6. Requirement that bus drivers display their names conspicuously;
7. Dismissal of Grover Chandler, who killed Williams.²⁹

The bus company agreed to all demands except they refused to hire black bus drivers for certain lines, and refused to dismiss Chandler (in light of pending legal proceedings).³⁰ Eventually the company agreed to transfer the bus driver to a different route.³¹ The Mobile bus campaign is described as one of LeFlore's biggest undertakings.³²

LeFlore continued to serve on the transportation committee of the Alabama state NAACP, and focused on unequal treatment and facilities for black and white patrons in his annual reports.³³

The homicide of Pvt. Henry Williams contributed to rising racial tensions in Mobile around defense industry work. In October, 1942 LeFlore reported to the national office that “to circumvent the employment of approximately fifty Negro welders and other skilled Negro workers here, shipyards and the Brookley Field Army Air Depot are accepting white women,”

²⁷ Important Announcement to the Public (September 2, 1942).

²⁸ Mobile's Colored People Call Off 'Walk' Campaign, *Mobile Register* (September 7, 1942).

²⁹ Letter from John LeFlore and MJ Jackson to Byron Pickering (August 26, 1942).

³⁰ Bus Firm Agrees to Disarming of System's Drivers, *Mobile Register* (September 1, 1942); Mobile Drivers Disarmed: Mobile NAACP Wins Big Victory, *The Pittsburgh Courier* (September 12, 1942); In a September 2, 1942 letter from the Mobile Branch of the NAACP to the Mobile Light and Railroad Company Superintendent, the NAACP branch notes that bus line's provision of an attorney for the driver showed the bus company's "utter contempt for its Colored patrons."

³¹ Enoc P. Waters, Mobile Leader Uses Jim Crow Laws in Fight for Equal Rights, *Chicago Defender* (April 24, 1943).

³² Enoc P. Waters, Mobile Leader Uses Jim Crow Laws in Fight for Equal Rights, *Chicago Defender* (April 24, 1943).

³³ John LeFlore, Transportation Committee Reports, 1947 and 1948 Alabama State NAACP Conference Programs.

and that management was refusing to hire black workers.³⁴ Eventually management gave into federal directives and agreed to hire twelve black welders. On May 25th, 1943, this resulted in a riot at the Alabama Dry Dock shipyard, where angry whites attacked black workers and bystanders. Eventually the shipyard was segregated to avoid more racial violence, a compromise denounced by the Pittsburgh Courier.³⁵

³⁴ Letter from John LeFlore to Roy Wilkins (October 10, 1942).

³⁵ Transcript of PBS documentary short "The War," Episode 3, "Segregation: Its Impact," http://www.pbs.org/thewar/detail_5381.htm.