

Celebrating a Little-Known Powerhouse for Racial Equity: Documenting the Legacy of Charles H. Williams on the Campus of Hampton University

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Abstract

A new cross-disciplinary digital archive is being developed to elevate the work of Charles H. Williams during his tenure as a professor at Hampton University in the early 1900s. Structured around the theme of architecture and dance, the digital archive is intended to be a unique tool for the teaching of humanities. Upon its completion, it will reveal the relatively unknown history of Charles H. Williams. Three main categories – Architecture, Dance, and Equity – serve as topics of critical inquiry and offer a path to understanding these three aspects of his influence. This NEH funded project - *Black History Matters: Documenting the Legacy of Charles H. Williams on the Campus of Hampton University* - specifically addresses his work as a dance educator who promoted modern dance at Hampton University. Near the geographical seam between the north and the south, Charles H. Williams strategically worked to build alliances up and down the east coast by traveling extensively with his Hampton Creative Dance Group; they were at times the first black dance troupe to perform at previously white only venues, such as the Mosque in Richmond, Virginia. Williams was successful in sponsoring performances on the campus of Hampton as well. His relationships with modern dance pioneers, such as Ted Shawn - founder of Jacob's Pillow - allowed for a rich interchange of ideas and visits to each other's schools. Charles H. Williams' interest in African influence on modern dance was a hallmark of his tenure and provided a path forward to black dancers.

Keywords: Racial Equity, Hampton University, Charles H. Williams, Dance, Architecture

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Introduction

This paper illustrates how an ongoing NEH grant project - *Black Dance History Matters: Documenting the Legacy of Charles H. Williams on the Campus of Hampton University* - reveals the relatively unknown legacy of Charles H. Williams through the creation of a Dance + Architecture digital archive and explores its subsequent use as a teaching tool.

Beginnings

The project began with a desire to find a unique way to reveal historical knowledge about Charles H. Williams. Located in a half dozen boxes in the Hampton University archive accessible only by appointment, and with gloved hands, many documents about Williams existed but were viewed by only a few researchers who wrote about what they found: David K. Wiggins in his 2019 article featured in the *International Journal of the History of Sport* (Wiggins, 2019), and Mary Ann Laverty for her book *Finding a Way Out* in 2012 (Laverty, 2012). Old letters, musical programs, photos, and articles spanning 50+ years were waiting to be discovered by more people and were the starting point for our grant work. We intend to digitize all the documents we can find, but also want to make an archive of Williams' story come to life in a pedagogically relevant way as a teaching tool. By focusing on architecture and dance, we will creatively reveal a major portion of Charles H. Williams' contributions as a modern dance instructor and highlight his efforts to achieve relevance for black dancers in the early 1900s. Our new digital archive, almost 100 years later, will bring the history of Charles H. Williams' legacy and his prolific efforts to champion equity to a new, broad, and varied audience.

Our Grant Team

Our team includes educators in the fields of music, dance, physical education, and architecture. With seemingly disparate academic agendas, we came together in late Spring 2020 to form an NEH grant team with the goal of honoring the foundation's purpose which includes "... the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life" (National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, 1965). We started our project in a year fraught with upheaval in the national psyche created by two significant events. Like many universities at that time, students and faculty at Hampton University were adjusting to online education due to Covid restrictions. And like other HBCUs, we were faced with emotional repercussions after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. With an initial body of documents collected by Dr. Mary Ann Laverty, Dance Anthropologist, we believed that the story of Charles H. Williams was important to share in that heavy moment in our collective history.

Who is Charles H. Williams?

Charles Holston Williams is a little-known powerhouse for racial equity. His 92 years (from 1886-1978) reflected continual dedication to elevating the lives of Black Americans, especially those he influenced as an educator, coach, administrator, and dance instructor at Hampton. Williams' personal history, in fact, is steeped in overcoming racial disparities. Although originally enrolled in Berea College in Kentucky, the Kentucky Day Law of 1904 forced him to leave due to the color of his skin. His strong love of learning and steadfast commitment to the advancement of Black Americans, helped him to reach academic success

earning a degree in Painting at Hampton Institute in 1909, a Bachelor of Physical Education from Springfield College in 1924, and a Master's in Physical Education at Harvard University in 1930.

Charles H. Williams was a professor at Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now called Hampton University), from 1909-1951. Founded in 1868 by General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, this Virginia school was intended to educate newly emancipated Blacks and Native Americans. Hampton began as a trade school and later developed into a renowned Historically Black College and University (HBCU). During this transition, Charles H. Williams' influence in the community and at the school was broad and multifaceted. As an educator, he taught physical education classes for both men and women, which was notable at a time when females were typically left out of such programs. As a coach, he elevated Hampton athletes to great acclaim and was a founding member of the Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) - referred to now as the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (Wiggins, 2019). And as an author he described the conditions of black World War I soldiers in his book, "Sidelights on Negro Soldiers" (Williams, 1923). It is his work as a Hampton dance instructor that is of particular interest. Promoting modern dance for black dancers, both male and female, he established the Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group in 1934. Little known in today's contemporary dance world, "he was the first to place Afro-centric thematic material on the formal concert stage" (Lavery, 2012). Hampton Institute promoted this achievement as a significant Black cultural contribution. A quote from the Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group's Souvenir Program reads, "Hampton Institute has heard many descendants of those who came from that African background raise their voices and sing, as only American Negroes can sing, the deathless Spirituals which their race has created and added to the culture of the United States - of the world. Listening to these, and conscious of the aptitude of the Colored People for making their own dance measures and rhythms, Hampton believes that in the field of dance, the Negro can make another significant contribution to the aesthetic life of America" (Creative Dance Group Souvenir Program, 1937).

Near the geographical seam between the north and the south, Charles H. Williams strategically worked to build alliances up and down the east coast by traveling extensively with his Hampton dance troupe – the Creative Dance Group; notably they were at times the first black dance troupe to perform at previously white only venues, such as the Mosque in Richmond, Virginia in 1935. Williams was successful in sponsoring performances on his own campus of Hampton University as well. His relationships with modern dance pioneers, such as Ted Shawn - founder of Jacob's Pillow - allowed for a rich interchange of ideas, collaboration on choreography, and visits to each other's dance schools. Charles H. Williams' interest in African influence on modern dance was a hallmark of his tenure. His work offered up a critical dialogue as to the significance of Afro-centric dance and provided a path forward to black dancers (Lavery, 2012).

Why Architecture + Dance?

The pairing of architecture and dance may at first seem a strange way to frame Charles H. Williams' contributions. Charles H. Williams was a dancer and dance instructor but was not, in any way, an architect. Curiously though, he was at Hampton Institute when trade school skills were prioritized, to provide newly freed men and women skills with which they could earn a living (Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, 1893), and Williams did indeed spend time working on the construction and maintenance of some campus buildings. But

these conventional brick and mortar aspects that are often associated with the field of architecture are not the only thing that inspired our team. Part of our work involved, and continues to involve, the documenting of significant venues that Williams and the Creative Dance Group performed in such as Ogden Hall at Hampton University. In fact, the grant funds allowed us to hire a consultant to make a 3D scan of this building using Lidar technology which architecture students subsequently rendered in 3D software. But just as important was a belief that Hampton University, as a place, was a significant actor in the story of Charles H. Williams. Architecture in a broad sense is about place making, and the importance of place in a historical context. On a macro scale, we hoped that our focus on the Hampton Campus, its buildings, and its location near the intersection of the North and South, would be realized as having a strong voice in Williams' history, and in our database as well.

At an alternate scale, architecture and dance share many things. They share a reality of relying on the movement of a body through space. It can be argued that architecture is the creation of permanent space which one activates while one moves through it, while dance is the temporal movement of the body through space. This intersection is rich with potential to take our project beyond an ordinary research endeavor, and to instead inject factual historical research with means of interpreting artistic expression.

The Beginning of the Archive

The first grant year was primarily dedicated to establishing the archive and required our team to develop a multi-step technological process. Our dance anthropologist - Mary Ann Lavery - had accumulated many documents of Charles H. Williams' life work while working on her book *Finding a Way Out* (Lavery 2012). The first step was to make high quality scans of this existing documentation, and to develop a method to categorize the information that could be easily translated to the future archive. The second step was to translate the documents (written and photographic) to a format that could be recognized by MediaWiki software. Success depended primarily on the quality of the scans. For those items which did not translate, we re-wrote the information in Microsoft Word. Hampton students were hired as work study employees to do the bulk of this work and learned many seemingly simple but important methods of archival documentation.



Figure 1: Photo of Shahadah Allah Hampton University student working on grant project (2021)

The corresponding architectural work during this first step included the making of three-dimensional photorealistic models of select buildings on campus: Ogden Hall, Armstrong Hall, and the Wigwam building. These are the main buildings that were important to Charles H. Williams' tenure at Hampton University. We hired an engineering firm to make three-dimensional point cloud scans of these structures that were then re-created as digital models.

Point clouds are scans of physical buildings that contain measurement points in the X, Y, and Z axis. Point cloud scanning technology is extensively used in the building and design industry on projects which involve existing structures and landscapes. Two of the Hampton University architecture students were able to witness the making of these scans, and to learn about the technology.



Figure 2: Photo of Gene Corbell and Hampton University students working on 3D scanning (2021)

They were also involved in translating the scans into 3D building models using software called Revit, a platform that is the primary modeling and drawing tool used in the architectural industry today. These building models will be featured in the final archive so that users might more fully understand the places in which Williams taught and performed.

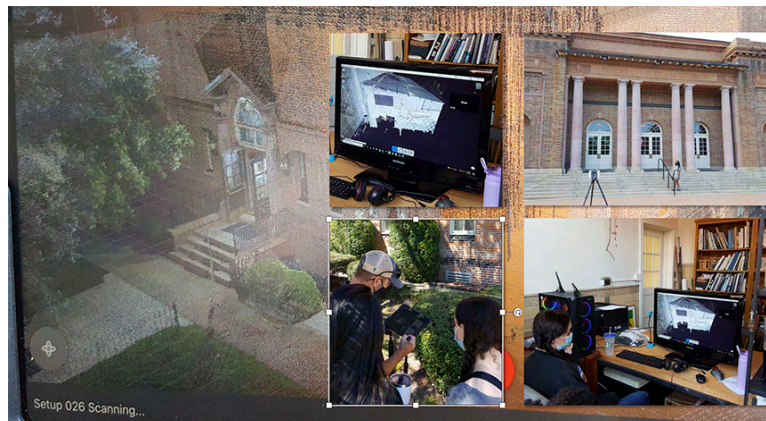


Figure 3: Photos of 3D scanning and modeling process with Hampton University students (2021)

Pedagogical Opportunities

Phase I offered, and continues, to offer many pedagogical opportunities beyond those that are technical. During this phase, two elective classes in the Architecture Department were developed to bridge between the Humanities and the Arts. Historically, Hampton students take humanities courses to seek knowledge with a focus on the unique contributions of African Americans after their forced migration to America. Rarely are these humanities classes taught in an interdisciplinary fashion, but this grant offered that exact opportunity. Two courses - ARC530 Architecture + Dance 2021 and 2022, taught by Professor Battaglia - were developed and implemented to expose students to Charles H. Williams' contributions, a

person that none of the students had heard of. As designers, they were also tasked with a creative endeavor. These courses asked the students to consider how the research could be made into an accessible, user-friendly, and interactive website offering historical information while inspiring new insights. Student teams worked on many initiatives: the design of a historical timeline as narrative connecting event, time, and place; a digital space which would link to other initiatives involving architecture and dance; and an exploration of how a digital archive can be a graphically appealing, and interactive environment engaging to a variety of users. Their work in these classes led our grant team to understand that the MediaWiki platform alone was not going to be able to tell the story of Charles H. Williams in a way that could be used as a pedagogical curriculum or a platform for interaction and discovery. We are now working on transforming our archive to reflect these goals.

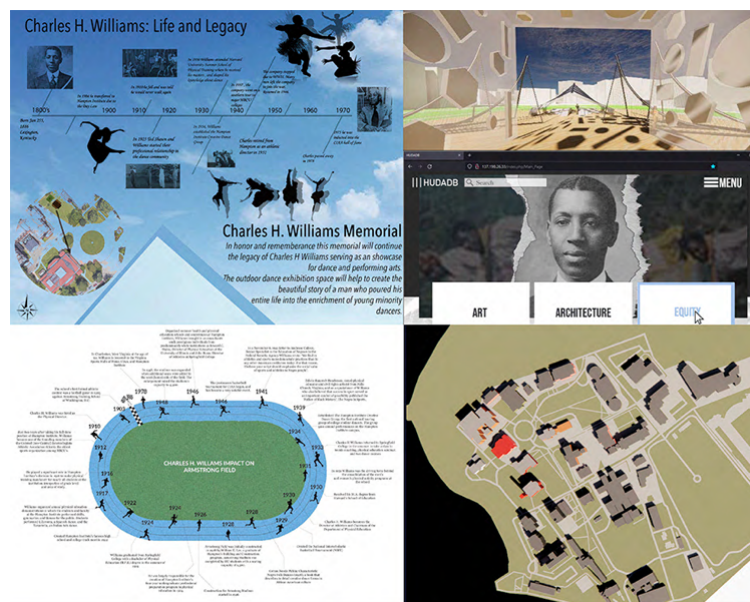


Figure 4: Photos of Hampton student work for grant

This second/“Beta” version prototype focuses on three aspects which our students agreed were important to highlight: Architecture, Dance, and Equity. By creating a more focused interface, the students decided it would be a better platform to engage a larger audience in the discussion of these topics as they relate to Charles H. Williams, and to current day events. For example, without specific knowledge of what to search for in the MediaWiki site, this “Beta” version would allow the user to gain knowledge about how all three topics are interwoven. The new version will allow for interesting cross disciplinary research that will simultaneously touch on historical knowledge and current cultural connections. In other words, it will allow for interest in this subject to reach beyond mere facts, and instead pose questions, present curriculum, leading to a fresh perspective on architecture, dance, and equity.

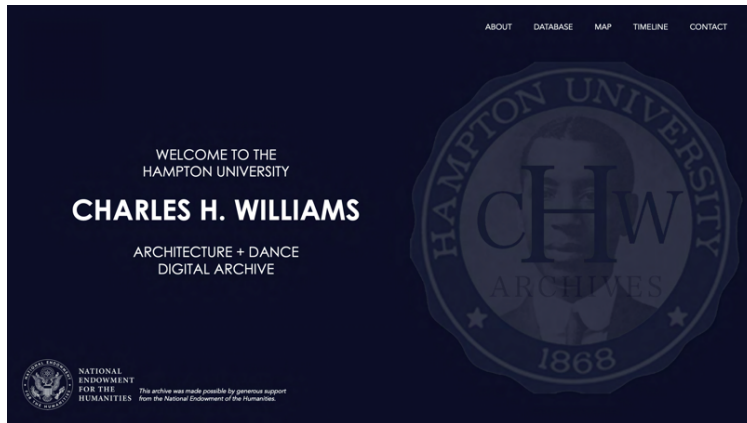


Figure 5: Screenshot of prototype digital archive Title Page (2022)

Linked directly to the MediaWiki site, this Beta prototype is intended to supplement and enhance the little-known history of this amazing man. For example, if the viewer were to “click” on the ‘Architecture’ icon, and then ‘Performance Venues’, they will see a map of the campus and a 3D interactive model of Ogden Hall. If then they click on the ‘Interpretation’ tag, a set of elevation drawings of this historic building, drawn by Hampton students in the Department of Architecture, will be revealed.

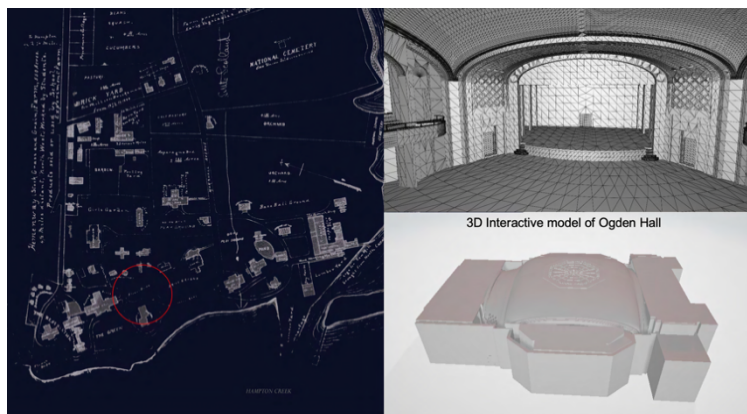


Figure 6: Screenshot of prototype digital archive Architecture page (2022)

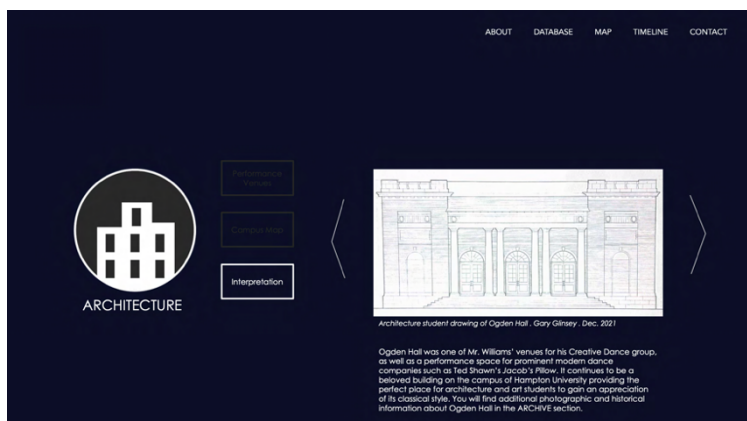


Figure 7: Screenshot of prototype digital archive Interpretation page (2022)

Another link in the Dance category, will allow viewers to access an educational module for use in the K-8 school setting, one which engages architecture and dance used to creatively teach the history of Charles H. Williams. This space will allow others to upload their own

curriculum for architecture and dance, ultimately creating a collection of information for this unique cross disciplinary education.

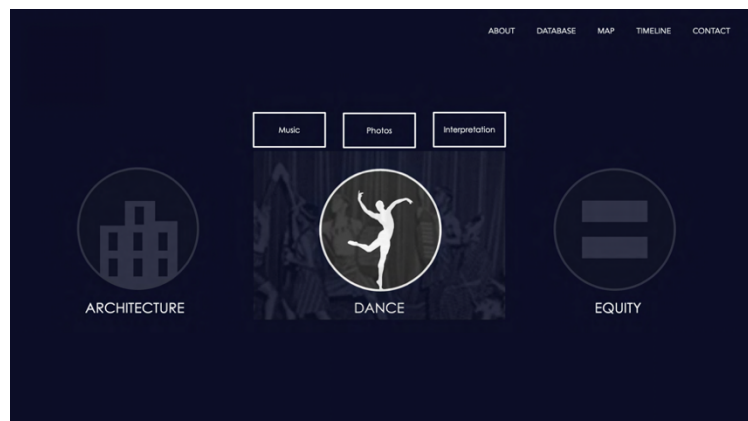


Figure 8: Screenshot of prototype digital archive Dance page (2022)

Equity as a third category will offer Williams' 'Writings', 'Academic papers', and student and researchers' 'Interpretations'.

An interactive timeline reveals relationships between all 3 categories. As an example, year 1925 highlights 3 significant events: a performance at Ogden Hall by the premier Denishawn Group, the effort by the Ku Klux Klan to segregate Ogden Hall, as well as Williams' efforts to counteract segregation by chairing the Hampton Tuskegee Endowment. Each of these events are tagged with Architecture, Dance, or Equity, or a combination of all three.



Figure 9: Screenshot of prototype digital archive Timeline page (2022)

The last part of the archive is a Contact and Connect page allowing viewers to participate by adding thoughts and questions to the discussion about Charles H. Williams' Dance, Architecture + Equity.

A Performance

Our project will end with a dance performance as a tribute to Charles H. Williams, available for viewing on the future database. To give new energy and vigor to what Charles H. Williams began with his Creative Dance Group, The Hampton Terpsichorean Dance Company's performance entitled, 'Rejuvenation', will be a modern piece using updated versions of songs that were formally negro spirituals. Expanded from the work 'River' by

Ibeyi where Yoruba dialect is used, it will be choreographed by Crystal Neal to the music ‘Water in the Water’ by the Spirituals Gospel Choir. As part of the dance performance, design students have created structural interventions (pros) which are meant to be objects with which the dancers interact. Abstractly, they are the “architecture” component of the performance which speak to boundaries that have been challenged by Charles H. Williams. They have been designed and built by students at another university where Laura Battaglia is currently teaching - Virginia Commonwealth University. By connecting VCU to Hampton U. we are mirroring Charles H. Williams’ efforts to connect students and dancers from different parts of the country. Charles H. Williams challenged boundaries by building bridges. We are similarly building bridges for this performance. The performance will be held in Ogden Hall. The Terpsichorean Dancers, the current dance troupe at Hampton, is excited to be performing on the same stage as the Creative Dance Group back in the early 1900s, with a story that speaks to his legacy.



Figure 10: Screenshot of prototype digital archive Performance page (2022)

Conclusions

Although it remains an ongoing effort, this project has already begun to highlight the legacy of Charles H. Williams, and his unique contributions to early African American Modern Dance. Qualitative surveys reveal that students at Hampton University School of Architecture appreciated the opportunity to participate in the grant work; one Hampton student wrote that, the grant is “very important to Hampton University, and that “more opportunities like this should be given to students.” They found the emphasis on architecture and dance to be a unique vehicle for discussing past and current cultural issues related to race and equity. One student related the past work of Charles H. Williams to the University’s current Standard of Excellence. When completed, the archive will be interactive, not static, constantly growing from contributions made to this topic.

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