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William & Mary Law School Unveils Portrait of First African-American Graduate

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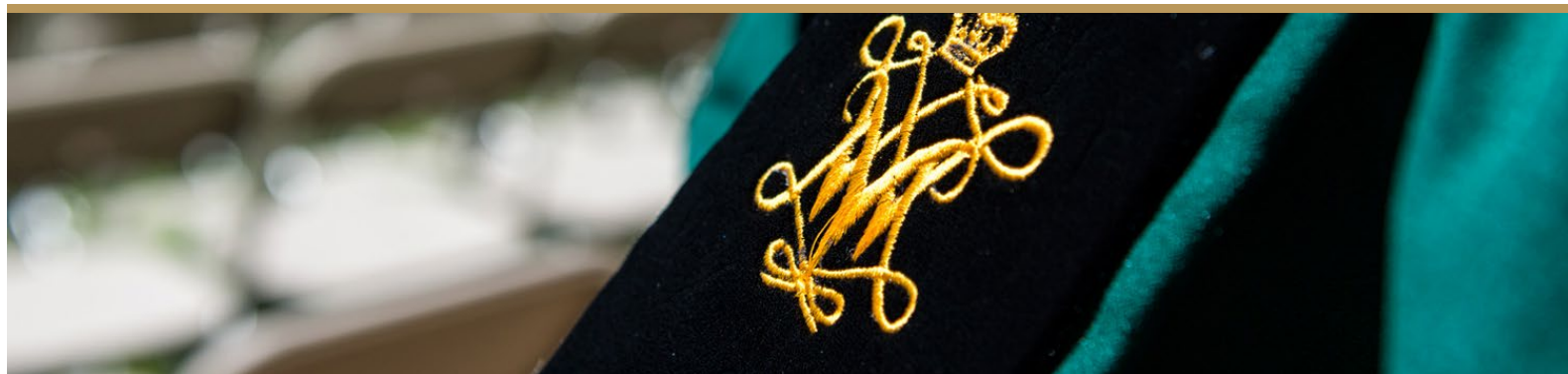
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William & Mary Law School unveils portrait of first African-American Graduate



A Legacy Lives On Edwadne Travis Whitehead, President Taylor Reveley, and Dean Davison M. Douglas started off the 2018 African-American Law Alumni Celebration with the unveiling of the portrait of Edward Augustus Travis B.C.L. '54, the first African-American graduate of William & Mary Law School. *Photo by David F. Morrill*

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by *David F. Morrill* | **March 6, 2018**

February 23 was a special day at William & Mary Law School,

signaling the beginning of the second **African-American Law Alumni Celebration**.

It was also the day Edward Augustus Travis B.C.L.'54, the Law School's first African-American graduate, returned to campus—in the form of a handsome portrait by artist Connie Desaulniers.

On hand to do the unveiling honors were Travis's daughter, Edwadne Travis Whitehead; William & Mary President Taylor Reveley; and Law School Dean Davison M. Douglas.

"Today is a day that we have been looking forward to for a very long time for many different reasons," Douglas said. "Before a few years ago, we didn't know about Edward Travis."

Douglas recounted how he was reading a dissertation and was intrigued by a reference to a black law student who graduated from William & Mary in 1954.

Not only would that would make Travis the first African American to graduate from the Law School by 18 years, but also the first to graduate from the College of William & Mary. So Douglas set out to discover who he was.

Travis was born in 1911 and attended high school at St. Paul's in Lawrenceville, Va. He then attended Hampton Institute and graduated from Florida A&M University in 1940. In 1951, he was living in Hampton, Va., when he entered law school, after which he became a teacher at Carver High School and a member of the Newport News Teachers Association and Dochiki Civic and Social Club. Travis died in November 1960 in Newport News, Va.

During the ceremony, Barbara L. Johnson '84, a member of the William & Mary Board of Visitors and co-chair of the African-American Law Alumni Celebration, told the crowd that the unveiling was more than just about a portrait in a frame; she recognized the occasion as "a very big deal."

"Edward Travis was one of those hidden figures in African-American history who has now come to light in a very powerful way," Johnson

said. "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 described Travis as a life-long educator and a successful businessman who forged a legacy rooted on service and as a builder of other people's lives. As the only African-American law student in the early, segregated 1950s, he was not allowed to live on campus and had no support group to make him feel welcome. Still, he persisted.

"As we have turned to the past, what are the lessons we can learn?" Johnson asked. "Vision, courage, perseverance and building a legacy of being rooted in service—that's his legacy."

Harold R. (Bob) Wise Jr., a nephew of Travis, remembered 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 said that words such as "loving," "selfless," "nurturing," "thoughtful" and "compassionate" perfectly described his uncle.

"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," Wise said.

After the unveiling, Connie Desaulniers shared that although she has done other portraits for the Law School, this one "brought out a lot of emotional feeling."

Desaulniers mentioned how her references were limited to three old photos, one of which was a photocopy lacking detail and shades of gray. To get more visual information, Desaulniers sought out Travis's daughter.

"She was able to paint a portrait with her memories, and I would never have been able to do that without speaking with her," Desaulniers said. "Her most vivid memory was that he was patient

and kind, and she sat on his lap while he graded papers.”

Taking a good, long look at the portrait, Barbara Johnson recognized more than just a kindly face that will take up residence at the Law School.

“We thank you, Edward Augustus Travis, for your vision, for your courage, for your perseverance, and for your legacy of service,” Johnson said. “We stand on your shoulders.”

About William & Mary Law School

Thomas Jefferson founded William & Mary Law School in 1779 to train leaders for the new nation. Now in its third century, America's oldest law school continues its historic mission of educating citizen lawyers who are prepared both to lead and to serve.

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