

Good evening, everyone. I am delighted to have been inducted as an honorary member into the nation's oldest and most prestigious academic society. I want to thank the officers and members of the Alpha chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, on this the 243rd anniversary of its founding at William & Mary, not only for the recognition of my scholarly achievements over the years since graduation, but also for the honor of inviting me to speak here this evening.

I came to William & Mary as an associate professor of English in 1992. Having taught for 3 years at Hofstra University and 3 years at Amherst College, I thought I'd do another 3 year stint here at William & Mary and then figure out where I really wanted to be. Some 21 years later I retired from this university as a full professor,.

Why did I stay? Well, as with the other schools I had wonderful colleagues and very smart students, but I also recognized William & Mary as a place that needed someone like me in its efforts to fulfill a commitment to diversity & inclusion. I taught African American literary history and culture in keeping with my specialty, and I also taught in my secondary field of Early English Literature. I loved teaching Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare, who I secretly called the "Big Three" and their contemporaries as much as I loved teaching Black writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and their contemporaries, but the importance of teaching African American Literary history and culture for me was that it was a way to prepare all students to feel more culturally competent going out into the world. Also as part of that goal, I helped to establish a Black Studies program and was the founding director. That program merged with African studies in 2009 and is now Africana Studies.

After retirement I continued to teach here part-time both in the classroom and on line for several years, and in 2016, I was asked by then Provost Michael Halleran to chair a committee to

plan a commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the first African American students in residence at William & Mary.

Yes, William & Mary was 274 years old before it admitted its first black residential students—Lynn Briley, Janet Brown, and Karen Ely. Planning the commemoration year which took place in 2017-18 was in many ways eye opening for me. I knew some of the history; for instance, I knew William & Mary had owned enslaved black people, and I knew about the first Black person who had been admitted into graduate school here because a society had been formed in his name—the Hulon Willis Association. However, beyond that I hadn't given much thought to the history of African Americans at this institution until I met the three women who would be fondly nicknamed the Legacy 3 by members of the Black Student Organization during the commemoration.

Programs and courses were planned for the year that focused on our theme, Sankofa, a West African philosophy that means “It is not taboo to go back and get what you forgot” because one needs knowledge of the past to build a successful future. Our theme was Sankofa and our logo became “Building on the Legacy” since that is what we were doing, building on the legacy of those three courageous women who were the only African Americans living in the dorms of a Southern white institution during a time when many other campuses in the south were fraught with violence.

I spoke to many Black alumni during that period and asked them what they would like to see happen as a result of the commemoration, and two in particular responded “a written history that includes us more than peripherally.” And since that response was echoed by so many more, I decided to write the book *Building on the Legacy: African Americans at William & Mary, An Illustrated History of 50 Years and Beyond*, which was published in September of this year. The

book primarily covers the historical period from the admission of Hulon Willis, Sr. in 1951 through the end of the commemoration year in 2018. I discuss a number of firsts such as the first Black person, Edward Travis, to receive a degree from William & Mary. In 1954 Travis graduated with a Bachelor of Civil Law degree, the equivalent of the Juris Doctor degree, from our law school. In 1955, W& M admitted its first Black woman, Miriam Johnson Carter, into the law school; however, she did not graduate, the interesting story surrounding her difficulty being admitted and her reasons for leaving after a year are covered in the book. And in 1963, the first Black undergraduate was admitted, and he left after two years, the reasons also covered in the book.

Before any of these African Americans were admitted, some of the white students in attendance were not only open to expanding the admissions policy to include African Americans, but were vocal in challenging the administration. In 1945, for instance, a brave young senior, Marilyn Kaemmerle, published an article as editor-in-chief of William & Mary's student paper *The Flat Hat* titled "Lincoln's Job Half-Done" in which she states that "Negroes should be recognized as equals in our minds and hearts. For us, this means, that Negroes should attend William and Mary." Kaemmerle was immediately fired as editor and nearly expelled. Again, some 20 years after Kaemmerle's attempt, the *Flat Hat* reported that 800 William & Mary students signed a statement and sent it to the president expressing the opinion that "the college should never consider the race, color, or creed of an individual in its admission policy." That was 1963, the same year that a young Oscar Blayton enrolled as the first Black undergraduate.

Several young black men were enrolled after Blayton, but were not, shall we say, encouraged to live in the dorms. Two such students, James Bernard Bailey and Michael Engs became the first black undergraduates to earn a degree from W&M, both graduating in 1969. The

Legacy 3 became the first black undergraduate women to earn a degree, graduating in 1971. As part of the commemoration, William & Mary dedicated bricks with inscriptions of the three women's choosing to be placed among those on the patio of the Alumni House. A marble plaque was also dedicated in April 2018 and graces the portico of the Wren building. It reads:

William & Mary Honors

Lynn Briley, Karen Ely, Janet Brown Strafer

Who in September 1967 Enrolled

As the First African American Students

In Residence and Whose Fortitude Resulted

In their being the First African American

Women Graduates of William & Mary.

We also Pay Tribute

To Those African American Students

Earlier Denied Full Participation

But Who Played a Key Role in the

Process of Integration and who persevered

Through some of the most challenging

Moments in our nation's history.

We honor these brave African American

Women and men Whose Courage, conviction,

Strength, and Resilience Paved the Way

For Others Who Have Built on Their Legacy,

Enriching the Life of William & Mary

And Changing it for the Greater Good.

Whenever I'm asked to talk about the book, I always hasten to explain something that's very important to me, and that is the fact that this is not a book about Blacks as victims but about what is represented in the last line on that plaque – about the many contributions we have made that have helped to change William & Mary for the greater good and to live up to its reputation as a top-tier university. It was particularly fitting that the plaque be placed on the portico of a building that has been described as, among other things, “the soul of the College.” Asked to speak on the occasion of its dedication, I remarked that its description as the soul of the college resonates most strongly with me because of the multivalence of the word “soul.” For along with its spiritual, religious, and emotional connotations, the concept of the “soul” also has special significance as the embodiment of African American culture and pride. That these women's names, along with a reference to earlier pioneers, all of whom played a key role in the process of integration, be prominently and forever integrated into the “soul of the College” was a gesture toward truly acknowledging that who comes here belongs here.

As I acknowledge on the front flap of *Building on the Legacy*, in April 2018, the William & Mary Board of Visitors adopted a resolution apologizing for enslaving people and acknowledging that the institution “exploited them and their labor and perpetuated the legacies of racial discrimination.” The resolution also expresses regret and a promise to “continue our efforts to remedy the lingering effects of past injustices....” This resolution was just one of the many milestones that occurred during the 50th Anniversary of the first African American students in residence at William & Mary. The history recorded in the book demonstrates the ways in which African Americans have continued to build on the legacies of those who were enslaved at the college and those who were “brave enough to be first.” Even more stories are included not only in the book, but also on the 50th web page that may be found on William & Mary's website.

Building on the Legacy is not only about African American students past and present but also about African American staff, faculty, and administrators. During my research for the book, I learned about the first African Americans who were “borrowed” from Hampton University to teach courses here, one in particular, Dr. Hugh Gloster, who was considered an asset because he had taught Japanese to students in Japan; I learned of the first black tenure-eligible professor, Dr. Louis Noisin, who was tenured in 1976, and in 1979 Dr. Trudier Harris was the first African American woman to be tenured, and the list of firsts goes on.

My book centers on African Americans, but I asked three of my former colleagues whose work is on American Indian, Latinex, and Asian American communities to contribute to the epilogue as a way of beginning to communicate cross-culturally. I believe diversity promotes a greater variety of perspectives, which leads to a higher degree of creativity and innovation.

Although I took a bit of a detour before getting a Ph.D., I believe becoming an English professor was inevitable, a true calling. I was an avid reader growing up and constantly trying my hand at poetry and short stories, written, to my parents’ dismay, in the blank spaces of the encyclopedia and other books that had often been purchased at great cost. Nevertheless, I wasn’t chastised, only encouraged as I encourage you this evening, fellow inductees—I encourage and challenge you to follow your true calling, armed with the knowledge you’ve acquired here and the achievements that led you to this celebration. You are some of the most accomplished students here at William & Mary; you have already become role models, and the future of our nation lies in your capable hands.

So I congratulate you for your fine achievements and for what you are about to take out into the world, and, again, I am delighted to share this honor with you. For as one of my favorite

writers Toni Morrison said in ending her Nobel acceptance speech, “Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together.” Thank you