# AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARCHITECTS OF LOS ANGELES:

John D. Williams

Interviewed by Wesley H. Henderson

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California

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None.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

**Born:** November 15, 1921, Chicago, Illinois.

**Education:** Pepperdine University, 1947-49; Bachelor of Architecture, University of Southern California, 1955.

**Military Service:** First sergeant, United States Army Air Force, 1943-46.

**Spouse:** Pearl Dinkins Williams, married 1949, three children.

CAREER HISTORY:

Superimposer, Jack Chernoff's office, Los Angeles, 1954-55.

Draftsman, Sam Reisbord's office, Los Angeles, 1955-57.

Draftsman, Bernard Leuin's office, Van Nuys, California, 1957.

Draftsman, designer, Reichl and Starkman, Los Angeles, 1957-58.

Architect, John D. Williams and Partners, 1958-present.

Instructor, design and professional practice, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 1973-74.

AFFILIATIONS:

American Institute of Architects.

California State Board of Architectural Examiners, commissioner.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

National Organization of Minority Architects, national vice president.

Urban League.

SELECTED WORKS:

Bradley International Terminal, Los Angeles International Airport (with Daniel L. Dworsky and William L. Pereira).

Compton Police Department building, Compton, California.

Edgar Guinn house, La Jolla, California.

Florence-Firestone Multipurpose Service Center, Los Angeles.

Harrison-Ross Funeral Home, Los Angeles County.

Hunters Point, California, redevelopment project, San Francisco.

Ida Orr house, Oxnard, California.

Normandie Villas public housing project, Los Angeles.

Kedren Community Mental Health Center, Los Angeles.

Theresa Lindsay Senior Citizen Center, Los Angeles.

Ujima Shopping Center, Los Angeles.

Ujima Village public housing project, Los Angeles.

Ward Villas public housing project, Los Angeles.

Willowbrook Shopping Center, Los Angeles (with Maxwell Starkman).

Winston Wright house, Los Angeles.

## INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Wesley H. Henderson, B.S., Art and Design, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Master of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Ph.D., Architecture, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

**Place:** Williams's office, Los Angeles.

**Dates, length of sessions:** October 12, 1990 (36 minutes); January 29, 1991 (45); February 12, 1991 (68); March 25, 1991 (74); May 15, 1991 (45); August 13, 1991 (42); February 18, 1992 (40).

**Total number of recorded hours:** 5.85

**Persons present during interview:** Williams and Henderson

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series related to the history of African American architects in Los Angeles. In preparing for this interview and others in the series, Henderson had a preinterview with Williams, interviewed his associates, and relied on the background research for his UCLA doctoral dissertation, "Two Case Studies of African American Architects' Careers in Los Angeles, 1890-1945: Paul R. Williams, FAIA, and James H. Garrott, AIA."

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Williams's childhood, schooling, and military service, and continuing through his architectural career in California. Major topics include white architects' attitudes toward employing African Americans in the 1950s, projects available to African American architects, Williams's own works, and practices of the California State Board of Architectural Examiners.

EDITING:

Alex Cline, editor, edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Williams reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made minor corrections.

Cline prepared the table of contents. Kristian London, editor, assembled the biographical summary and interview history. Derek DeNardo, editorial assistant, compiled the index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

OCTOBER 12, 1990

HENDERSON: This is our first session, and it's going to cover the areas of family history and background and early education and schooling. And what I like to do for these tapes is first get your complete name and birth date and your parents' names.

WILLIAMS: Okay. My name is John Doss Williams, born the fifteenth of November, 1921.

HENDERSON: Where?

WILLIAMS: In Chicago, Illinois.

HENDERSON: And your parents' names?

WILLIAMS: My father's name was John Doss Williams.

HENDERSON: You don't go by Jr.?

WILLIAMS: No, I dropped Jr. some time back. And my mother's name was Linnie Williams.

HENDERSON: Do you remember her maiden name?

WILLIAMS: Gary was her maiden name.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: They were born in the South, in Jackson, Mississippi.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay. What do you remember from Chicago?

WILLIAMS: I remember the fun that I had as a youngster playing in the wintertime in the snow with a sled and

sliding on ponds of ice made after the rains. Those were the fun times. I remember the extreme cold weather and playing until you were almost frostbitten. You'd come in, and you'd have to thaw out in cold water, and my mother would say, "Don't you have no sense to come in when you're about to freeze to death?" It was a fun time. I remember that most specifically.

You see, we left Chicago in 1930, so I was eight. It was '29 or '30 when we came here, so I had just started grammar school. I was in grammar school, in second or third grade, fourth grade, something like that. Then we came to Los Angeles, and my primary education is basically California and Los Angeles in particular--elementary, junior high, high school, and college.

HENDERSON: Okay. Do you remember what area in L.A. you moved into?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. The first place we moved to was Fifty-fourth [Street] and Avalon [Boulevard]. It was in between Avalon and McKinley [Avenue]. I attended Forty-ninth Street Elementary School. And then, of course, we moved to another spot which was a little farther north, around Forty-third Place, I think it's called now, near Avalon. Then we also moved to a spot around Santa Barbara [Avenue, now Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard] and Avalon, and I attended Wadsworth Elementary School. So I attended

Wadsworth and Forty-ninth Street in elementary school.

HENDERSON: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I have five brothers. There were six brothers. There were seven altogether in the family, and one brother, the one between me and a brother younger than me, he died as an infant. So there were six of us who grew up. So six boys. No sisters; all brothers.

HENDERSON: And what's your position in that?

WILLIAMS: I am second from the oldest.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay. Do you mind if I ask what your parents did for a living?

WILLIAMS: Of course not, no. My mother was a housewife; she never worked. My father was a Pullman porter for a good portion of his career. After he retired from Pullman portering, I think because of the decline in train travel, that people didn't travel as frequently by train across the country-- Maybe it was the advent of aviation or something. But anyway, there was a curtailment of that, so he stopped running on the road. Perhaps also because my mother said, "You're away too often." He began driving a cab here in Los Angeles. He drove a cab in Los Angeles for several years before he passed. But in Chicago, of course, he worked in foundries and the steel mills, in that industry.

HENDERSON: I don't know if you noticed my reaction when I

heard the Pullman porter, that that's what your father did, but in the histories that I've been reading and finding out about regarding blacks in Los Angeles, many of them have come here on the railroad or were involved with the railroad.

WILLIAMS: Well, that's exactly-- As a matter of fact, what happened was that that's how we got here, because he was running from Chicago to Oakland [California]. And when he had gotten that run and had been running for a while and became disenchanted I guess with Chicago, he was told by one of his friends, "Well, if you want to leave Chicago, why don't you go down to Los Angeles? That is really the place to be." So, as he said, I think it was a "deadhead" run. I guess that means that you go not working; you just take a run down to L.A. He came down here once. He made the decision. He didn't go back to Chicago. He sent for the family, and we all came out by train across the prairies, all across the country, and it was an adventure.

We had been reading about the West and the Wild West, of course. Unlike the movies, it was not like that, except that there was certainly a scarceness of development all across. And all you saw were prairies and farms and cows, and being from Chicago, we didn't see much agriculture, even though the stockyards were there.

HENDERSON: You didn't think about that.

WILLIAMS: We didn't think about that. And I was a youngster, too. But coming across, we crossed the country by train, and we saw much of what is called old Midwest Americana. You'd still see people on horseback and say, "There's a cowboy." We were fascinated by the trip. And I think because of his immediate kind of decision to move from Chicago, that he took that trip and came here, the preparations were certainly not as extensive as they may have been. But it was like, "Move it. Let's go." She said, "Come now?" "Come now." [laughter] "We're going to come." So we made that trip. And I think the first place we moved when we came here was on Fifty-fourth, as I've told you. That's where we were living.

The thing I thought was fascinating, too, about California at the time--and I think it must have been October, near the end of the year--

HENDERSON: When you arrived?

WILLIAMS: When we arrived, yes. The weather was so different from October in Chicago that we were running around without sweaters. Kids that were in the neighborhood would have sweaters, and we were in short sleeves. They said, "Aren't you cold?" So it does tell you that there is something to the thickening of blood and thinning out. It takes a while to acclimate. You had

that insulation in you built in, that immunity from the chill, and it took two or three years before you'd begin to feel the same as your compatriots were feeling. When it got chilly, you'd put a sweater on, but we were running without. But it was interesting, because you'd recognize it, and it was called to your attention. It was, "Hey, aren't you cold, man?" "No, I'm not cold." [laughter] "Let's go." Those were some fun days. Now, you talked about mentioning where you lived and what happened and some of the people that you recall during that time. When I say Fifty-fourth, I was thinking of my friend Nathaniel Hart that I used to--

HENDERSON: What was his name?

WILLIAMS: Nathaniel Hart.

HENDERSON: Well, actually, I am kind of interested in people you knew back in those days whom maybe you've still kept in contact with.

WILLIAMS: Nathaniel I didn't. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure where he is.

HENDERSON: Well, not necessarily kept in contact with, but maybe anybody that you think of as significant, close friends or running buddies.

WILLIAMS: Okay. Nathaniel is the one I happened to think of, because I think he was much-- Keep in mind, now, I think there was one, two, three-- There were five of us

who were born-- Only one of my brothers was born here, but there were five of us ranging in age from eleven to baby. If you'd have a friend or playmate, maybe the playmate was the older, but he was also known by the younger siblings.

HENDERSON: Okay, yes.

WILLIAMS: I think Nathaniel was a little bit older than I but not much, maybe two years. He was more a friend of my older brother [George Williams] who was there. But anyway, he was larger. But he eventually became one who was a real kind of playmate. I think he was testing, as most kids will do, to see who he could bully and who he couldn't bully and what would happen. I tend to remember Nathaniel Hart, though.

HENDERSON: What junior high school did you go to?

WILLIAMS: It was called William McKinley [Junior High School] at that time but is now Carver Junior High [School], George Washington Carver there on Vernon [Avenue] and McKinley [Avenue].

HENDERSON: And what high school did you go to?

WILLIAMS: I was at Thomas Jefferson High School--yeah, Jefferson when it was more majority and fewer minorities, when I went to Jefferson back in '37 to '40. There were not many--probably 35 percent, 40 percent minority, I guess--mostly blacks, but there were a few Orientals, very few Hispanics. Mostly it was predominantly majority

Caucasian.

HENDERSON: Was that high school brand-new at that time, with a streamline moderne building?

WILLIAMS: As a matter of fact, what had happened was that it was an older school, probably one of the older high schools in the city, but after the '33 earthquake some of the buildings were destroyed. That's when they built the streamline moderne.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: That was after the '33 quake that they rebuilt some of the buildings there. As a matter of fact, they probably built most of the buildings except the gym. The gym they didn't do until later. I think we were in the old gym. I know that I played basketball in some of the lower divisions, "B" and "C" basketball--I was a little guy--and we got to play in the old gym. But we didn't think about any earthquake subsequent to that.

I know one of the interesting things is that you talk about the '33 earthquake, and I remember the '33 earthquake very vividly, because I was a paperboy. I sold papers around Central Avenue and delivered papers on Sundays and weekends. And in the evenings after school I also worked Central Avenue from Vernon [Avenue] all the way up north to Jefferson [Boulevard], and just walking the streets there I guess until I was-- I got started just

after we arrived here, maybe '31, '32, and probably sold papers up there until '35, '36, somewhere between that time.

HENDERSON: You were like a guy on the corner selling--?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, on the corner or-- What we'd do is that we would go down-- See, there was a guy who was sort of the patriarch of all paperboys on Central, a fellow by the name of Carlyle Perry, who had the stand at Vernon and Central on the northwest corner. He had a paper stand there, and he would hire young paperboys to cover the streets--some south, some north--and we'd go all the way down, but our activity was mostly north. So both my older brother and myself and the one next to me [Harold Williams], we all sold papers on Central. And that was in the evening; that was the evening paper, the Evening Herald. And there was the [Los Angeles] Express at the time, and they had the [Los Angeles] Mirror that we sold and the Daily News we'd sell. But, see, we would go into all of the businesses along there, and we knew the owners, and they'd say, "Hi, how are you?" "Paper this evening?" "Yeah." So we were hustling the papers.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: But on weekends--when I say weekends it's really Sunday, because Saturday we'd still sell on Central--but on Sundays we'd do the large ones, [Los

Angeles] Times and the [Los Angeles] Examiner, when those papers were the two predominant papers. There used to be the [Los Angeles] Tribune, too, that we would sell. We would go from door to door, you see. We'd go down the street yelling--

HENDERSON: In the houses?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yelling, selling the Examiner, the Times. People would come out on Sunday morning, and you'd ride up, tell them the paper, "Fine." And if you had regular customers, you'd go in and leave the paper and you'd come back later. You wouldn't disturb them. You'd leave the paper and come back later and collect. So that was before the advent of the huge circulation where you do things almost by, not Tupperware, but some sales technique where you would actually go out and solicit subscriptions, and then you'd have the paper delivered by somebody else, and they'd collect. But this way you would just take the paper in, and you'd come back later and collect. And oft-times you would loose money from somebody who wouldn't pay you, but you would only do that one or two times. Then you'd stop that. "I won't deliver there anymore." [laughter]

But I also had a paper route. When I say a paper route, that's where you deliver every day. And once a week we'd collect. Of course, it became much more

sophisticated in later years. Now you don't even see anybody. They just do it by computer. They send you your bill, and you pay it and go--

HENDERSON: That's right.

WILLIAMS: It's different from the old days.

HENDERSON: That's right. Do you remember anything from Jefferson High School days? Any significant teachers or friends?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. Yeah. I remember a couple of social studies teachers, one by the name of Mr. Root, a very nice, eccentric kind of a professor who showed a genuine interest in you, really kind of spaced out but very knowledgeable and a very effective teacher. You got a lot from him. And one other teacher, an Elizabeth Hayes. I remember Elizabeth because I was particularly impressed because she probably thought that I was a fair student and I would work with her. I was so impressed with her, as a matter of fact, that when I went into the service and when I came back from the service I went over to Jefferson to see her, and she was still there, and she remembered me, and I told her what I had been doing. So we just chatted a little while. But it was interesting that I remembered her and I remember her name spontaneously almost. To me she was quite an impressive lady, and she influenced me.

And, of course, there was one teacher at Jefferson, a

fellow by the name of Francis Riley. He was my drafting teacher. I'm not quite sure whether he had a genuine interest, but at least I piqued his interest enough to have him respond when we began talking. The reason for that was that it was a mechanical drafting class, and when I told him that--now, this was I guess tenth grade--I'd like to study architectural drafting, he said fine. So another student and myself, we were the only two who studied architectural drafting; the rest of the class did mechanical. We were doing things like getting plans of houses out of books. And, of course, that was my first introduction to Paul [R.] Williams, because Paul had a book, and he'd published some book of plans, I guess a book of houses. And Riley said, "Oh, do you know of this fellow, this architect?" I said no. So I began reading about some things that Paul-- So, you see, that was when I was probably sixteen. So that was an introduction. So that just sounded good, because this was a namesake and, "Hmmm, architecture." I was interested too, so it had a connection--not an overwhelming connection, but at least it sort of-- I was not told that he was black. I didn't know that he was black at the time.

HENDERSON: Oh, you didn't?

WILLIAMS: I didn't know that Paul was black.

HENDERSON: I was about to ask that.

WILLIAMS: Right. I didn't know that Paul was black, and he didn't say he was black. No picture there. He just said, "Here's an architect. Do you know him?" I guess to Riley's credit he didn't specifically say that Paul was black.

HENDERSON: Oh. Was Riley black?

WILLIAMS: No.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: No, no. He was an Irishman who had all the stereotypical characteristics of Irishmen.

But anyway, I had him in the tenth grade and the eleventh grade. So we proceeded to go through whatever there was that he was exercising to the degree of his ability to talk about architecture.

Finally, when I was in the eleventh grade--A-11, I guess it was--I asked him to tell me something. I said, "What do I need to do in order to become an architect?"

He said, "You mean a craftsman."

I said, "No, I mean an architect. I mean where one can design houses."

He said, "Oh, no, you don't want to become an architect. Craftsman is good enough. You can do drafting fine."

I said, "Well, what do I need to do in order to get

the education to become an architect?"

He said, "Well, why don't you go and talk to your counselor."

So I guess I did speak to the counselor, who was equally as discouraging. He said, "Well, you're in an industrial arts course here. Drafting is okay." He said, "But if you talk about architecture, you have to go to college. You have to have science or an academic course. You have to have foreign language, you have to have math and chemistry or physics."

So I said, "Well, I'm A-11 now. I'm over halfway through high school."

So he said, "Okay. I'll see what I can do."

I couldn't get chemistry because what they do, they teach these courses in physics and chemistry sequentially.

HENDERSON: Oh, yes.

WILLIAMS: You take basic, and then you take the intermediate, and then you take advanced. So here I am--

HENDERSON: You're in a track.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I'm in A-11 with a year and a half to go, and what can you do? He said, "Well, the only thing you can take is beginning algebra."

So okay, I took algebra and English in the A-11. And that's where I began to prepare, as the saying goes, for

some academic pursuit to qualify to get into a school of architecture or into college. You see, because a school of architecture-- As a matter of fact, at that time--this is '38, '39--they didn't know what was being offered. I think they weren't interested enough, I guess, in the kids in the class there. Maybe nobody had those aspirations. Because I understood later that Polytechnic High School, which was a high school here in Los Angeles on Grand [Avenue], where Trade Tech [Los Angeles Trade Technical College] is now, I think, had courses that would prepare you for college in architecture. And of course, if you didn't live in the district you had to get special permission to go to these schools. And they said, "Okay, look, at eleventh grade, let it be. You'll figure out a way."

So it turned out I went on through there, through Jefferson, graduated, and--

HENDERSON: Oh, when did you graduate?

WILLIAMS: In '40, summer of '40. I had aspirations of going on to college, so I began to write to various schools around the country, and I got a curriculum catalog from Howard University--I was thinking about Howard--and from [University of California] Berkeley. I didn't think about 'SC [University of Southern California] because

someone said, "You know, 'SC, that's a rich man's school." [laughter] "You don't go to 'SC. That is really expensive." And I guess by the standards at that time 'SC was expensive, and the other schools were much less expensive. Of course, Berkeley was probably the least expensive because it was a state school, and if you qualified academically you'd get there. But that meant that you'd have to go away to school, you'd have to matriculate there in Berkeley, and that's something else again. So the folks were encouraging, but they couldn't afford to send me away to school.

So I finally wound up at L.A. City College, I think they call it. And of course at that time they didn't have a course in architecture. You could take some physics and take the algebra and geometry and foreign languages, those kinds of preparatory courses that you could get. So I started there. I didn't do very well in that transition, because I found that I was not grounded well in some of the science courses and the other academic courses. So I dropped out after the first semester.

Then I discovered that there was a program that was offered by the NYA.

HENDERSON: What is NYA?

WILLIAMS: National Youth Administration.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: That organization had a program that would afford youngsters who had some kind of drafting or certain skills to work in established agencies that did that kind of work. In this instance, it was the Housing Authority, and they had an office out on Aviles Street in East L.A.

HENDERSON: This is the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles?

WILLIAMS: L.A. Housing Authority. And what they were doing was they were doing work on some public housing projects on which they had hired Richard [J.] Neutra to do the Channel Heights housing project out here in San Pedro. Well, I was just working there part-time--say, four hours a day--but that was my first introduction to Neutra. And it was like a school almost. I think we made seventy-five cents an hour or something. It was just some nominal thing.

HENDERSON: Well, now, was it structured like a school? Or was it more of an office that you just--?

WILLIAMS: No, it was more like an internship that you were involved in. It was just letting you become involved with what an office might be and what they were doing and how they were working. They were getting some work done, and they were getting it done inexpensively. But you were also getting an idea of what this was all about.

So that went on for I guess about eight months, and

it was an interesting experience. At least you began to get some feeling as to, "Ah, so this is what architecture is about. This is what architects do, as it were."

After that job was finished, of course, that was about the time that I said, "Well--" This was probably mid-fall, or maybe it was earlier than that, maybe June of '41 or a little earlier, May or June of '41. I then had a friend [Lester Freeman] who said, "Hey, if you're talking about doing some work, working with the NYA program, why don't we go up to Monterey [California], because they've got a program up there where you can get some courses in drafting, and you work out that way. So let's go up and see about that." So we inquired, and we were accepted. So we both went up to Asilomar.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: In Monterey. You know Asilomar up there?

HENDERSON: I've heard of it.

WILLIAMS: It was a resort complex there. I think it may have been state owned. I'm not sure whether it was state owned or whether it was--

HENDERSON: I believe it was sponsored by the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] or YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association], something like that.

WILLIAMS: One of those organizations. So I think the state or the federal government leased it, apparently, for

this purpose, for doing the schooling here. But that program never got off the ground, because they-- So we went up there. So for I guess a month or two, everybody was waiting to see if they were going to get programs going. And apparently there was more in the air about an impending kind of problem with the world and the unrest, because we know that Hitler had done what-- [tape recorder off]

So anyway, when we went there, they never got the program going, and as a result of that we began to look around in the [Monterey] Peninsula--Asilomar and Pacific Grove and Monterey--and we got a job-- My friend and I met someone who lived there in Pacific Grove, and we got a job in the Dinwiddie Construction Company cleaning windows at Fort Ord. So we worked there about a month or two. Then that job petered out, and then my friend said, "Look, why don't we go out to the Monterey Country Club and we'll become caddies?" So that was my introduction to golf.

So I was caddying around the course there and did that until after December 7, because I remember I was on the course there caddying for a Major Reader who I guess was stationed at Fort Ord. They had this announcement that all personnel were to report back to the station.

HENDERSON: This was on the PA [public address] system?

WILLIAMS: This was on the PA system. We were out near

the clubhouse there. So he said, "Well, I guess I'd better go." So we stopped. I don't know, he was somewhere out near the first nine. He went back to the clubhouse, came out, and then we got the news that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

HENDERSON: And he told you?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he told me.

HENDERSON: Wow.

WILLIAMS: He said, "They bombed Pearl Harbor." He said, "Well, listen, things are going to happen now, I'm sure," you see.

But from there, of course, I left Monterey and went to San Francisco and was working there for I guess a month or two. First of all, I thought I might join the merchant marine, and, of course, being underage, I had to get my parents' consent. So I called and asked my mother and father if they'd have any objection to my joining the merchant marine, because I could make some money, and I could do this. About two weeks later, I came home from my work--I was working at Fort Mason as a warehouseman there--one evening, somebody knocked, and I opened the door, and it was my dad. He said, "Boy, what's the matter with you? If you want to join the merchant marine, you'll get--" And of course, in the paper, I guess, a week before or something, this ship, I guess called the *Woodrow*

*Wilson*, a merchant marine ship, was bombed and lost in the Pacific. So I guess that's it. "That's not what this kid ought to be doing." So he said, "Let's straight-talk some sense into him."

HENDERSON: The merchant marine vessels were not armed, right?

WILLIAMS: They weren't originally, but I think that they mounted some with 40-millimeter and probably 60-millimeter guns on them, as well. And they needed supplies, so they were out in the zones. And the merchant seamen, if they lasted, they made lots of money. [laughter] If they lasted.

HENDERSON: This may be a good sort of point for us to come to a conclusion. You're about to join the service, and you'll tell me more about that at the next phase.

WILLIAMS: Okay.

HENDERSON: I have a conceptual question. When did you first or when do you remember first thinking about wanting to be an architect? Was it back in high school? Or even before then? Was there a specific incident or time or situation where you wanted to be an architect or thought about it?

WILLIAMS: Well, I think that it was probably, as I say, just prior to high school, so maybe even in junior high. I think I recollect that as being a time when I was just

looking through and seeing houses and seeing how they looked, and it was just pretty-- It was something to do, but I had no idea who did that. I didn't know whether it was an architect or draftsman or-- That was not the connection in that sense. But I think that it probably began to formulate in a more crystalline form in high school. But I think that the interest in houses and drawing was at the junior high level. So, as I think about it, I might even modify it.

HENDERSON: Sure, sure, that's always possible.

WILLIAMS: To make sure you really have it right.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

JANUARY 29, 1991

HENDERSON: I'm interested in how many men and women were in these drafting classes [of the National Youth Administration (NYA) program] at Asilomar [Pacific Grove, California]. You were saying--what?--eight males, thirty females.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, about thirty females in the facility. And we were billeted in the old Asilomar resort there. There were cabins that they provided for the people who were assigned there. And they had classes for women which were domestic; they were doing cooking and serving and that business. The men were supposed to have some vocational things, and, of course, that's when they classified drafting as a vocation rather than an art form. I was not absolutely certain that I could refute them at that point. But we were around there. We were doing nothing for two or three weeks or more, I think, just occupying ourselves. They said, "Well, we're going to get everybody and start the classes." We were going to get classes. And I think that the supervisors there who were monitoring the program were for the most part very well-schooled folks in their particular areas, but none had drafting backgrounds.

HENDERSON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: They were sociologists and psychologists. And I began to ask them--as opposed to this friend of mine, Lester Freeman, who came who went up with me--"When do our classes start?" They said, "Well, we're trying to get more people here, because there are only you and a couple of others who were interested in that." But some of the other kids, the other young boys who were interested in other vocations, they were told about mechanics and auto repair and various things.

So after, I guess, a short two- or three-week period we began to get impatient. So they said okay, and they began to look for things for the people who were at this camp to do. And they scouted around Fort Ord, which is probably ten or twelve miles, say, from the camp, and they found clerical administrative work for girls who had that aptitude, and they said, "Hey, let's work out a program where we can get the guys to drive the girls into the camp." So they had these old International [Harvester] tarp-covered trucks in which we would get assignments to drive the girls into camp. There was nothing for the boys to do in camp, and they were just hanging out, as the saying goes.

A couple of the girls worked in what they called their blueprint reproduction section at the fort there.

So I went in there, waiting for them to pick them up, and I saw what these guys were doing. I said, "Well, maybe let me see what I can find out. Maybe they're doing some drafting or something in here." So I went and talked to the civilian who was really running this and told him who we were. He said, "No, we don't do any of that stuff here. All we do is make prints." And he said, "If you have any interest in doing anything like that, maybe we can use you in here." So I went back to camp and told one of the supervisors what I had discovered. He said, "That's okay with us. That would be good; that would be fine, John." So we went out, and I started working in the blueprint reproduction area of Fort Ord there where they made all the prints for all the things they were doing. They were doing housing in some areas there, too.

Now, keeping in mind this was--what?--1941, and it was interesting, because at that time all they made was blueprints, and the-- That is the--

HENDERSON: No blueline prints?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, the blue background and the white lines. And you would hardly believe what I'm telling you: in 1941, we would get our blueprints from exposing them to the sun.

HENDERSON: Yes, I can believe that.

WILLIAMS: See, they had the plates, and we'd have to take them out of that-- We'd get them back, we'd take them out of the frame-- Because you had to put them in a frame to hold them so that you'd get good exposure, good, even exposure--glass on top, and a wooden background with like a racket press, see, a tennis racket press. You'd screw this off, you'd take it off, and after you had a certain exposure you'd pull the-- And you'd do it by watch timing. So this is three minutes, and you'd get this-- Then, after you got it out, then you'd have to take it in, and you'd have to dip it and develop it in a potash solution, see. And the only disagreeable aspect of it was it would turn your fingers brown or blue on the end, you know, dark brown, light brown, yellow. But it was an interesting experience, because what I did was, see, on occasion, when they were drying-- And then you have to take them out and hang them up on clothesline pins, and they dry. You have to drip them dry, and they dry. That's why you'd always be able to get a crinkled print. It wouldn't take. It would take a long time before it would really straighten out. For the more permanent record, we'd develop them on linen, a sensitized linen background, which made a more permanent kind of a record. But you had to be very careful, because they all bleached if you kept them outside in the sunlight. So they worked them up that way.

But what I did after-- I worked there I guess a month or two, and that was probably around the fall of the year, say September, thereabouts, October. I guess it was really more close to September, because it was still warm there. And I had a friend who was not at the camp but he lived in Pacific Grove, see, just outside of Asilomar, a fellow by the name of Torrey Butler. This is the first time I've even thought about Torrey's name in forty years. He was a little older than me, three or four years older than the guys there, and there were only two black guys at the camp--that was Lester and myself. I think there was one black girl out of thirty. But we began to see that this program, this NYA program at Asilomar, was not going to evolve the way I think it was projected to us when we were down in L.A., when they were telling us, "Well, here's a place you can go to the NYA program." Then we began to look around, and Torrey said, "You know, it may not be a bad idea if you'd go out to Fort Ord. I know a guy out there who was cleaning windows for the contractor who had to finish up this construction work." And they had housing. Actually, soldiers' barracks is what they really were. And they had all of these multi-pane windows, and they were all wood. But when they were cutting the windows, they'd leave paint on them when they-- Like these windows here.

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: When they were painting the sash and the muntins and the mullions, you see, they'd leave paint on there. So his job was to clean all the windows, like a clean-up job on any architectural job. You'd clean up, and you'd get the paint off and then sort of wash them out. But Torrey knew this fellow who had this contract, so he was looking for people to work. He said, "If you want to work out there--" I think it was some nominal sum, but it was not bad. But it was only a temporary job. But they had a lot of windows to clean, and, I mean, I used up a lot of razor blades, and there were a lot of nicks on fingers. But I worked there for probably a couple of months, I guess, which is not too bad.

When that job faded, then Torrey said, "Hey, let's go up to the country club; we can caddy out there." Of course, blacks were a novelty in and around that area. There weren't many blacks in Pacific Grove and Monterey and Carmel, all those places around there at the time.

So we went out to the country club out there, and they said, "Yeah, you can go over to the caddy house and see if there's somebody who calls you. Did you ever caddy before?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I've caddied before." [laughter]

He said, "Well, tell him you can caddy if anybody

asks you."

But you discovered that there's no mystery about golf. It's just a matter of observing and seeing what guys do and having reasonable eyesight you can work with.

But anyway, that worked really well. So I worked there I guess until December 7, just caddying for various people.

But the interesting thing was--and this was one of the things that I recall reading, and then I heard it later on television, one of these commentators said it--that the two things that people of my generation would probably remember are where they were December 7, 1941, and where they were when [John F.] Kennedy was assassinated.

HENDERSON: Yes, yes, yes.

WILLIAMS: You've probably heard that.

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And I do recall that on December 7, 1941, I was on the golf course, and I was caddying for a Major Reader, who was a--

HENDERSON: You told me about that in the first session.

WILLIAMS: I did? So he got the call, and he left. So I left Monterey, and Lester and I decided to go to San Francisco. We left Monterey, went to San Francisco, and were looking for work. Now, keep in mind, this is

immediately after the war [World War II] started.

HENDERSON: Right.

WILLIAMS: December 7. So things had not really sort of geared up, and it was kind of remote for us. We just knew that Pearl Harbor had been bombed and that-- Of course, keep in mind, too, that I'm nineteen, twenty years old, just a kid, not really knowing where I'm going or what I'm doing. Of course, I really had no intention of going to war or going into the army or the service, because I said I had some other things I wanted to do. I didn't want to get involved with that. But you began to get more of a realization as you'd move around San Francisco, because there was quite a lot of shipping out of San Francisco at the time, see, where they were shipping to the Pacific theater. We were looking for jobs.

We found a job at Fort Mason, which was a fort up there in San Francisco. We got jobs as warehousemen working on the graveyard shift. So we were--

I'm sorry. Before that, though, before we got that job--we got a reference on that--we had been looking around for a job to do. We went down to the employment office and got a call to go to Cudahy Packing House out in South San Francisco. So the guy said, "Do you have any idea what they do?"

I said, "No. A stockyard. How bad can that be?"

So I had my jeans and saddle oxfords on and got on the bus, and we rode out to South San Francisco, Lester and I.

When we got there, he said, "Oh, you're the guys they sent up from the employment office."

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "You ever work anyplace like this?"

We said, "No."

He said, "Where are your work clothes?"

I said, "Well, these are jeans."

He said, "I mean clothes that you don't care about." [laughter]

So I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "You're going to work in the hide cellar, see."

Now, if someone says a hide cellar, you know what a hide is, but the hide cellar, you have no idea what goes on there. But what happens is that when they hit one of these steers in the head and kill it, they skin it and they take the hide off, and then they salt the hide, and they stack it in the cellar, which is at the lowest point. But you had to salt it, each layer, and they folded it so it would take up the smallest amount of room. So you'd take maybe a hide that, when it's open, may be eight, ten feet, but then you put salt on a layer and you fold it

over, then you put salt on it again, and you fold it back so you have it in quarters, and you stack it in smaller pieces.

So we were in-- It was bloody, because these are fresh-killed beef. So we were shoveling rock salt that you had to put there to preserve them, and also it helped cure them so they would get the degree of consistency so they could use the cow hide for commercial use. So we were wheelbarrowing salt, and of course it had, maximum, a six-foot ceiling, or I'd say six-foot, six-inch ceiling, so you were always in a stoop, bending. I mean, we worked there that day until the end of the day. I mean, my shoes were ruined.

HENDERSON: Oh, my.

WILLIAMS: My jeans were ruined. So Lester and I were talking, and he said, "Do we really want to go to work at this place?"

And I said, "Well, it's a long way out to South San Francisco."

So we said, "No, let's try it. Maybe it won't be as bad tomorrow."

So we went back again, and we were not convinced that this was not the thing we wanted to do.

We worked there a couple of days and said, "We'd better find something else." That's when we began to talk

to some of the people in the neighborhood.

We were living on Geary [Street] and Fillmore [Street] at the Geary Hotel. We were eating in a little restaurant around the corner there, and we were talking, and we said, "Hey, what are you guys doing?" So one of the guys was a West Indian, and he was a merchant marine, so he said, "Hey, you know, listen--" We're now talking probably after Christmas, the first the of next year. There had been some time, so we had gotten involved in the war and began to tool up and say, "Okay, we're going to get this, the war effort, going." So he said, "You could make a lot of money. They give you 200 percent hazard pay, and they make--" "Hey, that sounds pretty intriguing." And I had thought, "Hey, that may not be bad." Of course, you get exempt from the war; you don't have to go into the service. You'd be in the merchant marine. So I said, "Let me find out about that."

So I went down to the merchant office, the union hall there, and they gave me all the data I needed, and I signed up, got all registered as a steward. That's all you could do. You could only ship out as a steward. They didn't have any black deck hands. They kept all the blacks as stewards, like in the navy, also, see. So then I said, "Hey, maybe I should tell my folks."

So I called my folks back in L.A. and started talking

to them. And my mother [Linnie Gary Williams] said, "Doesn't that mean you have to go out on the water with all that--?"

And I said, "Yeah, I'll be going in the water."

And she said, "Boy, have you lost your mind?"

I said, "Look, I get exempt from the service."

She said, "Here, talk to your father [John D. Williams]."

So I talked to my dad, and he said, "Well, tell me what possessed you to do this."

I said, "Look, I could make some money."

He said, "Money? You could also lose your life, you know." [laughter]

So I said, "Okay." And in that time, I had actually been tentatively assigned to a Liberty ship called the *Woodrow Wilson*, which was going to Australia. I think the cargo was going to Australia.

And then he said, "Well, don't do anything. Just take it easy, and I'll get back to you."

The next thing I knew, probably the next day or so, Lester and I were in our room, and there was a knock on the door, and it's my old man. He said, "You're going to drive your mother crazy. Now, what's the matter? You can find something else."

And I said, "Well, you know, I thought it might be

easier."

He said, "Look, put it out of your mind. Just tell me that you're not going to do that and I'll leave you alone otherwise."

Because I wasn't quite twenty-one yet, I said, "I'm convinced that nothing will happen to me, okay?"

He said, "All right, just promise me that you won't go."

I said, "Okay."

Now, that's when I said I wanted to stay up here a little longer, so that's when we started looking for jobs around here.

So I got this job at Fort Mason. Lester and I started working at Fort Mason as warehousemen. I guess it was getting fairly noisy in the Pacific, because the Japanese were moving through all the islands. So I guess we worked there for, oh, two or three months, three or four months maybe, and I was told that I had a draft notice at home. So we just said, "What should we do?"

I said, "Well, I don't know. Maybe I should get back there and see what needs to be done."

But, anyway, I left San Francisco after that, came back to L.A., and a friend of mine, a fellow by the name of John Lowe, we had-- Actually, I guess he was a friend of my younger brother [Harold Williams]'s, but we met and

were talking. We were at Jeff [Jefferson High School] about the same time, only I was a couple of years ahead of him. He said, "You know, I got this draft notice." He said, "You know what we can do? We can enlist in the ERC, the Enlisted Reserve Corps."

HENDERSON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: The Enlisted Reserve Corps. "You can study what you want to study there, and we can meet, and maybe we can get together and go to OCS [officer candidate school]."

"Yeah, I'd like that." So I said, "What do you think you'd like to get involved with?"

So he said, "Well, I don't know. I've always liked radio."

So we enlisted in the ERC in the Signal Corps, communications.

So we were taking classes in Compton. The Compton JC [Junior College, now Compton Community College] was conducting the school there. We'd go at night. You could do whatever your normal occupation was during the day, and you'd just go there and take classes at night, and you were in the ERC. And they guaranteed you that you'd have six months of training. You wouldn't be called for active service.

HENDERSON: And you'd be out of the draft?

WILLIAMS: You'd be out of the draft. You could work with that.

So that worked reasonably well for about four months. Then in, I guess, January of '42, they said, "We need all the help we can get," so they began activating some of the Enlisted Reserve Corps people. So then I was moved into the army, not drafted. See, as enlisted personnel you didn't get the same kind of serial number that drafted personnel had. So they'd give you a serial number of one type, and then the enlisted personnel had one number. For instance, the ERC personnel, their serial number started with a one. And I'm not absolutely certain, but I think that the draftees were another number, three or four or something like that, and officers were zero, they started with zero. But anyway, I mention that only because later on, when I got into other units, when the guys knew your serial number, they'd say, "You're one of those damn fools who enlisted in this army!" [laughter] So I'd say, "Well, it didn't seem that bad at the time, fellows." But I did, and we went through this whole exercise.

So I went to various camps around the state.

HENDERSON: Oh, a question here at this point. Was the ERC also segregated at that time? That is, was there a black ERC? Or were you just in with all the other troops?

WILLIAMS: No, no, no, no. See, when you enlisted in the

ERC you enlisted in a certain field or skill category. Within that school there was a mixed class.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: They were mixed both. But, you see, when they took you out of that--I guess it was called inactive status--and put you in active status, then you were in a segregated unit.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: Now, I've got a couple of interesting incidents there, and that was that as this person who had this radio background, because we'd gone there, they-- It was kind of a specialty skill. So they said, "We need these in various branches of service." And it subsequently turned out that I was assigned to the Signal Corps in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. But I had gone to a camp of the [United States Army] Air Force at Utah, Kerns Field in Utah. I was assigned there. That was the first assignment there from the Signal Corps.

HENDERSON: That was with the--?

WILLIAMS: Air force.

HENDERSON: Air force.

WILLIAMS: The Army Air Corps. And after going to Kerns for a while-- It was really basic training. So you did the basic training for I think twelve weeks, something like that, and then after that they said, "Well, we're

going to assign people." And what they did, when they took me into the service as a radio specialist, they had given me the rank of corporal. I was never a PFC [private first class] in the service. So they give you the rank of corporal, and that was a specialty. So after Kerns and after they made the assignments out there, they said, "Okay, you're going to go to the Signal Corps." So I said, "Terrific. That's what I was assigned to. That's what my interest was."

So they assigned both John and me to the Signal Corps at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. I went there, and they put me in teletypewriter repair school. So I went through the course there. I guess that was about a twelve-week course, too. So I went through the course there. And near the end of the course, the instructor in the course there came and asked me, "Look, I'm going to admit you as one of the assistant instructors here. Do you want an assignment here as an instructor?" I said, "No, no." I could not see being in Monmouth for any protracted length of time.

Now, I've probably made a mistake, because when I left there, they sent me to Camp Eustace, Virginia, just outside of Richmond, and I was assigned to the coast artillery. Now, being a corporal, they didn't give me a technician's rating. See, normally technicians, they used

to call them T-5s. You may have seen the two stripes with a "T" underneath there; he's a technician. He's not what they consider a line NCO [noncommissioned officer]. And since someone had made that mistake, deliberately or whatever, when I went to Camp Eustace we started this basic training all over again, see. So I went through basic training again.

HENDERSON: Goodness.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I said, "Hey, I just finished--" They said, "That was there, and this is here, and we're doing this now."

So, anyway, I went through that particular training. It was interesting and fun, because you learned a lot about field pieces, and that was the first time that I'd been assigned where they had black officers, also, at Camp Eustace. I'm trying to think of the name. It was the coast artillery, but what was the unit designation? In any event, I went through that period, met interesting people.

And they said, "Okay. We've got an assignment for you. We have a Signal Corps assignment for you." I said, "Terrific." I mean, that's what I wanted to do. And it was at Eglin Field, Florida, attached to an air squadron. Okay.

Now, something apparently went awry in the cutting of

orders, because they neglected to tell this air squadron that they had a person of color coming to their squadron, being assigned as their communications specialist. [laughter] I went on this duty by myself, so I just left Eustace and went to Eglin Field. And when I got to Eglin Field, I had the orders all cut to report to air squadron so-and-so and whatever it is and corporal so-and-so. They said, "Fine." So they sent a man from this squadron when they knew I was due in there. As a matter of fact, as I got into the base there, I called, and they said, "We'll send somebody down." So this guy tooled down here in his jeep, this private, and he said, "Hi, Corporal." He said, "Are you corporal so-and-so?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "Hmmmm." So he zipped me back on up to the air base squadron up there.

So I walked into the room, and of course this clerk said, "What's your name?" [laughter] Like, "You know damn well you have no business being in this place at this time." And it was all white, because they had no integration. They didn't even have enough people in these areas, but they just wanted a specialist. But this was when the staff was-- See, had I had any notion, I should have kept orders and kept these things for my memoirs or some such thing. [laughter] Because it was the most hilarious-- As a matter of fact, it was so tragic it was

hilarious. Because you knew, too, that when you had this white dude pick you up and bring you up to this [inaudible], something is wrong, because you knew that they had no units that were mixed unless you had a special area over here for you to take care of what you needed to take care of.

But in any event, I mean, I never even got to see the commander. I got to what they call the flight sergeant, and he said, "There's been a mistake, Corporal." [laughter] "You're supposed to be at the other part of the base over here." [laughter] So I said, "Well, this is what my orders say. Is this so-and-so?" He said, "No, there's a mistake." So they got my duffel bag and me and sent me down to the 1898th aviation engineer battalion, and that's when I was down and told this sergeant-- Now, this sergeant didn't have any idea that there was a guy coming to his outfit. He said, "We aren't expecting anyone. We're just forming this battalion. Where did you say you're from?" He said, "They really fucked up, didn't they?" [laughter] And, you know, this man, this first sergeant, he said, "You know, if this man's army--" As much as to say, "You must be crazy to even think that you could stay. Who do you think you are?"

But anyway, Sergeant Leroy Baskerville was my guy, so he was-- But anyway--

HENDERSON: That was Leroy Baskerville?

WILLIAMS: Leroy Baskerville, right. As a matter of fact, I don't know if he's-- I saw him fifteen, twenty years later. He was out here, and we ran into each other.

But anyway, I said, "Hey, I'm not an engineer. I'm a signalman."

He said, "Well, you're an engineer now."

So I proceeded to try to get a transfer out of there to the air force. I said, "Okay, I want to go to OCS" and all this business.

So he said, "Well, we'll see what we can do. But in the meantime, you do this." You know, "You're a corporal."

I said, "Look, I've been through a couple of basic trainings."

He said, "Well, that's good. We're going to make you assistant squad leader."

So I said, "Okay. I'll work with that." Because I had the notion--and I learned this from seeing other folks there--that the best way to get along in the army, if you decide you're going to do that, with the aspirations of wanting to go to OCS or get out of there, was you didn't rebel the way some of the youngsters rebelled who were in there.

So I was cooperative, and I was given assignments

like reading the fuel manuals so they could conduct classes and drill the squad and later the platoon. I mean, I enjoyed that preparation training period, so apparently it manifested itself in a manner in which the CO [commanding officer] and the first sergeant thought that I was doing a good job. They were noticing it. I wasn't concerned about that. I was just saying, "Oh, this is fun for me. I'm doing this right now."

And as it turned out, they then promoted me to platoon leader. I said okay. And they also promoted me to buck sergeant, and I went along with that. I guess we were there three months. And I didn't know until the sergeant took me into confidence that this was one of the units we were training that was going to be shipped out in the not-too-distant future. So he said, "And I'm not going to go."

So I said, "Why is that?"

He said, "I'm just not going overseas. I've got the disability to keep me from doing that."

So I said, "Okay."

HENDERSON: This is what the sergeant was telling you?

WILLIAMS: This is what the sergeant was telling me. But we would be going over. And the CO at that time was a fellow by the name of Lieutenant Gordon. He said, "I talked to Lieutenant Gordon, and we'd better start getting

prepared to get this unit into shape, because we're going to go. We've been watching you, and what we think we'd like to do is to make you the first sergeant of this outfit if we go."

I said, "I don't want to be first sergeant. I want to go to OCS."

"Let me tell you something," Leroy said. "You ain't going nowhere." He said, "He wants you, and he's got you, and he's not going to let anything take you away from this outfit. And they can do that if they want to." I mean, they just send some papers in, and if they get the battalion CO concurring with their decision-- He may talk to you and say, "Look, do you want to get out?" "Yeah." He said, "No, the outfit needs you. You understand, you're so and so and so and so." And finally you reach the conclusion-- And time is passing here. You know, you're getting closer to what-- They're not going to let you out of there now. And of course, then, at a certain time, when a unit is activated for overseas duty, you don't get any transfers. It has to be almost a medical emergency in order to get out. I mean, it was just that procedural. So they had me.

But I said, "Look, you've got a couple of other ranking sergeants, staff sergeants, in here."

And he said, "Well, we evaluated all that. We want you to be it. And if you don't want it, then we'll give it to somebody else, and you'll still be going, but you'll be going to be under them," see. [laughter]

HENDERSON: So you might as well go and be over them.

WILLIAMS: That's right. So he said, "It's your choice." He said, "We think you can do it and be the best choice."

Anyway, that worked out. So I'm a buck sergeant now, a three-striper. And you had some four-stripers--three up and one down--staff sergeants, who were there. But the announcement was made, and he said, "You're it." And from that time on, I guess my outlook changed in terms of, "Well, look, you've got to go overseas. You're going to do this. You're going to be in this outfit. You're not going to get out, so you may as well make the best of it." So I carried on.

And during our trip from Hampton Roads, Virginia, to North Africa-- I think it took-- How long was it? Fifty days, I think, of travel.

HENDERSON: By ship?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, ship. And we were zigzagging all over the place. But I said I was a buck sergeant when I left the United States, and I was a first sergeant when I got to our final destination, because they gave me a stripe a month. They say unless it was a battlefield promotion you

couldn't skip a rank. You had to go through the ranks, and you had to get a stripe at a time, as it were. But anyway, I was a first sergeant, and I remained a first sergeant in all my army experience, starting in North Africa and then in Sicily and then into Italy. And we went on through, say from Naples, went across to Bari, Italy--it's on the Adriatic [Sea] side--and spent a good deal of time there with the Fifteenth Air Force. I think that was it.

We were repairing runways and building hangars. So you could see the connection at least in a very limited way, the connection between architecture and engineering, so it was okay. It was interesting, and it was a gainful kind of experience. But it more than anything else solidified my own notion of what I thought I wanted to do when I got out of the service.

HENDERSON: You mean architecture.

WILLIAMS: Architectural work, right. And then, of course, being in Italy after the hostility ceased, we could go into cities, and we could begin to just look at this not even knowing, see, not having the historical background of knowing architectural history, and begin to say, "That's a beautiful building. Look at that building." You began to look at that and be able to appreciate it. Then I really began to decide and say,

"What I want to do is to go to--"

We had an Armed Forces Institute training that they had, where they had courses they would give GIs and I guess officers, too, if they wanted to go to school. They had a couple of them, but the most prominent one was in Florence, Italy. So after the war ended there in Italy--of course, there was still fighting in the Pacific--I went to the University of Florence for about three or four months studying architecture, history of architecture, Italian and American literature, if you can believe that.

HENDERSON: Goodness.

WILLIAMS: It was a concentrated course, but it was--

HENDERSON: And they paid for it?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. It was free to any of what they called qualified GIs, if you will.

So when we finished the course there, I went back to my unit, and they then decided that-- This guy Lieutenant [Gerard] Rettig, who was the acting CO at the time, he said, "I was talking to Captain Brown," who was the CO who was transferred to the battalion--he became battalion commander--"and we're going to need some people during this demobilization period, and we'd like to have you stay so you can get your battlefield commission. You'll get your lieutenant's bars if you'll stay for two more years." I said, "Lieutenant Rettig, it's been an awful lot of fun.

I've enjoyed it, but I could not possibly think of staying in the army for two more years." So he said, "You ought to think about it. Look, in two years you'll go back and--" I said, "Hey, listen. It's great, and I've had a lot of fun." So I declined that, and not very long after that the guys in the outfit found out that I was being rotated back to the States, and they gave me a big party, and we left, and that was my end to the service.

HENDERSON: It's interesting. You talked about all these army experiences. You seemed to have gotten a wide range. Generally, do you think your army experiences were very positive? They were very beneficial or--?

WILLIAMS: Well, for me I think they were positive. There was probably an attitude toward blacks in general that was not positive, but individuals, people, would-- Say, for instance, as I mentioned to you, Fort Eustace was the only place we had black officers. All the other places had all white officers. And of course, if they discover that you can talk and you may be able to respond in some intelligible fashion, they say, "Well, he's okay."

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: So you don't experience that. And of course, being in the position that I was in for most of my army experience, you were going to school, and then, when then I really got into a line company, I became one of the bad

guys, as it were. You gave orders, you see. [laughter] So it was a different kind of experience. But I can imagine that-- And I had some kids--because I was in as an old guy of twenty-two, twenty-three--some younger kids that were nineteen, twenty, draftees. I mean, they didn't want to be in the service, and there was nothing you could do to convince them that it had any merit at all in their lives. So it was good to try and identify and work within to have them work through their traumas.

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HENDERSON: So you were saying you remember things, people and connections--

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. And then when one was in school, one went to the University of Florence. I guess I did tell you that this was under the U.S. Armed Forces Institute.

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: USAFI, whatever it is. Anyway, I was in Florence for a-- I think it was a couple or three months. I'm not sure. I don't recall that much. But anyway, I studied architectural history, Italian and U.S. history, so it was fascinating from that standpoint. And I even got the impression that I was removed from the war, although the European theater-- The Germans had surrendered I think just before the Japanese had begun to feel the effects of the total concentration of power. But anyway, after I went back to my unit from Florence they had begun a demobilization program. And of course, I think I mentioned to you that I was a first sergeant. We talked about it, yes. I was a first sergeant.

HENDERSON: Right.

WILLIAMS: Of course, I almost didn't get a chance to go to the university because the commanding officer of the

company said, "We can't let you go. What do you mean you want to go? You want to stay here and enjoy yourself? The war's over." I said, "I'd really like to go." So he finally acceded to the request, and I went. And when I came back, of course, they told me that it appeared that I was going to be in the first round of people that were going to be rotated back and demobilized and sent back to the States. And sure enough, it wasn't too long after that, maybe a couple of months, and I was out.

But the curious thing that happened was that one of the officers from another company had come and said to me, "You know, you had tried to join the air force because you wanted to go to cadet school and become a pilot." And, of course, the interesting thing was that when I had done that I was told at that time that I was too tall and too heavy, because all they were training at that time were pursuit fighter pilots. They had not developed the bomb group for blacks at the time. Hence I was rejected from any consideration for the air force. Because I knew that the Ninety-ninth Pursuit Squadron was very close to where I was stationed when I went to school there, at Barrieta. They were at San Soverno, which was a little farther north. And a couple of people from Los Angeles came down; they flew down one day and we had drinks. And they told me at that time that they had later formed what they

called, I think, the 477th Bomb Group, which was out of Selfridge Field, I guess, in Michigan. I guess it was in Michigan. But that's a verifiable--

HENDERSON: None of those guys became anybody noteworthy in L.A.? Did you keep in contact with them when you got back to L.A.?

WILLIAMS: As a matter of fact, there's only one that I know who was in that group, a real estate developer, Lowell Stewart.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: But one fellow who I was told was in that group, "Chappie" [Daniel] James [Jr.], who was in the Ninety-ninth at that time, we were talking about him. When he came out here he would meet with some of the guys, but I was never involved with that.

HENDERSON: Yes, I've heard of Chappie.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. But anyway, when it was discovered that I was going to be mobilized, this lieutenant--[Gerard] Rettig was his name, but that's not important--he said, "Sergeant, I was talking to Captain Brown. We're going to need some people to stay on while we dismantle all of these troops and materials and equipment and send troops home. I can get you a commission if you'll stay two additional years." I said, "Lieutenant, I've been here a pretty good while now. Now, when I first came over, that

was of great interest to me."

As a matter of fact, I had even thought that I would like to join the infantry regiment, the 366th. Colonel Queen was the commander of that regiment. That was an all-black regiment that was stationed in Italy. They had sent out a memorandum to company commanders, "If you have people in your organization that are of NCO [noncommissioned officer] rank second grade or first grade whom you feel might be capable leaders in the infantry company that you would be happy to entertain for field commissions--" So when I looked at this memo, I said, "What does this mean, Captain Brown?"

He looked at it and said, "You're not thinking about anything like that, are you?" [laughter] "You've got the greatest job in the army, and you're talking about going and exposing your behind to fire." He said, "You've got to be kidding! Throw that away!" [laughter]

I said, "I don't know, I thought I might." I'd been overseas at that time, I guess, fourteen, fifteen months, and we had moved back from where we were early on in the war. Because we were, I guess, assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force. I was in the aviation engineer battalion. I think I mentioned that to you.

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: So we were servicing air fields and the like. But in any event, I declined the invitation to remain in the European theater for two additional years with the seduction of a commission, which I thought would be kind of nice, but I said, "Let me get out ahead of the plans, and I'll go on from there." So in 1946 I returned to the States.

HENDERSON: Let me kind of cut in on you there. You had talked in the last session about Italian POWs [prisoners of war] that you had--

WILLIAMS: Okay. Now, the POWs were being used as labor before they had been sent to us. We used our own GIs, privates and the like, to do the heavy labor, moving plants around and just doing the grubbing of stumps, trees, when we were doing a runway or handling pieces of apparatus on Butler hangers when we were erecting those things. But there was an inclination initially of some of our corporals and sergeants and even some of the PFCs [privates first class] to mistreat the POWs. They were white. And of course, some of the expletives I would decline to dictate. And they addressed them as they address some of the other folks, except they would say, "That white so-and-so." And you may have some problems in terms of this racial thing, because a good portion of the people in my-- Remember, this is the 1940s, when the

circumstances were considerably different in the South than they subsequently turned out to be, see, in the sixties and beyond. And I think that it was a question of really trying to make them understand that this kind of treatment--because you may have even heard of or experienced the kind of treatment by the same color group, if you will, in the United States--it would just not be tolerated or it wouldn't be accepted. It was just wrong. I mean, it was.

HENDERSON: Right, right.

WILLIAMS: And I think that we had few instances after I experienced it, because I heard from some of my platoon sergeants that "Sergeant, we'd better check this. Come and check and see how they do this." And of course, after that incident, a representative of these POWs would come to the office, and he explained to me that some things had happened. And I said, "Look, we will make sure that doesn't happen anymore." But I think that it was an incident which sort of colored my thinking, because I couldn't understand the South.

See, I was not experienced in the subject except through my army experience when I was stationed in the South a couple of times, at a couple of stations there, but I wasn't exposed to the South as such. And being from Los Angeles, before the war, see, there were very few

blacks. It was not a problem as such, because we were in pockets: Vernon [Avenue] and Central [Avenue] and Avalon [Boulevard], West Temple district, the west side of L.A., Thirty-fifth Street, Jefferson [Boulevard], Dalton [Avenue], and around Western [Avenue] and that area. And anything in between, you see, was all virgin territory. There were just no blacks. So not having that kind of exposure, since you could get almost anyplace in the city, you apparently just-- You had such a broader geographic area in which you would function, and maybe those places where you would not have been accepted you didn't go because there was no inclination to go. But subsequent to that, I think there were incidents where people would try to go down to Vermont [Avenue] and First [Street], the Feminy Baths where they would have public swimming facilities there, and they would not be treated-- They weren't refused necessarily, but they weren't treated kindly or friendly.

HENDERSON: But in general, you didn't have the bitterness that some black southerners had.

WILLIAMS: Right, in terms of that, because, see, all the schools that we attended were integrated. All the schools here were integrated, and in most of the schools that I attended it was predominantly Caucasian, Anglo. There were not many Hispanics, a few Orientals, and blacks,

probably more blacks than Orientals, but predominantly Anglos.

HENDERSON: Even at Jefferson [High School] at that time?

WILLIAMS: Even at Jefferson at that time, yeah, and that would probably be a reflection of the trend that would endure in the future, that although there was a predominant Anglo population at the school, in most of the athletic departments you had blacks who were in football and track especially. That was in the forties, in '42, '44, when Jefferson was the scourge of the state with the track team, because most of the blacks went to Jefferson and probably a few to Manual [Arts High School], a few to Poly [Los Angeles Polytechnic High School]. Probably none to Fremont [High School] or Washington [Preparatory High School]. And there may have been on occasion a few at Belmont [High School], which was in the East L.A. area there--not East L.A., north L.A., around West Temple [Street] and the like. But it was because of that experience of at least interacting with other ethnic groups on a basis of "If you can do it, I can do it" that we moved on that way.

Now, what didn't happen was that I probably didn't initially have the frustration of trying to go on to college and see what the problems were there. One reason, of course, my folks told me that they would assist me in

whatever way they could to go on to college. But when I got out of high school, the war was about ready to start. So that was in a sense a real benefactor for me, because they had the GI Bill, which came a little later as the war progressed. They were talking about some of the benefits you have accrued, "We'll do anything for our veterans, and maybe when you've completed this stint of service and you return home, you will have these benefits." So he said, "Well, here's a way to do it."

So I did, and I started to go to Pepperdine [University]. As a matter of fact, I applied to USC [University of Southern California] in, I guess, '49, but I started at Pepperdine in '47 or--

HENDERSON: Excuse me for interrupting one more time. When you got back here to the United States when you were in the army, you were getting out. Were you mustered out? Or was there a ceremony? Were you told at the time you were leaving the army that you've got these rights, that you've got this GI Bill? Was it a special ceremony at which you were debriefed, I guess?

WILLIAMS: No. But I think that you were given documents which you could read and which would tell you that you'd keep your separation paper because you're going to need this to qualify you for any veterans benefits that you'd have. Of course, they did tell me one thing. They said

you had-- That's what I think it was. There was a 52-20 Club. And I think I recollect this accurately. What was allowed the GIs was to collect twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks for a year. You had that transitional kind of a monetary benefit that you had until you started to work. But you had that on the day you got in. That was listed in some of the particulars that you had there.

But if you're asking me did they have some special ceremony and have a group of people, no. It wasn't like that. As a matter of fact, one said, "Don't have any more parades or ceremonies. I want out." [laughter] You just go through this separation center, which I think was Fort MacArthur--they had a separation center in L.A., Fort MacArthur, down in San Pedro--and you were delighted just to do as little as possible and have as little to do with these kinds of gatherings. So you'd say, "What do I need?" So I think you had a physical examination, and they said, "You can take this and you can't take that, and you can take this and you can't take that," and you'd get your duffel bag, smiling all the way through the gates to the bus to get ready to go.

And, of course, I guess most GIs did what I did. I wrote them when I was in Naples that I was coming home and I'd let them know when I got to the States. But inasmuch

as they separated me from Fort MacArthur, which was in San Pedro, I said, "Look, I'll just surprise them." So I didn't have anybody meet me. I just made my transportation back, and I came and just knocked on the door like you see in the television ads. "I'm home." "Yeah," they said. "Okay, where have you been?"

But anyway, I think that when I got there you went through this whole process of reacquaintance and adjusting. And it was an interesting readjustment period, because I think that no matter what you'd been doing, if you'd been away from home for that three- or four-year period, you would just have to refamiliarize yourself with the surroundings.

And the thing that I thought was most fascinating was that when I left to go to the army I could go down Central Avenue or Vernon or wherever, you could go there and almost everybody you'd see you'd recognize. I mean, people recognized each other. There was that kind of sense of community, because everybody was involved with the community. There weren't that many blacks there. But when I returned it was a different situation altogether. And that was because of all the defense plants being located here, airplane. Lockheed [Aircraft Corporation], I guess, Northrop [Aircraft], Douglas [Aircraft Company], all those people had plants here, and Todd shipyards down

at San Pedro, they had a great number of jobs they were offering people.

And of course, they were giving people of color jobs, because you didn't have that kind of discrimination during that time. But once the effort was over, then it reverted back to the same kind of problems. A number of people sort of escaped that and sort of moved on and went into the areas in which they had been working. But I think generally you had the same kind of problem of discrimination once you-- And then it was brought to the fore more because people needed it who didn't have to be there. Because "I was working during the war. I mean, I learned to weld at Lockheed, but why can't I weld at C. F. Braun or one of those other people who are manufacturing other kinds of things?" So I think that there was that sense of, "Well, they'll get better." But more and more GIs came back, and they began to find some of the same things.

But I guess those of us said, "Look, here's an opportunity to further yourself and your education," plus the insistence of parents-- And the interesting thing that I think happened or was happening during that time was parents who were interested in their children--and I'm sure this is probably true for most families, black or white or whatever--said, "Education is what you have to have. Go to school. If you have the opportunity, go to

school." And I think because of that, along with the interest that I developed in architecture, which I knew I wanted to do, I said, "That's the chance for me."

So I enrolled at Pepperdine. As a matter of fact, I inquired at 'SC--I guess that was in '47, '48--and they said they didn't have any openings but keep in touch. So I enrolled at Pepperdine, and I had 'SC's curriculum catalog, so I looked at that, and I saw those related lower-division courses. They weren't teaching architecture, but they had comparable lower-division courses: Man and Civilization, International Relations, English, and, of course, the science courses which they had there, also, science and math. So I got rid of all of my lower-division courses at Pepperdine that were required at the School of Architecture at 'SC.

HENDERSON: This was Pepperdine, the campus that's off of Vermont [Avenue]?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, that's right, when they had eleven hundred students, and probably the most pleasant experience, as far as college goes. I mean, I was spoiled there again, because, see, I thought this was college. I mean, this was the college life. Now, living here in the city, I mean, I didn't have to stay on campus, but I knew some people who were living on campus who might have-- But there were probably eight or ten blacks going to

Pepperdine at that time. But I think the most rewarding aspect of it was the fact that you had class sizes of eight to twelve people.

I think the largest class that I was in was in the sciences, in physics. There we had eighteen. So the professor, Earl Rex, just an eccentric guy--I'll always remember this guy--was such a help. He had time to spend with-- And he had two lab courses, so he had no more than eight, nine people in each lab section. So you could really get involved. And being able to have that attention, if you had problems you could solve it. He could spend the time with you, see.

So I enjoyed that, and apparently it was reflected in my own reaction to it, because I did fairly well there. As a matter of fact, after I'd finished the first year and a half--now this is in '47, '48--I went in and said, "Why don't I try to get into 'SC?" I was just about finished, see. So I sent them an application, sent a copy of the transcripts, and they called and said, "Come on." So I went there in '49, see, September of '49.

HENDERSON: And it was very easy to get in? I mean, no hassle at the interview?

WILLIAMS: Oh, no. I mean, I discovered later on that they said, "Hey, here is a guy who apparently has some grades that we don't have any problem with." And I wasn't

athletic, of course, but I went out for the basketball team at Pepperdine--that's another story--and interestingly enough had made the team, but in the pre-season I pulled a hamstring, and I just didn't get back in the flow of the whole game. But anyway, 'SC probably said--because on the application you have to say who you are, ethnicity and the like--"Well, let's try this guy."

So when I went to 'SC there was one other [African American architecture] student, and I think he was in the fourth or fifth year, and that was Robert [A.] Kennard.

HENDERSON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: So when Bob was a senior, I was a freshman. And also there, but I think he must have been before, someone said that Carey [K.] Jenkins [Sr.] had gone to 'SC. I don't know if Carey was before or after Bob, because I--

HENDERSON: Bob told me Carey was before him.

WILLIAMS: Okay. So he preceded him. Then, when Bob graduated, I had the School of Architecture to myself for a couple of years. And then a fellow you probably have heard of by the name of Ernest Jackson-- Do you know him?

HENDERSON: Oh, yes. I've heard of him.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, Ernie was a transfer in his third year, but he only stayed a year. He didn't feel inclined. I guess he didn't want to go into architecture. So he went

into interiors, and then he formed-- But he left school. And when I was a senior, Carl [M.] Kinsey came in as the only other-- So we kept the tradition rolling, one in and one out, you see. So we moved through that way.

HENDERSON: It's interesting. I know all these guys, but I had never put them in a line like this.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah. So the lineage set there. But the school was interesting. We took a basic design course. I had a concept of what architecture was about, I thought. And when the basic design instructor by the name of Byron Davis, who was a sculptor-- When we walked in the class the first day, all of these aspiring, eager students--and of course, having gone into the service, I was a little older--we walked in with our T square and our tackle box with the instruments and the like. And he saw all these when he came in, and he said, "I want all of you aspiring designers to take those mechanical contrivances and put them back and lock-- I don't want to see them anymore." [laughter] We said, "Hmmm, what's this all about?" "I don't know, I don't know." Everybody's talking, "I don't know." So then, of course, it occurred to you that this fellow started you out in thinking about design. You may have thought that you had some notions about it, but, you know, he was even getting his students to read about Mondrian, Piet Mondrian, and read about

Gregory [Gyorgy] Kepes, and you-- I mean, it was just assigned--not architecture, as such, but of course we didn't see the relationship at the time.

So we began to do color charts. You get your tempera out and you mix colors. You select a color, any color you want, start with a basic color, and then you add white until you get your tints toward white, and then you add black to get the tint toward black. You get your shades and tints. It began to familiarize you with the nuances of what color does, how it works, and it became engrossing, see.

And then, of course, we did collages. We did papier-mâché, origami, you know, the Japanese-- And the interesting thing is that after you'd been in there six months or a year--say a year's course, you'd been in there six weeks or so--you forgot about all the other stuff, the houses as such, because you see architecture as a house, not a shelter, not defining a space, not sculpture as it were. So anyway, you got that.

And then he wanted you to do sculpture in plaster, sculpture in wood. You'd do a picture or an object with shades of pencil with a 9H lead, just getting heavier, doing those kinds of things. And of course, at that time, a corollary class was shades and shadows and graphics, as it were. So you'd do shades and shadows and do projections

and graphics. So it began to tie together, and somehow I seemed to take to it, and it was working very well for me. So I think that I was selected as one of the--

At the end of the first semester we had to do the collage, and we had done all these things, and I was working on my collage, and he said-- You had an idea, but you didn't really know. He said, "Now, here's what I'll do. I'll take a piece of raw product, and you will get something representing that, and then from that product, what would it evolve into?" And in my case, I took a piece of iron ore, if you will, and then from that, through some abstract kind of indication, it evolved into various pieces of metal that would go with steel and made a rather interesting pattern out of it. And of course, you know what happens when you compose something that-- You don't know why, but that looks good. I mean, somehow that seems striking. "Well, okay, look, that's the best I can do." And these are the kind of things that you do at the eleventh hour, you see. [laughter] Because, see, you take this huge piece of pebbleboard, and you kind of stealthily begin to look around and see what everybody else is doing. "Oh, shit. It doesn't look like mine." [laughter] "I must have missed it." So, in any event, I turned it in for the class. It was supposed to be due at five [o'clock], turn it in on a Thursday.

Apparently Byron didn't have a chance to review them until over the weekend. So on Monday, when we went back to class or some of the other classes, "Hey, did you go to the design class? Did you see your--? Did you see? Go on in and take a look." Okay. So there were three of them he had on display: Fred Dinger and George Bissell and John Williams. And I will tell you what happened, how sheepish designers are, you see, in architecture, I guess, or in any of the others. From that point on-- And of course, they graded by the number system--ten, nine, eight--so these three were nines according to Byron. And from that time on, John Williams was the celebrity of the school, and this puts the pressure on.

So, in any event, that went on in almost anything one did. But, you see, it does sort of get you to thinking, "What is this?" I mean, I don't understand what I did, but there was some kind of feeling about it, so you say, "I'll try and work on that premise that maybe there's something there." And I suppose that really is what happens now, except that you know whether it's realistic, you know whether it can be done and whether it conforms to codes and the other constraints. Whereas you had the freedom when you were doing an abstract piece of work as opposed to a building. But you do the best you can under those circumstances. But in any event, I was expected to

do well.

So when I went to the second year, they said, "Okay--" And I'll tell you an incident that was really interesting. The second-year professor was a fellow by the name of Clayton Baldwin, who had been at 'SC during the transition from the beaux arts to the contemporary school. And then, of course, in the second semester of second year they gave us our first house to do, which was really-- Actually it was a public part of the house: patio, family room, living room, outdoor integration. And I then reverted back to what I thought a house was like from the houses I've seen. You see, it's an interesting phenomenon. And he said, "Okay, I'm not too sure--" It was nicely done, but it was not as imaginative as it could have been, because I had these overviews of what I thought my house and other houses you'd see around the neighborhood-- I hadn't really explored the possibilities of really contemporizing it and thinking of the house as a piece of sculpture in which you shielded the weather and you shielded the sun and the light. And he said, "Okay." And I had that constraint, because I was "A" all the way up to that point. So you've got "B," but, "No, there's something wrong here. The guy must be having a lapse here, but let's go on."

Then I went to third year and studied with a fellow

by the name of Cal [Calvin C.] Straub. You've probably heard of Straub. Buff, Straub, and Hensman, they were a firm for a while out of Pasadena. Cal is still teaching in Arizona. So we would talk, and he would tell me what we were doing and how you relate this and set this up, and I said, "Oh, okay." So it began to open up and free up a little bit, and that was better.

But it wasn't until, I guess, really the fourth year, of course-- I must tell you about this. In the fourth year I thought that I was going to have one of my all-time favorite architects, Gregory Ain, but Ain became ill, and he didn't teach the fourth year that year, and I had another architect whose work I liked but it was a little more flamboyant, and that was Kenneth Lind. Kenneth Lind was the instructor there. But anyway, I remember one instance where we were working on a little five-hour skeese [equisse] where we had to do a day care center. So I was playing around with it and working with it. Kenneth came by my desk--and he had never talked extensively--and he said, "John, what's the matter?"

I said, "Huh?"

He said, "Listen, you've got more ability than that. Put this down. Go across the street and get a drink."

So I began to think, "Maybe there is some constraint,

some overriding incident or experience that you can't quite let go of for whatever reason. You don't understand what that is." And I discovered what it was: I didn't have the absolute confidence that I could do what it was that I had the ability to do. I was not certain. "Hey, am I right? I mean, am I going the right direction? Does it make any sense?" And I'm also thinking, "What do my peers think? How would they evaluate me?" But that's until one says, "To hell with that. This is what I think I can do, and let me go and do it this way." And I began loosening up at that point.

And then, for my thesis, fifth year, a guy who had me this whole year was George Vernon Russell. You've probably heard about Russell, who was quite a--

HENDERSON: That was George Vernon Russell?

WILLIAMS: George Vernon Russell, right. We talked for the first semester almost, trying to solidify the project and saying, "Okay, what are you going to do?" And he would monitor you as you went along. And I became really enamored with elderly housing, and I selected that for a thesis.

HENDERSON: Elderly housing, even at that point?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, elderly housing, housing for seniors, if you will.

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HENDERSON: So you were saying housing for seniors.

WILLIAMS: Actually, as I recall, I think I misnamed it. Of course, I think I called it housing for the aged, but it was for senior citizens, if you will.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: We had to write a program. You selected a site, and it was a true physical site that you had to visit and do your-- So it was a--

HENDERSON: What was your site?

WILLIAMS: The site was in south L.A. down at El Segundo [Boulevard] and Vermont or somewhere around there where we had a piece of land that looked like it might make a good location. What I began to do in the first part of the second semester, when we had to then present it in a thesis form, I began to make sketches, pen and ink sketches, of various components of what I'd be doing. And I would take this class. And there were times when I'd go to class, and there would be one other guy and myself-- See, after you'd gotten into the program and proved yourself, it wasn't mandatory that you spend the time in class; it was just that you produce the product at the end. Now, if he saw you and saw how this evolved, he

said, "Hey, that's coming along nicely." So I was working with George almost one on one for two or three months. He was seeing how I was getting the solution to the problem. And when I was probably, oh, 80, 90 percent through with the whole design, the development process put in pretty freehand sketch form-- But I had just reams of paper one day when we were-- Well, I guess we were probably a month away from submitting, and he said, "Okay, now you've got to put this in the acceptable form so that the dean and the other faculty can read what it is you've been doing here." But George told me something that was interesting. He said, "John, as far as I'm concerned, you've got your grade in now, because you solved the problem, and you've done it. I don't need it, but you've got to put this in a form here where I can tell the dean and other folks what you're doing."

But anyway, I went to work and began working and putting it together in a presentation, in a mode that was acceptable, but I didn't finish. This was in '54. I had gone with my father-in-law to Tucson [Arizona]--we were taking care of some business there--and on the way back we had an accident in which he was killed and I was just hardly scratched. But in any event, it was traumatic. I went back to see George, and he said, "Don't bother about that. You can do it over the summer, because I've got

your grade in, and that's a valid explanation of what happened."

So I missed the graduation with my class in '54. I got into the graduation of the next year, which was '55. And I had the advantage, of course, of knowing all the guys or some of the guys who were in that class. It's not difficult when you're the only black. They say, "I remember you." I'll see guys now, "John Williams." I say, "Yeah?" "I remember so-and-so." I say, "I'll be damned." You know, you go through that process. But that's what it meant.

And I think that it was an interesting if not foreboding kind of an experience, because you hear, "Why weren't there more blacks in the School of Architecture?" And I'd suspect it's because they felt at that time, and maybe even now--because I don't know whether the situation improved a great deal at 'SC--that maybe it's the cost of tuition. But there's probably a concept abroad that architects are some special kind of breed, and they have to be exceptionally bright or exceptionally talented, and that may dissuade many people who may have thought about it. And maybe it's the fact that you don't make any money, also. [laughter] You have to be involved with the profession and really want to be involved in the kinds of activities that architects are involved in, and the money

is a secondary consideration. But I'm sure that if you don't know that going in, it doesn't take you too long to discover that it is not one which is highly remunerative.

HENDERSON: And then you want to get into another profession or a side profession or something.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, well, I think probably what should happen is that in our society you have to decide, I guess, a mode or a standard of living that you want to attain, and you either have a secondary source of income and you do what you can in architecture or you decide that you're going to make architecture primarily a business and you proceed in that direction. But I don't think that you can get a great deal of personality in commercial architecture, high-rises. I think that the individual kinds of things, you can make them pleasant or unpleasant. You can do it articulately and with a great deal of care and finesse vis-à-vis [I. M.] Pei's Creative Artists Agency Building there on Wilshire [Boulevard] in Beverly Hills.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I mean, that's a classic kind of contemporary architecture. It's not gimmickry. You see an awful lot of gimmickry in so-called contemporary architecture now. I think that you have to be able to discern when something is stated well and if it will not become outdated when the next fad hits, you see. And I

think that that's what you try to do. At least that's what I try to do. I try to establish a method of expression where you know it makes sense. Now, it may not be reflective of what the fad of the day is, but let's see what happens. Go back and look at it later on and see how it looks. So I guess that's really the direction or the thrust that I try to take. And I think that I try to impart that to people that I work with and for and have worked for me over the years.

HENDERSON: Let me ask this question about your college education. We were talking before the interview got formally started about history and how much history you had at USC. Can you tell me about the classes that you had and what this emphasis was? And was that even a relevant class after you got out in practice?

WILLIAMS: The history?

HENDERSON: The history, yes.

WILLIAMS: Yes, I think it was-- Yeah, history was two years. You had two years of history at 'SC at the time, or we had it for two years. And of course graphics, and we had design, of course. Those were the basic technical courses that you had. Now, see, I went four or five years, and I had that year and a half at Pepperdine, so I had taken many of the lower-division classes, so I had some electives in order to maintain my fifteen units,

which was the qualifying number of units to be a full-time student. So I then had the luxury of going into the School of Business Administration and the School of International Relations, so I took classes in those areas and of course also in watercolor. So I could take some classes that weren't required but that filled up and were acceptable to fill out your fifteen-unit requirement. And those classes, I think, that I listed there, they pertained up through, say, first, second, and third year. No, the third and fourth year another was added. We had landscape architecture.

So the third and fourth year we had landscape in which a fellow by the name of Garrett Eckbo-- Eckbo, Royston, and Hamamoto were the landscape architectural firm who did most of the major work throughout-- As a matter of fact, all over the world. They did work all over the world. I'm not sure whether [Lawrence E.] Halprin was a contemporary or younger than Garrett. I don't know if Garrett is still around. I haven't heard from him, but--

HENDERSON: I think Lawrence Halprin is younger, but I'm not sure.

WILLIAMS: He's younger. Yeah, okay. And there's a landscape architecture firm now whose name escapes me at

the moment, but he was a reader for Eckbo when I was taking--

HENDERSON: Sasaki and Dawson?

WILLIAMS: No, it's a--

HENDERSON: A different one?

WILLIAMS: It's a different name. I'll concentrate on it. Maybe I'll think about it, because I've never used it. [Emmet L.] Wemple.

HENDERSON: Wemple?

WILLIAMS: I think Wemple Associates. They switched names. I think you'll have to look in a telephone directory to get it, but I think it's Wemple.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: But Wemple was his reader, so we talked a lot about architecture and the like. But it was very informative. And there, of course, we were talking about more emphasis on composition, of how you used plants and trees and shrubs, than in the botanical aspects of it. Don't need to know the Latin name for Hans ivy, if you will, but you get distances, and how do you get emphasis on a tree. So you have one tree for accent, or you put a clump of trees for shade, or you put an orchard for shade. It's in the characteristic of the tree, so do you want high, low, those kinds of things. And structures, you talk about landscape structures. You dealt with those on the

same basis, something that would complement, and the shrubbery and the plants. And benches, you know, the hardscape on the site. So that was really interesting.

The other was planning. We had two years of planning, also, in the upper division. And that was very fascinating. What we did was we had to do a planning program where we actually took a particular site, and we then did the economics on it and we'd talk about the trips, automobile trips. And this particular site was in Pasadena. It took a block, I think, right where Buffum's [department store] is maybe still there in Pasadena. But we had to go out and interview people: where they came from, how often they shop here, that kind of street interview. Then you compile all the data. It was a team; it was a group effort.

And then we did a planning exercise on how this would be, how we would use this, or would it be valid to have this particular facility at this location. And you'd see the parking pattern was erroneous here, it doesn't work well; these people had to make left-hand turns to get in. So those kinds of things were really quite helpful. I think that that is something that I always thought was valuable.

I would say that, all in all, the experience I had at 'SC was really quite good. I mean, it was quite good.

We got some interesting-- And some of the guys out of my class-- Of course, you'll probably recognize Frank [O.] Gehry.

HENDERSON: Oh, he was there at that time?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. He was in my class. Frank was in my class. I see him from time to time at certain functions, and he remembers. But, off the record, at that time it was Frank Goldberg, see.

HENDERSON: Frank--?

WILLIAMS: Frank Goldberg. Frank Goldberg was his name then.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: I think that he thought that it might be better to say-- I think that he's even an east Canadian, so he remembered that, I think, in one interview that was printed where he said his reason for changing it. It was probably more theatrical, I guess. Gehry. Because I'm certain Frank was not moving around anyplace, ethnicity or any other thing.

But there's one thing that I have to admire about Frank, which is that he was an adventurer; he would do things that were a bit different from what was happening there, but not to the extent that he ventured into deconstructionism, you see. At his house, I guess, an addition he did in Santa Monica there, where he put that

galvanized [sheet metal] wall up there and exposed studs and all--

HENDERSON: Right.

WILLIAMS: --I mean, you say, "But come on!"

HENDERSON: You have to evolve into that taste.

[laughter]

WILLIAMS: Or devolve into it.

HENDERSON: Yeah, devolve into that taste. I think I'm giving him a rough time. It's an acquired taste.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, right. You have to work it out that way. Okay.

HENDERSON: Let me ask you one more question before we end the session. I know your time is getting pressed. You mentioned a father-in-law; that implies that you had a wife. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. My wife is Pearl, Pearl Williams. Her name was Pearl Dinkins Williams. She was a Dinkins before--her maiden name. And, of course, I have three children.

HENDERSON: Oh, I didn't know that.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I've got a son and two daughters. My son is a civil engineer by profession, registered civil engineer with a leaning into management and construction. I had him starting off in architecture and environmental design at [California Polytechnic State

University] San Luis Obispo when I taught up there. And when I called to talk to the dean after the first year, he said, "Oh, he's doing great."

And I said, "Well, fine. Well, how's design?"

And he said, "He's in engineering now." [laughter]

I said, "Oh, okay. You didn't tell me that."

But he said, "He went into engineering."

And, as a matter of fact, he did very well and made the dean's list, so he received a fellowship at Stanford [University]. So he got his master's from Stanford in civil engineering. He's now in construction management for Peck Jones [Construction Corporation]. He's working at UCLA on a group out there. Of course, my wife is a teacher. She's been teaching so long they'll probably have to dislodge her from the classroom. She's a special education teacher, and she just loves teaching. It's been thirty-some years.

And my oldest daughter is an accountant. She works for Pacific Gas and Electric. She's an analyst for the senior management. And my youngest daughter is a professional student; she'll never get out of school. She graduated from Cal State at Rohnert Park in--

HENDERSON: Cal State where?

WILLIAMS: Cal State at Rohnert Park, up where-- No, they

call it Cal[ifornia] State [University] Sonoma. Cal State Sonoma, which is in Rohnert Park. It's in Sonoma County, but Rohnert Park is north of San Francisco about thirty-five, forty miles. So she's in political science, and then she decided that she wanted to be in communications, so she's been going and is about to get her degree now in journalism and communications from Cal[ifornia] State [University] Northridge. So she'll probably decide to step out into the deep water sometime soon, hopefully.

HENDERSON: Do you mind if I get their names?

WILLIAMS: No, of course not, no. My son is Doss Craig. They all have middle names. And the oldest daughter is Shawn Lea. And my youngest daughter is Linne Ann. And that interesting spelling for Linne's name, you know, L-I-N-N-E-- There's Lynn and Lyn, there are all kinds of spellings. But my mother's name is Linnie, so she said, "Well, okay, rather than Linnie, name her Linne. Don't name her Linnie." But in any event, that's how the spelling came out for Linne.

HENDERSON: Now, I don't want to get too deep into your business, but I just want to know, kind of at what time did you meet your wife or get married? About what year was that?

WILLIAMS: Oh, okay. I met my wife in '47, '48, somewhere

like that--I think it was '47, '48--through a friend of my brother's. My brother was going with a lady, and she said, "I have a girl you ought to meet. She's quiet like you, very dignified, intelligent, and da da da da da." I said, "Okay, listen, I'll meet her. I'd like to meet her." So we went out on a couple of dates, and, sure, quiet, that's right. She is quiet but a very nice lady. And she's an 'SC graduate, also. We got married in 1949, so while I was going to school she was almost-- She was a junior in education in '49 when I started, so she had one more year to go. So she graduated in '50. She was going into her senior year, so she finished.

And right after she finished, she got a position with the [Los Angeles] Unified School District. She's been with them for all but about five, six years. She decided that she'd want to take a sabbatical, so she took off, I guess, after about fifteen years. And then she said, "I want to go back to work." So she went back to work, but she went back to work in special education. She went to school to get a degree in special education, and she was teaching EMR students--that's the educable mentally retarded--which is what she dealt with there. But then it just became-- I don't know if they call it EMR anymore, but it required special training that they needed. So she has students from maybe [age] seven to eleven in her

class. But fortunately they only have maybe eight or ten per class, so they get lots of special attention. And she likes that kind of work.

HENDERSON: All right. Let me push just one more question. For paying for schooling at 'SC, did the GI Bill cover everything? Or did it have a time limit? That is, did you have to get everything through within X number of years?

WILLIAMS: It had a four-year time limit.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: And I ran out of money on the GI at the end of the fourth year. Fortunately, the state also had an educational program for California veterans, and they assisted somewhat to finish up the fifth year for us. So I got through it okay and haven't regretted architecture.

I might regret some of the decisions in architecture. See, I may have done better had I, along with doing projects for clients-- And on occasions early on in my career, I had the opportunity to-- They said, "Why don't we go and do this project because they use flat plans?" And I'm thinking, "I don't want to get involved with that. I mean, I'm an architect. Architects don't do development." Developers had a negative connotation at that point.

HENDERSON: Yes, they did.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, they were exploitative, and they did their

best to subjugate everybody in the whole developmental process, whereas there's a little better team concept employed now. And I think that had I known that I didn't necessarily have to do what they wanted, I could have been more assertive, as I think some have done, but not many. They waited until they had the opportunity vis-à-vis-- John [C.] Portman, see, he said, "I'm doing what I want to do here." And you make your deal so that "If you don't take it, let me have a shot at it." So I think that when I read that fifteen years ago, I said, "That is a possibility." But most developers that you have an opportunity to come into contact with are as exploitative now as they would be then, but you're in a little better position, because they say, "Oh, okay. So this guy at least has some idea what's going on. He's been around. I've seen some of the things done. So okay." But they'll take advantage if you allow them.

HENDERSON: Oh, yes.

WILLIAMS: So you have to work it that way. I would probably have gotten more involved in developing things that would have created a different kind of a revenue stream, which would have been helpful, but I think it's never too late, you see. And I'm talking about some things now, so-- [laughter]

HENDERSON: You're an optimist.

WILLIAMS: Oh, absolutely. I mean, if I were not, I tell you, Wes, I'd have gone looking for a job in some of these other places. But I have been in this business ever since 1958. I got my license in '58, January, and I opened an office in the same year and have continuously had an office, sometimes no more than myself, and most of the time with a secretary. But I have been doing it continuously. See, when I complain about the ebbs and flows, people say, "You must be crazy." I mean, there aren't many firms-- Except you name some around the city--

HENDERSON: The really big ones.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, the biggest have been continuously in business for that period of time. It hasn't been easy, but it's fun, too. I mean, I enjoy it. For instance, I like seeing the building put together after you've gone in the field, and you see how the guys interpret what it is that you have and how you set it up there. But I don't think that I would have done anything different. If I had another chance at it, I would do the same thing, perhaps even more vigorously in some areas.

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MARCH 25, 1991

HENDERSON: In our last session we were talking about your education at USC [University of Southern California], and you were graduated, and I'm going to pick up from there, where you first worked and first projects and that kind of thing.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think the first job I had in an architect's office was during my senior year at 'SC. I was working for an architect by the name of Jack Chernoff. And the most significant aspect of that employment was that I discovered that his and my philosophy were divergent. [laughter] We had some heated discussions. Because I think he was a USC graduate also, but he had one philosophical bent and I another. He had been out three or four or five years, I guess, before I was graduated.

HENDERSON: What was his particular leaning?

WILLIAMS: His bent was that he said he wanted to build all of the apartment buildings in L.A., not the best ones. And I said, "Well, you should probably do the better ones and not do so many." [laughter] I, of course, was trying to impose my recent scholastic experience onto some of the things that we were doing in his office. So he at least gave me this deference: He said, "I will do the plans,

because I don't think there's anybody in Los Angeles who can get more units on a given piece of property than I can." And I think he proved himself right, he could pack them in. And after he had done the plan--and of course, I was working maybe sixteen to twenty-four hours a week during school--he would have these plans there for me and say, "Okay, do the elevation, John." [laughter] So that was quite a challenge to try to get, because it's impossible to not think about the three-dimensional projection while you're laying it out two-dimensionally. You have to get these forms interrelated, and you get them matched and composed while you're doing the entire design. He said, "Well, if you have to offset some or do something to get some, do that." And he was always only concerned with the front elevation. "Don't talk about sides and back. I'm getting them in here this way." But anyway, maybe we shouldn't mention his name. You can edit that out. But this was the first architect I worked for.

HENDERSON: I'm kind of curious how you got this job. I mean, being that you were a black person, did you have any problem getting that job?

WILLIAMS: Right. A school chum of mine, a classmate of mine, said, "Look, I can't stand this guy anymore, and I hate to wish this on you, but if you're looking for a job there's a part-time job." He was working more hours than

he wanted to. I said, "Great."

Because I had had an experience in--what was it?--the third year, I guess. For the summer I went looking for a job that had been advertised in the paper from C. F. Braun in Alhambra. They were looking for someone in the architectural department. And when I went out, I took my little portfolio and stuff out there, and the receptionist sent me to the personnel person. The personnel person looked at it and said, "Honey, I think I should let you talk to the head of the architectural department." So I went over and I spoke with him, and he said, "This is fine. That looks good." He said, "Look, I think we could probably work out something here." I didn't tell them that I was just looking for summer employment because I was going to school. But C. F. Braun, of course, was a large engineering, architecture-- They did all kinds of things there. And he said, "I would like to give you a try." So as it turned out, I was quite elated. I said, "Look, here's a chance for me to get into architecture, and perhaps maybe I could postpone [school] for a year if I need to," because I thought I needed to work at this time.

As it turned out, it was such a traumatic shock for all of these personnel people and the boards of directors and the like to have someone who was asking for a

professional position-- They had blacks and some other minorities in their custodial staff. I think perhaps they even had some in their warehouse, in the stockroom and the like. But to have someone who apparently piqued their interest as a professional in their specialized department, this was something new to them. This was probably '51, '52. And I think that it was such a trauma that they had to have a board meeting to talk about policy on this.

HENDERSON: Wow!

WILLIAMS: And after I had left the premises I received a call the next morning, because this personnel manager said he would call me and let me know what transpired. He said, "I don't know how to say this, John, but it was such a new experience for this company to have someone--" I guess no person of color ever applied in the professional category. But they had a board meeting, and he said that at that time it would probably be a bit disruptive to have someone other than the kind of people that they had been hiring. Now, I think that they had some Asians there, but no blacks or Hispanics, as it were.

But in retrospect I think it was probably a kind of a blessing in disguise, because had you gotten there and you really began to have some degree of success, then you would have stayed with the company. And I think that I

didn't know a heck of a lot about C. F. Braun, but they were very straitlaced, dark ties, white shirts, and you notice that after you hear-- Well, they were all tied and coiffed, you see. But anyway, that was an experience I had. I said, "Well, nobody told you it would be easy, but let's see where we're going from here."

So I went back to school and finished and didn't get some employment in the profession at that time. I found something to do, but that's really kind of incidental. But when I was in fifth year, and I had talked with this classmate, and he suggested Jack-- That was an easy in, see, because I didn't have to-- So I went to see Jack, and we talked, and he said, "Well, you were recommended very highly by this person, so let's see what you can do." And I remember it very distinctly, because I was impressed by the fact that I was going to earn $1.50 an hour. And, you see, back in '54, which isn't eons ago, but it's a few years ago, he said $1.50, when the minimum wage may have been a dollar or some such thing--or maybe it was $1.50, I don't know, but it was very low--but at least you were doing something that you were being trained to do. So I worked with Jack throughout my senior year. I think I only took off maybe six weeks in my senior year when I was doing my thesis, and he said, "Fine. You take off the time you need and we'll work it out. And when you come

back, we'll go from there, because we're going to do great things, you and me."

HENDERSON: How large was his staff? How many other people were there?

WILLIAMS: There was him and me.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Yeah. So he was a draftsman and layout man, and I was the superimposer. I did the exteriors for him, see.

But after graduating, I went back to Jack, and we were working. And I said, "Well, now, Jack, it appears as if I'm done now. I've got my degree, and I think we ought to talk about some reasonable compensation here."

He said, "Okay, we'll talk about it. Let's get settled down. You need to maybe take a week off, and you've got this, and we'll get back together."

I said, "Okay."

Now, interestingly enough, this friend of mine--he and I graduated at the same time--he said, "Hey, are you still working for Jack?"

I said, "Yeah, I'm still working for him."

He said, "Why don't you leave that so-and-so? I know somebody who's looking for architects now, and I think you ought to come and talk to him."

I said, "Fine. Who is it?"

So he told me about an architect by the name of Sam Reisbord. He's not a household name, but Sam had done a couple of things-- Sam had done some work with Alvin Lustig, who was a very well-known architect from Indiana or someplace. I'm not sure exactly where Lustig was. But anyway, they did the Beverly Carlton [Hotel] and some other hotels, apartment complexes there. So I went in to see Sam, and we sat and talked. Very affable, nice man. And I went back, and he said, "I understand you're working for Jack [Chernoff]." So he made some remarks about Jack and his attitudes and what he's doing and the like.

And I said, "Yes, that's what I thought, too, Sam." So we finally ended by saying, "Well, I think that if you'd like to come--"

He said, "How long would you have to have before you could come to work?"

"I should give Jack notice sometime." I said, "Listen, I can come to work anytime you say." I said, "I'll give Jack notice that I'm quitting."

But anyway, he said, "Okay. Let me know what kind of timing you have, and as soon as you can get away-- Not too long, because we have some things we're doing." One aspect we hadn't discussed was what kind of compensation. He said, "Well, since you're out of school now, we at least ought to start you at a couple of dollars an hour."

I said, "A couple of dollars an hour?" He said, "Well, maybe we'll make it $2.25."

So I said, "Okay, fine. We'll start with that."

And he said, "Fine. Thanks very much." So I told them I'd be back.

I went back to work and didn't say anything to Jack, because I was thinking maybe he was going to say something about it. Because if Jack had said, "Look, I'll give you $2.25 or $2.50--" Because I had much more control with Jack than I would in a six-, eight-, ten-man office. I think he had about six or seven people at the time. So I went back, and I was talking to Jack. Finally, after two or three days, he didn't say anything. I said, "Well, Jack, what are we going to do? I mean, what kind of a relationship are we going to set up here?"

He said, "Well, listen, okay." He said, "I guess I have to give you a raise. I would anticipate as much." So he said, "Well, listen, I'll tell you what. It's probably more than I can afford, but I'll give you $1.75."

HENDERSON: Wow! [laughter]

WILLIAMS: So I said, "That's only twenty-five cents more than before the degree. I mean, I was just a student, but now I've graduated."

He said, "Well, let's work at that for a while, and then we'll see how it works, and then we'll go from there.

I think we can work something out."

I said, "Okay. That's the best you think you can do, Jack?"

He said, "Yes."

"All right. Okay. We'll see."

So I worked the rest of the week. At the end of the week, I said, "Jack, I'm going to have to give you my notice." The surprise on his face was more than-- I mean, it was genuine shock. It was like he had done his thing and "I've got this guy now." And I'm not sure whether he thought that because of the difficulty-- He didn't assess that. I think it was really his own purpose and his own motivation that caused him to react the way he did and even treat anybody-- Because I guess it was the same with the guy who was my classmate, whose name I can't recall at this moment. Jerry Caris is his name.

HENDERSON: Jerry Caris, okay.

WILLIAMS: Jerry Caris. And that's interesting, too, because we tried to practice together for a while.

But anyway, we had a little discussion. I said, "Well, I think I'm going to have to leave, Jack."

So he said, "Well, you couldn't reconsider if we--? Well, I could probably go for another ten cents or fifteen cents an hour."

"No, I think it's probably better, because I think

two things: philosophically, we don't agree, and it would be a big fight."

And he said, "Well, maybe you can change me." [laughter] That was Jack, and of course, if anybody ever knew Jack he would probably get that kind of a reaction.

But he had a beautiful, nice, affable, amiable wife. She was a jewel. She was sympathetic. But listen, she may have been the force behind Jack. If you make this and you only have to pay this, this leaves you this. [laughter] So the larger piece of pie you can keep. The better way is if you can get done what you want to get done.

But anyway, we parted, and I went to work for Sam for-- I guess I worked for Sam two, probably three years. I guess about two and a half years, at least two and a half years. Sam was doing much the same thing. He was doing apartments and some small commercial buildings. I think he may have done a residence or two, but not much. But it was basically that kind of practice. I was supposed to get periodic raises, but after a while it became kind of evident that I would have to move on and get some more diverse experience. So I began looking around.

I found an architect in the [San Fernando] Valley by the name of Bernard Leuin. I guess he was in Van Nuys or

Sherman Oaks, I'm not sure. I think it was probably Van Nuys near Hazeltine [Avenue], something like that. But that was a small office, also. That was just him and me. It was an interesting experience.

We were doing large residences. We did a residence for Jack Warner and Sterling, who was his son-in-law. I mean, we just kept busy doing that. But the interesting aspect to that was that Leuin asked me how I was in engineering, and I told him, "Fine." I mean, I liked it, and I was good. He said, "Okay, well, what we'll do is I will let you do the engineering on these jobs, and I'll review them, and then I can sign them." So I got involved in actually engineering large residences. I was doing steel beams and retaining walls and things like that, which was really a benefit, because what it did was it afforded me an opportunity in a practical sense to see how you solve engineering problems. In school, theoretically, you get something, but here was an opportunity to do that in a very real and practical sense. I did that for about a year, maybe a year and a half. No, less than that, a year. Twelve, thirteen months I did that. One of the reasons was I was driving from L.A. to the Valley, and all the while I was against the traffic in each situation, going and coming. But it was still something where I said, "Well, that's fine. I think I've had my exposure

there."

And I'm just trying to remember what caused me to get to the next job. That was with Maxwell Starkman. Anyway, I went there and was interviewed by Max. That was when Max had probably fifteen, sixteen people at the time. He was doing tracts. It was Reichl and Starkman at that time.

HENDERSON: That's like, I want to say, a building construction firm? They were doing like tract houses, right?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, they were doing a lot of tracts and some shopping centers in the tract and the like. But anyway, I went with Max, and I started working for him. We were doing some apartments. We were also doing subdivisions.

Apparently he had heard that I was somewhat of a designer, so he said, "Okay, why don't you do some designs for these houses." So I was working at that time directly with Reichl, and I was doing some designs of houses, tract houses, small, I guess a thousand square feet, twelve hundred square feet, fourteen hundred square feet. So of course I had what was called, I guess, a contemporary kind of design approach to tract in the idiom of A. Q. Jones [A. Quincy Jones Jr.] or Ed [Edward H.] Fickett or one of those firms, or even the Straubian approach. Do you remember Cal [Calvin C.] Straub, who--? Did you go to 'SC?

HENDERSON: No, I didn't go to 'SC, but I've heard of Cal Straub.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, okay. Cal Straub was an instructor at 'SC who was quite impressive in the third-year design there. He was a post-and-beam aficionado.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: But anyway, I was doing some design for them, and, I mean, I thought the designs were neat. It worked fine; they were satisfactory. So did Reichl, and so did Max. But the problem was that he had a builder who was doing a subdivision development. He said, "This is different from what we usually get from you, Max. What happened?" He said, "I don't know whether these are going to sell or not. They look okay to me, but I know what sells out there." They were doing it in Lakewood and various other places, La Mirada and some of the other areas out there.

HENDERSON: I was about to ask you, where were the subdivisions where these were going? This is Lakewood and where?

WILLIAMS: La Mirada, out in that area.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: So we had protracted kinds of discussions about this. And of course, you know how owners of businesses, they finally reach a point where they say, "I understand

what you're trying to do, but this is what my client is going to pay me for." So he said, "Okay, I'll submerge my attitude and we'll see what we can do." But I said, "I can't do it like you want to do it. I mean, that's not my style." He said, "Okay, we'll let Reichl do it." And he said, "We'll put you on some commercial things." So I got into doing medical buildings and small commercial things they worked on, some small shopping centers.

HENDERSON: Where were some of these shopping centers?

WILLIAMS: Well, we had them in the Valley and then some in the southeast--Norwalk, Whittier. We'd work on these buildings at the same time.

See, about the time that I had been with Max six months, eight months, the [California state licensing] exam [for architects] came. I said, "Well, I qualify for the time to go to take the exam for the license" I guess about four years or so after I made the rounds to those spots. After, I'd say, five or six months I said, "Well, I guess I'm going to take the exam, so I'd better start preparing for that." I took a week off and reviewed history and those things. And then, come I guess June, when I took it, June of '57, I think I passed the exam except for I guess it was mechanical practice, where you talk about these one or two mechanical things: plumbing, HVAC [heating, ventilating, and air conditioning], and I

guess electricity, where you get this. So I felt the mechanical section of the exam was-- I mean, I knew I passed it. The other things I may not have been sure about.

But I asked for an assessment just to reevaluate this. So I wrote the [California State] Board [of Architectural Examiners], and I got the results back in September. I wrote the board, and I said, "I'd like to see the results of the exam." So they set up something in October, early November, and said, "Fine, you can go down and review it." And it was quite an experience. You have a certain mind-set when you're taking an exam. I mean, you can't focus, but at least you're going through and you have a reactional response. You say, "Hmmm, yeah, that's right." So I tried to recollect what I had done at the exam.

When I finally got to the mechanical section, I began looking, and I said, "I thought that was right. I thought that was right." The guy had marked minus two, minus one. So he had gotten down to 68. Now, 70 was passing. And when I reevaluated it, it should have been 84, 85. And I said, "Hey--" I mean, when I left that reevaluating room--it was down at the state building downtown here--I said, "This is it." So I said, "Okay." So then I went to the person who had the exams and said, "Now, how do I get a

review or have this reevaluated?"

He said, "Okay, just make your remarks on each question that you answered and what was given and what you felt was correct." So I did that.

About three weeks later they said, "Congratulations, we reviewed it."

I said, "Okay, what's my grade?" [laughter]

"Your grade was 68; it should have been 84." They said, "You passed."

HENDERSON: They wouldn't even tell you--?

WILLIAMS: They wouldn't even tell me, see. I said, "He blew this." I mean, somebody blew the evaluation. But they said, "They're looking for two points." They said, "Look, we can give him passing. We won't go from there." But anyway, they said they would notify me as to when an oral interview would take place.

And I think about the early part of December they asked me if I would be available for a board meeting in January--I said I'd be ready next week--in Palo Alto.

HENDERSON: Oh, my goodness. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I guess they were holding a board meeting and doing some reviews. So the board met at Stanford University there in Palo Alto. I said, "Of course. What do I need to have? What do I need to do?" So I got my rolls of drawings and specs and things I'd

worked on, the medical buildings, some of the more complicated things we were doing there, and trundled off to Palo Alto with absolute excitement and anticipation. You know, "What can they do to me now?" [laughter]

I arrived there, and I think there were about four of us. As a matter of fact, I went up on the plane with some fellow, and we just began talking, and fortunately we mentioned what we were doing. He said, "I guess you're concentrating on what you're doing." I said, "I'm going to go to San Francisco and then come back down and--" Anyway, we talked and we set up some dialogue. So we got the transportation back to Palo Alto. We were sitting, waiting and-- I think his name was Aldridge, but that's not important now. Anyway, he went in for his examination before I did. I guess there were two or three other people. I may have been, I guess, the next to the last person in that group, in that morning session, so it was just before noon, I think, before I went in. But when he came out, I mean, he looked like he was red, flushed. He was red-faced, flushed.

HENDERSON: Goodness!

WILLIAMS: I said, "Hey, what happened?" He said, "They're tough. They're really tough." Imagine him telling me that, and I'm going in. See, keep in mind that you understood that there was something unique in the

whole business of blacks in architecture. There were very few. I think I've told you about the number that occurred at 'SC: Bob [Robert A. Kennard] and myself and Carl [M. Kinsey]. And I said, "Well, listen, how bad can it be? I mean, they can't--"

But, anyway, I went in, and I set out to being my most affable self. You know, "How are you?" I turned it on to see what was happening, but, you know, you could hardly speak, because this is a very important event in your life, to be examined and to be judged by your future peers. You couldn't call them a peer until after you got your license. The president of the board at that time was a fellow by the name of C. [Clarence] J. Paderewski out of San Diego. I don't remember who else was on the board, but he was the examiner. "How are you?" "Fine." A very pleasant person. So my conversation, it was almost directed by him. The other people didn't say too much. He said, "We were just looking at your exam here and we want to congratulate you." He said that, "Not many people finish this exam and were as successful as you were." So when he said that, I was-- [indicates great relief]

HENDERSON: Yeah! [laughter]

WILLIAMS: And then I said, "It's something that I've aspired to for many years, and I really wanted to be successful at it." He said, "I'm sure you will be." And

there was a pause, and I said, "I brought some things." He said, "We don't need that." They didn't look at specs, they didn't look at drawings. I was in there no more than ten minutes.

HENDERSON: My goodness.

WILLIAMS: He said, "Congratulations. Happy to have you aboard."

HENDERSON: No tough questions? No nothing?

WILLIAMS: No. It was almost anticlimactic. [laughter] I said, "I can't believe it." So this guy who was waiting for me out there, he said, "Hey, they kicked you out in a hurry." I said, "Yeah, they sure did." [laughter] And I bounced all the way back to San Francisco. I could have walked back. It was such an experience that you never could have believed it.

But anyway, I think that I have probably ascribed to Paderewski the kind of attributes that he may not have been deserving of, but I think that in my experience with him, one didn't-- Of course, I'd seen some of the things he'd done in San Diego. They were my style, I mean, my kind of architecture. And the interesting thing is that I didn't see him for probably six, eight years after that, at one of the AIA [American Institute of Architects] conventions, national conventions. And when I saw him at that time, I said, "Mr. Paderewski, my name is John

Williams." He said, "I remember you. How are you doing, John? How have you been? What are you doing?" I said, "I can't believe it." But, you see, there's one advantage, and this is something that everyone else had in our profession, because the preponderant number, of course, is non-minority. So if you happen to be one who may make any kind of an impression in any manner, then you may be remembered easier than a sea of other faces. So I suspect that that may have been part of his-- "Oh, here's a guy who--"

But in any event, I took the exam and got the license in January of '58. And when I went back to work at [Maxwell] Starkman's, they were all congratulatory, and I said, "Fine, fine, okay." Because when you pass the oral, then of course you don't have to wait. They just send you the license later. And they would tell you then, whereas now, when I was on the commission to test the candidates, they said, "Don't tell them whether they passed. Even if you passed them, don't tell them you passed them. The board will notify them if they passed or not." So this was a different kind of a technique, and perhaps that was probably instituted because of some misinterpretations of things that were said. So perhaps a candidate may have felt that "Based upon what I gleaned from here, they told me I passed, and then I get this notice that I didn't

pass." But in order to avoid confusion, you specifically state that you will be notified of your success or lack of it by the board.

But in any event, when I went back to Starkman's for work, of course, you have a different kind of a perspective. You say, "Okay, now I'm legal, so things ought to be different." But you're still the same person doing what you were doing. So after a couple of weeks or so, I thought I should talk with Max. I said, "What are your plans for me?"

He said, "Listen, John, we'd like to keep you. We like what you're doing, and we'd like to work with you."

I said, "Okay, let's see how it works and we'll see how it goes here."

So I only had worked with them another couple of months, and we had one of these discussions about design and what he thought and what I thought and what they thought. See, that was the thing I found difficult with Max was that he agreed with me, but if a client came in and said, "I'm not sure, Max. What about this?"-- I said, "Max, let me talk to the client" or "Give that to me." At that time, I guess, in the profession they liked to keep other folks in another category. [laughter] "We don't want you to--" Keep in mind that this was 1958. There was an incident, too, during my stint with Reisbord that I

may relate to you. But I believe that there would be a connotation that here was a person who would have this kind of client contact, and it may be construed that he was one that they would be dealing with, and they could have difficulty. So they said, rather than actually precipitate any possible confrontation psychologically or emotionally or economically, if you will, in this situation, "As long as they'll stand for it, we'll just let it go." So what that did, of course, was that that really precipitated in me a kind of anger and agitation. I said, "Look, if I can't deal with a client and try to justify what it is we are doing and explain to him the rationale for evolving what evolved here, and maybe I can convince him, then I can go off and beat my own head against a wall and deal with my own clients."

So after that, a few months after I'd gotten my license, I did tell Max. I said, "Max, I'm leaving."

He said, "Well, where are you going?"

I said, "I think I'm going to try it on my own."

He said, "You're kidding."

I said, "No, I'm going to try it."

HENDERSON: He said what? "You're kidding"?

WILLIAMS: He said, "You're kidding. This is the toughest."

"I understand that. It's tough, and I don't have any

prospective clients, but I'm going to give it a whirl."

HENDERSON: That was very courageous on your part.

WILLIAMS: That was precipitous and stupid on my part. [laughter] But it was emotional, you see. So I think that you make those decisions, but with hindsight I think that I probably couldn't have done it any other way, because I knew, with the kind of organization that Max had, that was probably even more so in any of the larger firms. Or you go back to a smaller firm. I certainly wouldn't want to go back to a situation like what I had with Bernie Leuin, who was a very nice person, but you'd probably want to be the ascendant personality. And if you're depending on somebody else, they say, "Hey, listen, that may be okay, but this is what I'd like to see."

HENDERSON: I want to hear the incident with Reisbord, and before that, I'm going to need to turn the tape over, because I want to make sure I've got that.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO

MARCH 25, 1991

WILLIAMS: When I was working for Sam, after I'd been there about a year or, I guess, fifteen months-- I didn't realize that there was this coalition of people in Sam's office and in a couple of other offices. And I think that one of the people who was in league outside of Sam's office was Pierre [F.] Koenig, but I can't be certain, so I'll have to see if I can't dredge it up. But in any event, in Sam's office there was a fellow by the name of Aaron Cohen, who was, I guess, the chief designer, and a fellow by the name of Richard [A.] Jampol. I don't know where either of these people are now.

After I'd been at Sam's about fifteen months, I got a call into the office. When they said, "Sam wants to see you," I said, "I'm working on a project," and I said, "I can't think of any problem I have, anyway." So he called me in and sat me down and said, "John, we've got a problem. You don't have to make a commitment at this point, but I'm going to tell you what it is, and I'll tell you what we're trying to do, and then we'll see if you would participate." He said, "We've been trying for a number of months now to break down the bias in some of the larger offices in the city, and we have someone whom we

know is looking for people, black--" Actually, "black" was not fashionable in '55. So I don't know whether I was Negro or colored or what, but it wasn't black. [laughter] They didn't use that term. But anyway, what they'd always say--and this is what this person-- I think it was [Victor D.] Gruen's organization [Gruen Associates]. I think it was Gruen. It was either Gruen or [William L.] Pereira or [Charles A.] Luckman. I'm not sure which it was at that time. Anyway, this may not have been a stated policy which was saying, "You do it this way," but it was something that may have filtered down by innuendo or implication or inference or something. But they--

HENDERSON: The policy was not to hire blacks.

WILLIAMS: The policy was not to hire blacks. And of course, what they did was anytime a black would apply they would always find reasons for lack of experience or ability. "Based upon our conversation with our contact, they may not have had one that you could really be assertive about, and we think that we can be absolutely assertive about your capabilities and qualifications, and we'd like to have you apply for a job at this firm here." And they said, "If they hire you, then, that's fine. We'll move on through that maze from that point. If they won't, then we may talk about bringing whatever pressure--" Implying whatever techniques or tactics or--

Now, keep in mind this is in '54, '55, or '56--probably '56, '57.

Now, keep in mind, I'm just really getting comfortable in the hierarchy at Sam's office, Reisbord's office, and I'm moving up. I'm a project architect doing those projects that we're working on. That's now. If I don't have to, I don't really want to get into a new situation, and especially one that may be fraught with-- You knew you were needed and wanted at Sam's. But to get this other firm, see, we're going to hire this guy, so you're going to be a Jackie Robinson, if you will, in a firm where you say, "Will I like it or won't I like it?"--

So I voiced my opinion. I told Sam, "Look, I'll do it because it needs to be done, but that would also mean that I would have to leave this office at which I am very comfortable and I like it."

He said, "Yeah, well, thanks." Sam was saying, "That's okay, and we appreciate that, but we're looking around, and I'll report what your attitude and feelings are, and if that is okay, we can make our recommendation."

So I said, "Okay, fine. I'll deal with it."

So the next couple of days, he called me in. He said, "You may be pleased to hear that somebody who needed a job, we've referred him to it." And he didn't give me any more data than that. I suppose that it did move on

upward from there, but those were tough years in terms of graduates who had difficulty getting jobs at that point. But anyway, that was the incident.

HENDERSON: A question, though. You said that there was a coalition of people. You described them as a coalition--Pierre Koenig and Aaron Cohen. Was it a formal organization that you knew? Or it was just a group of--?

WILLIAMS: No, it was just-- I would say that-- And I would imagine these were liberals, liberals probably politically and ideologically. And I suppose that these were people who were really bent on trying to change the system and the oppression who said, "Look, this is ridiculous." And of course, there weren't too many who were graduates whom they knew had been trained and could satisfactorily produce in almost any environment. But I think that that was what it was about. But in any event, I think that that's what the motivation was--I think probably altruistic. I don't think there was any sub-rosa kind of a motivation. They just wanted to see things change because these were good people--Pereira, Kennard. I admired them.

HENDERSON: I don't usually discuss other interviews with people, but in my interview with Kennard he was saying somewhat the same thing about how in those years there were groups that wanted to integrate--Gruen and that kind

of thing--but he didn't say coalition. That's why I was asking that question about coalition. There just seems to be some liberal--

WILLIAMS: There was a liberal faction in the architectural community that wanted to see this. "Look, I mean, this is impossible, because we know there are some people--" Bob [Kennard] worked for Gruen. I don't know what year he went to work for him, but I think he was probably working for him at that time. I don't know if he was working for him at that time or not. But in any event, after that incident, of course, I was moving on to Leuin, to Starkman, and the like, and I said, "Well, I'm going to move into the arena of entrepreneurship and get my head beat there, I guess we'll start with that."

HENDERSON: I know your time is running short, but let me ask this question. About that time in the fifties you knew about Robert Kennard. How much were you aware of other black architects who were out there? You've told me that there were a few--

WILLIAMS: Well, at that time there was Paul [R.] Williams, of course, there was Carey [K.] Jenkins [Sr.], there was Jim [James H.] Garrott.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: And in this area there may have been licensed architects-- I think Roy Sealey may have been licensed,

but I think at that time he was working for Paul. At the time that I was licensed I think Bob was probably licensed. I don't know if he was licensed in '58 or not. But I was probably third or fourth in this community.

HENDERSON: But, I mean, you guys didn't even consider maybe forming some sort of little organization or a little club? It was just too small a number?

WILLIAMS: It was just too small a number. And I think that there was the business of what do I need to do in order to make a living or survive in this community here. And of course, we would see each other from time to time and say, "How's it going?" or whatever. But I think that we were busy doing our own thing like the others.

But I suppose that probably the thing that didn't happen that perhaps should have happened was that there probably should have been an attempt to really get involved with Paul Williams, to see Paul give us guidance. It may have been helpful had Paul been disposed to say, "Hey, look, guys, this is what you're going to--" Because there were so few of us. And I don't know if Jim Garrott and Paul Williams were really friendly or they would interact professionally, but I suspect that of the few that were here at the time, I guess we were kind of lost in the larger picture. But it probably would have been beneficial had we worked in that respect, because we all

knew of Paul and his stature, and his practice was assured, and he had that set. But I think the others were just more or less seeing what they could find or seeing if they could get the leavings.

But what we didn't understand was that when the large community thought about black architects getting involved with projects in which they had to dispense with [public work], Paul was the architect. It was Paul Williams; he was the one. I think that the other architects were relegated to finding their own place in the community, and I think that the practice was really primarily in the black community, and then trying to get involved in public work. So you try to get into the school board [Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)], the city work, the county work, and the like. It went the way it went over time. You'd make the applications, make the rounds to the county agencies and the L.A. school board and the city, and there was just no consideration. They would consider you and interview you, and I suppose that they just dropped them in the basket or put them in the dead file so that you never got called.

Of all the rounds that I had made over time, the first time I got a call from a public agency was from the school board after the Watts riots. And that was '65. The riots took place in August? I think in October I got

a call from Virgil Vala, who was the facilities director there at LAUSD, and that's when I got my first work with a public agency. Of course, over time I did other things for the county and the city and the school board.

HENDERSON: You know, during this time, say the fifties, when you were getting established, you yourself never thought about going to Paul Williams and working for Paul Williams?

WILLIAMS: Well, let me tell you two things. You see, in going to USC, I sat here, and Norma Williams [Harvey] sat here.

HENDERSON: Norma?

WILLIAMS: Norma Williams, Paul's daughter. She and I went to school together.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: And I would work with Norma on some of her graphics she couldn't get right, see. But we worked. So she said--and you may want to edit this out--when I was probably second year, because we had the second year together, she said, "John, why don't you come and see Daddy and you can work summers there?" So I said, "I'll think about it." Let me tell you that [because of] the--what do you call it?--ego, pride, whatever, I said, "Look, I can do it. I can make it okay." But while I was going to school, of course, I worked in a melange of different

kinds of jobs. And I think the primary reason was that during that second year I didn't feel confident that I could perform appropriately--I mean, in the architectural-- But, you see, if you say-- And in addition to that, I'd say, "I got here because Norma recommended me to father. Okay, I'm going to placate daughter and get him." But Norma, we had no special relationship. She was a very handsome lady, and we'd talk, but there was just a situation there that-- I've seen Norma on other occasions, of course, and her sister Marilyn [Williams Hudson], too, and we'd talk about things and recall some things. But anyway, she left architecture after that, the second year. She went into industrial design, and she went on into interior design.

HENDERSON: Is she practicing now?

WILLIAMS: Oh, no. She's retired. She retired from anything, because-- Let's see, her father died in '73, '74?

HENDERSON: I think he died in '80, 1980.

WILLIAMS: In '80? Oh, okay. But he retired before he passed.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: I guess it was subsequent to that, but I know that it was at the testimony of Paul that I had a chance to see Norma. And I've seen Marilyn on other occasions,

but I don't know when I've seen her.

But in any event, I think that that was probably the overriding factor. I said, "Okay, look, when I'm ready I'll go and talk to Paul." And I related this story to Harold [L. Williams], because Harold said, "When I came out here from Ohio, I said, 'Is someone going to hire an architect? I'm going to go up and see Paul.'" So he went to work for Paul. In any event, I think that that was the reason. And, of course, after you, say, arrive professionally, you say, "Fine." There are stories which don't even need to be alluded to now.

But I think the thing that was probably one of the nicest and most gratifying experiences--I'm trying to think of when it was, and I think it was probably around '68--was when there was talk of-- The U.S. post office [United States Postal Service], I guess, at that time was thinking about putting a bulk mail facility on the old Ujima [Village apartments] site there on El Segundo [Boulevard] just west of Central [Avenue]. And it began to be rumored that there would be a good chance of a coalition of black architects getting that job, because it was in Gus [Augustus F.] Hawkins's [congressional] district, and it was something that Hubert [H.] Humphrey was in concurrence with Gus on. So we'd talked with the congressman, and it was developed that we ought to get a consortium of black architects.

Paul was addressed, and he agreed to join the group. And of course, it was interesting, because Paul then began to talk about some of his experiences and what you had to do and the like, but he also discovered one other thing: He told us that he'd gotten a call from an old colleague of his whom he'd done some things with, and that was Adrian Wilson. You may or may not have heard of Adrian Wilson's firm. I don't know what it's called now. I know he's not around. But he said that in his conversation with him that this bulk mail facility had been promised to Adrian and that he said, "You can come with us," and he said, "No thanks." So he said, "We're going to get this." And with Paul there--and Paul had his relationships with the Republican Party and the like-- But there was a Democratic administration at that time. I think Lyndon [B. Johnson] was-- Let's see, '68?

HENDERSON: Yeah, he was still president then.

WILLIAMS: And Humphrey was vice president at the time. So we knew we had it. And I will tell you that because of the kinds of political overtones and ramifications of that job, they moved it from that site to the Shellis Air Force Base in Maywood, because they said, "Look, if we select this site here, we're going to deal with this issue. So if we get it out of Gus's district, you can get it, and we can assure you that you have the power of persuasion and

largess and ability and pressure that you can exert." He said, "Okay, if you can't deal with it, you either back out or you go ahead and do it the way people want to get it done." But they had moved it from that location, and that's how we got-- I guess they got Ujima Village going, see. But that was to be the selected site. See, it was actually purchased from Boise Cascade [Corporation] and Ray [A.] Watt. They had an interest in that site. But anyway, that's the story.

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE

MAY 15, 1991

HENDERSON: Today I would like to talk about when you first opened your office. What were your first projects? What are your favorite projects?

WILLIAMS: That is difficult as far as a favorite project is concerned. But the first project was an alteration and addition to an existing residence on Clinton [Street] and Mariposa [Avenue] in the north portion of town [Hollywood]. It's between Melrose [Avenue] and Santa Monica [Boulevard]. That was the [Ida] Orr residence, which I did. What she really wanted was not an addition in the traditional sense about expanding that facility, because it was a kind of Mediterranean style. She said she wanted a little grand kind of contemporary style. She was an elderly lady, and she asked me to see what I could do, how she'd like that. I, of course, gave her the classic contemporary style, which was a little bit surprising, but interestingly enough she thought it would be appropriate because it was simple. Their building was simple. It was stucco finish. And the building that I did, or the addition that I did, was really a separate unit, because it was a multifamily zone that we could make separate. So it became her separate house with no

necessary access from the front house to the rear unit, which faced on Clinton. The main house faced on Mariposa. So we provided for this. It was a self-contained unit. As a matter of fact, I may even have some photographs of it somewhere.

HENDERSON: It still stands?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. This was in '58, '59, one of the first additions that we did. The initial projects were additions to residences. I think that I did a house in Silver Lake, the Winston Wright house--they would call it the Wright house--and that's still there also, obviously. So that's been a few years. But the Wright house is there in Silver Lake; we did that one.

And then, let's see, we did some more additions. I'm trying to recall if I did any other residences before I did the first institutional-type, commercial buildings. That was probably in either '59 or '60 when I did a remodel of the Harrison-Ross Funeral Home on Firestone [Boulevard] and Bell [Avenue]. In order to not obviate the entitlement that he had in that zone, he could remodel, but he had to maintain at least a four-foot section of a wall someplace, saying he didn't completely demolish and then start new, but as long as he had-- See, the building was configured so that it was adjacent to the property line on Firestone and Bell, at the corner there.

So we were allowed to strip all the material off, and then we reinforced the existing wood frame, because that corner only had to hold four feet of it, and then we just built from that corner and then just reconfigured that whole thing from that point out. [laughter] And that at least eliminated the necessity for having to get another conditional use permit. And that was one, too, which I thought was interesting, because the owner wanted me to do a chapel which was reflective of a chapel in--

HENDERSON: You mean another funeral--

WILLIAMS: Another funeral home that he'd seen. It was called Wee Kirk o' the Heather; I'll always remember that. That was the name of the chapel in-- I guess it was Forest Lawn [Memorial Park, Glendale, California]. It's on the grounds there at Forest Lawn. And keep in mind, this was in '60. Damn, that was a long time ago. [laughter] So I went out to see Wee Kirk o' the Heather, and it was as I thought it would be. It appeared as if it was a church. I mean, it was a church and it was a chapel where they had the deliberations that went on at any funeral. And it was set in a different kind of a setting, very expansive greenery, and it reminded you of an old, say New England-type clapboard church with the tower and the business of--

I came back and told the client, "Maybe that's okay for them, but you're on the corner of Firestone and Bell.

You have a commercial enterprise here where you're going to have to receive people. You're going to have to have parking spaces around here. You're not going to have the kind of expansive greenery that the Wee Kirk o' the Heather has." I said, "What we really ought to do is to try and develop a sense of tranquility in the chapel where you're going to have your services here. But the other portion is going to have to be commercial, because you've got the reception, administrative offices, you've got the embalming room, your preparation room, and you've got slumber rooms for viewing--" Now, Wee Kirk o' the Heather had none of that. All they had was a chapel, so all the other things would take place in some other part of the establishment, and you'd come here just for deliberation.

"I don't know," he said. "I've looked all over the country, and I've seen these things, and that's really what I think would really be unique and different."

I said, "Okay, look, let me try to show you something."

So we proceeded to develop this, and we had it worked out fairly reasonably, and we got the approval of the city. They said-- That's in the county.

HENDERSON: County, oh.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think that's in the county there. And they said, "That's fine."

So I gave it to him, and he said, "Okay, I'm not sure. Let me take a look at this." So he took it. And, of course, he traveled extensively throughout the city, throughout the county, because he had a number of associates-- These are obviously all black morticians or undertakers, if you will. So he went all over the country.

So about three or four weeks later, I hadn't heard. They said, "Well, he's not in town." He came back, and he called me one day and said, "Hey, come out here. I want to talk to you." This is Firestone and Bell, and at that time I think I was at Washington [Boulevard] and La Brea [Avenue].

HENDERSON: That was where your office was located?

WILLIAMS: I think it was at Washington and La Brea at the time. So I went out, and he said, "Now, let's look at these plans."

"Okay." So I said, "Tell me what you like."

So I went over them with him again, and he said, "You know, I was just thinking, these may be all right. Why don't we proceed this way." So of course I was flabbergasted, because I expected him to say, "If we can't get Wee Kirk o' the Heather, let's do this. Let's add this." I will say that after we had that conversation we proceeded to do whatever the plans reflected at that time,

and it also turned out very well.

I haven't been out there in recent months, or recent years, as a matter of fact. I don't know whether they've changed colors. We had the whole color scheme and everything all worked out. He had some reaction to our color scheme, and he developed a color scheme. And he asked us to do a logo, which we did. He liked it, and his wife liked it, but he said, "It's too modern." That's what he had on the sign, but he later changed the sign. I don't know, he had to put some wreaths or--

HENDERSON: Something more traditional.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Like you'd say, "Look, it has at least a reflection of, shall we say--" I was going to say death, but I think that-- Ecclesiastical--

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. It was an ecclesiastical connotation. But it's always like "Peace forever" and "Rest in peace" and flowers or that kind of business on the logo. But in any event--

HENDERSON: Oh, let me break in here. You were saying, "We did this logo and we came up with a color scheme." Did you have employees working with you at the time? Or were you just by yourself?

WILLIAMS: At that time there was probably one person who was helping me. As a matter of fact, in thinking back, at

that time a fellow by the name of William Craig I think-- I don't know if that's important or not, but Bill Craig-- And I don't know if Bill ever got his license or where he was at. I lost track of him after he left me. But yeah, he was with me two or three years.

But anyway, we built the building, and Woods Construction Company did it. And a superintendent by the name of Jim Allen, who was working as superintendent of Woods for Tim and Jim Woods at the time, he was impressed. He liked the building. And it worked out fairly well. And of course, I think that I may have misspoken. I think that Manchester [Boulevard] may be the dividing line, city or county. I'll have to find out. But we'll just leave that--

HENDERSON: I know Manchester and Firestone switch names.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I said Manchester. Manchester starts out, and when you get past I think it's Compton Avenue, it turns into Firestone. See, it's Manchester, Firestone. I don't know where the break line is, but I think there's-- But anyway, as I recall, I think it may have been in the county. But anyway, we'll leave that for the moment.

Anyway, when the client had the dedications, he had all the politicians, of course, and Kenny [Kenneth] Hahn I think was a [Los Angeles County] supervisor at the time.

I think he was a supervisor in '60. I think he's been there that long or very close to it. But he was there, whatever he was, because he was a friend of my client's. But from that I think I did some more soliciting and did a couple more residences. [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON: Let me ask you this question: How were you meeting your clients at this point in time? How did you, say, meet the Orrs?

WILLIAMS: As a matter of fact, they were referred to me by a friend of mine whom I'd done a little five-unit apartment for, and I'm trying to think of where that apartment was. I think it was--and it may even still be there--off Pico [Boulevard] someplace. But the guy's name I know; his last name was Wright. He was a fellow who was in the hauling and excavating business. He was working on a project, and he was doing some work, or somebody told him about this lady who, I guess, he was hauling some trash work for or cleaning up or doing something for, and she said she was thinking about doing some building on--She said, "Do you know anyone who does building?" because she was not distinguishing between contractor, architect, or what these various functions were. But he referred me to her, and I called and talked to her. So apparently she thought that there was some potential. She said, "Oh, Mr. Wright recommended you highly." So I said, "Okay, well,

let me see what I can work out." So I did sketches for her. And I'm not sure that she fully understood, but at least the impression was apparently a favorable one, so we went ahead from there.

HENDERSON: Was the Winston Wright house the same Wright?

WILLIAMS: No.

HENDERSON: Oh, a different Wright.

WILLIAMS: No, this was a different Wright, right. No, maybe this fellow Jack or John-- It might come to me, the other Wright. Ralph? Incidentally, he was a pilot.

HENDERSON: Which Wright is this?

WILLIAMS: This is the Wright that recommended Orr to me.

HENDERSON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: He was a pilot. But he was the fellow who had the excavation--

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: He was constantly asking me to, you know, "Take a ride with me." I was interested in flying then and am now, but I think at that time I probably had more enthusiasm for it than I have now. But curiously enough, he made trips up and down the coast, frequently to San Francisco, so he'd ask me to go sometimes. I said, "Fine." But I remember picking up the paper one morning--I guess this was in '63, '64, or thereabouts--and I saw this, "Pilot lost in crash," and they talked about it. I

said, "I can't believe it." I've still got the article. They found his plane later. He had crashed in a storm not using good judgment. That's what normally happens; you don't use good judgment. I don't know whether he ran out of gas or what it was like to make it from that spot to that spot. But anyway, that's how I met her.

You asked about how you'd meet clients. You'd meet them or you'd be introduced to them or somebody would introduce them or you'd, say, go to fund-raisers or various social gatherings. I suspect that the best way for, I guess, minority architects--

HENDERSON: And that's really sort of what I was asking.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, what you would have to do is you'd have to be dealing in either the public sector or the religious sector, because the only clients that you'd probably get for larger projects would be churches or additions to churches. And by having that kind of relationship--

During the post-Watts riots times, say, after '65, you probably had a greater emphasis in housing. Initially the blacks who were involved in housing were nonprofit, and the nonprofit entities almost always seem to lean toward the religious nonprofit. Of course, they subsequently had some other types. But that's how you sort of segued into working with nonprofit in housing, because those are the ones that I did, as I recall, over

time. I don't think that I did any multifamily housing projects other than nonprofit, either religious or private nonprofit. See, because the benefits from the tax standpoint were for nonprofit, because, not needing the tax benefit because they were tax exempt, they would sell their interest or tax benefits to for-profit individuals or other corporations, and they would foster the next project. You make some money, you put it in. And then, of course, after you have done a couple of housing projects and you have relationships with people at the various staffs, say at HUD [United States Department of Housing and Urban Development] or CRA [Los Angeles City Community Redevelopment Agency] or the state or whatever, and they don't have too many bad things to say about you--

HENDERSON: Yeah, you get in the system.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, they'll say, "Well, look, have you talked to so-and-so about this? He's done some projects. You ought to talk to him." So you even had the for-profit individuals who'd come to you, but you quickly learned that the for-profit individuals from the beginning wanted you to really provide them with drafting service, and they'd pay you like a drafting service, but they'd want you to assume all responsibilities. And I think that most for-profit developers at the time felt that architects and housing were mutually exclusive. They don't need them

involved if they get a drafting service to do that. They just wanted to pay architects like they paid a drafting service. And during that time, of course, they didn't distinguish them by calling them designers; they'd call them drafting services. They didn't have to have a license as long as they had this.

HENDERSON: Right.

WILLIAMS: So they'd get an engineer to do the-- Anyway, that's all history, which we know about.

As a result of that, I never did a project for a for-profit entity. All my housing projects--and I've done a number of them--were for nonprofit entities. And then, of course, because of the relationships that the for-profit entities had established with some architects who would work with them--they were participating in the architect's fee--they would ask for the maximum fee from HUD which they would allow, and then they'd say, "Mr. Architect, I'm going to provide these kinds of services here, and I'm going to give you this much of this fee, but you're going to have to do the drawings. Just produce these documents and you'll have to sign all the documents--you'll have to--and be the responsible entity." As a result of that, HUD really developed a jaundiced view about what architects were and maybe even how badly they would prostitute themselves. And I think that I had constant discussions

with the A and E [architecture and engineering] cost section about what fees ought to be if they wanted a service. So we lost money because of the protracted time, but we always did as good a professional service as could be done. And it just cost us money, because we felt differently about the profession and about this product you're trying to produce.

HENDERSON: Sure. Well, let me ask you this question: You were a black professional, and this was the early sixties, and you were dealing with some clients who were white. Did you feel that there was friction between the two? Or things just worked out well when, let's say, you were introduced to the Orrs or to the Wrights? They didn't express any shock at seeing a black professional? Or did things just go very smoothly?

WILLIAMS: Well, no, I think what happened was that, as a professional and over time, if you were to meet a new client that you had been referred to, they already knew who you were.

HENDERSON: Oh, oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: You see, it's not like applying for a job, as such, where you go in cold and they would talk to you or you would call them on the telephone to go in for an interview. And of course, if they don't discern by your speech or conversation, then when they see you they may

say some exclamation like, "Hmmm, I didn't know who you were" or "I didn't expect to see you."

HENDERSON: But none of your clients backed out on you for racial reasons, you feel?

WILLIAMS: No. Because I think that they were all either aware of it, or when you were introduced in a situation they could see that, "Yeah, I guess he is." [laughter] "And he must be related to Paul Williams," you see.

HENDERSON: Oh. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: And, of course--and I've told Paul about this--I forever was asked the question. And what those who were going to be polite and courteous did was they would ask you the question, "Say, are you related to Paul?" I said, "No, only as a blood brother, not any kinship in genealogy. But Paul's a good friend of mine, and I went to school with his daughter." So that always allayed any fears. They'd say, "Okay, you went to school with his daughter, the daughter of Paul Williams, and of course Paul was at 'SC, so you must be okay, because there's some continuity there." And then, of course, the other approach was, "I knew your father." And I said--

HENDERSON: Oh, people would tell you, "Oh, I knew--"

WILLIAMS: People would tell me. They'd say, "Oh, an architect. Oh, I knew your father."

I said, "Oh?" [laughter]

He said, "Well, didn't he do so-and-so building?"

I said, "No, my father didn't." I said, "Paul did."

He said, "Well, you're not related to Paul? You're not Paul's son?" [laughter]

I don't know if the other Williams had the same problem, you know, Harold [L. Williams]. There was a George Williams in this city, too, you know. He was a partner of Clyde Grimes for a while.

HENDERSON: Oh, I didn't know that.

WILLIAMS: I don't know where George is. He may be working in some agency now. But I don't know what caused that association, and I don't know if-- As a matter of fact, I don't know if I ever asked Harold that, but I have to ask him sometime.

But anyway, no, there wasn't a problem in that respect, because I think that they knew who you were. I know that vendors who make arrangements to come in and show you various products would express surprise sometimes. But I usually could convince someone that I wasn't going to hit them or cut them or shoot them or resort to any kind of activity which may be stereotypical of blacks, as it were. [laughter]

But all in all I think that it's limiting in many instances. It had been limiting. It's limiting now, I

think, in the private sector for doing jobs that few architects might. But for the most part I think it's relegated to the public sector or those activities that are related to the public sector where public moneys are involved where you will get a shot. Affirmative action has gotten one involved in projects which prior to that one would never have even been considered for, because it's the kind of profession where social relationships are very important.

HENDERSON: Right, right.

WILLIAMS: The social and business relationship. You know, you're a member of this board or you know someone who's on this board or a relative of someone who's on this board. It's quite unusual.

HENDERSON: But did you consciously join any, say, organizations, boards, country clubs, to kind of network in that way?

WILLIAMS: If you did, it would be black country clubs. [laughter] You still had the same problems. They're not the leaders of building in the cities' infrastructure, the commercial, the commerce, and the industry. So you'd have to join the club where the activity was taking place, and you were excluded from joining those clubs, so you did it the other way. You'd join the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], or you'd join the

Urban League. And you may not necessarily be as active as you'd like, but I believe that over time you just accumulate a kind of a reputation, if you will, where they say, "Okay, this guy does a reasonable job. You can talk to him or call him up, and he's done these kinds of things, and you ought to see what he'll do."

HENDERSON: Was there a project that you feel was sort of like your breakthrough project? That was like the project which got you a whole lot of--? Maybe a housing project that really got you sort of established in the business and got you a lot of good referrals? Would Ujima [Village] qualify for that?

WILLIAMS: I think Ujima, in this sense-- Which is very interesting. Ujima was taken on exhibition around the country and around Europe and all over. This is Beata Inaya.

HENDERSON: Yeah, I've got the book [The Three Worlds of Los Angeles, catalog of architectural exhibit].

WILLIAMS: Yeah, Beata--

HENDERSON: Here, let me let you look at that.

WILLIAMS: I'll be damned. Yeah. Yes, yes, yes.

HENDERSON: It's kind of a beat-up copy, but it's one that she gave me.

WILLIAMS: I don't know. I may have a--

HENDERSON: You have a picture at the front.

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes, Beata Inaya. I don't recall-- I probably have this someplace in the archives, but I don't know if she gave it-- I'll be damned. Carey [K. Jenkins Sr.], John [D. Williams], Robert [A. Kennard], [Arthur H.] Silvers. [tape recorder off] Yeah, save that. Don't throw that away.

I think what Ujima did as far as housing, because it had been at least classified as one of the better examples of inner city kind of-- It wasn't a planned unit development, but I think at least it was a development that encompassed most of the activities which would satisfy family living, as it were. And I think it's kind of a shame that management and probably bickering within the organization that was running Ujima--

HENDERSON: Yeah, there was an article in the Los Angeles Times back in 1990, October 3--let me let you look at it-- and they said, "HUD has taken over troubled apartment complex." I read that and kept that. It was about Ujima.

WILLIAMS: Oh, let's see.

HENDERSON: The article starts there.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes, yes.

HENDERSON: And it looks like they're renovating Ujima.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: I don't know if they've contacted you about that.

WILLIAMS: No. This is October 1990. No, I think that-- See, what happened was that-- Okay, this is when they took it away from [Bruce] Rosette and--

HENDERSON: Oh. So they took it away from the original managers?

WILLIAMS: Well, no, not the original managers. They took it from the entity, the syndicate that bought it and bought the tax benefits from the Ujima Housing Corporation.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: See, the Ujima Housing Corporation had ownership, but they were behind in payments and various other things. So in order to induce Ujima Housing Corporation to transfer those tax benefits to-- I think it was Associated Housing. I don't know. Their names may have been in here, but I know that-- Let me see if I see it here. But anyway, it was a syndicate that goes all over the country buying projects. Let's see if this--

HENDERSON: Let me stop the tape and let you look more closely at the article. [tape recorder off]

WILLIAMS: But you see, they bought out the interest, 99 percent of it, from Ujima, I guess, in '86 or '85. They bought it out early on. The exact date I don't know, but they bought it out. And at that time what they did was they gave the housing corporation, the Ujima Housing

Corporation, and they induced HUD to separate that--what?--thirty thousand square feet? Yeah, I think it was about thirty thousand square feet of shopping center which was in the front of it, but it was separate from the housing. It was on two acres up front there. It was all tied together with one mortgage when we did it originally. But as an inducement for them to get it, they had it separated as the purchasers. Rosette and his group had had to separate it, and then they gave that free and clear to the housing corporation, plus 1 percent, I think, in the housing complex themselves. And they picked 99 percent. And they also then fired the managing entity who was managing at that time. I don't know who that was. But they just said, "Now you people don't have anything to do with this housing, so you can have this up here." And what apparently happened was that they were not, I guess, overseeing the-- And there was nothing in there, by the way; they were just using it for storage and various other things. Because I don't think it was ever leased.

HENDERSON: This is the commercial section?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, the commercial thirty thousand feet. And I think they talked about working out a deal with the [Charles R.] Drew Medical Group for them to start services and social services there. They'd worked on it, but they never got it operational in that sense. And subsequent to

that I think that they had a fire down there. They burned it down. I don't know what the status is now.

HENDERSON: It sounded complex, yeah. Maybe let me get back to this idea. What project do you feel you really liked during that time period? Was there something that came along that really got you very inspired and passionate and you enjoyed doing? Where the design was something that you were able to fully express?

WILLIAMS: All of it. All of it. All of it. Yeah. But I tell you, there was one which we probably haven't talked about, and that one was the Kedren Community Mental Health Center. It's in an unlikely place on 111th Place just east of Avalon [Boulevard]. It was one that was done on a piece of land that Kedren owned, and it was purchased by Dr. Jim Jones. He was a psychiatrist. He started Kedren, I think. And Kedren, of course, was the name of one of his daughters. All the Kedren Head Start [Program] locations, I guess they're still in existence now. Kedren took over the central city's mental health complex, the one there on Gil[bert] Lindsay's location, Gilbert Lindsay Community Center. That was one which I believe convinced people that we could do more than just housing. So it was, "Oh, okay."

Of course, we did a multipurpose center [Florence-Firestone Multipurpose Service Center] for the county at

Compton [Avenue] and Nadeau [Street].

HENDERSON: What was it about Kedren that was so enjoyable?

WILLIAMS: It was the ability to really involve yourself in some of the different activities, in the forms that would evolve out of the activities that had to be performed in that particular clinic. And as I said, we had an assembly area, we had a children's play area, we had offices, and we had exam rooms. [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON: I'll go look at that building. Do you think that there are architectural shapes that respond to the program? Or was it done in a particular style, like Le Corbusian? Or was that even a thought at the time? See, I haven't seen the building, so I'm kind of asking blind questions.

WILLIAMS: I'll say this: Almost every design that one starts with, I think it starts with a preconception of-- Once you get these various functions, you set a concept, and you say, "Okay, I think these forms and these activities ought to relate this way." And once you do that, then you begin to see, "How would I project these three-dimensionally?" And once you get those fixed in your head-- I mean, that's from the individual that's actually involved in it--it's very difficult to disabuse yourself of it. Now, you can go in many other directions,

but once you're fixed, that's where you are, you see.

HENDERSON: In plan, yes.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, in setting this up this way. Then you begin to test that when you have to impose all the other elements that go and then all the other activities. But I think that you can make it work in almost every instance if you've used a reasonable rationale in approaching the solution to that problem. And then, in the interest of Kedren, the location of the forms that we evolved just lent themselves, I guess from an architectural standpoint, to what was eventually the solution, which the state bought and the client bought, and it worked out. I think that the only disadvantage that accrued to this project was the fact that the site was too small for all the activities that we wanted to have go on there. But that was a program requirement. The building would have been better suited to another half acre or acre. But take a look at it and you'll get the-- And of course, that was the early days.

I think I told you we're doing the Theresa Lindsay Senior Citizen Center.

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. That's at Forty-second Place and Avalon [Boulevard]. And I think that--

Well, you talk about buildings. One of the things

that I've found very fascinating was homes. I mean, I like to do those. I did one in La Jolla. I think I may have mentioned it to you.

HENDERSON: Oh, no, you haven't.

WILLIAMS: For a Dr. [Edgar] Guinn. That was particularly satisfying and was also challenging, because it was an uphill site, but it had a great view of San Diego Bay. That was probably two miles from the bay, but it was up in the hills, so you had a better view.

HENDERSON: About that house, the one in San Diego for Dr. Guinn, earlier you had said you had a sort of Straubian approach to house design. Were you still maintaining that, which is kind of post-and-beam and--?

WILLIAMS: Well, actually it-- Post-and-beam, yeah. There's a post-and-beam but not in the true Straubian sense, in that I think I wasn't as rigid as [Calvin C.] Straub, because he did modular post-and-beam, see, whereas I would like to keep it in some modular sense, but all the elements didn't have to be on the same module. Whereas Straub, both ways, see, in transverse and longitudinal directions, he had these modules set. And if we had to move off of that in order to solve the problem, I found no particular infraction to any particular concept that I had. That would not hold me.

But I think one of the interesting things is that

when we had a NOMA [National Organization of Minority Architects] meeting in San Diego several years ago--I'm not sure exactly when, maybe the early eighties--I arranged for Dr. Guinn to have a reception there and feed the guys. And when the guys from the East came out, they were overwhelmed and said, "Well, goddamn! Is this what these people do out here? Did you do this? Great!"

TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE

AUGUST 13, 1991

HENDERSON: On this tape today, I want to cover projects that Mr. Williams has done, his design intentions for them and inspiration for them. Some projects that we'd like to cover would be the Kedren Community Mental Health Center, Theresa Lindsay [Senior Citizen] Center, Harrison-Ross Funeral Home, [Florence-]Firestone Multipurpose [Service] Center, Normandie Villas, and the Breakers. Maybe I should start with what I think is my favorite, and you mentioned in our last session that that was your best one, and that was Kedren. That's a beige brick building on 111th Place. What was sort of going through your mind when you composed that one?

WILLIAMS: It's been a while.

HENDERSON: Well, when I looked at it, it looked very different from previous buildings that I had seen. See, I don't have a certain idea in my mind as to the chronology of all your projects, but its look is very different from the first Harrison-Ross Funeral Home, which had a very Straubian, light, lacy, metal-column look. And then the Firestone Center had a centralized mass; it was two stories, very compact. And then Kedren was very spreadingly, nicely--

WILLIAMS: Linear in its concept.

HENDERSON: Linear.

WILLIAMS: Well, one of the things, of course, that dictated the design approach was the use to which the facility was going to be put. Now, originally we had, as a scope of work, to provide in-patient beds and an out-patient clinic. So it was to be a--

HENDERSON: More like a hospital.

WILLIAMS: A hospital and an out-patient clinic combined. And we, during the evolution of the design-- I mean, the scope of the work just leant itself to the concept of spreading: putting one wing one place, another, and then the central core where all the patients, both in and out, would be admitted, and then they would be distributed to their various activities.

And when we got the word that the state of California then changed its concept-- This was during the [Ronald W.] Reagan administration, right, when they closed all of the warehousing mental hospitals in Patton [State Hospital] and various others, Camarillo [State Hospital] and some of the others that they had around. They said, "We're going to put them in the community." But there were still some patients who they felt needed twenty-four-hour care at the time that they broke down the state caring for patients in mental hospitals. So as we were into the design we

received word from our client saying, "Listen, we've got to talk to you. We've got some other parameters we have to consider." And of course, whenever an architect hears that, you know that that's going to mean trouble. [laughter] You've got to start over again. And of course, they're all working on limited budgets.

But in our meeting, after we found out what it was, they said, "We need to eliminate the sixty- or eighty-bed"--I'm not sure which--"in-patient facility, because they won't pay for that, and we can't afford to do it. They won't give us the money, so we don't have the money to do that. However, we do need some spaces for counseling, so we would have the daily counseling, maybe twice a day in some instances where the patients were in the immediate neighborhood." So fortunately for us it wasn't too difficult to adapt what we had done conceptually to the new program requirements. But we were told that there would be a children's wing and an adult wing. So we said, "Fine." What would we do with that? Because we had hospital in-patient, we had out-patient activity, both adult and infants or children, and then we had the central administrative core, which never changed. We figured it was valid right where it was right there at the first point of contact. And we then just modified our layout, because the functions that had to take place in

the facility were slightly different, but the separation of the activities still remained the same. So we kept the same linear approach. We did gain a little more space for outdoor recreation. And of course I think, as I recall, they said something about, "Let's put a tennis court in." Was a tennis court there?

HENDERSON: I didn't check.

WILLIAMS: They said, "So let's add a tennis court." And, of course, we had outdoor basketball courts and things like this. So the outdoor recreation facilities were added when we were able to do that. But I recall there was an SP [Southern Pacific Railroad] right-of-way along the back. Did you go around the back?

HENDERSON: Yes. I didn't go around to the back, but there was a train track back there.

WILLIAMS: But I think what we wanted to do was, when we made the final concept of the activities for children in one wing and adults in another, all out-patient, and the day-care facility-- They wanted some kind of recreation when they were there. So we said we thought it would make sense to give a theme of a little more playfulness rather than something rectilinear. We said, "Let's get something with some hexagonal--" I think it was a hexagonal--

HENDERSON: Yes, it was a hexagonal-like auditorium.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, right. And then, of course, once you

establish the theme, "This looks fine here." Okay, we've got activity area in the children's wing, we have activity in the adult wing, and then to pull it together, we had children and adult and perhaps community in the Tom Bradley Auditorium, which you saw, so we just used that same thematic design form and replicated it in smaller fashions, larger and smaller, at the end for the adult playroom and the children's playroom. And then, of course, as a juxtaposing of forms, when you're dealing with very strong elements, we sort of simplified the administrative and reception area. We wanted to get that up larger, then, as a focal spot--

HENDERSON: High.

WILLIAMS: So we made that ceiling sixteen to eighteen feet high. I'm not sure what it was.

HENDERSON: A very dramatic entrance.

WILLIAMS: Right. And I think that we at that point said, "This is what to do here." And fortunately for us, the state, who was the funding entity, liked the concept, so they allowed us to proceed with it. Normally they get very austere and spartan in their health facilities. But since they liked what they saw-- And of course, we had the director, who was the sponsor and client. He was fond of it too, so he fought for it, and they got the money to do it. I think that we finally had to get some money from

the city [of Los Angeles] in addition to the state, and I think the [Los Angeles City] Community Redevelopment Agency gave us some money there, too.

HENDERSON: A question: As playful as the whole composition feels, there's also a feeling of sort of serenity, partly I think due to the color choice and very simple forms. There's a hexagon, but it's very readable on the outside. There's an administrative area with a very simple roof. Did the color choice come from you or the client?

WILLIAMS: Oh, no. Well, I think the color choice was ours in the sense that we wanted to make sure that we would elicit the greatest degree of tranquility in people who were agitated. You didn't want to make it look like a hospital or make it feel like a hospital. You knew that you were trying to see if you could reduce the kind of aggravation, agitation, that people felt when they came there. You knew that this was one of the things, of course, that was our charge. You say, "Well, this is a mental hospital. We'll be in and out--" We had to make our best judgment as to what would satisfy us, because we knew that other people would be coming in. [tape recorder off]

HENDERSON: What year was the Kedren project started? And when was it completed?

WILLIAMS: Did you see the dedicatory plaque in there?

There's a dedicatory plaque there in the administration area, which the sponsor and our client insisted on.

HENDERSON: I don't think I saw the plaque.

WILLIAMS: You didn't see the plaque? Okay, the date--

HENDERSON: I can go back and check.

WILLIAMS: As I recall, I think that we probably had-- We had some difficulty. I think it may have started in the mid-seventies. As I recall, it probably was the late seventies when it was completed. Yeah, I think it was the late seventies. I know we spent two or three years in going through the process of approvals and I guess acquiring and assembling funds to make sure that they could get what they wanted. I think it was a protracted period. We were involved in it for quite a while, yeah.

HENDERSON: Can you compare the Kedren project to the Florence-Firestone Multipurpose Center, which I think of as being very, very different in design intent? Tell me about what your intent was there.

WILLIAMS: Well, that's interesting, because in our first contact with the [Los Angeles] County project architect we had some discussion, and his statement was, "Remember, now, you're in an area where--" Keeping in mind this was post-Watts riots. "We don't necessarily want to have something that's open. We want people to feel comfortable and see sunlight, but we also

want them to feel secure and--" See, the county really sort of mandated that we make the building-- I suppose what they were really saying was, "Make it battleproof." [laughter]

HENDERSON: It does have a fortress kind of look.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. "Give it the kind of appearance in both the physical and the aesthetic that would make the people inside feel comfortable, and on the outside it would not be offensive." You'll probably notice that the main structural elements are concrete.

HENDERSON: Concrete posts.

WILLIAMS: Concrete posts and columns going around, right. So we developed that. And of course, with the masonry infill you'll notice the glass on either side of the columns as you come in the corner, mitered glass corners for the offices. And you also had X number of square feet that you had to put on that block. So we had X number of square feet, and I don't remember the total square footing, but it necessitated a two-story building, which in itself sort of, I guess, really intrudes on the space a little higher. I think in that building we had sixteen or fourteen feet floor to floor, because we wanted to give them the flexibility of moving things around. Although it's different in its character, because, you see, Kedren was all one story, although we have some higher elements

there. This being two story and rectilinear in form, it has a certain character that I didn't find too displeasing based upon what we had to do. An interesting observation is that, you know, across the street is a [Los Angeles County] Sheriffs [Department] substation, the Firestone substation.

HENDERSON: Yes, yes, yes, by James Garrott.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Garrott did that. As of the last time I was there, which was probably about four or five years ago, I was talking to the building manager. I think the Building [and Safety] Department moved into that building, too, on the second floor, one of the county departments. Of course, I found it fascinating that during the time that we were doing the building and just finishing the building we never saw graffiti on the walls of the building. And then I said, "Why on earth? Maybe it's because of the sheriffs substation right there." But they had graffiti on the sheriffs substation's walls. [laughter] So I said, "Well, maybe there's something else." So I noted that over time, and I asked the building service person there at Florence-Firestone. He said, "You know, it's very interesting. We never had any problem with graffiti." That was about four or five years ago. I don't know how it is now.

HENDERSON: It's still relatively clean as far as I

remember it. No graffiti on it.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. And I tried to analyze or rationalize why that happened over here and didn't happen-- See, one of the things is we don't have walls around the property, whereas you have walls very close to the sidewalk or the public way at the sheriffs station. We're sitting back, as you recall, on both sides. We do have walls around the patio--that is the community patio.

HENDERSON: That's at the back.

WILLIAMS: At the back, I guess, on the north side, in the northwest corner there. There was a wall there. And [graffiti was] not there, either. So I don't know what the answer is to that reason for not getting graffitied up.

Of course, we have graffiti on some of the pilasters at Theresa Lindsay [Senior Citizen Center], which you may have noticed around there, but obviously they like it, because I think Theresa Lindsay is not a bad solution, either.

I guess in all these approaches that you make, obviously you have to think about the use to which the building is going to be put. And then you say, "What can I do within this parameter of this space that we're trying to define to give it interest? You'll notice that we always try to keep it airy and light. When you get into

the large spaces, you go up over on the side, a clerestory or a skylight, so it certainly relieves the oppressiveness of having a space tight and closed.

So this is one of the prerequisites which I think we like to approach in our design solutions. And I guess over time it's been proved. Because I've always been impressed by what [Frank Lloyd] Wright used to do, getting light into interior space and bringing the outdoor in as close as you can to the indoors. Of course, that's the way I always tried to approach houses, custom houses. Even in multi-family houses we try to do the same thing. We try to get patios outside of the ground floor and balconies at other levels of the development.

But I think that the general design philosophy is to make it work as best you can for what that building is to be put to and make it as pleasant and as aesthetically pleasing as you can. Of course, you always talk about taste and what you think is a good composition and a good juxtaposition of materials and textures and colors, which is all a part of it. I think that you attempt to do that every time out. Sometimes it's not as successful as others, but we keep striving. And of course, now I think that people who work around get influenced by what you are about in your own taste in terms of composition and what you do. I think that the same thing happens, I guess,

with me and relationships with other people who work with me.

HENDERSON: Are there people in the local L.A. area that you can name that you've gotten influences from or you think have been influenced by you that you want to name maybe?

WILLIAMS: Well, I'd say as a designer who influenced other architects whom I like and felt was influential, one especially was George Vernon Russell, who was a professor of mine. I always admired his work. Kenneth Lind. And of course--I think I mentioned this to you early on--the influence of [Richard J.] Neutra, who, when I worked for the National Youth Administration, was working on Channel Heights [public housing project], the one he did out here.

HENDERSON: Where is Channel Heights located?

WILLIAMS: Two hundred twentieth Street off of Avalon [Boulevard] in San Pedro up there.

HENDERSON: Does it still exist?

WILLIAMS: As a matter of fact, probably in some modified form, it still does.

HENDERSON: Okay. I have gone out there and just sort of tried to look for it.

WILLIAMS: It's near Peck Park.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: If you find Peck Park you'll see it. It's on the east side of Avalon or-- I think it's [Avalon] or San Pedro [Street] or one of those streets out in the San Pedro area.

HENDERSON: Pictures of it are in many books, but they never show maps of where it is located in the community.

WILLIAMS: Right, yeah. That's where it is. And interestingly enough, when you talk about influences, of course Neutra and his very stylized detailing in forms and textures, that was his style, and I think that it was influencing. I thought that there was a great deal of rigidity, which I didn't adhere to, although it was his style, and he carried it off beautifully in most instances. [tape recorder off] Where were we?

HENDERSON: We were talking about Channel Heights, but I do want to talk about the Ward Villas project from the aesthetic point of view. I've looked at the plans and have been to the site, and I think it's a first-class facility and has very wonderful qualities. The community building seems like it will be very nice in terms of height and space and the solariums there, the brise-soleil-- There are any number of things. Can you tell me about what your design intentions were for that project? And also, let me go on and say this: some of your other projects were designed without the consideration of

fitting into the community, and that one has some qualities about it that look sort of Victorian that seem to fit into that particular site.

WILLIAMS: Well, I think that you have hit upon a very important aspect, and that is that we had a plethora of community meetings, and we were mandated almost to develop a theme which would at least reflect what may be the design motive in University Park. Now, we were embattled in many instances in terms of what people thought it ought to be, but we said, "Give us an opportunity to develop a design theme which would make us feel comfortable as persons who design in a contemporary idiom, to not try to get a Victorian or a Greene and Greene craftsman look but something that would be befitting three stories--" Some of the others are three story, some are two, and to have it blend as best we could with the kind of design requirements that we had to put 120 units on the site or the open space requirements by the CRA [Los Angeles City Community Redevelopment Agency]--

We approached it from the standpoint of reflecting, of suggesting that this may be what would be perceived as blending. The most important element of all is the roof, twelve-by-twelve pitch. And I said, "There will be concrete [roof] tile, matte glaze concrete tile." And I think that the octagons and the hexagons that we used were

put in judicious places to see if we could get those elements to repeat themselves around so that it was a total environment that we were creating rather than just some placed on here for some kind of applied decoration, if you will, so that we would keep the surfaces relating to one another and then just use the elements to give us the emphasis that we want. In this case, I think the roof and some of the forms of the entry element and the stair along with the octagon at the entry element and the stair, and with the observation platform above--

HENDERSON: A pergola.

WILLIAMS: Pergola, yeah.

HENDERSON: Are you uncomfortable with that blending of contemporary and sort of historic elements? Maybe uncomfortable is not the right word. Without community pressure, would you have done it differently?

WILLIAMS: I might not have been as responsive to the eclecticism that really-- It turned out to be very eclectic. But you see, this is in the eye of the person who is viewing this. They say, "That's fine. That looks like everything else around here." Yet it isn't, and yet it is. So you say, "I fooled them." Maybe you did. And Tania [Miclea] had a considerable influence on this, because she's from the old school. See, I'm from the contemporary school, and she's from a school from her

country [Romania], and she's quite conversant with the classical styles. I am only conversant with them through the history, because we learned history of architecture because it was interesting, and we did it, but we don't replicate Renaissance or Greek or Romanesque. We don't replicate them. You may borrow from them, if you will. We do a lot of borrowing now on these forms, I'll tell you.

HENDERSON: Sure.

WILLIAMS: And that's contrary to what we are accustomed to in Southern California. See, this postmodernism school that you see some architects handle reasonably well and others not so well. But you see a postmodernist like the designer of the [Anderson Building at the Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art]--

HENDERSON: The L.A. County Museum of Art?

WILLIAMS: The L.A. County Museum, which is kind of eclectic.

HENDERSON: Oh, which part of the--? The green tile?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, the green tile, right.

HENDERSON: I think that's Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer.

WILLIAMS: Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer. Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, yeah. They seem to have done a very good job in using postmodernism as opposed to the classical kind of approach that [William L.] Pereira did on the original

museum. So I think that some are handled well and others not so well. But I could not be accused of being in that postmodernist cliché, because I have always been more influenced by the classical contemporaries or classical modernism. You're talking about [Ludwig] Mies [van der Rohe] and [Le] Corbusier and [Erich] Mendelsohn and some of those, [Walter] Gropius. They design contemporary for the ages. And if you did a good job there-- Or even Philip Johnson, the things that he's done. You look at one of his fifty contemporary houses, they're such great homes.

HENDERSON: They're timeless.

WILLIAMS: That's the kind of thing that you try to strive for. But unfortunately the degree of craftsmanship that is required to replicate that kind of architecture is not easily affordable by people who want to do houses now. Now you have to use other kinds of techniques to get that kind of accomplishment.

HENDERSON: Let me bring up one project that I like that does retain a contemporary flair or feel to it, and that's the Normandie Villas on Normandie [Avenue]. Can you tell me about those? Because they appear to be well maintained. They look very contemporary. I love the color. I wish I could live there. What were the intentions behind that? And when were they built?

WILLIAMS: Well, that I think was probably in '81, '79,

'81. They're probably only eight, ten years old, something like that. That was on a piece of land by CRA; they owned the land. It was funded by CHFA, California Home Finance Administration, a state housing agency. Not HCD [Housing and Community Development] but CHFA, which is separate. It was started under the "Jerry" [Edmund G.] Brown [Jr.] administration. I guess he started it working.

What we were persuaded to deal with on that project and its design approach was to really turn outward to the community so that the streets-- You'll notice the streetscape is like townhouses or some brownstones when you come in out of the east, where you get off the street, although you don't get people walking down Normandie very often. But we were persuaded to do this. We had the building turned inward, and we had developed this, always giving respect to the viewer who passes down the street and not stopping. But you'd know that something interesting was going on, because if you looked in the court, which would have been the elevation which would have been exposed to the street, it was a very pleasant facade there. And I think that the individuality was achieved because we had to develop a system of roof shapes which would accommodate some solar panels, and we wanted to orient them to the southeast and west, so we said, "Okay, how do we do that?" So they became a butterfly,

some of the roof shapes there, and it gave us the appropriate angle to put the solar panels on. As a matter of fact, I think this is the only building we've ever done using solar panels for augmenting hot-water heat. And, interesting enough, the owner says the management adores it because it saves him a lot of energy costs. That's when they got rebates from the state for installing solar panel systems in projects. But that dictated that, if you saw that undulating roof there. He said, "Okay, how can we organize this so that we can give it a pleasant kind of a view and yet accomplish what we want?" So we did that, and I think that it turned out very well. As a matter of fact, I like that as a housing project. That's low-rent housing.

HENDERSON: But it looks excellent.

WILLIAMS: I was downtown the other day talking to John McGuire, who is the deputy administrator for housing at CRA. We were in there talking to him, and I happened to look over, and I saw a picture of Normandie Villas. So I looked and said, "Ah, so you like this?" His comment, he said, "I think that's one of the best-looking housing projects we have in the city." He said, "Somehow my architectural staff doesn't like it." I said, "Well, they didn't process it; CHFA did." He said, "That's the reason." They didn't process it. It wasn't processed

through CRA. They just told them it was processed through the state. But in any event, I thought it was an interesting comment. We felt that it turned out fairly-- And the owner was ecstatic. [Al] Maddox and [Joe] Stadler were the developers of that.

HENDERSON: Are there any projects you go out of your way to avoid looking at?

WILLIAMS: That I did?

HENDERSON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: No.

HENDERSON: No. You love them all?

WILLIAMS: Well, no. As a matter of fact, I think that there may be some that one could change something on.

HENDERSON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: But I remember I did projects back in the late fifties, early sixties, which were five-unit and three-unit and two-unit [apartment buildings]. People were doing all kinds of things then. And each time you'd have these economic constraints. Of course, most of them were in the black community. We always had the constraints, but I, fortunately or unfortunately--I think fortunately, economically unfortunately--if I'd spend enough time trying to work out a solution so that when I was driving around, I'd say, "Oh, I did this," and somebody would look at it and say, "Hmmm"-- You know, there would be a

favorable reaction. I said, "I wouldn't do that this way now. I would take some other finishes or I would use another kind of balcony rail." But we did some fairly interesting things early on.

But no, to answer the question is there anything that I did that I would not want to see again, no. I would not allow myself to do that. And I think that part of the satisfaction of this profession is that if you don't get any satisfaction out of that you won't get satisfaction, because this is not the one to go into if you want other kinds of compensations.

HENDERSON: Okay. I want to ask you about one more project. For the Bradley [International] Terminal at LAX [Los Angeles International Airport], what was it like working with [Daniel L.] Dworsky and the other groups? Did you feel like you were able to have the input you wanted to have?

WILLIAMS: It's interesting you should ask that question, because when we were interviewed by the group to be included, I had a conversation with Bill Pereira, who was an instructor of mine at 'SC [University of Southern California].

HENDERSON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: So I knew Bill. And we were talking. But I think that Dan is a strong personality, as is Bill. And

what we did, we had a design team. There were a couple of designers working, and they would come up with different approaches. We'd have partner meetings, and we'd sit and talk about various aspects of it. And only a few times would there be antipathy really between Bill and Dan. Now, Bill was much more laid back. I mean, Bill was sixty-eight [years old], maybe seventy at that time, so he was like, "No, Dan, I don't think we should do it that way. Take another look at that." So we would talk about that.

Now, we had one very heated discussion about a traffic circulation approach that Dan had done. As a matter of fact, he [Pereira] had worked overnight or a couple of nights. It was on his kitchen table. He'd say, "You're on the kitchen table again now, Dan." [laughter] So we would talk about that. So we sat up, and he made the presentation, and we talked a few minutes. And Bill said, "What do you guys think?" I said, "Dan, in all deference, I think that we really create a problem when we split the approach to departures the way we did there. I think that we ought to keep it level and have people going--" "I agree," said Bill. So of course, Dan was then off to defend himself. So they began exchanging words, and finally I said, "You know, Dan, think about it. If you were dragging a piece of baggage, and you had to come over

to some point here in which you had to change levels for your departure to load your baggage, would that be the most comfortable? I mean, see, you'd have to pick it up, you've got escalators-- Well, we've got escalators up here, so I suppose you could get an elevator if you could." He said, "Well, let me take another look at this." So if you go to the Bradley terminal now, you'll see that all the check-ins-- I mean, when you get up to the departure lounge or the departure level, once you get to that level and you take off and you go to the ticket counter and you go over to the baggage where they pick the baggage up, you go all the way out to the north concourse and the south concourse and you never change levels. You change levels only when you have to go downstairs to the arrival level. But departing passengers don't have to deal with that. We changed the levels maybe two, three feet to get to the north and south concourses, but we did that in a ramp, you see, so everybody can pull up there. If you had someone you wanted to take on board and--

But, yeah, that kind of input. I think, in terms of how we finally wound up treating that, it was a joint decision. It was really one of the pleasant joint ventures. And I think the thing that was most amazing was that I don't really believe that they thought that this not-so-young architect who had not done anything of this

magnitude--and neither had Dan and neither had Bill-- Bill had; he'd been in Doha in Qatar. They'd done a huge--

HENDERSON: Oh, this is in--

WILLIAMS: This was in-- Of course, keep in mind we started this in '78. In '79 I think the contract was signed. But anyway, I think that you have a feeling for magnitude and scale. And it turned out that after we'd finished that they said, "Okay, well, John, you take the specs and the technical services, because we want you to monitor construction and attend the meetings at the airport." So being involved from inception to the finish was a tremendous learning experience. I think they were surprised, pleasantly so. But I said, "We're architects." He'd been around a long time and done a lot of things. Of course, Dan had gotten his reputation from the things he'd done, and they'd done some interesting quality of work.

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WILLIAMS: I am looking at a flyer that was handed me. I tell you, I don't recall this particular one, but I see my name is on this, so apparently--

HENDERSON: Maybe you can read some of the names on the flyer. That's a flyer for the Negro in the Creative Arts Committee.

WILLIAMS: Yes, under the direction of Beata Inaya, who is an old friend of mine who introduced me to some of the artists on the left whose names, some are recognized, and others I have paintings of theirs. Wilbur Haynie, and, as I say, Kenneth Kemp. And of course I know Marion Sampler, and I think I've met Laura Soares. But on the other side, the list of architects, you know I'll know all the architects: David Crompton, James [H.] Garrott, Thomas Haywood, Carey [K.] Jenkins [Sr.], Robert [A.] Kennard, Vincent [J.] Proby, Harold [L.] Williams, Ralph [A.] Vaughn, and John [D.] Williams.

HENDERSON: Was that an ongoing committee? Or was it just a one-event kind of situation?

WILLIAMS: It was apparently a singular event. Now, Beata was constantly involved in promoting black artists and architects, so she would intermittently get these folks

together and have an exhibit of their work. On special occasions, I do recall Beata putting together a traveling exhibit, which you--

HENDERSON: Which I have. That was The Three Worlds of Los Angeles.

WILLIAMS: Right. She lived about a block away from me when I was living on Nicols Canyon [Road], so we would visit reasonably regularly. As a matter of fact, I don't know if she's still--

HENDERSON: I believe she has passed.

WILLIAMS: She has passed.

HENDERSON: I don't know that for sure, but I think she has.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. That's a shame. She was a very good person. I think the last time I saw her was at some gallery, and I don't know which art gallery it was. She treated me like her long-lost brother. She was a sweet lady, very genuine, and I think that she had the interests of people at heart. And she especially decried the injustices of not having more black artists and architects involved in the social fabric of our society in terms of making a contribution that she felt they could make.

HENDERSON: What year was this when you last saw her?

WILLIAMS: Oh, it must have been in the very early eighties, very early eighties. I'm not sure exactly what

the specific occasion was, but it was that time.

HENDERSON: She was around in the later eighties, because she organized the Schindler exhibition.

WILLIAMS: For 'SC.

HENDERSON: I don't remember what date that was, but I helped her in that organization.

WILLIAMS: Well, this wasn't the centennial exhibit, was it?

HENDERSON: I think it was.

WILLIAMS: At the [Rudolph M.] Schindler House there on King's Road?

HENDERSON: Yes, yes.

WILLIAMS: That's when I saw her.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: That's when I saw her, because both Tania [Miclea] and I were there. We went there. And they had that excellent food by Wolfgang Puck.

HENDERSON: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, that's when it was. So that was the exhibit.

HENDERSON: Oh, I think I did see you there.

WILLIAMS: At the Schindler House.

HENDERSON: Yeah, I saw you there.

WILLIAMS: Right. And I saw my old friend Frank and talked with him a little while, Frank [O.] Gehry. But

yeah, that was the time. But what year was that? Do you have it?

HENDERSON: I have to look it up.

WILLIAMS: That was the late eighties, wasn't it?

HENDERSON: The late eighties [1988].

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

HENDERSON: Well, let me ask you in a different direction. You served on the registration board of architects [California State Board of Architectural Examiners].

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HENDERSON: Can you tell me something about that, like when you served and what was it like and what some of the problems were, etc?

WILLIAMS: I think the last time I served was in the-- I think I was here, so it must have been '88, '87 or '88, because it's been about five or six years since I've been on the board. But prior to that, I think I served as a commissioner, as a grading commissioner, for probably five years or thereabouts.

HENDERSON: This was like '83 to '88?

WILLIAMS: 'Eighty-three, maybe '82, '83. And I was initiated by Vince [Vincent J.] Proby.

HENDERSON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: When Proby served on the board--he was on the architectural licensing board--he called me one day and

said, "John, are you real busy?" I said, "As busy as any of us are." This was in '82, '83. So he said, "I'd like to have you serve as a grader on the board." And it had not occurred to me, because I was busy doing so many other things, and I suppose that happens to a lot of architects. They get busy doing their thing and they don't readily volunteer for things. But I found that when Vince called, I think we met and we talked about it, and I said, "Okay, I'll serve."

Then, when I got there, I think the first session was grading the design exam. As I recall, it was in San Francisco. And I think Arthur [H.] Silvers was there at the time. But we were grading design exams. And I think it was very illuminating, because I think that what we do is when we get in our day-to-day practice we sort of move away from the time that we started, and we begin to get jaded, I think, if we're not really careful about how we approach solutions to problems. And we saw some real solutions on some of these design exams. [tape recorder off] We'd have a good deal of fun sometimes in seeing the expertness of some of these problems and also the rather prosaic-- We'd ask each other some real deprecating things about, "How did this person get to take this exam? Can you imagine? Look!" [laughter] And as Art Silvers-- Do you know Art Silvers?

HENDERSON: No, I've never met him.

WILLIAMS: Art was quite outspoken, and he had a tendency toward the vernacular. [laughter] He used some terms which I don't think would be appropriate for this session. But he said, "No wonder this architectural profession is going down. If they let people like this--" But those people, of course, didn't pass, so they'd repeat it. But I think that we did have some comments about how they'd qualify some of the applicants so that they could get to a point where they would even be allowed to take the exam. But I suppose that they allowed many times because they couldn't screen them out from the application, say, if you had those qualifications either by working or experience in the field and a year for year as the equivalent, say, of a degree in architecture. So many, I guess, were not really trained; they were draftspeople, and they were not formally trained, let's say. They were draftspeople who were told, "Look, why don't you go and take the exam." But I suspect that those who really had good, solid experience and had done some design would probably get through okay, because they would sit and learn. It's the mind, I guess, a mind-set and what your goals are.

But I think that we did have some questions about how they'd screen these applicants. And in subsequent years I would begin to ask these questions of people in the

profession of education and, of course, one Paul [R.] Neel, who was president of the board for a while and was also the dean of faculty, I think, at [California Polytechnic State University] San Luis Obispo, because I taught there for a while, as you recall. We talked about it. He said, "Well, John, the law just won't allow us to do a prescreening. This is the only place we have to screen, so you guys really have to make good judgments. And this is one of the things that we were always admonished: not to think in terms of where you are or what you think this person should know, but is it enough that he would not be a menace to society? I mean, it may not be the ideal solution, and it may not be one that you would employ, but you can't fail him if he doesn't have, let's say, architectonic manifestations, a flair for drafting or sketching or whatever it is you need to do to transmit your ideas about the problem that was given you to solve. So this was probably the most difficult. And I think that you had to be very deliberate so that you could be as fair as you could to a potential candidate.

When I initially started, I think we graded exams, and your grade would be the one-- They may have one other person look at it. And as the complaints began to arrive at the board, they said, "Maybe we'll have to employ another technique so it won't be just one or two but maybe

three." So when I left there were three persons who had to look at each problem in order to get a pass or fail. And if there were two fails, they'd have a fourth person look at it. If that person said "pass," and you had, say, two passes and two fails, then a fifth person would look at it, and then that would be the deciding vote. But I think it was eminently fair. They gave all of the applicants, I think, all the opportunities. And I think the supposition was that if an applicant got three fails and two passes after five reviews he should not be discouraged, if you want, but he would prepare himself to come back and approach it again. Because if three people said, "We concur that this doesn't quite meet all of the requirements of the problem or it doesn't really appear that this particular candidate had clearly thought about what the solution was," then you had to be reasonably certain that you were not foisting on the public someone who would have really fuzzy thinking about what was happening.

The design problem was probably easier for some of the applicants or candidates than the planning problems. The planning problem, I think, was probably a little more subjective. [tape recorder off] I think that we found that the people taking the planning part had a little greater difficulty with that.

HENDERSON: Now, the planning part, this is site planning?

WILLIAMS: Site planning, yeah. You'd get a problem of, say, a country club. On one side of this country club you want to have, say, an equestrian section and golf. So you had to locate in the prevailing wind and those kinds of things. And I think it was probably because they didn't give enough thought to all the conditions. We had to impose the conditions so that you could really see how logical the approach would be. And I think that this is how you at least came upon some kind of a resolution as to how a person would approach a problem.

HENDERSON: Oh, a question: Did you participate in the formulation of the question? Or did you only grade? Did someone else make up the questions?

WILLIAMS: The first three years I did examining of the candidates' problems. And after three years, I think that Steve Crane called and asked me-- Oh, and Neil Desey, too, whom I knew--Neil Desey, an architect. He lives in Hawaii. I haven't seen him in several years. But he said, "We'd like to have you sit in on some of the question formulation." I think it was a meeting at Monterey [California]. And McGraw-Hill was involved in formalizing these questions. So we would get a group of people, and we'd put them in various smaller groups and would deal with the structure and the mechanical and the planning and the

design. So they would write the exam.

So all in all it was a very interesting experience, and it was certainly educational, because you begin to de-program yourself on what you thought it ought to be or how you ought to examine a candidate or what his qualifications are to be. You begin to see, "Well, that's rational." And then, of course, you also hark back to what your particular problem solution may have been when you were examined, and you say, of course, "It had no relationship to some of the things we see here," because it was complete-- And I suppose that that was probably the case, because I think that-- I know I'd had some years' experience. And after really working in a couple of offices and of course the training at 'SC, because it was a real good design-oriented school-- Some of the graduates took the exam again. We had not too great a difficulty with the exam. So I found that that was a tremendous help on some of the things that we had. So you'd pay attention, and you'd say, "Hey, I know what that is." So it works fine.

HENDERSON: There are some myths about the exam that people have said, like they discriminate against blacks in the exam, but the people's names are not on the drawings.

WILLIAMS: No. It's not identifiable by any manner. We don't know who they are. They are all given numbers, and

the numbers are all on the exhibits that you have. And when you grade it, you grade it by number. Now, I don't know if there is a style that--

HENDERSON: A black style?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, a black style, an Afro-American style, that you could see where you could say, "Hey, this is how this guy would approach this solution" or "This guy must be black," but I think there's certainly an incompetent and a competent category that you are put in. If you're incompetent, then that's manifestly evident; you can see that right away. And when three people look at it and they concur, then, "Hey, you failed, man. You didn't do your homework." So I don't think that--

Now, I tell you where people may have some problem: it's only when they would pass the written and then go for an oral interview. Then there may be some biases there, because I did-- As a matter of fact, I did both evaluating the written and also oral interviewing for probably about the same amount of time. I would go for the written in June, and of course in July, August, we'd have the candidates who'd passed come back for the oral interview at that time.

And then for a while, too, we were doing a lot of examining of foreign candidates.

HENDERSON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: The candidates who would qualify from another country who had a practice would come in for an oral interview, and if they showed sufficient knowledge about codes and lien laws, I think, and if their work manifested competence, you could give them a license. But they were licensed in other countries. And generally speaking, I think that there was a high degree of competence shown.

There were evidences of bias on some of the committees. We would examine these in groups of threes; three commissioners would do the oral interview. And there may have been incidents where-- "Why couldn't he learn to speak English well so we can understand him?" They'd get the communication [problem], but [otherwise] they'd be just like us, if you will. But as long as they were intelligible and conversant, even if they had some accents, I was lenient in that matter. But if they get into--and here are some of the things I talked about-- "It's evident that the person has done this work, and it appears that that's the case, and we've talked to him, and he has a grasp of what there is on these documents, but if he can't communicate with the client he won't get any clients. So you needn't worry about it. He'll learn the language. And if not, then maybe he'll deal with people who do understand him, and then he won't be any competition to you." I suppose there was a bit of the

envy or jealousy of another foreigner coming in to create competition. That could have been the reason for some of the comments. But generally speaking, I think the other guys were very fair, and only on very few occasions did I have to kind of persuade them that "It's fine; this guy's okay." And in other instances I said, "Well, sure." I was dissuaded by saying, "Well, he is weak in this and this. Let him come back. One more time won't hurt." So that would happen on occasion.

But I would say that on no occasion was there any overt manifestation of discrimination and a candidate was failed because of it. I mean, there were none. And there were very few black candidates.

HENDERSON: Oh, really? Very few?

WILLIAMS: We had very few. And walking into the waiting room during the oral interview, that's just the oral interview, because the only way you know there's a black candidate is if you see him in the waiting room. And then in talking with other people who'd served on the various commissions too, there were not too many. But [there are] more in practice in recent years, say, transfers or immigrants from other states coming into California. I don't know what the number is now, but it's a larger number than it was even five years ago.

HENDERSON: Let me jump to another area. I know we've

talked about San Luis Obispo, but can you tell me how you got to where you first started teaching there? How did that come about?

WILLIAMS: I was asked by an alumnus of San Luis Obispo [Benito Sinclair] to call George [J.] Hasslein, who was a dean at the School of Architecture and Environmental Design, because he was looking for career day. So Ben said, "Well, why don't you call George? I told him that you might be interested in coming."

So I called George, and he said, "Glad to have you, John. Why don't you come up? You're just what we're looking for." So I said, "Okay."

So I agreed to go up there for one quarter for orientation and career day. They're having kids who come up, the first freshman class, the first coming into the School of Architecture and Environmental Design. So I went up at that time, and--

HENDERSON: This was about what year?

WILLIAMS: This was '73.

HENDERSON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: And they had in this auditorium, well, probably four or five hundred kids just coming in the freshman class. I guess they're both in engineering and landscaping. All the environmental design disciplines were represented in this class in this auditorium. So I

gave them a talk, talked about myself and about the profession, and went on and on and gave them some of what I thought were the shortcomings of the profession.

Interestingly enough, one of the comments I had, which is kind of interesting-- I may still have that list of comments. I never alluded to the fact that being a black architect was an especial barrier. I just talked about how difficult it is for all architects, and it might be more difficult for some than others. I was just outlining this, because I thought that this was the appropriate way to present it. Because looking out, standing up there on the stage by yourself with all these white faces there, there was no mistaking who they were or what kind of-- Say they were going to talk to their dads or somebody and say, "This guy who was talking to us, he said some things. Is this true about architecture?" It was a generic kind of a delivery, nonspecified toward my own particular thought. It was tough at that time, too.

But I told them what I did and that I had had the fortune or misfortune of having to do housing, but I did a couple of churches and some other things. And that's primarily HUD [United States Department of Housing and Urban Development] housing. I had done some market-financed housing, but for the most part it was residences and multifamily, and multifamily in the areas that I'd

been dealing with were HUD. And of course, at that time I had just finished Ujima [Village], and I had just finished Hunters Point and had done some proposals for some things in San Diego. There was a variety of things that you could talk about, about the agencies and what problems you had in dealing with them.

I said all that to say this: It was the way I was delivering this particular bit of information that apparently impressed these kids there, because when I left and that was over-- Of course, George came in later--he left before I finished--and he was talking, and he said, "Okay, if anybody has any questions, I think John can stay a little while but not long." This period was just an hour, so the bell rang for the end of that session--which, I guess, was one o'clock, something like that--and there were probably ten or fifteen kids who came up on the stage and asked me, "Well, what about this?" One said, "Where do you practice?" One said, "Where is your office?" He was so impressed that he wrote me a letter and said, "You know, John, we've had people up here on career days, and we've had a couple of other black architects"--one being Jack Haywood--and they said, "and of all of the black architects--" I don't know who else went. I don't know if Vince [Vincent J. Proby] had gone up there, too. But "We were most impressed with you because you talked about

architecture. You didn't talk about all that like Jack was talking about, how he was discriminated against in this area and that area." And it was something that they probably knew or suspected. And Jack came after I did, by the way, see. So I said, "Well, they don't all feel put upon in that sense." And of course, I don't know but that for these kids who really wanted to see what architects and architecture may have been about, to beat on them further about, "Well, it's okay for you guys, but it's tougher for us--" And I think that they had gleaned something from that.

But as a result of that, I think it wasn't more than a month later that George called me and said, "Say, how would you like to come up here and take this on for a year teaching one of our classes?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I'm up here, down there." He said, "Well, look, we'll take care of all your expenses at the motel." So I lived at a motel; they call it the Olive Tree Inn. That's where I lived. I stayed up there during the week. I had three design classes and three full-practice classes, and I was up there for that year. I think it was the year of '73-'74. But of course, in '74 things began to pick up down here, so I couldn't afford the time away, so I had to come up and come down.

Another little sidelight to that was that that was

also the first year my son [Doss C. Williams] started at San Luis, so he, interestingly enough, didn't know that I was going to be the career day speaker. So when George came in and he introduced me, I came out-- He was sitting in the front row, so I thought that I would keep my eye on him and see what he was doing. And you notice how when you get uncomfortable, when you're watching and you just kind of screw up, you just slide further down?

HENDERSON: He slid down? [laughter]

WILLIAMS: And then as the lecture, I'd say, or the delivery wore on, you'd see him, and he was sitting up straighter. Because he told me later that his friends who were with him at the time, he told them what it was. But they began to really quiz him then about what he was about and what he was going to do. He's an engineer, by the way. He transferred from architecture into engineering after his second year. But he was telling me that because the classes they had in his first year there were things, of course, that he'd experienced in the field from working in the office and working in our place, they used to call him "Professor," because he knew the things that other kids hadn't had a chance to get exposed to. He was just farther ahead. Which is one of the things we talk about, you know, dynasties and people having opportunities to be exposed to that which they think they have an interest in

on a professional level.

HENDERSON: That leads me to the next area. What's ahead for architecture from your point of view? And this can be either conceptual or you can make it particular with your own firm.

WILLIAMS: I think that one of the things that is going to be necessary is that we're going to have to get involved with computer-aided drafting. My partner [Tania Miclea] and I were talking about that. And I think there's a reluctance or a hesitancy to do it because of the horror stories that you hear from other architectural firms about, "Well, we made the transition. I'm glad we made it, but for a year it was a nightmare." And of course, I don't know what emphasis is being placed, say, on computer-aided drafting in colleges now, because I haven't visited. As a matter of fact, it may be a good idea to go and visit 'SC and see what their curriculum is now. But I think that from a production standpoint and also from a control standpoint and in being able to eliminate some of the egregious human errors in terms of, say, drafting-- Follow-through and coordinating that is such a nightmare for architects because you can get into all kinds of problems with it. So you say, in talking to draftspeople here, "Why did you do this here and over here this is this way?" [laughter] You can put your hands on your head and

say, "Look." And the interesting thing is that you can take a look, say, through a set and things register. You say, "Well, that wasn't like that when my teacher came back here." So, now, why couldn't someone working like this--? And then, of course, the question of being too close to it. But I suspect that you need this because changes are the things that cause it. If you're just drawing one time, and everything is just perfect, you get it done, you have someone check it, that's fine. That's okay. But when you get changes that are related to a plan, if you will, and it may occur on five, six, seven, eight sheets, with computer-aided drafting, if you make that change, then it's related. That means those changes are going to be made on the other sheets. This is not to say that you can't introduce errors in the CAD [computer-aided drafting] system, but if you do, then it will be a consistent error. But you find things that are sporadic when the guys have got problems at home or outside or something. It's a problem. But I think computer-aided drafting is going to be one of the things.

I suppose that architecture is also going to really have to get involved in the political arena. They are going to have to be advocates for better planning and for a better environment. We are certainly going to have to talk about how we provide housing for all the people that

are unhoused at this point. And I don't know that the lip service that is being paid to the solution for the homeless now is going to be sufficient. We're going to have to really get involved and talk about that, being strong advocates for affordable housing. And that's not just for poor people; that's for people in middle and lower-middle income levels who can't afford to buy a home just to realize the American dream. It's almost impossible now, condominiums notwithstanding.

But the various, you know, civic buildings that you see, there are some real interesting approaches to how these things are planned both from a two- and three-dimensional standpoint. And the people's spaces are going to have to be paid more attention to, because you see buildings that are done downtown, and even not in the densely populated areas, where there's just no place for people to stop; you can't stop, and there's no place to sit if you decide "I'm tired" and "We'll just converse here." We've got some plazas inside, but that's private space. There's no public space where you don't feel that you're intruding on someone's private land if you move past the property line there, so you've got a spot that's dedicated to public use.

I'm really kind of encouraged in the last two or three years that things are looking better, and I hope

that black architects are given an opportunity to participate in the larger arena. I think that they are with joint ventures and various other things, and there are a few of us who've had, I'd say, some success in involving ourselves in some of the major works.

And I think that one thing that architects are certainly going to have to recognize is that marketing is so important.

HENDERSON: Oh, yes.

WILLIAMS: It is so important. I certainly have been negligent in many respects this way, because you get a feeling that if you try to do a good job that good things would come.

HENDERSON: Automatically.

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. It doesn't necessarily work that way. No. You've got to have a little push. You've got to push, and you've got to let people know that you're there and that you can do what you can do and that you'll be better off for it, see.

We're just putting in applications now for state work, and we did before, but we're told that there are some opportunities to do some university work, state university. So we were working on that aspect of it. But marketing is most important. I think that, in as much as I am the name on the firm that's being used, I guess

people like to see me do the marketing. You may not be able to hire someone to market at this level. In a small firm you couldn't afford to hire a business development person. But I have spoken to a number of heads of agencies. No matter how large you are, they really like to deal with the principal when you're going out soliciting for work. And then, of course, they ask the key questions, saying, "If it's you that I'm dealing with, well, what's your involvement going to be in the project? I mean, how much of your time can we expect?" Which is a normal kind of question. You get that question all the time. So I think that personal marketing is necessary.

So this is what I'll be doing more of, and maybe it will keep going. Let some of the younger folks do much of the detail stuff that needs to be done. And I think that it will be better. It's getting better all the time. Of course, it's in the latter stages of the career, but some of the best things have been in the later stages. So we keep after it, and you keep working on it.

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