**Charles H. Williams (b. January 25, 1896 Lexington, Kentucky; d. 1 January 1978, Hampton, Virginia)**

**Summary**

In a career spanning 1910-1951, Charles H. Williams was a pioneering educator, author, choreographer, and athletic director at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, an all-black school that focused on the vocational education of young people. His interest in dance came from his work developing new ways to connect physical education, creative movement, and recreation with self-improvement and moral development. Echoing the New Negro philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance and paralleling the efforts of Edna Guy, Hemsley Winfield, and Asadata Dafora, he believed that dance served the important purpose of connecting African Americans to their heritage. Inspired in part by his association with modern dance pioneer Ted Shawn, he founded the Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group in 1934. At a time when higher education was largely segregated, this non-professional African-American concert dance group toured nationally and, in so doing, created a place for modern dance within historically Black colleges and an audience for modern dance among the Black middle-class.

**Early Development**

Charles H. Williams first attended the racially integrated Berea College in Kentucky, but when a state law in 1905 mandated educational segregation, Williams transferred to Hampton Institute, where he became an outstanding athlete and after graduating in 1910 took the position of athletic director. A performance by Denishawn at the school in 1925 introduced him to the world of concert dance and to Ted Shawn, who became a friend and colleague. Williams earned a Master’s Degree at the Harvard Summer School of Physical Training in 1930, and in the summers of 1937 and 1938 he visited the Bennington School of the Dance where he observed classes and saw performances. In summer 1938 he also took class with Doris Humphrey and Hanya Holm in New York City.

In the first twenty-five years of his tenure at Hampton, Williams’ powerful, multifaceted position allowed him to draw on the rich black musical and cultural environment of the school. He organized pageants, drills, various national dances, and physical education demonstrations as part of the Institute’s mission to instill moral lessons and self-improvement. But it was not until 1934 that Williams established the Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group, one year after Ted Shawn had returned to Hampton with his all-male troupe. Shawn’s use of Delsartian plastique (musically-inflected poses), his emphasis on the male dancer, and his own interest in ‘Negro’ themes appealed to Williams’ developing aesthetic. Also influential was Williams’ trip to the 1933 Century of Progress exhibition in Chicago, where he saw traditional dances from Nigeria and Ghana—‘a pleasing discovery,’ he wrote in the Hampton journal, *Southern Workman*, for the traditional dances countered stereotypes of African ‘jungle’ dances in popular entertainment. Rather, ‘they tell a story of war, thanksgiving, death or love, and are connected in some way with the life of the people.’[[1]](#endnote-1)

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Williams created a diverse repertoire of dances with the help of several male students from Africa and with the assistance of Bernice Smothers and later Charlotte Moton, herself a student at Bennington.[[2]](#endnote-2) He presented dances on black cultural themes, adapted African dance forms, and pursued more abstract compositions that emulated Shawn’s emphasis on male dancers. (Group works featuring women were generally choreographed by Smothers or Moton.) The first performance of the Creative Dance Group in 1934 included *The* *Feast of Ramadan*; *Ya Ma Wisee*, a dance of thanksgiving; and the very successful *Men of Valor*, a high-intensity athletic piece, which drew from sports activities such as boxing, sprinting, and shot putting and reflected both Shawn’s influence as well as Williams’ own extensive experience with athletics. In 1935 Williams created *Labor Rhythms*, which was inspired by black labourers in Cuba and included a section choreographed by Ted Shawn entitled ‘Cutting the Sugar Cane.’

Critical reaction to the company was generally favorable, although the company’s performance style was seen by some as reserved and not fully integrated in its aesthetic focus. Inspired by Edna Guy and Alison Burroughs’ Negro Dance Evening in 1937, Williams scheduled his Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group at the same New York venue later that same year. Introducing the student ensemble to readers of *Dance Observer*, Williams described his intention to instill in members of the group ‘a feeling of pride and genuine appreciation for a great racial heritage.’ He goes on to note that the group had performed for both ‘Negro and white’ audiences at historically black colleges as well as at elite women’s colleges such as Bryn Mawr.[[3]](#endnote-3) In other words, Williams aimed for as broad an audience as possible, despite the de facto segregation of many theatres during the 1930s.

**Legacy**

Williams’ pioneering fusions of dance, physical education, and embodied Black culture helped establish new standards for the educational and creative self-expression of young people. Along with Asadata Dafora, he was among the first to introduce traditional African dance to the concert stage and, along with Hemsley Winfield and Edna Guy, he was among the first to address issues specific to the Black experience. And, like Margaret H’Doubler at the University of Wisconsin and Martha Hill at Bennington, Williams was among the earliest educators to advocate for modern dance as integral to the university curriculum. Many members of the Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group went on to teach dance and physical education at schools and colleges across the country, and they took with them Williams’ ideas about dance as a means for education in cultural diversity.

**Carl Paris**

**Selected Choreographic Works**

*The Feast of Ramadan* (1934)

*Ya Ma Wisee* (1934)

*Men of Valor* (1934)

*Labor Rhythms* (1935)

*Cycle of Depression* (1935)

*Dances of the People* (1935)

*Cake Walk* (1936)

*Juba* (1936)

*African Dances* (1936)

*Haitian Dances* (1936)

**Artist’s Writings**

Williams, C. (1923) *Sidelights on Negro Soldiers*, Boston: B.J. Brimmer. Rprt (1970) *Negro Soldiers in World War I: The Human Side*, New York: AMS Press.

---------- (1928) *Cotton Needs Pickin’: Characteristic Negro Folk Dances*, Norfolk: Guide Publishing Co.

---------- (1937) ‘The Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group,’ *Dance Observer* 4 (8): 97-98.

**References and Future Reading**

Emory, L. F. (1988) *Black Dance from 1619 to Today,* 2nd ed.*,* Princeton: Princeton Book Company Inc.

Laverty, M. A. (2012) *Finding A Way Out: Charles H. Williams and the Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group,* Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.

Manning, S. (2004) *Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Perpener, J. O. (2001) *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond,* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

**Suggested Paratexts**

The Hampton University Archives has photographs of the Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group. See reproductions and captions in Perpener (100 ff) and Manning (40-41)

**Notes**

1. Qtd in J. Perpener (2001) *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and* *Beyond*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bernice Smothers was a graduate of and faculty member at Hampton who also studied with Margaret H’Doubler at the University of Wisconsin, according to her biography on programs from 1935 and 1936. Charlotte Moton was a graduate of Tuskegee and the Sargent School of Physical Education at Boston University and had also studied with Pauline Chellis in Boston. Programs from 1936 through 1941 list her as Charlotte Moton Kennedy, and the black press noted she was the daughter of Tuskegee founder Robert Moton. Among her works for the group were *Negro Spirituals* (1935) and *Finding a Way Out* (1935). After leaving the Hampton faculty, Moton subsequently worked in public affairs, eventually becoming a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State under Lyndon Johnson. Her second husband was Mareo Hubbard, and her papers at the Library of Congress are held under the name Charlotte Moton Hubbard. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. C. Williams (1937) ‘The Hampton Institute Creative Dance Group,’ *Dance Observer* 4 (8): 97, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)