



Charl Ormond Williams

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She Stood For Separation: Meet Charl Ormond Williams — Feminist, Advocate For Public Education And A Key Figure In The Founding Of Americans United

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In the photo of Americans United's founders taken in 1948, Charl Ormond Williams stands out: She's the only woman in the group.

The more you learn about her, the more you realize that it's not surprising that Williams, an educator, advocate for women's rights and lifelong activist, would have joined a group of male clergy and others for a cause she believed in. Williams was always one to break the mold. At a time when few women had professional careers, Williams was determined to make her mark in the world – and she did exactly that.

Being among AU's founders was just one of Williams' many accomplishments. Born in 1885 in Arlington, Tenn., Williams decided early in life to dedicate herself to public education. She began teaching in 1903, and just one year later was appointed principal of Bartlett Secondary School. A few years later, she transferred to Germantown High School to teach but was soon appointed principal there.

Williams later taught in the mathematics department at West Tennessee State Normal School (now the University of Memphis), but in 1914 she returned to secondary education and took the position of superintendent of public instruction in Shelby County, Tenn., a slot she held until 1922.

Her time in Shelby County was productive. As the online Tennessee Encyclopedia reports, "She revolutionized the county school system, increasing its funding, adding new school buildings, and doubling school attendance. During her tenure, Shelby County's schools rose to national prominence." (According to Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, a Williams biographer and history professor at Arkansas State University, Williams showed an early interest in church-state separation when she refused to allow ministers to have to access to children in the county schools.)

Williams was committed to rural education – for everyone. Education was segregated by race at the time, but Williams pushed for equal opportunity for all children, regardless of race or gender, and she worked to improve facilities for Black students.

But Williams knew she had to do more than focus on rural Tennessee. She was convinced, for example, that the only way to boost funding for public education was to secure the vote for women. She became a suffragist, playing a pivotal role in securing Tennessee's ratification of the 19th Amendment by mobilizing women for the ratification effort. Tennessee's vote was crucial because it gave the amendment the final state needed for ratification at the national level, and

Williams was on hand to witness Gov. Albert H. Roberts sign the state ratification papers on Aug. 24, 1920.

Williams, who was active in the Democratic Party, was elected vice chair of the Democratic National Committee in 1920. She was the first woman to hold a position that high, and in 1944 played a crucial role in persuading the party to adopt a plank calling for federal aid to public schools.

With her profile rising, it wasn't long before Williams ascended to the national stage. In 1921, she was elected president of the National Education Association (NEA). Although she was not the first woman to hold this position, she was the first woman from the rural South to do it. From there she moved to a staff position with the NEA as national field secretary and lobbyist.

"She served with distinction in that office until she retired, traveling thirty to fifty thousand miles per year, lecturing, serving on a variety of boards and committees, and writing numerous articles and two books on educational reform," observes the Tennessee Encyclopedia.

In 1935, Williams was elected president of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and lobbied the group to endorse the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1955, she was elected vice president of Phi Beta Kappa, the oldest academic honors society in the United States. The Women of Achievement website notes one other unusual honor: "Charl was named one of the 12 American women competent to hold the presidency of the United States by the president of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs."

A confidante of Eleanor Roosevelt, Williams in 1944 took part in two White House conferences. The first, in June 1944, was titled "White House Conference on How Women May Share In Post-War Policy-Making." The event came about in the wake of the creation of an organization called the Committee on the Participation of Women in Post War Planning, created by women academics and others in 1942. (Unusual for groups at the time, the committee included Black women's organizations.)

Roosevelt supported the committee's goal of boosting women's participation in international affairs and convened the conference, with Williams serving as conference chair for the event.

Williams wanted to see women serving in government and in the federal judiciary. Again, she was ahead of her time. While a few appointments were made, they were far short of Williams' dream.

The second event was the "White House Conference on Rural Education," which took place in October 1944. was among 230 rural educators at the event, which included Black educators. Attendees highlighted problems at rural schools, including poorly equipped facilities and under-paid teachers, and they produced a Charter for the Education of Rural Children, which stated that children living in rural areas had the right to a modern elementary and secondary education, regardless of "race, color or situation." Williams was quoted in a *New York Times* story advocating for a federal program of aid to rural schools.

Williams' vision for public education was far-sighted. She lobbied for a federal Department of Education in the 1920s and '30s, something that did not become a reality until 1979. She also pushed to end the common practice of limiting teaching jobs to single women.

Williams also believed firmly that public funds should be limited to public schools, and that public education should be neutral on matters of religion to ensure a welcoming atmosphere for all students. These stances undoubtedly led her to align with Americans United in 1947. She

served on the organization's first executive committee (a term equivalent to board of directors), spoke at its national conferences and represented the new group in the media.

In 1949, Williams appeared on a television program titled "Court of Current Issues" broadcast by the since-defunct DuMont Network. The program took the form of a mock courtroom proceeding debating the question, "Should Federal Funds for Education Be Used for Public Schools Only?" Williams' partner was Joseph M. Dawson, the recording secretary of AU's executive committee. The two squared off against the Rev. John Courtney Murray, a prominent Catholic theologian, and Porter Chandler, an attorney. During the event, all four participants were cross-examined as if they were on trial, with a judge presiding and 12 observers seated as a jury. At the conclusion, the jury voted 9-3 to side with Williams and Dawson.

That same year, Williams played a behind-the-scenes role in a controversy that attracted national headlines. U.S. Rep. Graham A. Barden (D-N.C.), had proposed a bill that would direct \$30 million in federal aid to education. Barden's proposal included no money for private religious schools, which infuriated some members of the Catholic clergy.

Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York City launched an aggressive attack, calling Barden a "bigot" who "vented his venom" on children. Williams thought the attack was unfair, and she approached Eleanor Roosevelt to urge her to defend Barden's bill in her nationally syndicated newspaper column "My Day."

Roosevelt took Williams' advice. Her column, which ran in newspapers on June 23, 1949, was blunt. She wrote, "Those of us who believe in the right of any human being to belong to whatever church he sees fit, and to worship God in his own way, cannot be accused of prejudice when we do not want to see public education connected with religious control of the schools, which are paid for by taxpayers' money. If we desire our children to go to schools of any particular kind, be it because we think they should have religious instruction or for any other reason, we are entirely free to set up those schools and to pay for them."

Roosevelt went on to write, "The separation of church and state is extremely important to any of us who hold to the original traditions of our nation. To change these traditions by changing our traditional attitude toward public education would be harmful, I think, to our whole attitude of tolerance in the religious area. If we look at situations which have arisen in the past in Europe and other world areas, I think we will see the reasons why it is wise to hold to our early traditions."

Spellman was not pleased and blasted Roosevelt as "an unworthy American mother," a move that turned out to be a huge blunder. Roosevelt, the widow of a popular president, was beloved by the American people. Reaction to the cardinal's broadside was swift and unrelenting. Facing a growing chorus of disapproval, Spellman trekked to Roosevelt's home to offer a personal apology.

Williams in 1950 spearheaded AU's efforts to organize youth activists and opened up her home in Washington, D.C., for an inaugural meeting. Church & State reported, "Miss Williams' decision to call the meeting was prompted by her profound conviction that those who will lead tomorrow must train today, and that it is the youth of America who have most at stake in the current struggle to preserve American guarantees of religious liberty."

Later that year, Williams shepherded passage of an NEA resolution affirming support for separation of church and state and opposing public funding of private schools. The resolution noted that religious groups have every right to operate their own schools but went on to say,

“The Association believes that these schools should be financed entirely by their supporters. The Association therefore opposes all efforts to devote public funds to either the direct or the indirect support of these schools.”

Not long after, Williams delivered a major address in New Orleans to mark American Education Week. Her speech was titled “Public Funds for Public Schools Only.”

Williams retired from the NEA late in 1949, but she remained active in the causes that were important to her. In 1954, after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down segregation in public education, some Southern states set up voucher plans to fund all-white private academies. Williams was appalled and wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt, “I have talked to leaders in Virginia and South Carolina, and I told them in no uncertain terms that abolishing the public schools and turning them into private schools would be an asinine procedure.”

As Wilkerson-Freeman wrote in a chapter on Williams in the book *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times*, Williams “was especially appalled as reactionary forces took hold in the South and used religion-based private white schools to preserve segregated education. She considered this to be a dangerous breach of Jefferson’s ‘wall of separation between church and state’. . . .”

Williams died on Jan. 14, 1969, in Washington, D.C., and was buried in her hometown of Arlington, Tenn. Her papers are held in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

In an article announcing her death, *Church & State* observed, “A tireless worker, Williams served on a number of committees of Americans United, and, even in retirement, often visited with its leaders at the national headquarters. She was always available for advice and counsel.”

In her home state, Williams has not been forgotten. Officials in Memphis have erected an Equality Trailblazers Suffrage Monument in the city’s downtown that honors the women and men who fought for suffrage. Sculptor Alan LeQuire has created bronze busts of six people for the monument, which were installed last month. Among the historically significant figures is Charl Ormond Williams.