

Proclamation

on the Occasion of the
Anniversary of the 104th Birthday of Franklin Hall Williams

Declaring October 22, 2021 “Franklin H. Williams Day”

Whereas, Franklin Hall Williams was born on October 22, 1917, in Flushing, New York, graduated from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1941, thereafter served in the United States Army, and earned his law degree from Fordham University School of Law in New York City in 1945; and

Whereas, Mr. Williams served as an Assistant Counsel to Thurgood Marshall, who was then Special Counsel to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (“N.A.A.C.P.”), and from 1950 to 1959, served as the Director of the West Coast Office of the N.A.A.C.P. and was credited with major inroads in the civil rights movement, including successfully litigating cases on school desegregation and restrictive covenants; and

Whereas, Mr. Williams played a significant role in challenging the systematic exclusion of African Americans from juries and helped lay the foundation for the Supreme Court’s formal end to that practice some 40 years later in *Batson v. Kentucky*; and

Whereas, Mr. Williams was instrumental in the development of the Peace Corps and eventually became the Peace Corps Regional Director for Africa, with the Peace Corps currently honoring his memory with the “Franklin H. Williams Award,” which has been given to over 90 outstanding returned Peace Corps Volunteers; and

Whereas, Mr. Williams went on to serve as the United States Ambassador to Ghana and his contributions as Ambassador were formally recognized by the State Department, which presented him with a Distinguished Service Award, and by numerous Ghanaian tribes and communities; and

Whereas, after returning from Ghana, Ambassador Williams assumed the Directorship of the new Urban Center at Columbia University in 1968, and from 1970 to 1990 served as President of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, promoting educational opportunities for Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans; and additionally worked to persuade the Fund’s board to divest itself of holdings in corporations that did business in South Africa, which at that time was engaged in the racially segregated practices of apartheid—an influential action that was later adopted by other major foundations and institutions; and

Whereas, in 1988, then-Chief Judge Sol Wachtler appointed Ambassador Williams to serve as Chair of the New York State Judicial Commission on Minorities, charging him with the responsibility of conducting extensive research on the perception and treatment of people of color in the court system, and the Commission issued a report in 1991 which revealed a severe lack of diversity on the bench and court management positions, and a widespread perception of racial bias in the courts; and

Whereas, the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission, named in honor of the distinguished attorney and civil rights leader, was permanently established in June 1991, and is composed of 28 diverse members, who are judges, attorneys and court administrators appointed by the Chief Judge of the State of New York to develop strategies to make the court system more responsive to the issues facing people of color in the courts, including litigants and members of the legal community, and to implement recommendations to address those issues; and

Whereas, the Williams Commission is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary this year as a permanent court-based commission committed to racial and ethnic fairness in the courts and is chaired by Hon. Troy K. Webber and Hon. Shirley Troutman, Associate Justices of the New York State Appellate Division, First and Fourth Departments, respectively; and

Whereas, a recent award-winning documentary, entitled “A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams,” narrated by actor Sterling K. Brown, examines the life of the trailblazing attorney-diplomat who devoted his professional life to building bridges between people and breaking racial barriers, and ensures that Ambassador Williams’ life story and contributions to civil rights will continue to be shared for future generations and inspire others to do what is right in the struggle for equal justice; and

Whereas, in 2020, Chief Judge Janet DiFiore appointed Jeh Johnson, former Secretary of Homeland Security, as Special Adviser to conduct an Equal Justice Review of the New York State Court System’s policies and practices relating to issues of racial bias and fairness, and the Williams Commission’s Co-Chairs advised and supported Secretary Johnson in his review of those policies, practices, rules and programs; and

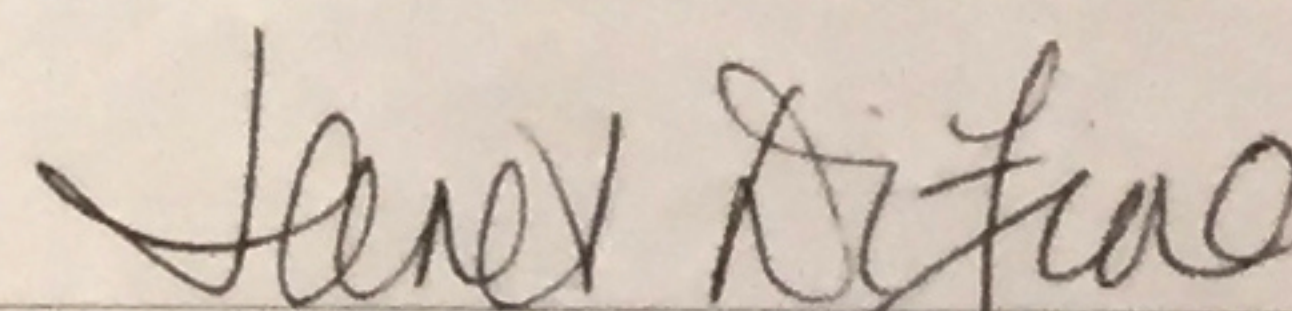
Whereas, in October 2020, the Special Adviser on Equal Justice issued an extensive report, setting forth thirteen recommendations to address racial bias and intolerance within the New York State Court System, reiterating concerns originally raised by Franklin H. Williams in his 1991 report, and making clear the importance of giving the Williams Commission a larger platform to effectuate its mission of eradicating systemic racism in the courts; and

Whereas, it was Mr. Williams’ unwavering pursuit of equal justice and his efforts to address and correct the perception of injustice that resulted in the Commission being named in his honor and becoming a permanent entity in the courts whose legacy continues today as the Commission advances its initiatives to improve diversity and ensure equal justice and fairness in the New York State Court system; and

In recognition of all of the above-said accomplishments, I, Janet DiFiore, Chief Judge of the State of New York and Chief Judge of the Court Appeals, do hereby order that October 22, 2021, is proclaimed “Franklin H. Williams Day” in honor of the distinguished civil rights attorney and statesman, Franklin H. Williams, who devoted his professional life to the cause of civil rights and worked to transform the New York State Court System’s treatment of people and litigants of color.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty-second day of October of the year 2021.

Date: Albany, New York, October 22, 2021



Hon. Janet DiFiore
Chief Judge of the State of New York

