

# A Bridge to Justice

## The Life of Franklin H. Williams

narrated by  
Sterling K. Brown



Buffalo • Toronto Public Media

## Discussion Guide

Civil rights leader, lawyer, diplomat, organizer of the Peace Corps and its first African-American director, United Nations representative, president of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, associate of Thurgood Marshall, and first chair of a unique judicial commission dedicated to racial fairness, Franklin Hall Williams was a visionary and trailblazer who devoted his life to the pursuit of civil rights—not through acrimony and violence and hatred, but through reason and example. Recent events in our nation’s history and the troubling resurgence of the white supremacy movement make it painfully clear that the battle for civil rights is not one that has been fought and won, but rather one that demands eternal vigilance. Franklin Williams’ inspiring life story and his impact on the civil rights movement and on the court system is a story that simply must be told and must be remembered by those to whom he handed the baton of freedom and equality.



Photo credit: NYS Court of Appeals

“A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams” is a half-hour documentary that explores the life of Williams and his contributions to the civil rights movement and the unified courts system. The documentary was developed by the New York State Unified Court System, working with a professional production company. The program includes archival footage of Ambassador Williams, Oval Office audio of President Lyndon Johnson, and then-Solicitor General Thurgood Marshall discussing Franklin Williams. It also includes insightful interviews with former Chief Judges Sol Wachtler and Jonathan Lippman, introspective footage of the Ambassador’s son and namesake, and several other interviews with scholars, civil rights advocates, and others who knew Franklin Williams.

*“We must not stop now.*

*A nation that has come so far, must not now give up the struggle to rid itself of racism.”*

*Franklin H. Williams*

## Introduction

Recent events in our nation's history and the troubling resurgence of the white supremacy movement make it painfully clear that the battle for civil rights is not one that has been fought and won, but rather one that demands eternal vigilance. Franklin Williams' inspiring life story and his impact on the civil rights movement is a story that simply must be told and must be remembered by those to whom he handed the baton of freedom and equality. As we learn about the civil rights movement and the continuing struggle for equality today, a lot can be taught from the life of Franklin H. Williams. What can we learn from his drive and dedication? How can we honor his work by continuing it in our own way?

The documentary, "A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams," and this discussion guide can be valuable tools to educate students and community members about the importance of Franklin Williams and his objectives. In

addition to this discussion guide, accompanying lesson plans for middle and high school students can be found on PBS LearningMedia and the project website at [wned.org/FranklinWilliams](http://wned.org/FranklinWilliams).

Discussion questions and video can play a supporting role in understanding what role Franklin H. Williams played in the civil rights movement and the New York State Judicial System as we know it today. The impact that Williams had can be examined by using the "A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams" program and having follow up discussions. The program may be shown in its entirety or in segments.

There are many themes featured in "A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams" that can be used to initiate meaningful discussions about this important aspect of U.S. history. Some of the themes that can be explored are the importance of civic engagement and the courts - including jury service, the impact of the court system on the preservation of civil rights and civil liberties, racism, civil rights advocacy, the importance of diversity, and the Judicial Branch and Judicial Independence.

*"By ensuring diversity in the courts, we reinforce the public's confidence in an impartial justice system.*

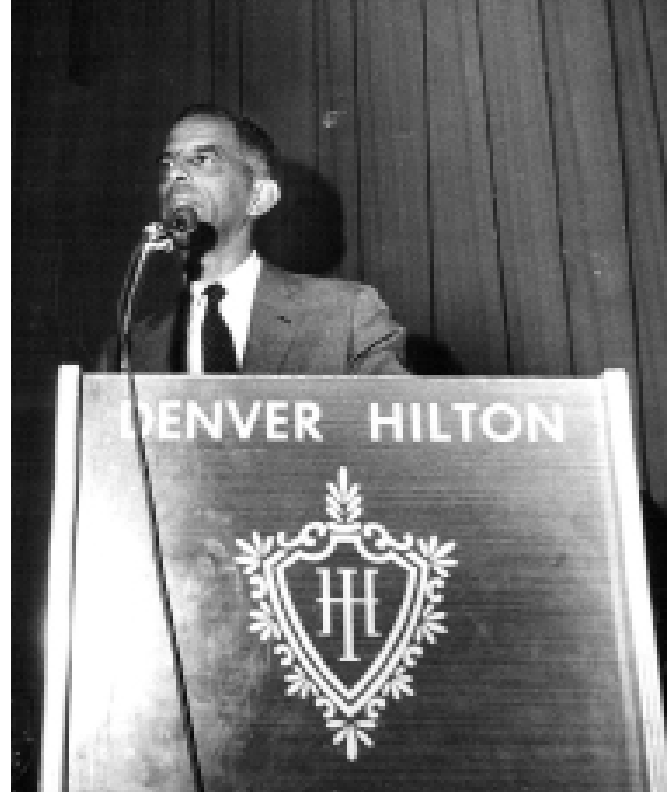
*For it is only through knowledge and awareness that we can defend the principle of justice for all..."*

*Honorable Rose H. Sconiers*

## Screenings and Discussions

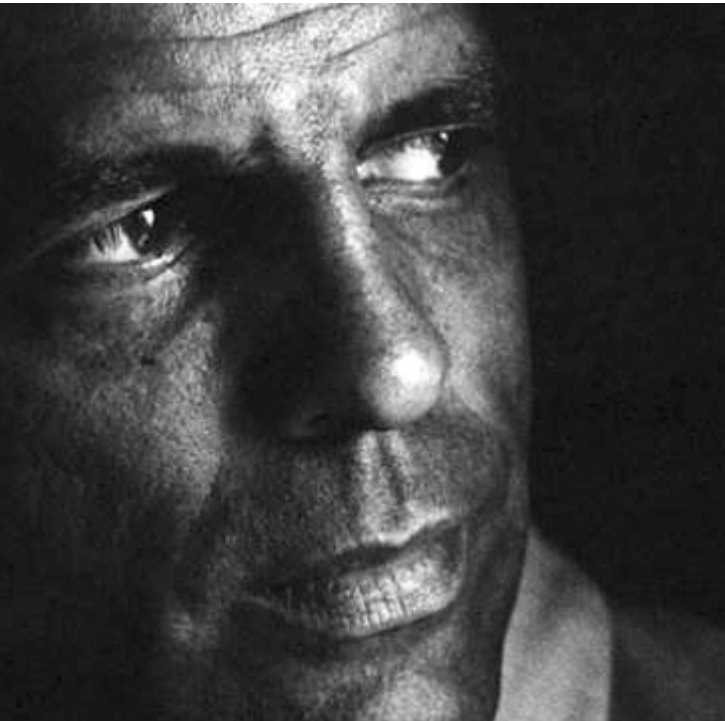
Viewing "A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams" can be a great tool to raise awareness and get people to recognize the significant contribution that Franklin H. Williams had to the civil rights movement. Williams' story emphasizes the dedication that he had to the judicial system and establishing and maintaining equality and diversity within it.

Whatever the setting or audience, using any of the following suggestions can lead to an engaging and powerful event.



*Photo credit: Getty Images*

- Find a location where “A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams” can be screened – access to the internet will be necessary to play the film from the website.
- Have a virtual screening - internet access will still be needed to access the video.
- When planning a community discussion around “A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams,” inviting related speakers to be a part of the event is encouraged.
- Follow the screening of “A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams” with a discussion.



*Photo credit: Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission*

Guest speakers or a panel of experts can be very useful for discussions. Some guests to consider are local or national racial equity advocates, historians, members of the judicial system, or other representatives from powerful movements such as Black Lives Matter to draw comparisons. There are many local and national organizations that can be used as a resource for partnering with or securing guest speakers. Reach out to members of your own community who may be able to help out locally.

“A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams” may be shown in its entirety or, if time is limited, a selected chapter or two may be screened. Below is the list of chapters with approximate run time.

- Introduction (approximately 1 1/2 minutes)
- Who is Franklin Williams? (approximately 6 minutes)
- Williams After College (approximately 4 1/2 minutes)
- Groveland (approximately 4 minutes)
- Ambassador Williams (approximately 4 minutes)
- The Commission (approximately 5 1/2 minutes)

After watching “A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams,” invite your guests to share their thoughts on the program and how it relates to their own work or experiences, allowing time for questions and answers from participants. To continue the discussion, whether with panelists or participants, the following suggested questions can be used.

## Suggested discussion questions for students or community:

- What does fighting for civil rights mean to you?
- What makes something worth fighting for to you? Do you think Franklin Williams always did the right thing?
- Would you have done everything that Williams did? Why or why not?
- What were some strategies used to advocate and fight for civil rights? What strategies did Franklin Williams use? What strategies does the Black Lives Matter Movement use? How are they similar and different?
- In any movement, why is important to have allies? How was Honorable Sol Wachtler an ally to Franklin Williams?
- How did the civil rights movement shape what our country looks like today? What role did Franklin H. Williams play?
- What shocked or surprised you the most about Franklin Williams' life and work? Was there anything that stood out to you in particular?
- What role does the government and court system play in the area of civil rights?
- What do civil rights guarantee to all citizens of our country? What do you think still needs to be done to protect civil rights of all people? Do you believe the promise of civil rights for all citizens has been fulfilled?
- What does advocacy mean to you? Who can be an advocate?
- What are topics you would advocate for?
- What are ways to advocate for marginalized communities? How can you advocate for your peers or community members?
- How can young people advocate for an issue they care about? Who can they look to to be an ally?
- Can you think of a time where you thought it was important to stand up for yourself or someone else? Explain.
- Can you connect past and current inequalities- how is race still a factor when looking at equal rights for all people?
- What does judicial independence mean? What factors are in place to assure judges are free from public opinion?
- How do you think the court system would be different if judges were not independent from public opinion or other branches of government?

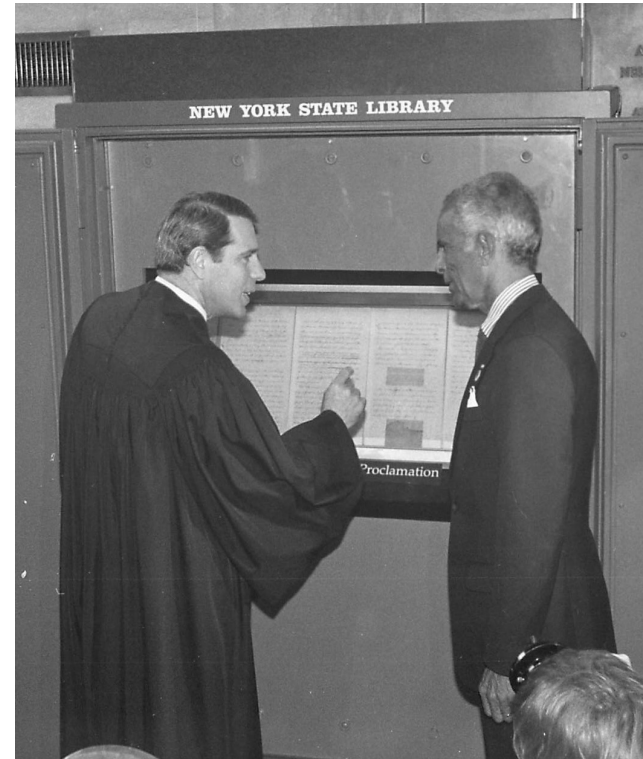


Photo credit: NYS Court of Appeals

## **Classroom Resources**

“A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams” would be a great addition to any unit teaching the Civil Rights Movement, activism activities, the judicial branch of government, or contemporary connections like the Black Lives Matter Movement. The program can be screened in a classroom or school in its entirety or in segments and followed up by asking students the guiding questions provided above.

Classroom curriculum, to be used with the documentary “A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams,” is intended to be used with middle and high school students. Lesson content is based on the documentary as well as its important themes. Lessons are aligned to New York Social Studies Education Standards, but meet many national standards as well.

The full accompanying lesson plans for middle and high school students can be found on the project website at [wned.org/FranklinWilliams](http://wned.org/FranklinWilliams) as well as on PBS LearningMedia. There are also a limited number of flashdrives containing all videos and educational materials for distribution.

## **About the Documentary**

“A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams” was conceived, developed, scripted and brought to fruition by John Caher, Senior Advisor for Strategic Communications, New York State Unified Court System, and Joyce Y. Hartsfield, Esq., former Executive Director of the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission (1992-2019). Enid Gort, Ph.D., served as project consultant. The project was funded primarily by the New York State Unified Court System, with generous support from the New York State Bar Foundation and the Historical Society of the New York Courts. Nicholas Ullo, Principal Management Analyst and videographer for the court system, filmed several interviews.

Support for the curriculum materials that accompany “A Bridge to Justice: The Life of Franklin H. Williams” was provided by the New York State Unified Court System and Buffalo Toronto Public Media.