

A RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE WINDSOR AFRO AMERICAN CIVIC ASSOCIATION

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ABSTRACT

*The Windsor Afro-American Civic Association (WAACA) was one of the first and only community service-based organizations dedicated to serving the town's Black residents. Founded in 1982, WAACA's early beginnings coincided with Windsor's rapid racial diversification during the late-20th century. Social and political participation from Windsor's Black population was statistically low at the time, but WAACA sought to change this. Over the span of two decades, WAACA led many initiatives to increase the visibility of Black Windsor residents. This essay coincides with the Windsor Historical Society's 2023 exhibit entitled **Inspiring Equal Participation: Windsor Afro American Civic Association.***

Following the arrival of English settlers in 1633 and the concurrent depopulation of indigenous groups, the racial and ethnic composition of Windsor became primarily white. This remained the case for more than three centuries. However, the first indication of imminent demographic shifts came in 1980, when the town's white population fell below 90 percent for the first time in Windsor census history. The Black population rose from 2.8 percent in 1970 to 9.8 percent by 1980, making up 2,476 out of the total population of 25,204 residents.

Merely two years later in 1982, social activist Willie Graham began to take note of the concerns faced by Windsor's Black community. In addition to low civic and social engagement among the town's Black residents, the Windsor school system also lacked the resources needed to support students of color. To tackle these issues, Willie Graham and her husband Albert invited eight Black couples to their home to form the Windsor Black Caucus. The organization was later recognized as the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association.

Community service was a key component of WAACA, and many of their efforts involved helping students. This included providing financial support for high school students seeking higher education. WAACA also encouraged Windsor's Black residents to become familiar with one another and to participate in civic activities as well as town politics.

"At the time, I had four children growing up and I found that you just didn't get to know your minority neighbors unless you were involved in the schools," Willie Graham told the *Hartford Courant* in 1989. "We also wanted some means for our kids to know one another – for our kids to get some scholarships."¹

¹ Lisa Richardson, "Organizer makes a difference: Willie Graham's work helps civic association influence community," *Hartford Courant*, November 29, 1989, D3.

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Prior to the establishment of WAACA, there were virtually no organizations in Windsor specifically created to benefit the Black population. The Greater Hartford Black Democratic Club and other Black community groups operated in neighboring towns and drew membership from Windsor residents like Willie Graham. The exception is the short-lived Windsor Citizens Civic Association. Founded in December of 1956, WCCA was the response to calls for an organization that would represent the needs of Windsor residents. Most members lived within a two-mile radius of Kennedy Road and the newly constructed I-91. Throughout the 1950s, this area had a high concentration of Black residents.

As a political organization, WCCA was a leading voice in the opposition to unrestricted zone changes in the Kennedy Road and I-91 area. These changes would shift the region from a residential zone to a business zone, and members expressed concern about potential deterioration of the area as a result. WCCA also noticed that applications were submitted to make zone changes at Park Avenue and Poquonock Avenue, which were historically white neighborhoods. The application gave residents a say in the outcome of zone changes, but this option was not extended to residents of Kennedy Road.

Other efforts made by WCCA included voter drives to increase political participation and renaming McGee Street, which is now Indian Hill Road.² Notably, WCCA entered a float in the parade for Windsor's 325th anniversary in 1958. The organization operated until 1961, and although it is unclear whether WAACA drew any inspiration from WCCA, both shared similar foundations and objectives.

Organizational Structure

When the state of Connecticut officially incorporated WAACA as a 501(c)(3) in March of 1983, there were eleven officers:

President: Bernard Crowley

1st Vice President: Rufus Battles

2nd Vice President: Stanley Cicero

3rd Vice President: Frank Jacobs

Treasurer: William Bailey

Assistant Treasurer: Albert Graham

Recording Secretary: Vivian Cicero

Correspondence Secretary: LaBarbara Crowley

Parliamentarian: Shirley Freeman

Historian: Dr. Ivor Echols

Assistant Historian: Bertha Arnold

² "Oppose Zone Change," *Hartford Courant*, September 10, 1957, 24.

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These officers made up WAACA’s executive committee, which held executive authority over the organization. Willie Graham is noticeably absent from this list, but she was still very active in WAACA. Later that same year, Bernard Crowley presented Ms. Graham with a plaque that formally recognized her as the founder of WAACA.

In addition to the executive committee, WAACA had eleven subcommittees in 1983. The number of committees decreased to six by 1991, and this included fundraising, education, community awareness, membership, cultural, and social action. Each committee consisted of WAACA members and was led by a chairperson who reported to WAACA’s three vice presidents. The functions of each committee are as follows:

Fundraising	Education	Community Awareness
Obtained financial support from the community in both public and private sectors for WAACA programs	Monitored educational activities in the Windsor school system and organized programs for students	Observed issues in Windsor and extended help to the youth and the elderly.
Membership	Cultural	Social Action
Sought to secure additional membership for WAACA by way of marketing	Created cultural events that focused on presenting culture and history to the youth of Windsor	Responsible for bringing members together for informal social gatherings

Note: WAACA later introduced a Scholarship Committee with similar functions as the Fundraising Committee.

By 1993, WAACA developed a system of by-laws that detailed the purpose of the association and the distribution of power. Revisions made to these by-laws in the following years resulted in several changes to the structure of WAACA, including the reduction of officers. Starting from 1996, WAACA would only have six officers – President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Historian, and Parliamentarian. Despite the presence of an executive committee, WAACA members had legislative authority over the association. Therefore, the executive committee was subject to any decisions made by the members and could not take any action that contradicted the consensus.

To become a member of WAACA, an individual had to be an adult resident of Windsor and pay dues yearly. The cost of membership varied over time, but it was \$15.00 between 1991 and 1994. Attending meetings, which took place on the second Thursday of each month, was one of the requirements for WAACA members. One of the most important gatherings was the annual meeting, as this is when officer elections occurred and when members received the annual report. In general, WAACA meetings often involved planning and discussing events that members were also expected to participate in.

WAACA Mission Statement

“We the members of the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association hold as our mission, the enhancement and facilitation of equal participation within all aspects of the political, social, and economic processes within the Windsor community.”

(Windsor Journal, October 29, 1982)³

Engaging and Serving the Community

Over the years, WAACA hosted a wide variety of programs designed to benefit the entire Windsor community, many of which were free of charge. One example of this was the Annual Celebration of the Black Experience, an event that took place every year during Black History Month for more than a decade. The first of its kind occurred on February 11, 1984, at L.P. Wilson Community Center and had free admission for the public. It included an arts and crafts sale, performances by the A.E. White Chorale (a choir from the Metropolitan AME Zion Church in Hartford⁰), the Artists Collective Dance Theater of African American Dancers, and poet Carolyn Dixon. Thirman L. Milner, who was the Mayor of Hartford at the time, also served as a guest speaker. In later years, the event featured groups like the Police Athletic League (P.A.L.) Drill Team and the Jazz/Gospel Choir from Windsor High School.

Another program that WAACA regularly held was an Educational Awareness Seminar. Free of charge, this workshop provided high school students and parents with valuable information on obtaining financial aid, interpreting test results, and career development. Although the workshop was open to students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, it gave Black students an opportunity to discuss their unique concerns about higher education that were not being addressed by the school. For instance, some students asked questions about how to evaluate a university’s curriculum, how to prepare for college, and whether they should attend a predominantly Black or predominately white school. Attendance rose from 10 students and parents in 1986 to 70 in 1992, proving that this seminar served as a much-needed resource to quite a few students of color in Windsor.⁴

WAACA also organized several fundraising events to support their work in the community. Of these were an annual spring dance, a New Year’s Eve gala, a trip to Foxwoods, an annual fall fundraiser, and many more. In 1987, the fall fundraiser included a luncheon and a fashion show that featured the Flare Fashion Group, a modeling agency run by Windsor resident Gladys Jackson. The fashion show, along with many other fundraisers, served as a way to raise money for WAACA operations and to fund scholarships for Windsor students. Each year, the organization awarded two students with \$500 to pursue higher education, and the application included an essay, two letters of recommendations, as well as information on their

³ This is the first iteration of WAACA’s mission statement, which was revised multiple times between 1982 and 1996.

⁴ Stan Simpson. “Afro-American Civic Association plans educational-awareness session,” *Hartford Courant*, January 11, 1993, C5D.

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extracurricular activities. The essay prompt varied between each application cycle, but the 2005 scholarship required students to write between 250 and 300 words about racial profiling and personal experience as a victim or witness to discrimination.

The two scholarships were later named the Willie Graham Scholarship and the Billie Rodgers Scholarship to recognize two notable members of WAACA. Billie Rodgers was the president of WAACA in 1987 and made history in Windsor that same year by being elected as the first Black female president of the Board of Education. Much like Willie Graham, Rogers was active in numerous organizations, including the Urban League of Greater Hartford, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and the Windsor Democratic town committee. The impact that Willie Graham and Billie Rodgers had on the Windsor community and beyond is undeniable, and WAACA sought to shed light their continuous efforts to serve the town.

Willie Graham's daughter Kimberly Graham and granddaughter Kai Davis remember that WAACA's founder had a legacy of activism and community service. Originally from Washington, Georgia, Willie Graham relocated to New Britain, CT in the 1940s as a child once her father found employment at a brickyard. She later settled in Windsor with her husband Albert, and quickly became involved in the town as well as the Greater Hartford area. In an oral history interview with us, Kimberly Graham stated: "[My] mom was very active here in the town of Windsor. She was a notary as well as a justice of the peace. [...] She was very active in an organization called the Makaila Court Daughters of Isis which I believe is still in existence, and they did a lot of charitable events. She was active in her church. We were baptized and grew up in the Metropolitan AME Zion Church in Hartford."

Meanwhile, Kai Davis shared a few fond memories of her grandmother, describing Willie Graham as a compassionate individual who deeply valued her family. In a separate interview with Kristen Davis and Albert Graham Jr., two children of Willie and Albert Graham, both elaborated on their mother's commitment to making a difference in her community. Kristen Davis also spoke of Willie Graham's close relationship with Senator Christopher J. Dodd, along with the crucial role she played as the liaison for his senatorial campaign.

In May of 1992, WAACA celebrated their 10-year anniversary by hosting an event that honored Willie Graham as the founder. In attendance were individuals such as Gayle King, who was the Mistress of Ceremonies, and Senator Dodd. Gayle King previously worked as a news anchor for WFSB in Hartford and is now the co-anchor of *CBS Mornings*. Graham first became familiar with Senator Dodd after working as a volunteer coordinator for his senatorial campaign. After noticing her successful contributions to his campaign, Senator Dodd offered Graham a position as a full-time assistant, and their friendship remained constant in the years that followed. In a letter addressed to WAACA for the 10th anniversary, Senator Dodd reflected on the achievements of WAACA as an entity and of Willie Graham:

For the past 10 years, WAACA has enriched and strengthened the fabric of our community by encouraging the active participation of its African American members in every aspect of Central Connecticut's social, cultural, and economic enterprises. WAACA can be proud of the wide recognition it has gained due to its constant support

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for high school and college students seeking to continue their education, for civic organizations promoting cultural programs, and for its sponsorship of much-needed educational workshops. [...] I am honored and delighted to participate in this special celebration recognizing Willie's dedication to the Windsor community and the State of Connecticut. [...] This is a well-deserved and fitting tribute to a woman who has tirelessly given of her time and talents.

Congresswoman Barbara B. Kennelly and Connecticut State Representative Annette W. Carter also extended their congratulations to both WAACA and Willie Graham. At the 10th anniversary celebration, attendees heard words from keynote speaker Senator Dodd, WAACA Historian Annie McGeachy, and President Stanley Cicero. Several others also spoke of Willie Graham's accomplishments, including family members and friends, before she was formally honored with a plaque.

Only six months after this celebration, Willie Graham sadly passed away at age 64. Two years later, in 1994, Billie Rodgers passed after a battle with cancer at age 46. To this day, both Graham and Rodgers are remembered as hardworking leaders with a passion for improving their community.

Fostering Equal Participation and Representation

Two of WAACA's top priorities were increasing the visibility of Windsor's Black residents and addressing the challenges they faced. Both priorities often went hand in hand, as many of these challenges stemmed from the lack of representation and Black participation in multiple areas. Town boards and committees, for example, consisted entirely of white members for years, and Black residents were not showing up to the polls. One of the first signs of change came in 1989 after Guy Jacobs, a founding member of WAACA, was elected to Town Council as its only person of color. Although WAACA's growing membership supported Guy Jacobs's campaign, his success primarily came from voters in the Poquonock area, which had a very small Black population. In a 1991 *Hartford Courant* article, Guy Jacobs stated: "The minorities who move to Windsor use it as a bedroom town. We're not really active in the community. But we can't blame the community for that, we have to blame ourselves for that."⁵

To combat this lack of social and political involvement, WAACA began encouraging its members to become active on other local boards. Individuals like Stanley Cicero served on the Northwest Park Committee and others joined the Youth Task Force, School Advisory Board, and town commissions. In addition, WAACA made an active effort to increase awareness about voting among the Black population by visiting polling stations and informing voters about local candidates. Members of WAACA served the Windsor community both inside and outside of the organization, as they frequently volunteered at places like the Senior Center and the Food Bank, as well as a host of others.

⁵ Mike Swift, "Blacks seeking stronger political voice: Rising numbers of minorities in town prompts call for cohesive community," *Hartford Courant*, Feb. 28, 1991, B3.

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The Windsor Afro-American Civic Association acted as a voice for Black Windsor residents and their concerns on several occasions. One matter that became the subject of controversy was the Board of Education's decision to close John Fitch School and Clover Street Elementary School and restructure the grade levels. Within months after the formation of WAACA, members took action by protesting these plans at a Board of Education meeting, suggesting that closing both schools could disrupt the racial balance in classrooms and the quality of education for students of color. "We felt appalled that throughout the issue of closing schools and restructuring grade levels, the quality of education was not addressed," Rufus Battles, founding member and vice president of WAACA, stated in 1982. "Juggling people around to reach percentages isn't necessarily the answer. But no matter where the kids go, we want quality of education."⁶

Following these protests, the Board of Education later rescinded their decision to close both schools and Clover Street School still stands today. However, the new plan, Simulation 17, once again proposed the closure of John Fitch School as well as L.P. Wilson School. A four to three vote led the Board of Education to approve this plan and both John Fitch School and L.P. Wilson School closed shortly after.⁷ This decision pushed WAACA further into action, and the organization continued to speak out on other issues that often related to education.

In fact, similar concerns about racial balance resurfaced in the beginning of 1990 when the Windsor Board of Education introduced a plan to desegregate schools in accordance with Connecticut's 1969 Racial Imbalance Law. To prevent racial division within schools, the state required school districts to submit annual reports on the status of enrollment among students of color. If the number of minority students did not adequately reflect a town's demographic makeup, then the town needed to create a plan to correct this racial imbalance. The law required schools to keep minority enrollment below 25% of the town's total minority population. At the time, students of color made up more than 50% of the Roger Wolcott School, and passing 55% would have put the school out of compliance with the law.

In Windsor, the racial balance plan included an all-day kindergarten program that would provide daycare before and after typical school hours, and it was specifically designed to attract Black students from Roger Wolcott School. WAACA actively encouraged Black parents to reject the racial balance plan, emphasizing that minority students should not have to carry the burden of desegregating schools. In addition, they disapproved of the plan because it required the busing of students to Poquonock School, and there were concerns about elementary school children traveling on I-91 during ongoing construction. It is worth noting that the initial protests against closing the John Fitch and Clover Street schools also stemmed from safety concerns, as students from the Poquonock region would have to be bused to L.P. Wilson School if the original plan passed in 1983. However, the main difference is that the widening of I-91 was merely a proposal at that point. It was already in the midst of construction by 1990, adding a very real sense of uneasiness for Black parents. In an open letter sent to multiple newspapers in Windsor and Hartford, WAACA stated:

⁶ Anne Bonney, "Racial Balance, Economics Weighed for Windsor Schools," *Hartford Courant*, October 12, 1982, C5.

⁷ Steven Mauren, "Say Goodbye to Fitch School," *Windsor Journal*, October 22, 1982, 1.

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The racial balance plan adopted by the current board's majority members stipulating that African American parents in the Wolcott school district will be asked to voluntarily agree to bus their children across the town to the Poquonock School seems to us to ignore the question of their safety. The widening of I-91 is no longer a proposal, it is a reality. It would seem to us that the safety of these children, who will range from age 5 years old and up, will be bused earlier and later than what is a normal school day if they are to be considered for all-day kindergarten and before and after daycare, which would mean that during the winter months, they would be on a bus on I-91 after dark. Taking these factors into account, it seems that the safety of these children is in greater jeopardy than children would have faced in the early 1980s during the issue of closing the L.P. Wilson School, yet the board is not addressing the safety issue in its racial balance plan. Why? Could it be that the children to be bused are African American and don't deserve to be safe?⁸

To prevent this plan from materializing, members attended meetings and open forums held by the Board of Education to vocalize their opposition. After hearing the perspectives of Windsor residents, the Board of Education finally settled on a racial balance plan in April of 1990. Under this new plan, the board unanimously agreed to create an all-day kindergarten for the following school year and to move sixth graders to Sage Park Middle School. The all-day kindergarten program included either one or two full-day classes at Roger Wolcott School and was intended to draw in non-minority students from other schools in Windsor. A significant change to the racial balance plan was the elimination of a proposed daycare before and after school hours, which was the primary source of concern for WAACA.⁹

The expansion of Sage Park Middle School, an effort that WAACA supported, was the only aspect of this plan that became a reality. Budgeting issues led to the closure of Roger Wolcott and the redistribution of elementary students throughout the town's schools just a year later. Even so, the influence of WAACA and other local organizations they collaborated with to get their message across is clear. Due to their petitioning of the racial balance proposal, the Board of Education made several changes to the plan that reflected the concerns of parents and civic organizations alike. Although the town faced some hiccups along the way, Windsor schools are currently in compliance with the racial balance requirements.

WAACA In Hindsight: Reflections from Previous Members

For more than two decades, the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association made a continuous effort to increase Black representation and to create a system of educational and financial support for minority students. Due to the dedication of WAACA's membership and executive board, the town of Windsor began to reflect its increasingly diverse population in multiple areas, including town politics.

As we look back at WAACA in the present day, there are several questions that remain about the inner workings of the organization and how it was perceived. To answer these questions, we

⁸ The Windsor Afro-American Civic Association, "Reject busing plan." *Hartford Courant*, February 14 1990, C2.

⁹ Melanie Winters, "Racial Balance Agreed Upon: All-Day Kindergarten Adopted," *Windsor Journal*, April 27, 1990, 1.

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conducted a series of oral history interviews with former members and associates of the civic group. Each interview provides insight into the lives of the people behind the organization, many of whom had similar experiences to one another.

As is true for most WAACA members, Florence Barlow's story does not begin in Windsor. Rather, it starts in the southern U.S., as she was born in Georgia before her family moved to Pompano Beach, Florida. For unknown reasons, Florence and her brother were sent to live with their aunt and uncle in New York when she was seven years old. Shortly thereafter, Florence's family bought a home in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and this is where she spent the remainder of her childhood and teenage years. By the mid-1960s, Florence and her husband James relocated to Connecticut for a job opportunity, initially seeking housing in Hartford. After being denied an apartment due to their race, they opted to live with James's relatives until purchasing a home in Windsor several years later.

It did not take long before Florence became involved in the Windsor community. The first organization she joined was Ebony and Ivory, a group that gathered during the 1970s to discuss racism. She was also involved in the Democratic town committee, much like Billie Rodgers, before joining WAACA. As a former two-term president and vice president, Florence was one of the leading figures behind WAACA in the 1990s. She and Vivian Cicero, another founding member of WAACA, essentially became synonymous with the organization by serving as spokespeople. "They've always picked on Vivian Cicero and I because we were the two blacks in Windsor who [were] involved," Florence told us in an interview. "If someone said to me last week, 'Why is your picture always on the front page of the paper?' Because they don't have any other black people that are involved. [...] It's that type of thing. Vivian Cicero and I always just loved being part of Windsor."

Florence spoke about WAACA's dedication to improving schools, including their combined effort with Pratt & Whitney to install new computers at Clover Street School. At the time, Pratt had an outreach program that involved working with a non-profit to fund their community project proposals. Seeing the need for a computer lab, WAACA made this their proposal, which led Pratt & Whitney to donate 17 computers to the school. WAACA also desired to hire more teachers of color in Windsor, but this proved to be a very difficult task because teachers sought higher wages in other towns.

When asked about the key accomplishments of the organization, Florence stated: "To me, it was opening up the door for more young African Americans to see that their lives in Windsor [were] just as important as anyone else, and you could do anything you wanted." She also went on to discuss WAACA's involvement in the Shad Derby Pageant, a competition held annually by the town of Windsor as part of the Shad Derby Festival. Each year, a Shad Derby Queen is selected by a panel of judges based on their community involvement and extracurricular activities. Between the first Shad Derby Pageant in 1966 and WAACA's inception in 1982, there was only one student of color chosen as Queen, and that was Vallerie Lynn Huyghue in 1978.

To increase the number of Black participants in the pageant, WAACA began encouraging students to apply and became a sponsor for Queen candidates. One of the first candidates

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sponsored by WAACA was Stacy Ellison Veney, a senior at Windsor High School in 1993. During an oral history interview, she recalled her experience competing for Shad Derby Queen, which she did alongside her close friend Lisa Maynard.

[...] As far as African Americans, [Lisa] and I were the only two that were contestants and prior to us, I had never – and there may have been some contestants – but I don't ever recall seeing anyone on that float every year that looked anything like me. And so that was the huge thing for me. You know, growing up in Windsor every year going to the Shad Derby. Seeing these beautiful girls and beautiful gowns, waving on the float. I looked at my mom. I said, "I want that. I want to be that."

As a sponsor, WAACA covered the cost of entering the pageant. Florence Barlow helped Stacy immensely during the application process, which involved submitting multiple essays that were later read at the Shad Derby Champagne Reception and the Coronation Ball. Stacy was not selected as the Shad Derby Queen that year, but she was chosen as Miss Congeniality by the other queen contestants and received a \$350 savings bond. Upon graduating high school, WAACA also provided Stacy with scholarship money to support her college education. She went on to attend Howard University and is now a practicing nurse.

Today, Stacy continues to look back on WAACA fondly, and she identified Anne Ford as someone who had a great impact on her when she was younger. Anne Ford was the principal of Windsor High School and a former member of WAACA. Even beyond Stacy's time in Windsor, she maintained contact with Anne Ford, stating that she was one of her favorite people in high school.

The Shad Derby is one of many examples of how WAACA became more visible and involved in the town of Windsor. Along with joining the Shad Fest Bureau, which organized several aspects of the Shad Derby Festival including the annual gala and parade, WAACA also participated in the Northwest Park Country Fair. Joan Huyghue, a previous member of WAACA and the mother of Shad Derby Queen Vallerie Huyghue, remembered tabling for the event and selling food to raise money. She also recalls taking part in Northwest Park's Halloween Night, where members volunteered to dress up in costumes and pass out candy to children.

Joan Huyghue first joined WAACA in 1992, and she served as the treasurer for two years. When asked about WAACA's involvement in town politics, she responded: "I don't think we were allowed to be political. We did have members that had been elected [to political offices like] the board of education [and Town Council]. Tim [Curtis] was on the Town Council, the board of education. But I don't think we were allowed to play a political role in town." Given WAACA's 501(c)(3) status, the organization was not allowed to publicly endorse or fund a political campaign. They could, however, participate in activities that encouraged nonpartisan voter registration, and this was the extent of their elected politics engagement.

Nonetheless, several WAACA members became elected town officials without the intervention of the civic group. As previously mentioned, Timothy Curtis, who joined WAACA upon the suggestion of founding member Guy Jacobs, eventually gained a spot on the Windsor Town

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Council after winning the 1999 election. Before this, he served on the Board of Education for three terms between 1991 and 1997 and was one of very few board members of color.

“At that point in time, the fear was that there could be no more than one person of color, African American, who could win because the election was really five of one party and four of the other,” Tim stated in an interview. “It was never a super majority, but the fear was if more than one black person ran for office for a particular party, that particular party would lose the majority. So, I was the black person on the board when I went on. Guy Jacobs was the black person on the Town Council.” For this reason, and because he did not want to compete against Guy Jacobs, Tim waited until Guy Jacobs stepped down from Town Council to run for a seat. Timothy was a Town Councilor for ten years, simultaneously working as a teacher and as the Deputy Mayor. Despite his busy schedule, Tim still managed to be an active member of WAACA. In his eyes, WAACA successfully served its purpose of bringing Black Windsor residents together and making an impact on the community. Tim’s wife, Cheryl Curtis, also participated in WAACA activities on some occasions but was more of a casual member. Even so, she recalled attending potluck dinners and other fundraisers held by the civic group.

Following the 2001 municipal election, Timothy served on Town Council alongside another WAACA member Lenworth Walker. At the time, they both represented the Democratic Party and remained the only people of color on the council until Timothy’s final year in 2005. One of the efforts Councilman Walker made as a Democrat was fighting to hold a West Indian parade on the Windsor Town Green. As a native of St. Andrew, Jamaica, Walker felt as though Windsor’s West Indian population lacked proper representation in town activities. He was able to put on this celebration in 2002 but received significant pushback from other Democrats on Town Council due to safety concerns, preventing the parade from occurring in Windsor again. This is one of the reasons Len Walker decided to walk away from the Democratic Party.

He was particularly involved with WAACA during this time, and regularly attended their meetings and events with his late wife, Warnie, who was the organization’s secretary. Lenworth remembers WAACA as a collective of individuals who gathered to discuss issues faced by Windsor’s Black population and how they could address them. In response to a question about his perception of WAACA, Lenworth said: “We didn’t have posters marching in front of town hall, but we used diplomacy, and I think it was effective.” Today, he serves on Town Council as a Republican, but is referred to by some as a ‘Windsorcrat’¹⁰ because of his dedication to town politics regardless of political affiliation.

Jennie Dixon, also a native of Jamaica, was first introduced to WAACA by her neighbor Guy Jacobs. She strongly believed in WAACA’s mission and was passionate about informing people of color about the political arena as well as the importance of community involvement. As a business consultant with a special interest in financial literacy education, Jennie used her knowledge to benefit Windsor students. She organized many of WAACA’s financial aid workshops and invited community members to speak to high school students at career day events.

¹⁰ In his 2021 interview, Timothy Curtis used the term ‘Windsorcrat’ to refer to Lenworth Walker.

“Some members of WAACA would come mentor students from the high school. So there were a number of events to help the children along and to help plan their futures and their careers,” Jennie stated. The motivation behind this mentoring program was the perceived lack of effort made by school counselors, as Jennie and other parents believed they could do more to help students. Jennie saw her wealth of knowledge as a gift and felt a duty to pass it on to those who needed it most.

As evidenced by many of the oral history interviews, the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association served as a passage for Black residents to further integrate themselves into Windsor. Essentially, the organization sought to find innovative ways for people of color to participate in town activities as a collective and on their own, as well as build a community amongst themselves. Vice President Marjorie James, who had not heard of the civic group when Willie Graham approached her in a grocery store to join, mentioned looking forward to meetings and other social gatherings. She especially enjoyed attending WAACA’s Christmas parties, where members celebrated the holidays together with a Yankee gift swap.

Iva Allison, a secretary and historian, valued the group because of the discussions they had on important topics such as race and education in Windsor. Through WAACA, she fostered meaningful connections with other individuals and institutions in Windsor like Archer Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church, where she continues to attend and serves as the historian.

WAACA’s Gradual Conclusion

Over time, WAACA experienced a steady decline in membership, with the number standing at 80 in 1989 and falling to about 60 in 1993. During the early-to-mid-2000s, total membership continued to drop until there was an insufficient amount of people left to maintain the organization. Various factors contributed to WAACA’s decline, but several interviewees cited the aging membership as one primary cause.

President Richard Quintero discussed some of the challenges he faced during this time, as he had a vision of expanding WAACA’s role in the community and reaching a wider audience. However, this proved to be difficult given low attendance at meetings and a lack of engagement among the remaining members. Richard also indicated that young people were not particularly interested in volunteer work, and there was no line of succession in place to keep the organization going.

Interestingly, as pointed out by member Shirley McKnight, WAACA’s disbandment came at a time when Windsor’s Black population was larger than it had ever been. She also shed light on a point of contention that may have led to the dissolution of the group, and this was the inclusion of non-Black members.

WAACA had a total of three white members, with the first being Jim Mason. A writer for the *Hartford Times*, he had a special interest in civil rights, and even interviewed Malcolm X during

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his career.¹¹ He was a chairman of WAACA's scholarship committee, and frequently volunteered for the organization. Next came James Silver, who served as the pastor of Poquonock Community Church for over 30 years. Lastly, there was Bill Warner-Prouty, a member of the Windsor Human Relations Commission and an associate minister at First Church of Windsor. Through the Human Relations Commission, he became very involved with efforts to achieve racial balance in schools and arranged study circles to promote diversity education among students. As stated in a 2022 interview, Bill joined WAACA because he supported their mission, much like Jennie Dixon. He also understood the necessity for an organization that could represent people of color and their needs, other than town committees with a white majority.

Despite this, some WAACA members opposed the idea of having white members, and Tim Curtis reflected on these sentiments in his interview with us, noting:

The fear at the time was that WAACA would be taken over by white people. More and more white people would say, "Oh yeah, I'd like to join WAACA." And so the voice that WAACA had, of just African Americans, would be lost. You know it's almost like the fear of white people when Black people moved into the neighborhood. Here there was a Black organization that white people were interested in becoming a part of and we thought that we would lose our voice. I mean there was really only one person who was interested that I can recall and so [we] changed our bylaws to say that it was open to Windsor, as a whole. And a number of people broke away from WAACA at that point. They decided that they didn't want to be a part of WAACA because the original intent of having a civic organization solely for African Americans was now lost.

Given the gradual nature of WAACA's dissolution, many interviewees were unable to identify the exact year that it occurred. However, news articles seem to suggest that the group ceased operations between 2006 and 2007, as there is little to no mention of WAACA as a collective body beyond that point. During WAACA's three-decade life span, the organization created a legacy of inspiring more equal participation in the Windsor community. From creating a space for people of color to giving out thousands of dollars in scholarships for Windsor students, WAACA changed the lives of hundreds of Windsor people.

With the absence of an organization similar to WAACA in Windsor today, when the town is more diverse than ever, there remains the question of how we could see a resurgence of Black civic groups. According to many interviewees, the answer lies in a strong sense of leadership and involvement among younger generations. Others even suggested that the current social climate calls for an organization like WAACA, and they also expressed an interest in rejoining the group in present day. Will there be another WAACA? Only time will tell.

¹¹ "2012 – Jim and Marsha Mason," *Windsor Chamber of Commerce*, 2012, <https://windsorcc.hostingct.com/Events/annualchamberevent/annualdinner/annualawards/citizenoftheyearaw/2012jmandmarshama/>