

Leslie Devan Smith, Jr.

The First African American Law Student at Washington and Lee University



In 1964, Washington and Lee University remained an all-male, all-white institution, and the university faced increasing scrutiny for its failure to racially integrate. The Board of Trustees publicly reiterated the school's policy that no provision of the university's charter or bylaws, nor any resolution of the Board, established a policy of discrimination among qualified applicants for admission. Nonetheless, it was apparent that the university would need to proactively seek racially diverse applicants if integration was to occur. In the spring of 1966, the university's student government advocated in favor of the "recruitment of Negro students," and the student body president personally established a scholarship fund for this purpose.

Admission Rules Up To Faculty; No Race Discrimination at W&L

Washington and Lee University's Board of Trustees has reaffirmed the university faculty's responsibility in determining standards of admission for qualified applicants. President Fred C. Cole said today that "The Board of Trustees has no intent to deny the opportunity of this admission of authority to the faculty and has no intent to deny the individual student of the faculty in determining the admission requirements."

In response to an inquiry from the student body, the Board of Trustees met in a meeting on July 15. Said President Cole:

"It was noted that no provision of the Charter, or provision of the By-Laws, or resolution of the Board has established a policy of discrimination among qualified applicants for admission."

Washington & Lee Accepts 2 Negroes

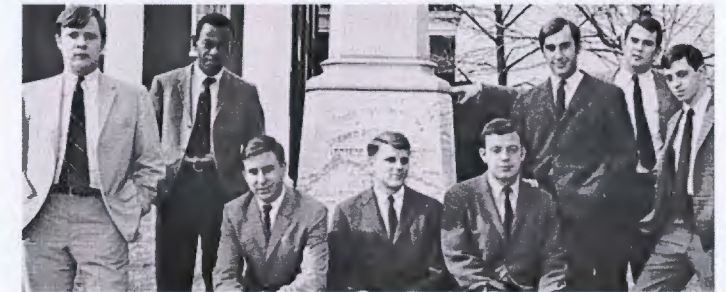
LEXINGTON, Va., Aug. 19 (AP)—Washington & Lee University has announced the acceptance of two Negro students for enrollment this fall.

They are Leslie D. Smith, Jr., 21, of Chuckatuck, Va., and Dennis Alan Haston, 18, of Lexington, Va., a graduate of St. Paul's College. Smith and Haston will be a liberal arts freshman.

They are the first Negroes to be enrolled at W&L in modern times.

Law has been and continues to be a vehicle in which man may move toward greater freedom and individual dignity. I would be very proud of being a part of so noble a profession.

- From Leslie Smith's Washington and Lee application personal statement.



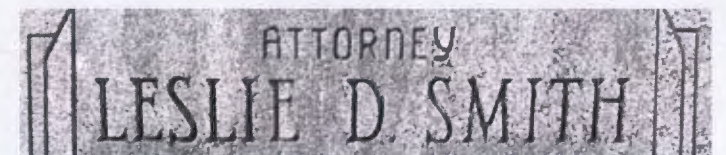
In the same year Smith matriculated at the School of Law, Dennis Haston became the first Black student to enroll in the College at Washington and Lee. As one of only two African American students at an otherwise all-white university, Smith was not spared the racist attitudes and behaviors of that time and place. Nonetheless, by all accounts, Smith not only persevered in this environment, he managed to excel as a student. Les, as he was known to his fellow students, served as a member of the Washington and Lee Law Review, the Student Bar Association and the Legal Research Association. Additionally, he served as president of Delta Theta Pi, co-editor of the law school magazine The Lawyer and treasurer of the Young Democrats Association. Possessed of an even temperament and dry wit, he befriended students and faculty alike.



Les spent his summers during law school working in Washington, D.C. While on Capitol Hill, he was the first African American to clerk in a Virginia Senate office. He served as a research aide to Senator William B. Spong, who came to regard Smith as his protégé. Spong recommended Smith for a clerkship the following summer at the law firm of Steptoe & Johnson.

Les passed the Virginia State Bar exam the winter before he graduated. At the commencement exercises in June 1969, he was inducted into the law school's chapter of the Order of the Coif.

Tragically, Les's promise for professional success and service to society was cut short on June 9, 1971, when he was murdered inside his DuPont Circle apartment. He was just 26 years old. The crime remains unsolved. Les's law school dean, Roy L. Steinheimer, Jr., wrote to Les's parents: "Words can't express the depths of desolation and despair the faculty and staff of the law school feel upon learning of Leslie's tragic death. He was a joy as a student and we have followed with pride his accomplishments since he left us." Les's remains are interred in the Oakland Cemetery in his hometown of Chuckatuck, Virginia. His headstone bears the one-word epitaph, "Attorney."



We at Washington and Lee University School of Law are proud that Leslie Devan Smith, Jr. achieved this professional status in part through the legal education he received here, and we are grateful to him for leading our school through the challenging process of integration.

After graduation, Les joined the United States Department of Justice, working in the Civil Rights Division. Fittingly, his work involved gaining the compliance of southern school boards with court-ordered desegregation.

Leslie believed in America, not as it exists today, with racial injustice, but as a place where every man could obtain his fullest freedom and be truly liberated.

- From "A Brother of Mine," a tribute to Leslie Smith by his brother, Bobby Ray Smith '74, published in the 1972 Calyx.



SCHOOL OF LAW
WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY
LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

Application for Admission*

Name of applicant: Smith, Jr. Leslie Devan Age: 21

Type of applicant (Law): Law

Present address: P.O. Box 93, Chuckatuck, Va. 23029 Telephone No. 255-4262

Home address: 2500 St. Albans Telephone No. Same

Name of your college or university: St. Paul's College

Date of this application: June 1, 1966

Les was a true gentleman, a caring person who was generous with his time. He was a hard worker dedicated to the profession. He was always reaching out to help and assist. - Ed Schiff '69L