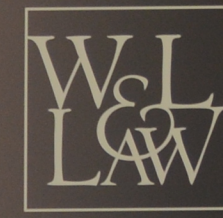


Leslie Devan Smith, Jr.

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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, Va., Aug. 13 (AP)—Washington & Lee University has announced the acceptance of two Negro students for admission next fall. They are Leslie D. Smith, Jr., 21, of Charlottesville, Va., and Dennis Alan Haston, 18, of Lexington, Va. Smith is a graduate of St. Paul's College, and Haston is a graduate of St. Paul's College. Both are students of the law at Washington and Lee University. Smith is the first Negro to be admitted to the law school at Washington and Lee University.

The Ringneck Post, October 27, 1964.

Washington & Lee Accepts 2 Negroes
LEXINGTON, Va., Aug. 13 (AP)—Washington & Lee University has announced the acceptance of two Negro students for admission next fall. They are Leslie D. Smith, Jr., 21, of Charlottesville, Va., and Dennis Alan Haston, 18, of Lexington, Va. Smith is a graduate of St. Paul's College, and Haston is a graduate of St. Paul's College. Both are students of the law at Washington and Lee University. Smith is the first Negro to be admitted to the law school at Washington and Lee University.

The Washington Post, August 27, 1964.

In 1965, the School of Law extended an offer to a graduate of St. Paul's College, an all-Black institution in Lawrenceville, Virginia. While he chose to attend school elsewhere, the following year, the School of Law offered admission to another graduate of St. Paul's College: Leslie Devan Smith, Jr., who matriculated in September 1966. He resided in Davis Hall, which at the time served as the law student dormitory, and he took his meals at Evans Hall.

SCHOOL OF LAW
WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY
LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

Application for Admission*

Name of applicant: Smith, Jr. Leslie Devan
Age: 21
Present address: P.O. Box 93, Charlottesville, Va. 22909 Telephone No. 255-4268
Home address: Same as above Telephone No. Same
Name of your college or university: Saint Paul's College
Date of this application: June 1, 1966

*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.



Leslie Smith receiving his diploma from President Robert E. R. Hooley in June 1969

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.



Smith's small section during his second year of law school.

Smith 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.

Smith 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.

After graduation, Smith 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.



The editorial staff of The Lawyer magazine, 1968

Tragically, Smith'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. Smith'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." Smith'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 Smith 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.

*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.

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