Williamstown and Vietnam: The War at Home
by Dustin Griffin

Those who lived through the late 1960s remember that the Vietnam War sharply divided the country and led to the downfall of a president in 1968. The war also had an impact on Williamstown, especially on a decade of Williams College students who in increasing numbers protested the war, and on the local families whose sons – and in those days it was only sons – were sent to Vietnam. It divided the town; it even divided children from their parents.

About 9 million Americans were on active duty during the Vietnam period (1964-75). 2.7 million US soldiers served in Vietnam. (The best estimate is that about 70% of them volunteered. Only 30% were drafted.) 58,000 died there. 150,000 - 300,000 were wounded, 98,000 of them severely or totally disabled. Another 1600 are still listed as Missing in Action. Thousands more who returned alive suffered from Agent Orange or PTSD. At least 9000 Vietnam vets, and by some estimates many thousands more, committed suicide after they came home. Some 25,000 of them joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, founded in 1967.

About 250 Williamstown residents served in the armed forces from 1961 to 1975. Their names are on the War Memorial in Field Park. A fraction, perhaps one third, served in Vietnam. Very few of the Williamstown boys – and they were mostly still boys, not yet 21 – who enlisted or were drafted lost their lives in Vietnam: there are three names of Vietnam War dead on the Vietnam Memorial in Field Park, one of them a mistake, since he was not a Williamstown resident. 28-year-old Captain Francis Bissaillon was an Air Force pilot whose transport plane went down in 1966. The other was 20-year-old Gary Edgar Field. He was a gunner on an assault helicopter, shot down in 1970 – his body was never recovered, and he was subsequently declared dead. There is a burial stone for him in Eastlawn Cemetery. And only five Williams College students died, all from classes who graduated in the 1960s, one in 1966, two in 1967, two in 1968.

But the war also formed (or deformed) the lives of an entire generation of young American men. Many personal and career choices were made under pressure of the draft. Many college graduates went to law school or graduate school, joined Officer Candidate School, or the Reserves, or went into the Peace Corps. Jessie Winchester, a 1966 graduate of Williams, was one of perhaps 30,000 young men who went to Canada. Thousands dropped out and joined the "counterculture." One Williams graduate served time in prison for firebombing an ROTC building in Hawaii in 1971. Williamstown boys who did not go on to college were certain to be drafted.

But the story of the war at home in Williamstown has never been fully told. The chapter added in 2003 to the Robert R. R. Brooks town history says only that Williamstown "had its share of antiwar protests on and off campus," adding without comment that "in the midst of the turmoil over Vietnam," the local American Legion post celebrated its 50th anniversary. A 1990 honors thesis by a Williams history major focuses narrowly on the 1970 student strike at Williams College in response to the incursion into Cambodia, but does not attempt to tell the wider story of how the war impacted the campus and the town for nearly ten years. Now is a good time to tell a more complete story: May 2020 is the 50th anniversary of the strike.

It is important to remember that responses to the Vietnam War did not split along town/gown lines, the college community against the war and the town in support. Opinion on the Williams campus was deeply divided at least until 1969 – by which time most of the campus wanted the US to withdraw

it troops more rapidly, though a few professors remained supporters of the Nixon administration. Opinion in town was also divided.

My primary sources are the back files of the local newspapers, the *North Adams Transcript* and the *Berkshire Eagle*, along with the student newspaper at Williams, the *Record*. Williams students and faculty got most of the headlines, but town residents were also involved in anti-war and pro-war actions. There was substantial coverage of the war and of the protests at home in the *Transcript* and the *Eagle*, both of which in those days covered national stories. Letters to the editor responded to, and sharply disagreed with, each other. I've also talked to several members of the Williamstown post of the American Legion, and to a number of Williams professors, now retired, who lived through the war protests of the 1960s in Williamstown: Kurt Tauber, Fred Greene, Dan O'Connor, Peter Frost, John Hyde, and Lauren Stevens.

National and International Events

I'll begin with a reminder of a simplified timeline of the war. US military advisors were in Vietnam as early as 1954, but the war did not come to national attention until the Kennedy administration. At the end of 1963 there were 16,000 military advisors in Vietnam. Escalation came by stages: the Gulf of Tonkin incident and resolution in August 1964, bombing of North Vietnam in February 1965, and the first US combat troops in Vietnam in March 1965. Within a year there were 400,000 US troops there. Anti-war mass demonstrations (in New York, Washington, and San Francisco) began in April 1965.

January 1968 brought the Tet Offensive, the political turning point, when domestic sentiment turned against the war. 1968 was also the peak year for US casualties: nearly 17,000 (an average of more than 325 per week). In March 1968 Lyndon Johnson declined to run again. Nixon, who said he had a "secret plan" to end the war, won the presidency that November. He promised "Vietnamization" of the war, and troops began to be withdrawn, but in May 1970 Nixon extended the bombing to Cambodia. By the time he was reelected in 1972 US troop levels were down to 69,000. In January 1973 the Paris peace talks began. In March 1973 the last US troops left Vietnam, but the war went on for two more years, until the US evacuated Saigon in April 1975, and South Vietnam surrendered.

And here is a simplified timeline of major war-related events in Williamstown:

1964-66	Protests led by radical SDS (Students for a Democratic Society)
1967	Walkout from Williams College Convocation. Renewed SDS protests.
1969	Moratorium march to Eastlawn Cemetery
1970	Williams College student strike

Some Key Players

John L. (b. 1914) and his wife, Vera I. Fisher (b. 1916), who lived on Benlise Dr. from 1962 to 1963 and at 31 School St. from 1963 to about 1971. (In 1966 they bought the four-apartment building on School St. as an investment.) Outspoken antiwar activists, they emigrated from Berlin, and while in Germany had reportedly been members of the German Communist party in the 1930s. They emigrated to the US, and he later served in the US Army during World War II. Fisher worked as a traveling

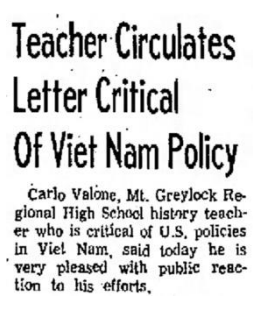
salesman. He and his wife began writing letters to local papers about the Vietnam war and other leftist causes as early as 1963 and in 1965 organized the Berkshire Committee Against the War in Vietnam. In the early '70s the Fishers moved to Northampton.

Carlo Valone (b. 1935) was a history teacher at Mt. Greylock Regional High School. He grew up in Pittsfield, got degrees from U. Mass and Wesleyan, served in the Air Force, where he learned to speak Arabic and Chinese, and began teaching at Mt. Greylock in 1963. He was an outspoken antiwar activist. After winning a contested battle for tenure, he resigned in May 1966 and took a curriculum-development job with Xerox in West Virginia. He later lived in Williamsburg, MA.

Filmore Baker (1926-1994) was a World War II vet – he took part in the D-Day landing – who lived on Belden St. He had very little formal education, and worked as a janitor in the post office, but took a keen interest in public affairs, often writing letters to newspapers. In the early 1960s he ran repeatedly for elective office, finally being elected a selectman in 1964 and reelected in 1967, but resigned in September of that year. He ran again for selectman in 1976 but lost by a wide margin. He moved to Florida in 1985, where he died. He is buried in Southlawn Cemetery.

Frederick Schuman (1904-81) was a professor of political science at Williams. He made his reputation in the 1930s and 1940s as a scholar of international relations, writing books on Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. By the 1950s he was a fierce critic of American foreign policy, warning against the dangers of nuclear war, and in the 1960s was an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War.

Not many Americans paid much attention to Vietnam in the early years of the war. At the time John Kennedy was killed, in November 1963, politically active citizens were paying more attention to the struggle for civil rights at home than to a war in Southeast Asia. It's usually assumed that antiwar protests began on college campuses, but in Williamstown the first protest came from John Fisher, who wrote to the *Transcript* in March 1964, calling for the withdrawal of American advisors. In May 1964 a handful of Williams students attended an anti-war rally in New York City. And in July Vera Fisher wrote to the *Transcript*, with a copy of her letter to Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon, in support of his speech warning of American involvement in Vietnam. In December 1964 Williams senior Steve Block founded the Williams College chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), but the group initially focused on civil rights rather than Vietnam. However, when the US began bombing North Vietnam in February 1965 Block and the SDS sponsored a forum at which Williams professors Fred Schuman and Fred Greene discussed the latest US actions, Schuman arguing against them and Greene broadly defending them. And after the first US combat troops were sent to Vietnam in March 1965, some 150 Williams students took part in the first of what would be annual spring antiwar demonstrations in Washington.



Teacher Circulates Letter Critical Of Viet Nam Policy

Carlo Valone, Mt. Greylock Regional High School history teacher who is critical of U.S. policies in Viet Nam, said today he is very pleased with public reaction to his efforts.

Meanwhile, the Fishers continued their protests. John Fisher engaged in an exchange of letters with a pro-war student at North Adams State College, Fisher calling for withdrawal of troops and negotiations. And in the fall of 1965 Williamstown residents joined Williams students in a "peace march" from Williamstown to Bennington, where they found counterprotesters from the local VFW. In October Carlo Vallone, a history teacher at Mt. Greylock, and an outspoken critic of US policy in Vietnam, attracted attention from both town and college by writing to the *Transcript* that the war was "completely immoral," and

defending young protesters who had burned their draft cards. Several townspeople contacted the school superintendent to object to Valone's letters, declaring that a public school teacher should not openly criticize US government policy. The American Legion discussed whether it should stage a protest at the high school. The *Transcript* defended US policy, but the *Eagle* editorialized in favor of Valone's right to free speech. In November Valone participated in a "community forum" on Vietnam at the First Congregational Church, along with fellow history teacher Baxter Richardson, Williams chaplain John Eusden, and two Williams professors. (Two town selectmen, including Filmore Baker, were invited but did not appear.) The forum drew about 140 people, as well as counterprotesters from the North Adams American Legion post.

Over the next five months Valone himself became the center of controversy, half of the Mt. Greylock faculty defending his right to speak freely, and a parents group supporting him. The school superintendent notified Valone that he would not be recommended for tenure, but the school committee voted to disregard the superintendent's recommendation, and granted tenure. John Fisher wrote to the papers to commend the decision. Valone's opponents then circulated a petition in town urging a reversal of the decision; one of the organizers was Filmore Baker. 500 people signed it. The school committee declined to reconsider, but Valone, apparently sensing that he faced a hostile environment, resigned at the end of the school year and left town.

The war itself was still on people's minds. On the Williams campus in December 1965 faculty circulated two petitions, both urging a negotiated settlement to the war, but one of them more supportive of US policy than the other. And just before Christmas there appeared in the *Transcript* an ad, organized and paid for by John Fisher and a new organization, the Berkshire Committee Against the War in Vietnam. Entitled "An Appeal to Sanity," it called for an end to the air war, withdrawal of troops, and negotiations. It was signed by 74 local residents, including four from the Fisher family, some other Williamstown residents, and some Williams College students and faculty. The ad may have had some impact. By late February the *Transcript*, which had previously editorialized in support of US government policy, now declared that "better ideas" were needed, that attention needed to be paid to the "moral revulsion" in the country over the slaughter of civilians in what might well prove to be a "futile" effort. What changed the minds of the editors was probably the publication in January 1966 of the cautionary report from Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana, urging the US to move quickly toward peace. The Fisher ad may have reminded the editors that there was local "moral revulsion."

But antiwar activism was still limited to a relative few, on the Williams campus and in the town. SDS-sponsored events lapsed. A poll of Williams students in April 1966 showed that 65% supported LBJ, and that many admitted that they were not well informed about the war, even though guest speaker William Sloane Coffin attacked Vietnam policy in a campus speech on May 1, and took part in an ecumenical service focused on "Christian Responses" to the war, sponsored by college religious groups and the Williamstown Associated Ministers. Small group discussions were led by clergy, faculty and students, and "lay people from the community." When John Fisher wrote to the *Eagle* about reports that South Vietnamese officers laughed as they killed Viet Cong, comparing US policies to Hitler's, the *Eagle* replied editorially that although it opposed the war it thought the comparison unjustified.

The primary election in September 1966 showed that there was strong antiwar sentiment in town. A "peace candidate," Thomas B. Adams, ran for the Democratic nomination for U. S. Senator. Although he won only 8% of the vote statewide, and lost to Endicott Peabody, who in turn lost to Republican Edward Brooke in November, Adams was the leading vote-getter in Williamstown. Kurt Tauber chaired a local committee that supported his campaign. Vera Fisher, a member of Tauber's committee, was arrested and charged with distributing campaign leaflets for Adams within 150 feet of a polling place. (She refused to plead guilty, and when the case went to trial in November, she was found not guilty.) Later in September an incident suggested that antiwar sentiment was stronger in Williamstown than in North Adams. At the "Family Fun Day" at Noel Field in North Adams, part of the "Fall Foliage Festival," an 8-man Green Beret reserve unit was invited to demonstrate weapons, rope-climbing, and parachutes. John Eusden, spokesman for the Williamstown Associated Ministers, and some 145 others signed a paid ad in the *Transcript* the previous day, deploring "the emphasis on violence, weapons, and brutal tactics, which have been reported to be a major aspect of this year's 'Family Fun Day.'" And at Noel Field 50 Williams and Bennington students picketed, distributing leaflets and waving banners with the slogans "Fall Defoliation Festival?" and "Green Berets Are Killing Children Like Yours." The *Transcript* published a letter from John Fisher, under the headline "Never Again," protesting the Green Berets' martial display.

Mrs. Fisher Wins Her Appeal In Hand Bill Case

Mrs. Vera I. Fisher of 31 School St. has won her appeal on a charge of illegally distributing campaign literature during the primary election here Sept. 13.

A 6-man jury brought in a not guilty verdict yesterday following a hearing on her appeal in the District Court of Central Berkshire at Pittsfield.

The students were a vocal minority in the crowd at Noel Field, but antiwar sentiment was growing. Fisher's Berkshire Committee Against the War in Vietnam again published a Christmastime 1966 ad in the *Transcript*, entitled "An Appeal to the American Conscience," calling for an end to the war. This time the ad carried 136 signatures, including many from both college and town. At the end of 1966 there were 400,000 US troops in Vietnam, and Williamstown had already suffered its first fatality, Captain Francis Bissaillon.

In 1967 troop levels increased to 500,000, and in February the US began bombing Haiphong Harbor. Later that month General Maxwell Taylor, former head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former ambassador to South Vietnam, spoke to a college crowd of 800 in Chapin Hall on the Williams campus in defense of the bombing. arguing that the US should not withdraw its troops. Outside the hall 100 Williams students picketed. They were joined by local activists, including John Fisher, who held up a sign declaring "End the War in Vietnam." Also present were counterprotesters, including Filmore Baker, whose sign read "I am a Red Blooded American – Not a Pink Pacifist." The event got full coverage in local papers. Fisher later wrote to the *Eagle*, accusing Taylor of "distortions" and "misrepresentations." He again called for an end to the bombing: "end the war, bring the troops home."

The summer of 1967 saw the formation of a new antiwar citizens group, the Northern Berkshire Action for Peace Committee. Its organizer was John Lawton, a curate at St. John's Episcopal Church, and its leaders included a dean from Williams along with three scientists from Sprague Electric Company. The committee called for an end to the bombing and a general truce. In late October it conducted a poll of residents of Williamstown, North Adams, and Adams – pollsters included both townspeople and Williams students. Results were somewhat mixed, showing that 52% of their 582-person sample were opposed to the war. (Interestingly, this was very similar to the results of a May 1967 poll of Williams students.) 72% preferred a negotiated settlement to the war over efforts to achieve total victory, but 70% either wanted the US to continue bombing North Vietnam or were undecided. Surprisingly, the poll found that although Williamstown had the highest percentage against

bombing, it also was the only one of the three towns in which a majority supported the war. Asked if they would vote for a presidential candidate in 1968 who would reduce US involvement in the war, 45% in the three towns said yes. As a result, the Committee resolved to run a slate of antiwar candidates supporting Eugene McCarthy in the Democratic primary the following spring. And as a further result, on December 4 the Committee placed a large display ad in the *Transcript*, headed "Who Wants the War in Vietnam?," citing the results of their poll, and calling for immediate de-escalation and an end to what it called LBJ's war. The ad was signed and sponsored by 117 "friends and neighbors" of *Transcript* readers, 90% of them town rather than college (including John and Vera Fisher). College signatories included several who still live here today: Kurt Tauber, Frank and Claire-Ann Oakley, and Dan and Mary O'Connor.

Kurt Tauber

Protest at the 1967 Williams Convocation

Opposition to LBJ was expressed more directly that fall by Williams professor Frederick Schuman, who in an open letter to John Sawyer, the college president, called Johnson a "pathological liar," a "megalomaniacal militant," and "the most dangerous man in the world today." The occasion was the Williams College Convocation on October 8, in which an honorary degree was to be awarded to Lady Bird Johnson in recognition of her environmental work. Schuman, along with the rest of the Williams faculty, was invited to participate. On September 6 Schuman wrote to Sawyer withdrawing his previous consent to take part in Convocation, which he now saw as a "glorification of the Johnson Administration," and on October 6, two days before the Convocation, Schuman wrote to the *Williams Record*, with copies to the *Transcript* and the *Eagle*, to make his views crystal clear. His letter aroused vigorous opposition from the editors of the *Transcript*, who deplored Schuman's "bad judgment, . . misguided zeal... and name-calling." In a letter to the *Eagle*, the head of the Pittsfield VFW attacked Schuman's views.

The presence of LBJ's wife in town aroused considerable local interest. Some 2000 people from the college and the town watched the academic procession from the Williams president's house into Chapin Hall. Some, including Filmore Baker, held up signs supporting LBJ. Others, including John Fisher, held up banners opposing him. 125 students, organized by the Williams Committee for Action and Resistance, picketed in front of Chapin. Inside the hall 46 students, wearing white arm bands to signal their pro-peace sentiments, walked out when Mrs. Johnson was granted her degree and rose to speak. But when she finished, she was given a standing ovation by those who remained. Even Schuman regretted the "discourtesies" shown to her by those who walked out.

The event received thorough coverage from the *Transcript* and *Eagle*, as well as the *Williams Record*, with several photographs. John Fisher wrote to the *Eagle* on October 12 and to the *Transcript* on October 17 praising the protesters for conduct he found "perfectly reasonable."

LBJ'S POLICY BACKED — Filmore Baker of Williamstown holds large sign in demonstration backing President Johnson's policy in Vietnam. Pickets flanked one side of academic procession.

AND HIS POLICY OPPOSED — John L. Fisher of Williamstown led second group which opposed policy in Vietnam and also flanked one side of procession. (Photos by Randolph Trabold.)

Just two weeks later one of the most famous of the Vietnam era protests took place: the march on the Pentagon in late October, reported by Norman Mailer in *Armies of the Night*. Several protesters from Williamstown played a small part in that event. The march, sponsored by the National Mobilization Committee, was planned in advance but did not receive a permit. This meant a direct challenge to the D. C. police. Forty students from Williams, together with 50 from Bennington, and a few students and teachers from Mt. Greylock Regional High School, made the trip. Several students were appointed marshals, and warnings were issued about how to respond if the police used tear gas. As the event unfolded, hundreds were arrested, including Stewart Burns, one of the Mt. Greylock students and the son of Williams Professor James MacGregor Burns (who supported Johnson's policy). Young Stewart was fined $25 and released the next day. When his parents were contacted by a reporter from the *Transcript* and asked for a comment, they stated that they had raised their children – all four of them took part in the march on the Pentagon — to speak their minds freely.

January 1968 brought the Tet Offensive, usually cited as a political turning point, the moment when American majority opinion shifted against the war. One of those who shifted was Williams history professor Robert Waite, who in a January 13 letter to the *Williams Record* declared that "I have been mistaken about our war in Vietnam. Two years ago I generally supported US policy in South East Asia. Events have proved me wrong."

Six weeks later Walter Cronkite famously announced on network television that he had concluded that the US was "mired in a stalemate" and that the only way forward was through negotiations. Watching that night, Lyndon Johnson told an aide that "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America." And less than five weeks after that he announced on national television that he would not be a candidate for president in the fall election. By then many of the more moderate of the anti-war activists both on campus and in town were devoting their energies not to protest but to electoral politics, campaigning for Eugene McCarthy and, later, for Bobby Kennedy. But John Fisher

continued his public protests, leading 100 peace marchers on March 13 in Pittsfield, where they were heckled by about 60 pro-war high school students carrying signs declaring "America – Love It or Leave It," "Better Dead than Red," and "Right or Wrong, My Country." And in late April he chartered a bus to take 43 residents of Williamstown, North Adams, and Pittsfield to the anti-war demonstration in New York City. In 1968 he sent at least 14 letters to local newspapers, an average of more than one a month.

In the 1968 election Humphrey carried Massachusetts easily but Nixon by a narrow margin won the national popular vote and the electoral college by a much bigger margin. In Williamstown, the election proved to be the occasion for some minor violence between pro-war and anti-war activists. John Fisher, who lived near the polling station at the old Mitchell School on Southworth St., put up signs in his front yard urging voters to vote for the socialist and anti-war candidate, since, in his view there wasn't much difference on Vietnam between Nixon and Humphrey. On election day Filmore Baker accosted Fisher and tried to remove his signs. They scuffled. Baker then proceeded a short distance to the polling station, where he and a colleague found SDS members from Williams carrying similar signs and tried to tear them up. Again, a scuffle ensued, in which a student grabbed Baker and knocked him down. Police observers were on hand but did not intervene. A second protester shouted, "What the f— is going on?" and Baker then left the scene. At that point police stepped in and charged one student with assault and the other with profanity. At the police station Fisher and the students countercharged Baker with assault; he countercharged Fisher with posting an illegal sign.

The incident was reported in the local papers, complete with photographs. The *Transcript* referred to Baker and Fisher as "Williamstown's leading hawk and dove." When the case was heard at the District Court on Spring Street the courtroom was crowded with supporters of all the parties. The American Legion began raising money to pay for Baker's legal fees. Everybody pled not guilty, and a trial date was set, and then continued. Newspaper coverage also continued. In January 1969, the plaintiffs all agreed to drop charges.


Leading Hawk, Dove Clash
During W'mstown Election

For whatever reason, there was not much Vietnam-related activity in Williamstown for the first half of 1969. It has been speculated that many moderates were ready and willing, since Nixon had promised to reduce US involvement, to cut him some slack and see what he would do about bombing and troop levels. But more engaged peace activists on the Williams campus and in the town cooperated with each other. A contingent of Williams students traveled to New York City for the annual spring antiwar demonstration in April. John and Vera Fisher helped organize the trip, taking reservations for places on the bus. Fisher wrote a long and enthusiastic account of the demonstration in a letter to the *Transcript*. A month later his son, Allen, a senior at Mount Greylock, who shared his parents' political views, was suspended for distributing an underground newspaper.

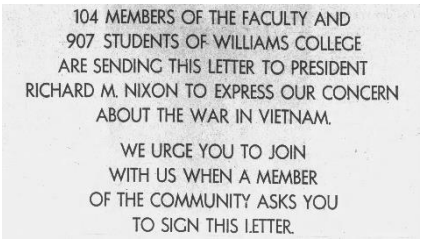
In the absence of public activity, it is difficult to determine the mood in Williamstown. But editorials in the *Eagle* and the *Transcript* suggest that local opinion was continuing to shift against the war. On September 12, the *Transcript* lamented the "tired advice" that Nixon was getting from his advisors and warned that "time is running out." Soon "Johnson's war" would become "Nixon's war." It's a "delusion," so the paper argued, to think that "military victory" is possible: the war "must be ended without further delay." On September 20, after Nixon announced the withdrawal of 25,000 troops and canceled draft calls for November and December, the *Transcript* condemned what it called Nixon's "halfway measures." On the 27th its lead editorial was headlined "Nixon Can Blame Self for Lack of Support on Vietnam," and on October 1, "Nixon Should Listen to Vietnam Dissenters." The *Eagle* had turned against the war earlier than the *Transcript*. On August 29 it opined that the US

should cut its losses and back away from its commitment. On October 14 it argued that continuing the bombing of North Vietnam is "pointless, dangerous, and damaging to the cause of peace."

The October 1969 "Moratorium"

The big event that year was the "Pause for Peace" march on October 15, from the college chapel to Eastlawn Cemetery, timed to coincide with the national "Moratorium" Day – when citizens all over the country were encouraged to stop "business as usual" and come together to urge that the war be speedily ended. The leaders of the national Moratorium Committee had worked in 1968 on the presidential campaigns of McCarthy and Kennedy, and sought now to use mass demonstrations, up until this point a tool of radical groups such as SDS, to mobilize public opinion and thus put pressure on the Nixon Administration. The organizer in Williamstown was a Williams senior, Joe Sensenbrenner '70. He made clear from the outset that the objective of the Moratorium was to go beyond the college campus and to seek "throughout the community as broad a base of disenchantment with the war as possible." Even the word "disenchantment" – adopted by the national organization and then by local chapters – was designed to reach a wide audience of moderates and liberals and anybody who thought the war had gone on too long and that Nixon was not moving rapidly enough to disengage from Vietnam and the Thieu- Ky government.

The event in Williamstown was carefully planned and publicized so as to attract a large turnout. The *Williams Record,* whose editor-in-chief was a strong supporter of the Moratorium, gave it enthusiastic coverage. Sensenbrenner and his local committee of faculty and students placed paid advertisements in the *Transcript* and the *Eagle*, issued press releases, quickly picked up by the local newspapers, which gave wide coverage to preparations for the community march and to plans to solicit signatures on an open letter to be sent to Nixon. He also urged participants to behave in a civil manner, to avoid violence and offensive behavior, even to dress conservatively in coat and tie, so as to demonstrate that those engaged in the march were not radicals or "hippies" or anarchists. Some faculty canceled their classes on Moratorium Day.

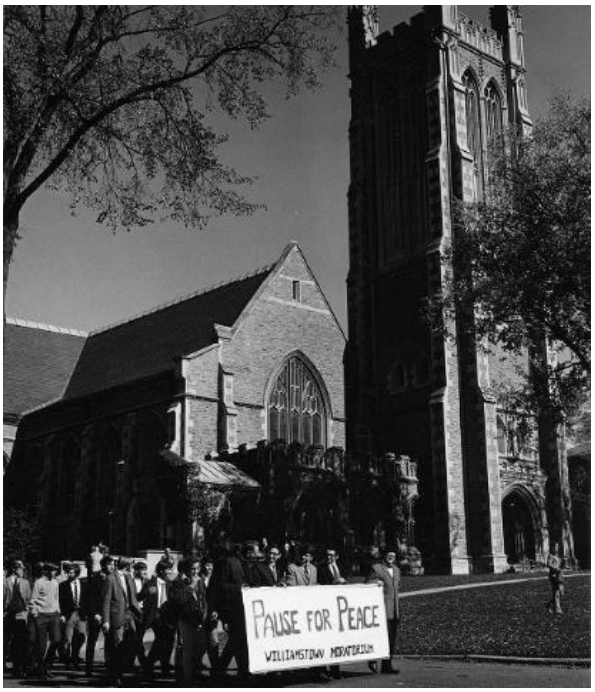

104 MEMBERS OF THE FACULTY AND
907 STUDENTS OF WILLIAMS COLLEGE
ARE SENDING THIS LETTER TO PRESIDENT
RICHARD M. NIXON TO EXPRESS OUR CONCERN
ABOUT THE WAR IN VIETNAM.

WE URGE YOU TO JOIN
WITH US WHEN A MEMBER
OF THE COMMUNITY ASKS YOU
TO SIGN THIS LETTER.

The *Eagle* and *Transcript* published respectful news stories and editorial support of the upcoming event. But not all opinion was favorable. On Sunday, October 12, at St. John's Church in Williamstown the rector, the Rev. Lafayette Sprague, spoke from the pulpit in opposition to the Moratorium, which, he said, would "create confusion and even chaos," and urged support of government policy. One letter to the editor in the *Eagle* on October 13 insisted that the Moratorium was being organized by "the same groups of student radicals, draft dodgers, pinko intellectuals, and outright communists who did their best to force President Johnson out of office." A letter on October 14 complained about the positive coverage of the Moratorium in the *Eagle* and concluded that Russia, bent on world domination, would gain by widespread antiwar protests. A local pro-Nixon group urged that residents show their support for the US government by driving with their headlights on or turning on their outdoor house lights. The head of the VFW post in North Adams warned readers that the Moratorium was being organized by a "vocal minority," and assured them that a "silent majority" completely supports US government policy. Some Williams students opposed the Moratorium: one student wrote to the *Record* objecting to "precipitous withdrawal" and endorsing what he called Nixon's "middle course" of gradual withdrawal.

Plans for the Moratorium were also challenged "from the left" by antiwar activists on the Williams campus who called for "stronger action." One group, which called itself simply "The

Committee," wrote to the *Record* on October 10, calling for a boycott of classes on Moratorium day, announcing that it would urge Spring St. merchants to close for the day, and arguing for confrontational tactics: don't ask for a march permit (the selectmen had in fact approved a permit by a vote of 3-1), wear what you want, continue the march even if townspeople try to block it. It closed its anonymous letter with words that some found alarming: "We will be watching you." A junior faculty member of the Moratorium Committee wrote in reply on October 14 that the purpose of the protest is to "persuade" the people of Williamstown, not to "offend" them. A senior member of the faculty wrote to say that the anonymous Committee's threats were "contemptible," and reminded him of activities of the Hitler Jugend in the 1930s.

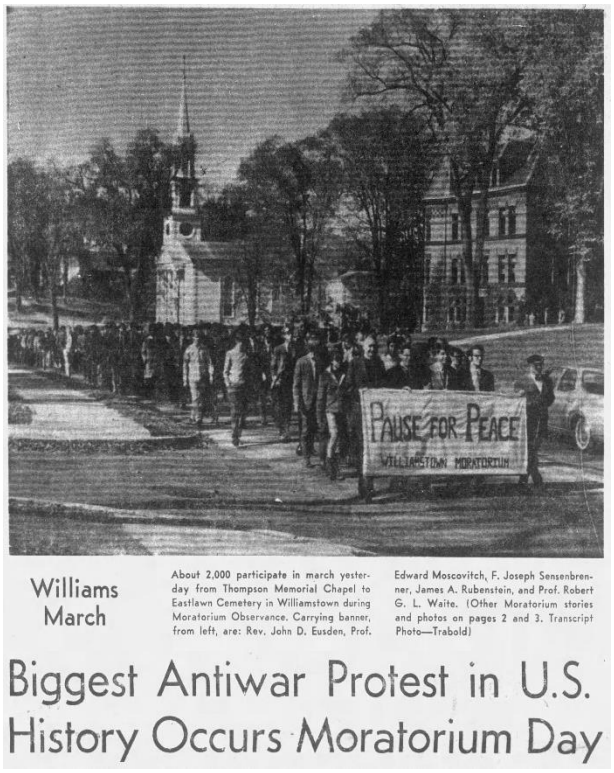


October 15, 1969, Moratorium Day March
Williams College Archives and Special Collections

Moratorium Day began in Williamstown with a noontime service in the college chapel. Selectman and local lawyer Larry Urbano spoke, calling for "moderate means." An estimated 2000 people from the college and the town joined the march to Eastlawn Cemetery. It took place without incident, and without counterpicketing. The two bookstores on Spring St. closed for the day. An open letter, addressed to Nixon, calling for a rapid end to the war, was signed by 2100 people, including 932 students (about 75% of the student body), 108 faculty (about 85%), and about 1250 members of the local community, suggesting that on this occasion, at least, town and gown had come together. At the high school a number of speakers addressed the whole student body, all of them urging a rapid end to the war.

A few indications of pro-war sentiment were evident. A *Transcript* headline on Moratorium Day announced that "Moratorium Divides Town But No Incidents Reported." There was said to be an air of tension on Spring St.," and "several American flags flew and some building lights were turned on in dissent to the Vietnam Moratorium." An observer for the *Transcript* reported that at 8 am on State Rd. between Williamstown and North Adams about one car out of 50 had its headlights on; at 11:30 am, just before the march began, about three cars out of 50.

Signs indicated, then, that the community was still divided over the war. Even families were divided. At one event at Miss Hall's School in Pittsfield on the night of October 15, given extensive coverage in the next day's *Eagle*, James MacGregor Burns appeared with his son, Stewart. The elder Burns, a longtime liberal Democrat and biographer of FDR, but still a supporter of the Johnson and Nixon administration war policies, warned of the dire consequences of an immediate withdrawal of troops, and of the authoritarian North Vietnamese. Stewart, a self-described pacifist, who had not only been arrested at the Pentagon, but had burned his draft card, and faced imminent indictment, called for an immediate end to the war. At his father's funeral many years later, Stewart said that while he prioritized "social justice," his father prioritized "political freedom." He described his father as a "Cold Warrior" misinformed about "American motives and political repression in South Vietnam," but conceded that he himself was "mistaken" in thinking that the Vietnamese Communists were committed to "meeting human needs."



Williams March

About 2,000 participate in march yesterday from Thompson Memorial Chapel to Eastlawn Cemetery in Williamstown during Moratorium Observance. Carrying banner, from left, are: Rev. John D. Eusden, Prof. Edward Moscovitch, F. Joseph Sensenbrenner, James A. Rubenstein, and Prof. Robert G. L. Waite. (Other Moratorium stories and photos on pages 2 and 3. Transcript Photo—Trabold)

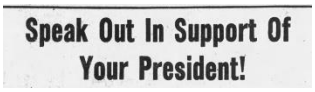
Biggest Antiwar Protest in U.S. History Occurs Moratorium Day

Local newspapers treated the Moratorium with seriousness. The *Transcript* published a photograph of the march on the front page and editorialized in its favor: "The Vietnam Protest Comes of Age" (October 17). The *Eagle* wrote that the war was a "wretched misadventure," and that the Moratorium kept pressure on Nixon to "move toward peace." But both papers reported local dissent: three Adams selectmen denounced the Moratorium; "opposing views" were presented at a teach-in at North Adams State College. Letters to the editors came in from both sides. John Fisher's October 15 letter was given a headline: "Anti-War Minority Now a Majority." But a letter from North Adams objected to the "thoughtless outbursts of immature children." A letter from Adams alleged that the Moratorium was "giving aid and comfort to the enemy," and constituted treason (October 17). A letter-writer to the *Eagle* (October 16) was more temperate: one could "truly want peace in Vietnam," he wrote, "and still support the administration's position, as opposed to the policy of immediate withdrawal."

The Moratorium Day was designed to be only the first of a series of monthly observances, to continue until the war policy significantly changed. The Williams Moratorium Committee began planning for a November 15 event. The march also prompted local activists on both sides to follow up. On October 30 several community members, including Joe Dewey, who ran a bookstore on Spring St., and Nancy Lawton, wife of the organizer of the North Berkshire Action for Peace Committee, sponsored a discussion at the Congregational Church on "What Way Out of Vietnam?," with speakers from the college. But the event was "sparsely attended." On the other side, the North Adams post of the American Legion organized a telephone campaign to celebrate the upcoming Veterans Day and rally support for the Nixon administration, urging people to fly the flag, leave their porch lights on, and drive with their headlights on.

Although the November Moratorium events in Williamstown lasted for three days instead of one, some momentum seems to have gone out of the local antiwar movement, perhaps because of Nixon's speech on November 3, appealing to the "silent majority" in the country to support his policy of "Vietnamization," suggesting that the administration was not going to be moved by the Moratorium, perhaps because local energies were divided when some 200 activists chose to take part in a huge mass demonstration in Washington on November 15 rather than to remain in Williamstown. The events in Williamstown were much lower-key than in October: a project to clear up vacant lots on Rt. 7 and on Cole Avenue (to demonstrate to the community that "our concerns are constructive" and that money being spent in Vietnam could be better spent at home), and informal discussions with Williams alumni in town for Homecoming. Students called off large Homecoming Weekend parties and a Shirelles concert, but the football game was played as usual. About 300 people, including local residents, took part in a candlelight procession up Spring Street, past a color guard in front of the American Legion hall, to the steps of Chapin Hall. A discussion of Nixon's November 3 speech took place at the Congregational Church, and two faculty speakers addressed students at Mt. Greylock, one (antiwar) arguing that "A Dissenter Can be a Patriot," the other (prowar) "Why We Are Fighting in Vietnam."

On November 13 John Fisher organized another ad in the *Transcript*: it asked the question "Will President Nixon's Plan End the War?" and answered with a resounding "No," urging readers to support the Moratorium and write their congressman. It had 160 signatures.



Pro-Nixon voices continued to be heard, but they were now a minority. On November 13 ninety-eight people signed a paid ad in the *Transcript* supporting the president. A Williams student wrote to the *Record* on November 14, claiming to represent the one-third of the student body that did not support the Moratorium.

There was no Moratorium event in Williamstown in December, organizers said, in part because students were taking final exams and in part because some committee members thought that Nixon was "pulling out troops at a faster rate than . . .expected" – on December 15 it was announced that another 50,000 would be withdrawn. (Nixon thought that troop withdrawals would cool antiwar fervor. He was apparently right on that point.) Although events sponsored by the national Moratorium Committee continued until April 1970, the local committee ceased its work. On January 15, in the middle of Winter Study, no Moratorium events were scheduled, largely because Committee leaders were out of town. When February 15 went by without local Moratorium observance, an op-ed piece headlined "Moratorium Movement Dies?" appeared in the *Record*. It quoted the former editor-in-chief, who lamented that Nixon "had given no sign of being affected" by Moratorium events, and speculated that the new draft lottery, instituted on December 1, had taken a toll. If you got a low number, you were likely to be drafted, but if you got a high number you could relax: it "has really taken a lot out of the movement."

The 1970 Student Strike

War-related activity in Williamstown subsided for several months, but at the end of April 1970 it burst out again, in response to Nixon's announcement of a bombing campaign in Cambodia: after the war was supposed to be winding down, it now appeared to be widening. This led to the biggest antiwar event that Williamstown has ever seen: the student strike at Williams, part of what was in effect a national student strike, beginning on May 4, the day when four students at Kent State University were killed in an anti-ROTC protest. On May 6 the faculty agreed to suspend classes for the remainder of the semester.

May 1970, Student crowd in Chapin Hall to discuss a Vietnam War Strike
Williams College Archives and Special Collections

Students wearing strike shirts outside of Hopkins Hall
Williams College Archives and Special Collections

Much has been written about the strike: it is perhaps the best remembered protest event in Williamstown during the entire Vietnam War, so it does not need extended treatment here. What most people seem to remember is that during a mass meeting of students and faculty in Chapin Hall to decide a course of action, after a long time spent on procedural wrangling, Robert Waite stood up to declare famously, "Enough of this chicken shit! Let's get going!" But little has been written about the impact of the strike on the town. A few points are worth making:

1. Although the strike was largely confined to the Williams campus, student organizers set up a committee on "Williamstown organization," proposing that students canvass the community to press for antiwar legislation in Congress, lead discussions in local schools, hold meetings in local churches, and encourage a special town meeting. Two Williams faculty members circulated a petition in the town protesting the invasion of Cambodia, and secured more than 1000 signatures.

2. There was no violence in Williamstown, unlike (for example), the violent crackdown on the Berkeley campus, no civil disobedience, no arrests, no confrontation between antiwar and prowar groups.

3. On May 6 students at Mt. Greylock called for a strike, but only fifty students stayed home. On May 7 three hundred people attended a community meeting in the Congregational Church to discuss the strike as a response to the widening of the war, and "most seemed friendly to the strike."

4. The *Record* published a story about local reaction, finding that opinion was divided. Several Spring St. merchants supported Nixon, and thought the strike a sign of "foolishness" and "immaturity." Other merchants placed ads in the *Record* expressing their "deep concern" about the escalation of the war and the future of America. A Mt. Greylock teacher supported the students, as did the principal. Of the four selectmen interviewed, one supported the students; another supported the war but thought the students were conducting themselves properly; two others thought the strike would not change many minds.

After an initial burst of enthusiasm, and the establishment of "Strike Central," where activities were coordinated, student engagement seemed to die down. On May 11 a strike supporter wrote to the *Record* urging that "the student commitment to peace must be maintained." (Apparently because it was *not* being maintained.) On May 12 seniors voted to hold commencement as originally scheduled. On May 13 a student who participated in the May 9 march in Washington reported a smaller crowd than at earlier demonstrations, and sensed that there was a "smell of weariness" in the air, suggesting that the antiwar movement should reconsider whether mass demonstrations were useful. On May 14 the "Pause for Peace" movement, founded on the Williams campus, working to set up a one-hour nationwide work stoppage on May 27, announced it would disband for lack of political and financial support. Some students who supported the war objected that the strike had politicized the campus, and that they themselves felt "pressure to conform." Some black students remained uninvolved in the strike,

regarding it as too narrowly focused on the war (rather than oppression at home), and a kind of political theatre for white students.

This judgment unfairly dismisses the political fervor that drove committed activists. But it points to the fact that, as one professor put it later, most Williams students at the time were "protected" from the war, and knew that, one way or another, they themselves would not have to serve in the war. Most of those who did not go beyond high school, including some in Williamstown, did not have this luxury.

When students went home after graduation, war-related activities ceased. The strike had little or no effect on the Nixon administration. (Historians of the period are broadly agreed that nationwide campus protests in the spring of 1970 generally failed to achieve their objectives.)

When classes at Williams resumed in the fall, the *Record* published a front page story with the headline "Students return to class; activism wanes," noting that "the sense of political urgency so evident last spring is gone." In November, on the anniversary of the second Moratorium observance, a *Record* story was headlined "Quiet on campuses contrasts with activity a year ago," and went on to say that "there is general disenchantment among students" – "disenchantment" with the war was the key word of the Moratorium – "but it hasn't translated into action. The war has decreased as an issue, and is now one of many." A student who had participated in the Moratorium a year earlier wrote to say that "many of us have turned inward," not in apathy but in pessimism that activism might accomplish anything.

Troops continued to be withdrawn, and war-related protest was only sporadic for the rest of the war. It resumed the following spring, but this time in response to two specific events: a Green Beret training exercise at the North Adams airport, and the conviction of William Calley for war crimes at My Lai. The responses served as reminders that local opinion about the war was still divided. On March 19, 105 Green Berets parachuted onto the airport in a "tactical combat training mission," aiming to "take over" the airport and then march six miles up Mt. Williams in deep snow. The event, publicized in advance, brought out some 1500-2000 people, including about 400 students from Williams and Bennington, shouting slogans and passing out leaflets, and others, including some members of the local VFW and the North Adams and Pittsfield chapters of the John Birch Society, who distributed their own leaflets. It also attracted a large crowd who just came to see the "air show." Protesters hoped to disrupt the exercise. In the end it was the wind that caused disruption, as parachutists were blown off course, and sustained casualties when they fell off roofs and from trees. The protest received thorough coverage and front-page photos in the *Williams Record*, the *Eagle*, and the *Transcript*. Some letters to the editor from local residents commended "the Green Berets' Great Show" and denounced the "pitiful actions" of a handful of "unthinking students," Another letter praised the "spirited group of peace advocates" who behaved in "a sincere and peaceable manner." A letter from Professor Kurt Tauber, co-signed by 29 others, lamented that the simulated attack brought to mind the "devastation our armies are wreaking on the people of Vietnam."

Less than two weeks later news of Calley's conviction prompted more local protests, again from both sides. A one-man "Free Calley" campaign was organized by a World War II vet, whose platoon, he said, seldom took prisoners. The *Eagle* called the court's decision a "just verdict," but published letters from those who thought Calley had been made a scapegoat, and others (including two from Williamstown) who lamented that Calley, a "confessed killer of women and children," was being hailed as a hero. Predictably, Filmore Baker wrote to the *Transcript* in defense of Calley. Just as predictably, John L. Fisher (along with local lawyer Larry Urbano) took part in a panel discussion,

before a college audience of 90, in which the call to free Calley was firmly opposed. Fisher asserted that Johnson and Nixon should be tried as war criminals.

A year later, in the spring of 1972, antiwar protests again spiked because of another incident: escalation of the war in mid-April, when Nixon ordered the resumption of bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, and in early May, when Nixon announced Haiphong Harbor was being mined. On May 10 a large number of students and faculty – estimates ranged from 600 to 1000 – crowded into Chapin Hall, some thinking that it was time to call for another student strike. But this time the meeting was introduced by comments from President Sawyer and two faculty members. When students took their turn, the meeting passed a tepid resolution calling on students to take up Sawyer's suggestion and write letters opposing the war to Congress and the White House. As the audience began trickling away, resolutions were introduced to ask the faculty for extensions on academic obligations (narrowly defeated), and to go on strike (defeated 121-166). By the time a third resolution was introduced, to endorse and continue the sit-ins that had been staged over the previous several weeks at Westover Air Force Base in Chicopee, only a handful of students remained. The *Transcript* story about the meeting was headlined "War Reaction at Williams Is Confused, Inconclusive."

Perhaps in response to the inconclusive student reaction, or to emulate faculty from Amherst who had been arrested after they staged a sit-in, fifteen junior and mid-level members of the Williams faculty traveled to Westover on May 18, tried to block the entrance to the base, were arrested for disturbing the peace, fined $10 apiece, and released. One of the participants later told me he didn't think the protesters knew what they were doing.

The protests had little effect: bombing of North Vietnam continued through October 1972. Nixon's reelection in November took more wind out of protesters' sails, as did reduction of troop levels to 69,000 by the end of the year, and the beginning of the Paris Peace talks in January 1973. The small group of Williams students who went to Washington to protest at Nixon's inauguration. reported afterward that they felt "powerless and ineffective." Defense Secretary Melvin Laird's announcement on January 27 that the military draft had ended may have meant the end of peace marches. (Some observers, including Kurt Tauber, thought that the antiwar sentiment of many students was "opportunistic" rather than principled: they did not want to be sent to Vietnam.) Even John Fisher, who had written more than 65 fierce and passionate anti-war letters to the *Transcript* and *Eagle* since 1964, had stopped sending letters about the war by late 1971. There was no further antiwar protest in Williamstown to speak of, even though the last US troops would not leave Vietnam for another 14 months.

As the last troops left in late March 1973 a long story appeared in the *Eagle* under the headline "Williams tolls the bell for Vietnam." It noted that the college planned to install a plaque in the chapel with the names of the five alumni who died during the war, but had no records to show how many graduates had served in Vietnam, or even how many had served in the military during the Vietnam years. Already the history of Williamstown's part in the war was being lost.

April 30, 1975, the day when the US abandoned the embassy in Saigon, is usually regarded as the end of the Vietnam War. But the war has continued in cultural memory, in Hollywood movies, novels, and in books arguing why the US lost the war, or whether it *really* lost the war militarily. If Vietnam has faded from conversation, it's probably because so many world crises have intervened: the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Great Recession, never mind coronavirus. But the war has left its mark, especially on those who fought in it, or fought against it. Many of the Williamstown boys and men who fought in Vietnam now lie in Eastlawn Cemetery.

Others survive, as members of the local post of the American Legion. Mike Kennedy, the local veterans' agent, worked with a number of Vietnam vets who struggled over the years with disabilities, PTSD, or with the effects of Agent Orange.

But the Vietnam War is slipping into the past. Those who were of fighting (or draftable) age in 1965 or 1970 are now in their 70s. For anybody younger than 70, Vietnam is now part of "history." The Williams professors who protested the war are now in their late 80s or 90s. At least twice a year in Williamstown, Memorial Day and Veterans Day, we are all rightly invited to remember those who fought in uniform. We should also remember, perhaps on the anniversary of the October 15 Moratorium, those who fought for peace: they also served.

Special thanks to the Williams College Archives and Special Collections for the use of several images in this piece. All other photos were from the *North Adams Transcript*