



## One Journey In A Century

by John Charles Thomas

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I came to Hunton & Williams 27 years ago on August 11, 1975. The firm was then styled Hunton, Williams, Gay & Gibson. I was the first Black at the firm. I did not know what to expect. We were not many years from the searing violence that scarred the nation during the days of the Civil Rights movement; the Selma March, King's assassination, riots in the streets of major cities all were within recent memory. And so it was a major step to be the first Black lawyer at Hunton & Williams; I saw it as part of the integration of our society.

But my coming here was not universally applauded in the Black community. Though there had always been a struggle for integration in the South, when I went to my first meeting of the Old Dominion Bar Association in Richmond I was greeted with, "Oh, here comes the Uncle Tom N\*\*\*\*r from Main Street." Another black lawyer chimed in, "Those white people are going to use you up, squeeze you dry, then get rid of you. Before it's over you are going to come crawling to us begging for a job." With uncertainty about my position in the firm and hostility from some in the Black community outside the firm, I was not to be in for an easy time.

I went to work on the old Vepco 1 team. My first assignment was to find out whether the warranties on equipment to be installed at the North Anna Nuclear Power Plant could be extended in light of construction delays that would keep the equipment from going into service at the times originally planned.

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John Charles Thomas joined Hunton & Williams in 1975 and was made partner in 1982. He became the first Black Justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia in 1983. In 1989, he resigned from the court to return to Hunton & Williams.

I worked with Mike Maupin, who greeted me on my first day here. I was assigned to Evans Brasfield, who through everyday interactions taught me a bit of the ways that lawyers talk. I can recall his taking down a book of old memoranda to remind himself how he had “opined” on a subject in the past. And so I learned that I didn’t just reach conclusions with regard to legal matters, I offered my judgment and opinion; before long I started to opine for myself.

But my most vivid memory of being on the Vepco team was working with John Riely on an application for a Vepco rate increase. I had thought that Riely — as everyone referred to him — was a corporate lawyer. I came to understand that he worked on whatever matters around the firm that interested him. And I came to understand further that one of his great strengths was his ability to write about the most complex subjects with sparkling clarity. When I saw Riely’s written work on a rate increase application, it was clear to me that I wanted to find a way to write with the same clarity and authority.

I remember receiving George Gibson’s memorandum on writing well, on how properly to staple the corner of a paper, and on attention to detail and the Hunton & Williams’ way. He seemed to me every bit of a living legend. We all spoke of him in hushed tones. And though many of the partners would tell us to call them by their first names, everybody, except the most senior people in the firm, called him

Mr. Gibson and would have been shocked at anything else.

And then there was Thomas Benjamin Gay — Mr. Gay — the true old soul of the firm. He, for many years, would summon the new lawyers to his office for an audience. I got such a summons one day. I answered the phone and heard a voice say, “This is Ben Gay. Come see me.” “Yes, sir,” I said. But in my haste to go see him, I managed to get some bottled ink on the front of my suit, and so I went upstairs carrying a legal pad trying to cover this ink spot. This caused me to have to hold the legal pad in an unusual manner. But he didn’t mention the ink spot, so I guess my little cover-up worked.

I stayed on the Vepco team for only a short while. Litigation developed over the construction delays at North Anna and over the discovery of problems in fabricating so-called heavy welded structures designed to support the steam generators. “Warm bodies” were needed to staff the enormous amount of work being done on that litigation, and I was sent from the Vepco team to work with the “gators.” I never went back to the Vepco team.

On that, my first litigation assignment, I worked with Tom Slater, who was still an associate. There were Ken Wheeler and Robert Brooks and Doug Davis and others. There were tons of research, mounds of documentary discovery, numerous depositions, endless motions, and briefs. It was the way this firm handled big cases. We went at it tooth and

nail. And as part of this effort, we worked with Control Data to create one of the first, if not the first, litigation support computer database in the country. Much of the dispute was over the quality of the welding work on the heavy welded structures, so we had to be able to prove the condition of each of the hundreds of thousands of welds in the structures. To do this we turned to punch cards and computers. It was new untested ground. But we did what we had to do to best represent our client.

About 1980, I was assigned to work with Tim Ellis on the litigation team. He was known as “The Taz,” short for the ripsnorting, whirlwind cartoon character, the Tasmanian Devil. The word was that Ellis was a relentless taskmaster; that he would give a research assignment, then do part of it himself and if the associate did not find a case that Ellis had found there would be hell to pay; and that no associate who had ever worked with Ellis had lasted more than a year or two. But when I went to work with Ellis, I did not know all these things about him; all I knew was that he worked long hours and that he demanded fast accurate work. I was working with Ellis when the time came for me to be considered for partnership. There was no way I could predict what might happen.

Ellis and I tried cases together, represented a few unpopular causes, and learned to work well together and to depend on each other. In the end we became not just law partners but friends. Hunton & Williams has that way about it. It puts together in one place people

of diverse backgrounds often in pressure-cooker situations and out of such comes the special relationships of lawyers who have been through it together.

I was made a partner in April 1982. It was quite a moment. I can remember vividly going to my office and finding an envelope which contained a copy of the partnership agreement and a signature page for me to add my name to the roll of partners. As I sat there alone in my office, the history of the moment was not lost on me. I understood that I was the first Black lawyer to add his name to the list of partners. But I did not realize that the story would be picked up outside the firm.

I was interviewed by a local television station about making partner. There was a story in the Richmond newspaper. And then a bit later there were stories in *The National Law Journal* and *The American Lawyer*. The national stories made a point that had not occurred to me: They said that I was the first Black lawyer in the history of the American South — from Virginia to Texas — to come to an old-line, southern law firm out of law school and “go up the line” to make partner. The wordiness of the description was necessary to distinguish my case from those involving laterals who were partners in some of the Atlanta firms. Surprisingly, within the Black community hardly anything was said about this milestone.

Almost a year to the day of my having made partner at the firm, I was gone. A vacancy had occurred on the Supreme Court of Virginia at

the end of 1982. When the General Assembly convened in February 1983, it tried to fill the seat, but the Senate had one candidate and the House of Delegates had another and they could not agree. When the General Assembly recessed in March 1983 without having filled the vacancy on the court, the power to fill the seat on an interim basis passed to then-Governor Charles Robb.

Alan Rudlin, who had become a partner in the firm on the same day that I did, wrote Governor Robb a letter in which he suggested that I be appointed to the Supreme Court of Virginia. I had no knowledge of this, and things were very far along before anyone said anything to me. I was told later that the governor met with Alan and with others from the firm to talk about how the Commonwealth might react to the appointment of the first Black Justice on the Supreme Court of Virginia. Those who attended this meeting told me that when the meeting was over, it was clear to them that the governor intended to appoint a 32-year-old Black lawyer to the court. And so it was that Hunton & Williams was deeply involved in helping the Commonwealth move yet another step closer to including all of its citizens in the government.

On April 11, 1983, Governor Robb announced my appointment to the Supreme Court. On April 15, I left the firm and moved into my chambers at the court. On April 25, I was sworn in as a Justice. While at the court I was able to see the way in which Hunton & Williams was viewed by the Justices. The firm was considered one of the best: good lawyers on whom the court could rely for intellectually honest work and a thorough analysis of the problem under review. It is not that the firm won every case; rather it is that the firm's work was respected even when the decision went the other way. That is no small achievement.

It is impossible to cover the events of almost three decades in a short paper. But there are some overarching impressions that can be simply stated. This firm has been and remains a leader because it knows how to grow and evolve and expand and change while holding on to the bedrock principle that each lawyer must always give his or her best and that working together we are much more than we could be working separately. And so I can say with great conviction that I am proud to be part of the history of Hunton & Williams.