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‘Boss of the Grips’ Review: A Porter Extraordinaire

James H. Williams was the African-American leader of Grand Central’s Red Caps—city icons as recognizable then as the Rockettes are today.

By Edward Kosner
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A magnificent new Grand Central Terminal opened one midnight a little over a century ago in Midtown Manhattan. As the doors swung open and New Yorkers surged down the steps to gawk at the great concourse built over the bones of the old station, they were greeted by 150 African-American porters smartly turned out in trim blue uniforms and crimson caps. At the head of the formation stood a stocky 34-year-old man named James H. Williams, the chief of the Red Caps, Gotham icons as recognizable then as the Rockettes are today.

Williams and his 45-year career at the heart of black life in New York is the subject of Eric K. Washington’s “Boss of the Grips,” an at once inspiring and cautionary new social history of Harlem and beyond in the first half of the 20th century. Mr. Washington, an independent historian, reanimates a lost world of strivers who created a protean civic, artistic and commercial society to subvert the Jim Crow bias still resilient in the most liberal city in America.

Some readers may fear that they’re in for a polemic from Mr. Washington’s introduction, in which he refers to “the servitude of African-American workers . . . rooted in the American tradition of racial exploitation.” But “Boss of the Grips” is nothing of the kind. Rather, it’s an illuminating chronicle of success against the odds. The only available jobs on the other side of the color line at Grand Central, he writes, “afforded black workers the means, proverbially speaking, to make a way out of no way.”

The Red Caps started in 1895 as a uniformed squad of a dozen white men assigned to help travelers with their luggage to counter the roughneck porters who infested the station. Eight years later, Williams became the first African-American Red Cap, and soon the group was solidly black.

The arc of Williams’s life is an American epic in itself. The son of former slaves, he was born in what is now chic Chelsea on the lower West Side of Manhattan, not far from the harum-scarum Tenderloin of theaters, gin joints and brothels. By the time of his death after World War II, he had lived in most of the city’s black neighborhoods. He had graduated from New York’s segregated school system, toiled for a white society florist, enlisted in the Colored Elks and the nascent NAACP.

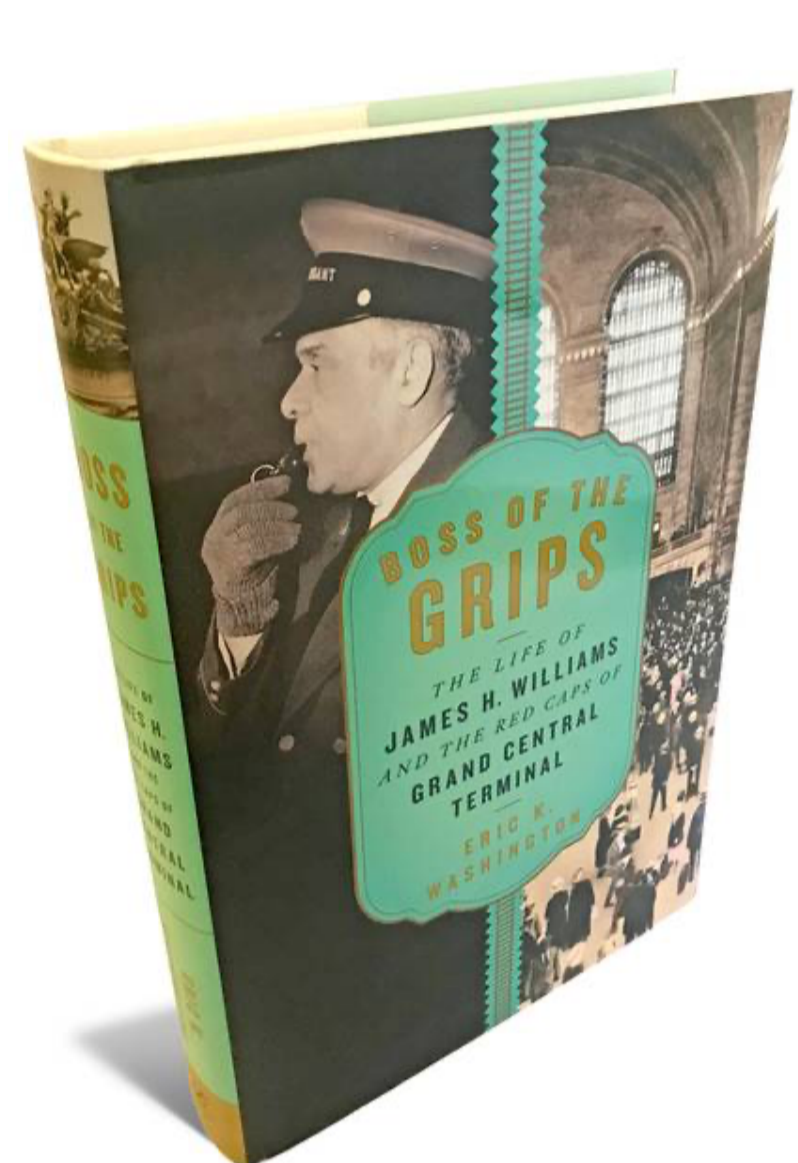


PHOTO: WSJ

BOSS OF THE GRIPS

By Eric K. Washington
Liveright, 350 pages, \$27.95



PHOTO: CHARLES FORD WILLIAMS FAMILY COLLECTION

Inside Grand Central and out, he had met and mingled with everyone from heavyweight champions Jack Johnson and Joe Louis to Eleanor Roosevelt, Duke Ellington and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and all the major figures of the Harlem Renaissance. At one point or another, he’d hired Paul Robeson and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and scores of other young black men “smashing” luggage to pay their way through college.

The author uses Williams’s man-about-Harlem life to build out his story of black ambition, disappointment and success from the turn of the century to the end of World War II. With Williams, we attend games of the Red Caps baseball and basketball teams he founded, concerts and radio performances of his jazzy Red Caps orchestra, choir and quartet. There are the elaborate banquets and testimonial dinners of his fraternal and philanthropic organizations at sleek Harlem hotels and private clubs. Now forgotten newspapers and magazines, theatrical companies, literary circles, ladies’ auxiliaries, masquerade balls and more come to life, plus outings on the Hudson River and weekends at the black resort hotels in the Rockaways and on the Jersey Shore. Crime and poverty were part of Harlem life, too, but you won’t read much about it here.

All these parallel organizations, institutions and facilities existed because blacks were effectively barred from participation in the life and commerce of white New York. Exclusion was strictly enforced by custom if not law. One of Williams’s closest friends was the first African-American to break the color barrier in the New York Police Department. Williams’s bookish, athletic son Wesley become Manhattan’s first black fireman. At the firehouse, he was relegated to a bed next to the toilet, but he persevered—despite delivering bootleg liquor during Prohibition—to become the department’s first black lieutenant. The book is full of letters from the elder Williams to big figures he met at Grand Central—Sen.

Robert Wagner, Cardinal Hayes, Mrs. Roosevelt—seeking help in promoting the careers of his highly protégés.

It’s hard to imagine now, but in the first decades of the 20th century a white Harlem real-estate man tried to get white homeowners to build 24-foot-high fences walling off black renters from their brownstones. Covenants barring the sale of homes to blacks became common until they were undercut by the Depression. It took a major effort to get travelers to stop calling every black sleeping-car porter or Red Cap “George.” Unions fought efforts to assimilate black workers.

During Chief Williams’s reign, the prevailing view among African-American leaders was that acceptance from the white majority could be earned by black achievement matching or exceeding the white model. Mr. Washington’s book is full of photographs of strivers playing that game. It was not until the 1960s that the civil-rights movement created a widely accepted new template for African-American identity.

Williams survived and thrived for more than four decades by accommodating himself to the powers that were while relentlessly pushing his own agenda as what was known at the time as a “race man.”

It’s poignant to read all the stories of dogged advancement through deft maneuvering within a rigged system. Williams and his brethren had white allies and occasional benefactors. The heavy lifting, as it were, was done not only by the Grand Central Red Caps, but by uncounted and unheralded others in ghettos now transformed by gentrification. They struggled, as Mr. Washington writes, “with persistent fellowship, ingenuity, and grace.”

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News and the author of a memoir, “It’s News to Me.”

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