



Andover Newton Seminary

AT YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL

Braxton Shelley Appointed to New George Washington Williams Endowed Faculty Chair at YDS

New Haven, June 26, 2025: [Professor Braxton D. Shelley](#) has been appointed to the new [George Washington Williams Endowed Faculty Chair at Yale Divinity School](#), which is named for the first African American to graduate from Newton Theological Institution (which is today part of [Andover Newton Seminary at YDS](#)). The appointment carries historical significance, as does the creation of the chair itself. The George Washington Williams Chair is the first endowed chair at YDS, and only the second in any school at Yale University, to be named after an African American person. It honors the legacy of an unsung hero of American history.

George Washington Williams was a Baptist minister who fought the oppressive institutions of slavery and imperialism during the nineteenth century. A Civil War veteran, Williams became the first African American to graduate from Newton Theological Institution in 1874; the first to produce a comprehensive narrative on African American history with the 1878 publication of his book, *History of the Negro Race in America From 1619 to 1880*; the first African American to be elected to the Ohio State Legislature in 1879; and the first to open the eyes of the world to the exploitation and brutality of colonialism in the Congo Free State of Africa with his 1889 “Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo.” He is reputed to have coined the now globally recognized expression, “Crimes against humanity.”

Williams was a trailblazer who continues to guide the present. Williams gave the world an example of how, in the words of Andover Newton’s mission statement, “deeply rooted, radically open” Christian faith leadership can change a life and change the world. Through the financial support of its loyal donor community, Andover Newton at YDS succeeded in creating the George Washington Williams Endowed Faculty Chair to attract and retain the pioneering, world-class faculty needed to educate the leaders faith communities need.



Prof. Braxton D. Shelley

With the strong advocacy of YDS Dean Greg Sterling, unequivocal affirmation of faculty members already occupying YDS named chairs, and resounding acclamation of the Andover Newton at YDS affiliated faculty, the Yale University President and Corporation approved the appointment of Professor Braxton Shelley as inaugural George Washington Williams Chair on June 11, 2025.

Professor Shelley is a decorated scholar, ordained minister in the Missionary Baptist tradition, and path-clearing theorist of African American sacred music. A native of North Carolina, Shelley’s study of music and history began with distinction at Duke University. He then earned a PhD in History and Theory of Music at the University of Chicago while also completing a Master of Divinity degree at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

In 2017, Shelley was appointed assistant professor of music at Harvard University, where he taught for four years before he joined Yale as the faculty director of the [Interdisciplinary Program in Music and the Black Church at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music](#).

Shelley is celebrated as a once-in-a generation scholar of music. His field-changing article, “Analyzing Gospel,” was recognized with the Alfred Einstein Award from the American Musicological Society, the Kunst Prize from the Society of Ethnomusicology, and the Adam Krims Award from the Popular Music Interest Group of the Society of Music Theory. To receive these prizes from three distinct guilds signals the broad impact of Shelley’s work. Other notable publications include *Healing for the Soul: Richard Smallwood, the Vamp, and the Gospel Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2021), which was recognized with the Lewis Lockwood Award; and *An Eternal Pitch: Bishop G. E. Patterson and the Afterlives of Ecstasy* (2023). He has two forthcoming books, *Digital Antiphony: Black Gospel, Social Media, and the Craft of Collectivity* (Oxford University Press) and *Mattie Moss Clark: A Life in Song* (Yale University Press).

Upon learning of the appointment, Professor Shelley stated, “I am deeply moved by this great honor, named for someone who made such an amazing mark in both religion and politics. And I am doubly appreciative for the light this appointment shines on the work we are doing to lift up the contributions Black sacred music has made to the church and the world.”

In appreciation for this appointment, Andover Newton Founding Dean, Sarah B. Drummond, said, “Braxton Shelley’s work moves music from the background to the foreground in scholarship on the religious experience of individuals, congregations, and the wider culture. He has been a dedicated member of the ANS at YDS affiliated faculty, providing our students with opportunities to meet and learn from today’s most influential Black Church musicians. We are overjoyed that he will be the inaugural George Washington Williams Chair.”

When Andover Newton became permanently affiliated with YDS, it committed to funding two faculty lines. With Shelley’s appointment, the George Washington Williams Endowed Faculty Chair becomes the second of those two, joining the Samuel Abbot Chair, which is the oldest faculty chair in any graduate school of theology in the US, preceding even the founding of Andover Seminary in 1807. This symmetry of old and new represents Andover Newton’s commitment not just to stewarding tradition but to preparing faith leaders for the future.

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