



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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CONTACT: GEORGE HARDEEN
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR
OFFICE – 928-871-7917
CELL – 928-309-8532
pressoffice@opvp.org

Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., commemorates Williams family for persistence that led to U.S. Supreme Court sovereignty ruling

STEAMBOAT, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., joined former Navajo Nation Chief Justice Robert Yazzie and chapter officials here Saturday to honor 96-year-old Lorena Williams and the late Paul Williams for their persistence and conviction which resulted in affirming Navajo Nation sovereignty as the law of the land.

In the 1959 decision in *Williams v. Lee*, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned rulings by the Arizona Supreme Court and the U.S. District Court in Holbrook to find that Navajo tribal courts had jurisdiction in a case between a Navajo and a non-Navajo.

The Arizona courts had found in favor of Ganado trader Hugh Lee who had sought payment of a trading post debt by confiscating some 50 sheep owned by the Williams when they were away from home. The Williams sued, and persisted even through the courts ruled against them.

The case established in law that non-Natives must seek legal remedy in Navajo courts rather than in state courts, and reaffirmed Navajo Nation sovereignty as recognized in the Navajo Treaty of 1868 and before.

“We want to say thank you for saying they’re not going to walk all over our sovereignty,” President Shirley told Mrs.

Williams at the first commemoration of the high court decision at the chapterhouse, albeit 49 years after the decision.



The family of the late Paul and Mrs. Lorena Williams (center) at the commemoration of the 1959 U.S. Supreme Court decision at the Steamboat Chapter House on Saturday. Pictured from left to right are Roy Kelewood, Steamboat Chapter Vice President Wallace Tsosie, Dorothy Lee, Adline Tsosie, Danielle Lowery, Geraldine Williams, Verna Peterson, President Shirely, Paul Williams, Jr., Verdii M. Lee, and in front right, the sisters of Paul Williams, Sr., Edith Willie and Julia Willie.

“If they walk all over our sovereignty, they walk all over us, and our children, and our children’s children. We’re not going to allow that. So we’re going to fight for our sovereignty, and I’m sure glad that they did. We can’t say thank you enough.”

In its unanimous decision, the U.S. Supreme Court used the precedent from the famous 1832 *Worcester v. Georgia* decision that recognized all Indian tribes as self-governing nations within the United States that prohibited state interference in internal tribal affairs.

“They argued on behalf of our sovereignty, on behalf of who we are, and which was spelled out in treaty,” he said.

To commemorate the decision, the President, Navajo Nation Council Speaker Lawrence T. Morgan and Navajo Nation Chief Justice Herb Yazzie issued a proclamation taking note of the decision of *Williams V. Lee*, 358 U.S. 217.

“We have always cherished, protected and exercised the freedom to govern ourselves according to our ancient laws, traditions, customs, and practices,” the proclamation states. “This freedom underlines the Treaty of 1868 wherein we as a Nation agreed to live in peace with the United States of America. This freedom is what still sustains us in the contemporary world where we continue to confront many challenges to our right to live as Diné.”



Lorena Williams

In accordance with the Navajo Treaty of 1868, jurisdiction over crimes committed by or against Navajos was to remain exclusively in the hands of Navajo tribal courts.

By unanimously affirming the right of Navajo self-government, the high court ensured that any legal claims were to be decided by a tribal court.

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“Sovereignty is about the laws given by the Deities to the Navajo people whereby they can govern themselves and be Navajo people,” President Shirley said. “We were put here between the four sacred mountains, and this sovereignty we had before the white man crossed the big waters. They tried to take it away from us, and they were not successful. We’ve always been a nation. We’ve always been a sovereign, and the treaty reflects that.”

The President said that even though Mr. and Mrs. Williams were standing alone against greater odds, they did not give up.



President Shirley is assisted by former Navajo Nation Chief Justice Robert Yazzie and others in placing a shawl on Mrs. Lorena Williams.