DELON HAMPTON
1933–2021
Elected in 1992

“For outstanding contributions to education and practice in geotechnical and transportation engineering, and for leadership in engineering education for minorities.”

BY DAVID E. DANIEL AND PERCY A. PIERRE

DELON HAMPTON, an exceptionally talented engineer, role model, and visionary leader in civil engineering education and practice, died at his home in Potomac, Maryland, on January 14, 2021, at the age of 87.

He was born in Jefferson, Texas, on August 23, 1933, the son of Charles and Alzadie Douglas. His birth mother, who died shortly after he was born, had asked her sister, Elizabeth Hampton, to raise Delon should something happen to her. Elizabeth and her husband Uless took the baby to their home in Chicago and raised him there.

Uless Hampton worked at the Tuthill Company, which made bricks, pumps, meters, and other materials and equipment used in the construction industry. His formal education had ended in 8th grade, but he had a collection of classic books by Shakespeare, Churchill, and Plato, which Delon devoured; an avid reader, he also became a frequent visitor to the local library. The neighborhood was rough, but, after Uless left, Elizabeth Hampton scraped by financially and was attentive to her new son’s upbringing. Perhaps most importantly, she instilled in Delon a desire for a better life.

The young boy had a close group of friends who did everything together—football, basketball, and baseball, and building things such as forts, soapbox cars, and scooters from
scraps—but more than anything, Delon desired to learn and to succeed as an adult. He decided to leave the poor-quality high school in his neighborhood and transferred to Englewood High School, farther south in Chicago, even though it meant more than an hour and two streetcars for his daily commute. He succeeded at Englewood, actively participated in sports, and made friends. When he graduated at age 16 he attended career fairs at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where he discovered an interest in architecture and civil engineering.

He decided to attend the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and enrolled in the Department of Civil Engineering in January 1950. There he was inspired by the teaching of Ralph B. Peck (NAE 1965), and what became a lifelong interest in soils and geotechnical engineering blossomed. He was also active in campus activities and developed a passion for bridge. Unfortunately, he also experienced discrimination when he sought summer jobs with civil engineering firms.

After graduating in 1954 he headed to Prairie View A&M University for a teaching job, which lasted less than a year because he was drafted into service in the US Army. He served 2 years1 and decided, upon discharge in 1957, to attend Purdue University for a master’s degree, which he received in 1958. In part because engineering practice at the time was largely closed to African Americans, he stayed on to get his PhD in civil engineering. He completed his doctorate in June 1961 and decided to spend the summer in Europe. A highlight of the trip was attending the International Conference on Soil Mechanics and Foundation Engineering in Paris that July.

He returned from Europe ready to start working in the private sector. Though highly qualified, he received no job offers. But he was an optimist and a “can do” person.

With an introduction from a friend, he was offered a teaching position at Kansas State University. After a successful year there, he was offered and accepted a 1-year appointment as interim head of the soil mechanics research program at the US Air Force Shock Tube Facility in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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1 He later served in the US Naval Reserves (1968–71).
This position allowed him to continue studying soil dynamics, which had been the focus of his graduate research. In 1963, at the end of the short-term appointment, he returned to Kansas State, where he found that the new chair of the Department of Civil Engineering did not like the fact that this young faculty member had spent the previous year on leave. Dr. Hampton realized that he had no future at Kansas State and began contemplating his next move.

He was offered a teaching position at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in his hometown of Chicago. He accepted and began teaching and conducting research in 1964. His time at IIT was successful, but it wasn’t long before a prime opportunity presented itself.

Howard University recruited him vigorously. Walter T. Daniels\textsuperscript{2} was chair of the Department of Civil Engineering and the two men had met at professional events; Daniels wanted the young scholar to come to Howard to teach and increase research in the department. In 1968 Dr. Hampton decided to accept the university’s offer and moved to Washington.

He excelled at Howard as a teacher, a researcher, and a professional engineer. He served on the faculty for some 25 years and later on the College of Engineering advisory board.

Teaching the soil mechanics course required of all civil engineering students, he was known as extremely demanding but also fair. At the beginning of the year, he told the students exactly what they would have to know at the end of the course and gave them a list of questions they would have to be able to answer. When the time came he tested them on exactly what he had taught them. His course was hard, but no one complained that it was unfair.

Dr. Hampton was not only an effective teacher but also one of the most active researchers in the department. By the end of his first year, he had built the laboratory Dr. Daniels had promised him. He brought in some of the department’s first

\textsuperscript{2} Daniels, who received his PhD in civil engineering from Iowa State University in 1941, is recognized as the first African American to receive a PhD in any field of engineering.
research grants, including, in that first year, a research contract from the US Forest Service to study the soils and rocks of an area called the Idaho Batholith.

As a registered professional engineer in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Indiana, and Virginia (and eventually also in Alabama, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, New York, Tennessee, and West Virginia—16 states), Dr. Hampton had increasing opportunities to consult on engineering projects. He seized an opportunity to manage a small, local engineering office on a part-time basis and soon developed a close working relationship with two preeminent Chicago-based engineers, Clyde N. Baker Jr. (NAE 2004) and John P. Gnaedinger, who invited him to join them in an engineering partnership. The firm of Gnaedinger, Baker, and Hampton Associates (GBH) was established in Washington in 1971, with Dr. Hampton as president with a majority interest. The business prospered.

Dr. Hampton learned that building a successful engineering firm required not only strong engineering skills but, very importantly, excellent client relationships as well. Leading an engineering company was an enterprise for which he had, in effect, been preparing his entire life: from his resourceful childhood days of creating usable items from scraps to his passion for school and learning the craft of engineering, and his lifelong skills at building and nurturing relationships.

In 1973 he sold his interests in GBH to the two partners and chartered his own firm, Delon Hampton & Associates (DHA), at a time when there were few Black-owned engineering firms. DHA’s first big job was a project for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) to design two rail service and inspection shops. The firm delivered, and WMATA returned repeatedly for engineering services.

DHA added program and construction management services to its capabilities and grew throughout the 1980s to provide nationwide services. Major projects included the Archer Avenue heavy rail transit station, a tunnel and reservoir project, and renovations to Soldiers Field and Comiskey Park, all in Chicago; the Omni Rail Transit Station of the
Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority; multiple stations for the Los Angeles Light Rail System and improvements to LA International Airport; the Baltimore Convention Center; and the Capitol Visitors Center, Nationals baseball park, and the Verizon Center and adjacent Gallery Place in Washington. Today DHA is counted among the top 360 engineering design firms in the United States.

In the course of his career Dr. Hampton published more than 40 technical papers. He also chronicled his experiences and challenges as an aspiring African-American engineer in his autobiography *A Life Constructed: Reflections on Breaking Barriers and Building Opportunities* (cowritten with Bob Keefe; Purdue University Press, 2013).

He made major contributions to the engineering profession through his engagement in and leadership of a number of engineering associations. Perhaps the highlight was his election as the first Black president (2000) of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE). During his term he led the society to establish the Outstanding Projects and Leaders awards program, known as OPAL, to recognize and celebrate civil engineering standouts. He was also very active in the following organizations:

- American Road and Transportation Builders Association: board of directors (1977–87)
- Consulting Engineers Council/Metropolitan Washington: president (1986–87)
- American Consulting Engineers Council: vice president (1987–89)
• Civil Engineering Research Foundation: corporate advisory board (1989–92)
• National Science Foundation Engineering Advisory Committee (1992).

In addition, he was exceptionally involved in studies and operations of the National Academy of Engineering and National Academies:

• Task Force to Review Guidelines for Construction Management Developed for the Urban Mass Transportation Administration (chair, 1988–89)
• Committee for Peer Review of Program Plans, University Transportation Centers Program (1990–91)
• FHWA Research and Technology Coordinating Committee (1991–95)
• Building Research Board (1992–94)
• Panel on Transit Cooperative Research Program Strategic Planning Process and Strategic Plan (chair, 1993)
• Transportation Research Board: executive committee (1994–2000)
• NAE Civil Engineering Peer Committee (1995–98; chair, 1997–98)
• NAE Committee on Membership (1997–98 and 2005–07)
• NAE Civil Engineering Section (secretary, 1997–2000)
• NAE Council (1997–2003)
• Board on Infrastructure and the Constructed Environment (1997–99)
• Committee for the Assessment of Upper Mississippi River-Illinois Waterway Navigation System Feasibility Study (2000–01)
• NAE Executive Compensation Committee (2000–03)
• Transit Research Analysis Committee (2004–06)
• Panel for Building and Fire Research (2004–05)
• Committee on New Orleans Regional Hurricane Protection Projects (2005–09).
Purdue University recognized Dr. Hampton as a distinguished engineering alumnus in 1982. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign honored him with distinguished alumni awards from the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering (1990) and College of Engineering (2000). The National Society of Black Engineers presented him with its Distinguished Engineer Award, and the American Academy of Environmental Engineers designated him a diplomate in 1990. ASCE selected him for the Edmund Friedman Professional Recognition Award (1988) and James Laurie Prize (1997), and designated him a distinguished member in 1995. He was elected to the NAE in 1992, and posthumously inducted in November 2021 to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) Hall of Fame.

Recognizing the importance of his education, in 2012 he made a generous donation of $7.5 million to Purdue’s Department of Civil Engineering, and the university’s Civil Engineering Building was renamed the Delon and Elizabeth Hampton Hall of Civil Engineering.

To those who knew Delon Hampton, he was a very special, memorable, extraordinary individual. He was easy-going, always seemed to have a smile, and was interested in getting to know others. His leadership style emphasized hard work, building trusted relationships, and appreciating the good things about life’s experiences.

One of his most important contributions was his advocacy for fairness and opportunity for Black engineers. Dr. Hampton suffered from closed doors and unavailable opportunities at numerous points in his life, but he never let that discrimination dampen his desire to succeed. Though he was undoubtedly proud to have been selected as the first Black president of ASCE, he was likely equally disappointed that, so far, he is the only one.

He succeeded beyond all reasonable odds to create a highly successful engineering firm, but he was quick to point out that there are still no more than a handful of Black CEOs of major engineering or construction companies in the United States. It was his belief that we can solve this problem only if all people
know that if they work hard and prove their abilities, every position—including CEO—will be open to them. In his candid but constructive way, he consistently pointed out that we have much work to do if this openness is to become a reality. Dr. Hampton believed that commitment was key and that leadership matters.

He led by example. Even after he started DHA, he remained affiliated with Howard University for 25 years, serving as a role model, mentor, and source of inspiration to innumerable students. With them and others, he was frank while offering constructive advice on how they might advance themselves and their careers. His own life story of achievement put him in an ideal position to help others rise to their full potential.

As an engineer, role model, and inspirer of others, few have outshone Dr. Delon Hampton. The world—and not just the engineering world—is a better place because of him.

He is survived by his wife of 27 years, Sonia M. Hampton, with whom he traveled the globe and shared joyous adventures.