

I N T R O D U C T I O N

This project is a study of the changes in Bridgeport neighborhoods from the viewpoint of selected Black residents during the historical periods of World War I, the Depression, World War II, and the 1960's.

By means of interviews, we have investigated the social and economic effects of each period on Black Bridgeporters. All persons interviewed have resided in Bridgeport during at least three of the targeted periods. We attempted to explore how their families, friends, and neighbors were affected during those turbulent times. We discovered the changes that occurred on their jobs, in their neighborhoods and in the city as a whole.

This kit contains a transcript and a tape recording of the interview along with suggested activities that are best suited for grades 5-8 and adaptable for high school students.

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PERSONAL DATA

Arthur Stanton Collins

11 Coachlight Square

Born: July 2, 1897 - Washington, D. C. to Margaret and
Matthew Collins

Spouse: Josephine Collins

Children: Marjorie Hamilton and Muriel McCoy

Education: High School

Employment: Bridgeport Brass

Travel: West Indies, Jamaica, Bermuda, Europe, Canada

Church: St. Mark's Episcopal

Organizations: St. Mark's - Vestry Choir, Men's Club
Elks #290
Empirials Social Club
Le Grand Hommes

"A Study of Bridgeport Neighborhoods:
A Black Perspective, 1900 -- Present"

Interview by: James Johnson
Interview with: Arthur S. Collins
Date: December 29, 1982

COLLINS

Johnson: I want to express my appreciation on behalf of the organization for letting me come into your home to interview you. The purpose of this interview is to collect information on Black history in and around Bridgeport. I think a good beginning would be as to where you were born, when you were born and also, some background about your parents. Where were you born, Mr. Collins?

Collins: I was born in Washington, D. C. -- 1897 -- on L Street, North West.

JJ: How many children did you have in the family?

AC: In my family I had two brothers and one sister.

JJ: Where are they now, Mr. Collins?

AC: Both of my brothers are dead. My sister is still alive. She lives in Pittsburg. She has a son, a neurologist -- the first Negro neurologist in that state.

JJ: What is her name?

AC: His name is Dr. Eugene Young. My sister's name is Gertrude Young. Her husband was a doctor. He was in charge of the Lincoln State Hospital in Lincoln, West Virginia. He died and my sister sold the home there and moved to Pittsburg where her son was located. He had quite a thriving practice there and he was head of the neurology department of that hospital in Pittsburg.

JJ: Where were your parents from?

AC: My mother was from Charleston, North Carolina.

JJ: Charleston, North Carolina? There is a Charleston in South Carolina.

AC: She was from Charleston.

JJ: Charleston, South Carolina. What about your father?

AC: My father was Lawrenceville, Virginia. That's where he was born -- where Dr. Russell's school is. I can tell you a little history about that school. Every summer we used to go to Lawrenceville; that was my father's home. And we used to go out into the country to visit relatives. I remember when that school was nothing but a little red barn. It was originated by Dr. Russell. It's college in Lawrenceville, Virginia now. It's called St. --

JJ: St. Paul's Episcopal.

AC: St. Paul's Episcopal College. I remember when there was just little red barns at the beginning of it. Dr. Russell was the originator. When I hear of different students that the family knows that attended that institution, it carries me back to the background of it. That's one point on that line. My uncle ran the grocery store there -- what you'd call the village store. As I said, we used to visit there from Washington when we were kids every summer. He used to slaughter his cattle right next to his house. I used to think it was the cruelest thing to see him take an axe and cut a head off and cut a pig's throat. It was all new to me. Lawrenceville, Virginia was the home of my father.

JJ: What were their occupations? What kind of work did they do?

AC: My father worked in the Bureau of Statistics in Washington. My mother was a housewife. In them days, a woman's place was in the home. [Laughter] The man wore the pants.

JJ: Did your parents own their home?

AC: No; we rented. Back in those days, didn't too many people own

their homes. Most of them rented. Rents were cheap.

JJ: About how much?

AC: You could rent a house for about twenty-five dollars and up.

Beautiful homes. Nice homes. Some of them had nice lawns. In those days the wages were low. And everything, in general, was cheaper. You could get a pound of butter for about thirty-nine cents and you could get liver for about ten cents a pound.

Things were according to salaries that people made. In those days Washington was always known as a society town. Most of the people there all had backgrounds, like the Dougla^ses. My shorthand teacher was from the background of Frederick Dougla^s. People judged you, in those days, on what your parents did.

When you used to see the young girls in high school, the first thing the parents wanted to know was, "Who are your folks?"

It was a college town. Howard University was located there. Most of the work there was government work. It was three distinct groups, I might say, when I say society. If you went to a dance or something like that, they didn't have to have a policeman at the door who said, "You can't come in here."

Now, they had several halls there. One was named

Hall on Twelfth and U Street in Washington. Then they had the Oddfellows Hall and like that. In the hall they'd have a main auditorium and they'd have two other rooms. If some undesirable came and looked in, a policeman didn't have to tell him he didn't belong. He looked in there and he knew he didn't belong there. So, he said, "I must be up in room five or room ten."

I remember some incidents when I first went to commercial

s school. Cortez Peters -- this was the champion typist of the country in those years. Do you remember him?

JJ: I've heard of him, yes.

AC: My first year in commercial school he was in his senior year. This is just an incident. He was over there and he was just carrying away, ring, ring; so many words a minute, like that. We had come into the commercial school. Of course, one of my subjects was typewriting -- a commercial course -- and bookkeeping, commercial law and things like that.

JJ: This is what we would call high school now? Commercial School.

AC: Yes. It was high school; but, it was the commercial high school. We used to admire him because he was in his senior year. In those years they didn't have the standard of typewriter with the touch system that they have today. They had the Remington and the Monarch and such typewriters as Smith. You almost had to hit them with your fist. [Laughs] Getting back to the point of Cortez Peters. We were just starting learning the alphabet like q, w, r, e, r, t, y, u, i, o, p, shift the carriage -- learning the keyboard. And he was just going to town.

JJ: Were there many Blacks taking commercial courses?

AC: It was a segregated school. The whole system was a segregated system in Washington. It wasn't mixed like in Bridgeport when I first came here. It's not a segregated system here.

JJ: How was your elementary education? What grade did you start in school?

AC: I started from the very beginning. I started in first grade.

JJ: How many elementary grades did they have before

AC: You had twelve elementary grades. And from there you went to first year of high school. Four years of high school. And from there you could go to college. In those days in the medical division you would go right from high school and take pharmacy. And you didn't have to take a pre-med course for M.D. Things were a little different and easier in those days.

Washington was always known as an intellectual city because Howard University was there. Most everybody worked in government jobs. There were no factories. It was all clean working and all that type.

JJ: How was your social life? Were there any restrictions on your parents?

AC: Washington was known as a society town. There were three social groups -- the backgrounds were different. There was the medical profession and the people who worked in the government and the teachers and like that. As I said, it wasn't exactly divided; but, you had to be in that circle as a young kid going to see the girls because the first thing the parents wanted to know was, "Who were your folks?" and things like that. It was quite different when I left Washington when I was nineteen and I came to Stratford.

JJ: Why did you leave Washington? Why did your parents leave?

AC: My parents never left Washington. They died in Washington. I left when I was around nineteen. It was during the First World War. A Mr. Jefferson from up in Bridgeport here -- they sent down to Washington during the summer months when school was out, to bring up a group to clean trolley

cars here in Bridgeport. In Washington I worked in a drugstore, soda-jerking and waiting [on people]. In the wintertime I got about two dollars a week and in the summertime about five dollars a week. That was a lot of money. And you could go around Washington all week on as little as five dollars. We came here -- to make a long story short -- when school was closed during the First World War. They sent this Mr. Jefferson down to Washington through Reverend Wiseman. They had a picture of some fellows leaving to go to Atlantic City to work. [So, we came] to clean cars at the car barn.

JJ: Here in Bridgeport. This Reverend Wiseman -- was he --

AC: He was in Washington.

JJ: He was the person that Mr. Jefferson contacted.

AC: He was a friend of Mr. Jefferson's. A bunch of us came here and worked at the car barn seven days a week. We got fourteen dollars a week. And we thought that was the "public debt." [Laughter] When they wanted to hold back two days, that was it. [Laughs] That was a lot of money for us just leaving Washington and when you're in school, too, and making that kind of money; but, it was seven days a week.

JJ: How long did you work at that job?

AC: In those days, we worked at that job and got our transportation free. I'd say three or four months. At the end of it, we'd shift around and get jobs here and there. But, I want to make one point clear. In the industrial field in Bridgeport, if they didn't have no dirty work or sweeping for you to do, there was no work for you. You could name on one hand the colored that held responsible positions in the industrial end of it.

One, I knew personally. He was a boss electrician. He was colored. He had working under him an assistant who was a white man. Ivan Kerny was the name of the boss electrician. He was colored. And it wasn't then. Somebody that knew you and thought well of you -- a white man -- had to put you there. Here was a man, one of the best electricians in Bridgeport. There wasn't any white or any other [any better]. But, you just couldn't go and apply for a job as an electrician because you were colored. And this white fellow who was his assistant, when Mr. Kearny died, became boss; and he never hired a colored man -- that is in the industrial end of it.

Mostly the work here in those days was domestic, working for people. But, they were decent people. But, the opportunities weren't there. It wasn't like it is today or in the sixties when things began [to happen] and Martin Luther King and everybody moved up. The banks didn't hire [Blacks] or the big department store. You could run accounts here, spend all the money you wanted; but, you couldn't buy a cup of coffee in their restaurant. They wouldn't serve you. That was the set-up here. It was in the sixties that things began to break a little, though.

You didn't see colored girls working in the banks like they do today or in the big department stores behind the counter waiting on people. It was entirely different. I worked in several factories. As I said, if there wasn't dirty work or sweeping to do, then, there was no job. That was for the colored -- that type of work. Not casting aspersions on the type of people that lived here, during the First World War, a

lot of them just began to make enough money to start buying a home which most all of them lost when the Depression came. A lot of people around here that should have been putting their money in the bank were buying stock through the brokers.

JJ: Wall Street? Stockbrokers?

AC: Stockbrokers. They weren't making but so much. They should have been putting that in the bank.

JJ: These are Black people that you're talking about?

AC: These are Black people.

JJ: They were investing in stocks at that time?

AC: Yes. Buying stock on margin, that's what I wanted to say. When the "Crash" came, the brokers closed in on them. Those who had homes -- And a lot of them hadn't been paid for. -- lost them. All through the sixties after Martin Luther King things began to break.

JJ: Right on.

AC: They started employing colored in the department stores as sales girls and salesmen. Also, in the factories -- After Japan jumped them, that's when. Things opened up a little. In the factories and industrial departments they began to hire more colored in decenter jobs. If you had a trade, you just couldn't go and apply for it. A few of them got through; but, they had to have someone in that organization that knew you. And he had to be white, too, to put you there. That's how a lot of them got there.

We didn't have back in those days a colored student attending a school like Mrs. Johnson. There wasn't nothing like that open for a colored. You could go to a business school and

they wouldn't even accept you if you applied. Most business schools in those days after you'd finished the course, were guaranteed to find you a job, to place you. So, therefore, the colored never had the opportunity to go to some of these schools because they knew darn well that they couldn't place them like whites.

Doubling back, some of the problems of the people that I knew coming along and came in contact with -- just like I'm talking with you -- one was Claude Hopkins

JJ:

AC: [malfunctioning of recorder] was a professor of music at

[end of side two, tape one]

JJ: You mentioned Claude Hopkins.

AC: Claude Hopkins' father, Professor Hopkins, was head of the Music Department at Howard University. He was from a musical family. Of course, back in those days, we were all young kids in the adolescent stage. We used to

Ten cents. It always used to be on Friday night because the next day you didn't have to go to school. We used to pay ten cents to come in. That was our enjoyment.

Duke. I remember him. I lived right around the street corner from him. He lived on Thirteenth Street and I lived on T Street just around the corner. He was all music; He never went in for sports, athletics, like the other students did. We used to go to his house after school, books back of the door, and we would dance until it was time for his mother

and father to come home. His father -- Mercer was named after him.

JJ: Mercer Ellington.

AC: We used to dance until it was time for his mother and father to come home and then we'd beat it and go home. [Laughs]

Mercer's named after his grandfather. Duke's father worked at the White House. He had a pretty good position; it was like head of the other employees there. We used to enjoy having the big times at this house then until time for his father and his mother to come home.

JJ: Another thing, Mr. Collins, when did you start dating?

AC: I'll tell you. I was the dumbest thing coming along the path. The girls -- I didn't know nothing.

JJ: Did that start here in Bridgeport?

AC: When I left home and came to Bridgeport that's when I began to become educated in the sex life. [Laughter] It was my first time away from home other than in school years to go to Baltimore to play basketball. Of course, I never will forget those cobblestones in Baltimore. Are they still there? Have you been there recently?

JJ: No, I haven't.

AC: Those little, red brick houses with the little white steps. All of them look alike. I used to say to myself, "If you ever got high, you'd have to be amagician to find your way, which house you lived in."

JJ: How old were you when you married, Mr. Collins.

AC: When I was married, I was about twenty-five. Marjorie -- you know my daughter -- she was my first born. Her mother,

Dorothy, was the first secretary in Bridgeport. She worked for Echols. He was an engraver. Then, he went into politics and he became Senator. And she worked for him.

JJ: Where did you meet your wife?

AC: Right here in Bridgeport. They are one of the oldest known families in Bridgeport -- the Hawleys. I'd been around several girls and I finally met Margie's mother. We became pretty close. At this time I was going back and forth to Washington. I'd come up here in the summer to see her. And, so, finally, I got up nerve to ask her mother if we could get married. They thought quite a bit of me. We got married and Marjory was the first-born. And next is Muriel. I only have the two. Have you ever met Muriel?

JJ: Yes, I have.

AC: She lives in New Jersey.

JJ: Do you recall where you first met your wife?

AC: Going around to little parties.

JJ: House parties?

AC: House parties and like that. Back in those days it was great for picnics during the summer. Things were cheap. And you could go out and have yourself a nice little outing for very little money. When I first came here, the fad among the younger people was dinner parties. Their mothers used to bring out their nice china and we'd have dinner parties; no strong drink, but, wine. People lived very decently around here. But, as I said, business opportunity was very scarce.

JJ: During World War I when you were here in Bridgeport, were you working cleaning the trolley cars?

AC: Yes. All of World War I. In those days, quite a few of the Washington boys came up here like Dr. Wilson' son and different ones.

JJ: How long did you continue in that job after the war, in the twenties?

AC: In '24 I went to work for the Bridgeport Brass Company. That was another one of the prejudiced factories. Most all of them were prejudiced when it came down to it.

[Tape interruption]

JJ: We were talking about the Bridgeport Brass.

AC: Back in them days I started running the elevator just like sweeping the floor. It's a colored man's job. I worked there thirty-eight years. And when I finished, I was the foreman of my department -- about sixteen all white with the exception of about two or three. But, as I said, I was put there by a white man that knew I was entitled to it and qualified for it. I had my own department. I had my own budget and for that department I did the buying and the hiring for my department. I worked there from 1924 until I retired August 1, 1962. I was put there as I say by the white man. I was put there and introduced as a foreman with such men as were chairman of the board [tape interrupted] and president of a company like that as one of them. I sat down with them and we had our lunch. I was waited on by the others the same as they were. [tape interrupted] I worked there for thirty-eight years. When I first went there, I went there as

a usual Black man has to do, go there to run the elevator or sweep the floor. I was there from '24 to '39. Then they made me the head of this department. I was placed there by Mr. Steinkraus. He was the president. When I was coming along, I used to play softball with them during intermission and all of them knew me as Art Collins.

JJ: You liked softball?

AC: I played baseball. In school I made quite a second baseman. [Laughs] They all used to say that if I had been white in them days, I'd have been in the league. I used to go to Griffith Stadium in Washington in the morning and chase "flies." I used to come in contact -- I used to sell peanuts and popcorn in Griffith Stadium. -- with some of the greats like Tris Speaker of Boston, and players such as that. The worst stinker was Ty Cobb. He was [interruption] He didn't like Negro players. All the big players of those days -- Eddie Collins of the Phillies. I used to come in contact by shagging "flies."

[Tape interruption]

connected with the Yankees. That's when they had the name the "Stadium that Ruth Built" -- Yankee Stadium. So, as far as experience along that line I can recall a lot of incidents.

[Tape interruption]

JJ: Extra-curricular activities in the community as far as church was concerned or any organizations.

AC: I was Chairman of the House Committee of New Era Lodge number two ninety for a quite a few years -- the Elks. I eventually became treasurer of the lodge and also the Chairman

of the House Committee. I kept that position until I became sick. The members would come and see me and appreciated my efforts for what I had done for that lodge. So, I had quite an experience in Elkdom as treasurer of the lodge, number two ninety.

JJ: What church were you affiliated with, Mr. Collins?

AC: St. Mark's. I guess you've read in the paper recently of the first Negro woman priest.

JJ: Yes, I did.

AC: She is now the priest of our church, St. Mark's and she's doing a wonderful job. Father Cuffey was our first priest. He was there for forty years. Next was Father Coleridge. Of course, most of them started as a curate from New York. He built a day-care center under his regime and made quite a name for himself area. He is now a suffragan bishop.

[Tape interrupted]

She's traveled all around. She's well read.

[Tape interrupted]

JJ: There's something that interests me, Mr. Collins. How would you compare your early days in Washington with your latter days here in Bridgeport? Was there any significant difference in the two?

AC: Yes. No comparison. As I said, Washington was a society town.

[Tape interrupted]

JJ: There's something else I wanted to ask

[end of side one, tape two]

JJ: Compare the progress of Blacks, say here in Bridgeport.

He was the first colored dentist to come to Bridgeport. Of course, the colored one who was already here wasn't particular about colored clientele. Dr. moved here.

This man and were friends. I was working and soda-jerking. I was young. We became dear friends. This is after his friend died. Dr. had taken up his practice in Stamford. He moved here to Bridgeport and took up his friend's practice. There's a letter from him. He moved to California. And he always kept in touch.

[Tape interrupted]

I retired August 1, 1962. I've been in retirement twenty years.

[Tape interrupted]

JJ: What would you advise your people for a long life like you've had, Mr. Collins?

AC: Today it's different than when I came along. There's dope and things that are

[Tape interrupted]

It's the greatest set-back to all people -- white and Black. With the opportunities that they have today, so much of it is wasted. As I said, these are taken up in this "doping stuff." It's not only the ones who haven't had the advantage of education. It seems like it's the general thing. They become so easily involved.

In those days we didn't have the drugs thrown in front of us. We didn't know what dope was because we never had come in contact with it. But, now, it seems that that's the way of life among young people. Of course, our people are great

imitators. [Laughter] They fall right in line. The opportunities today -- There's no question about it, especially the Blacks. -- are greater than they've ever been. And if they ever lived to be as old as I am -- eighty-five years old -- and live the kind of life that I've lived, there's so much ahead of them, so much, opportunities and things like that. When you look back before Martin Luther King, before the sixties, they've made tremendous strides.

I'll ask you a question now. How long have you lived in Bridgeport?

JJ: Since 1955.

AC: What improvement have you found since '55? It's nothing compared with the sixties, is it?

JJ: No. since the sixties.
That's the interesting thing about it because you have been here since World War I.

End of Interview