

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.

AAEA Education Committee Members:

Demise Foster-Bey
Susan Golson
David Hicks
Gwendolyn Johnson
James Johnson
Juanita Wright
Frances Judson, Chairman

Consultants:

John Sutherland, Ph. D.
David Palmquist, Curator

PERSONAL DATA

Bessie Thomas Diggs Forrester Eaton

376 East Washington Avenue, Bridgeport

Born: January 6, 1883, Richmond VA to Walter Scott
and Laura Palmer Randolph Diggs

Spouse: Alfred W. Forrester
Thomas H. Eaton

Children: Thelma Whitney, Wallace, Iris Francesca,
Thomas Hilliard, Scott Diggs, Virginia
Elizabeth, John Randolph

Education: Elementary School and Normal School

Employment: D. M. Reads
Howland's
Stratfield Hotel

Travel: Continental United States

Church: St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Bridgeport

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

Interview by: Frances Judson
Interview with: Bessie Eaton
Date: November 26, 1982

Judson: This interview is with Mrs. Bessie Thomas Diggs Eaton of 376 East Washington Avenue, apartment C-57, in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The date is November 26, 1982. Mrs. Diggs -- Eaton -- was your family an extended family? (I'll begin with questions about your family and its makeup, okay? And I'm also talking about your early childhood, when you were little.) Was your family an extended one? Do you know what I mean? Did more people live with you and your mother than your sisters and brothers? Cousins or --

Eaton: In Richmond?

FJ: Yes.

BE: No. Just the family.

FJ: Just your family, together. Okay; how many people were there in your household?

BE: There was my mother and father, my brother and sister and myself. My mother had seven children, but only three of us lived to be of age; I mean, grew up. The others died in infancy, so only three of us lived to grow up.

FJ: Was the place where you lived, your parents original home?

BE: Yes, that was our original home. Of course, he owned the two houses. One was rented, and the other we lived in. We all lived there until -- I was the first one to get married. I looked, and to tell you the truth, I was eighteen years old. [chuckles]

FJ: Oh, did you?

BE: Because I had the two children, and my husband died. I think it was five years, because she was five years old when he died;

FJ: At what age did you come to Bridgeport?

BE: When I was twenty-five. I've been here for almost seventy-five years now.

FJ: When you came here, was it during the time you were with your first husband, or were you by yourself when you came here?

BE: Oh yes, I was alone when I came here. I came here on a visit, and I met my husband here. The next year we were married, and then I came to Bridgeport to live. I was married when I was twenty-five years old. But I had the two children by my first marriage.

FJ: When you moved here, did you rent your home, at first?

BE: Oh, that was my mother's home. She sold it. After I came here, my sister came here to visit me. Well, she stayed here quite a while, and she got a job and decided to stay. So she stayed here. I don't know how old Ella was when she first came here, but she married a man that she met here, and she died about -- how many years?

: 1978, she died.

BE: Yes, 1978, she died. But he's still alive; he's the same age as I am.

FJ: I'm trying to find out where you lived when you came to Bridgeport?

BE: What place I lived?

FJ: Yes.

BE: I lived on Broad Street; I couldn't tell you the number, or the house, or where -- but I know it was on Broad Street. That's all I know. I came to

FJ: Who owned it?

BE: I don't know who owned it. We rented the apartment. I don't

know who the landlord was.

FJ: An agency? You paid rent to an agency? Someone who took care of --

BE: Oh, I think he paid it to the person he rented it from; I'm not sure. I don't know. I didn't take care of that.

FJ: Oh, I see. Because your husband took care of it, you don't know who it [was].

BE: No, I don't know.

FJ: All right. So that means that during your shildhood, you attended school in Richmond.

BE: Richmond, Virginia.

FJ: Yes. And this is where you went to elementary school, and then --

BE: To normal school.

FJ: You finished elementary school, on to normal school, and --

BE: Stayed until graduation time.

FJ: Stayed until graduation time and --

BE: I failed in arithmetic, and I never went back to school.

FJ: So you completed all courses in normal school except arithmetic. Okay. What was the name of the school where you went in Virginia? Do you remember?

BE: Oh --

: Navy Hill, mama?

BE: No, it wasn't Navy Hill. That's the elementary school I went to. I went from there to normal school. All I know is, it was thirteen blocks from where I lived. I can't tell the name of the normal school. I can't remember. But we had white teachers, but it was a colored school. We had a white principal, but it was a colored school; a colored normal school. It was the only one

in Richmond, so anybody who knew Richmond [would] know what I'm talking about.

FJ: Yes, yes. I think that what you're talking about is typical of quite a few places in Virginia, especially --

BE: Oh, yes. This was in Richmond.

FJ: You were saying that when you married at eighteen, that you eloped?

BE: [laughs] Yes, we eloped.

FJ: Did you date before you married your first husband?

BE: Oh, yes. We went together -- oh, I guess we went together more than about a year, because I was so proud of him. He was just about the same age as I was. We were about the same age.

FJ: Oh yes? Was that your first boyfriend?

BE: No, I had other boyfriends. He wasn't the first one. [chuckles]

FJ: How old were you when you started dating?

BE: I'll tell you. I was into normal school, and I hadn't been having boyfriends coming to visit me, but very often coming from school, and the boys would -- If they liked you, they would want to take your books, you know. But somebody wrote my father a letter and told him that I was coming from normal school with some boy, and he was carrying my books, and they left me at the corner of Sixth Street and Lee Street. So when he got this letter, he was quite upset. So he said to me, "Bessie, I don't want you to ever let anybody walk with you part of the way home, and leave you, and you come home alone." He said, "This is your home. Your company brings you home, and then they go about their business. But," he said, "never let them leave you in the street and come home by yourself." He said, "This is your home, and if you want to have company, they come here to visit you. They don't leave you in the street."

And he gave me a good lecture on that. So from then on -- I had a special boyfriend then that I liked very much, and the family always thought I was going to marry him. I was young, but they were sure that I was going to marry their brother. And the mother did too; they thought I was going to marry him. But I went with him for a while, and then [with] other boys. Of course, Union University was right there in Richmond, you know, and the Union boys would come down to visit the girls in the city. There were three of us -- one girl lived on the same side of the street, but she lived about a block away. Then my closest friend was right across the street from me. And the same boys would go to each one of their homes, you know? Especially Sunday afternoon. One Sunday afternoon, there was twenty-three of them, all the went to visit all three of us. It was awful. [laughs] I used to know two of the boys. One of them thought that I was going to marry him, too, but I didn't. [laughs] I had quite a few boyfriends when I was in school.

FJ: All right, now. And you married at eighteen. Then your first husband passed --

BE: Oh, yes, he died about five years after -- My daughter was five years old when he died.

FJ: Then you came to Bridgeport.

BE: I married. I went to my brother's; my cousin's. He took care of the first floor of a big -- I called it a mansion. It was a beautiful place. He had charge of the dining rooms and the kitchen; he took charge of that.

FJ: Is that here in Bridgeport?

BE: That was in Philadelphia.

FJ: Did that lead to your getting here in Bridgeport?

BE: Yes, it did, because I met a girl. I was getting ready to come to Richmond because my mother was in Richmond, and she had my two children there with her. I was getting ready to go home, to the children. So she said to me, "I'm going up to Connecticut on two weeks vacation. Why don't you come and go with me?" I said, "I can't. I've got to go home, because I have my children there." My mother had come up to Philadelphia, and she was there, anyway. I said to her, when I went home, I said, "Susan asked me to go with her to Bridgeport because she was going on her vacation, and she thought it would be nice if I could go with her." So I said, "But I told her I couldn't go with her, because I was going home to the children." She said, "Well, Bessie, you can go home any time. But if you got a chance to go visiting some place you've never been -- you've never travelled much -- so why don't you go?" So she encouraged me, and I came to Bridgeport. That's when I met Mr. Eaton; I was there for two weeks. Afterwards, I went home, and every day, I got a special delivery from that man. From the day I left Philadelphia until I got back to Richmond, I got a special delivery letter from him; and sometimes, a telegram. [laughs] So he came to Richmond, and we were married in Richmond. He came to Richmond.

FJ: Oh really? When you came here to visit, where did you stay?
You and your girlfriend.

BE: I stayed with a friend of this girl. Her name was Mrs. Dawson; I stayed with Mrs. Dawson for the two weeks that I was visiting here.

FJ: Okay. Then you went back home. He was courting, via mail; he

came to Richmond, married you and brought you back to Bridgeport.

And this is when you lived on Broad Street.

BE: That's right; when I first came back, I lived on Broad Street, yes.

FJ: And this was your first job; this was the first time that you worked, when you came --

BE: I'd never worked before in my life.

FJ: Until you came to Bridgeport.

BE: I never thought -- You see, girls down south -- those that I knew, anyway -- they didn't work. If they got married, they surely didn't work, because the husbands seldom let them take a job, after they got married. The husband took care of them. So I didn't know anything about going to work. [chuckles] I didn't know what going to work meant. It was just accidental that I got a job here. I knew a girl, and she was (now how was that? Was that the first job I had?) Yes. She was leaving Read's. (That was the way it was.) And she said to me, "That will be a nice job for you, if you wanted to work." So I said, "Well, I guess it would be all right." So I went to work in Read's.

[interview interrupted]

I can just barely go back that far, to remember.

FJ: That's okay; whatever you can remember, it's all right.

BE: So anyway. I think Read's was the first -- As far as you know, isn't it, Iris?

: I think so, Mama, because Daddy didn't want you to work, either.

BE: No. [chuckles]

: But Papa needed the money. [chuckles]

FJ: Was the War going on during this time? You told me earlier that

you were working in a factory. That happened later?

BE: Yes, later. Oh, yes. That was after my husband died. Wasn't it after your father died? He died in '29.

: Well, you worked before Daddy died, because Daddy didn't want you to take the job. You said, "Well, but we needed it."

So you did. Because you really did need it.

FJ: Okay, but World War One: did that have any kind of effect on you? 1917, or '18?

BE: How do you mean?

FJ: Was anyone in your family involved in it? Any brothers, or --

BE: My mother was here with me at that time. She sold the home in Richmond and came here, and bought a home on Connecticut Avenue. That's what she did. That was my home, on Connecticut Avenue, when I first came to Bridgeport. After I had been married, she came to Bridgeport. We all stayed together for a while, before she bought that house.

: Mama, you lived on Newfield Avenue, for a while. That house across from St. Lawrence.

BE: That was before --

: When Aunt Etta came, that's where you were. And then Grandma came to visit and bought the house -- Grandma decided to come and live in Bridgeport, too. She came to visit and bought the house on Connecticut Avenue, so then everybody moved over to Connecticut Avenue.

BE: Yes. That's the way it was.

: And Grandma and Aunt Etta lived upstairs, and Daddy and us lived downstairs.

FJ: All right. But the thing that I was trying to get to is that during World War One, that took place in the beginning, 1917 and that -- no one in your family was involved in that war, so it didn't particularly --

BE: Not in World War One, no.

FJ: Okay. Now, as far as your work is concerned, did the work you [did] require any particular skills? Did you have a trade of any kind?

BE: I told you, I worked for the W.P.A. [Work Projects Administration] and I did the sewing. Then that closed down, and then I went -- I'm all mixed up about it.

FJ: That's okay. Whatever you can remember.

I that you went to work in Reed's, didn't you? And the various other places.

FJ: It doesn't matter. I want to hear about the work that you were doing that you -- Do you remember when you were working with the machines?

BE: W.P.A.?

FJ: Yes.

BE: Well, that's what I was doing; I was sewing. But I told you the woman raised everybody's salary but mine. Do you know, after that, they even recalled the raise that they gave the others, because I wasn't a part of it. This woman, that came down from Hartford, she took care of that. I told you, the woman, she got fired. The woman --

FJ: Who didn't give you the raise, got fired.

BE: No, she didn't give me -- I don't know whether that was the cause of it or not, but she wasn't there long after that.

FJ: Well, now, what happened with this incident wherein they didn't realize that you were black?

BE: They didn't realize that until this man came in: I knew him, and he knew me. He knew that they didn't hire black people.

FJ: In this W.P.A. job you had?

BE: No, that wasn't at the W.P.A. job.

FJ: This was another job, then.

BE: This was the war job, when I was working for World War Two.

That's when that happened, because he knew -- He was very friendly with one of the white girls, and he came in there one day, and he spoke about not hiring black people. He said, "But yes you do, because Mrs. Eaton is black. She's not white."

FJ: What kind of work was that you were doing during World War Two?

BE: I told you, I was on this machine. We weren't supposed to divulge the kind of work we were doing, or what we had to do or anything. So that's why I called it the "secret service" job. Of course, when the job was over, they didn't replace me -- They didn't give me another job.

FJ: But they gave everyone else another job, except you.

BE: Yes.

FJ: This was a government job.

BE: Yes.

FJ: It was not illegal during this time for them to discriminate, and not hire blacks, as they were doing?

BE: Huh?

FJ: You say that they had a policy to only hire whites, but they had hired you by mistake because they thought you were white.

BE: That's what they did.

FJ: There was no policy that kept them from doing this with government jobs?

BE: Evidently not. I don't know. I don't know. I stayed there until the job closed, but the boss -- the man that was over this department -- he changed his attitude right around, after he found out I wasn't white. All them: he gave them all jobs, but he didn't give me anything to do. [chuckles] But that's all right. Everything turns out all right.

FJ: [chuckles] Now, guess what my next question is?

BE: What?

FJ: Were you aware of discrimination during your early adulthood?
[laughs] And I would say that you were.

BE: You mean before I came to Bridgeport?

FJ: No, in Bridgeport. I know that you just cited one incident where you were aware of it. Were there any others that you can remember?

BE: Where I was concerned?

FJ: Yes.

BE: No, I never even thought about that, because so many that I worked with were black, so I never thought anything about it.

FJ: Oh, yes, okay. Were you still having children at this time?

BE: I had my last child when I was forty-two years old.

FJ: Who delivered your children here in Bridgeport?

BE: The doctors. Dr. Wise delivered John, I think. Let me see.

FJ: In the hospital?

BE: Let me see. The only child that I had at home was Tom, because Dr. Blackman delivered me when Tom was born. [pauses] You were

BE: That's what they did.

FJ: There was no policy that kept them from doing this with government jobs?

BE: Evidently not. I don't know. I don't know. I stayed there until the job closed, but the boss -- the man that was over this department -- he changed his attitude right around, after he found out I wasn't white. All them: he gave them all jobs, but he didn't give me anything to do. [chuckles] But that's all right. Everything turns out all right.

FJ: [chuckles] Now, guess what my next question is?

BE: What?

FJ: Were you aware of discrimination during your early adulthood?
[laughs] And I would say that you were.

BE: You mean before I came to Bridgeport?

FJ: No, in Bridgeport. I know that you just cited one incident where you were aware of it. Were there any others that you can remember?

BE: Where I was concerned?

FJ: Yes.

BE: No, I never even thought about that, because so many that I worked with were black, so I never thought anything about it.

FJ: Oh, yes, okay. Were you still having children at this time?

BE: I had my last child when I was forty-two years old.

FJ: Who delivered your children here in Bridgeport?

BE: The doctors. Dr. Wise delivered John, I think. Let me see.

FJ: In the hospital?

BE: Let me see. The only child that I had at home was Tom, because Dr. Blackman delivered me when Tom was born. [pauses] You were

born in Bridgeport Hospital, weren't you?

: I think we were all born in the hospital; maybe except Tom.

BE: Only Tom wasn't. Tom wasn't, because Dr. Blackman delivered me when Tom was born, but the rest of them were born in the hospital. Let's see: it seems to me Dr. Blackman delivered Scott, too.

FJ: Okay. During this time, was there a need for mission work?

Were there families who were needy, who needed clothes and food so that black people were helping each other in this way?

BE: I don't know. I never took care of any of the business part of it; I don't know.

FJ: I mean, you know how families grow up beside each other, and sometimes one will need assistance, and instead of having welfare at that time, we just helped each other through, you know?

BE: Welfare?

FJ: No. Were there any families that were needy, so that you would have to help each other out, during this time, to give clothes to other people, or --?

BE: I don't remember. I don't remember that.

FJ: Now I want to move on to another phase. Were you a housewife any time during the time that you were married, exclusively? I mean, did you work all of the time?

BE: I didn't work until --

FJ: I know, until you were twenty-five.

BE: I never worked before I was twenty-five; never worked.

FJ: I know. Did you work for a long time after you came to Bridgeport? You seem to have gotten jobs very easily, even though you weren't looking, particularly. [chuckles]

BE: I think Reed's was the last place I worked.

FJ: When was that?

BE: I think Reed's was the last place, but I couldn't tell you.

I'm hard on -- Dates escape me. I can't remember dates too well.

So I can't tell you.

FJ: Okay. I see now; because I was about to ask you about the time when you were forty-five and all your children were grown, but that couldn't be because you had the last one at forty-two. So when your children were grown, were you still working? When all your children were grown, did you still continue to work?

BE: I didn't work while I was in pregnancy.

FJ: By the time that John got grown, were you still working?

BE: By the time John got born?

FJ: Grown. By the time he became an adult: were you still working then?

BE: I wasn't working --

: No, you didn't. You didn't work much past forty-two; that's a fact. Mama really didn't, and one reason, if you remember, was because you'd had an illness, and it made it difficult. So Mama really didn't work much past forty-two.

FJ: Okay, I'm getting to that.

: Yes, see she doesn't remember. She's getting confused. What she has to remember is, she did have an illness that prevented her from working, and then she didn't work any more.

FJ: Okay. Well, I'm going to get to her health, so she would eventually have gotten it. So, my next question is, about the condition of your health at this time?

BE: Well, before I was married, I had all the children's diseases.

I had -- No, when Iris was born -- nine days after she was born (I think it was nine days), I came down with scarlet fever. They took me into isolation, and I never saw her any more for forty-nine days. That's how long I was in isolation. That was when Iris was born; that was my first child. But since then, I haven't had any -- When Tom was born, Dr. Blackman delivered me. Hew had delivered somebody who had blood poisoning, and he caught and came and delivered me. I got blood poisoning. I had to have a trained nurse; I don't know how long Mrs. Selleck was there, but she was right there for an awfully long time when Tom was born. Every day, I don't know what they do, but they have to scrape you. Every day, that had to happen. If I hadn't had a nurse right there, I never could have made it, because he gave me this blood poisoning. After he knew he had given it to me, I was in bed. I was suffering terribly. I heard this footstep up the steps, and it was the doctor. He couldn't hardly make it himself, but he came to see how I was, and he told me what had happened. I think he paid the hospital. Did I go to the hospital? No. I think he had to pay the nurse, because he was the cause of my illness. That was when Tom was born. That was my second child. He was born a year or so, or a few days --

[end of side one, tape one]

FJ: Okay, you were saying that you did not work very long after your last son John was born, because of your health?

BE: Not because of my health. After John was born [pauses] --

: Mama -- I hate to --

[interview interrupted]

FJ: Now, were you saying something about your legs were bothering you after that time, so you couldn't work very much?

BE: Yes, I had trouble with my legs, but I went to Dr. Wise and he cleared that up very well. So that doesn't bother me any more.

FJ: But you just went to the doctor for that; you didn't have to be hospitalized or anything, and it wasn't for long.

BE: No, no.

FJ: Okay. By this time, had your husband passed?

BE: He died in '29. Oh yes, he'd gone.

FJ: Were you a grandparent by this time?

BE: Oh, yes. Thelma had two children; Tom had one boy.

: Wallace had one

BE: That's my grandson. She has -- Her children have children; they're my great-grandchildren. I have some great-great-grandchildren. [chuckles]

FJ: Now after Mr. Eaton passed in 1929, did you marry any more?

BE: No, I never married any more.

FJ: Is there anything particular that happened during this time? I know that it was beginning to be Depression time, right? And after that, World War Two broke out.

BE: We got help from the city.

FJ: During the Depression?

BE: During the Depression, yes, we had to have help.

FJ: Did any of your children go to World War Two?

BE: Yes, Scott went overseas. Tom --

: Tom didn't but Wallace did.

BE: My oldest son: he didn't go overseas, but he was in the service.

Wallace, Tom, Scott, and John: all four of them were in the service.

Scott is the only one who went overseas, but he was in the Battle of the Bulge; Scott was. He got several war medals; several.

FJ: You've got a war hero, huh? Now, during this time, or right after that time, how many people were there in your household?

BE: When?

FJ: During World War Two; after your husband passed, and during the Depression time and all?

BE: After Iris finished high school, she went to New York to work. Iris hasn't been home to live, since she left high school.

FJ: Did anyone live with you? Did you live alone?

BE: Oh, no, I didn't live alone. My mother was here. She bought the home on Connecticut Avenue.

FJ: So by this time, you were -- Did I ask you when you moved over on to Connecticut Avenue?

[interview interrupted]

You don't remember exactly when, but your mother purchased that house.

BE: Yes, uh huh.

FJ: Did she have any problems trying to get a house at that time?

BE: No, because they thought she was white, you see. It was an all-white neighborhood. They thought she was white, and she had no problem until after she got there and they found she was black. This woman stood across the street from the house and she said, "I'm putting a curse on that house." Whether she did or not, we had plenty of trouble. I'll tell you that. [both chuckle] My mother was able to talk to them. She'd say, "I know why you're acting like you are, because we're not white." But she'd

say, "Don't worry about it, because we're here, and we're going to stay here, and if you don't like it, you can move away yourself, but we're going to stay here." So that house has been there -- My son lives in it now. [chuckles]

FJ: Oh, yes? Still the family house.

BE: Yes, it's still the family house, because when my mother died she didn't leave a will, but my sister took it over. She got married, so the house was still hers when she died. So now John is there, and he takes care of the old man; he's upstairs.

FJ: This is your sister's husband. Your son takes care of your sister's [husband.]

BE: My son takes care of him, and he says he wants to stay there until the house collapses on him. [chuckles]

FJ: Who is it that, wants to stay there?

BE: That's the husband, so it looks like that's what's going to happen. [laughs]

FJ: What's the number of that house?

BE: 264 Connecticut Avenue.

FJ: Now, I want to go back for a little bit. So Iris had moved away; who was there with you, then, after the boys were in the service?

BE: My mother was there.

FJ: You and your mother: that was it?

BE: My aunt, and my sister.

FJ: Your sister lived in the house then. Okay.

BE: She lived there, but she and her husband lived --

FJ: Upstairs.

BE: No; they had the apartment there, but they worked together.

They worked out in Canfield's house out in Fairfield, so they were there only certain times. But their apartment was there, so it was just like her living there, because her apartment was there. So my mother and my children -- We lived upstairs because we had the top floor. The other part had two bedrooms up there, so we could use all that space. So that's the way we did it. Iris finished school; she went straight to New York, and she had a job. So that was -- Tom was married then, wasn't he?

: Yes. Tom was married and living in New Haven.

BE: Scott was married.

: John and Sug were there.

BE: And Thelma --

: Thelma was in Richmond, and Wallace was in --

BE: Thelma was in Richmond; Wallace was in Massachusetts, so they were all gone. Just --

: John and Sug.

BE: Just John and Sug were there. John and Sug and my mother.

FJ: What was your relationship to your grandchildren after they were born? I mean, did any of them come to live with you or visit you or stay any length of time?

BE: No, none of my grandcchildren. They had homes of their own; they would live with their parents. No, they didn't come to live with me. But I have a very close relationship with all of my grandchildren; all of them. I talked to my great-grandchildren in California, last night. We have a very close relationship there.

FJ: I think you said earlier that you were still in your forties when you retired from work, right?

BE: Yes, right. Forty-two, when John was born.

FJ: Now after you stopped working -- At this time, did they have any kind of retirement fund for people after they had worked?

BE: Oh, no. I'll tell you what I did: in the summer, my sister worked weekends for a family in Westport, and I would go down and help her, weekends. Of course, there wasn't much money in it, but I worked with her. All through the summer, we worked in these people's home, in Westport; but we didn't live there. She didn't live there either; she came home every night. But we worked there in the summer, together.

FJ: So you had no kind of income after you retired, right?

BE: No, I didn't have any income.

FJ: Do you know whether Read's provided any kind of retirement fund? I'm assuming now that you didn't work for them enough years to be eligible, but if you had, did they have a fund?

BE: I don't know.

: I imagine Raymond gets the pension.

BE: I don't know. I can't tell you anything I don't know.

FJ: Okay. After you became -- What is the usual retirement age? Let's say sixty-five and over. By this time, who was in your household? Were you still living alone?

BE: On Connecticut Avenue?

FJ: Yes. When did you move over here?

BE: I moved there -- we were living on Broad Street, but we moved there after my mother bought the house. We lived downstairs, and she lived upstairs.

FJ: Okay. When did you move from Connecticut Avenue, then, here?

You moved from there, here?

BE: No. I moved to Father Panik Village. That was when it was first -- Father Panik Village. It was very nice, and I lived there for sixteen years. I lived there; when I left there, I came here to live. I've been living here since the building opened; I think that was 1957. Was it 1957, Iris?

: I'm not sure, but you've been here about sixteen or seventeen years, I guess.

FJ: In this building?

BE: Yes. When it was first built -- I've been in this apartment ever since the building was built.

: It's a very nice building; it still is.

BE: Well, they don't keep it like they did in the beginning.

: Mama'll be shocked to know they're waxing the floor downstairs; they haven't done that for years.

FJ: Okay. When you lived in Father Panik, did you live alone?

BE: Oh, yes, I lived alone in Father Panik. Iris was working in New York then, and she could come home more regularly than she can now. Yes, I lived there alone. It was a lovely apartment: nice big rooms. I enjoyed it so much. I had a big bay window, and I had it full of all kinds of plants. I just enjoyed it there. But when it begun to go down, I couldn't take it any more, so I applied for here. I didn't have an easy time getting in here. I should have gone to ask for an apartment, and they told me that this building was only for veterans' wives; it wasn't for just anybody. I didn't think to tell them that I had four boys in the service, so I went to my priest. I told Father Coleridge,

I asked Father if he had any influence over housing or anything. He said, "No. Why?" I said, "I thought maybe you could help me try to get into the new building that they're building for senior citizens." He said, "Well, I can try." So he went to McDonald Isaac, who was the first director here, and McDonald Isaac sent me word, I would certainly have an apartment right here. He would see to it, and he did.

FJ: Did everyone have difficulty getting in here? Was there a clamor or something?

BE: At the beginning, they screened, very, very closely. Everybody was screened very, very closely. But now, it looks like any old tramp can move in.

FJ: [chuckles]

BE: That's the truth. That's the way it looks to me.

[interview interrupted]

FJ: During the time that you lived on Connecticut Avenue, where did your children go to school?

BE: Lincoln.

FJ: Lincoln School on Stratford Avenue?

BE: On Stratford Avenue.

FJ: All of them went there?

BE: All of my children went there, but Iris graduated from --

FJ: Harding?

: Prospect. Oh, oh, Lincoln grammar school. I went to Prospect School. I was there. Anyway, we did go to Lincoln, most of us.

FJ: Okay. To what do you attribute your long life? Why do you think you've lived such a long time?

BE: I really don't know, because nobody in my family, as far back as

I can remember, nobody in my family lived to be as old as I.
Nobody. As far as I can remember -- and that's a long ways back --
I can't remember anybody --

FJ: So if I'm trying to make it, you can't tell me the formula.

BE: No, no. My mother died when she was seventy-three, and my
father died when he was sixty-six.

FJ: Is there anything else that you want to tell me about? I finished
all the questions on my questionnaire, so if there's anything
that you want to add, to tell me about, you're welcome to at this
time.

BE: I don't think I have anything to add. [laughs] I've covered
all I can think of, that's worthwhile telling.

[interview interrupted]

FJ: Someone who belonged to your church -- and your daughter tells
me that you were one of the founders of St. Mark's Episcopal
Church --

BE: I was.

FJ: So then, see, you didn't tell me everything. [all laugh]
You missed something.

BE: You didn't ask me anything about the church.

FJ: Well, I asked you your church affiliation, and you said it was
St. Mark's, and you stopped right there.

BE: Well, I didn't think you wanted to know any more.

FJ: I do. I want to know everything about [it]. Do you have any
more secrets? [both laugh]

BE: That wasn't a secret. I overlooked that.

FJ: Okay. Well, can you tell me about that now?

BE: I remember there was a minister there; I think he was a Methodist

minister. I said to him, "We don't have a colored Episcopal church," because I was attending the Episcopal church in Richmond before I came here. He said, "No, we don't have any now. Perhaps we will have it." I said, "Well, anyhow, we worship at Trinity." That was a white Episcopal church. We used to go there. Every Sunday, they gave us a little chapel, and we held our services in it. There were only a few of us that gathered, and we held our services in this little chapel. Trinity was very, very kind to us. It didn't cost us one penny to be there.

FJ: Where is Trinity?

BE: They demolished it and put a whole lot of stores there, and it was the most beautiful state church you'd ever want to walk into.

: It used to be on the roads

BE: Right at the corner of Broad and Fairfield Avenue.

: Mama, where Trinity now is up near Golden Hill, isn't it? There's still a Trinity Church; they rebuilt.

BE: Yes, they rebuilt it, but it's not the same.

: They didn't even keep our records.

BE: No, they didn't keep the records. But anyhow, that's where we started, in this little chapel in Trinity. I've been there ever since it started, in 1921.

FJ: So you started there, and then you moved.

BE: I was baptized there and confirmed there, at Trinity Church.

FJ: How long did you stay there, and what did you do to get started over on Newfield Avenue?

BE: Well, I want to tell you. We went from Trinity -- what was the name of that place?

: When were we at the firehouse, Mama?

BE: We went to Father Dwyer's church -- where was Father Dwyer?

: Father Dwyer -- gee, it's hard to remember. Did he come to the firehouse?

Then we went to North Avenue. That was a lovely little church.

BE: Father Cuffee was there at the firehouse. We had North Avenue for a -- Beech Street, wasn't it?

: Was that Beech Street? Well, it was up off North Avenue. A lovely little church.

BE: Yes. We worshipped there for a long while, and then we came back -- no, we went to the firehouse first, didn't we?

: I think so, yes. And Father Cuffee came.

BE: And Father Cuffee came, and we worshipped in the firehouse while this church was being built, wasn't it?

: Yes, and they brought the stones from Sylvan Ave.

BE: From a little church on Sylvan Avenue. The stones in our church are from the monastery, like, on Silvan Avenue. They built this church -- I forget the year. Do you remember?

: I don't remember the year. They built and crypt the lower part; we worshipped there until they got the upper part built. It's most unusual to have a church like that, of that kind of stone, you know. And Father Cuffee saw to it that all the men in the church hauled those stones over to Newfield Avenue, to build that church. Remember?

BE: Yes. It's a beautiful little church.

: And Mama, don't forget your association with St. Mary's Guild.

BE: I belong to St. Mary's Guild -- I'm one of the ex-members --

: Honorary members.

BE: We went to Father Dwyer's church -- where was Father Dwyer?

: Father Dwyer -- gee, it's hard to remember. Did he come to the firehouse?

Then we went to North Avenue. That was a lovely little church.

BE: Father Cuffee was there at the firehouse. We had North Avenue for a -- Beech Street, wasn't it?

: Was that Beech Street? Well, it was up off North Avenue. A lovely little church.

BE: Yes. We worshipped there for a long while, and then we came back -- no, we went to the firehouse first, didn't we?

: I think so, yes. And Father Cuffee came.

BE: And Father Cuffee came, and we worshipped in the firehouse while this church was being built, wasn't it?

: Yes, and they brought the stones from Sylvan Ave.

BE: From a little church on Sylvan Avenue. The stones in our church are from the monastery, like, on Sylvan Avenue. They built this church -- I forget the year. Do you remember?

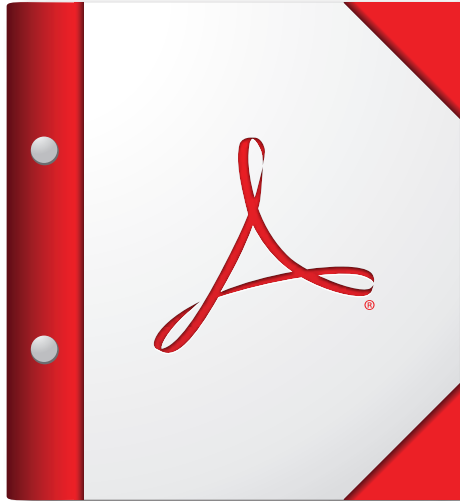
: I don't remember the year. They built and crypt the lower part; we worshipped there until they got the upper part built. It's most unusual to have a church like that, of that kind of stone, you know. And Father Cuffee saw to it that all the men in the church hauled those stones over to Newfield Avenue, to build that church. Remember?

BE: Yes. It's a beautiful little church.

: And Mama, don't forget your association with St. Mary's Guild.

BE: I belong to St. Mary's Guild -- I'm one of the ex-members --

: Honorary members.



**For the best experience, open this PDF portfolio in
Acrobat 9 or Adobe Reader 9, or later.**

[Get Adobe Reader Now!](#)