

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

Inez Mavritte Holley

130 Tremont Avenue

Born: July 30, 1894 - Bridgeport, to Edwin and Nannie
Mavritte

Spouse: John B. Holley

Children: Janet Lumpkin, John, Eleanor

Education: Yale School of Music

Profession: Church Organist

Travel: None Listed

Church: Messiah Baptist

Organizations: None Listed

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

Interview by: James Johnson
Interview with: Inez Holley
Date: September 26, 1983

HOLLEY

Johnson: Mrs. Holley, I am pleased to be here to interview you this afternoon. I suppose a good place to start would be to talk about your birth place. You can tell me something about that; your family and early childhood.

Holley: I was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, July 30, 1894. It was called Beardsley Lane. It was in the east end of Bridgeport. My father and mother -- they only had the one child. It was me. I grew up here in Bridgeport and attended schools here.

JJ: What were the names of your father and mother?

IH: His name was Edwin T. Mofvert. That's the right pronunciation of the name. And my mother was named Nannie Jane Mofvert. They met in, I think it was 1891, after they'd come to Bridgeport. And they were married by our first pastor, Reverend Morton. He was the pastor at Messiah Baptist Church.

JJ: What kind of neighborhood did you live in, Mrs. Holley?

IH: The first neighborhood we lived in was mixed. Then we moved from there to Gregory Street, just a little way from Zion Church.

JJ: Did they have one family or an apartment?

IH: Then there were two-family houses. I did remember my mother telling about the family who lived in their house. They were Black. Of course, we used to say "colored." Then, they moved from here up to the north end -- 1512 North Avenue. We lived in a little house. Their house is still there.

JJ: Was this a one-family house?

IH: That was a one-family house. Then, Mr. Jordan -- He was a deacon in our church, -- lived two houses down from them. It

was mixed -- a lot of Irish and so forth.

JJ: Were there many Blacks in Bridgeport at that time?

IH: No. They were coming in trying to find jobs and homes which was hard.

JJ: Where did you attend school?

IH: Webster.

JJ: Webster School.

IH: That's the first one.

JJ: The one that's on North Avenue?

IH: That's right. It's still there.

JJ: You moved from Beardsley Lane to Gregory to North Avenue. And this is where you started school -- on North Avenue?

IH: That's right.

JJ: Would you describe your teacher-pupil relationship or student-student relationship at school. How was it?

IH: It was not too friendly to me. I could tell. You're a little kid and you can tell some things like the least little thing that I did, I'd get punished for. They'd send me home and to me to tell my mother. I remember one day [Laughs] I got tired. They were singing music from the blackboard. I must have put my knee on the -- You know how the seats are in school. And I fell down. Boy, she got mad about that. And she whooped and hollered at me and made me go home. I didn't see the things I was doing; but, I got the ruler for it.

JJ: Did you feel that you were being treated as fairly, as far as the teacher was concerned, in comparison to white students?

IH: She just didn't like me. That's all. That's the way I felt.

JJ: How long were you at Webster?

IH: Let me see. I have to think about this. We moved from there over to Putnam Street in, it must have been '04 or '06. And then I attended Barnum School. I don't know.

JJ: How long were you at Barnum School?

IH: They built a new school called Beardsley School. You know where that is. To tell you the truth I got along better at Beardsley School than what I did at Webster or Barnum.

JJ: What grades were you in at Beardsley School?

IH: I must have been about fourth [grade]. But, I'll tell you what! I had a time in Barnum School learning arithmetic, especially fractions. I had an Irish teacher there. She was mean. I couldn't understand about those fractions. Instead of her taking time with me, she'd holler and "cut up." One day she kept me after school. She kicked me with her knee. It was right down in the back of me. I couldn't half walk for two or three days. I met some nice white kids over there. And they heard about it and they said, "You need to tell your father about it. Let him go to see her or else go to the principal about it." They were helping me to go to school. And I was limping and carrying on. So, my father went to her house one night to see her about it. I don't think she was there. If she was, she didn't show up. Soon after that I got into Beardsley School and I got along fine up there with those teachers.

JJ: How many Blacks were at Beardsley School?

IH: Do you know I was the one Black in the room! I was one Black in the room at Oak Street School -- I call it. -- at Webster. I was one Black in Barnum School. There weren't hardly any

Blacks over there.

JJ: If you had to how many Blacks were in the school as a whole, how many would you say?

IH: I don't know because I didn't see them. Our people were living all over in those days. There were some in the south end and some in the east end, and a very few on the east side. When we lived on Putnam Street, we lived in a house that was owned by Mr. Arthur Taylor. He was a blacksmith. He shoed horses and that's how he bought his house. They had one family rented out and they lived in the other.

JJ: Was he Black -- Mr. Taylor?

IH: Yes.

JJ: What sort of activities were you involved in, Mrs. Holley, other than in actually classwork? Did you have any other activities you were involved in or any other interests during the time you were in school?

IH: No. There wasn't much in those days for our folks to do. That's the reason -- You've heard of the Phyllis Wheatley Branch of the Y.W.C.A. that we started in Bridgeport?

JJ: Yes.

IH: That's how we got involved in that. That made it very nice for the kids because they planned things for them and they had rug-making and activities there that helped kids a lot and kept them off the streets. They'd give little parties and things for them. They'd have singing groups. I taught one singing group there in the Y.W.C.A. I forgot the name of it now. It was a choral class.

You take Reverend Johnson's church. He had a lyceum.

They called it a lyceum. Once or twice a month, something like that. Round about four o'clock. That interested the young people. They'd ask you to recite or have a paper. Or if you had learned how to play, if you'd give a piano selection. Like that. For Sundays. That interested the young folks. Kids [would say], "Going to lyceum Sunday?" Other activities -- there weren't any.

JJ: You were in school at Beardsley School or Barnum School and you'd come home in the afternoon. What did you usually do?

IH: Just go play. Sometimes parents would buy a bicycle and they'd get out there and ride. They were white kids. I'd be the only Black in the neighborhood. No others. All white. In those days there were more Irish that was here.

JJ: Were you involved in many holidays or celebrations or anything like that or had a special interest in?

IH: No. When the Barnum and Bailey Circus came to town, everybody would get up and go see the circus and the parade.

JJ: Where did you attend school after Beardsley School?

IH: Lincoln.

JJ: What grades were you in at Lincoln?

IH: I think it was fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth. They had very good teachers over there. They were, I said, "civilized."

JJ: After that where did you go to school -- after Lincoln?

IH: We had graduation from Lincoln. I was supposed to go to Bridgeport High School.

JJ: It was located where?

IH: Up there where we are now near the police station. But, I didn't want to go. I wanted to take up music. My mother got

me a piano when I was ten years old. I started taking music lessons. That interested me a lot when I was little. From four years old she got me one of those little pianos. I used to entertain the people when they came to see us on Sundays. I'd play all the church hymns "by ear" when I was four years old.

Some of the older people bought bicycles. I was out bicycling on Sunday. We had an old deacon in our church who said, "We're going bicycling Sunday. They won't come to church, they's going bicycling." And some of them even bought what they call "tandems." Did you ever hear of them?

JJ: No.

IH: That's that bicycle that both man and woman ride on it. Two on one. They were called "tandems." We used to have a lot of fun when picnics came. The church school would have picnics. Beardsley Park was a beautiful place then.

[lengthy pause]

We used to go to Savin Rock and take the children. At that time they had those old-fashioned trolley cars. And they'd take the children up there on basket picnics and stay all day. It was a beautiful place. And later on we had Walnut Beach to go to for recreation.

JJ: This was a church activity?

IH: Oh, yes. Every year they'd have a big Sunday school picnic. It got so that the Bridgeport churches and the New Haven churches -- the Black folks would take over that place!

JJ: What church did you attend?

IH: Zion. I've been a member there seventy-six years.

HOLLEY

JJ: Who was the minister there?

IH: Reverend Morton.

JJ: How many have they had since?

IH: We only had four ministers. Here's something for you. The first minister -- my mother and father were married by him; I was married by him. He blessed my first child. He died in 1919. I played at his funeral. The second minister was Reverend Gaye. He stayed with us around twelve years. They asked Reverend Jenkins, which was our third pastor, to come and preach at his funeral and bring our choir. I had to go to New Haven to play for the choir. The third pastor was Reverend Jenkins. I played for his funeral. The fourth pastor who is there now -- I played for his wedding. I really played for Messiah, for weddings and funerals and everything else for fifty-two years. When I wasn't there five years one time I was over at Reverend Cuffey's church. I stayed with him two years. I really enjoyed it. And it's been about seventeen years now I retired from music

JJ: When you were at Reverend Cuffy's church, did you play the organ there?

IH: We had a little pipe organ over there. At that time they were up the north end here, near where the Bamby Bread or who was it. There's a sight there that is a little white church and they were started in that

JJ: Where was Messiah located?

IH: At first Messiah was way downtown there. They were worshipping upstairs in a place near where old Read's store was, over a blacksmith's shop because my mother said that folks got funny

about going up the stairs. It was so shaky that some of them wouldn't go to church there. So, a lot of them went down to Zion Church. But, they moved from there to another site that was much better and they stayed there until they called Reverend Morton from Washington, D.C. Then, they began to save money to build Messiah up there on Arch Street.

JJ: What kind of transportation did you have in the days when you were in school?

IH: Trolley car. You could walk to where you were going waiting for a trolley car. I've got it in that history by that Stratford Church. And if you didn't get out there in time, shame on you! You had to walk.

When my mother and father first came here, they had the old horse cars. That's what they told me.

JJ: Where were you during World War I, Mrs. Holley?

IH: Fine.

JJ: Here, in Bridgeport?

IH: Yes.

JJ: What were you doing during this time that World War I was taking place?

IH: Playing and having concerts and stuff like that.

JJ: You were about how old at that time during World War I?

IH: That was 1917 wasn't it. Well, you total it up. I got married when I was twenty-three. So, I got married in 1917, in June. My husband was working with the big Locomobile company. They were manufacturing Locomobiles here right down there where they've got that big tank out there on the water.

JJ: How did you happen to meet your husband?

IH: Through music. He came to the church one night and a lady introduced me to him. I said, "Do you want to sing in the choir?" I took the choir in January, 1914. I think I got out of Lincoln around 1912. They want people now to acknowledge that they went to school over there. Some lady told me that she's going to take my name in.

JJ: Did you have any special thoughts about the war during that time?

IH: Yes. I didn't want my husband to go; I'll tell you that. And he was to go in 1918; but, the war was over. And Eleanor was born in 1918 that May.

JJ: Did you have any close friends that went to the war?

IH: That's what Alice and I were talking about the other day. She said she remembered one. I said I didn't remember any of my close friends because at that time they didn't want no Blacks in the war. They said we didn't have to go. But, that bunch of folks was cutting up in New York to go. They were up and down the street because I went down there one day and they were up and down the street playing their music and carrying on. Nobody did tell me what bunch that was.

JJ: Did you experience any shortage of food?

IH: I had to go stand in the coal line to get coal. There was a shortage of flour, sugar. We thought that was a lot. [Laughs]

JJ: Where did you live at that time, Mrs. Holley, during World War I?

IH: Newfield Avenue right across from Newfield School -- four hundred.

JJ: And you were there during the length of World War I. Were there any other difficulties that you experienced during that time, during World War I, other than food shortage or coal?

IH: No. I don't remember anything else.

JJ: How were jobs during that time?

IH: Oh, they were coming up here from South. I had to laugh one day. Across the street from us was a bunch of girls who had come up from Florida and they'd never seen snow before. They were out there, "Oh, it's beautiful!" They were coming in here like mad, working in the factories.

JJ: What kind of factories?

IH: It seems to me it was General Electric and -- of course, I couldn't remember all the names. I know there were factories taking them in that had never taken them in before.

JJ: Previously, you had mentioned that there were very few Blacks before this time. How about the Black population during World War I? Did you notice any changes?

IH: It began to grow. We could find out by people coming to church more. Then, we would find out where they were from. Young people were coming into the choirs and joining and like that. That's how we found out.

JJ: Did you find any change in your social life during this time with people coming in?

IH: No.

JJ: How were the race relations during this time with more Blacks coming in?

IH: I don't know because the race relations were always funny to me. From a kid, I would know many a night when my father would

come home from a prayer meeting or something and be angry by the time he got home because he had chased some white boy up into his mother's house for calling him "nigger" and "coon, coon, I wished my color would fade," and all that junk. It was something!

JJ: Where did Blacks live during this time?

[End of side one]

JJ: The Blacks were living where during this time?

IH: They were spreading out all over town -- a lot of Jews letting them have rents and so forth. I know one family -- The daughter still comes to see me. -- started out with a barrel company right there on Beardsley Street. He rented that whole house to our folks.

JJ: Were there any concentrated area of Blacks on any particular street like they have now where you have Blacks concentrated?

IH: More so now.

JJ: More so now than then, during World War I. After the war was over, Mrs. Holley, how was the situation in terms of work?

IH: I told you. They began coming in and jobs were opening up.

JJ: Did they continue to work on the same kind of jobs that they did during World War I?

IH: Some of them did. Of course, a lot of people -- the stores began to open up and let them come in the stores and do different things. All that. A lot of people worked in the stores. I know some who worked there forty some years. Gave them nice send-offs here a few years back. You take Ruby Cox who worked in Read's forty-seven years. She got a nice send-off.

JJ: Did the living conditions change after World War I for Blacks? You had an increase of them during World War I. How were the living conditions after World War I, let's say between World War I and the Depression period? Did the living conditions change much for Blacks?

IH: After then, those projects were built, Father Panik Beardsley Terrace.

JJ: After we leave World War I, then there's the Depression period. What were your experiences during the Depression period?

IH: We had a big garden. We canned a lot of food and so forth. And when the Depression came, some of our neighbors -- we would exchange things for what they had too much of, for silver money.

JJ: Where did you live during that time?

IH: On Beardsley Street. My mother had two houses there. So, we lived in the little house.

JJ: How was it in general for people during that time, people that you knew of, in terms of jobs, in terms of getting food?

IH: It was pretty hard

JJ: Did they have government type programs at this time? Did the government help people during the Depression?

IH: It was something there; but, I just can't remember. Some kind of food program. When was it they had the W.P.A. ?

JJ: Was there anything that you recall, any of your experiences that really stood out during the Depression period, any family experience, or anything that happened in the country during this time that really stood out? Did you take care of the garden or did Mr. Holley or did both of you?

IH: My son did.

JJ: Also, during the Depression how was medical care? Did you have mid-wives or doctors?

IH: Dr. Bradley was around here. Dr. James came soon afterwards.

JJ: During the Depression where did many of the Blacks live? Was there much recreation going on during that particular time? Most of the Blacks lived where -- the south end?

IH: All over down there.

JJ: How about recreation during that time? Not much. How about the church during the Depression period?

IH: I don't know.

JJ: Did they have any clubs or organizations? You had mentioned the Phyllis Wheatley earlier. Did they have any more other than the Phyllis Wheatley Club?

IH: I don't remember.

JJ: During World War II what was your situation? Where were you living during World War II?

IH: On Beardsley.

JJ: What was the situation then during World War II? How would you compare the family? Were there any changes that took place in comparison to World War I to World War II? How about the food situation for people during that time? Work? Did Blacks have many technical kind of jobs or just menial work, sweeping and this kind of thing during World War II?
[Tape interrupted]

JJ: Would you describe or tell me about the recreation during World War II, Mrs. Holley?

IH: You'd go to the theater. You had to sit upstairs. You weren't

allowed to sit downstairs. And there was a lot of places that you couldn't eat in -- the restaurants.

JJ: And what kind of jobs did Blacks have at this time? Did they have better jobs? Or did they have sanitation jobs or work for other people in homes in domestic jobs?

IH: Some of them did that.

JJ: Where did Blacks live during World War II? Was it much different than what it was during World War I? Did they live in the same general area?

IH: We never had ghettos then. We began to spread out as times got better.

JJ: Getting to the young area now, as far as the sixties are concerned -- do you recall anything about the sixties when we had this social change during the 1960's? That's when we had all the demonstrations, Martin Luther King. What did you think of these particular social changes that took place in 1960? How did you look upon that? Martin Luther King in Alabama and the March on Washington. Did you have any thoughts about those sorts of changes during that time?

IH: I thought it was wonderful. I was glad that he came forward. He was making people realize that we were somebody and we should be noticed.

JJ: Did you think this helped Bridgeport in any way as far as the attitude between Blacks and whites?

IH: I didn't know about the thoughts of people in Bridgeport. Did you ever read one of these books telling about the city of Bridgeport?

JJ: No; I haven't.

IH: I remember they had a mayor there called Mulvihill. And the white kids would get out in the streets and say, "Up the hill and down the hill, but, don't vote for Mulvihill." Mulvihill was there two terms.

JJ: This is the story of Bridgeport from 1836 to 1936. This is very interesting. There are certain areas that I have covered during this interview, Mrs. Holley. Is there anything that you would like to talk about that I have not asked? Feel free to do so.

IH: When it came to buying a house, it was something else these late years especially when they started building that through-way. You'd be surprised. You'd go out and try to look around. Up there, they'd see you in a car and they'd get at a window and they'd come out on the porch and see where your car was going to stop and all that foolishness. Then, if you'd go look at a house, the man would try to tell you all the wrong things about the house, not the good things, but the wrong things. And then they'd say to you, "Why don't you go over there to Chapsey Hill? Why don't you have Sorrentino build you a house?" My husband said, "I don't want no house built by don't want to live in Chapsey Hill.

Then there was a man worked in Sears-Roebuck and my husband seemed to have gotten along with him. He said, "Well,

"John, come over. We have some new houses to look at over there in Stratford." We went and looked at the houses; but, they weren't what we wanted. He called me up on the phone and said, "Mrs. Holley, where would you like to live?"

I said, "I don't know yet. I looked at the houses in Stratford; but, they didn't appeal to me." He said, "Mrs. Holley, you can't live anywhere." I said, "What do you mean I can't live anywhere!" I said, "because my face is dark!" And I got through with him.

And we went further up Madison Avenue here.

I said, "This is the limit!"

I'll tell you what we did. I got tired of looking at their houses. They always had some excuse -- "The people that were living in this house died of cancer." So, I said to my husband one day, "I don't want any of their houses." He said, "What are you going to do." I said, "Buy a lot and see if we can have our own house built." "Where are you going to find a lot?" "Keep looking in the newspaper." I was home one Sunday; I didn't have to play. I looked at the newspaper and I these lots -- one, two, three, four, five, six. I think it was six or seven. I had an agent that lived in Stratford. I called him up on the phone and I told him. He said, "What? You saw them in the paper!" "I sure did!" He said, "What page?" He said, "All right," and called me back. He said, "Look, have you got any money?" I said, "Yes." "Because I want some money to put down on that lot." I said, "All right." "I'll be to your house, I'm going to call that Italian up. He owns it. I called him and told him the meeting was seven o'clock." He said, "You haven't been looking have you?" I said, "No. But, I want to go and look." He said, "I think I know about where that is." So, anyway, he came up here and called the man and they got together

And so, he called me back. And the man [asked], "What are you planning on building around here?" He said, "A Cape Cod house." "You've got markers on your car that says 'Florida'." "I know," he said, "I live in Florida." The man lived in Stratford. He said, "I go to Florida in the winter; and I like to be up here in the summer. What lot would you like?" He said, "I want this one here, this one this side of the telegraph pole." The man said, "All right." I said, "Can I meet you in the bank tomorrow?" He said, "Yes and put a deposit down." They did.

All right. We went from there to in coming up here, turning off the lot. And across there, lived a Hungarian Jew. He was very particular who he wanted living in front of him. So, Edwin said he came out and looked at him. "What are you all doing cleaning the lot up? Who's going to build a house there?" He told them the man's name. "Well, oh." Edwin said that he could hear blinds going up, windows, shutters and everything else since they were up here.

So, we cleaned the lot off and started building. We had a different builder. They told the guy to come up here and we had a lawyer. The lawyer told him to get up here and that he wasn't going to get a penny until he put the foundation in. He came back and told the lawyer he couldn't build the house because the plumber said, "Niggers are coming up there." And he wasn't going to put anything in. He went to another man and he said he wasn't going to do anything either. "And I don't got no money to start it." I said, "You can tell him he can forget it; and we'll get someone else. I don't want him to build my house because I don't think he wants to build it either."

He went and told him and they went to the bank and the lawyers. They said, "Stop everything. You can't do nothing more there." So he got out of there and we got ourselves another builder. And they came up here and built our house. And after the house was built, do you know a man came here from Washington to ask me: How did we fare? and How did the neighbors treat us? That's what we went through. It was no easy job in those days trying to find a house. It was hard.

JJ: How long have you been at this address?

IH: Twenty-nine years. And do you know while they were building the house, that Jew over there came at night and stole our lumber. And one day somebody up the street saw two boys taking our window frames. And they told them to take them back. Somebody was kind enough. We didn't have no easy task. I never will forget that! Talk about prejudice! I moved up here. I don't even know their names. I don't bother them either because the woman in that big house over there got after Mr. Bigley, "What did you sell that? Why did you build a house for them niggers down there for? I'm selling my house." He said, "All right; go on and sell it if you want to sell it." I'm told about him. He's dead. He went and left here when that little house was built. And he wanted to know who was building it. The contractor told him. He appeared at the real estate company up the street, "They interested, those people, about buying the house?" He did have a mean old Italian man. And he was like the devil. I was so glad that he didn't get in there. And he tried to make believe like some of our property belonged to him. The man who came up here -- the

surveyor -- said he wasn't coming up here anymore because he knew what he'd done and he'd done it right. The old man got nasty over it and the phone. The Main Realty Company told him, "You don't want any house. I'm not selling to you." So, he sold it to this colored family who moved in. So, he came out and told us that ten people were going to live in that house. How are ten people going to live in that house! So, he moved to Florida and he no more than got down there when he died.

Then, we had a man lived over the east end; and he went around telling people that he had this street sewed up. He's Black now. He went over to where Judge Spear lived and said he was going to buy that house and send -- I forgot the man's name. -- for a holy man for a church. My husband went out and said, "What are you doing? What are you trying to do up here? I got away from Beardsley Street because there was so much noise and the change of the people and the class of people that were living over there. I had to move. I had to get out the way of the through-way because they'd taken the house. Now what are you trying to do?" He went across the street. The lady just got the house three years ahead of us.

two family house

He went and got after that lady and wanted to know if she would like to sell her house. She said, "We just bought the house." She said, "If you don't get out of this house, I'm going to call the police. I'm satisfied with my house." "There's more Black folks coming into this -- " She said, "If they come, let them come." He went over there and he said to

her. "What are you trading to do? I don't want no holy church sitting in front of me. That's the reason I moved and built my house. Now, just get out of the neighborhood, will you?" So, he got rid of him. I'm telling you, we had a time.

One lady way up the street -- there was a woman from our church working for her. And she said, "I think I'll move." "What's this? What are you going to move for?" "Because too many niggers are moving into the neighborhood." And she said, "Who's moving?" "We went downtown and we heard that a family was coming in there and there are others coming in, too. So, I'm getting out of here before they move." She said, "Those people are friends of mine. And they're nice people. I don't see why you'd think they'd hurt you way up the street here." And she moved out. And another white family moved in. That's really history.

End of Interview