

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:

Denise 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

Ella Marie Jackson
43 Smith Street, Bridgeport

Born: February 17, 1903 - North Carolina to Rebecca
and John Wesley Cecil Skinner

Spouse: Columbus Jackson

Children: Walter B. Hill, Jr., Dolores Hill Adkins

Education: High School

Employment: Director, Bethune Senior Citizen Center

Travel: Europe, United States

Organizations: NAACP
National Council of Negro Women (one of the
founders of the Bridgeport Chapter)

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

Interview by: Gwendolyn Johnson
Interview with: Mrs. Ella Marie Jackson
Date: October 10, 1983

JOHNSON: Mrs. Jackson, will you tell me something about your early childhood?

JACKSON: My early childhood was spent in a place called Newbern, North Carolina. Newbern is a very famous place locally. It was discovered by Baron
from Sweden. And the capital of [Switzerland] is Bern. And just fortunately and incidentally I visited that place when I went to Europe not knowing I was going there but as one of the places we passed by. And I was just dumbfounded when I found out I was in Bern, Switzerland.

GJ: Well I bet you were.

EJ: Because I had heard so much about it. And then the insignia for North Carolina is three bears Is the bear.

GJ: Yes.

EJ: And they had them all over Switzerland, see.

GJ: That's interesting. When did you go to New York? You told me you went to New York. When did you go to New York?

EJ: Well my mother took me to Philadelphia first. I was around three or four years old. We stayed there, I imagine, until I was around five or six years old because I wasn't in school. Then we went back to Newbern, North Carolina and we stayed there until I guess I was nine. And then we came back to New York City again.

GJ: I didn't establish your date of birth. Will you tell me that, please?

EJ: February 17, 1903.

GJ: You had most of your education where?

EJ: In New York. I went to Public Schools 169 and then I went to DeWitt Clinton High School.

GJ: When did you come to Bridgeport?

EJ: Came to Bridgeport May the year of 1942. In fact that wasn't the first time we came. I came looking for a house. Because, you see the war had just started and my husband had a friend here, Joe Raines. My husband was a comedian. He was on the stage with Ethel Waters. Joe Raines' brother was a comedian. So they knew each other.

GJ: You're speaking of Mr. Hill?

EJ: What?

GJ: Which husband was this?

EJ: No I'm talking about Jackson. You're talking about Hill.

GJ: Alright then. It's alright I wanted to establish which one because I have on your form here two.

EJ: Oh I see. Well then maybe I better stay with Walter.

GJ: No it doesn't matter.

EJ: Because when you're say here my husband and I had already separated in New York. So when I came here we were not together.

GJ: All right. So you're speaking of Mr. Jackson?

EJ: Yes.

GJ: Would you go on. You said he was a comedian?

He had been on the stage with prominent people?

EJ: Yes. But then he was older than I was. Well during the depression -- it wasn't the depression really that took Black folks off the stage. It was talking. It was television.

GJ: Yes. That's interesting.

EJ: And, of course, if after the movies began to talk and you didn't have something to offer -- I mean like Bojangles, Lena Horne and that caliber person -- you were just washed out. So, of course during the depression you see Roosevelt -- I stood on line in New York City four hours to vote for that man -- and he really did the trick. And this is where those acronym, names come from like you know, the PWA and the this. But whatever work that you did that's the work that the money was put for you to still do. You didn't have to do anything that you didn't do before. So, of course, in New York City the actors got money. And in the Lafayette Theatre in New York City they had money for them to put on plays and hire actors that were out of work. Now this was the depression you know. And of course everything was dead. Broadway was dead. There was no shows. There was no this. And when the movies came in it just knocked vaudeville right out of the --

GJ: So he came here to work?

EJ: The pictures.

GJ: He came to Bridgeport to work?

EJ: When I thought he was coming here to work. That's

because I was young and didn't know no better. I wasn't that young. I should have known better. And then they just established the what you call the PWA. Somebody that really didn't have a trade and instead of giving you straight out welfare they paid you to work every day. And every Friday that's when you got a check.

GJ: Yes. So he worked here?

EJ: So when Columbus came here Columbus got a job over at the aluminum company on Atlantic Street. I guess Columbus stayed there -- I don't even remember how long he stayed there. But I know he didn't stay there too long because my husband wasn't a working man. He did his thing and I did mine. Yes. So now where am I at?

GJ: Talking about your husband. You did your thing and he did his thing and he wasn't a working man.

EJ: Not physical labor. He was an Elk. I was an Elk. That was his second home that Elk's. Along with Dr. MacCalla and all of them they'd congregate over there and they'd talk. You know how men can talk for hours and drink their beer?

GJ: Yes as much as women.

EJ: And talk and then go on home. Well that was the picture.

GJ: Where were you during World War I?

EJ: I was a child.

GJ: Were you in North Carolina?

EJ: Well, my mother and I was on our way to New York City. We took a train from my home, Newbern, to Norfolk. Then you take the Old Dominion from Norfolk to New York.

GJ: Norfolk, Virginia?

EJ: Yes. You see that was the Old Dominion. That was water travel. So few people remember that. And then we went to Severn because my mother had a very dear friend that incidentally lived to be 100 years old.

GJ: Oh my.

EJ: She just died here about four or five years ago. But then I was a very young teenager so I went to school. And then when I finished that school then I went to DeWitt. See Harlem didn't have a high school at that time. So I went to DeWitt which is at 59th and Columbus Avenue.

GJ: Do you remember how the war affected your family? Was there shortage of food? Did you worry about anybody in the service? Was there more or less work?

EJ: Well there was just less work. See, when you're a child you don't realize what money's in the house because you don't know.

GJ: That's true.

EJ: I didn't have to feed myself. I didn't have to clothe myself. I only know that the money was there and that my mother worked every day. And that when it was time for us to have money --

And at the time we went to another St. Cyphrian's church which I was confirmed from in 63rd Street.

Near 10th Avenue. St. Cyphrian. Most everybody from New York remembers that church.

GJ: That's an Episcopal church?

EJ: Yes. But I was confirmed from St. John the Divine Cathedral which they're still building. I was confirmed from that church in 1919.

GJ: Where were you during the depression years? Where were you?

EJ: I was partly in New York and the rest of it in Bridgeport.

GJ: Can you describe Bridgeport for me during that time? Can you tell me something about Bridgeport at that time? Where did you live?

EJ: No I can't because you see my father had died and he left me a portion of money and I bought this house so this is our house from the time I moved to Bridgeport.

GJ: You've always lived at this address? Well that's interesting.

EJ: Except for fifteen years because I left my husband here and I bought a house over on 5th Street. I stayed out of this house for sixteen years until after he died.

GJ: But this was your original house?

EJ: This was my original house. I bought it in 1942 for \$7,500. That was depression.

GJ: Yes. Where were you employed during the depression?

EJ: I did day's work.

GJ: You did day's work during the depression.

EJ: That's the work that you could get. You know these children today they'll say, "I can't do that kind of work." And they go on relief. But you see we didn't have no relief to go on.

GJ: That's true.

EJ: You had to get out there and take care of yourself.

GJ: How were your spirits at this time? What was your frame of mind at this time?

EJ: Just about the same. Nothing ever gets me down.

GJ: Were your friends employed? Relatives?

EJ: Yes, because we all did day's work.

GJ: Can you tell me some of things that people did to survive during that period of time? I know people did all kinds of things to survive. You did day's work. What did people do to survive?

EJ: Well in New York they had -- that was just before I moved here -- they had apple lines. People would sell apples on the street. There was soup kitchens all over the place. Father Divine in those days you had a whole meal for 26 cents.

GJ: That's true during that period. What was in Bridgeport? Do you remember?

EJ: I think Father Divine was here. Wasn't he here? Didn't Father D vine have a kitchen here?

GJ: I don't know.

EJ: I believe he did. I was thinking about that the other

day. I know he was here.

[tape interrupted]

See when I came here was 1942. I think the war started in either 1939 or 1940, didn't it?

GJ: Yes. The war really started in Europe in 1938 I think.

EJ: Yes, but we weren't in it. We didn't get in it until they sent the Mauritania.

GJ: 1941. No, they bombed Pearl Harbor. Talking about World War II.

EJ: No. No. No. I'm talking about World War I.

GJ: Oh, you're talking about World War I. We're talking about World War II.

EJ: Now you're talking about World War II.

GJ: You were talking about World War II. You said you came here during the war and that there was plenty of work to be done.

EJ: Oh, yes, and see because Roosevelt said that if you didn't hire the minorities that you wouldn't get the contracts. So they had to hire minorities and I was one of the first ones who was hired over the United Aircraft which is now AVco. And I was a riveter. They trained me over at --

And the New York people they just poured in here. They poured. They slept in their cars. They slept in attics. They slept anywhere they could because there were shifts around the clock. And factories never ceased.

GJ: Is it true that they had sometimes three people using

one bed according to the shifts they went to?

EJ: Three? No honey they'd be three, four, five, six. They'd use a shift of people that worked in the day time so those that worked at night slept and vice versa. And when you couldn't do that -- now people that did have houses -- they made money. But of course the rent wasn't like it is now. Because things were very very cheap, you know. And of course we did not get into this. I did not get into this house until -- when I got here, let me see, March. Did we move in in March? I think we moved in here in March of '42. We got this house from Nims. I had been here the year before but what they showed me was down at South End with no bathrooms and water in the cellar and all that kind of thing. Because there was -- and still is -- among the realtors that you don't show Black people good houses.

GJ: Yes. Is Nims that you refer to Louise Johnson's father?

EJ: Yes. He's the first man that we met when we came here.

GJ: And he was a real estate man.

EJ: Yes.

GJ: Where did most Black people live at that time?

EJ: Around Lexington Avenue and wherever they do go just like they are now. You find Black people all over Bridgeport.

GJ: Was there any shortage of food during that time?

EJ: Yes, I guess there was... No, there was a shortage of

meat and then gasoline. Because you had to have gasoline stamps. And then they stopped making silk stocking and made nylon stocking. And then you could get black market things out there like silk stockings. Somebody'd go down to New York and buy some. And meat. Now there's a place up here -- he was up there on Stratford Avenue for years and years and years -- of course when we came here Stratford Avenue was really Stratford Avenue. It was a beautiful shopping center.

GJ: Well isn't that interesting.

EJ: And it had theatres -- three theatres, hardware stores, three -- and Ross Drug Store was on the corner for years, that drugstore that Emma Woods bought out. He was there for years and years. And Beardsley Lane right near the Monterra House that was Beardsley Lane. Right on that corner was another drug store. Bertha Goodman and her husband -- did you know the Goodman's?

GJ: No, I didn't.

EJ: Well Bertha Goodman and -- did you know Henry Cousins? Marie Ford's husband?

GJ: No I've heard of the Cousins.

EJ: Well Bertha Goodman and her husband lived in the house around the corner which is now the American Legion.

GJ: Oh I know where that is.

EJ: Yes. Well that's where Bertha Goodman and her husband lived. And rent at the time she paid \$14 a month.

GJ: Oh my!

EJ: And the people -- just to show you how cheap things were -- the people that lived in this house was paying \$25 a month.

GJ: In this house [laughter].

EJ: In this house. But I came back the second time because I wasn't going to put my money -- and I didn't have very much -- but I know that if my husband had convinced me that if we could get the downpayment we could always make the mortgage. You know. We came back the second time because the first time I wasn't going to put my money into it. And so we went back to New York. And then one day he said, "Let's go up to Groton." Somebody had told him about Groton. And so we went up there and we couldn't find anything. And coming on back he said, "Well let's stop by and see Nims. Maybe Nims got something by now." So we went to Nims. We found them. At that time they were living on Main Street in front of Jenkins Valve.

GJ: Jenkins Valve?

EJ: We found him and he said, "Yes, I'm glad you came. We do have something that you might want." So he showed us this house and the minute that I saw it I said, "That's alright." You know. We paid the downpayment and told the people that they'd have to move. So one lady up there said that she was building, the lady on the top floor, she was building and to give her time to -- So Nims said, "Don't do it just raise the rent." So our lawyer was Judge Herman Milton. Do you know Herman Milton?

GJ: No.

EJ: Oh he was a very famous lawyer here. Now he's a judge. He's very well known around here.

GJ: I heard, yes. I've read about him too. Was it hard for Blacks to find houses then?

EJ: Very hard. Because what you found was dumps. And that's why we hadn't come a year before. Because what they showed me was -- now like that house that the Johnson's had, that barbershop down on south End -- that was the house. No bathrooms and the water was knee-deep in the basement. I said, "Oh no. I ain't getting into that. And then a couple other houses that were railroad flats. I said, "No, no. I'm not going to bother with that." And I went on back to New York. And then when we came through again this one was here and of course we paid the downpayment. And the next day supposed to get the people out of the house. So we just raised the lady's rent up to \$95 and she was out in a week. Which Milton told us to do.

GJ: Was this an all Black neighborhood then?

EJ: Lord, no. I think we were just about the first Black folks to move here.

GJ: What was the reaction of your neighbors?

EJ: Nothing. And the next one was Charlie Banks moved over here. You know Sally next door my neighbor?

GJ: Yes I've heard you speak of her

EJ: Yes. Well Charlie was -- well so was Sally -- they were in the American Legion over here. I think he was

captain or something. He lived there. I think now the other end was Black people like the Brooks'. You all know Brooks?

GJ: Yes.

EJ: The Buster's. I think. I don't know when they came in. But I know they're there now. I know they've been there a long while.

GJ: Was that school down there when you came here?

EJ: Yes.

GJ: Did many people change economic status during that time? Because there was a lot of money floating around in Bridgeport.

EJ: I think they did. Because I think a lot of people at that time during the war bought houses.

GJ: Particularly Blacks.

EJ: Yes. They bought houses. That house right across the street sold for \$7,000.

GJ: Yes. That's interesting.

EJ: Yes. And Mr. Nightingale bought it.

GJ: What about changes in social status. Did anybody change in social status? Did they move up the ladder because they had gotten more money during that time? He or she?

EJ: I don't think so because I don't think I was really conscious of that sort of thing then.

GJ: What about race relations? Did they change any during the war. So many people were here and people were working together.

EJ: No. I think it's just as bad now as it was then [laughter]. I don't see much difference you know. When you're Black you're Black that's all. And as I said about Avco -- now after I became active in the N.A.A.C.P. and we really was very active -- we fought Hubbel, they had no white no Black.

GJ: That was during the war?

EJ: Yes.

GJ: Did you win?

EJ: And The Bee Chain didn't have no. Bryant Electric never hired any Blacks.

GJ: Did you cause any changes by fighting them?

EJ: I don't know whether we did the changes or whether it was just the natural process that things had to change. And then we did get more civil rights in the federal government.

GJ: I'm going to ask you about the sixties because I know you were very active during that time. I know you've done many, many things in the N.A.A.C.P. I wanted you to tell me about some of them. I know for example about the busing business and you're changing that -- school buses.

EJ: Well, was that during the sixties?

GJ: It might have been during the seventies but I know that you have been very active all of the time. So tell me some of things you've done.

EJ: Well the things that we did together we really did them through the N.A.A.C.P. And then after we got ABCD we

did them through the East End Council over here. And then, of course, you know a few years ago the government cut back on the neighborhood projects and so all of the seven neighborhoods' offices had to be disbanded. Seven people lost their job -- Penny Green, Frances Riccio, Rose Johnson, Gertrude Cooper, who lost her daughter the other day, and Trina Walker. But then in some way or another Reverend Johnson sort of kept them on and put them here and put them there. That's the way these social programs work, you know. Maybe you might not be working this year but you might be working next year.

GJ: Yes. But you still haven't told me some of the things that you've done. And I know you have all of these plaques and medals out in your hallway and I know you've been very active in Bridgeport. I would like for you to tell me some of the changes that you've helped to bring about in Bridgeport.

EJ: I don't really think I've brought about any change. The only major one I think that I was really connected with was making Geraldine Johnson superintendent of schools. That was a fight. I think that they could have really done it an easier way because when we asked them to consider Geraldine they wouldn't. You know they weren't going to have no Black superintendent.

And we had a meeting the night before up in the mayor's office. We met with the board of education up there. And they had to have a public hearing. The place was crowded and everybody talked and talked and they begged and begged. I forget that fellow's name now -- King -- who was superintendent at that time. He's very well known. And Anna Baun Skane and she cried, "And don't do this, and don't do this, don't do this."

But anyway they sit there and took the vote while we were there trying to beseech them to hire Geraldine. They passed the vote that they would send an application to this man Demetris down in Westport. And so I said, "Come on, John, let's go." And I said, "I'm sorry but you're going to be sorry." And so John and I went out in the hall. And the next morning we were down standing in front of the Chestnut Hill buses. The very next morning. And I was the first one down there. I took my neighbor -- a lady who lived over here named Ms. Dell.

GJ: You were with J. Michael Smith too weren't you?

EJ: Yes. Jay he was the president. And Jay came. And I think at that time there was only four of us. And Reverend Roger Floyd you know.

GJ: He was president of the Council of Churches?

EJ: Yes and then after the 8:30 period there was no need of going for the kids probably went back home.

Then the next day we had about twelve or fourteen over

there. The next morning. And we got there in time before the buses rolled. And, of course, during this stay -- what was it I think it said about 19,000 kids -- was out of school in two days. And then the superintendent called another meeting of the Board of Education and they finally offered Geraldine the job.

But like I was saying to them the other day I don't know how how N.A.A.C.P. let you go by when you really should have had that job. And they didn't do something about it. I know that we were not functioning properly. We were not functioning properly and somebody said, "Well Mrs. Johnson hadn't been to us." I said, "Well maybe she talked to Reverend Williams."

But I don't remember ever having to discuss over once or twice that's why I was shocked with what you said the other day.

GJ: What effect did the civil rights movement have on Bridgeport? Do you remember back? Changes in the civil rights movement.

EJ: I think it did a lot for our kids. I think it did a lot to our kids in a way that they became aware of whom they were. And until a person becomes aware of whom they really are and can take pride in themselves I think this is where they get lost by the wayside. They did not mind being Black. They did not mind wearing the afro you know. And I think the Black Panthers also helped.

GJ: In what way?

EJ: Well, I think because the Black Panthers they kept saying Black was beautiful. It came from them. And the kids began to see it themselves. I really think this is why they got so doggone arrogant you know. You do sort of run away with things
But I think they have calmed down now. They know that the color of the skin has nothing to do with their brains.

[end of side one]

GJ: Have there been any changes in Black and white attitudes since the civil rights movement?

EJ: No.

GJ: Do you see any change in desegregation as far as facilities are concerned?

EJ: Well being as old as I am I don't see any. It's subtle. And that is something that is very hard to fight. You cannot swear that a man will not let you have his apartment simply because he has rented it to somebody else when you know deep down in yourself that this is what he has done. But they are doing it today and they did it in the sixties and the fifties and they're still doing it. It's just something that's very hard to rivet out.

GJ: What about employment and jobs and job programs?

EJ: That is better than housing. I think that's better than housing. But you see the federal government, I think, has something to do with that because you have to

have that. They passed a law. You have to have that token. And that's why when you go someplace I think you see one Black. So when the federal law gets behind them they say, "But we have Black." A Black. And you see the Black people has got to the point where they always look for the token. Where's our token? I don't see where the token in here.

GJ: What about government programs? Have they changed or did they change? How about subsidies and poverty programs? As a result of the civil rights movement.

EJ: They changed this year because they weren't alright because we weren't staying on our own. But I don't think that's the cause of the individual. If you can't get a job, you can't get a job. And I think the whole thing, to me, boils down that welfare had to step in because the children had to be fed. Even though some abuses it and does it today. There's somewhere in everybody from the federal government down will abuse certain things. Rich white millionaires -- I don't care who they are--down to the very poorest will abuse it if they can. And there are some that won't you know. So the federal government had to come in and feed these children. So some of them had to go on welfare. But I think it was the ruination of our younger generation.

GJ: Why do you think so?

EJ: I think because it gave them no incentive to go out there and really fight. And say, "I will not die. I will not drown." You know. And they could always get

work. But they won't do it. You think they go down Miss Ann's kitchen like their mother did and like I did and bring home the bacon? They're not going to do it. They think they're too good for it. And there were jobs out there and there's still jobs out there.

Those white folks who, "I can't get nobody to do this." They even made a joke of it. Well we make a joke of it ourselves you know, "I don't do windows."

GJ: How did the Vietnam conflict affect you?

EJ: Didn't affect me at all.

GJ: Your family?

EJ: No.

GJ: Your friends?

EJ: No I don't think I had a friend that had anybody over in Vietnam. I read about it in the paper of course. I'm still reading about it. But it really didn't affect me because at that time you see my son came from Europe. My son was in the army four and one-half years. And when he came from Europe he came back as a lieutenant. And then he joined the reserves. When he retired, he retired as a captain. He's a retired army captain now you know.

GJ: Now in closing is there anything that I have not asked about you that you would like to tell me? That you think is important and you would like to tell me before I close this interview?

EJ: The only thing really that I can think about is I don't think our people that has really made it, as we call it,

has reached back and helped the other ones that can't make it. I don't say that they can't make it. They haven't been able to. Maybe they haven't had the experience, you know. But somewhere in their lives they will. But there is no need when we have people here that will help and I'm talking about people and I don't condemn anybody moving out of a neighborhood to a better home. That's their privilege. That's what you make your money for. And that's one thing that we have to not do. Is because our people can afford to live in a better home that you're going to sit up and say, "Oh he's living out there in there and he's doing, I'm not going to vote for him here." Or, "I'm not going to do this for him." That's his privilege to move there. He has the money to move there, you know. I can move out of this house today or tomorrow if I want to. But I just got to the age -- as Margaret said, "Well I'm not going." I said, "Well Margaret if you ain't going I'm not going."

GJ: You're speaking of Margaret Morton?

EJ: Yes. Margaret saying, "Ella, where am I going?" You know. I say the same thing. At the time I was thinking about it I was too old to go into a house with a mortgage. And mortgages was too high anyway. And I don't have no mortgage. I haven't had a mortgage on my house in years.

GJ: Oh my, you are fortunate.

EJ: You see. But it's a good thing because the taxes is

the house on my taxes is over \$2,000 a year. And that's ridiculous. But we have got to learn to use all of our people.

GJ: We as Blacks you mean?

EJ: Yes. We have got to learn from the candlestick maker -- what's that name? The baker --

GJ: The butcher, the baker.

EJ: The butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker. Because everybody has their own field which they're good in. And that takes the making of an organization. Because if I can't be president of the organization I can cook and make money for the organization. The candlestick maker can do what he can do. And in that way you've got a full rounded organization that nobody can beat you know. Not just going off as Franklin -- Benjamin Franklin said, "We've all got to stick together or surely you're going to hang one by one."

GJ: That's true.

EJ: And that's exactly what we're doing. Hanging one by one. We have got to learn more to stick together.

GJ: Well, I thank you so very much. This has been an interesting interview.

End of Interview