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schools of which I speak.

Q: As I correct in saying that when you mention these two schools you are referring directly to James Lee Elementary School, which is on Seward's Road?

A: Yes.

Transcription of a Tape Recorded
Interview with
Dr. and Mrs. E.B.. Henderson
Falls Church, Virginia
on the subject of
"NEGRO EDUCATION-JAMES LEE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL"
Interviewed on 13 June 1969
by Ross Tucker

TUCKER: This is Ross Tucker, and I'm recording an oral history interview in conjunction with the centennial of Fairfax County Public Schools.

Our guests on this particular segment are Dr. and Mrs. E.B. Henderson, who have lived for a number of years at 307 South Maple Avenue and now make their summer home at this address in Falls Church, Virginia. Mrs. Henderson, where is it that you live during the rest of the time?

MRS. H: Well, I married and moved into Falls Church in 1910 and have just kept home and helped with the farm. There were two boys born five years apart. They both went to this school for a short time, and then they were transferred into the city schools where they drove in with their father every morning. The old school was a very dilapidated one with no facilities at all until 1947. Then it was decided with the Fairfax County School Board that they would give the colored children a new school with some sort of advantage to them in every way. They had all kinds of....they now had water and toilets, which they had never had before. I was principal there until 1947 when we went into the new school. Then I retired in 1950, after having taught nearly thirty-odd years in these two schools of which I speak.

TUCKER: Am I correct in saying that when you mention these two schools you are referring directly to James Lee Elementary School, which is on Annandale Road?

MRS. H: Yes.

TUCKER: What got you interested in teaching to start out with? And you are affectionately known, are you not, as Miss Nellie?

MRS. H.: That's right. Well, I taught in Washington before I came out here. I was what they called a Model Teacher, where other teachers came to observe. When I came out here I had no idea of ever teaching again, although I felt it good to get letters of recommendation from my supervisor and principal when I was in Washington. When World War I started the schools began to lose their teachers, because the government in Washington was paying so much better salaries and many of the teachers left. In fact when they came to me to open Falls Church School after it was closed for awhile because there was no teacher I refused it. I had a baby fourteen months old. Well, two of the supervisors came to see me and said if they could get me someone to take care of the baby, would I go back? Well, I said I would see.. Well, I did go back and taught, as I said before, until 1950.

TUCKER: Now, just very briefly, what have you been doing since your retirement, and I believe that you also have another home in Tuskegee, Alabama?

MRS. H.: My son has. You want to know now now what I _____(unclear). Before I retired I was interested in Girl Scouts, and I did a great deal of Girl Scouting, in fact I went off to Macy (?) to learn how to become a leader, to teach leaders. I came back and stayed with the Girl Scouts until they gave me a very fine statuette for services I had rendered. After that, after a few years of that I felt my time was best at home, and I left all kinds of outside work except working with the NAACP in Fairfax County and helping in other ways at church and in the clubs that I could until I left for Tuskegee in 1955.

TUCKER: I guess we should say that we are recording this interview with Miss Nellie or Mrs. E.B. Henderson of Falls Church, who has been retired for some time, but has if I'm correct, Mrs. Henderson, you were a teacher and principal in Fairfax County Public Schools most of the time of your professional education career. Is this right?

MRS. H.: I would say it was right, because I was only in Washington in a teaching career five years, and the rest of the time, which would amount to about thirty years, I was teaching out here in Fairfax County.

TUCKER: Let me ask Dr. Henderson a question. Am I correct in assuming, Doctor, that you at one time headed the Health Physical Education Department for the Colored Division of D.C. Public Schools?

DR. H.: Yes, I happened to be the first negro man in the country to go into physical education as a profession. I began to teach in 1904, was the head of the department for about twenty-five years, retiring in 1954, fifty years teaching in the Washington schools.

TUCKER: In case I forgot to say it we are prerecording this program on a very hot and humid day, the 13th of June, 1969, in case we have any people who need to know this particular date as far as future research is concerned. Miss Nellie, I think it would be kind of interesting to point out what kind of a school James Lee was before you had what you considered a new building.

MRS. H.: Well, it was just an old school like the old fashioned school of years ago, in fact it stayed without any improvement for years. There were two rooms, and finally the enrollment got so large that they had to hire another teacher to take off some of the stress, and they could not teach in the building where I was principal. They had to go up on another street in what was known as Odd Fellows Hall.

MRS. H.: The third grade was housed there.

TUCKER: That was the one you've got the picture of.

MRS. H.: That's right.

TUCKER: Another point we want to cover is how many teachers there were before the new building and after the new building.

MRS. H.: Well, I think I just said before the new building there were two teachers at one time, and then, as I said, the enrollment grew large, and there were three teachers. Then after the new building was erected, and the pupils from Bailey's Cross Roads - that school was closed - and those teachers came down here - there were about six teachers.

TUCKER: How many children are we talking about in this school, either before or after? Do you remember offhand?

MRS. H.: I can't say that I could say correctly.

TUCKER: Maybe somewhere between one-hundred and fifty, one-hundred and eighty? Would that be a good guess?

MRS. H.: I imagine there must have been about one-hundred and fifty after the new school came, and the teachers came with the pupils. There must have been about one-hundred and fifty children then in the new school.

TUCKER: Right. But you were the first principal?

MRS. H.: Yes, I was the first principal there.

TUCKER: Now I wonder if you could give us some personal memories or reminiscences that you think might be important to put down on a tape, things you recall that were interesting that went on during this particular period.

MRS. H.: Well, one thing that went on was that I was very anxious that they know whatever their ancestors had done, that we did have some very great colored people, or negroes as they call them now, who had done

MRS. H.: a lot of wonderful work in Reconstruction and all those days. So that I was very particular that we celebrate Negro History Week before it became important to the schools all over the states to have it. So I consider that that was a very great advantage, because the children then had something to live up to or try to do. It gave them some incentive. Color shouldn't keep them back, that it didn't necessarily [dictate?] (left out) their way of living, their homes, because some of these negroes of which I speak had come from way down south in just shacks almost. So they had every reason to go forward and relieve if they could make it as other people had done.

TUCKER: Did your children go through James Lee?

MRS. H.: No, my children did not go through James Lee. When my children started to school, as I have already said, the first World War took many teachers out of the County so that there were no teachers here in Falls Church for awhile until, as I also said, they got someone to stay with my baby, and I went on. My children had started already in school, the older boy had, and went in with his father every morning. But both of them went through the first three grades out here. Then after that they transferred into town because of lack of teachers and lack of competent teachers in some respects that I thought anyway.

TUCKER: Do you recall any of the names of the teachers or of the students that come to your mind just offhand?

MRS. H.: Well, some of the teachers: there was Mrs. Saunders, Miss Julia Brockman, Miss Mary Robb, Miss Margaret Robinson. Those are the ones that I remember, and Mr. Taylor Williams, who is now principal of Luther Jackson. I think that's about all. There was another teacher

MRS. H.: I couldn't think of her name though.

TUCKER: How about some of the students that you thought were particularly outstanding at the time and what are they doing today? Do you keep track of them?

MRS. H.: Well, some of them have done real well. One boy, Thomas, is hired down here by Hechinger. He's second in charge. He left me and went to the only highschool the colored children had at that time, which was Manassas. He graduated from there, but he holds this very important job at Hechinger's down here. Then I have some other children: I had a young man who became a very fine preacher in one of the churches around here. Other students have gone into the government and worked in the Bureau of Engraving, and very fine jobs they have. They're very trustworthy. And, of course, we had many that went in the Army during the Second World War. We had several to go and we kept in contact with them the whole time they were there. We wrote back and forth and kept abreast of what was going on in the town that they had left.

TUCKER: Dr. Henderson, do you recall any experiences that relate to Fairfax County Public Schools in your vast experience that it might be interesting to record at this time?

DR. H.: I think so. My wife has been delinquent in that she didn't say that her pupils were so well prepared in the three R's that when they went to the Francis Junior Highschool in Washington, she was complimented for having prepared them so well for the upper grades. I might say that my activity has been that I organized the branch of what is known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1915, partly to try to get people together to

DR. H.: improve the school conditions here. We were very much disturbed with the kind of school that my wife was teaching in. Even though she was prepared better than the teachers of the other schools in the County, yet she was always getting a salary reduced lower than the others. Finally that was won by the NAACP, the battle to equalize salaries, and thereafter they got the same salaries.

TUCKER: Do you recall offhand from the turn of the century until probably in the forties how many negro or colored schools there were in Fairfax County at this time and where they were located?

DR. H.: I know there is the school at Vienna, a pretty good school. And if you ever go up there, there is a Mr. West. He has written out a story on the schools at Vienna. And there was a school at Fairfax and a school at Bailey's Cross Roads. There was a school at Gum Springs, Chesterbrook, and where else do you remember a school? Those were about the most important. I might say.....

TUCKER: There was a highschool at Manassas.

DR. H.: Well, that was a sort of a boarding school. It was organized after the principle of Booker T. Washington's work to get schools, a training school. Part of the money came from the church and philanthropists. Some New York philanthropists came down and formed the school. Our children had to travel when they went to highschool either to Washington or to Manassas. I remember we added up the number of miles the bus would have to take, and it was about ninety-nine miles for some of them each day. We organized a committee of white citizens and negroes here, Mr. Senator Donovan and a good many prominent citizens and petitioned the School Board to give us a highschool. Out of that combination was the Luther Jackson School, which was then a

DR. H.: highschool, and its first principal was a boy that my wife had something to do with training in the County, was Taylor Williams.

TUCKER: Miss Nellie, let me ask another question along this line. You mentioned in conjunction with Bailey's that the school closed over there and you all of a sudden inherited these students. What was the circumstance on that, do you recall?

MRS. H.: Well, I can't say exactly that I recall, except that we were trying to have better schools, and they felt that if they consolidated that the children down there would get the same advantages that the children up here were getting.. So of course they had buses that brought them up and took them home. It was to improve their conditions that the consolidating started. Of course, after that other schools began to join in. I forget which ones now. It's been a long time, and I just don't exactly remember which schools did go in together besides us down here.

TUCKER: How about just reflecting for a moment on some of the things that were offered as far as studies were concerned in the typical elementary school of bygone years. First of all there was no kindergarten from what I understand. That's only been on a County-wide basis for the last year or so. What grades did the school cover? Was it grades one through six, and what were some of the things that were stressed? We mentioned the emphasis on negro history: what were some of the other things that were stressed?

MRS. H.: Well, you did mention that there was no kindergarten, but there was a private nursery school that opened in the basement of the Second Baptist Church that took care of children who would have gone to kindergarten had there been one. And that is still in existence and has a very good reputation.

TUCKER: How about some of the things that the teachers taught in those days that stand out in your mind....reading, writing?

MRS. H.: Well, as you might know, the primary teacher had just first, second and third.. I, as principal, or whoever took my place when I re-tired, had fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh. You had to use your own imagination on just how to bring in all the subjects that they should cover, especially the important ones. You stressed them and made your program stress them. That was about the best that we could do, but they did go well prepared into Francis Junior Highschool. The teachers used to ask Mr. Tinner, Mr. Ollie Tinner, who lived out here but taught at Francis, where those children came from, because they could do more than the children who had been brought up in the regular public schools in Washington.

TUCKER: Next I want to ask Dr. Henderson who has been a very long-term resident of the Falls Church area what things were like, and when was it exactly, Doctor, that you arrived?

DR. H.: My grandmother was one of the early settlers here, and adjacent to her house, right at the corner across from the bank, was the regular store. It was owned by relatives of mine, the Footes, who did own what is now Seven Corners. I used to talk to the grandson of Uncle Frederick Foote who owned that area down there about education. He was very well prepared in ordinary subjects, but in the first days many of the white and colored children were taught by the same group. In fact it is said that this Hangman's Tree that was across from that.... there was a man named Reed (Read?) who taught negroes and whites together, and because of his Federal or pro-Union sympathies he was he was supposed to have been taken out by Mosby's guerillas and

DR. H.: hung. But in those days the people, both races, the neighbors we had were all very friendly. There was no friction between races in those days. In fact the old Falls Church which adjoined the property which we owned and lived at first, occasionally some colored people would go to that church.. Some of the other churches have been known to have some colored people attend. Then some soldiers came here from the Civil War and were taught by chaplains in the Army, and they organized the first church. Then the first schoolhouse in Falls Church was where my grandmother lived right there across from the bank.

TUCKER: What is that adress?

DR. H.: That address? Two-something. About two-ten. It's a little building, (unclear..possibly "still there") on South Washington Street at the corner of Broad Street, right near the corner.. That's the location of the actual first school.

TUCKER: Have you got a description of that?

DR. H.: No, I don't. It was just an old log school where the children assembled. I'm not sure when the white schools were established, but I've read some of the papers that most of the people in the town used to subscribe money for a private school that became later on the Jefferson School, I think.

TUCKER: I imagine the community was quite a bit different in those days.

DR. H.: Oh, yes. The community were settlers many of whom came out from Washington, like General Lawton (the Lawton House is up there) and Mr. Church. At the time of the Spanish War a plot of ground on Lee Highway or Washington Street ~~extended~~ was used as the site of Camp Alger and the soldiers came from all around the country. But in those days the health situations were bad in that typhoid fever was a killer

DR. H.: every year. Across from where I now live was known as the Gundry School, and children were dying almost every year because they didn't know (sic). Then what happened eventually was that some of these soldiers died at Camp Alger from typhoid fever. Almost overnight they moved the camp to a spot in Pennsylvania.

TUCKER: Let me ask Miss Nellie again just to reinforce our thinking about the wooden structure, if that is correct, (If it is not, you correct me, Miss Nellie.) that preceded the James Lee Elementary School. This was essentially one that did not have such modern day conveniences as running water and sanitary facilities, things of this nature?

MRS. H.: No, it had nothing like that. We got water from a neighbor next to the school, who allowed us to get the water. Then she would try every now and then to wash the buckets real clean as the children had to bring the water in the buckets and set it on the back desk. The cups and all had to be left right on those desks. Finally, instead of having the children bring their own cups they finally got some cups that they could use, like what you buy now when you want to go out on a picnic, paper cups. There was no toilet. You had to go out in the yard whether the weather was good or bad, teachers and pupils alike, and use the toilet. Then you had to see that it was cleaned up. Also about the fire: they gave enough coal to last, but we had to see that somebody made the fire or looked after it. The children tried to do their best, but it was very hard work, so considering what they went through and what they've accomplished, it's just a wonderful story to tell.

TUCKER: Was there any busing involved or did all the kids walk?

MRS. H.: All the children walked to school until we finally got the Bailey's Crossroads School this way. Then they put on buses. Then they also brought the children, when the third teacher was hired she came from Chesterbrook. Well, they bused the children from Chesterbrook over to the school. And although the children lived (at) what we call railroad center, way up there at West Falls Church, those children had to walk three or four miles there, and they were very, very regular. They never missed a day of it. They didn't mind it at all, but we minded the idea that the other children were riding, some of the other groups were riding while our children were walking in the worst kind of weather, but they just loved it so that they never missed coming.

TUCKER: Well, thank you both very much. Do you have any concluding comments that we might want to put on here just in passing that you happen to think of? How about you, Dr. Henderson?

DR. H.: Well, I'll tell you I fought the battle so long. As I said, we organized the NAACP to fight against discrimination and segregation and then finally in fifty-four it came. I retired in fifty-four, the very year of the Supreme Court decision. But I attended as a counselor at the attempt on the part of the County to bring the teachers together in the following year. I think it was at Marshall School, where they spent one afternoon a week for a month or something like that with teachers to try to get them to understand each other, understand what was going on. Personally I felt that integration was a very fine thing. I've seen it even in the substance on places. I've seen here that we didn't have the friction that it was expected to have. Where I come from, Alabama, we probably have more friction than anyplace in the Union, but altogether I

DR. H.: have seen, and I can't sympathize at all with this younger element that seems to be what they call militant now, breaking up schools and trying to resegregate themselves. I have no sympathy for that. They call some of us today who used to fight the battle "Uncle Toms", because we're not militant, but I can't go along with the attempts that Howard University and the universities and schools to undo so much that has been accomplished in the past.

TUCKER: Thank you. How about you, Miss Nellie? Do you have any other little reminiscences we might add to a very vast collection in the many years that you were teacher and principal at James Lee Elementary School in Fairfax County?

DR. H.: I'd like to add something.

TUCKER: All right. Fine.

DR. H.: I'd just like to say that my wife's sister married the son of Booker T. Washington. And one of the reasons we're there, my son now is head of the Caldwell Foundation. He's the director. He's also elected to the School Board in Tuskegee. And there's another example in the deep South of how much progress we've made. I might also mention that my wife's father was a big real estate man in Washington before one of the financial crashes, and he was the first alumnus to be elected as trustee at Howard University.

TUCKER: Fine. Do you think of anything that you would want to add, Miss Nellie?

MRS. H.: Well, I can say I'm glad I lived long enough to see the children getting the fine education that we had hoped for when we first started out and things looked so dark. So that I'm very proud to know....the other night I had several children that I had taught graduated from

MRS. H.: Whittier School up here. And they're all in the County in the different schools, and I'm sure they're getting the finest kind of an education, because I think the School Board in Fairfax County is very particular now about the teachers they're hiring. They're hiring only the best, and our children are getting that advantage.

TUCKER: Well, thank you both very much. This has been another in the series of oral history interviews with interesting people associated with the centennial observance of Fairfax County Public Schools. We have been talking with Dr. and Mrs. E.B. Henderson of Falls Church, and this has been..(tape ends)