

Uncorrected Transcript of

Interview

with

GENERAL RANSOM FREDERICK COUSIN

31 August 1981

by

James Eddie McCoy, Jr.

Transcribed by Hester Kast

The Southern Oral History Program
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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[START OF SIDE A]

General Ransom Frederick Cousin
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James Eddie McCoy: ...date, the time is 5 to 4, and we are going to just go back over a little bit more brief history, might touch on a few things I might've missed the last time I was with him. And we are going to talk a little about Mr. Chavis, a little bit about the orphanage, trying to get some more history, and Dr. Shaw. We are going to browse around a little bit more about, little bit more about Roxboro. Mr. Cousin, what did you say about when you first heard of John Chavis? Where were you?

General Ransom Cousin: I was in [] Antioch.

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: But the first I ever heard about Chavis was 1915, I believe. [] anything, because we were, we left Roxboro and went to Virginia.

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: [] City. And we stayed over there for five years and then we came to Stovall and then in Stovall my daddy came to Antioch in 19-3 [i.e., 1903] and bought a place over there, and we [] 19-9. We came to Antioch in 1910, we built on that place.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And so I was kind of scattered around until that time.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: But after that time I settled down and been around here ever since.

EM: Mm-hmm. Did you know the Cunninghams up in, up there on the Northern Granville County when you was up in that area?

RC: Not then. I know them now, but I didn't know them then.

EM: You didn't know them then.

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RC: No, I didn't know them.

EM: Uh-huh. Did—who did you know in Satterwhite, the first people that you knew in Satterwhite. Did you know that was a Presbyterian and Episcopal Church up there in Satterwhite?

RC: Yeah...[] I know it...

EM: It was Episcopal Church.

RC: Yeah I know it cause Reverend Mail used to be here in Oxford and used to walk with me up and down the street.

EM: Reverend who?

RC: Mail.

EM: Mail.

RC: Yeah, Reverend Mail. Used to be here at the Episcopal Church here in Oxford. And he walked with me to Satterwhite, the priest up there.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: [] Reverend Mail.

EM: Uh-huh. Were you surprised blacks was Episcopalian back then?

RC: Hmm?

EM: Was you surprised that blacks was Episcopalian?

RC: No. Not a []. It's been many examples in organizations—I mean faith, and the blacks is [] than the white []. But it wasn't as many people [], wasn't so many, didn't hear of it so much.

EM: Did you ever go up in that community to the church or any time during that time Reverend Mail was up there preaching?

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RC: No, I didn't.

EM: When did you first heard of Chavises? What Chavis did you first learn of in person?

RC: [] Benji Chavis.

EM: Benjamin Chavis.

RC: Yeah, they called him Benji but he's Benjamin Chavis.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: He came to the orphanage in...I don't know what year it was in, 19...I tell you now, maybe after the first war, because he went to [] war with the army.

EM: World War One?

RC: Yeah.

EM: That was before Lisa Linda.

RC: No that was...Lisa Linda...you know in....what's that war. I believe it was 1917.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: You know, World War One.

EM: Mm-hmm. Did you know Benjamin Chavis daddy that lived up there in Satterwhite?

RC: No, I did not. I've been up through Satterwhite but—I know where he lived at but I [] know him by name.

EM: Did you ever hear talk of Benjamin Chavis that they sent off to college that went to school, went to Princeton and higher learning and they say they went him as a slave to see could blacks learn?

RC: No, I never heard of that.

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EM: Mm-hmm. But you know there were a Chavis that went to school.

RC: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah.

EM: Uh-huh. That went off to higher learning, went to school.

RC: Yeah.

EM: And they say that some of the people up in that area look kind of like Indians up in that area.

RC: Mm-hmm.

EM: Uh-huh. Did you ever know any Satterwhites that lived up there, black Satterwhites?

RC: Yeah [] I knew some but not enough to know the—I didn't correspond with them but I knew some Satterwhites up there.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: I didn't have much [].

EM: Did you know the one that ran Satterwhite Shop?

RC: No, I, not especially.

EM: Mm-hmm. So you didn't—did you ever go to that church or see that church up there in Satterwhite?

RC: Yeah, I never went to service there but actually I've seen it.

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Did you know the Chavises had a farm up there in Satterwhite?

RC: Really. Yeah I know the Cha—I didn't know which one it was. I know Chavis had a farm there, the Chavises. They was up in that section they called [], one guy.

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EM: Did the Ben Chavis you knew had other brothers and sisters, or was he the only child?

RC: No I don't know whether Benji had other brothers or not. I knowed his cousin but I didn't know [].

EM: Who was his cousin?

RC: Arthur Chavis.

EM: Arthur Chavis.

RC: Yeah he used to live there in—

EM: Where did he live at?

RC: He lived—of course I knew him when he was in Oxford, but he left here and went to New York and...I believe...I know a lot of Chavis married down South [] went back there to New York.

EM: Mm-hmm. Are you familiar with the Horner School? Did you ever know there where that school was when you came to Oxford?

RC: Yeah I used to go by there and heard a lot about it but I've seen him over there. Yeah, I—

EM: Did you ever—did they ever tell you who built those walls over there on Horner School? Do you think that slaves helped built those walls or just a average person built all those walls all around that school?

RC: I couldn't tell you. I don't know. [].

EM: Mm-hmm. Did you ever do any carpenter work at Horner School? Was you ever called in or Payton Brandon ever called in to do any work over there, patchwork or do any work on those buildings over there?

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RC: Not to my knowing, because you see there, when we was in our prime they didn't see us []. Horner and [], they didn't see us [].

EM: Uh-huh. What about the women's college, Hobgood College?

RC: That's what I said, they didn't see us for long.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Both of them [] and it wasn't easy [] what we was doing.

EM: Did you know Gus Carter worked over there at that—

RC: Yeah, I knew him.

EM: What did he do?

RC: [] manned cannons, or I don't know what []. I don't know, it's a certain job.

EM: Mm-hmm. Did you know anybody else worked over there?

RC: No I couldn't recall, I did know one or two more but I can't recall them right now.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Did you ever know a man called Alex Smith?

RC: Yeah, I knew him.

EM: Did you know he worked over at Horner School?

RC: Yeah, yeah, that's right. Yeah, I knew Alex Smith, yeah.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Knew him and his wife and...

EM: When you was a kid, why were some blacks called free-issue slaves? What did they mean by that? How was they being free?

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RC: Free-issue, yeah, well you know, you know it's a whole lot of black people that wasn't in slavery.

EM: They what?

RC: They weren't in slavery, a whole lot of them. They call them free-issues. I know they never was in slavery cause they're free-issue.

EM: How did they get by without being in slavery?

RC: I don't know, it's some kind of law or something they had, but I don't know, but—cause you know just like Antioch had, Antioch was Howell Town. It never was under slavery.

EM: Oh, it was not?

RC: No, it's called Howell Town. No.

EM: Howell Town was never in slavery.

RC: No, no they [] Howell Town. Why they named it Antioch, they tell me—now I want to let this part, one guy said that when they put down the railroad through there, they had a question [] ask them to make a flag stop or something so they could ride to town.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And they didn't want to have a stop called Howell's Stop, so they changed the name of it to Antioch.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: [] tell me that was the reason they done it.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: To keep from having the Howell Stop.

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EM: Mm-hmm. Did you ever know the Andersons that lived out by the Spring Mill farm?

RC: Yeah.

EM: Did you know they was free, too, they ever was under slavery? Did you ever hear they was free-issue slaves?

RC: I don't know, I never heard that discussed, but I always thought so, but I didn't have no evidence of it, you know.

EM: Why did you think so? What gave you that—

RC: Well, on actions, you know, all actions and deeding and all. I guess John and them [] because when they came up that way they had a little with an action.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Never was in the []. They wasn't no better off, but I mean in there [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: That just makes the finances a little better off.

EM: Right. Did they ever—did free slaves have to carry papers around with them, showing that they was free and they could travel from one farm to another plantation and things like that?

RC: Well in some [] they did, but in a neighborhood they wouldn't know, but there they knew one another.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: But if they was going out somewhere, they had to have—now I don't know about my great-granddaddy. After he bought hisself then he come to Antioch and married a girl in Antioch.

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EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: But I don't really see that as showing—he had a horse or mule or something he drove. He come on down there. I don't know if he had to show papers or not.

EM: Did his name—was his name changed, your cousin—your granddaddy, or do you know his real name before he was bought—before he was sold?

RC: Yeah that

[interruption]

RC: He was Cousin, always.

EM: He was always a Cousin.

RC: Yeah.

EM: When he was sold he was sold as a Cousin.

RC: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

EM: Oh. So you don't know if he had to carry papers around or not?

RC: No, I don't know whether he had to do that or not. But I didn't hear nothing of his going on until after he bought himself.

EM: Uh-huh. What do they mean by bush arbor? When they had churches in bush ar— what do they mean by that?

RC: Yeah, see you cut bushes, cut down these bushes and things and [] up and then cover it up with the bushes. Call that a bush arbor.

EM: Why did you have to do that? That was a church?

RC: Keep the sun out. [] the sun and [] got to keep the sun out.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: []. :?)

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: Yeah, but it didn't have no sides to it, it just had the top. Bush arbor.

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: Yeah.

EM: How did people keep meat back the old days, food, what they do, just cook up what they need, food you eat up? Or did they save—

RC: No. I tell you, that's one thing they understood better than they do now. They would salt it in a way, and have to kill [] yourself. [], they didn't try to—Now I tell you, they had [] they had the ice house.

EM: Explain that to me.

RC: They had a house they dug in the, hole dug in the ground and [], saw dust in there and they carry ice down and put it in there and cover it up with that saw dust.

EM: Where did they get the ice from?

RC: Cut ice off a millpond and things.

EM: Millpond.

RC: Yeah they had it, they shoe the horses with spikes to keep them from slipping. I used to get three and four—I had to be strong enough to drive [].

EM: And the mule would walk out on the ice.

RC: Yeah. It don't get [] now, but—

EM: And it won't fall through.

RC: No.

EM: It got that cold back then?

RC: See it got cold and it stay cold.

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EM: And they cut the ice with axes.

RC: Yeah. Cut the ice—

EM: And hauled it back to the house, and put it in the ground.

RC: Back then, ice house they called it. In town they had, they used to have a ice house right over here.

EM: Where? On Henderson Road?

RC: No. They had it hidden in that grove over there.

EM: Oh yeah?

RC: Yeah, they had to dig a hole in the ground and [] somebody had money [] how they find a [] home had a ice house. But they didn't have, they let the town [] have a big ice house. Cause [] grow that and sell ice.

EM: It'll last all summer?

RC: Yeah, man, I used to stand out and [].

EM: From one year to the other year?

RC: Yeah. See I done used it up getting [], I was—

EM: And what you do, wash the saw dust off when you get ready to use it?

RC: Yeah.

EM: Could you keep food down there on it too?

RC: I don't know [] but I don't remember them trying that that I know of.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: But they used to keep ice. Yeah. And they made ice cream and everything else you gotta freeze by hand mostly.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Didn't have much machines.

EM: Did the white man treat people bad in slavery, beat them and punish them?

RC: Some of them. I think some of them...some of them is mean now. I mean some of the Negroes was mean as them.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And the white folks is still meaner. I meet some somewhere that's a nice [].

EM: Uh-huh. What did they do to the women when they wouldn't do right, beat them or punish them—how did they punish them?

RC: They beat them or smack them down, yeah they beat them like—

EM: Take a whip or something, or a switch and whip them?

RC: Yeah. I know, they say that there was a fellow, I don't know whether [] or not.

And []. The white man done come one time to [] need a whipping. They call a nigger there and you don't [] but they whip him.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: They say when you call, when the first nigger, say that nigger jumped up and said, "What I been wanting to do all the time is whip a white man." He [].

EM: Oh this was another white man that messed up working for this farm? This man on the farm?

RC: Yeah, said, "Yeah, let the nigger whip him.

EM: Let the nigger whip him, whip the white man.

RC: Yeah.

EM: That's what he had been waiting for all his life?

RC: Yeah, wanted to all his life whip a white man.

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EM: I heard a man tell me that they tried to smart with you, tried to make you look small sometime.

RC: Well you know, if you was [], they treated you small and sorry.

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: And if you was making any record or anything they'd, you know, [] at you.

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: [].

EM: Did your father—did your grandfather ever hire your father and them out for to work for the white man?

RC: No.

EM: Huh?

RC: No.

EM: Y'all was never hired out?

RC: No. He []. I never known my daddy to...well, you know, I might can tell you about my daddy, he was—I was, one morning, about 12 years old and he [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah. And my aunt, she was around [], I mean around 18 or 20.

EM: Uh-huh. What does your aunt do? How did she—if your daddy was sold, what happened to your aunt?

RC: Oh, no, hold on, wasn't none of them sold.

EM: What about your granddaddy? Did he have any other sisters and brothers?

RC: I don't know nothing about him, I never knowed nothing about my granddaddy now, or my great-granddaddy.

EM: What kind of work did he do?

RC: Farm, []. You see, he bought a farm up there in [], bought himself.

EM: Where'd he get the money from to buy hisself, buy a farm?

RC: Didn't know where he got the money from to buy hisself. But you know that it's always been in that []. Somebody thought, some of the white people that had money [], you know.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And then after he bought himself, you know, then he got a couple of slaves himself to farm, you know, and he was doing good.

EM: He got a couple slaves?

RC: He had four. I believe all them—

EM: He was smart.

RC: Yeah.

EM: He hired slaves to work for him.

RC: He bought them. But, you know, they didn't cost much.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: No. But he...but I couldn't believe that [] 80 or 90 years in [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And after he was freed, I mean [], man like that, why he's got just as much as the other man did.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Did he ever go to school, your father?

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RC: I don't know whether—one of them schools [] they had some studying.

EM: Where about?

RC: In different houses, you know. Back then [] about []. But anyhow white people go by the churches and teaching. The whites teaching over there and then Saul Brown. Didn't have but one white school then. The only school in there [] but one room.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And they'd teach you, [] after you go back home from school, they'd come to your house, you know, and in his kitchen there give them some class.

EM: Was he black or white?

RC: He was white.

EM: A white man.

RC: Yeah.

EM: He taught black children in the afternoons?

RC: Yeah. In his kitchen, you know, he'd give them some studying.

EM: What was name?

RC: Saul Brown.

EM: Charles Brown.

RC: Saul. Saul.

EM: Saul.

RC: Saul Brown.

EM: Saul Brown.

RC: Yeah. Yeah I knew him well, but I didn't know nothing about his [] because he—

EM: How was his parents? Tell me something about him.

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RC: I didn't know his parents, cause he was older than my daddy.

EM: And he was interested in black people learning.

RC: Yeah, well you know he was—he'd get a little something. They'd give him something, a few pennies.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And just like I said about this learning out in Berier. I can't think of his name, said his name []. But anyhow, you see he'd go down and [] the first Negro school, I mean Negro teacher I knew anything about, [name] Riley, taught my brother, Will. And he had a place down there in an old home. The county would give him a little something. And he would let the children come down and spend the week, and they'd bring their ratchets. Didn't cost much, and they'd give him so much, you know, the parents give him so much for teaching [] in his house.

EM: Oh he had school in his house.

RC: He had—yeah well he teach—that was his [] children or what, but he had a—I been to where the school was when my brother was going there. Down on the branch after the old house where, know where that is?

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: And had that for a school.

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: That was in...oh...1892—3.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: But he didn't have no—teachers were occupied by the county then.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: But I think [] that the county give them a little something.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Now they didn't have to keep no record.

EM: They didn't have to keep no records?

RC: No records to keep []. [] daily records, you know.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: They didn't have to turn in no re—I mean they turned in enough to let them know they was doing something.

EM: Did you ever see a different in kids when they was coming along, the color, or they thought they was better than each other when they was coming along?

RC: Yeah, you see that, yes lord. Yeah. Always been that way, ever since I know anything about it.

EM: Did white men take care of his black children better than he did the black ones?

RC: Well, no I don't know, it depends. I never knowed enough to tell the difference in color and []. But they had pictures, though.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Why was that monument put uptown in Oxford? You ever heard about that? What was the story behind that monument?

RC: No, I never, I never really [].

EM: Uh-huh. What's the purpose of that monument?

RC: [] the monument [] slave monument, [].

EM: That's slave monument?

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RC: Yeah, you know that's a []. Back in slavery time. []. All this time, you know, [] down here on [] Creek.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And [] they called [] Hill.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: I think that's right [] over there.

EM: Mm-hmm. ... Well how did—well Oxford had a lot of schools around here, a lot of schoolhouses. You know a lot of people had a lot of schools around here in the area, all over the county.

RC: Well that's been way back yonder. Cause [] myself. Even when I couldn't remember their name. That started in [], that started in [], Howell School. Cause I know my daddy and his uncles built the first school that ever [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: It was in the woods and [], it was a nice school. And Oxford had []. Come back and [], just barely old [].

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: But it wasn't no schools much nowhere than that. They had what they call them academy schools, academy.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Different towns, big towns had an academy. But they didn't have no little school. I remember when they started to building them one-room schools.

EM: How did you study at night? How could you see at night when you had to get your lesson out?

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RC: [] light [], go in the woods and get a []—

EM: Called it what?

RC: []. Come off the trees with a light and [].

EM: Light at knot.

RC: Light it. Light a knot. You know where, you seen them light the wood, you know, light the wood, light it. But that's [].

EM: You throw it in the fireplace?

RC: Yeah. You can put it in the fireplace and lay down in front of it or sit down in front of it—

EM: And it'll light up the room.

RC: Yeah. Light up enough that you can see.

EM: And that's what you study by?

RC: Yeah.

EM: Could you see?

RC: Yeah, you could see, that fire make a right good light. [] open their eyes a bit [].

EM: How far did you go in school?

RC: Oh I...it was practically the seventh grade, practically.

EM: Where was the last school you went—where was the last place you went to school at?

RC: [] School in Virginia. Mecklenburg County.

EM: Oh.

RC: [].

EM: Uh-huh. And you used light, or not.

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RC: Yeah.

EM: And you lay down in front of the fireplace.

RC: Yeah, down on the floor, and sometimes you put a [] down and [] them together on the floor. You know it's what they were accustomed to, that's what come natural to you.

EM: And what did you go to next after lighter knot? The [] or what?

RC: They had lamps.

EM: Oh lamps.

RC: Yeah. A lamp you know, oil lamp.

EM: Mm-hmm. Where did you get the oil from?

RC: You could buy oil, they had oil []. Yeah. Kerosene oil, you know.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah. About, I don't know, eight or 10 cents a gallon.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah, they had oil then. Then they come [] making [].

EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: Had a bunch over there, and the oil, and making a [].

EM: What do you think about the Presbyterian Church putting money in Oxford to build a school, helping Dr. Shaw. You remember the lady who built, who helped him?

RC: No, I don't remember her.

EM: Uh-huh. Did you have dealings with Dr. Shaw?

RC: No, I didn't [] nothing no specially. I knew him in...[]. Used to work for him on some of the buildings.

EM: He had buildings where? Where did you work on his buildings at?

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RC: Well you know, right there he had two buildings there. John []—George [], he passed, but [] Charlie Taylor used to live in the church down that way.

EM: Where?

RC: Charlie Chavis used to live in the contract center. But it was a church there, over there before you get to Smith Hill. It was a Holy Church, I call it.

EM: Uh-huh. Charlie Taylor.

RC: Yeah.

EM: What did Charlie Taylor do?

RC: He was a contractor. He was a builder.

EM: What did he build?

RC: He built houses and [], he built...I was working with him when he built John Young's theater.

EM: A black man?

RC: Yeah. Charlie Taylor.

EM: He built John Young's theater?

RC: Yeah.

EM: Did Payton Brandon work with him then?

RC: I don't know, I was doing brick work then. I done all the brickwork, I know.

EM: What else building did he build around here? He build the post office?

RC: No. Betts and Henderson built the post office—I mean the hotel there. [].

EM: What he a black man or white man?

RC: He was a black man, John Betts.

EM: A black man?

RC: Yeah.

EM: Built the hotel downtown in Oxford?

RC: Yeah.

EM: That big one.

RC: Yeah, [] right there where the...

EM: The bank is now?

RC: Yeah.

EM: What's his name?

RC: John Betts.

EM: John Betts.

RC: Yeah. He built the...I know [] the hotel [] clocks.

EM: Did you work with him?

RC: No I never worked with Billy. Not in town. Me and Charlie [] build the Five and Ten Cent Store with Roland Henderson and Betts, and his name [].

EM: You built the Five and Ten Cent Store downtown on Main Street?

RC: Yeah, myself and Charlie Ridley was the contractors—

EM: Charlie Ridley.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Where was he from?

RC: He was down on, Sammy Ridley's daddy, down on []. []—

EM: Y'all built the Rosie Five and Ten Cent Store downtown in Oxford?

RC: Yeah.

EM: And what else did y'all build?

RC: Built the [] Charlie Ridley worked [] at the store mostly, and I was working [].

And then both at the same time.

EM: Did y'all get the bricks from the brickyard down in the [interruption] Uh-huh. And did y'all build the next store beside the Five and Ten Cent Store?

RC: No.

EM: Y'all just built the Five and Ten Cent Store. What else building did y'all build downtown?

RC: That's the only downtown []. I built [] in Oxford here on the corner here where the [] is [].

EM: You built that building?

RC: Yeah.

EM: Where [], where Hall Drug Store—beside Hall Drug Store?

RC: No. Up here around the corner.

EM: Yeah, [] is on the corner.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Where Granville Insurance come in.

RC: No, I tell you about where it is. Right on the corner [].

EM: Across from the post office.

RC: No this is right there on the corner, if you turn in there coming up, after you turn off of Hillsborough Street onto Main Street.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: It's that corner there.

EM: Oh ok. That's Penny Furniture Company. It used to be—Penny's used to be, J.C. Penny's used to be there. Now Cato's is there now.

RC: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's right. I built that.

EM: What about Fox's?

RC: I didn't help with that. That was already there.

EM: You built the building right there on the corner where Cato.

RC: Yeah, you see this, the Woolworth building, and they tore it down and rebuilt it.

EM: Uh-huh. And you rebuilt it back?

RC: Yeah. Yeah.

EM: Oh.

RC: Charlie Ridley and myself was kind of partners working together then.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Sometimes he—where he'd get the job he'd run his way, I get it, I run it. I ran this job but he was working this with me, we were working together [].

EM: Mm-hmm. Do you know what was the first black church ever in Oxford? Did anybody tell you what was the oldest black church in Oxford?

RC: No...[] the oldest one I know of was [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: I'm [].

EM: Mm-hmm. That's the oldest one, you think it was?

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RC: That's the oldest one I know of. Cause I used to have a aunt...all them women used to be working, just working then on the church. [] only church then. [] but every night it was [], and the oil lamp. Now you go [] lighting the church and anywhere else.

EM: Did Mr. Johnson run a store right there in William Breedlove? Paul Johnson daddy, what's his name?

RC: Lee.

EM: Lee Johnson. Did he have a store downtown there?

RC: I don't know.

EM: Was he a real estate man?

RC: No, I don't know.

EM: What did he do?

RC: [] I never did [] he was carpenter.

EM: He was a carpenter too?

RC: Yeah, Lee Johnson was a good, number one carpenter.

EM: With all these carpenters around town where did you find work to do, so many carpenters around here?

RC: Well...

EM: You didn't have no white carpenters?

RC: Not many [] white carpenters.

EM: Huh?

RC: It wasn't many white carpenters. Cause Charlie Taylor was a contractor, he was percentage contractor.

EM: Charlie Taylor.

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RC: Yeah.

EM: Was he—oh, he was black.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Uh-huh. He was a percentage contractor.

RC: Yeah. He was a contrac—he didn't have money but he worked with these contractors on percentage.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: But he had all the work he could do.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And, well they had one or two. [Name], I know he was a contractor, and my daddy []. [], that white Davis lived there.

EM: Where?

RC: On Front Street. Right there. Well, I don't know. Third house down, right there where that brick house on Front Street.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah. That was Davis's house.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: My daddy and I [] the pastor lived there.

EM: Was it ever a black newspaper in Oxford? Anybody ever start a newspaper office and try to print papers? You ever...

RC: Not to my knowing, I reckon. But I don't know, I don't know. I can't [].

EM: When you come to Oxford that monument wasn't there, was it?

RC: No. No. Cause I know they got... [] come in here. [] in the road, in the street.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And of course you don't see many—

EM: That's where everybody got water from.

RC: Yeah, they stop at the—one of was cobbles, a few cobblestones, and one of them was cement driveway [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And [] had a man to go down there at night and light the streetlights.

EM: Uh-huh. How was blacks being treated back then?

RC: Well it was...[], most of them [] treated mighty nice, but they wasn't bummed around so much. [] to be pretty strong, you know?

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: But they...they didn't have [].

EM: How did Granville County blacks get so much property, own so many acres of land around here? How did blacks in Granville County manage to come up with owning so much land?

RC: Well, I tell you, I don't know all the dealings, but the man was cheap. It was a just a few white people at [] to my knowing. I know when [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Just a few.

EM: Who was the largest landowner black you ever known in this county back then? Way back. Was Venable Daniel a big landowner, or the Ridleys was a big landowner, or...?

RC: Tom Peace was a pretty back land—

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EM: Tom Peace.

RC: Yeah.

EM: How much land did he own? From Peace Street all the way over to Antioch?

RC: No, I don't mean that Tom Peace. I mean the Tom Peace down there in Fairport.

EM: Oh, he was black.

RC: Yeah.

EM: How much land he did own?

RC: I don't know. He had his farm, but I don't know []. But that is just my—Now Eddie Peace, he had []—he ain't have so much land, but I knew of one, he had a whole log of lots. What they call Peacetown. He built a lot.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Cause he had a pretty good farm up here in []. But I couldn't say who is [] man on—

EM: Dr. Shaw had a big farm.

RC: Yeah, he had... Well I guess he [] most anywhere. Had his farm [] to live on, and all like that []. But they never asked for many renters.

EM: Who bought—where did the orphanage buy that land? Who did the orphanage buy that land from that got that building? That built that school on? Do you know who owned that land before the orphanage? You ever heard of who owned that land before the orphanage?

RC: I did but I don't know who it was now. Cause I wasn't [] better than mine.

EM: Uh-huh. Was the orphanage here when you came to Oxford as a little boy?

RC: Yeah.

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EM: Was Mary Potter here too?

RC: Yeah. Both of that [] had been in so long, I don't know how long, but both of them had [].

EM: Uh-huh. Did they ever have the post office in a house, or the courthouse in a house here in Oxford? Were you ever told that?

RC: No, not that I know of. No, I didn't, never heard of that.

EM: Mm-hmm. Was blacks ever buried in that graveyard downtown in the center of town? Was that a slave graveyard at one time?

RC: [] Oxford?

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Not that I know of.

EM: Uh-huh, whites always been—

RC: Yeah.

EM: Uh-huh. What did they bury, soldiers in that graveyard first? Or what.

RC: Yeah, [], I don't know. They had discontinued that but I don't know anything about it.

EM: Uh-huh. So you worked on most all those buildings around here, you and Charlie Taylor and John Betts and...

RC: Yeah well you know that the Negroes were doing most of the carpentry work then.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Most of the buildings []. And I don't know whether the white man [] nothing [], but he was trying to get kids an education and []. You know then he's posing as a carpenter, with experience [].

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EM: Uh-huh.

RC: He'd been working there for so long they could just, they had the experience of it.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: But the white man, he was looking for the letter.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: He wasn't looking for making []. His [] doing it. [] nothing against that. And then I tell you [] back along then, they liked to tell you what to do in that time. They won't do it so much, just wanted to be in the shape to see if you wouldn't do it.

EM: Who was doing a lot of telling back then?

RC: I mean the white man as a whole.

EM: He didn't want to do what?

RC: He didn't want to get out on his hands work. He wanted to be the man to tell you what to do.

EM: Oh he didn't want to work.

RC: No [] working.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah.

EM: He want to stand back and tell you what to do.

RC: Yeah, yeah, tell you what to do.

EM: But he didn't know what he was doing though.

RC: No, hell, the only thing he knew was to tell you what to do. And he had some book learning, but that's a whole lot different from the practice.

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EM: Well you didn't take orders from a man telling you what to do and didn't know how to do it, did you?

RC: Well it depends.

EM: Uh-huh. Could you read blueprints?

RC: Oh yeah, but [] that don't mean [] carpentry work. That [] a hole in working. [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: He the one to tell, want to be telling the Negroes what to do. That's what I been hearing.

EM: How did they clean out toilets around here? How did they do that kind of work? Who went around doing that kind of—

RC: Yeah. Some like to call them dump trucks.

EM: Dump truck?

RC: Yeah. Trucks would go around, you know, and clean.

EM: What, on a wagon? Or what?

RC: Yeah, two wheel, something like a two-wheel wagon.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: But I mean that [] wagon [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: If you dump it, you know, they load them up and count out to a certain place and dump them.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: That's what they used to do around Baltimore. They get that stuff up and scatter it and []. Used to [] out in Baltimore up until just a few years ago.

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EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Did you know when they ran the first water line in Oxford? Did you ever know Fred Douglas?

RC: Yeah.

EM: Used to come in working with the water company?

RC: Yeah I knew Fred Douglas.

EM: Uh-huh. What about Asgiz, John Asgiz, used to work with the—putting down the street, the asphalt. Did he come in with R.J. Lassiter working with them? Did you first knew him then?

RC: I don't, I really, I don't think [].

EM: Mm-hmm. Did you know John Asgiz?

RC: No, I knew of him. I don't know when I knew him. I'd seen him but I don't know.

EM: Uh-huh. Did you—when you was around a boy, your parents, did you ever have black books? Did you ever know teachers that—When did black books come out? When children started, whites started, black teachers could teach out of books? Did you ever see—What was the first black book you seen? Or heard of?

RC: I don't know. I tell you [] I went to school in [] what you call a blue-back [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And had running in line of baker and stuff like that. And let one [] the book with you. [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And then the next [] school that [] Speller came out.

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EM: Did you ever see a black picture in a book the whole time you was a little boy when you were going to school?

RC: I don't believe I did [] done something bad. But I don't believe I—I didn't notice.

EM: Was George Washington Carver the first black man you had ever heard of when you first heard of a man that's supposed to've been a great leader or great black man?

RC: No...I []. I remember the [] Booker T. Washington daddy and all the churches there. We had a meeting at the church, but—

EM: Where was this at?

RC: Out there at []. Hmm. [].

EM: []

RC: Yeah.

EM: Had Booker T. Washington ever been through this way?

RC: Not to my knowing, I don't know.

EM: Huh?

RC: I been to his home, let me see. George Washington, Booker T. Washington [], and []. But anyhow, [] two of them live there when [], before we had this, by Elk River go down to Virginia.

EM: Uh-huh. Did you know it was a guy in Oxford named John Chavis teaching white children?

RC: Yeah I heard of him, I didn't know him but I heard of him. Yeah.

EM: Where did he teach at?

RC: I don't know but I heard of him when []. He was instructing in some way though.

EM: He taught Mr. Horner's children. And set up Horner School.

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RC: I didn't [].

EM: Huh?

RC: Said I wasn't in on that.

EM: Did you ever hear talk of Mr. Worthem out in...

RC: Yeah.

EM: Mr. Worthem.

RC: Dudley Worthem?

EM: Yeah, did you ever know him?

RC: No, I've seen him, but I...yeah, you know, I saw him before he went [].

EM: What did he do?

RC: He was a, the only thing I know of he was kind of a schoolman.

EM: Did you know he was a schoolteacher?

RC: Yeah I said the biggest thing I know him [].

EM: Was he a justice of the peace or a magistrate out in this area?

RC: Not that I know of, now.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: He lived here around Oak Grove, something like that.

EM: Was he a light-skinned man, looked like he was white?

RC: Yeah.

EM: Could he pass for white?

RC: Well it depends, you know. Closest combination I don't think it []. Of course you know some white men ain't even white at all.

EM: You think he was a free issue man? Free to go and do like he wanted to do?

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RC: Well I think he had [] of freedom, but they had a little restriction on all of them.

EM: They had restriction, what do you mean by that?

RC: I mean, you know, they let you [] anything, they'd hold it up.

EM: How? In what way?

RC: I mean it's the living or talking or planning, whatever it is, you get too much of a lead in it, []. Getting long time here, coming along here it's getting much better, cause I knew when I was a kid and it's getting much better []. You had to fool with []. [] didn't do but so much. Get by, we get by it.

EM: Oh they let you know when you're getting out of your place.

RC: Yeah.

EM: The white man call you and say, "Hey, John, you too smart," or "Bill, you going to fast. You gotta slow down."

RC: Yeah.

EM: And if you didn't they would kill you, or hang out.

RC: Yeah, []. And there's plenty [].

EM: Was the Ku Klux Klan back then?

RC: I never heard of it till just a few years ago. [] they had patty rollers [].

EM: Patty rollers.

RC: Yeah.

EM: What do that mean? I ain't never heard of that before.

RC: That's what they—they on the same order of the Ku Klux. Patty rollers get you, you know. [] or anything like that, patty rollers get you.

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EM: What, like a bounty hunter they get paid for going and picking up the slaves and bringing them back?

RC: I don't know how that went, but I know that patty roller [] and you couldn't get in [] or didn't have something to show for it, they would carry you somewhere, find out where you going and then carry you back. I didn't [], but you call them patty rollers.

EM: Uh-huh. Was any blacks patty rollers?

RC: Not to my knowing.

EM: What—the patty mean white.

RC: Yeah.

EM: That's where that word come from.

RC: []. Or that's what they was. Patty rollers. That's why I was saying about my great-grandfather, you know, after he bought himself he was a free man. He didn't need no papers; then patty rollers won't get him because he was free.

EM: And he had his own slaves.

RC: Yeah, yeah, you see what freed him is he bought hisself.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: He couldn't own slaves unless he was a free man.

EM: You reckon it was so more blacks back then could bought themselves too?

RC: I suppose it might've been but that's the only one I know of.

EM: Uh-huh. He was a powerful man to buy himself back then.

RC: Well he was about between 15 and 20 years old when he [] young man.

EM: How old was he when he died?

RC: I don't know.

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EM: Did you see him live—did he ever live with y'all?

RC: No.

EM: Could he read and write?

RC: I don't know. He died before I was born.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: He died several years before I was born.

EM: Mm-hmm. Well he probably was back there with Nat Turner and those people.

RC: He was [] 60, 50, 60.

EM: Uh-huh, 1850. 1860.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Could you tell me why so many blacks from Virginia came over to North Carolina to go to school and to learn? They just didn't have schools over there or what happened?

RC: [] white school in Person, I mean in [] Township. They just, whenever somebody put up a school somebody out here flocked to it and []. Cause [] section.

EM: And Virginia just didn't have schools?

RC: No, no.

EM: In this section.

RC: No.

EM: And that's why so many people from Virginia came to North Carolina.

RC: Yeah. People moved to where the schools was at.

EM: Cause Virginia didn't allow blacks, didn't allow niggers to go to school there. They didn't want to educate their blacks.

RC: No.

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EM: Why Virginia was so hard on black people?

RC: Well [] I tell you they got something tickling them, telling them that the Negro was human too and they didn't want to conceive of it. They wanted to keep it a slave. That's what [] get what he wanted. Working for them.

EM: And work for nothing.

RC: Yeah.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Just work wherever they say, that's it. Just do what they said do.

EM: Where would you—do you remember when you seen the first airplane?

RC: No, I don't believe I know, can recall when I first saw it. I know I remember when [] but I don't—cause I been all down that way. [].

EM: What about train? Do you know where you were when you seen the first train?

[END OF SIDE A]

[START OF SIDE B]

EM: ...first train?

RC: Yeah, it was Rocky Mount.

EM: Uh-huh. How did it look?

RC: Well it looked pretty—for a train it looked alright.

EM: Was blacks working on the railroads then, building railroads back then?

RC: Yeah, yeah, yeah. When I come on.

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EM: Mm-hmm.

RC: Yeah. Yeah, they had [] cars, you know.

EM: What do that means?

RC: That means niggers had the different cars. They was [].

EM: A special car for blacks and a special one for white.

RC: A special [].

EM: They had what?

RC: Division, you know.

EM: Division.

RC: Yeah, niggers sat in one end and the whites sat in another.

EM: But the blacks had to wait on the whites, didn't they? Feed them and cook and...

RC: Oh yeah, [] now.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: []. Yeah. But that, you know, they get two or three dollars a week.

EM: Uh-huh. What do you think about the Central Orphanage? Don't you think a history book should be written about the orphanage?

RC: Yeah, I think it should be because they have done a big work.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Some good people come up in that [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: I think that would be fine if we had some book or something.

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EM: Do you know who founded the orphanage? Or was that founded, or did they ever tell you how they founded the orphanage or how they went about it?

RC: Well, no, not exactly. [].

EM: Why they pick Oxford?

RC: Well the first one that started work on it was living in Oxford. And they got a hold of this piece of land somewhere or another. And this old lady, now I can't think of here name, come in here from the North somewhere or another, she was working with them and she put some money in it and they started it. I forgot her name now. And after they got it started they just [].

EM: Uh-huh. Well why did all the work that you and Mr. Charlie Taylor and everybody did around here Ox—why they ain't never named something after y'all? Streets and buildings and stuff like that, all the dedication y'all done and worked hard in this town?

RC: That would be too much honor I think.

EM: Huh?

RC: I believe they think that would be an honor.

EM: Well they got them named after the rest of these white people around here, these buildings and different things named after them and they didn't do as much as y'all did. At least y'all built Oxford. They weren't here to build it.

RC: Well, but you see that's—they honoring them for who they is, and race has a lot to do with it.

EM: Race has a lot to do with it?

RC: Yeah. It ain't what you done, it's who done it.

EM: Uh-huh.

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RC: It's getting more about what you done now, but back in yesteryear it wasn't what you done but who done it.

EM: Uh-huh. And that's what went all the time, is who done it.

RC: Yeah, that's what it was.

EM: Did you ever know Mr. Green that lived up here, Professor Green's daddy? Was his name George Green?

RC: Yeah, I knew George Green and his brother cause I went to school with his brother.

EM: What did George Green do?

RC: [] remember is carpenter work. George Green's brother used to be principal over there at the Orange Street School.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: And I went—I know when he started the school. I think he started...But anyhow I knew the man, he was working for a white man [].

EM: What was he doing?

RC: Farming, and the man taught a lot of them in that school where I told you my daddy done built. It was over here. He stayed there in the winter and they'd live and go to school in winter, just feeding horses and feeding, you know, feeding [] work the next summer.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: They'd pay them something for the summer work. But they fed them and [] help around the house there.

EM: He was the house boy.

RC: Well he was working with the farm but [].

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EM: Were these people white?

RC: Yeah.

EM: They sent him to college too?

RC: No, []. He come back to Oxford and I got out of touch with him till I knew anything he was in the educational field.

EM: Uh-huh. Was he a good smart teacher? Instructor?

RC: To me he was. [] know I'm going to tell you he was pretty good.

EM: He have a wife?

RC: Yeah.

EM: What did she do?

RC: She saw []. You know []. After he died she went back, she left, she was from Charlotte.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Went back to Charlotte. I believe that's where she passed.

EM: Was it any singers around here in Oxford back in your day, people that could sing real good that deserve a lot of credit?

RC: Well, you know, they had what you call [] these singers [] note singers.

EM: What do you mean by that?

RC: Singing by notes [].

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Like they'd sing the note by the shape.

EM: Uh-huh.

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RC: And they had some [] choirs, they were some good choirs [] churches [] had some quartets.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: But it wasn't [] farm quartets. Hard [] get anything out of them. [] pick up. They had some good singers, but I mean they just picked it up.

EM: Can you tell me of families in Oxford that deserve some credit, that worked hard and helped these people in Oxford that shoulda gotten some credit, that was born here, some legion families that educated a lot of children? Was the Peaces a family that worked real hard and educated a lot of children, or were your wife? Her family educated a lot of children. A lot of these families in Oxford educated a lot of children in this town.

RC: Yeah.

EM: These teachers never been honored or nothing in this town?

RC: No, []. All of them [], you know. That's why they couldn't cause all of them pressed forward.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: Yeah. []. Quite a few people [] themselves with children and education.

EM: Well couldn't some of these blacks [] these around here and come back here, worked hard and helped move this town faster than what is has moved? Or do you think it's progressed a lot since it's been—since you been around here? Do you see Oxford progress []

RC: Yeah, I've seen quite a bit of progress here. It was during rapid progress that everything got so high and everything [] up, you know.

EM: Mm-hmm.

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RC: I've seen plenty walk from Antioch here [] way. Just the other day.

EM: Uh-huh.

RC: I don't even know if one walked one way three dollars a day. If they had to walk they wouldn't come at all. I know my mother, not only her but []—

[END OF SIDE B]

[END OF INTERVIEW]