

Calvin Pearson Interview Summary

Interviewee: Calvin Pearson

Interviewers: Jack Snowdon and Josh Grimes

Interview date: October 15, 2021

Interview location: Virtually, through Blackboard Collaborate

Length: 1:08:37

THE INTERVIEWEE: Calvin Pearson was born in Newport News on June 2, 1951 but mostly grew up in Hampton. Pearson attended Greenbriar Elementary, George Wythe Jr. High, and George P. Phenix High School, where he graduated in 1969. For Pearson's higher education, he studied at Thomas Nelson Community College, Hampton Institute, and the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). Pearson began work at 13, when his father became terminally ill. After graduating from UDC, Pearson was a draftsman for the city of Hampton and then rose to the position of Superintendent of Parks and Recreation, from which Pearson retired in 2005 after 30 years of service. Regarding Pearson's volunteer experience, Pearson is currently the founder and president of Project 1619 Inc., which is a non-profit organization in Hampton that tells the story of the first enslaved Africans brought to present-day Fort Monroe in 1619. For the past 45 years, this group has aimed to correct a false narrative. He has also served as the president of the George P. Phenix Alumni Association since 2007 and president of the Pembroke High School Class of 1969 Alumni since 1979. Other volunteering Pearson currently does includes being a member of the Hampton Roads Chapter of AAHGS (Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society), being a board commissioner for the National Juneteenth Observance Foundation (NJOF), and a board member of the Hampton University Boosters Club.

THE INTERVIEWERS: Jack Snowdon and Josh Grimes are students at Christopher Newport University, who took Dr. Puaca's Long Civil Rights Movement class in Fall 2021.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview was conducted virtually through Blackboard Collaborate. The interview took a life history approach, beginning with Pearson's early upbringing, family life, education, and community relations. A good portion of this interview relates to Pearson's education, particularly his time spent at George P. Phenix High School, which he describes as a pillar of the local Black community. He describes his efforts as president of the George P. Phenix Alumni Association to preserve the legacy of the school, and the activities of the Hampton school board during his time as a student and after his graduation. Pearson describes his higher education, work experience, and racial disparities in Hampton.

Pearson speaks about his involvement with non-profit organizations, particularly Project 1619, which he founded. He details the struggle to improve education about African-American history, with his efforts revolving around Fort Monroe, where the first enslaved Africans landed in the English settlement in Virginia, in 1619. His actions aimed at preserving Black culture, both at a national and a local level, are discussed. Pearson's stances on various issues relating to civil rights, as well as his takeaways of the civil rights movement, are also included.

Calvin Pearson–Edited Transcript

Interviewee: Calvin Pearson

Interviewers: Jack Snowdon and Josh Grimes

Interview date: October 15, 2021

Interview location: Virtually, through Blackboard Collaborate

Length: 1:08:37

START OF INTERVIEW

Jack Snowdon: This is Jack Snowdon and my partner is Josh Grimes. Today is October 15th, 2021. We are interviewing Mr. Calvin Pearson. This interview is being carried out as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University.

Good morning, Mr. Pearson. We are taking what is called a life history and would like to begin our interview with a few questions about your childhood.

Calvin Pearson: Okay.

JS: Alright, so can you tell us where and when you were born?

CP: Well, I was born in Newport News, Virginia on June 2nd, 1951.

JS: Alright, and is it right that you were born in Newport News, but you grew up in Hampton?

CP: Yeah, I'm in an era where it was not that great living in Newport News during that time period. Newport News, we called it East End of Newport News, had a reputation of low-income housing. It was the urban blight area in some cases. By the time I was three years old, my father somehow generated enough money to build a home in Hampton so, in 1954, we moved into a brand new home. It was unbelievable that we could do that because my father worked at the shipyard and my mother was a housewife. We never

figured out how my dad could build a brand new house in 1954, working at the shipyard. So when I tell people where I was raised, I always tell them I was raised in Hampton, because Hampton's all I knew. I was too young to know about Newport News, so I just tell people that I was raised and reared in Hampton.

JS: I see. That's very interesting. Thank you.

Josh Grimes: What did your parents do for a living?

CP: Well, my dad worked in the Newport News shipyard, and he also spent time in the Navy. He got drafted in the Navy around 1942. He got drafted and went into the Navy. It was unheard of, probably, at that time for Black people to be going into the Navy. But as you know, during that time period, he was not going to be an officer. They gave Black folks the menial jobs, so he was one of the cooks in the [mess hall]. So that's where he spent most of his career. But when he came out, he went back to the shipyard. And that's where he spent the rest of his life, because my father died at an early age. It was a hardship on our family. My dad developed cancer or a carcinoma from asbestos, because of the ships that he was working on at that time in the shipyard. There are a lot of people dying today because of asbestosis. So when I was twelve years old, my dad became sick, and he died when I was fourteen. So my mother, who was a housewife, then had to go to work. She was in her forties when she decided that she needed to go to college, to get some type of education to support her six children. She went to school and got a diploma, and she had to end up going to work. This was probably a mid-life crisis for her, to have to go to school and get an education to get a job to support our family.

JG: We'd also like to learn more about what it was like to live and to grow up in a segregated society more generally. How do you remember race relations in Hampton when you were growing up?

CP: Well, you got to go back to 1954, *Brown v. the Board of Education*, which ushered in the requirement that all schools be integrated. I was only three years old at that time, but it would have a profound effect on my life as I got older. By the time I started first grade in 1957, I knew that segregation existed. We lived in a predominantly Black, middle class neighborhood in Hampton. I remember my parents would shop in the Black-owned stores in Newport News on Jefferson Avenue. As I mentioned, it was called East End of Newport News, and it still has a reputation today as a Black, segregated neighborhood that has not received the attention that places such as Town Center has received, and Denbigh, and other places. It has been a neglected community all of my life. We went to an all-Black church in Newport News. There is a long story about my education growing up in a segregated school system. In 1963, Hampton was a segregated city. We had Black neighborhoods and we had white neighborhoods. And about six blocks from where we lived was white neighborhoods. I remember on many occasions, when I wanted to go to the local shopping center, I had to pass through these white neighborhoods. And I would get chased out of these white neighborhoods by a gang of white guys. But I soon learned to run fast, [laughter] and they were not able to catch me. So I went to a segregated elementary school, junior high school, high school. My high school here in Hampton was George P. Phenix High School. And it was named after a white educator from the North who saw the disparity in public education and believed children of all colors should have the same opportunities to learn. He was responsible for having a high school constructed

on the campus of then-Hampton Institute in 1931. The school was named in his honor because he died before the school opened. The city of Hampton in 1954 was forced to build their own high school for Black students, because Hampton Institute decided that they were not going to allow the Hampton City school system to use their property for Black high schools, that they should have their own high schools. So in 1962, the city of Hampton opened up a new high school for Black students, and they named it the George P. Phenix High School. And that school opened up in 1962. The first graduating class was 1963. Many high school districts in the state of Virginia refused to accept *Brown v. The Board of Education*, and many of them refused to integrate their high schools. A lot of them integrated elementary schools first, probably as early as 1960. Then they started integrating the middle schools, the junior high schools. But Hampton only had one Black high school, and that was George P. Phenix High School. But in 1967, the federal government said, "If you do not integrate this high school, we are going to withhold all federal funds." And that was the impetus for Hampton integrating the only Black high school that they ever had here in Hampton, Virginia. But it's a sad story. I am president of the George P. Phenix High School Alumni Association and I interact with a lot of people, a lot of classes. It's a sad story because, in 1968, the Hampton school board instructed their staff to go to George P. Phenix High School and discard anything and everything that had the name of George P. Phenix High School on it. So in the summer of 1968, they brought in these big dumpsters, and they started throwing away all of the class reunion pictures, all of the yearbooks, all of the student files, all of the academic and scholastic and athletic trophies. They started throwing away all of the band uniforms, the football uniforms, all the athletic uniforms, the choir gowns. Just like—. Anything they could,

they threw it into the dumpster and then they set the dumpsters on fire. Residents who were in the vicinity saw smoke billowing from their beloved high school and they ran over to the high school and started trying to go through the fire. And they were able to salvage some of the trophies, which the alumni association has today. And they were able to salvage a couple of artifacts out of the dumpsters. So the intent was to destroy all the memories of George P. Phenix High School. And they almost did. But we have a strong alumni association. We banded together to form the alumni association. We're collecting artifacts from some of those classes and some of the things that were retrieved from the fire. So the question always remained in the back of our minds: why didn't Hampton City schools donate some of these items to a museum, or put them in archives or a storage area for future generations? Why destroy the only high school that people of color in Hampton had experienced since 1932? And the bottom line is racism. I tell people that George P. Phenix was a white man, but they looked at George P. Phenix High School as a predominantly Black school. In 1968, we had a Hampton City school board that was all white. And the perception in the community was that these white people did not want their child going to what was presumed a predominantly Black high school. So they decided that they were going to change the name, and they changed the name to Pembroke High School, which upset a lot of people because we had protested to the Hampton school board that you cannot change the name of our school. But what do you do when you have an all white school board? In 1968, we had no voice. We could protest, but we had no voice. Our voice did not matter because we were living—still living—in what we believed to be a segregated society, where certain people had the power, certain people had control over certain situations, and the school board had complete control. So

it came up with a policy that said, “No high school in the City of Hampton will ever be named after a person.” So that was their excuse. They changed the name from George P. Phenix High School to appease those parents who did not want their children going to George P. Phenix High School, because that high school had 36 years of history. 36 years of Black history. So the decision was, “Change the name and it will be an entirely different school.” But there were some concerns about that too because, people don’t talk about it, but there was some conversation that Pembroke was formerly a slave plantation. That the school was built on a former slave plantation and Pembroke was associated with the slave plantation. And nobody really wanted to investigate that any further. So those are some of the stories that we tell from our high school days growing up here in the City of Hampton.

JS: I see. That’s fascinating. Thank you, Mr. Pearson. To clarify, this was during your senior year? That they changed the name?

CP: Yeah, I went to George P. Phenix in the 9th, 10th, and 11th grade. And then, in the summer of 1968, as we were getting ready to go into my senior year, they changed the name to Pembroke. And I graduated from Pembroke in ‘69. So I spent three years at George P. Phenix and then, my final year, they changed the name to Pembroke. But even today, the reason why I’m president of the George P. Phenix Alumni Association is because I still connect with George P. Phenix. I didn’t have a lot of connection with Pembroke, because—. Pembroke, you gotta understand, was a difficult time for us. I talked to a group of high school students last week, and I told them, “Imagine going to school and not having your first white classmate until you’re in high school. You don’t have your first white teacher until you’re in the 12th grade.” And that’s really unthinkable for

the past 30, 40 years, because of integration. We try to bring all of the people together to educate them in the same educational environment, and that's not what we had back in 1968-69 when I was in high school.

JS: Right. So on that topic, can you tell us what the dynamics were like between white and Black students?

CP: There were none. We were all the same people, but we were treated differently. We had great students at Phenix High School, and we could just run down the list of the distinguished people that came out of Phenix. People like Mary T. Christian, who recently passed away a few years ago, in the House of Delegates. Hampton Sheriff B.J. Roberts. The list goes on and on and on. We've got one classmate right now who is working on space exploration at NASA. I mean, the list goes on and on of the special students that came out of the predominantly Black high school. So when it became an integrated school, there was some adjustment because you had never gone to a mixed school before. We were always segregated. So there were some cultural differences going to a school now where there were white students and white teachers, but it wasn't a big difference. We looked at them as fellow students. They played on our football team. They were in the band. So, from the student perspective, there was no discourse, there was no animosity, there was no racial division among the students and among the teachers. But, you got to realize, too, that Phenix High School, being a predominantly Black high school, was a hand-me-down school. We got hand-me-down books from Hampton High School. We got hand-me-down furniture from Hampton High School. We were getting books that were torn, written in, that came from Hampton High School. We rarely got new books. So there was an advantage, probably, of being in an integrated

school because now we were getting new books, new textbooks. We were getting new furniture. So there was a difference, probably, in the quality of the furnishing. But it was still the same education. We had quality educators at Phenix and we had quality educators at Pembroke. So there wasn't much of a difference. It was just the climate of that time and the changes that we were going through.

JS: I see. And to take that comment you made about the educators and also, to look back at your earlier education, do you remember any particular teachers, or any memories in particular from Greenbriar or George Wythe, Jr. that stand out to you?

CP: Yeah, we always remember our first-grade teacher. Her name was Beatrice Courtney. Unfortunately with age, she passed away, probably three years ago. So we had the opportunity to continue a relationship with her for many years. And we did our reunions or we did something with [her]. We would always remember her and count on her. So she was probably one of the best memories that I have of elementary school. Elementary school was real exciting because, at that time, I don't think we had pre-K. I think you went straight into the first grade, in 1957. And we started meeting people that we had never met before. So it was an exciting time to be in the first grade because you knew the children in your neighborhood, but you didn't know the children three or four blocks away. And I had the opportunity to walk to Greenbriar Elementary School, because I lived about eight blocks away and there was no bussing, at that time, going to the elementary school. So most of the kids in the area had to walk to school. I mean I can talk to some alumni from the '40s, '50s, and '60s, and they would tell you how they had to walk to school. They'd tell you about how, on their way to school, these school buses of white kids would pass by them. Yet they had to walk to school no matter what the

weather or condition was. So there was a lot of disparity between integration and segregation as they were growing up.

JS: I see, thank you. One more thing about George Phenix High School. So you were saying earlier, was it the student body that was popularly against the name change when it happened?

CP: Oh, everybody—. Yeah, the entire Black population of Hampton was against the school name change because, you got to realize that, from the early 1900s, that Black people in Hampton went to a segregated school. We can go back to the Union Elementary School, back in the '40s and '50s. Phenix came along in 1931 and, before that, there were a few previous Black schools that people went to. So, for all of their lives, they went to segregated schools. And George P. Phenix was beloved by the students at Hampton Institute and the people who went to George P. Phenix High School, because we had built a legacy of excellence. We called it “a legacy of excellence.” At George P. Phenix, we had teachers from around the world. We had people from France and other countries who would come in and teach us as part of their program. Those who went to Hampton Institute and went to the George Phenix High School, I mean, they had access to the Ogden Hall, they experienced opera. Dinah Washington, all these famous people who were traveling around the world—when they came to Hampton Institute, the George P. Phenix students were invited to all the activities on campus. So it was like a worldwide education for all those going to school on the campus of Hampton Institute from 1931 until 1954. So in 1954, that was when Hampton Institute told the City of Hampton, “You got to build your own school.” There was a lot of history behind the people that went to George P. Phenix High School, and they did not want to give up that legacy. We tell

people today that, when they changed the name of George P. Phenix High School, that name died. It will never return. So it was up to the alumni association to keep the dream alive, to keep the vision alive. And that's what we've been trying to do. The other thing, too, is that we are a dying organization. There has not been a George P. Phenix High School since 1968. There are no graduates coming up behind us to carry on that legacy. So when we're dead and gone, that ends the alumni organization. Our days are numbered, and that's why it's critical for us to keep talking about the disparity in education, and how our school name was destroyed.

JS: I see. That's right. Thank you, Mr. Pearson.

JG: Just to backtrack, at the time, how did the broader community respond to integration during the time that you were there?

CP: When we look back upon the years of segregation, we talk about people living together, whether they were white or Black. But during segregation, people of color had their own community. They had their own grocery stores, restaurants, schools, churches, hairdressers, barber shops, family doctors, movie theaters, and some even had a local Black bank called People's Building and Savings Association. They would sometimes venture out of that safe cocoon to go to work. But other, than the Newport News Shipyard, they would find menial jobs outside of that safe neighborhood. Jobs like custodians, cleaning staff, a personal assistant, and entry level positions in most of the major industries. And many people, when they became of age, they decided that they were going to leave the area and move north or move west because they could no longer sustain a life of segregation. During that time period, a lot of white people only needed a high school diploma whereas Black people, who went to school and got their college

diploma, were still inferior here, in Hampton, to the people who had a high school diploma. People of color needed a college education to even get a job. And even when they got that job, in most cases, they were supervised by a white person with a high school diploma. That was a great disparity, here in Hampton, for many years. An example of that [happened] in 1974. I graduated from college with a degree in architectural engineering technology. But we knew the climate in Hampton, in 1974, that there was not going to be a white architectural firm hiring a Black person. So I had to change and look for another type of job. Fortunately, in 1972, the federal government came out with an employment program called the Comprehensive Employment Training Act. This was a program federally funded by the government for local jurisdictions to put people to work. They would pay their salary for two years and, after the two years were up, the local government was expected to hire them on as full-time employees. So after two years working for the City of Hampton, I was given a full-time position. Even with a college degree, I had to go through this system in order to get employment. I started out in 1974 with the Hampton Parks and Recreation department as a draftsman. And, again, I'd been working in an office where the three white people above me only had high school diplomas and I had a college degree. I quickly rose through the ranks. Within four years, I was now the supervisor in charge of all the government-financed employees. Within six years, I had moved up to budget administrator because of my background in math. And soon, I was promoted to the position of superintendent of Parks and Recreation in Hampton, which I held until I retired after thirty years of service. So there was a lot going on at that time, but I was one of the fortunate people who could find a job. There were a lot of people who could not find jobs during that era.

JS: Right, thank you. And so, follow along that line, you mentioned that you began working early, and did a variety of jobs. Can you tell us about some of your first working experiences, before you went to college?

CP: Well, I went looking for a job when I was twelve years old, because of the hardship. There was a nursery, a plant nursery, on Pembroke Avenue called [Le-Mac] Nursery. It was a tradition for my brothers to work there. All of my brothers before me, three brothers before me, worked at this nursery during the summer. This was like an azalea and rhododendron nursery where they grew plants. And so, at twelve years old, I went looking for a job and the owner of the company told me, "You're too young. Come back when you're thirteen years old." I remember at twelve years old needing to find a job. I went to work for the Fuller Brush Company. My job was to take Fuller magazines from house to house in the neighborhoods. (0:29:31.9) Fuller Brush magazine. So that was my first job. At the age of thirteen I went back to Le-Mac Nurseries and got a job for the summer. And I kept that job every summer until I was probably fifteen or sixteen, and then the City of Hampton had part-time jobs in the summer months. So around sixteen, I took a summer job with Hampton Parks and Recreation cutting grass and doing whatever we needed to do during the summer months. [pause] I've had some hard jobs. I used to work at the psychiatric hospital. It's called Bayberry Psychiatric Hospital. I was in there: I worked as an orderly, I worked in the kitchen. It was during the time period where you'd take whatever job came along, because you needed the money to support your family and support other things that were going on. I vividly remember those days working at Le-Mac Nurseries at the age of thirteen, fourteen years old, making ninety cent an hour. On Friday, I'd get my paycheck and I'd have twenty-nine dollars. And

twenty-nine dollars at thirteen years old was a lot of money. And I compare that back to my dad. I still have my dad's pay stubs from the shipyard, from 1942 era, and he was lucky to bring home a hundred dollars a [week]. There was a time period in my life where I said, "Man, I hope I make a hundred dollars--" I mean, a hundred dollars a [week], a hundred dollars a week. I was saying, "Oh, man, I hope one day I can make a hundred dollars a week." But you find out as you get older, that that's [not a lot of money]. I guess it was good money at that time because, I mean, how can you build a brand new home and support six children, medical expenses? He had a vehicle and he was doing all this on a hundred dollars a week. So, twenty-nine dollars a week for me was good at that time. But times change. You need more money to live today, so that's my brief explanation for that.

JS: Right, thank you. Well then, I jumped ahead a little bit there to talk about your work experience, but to come back to when you were younger again, were you ever involved in any of the civil rights protests that went on in the local area? Or, do you remember any that took place?

CP: No, because I was too young. In 1963, on the March on Washington, I was only twelve years old and my parents were not political or social activists. We never talked about politics, and my dad was in poor health when I was young. My mother never talked about political or social activism. These were stay-at-home people. They would go to church--they were heavily involved in their church at that time--so they relied on the Word of God to get them through the challenges that they faced on a daily basis. I call myself a child of the 1960s because I spent eight years in the educational system, out of twelve years, in the 1960s at Greenbriar, George Wythe Junior High School, and at Phenix. So, I

was not an activist, because I was heavily involved in sports, community projects. And it was just my age at that time that I just didn't get involved with protests and marches. We had strict parents—. Or I had strict parents at that time and there were some things that they did not want you to be involved in: being out in public, demonstrating, protesting. My parents always taught us to not get in situations where you can bring shame upon the family, and getting arrested was one of those shames that we cannot bring upon the family.

JS: I see, thank you.

JG: After Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, while you were in high school, there was a march that was held in Newport News to commemorate him. Do you remember anything relating to this?

CP: No, I do not, simply because we were not political activists, or at least I wasn't.

There were protests at Hampton Institute. I remember one of my older brothers, who was at Hampton Institute at that time, was involved with one of the protests. But personally, I never got involved in protests. Even today, with Black Lives Matter, I have my own agenda, and we were taught to stay in your lane. So there's some things that I don't do, and then there's some things that I take a leadership role in.

JG: Going into Hampton Institute, when you went to Hampton Institute, what was it like?

CP: Well, I went to Hampton Institute on a track scholarship but, you know, everybody is not ready for college. When I went to Hampton Institute in 1970, I wasn't ready for college. And I didn't [take it seriously]. I eventually left Hampton Institute and I went to the University of the District of Columbia, in Washington DC. And that's where [I graduated]. It was more of a technical school, and that's where I ended up getting my

degree from and graduating from there in 1974, before I started working for the City of Hampton. So, again, I tell young people, you got to be prepared for college. Some people go there and they want to party, and they want to hang out with friends instead of going to class and getting their education. So you got to have the mindset of going to college, especially if your parents are paying for it. I went to Hampton on a track scholarship, so I guess my quest was a little bit lesser, because I had a free ride and other people had to struggle to be there, and it probably meant more for them at that time.

JG: Thank you, Mr. Pearson.

JS: I'd also like to ask, did you notice or experience discrimination in public facilities around this time, and can you tell us more about that?

CP: Well, my father worked in the Newport News Shipyard, and they had the medical insurance. They had—if you got sick you had to go to the medical arts building, on Washington Avenue. And that's probably one of my most vivid memories of racial divide, racial segregation. And I vividly remember going to that building. My mother used to take me to the doctor whenever I got sick. This was right before my dad died. We would go to this building and we would take the elevator up to the third floor and you'd get out of the elevator and there was the receptionist and you'd check in. And automatically my mother would take me [to the Colored waiting room]. On the right hand side of the hall, there was the Black waiting room, and on the left hand side was the white waiting room. And my mother, by this time, would just automatically go to the Black waiting room. I remember going into the Black waiting room, and I said, "This looks like it used to be a closet." The room was about eight foot wide by twelve foot long. It had two rows of chairs on both sides of the room. It had a window on the wall, and it was

dingy, it was gray. It had these old chairs in the room. It had a radiator underneath the window. In the wintertime, you started sweating, it was so hot. In the summertime, you were still sweating because I don't remember any air conditioning in the room. The only air you got was from the air coming out from the hallway. When I was twelve years old, my mother took me to the doctor and she said, "Now, you wait here and I'll come back and get you." So I went up to the third floor, checked in. And I looked to the Black waiting room, I looked to the white waiting room, and I said, "I'm going to the white waiting room to see what happens." At twelve years old, I went to the white waiting room. This bright, spacious room, windows lining the hall, nice cushioned furniture. And I sat down, waiting for somebody to come and tell me to leave, and nobody did. When it was my time to see the doctor, the nurse came into the room, and called me into the room, the doctor saw me, and that was it. That was 1963, when I was twelve years old, right there at the start of the civil rights movement. And we know that public facilities had to be integrated at that time. So why were Black people still sitting in the Black waiting room, when they could sit in the white waiting room? It was a test for me to see what would happen. After nobody asked me to leave, every time my mother dropped me off in the future to go to the doctor, I would sit in the white waiting room. But, you also need to realize the culture of that time period. A lot of people did not know what you were or who you were because of the complexion of your skin. I told this story a couple of times, when people said, "Well, you look like you white." So, you get those kinds of comments. It goes back to my mother, and I don't know if you grew up in the local area, but you probably know Poquoson. Poquoson, Virginia is, or was, a predominantly white county. That's where my mother grew up, in Poquoson. And Poquoson has a long, stereotyped,

racist history where, even before—during slavery—before the Civil War, after the Civil War, before civil rights, after civil rights, it has this history where Black people were not able to marry white people. The complexion of most of the people in Poquoson is light-skinned. There was a period of time where you could not distinguish a Black person from a white person who lived in Poquoson because of a lot of factors. A lot of those factors included incest. If we go back to after the Civil War, Black folks could not marry white folks. The only option was to marry a Native American. And they did not want to marry a Native American, so who was left to marry? There was nobody left to marry but their own relatives. You had people in Poquoson who were marrying their own cousins. So the complexion and hue of their skin continued to be light for many, many generations. Even today, you can go to Poquoson and not distinguish between a Black person and a white person. So, my mother was fair-skinned. There were a lot of people in Poquoson who tried to pass for white, because you couldn't tell them apart. My mother tried to do that for many years, until she started having children. My mother married a Black man, and you could tell that their children were not white, they were Black. So there came a period in time where she had to relinquish her so-called white privilege, and finally tell people, "No, I'm Black." That was part of my life growing up with my mother, because my grandmother was white in Poquoson. So there was a lot of race mixing in Poquoson in the latter years. That was part of my history growing up, people trying to determine who you are and what you are.

JS: I see, thank you.

JG: Looking at your community experience, it was interesting to see that you are currently the president and founder of Project 1619, Incorporated. What makes this 1619 project different from what the *New York Times* did in 2019?

CP: Well, I see you've been doing your research. [laughter] The Project 1619, Incorporated: We have people on the board whose been teaching this history for twenty-five to forty years. One of them is an educator who taught this in universities. So the reason why we created this organization was we wanted people to know the truth about the first enslaved ancestors who were brought here in August of 1619. Now, you're from a different generation, but when we were growing up, we were taught that everything happened at Jamestown. The first settlers, the first enslaved Africans. And we were of mindset that if it was written in a textbook, and it was taught to you by a teacher, it had to be true. But later on in life, I found out that a lot of things that we were taught in school were not truthful. So when we discovered that the first enslaved Africans landed here at present-day Fort Monroe, I started a 25-year journey to correct the narrative to make sure people knew that present-day Fort Monroe is the actual landing site. How do we compare this to the *New York Times*? [pause] In 2019, Nikole Hannah-Jones with the *New York Times*, she said, "There is a historical commemoration coming up, the four hundred anniversary of the [beginning of America]. She called "the arrival of the first [Africans]-." And she didn't call them "enslaved." She said it was the arrival of the first Africans in America, which was not really true. There were Africans in South Carolina and Florida back in 1525. But what makes us so unique is that we are the first English settlement that became English North America, which is the settlement of Jamestown. So the first Africans in 1619 were the first enslaved Africans brought to the English colony

of Virginia. Nikole created a magazine called *The 1619 Project*. So really, she compromised our name by switching the words from Project 1619 to *The 1619 Project*. And for the past two years, my organization has been criticized about her opinions, because that's what it was, it was opinion from journalists, it wasn't documented by historians. So we're still fighting Nikole today. I get people from around the country will email me asking me about *The 1619 Project* versus Project 1619-- and I'm telling them the same thing I'm telling you-- that Project 1619 is the organization who laid the groundwork for President Barack Obama to declare Fort Monroe a national monument in 2011. Historians around the world have confirmed that the research we did is correct. So we try not to get into the debate with the *New York Times* because we can't beat the *New York Times*. They have too large a footprint. So we do whatever we can to try to dispel the myth that we are associated with the *New York Times*. I even had to go to my webpage and put a disclaimer on the webpage to let people know that no, we are not associated with the *New York Times* and we do not support their opinion.

JG: What have you been doing to help correct the false narrative during the 45 years researching the history of the first Africans brought to Hampton?

CP: Well, we do symposiums. I travel around the country speaking. I do a lot of papers for newspaper articles. I do a lot of TV programs. We do events each year. We do an event called "African Landing Day" at Fort Monroe. We've been doing that since 2008. Back in 2019, we partnered with the Commonwealth of Virginia to do an African Landing Commemoration Day. We had five thousand people over two days show up. So we've been doing that event since 2008. Sometimes we do movie screening. We do presentations, panel discussions. But the big thing is that I've created a network of

organizations around the country that's spreading our word. I have contacts in Africa that share our information. The first enslaved Africans that were brought here were captured from Angola. So Angola is real excited to know what we're working on because they did not know—. When these slave ships left Africa, they had no idea where that ship was going to. This was true for most of the African nations along the west coast. In 2012, I notified Angola. I said, "Look, the first Africans who were brought to present-day North America—English North America—were captured from Angola." And they got so excited because they had never heard that before, they never knew. And now, Angola is one of our big supporters to promote the history, because they want to promote the history of their ancestors, who were Angolan. So we do a variety of articles and presentations to let people know the true history. But we don't have to do a whole lot of that anymore because now it's recognized. With President Obama coming out, with Jamestown finally admitting I was telling the truth—. Jamestown spent millions of dollars on a new exhibit. And in their exhibit, they say the first enslaved Africans landed at Point Comfort in Hampton, present-day Fort Monroe. So we've done a lot over the past twenty-five years to change that narrative. I've been working on that project now for thirty-seven years.

JS: I would just also like to mention while we're on this topic. You mentioned that you were able to trace your own genealogy back to Fort Monroe. Can you tell us what that was like for you?

CP: Well, I did my DNA and I have a lot of people in the DNA field, in the genealogy field. I'm also a member of the National Genealogy Association. So I've got a lot of friends and contacts. When we look at the history of Virginia, when the Africans were brought here in 1619, there was no legalized slavery. Slavery did not become legalized

until 1661. So, for the first forty-two years of Virginia, Africans were able to gain their freedom, and they were able to marry white people. A lot of people don't know that history of Virginia. All they know is about antebellum slavery that existed in South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi and these other southern states. When Africans eventually were taken to their state, slavery was legalized but it was not legalized here in Virginia. One of the first women who got off that ship in 1619, her name was Margaret. During that time period, because slavery was not legalized, you [an African] could take your last name. She took the name of Margaret Cornish. If you google "Margaret Cornish," it gives you an entire history of who she was and who she married. Eventually, when she got her freedom, she married a white man. So we can trace my ancestry back to the first marriage of Margaret Cornish and the first white man she married. There's a lot of genealogy out there, where I've got relatives—. I have a lot of contacts who've been able to trace their ancestry back to 1619. So, we all interconnect somewhere, someway down the line. I have a direct connection to one of the first enslaved African women brought here. But we always knew that the first enslaved African woman who got off was Isabella. If you don't know the story of Isabella and Antoney, they got off of the pirate ship called the White Lion. But they were not slave ships, they were pirate ships. People always call them slave ships but they were pirate ships who attacked a slave ship and brought those enslaved Africans to here, to present-day Hampton, Fort Monroe. So there's a lot of history that we can go back and trace, but my ancestry goes back to 1619 and one of the first African women. The first African woman, like I said, was Isabella who married Antoney. They were [servants] of Captain William Tucker, who was a commander at Fort Monroe. In 1623, they gave birth to William Tucker, the first African

child born in English North America. [pause] Can I bring up one more subject before we go?

JS: Surely, yeah.

CP: I want to talk about public housing here in Hampton. In 1976, I was able to purchase my first home. [pause] It was not too far from where I was living, but it was in a white community, one of the communities that I used to get run out of. And when I went to purchase a home the lawyer told me, he said, "There was a restricted clause in this deed." I said, "What kind of restricted clause?" He said, "There's a clause that says this house cannot be sold to a Black person." This is 1976. But the lawyer said, "Don't worry about it." He said, "This clause is unconstitutional." That they cannot enforce it. So, I was able to buy my first home in 1976, in what used to be a predominantly white community. And I'm pretty sure that there were a lot of homes in Hampton that had that same restrictive clause. Because it was unconstitutional, we and others were able to buy their home in what was a predominantly white neighborhood. [pause] The other item I want to share with you before we go is that, by being President of the George P. Phenix Alumni Association, I talked to a lot of our elders. A lot of our elders, they tell me today that they wish that integration had never come. And I asked them "Why?" And they said it's because—. They say, "integration destroyed the Black family and destroyed the Black neighborhood." And that's where all the crime started in the neighborhoods because they were self-policing themselves, and they wish that [integration] never happened because they lived in a community that they controlled, and they enjoyed life living in a predominantly Black community. As I mentioned before, they had, in their words, all of the luxuries of life , but segregation or integration changed all of that.

JS: I see. On that topic that makes me think—. You used the phrase “a safe cocoon” earlier, when talking about it [the community]. Is that kind of the same idea that there was this common perception that this self-policed and more self-contained community might have been better in some way?

CP: Yeah well, I don't think so, but they think so. The older generation, that's all they knew, was segregation, and for them it came later in life. And it was a big adjustment for people later in life. I call it “the safe cocoon” because that's what they thought it was. We're in this safe environment. There is no police brutality. There is no overt police presence in our community. They felt it was a safe environment to live in. And we talked about [how] it takes a village to raise the family, that's what it was. If you did anything wrong in that neighborhood, your parents knew before you got home. And that's not the environment we live in today anymore. These elders, when I'm talking about elders, I'm talking about people in their late eighties, early nineties, who still feel that their neighborhood was destroyed by integration.

JS: I see. Thank you.

JG: Thank you so much for your time. Can we take your screenshot for Dr. Puaca?

CP: Sure. [pause]

JS: If you don't mind, I would also like to ask, just in closing, as a sort of conclusion topic, what do you view as the most important accomplishments of the civil rights movement?

CP: Well, the most important accomplishments were civil rights. And it wasn't just civil rights for Black people, it was civil rights for all people. There were a lot of poor white people in the country at that time and there still are. Civil rights was not just about us, it

was for all of us. And we think everybody has benefited from civil rights, from employment, education, banking and finance, public housing. There were so many things that we got from the civil rights era that benefited a lot of people. People look at civil rights as just for Black folks. But a lot of people benefited from the civil rights movement because when we go back and look at Martin Luther King Jr, he talked about the color of your skin. It was not about the color of your skin. It was about the rights of the citizens, that they deserve to be treated fairly and equal and that's what we saw coming out of the civil rights movement. Better access to lawyers, constitutional rights enforcement. So there were a lot of things that came out of civil rights. A year later in 1965, we got the right to vote. Now, can you imagine Black folk being in a country since 1619 and not getting the right to vote until 1865 [1965]? Those are the successes that we saw through the civil rights movement.

JS: Right, thank you. And then so, what are the things you might regard as the unfinished legacies of the movement, or what are the most pressing problems which face the African-American community today?

CP: Well, racism is not going anywhere. We've experienced that. We see it-. It kind of went underground up until 2008, a lot of these groups went underground. But with the election of President Barack Obama, we saw these groups rise up again. And so that's where we see the nationalists, the Proud Boys, the KKK. Everybody rose up after 2008 because nobody would ever have thought that a Black man, whose ancestors were once enslaved, would ever be the leader of the free world. That's why you hear the slogans today take back [our country], they want to take back our country. They want their country. They want to make America white again. And we just tell them to try to educate

yourselves because America was never a white country. America was a Native American country. Some historians say that they had been here for 50,000 years. The Native Americans were here for 12,000 years. So when we look at history, if the Black man was created in Africa, and the Black man ventured to all seven continents, they [Black man] were there first. So there's a long story about how the Native Americans came to exist when we know Africans were here 50,000 years ago. So that's another topic of discussion. When we go back and we look at 1607 and the landing of the first settlers, they did not found America, they invaded America. They trusted the Native Americans to feed them, teach them how to live off the land, and then when they outnumbered the Indians, they massacred them. And that's the history that people are not going to tell you because the alt-right wants you to believe that they invaded this country and it became their country. So, we'll tell you this was never a white country. We became predominantly white but it was never a white country.

JS: That's right, thank you. Another thing, a recent development is that you said you're the board commissioner of the National Juneteenth Observance Foundation. Can you give us your thoughts on Juneteenth being recognized at a federal level?

CP: Well, Juneteenth should have been recognized many years ago. I worked hand in hand with the founder, Reverend Dr. Ronald Myers. We worked together for many years. He would come to Hampton and do his Juneteenth jazz concerts here. When we go back and look at Juneteenth 1865, that was a historic date in African-American history. They call it the last freedom of enslaved Africans in America but we now know that it wasn't the last, it was the most publicized. We know that there were enslaved Africans in Oklahoma, up until 1866. But people didn't publicize it. So Juneteenth represents a

national narrative of the last outpost of enslaved Africans who were set free by General Gordon Granger in 1865. One of the strange parts of that narrative is that General Granger—when they arrived at Galveston Texas, there were two ships of Black soldiers. And people don't tell that story about how Black soldiers who had been enslaved and then joined the army and the navy, were able to go to Galveston, Texas in 1865 and notify [General] Granger that, “You need to come to Galveston, Texas. These people are still enslaved.” And when he arrived, he gave his general order number three freeing or notifying all those enslaved Africans that, “Look you've been free since 1863. They've held you in bondage for two and a half years.” So that was a major turning point in the quest for freedom. And that's why it's so important today because it's still recognized as the last outpost that were notified that they had been freed for two and a half years. So people want to know, “Why is that a national holiday?” And we call it a national holiday because it affected the United States of America. People have problems with the Fourth of July. Why is the Fourth of July a national holiday? Because, when Frederick Douglass talked about, “what does Fourth of July mean to the Negro?” he told them that Fourth of July didn't free anybody, it only severed the tie between us and Britain. It didn't free anybody, but yet people use that as a celebration of freedom. It was a freedom from Britain, but it wasn't individual freedom. The Africans still had to work the farm for another eighty-nine years before freedom came. So that's why, to the Black community, June 19th is one of the most historic dates in our history that affected not just Texas but every state. So, that's why Biden and some of the contemporaries decided that it needed to be a federal holiday.

JS: That's right, thank you.

JG: Thank you again for your time and participation. I just wanted to let you know that you'll receive copies of the interview transcript in the Spring of 2022 and will have several weeks after to make any additions or corrections before the interview is deposited.

CP: Okay. Well, thanks to both of you for inviting me to give you a little perspective of my life and civil rights.

JS: I sincerely appreciate you doing this, Mr. Pearson. And it was a great experience.

CP: Thank you.

JS: All right, thank you.

CP: Okay.

JG: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Josh Grimes and Jack Snowdon, December 2, 2021

Edited by Judiclaire Kinerney, February 3, 2021

Edited by Jaden Getz, February 14, 2022

Edited by Laura Puaca, April 14, 2022

Edited by Calvin Pearson, May 10, 2022

Edited by Laura Puaca, May 16, 2022