

## **James Granderson Watkins Interview Summary**

Interviewee: James Granderson Watkins

Interviewers: Katie Fisher and Amanda Norwood

Interview Date: November 9, 2014

Location: Paul and Rosemary Tribble Library, Room 152, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia

Length: 1 audio file, WAV format, 1:07:34

**THE INTERVIEWEE:** James Granderson Watkins was born on February 24, 1925 in Yanceyville, North Carolina. Mr. Watkins began working on his father's tobacco farm during his youth. He then joined the U.S. Navy during World War II. He left the navy in 1947 and married his wife in 1949. He moved to Newport News in 1952. Mr. Watkins worked in the rigging department at the Newport News Shipyard for 37 years. He believed the integration of the education system and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were the greatest accomplishments of the civil rights movement.

**THE INTERVIEWERS:** Katie Fisher and Amanda Norwood are seniors at Christopher Newport University. Both women are students in Dr. Laura Puaca's History Class: The Long Civil Rights Movement. This class requires students to prepare, conduct, and transcribe an interview that will be deposited as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW:** The interview was conducted in room 152 at the Paul and Rosemary Tribble Library. James Granderson Watkins was excited to be a part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project. The interview began with his childhood in North Carolina and then moved on to his work in the Newport News Shipyard and raising his family in Newport News during the civil rights movement. There are four points during the interview where Mr. Watkins addresses the interviewers to learn about certain experiences in their lives but the interview is quickly brought back to discussing his history.

Midway through the interview, Mr. Watkins asked questions about the recording device and the interviewer's notes for the interview. Towards the end of the interview, Mr. Watkins began "drumming" on the table. This can faintly be heard in the background of the recording.

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### **START OF INTERVIEW**

Katie Fisher: This is Katie Fisher and my partner, Amanda Norwood. Today is November 9, 2014. We are interviewing Mr. James Watkins, Granderson Watkins. This interview is taking place at the Paul and Rosemary Tribble Library at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia. This interview is being carried out as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University.

Amanda Norwood: Good morning, Mr. Watkins.

James Watkins: Good morning.

AN: Good afternoon, actually.

JW: Yeah.

AN: We are taking what is called a “life history” and would like to begin our interview with a few questions about your childhood. Where and when were you born?

JW: I was born in Yanceyville, North Carolina. February 24, 1925.

AN: And who were your mother and father?

JW: My mother was named Pensacola Watkins. My daddy was named Granderson Watkins.

AN: What did your parents do for a living?

JW: Farmers.

AN: What kind of farmers were they?

JW: Tobacco farmers.

AN: What was it like growing up on a tobacco farm?

JW: Sorta rough. Didn't get no money but we got plenty of food, plenty to eat. We raised most everything we eat. And the only thing we sold mostly was tobacco. And we sold that once a year. But, the rest of the vegetables and everything--. I mean, we had a big garden. We raised that. And we also raised corn and wheat to make the corn meal and the flour.

AN: Do you have any siblings?

JW: I have six kids. I think they kids. They grownups now, though.

AN: What was it like growing up in North Carolina?

JW: It was pretty nice. Plenty--. Most of the people around there were some of my people. We all cousins, and neighbors, and we grewed up pretty good. Didn't have no problems. Just a big family. All get together on Sunday. Just about every Sunday, we go to each other houses and have dinner and that was nice. Summer time, we go swimming in the river. I like that. I used to like [to] do that. I guess that's why I went into the navy, 'cause I liked the water. [pause]

AN: And you said it was like a big family?

JW: Oh yeah, ten of us. I had five sisters and four brothers [pause] and my mother and father. But the only thing about it, at that time, the house wasn't large like--. Actually we had three bedrooms. My mother and father had a bedroom. The boys had a bedroom, with the five of us in one bedroom. My sisters had one bedroom, and that was five in there.

And that wasn't so comfortable, [laughter] sleeping everywhere and on the floor and wherever you could sleep. But it's different from that now.

AN: What were the race relations like in the town you grew up in?

JW: The race relations?

AN: Mmhmmm.

JW: It was pretty good because we had a lot of white neighbors and then we had some mixed Indians around that area. And all of us got along pretty good together 'cause we would all go in the same creek at lunch hour. In the summer, we would all get in the same water, swim in the same water. But the only thing was we just didn't go to school together but we associate together around the farm and work together on the farm. If somebody need help, we helped this farmer. If somebody get sick at that--farmer can't do his work, we would go and help them out and then, we didn't ask for no money. Just help each other out. Kept everybody on the same playing field. Everybody about the same. Wasn't nobody no richer than the other one. Just about everybody about the same, just making a good living. And it was nice living. I tell my kids now we didn't have a lot of money but we sure had a lot of love for each other. Everybody got along together good, no fighting. Play, play a lot but didn't fight. And then nobody ever get arrested or go to jail or do anything in school like they do now. Everybody got along fine. And I wish it was that way today but it's not and it probably won't ever be that way no more.

KF: Yeah.

AN: What was it like attending school?

JW: School was nice. I enjoyed school. Only thing was we didn't get to go regular like the kids go. If there was something to do at home and it wasn't raining, my daddy would

keep us out to help him do things around the house. A lot of the time we didn't get a full week in school hardly ever unless sometimes you would go half a day and go back home to help. And plenty time my daddy say, "Y'all going half a day and coming back at twelve" to help him out on the farm, but that's the way it went. But we made good marks. Many come a snow one year and we didn't get to go a whole month, had to stay out of school a whole month. And one time the bridge got washed out and we couldn't get to school. So we had some problems going to school. But the time that I went, I was blessed because everybody say, "Well, how you make the honor roll and didn't go to school that many days this month?" I don't know but I'm pretty smart. (0:06:48) I'll never forget the day, the Sunday, that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, in 1941. I had a battery radio. And I had been getting my lesson out upstairs, trying to get it out before it gets dark 'cause we didn't have no lights then. And the radio come on and said, I remember, it said that "the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor." I said, "Pearl Harbor? I ain't heard of Pearl Harbor." I look at a map, I didn't see it on the map. So the very first day, the next day of school, that was on Sunday. It was Monday [and] the first thing the history teacher actually said, "If anybody can tell me what happened yesterday," she said, "I'll give them an A for the month." I didn't say nothing. Finally, I held my hand. She said, "You know?" I said, "Yeah." I said, "The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor." She said, "That's right." So we got the roll around globe map and we looked for Pearl Harbor, but we couldn't find it. Couldn't find anything other than Hawaii. It wasn't on the map and we never did find it. But that's where it was at because I found out about after I was grown and went over there. I went over there. I've been over there several times. And it wasn't on the map back in them days but we were wondering what Pearl Harbor was. Pearl

Harbor was a base in Hawaii on one of the islands, on the small island that Honolulu is on. The big island is Hawaii. I've been to both of them. I've been to-- Well, it's changed. There is a gang of them but I've been to two of them. I've been to Hawaii. I mean the one that Honolulu is on is the same one where Pearl Harbor is at. It's smaller than the bigger island because--they call it the bigger island. Y'all ain't ever been there?

KF: I've been there.

AN: [shakes head no]

JW: You have?

KF: I've been to Pearl Harbor.

JW: You've been to Pearl Harbor.

KF: Mmhmm, I have.

JW: Well, you know all about Pearl Harbor.

KF: Mmhmm, its--.

JW: What's the--. I can't pronounce the name of that island.

KF: What island is it on? Oahu?

JW: Oahu.

KF: Mmhmm.

JW: You know that ain't but seventy miles. We rent a car. The shipyard, they give us the last day off when we over there. We work all the time until the last day off. They give us the whole day. We rent a car, left Honolulu, and went all the way around that island on the same highway and came right back to where we was at. It seventy miles.

KF: Wow.

JW: Seventy miles, we clocked it. That's where we saw the pineapple and up in the mountain, it rained a lot up there but it don't rain down there near Honolulu that much. But we ran in the rain. We saw the sugar, where they make the sugar cane, where they make sugar. We saw the pineapple. I had saw a lot that I have never seen because nobody ever grow it in North Carolina. And I was wondering how the pineapple grow, but they grow on top of the ground. They stand up on top of the ground just about like an onion. Nothing in the ground but the root. And I was wondering if they grow in the ground, but they won't be in the ground, they be on top. It's funny how they be sitting around on top and roots right at the bottom, just a little root under there. And they go there and cut them. Got a machine, go there and cut them and they go down the conveyer and they know when to cut them. They got to get a certain amount of ripeness before they can cut them. And you've been there?

KF: Mmhmm.

JW: You've seen then the ship that the Japanese sunk then.

KF: Mmhmm. Yup, I have been on the Arizona Memorial.

JW: Yeah, me too. I've been on out there on the deck. I have looked at it sitting on the bottom, but they say a lot of it was sticking out of the water and they cut it off, even with the water and made a walkway out of it where you walk out there and look right down on it.

KF: Mmhmm.

JW: And you still see all the bubbles coming through.

KF: Mmhmm, and all the oil is leaking out of it now, too.

JW: Yeah, right. I don't think they never raise that, been down there that long. I tell my children I wish all of them could go out there and seen that. I've been out there--I love it--in the navy and then the shipyard sent me out there three times, working on submarines. It's a long ways though. It's a long ways down there.

KF: Yeah, it is. It's a long trip across the country.

AN: Did you ever visit Hawaii with your wife?

JW: No, that's what I said. I wish she could have went but she could never go and I was planning on taking her after I retired and then she [became] ill. She died suddenly after I retire. But I sure would have liked to have taken her out there.

AN: What was your wife's name?

JW: Sadie.

AN: When did you meet her?

JW: I met her in North Carolina. She lived in one county, Johnny [*sic* Johnston] County. I would say it's about as far from Newport News and Hampton, the parts that she lived in. I lived in one county and she lived in the other one. But we all always used to go to church together. The church was right across the line (0:13:03:5). I used to always go to that church and I met her at the church. And we got married in 1949. I'd been out there--. I went in the navy in '47 and I got married in '49. And then I moved here in '52, moved up in this area. This was just like the country. I never thought I'd see it like this up here. Paul Tribble did a nice thing for this part of the area because it was sort of just about like the country up in here in this area. [pause] Yeah.

AN: What were your experiences like when you served in the military?



JW: My experience? Lot of experience because I was on a carrier and we was in the Southwest Pacific. I battled Japanese. It's a rough time up in there during the war. But I was cook on them, but when battle stations--. When we were in a battle, everybody had a battle station even though you was a cook. We had to leave and go to our battle stations, when they have an attack. And my battle station was on the catwalk, on a forty millimeter gun. I was second loader because, when they put me through boot training, I made a high mark at--. The other thing is shoot, practicing up shooting, and I made pretty high mark but I didn't like that that good so and then they asked me about cooking so I went to cooking school and I passed that. Then I found out I liked cooking better than I did gunning other stuff. I qualified for both of them, but for battle stations they put me up there 'cause if you're gonna get killed, then the second outright and the second loader pass the ammunition right up to the--. And, if he get killed, then I could get on the gun and fire but I ain't never had to do that. I thank God. I didn't want to kill nobody, no way. But I found out the Japanese--. Once we captured some of them and had them on the ship, they laid me out when they got the chance, talking to me. One of them told me, said, "You know what?" I said, "What?" He said, "Why you out here fighting us?" I said, "I was drafted in the service." He said, "Yeah" but he said, "Don't you know you don't have no country?" I said, "I know. I don't have no country." I said, "Well how'd you know so much?" He said, "I've finished school in the University of California." I said, "What?" He said he'd finished school in California and he was a pilot. And he said he finished school in California but he back over there and they sneaked him in and bombed us. I don't know why they did it 'cause it--. They enough had to surrender. We was out there when they surrender on the big, on the *Missouri*, the battle[ship]. And we was right

out there with them. And they come in, brought with them, (and we snuck around, protecting them? 0:16:47.7) and they signed peace (0:16:52) peace on the ship there, the Japanese emperor. And it looked like to me they woulda did to him like they did Hitler, looked like they woulda kill him, but they didn't. But he signed an unconditional surrender. I don't know what y'all know or not but you remember, President Kennedy? Kennedy was out there in the same water we were but he was before we were. He was out there a year before I was and he was on a PT boat. And the Japanese--. He ain't supposed to be out there in the channel, 'cause he supposed to be sorta like a spy. PT boat ain't much bigger than a pledge boat around here 'cause them cabin is two officers and then eight enlisted men, small boat. He run his boat out in the channel. He ain't supposed to be out there and then the Japanese ship come by and tore his ship all to pieces and kept going. And that's how he got captain. He stayed over there for a while. But he ain't get killed. But they tore his boat up. And they did that before I got over there. And then the president, George [Herbert] Walker Bush, old man Bush, he was a pilot in the navy. I think he was in the fifth fleet. And his plane--. He got shot down. He was the pilot. And the Japanese got him, left him, and a submarine picked him up, saved him. So he come out of that early. But he was young then 'cause I think he is just one year older than I am. I think he's 90. And he made president of the United States. And Jimmy Carter, he was on a submarine out there. He was a submarine pilot. Do y'all know that? Did they teach y'all that in history?

KF: I didn't know that Jimmy Carter was a submarine pilot. I did not know that, no.

JW: You didn't know that? Yeah, he was a submarine pilot in the fifth fleet with--.

KF: Wow.

JW: Mmhmm. There were three [U.S. presidents]. But Kennedy was out there way before we got over there. He got messed up early, before we got out there. But Bush got shot down while we was out there. And Jimmy Carter, I never did see him. But we didn't see the submarine, but each carrier had two submarines and they stayed underneath water. We had two subs with us but we didn't know the name of them. But I found out later on Jimmy Carter was captain on one of them.

KF: Wow.

JW: And he's still living. Him and Bush both living.

KF: Mmhmm.

JW: Yeah, a lot going on out there in the war. [pause] How y'all like history?

KF: I'd say we like it enough. We're both history majors.

JW: Yeah.

KF: Mmhmm.

JW: I used to like history myself. Yeah, history is--. Y'all don't have the book like we used to have, what we used to call geography. What we call that book? Had all them maps and all the states and all the countries. I used to like studying geo--. I believed we called it geography.

KF: Geography?

JW: Yeah. Been a long time. I've forgot a lot of this stuff but some of it I ain't forgot. Some stuff I won't ever forget.

AN: Well, it sounds like you've been a lot of places.

JW: Oh yeah, I sure have. Everybody say [that]. My son, he say, "Dad." He said, "How you travel?" I say, "I don't know, the shipyard make me travel." 'Cause I went to

Norway, went to Norway and Scotland with the shipyard. And, if I hadn't retired, I suppose [I would have] went back to San Diego. And in March the year I retired-- [I retired] in February--he got mad at me because I didn't want to go out there. No, I'm tired of going. I felt like that's something I am because we were on the plane coming high water and landed in Chicago. It was thunder cloud and when we hit the runway, the plane skidded and all that luggage in the overhead fell out and I was scared. And I said, "If I get off this plane I ain't getting on another." So I ain't ever been on any ever since. But that was a scary time 'cause, as I was saying before, everything from overhead fell down on us. I think someone got hurt a little bit but I didn't get hurt that bad. Not enough to go to the doctor. And I was glad to get back to Newport News. I don't know how he made it down 'cause I could see the lightning, flashing down on the sides of the plane, coming down when we hit the runway. There was lightning on the sides, was like, "Boom!" I thought we were gone. [pause] I don't know why this air conditioning-- Do the same thing at the church, my eyes run water. They don't do that at my house. I think it's the air conditioning. And then I got sinuses. Doctor won't do nothing for me. I tell him every time I go to my doctor. I say, "Look, can't you give me something for my sinuses?" [The doctor said] "I don't know nothing to give you." I have to live with it.

KF: So what was your job at the shipyard?

JW: I was in the rigging department. And I usually do all the heavy work. We used to do all the heavy work. We started on the *Enterprise*, put in all the (sea bear? 0:23:20.1) and we make decks move up to the--. We got decks by the engine room, where we put all the engines in, we put all the chairs in, all the wheels on, everything, all the rutters.

Everything like that we put it on there. And then when we got up to the island house we

put all the antenna way up there. The highest thing you see on a carrier, the rigging department put it up there. I didn't ever do that but the rigging department had two parts of it. I was what they called an iron rigger, did the heavy weight. The other riggers did the staging, built all the staging that we worked on. Put them boards around that we walk on. I didn't like that. But I used to like do that heavy work 'cause we--some days we work on one thing. We worked on the wheel one day, eight hour, and we didn't move but ten feet. And we had chain fall--had to pull chain falls by the hand. Now they got electric things, (mash button? 0:24:40.0). Now everything different, but we used to do some hard work in there, I mean hard work. When I first went in there, we done a lot of repair work. That was when the Korean War was going on and all those ships were coming in there. It was merchant ships, tankers. And some of them had got holes knocked in them and some of them were run out. The engine had gone bad and we had to help get the engine out and put a new one in, all that kind of work, working night and day. I worked sometimes sixteen hours a day. Go home and go right back, be so tired. Did a lot of work in that shipyard. I mean I did a lot of it. But I made a lot of money. But money ain't everything. Everybody said, "I don't know how in the world you live this long as hard as you work." I don't think hard work--. If you try to get--. When I was off, I'd get my rest. I didn't ever play the streets like a lot of people. I go home, I go take my bath, eat, and go to bed, get up the next morning, take a shower, and jump in the car, and go on back to work. And I have worked--. Shipyard sent us over to Norfolk to work on ships over there. We got over there and run into problems. And I stay over there after about twelve o'clock at night. And once you stay after twelve they have to pay you triple time but they don't like to pay you triple time. And a lot of people who work at the shipyard never made no double time,

but we used to make double time on Sundays and triple time after twelve o'clock at night. After sixteen hours, you get triple time. And I used to get triple time and that money went a long way. But I need it 'cause I had six kids and all of them went to school but one-- went to college--and he went to apprentice school. But he was getting paid while he was going to apprentice school in the shipyard. But I had an older boy who went to Virginia Tech, I had a daughter in Petersburg, I had a daughter in Greensboro, North Carolina, and then I had a son over here at Old Dominion. That's four. And a boy in apprentice school. He getting paid, I didn't have to give him no money. But then I had one boy, no--. He didn't go to college but he stayed in the army twenty years and then retired--postal worker--retired to Columbia, South Carolina. He live down there, but he retired from the army. So I didn't have to send him to college, I forgot about him. I had four in college, and one in apprentice school and one that didn't go to college. I wish I coulda went but by the time I was in school you didn't get too many girls going to college (and even less? 0:28:08.4) boys. Very seldom boy went. I did have one sister, [out of] five sisters, I had one sister who went to college. The rest of them didn't go. But my daddy wasn't able to send them, didn't make enough money. Now they get scholarships and everything. We didn't know what a scholarship was.

KF: How long did you work at the Newport News Shipyard?

JW: Thirty-seven years.

KF: Wow. And you said you traveled to Norway and Scotland?

JW: Yes.

KF: How long were you in each of those countries?

JW: I was in Scotland sixty-two day. I was in Norway eighteen day. We was working on a submarine and all that. But we was working on a submarine in Scotland, too, but bigger job. We had that overhauling, to refuel it. And it was in the dry dock out in the bay, in a floating dry dock. We had to ride a boat out there every morning to get on it. Some days the weather be so bad we couldn't get to work. The little boat--"the little taxi" we called it--couldn't fight them waves to get out there. Well, Scotland is a rainy place. Rain every day we was out there. I like it the weather. The weather, it don't get as cold--. Well, it's cold but it don't seem as cold as it do here.

KF: Mmhmm. Do you feel that you were fairly compensated for your work at the shipyard?

JW: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I sure do. I was blessed to make the money I made in the shipyard. Used to be a time you'd make a certain amount, they stop taking out of tax. And my taxes were cut off every year, social security. Only had to pay it about August, September, and the rest of the year I don't have to pay any. So--. But a lot of people, they never make enough to get the social security cut off. And I think there might be none in there, I don't know what they do with them now, but I don't worry about it now, though. But I used to like it when they cut off because that was more take home pay. And now I've been drawing social security twenty-four year. I feel like I've drawn more than I've put in it. I believe I have, anyway.

KF: Do you remember Reverend Jerry [Cornelius] Fauntleroy?

JW: Fauntleroy. Yes indeed, I know Reverend Fauntleroy.

KF: Did you have any interactions with him, any you remember?

JW: I ran into him several times. Some meetings we went together. But he was on the unions for a while. And I believe, if I'm not mistaken, him, or either his brother, had for the same job, I believe. It was up there with Paul Tribble up in Richmond, I think. I don't know what it was. City Council? I want to say. I forgot what it was but I know he work in the shipyard but he would go to Richmond so often. But I don't know what he was. Do they say on there [the interviewer's notes] what he was?

KF: No, it doesn't say anything about his work in Richmond.

JW: It seems to me it might have been his brother 'cause there was two of them--. One of them was a preacher and the other one wasn't. I don't think--. One was on the city council, I think it was. It might not been the preacher. Yeah, Fauntleroy was a nice man. He used to live out on East End out there near where I used to live, but he died. Been dead a long time.

KF: During the Cold War, the shipyard wasn't receiving adequate funds. Were you ever worried about losing your job?

JW: No. I seen people that lose the job. And one time the union come to me, one of the delegates come to me and he said, "You know what?" Said, "You ain't got as much time as some of the people losing their jobs. You gonna be on the next layoff coming up, you gonna be on it." I said, "Well, I ain't worried about it." Next layoff come up and I wasn't on it. I've never been on a layoff. And I think that come from working regular. 'Cause I didn't do no time off. A lot of people wouldn't show up Mondays. And I often wonder why and I come to find out they feeling so bad from the weekend. They feeling bad, they can't come to work, but I come to work Mondays. Then I worry about not looking for me 'cause I go in there and said a lot of the time--. One or two times, I went in there on the



weekend. And I wasn't supposed to go but they went on and gave me a job anyway. But I wanted to make that money 'cause I need the money, all them kids I had. And they'll never go hungry. But I discover that I'm getting it back, getting some of it back. My children help me pay things now that I don't have to pay. I don't pay for no paper, don't pay no light bill, don't pay no gas bill. Well, I do pay for my food. Waste a lot of that.

KF: Did you ever witness any riots, such as the one in 1967?

JW: Yeah, I was at that shipyard when they had that strike. But I didn't get involved. And I didn't lose no time. I worked every day of the strike. Worked more when the strike was on than I did when it was off. 'Cause we could ride in there. We drive right on into the shipyard and park right at the ship I was working at and they didn't had nobody mess with--. A lot of people were getting their cars, were getting torn up. But I didn't have no problem whatsoever. And some of the boys got mad because--. Some of my friends got mad at me 'cause I was working and they weren't, but I left it up to them. It was up to them what they want to do. They claim they gonna get the union in there, but the union didn't get in there at that time. They had trouble striking and then they had another one. I think they had one since I've been out there. But the one I witnessed was pretty rough. Oh yeah. Right there at 37<sup>th</sup> Street, at the main gate. One night, some strikers turned a police car over and burned it up right in the middle of the street. They had a problem in there but I stayed away from all that. A lot of my friends went to jail behind that strike and they got hard with me, "You ought to be going over there and help us out already." I ain't getting my head busted over trying to walk picket lines. They would holler at us as we go by but they had the police and everything out there guarding. And then one morning, they stop me before I got to the gate. I said, "What's wrong?" Policemen said,

“Well, we got to wait a while ‘cause they going to put tacks out there in the street to puncture your tire and we got to clean them up before y’all get in there.” So after they cleaned them up, we drove on in there. I don’t get no tire punctured.

AN: Were you ever afraid when you were trying to get into the shipyard?

JW: Oh yeah. Yes, it was nervous going in there with (everybody? 0:36:54) hollering at you. They know who you were. I thought they would have come to my house at night and did something, but they don’t bother. Nobody don’t come out there.

KF: Do you remember when the shipyard was bought by Tenneco in 1968? Did you see any changes after they were bought out?

JW: Yeah, it certainly--. It come up with a little change ‘cause they started working a lot safer after Tenneco come in there. Wasn’t nobody getting hurt much. They started--.

They had the safety people around there watching you. Couldn’t--. Certain things you couldn’t do. You had to have a safety belt on to get up high as six feet tall. And before Tenneco come in there, I mean we could go up anywhere, taking chances. I’ve been up in there walking on one board, way on up there with no safety belt on but you couldn’t do that after Tenneco came in. Tenneco tighten up on them. And I thought they would have stayed on in there but they finally left. But they pay you a little bit more money when they first come in there, ‘cause we all got a raise. So they started at a different rate. We used to (come in on a? 0:38:24.2) top rate, and they picked up with another rate. They come up with a special rate, second--. First class, second class, third class special, so that was three more raises [where] we could get more money. But at that time, I had made supervisor, and I was in management for a while, but I ain’t like management. You get you ten or fifteen men to work and one of them--. None of them worth five cent. Couldn’t

get the job did so I give it up and went back to work. Everybody said, "You ought to keep that job, you gonna have to work." But I'd rather work [as opposed to] try to work somebody and they not do the work. Man breathing, breathing down my back. At least I could go home and sleep at night. When I was supervisor, I stayed halfway (works? 0:39:29.4) 'cause couldn't get the job did [Mr. Watkins would have to stay at work longer because the men under him would not get the job done in time]. Men would tell you, "I've been down there working like you don't know what." I go down and look and they ain't did nothing. I ain't never been that way. I ain't never told a tale. When I had a supervisor on me, I always do what he tell me to do and or I tell him I couldn't do it. But everybody not alike. I hope your tape getting it this time, is it?

KF: It's recording.

JW: Oh, it is?

KF: Yep, it is.

AN: We understand that you lived in the Morrison community. Can how tell us how like the development of Christopher Newport University and Christopher Newport College affected you and your family?

JW: Yeah, they sorta picked me, 'cause it got really busy up here after the kids got up here. It got to the point where--. Well, it wasn't that noisy. But there's a lot of traffic going in and out. And then when they were building the building, they made a lot of noise 'cause they was driving them piling right behind my house. And I had a well out there, where the wall must have fell in because the pump stopped working. And I never did fix it because I know, I was getting ready--. I know they was going to run me out. So I left that next year after the well caved in. Because they was regularly moving my way

and I could see them coming. I said, "Now I know I ain't going to be able to keep this house here because it would be right in the school area." And I don't think but one house out there and that's--. I think she passed not long ago. And that'd be Ms. Gwen from right behind me. And she told me, she said, "Mr. Watkins, I ain't going to let them run me away. I'm gonna stay right here until I die." And she told the truth. She died this year and the house still out there but it's sitting right in the parking lot and she didn't have but a small lot. Her lot wasn't as big as mine. I had an acre and she didn't have but nothing, just a small lot right behind me. And, last time I went out there the house was still sitting out there, but the parking lot is all the way around it. And that's right behind the--. You said y'all live in that building? What's the name of that building?

KF: The new one, Rappahannock?

JW: Yeah.

KF: Mmhmm.

JW: Is that the one with the 500 students in it?

KF: It's the one that what?

JW: Do the whole 500--.

KF: Mmhmm, yeah, it has 500 students.

JW: That's the one, that's the one they told--. That's the one they built right behind my house.

KF: Oh, okay.

JW: And that's where y'all live now?

KF: That's where I live. Yes, mmhmm.

JW: You can see Warwick Boulevard then. Can't you?

KF: Yes, mmhmm.

JW: If my house would've stayed there, that would've blocked me out. I couldn't see Warwick Boulevard.

KF: Oh, okay.

JW: My house sat west of that building. In other words, right at the building. 'Cause the building came right up to my garden--well, I mean my fence--and they had that land before they got mine. So when they got mine, they just tore my house down and made a, I think, a sidewalk. Comes right through the parking lot, goes towards that cafeteria now. But that went right across from right behind where my house was at. My garden was right where the sidewalk's at.

KF: Oh, wow.

JW: So I went down there one Saturday, not long ago. I don't go down every week, 'cause they working and I'm not certain--. I hardly know where my house used to be but I look and it was that big building and the sidewalk on that big building that leads right back to that dumpster, where they eat at back there. I think they got a little place back there, the cafeteria, where they cook. But that was right behind my house. I smelled the food when they cooking out there. And, at that time, I had a fence around there. I couldn't get through there but (I'd find that they color? 0:43.48.8) on a little driveway right through where my house [was] out there. I'd just get on my wife's riding chair and ride out there to the cafeteria, 'cause they got the trash truck and things come out there at night and that was noisy. They dumped them trash boxes at night and make a lot of noise. And I said, "Well, that's driving us away." So, that was the biggest noise there was. That

thing would wake me up out there early in the morning and with them trash box behind the cafeteria. [pause] Do y'all eat out there? Do y'all eat in another place?

AN: No, we eat in the Commons.

KF: Yup. Mmhmm.

JW: Oh, you do?

KF: Yeah, we do. Mmhmm.

JW: Ah. [pause]

AN: Now did the school offer to move you or did you move willingly?

JW: No, they offer to move. They was there for me. Plus they told me, said, "If you can't find nowhere, we'd put you in a house." I said, "Where at?" They said, "We got some houses over there on Sweetbriar." I said, "I've seen them house, I didn't know y'all owned." They told me to go down and look at them. I had two to pick from. They had one that had one bedroom and one had two. And I picked the one with the two bedrooms. So I'm still (in it? 0:45:22.2). The house belongs to the school. That whole block belongs to the school. Y'all didn't know that now, did you? They got them from behind that Esso [now Exxon] station all the way down to the corner where I'm at. All them houses belong to the school. And they all sitting on pretty big lots. And the house that I'm in has got two big sheds behind it where you can drive your car right in, no doors on them. And I think it used to be--. When I first moved up here, the farms (? 0:45:58.1) were where people raised gardens and they had their tractors. And they run the tractor right in there and they never worried about closing no doors. That's the way they left them buildings. And they had the gardens out there 'cause they raised a lot of vegetables and sold them all along the highway there. But the school bought that whole block. And, I was talking with a man

the other day, I said, "When y'all going to run me out?" He said, you know, said "They ain't talking about building over here no time soon so you might be able to stay another two or three years." I said, "Well, I don't mind holding on to it as long as I can 'cause I like all that." I ain't worried about it. Don't have to cut my grass. Don't have to do nothing outside, they do all the outside work. [pause] Oh yeah, they cut my grass and it was a big job, too, 'cause I have a big yard plus a big garden out there. A lot of work.

AN: Now we've kind of talked about your children a little bit. What was it like to raise children in Newport News?

JW: It wasn't that bad. One thing, they didn't have nothing to do when they got home, like we did. They get home, all they do is get out their (00:47:24) and look at the TV. We used to have to work, right on up until it got--. Well actually, we used to have to work in the dark 'cause I had certain things I had to do, certain things my brothers had to do. But my kids, they don't have no certain things to do, nothing. My wife did all the cooking. All that evening cooking. I used to--. [She] didn't wake up. I'd get up in the morning and fix my own breakfast and I didn't eat that much normally. Pack my own lunch and, when I get home in the evening, she'd have dinner. And then she did a lot of canning and my kids didn't help her do that because none of them, neither one of my girls, don't know how--. They come to my house when they want something to eat. Probably don't know how to cook. I tell [them], "Y'all pitiful, don't know how to cook." But when they went to school, went to college. They didn't do no cooking. Y'all know how to cook, don't you?

AN: [shakes head no]

KF: I do.

JW: But that's why they got the "Shake 'n Bake."

ALL: [laughter]

JW: There used to not be "Shake 'n Bake." You had to shake--you had to bake it yourself. I used to have to buy great big bags of flour and now I don't think you could get too big of bags. When we were back there on the farm, we used to buy the ninety-pound bag, the great big bag of flour. And I don't think you can see that no more. You may see a ten pound bag.

AN: Did you think integration affected your children during their schooling?

JW: No, I believe it helped them. I believe it helped them 'cause they gets along together. (It helped them? 0:49:24) None of them have no problem. And my daughter, she's Assistant Principal at Menchville [High School] and she'll come by the house and say, "The kids are badder than what they was when I was in school." I said, "Yeah, they getting worse all the time." [She said,] "I'm going to retire." [I said,] "There ain't no reason to retire on account of the kids. Go ahead and work." She talking about retiring on the account of bad kids. Always into something but all of them ain't bad. You got some good ones. [pause] Not really the time--. After they started going together, school together. (They are better than when they were before they were going? 0:50:16.9) You know way back, when I was going to school, we didn't have--. We had to walk to school. We walked. One time, we had to walk about, I think it about three miles. And then, finally, we moved so far away that they did let us ride the bus. But my daddy bought a farm. That thing is fifteen miles from the school; you had to ride the bus then. That was, that's where we living now. So all my sister's children, all them rode buses 'cause they live way out in the country. When I was growing up, we lived two miles, well a little over



two miles, from school. I could see the school. I had to go down a long hill, cross a creek, and go up the hill. The school was on top. But we'd used to have to walk the dirt road, muddy, muddy dirt road. There wasn't no use in shining your shoe 'cause they didn't stay shined long. And y'all ain't even walked in the mud, have you?

KF: Just the flooding that happens on campus.

JW: Y'all blessed. I'll tell you the truth. I look at the people today, I ain't never--. We ever go to church--. We used to go to church on a wagon, horses pulling the wagon in the mud. Some places you couldn't get out of 'cause the horses couldn't hardly get through the mud. (Looks like it might rain more, have to do with it.? 0:51:57.9) But we went to church on a wagon, stay all day. I used to want to go home some kind of bad, but Momma make us stay all day long on Sunday. Be dark leaving and dark getting back home. And they didn't ask. They didn't ask you, "Did you want to go to church?" Now the kids asking--. Parents ask the kids, "Do you want to go to church?" And they said, "No." And I say, "They don't go." But we had to go. We know we had to go. Even had certain clothes we had to wear. And you couldn't wear them through the week. You could wear them on Sunday only. And you had to keep them, keep them nice and clean. Now you have clothes--. For every time you go out, you got different clothes. [laughter] I got some, I tell you, I got some clothes I ain't worn in two years.

KF: Are you still active in the church or community group?

JW: Oh well, I'm inactive now. They don't let me doing nothing. I'm still on the trustee board but I don't do no work around the church. I go down there sometimes and sit and look at them work. Then I belong to a few clubs, the (Young Golden Eight? 0:53:35.3). We go out once a month to eat at the Golden Corral. In the same way at the shipyard. We

got a group of us from the shipyard goes out every Tuesday, that's "veteran day." I usually eat free on "veteran day." But we go out Tuesday every week, second Tuesday of the month from the shipyard, about twenty of us. We get together and go out to dinner at Golden Corral. Stay from about 8:30-11 talk shipyard. That make you think you're young again.

KF and AN: [laughter] [pause]

AN: Did your children have to have court-ordered busing to go to school?

JW: Huh?

AN: Did your children have court-ordered busing to go to school?

JW: No.

AN: No.

JW: Uh-uh.

AN: What high school did they attend?

JW: Most of them that went to high school went to--. They started off--. My two boys went to Carver. Carver on Jefferson Avenue was a high school. My two daughters went to Huntington, but Huntington--. They got two years in Huntington [before] they consolidated. They made it an elementary school and they had to go to Menchville. So they finished Menchville. And two of my children went to Menchville the whole year. But my daughter went two year and my oldest two boys went to Carver. They finished Carver in 1967, I think[that was] when my oldest boy went. And a lot of the younger children went to Menchville for the high school. They had to ride the bus up there.

[pause]

KF: Were you an advocate for your children's higher education?

JW: I sure was. I definitely wanted them to do better than I did. Well, I couldn't go. I wanted to go but I couldn't, 'cause they--. During the war, just about every boys get eighteen had to be--. Go in the service if they passed. All my brothers passed, all of us passed. I didn't want to pass but I didn't want to go in the service either so. But I passed, so I went in. [pause] School paid off now 'cause just about all of my grandchildren that went to college has got their master degree, went back to get their master. I got one boy, one grandbaby, I call him "grandbaby" but he grown, teaches at (Hurtz High School? 0:57:05.4). He teaches English down there. He got his masters. I got another granddaughter, she got her master's degree and she, I think she works with--[coughs] pardon me [coughs]--she works with AARP [American Association of Retired Persons] up somewhere in Maryland. And she's making pretty good money. And my daughter, the one that's in Menchville, she got her masters. She's an assistant principal. She worked at Huntington and then moved her up there. She like it better there than she did at Huntington. You say y'all been to the Newsome House?

AN: I have, yes.

JW: You've been to the Newsome House. I didn't live far from the Newsome House. I lived on 33<sup>rd</sup> Street. I lived on that block. That's where I live when I first come here. I bought a house there and I sold it and bought up here. I know all about East End. I'm glad I got away from down there before it got so bad. It wasn't bad when I was there. I could go out and sit on the porch and sleep. But you sit on the porch now, somebody kill you in your sleep. Dangerous down there. There's (two hundred? 0:58:46.6) people hanging on the corner. They don't get out until it gets dark. When we used to, we used to--. Definitely, when I was growing up, we was scared of the dark. And it was dark back in

them days 'cause there are no lights, there no street lights. You didn't see no street lights. And now all out there--. My daddy left us the farm and we even got lights out there on the pole, out there in the country. But you used to not see no lights in the country at all. (? 0:59:23.7) I was surprised when I went down there at Christmas with my sister. All them got homes built down there on my daddy's farm. I have three sisters there now. I say, "What y'all--. You all got a dump truck?" And they say, "Yeah we got trash man come down and pick up the trash." Last year they had a milk man come bring milk. I said, "What?" I said, "Used to be a time when we sold milk, send milk." The milk truck come down to the house, mailman come right to the house. That's about it. Garbage man come just like they do in the city. I said, "Ain't that something. I never thought--." If I had known it was gonna get that way when I get there now, I probably stayed on down there. The highway paved right to the house. When I was down there, that was dirt roads and they didn't have no electricity, no telephone. And now they got telephone, they got cable. They got everything they got in the city but it's out in the country. And they got a fire station not far from there. And, if the house catch on fire, only be but a few minutes before the fire truck will get there. I said "Y'all living it up."

ALL: [laughter]

JW: 'Cause we didn't have all that. I used to have to carry the milk can out to the road to meet the mailman. My daddy sold milk and we had a can and I took the can in one hand and books in the other one. And now they ain't got no cows, no hogs, nothing. My sister ([name of sister]? 1:01:13.9) got some chicken. I said "Y'all, we used to raise all the things." We had hogs, cows, horses, and--. Don't have to worry about that no more.

AN: How many grandchildren do you have?

JW: I got ten grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren. I had ten last week and I had another one born this week. Made eleven. One of my grandchildren in Oklahoma, his wife had a little girl. She had one little boy and he married an Indian and they nice people, though. They came down to my house and I never seen them. They came down and spent the night with me last year. And they real nice people. Yeah, I don't have no more grandchildren, I have some more great-grandchildren. All the grandchildren--. All my children married but one. My daughter was married and she got a divorce from her husband but not the rest of them. (01:02:42) All of them living with the wives. But my baby daughter, she married a serviceman in Oklahoma. And she got two kids--and that was her son that had the baby--and she left them out there to come back here to stay with me while my wife was sick, 'cause she work at the VA [Veteran Affairs]. And she working over there in the Hampton VA [Veteran Affairs] while my wife was sick and stayed with me, helping me with my wife. My wife stayed sick about a year. And then, after she passed, they sent her over down to Salisbury, North Carolina. That's where she is now. She went back to her maiden name, Watkins. She went back to Watkins. Her husband was (Evans? 1:03:38.8) and her children is (Evans? 1:03:41.5). But the rest of them still sticking with their wives. [pause]

KF: What do you view as the most important accomplish of the civil rights [movement], or accomplishments?

JW: What I get out?

KF: What do you view as one of the, some of the, most important accomplishments of the civil rights movement?

JW: I think it--. Going to school together was one good thing, I think. And you know, y'all don't know this, there used to be a time when we couldn't vote either. Y'all know about that, don't you?

KF: Mmhmm.

JW: I think, I registered, I think, in 1965 in the city hall, right here in Warwick. 'Cause you know, Hilton--. This was Warwick County. I worked in the shipyard in Newport News, but I lived in Warwick County. And we had to register right and the city hall was a little building on Main Street. Had to come all the way up there to the city hall and they didn't have the big one downtown like they got now. And that's where I registered to vote. My first [first time registering to vote]--1965. And I think that, if I'm not mistaken, I believe we had to pay a--. I believe we had a poll tax, they called it. You ever hear about the poll tax?

KF: Mmhmm. We've heard of them, yes.

JW: Yeah, right.

AN: We've never had to pay them.

JW: Mmhmm.

KF: Yeah.

JW: Well, we had to pay poll tax. It wasn't much but we had to pay. They finally cut it out. It didn't make sense, no way. And now a lot of people don't vote on account--. They got the privilege to vote and won't vote. And who get elected (? 1:06.06.6) and whoever they want to get elected don't get elected, and they set up and argue with you. And you can't argue if you didn't vote. You ain't got--. Shouldn't have said nothing. Shouldn't be involved if you don't vote. You got a right to vote, you ought to be. At least you can cast

your vote. I vote almost every time. I try not to miss. Sometimes I go absentee. It makes it easier.

KF: What do you regard as the unfinished legacy of the civil rights movement?

JW: Unfinished?

KF: Yeah. Do you think there are any unfinished legacies?

JW: No, I don't know any unfinished.

KF: Okay, well that's all our questions. Is there anything else that you would like to contribute or something we may have missed?

JW: No, I don't think so. I just want you all to be sure to get what you want. Get what you want to get out of me.

KF: [laughter]

JW: I may not be able to come back out here no more.

KF: I think we got everything we need. Thank you for taking the time to let us interview you and for being part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project.

JW: Okay.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

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