

## **Mary Walker Blowe**

### **Interview Summary**

Interviewee: Mary Walker Blowe

Interviewer: R. Joshua Sipe

Interview Date: September 28, 2015

Location: Room 215 of the Blechman Reading Room at the Paul and Rosemary Tribble Library at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia.

Length: 1 audio file, WAV Format, 1:08:15

THE INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Mary Walker Blowe was born in 1942 in McKenney, Virginia. In 1943, she moved with her family to the Newsome Park community of Newport News when her father began working at the Newport News Shipyard. As a student, she attended Newsome Park Elementary, George Washington Carver Elementary School, and George Washington Carver High School. She later attended the Riverside School of Nursing's LPN Program. She married her husband, Harold Blowe Jr. in 1962, and the couple continued to live in Newsome Park until 1965. With regard to her career, Mrs. Blowe worked as a nurse at Riverside Hospital as well as at her husband's dry cleaning business, Blowe's Cleaners. Mrs. Blowe still engages in the community today, especially with healthcare education for the community.

THE INTERVIEWER: R. Joshua Sipe is a senior at Christopher Newport University with a B.A. in History. He is working with the Hampton Roads Oral History Project in conjunction with Dr. Laura Puaca.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview was conducted in the Room 215 of the Blechman Reading Room at the Paul and Rosemary Tribble Library at Christopher Newport University. Mary Walker Blowe was very excited to participate in the Hampton Roads Oral History Project and especially excited to talk about the Newsome Park community. Her cheerful demeanor, along with her caring tender tone used to discuss the events in her life, portrayed this excitement. The interview took a life history approach exploring Mrs. Blowe's life from childhood through adulthood, with a large portion of questions pertaining to her time spent living in Newsome Park and the different aspects of that community. In her discussion of Newsome Park, she emphasized the loving and nurturing role of the community and its part in her development. Mrs. Blowe also discussed several structural aspects of the Newsome Park community, including stores in the community and the physical layout of the community. Additionally, Mrs. Blowe recalled her educational experience, and noted the deep dedication of her teachers and educators. The interview concludes with Mrs. Blowe discussing race relations in Newport News during the 1960s and the lasting impact of the Newsome Park community on her life.

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**START OF INTERVIEW**

Joshua Sipe: This is Joshua Sipe. Today is September 28th, 2015. I am interviewing Mrs. Mary Walker Blowe. This interview is taking place in the Blechman Reading Room 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. Good afternoon, Mrs. Blowe.

Mary Blowe: Good afternoon.

JS: We like to use what's called a life history approach. So, we're going to start with some questions about your childhood and family, before turning to more focused questions about Newsome Park as well as some about Newport News. So first off, where and when were you born?

MB: I was born March 30, 1942, in a little town, twenty-four miles south of Petersburg, called McKenney. M-c-K-e-n-n-e-y, Virginia.

JS: Ok. What were your parents' names?

MB: My father's name was Reuben Preston Walker. My mother's name was Hazel Tucker Walker.

JS: And what did they do for occupations?

MB: Well, when my father first came from McKenney to Newport News, he was working for the railroad. Then, he became ill. After that, he went into carpentry. My mother did some day work. She was also a waitress. And, she also did sewing. She was a tailor.

JS: Ok. When your parents first moved to Newport News, did they--? What community--? Where'd they move to?

MB: They came straight to Newsome Park from McKenney, Virginia. From my understanding, the complex had not been up that long. I think, it was built, because--. During that time--the wartime--there weren't many places for the Negro, the Black families, to go. And, that was one of the communities that was built for Negro people at that time.

JS: Ok. So, you mentioned how Newsome Park was created as part of the war effort. Were--? Was your father's role in the railroad a part of the war effort or just another job opportunity?

MB: Just a job opportunity.

JS: Ok. Do you have any siblings?

MB: Three sisters.

JS: Are they older or younger?

MB: I'm the oldest.

JS: You're the oldest, ok. What years did you live in Newsome Park?

MB: I lived in Newsome Park from 1943 until 1965.

JS: What was it like growing up in Newsome Park?

MB: It was great to me at that time. And, it was a family. It was a community of families. All walks of life, different working opportunities--teachers, mayors, lawyers, doctors, Indian chief—lived in Newsome Park, who were people of color, and we all came to know one another. We attended the school that was built there in the area which was called Newsome Park Elementary School. And, [we] didn't have far to go to that school because I lived close to the school. So, walking was no problem from where I lived to where the school was. And, we attended Newsome Park School from the first grade to the sixth grade. In the seventh grade--during the time that I

was in the system--they built George Washington Carver Elementary School. So, I attended that school in the seventh grade. In the eighth grade--during that time--they started with the high school. So, high school, for me, was from the eighth grade to the twelfth grade which was called George Washington Carver High School.

JS: Gotcha. What do you remember about Newsome Park Elementary School, going there as a student?

MB: During the war time, they would prepare us if we ever had a siren go off. And, we would put paper down in the hallways. And, we would have to go out into the hallways and lie flat and still, just in case an airplane or somebody was trying to do harm to us. They would do that like a fire drill. I remember walking--whether it was snow, rain, or whatever the case may have been--we all walked to Newsome Park Elementary School. We had excellent teachers. Some of the teachers lived in Newsome Park community. One, in particular, was my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Short. And, she lived in Newsome Park. Mrs. Henry lived in Newsome Park. Mrs. Greene lived in Newsome Park. It was just a great, loving, and kind community. You had parents. You had your set of parents, but you also had another set of parents, too, who watched over you. And, if you did anything wrong, they were given permission to--I wouldn't say punish you--but, they would discipline you. They would discipline you. And, then, they would let your parents know what you did, and you'd get another disciplining by your parents. So, it was a great family. It's funny, but you didn't realize that, at that time, you were even poor because people shared with one another. We shared our food. We shared our resources. We were there for one another. One got sick, and, during that time, I remember my mom, being pregnant and [I] didn't quite understand all that was going on. But, there were midwives during that time. [My] twin brothers [were] born in Newsome Park, but they did not survive. And being the oldest of the four children, I had to keep my other sisters [because] they were curious as to what was going on. So, I had to watch them and make sure that they were okay until my dad got home from work. Cooking was great. Food was excellent. My mom would make hot rolls every Sunday and we would have chicken. During the

summer months, we got out of school on a Friday [and on] Sunday, we were back in McKenney at my grandmother's, for the whole summer. We would spend the summer on the farm helping my grandparents. And, then, as I got a little older, I asked my mom, "Do I have to go this summer?" So, around ten or eleven years old, I didn't have to go any longer. So, I stayed with my parents and helped them at home. But, it was a great opportunity. I was telling one of my classmates, from when we first came, I believe, the houses were white. And, then, they changed and gave color to the community. Our house was painted green one time. Then, it [was] painted all one color, like, a grayish color. We had the coal bins. And, when you started them, in the cold, cold winter, you would have to get up and make a fire. Those were times before oil stoves even came, until the '60s. I, myself, I learned how to make a fire in the stove. The stove was placed in the living room. It would give heat, as much as it could, to the rest of the house. But, [it was] cold still. [We] didn't have fans that could blow the heat throughout the house. It was just in one area. But, one thing about Newsome Park, at that time, during the summer months, I remember when storms would come. And, I was telling somebody, they would be sand storms. One minute, it would be nice and clear. Next minute, it would be so dark. The storm would come, and if you had your windows up in the house, if you didn't hurry up and get them down, sand would come in through the screens. And, when it was hot, during those summer times, we slept outside. We made pallets on the grass, and we were able to sleep outside. Nobody bothered us. I don't think we even thought about insects and things like that. It was just a great big family coming together, eating together, shopping together. Then, we [attended] Sunday School that was in Newsome Park. And, to the side of it, they had a great, big rink. We learned how to skate, roller skate in this rink. And, on Sunday mornings, the person who was in charge of transportation at the Sunday school--I'm trying to think of his name--Mr. Tolbert, would go into the block, pick the children up, and bring them to Sunday school. And, that's how we got to attend Sunday school before going on to the larger places. Then, we learned how to ride the city bus. Citizen Rapid Transportation, I think, that's what it was called at that time. The one thing, I guess, I didn't

understand was that, when we got on the bus, we had to go to the back of the bus. We weren't allowed to sit in the front of the bus because everything was segregated. But, at that time, we didn't even realize segregation. We just knew that it was a [time] in our lives when we were told what to do; and, we did what we were told to do. I learned how to go [where] we used to call "uptown" and "downtown," ride the bus, and go down to the marketplace, and get groceries for my mom, or get vegetables. There was a place on Jefferson Avenue where people [displayed] their vegetables, and things they [grew] outside of the store. You went and you chose your vegetables [and] your fruit. Nobody [stole] anything. And, I can imagine, there were, probably some times when people would steal. But, they put their merchandise outside, and you could check it out, if you wanted it. If not, then, you'd leave it alone. [Then,] you'd go to the next store. [Three] movie theaters [were located] on Jefferson [Avenue.] One was on 25<sup>th</sup> Street, which was called Jefferson Theatre. One was on Jefferson Avenue and 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, which was called Dixie Theatre. And, then, there was another one--right down the street from Dixie Theater--it was called Moton Theatre. I believe that place still is in existence--the Moton [Community] House, now, where they [display] Black history. Our George Washington Carver mementos are there at the Moton. When I grew up, [the] first house we moved in was 1067-48<sup>th</sup> Street. I lived there until I married. And, after I got married, in 1962, we still lived in Newsome Park. But, this time, I lived on a different street. I lived on 44<sup>th</sup> Street, 700 block, in Newsome Park. And, when they began to start tearing down, and getting ready to restore old Newsome Park--to bring it up to date with new apartments and things--I left 44<sup>th</sup> Street and moved to the 1400 block. 1465, I believe was the address, 48<sup>th</sup> Street. So, I stayed there until we bought a home in what is now called Warwick Lawns community, in 1965. Great memories of old Newsome Park. There was a time when coal was no longer needed and they--Newsome Park apartments--began to put in oil heaters, oil stoves. We used the coal bin to play in. And, we would say, "That was our house." And, the kids in the community would come out. We learned how to ride our bicycles in the Newsome Park community. I can even see it right now, you know. [We] played marbles, jumped rope[, and

played] Hide-and-seek. We had a glorious and a happy childhood in Newsome Park. [Then,] the world began to change, somewhat, and, people [had] different attitudes, I should say. Just as it is now. You sort of miss those old times, you know. Even though they may not have been, what one would call, very socially accepted. But, I remember the Mayor of the city, Jessie Rattley, lived in Newsome Park. Dr. Douglas [also] lived in Newsome Park. So, Newsome Park had a lot of individuals who were, in their livelihood, considered the elite. But, they lived in Newsome Park because of the color of their skin. When integration [came] into existence during the '60s, things began to change, people move[d] out, and [were able to] build their homes elsewhere, you know. But, it was a great time for me. I enjoyed my life in Newsome Park. I enjoyed the friends I made in Newsome Park, like Mr. Morgan [William Morgan]. We have been [friends] since the third grade. And, I have many memories of a couple of friends who are still with me. And, one young man--we buried him about four weeks ago--he and I had been [friends] since [we were] four years old. On Sunday mornings, we would get up, and we would go down to the waterfront. [There was] a ferry that left the end of 16<sup>th</sup> Street all the way down, past 16<sup>th</sup> Street, down by the waterside. My mother would take the four of us, and Mr. McIver's [Albert McIver, Jr.] mother would take him--[be]cause he was the only child--and we would go on the boat ride, from Newport News to Norfolk. And, then, we would turn around and come back to Newport News. We did have a lot of opportunities to do different things. It may have been what one would consider, "boring," or whatever; but, it was never boring to me, even [while growing up]. I was a cheerleader at George Washington Carver High School. And, that was a great opportunity for me. And, then music came into existence with one of the music teachers, Margaret Davis. I got into her class. She taught violin, and she taught voice. But, I didn't sign up for the class. Somehow, or another, there were two Mary Walkers in George Washington Carver High School. Her middle name was "E" and mine was "L." So, I wound up in this class with Mrs. Margaret Davis. And, I told her it was a mistake. So, she looked at my hands, and looked at my fingers. She said, "Oh, no. It's not a mistake. You got the fingers to reach the notes on the violin. You're staying." And,

she wouldn't let me out of that class. But, as I began to learn how to play the violin, I began to love the music, the classical music. I enjoyed it, so I did stay in that class. In fact, me and my sister--. One of my sisters, she played the viola; and, I played the violin. The other two were not interested in music at all. But, it was a great opportunity. [We] got to travel to see a professional orchestra up in Washington [D.C.]. I still love classical music today. I have a daughter who plays classical [music] with the orchestra up in North Carolina. She plays flute. But, God was good to us, blessed us tremendously. A young man and his wife [moved] here from Michigan. He became the superintendent of the Newport News schools. [I saw] him about a couple of months ago. He and his wife live in Gloucester now. So, it was good to see him. They had three children at the time, and we would go and babysit them. But, throughout my living in Newsome Park, it was a great, great place to live in. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I wouldn't take anything for the experiences that we had. I remember we went to the country, one summer. And, my dad brought back a live chicken. So, I'm trying to figure out what is he going to do with this live chicken. But, he tied it to the coal bin. And, then, I would see my grandfather--when we went to the country--how they would, you know, well, I guess, you would say, kill the chickens, ring their head off, and kill the chicken, and prepare it for a meal. But, when my dad did it, in Newsome Park, he got sick. So, it was a long time before he even wanted to eat any fried chicken. But, my mom would [fry the] chicken. My dad would go hunting. And, he went hunting a lot for rabbits, and squirrels, and those kinds of things. And, I love myself some rabbit. It was good eating, but, like I say, things have changed nowadays. I don't eat any of that now because you don't know if it had rabies or what it is, now. But, we didn't even think about that during the time that my dad was doing the hunting, or the fishing, or anything. You just ate--. You just ate the wild, you know. And, I enjoyed it. Like I said, my house--when we grew up--was the house that everybody would come to for hot rolls because my mom made them every Sunday, from scratch. Every Sunday we had fried chicken, and we had those hot rolls. We may have something along with it, but that's two things that we did have. Some of the people that I grew up with--there a few that are, a lot, I



would say, that still are living--we've gotten up in age now. We're almost seventy-five years old now, so. And, you ask yourself, "Where did the time go?" But, God blesses in a mighty way. I grew up in an A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal] Church--Saint Paul--at that time, was on 23rd Street and Jefferson Avenue. And, when I got married, I became Baptist. And, I was baptized in Shalom Baptist Church. When I met my husband, I met him in Newsome Park. He was from Emporia, Virginia. And, when I got married and stayed in Newsome Park until, like I say, when they start beginning to tear down the old neighborhood--. We call that the old Newsome Park. And, then, it was the new Newsome Park when they went and built the brick apartments. Everything changed tremendously during that time. But, it was great learning how to ride the city bus by myself. And, nobody bothered you, you know. You'd catch the bus, and you didn't have anybody approach you or--. The way it is now, you can hardly let your children play outside. But, we played outside greatly, rode our bikes up-and-down the street, down the sidewalks. I mean, [we] went to stores on our bikes. safety. It was safe, during that time. So, those kinds of things I wish would exist now. And, even in the wonderful communities that we call "elite" communities, they still have problems, you know, when others moving into a community and bringing not so good things. But, I thoroughly enjoyed the way that I was raised in old Newsome Park. I still have a godmother; she's eighty-nine years old now. She [has] one daughter, who was like a sister to us. And, that's how we were raised. So, it's just great to know that I remember. My mom used to do day work. She was going to apply for a job. I think it was called Gloria Manufacturing Company. She got dressed up and everything. You know, you're supposed to be presentable when you go. And, of course, she was like that. They wouldn't hire her because they said she didn't need the job. I never understood that [laughter]. But, during that time, that's the way it was. You either had to go looking kind of shabby because, in this way, I guess, for the employer, it felt [like] you were [needed] a job. But, if you looked, you know, presentable, and clean, and everything--they wouldn't hire you. They'd say you didn't need it. But, we made it. Somehow, we made it. And, she did her sewing, you know, for other people. She went to, during

that time, Hampton University. It was called Hampton Institute. And, my mother took up tailoring down there. So, she was able to help my dad make a living. And, then, during the summer months, I would go with her to [her job]--as she did day work-- and help her. She got a job, finally, as a cook, in Kress' 5-and-10 store, on Washington Avenue. And, on Washington Avenue, we call that "uptown." That's where your department stores, and all those things, were. On Jefferson Avenue, we call that "downtown." They had some stores there--not the most famous stores--but they had stores that were really owned by a lot of Jews. And, I did work for a couple of them, but they [the individual owners] were unfair, you know. If people [were un]able to pay their bills, I couldn't go and--if they were sick, or whatever--I just didn't have the heart to go and be brutal to them. And, that's what they wanted to do. So, I couldn't handle that. But, I worked with her, during the summer months, at Kress' department store, down in the kitchen area. We couldn't even eat at the counters at all--we had to either go to the side of the counter, get our food, and leave, depart. And, then, when integration came into existence, then they began have the sit-downs [also called sit-ins; acts of protest against segregated lunch counters]. And, then, when Civil Rights [Act] came into existence in 1964, we were able to go into different places, and sit down, and have a meal. Whereas, before that time, we weren't able to do that. But, God kept us as the saints. I tell you, he brought us a mighty long way [laughter]. And, kids were able to go on to college. I went to Peninsula Business College for a while. And, that was run by the [future] mayor of the city, Jessie Rattley [served as mayor 1986-1990]. I attended that for a year. I didn't graduate from there. So, after I got married, I went to nursing school at Riverside LPN School. And, then, I graduated and worked at Riverside Hospital. Being married at that time to my husband, Harold decided he wanted [his own business.] He had been working in the dry cleaning business, for a number of years for his cousin who had a business in Portsmouth. And, then, when we [moved] here, he started working in the shipyard. He also had a part-time job working at Clothing Care, which was a dry-cleaning business in Hampton--until we opened up our own business in 1970. So, it has taken us on a journey, it has blessed us, and the doors are

still open, even after forty years of being in business. So, my husband, you know, he's seventy-[seven] years old, but God still enables him to get up, just keeps him going. One year, 2005, he had a heart attack and God brought him back. And, in 2011, he had a stroke. And, God brought him back. And, the job, itself, was like rehab for his body that allowed him to heal because he wasn't even able to walk or do anything for a while. But, the doctor said that was a good healing process for him; and, that's where he is, right today, doing the same thing. For me, things began to change with my health, and all. I lost my vision completely in 2009. And, it didn't happen overnight. It started when I was thirty-two, when I lost it in one eye. And, I was going to an eye physician, and he said it was MS [Multiple Sclerosis], the beginning of MS. I had my issues and things with my health, from that point on. But, I'm at a place, now, where I'm thanking God for each day that he gives me. And, I'm just happy to know that his omnipresence with me has been, even bringing me through whatever I went through, physically, you know. So, I am just grateful. So, now, I just have four children, and eight grandchildren, and three great grandchildren, now. So, life is just taking it a day at a time, and watching them grow up, and go on to make lives for themselves. So, I am grateful. I'm just so grateful, Mr. Sipe, to know that someone is wanting know how we all grew up. Everybody in Newsome Park had a different experience. Mine was different from others. And, my classmate, Mr. McIver [Albert McIver, Jr.], you know--God bless his soul--his was different. We parallel because we were with one another for a long time until he died about four weeks ago. But, I'm still here, Mr. Sipe [laughter].

JS: Yes, ma'am. So, I guess, going back, a little bit--.

MB: Ok.

JS: To the community of Newsome Park, in general. How would you--. You talked about it being a family community--.

MB: Yes.

JS: And, coming together. Can you describe a little more about the community dynamics of Newsome Park?

MB: You mean as far as people?

JS: The people; the way they interacted with each other.

MB: They interact[ed]--to me, in what I saw, and what I experienced--well. If you needed food to eat, you were able to get the food. If you knocked at somebody's door--and even if you needed a place to lay your head--if you knew a person, you would help them out. They were there--not just my parents, [not] just for her children--but, they were also there for the other families' children. They watched one another's children. And, if they did something wrong, it wasn't like they couldn't discipline you. It wasn't a harsh discipline. You got disciplined, but you knew, without a shadow of doubt, that you had done something you had no business doing. But, the love and the concern for one another was there. I think some of those persons who are still living today can relate to that fact--that that part of us is still there in our hearts and minds--that we're there for one another. The dynamics of it was that we loved, and we cared for one another, irregardless of who they were, irregardless of if they didn't even have a place to sleep, food to eat. We shared. We shared our love. We shared our resources, and they helped. The teachers were just dynamic. You know, they wanted to make sure that we learned. They cared about us. And, yes, they even had the ability to chastise us. I remember one teacher, in particular, Mrs. Daughtry. During that time, they had bean shooters. They were rubber bean shooters. And, you'd put the bean in the middle of it, and you blew it out. But, she took one and she would let it get soft. So, when you did anything wrong in her classroom, you got some whacks in the hand with that rubber bean shooter. But she loved us because she cared about us. We had some, sort of, sometimes, rambunctious young men who wanted prove that they were this and that and the other. But, she let them know who the boss was. And, we appreciated that so greatly. Today, it's a little bit different. Kids don't have that kind of discipline like we had when we were growing up in Newsome Park. It was great. Weather was a little harsh, sometimes, when it would snow. Sometimes it would snow for two weeks at a time. And, we had to walk in it to get either to the store or just to get some resources. Even when the first hurricane that I can remember, in Newsome Park--. And, I was a

student at George Washington Carver Elementary School. We got out early because of the storm. And, believe it or not, that first hurricane that hit here was called "Hazel," and that was my mother's name. So, I got teased a little bit for that. But, I left school. Instead of going straight home, I went to a friend's house because I didn't have any idea how serious the storm was. I just thought it was raining, thunder, and that kind of thing. But, it was a serious storm because it destroyed a lot of homes and took roofs off the top of the housing, and that kind of thing. It's strange because, even then, the school busses would bypass many schools. And, the Black kids would be at Carver High School. We weren't allowed at that time to attend closer white schools--integration hadn't started. So, kids whose parents were in the military--and they lived on the base at Fort Eustis--had to come to George Washington Carver High School or George Washington Carver Elementary School, by-passing all the other schools because they were white schools. We weren't allowed to attend [them]. Finally, like I say, things began to change and look up for Newsome Park. I can remember, in Newsome Park, during the war time, there was an area of Newsome Park that I would go with my mom and she would get in line. They had rations of sugar and milk and one other commodity that they had to get in line in order to get it at that time. And we would pick out supplies and, then, we would walk back home. They had one area in Newsome Park where they built like a little shopping, strip mall, I would say: one grocery store, drugstore, the barber shop, the beauty shop, even a pool hall. I remember those five things being there. And, then, people who needed food, and didn't have the money to purchase the food at that time, were able to set [up] accounts, you know. And, then, when they get their money, or get paid at the end of the day, they would pay on their accounts or pay it out. But, the man who owned the store would let them have the food so that nobody would go hungry, you know. But, they had the opportunity to pay, and that's how lots of things were done back then, during that time. Family took care of family. Family took care of those who were not family. And, it was just loving, caring, and sharing.

JS: Gotcha. I guess, going on from there, you mentioned how you went to Sunday school every Sunday. What were some of the local churches that were around Newsome Park or in Newsome Park?

MB: In Newsome Park, there was one church that I can remember. It wasn't in Newsome Park, but it was directly out from Newsome Park called--off of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street--and, it was the First Baptist Jefferson Park. That's what that area was called, Jefferson Park. And, the Newsome Park Recreation Center--that's what it was--but, that's where they held the Sunday school for those of us who lived in Newsome Park. When I started going to and attending a church itself, a larger church itself--I guess, I was about twelve years old--and, that was downtown. And, that was Saint Paul A.M.E. Church, is what I attended, like I said, until I got married. My husband was Baptist and, then, I got baptized and became Baptist. And, I've been a Baptist ever since then. So, that's been over fifty-something years ago. But, as far as a church--church being directly in the community of Newsome Park, the only thing that I can remember is that it was the Recreation Center. They had activities for the children of the community. They had the roller skating rink out there, and we even had, like, little dances or shows for the people. They even had where they could come in, play ping pong, like that kind of thing. But, that Recreation Center was used for just about everything, that I can recall, that was community-involved. And, I can imagine, for those who lived in Jefferson Park, which was another branch off from Newsome Park, a lot of the people attended First Baptist Church Jefferson Park. But, for me, I was there with the recreation site that we had for our spiritual teaching.

JS: Ok. Did church and religion play a big part in community life?

MB: Yes, it did. It--. One thing that you could depend on was that--if you were going through or had a problem or whatever--the one thing that kept you strong was the spiritual part, the Bible, the teachings. It's like, with my grandparents--before a meal was even served--we had, like, a little Bible study. And, you had to recite a Bible verse. We would get in a circle, and my grandmother would read scripture from the Bible. My grandfather would pray, and then you

would say your Bible verse. And, then, from there, then everyone would go and sit there at the table, the food is blessed, and you'd have your meal. I can imagine there are probably some families who still do the same thing today. But, that's how it was for me.

JS: Oh, ok. I guess, going, kind of, looking at, kind of, your family, in general; what were some of the things that you and your family--your parents and your siblings--do for fun together?

MB: Like I said, we went boat-riding, ferry-riding. At that time, it was called the "ferry boat." We went to the movie. We went to the movie, like, every Saturday because, at that time, they had a vitamin called "Hadacol," the "Three 6s" ["666," as it was officially labeled, was a patent medicine]--that was a medicine. But, what we would do, and how we got into the movie every Saturday, was the box top. We would tear the top of the box top, and we would present that at the window to get in to see the movie. So, each Saturday, there would be like a series of westerns, and comedies, and things like that. And, instead of money-- We didn't use money. They used money, but if you had a box top, you didn't have to use money to get into the theater. And, then they would have baseball. They really played a lot of baseball out there in Newsome Park because they had a baseball field. We celebrated "May Day." May 1st, of every year, we had a celebration at Newsome Park Elementary School where we'd do the flagpole, you know, and have games, and those kinds of things. I don't even know whether anybody know anything about May Day [laughter]. But, that's what it was called, "May Day." And, we played marbles, and we did jump rope, you know. Sometimes, the men in the neighborhood would go fishing or crabbing. One of my neighbors--my godmother--her husband would go crabbing. On Friday nights, he would put the crabs in the pot, and would cook them. And, we'd sit outside eating crab. Uh huh, and it was--. That's how I learned how to pick a crab, doing that. And, that was great, during that time. We even called for the teenagers--when we became teenagers--we used to have what was called block parties, lawn parties, you know. Then, some of the business places began to have little teenage dances for teenagers, you know. But, we still had those kinds of things, and we were able to do that. Every once in a while, you would have somebody that may want to fight, or

whatever. But, nothing that was so destroying to an individual. At the George Washington Carver High School, we had our own football field. And, having been a cheerleader, we had, you know, kids who would get into a fight or something like that. But, we had great fellowship at the football games, and eating those kinds of things. I can't remember if people do a lot of cookouts now--we didn't have what was called cookouts. We did a lot of in-cooking. And, people would invite you to their homes, you know. Or, children, they knew where they could get a good meal. Like I said, my mom made rolls every day, so kids were always over there wanting to eat with us, 'cause they knew my mom could cook. And she was a great cook [laughter]. But, those are the kinds of things, you know, we did: fishing, crabbing, bicycle riding. And, I loved-- I used to love to play marbles. And, we used to love to jump rope. So, those are the kinds of things we had.

JS: Ok. Going back to--you were talking about you presented box tops at the movies--and you got the box tops from medicine tops?

MB: Uh huh, yes, yes. If you had-- During that time, they used to give you Hadacol; they said it was like a vitamin supplement. And, if you kept that box top that would be your entry into the movie theater. And, if you didn't have the box top, then you would have to pay, you know, cash or anything for it. So, we always would try to save as many box tops as we could, so we could keep on going to the movies and didn't have to pay money, yeah.

JS: And, so, you went to Carver High School. Do you remember any teachers there that, kind of, stand out in your memory and really, kind of, inspired you?

MB: Yes, one, now. She's still living, Mrs. Crittenden. Flora Crittenden. And, the other one's Queenie Tabb. They're both still living. Ms. Tabb, who is now Mrs. Carr, is a patient in a nursing home. Mrs. Crittenden, Flora, lives with her daughter. And, there was a teacher that was called-- we called her "Ma Holland." She was an English teacher at Carver High School; very disciplined, very strict, didn't take anything off of any students. But, she was funny. She was-- I mean, she would just keep you laughing, but you had to do that work right or you just did not pass in that class. And, everybody knew Ma Holland. And, she never married, never had children. But we



were her children. And, everybody just admired her so much. She was a great influence on a lot of people, even our Commonwealth Attorney, Howard Gwynn. He went to Carver High School and many others who went to Carver High School. My pastor, Alvin T. Harris, he went Carver High School. So, Mrs. Crittenden and Mrs. Carr have seen a lot of students go on to do great things, you know, so. And, they were very, very instrumental in helping you with anything that they could. They wanted to make sure that you [could] read, write, do your arithmetic... It wasn't presented to you for you to learn, but you did have responsibility to learn and study for yourself, you know. But, they were very instrumental in teaching us how to go about getting scholarships and things of that sort. They would help you, so they were a great influence on us. Right today, they still are, even at their age. They still are. We still love them.

JS: Sounds like it. Now, as you mentioned, when you were at both Newsome Park Elementary and Carver Elementary, and Carver High School, they were are all still segregated schools.

MB: Yes.

JS: How did they compare to the white schools in Newport News?

MB: I think the white schools had more leisure time. Their discipline was not like the discipline that we had at our Black schools. I believe the teachers that we had were different. I believe some of the white kids got away with more than we did, you know. We couldn't get away with anything, not a thing. But, they had the means to do so. And, I think, some of them tried to do so but the teachers wouldn't let you do it. They would stay on your case. They made sure--. And, they made sure that the parents knew about it. If there was anything that you did wrong, they made sure that the parents learned of what it was, and how they were trying to help you, and trying to get you to change to be something different. Some, it worked for; and, some, it didn't, you know. Some still did not listen, or whatever the case may be. But, that's how we looked at it: that the white kids had more freedom than we had.

JS: Did you have many interactions with white students during your time in school?

MB: Not during my time. We didn't have--. We didn't have any because, by the time that we had graduated, they hadn't even [begun] to [integrate schools] as of yet. So, the first--I graduated in 1960 from George Washington Carver High School--so, my [first] interaction with the white students, as far as the classroom side, was when I went to nursing school at Riverside Hospital. But, other than that, all of my time was with people of color.

JS: I guess, now, more broadly, in Newport News, what were race relations like when you were growing up?

MB: For me, from what I can recall--. Like I said, I didn't come in contact with the Caucasian race until after '64, '65, somewhere like that. We always--. There was always this sense--. It's like when you went into a store, or you rode the bus, I could never figure out what difference did it make where you sat on the bus when we all paid the same price. Or, what difference does it make, when you go into the store, why couldn't we sit down and have a meal. We weren't going to stay there, and hurt anything, just wanted to sit down and eat. But, for some odd reason--. And, when we would travel--for someone to go use the bathroom--sometimes they wouldn't let you use the bathroom. And, I couldn't understand a "White Fountain," water fountain, from a "Black Water Fountain." It just behooved me. And we are all human beings. It just behooved me what was is it that they thought they would catch from the color of my skin [laughter]. You know, that's one thing that puzzled me about that. But, I guess, it all depends on how each person was raised, you know. Some white people were raised around black people [be]cause their mother, or auntie, or grandmother worked for white families. So, their interaction might have been a little different than mine, you know, as far as around them. My mom did work for some white families when she did day work, and I would help her sometimes. But, they were kind. But, you always knew that there was something there--and you couldn't quite put your hand on it--as to why they didn't like you, you know, or didn't want you to learn. That was the one thing that really, really amazed me. Or, if I talked or spoke differently, it's like, "You're not supposed to be speaking like

that. You're Black." I couldn't never figure out why that would make such a difference, you know, 'cause it wasn't hurting you, you know.

JS: Moving on from there, kind of, along the same vein, right near Newsome Park was Copeland Park, correct?

MB: Copeland Park was--. All of them was up around the same time. Copeland Park, before they tore that down, I didn't have--. I had a friend that used to live over in Copeland Park on what was called like 52<sup>nd</sup> Street and 53<sup>rd</sup> Street and 56<sup>th</sup> Street, over in that area. But, once they tore it down, they left there and just started at, I'd say, 48<sup>th</sup> Street. And, people who lived either there, or those who lived in Copeland Park began to move into that area of Newsome Park. Right.

JS: Did you have much interaction with the people of Copeland Park besides your one friend?

MB: No. I didn't. I didn't have [much interaction] because we weren't even allowed to even go that far without permission or anything because it was a good little walk from where I lived, you know, to where Copeland Park was. And when my friend left Copeland Park, she went to stay with [her] grandmother in Jefferson Park. And, then, her mother died when she was very young. She was about four years old then. Then, her father and her grandmother, you know, sort of, helped raise her, until he remarried again. And, then, they built a home, off of 40<sup>th</sup> Street, near Roanoke Avenue then. That's where she lived.

JS: Oh, ok. In 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement starts to pick up, and demonstrations happen across the country. Were you involved in any local demonstrations in Newport News?

MB: No, I wasn't. I wasn't involved in any demonstrations. I would help, sometimes when it came to, like, voting, and those kinds of things. But, I didn't demonstrate or anything like that.

JS: Do you remember any of the demonstrations that occurred in the area?

MB: I remember, F.W. Woolworth. I remember when they had the sit-in. And, a certain group of people went down, and sat down, and refused to get up because they felt like that was their civil rights to be able to eat at that counter, too. "If you took my money, then, I should have the privilege to sit down and eat," [the demonstrators argued]. I remember that happening. But, I

can't remember any--. And, I'm pretty sure they had some other things that were happening, but I can't recall for myself.

JS: Ok. I guess, turning back to Newsome Park, as we, kind of, wrap up our time here today, what was your fondest memory of growing up in Newsome Park?

MB: My fondest memory was having the relationship with friends that have taken us from that point A to point Z, now, in which we are; most of us are still friends. I can remember playing with those individuals and how we shared. You know, when I was growing up, the kids had bicycles, and everybody--. Every child in the household has a bicycle. Well, we didn't have that. We had one bicycle. And, everybody was sharing and riding that bicycle. And, for a person who could not afford a bicycle, then you shared your bicycle with that individual. I can remember learning how to ride a bicycle on a boy's bicycle; didn't have a girl's bicycle. I had a boy's bicycle. [I] just put my leg through that hole, and learned how to lean, and sit up on that as best I could, to learn how to ride the bicycle. My fondest, too, is good eating. We had great eating in the families that I was raised around, you know. And when we went anywhere, we just shared everything. You didn't think the other person was poor; you didn't think you were poor because you were able to share with that individual.

JS: Sounds quite amazing.

MB: It was, it was--. Mr. Sipe, it was an amazing time. It really was an amazing time when I grew up in Newsome Park. It was so loving, so sharing, much kindness given, much caring. It's just hard to see how it is, nowadays, that people don't have this love for one another, this Agape love for one another, that we can be there for one another. And, this is what we had in old Newsome Park. I mean, families sat out, and they talked. And, they conversed with one another. It wasn't a whole lot of arguing and cussing and that kind of thing. It was just kindness, goodness, you know. You believed: Bible reading, teaching. Individuals would help the children. It was great. I wouldn't take--. I wouldn't have taken anything for the experience of being a person who was raised in Newsome Park.

JS: I guess, building off of, kind of, what you just said--. What does old Newsome Park mean to you?

MB: Old Newsome Park means love, the sharing, as I said. The memories of great times together. You know what, even when we had the sharing of Sunday school, every--. There was one Sunday in that summer month that they would get a bus. And, they would take us to a place that was called Log Cabin Beach, and that was up near Williamsburg. But, we went up there and we would have our picnic, we would swim, we would play games. We had a great time. I remember those kinds of times that we intertwined with one another. And, they planned activities for us, you know. I remember the man who used to pick us up for Sunday school; his house caught fire. And, we could see the fire from where I lived because he lived just two blocks from me. But, the outpouring of love for the family who lost everything, at that time, was just great, great. And, he was able to get back and to keep on picking the children up for Sunday school, yes.

JS: Well, Mrs. Blowe, is there anything else that you'd like to add, or talk about, that I might have missed, or that you want to comment on further?

MB: No, I think I've covered as much as I can remember. Somebody else may pick up, and theirs may be a different story than mine. But, what I've passed on to you is what I remember in growing up at 1067 48th Street. That's what I can remember.

JS: Well, thank you so much for participating in the project, again. And, that concludes our interview, today, with Mrs. Mary Walker Blowe. Thank you very much.

MB: Thank you, Mr. Sipe, for even wanting to--I mean, to even remember--old Newsome Park for many of us and for some of us who are still living, to see it come to fruition that we're not a forgotten culture.

JS: You are welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

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