

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS

Oral History Documentation Project
The St. Joseph Parish Housing Project

SARAH A. WHITE

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Interviewed by Michael McCauley
at the home of her son in Mechanicsville Maryland
Transcribed by Michael McCauley in 2006
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Original format is digital audio recorder
13 minutes, 31 seconds

[Beginning of digital file]

Michael McCauley: Today, I'm talking to Sara White today. Mrs. White, tell me about your family and where you were living before you heard about the St. Joseph Project.

Sarah White: I were living on Summerseat Farm. That's where I were raised at and then I, from there I got married and moved in with my mother-in-law and then from there we – through Father Kavanaugh – we started building a house and that, sort of after we – three cinderblocks up, got to three cinderblocks up, then my mother-in-law took over the rest of our house and finished it. But the others, Mr. Berry, John Berry that were in with us at the time with Fr. Kavanaugh, he finished his house. They made their own cinderblocks and finished his house.

MM: Your house, did your mother-in-law move into it or did you move into it? SW: I moved into it.

MM: You moved into it?

SW: Um hmm, I moved into it and I lived in there for about, I guess, thirty years, twenty, maybe twenty years, give or take, because part time went back over.... When I first got married I lived with my mother-in-law and then we went back over to Summerseat, again, up to Summerseat in a house next to the big house and my husband at the time he did, he kept the yards up. And then we moved back, years later we moved back and that's when they started this project for to build these houses.

MM: Do you remember how you heard about it? SW: Through Fr. Kavanaugh.

MM: Like you went to the church up here? SW: St. Joseph's

MM: St. Joseph's, and he announced it at church?

SW: He decided that, if I'm not mistaken, it was four of us, couples, my sister and her husband, John Berry and his wife, two sisters, I think were in it, I think and their husbands, John Berry and his wife, four couples of us altogether. I can check with John Berry and find out if I'm correct. We started off that way.

MM: Do you know if those were the first houses that were built?

SW: I will have to double check with him to find out. I'm not sure, but it seemed to me that the barracks were the first, but I will have to check on that, which I can do that now with him, but I think it started with the barracks.

MM: When you were with the other couples were all the houses built in the same place?

SW: No, somehow the project fell through and only John's house were finished. Only John's house were finished and the others all dropped out or whatever.

MM: But your house was finished, even though your mother-in-law

SW: Yes, she finished it after three cinderblocks up with Fr. Kavanaugh, then she finished the others.

MM: So were the families working on their own houses?

SW: Yes.

MM: So, after you got the three courses of cinderblocks up, things kind of went off SW: Yes.

MM: So, was it a hard time?

SW: Yes, it really were a hard time, because at that time Fr. Kavanaugh that, since my husband and I had the most kids, we should start our house first, but sometimes that doesn't work with some others, but, anyway....

MM: Were some others resentful?

SW: Yes, some others – name I won't mention – figures theirs should be built first, but he felt that since we had the most kids, ours should be.

MM: How many children did you have then?

SW: I had about five then, approximately, five because I had eight kids altogether, seven boys and one girl.

MM: But they must have been pretty small. SW: There were, they were.

MM: So that meant you couldn't do too much on the house yourself SW: No, I didn't do anything on it [laughter] I didn't do anything on it. MM: So your husband had to lay the blocks on it.

SW: He helped, with the help of the others.

MM: Did you have to make your own cinderblocks?

SW: They started out making them and I'm not too sure if they finished making them or if they ended up buying some, but they started out making cinderblocks themselves, but, as I say I'll check on some of these things with Mr. Berry, because he was one of the couples whose house got

MM: Where was the house?

SW: Mr. Berry's?

MM: No, yours. Where was your house?

SW: What is that route going towards Hollywood? Is it off of Rte. 5? MM: Or 235?

SW: Yes, 235. Let's see. Right at Mr. Sprigg Reeves farm going into the lane where you go through Sprigg Reeves farm and then it were in back of Sprigg Reeves farm, which now has all these big pretty houses built on the farm.

MM: Is that house not there still?

SW: I haven't been back there in years, but one of my children were telling me it's still standing, but I haven't been back there in years and the last time I were back there it was summertime and the trees all grown up and I didn't really pay that much attention but somebody said it's still there.

MM: Do you know who they got the land from?

SW: My mother-in-law. The land that our house were built on belonged to my mother-in-law. It were her place.

MM: So she already owned the land. SW: Exactly.

MM: You just built on her land.

SW: Exactly.

MM: Did the house have running water?

SW: No, no plumbing, no electricity. Only two rooms in the house had drywall at that time — only two rooms. In 19.., about 19.., in the late 50's or early 60's I had the house inside completed. I were in a car accident and with the money I had the drywall put up, put in the kitchen, the other bedroom. I had the electricity put in and then I got a telephone and

washing machine. But we still didn't have any plumbing.

MM: Was the best thing about it that you had a place of your own? SW: Yes.

MM: Do you remember how you felt when you moved in?

SW: I were happy. Even though it weren't completed I were happy, just knowing that I had a place of my own and I loved to work in a yard; I love flowers and I love working in a yard so I had a pretty yard.

MM: So really all of your kids were raised there in that house.

[Recorder turned off for a few minutes and then back on again. Her son, Philip Butler briefly joins the conversation before leaving the house]

SW: ... were made by John Berry, and, you know Peter, your father and them. They were used for the foundation for the house we had. But, after that, John Berry's house, they bought his, because everything, must went.... But Father Kavanaugh did give me some — he were remodeling the school and some of the drywall in pieces he took out the school he gave, he gave that dining room. [unintelligible] a two bedroom house, dining room and kitchen.

PB How did [unintelligible] Young get his house?

SW: He were with the St. Joseph Project. That was the St. Joseph Project It was Peter, Snack, and them first. It were the barracks and then the St. Joseph Project were the last, because the St. Joseph Project was the big farm.

PB: What about Sarah Butler and them house?

SW: With the, started out with the barracks. Sarah Butler's house started out with the barracks.

PB: Where did [unintelligible] King and them's house come from?

SW: All them houses on the St. Joseph Project, they are not a barracks. I think Leroy Medley's might have started out a barracks, but the others are, they are all, you know, built like from contractors or whatever. [Recorder was turned off, then on again] Her house were a barracks. Miss Holt's house, barrack. Going through by the St. Joseph's Project, and go all the way back in the woods and make a right [laughter]. Those two houses up in there were barracks. Miss Beatrice Summerville, Parran Woodland, Minette Fenwick.... There's more. Sarah Butler.

MM: There were two Sarah Butlers? SW: My name was Sarah Butler. MM: I know [laughter].

SW: The only way we could tell the difference when we'd go to the village center is she would be Sarah E., Sarah Elizabeth, and I'm Sarah Ann. But if they would just say Sarah Butler, they'd get our records mixed up. And in Johns Hopkins [recording stopped]. Miss Ella Reed had a barracks. She sold her piece of land and I don't know who bought it and if, they might have torn the house down. But I know those two were barracks and Minette's and I think Mary Annie Fenwick's, before it burnt down, were a barrack, down there by Fenwick's bar, and after it burnt down he built that cinderblock house. And, I'm trying to think.

MM: Did you have to go to meetings for this?

SW: When it started off it were going to be very nice, but, like I said, John, maybe that's why he don't, he doesn't want to get involved because his wife were the one that, she wanted to be first. And Fr. Kavanaugh said they had only one child, and still only have that one girl and Fr. Kavanaugh suggested that, since we had the most kids, let us be first, but she didn't like it so But I loved, I had, for once I had a place of my own and I had a

beautiful yard because I loved to plant flowers, house flowers, and, you know, outside. And then I would walk in and out of there for years to meet my ride out at the main highway to go to work. Put you out there in the afternoon and you walk back home and my first washing machine were a gas one and then after I got electricity in the house, I got an electric one, but we never did get plumbing. And we all carried our water from our mother-in-law's house, the big house that were there from the well, first from a spring, and then she put in a well and we all would use the well. As she would always say: a chicken coop of your own is better than a palace of somebody else's. [laughter] Aaaahh! A chicken coop of your own is better than a palace of somebody else's. But after I liked it better, I liked it better after I got a, I loved it better after I put in the drywall, finished the drywall and put electricity and telephone, gas stove and electric refrigerator, because I had a gas refrigerator, gas washing machine.

MM: Did your mother-in-law live back in there too?

SW: Um hmm. She had a big house back in there on the hill. She started off, I think, with the four rooms, two down, and two up. She had quite a large family, and she were, she were a go-getter. She would build a porch on and the next thing you know, she had a room. She ended up with one, two, three, about a six, eight rooms in that house. Start off with a porch and she just, she just

MM: Kept going.

SW: She were a go-getter but she was just so domineering. You know. I were glad when I got out of there but she died years before I moved.

MM: Where was the money supposed to come from for the materials and all? Did each family get their own or....

SW: Somehow Fr. Kavanaugh were supposed to have seen to that part of the finances, himself for to do those things with, but, as I said, didn't, we didn't get that far in the project for to do anything. That's what happens when one want to be first and he just suggested that we should have been first. And that's her husband that I had on the phone. Well they've been divorced for years now, but they were together then.

MM: So, because of that little trouble there with who was going first, they didn't help out as much as they should have?

SW: They didn't help us after that. My mother-in-law had someone else to, you know, finish building the house closed the outside in and all. But she did not have the drywall put through the whole house. She probably ran out of money, too. Who knows, she didn't say. I were just so glad to get in it I didn't care. [laughter]

MM: It would be interesting to see if that house is still up.

SW: I have to ask, I should have asked my son, Chum, that were in here. He probably know.

MM: I'll ask him when I go out.

SW: But, I've enjoyed it myself It wasn't a problem when they started the St. Joseph's Project or the barracks, it was just this first one they tried with Fr. Kavanaugh tried to get off the ground. Cause John, the one we call Snack, he said that they he just used all, had got all his cinderblocks from up Mechanicsville. Cause what few was made was used for the, what you call the bottom of the house?

MM: The foundation.

SW: Yeah.

MM: Was Fr. Kavanaugh upset

SW: Oh, yeah.

MM: When you had trouble, when things didn't work out?

SW: Oh, yes, he apologized, he was so nice. He apologized MM: Because you didn't get the help you expected?

SW: That it didn't work out the way he had it planned. Things happen sometimes. Quite a experience. I learned from it, you know. I went to St. Joseph's school. He were there when I graduated. He baptized most all my kids, he married me....

MM: How did your husband feel about the whole thing?

SW: It didn't seem to matter to him one way or the other, because he knew his mother would look after. [Laughter] He knew that she would see to it, you know that it got partially finished, which she did. I give that to her, she did. I did the drywall in the other two rooms and the electricity in it. I were in a car accident and I took the money and put that, had that put in it. My father and my nephew by marriage did that for me. And then I had the electricity put in. We never had plumbing back in those days, cause houses back there didn't have plumbing, houses back there. All Mrs. Butler's land, not any of them had plumbing and only two of them there now have plumbing. That big house that my mother-in-law lived in, they've since burned that down.

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