

**UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS**  
Oral History Documentation Project  
The St. Joseph Parish Housing Project

Mary Dickerson  
Joseph Dickerson

July 2, 2009 at 10:00 AM  
Interviewed by Michael McCauley  
at their home in Abell Maryland  
Transcribed by Michael McCauley on October 24, 2009  
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26 minutes, 23 seconds

[Begin digital recording]

MM: Introduction by Michael McCauley: This morning I'm talking to Mary and Joseph Dickerson at their home over here in Abell, right by the Potomac River. And they still live in the barracks house that was built --. When was it built?

MD Ahh.

JD It was right before --. When was that little girl born?

MD Which one? Martina?

JD Yeah, she was born over here. When was she born?

MD '53 wasn't she?

JD Yeah, so it was '51 or '52.

MM Uh huh, and what was your life situation when you got this house? I mean where were you living?

MD Oh, I was living with his mother. We got married in '47 and we lived with her until I guess about '50, about '53.

MM Um hmm. And that's when the house was completed?

MD Um hmm, completed.

MM And you moved over here.

MD Right.

MM Ok, so was --. When you were living with --. That was Ms. Betty you were living with?

MD Um hmm, his mother.

MM His mother.

MD Um hmm.

MM Was it crowded in the house?

MD No, her house wasn't crowded, wasn't crowded.

JD It was a big house.

MM Oh it was a big house.

MD She had a great big old house over there.

MM So was there more than one family living in the house?

JD Sure it was.

MD When we lived over there it was just ....

JD Me, you ....

MD Yeah, and my next door neighbor.

MM Hmm.

MD His brother.

MM Ok, ok. And how did you find out about this project they were starting?

MD My mother, she's the one knew all about it. [laughter]

MM Ok.

MD And brought it down here to me.

MM So what did you have to do to get one of the houses?

MD Ah, I really don't know. See, she would ....

MM She handled it all.

MD She handled all of that.

MM So

MD She brought it to us to start with as a wedding gift.

MM Oh, really.

MD Umm hmm, and his Daddy gave us the land.

MM Ok. Ok, great, great. So, uh, did you have to go up and help bring the house down,?

JD No.

MM They brought it all down for you.

MD She had some, yeah, she had somebody brought it down. I can't remember who it was now.

MM Um hmm.

MD It's been too far back for me. [laughter]

MM Uh huh.

JD It's been almost, them windows, sixty years.

MD Sixty years, umm hmm.

MM Sixty years, wow! Yes, yes. As far as I know you are the only couple that are still together in their house, in their original house.

MD Yeah, we've been married 62 years.

MM Oh gosh, that's wonderful.

MD In November.

MM Uh huh. So how many children did you have when you moved in here?

MD When I moved in here ....

JD When we moved in we had what, four?

MD Yeah, I had four. Five girls and one boy.

MM Wow, um hmm.

MD And we all snuggled in here. [laughter] Yeah.

MM Was it exciting when you moved in here?

MD Indeed it was.

JD Yeah.

MM To get your own place.

MD Get your own place, yeah.

MM Did it have running water or electricity when you first ...?

MD No, no.

MM When you first moved in? Neither one?

MD We had electricity. No, did we?

JD [laughter] We had electricity.

MD No we didn't have electricity, because, you remember, the doctor came here, we had lamps. Yeah, no, we, uh, moved in here in '53 and we probably got, you know, electric some during that year.

MM Um hmm, within the first year.

MD Right.

MM Um hmm. When they delivered this house was it already partially put together?

MD Um hmm.

MM Oh, it was?

MD Yeah.

JD It was in sections, that's all, odd sections. We had to do all that over.

MM You had to kind of make those sections fit what you wanted.

MD Right.

JD We had to get some more lumber, too.

MM You did?

JD Yep.

MM Uh huh.

JD Yes indeedy.

MD Had to get some more of everything, windows and all that stuff, because it didn't have none in it.

JD The foundation.

MM You had to pay for all of that yourselves.

JD Yeah.

MM Did you have to pay for the package they brought down or is that what your mother -

MD That's what she did.

MM Gave you?

MD Yeah, she took care of that part.

MM Uh huh, the wedding present. She got a house, too, didn't she through that?

MD Yeah, and one of my sisters, I think Molly got part one, too, didn't she?

MM I don't know, I'm going to talk to Molly.

MD Yeah, I think she did.

MM Uh huh, ok, so then you, and your brothers took it from there? You, you and your brothers took it from there.

JD Yeah.

MM So you, you had enough carpentry skill among your family.

JD We knowed a little bit about carpentry. We set up all them row of houses. [on Dickerson Rd.]

MM Uh huh.

JD Yeah.

MM That's great, because some people, I know, they had to get in a carpenter to put up the houses.

MD Yeah, we got one like I told you to do this stuff here.

MM Just recently, yeah.

JD To redo all this stuff here. But this whole thing been remodeled twice. I mean this part....

MD This is the barrack part.

MM From where to where?

MD From here to over there. [pointing to the far wall]

MM To the wall?

MD Uh huh.

MM So all this is new over here?

MD All this is new, yeah.

MM Ok, uh huh, yeah. [pause] Did you know Fr. Kavanagh?

MD Yes, indeed, because that's where I'm from. [laughter] I'm from St. Joseph's, went to St. Joseph's here until I got married. Fr. Kavanagh married us.

JD All the way down there?

MD Huh? Not, no Fr. Kavanagh, no. St. Joseph's.

MM Yeah, uh huh.

MD Yep, that's where I came from, right up on that hill. [laughter]

MM What was he like?

MD Fr. Kavanagh? He was good. Yes he was. Yes indeedy.

MM Did he come over here and see how the house was going?

MD No, he never came down here.

MM Uh huh. It was kind of far outside his parish.

MD Yes, um hmm.

MM But he knew ....

MD I'm in Holy Angels parish now.

MM Yeah, uh huh. Did you know, uh, did you know Scanlon Herbert?

MD Yes, indeedy.

MM Did he ever come down here?

MD No. [laughter]

MM They just, they just said, “Ok here’s some, here’s some materials for you.” And somebody brought it over here to you.

MD Yeah, Momma took care of all that stuff, on her end.

MM Uh huh. What was Scanlon Herbert like?

MD [laughter]

JD We know him, that’s all.

MM He drove a school bus, I know that.

MD Yeah.

MM He seemed, seemed to have been kind of a sparkplug in putting this whole thing together.

MD Oh, Yeah?

MM According to ....

JD Who, Scanlon?

MM Yeah, I think in that little booklet there it says that, Fr. Kavanagh says that when they were putting up the school there, you know the building for the school?

MD Uh huh.

MM That came from Ft. Meade also.

MD Oh, did it?

MM Um hmm.

MD The school behind the church?

MM No.

JD Morganza, ain’t it?

MM Yeah, the one, the one that was the colored school, St. Joseph’s Colored School.

MD Right, that was behind it, yeah.

MM And now it's apartments.

MD Um hmm.

JD That's where it's at.

MM Uh, Fr. Kavanagh says in there that Scanlon Herbert had the idea that if we can use this for a school, why can't we use it for houses.

MD Right, he had a good idea. [laughter]

MM Do you remember how long it took you to put the house up?

JD How long do you think it took?

MD Indeed, I don't know.

JD Working on it a little bit at a time.

MM Six months or so?

JD No. [laughter]

MM Not that long?

MD It took longer than that.

MM Longer than that?

JD You mean put it up, you mean put the house up?

MD You mean get it together?

MM Yeah.

MD Oh Yeah, it took longer than that.

JD After it kind of lay there for a while, then we went to work on it.

MD About a, about a year.

MD It wasn't no year?

JD Indeed it wasn't. It might have been seven, eight months.

MD Seven, eight months.

MM Uh huh.

JD That's so far back now.

MM Then how many brothers worked with you on it?

JD Two. Even much my father helped a little bit on it [laughter], when he was living, yeah.

MM That would have been Ms. Betty's husband. What was his name?

JD Yeah, George Allen Dickerson.

MM George Allen?

JD Um hmm.

MM What kind of work were you doing then?

JD Oystering.

MM Oh, were you?

MD He's been a waterman all his life.

JD ... a waterman. I've been on the water all my life, ever since I was about 18.

MM Really.

JD Since a little boy crabbing around the shore.

MM Really, so you've lived down here all your life.

JD Yeah, um hmm. Yeah, did a lot of crabbing too. Back in them days there was something to catch, not like now. [laughter] Everything done disappeared now.

MM Yeah, it's a good thing you don't have to make your living on that now.

JD That's right

MD [looking at list of name of other barracks house owners] Cullins Butler, Paul Reed, ....

MM Do you know where his house was, Paul Reed?

JD Up at Budd's Creek somewhere.

MM That's apparently where he lived later on, but didn't he have a house somewhere around Morganza first?

JD I don't know.

MD Paul Reed.

JD I don't think so. ....

MD They must have lived close, Joe, they must have lived somewhere.

MM Do you have any memories about building this house, any particular thing that happened or any ....

MD No, the only thing was glad to get in it. [laughter] That's the only memories I got was getting in there.

MM Were your kids excited to get in it?

MD Oh, yeah.

MM How many bedrooms did it have at first?

MD Uh, two. There, I think over here was a bedroom.

JD Had three altogether when I added that.

MD Yeah, you added that back on the side.

JD On the back. Three bedrooms.

MD It's a nice little project book [looking at "Good Homes Are Everybody's Business," a brochure on the St. Joseph's Project]

MM Yeah, it is, it is.

MD There's Alice Marshall and Scanlon Herbert.

MM You knew all those people, huh.

MD Wilson Marshall, uh huh, every one of them. John T. Somerville.

JD That's her cousin, John T.

MM Oh, it's your cousin?

MD Um hmm.

JD First cousin.

MD I'm almost kin to everybody in Loveville. [laughter] That's the way it goes.

MM So, it sounds like, because you all were kind of at the most distance of anybody from Morganza, so it's kind of you all went off on your own in a way.

MD Yeah.

MM And your mother got the place for you.

MD Right.

MM Um hmm. And then you all took it from there.

MD Right. Then his Daddy gave him, us this plot of land.

MM Yeah.

MD All three brothers. Three houses, two houses coming in, that was his brothers and this one over in front was his brother.

MM Ok, so it's a family compound.

MD Right.

MM Did your --. Was your father the first one to own this property in your family, or did his father own it before him?

JD I didn't know his father. [not clear] That was back a long time ago before I was born, I guess.

MM Did any of your brothers want to get one of these houses when they saw how it worked?

JD No, I don't think so. [laughter]

MM I guess maybe it was kind of over with by then.

MD They wasn't that lucky.

MM Your mother's house is still existing there isn't it? [Beatrice Somerville's barrack's house]

MD Yeah, it's still there but it's in bad shape.

MM Uh huh, but your mother's house gives an idea of what the original house would have looked like. Because if it's the house I'm thinking of, it maybe didn't ever get added on to or anything. Did they ever make any ....

MD No I don't think --. Momma never added on.

JD No I don't think so.

MM Um hmm, yeah.

MD Because, I can always remember, you know, living in someone else's house, renting tenants, farmers. And I don't think I got to stay a night in that one. Maybe, maybe one night or so visiting, because I had left before she got that building.

MM So your family moved around from farm to farm?

MD Um hmm. When we first started out, you know, when we were children.

MM I guess that's what really made it, this project really made a difference in peoples' lives, because then they could have a place of their own, they didn't have to be ...

MD That's right.

MM Depending on the farmers.

MD When you're going to get put out or something. [laughter] Hard times.

MM Yeah, were your parents tenant farmers then?

MD Um hmm.

MM That's pretty amazing, you've lived here for 56 years. You've added on to it and made it into a beautiful home. So many of those, when you look down there on the list, they don't exist anymore.

MD Oh no?

MM I think maybe half, at least, don't exist anymore.

JD A lot of them people are gone, I think, the ones in that book.

MD Frank Carter.

MM Yeah, that house is gone.

MD It is?

MM Um hmm.

MD The Bankins.

MM Well, that's there. The houses in St. Joseph's Park, the ones, you know, where the statue is, are still there.

MD Fr. Kavanagh.

MM Yeah, Kavanagh Rd. Those are still there, but most of the barracks, well I'd say half of the barracks houses, maybe, no longer exist.

MD Which Collins was these, [looking at booklet] Henry Collins you reckon? [It looks like it's] Almost ready.

MM That's over in St. Joseph's Park you know.

MD Yeah.

MM So it's just down past where the community center is.

MD Yeah, that's where, Giv, what's his name, Joe? Givney Young?

JD That wasn't no barracks house.

MD Yes it is.

MM No, they weren't barracks houses.

MD These wasn't?

MM No, no.

JD All them houses were built out. [unintelligible]

MM There were 13 barracks houses altogether and, let's see, which ones are still up, Helena Holt's is up. Is that a list of them there?

MD Uh huh.

MM Here it is. Ok, Dick Forbes house in Morganza. That's still existing, I think that's where Jerome Herbert lives.

MD Yeah.

MM Um hmm. Ella Hebb, did you know her?

MD ... I might have known her.

MM That house is gone, but somebody told me she played the accordion, I don't know if that rings a bell to you.

MD Yeah.

MM But she lived on the Morganza-Turner Rd.

MD Turner Rd., yeah, um hmm.

MM And then Mach Holt. His house still exists and that's been renovated. Alphonse Fenwick, his is gone.

MD Yeah, Bootsie Fenwick, um hmm.

MM And Parran Woodland, that house is still up. Ms. Alberta Woodland still lives there.  
John Pinkney Young, his house is, is gone, they tell me.

MD Yeah.

MM Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Somerville. That was your mother, right?

MD Um hmm.

MM Now it says here that there were nine adults and seven children in that house [her  
mother's house]

MD Probably. [laughter]

MM Is that true?

MD I guess, indeed it was, she had thirteen of us.

MM Wow, ... wow. Nine adults and seven children. Umph. And where did they come from  
before they came to, before they got that house? What farm were they on?

MD Umm. What's the name, what's Alberta's, what was Alberta's husband's name?  
Vincena's father's name? Johnny Somerville. We lived in one of his tenant houses. Um  
hmm.

MM Huh. And Cullins Butler. Their house is torn down now.

MD Yeah.

JD Somebody's building a great big house there now.

MM They must have added on to that, didn't they?

JD No, they tore that down.

MD Somebody tore that ....

MM Oh, yeah, but I, it's gone, I know. And, ok, Helene Holt, hers is still up. Harrison Nelson, did you know them? At Helen, Harrison Nelson? Paul Reed, you mentioned him.

MD Yeah.

MM John Carter at Oakville, their house is gone and then you.

MD Um hmm.

MM So, that's one, two, three, four, five, six are still standing out of 13, except I don't know about Harrison Nelson.

MD Um hmm.

MM So it's either six or seven. So that makes this house a rare, a rare house, [laughter] because it still exists and it still looks so nice.

MD Um hmm. Yep, we put a lot of work in her.

MM Uh huh, uh huh, yes.

MD But, at least it was a start.

MM Yeah, yeah, and a good start. What did your Mom say to you; she said "They have this housing program and I'm going to get you into it"?

MD Um hmm.

MM "As a wedding present"?

MD That's what she said. [laughter] But at first she wanted me to come up there but it wasn't --. You know she wanted us living up there but didn't have room enough, so ....

MM Who did they get their land from, your mother?

MD Uh, Fredericks.

MM Fredericks, were they relatives of yours, or ...?

MD No, no.

MM They just bought it from them?

MD Just bought land, yeah.

MM There just wasn't enough.

MD No.

MM I know Mr. Joe wouldn't have wanted to leave the water anyway, would he?

MD Indeed he wouldn't of.

JD They never would have gotten me up there anyway. [much laughter]

MD He didn't want to leave and his Momma didn't want him to leave, so ....

MM It says in here, I think it says in here somewhere that they charged \$500 for each of the people that wanted to get a house.

MD Oh yeah?

MM Um hmm. Later they raised it to a thousand because I think they had to pay carpenters to work on it.

MD She must have caught them before they started.

MM Yeah, well that was a great gift from your Mom.

MD It sure was.

MM Um hmm. So in 1993 you had carpenters come in and they jacked it up, but they didn't add anything onto it then.

JD No, not then, just fixed a little part of it.

MD What you looking for?

JD Looking for when the carpenters came in and did it [?] . Right there, give me that one.

[looking through pictures] That's when they come in and redid the house.

MM Ok.

JD Contractors.

MM Ok.

JD Um hmm.

MD Tri-County contractors.

MM Oh really, and that was in ....

MD '93.

MM '93. That wasn't --. That wasn't Tri-County up at Hughesville, was it?

MD No.

MM There's a Tri-County Builders.

MD Right. That was a \$15,000 job.

MM Whew, wow. [laughter] And this is when they finished, hunh? [looking at pictures]

JD Now this is when they first came in. This is the first picture there.

MM Ok.

JD That's what we did.

MM Ok, the first one and then they went to this, they took the dormers off.

MD Um hmm.

JD Took the dormers off.

MM Such a nice picture, must be your son and granddaughter.

MD Huh?

MM Must be your son and granddaughter.

MD That's my son-in-law and my granddaughter.

MM Yeah. This one you can see the whole house. Ok and then which would be a good one to show this last renovation, when that was under way?

MD I don't have nary a one when it was completed.

MM Oh, well I'm going to take one outside to show it completed.

MD Oh.

MM This would be good, ... shows it in progress.

MD Oh, yeah, that was the lumber. [laughter]

[recorder turned off]

[End of digital recording]