

**UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS**

Oral History Documentation Project  
The St. Joseph Parish Housing Project

Helene A. Holt & John Armstrong

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Interviewed by Michael McCauley  
at their home in Clements Maryland  
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36 minutes, 3 seconds

[Begin digital recording]

Michael McCauley: OK, I'm talking this morning with Mrs. Helene Holt and John H.

Armstrong, who's Mrs. Holt's brother-in-law, married to his [her] older sister, and  
your sister's name?

Helene Holt: Mary B. Armstrong

MM: OK, we're talking this morning about the St. Joseph project, that was started at St.  
Joseph's parish at Morganza.

HH: Oaksville

MM: In Oaksville. OK, now, what do you remember about how this project got started.  
Do you have any recollections? How old were you then?

HH: Twenty.

MM: Twenty? But you were married when the project started?

HH: [indicates agreement inaudibly]

MM: What do you remember about it getting started, about hearing about it? Did you  
hear about it through your father or through Fr. Kavanaugh, or what?

HH: Well, both of them, because both of them was talking about this house and what

they were talking about and I heard through that way and then I told my sister which at that time they were living in Washington about it and I said "Boy, let us jump for it." My husband and I, we put our names in.

MM: Were you were living then ...

HH: At that time I was staying with my father, but I left and went to Baltimore to live.

MM: So, you weren't actually living down here when this project started then. You weren't living here you were in Baltimore?

HH: No, at that time because my husband also was in service and I was going with him.

MM: Um hmm.

HH: Back and forth.

MM: So when you heard about the project you decided to move back for that reason?

HH: When my husband come out of service ...

MM: OK.

HH: By that time we was in, my number come up for put my house.

MM: When you say your number came up, was it like a lottery or something?

HH: No, like, you know, they were taking turns who was the first one asked for it, like that.

MM: OK

HH: Which, who was the first one asked.

MM: It was like a waiting list?

HH: Yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah, and if they was able to. We was the one in the line to have this done for us.

MM: Did you have to put up any money for it.

HH: Oh yeah, we had to put up, I think we did.

MM: Then, did you have to go up to Ft. Meade?

HH: No, I didn't

MM: Did your husband?

HH: He went when he come in. He was in the service three years.

MM: So other men in the community, they brought the houses down?

HH: That's right.

MM: How did the houses get put up?

HH: Well, was James Rustin and Joe Smith with the help you know of other people coming in giving them a hand..

MM: So this is the same house we're in right now, isn't it?

HH: Yes, it is. It wasn't but four rooms, but afterwards we built upstairs to it. Which was already an upstairs, but we partitioned off for it, upstairs.

MM: So did it have the porches on or did you add those?

HH: No, no porches. We added those.

MM: You added those on. That's good.

HH: Yeah, we added them on. It was extra, but we had them do it. We was related. You see my husband was related to these two guys, not to the two guys, but to the Smith man, he was related to.

MM: OK, OK. Did the house have running water when you first got it?

HH: No. Yeah, yeah, we did. They put that running water in.

MM: When they built it. The land for the house, that came off you father's farm?

HH: My father. He deeded all his children two acres of land to build their homes.

MM: Were you the only one in the family who got one of these houses?

HH: No. They each got two acres.

John Armstrong: He means one of the barracks houses.

HH: Oh, the barracks houses. No, I'm the only one down here in Clements that did it. Only one in Clements that did it. Because you see, the people, most of them were getting it were in St. Joseph's parish. Most of these people live here go to another church, over at Chaptico.

MM: Over at Chaptico. OK. Was it an exciting thing to get that?

HH: Yes, it was. To get my home? Yes it is. To have my own place.

MM: Do you remember the day that you moved in.

HH: I haven't thought about it in so long, I don't know. Got so excited I lost my wedding ring, I know that.

MM: You did?

HH: Indeed I did.

MM: The day you moved in or when?

HH: Yeah, when I was moving.

JA: [intelligible}

HH: I lost my wedding ring I was so glad to get off to myself.

JA: [unintelligible]

HH: My husband had kin. He signed papers and went to work, you know, putting that siding on outside.

JA: [unintelligible]

MM: You could still work on it after it was ready to move in.

HH: Yeah, oh yeah, o yeah. That's how we added porch to the front and back.

JA: [unintelligible]

MM: Oh, so you worked on the houses. But you weren't living down here. You just

came down on weekends.

JA: Yeah. My mother and father were down here. My mother and father moved into the house and then we came down here and stayed in '87.

MM: You had a large family didn't you?

HH: Oh yeah, twelve.

[Recording was stopped and then turned on again.]

MM: From what I read in the booklet your father was president of this organization.

HH: Yeah, yes.

MM: What was your father like that he would get the leadership of this kind of program?

HH: He could get along with mostly anybody, but he was sort of a [unintelligible].

MM: [laughter]

HH: And we was older and the reason he had full respect because we didn't sass him.

JA: He had conversation with everybody and everybody knew him.

HH: He would try things. He would like the chance in things, you know A whole lot of things he aim to do and I used to get so hot he had to be the one to do it. Let someone else do it but he would always go for it and everybody was behind him.

MM: You didn't go to St. Joseph's parish then, right? You went to Our Lady of the Wayside.

HH: No, no. When I got married we still went back up there. You see when we lived back there, we was living in Morganza long time before we came back to this land here.

MM: Oh.

HH: My father inherited that from his father. MM: OK.

HH: And when, you see, his father got bad off, my father and his family all moved back down here, but continue going on to St. Joseph. That was our parish.

MM: OK, so that was how your father knew Fr. Kavanaugh.

HH: Yeah cause he was president of the Holy Name [Society] up there and all the priests began to know him.

MM: What was Fr. Kavanaugh like?

HH: He was a lovely priest. He couldn't do nothing wrong or say nothing wrong in my eyes, but that was just and the same way with my father. We had full, full respect for him, not only because he was a priest, but we just had full respect for him. I don't care who you were he would try to help, Fr. Kavanaugh.

JA: My father-in-law had a school bus and got in the school system.

HH: He was the first black man that drove a bus.

JA: That owned a bus.

HH: That owned a bus.

MM: Your father was.

HH: Um hmm. .

JA: He was a forward man.

HH: And Mr. Frank Bailey, he was the one that helped him.

MM: Did you ever hear your father talk about the project as it was coming along?

HH: Yes. Till I got tired hearing that. I got so tired hearing that. That was his main conversation. Oh Lord, that's the only thing he talked about. And I often used to say why can't he come on and build us a brand new home? [laughter]

MM: But he was building them for everybody else.

HH: Yes, that's the reason why, he was building them for other people, but he wasn't building his own house. We did have a big house, a great big house, but still we wanted a brand new home like everybody else was getting.

JA: He was well established. [unintelligible]

HH: He was very manly, he didn't back off. He was a very stubborn kind, I know that.

MM: Did you, were you aware of any problems or issues that came up while they were ...

HH: Having their, building their homes?

MM: Yeah.

HH: Well, some little things he got upset about. Some of the people didn't come up with the money or something like that he would get kind of angry about. And he would come home, you know, and he kind of, you know, upset and went on with it, but it still didn't stop him from talking about that project.

MM: He must have been proud, proud of it.

HH: Yes, he were, he were. He just were living for that.

MM: What did your mother think about it?

HH: Well, mother thought OK about it, but at the time mother was teaching, she was a teacher, she was. Started to raise a family and she, you know, she had to quit and went back after all the family. Taught up there at St. Joseph's school.

JA: Very nice people, very nice people. [unintelligible]

MM: How did the people around in the community who weren't in the project, did you get much feedback from them?

HH: Sometimes, but sometimes didn't, you know how it is. You can't satisfy

everybody like that. I know they were talking, you could tell they saying things because when they come around, they, you know, hush hush. Some of them, you know, didn't care for it because I guess, I figured on account of their name didn't come up for the house [laughter]. They wanted to build a home but they didn't have no land for the land, didn't have the money to put up like the rest of us. Poor Fr. Kavanaugh, Fr. Kavanaugh, he tried to get on and get them some money to put down on it.

MM: It was pretty hard times back then, wasn't it.

HH: Yes it were. Seemed like everybody just pulled together on it. I guess they were like me glad enough to get a home for their selves.

MM: Yeah.

HH: With a large family, when you're with a large family all of your life, you're glad to get to yourself.

MM: Yeah, that's true, that's true.

[Recorder turned off and then turned back on again.]

HH: Walked the land over and see where they wanted to build and I wouldn't go because I was scared of snakes. He didn't force me.

MM: Well, when, when somebody wanted to build they had to have their own land or get land and then your father would go walk over the land?

HH: With them, with the person that was buying the land. But I just wouldn't go, because I was scared.

MM: He wanted you to go?

HH: At times he wanted you to take, you know, some of the younger ones along, like me. Elizabeth, he would take her, she wasn't scared of nothing it seemed like to me, but I was scared of snakes. She would go at times but me, I swear, I just couldn't go. Them snakes were too much for Helen.

MM: Did you have a sister who was a nun?

HH: My father had two sisters that was nuns.

MM: Ok, Ok.

HH: My father did. That was my sister went to school in Baltimore, to high school in Baltimore, the one that passed, here last year, and she the one that went to school there, to high school.

MM: Did she come back to the County?

HH: No cause she went on, she got married when she come out of school. She got married and went on and followed her husband, where her husband went to. Dorothy.

MM: Who else do you think would be a good person to talk to about this, who was involved in this?

HH: Wilson Marshall and them's children. I don't know where in the name of the Lord they live. Elizabeth and Gussie, that was the first house they built, I think. Forbes.

MM: I know Elizabeth Forbes.

JA: Joseph Carter.

MM: Yes, I talked to his wife Genevieve, Agnes Genevieve.

HH: Agnes G.

MM: She's 95 years old.

HH: Right. Right. Right. That's the one whose daughter had recommended me....

MM: Shirley.

HH: That's Right. Mary Catherine Wallace. They should know something about it, how they went about it. I know Miss Agnes did, Wallace.

MM: What's his last name, Wallace?

HH: Ashton, lived right, little ways from Joseph Carter. Right there on the St. Joseph Project. Mary Agnes Young. They started from scratch. Anna Payne because Anna Payne bought the house from someone who gave the house up. Mary Agnes helped her father

MM: Where does she live?

HH: She lived right there on the project, too. You know where Rose Thompson lives?

MM: I think so, George Thompson's wife?

HH: Yeah, yeah. You from Oaksville?

MM: Yeah.

HH: You should know people from around there.

MM: I know some of them.

JA: Was Walter Mason involved in it?

HH: No, you see Walter Mason he built on his own land, his wife's people's land. He wouldn't know. The only ones ... , Mary Agnes is the one that went down and talked to the people about it. Mary Agnes should know a little something about it. Mary Agnes Young. You know where the Bankins live?

MM: Yeah.

HH: The little house facing to the Kavanaugh Road, not the one facing 247, the one facing Kavanaugh Rd., his house, Anna King's house, and that house sitting up on

the hill and another house sitting up on the hill. That's that house. That's one, two, three, the fourth house, in other words, right behind Thompson, the one you were speaking about.

MM: Right, behind Thompson, Thompson is the one closer out to the road?

HH: Right, right.

MM: That's that house back up in there.

HH: Up on the hill. She was the oldest and she seen after, helped her father make the payments and things on the house. She may know something. They told us what they wanted us to know and what they didn't want us to know they didn't tell us. They had that old way, had that old way in his head and you just couldn't get it out of his head.

MM: Yeah, yeah. Is the land still in your family, the farm?

HH: No, no my sister went on and sold it here a couple of two, three years ago. Everybody in our family was passed, there were thirteen of us and I don't think there's but five of us left. And nobody didn't want to rent the land for farming or anything like that. Back behind the houses, that was all our land back and come on up the roadway. I'm glad we got rid of it too, paying taxes on it, paying taxes on it and wasn't doing a darn thing on it. His wife, my sister, she was the administrator and she went on and we all agreed, go ahead and put it up for sale.

MM: Well, maybe, would your wife have any of the records that her father kept on this do you think?

JA: She's not in condition, right now.

MM: She's sick.

JA: She's in a wheelchair. She has a heart problem.

MM: OK. OK.

HH: She had open heart surgery.

JA: She's been through a lot of the last four or five years.

[Recorder turned off and turned on again]

MM: What was your thought about it then?

JA: I thought it was a beautiful thing, because I discussed with Fr. Kavanaugh came down and had dinner with them. Without Fr. Kavanaugh it never would have happened.

MM: How were the people living back then before they got houses?

HH: With their families, each other's families, you know, in-laws, things like that. I was living, right after I got married, live right here with my mother and father.

JA: I would come down and help occasionally, when I had time on my hands.

MM: How many brothers were there in your family?"

HH: In our family? Two.

MM: Just two? Two boys and ten, eleven girls? Oh, my goodness!

HH: [laughter] Yeah, and then one brother passed. There did have three boys but two boys. One brother passed about five, six years ago but I have a brother lives in California. He went in service and didn't come back. He said he was tired of farming. He made his home in California.

JA: The girls did the farm work. MM: Sounds like they had to.

HH: We did, we had to. That's what made me hot, walking up and down the rows, while he help people get homes and things, left us girls working. My father had so

much old ways in him, but I loved him just the same.

MM: So you didn't like the idea of him leaving you in the fields while he went out and

....

HH: You're dang right. Excuse me.

JA: He was one of the leaders and it took a lot of his time away.

MM: He had the responsibility, so he ....

HH: Yeah, so he, after he started, he had to continue with it. Oh, your names in here;  
no, St. Joseph's Welfare ....

JA: He was in St. Aloysius parish when he died.

HH: Oh, that's the parish he was in?

[Recorder turned off and turned on again]

HH: The White Pine Tavern over at Chaptico.

MM: I know where that is.

HH: After the White Pine, there's a trailer. I think there's a house up in there  
someplace. And the next house is Nelson. You know where William Young and  
all that bunch live up in there?

MM: No, I don't know William Young.

HH: And Paul Reed now, that house you talking about now was torn down, that house  
Elizabeth Herbert lived in on the other side, that house was torn down.

MM: That was Paul Reed's house?

HH: That was Paul Reed's house, but they all passed now. And which you know is Mr.  
and Mrs. John Carter?

MM: Yes, I talked to them. Was that the same one though?

HH: Yeah, Mr. and Mrs. John Carter, right there, Oaksville, that's in the barracks house. Mr. and Mrs. Dickerson in Oaksville or Oakley, Oakley not Oaksville. I don't know them. Dickerson, I don't know them. And Cullins Butler, he lived way down the road. That's all the barrack's houses. That's all the barrack's homes and that's it. Leroy Butler, that's Chum Butler, and John Berry.

MM: Snack Berry.

HH: That's right. You know. That's right. That's the house but I don't know where they live at.

MM: They call it Red Oak Lane. It goes up by....

HH: Oh, it goes up by the church that used to be there?

MM: That's right, by the Methodist church.

JA: I don't know if that house is still there.

MM: It's still there. It has a bunch of old cars around it.

HH: I've never been through there.

MM: It's where Dodo Chase has that roll back parked up in there.

HH: Oh, Dodo Chase, Dodo Chase, that's Agnes Chase's daughter, I mean son. I couldn't say. I've never been up in there. And the third lot, you know where Leroy Medley lives.

MM: Yeah.

HH: And you know were James Young, that's Mary Agnes Young lives.

MM: Near the Thompson's

HH: Right. And that Wallace Ashton's.

MM: Down a little farther on the left

HH: You know where on the same side as Genevieve Carter on down farther..... and you know where Frank Carter, you know that's Patti Scriber and them. That's up on that hill behind them Chase's and Butler's and all.

MM: Well, you see, that's the Carter I talked to I think. She was in the third project, so who is this Carter up here? Didn't you say a Carter up here somewhere?

HH: That's the one you said the wife is 95.

MM: I thought that was that one down here.

HH: No, unh unh, that's different. Carter married Patti Scriber, but them is dead.

MM: OK, OK.

HH: Kind of up there on the while, up behind the Butler's and Chases and all them live, right up in there. And Henry Collins, Thelma Collins, married her. And that's the one that lived right up there, one, two, second house from the rec center. In other words he lived right next door to this Chase. I thought everybody knows where the Chase's and Butler's live. [laughter] Every time you turn the radio on you hear the police are up there with them.... Back there where Snack Berry and them live. I never knowed where his house were. I don't know. It's Oaksville. And Bernard Bankins, you know were Bernard Bankins lived, right across the road.

MM: Yeah, I know where they lived.

HH: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven houses ...

MM: And now there's more because they built some up in the project after that.

HH: Yeah, yeah, oh yeah, Thompson and all them.—George Chase's house was built and his name wasn't in the paper. George Chase and Mary Ann's house and there name's not in there.... Bought the house afterwards. I forget the people's names. Anna King, her name's not in there. She bought the house afterwards. Somebody

put their house up for sale. I think it was Ashton or uh that bought the house first or Jimmy and Elizabeth Ashton bought that house first and gave it up. They went to Baltimore to live. Nelson, somebody gave that house up, Adams, wasn't it, at the corner where you turn onto that Dixon road.

MM: Joe Smith isn't still around is he, that helped to build the house?

HH: No, he passed, he passed.

MM: And Paul, you say Paul Rustin, or James.

HH: James Rustin. He passed, too.... I never took time to read it. Because the child took it and passed it on to me here last year.

MM: Oh yeah?

HH: George Chase and them had it and after he passed, his wife had it and gave it to her niece and then the niece she gave it to me.

[Recorder turned off and then turned on again.]

HH: Got the bus and carried a bunch of peoples up there for to tear the houses down. I remember that now. Cause we wanted to go cause we were working like mens, in the fields, it looked to me like we could go up there, because we were going to go up there to be sightseeing, but Daddy wouldn't let us go up there.

MM: He took the men up there in the bus?

HH: Yes many a time took them up there in that bus, that school bus.

MM: I wonder where they got the trucks to haul the stuff back.

HH: They had trucks. This one had a truck, they volunteered and they gave them a little something for their gas, I guess, I don't know, I'm quite sure. Cause I know a

whole lot of people, you know say they was, they know Daddy was the leader and they were going to follow him.

MM: Um hmm.

HH: Especially the ones that wanted the houses. Had their names on the list, you know. They were the main ones willing to get this one, that one to help them out. They were the main ones with this one and that one to help them out.

JA: [Inaudible comments]

[recorder turned off and then on again.]

HH: I drove for one of my sisters up at St. Joseph's, what do you call it, Mother Catherine Spaulding, and then after a while I got off that bus and drove my own bus. She didn't want to drive my brother's bus, she wanted to drive my bus because she liked to drive up on this end.

MM: You were a bus family.

HH: Yeah, and when my father give it up in '66 I took the bus from him and then I drove it until I was 67 and then I gave it up and didn't renew my license. I swear the children begin to get so bad.

MM: I know. It's a lot of responsibility.

HH: It is. Nobody don't realize until they drive a bus the responsibilities they have to have. I'm telling you, whew. I didn't have any problem out of my kids. No, no, no. The children were very nice.

MM: You probably didn't take any nonsense from them.

HH: There's a lot of things you got to see and not see when you drive a bus. See and

don't see. You can't jump a child every least little thing they do. Now you got to. You can't even put your hand on a child. You can't even tell a child how they look when they get on the bus.

[End of digital recording]