

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project and the
Southern Maryland Folklife Project, St. Mary's College of Maryland

James Alexander Forrest Sr.

Interviewed by Bob Lewis
February 25, 2003
For Bob's anthropology class semester project
At Mr. Forrest's home in Leonardtown
Logged by Bob Lewis on June 23, 2006
A verbatim transcript is available
Original format is one cassette tape
2 hours, 24 minutes, 57 seconds

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Track 01

- 0:00 Introduction by Bob Lewis
0:32 James Alexander Forrest – born 15 miles below St. Mary's City and 10 miles north of Pt. Lookout. Raised partially by great grandmother who was a former slaver freed at Point Lookout.
1:38 Great grandparents: Briscoe Smith from the Scotland area was her master. Told many stories of her slavery days. She married Lewis E. Bennett (his master was John Jay Lilburn from St. Inigoes area) who worked at Pt. Lookout during war (son did genealogy research to find this out). They had 4 boys & 1 girl. He owned 2 sailboats and bought 9 acres of land below Taylor's hill on road going down to Miller's Wharf. Farmed and did commercial sailing (took cord wood and other products to Baltimore). He had an orchard and horses. They laid the groundwork for him to follow. They were very strict and religious.

Track 02

- 5:47 One story about his great grandmother escaping from slavery. Used password 'Friend to guard' and 'advance friend and show your countersign' at the boundaries to the Pt. Lookout Camp/Prison.

Track 03

- 7:19 Great grandmother was a grown woman when Emancipation was signed, died in 1934 - calculated she was close to 100. His mother was 101 when she died.
8:30 Mother went away to work in Detroit, father was a waterman. There were no large farms in Ridge area at time. Blacks either worked in factory (summer) or on water (winter).

Track 04

- 9:35 Normal day chores: hogs and chicken to feed, wood to cut and bring in, water to get in from spring, went to school; the same as everyone else.

- 10:40 Went to Eastern Shore to pick strawberries
11:15 Raised most of food (chickens, hogs), had gardens, brought flour from store; food staples included fish, cornbread, beans, molasses etc., the same as most people in lower part of county.

Track 05

- 12:19 Relationship with great grandparent: Discipline was a stabilizer, different from today where parents try to reason with the child.
13:47 Cecilia Briscoe, teacher, called switches 'doctors' would sometimes say "you're sick, the doctor may have to give you some medicine."
14:15 Had respect for the elderly, so that form of discipline worked
15:15 That era was more peaceful, less tension and stress then now
16:06 Discipline example: sent to store at 9:00 expected you back by 9:15, if not there were consequences because you dilly-dallied. Not disciplined for anything major.

Track 06

- 17:57 Had half brother, only child of only child
18:20 Religion: Mostly Catholics in that area, religion seemed to be more structured than today. Was an alter boy, went to church every Sunday.
19:36 Travels: In winter sometimes went to uncles: If children had a serious illness went to Johns Hopkins (aunt worked there): Sold papers in Baltimore on Monument St. Lived in Detroit from 1921 to 1922, sold the Detroit Free Press.
20:33 Watched the men make cars on the assembly lines at the Ford Plants at Holland Park and River Road.
21:39 Seems to remember the Prince of Wales coming over and Henry Ford putting a car together for him, got out of school especially for that event. Family has done a lot of traveling to expose children to different ways of life.

Track 07

- 22:54 Doctors were there but not as available as today. Home remedies such as coal oil and sugar for sore throats for colds, mustard plasters on chest. Some people had skills and training passed down to them for these remedies

Track 08

- 26:29 Formal schooling: St Peter Claver in primer grade then to Cardinal Gibbons Institute (opened in 1924) which was non-denominational. Only high school in area in the early 30s for Blacks, kids from all over the country went there. Thinks it was experimental- basically industrial, farming methods.
29:00 Victor Emmanuel Daniel from Tuskegee taught different methods of farming such as rotating crops; brought in new era of living to Blacks.
30:30 Teachers: Cecilia Briscoe, Lula Harper from Charlotte Hall area, Sister Nunceida. At Cardinal Gibbons most nuns were from Louisiana (Ives, Duchaux, Parnell, Marchan).
31:31 Cardinal Gibbons was a boarding school with dormitories strictly disciplined by Mr. Daniels and were asked to leave if you didn't toe-the-line.

Track 09

- 32:36 After school went to work for four years at St. Mary's College (they were having a 300th year celebration) in 1933; Adele Franz was another disciplinarian; had one day a month off, made a good living - \$1 a day was top of pot; lots of people worked for \$.50 a day/ farmers \$1 a day.
- 35:00 J.J. Sullivan came from city and paid \$2 a day, nearly got run out of the county, paid too much.

Track 10

- 35:48 Only lived in Detroit about a year in 1920s. Henry Ford was a powerful man; had thousands of men working at the plants.
- 36:42 Schools in Detroit were not segregated. Lived in mixed neighborhood; mostly foreigners who came to work in factories. Jews had the stores.
- 37:10 Difference between the racial attitude in Detroit and here. It was the custom/ accepted here – that's the way it was. Didn't pay much attention when he was young.
- 40:00 After got older realized something was wrong with system.

Track 11

- 40:37 No problem with any teacher, liked History. Daniels wanted kids to look at finer things in life, broaden scope of knowledge. Studied Negro history- Wheatley, Dunbar, Du Bois, Washington etc. He opened the window to know these people. Daniels said look at Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University. He feels that some of us have lost that desire to be informed of certain activities and have pride in the race. Display at Library [African American Schools from a Century of Segregation]: shows that Blacks have made contributions.

Track 12

- 46:00 After St. Mary's went to work during summer as a waiter at the Meatyards Boys Camps in Piney Point then to the telephone company on contractual bases for 3 or 4 years: Harry Jones was contractor, supervisor was white and all the workers/ linemen were black. Was at Indian Head for 2 or 3 years then to C&P (Mother Bell) where he became foreman of all-black line crew in the 4 counties. Worked from Point Lookout to parts of Ann Arundel County for 34 years.
- 49:20 Segregation while working at C&P

Track 13

- 50:01 Started to wonder why segregation was necessary – an expensive and foolish system.
- 51:00 Segregation in school arena: Lettie Marshall Dent, conscientious, but had to conform because of her job. They were out to attack the system, to ask for justice. Attended meetings and discussed issues openly and honestly.

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Track 01

- 0:00 Worked on Charlotte Hall Project committee: Brought in Veteran's Home rather than hi-rise development.
- 0:56 Hospital Board: Sometimes ran up against brick wall
- 1:44 Gives credit to all the people who wanted to get things done

2:00 School Board: Served for 10 yrs, 5 as president

Track 02

- 2:10 Involvement in school system was a matter of money: Parents had to raise money for the schools/buy books. He was working for C&P when playground equipment was bought for Banneker by private funds. Got permission from his boss to use truck to pick up the equipment where it came in on the train at Forest Hall.
- 4:10 Appointed to School Board by Governor Mandel because he opened his mouth; Robert King, superintendent after Lettie Dent, put his name in the pot (just as they did for him to get the honor at St. Mary's College)
- 5:30 On Board during time of integration/ when attitudes were changing. Did not have a great awakening – he was just there.

Track 03

- 7:23 What his kids went through: His youngest son was some of the first to go to Chopticon (played football). Did not see any great commotion.
- 9:31 Set down with man he worked for, Bailey who owned restaurant in Leonardtown where pet shop is now, and asked if Blacks could come there to eat: The economic consequences of this move were explained.
- 11:38 Theatre House above Dukes: Came in difference doors but ended up in the same room.

Track 04

- 12:42 His son served in Vietnam; While in Florida, in uniform, was asked “nigger where did you steal that car”.
- 13:34 Did not know of anyplace in area that was not segregated. Worked as orderly in hospital; talked about the back steps that Blacks had to use.
- 14:41 Dr. Welch: Worked in operating room with him giving ether through a shifter and holding people down on the table.

Track 05

- 15:43 Hospital Board: Someone put his name in the pot, served for 7 of the 10-year term. Served during period segregation was still going on. Served again within the last 5 or 6 years
- 18:27 He was not the first Black on the School Board; Robinson Barnes, Leo Young and Raymond Hewlett were on before him. Does not remember if he was first Black on Hospital Board.
- 19:47 Served during construction stage of hospital. Board talked about segregation issues
- 20:00 Does not remember any marches to bring attention to the problem of segregation. Maybe NAACP did.

Track 06

- 20:58 Meeting wife: Married for 67 years. Leonardtown, during his courting days, was a Mecca for black socializing. Her mother owned a hotel in town – During any event (like March court or anything at the courthouse) Blacks stayed or had meals at that hotel. A friend introduced them, they courted for 3 years (he was working at St. Mary's City at the time). They had the right chemistry going.
- 25:02 They have 5 children; she is a good leader for the family and has been good for him.

Track 07

- 25:35 Community activities: NAACP and committees set up to study certain issues. Involved with school system good part of life.
- 27:00 Life is better now but it's hard to define and compare the differences.
- 29:00 Lifestyle changes because of having more money do not mean life is better.

Track 08

- 30:11 Very interested in Philosophy. People are so into this is mine. Self worthiness and using what is here; insignificance of ourselves.
- 32:50 Lifestyle changes: Uncle who was very down to earth said "machinery will be the ruination of man". Age of technology; computerized.

Track 09

- 34:30 In his opinion basically kids are no different now; availability of information makes them seem different.
- 36:00 Living in St. Mary's County has been good to and for his family.
- 37:05 Made fair wages to allow 3 kids in college at same time. He has been to ½ of US, Germany and Rome; they were not compatible to St. Mary's.

Track 10

- 39:06 Growth in county: He is comfortable/ complacent - would like to have seen less growth, but to control growth is impossible.
- 40:47 Wonders how much will be left for great grandchildren: 50 years ago there was plenty of water and land for everyone.
- 42:45 Depending on Defense has changed way of life in county. People are not independent; they depend on outside sources such as grocery stores for their food.
- 44:24 Most valuable things in his life are his health and family

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Track 01

- 0:00 Awards and Recognitions
- 1:30 Reasons a school was named after him
- 2:23 Received trophies and plaques when retired from school board

Track 02

- 3:46 Use to go to schools to 'preach' about Black History; telling kids about accomplishments that Blacks have made.
- 5:46 Use to visit nursing home and hospitals talking to people, but it got too depressing.
- 6:46 There is nobody he does not like; there are some he may disagree with
- 7:37 Box of awards and press releases upstairs.

Track 03

- 8:16 Has pictures of his elders on one wall, wife has hers on other wall.
9:50 Received a Dr. of Humanities from St. Mary's College a few years back. Put first invitation in trash, did not realize the importance of invitation.
11:26 Two doctors in the family: One granddaughter is a Dr. of Pharmacy.

Track 04

- 12:18 Receiving Doctorate: Two day event; had dinner with 'heavy shooters'. Born in a section of Ridge called Taylor's Hill, he felt overwhelmed and humble to be sitting with these professors, PhDs and MDs because he knew in his heart that he had done nothing more than anyone else.
14:49 Mr. Daniels, principle at Cardinal Gibbons, was inspirational to him and pushed him along. Institute built a house for him in Hollywood and set him up in the chicken business until the depression.

Track 05

- 17:09 Is there more you want to do? Wished he had paid more attention to his education. Philosophy would have been his goal in life. He likes studying people.

Track 06

- 20:03 Before TVs, radios and phones use to have to make up own stories: Use to tell the kids about Uncle Remus - the story of Bier Fox & Rabbit and Tar Baby and how they made their living.

Track 07

- 24:17 How countians kept informed: As a child his aunt (who had a fairly good education) would read the paper called 'The Grit' to them; on Sundays at church; at Post Office (almost a community gathering place). Before the 1940s mostly doctors and stores were the only ones who had telephones.
26:50 Big stories when growing up: Titanic – news about it was just getting to them (5 years late), then WW1 and the experiences of the men coming home.

Track 08

- 28:41 The Depression: not as great here in the county: Grandparents owned own farm and didn't have to move. Lots of stories told but didn't involve them too much.
30:30 Jim Crow Law: didn't have much dealings with it.
31:30 Work history: Worked at St. Mary's City as waiter during the Tercentennial; while still at school, was a waiter at Pt. Lookout Hotel (largest building in lower St. Mary's County). It was where the aristocrats from Baltimore and DC spent their vacations; worked for telephone company; did a little farming raising tomatoes; worked at Hotel St. Mary's (3 stories) in Leonardtown; shined shoes in Leonardtown; did little carpentry jobs painting and cooking.

Track 09

- 34:52 Threatened because of race: Felt threatened when denied service in restaurant; felt embarrassed, humiliated and aggravated and then you realize it's the law.

37:23 Felt some of the people would have served them if it wasn't law: Had to be careful or the bitterness would fester. That was the law and the custom and you had to approach it a different way.

Track 10

39:52 Results from these aggravations: Young Blacks are frustrated today and do foolish things. MLK successes were because he stepped back and looked at the situation.

41:30 Accused of not doing enough to rebel

42:11 He and wife have made a good team

Track 11

42:17 In their church were forced to sit in back of church; 30 years ago could not sit in front of church - now a lay minister in that same church.

45:50 Doesn't talk to his children much about these frustrations.