

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS  
Oral History Project

John Samuel Weiner

Interviewed by Alma Jordon, Anna Moseley, and Jeanette Kelly

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a verbatim transcript is available

Original format is MP3 from digital audio recorder

47 minutes, 11 seconds

00:31 Introduction – John Samuel Weiner was born in Leonardtown, Maryland on October 13, 1949.

00: Family and early years – His parent were Joseph and Roberta Weiner. They lived in a two-story brick house across the street from the Governmental Center in Leonardtown. His father was an attorney and was a circuit court judge for one year and his mother was from the Eastern Shore. She initially taught in elementary school for four years until she started to have children. Mrs. Weiner had six children in 11 years. During this time, she became a housewife. John was the third child, and they were all raised in that house.

2:05 Father - His father built the house in 1946. He was born and raised in St. Inigoes. As teenagers, his father's parents immigrated from Lithuania in 1900. They had a general store and post office in St. Inigoes.

3:15 Church and community activities - His father was very involved in politics. He was elected states attorney in 1966 and 1970. In 1972, he was appointed circuit court judge by Governor Mandel. He was only a judge for one year after he lost the election to Joe Mattingly.

4:05 Professional life and wife - Upon returning from law school John practiced law with his father. He retired after 45 years. His wife Sharon was from Baltimore, and she initially taught school in the city for 3 years before moving to St. Mary's. She taught at the elementary school level for 32 years before retirement.

5:15 House and family – They built their house in Esperanza Farms 41 years ago. They have three children. His two sons live in Hollywood. His daughter's husband

is in the Navy and they live in Jacksonville, Florida with his two grandchildren. His other two grandchildren live in St. Mary's.

5:50 Growing up in St. Mary's – They were a close knit family and they all went to public schools in the county. They went to Leonardtown School when it was 1<sup>st</sup> through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. At one point, all six siblings were in school together and riding the same bus. During that time his oldest sister was in 12<sup>th</sup> grade and youngest brother was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. They attended Chopticon High School when it opened.

6:40 St. Mary's County – He enjoyed rural life in St. Mary's county and thought it was a good place to raise kids. His wife was a city girl, but she adjusted well and was involved with work and the community.

7:40 Lawyer in the family – Mr. Weiner received his undergraduate degree for University of Maryland College Park. He and his father received their law degrees from the University of Baltimore. At the time his father went to law school, they were not required to attend undergraduate school first. He went from Great Mills High School to law school. His father passed the bar and was an attorney at age 21. His brother Ted is also an attorney and is a St. Mary's County Deputy State's Attorney.

9:00 Race Relations – When his father was growing up in St. Inigoes, the population was 75% African American. His father had African American friends and a lot of them shopped at his grandparent's store. His father set a good example for his children and taught him to be fair with people and not be prejudiced. He also had a lot of African American friends and clients in the law firm. Things were unfair during the time when everything was segregated in St. Mary's until public accommodations passed in 1964. Chopticon High School was integrated when it opened in 1965.

12:00 Race situations – Growing up in Leonardtown, the business and the Catholic Church were segregated. They had an African American babysitter named Ella Butler. She was Catholic and when she took them to church, they all sat in the balcony because that's where the African Americans had to sit. It was the same situation in the movie theater. He felt the balcony in the movie was better because it was more private, and you could "get sweet" with your girlfriend.

When the lunch counter in the pharmacy was segregated, he remembers his friend Harry Mason could buy a sandwich, but would have to go out back to eat it or take it with him. "That was so ridiculous, unfair and wrong."

Once Lyndon Johnson signed the 1964 civil rights laws, things changed. He also noted how even the World War I memorial was segregated with whites on one side and colored on the other. The Catholic schools were also segregated.

15:30 Are things better - They are much better now. During desegregation they thought there would be "terrible trouble." There were an average number of fights in the school. The younger people seemed to be able to work it out and get along. After desegregation, there were more opportunities for business, education, and employment for African Americans. The Navy base influenced a lot of positive changes.

When he graduated from Chopticon High School in 1967, there was a saying. "When you graduate from Chopticon, we're going to give you two pieces of paper. One is your high school diploma. Two is a one-way ticket out of St. Mary's County. There weren't as many opportunities to work in the county at the time. Most people had to leave to work in DC. Now there are more opportunities to work on the base in civil service or contractors. When he graduated most of his classmates moved out of the county for job opportunities.

18:25 Military Base – It was unfortunate that people living on the property that is now the military base lost their land. They were compensated for the property that was acquired by the federal government. The acquisition of the property was necessary for defense during World War II. The building of the base allowed younger people to have jobs and more opportunities without having to commute one and a half hours to DC.

20:10 St. Mary's County experiences - John felt that the county was too rural when he was growing up and there wasn't a wide spectrum of people and things to do here, but it was a good place to raise children. It is close enough to go to DC or Baltimore for sport events and museums. He doesn't like the crowded roads of city life. He enjoys the friendliness of running into people he knows.

22:35 Relationship with Harry and Kathy Mason - Kathy Mason was their housekeeper in Leonardtown when he was growing up. She was a dear and very

special person who thought of the Weiner family as her own. When she babysat, her husband Harry would come over and have dinner with them too, which made him become close to him too. When he and his wife had children, Kathy came to work for them. Harry also drove the school bus for his daughters sports events. We kept in touch with Kathy because she was a special person. The family requested that I do her eulogy at St. Aloysius church and I was happy to do it. His parents thought the world of Kathy. One of his dearest friendships was with Kathy and Harry.

25:40 Historical events – Senator Paul Bailey told the story of Thurgood Marshall (future Supreme Court Justice) visiting St. Mary’s County between 1937 and 1941. Based on the book “Young Thurgood,” by Larry Gibson, during this time period he was the attorney for the NAACP handling education civil rights cases. The book presented data that in 1932, the African American teachers in the Maryland public school system were making half the salary of the white teachers. Mr. Marshall filed and won a case starting in Montgomery County to make the salaries equal. Next, he went to Calvert County and won a case there. He went to different counties filled suit or persuaded them to make the salaries equitable. According to Paul Bailey, Phillip Dorsey told him that Thurgood Marshall had come to St. Mary’s County and spoke with him and Superintendent Lettie Dent about the inequity. He told them if they didn’t make the pay equitable, he was going to sue them.

“Yeah, as Paul Bailey tells the story, he actually gets into the voice of Phil Dorsey. And I can't do it justice, but what he said,” “Now Miss Lettie, you're going to have to find the money to pay equal pay to the black teachers, same as the white teachers. You guys still going to have to look in your budget, Miss Lettie, and you have to find the money.”

“They said, what Thurgood Marshall did in Maryland, including what he did in St. Mary's County, it spread throughout the entire South. And it established, the NAACP, established their reputation as a leading civil rights organization.”

37:00 Two of his brothers are named after his father’s two best friends, Paul Bailey, and Phil Dorsey.

37:54 Historically information – During the early 1950's "Theodore McKeldin was the governor of Maryland, and he was a Republican. In those days, the Republicans were the more progressive party, and they were more for civil rights than the Democrats, who tended to be in this county Southern Democrats. And they were not as progressive on civil rights as actually the Republicans were back in the 1950s."

At the time, his father was the leader of the Republican Central Committee. The governor would make appointments based on the recommendations of the committee. His father was instrumental in the appointment of five African Americans appointments. They were appointed for the following positions:

Robinson Barnes (Board of Education) Leroy Thompson (Supervisor of Elections), and three Justice of the Peace appointments to Owen Baldwin, Irvin Shuebrook, and Clem Dyson. "But during the 1950s, to me, it's remarkable that this happened in 1950s. Where St. Mary's County was still very segregated. African Americans were still treated as second class citizens. They couldn't eat a sandwich at the drug store." The schools and businesses were still segregated.

John has a lot of respect for his father "to do the fair thing." To recognize his help with the African American community, Bobby Gant and the Knights of St. Jerome honored his father and made him an honorary member of the organization.