

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions  
Oral History Documentation Project

George Purnell Frederick, Sr.

Interviewed by Richard Portee  
November 16, 1996  
at his office (county administrator's office in the Governmental Center)  
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48 minutes, 26 seconds

[Begin Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]

RP: I would just simply like to ask you a few questions, of course, on behalf of the Unified Committee for African American Contributions Oral History project. And, what is your name?

GF: George Purnell Frederick, Sr.

RP: And the address?

GF: PO Box 106, [redacted street address], Abell, Maryland 20606.

RP: And what would be your telephone number?

GF: 301-769-3406.

RP: If I'm not too personal, the date of your birth?

GF: 8/25/22.

RP: And birth place?

GF: It's Clements, Maryland.

RP: Tell me a little bit about your education. What level of education of did you go to?

GF: Well, I was pulled out of school at 8<sup>th</sup> Grade because my father was ill and he hadn't – was working on buying a farm. And, I had one sister in high school and high school, at that time, was in Charles County. There wasn't any in St. Mary's County.

RP: Okay. So, what were some of the schools?

GF: I was attending Banneker School at that time. Yes. She was going -- She was boarding -- My sister was boarding in Charles County at Pomonkey High School so she could further her education.

RP: Okay, you personal. You went from what grade to what grade?

GF: For all time, I went from the 1<sup>st</sup> Grade to the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade.

RP: Okay. At what school?

GF: At Banneker School.

RP: Banneker School. And, did you ever attend any schools? Get any other training somewhere else? Technical training or something?

GF: Only other training I got I give it to myself through looking at my sister's books when she was in high school. She was one grade ahead of me.

RP: Alright. Thank you very much. What is your occupation?

GF: Right now, I'm retired.

RP: What was your occupation?

GF: I retired from the St. Mary's County public schools.

RP: As?

GF: As a Supervisor of Custodial Services.

RP: Okay, and your wife? What is her name?

GF: Rita Elizabeth Frederick.

RP: Rita Elizabeth Frederick. Your -- tell me about your mother's grandparents. Tell me a little bit about them.

GF: About my grandparents? On my mother's--?

RP: On your mother's side.

GF: On my mother's, I only remember my grandfather which is my father's mother on my mother's side. He was a -- born on a slave farm and he was about eight years old, he said, when slaves were freed.

RP: And was that in St. Mary's County?

GF: Yes. St. Mary's County.

RP: Any particular farm, do you remember?

GF: I don't remember. I said St. Mary's County, I think. It could be in Charles County.

RP: Okay. So you don't know about your mother's parents.

GF: No. I don't know anything about her mother.

RP: Your mother -- Can you tell me a little bit about your mother?

GF: Well, only thing I could tell you ---

RP: What was her name?

GF: Her name was Lena Frederick.

RP: And, what about your father?

GF: Father? Father's name was John.

RP: Do you have any children?

GF: I have 12.

RP: Twelve children.

GF: Three adopted children.

RP: Thank you so much for this.

Now, moving on to some other questions I would like to ask you, Mr. Frederick. What were the times like when you were a child?

GF: Times were very tight when I was a child. Glad to get a penny like most people now get \$5.

RP: How did you and your family live?

GF: Well, I worked several jobs. I farm a little bit. I did construction work when I could find it. I contracted small jobs. I worked on, a little bit on the water as a waterman.

RP: What did you eat?

GF: Well, I raised pork. And of course, I worked on the water a bit so I would eat a little bit from the seafood, raised gardens.

RP: Do you think times were better or worse than they are now?

GF: Times were much worse than they are now.

RP: Why do you think so?

GF: Well, you couldn't make money enough to do hardly anything for the family. Most I could do was feed them and cloth them.

RP: When you were a child?

GF: When I was a child? Well, I worked many days on the farm. I didn't receive; I would say hardly any -- any money. I was glad to get 10¢ or 5¢.

RP: What is your earliest memory?

GF: I would say when I was about four or five years old about my brothers would be my

earliest memory.

RP: Can you describe your relationship with your siblings?

GF: Oh, I have a very good relationship with my siblings. Got along very well.

RP: What church did you attend?

GF: I attended St. Aloysius Church in Leonardtown. And then from there, we moved to Loveville. I attend St. ... Church.

RP: Going to church, how was the transportation?

GF: We walked to church. Once in awhile, my father would take us in the buggy when I was very small.

RP: Kinda like the Amish do today.

GF: Like the Amish do today.

RP: What are some of the trips that you did take as a child?

GF: Trips that I took when I was -- First thing I remember is taking trips, going down to the, to the water to go crabbing and things of that nature in the spring and summer.

RP: Looking forward to that weren't you?

GF: Looked forward to that.

RP: What about your health...during that time? How did your parents deal with your health and illnesses?

GF: Well, when we -- When we mostly had colds, they had some type of a remedy that they would give you. They would make some type of tea or something to help you with your colds.

RP: Do you remember any special cures?

GF: No, I really don't. I really don't remember any special --

RP: What about medical bills? Did your family have any medical bills? Or, medical doctors?

Excuse me.

GF: Yes, we had a medical doctor.

RP: What was his name?

GF: Dr. Greenwell

RP: Dr. Greenwell. Okay, what types of things did you do as a child? What did you like to do?

GF: As far as recreation?

RP: What did you like to do the most?

GF: On Sundays, we would get a little free time and go to visit my cousins and play.

RP: Why did you like to do that the most?

GF: Well, that's the only time that we wasn't really working. I didn't have something to do.

RP: What chores did you have to do?

GF: Oh, I -- getting wood, chopping wood, getting water, getting up the cows, milk the cows.

RP: How did you get the water? Explain what you mean.

GF: Well, we -- Well, especially time for wash days, you have to draw the water out of a well and take it to the house for washing.

RP: How did your parents treat you?

GF: Oh, they treated me very well. Very well. Of course, I know if I got into mischief, I would be corrected. They would spank me which I think was very well.

RP: When they spanked you, what were you disciplined for usually?

GF: Disciplined for something that I know I shouldn't have done.

RP: Like what? You can't remember? I'm not trying to be too personal.

GF: I was -- I would say I was a bad boy. I did several things that I shouldn't have done.

RP: A rascal. Like that?

GF: A rascal. [Laughter]

RP: Do you feel that your parents prepared you well for life?

GF: Well, they did the best that they could with what they had. They wasn't educated either. I feel that they did the best that they could.

RP: Describe your formal schooling. How did you get to school?

GF: Well, I walked to school at my first two or three years. I walked to school all of my life.

RP: And how far, round-trip did you have to walk?

GF: My first schooling was only about a 1/4 of a mile from school. My first three years. And the rest of the time, I was about, approximately 1 mile from school. It was about a mile each way.

RP: You were lucky.

GF: Yes, I was lucky.

RP: What was your classroom like?

GF: Well, the classroom was -- was -- after I went to Loveville for that first four, five years we had Grades from 3-7<sup>th</sup> in one classroom. My teacher was Mr. Thompson, Frank Thompson.

RP: Was that the name of your favorite teacher?

GF: Well, I would say --

RP: What was the name of your favorite teacher?

GF: Well, I give a lot of credit to my first teacher, Mrs. Devora Somerville because I was a bad boy and she corrected me. And I know if she hadn't corrected me, then I probably wouldn't have gotten as far as I did.

RP: What about your least favorite teacher?

GF: I liked all of my teachers.

RP: What was your favorite subject?

GF: My favorite subject really was English.

RP: What was your least favorite subject?

GF: My least favorite subject was Math.

RP: Why do you think that was your least favorite subject?

GF: Because it seemed to be a little tougher, a little harder to get anything out of.

RP: You could handle English a lot better.

GF: I could handle English.

RP: As a teenager -- No, let's go back. What were your dreams of becoming? What were your dreams of becoming as a young adult?

GF: Well, I used to look at teachers when I was going to school and we, once, we had a teacher to board with us. And, I felt that I wanted to be into that. Would like to have been educated pretty well.

RP: As a teenager, did your parents let you court?

GF: No. I didn't.

RP: That was to boot, huh?

GF: I think I probably started going out pretty early because I was working the farm and I felt, had a feeling that they would let me go out when I was about 15, 16 years old to --

RP: Where would you go?

GF: Well, we'd go to ball games. Got with my -- I had some other friends. We used to go walk up and down swamps in the woods. That's your way of courting. That was the only courting we did at that time.

RP: What was it like when you first went out on your own?

GF: Well, it was a different world. When I first went out on my own, I used to think a bit of feeding myself and a place to stay. Of course, I stayed with my parents until I was about 19 years old.

RP: When you actually went out on your own, where did you go?

GF: I actually went on my own after -- I still lived with my parents after I was married for about a year. And then, I --

RP: And after you left your parents?

GF: Oh, I went in the Service.

RP: Can I ask you why? You were drafted?

GF: Right.

RP: Drafted. So, what did you do in the Service?

GF: What did I do in the Service? I was a vehicle mechanic for most of the time I was in Service.

RP: What was the money situation like when you were on your own again?

GF: Well, the money situation was -- There wasn't but a very small sum for the service.

RP: Like what?

GF: From the Service. I can't hardly remember what they used to pay me. About 20 some dollars per month, but I saved some money while I was in Service. Because I used to do extra work like changing tires.

RP: Were you married then?

GF: Yes, I was.

RP: Guess you used to send money home.

GF: Yes, I send -- In fact, a lot of it I sent to the bank.

RP: Okay. What kind of work have you done to actually support yourself?

GF: Well, after I was discharged from the Service, I worked on the water contracting small jobs. I worked for contractors. I farmed.

RP: How did you get to work?

GF: Well, I used to either catch someone going to work until I got a vehicle, but I used to -- Most of the time, I used to catch someone that was going that way or walked.

RP: Why did you choose that kind of work?

GF: Well actually, I wasn't educated. I didn't have -- didn't have -- There was no other special jobs.

RP: So, was it difficult for you?

GF: Very difficult. Very difficult.

RP: So what actually did that mean?

GF: It meant that any person that could get a education and get a new job, they should move on and any time that they could.

RP: How much money did you make?

GF: Money was very tight at that time. I thought I was making big salary when I went down on the Base at 87 and a half cents an hour.

RP: Kinda described a day on the job.

GF: Well, when you went on the job, you went on the job to work. You didn't go there to play because you didn't want to be discharged. Jobs was hard to come by and you needed -- I needed the money. I just would go and do -- put in as I had to. I worked -- I worked my way up on contractor jobs to be a foreman.

RP: Let's talk a little bit about your wedding.

GF: My what?

RP: Wedding. You only married once, I suppose?

GF: Yes.

RP: When did you actually marry? What is the date?

GF: I married January 1, 1942.

RP: How did you meet your spouse?

GF: I met her through school functions. They used to have field days once in the spring and all the schools would get together and have -- compete against each other at the games. And, I met her at one of these school functions.

RP: Why did you decide to get married?

GF: Well, I felt I was like a lot of others: in love, I guess. [laughter]

RP: What about your honeymoon? What was it like?

GF: Well, the honeymoon was rather short because I went back to work the next day. I went

right back on the job.

RP: That was your honeymoon?! [laughter] What has your family life been like?

GF: I would say my family life has been pretty good, other than the tough times.

RP: Tell me a little bit about your marriage and your relationship with your wife. I hope I'm not too personal.

GF: I had a pretty good, a good relationship with my wife. I had a good relationship. Of course, everybody had these little arguments. I think every family.

RP: What about your children? Your relationship with your children and your grandchildren?

GF: I own a great relationship with my children and it really shows at this time. During the past few years as my health wasn't too well – to good, they would come in and do things that they see needed. A few years ago, I'd been talking about a garage or just a shed for my -- to put my car under. And course, they -- I was ill and after I got out of the hospital. The next week they come in and bought a packaged garage and built it, put it up.

RP: How many children and grandchildren did you say you have?

GF: I have 12 children. Grandchildren: I don't know. I have quite a few: 35, 40.

RP: Congratulations! What part has religion played in your life?

GF: Religion played, I guess, played a part in my life or course I tried to go to church. Even a lot of times it was on Sundays, but I never missed Mass on Sundays with my children.

RP: What church did you attend?

GF: I attend Holy Angels in Avenue.

RP: How do you know there's a God?

GF: Well, I was brought up believing that there was a God and I still -- that is still my belief.

RP: What is your relationship with Jesus?

GF: I would say my relationship is very well. At this time, I'm a Eucharistic Minister. Have been for several years.

RP: Now, you're a Eucharistic Minister at --?

GF: At Holy Angel.

RP: At Holy Angel. What about your community activities? What communities activities did you participate in?

GF: Well, I -- several community activities. I started out with PTA in schools. I used to be -- I was President for awhile and then I -- When we actually --we have a small PTA at Miles Town Elementary School. It was about six, probably seven active members and we got together. We were the cause or, I would say, started to works on to getting the Bethune Elementary School built.

RP: Great.

GF: That school was very cold.

RP: What about holiday activities?

GF: Well, at the present time holiday activities is, I guess, it's almost like a homecoming for my family.

RP: Family reunion?

GF: Well, we have family reunions. But all of my children mostly is home on Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas. In fact, most all of the year...

RP: What -- Do you any affairs in your community ...?

GF: Well, not -- They do have Bingo. The church has Bingo, have Bingo in the community

every Thursday. I don't work at anymore. I used to work at Bingo, but other -- The only other socials that they have is the senior citizens meeting at the hall, at Oakley Hall.

RP: What about life in general today? What ways is it different from the way it used to be?

GF: Well, life in general today: It seems pretty tough. Because when I was going around, at my age, younger age and up until the past few years, you could go any place. You didn't worry about someone robbing you or if you leave your door unlocked, someone to come in. It was several years went by before I even locked the door at my home. Now, it's -- Things are quite different.

RP: What about the quality of life: Do you think the quality of life is better now or is it worse?

GF: Well, I would say the quality of life, actually, is better. I would say it's much better now.

RP: Why do you think so?

GF: Well, I always feel that anybody that want a job -- You may not be able to make as much money as a educated person by no means, but I feel that you can still get out here and find something, some work to do.

RP: Do you think people are different from what they used to be?

GF: Yes, people, especially the younger ones. The younger generation is quite different from what it was about the time I was coming along.

RP: Do you think the changes are for the good or the bad?

GF: I think it's bad. I think the changes for that is bad for the country as a whole.

RP: What do you think caused these changes for the teenagers in the county?

GF: Well, a lot of the teenagers -- A lot of it is the -- I blame some parents. I blames the -- I

blames laws that's made. You can't correct a child. I would say, just spanking a child because they do something that they shouldn't do. Just spanking them is not abuse. And, they will get on you about that. I think the laws has changed that they makes it bad for, for raising some families. Some children, you have to spank; some you can talk to.

They're different, all children are not alike.

RP: Good point of view. What about race relations? Are race relations different today in the County?

GF: Yes, race -- race relations are different.

RP: How are they different?

GF: Well, one thing: You can go into any public place you want to go any time, but I feel that race relations have slipped in the last few years.

RP: Why do you think they have slipped?

GF: Well, I feel that race relations was better four or five years ago than they is today.

RP: Why do you think?

GF: I don't know if it's because -- I don't know. If it's because of laws or what. I really -- I really can't say. I can't put my finger on it.

RP: Well, what was segregation like?

GF: Segregation was pretty tough. Course, if you was out some place and wanted -- wanted a sandwich, many places you couldn't even stop and ask for a sandwich.

RP: Was that -- that was before the coming of the Base? Was it like that then?

GF: I would some of it was like that than, sure. Quite a bit of it was still like that.

RP: Were you ever afraid of a group or person practicing hate? You've heard of a lot of hate

groups.

GF: I've heard of a lot of hate groups, but I never went into -- had run into any myself because I try -- always tried to carry myself in the right manner.

RP: ...Actually, so you think that's key...

GF: A lot of it is the key. A lot of it, but some of it, I would say, you catch some of these groups, violent groups: They don't care whether you turned yourself right or what. They just will... [tape ends abruptly]

[End of Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]

[Begin Side 2, Tape 1 of 1]

GF: Violent groups: They don't care whether you turned yourself right or what. They just...

RP: If you saw a group of persons practicing hate, how would you treat it? What would you do?

GF: I would go off -- I would probably go off and report it. You don't jump into those things because this is where a lot of the bad parts get started.

RP: Do you think ignoring it and just moving on out and not being a part of it...?

GF: Well, not being a part of it, yes.

RP: It'd be the key.

GF: It'd be the key.

RP: Ignore it.

GF: Ignore it and move on. You may have to take it up with someone else in a good manner.

RP: How do you feel about living in the County?

GF: I feel alright. I know quite a few people in the County.

RP: If you've ever -- If you have lived in a city, which do you think you'd like the best? Did you live in the city at any time?

GF: No. I never lived in the city.

RP: You didn't?

GF: No.

RP: Now, do you feel there is a difference between country people and the outsiders? County people, excuse me. County people.

GF: And outsiders?

RP: Do you think there is a difference between county people and outsiders?

GF: Well, it seems like a lot of outsiders come into the county. They will -- If you speak to them or greet them, they will treat you better, a lot a times, than the county people will.

RP: What do you think makes the difference?

GF: I don't know what makes the difference. I don't know if they feel that they may run into something, some violence or what. But, it seems that they will treat you better.

RP: How do you interact with outsiders living in the County? A lot of people come in. How do you get along with them?

GF: I can get along with most anybody as long as they treats me fair. I get along with anybody, and I want to treat them like I want to be treated.

RP: You haven't experienced situations like that where...

GF: No. I never experienced it.

RP: Have you traveled or lived outside of the County?

GF: I traveled quite a bit outside of the County.

RP: Where did you go?

GF: I've traveled to Carolina, Georgia, Florida. Fact, I've traveled quite a few states being on the Board of the Electric Co-op. I've traveled quite a few places.

RP: You're on the Board of Electric Co-op?

GF: I am on the Board of Electric Co-op.

RP: Are you an elected official?

GF: I was elected on the Board, yes.

RP: In what capacity?

GF: As a member. It's a 15-member board.

RP: And, how many terms have you had?

GF: Well, we used to be elected once each year until about the last 10 years, but I've been on the Board now 19 years.

RP: Great! Were you the first elected African American in St. Mary's County?

GF: Well, I was the second one.

RP: Who was the first?

GF: Joe Lee Somerville was the first.

RP: Joe Lee Somerville. So, what do you think of the direction the County is going in today? What do you think of the direction of the County? So many changes around here.

GF: Well, there's quite a few changes. Right off hand, I wouldn't -- I couldn't say. It couldn't say, but I feel that a lot of improvements are being made. And, the County really is growing with the expansion of the Base.

RP: How did you contribute to the County through your work and your family, as a citizen, your politics and your values?

GF: Well, I used to -- In work; I contributed to the County and the community, I would say. I did quite a bit of work. I worked for the County. I did work for the County that I wasn't even paid for.

RP: Putting in more hours than you should have?

GF: Oh, I put in -- I put in many hours than I should have. I hung the first fire extinguishers in the Leonardtown jail and courthouse. I did all that work and I didn't get paid for it.

RP: So, you were a loyal citizen. What about politics? Were you engaged in politics quite often?

GF: Not too often. I worked politics a little.

RP: How did you?

GF: Trying to -- We used to go out and register people to vote. I traveled quite a bit doing that.

RP: Okay. What about your recognitions? Do you have any recognitions? Awards?

GF: Well, I did to -- I received recognition and awards through the School Board, through the school system. I receive some now through the organizations that I -- Knights of St. Johns.

RP: Very good. What do you consider to be the most valuable thing you have ever had?

Something you could not have done without in your lifetime? The most valuable thing you have ever had. Something you could not have done without in your lifetime. Let's do the first one first...

GF: It's hard to say. I really couldn't think of any.

RP: Something you could not have done without in your lifetime. What do you think? Something you have now that you could not have done without in your lifetime?

GF: Well, a little experience I don't think I could have done without. A little experience. You can still let it be most value thing you ever had, right?

RP: You couldn't have done the things that you have done without your experience.

GF: Experience.

RP: That's good, that a good answer. Have you done everything in your life that you wanted and planned to do?

GF: Not really. No, I didn't really do everything that I planned to do or would have like to have done.

RP: What do you think that is?

GF: Well, I would like to have had a little bit more recreation. I really liked to -- I wanted to travel a bit more than I have traveled. And I travel quite a bit, but I wanted to travel.

RP: If you could go back and live your life over, what do you think you would change?

GF: Really, I don't know. I probably couldn't change anything. I would change -- I would -- If I could have done so I would have had a better education.

RP: What do you think have been the biggest changes in St. Mary's County in your lifetime?

GF: Well, integrating schools I would say probably is one of the biggest things.

RP: Can you tell some old stories about what life was like in the time—for your parents?

GF: Well, my parents life was -- I would say was pretty tough although it wasn't as bad as it could have been for some others because my father did quite a few small projects. He used to be a contractor on county roads. They were just dirt roads at that time and he used to contract work on county roads, other than farming. And of course, he did a lot of work for other farmers around the County. I would say he made a little extra money and things of that nature. So where some farmers didn't have that privilege to do those things.

RP: What about your mother?

GF: Well, my mother was -- She had to do most all of the housework.

RP: Never did work out?

GF: She never -- She worked -- She would work out maybe babysitting or something in the afternoon when the children got home from school.

RP: Who was it she was babysitting for? Some of the -- For whom?

GF: Some of the white neighbors or maybe she made -- I don't know what other type of work she could do.

RP: Well, how did black folks get their news in the County when you were growing up? How do you get your news?

GF: Only what news I know they would get: If someone passed away, it would be a neighbor would get on a horse and travel around and give them the news.

RP: That's interesting. What about reading? What did they read?

GF: The only reading I know they had was the books from school.

RP: No newspapers?

GF: I don't remember any newspapers.

RP: What about radio or television stations?

GF: There was no television stations back until I, as I can remember it must have been in the 50's, I would say.

RP: What stations did you listen to?

GF: The radio stations -- The radio station was, as I can remember I had a battery radio right after I got married and the only stations that we listened to were mostly out of Virginia or some place.

RP: No local stations?

GF: As far as I know, there wasn't any.

RP: Not even WPTX.

GF: No. Wasn't WPTX. WKIK, No there wasn't those stations at that time.

RP: When you -- When you were growing up, it looks like you were a mature man when things started moving.

GF: Started moving.

RP: How did Countians get their news? How do they get their news today?

GF: I'll go back and say about 19... I can't remember *The Afro*. We had a paper. We called it, I think we called it *The Afro* many years ago that my parents, my brothers subscribe to that was sent to them. I don't know if that was every week or every month, but I know they used to read it and get a lot of news from that, from that *Afro* which was, I think it was a strictly negro paper.

RP: Well, Mr. Frederick, I certainly want to thank you for taking the time out to kind of bring us up-to-date on the time you were a child, and hopefully our children and their children's children will be able gain a lot of knowledge from what happened many, many years ago. So, thank you very much once again.

RP: Now Mr. Purnell we have completed our interview. I certainly want to express my appreciation, it has been truly wonderful. In case we have forgotten something, is there something that you want to add to this that might fill it in or something you think might be of some importance?

GF: Well, I was thinking about the activities. You asked about school activities. I use to look forward to making little small trips around the county. I was under the – My teacher was Mrs. Devora Somerville, in fact at that time she was Devora Corbin, but she married Mr. Somerville. We had a chorus that we used to sing – a chorus of about ten or twelve. We used to sing several places around the county. We even went to Annapolis one time to sing. I can remember coming to Hermanville the first time I was down this end of the county. The school bus had to turn around. It back up and the wheels got on the edge of a grave at Hermanville. I was – it really, really shook me up to back up on that grave. I remember when I was singing, my mother went out and bought a suit and I thought this is great. I had a – she couldn't find a suit she wanted. Because at that time boys eight or nine were wearing knickers. The call them knickerbockers. The little pants tied right below your knees. This suit was – had long pants to it. So I went to school happy and come home to get ready to go to this – and she had cut them off and made knickers out of them. [Laughter] I was really taken back.

RP: [Laughter] Well thank you so much. I bet you were really disappointed.

GF: I was really disappointed.

RP: Were you embarrassed?

GF: No, I wasn't embarrassed; I was disappointed because other boys still had the little short pants.

RP: Thanks again.

[End of Side 2, Tape 1 of 1]