

Interview of Eliza I. Waters

UNIFIED COMMITTEE FOR AFRO-AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS Oral History Project

Eliza Isabella Dyson Waters

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AJ: Good afternoon

EW: How you do?

AJ: Fine. Can you give me your full name and where you're from?

EW: My name is Eliza Isabelle Waters. I'm from *Drayden*, Maryland.

AJ: Okay. Nice to meet you, Miss Waters.

EW: Thank you.

AJ: Can you tell me where you were born and what are your earliest memories?

EW: I was born in Drayden, Maryland, in 1929 and my earliest memory is that we walked to Sunday school when I – I started at 6 years old and my mom and dad would go to church, and they would always come back. And my dad was a waterman, and he would take the boat and bring it around on Saturday afternoon, take us on Sunday afternoon after church and on after dinner and take us to *Broomes island*, wherever that is, to – we would have ice cream. It was six of us. That is my first memory.

AJ: You mentioned all the children, there were six of you, can you give me their names?

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EW: My oldest sister was named Leslie Rebecca Dyson, James Henry Dyson, Sarah Catherine Clay, Mary Margaret Cutchember, Franklin Roy Dyson and I am the last one.

AJ: And your parents' names?

EW: My daddy was Frank Dyson, my mother was Lettie Bell Whalen Dyson

AJ: Okay, and you talked about your earliest memories was going to church and coming back and having ice cream. Tell me about your church and the church service.

EW: I used to go to St. Mark's Church, and we walked about nearly three miles, we walked every step of the way to Sunday School every Sunday. Sometimes we were allowed to stay to service. And again, we would have to come on back home and mom and dad would go to church. But we would always be in Sunday School.

AJ: So, actually you and your siblings walked to Sunday School alone?

EW: Yes, we did. They were older than I was, but we walked every step of the way, nearly 3 miles every Sunday morning to Sunday School. Sometimes when school was over, we would come on home and then we were allowed to stay for service.

AJ: Tell me about going to school. You said your earliest memories were when you were 6 years old and went to church, well, tell me about --

EW: I was 6 years old when I started school. I was so afraid of the teacher. I heard the older children talk about him being so rough and all I could do was watch him mostly. I didn't learn too much the first 2 or 3 years. I kept my eye on him, but after 3 years a lady came to teach us, and I went wild learning. I learned everything I could learn because she was so patient and kind and nice.

AJ: Do you remember who your teachers were?

EW: Her name?

AJ: Yes, both teachers.

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EW: The first teacher I went to was Mr. Luther H. Stuckley. He came from North Carolina. The second teacher was Mrs. Carrie Tillman and I forgot where she came from. She was over on *Talbot Island* somewhere over there, I don't know. That was my second teacher and after that we would have some other teachers to come and help us; Ella Thompson and different ones. I don't know the rest of them.

AJ: Can you describe what your classroom looked like? Tell me about your classroom.

EW: I started the school when I was 6 years old and my girlfriend was 6 years old. She was named Pearl Brown and we walked in school together hand in hand because we were both afraid and we went in hand in hand. And my – the room was – it was just a one-room school, you know, but I can picture where I sat and about the room, you know, different grades were seated in different places and I remember when I went to the first grade on down. I remember when I got to the sixth grade. I remember I was near the back door or to the right in one of the pews and then when I got in the seventh grade, I was still in that one in the back. At the end of the school in seventh grade, that's where I stopped.

AJ: Okay, tell me about, did you have blackboards or paper and pencil and books?

EW: Yeah, they called them composition books. My dad would buy them as soon as school opened. He would go to the store and buy us all composition books and pencils and we had big blackboards in the school, and I loved to write on that board. We had a white crayon and erasers and we would put different things that the teacher would ask you on that board and I loved it so much.

AJ: What about your books and the desk?

EW: My books?

AJ: Yes

EW: Well, we were given some hand-me-downs. They would bring us some hand-me-down books, but they were still good, and I loved the books and I

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loved geography and history. I loved that very much. That was my favorite subject, geography and history.

AJ: Anything else you remember about your classroom? Did you – How did you keep warm at school and all of that?

EW: The boys would go out and cut wood. We had a wood stove and one of them would get there early in the morning and get the fire started before we got there and when the fire would go down a little, one of them would get up and put another piece of wood in the stove and we kept warm like that. And we had to get water from a spring. The boys would go and get buckets of water and we had a big dipper, that's what we had in school. And when recess came, we would, there was nothing much to play with, but I loved volleyball. I was the leader in volleyball. I couldn't stop playing, so they would call me out to play volleyball. I'd start out and mess around all day long with volleyball. Then we had a big well that went dry near the school and that's what we had to play with. It was real nice and dry and dusty. We would run around and then count. That was our fun and then they built benches between the trees that was at school and that's where we would go and sit out there if it was warm weather and we had our lunch. And we brought our lunch to school and nobody was ashamed of whatever they had. They would divide it with other ones if they wanted some and I enjoyed school.

AJ: What about – you were saying you had – someone went and got the water and they had a pitcher did everybody have their own cups or what?

EW: No. They were all drinking out of the same dipper. Everybody would go and have some.

AJ: What else do you remember about your classroom?

EW: Oh, they would call on different ones to speak poems and open the service – I mean the school in the morning and sometimes I would –and then others would. I remember in my lower class – I'm not talking about the high children, but when we were in the first to the – I would say the fourth grade the teacher would give us poems to carry home, to read, to learn and I'd learn mine before I left school.

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AJ: Do you remember any of those poems?

EW: I remember the songs that we sang for different holidays.

AJ: Can you sing a song?

EW: They gave us Columbus, Halloween, Thanksgiving and of course Christmas. I can sing you one.

AJ: All right.

EW: Just a little bit. The first one was Columbus

Once Columbus, mighty captain,

sailed the seas and days alone.

Oh, the storm and dreary waters

with his ship his sailors bow

day and night his lone watch keeping,

hot and weary days had passed

then he heard the sailors crying land before us land at last.

The next one was Halloween. I didn't like that one, but I'll sing it.

It's Halloween, It's Halloween. Tonight, the strangest

things are seen, perhaps the witch will go riding by,

put her broomstick through the sky. Tonight, all cats

are very black, their tails stand up, they arch their back. Hoot

owls cry to who, to who, can't see me but I can see you.

And Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving Day is coming, so Mr. Turkey said,

and very careful I must be, or I could lose my head.

The pumpkin heard the turkey

I'm frightened too, oh my. They'll mix me up with sugar

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and spice and I'll be pumpkin pie.

That's it. Of course, you all know Christmas.

AJ: What song did you learn for Christmas?

EW: *Silent Night, Holy Night all is calm all is bright,
Round yon virgin, mother and child.
Holy infant so tender and mild,
sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.*

That's it.

AJ: That's wonderful. You have a beautiful voice.

EW: Oh, it used to be, not now.

AJ: Beautiful voice. You mentioned opening school. How did you open school? Did you say a prayer or Pledge of Allegiance?

EW: Yes, we did. We always had a prayer in the morning. One of the children would lead the prayer and most times it would be the Lord's Prayer and we always pledged allegiance to the flag; you could do it back then.

AJ: Okay. You talked about the one teacher that you were apprehensive about. How did you get over the fear of that teacher?

EW: When he left.

AJ: It took – how long did that take?

EW: 3 years. He was there 3 years and I did have a fear of him because the older children talked about him. So, before I started school, I had a fear of the teacher. Maybe he wasn't as bad as they said, but I thought he was. He was pretty good once I got there but I watched him. All day long I kept my eye on him.

AJ: When you were keeping your eye on him, what was he doing?

EW: Sleeping a lot of times.

AJ: He was sleeping? And what were the children doing while he was sleeping?

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EW: Carrying on.

AJ: And then what would happen?

EW: He'd get up and if he'd catch some of them, he'd whip them. He would say "frail 'em". Yes, he did, and I tried to be as good as I could.

AJ: Okay. Now you talked about school, what about at home? I know there were several brothers and sisters. Did you have any chores? What was your responsibility around the house?

EW: My responsibility was to get vegetables from the garden. My daddy had a big garden. I would always do that and then we would help to get wood in. We burned wood and I would even help to go out and get wood, to bring wood in, you know, in my arms, put in the box for at night. I always helped to bring in wood. When he would dig the vegetables, we would pick them all up.

AJ: What type of work – did your mom work outside the house?

EW: No. Mom didn't work.

AJ: And your dad?

EW: My Daddy was a waterman. He was on the water. He caught crabs and he caught oysters and fish and everything.

AJ: Did you ever go out to work with him on the water?

EW: No. I did a bad thing on the water once. I went to take his lunch. Mom told me to sit on the wharf until he came up and he was too long coming, and I tried to take a boat and go meet him and I was like maybe 8 or 9 years old and he was so afraid when he met me.

AJ: How far did you have to go in the boat to meet him?

EW: It was a good ways to go, but I didn't get that far before he came around and met me, which was a good thing because I didn't know nothing about no boat.

AJ: Okay, and so you're talking about what happened with your dad and the boat. What was your relationship with your parents and siblings?

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EW: Oh, it was lovely. I had one of the best dads and moms that anybody could have. He never called me by my name. He called me Baby and he would always – when he would come home, he'd bring me candy and when he got a little older and I was still there, he would tell me, "when you was a baby, I brought you candy, now you be sure to bring me something when you come back, now I'm the baby", and my Mom would give me more punishment than Daddy would. I carried on. They said I was mischievous. I don't know, but anyway she would give me a little whipping now and then, but she was still a lovely momma. I loved them both. My sisters and brothers, they were real sweet and good. Of course, we'd all get into it sometimes and with me being the baby, I just stayed – thought they could take it over, but all the time they couldn't.

AJ: So basically, the type of discipline you got when you got in trouble was a whipping once in a while?

EW: Once in a while Mom would give me one, but Daddy never did.

AJ: How did – you were telling me earlier about your living someplace else when you were younger. Tell me more about that.

EW: One of my sisters and her husband lived on the *Susquehanna Farm*, which is the *Base* now, and I was 8 years old before the Base was ever put there. They were working on a farm on that Base with some more couples and I stayed with them on that farm when I was 8 years old. It's called the *Susquehanna Farm* and it was in *Pearson*, Maryland.

AJ: How was that experience for you?

EW: Not too good because I got lonely. It was all right to get away from home once in a while.

AJ: How long did you stay there? Do you remember?

EW: Oh yes. I would stay like maybe a month at a time and go home but my sister was there, and she was lonely by herself when her husband went to work, and I would be her company.

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AJ: You mentioned that one of your chores would be to help out in the garden with gathering the vegetables. Can you tell me more about the types of food that you ate. Did you go to the store? Did you have a store, or what?

EW: My daddy always had a big garden and we would have everything in it that a garden has in it, and even he would save stuff for the winter in that garden. We had something called a kiln and he would put turnips and white potatoes in there and knew how to pack it with chaff and stuff to keep them warm. We had food in that kiln all winter. We could pour that sack out and get potatoes. We could pull it out and get turnips. He made a place over and put dirt into it and cabbage all winter back in that place in the shed, and we had all kinds of vegetables like that, and my mom canned all, everything she could can. We would have like two or three hundred cans of fruit in the winter and they would kill 2 hogs every winter. We had meat and we had lard and we were not hungry.

AJ: Tell me about, how did you preserve the meat? Did you have refrigerators?

EW: No. My dad would, they called it curing it, but they would salt it, you know, all the hams and spare ribs. Of course, we ate the others up first, the sausage and all that was gone but we always had ham for Thanksgiving or Christmas, and greens, they would salt that, and they would even salt fish in a barrel. We had fish all winter, take them out and salt them. We never were hungry. We ate something.

AJ: That's very interesting. Do you remember – you mentioned going to visit your sister from time to time. Did you take – you and your family take any other trips. Do you remember, when you were a child? Did you take any trips, go on vacation?

EW: No, we didn't go anywhere. No, we didn't get to go anyplace.

AJ: You mentioned a lot of games that you played at school that you really enjoyed – volleyball and what have you. What about when you were at home?

EW: We would still play ball. I was in the middle of the field, I would love to try to skate you know. They had a -- at winter time there was water in the middle of that field, and it would be a long streak of ice, and they couldn't

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keep me off of it. I skated half the day until I got nearly frozen. I loved to skate, and we just played ball all the time; volleyball at home and all, and dodge ball, whatever we could play. Of course, we played games, you know, like bingo and dominoes and things like that.

AJ: Did you play for prizes?

EW: No, we did not.

AJ: Tell me about your life as a teenager, you know, getting to be a teenager.

EW: When I got to be a teenager, I loved to dance, and I could dance and I would go with – I had a girlfriend, she would get to go out more than I did. She would go to *Happyland*. She would learn the new dances. She would come back and teach them to me, and I just stayed on the floor dancing. Not all my family did that, but I did. I did love to dance.

AJ: What kind of dances did you learn back then?

EW: The first one was the jitterbug and one was a waltz that was about it.

AJ: What about courting?

EW: Oh my.

AJ: What age were you when you started courting and tell me about that.

EW: I was 16. I met this fellow and we started to court, and we fell in love. I think, a little bit, but I didn't want no, you know, further doings and I told him. I said wait until I'm 18 and you can come back to see me. He came back to see me. He came back and I married him when I was 19. But I met him at 16.

AJ: Where did you meet him?

EW: Well, he was in the army and I was on the job working one day with the girls, and he came down to see some of the fellows and I took one look at him and I said, I don't know. That's where I met him. He was an army man.

AJ: Did you meet him near your home or locally?

EW: Locally. We were on the job working

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AJ: Where was this?

EW: At the *Oyster Plant*. The girls were shucking oysters, and he came down with some of the men that he knew before he went in the service, and that's where I met him.

AJ: So, you were shucking oysters? Was that your job?

EW: Yes Ma'am. We shucked oysters.

AJ: Tell me more about this. Where was this?

EW: This was Drayden, Maryland and the owner of the place was named Carroll. That's where we started working. Was to shuck some oysters and we'd have to get up like 4:00 in the morning to go and finally that got too much for me and I gave it up and went on the base, stayed over there doing domestic work for five years.

AJ: Tell me about your health and illnesses. Did you have any sickness in your family when you were younger?

EW: Not a lot. We would get a cold once in a while. My mom would make onion syrup and give us onion syrup and different things, and we'd get all right, but we never had a lot of sickness, thank goodness.

AJ: Did you go to the doctor at all?

EW: Yes, we did. He was Dr. P.J. Bean that was the man that everybody in Drayden went to. That was the first doctor I remember.

AJ: But did you have some home remedies then?

EW: Yes, we did, plenty of them.

AJ: Would you like to share any of them with us?

EW: The remedies?

AJ: Yes.

EW: The only one I remember was that onion syrup and of course aspirin. Every now and then we'd get some cough syrup, but we didn't have a lot of medicine.

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AJ: You mentioned that you started courting when you were 16, and you got married when you were 18 –.

EW: 19.

AJ: 19, Okay. Did your parents prepare you for marriage back then?

EW: Well, a little bit. But when the fellow came to ask my daddy about marrying me – well, see, his mother and my mother were friends once and way back before I was even born, he said my mom said to him one day that if he would go down to the spring and get me a jar of water, I'll give you one of my girls when you get grown. I wasn't born. He never forgot it. He said he never forgot it, and when he asked Daddy about it – he didn't ask her –he said that he had already given me one. I want to pick the one I wanted.

AJ: Would you like to share with us who that gentleman was?

EW: He was in a family that lived right in Drayden. His name was Robert Denver Armstrong, and I was Mrs. Armstrong for 23 years, and he passed away.

AJ: So, he was from the area?

EW: Yes.

AJ: Was he local?

EW: Of course.

AJ: You talked a little bit about church and the family. What other community activities did you and your family get involved with? Were there any community things going on?

EW: Later on, in the years when we were singing a lot, the choir and all, we would have something called *Choir Day*, and I loved it so much. Every year we went from church to church, mixing with other people, you know, and my school teacher had taught us how to sing, change our voices you know, and my sister was leading the choir, and there were a few more girls, people in the choir. We would go down to *St. Inigoes*. We would go to *Reverend Chamber's church* in Lexington Park, and we'd go different places

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to sing. So that was really enjoyment. Then they would prepare dinner and we would all go from place to place.

AJ: So that sounds like it was a lot of fun.

EW: It was. I enjoyed it very much.

AJ: What was your singing group called? What was the name of your singing group?

EW: The *St. Mark's Choir*.

AJ: You mentioned your teacher taught you how to sing.

EW: Yes.

AJ: What teacher was that?

EW: That was Miss Carrie Tillman because we were all singing one voice one time and she taught me how to sing alto, different from the other voices. That's when we really took off in singing.

AJ: It sounds like you learned a lot in that school.

EW; Yeah. I learned a lot and I enjoyed it very much the years I was going there. And I got along so well with my teacher. When she went away, we would write to each other. I would always write to her and she would write to me.

AJ: She went away?

EW: Yes, she finally left, went away, after I had come out of there. I wasn't there then. But I still knew her, and I would write to her and she would write to me.

AJ: We talked about a lot of things back in, when you were growing up. How do you feel people are different now than they were back then?

EW: Oh my, so much different. They were more friendly. I don't know, they're friendly now, a lot of them, but back then everybody got along, I mean, in our community, they did. I don't know about all over, but everybody, all different colors and all, got along together real good. We had lots of people down in Drayden that would come to see us. When I was going to

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school there was a family that, they had some children and they had a family in Tennessee and their children outgrew nice clothes, and that woman always give me some good clothes to wear to school. Her children didn't wear then all out before they got more, and she would give them to me. So, we all got along nice.

AJ: What about the – what about the race relations back then?

EW: Back then it wasn't bad where we lived, but farther away it was bad. Some places you couldn't go and some places you could. You were allowed but there were some places you just knew you weren't supposed to go, you couldn't go. We could go to the stores and some of the people, when they went to restaurants or places like that, they weren't allowed to come in the front. They could go around back and get a sandwich, and they knew it was like that, and they just didn't bother.

AJ: So how did you feel about that?

EW: Well, I knew it wasn't right, but there wasn't anything I could do. It was not right but now today it's a little different in that part. I mean, you can go most of the places you want to go.

AJ: How did you get your news back in those days? Did you have newspapers or radios?

EW: Yes, we would always get the newspaper. I loved the funnies in it. We would get that and then my daddy had a big radio. He bought a big battery and we could hear services every Sunday morning. Of course, we played it all the time. It killed the batteries, but we did have a big radio. We'd get the news and we would get things that was going on, you know, in different places, that was the way we heard it. That was the only way, was through the radio. There wasn't any television or nothing like that.

AJ: Is there –Do you feel there is anything else you would like to share with us about life in St. Mary's County, how you feel that might be different than most places?

EW: Back there then, we didn't have no water running like there is now. We didn't have no bathrooms. We had something outside called the *johns*, and

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I think everybody had that. Later on in years we got water and lights and things in the house. There weren't bathrooms or nothing then, but life is pretty good in St. Mary's County now, I would say. I enjoy everybody. The people come and see about me so much, I even have white friends, black friends and all, that come and see about me, bring me dinner once in a while, take me places. I love it, and I think I'm getting along pretty good.

AJ: Did your life turn out the way you planned, you think?

EW: Yes, I think so. I had two husbands. The second one, he came from Charles County, and he came on down. I lived in Charles County for 10 years with him. Then we came on back to St. Mary's County and he lived here until 1994, and he died, and then of course I was home and I stayed home, and now I am living in the home place. I live alone at the home place.

AJ: So, is there anything else that you would like to share with us?

EW: And I do have a bunch of – I don't have any more siblings, but I have a bunch of nephews and nieces, which is really good to me. They check on me every day. They look after me. They come to see me. They carry me places and I don't have any children. If it wasn't for my nephews and nieces, I don't know what I would do. But God seen fit that I would have a bunch of nephews and nieces, somebody to look after me and I am very, very thankful.

AJ: Okay, well, thank you very much.

MT: I have two question. You talked about a well at the school. You said there was a dry well. That well went dry at Drayden?

EW: Yes, the well went – it wasn't at the school. It was just a little ways from there.

MT: Because everyone's talked about getting water from a spring.

EW: We had water from a spring, but this thing was something that was already closed in for years, that I was talking about.

MT: So, they got water from a spring?

EW: Yeah, we went to a spring to get water.

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MT: The other thing I wanted to ask was, also I never heard anybody talk about the oyster shucking at Drayden. Where was the *Oyster House*?

EW: Down to *Porto Bello*.

MT: Okay.

EW: Porto Bello, down in Drayden, Maryland.

MT: Good. I'd like to know because I've been wondering about that.

EW: I know where it was, but the place is not there now.

MT: It is not there; right? Anybody else?

AJ: Any other questions?

EW: What else you want to know? Anybody want anything?

MT: Did you have a flag in the schoolroom?

EW: Yes, we did. We had a little flag. Not a real, real big one, but it was a little one and we pledged allegiance to the flag every morning. Yes, and we said the Lord's Prayer.

AJ: You mentioned that you stopped at seventh grade; right? You said you stopped at seventh grade?

EW: That's where the school, that's where it stopped.

MC: Was that the highest grade?

EW: Then it went to *Jarboesville*.

AJ: You went to Jarboesville?

EW: No, I didn't go there anymore. I called it off.

MC: Was there a ceremony? Did you have a graduation?

EW: Oh, yes. I went to different places. I went to -- I won a contest, a spelling contest and all. I went to *Talbot County*. Of course, I even went to *Loveville*. I thought I was going somewhere to get out of Drayden. Went to three or four spelling bees, and I won them all.

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AJ: Oh my. Tell me about the spelling bees. How did you compete?

EW: I don't know. My teacher carried me in a -- we would have to stand on a big thing on the floor with the states wrote on it, you know, and you would stand on that whichever one you were from and all and whoever was left standing was the one. Of course, I was standing.

AJ: They had different states represented?

EW: Yes Ma'am.

AJ: Where was this competition?

EW: It was in Loveville and Talbot County. What'd I say? Talbot County, I think, yeah.

AJ: How many states do you think participated?

EW: I don't really know. I do remember going to Talbot County, but the others I don't know, but there was a big thing on the floor that had different names on it. That's the one you stood on.

AJ: Do you have any of your certificates that you won?

EW: No, not really.

AJ: You don't have a copy?

EW: No.

MC: Did they take pictures? Did they take any class pictures? Did the school take any class pictures?

EW: No, we don't have any of that. If they did, I don't have any.

AJ: Okay. Well thank you very much.

MT: Thank you so much.

[Recording ends]

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