

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

Harriett Ann Swales Forrest

Interviewed by Alma Jordon

July 14, 2005

At her home in Leonardtown

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[start of tape 1 of 1, side 1]

Alma Jordon: Good afternoon. My name is Alma Jordon and I am interviewing Mrs. Harriett Forrest today. Today is July 14th, 2005. Note that I am going to ask you your name.

Harriet Forrest: My name is Harriett Forrest. I live in Leonardtown, Maryland. My address is [redacted address].

AJ: Okay. We are meeting today, Miss Harriet, to talk about some of the things in your past that you would like to talk about. And specifically, we would like you to tell us about your schooling and your experiences at school when you were younger.

HF: I was six years old when I started school in Leonardtown. The school at that time was a one-room in the St. Aloysius Society Hall.

[tape cuts of and then back on]

I went to school with two brothers and one sister. And when we finished the third grade we went then to—my mother moved to Washington DC—we went to St. Augustine's on Fifteenth Street in Washington. We stayed about two years there. Then we moved back

to Leonardtown. At that time I was in the third--fourth grade. We went then to Leonardtown School under the hill where St. Aloysius' cemetery was. It was a one-room school on that hill. Well I went to school there every day. We had teachers that came from the city to teach us so the teacher that I admired so much—her name was Miss Cora King. I had an interest in her and she had an interest in me. At that school, they wanted a janitor because it was one-room—they had nobody to sweep and go in the morning, make the fire, and come back home and get dressed for school. We lived in Leonardtown so the Board of Education hired me to sweep the floor and come in the morning and start the fire 'til the first child got there. Then I could go back home and change my clothes and go to school. We-- This teacher taught for at least three years and in that time she learnt—I talk about this teacher every day. She was the one to tell me about how to save, how to—when the school Board of education paid me, she carried me to the bank and started me a bank account.

[tape cuts off and then back on]

AJ: Okay.

HF: When-- I don't know how long it was that she taught but when she left, I stayed at that school until I finished the sixth or seventh grade. Well they had no other high schools. I got a diploma from St. Mary's School in Leonardtown but they had no high school that you could go to. So my mother said, "Well we will go to St. Joseph and see if the priest will take you up there where you would learn more religion." So he took us and I think it was six or seven of us that graduated in St. Mary's County but wen to St. Joseph to school. They had no transportation. We had a car. My brother would carry us up in the morning and come back in the evening and pick us up. And these nuns were very—they

were very active nuns because they played ball with us and we had about seventeen or eighteen children in that seventh grade. But when we finished that seventh grade at St. Joseph, then we had no school. We either went to work—some of the children—some of the Somerville children, they went off to the cities with their kin people and they finished high school and went on college. But that was as far as I went was the seventh grade. But through—going through this seventh grade, I have learned to live with Cora King as my mentor. She was the first one that ever taught me anything about banking or trying to save money. And from that day, I've always had a bank account. [tape cuts of and then back on] And while we were at St. Joseph, they taught us how to make out of ordinary tablets, we made prayer books. We made-- We wrote all kind of prayers. We had concerts Christmas times and Easter times. We would have concerts up at the St. Joseph's Hall. These nuns really pout us how we could go out in life and not—you learnt how to manage. And that's what I liked--I liked about the schools because they really learn you how to manage and I've found out that in this life—course now it's changed because I can't work with the computers but I can still keep a good bank account.

AJ: That is really special, Mrs. Forrest. Now you've talked from time to time to me regarding some of the nuns that you really liked and I know you talked about the nuns but you didn't mention any names. Would you like to tell us more about them?

HF: Well Sister Charles, she was a nun. She taught from the fifth to the seventh grade. Sister Mary Alma, she taught from the first grade to the third grade. And it was just a two-room school and the priest would come every Friday. We had confession because we were all Catholic. And we really enjoyed being with those nuns. Then one of the girls that went to school with me that finished St. Joseph—her name was Mary Holt. And she is a nun somewhere in Baltimore. I have seen her four or five times and we talk about what good times we had at St. Joseph.

AJ: That is really interesting. It is really nice to know that you are still often remember that nun, Miss Holt. Do you remember what her name is as a nun? But she is an Oblate Sister.

HF: Yes. I've seen her.

AJ: Oh, okay.

HF: And I--. I've seen her four or five times but I haven't seen her lately because I haven't been able to get out to go down to St. Peter's because I've seen her down there on several times. But I don't--. I don't remember. You see now I am ninety years old and all of the children I was raised up with in Leonardtown, they are all gone. And all of the children that I went to school with up at St. Joseph—I think in March, the last girl that I went to school with in St. Joseph--. Her name was Brunette Frederick. She died. And that was the last person that I know of that I went to school with and I don't have any classmates left out of all the children that I went to school with.

AJ: My you have a great memory.

[tape cuts off and then back on]

Earlier when you talked, Miss Harriett, you mentioned when you went to St. Joseph's School. And you told me how you got there. But I want you to talk about that again.

HF: Well, when we went to St. Joseph there wasn't any transportation. And my brothers had a car and we had some children that lived two miles away—they would walked from their house to Leonardtown, then we would get in the car and there was children that lived near St. Joseph. Well, we would pick all them up and he—my brother would tell them, "Sit in one another's laps, just as long as you get to school on time." And we

would take up a carload of children on the road when they go to St. Joseph and we would bring them back in the evening and put them out at their driveway when we got home.

[tape cuts off and then back on]

AJ: So you talked about your formal schooling. Would you like to talk more about that?

HF: Umm humm... [yes] Well, my—my—I didn't have a favorite [teacher] 'cause I really wanted to learn more about English. But I ended up with math. And I could do good times tables, multiplication, and division. But when it come to fractions, I couldn't do much with the fractions. But it was enough that when I got married and had my children, I taught my children. Some of them hadn't started school but I was trying to teach them that multiplication because I thought that that was the best subject that I can learn. Because you need that with counting and everything and I taught them when they were going to school. Even the oldest one when he went to school, he knowed his multiplication tables. But I couldn't teach them much more when they come and [are] getting in the fifth and sixth grade. They come there—I couldn't help them with that math and stuff. So it's an advantage to children of today to learn everything that you can because education is important. I realize that that's the reason why I made a sacrifice to educate five, with my husband, and it was hard. But we mortgage everything we had to educate those five children and it worked.

AJ: Well that is an amazing story, Miss Forrest. Thank you for sharing that.

[tape cuts off]