

How We Got Over

*Growing up in the Segregated South:
a Collection of Narratives*



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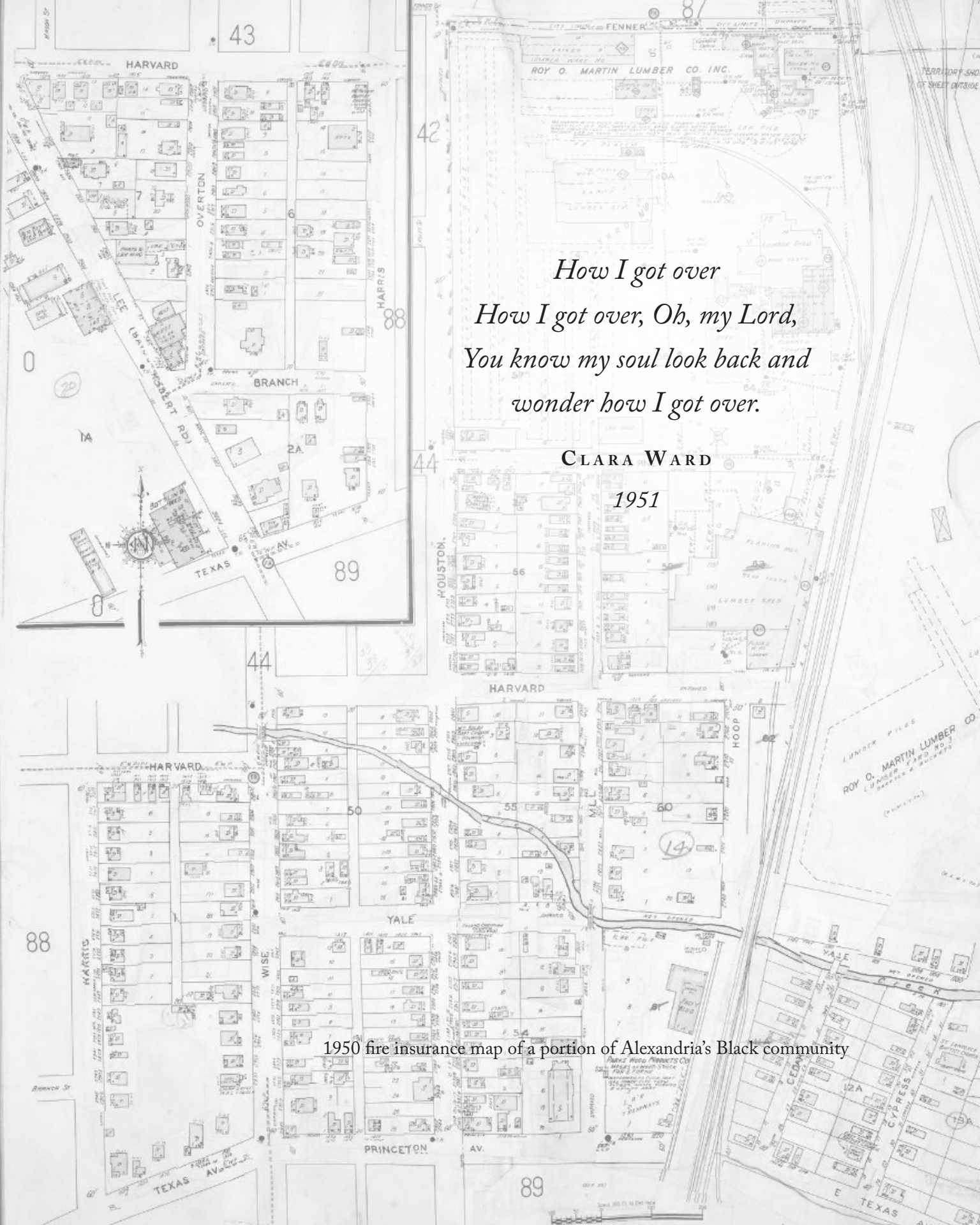
ISBN: 979-8-9853177-0-1 (Paperback)

ISBN: 979-8-9853177-1-8 (Hardcover)

Book cover design by Melanie Belanger

Book interior design by Najdan Mancic

First printing edition 2021.



*How I got over
How I got over, Oh, my Lord,
You know my soul look back and
wonder how I got over.*

CLARA WARD

1951

1950 fire insurance map of a portion of Alexandria's Black community

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	I
PREFACE	7
INTRODUCTION.....	II

PART ONE: Our Community: Enslavement, The Civil War, and Reconstruction

NARRATIVE ONE	26
A Story, A Story. Let It Come, And Let It Go, <i>Rosa Ashby Metoyer</i>	
NARRATIVE TWO	42
One More Thing, <i>Dr. Helen Benjamin</i>	
NARRATIVE THREE	62
As I See It, <i>Jo Ann Cotton Williams</i>	
NARRATIVE FOUR	68
My Family Legacy, <i>Rose Dempsey Williams</i>	
NARRATIVE FIVE	76
The Least of These, <i>Winnifred Lorraine Edwards Jett</i>	
NARRATIVE SIX.....	85
The Road Less Traveled, <i>Elaine Ford Provost</i>	

PART TWO: Our Community: Separate and Unequal

NARRATIVE SEVEN	109
Analyzing and Fixing Things: A Rock Island Quarters Story, <i>Sherman Fulton</i>	

NARRATIVE EIGHT	141
Saved by the Promise , <i>Kathlyn Giles Stewart</i>	
NARRATIVE NINE	167
Navigating and Surviving Prejudice and Injustice to Grow into a Proud Black Man , <i>James Goff</i>	
NARRATIVE TEN	176
My Grand Adventure , <i>Phyllis Hamilton Venable</i>	
NARRATIVE ELEVEN	185
An Answered Prayer <i>Joseph R. Jett</i>	
NARRATIVE TWELVE	194
Making Do, Mastering Perseverance , <i>Michael R. Johnson</i>	

PART THREE: Peabody: Our Community’s High School

NARRATIVE THIRTEEN	224
This Is My Journey, Not My Destination , <i>Dr. Willie James Johnson</i>	
NARRATIVE FOURTEEN	235
Seeing Life “through a Glass Whitely” , <i>Rev. Ameal Jones</i>	
NARRATIVE FIFTEEN	255
My Journey: Empowered by His Grace and Favor , <i>Emma L. (Jones) Gray, CPC</i>	
NARRATIVE SIXTEEN	277
Change Gon’ Come , <i>Pearlie Mae Lewis Carter</i>	
NARRATIVE SEVENTEEN	282
Coming of Age in Alexandria, Louisiana , <i>Michael Milton</i>	
NARRATIVE EIGHTEEN	297
Debt of Gratitude , <i>Roderick Newman</i>	

PART FOUR: Our Community's Fight for Civil Rights

NARRATIVE NINETEEN	316
No Error , <i>Doretha Perry Wyatt</i>	
NARRATIVE TWENTY.....	323
My Fight for Equality , <i>Freddie Price Sr.</i>	
NARRATIVE TWENTY-ONE	331
An Unexpected Journey , <i>Gloria Roberts Sadler</i>	
NARRATIVE TWENTY-TWO.....	346
Blessings Wrapped in Struggles , <i>Rev. Larry D. Smith</i>	
NARRATIVE TWENTY-THREE	367
Still Here , <i>Dr. Linda Smith Green—Ethel's daughter</i>	
NARRATIVE TWENTY-FOUR	381
Life Lessons , <i>Aubrey Woodley</i>	
EPILOGUE	401
...The Struggle Continues , <i>Jean Nash Johnson, Coeditor</i>	
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED	407
PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS	410
ABOUT THE EDITOR AND COEDITOR.....	411

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

CREATING A WORK such as this requires the efforts of many hands from idea to reality. The genesis for this book came to me in October 2020. I was engaged in a professional development activity via Zoom with a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The facilitator, Natalie Gillard, creator of the Factuality Game, was discussing structural inequality in America, using redlining as an example. She used maps from various cities and historical information to explain redlining in detail and its impact on African Americans. I knew about redlining but had never thought about it deeply. I had a visceral reaction that day. I was immediately transported to the 1950s to my old neighborhood in Alexandria, Louisiana, because we lived in an area similar to the one she described. It limited our economic and intellectual growth as well as our ability to live healthy lives.

The moment was both emotional and epiphanous for me. I thought of the major railway systems with tracks literally at the back doors of some homes. I remembered the ever-present noise and air pollution, resulting from the numerous railway systems that ran through our communities and plants releasing toxic chemicals. In that moment, I thought about the extent to which we had been taken advantage of as a people in a different way. It was a gut-wrenching, painful moment. The facilitator called on me to comment, and I could not speak because I was emotionally wrought. When I spoke, I had a tremor in my voice. I asked her to come back to me. I thought about my life and the lives of my high school classmates and decided in that moment that we had stories to tell, stories that had to be preserved and shared. We

had survived redlining and the numerous indignities placed on us. We got over by the grace of God! Clara Ward's "How I Got Over" in the powerful voices of Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin came to me instantly. We survived unfiltered racism in the segregated South as so many have done.

It was not only important that our stories be told but also that the historical context for our narratives be recognized and included in this volume. I am not a historian, but I am interested in history. So began my deep dive into the past. I remember being in the required Louisiana history course in eighth grade, but I was not taught any of the known facts I have discovered in my research for this volume. So much has been kept from us, but it is there to be found. My hope is that this book will educate and inspire readers to think deeply about their personal histories and commit to learning more and sharing what they learn.

Yes, many hands contributed to the completion of this project. I enumerate and offer thanks to them here.

- The greatest debt of gratitude is owed to my 24 Peabody High School classmates whose narratives comprise this volume and make it possible. For some of them, writing was the last activity in which they wanted to participate, but they had in common the desire to tell their stories. I thank them all for first, feeling the sense of urgency to write, and then writing.
- Family and friends were indeed an asset to the project. My dear baby brother, Michael, found things (historical books on Rapides Parish, the 1950 fire insurance map for Alexandria detailing every street and edifice in town) and assisted with all technical interpretations. My daughter, Traci, provided all manner of technical assistance from retrieving files I lost in the process, advising me on publishing, to reviewing copy and in needed moments, eagerly being my listening ear. My son, Michael Patrick, served as advisor and reviewer, challenging and questioning and giving meaningful feedback throughout the project. My brother, Justus, Jr., I thank for technical advice and last-minute photography in Alexandria. Barbara McClain, Tess Caldwell, and

Dr. Debbie DiThomas reviewed essays and worked with individual writers. Linda Lamar and Dawn Benjamin typed handwritten essays submitted by contributors. Cheryl Jones, my friend since first grade, sent me information on the first Black schools in Rapides Parish and connected me with resources in the Rapides Parish School Board office. Sadly, we lost her a few months before publication. She was a champion of this project. Graduate school friend and colleague, Dr. Phyllis Elmore, contributed her keen analytical skills and brought only the clarity that she can bring to all things Black. Dear friend, Dr. Elsie Burnett conducted the final review of all except the narratives before we sent the book off to the designer. Throughout the project, Dr. Cindy Miles, business colleague, provided sage advice, and college roommate, Rebecca Harrison, kept me sane.

- Mr. Earnest Bowman, who taught many of us calculus and trigonometry, did not hesitate when asked to write about his teaching experience at Peabody under the leadership of Professor Iles. Thanks for an accurate and honest portrait of our principal.
- Two Peabody alums, Charles F. Smith (Class of 1959) and William Douglas (W.D.) Johnson (Class of 1946) helped us tremendously. Mr. Smith shared documents and stories about Professor J.B. Lafargue that would have otherwise been unknown to us. Mr. Johnson, aside from being our cheerleader for the project, shared photographs from the 1940s and filled in historical gaps important to the project. Many thanks to both of you!
- Librarians in the Rapides Parish Library system in Alexandria and LeCompte were most helpful in providing invaluable assistance in the research effort: Sophia Pierre Louis, Kyle Franklin, and Sonia Span. Sonya Jeter, manager at the main branch, was available to me any time I called and ran down numerous rabbit trails with me in validating facts. She was a joy to work with. Thanks is extended as well to Patricia Boone of the Alexandria Historical and Genealogical Library and Museum in acquiring photos and information from pre-Civil War local newspapers.

- The *Town Talk* was a major source of information otherwise unavailable for historical aspects of this work.
- Melanie Belanger and her team created the front, back, and inside covers.
- Rev. Ameal Jones, longtime friend and preacher extraordinaire, engaged in numerous conversations with me about our town and surrounding communities. He has an incredible memory and made sure the facts were straight, especially the ones about churches and plantations.
- Michael Johnson, another person I have known since first grade, has lived and breathed this project day and night since its inception because he is married to the coeditor. He has been witness to and sometimes a part of early morning and late night phone calls about the project, on the receiving end of finding photographs, as well as sending them, solving technology problems, including staying up half the night to find files that seemed to be forever lost. He is owed a ton of thanks. All he has asked me is, "When do I get my wife back?" I can now say we are done. Thanks so much, Michael, for your sacrifices as well as your support in every way.
- Rev. Larry Smith, classmate and longtime friend, has assisted from the beginning of the project. After hearing my pitch, he joined me in making initial contact with classmates and building the contributors to 24. He obtained and shared historical information, photos, and ideas and has been an advisor on every aspect of the project. He has been a great supporter, encourager, and partner. His written contributions and other input on the historical pieces make a positive difference in the content.
- I end with my coeditor who has been an invaluable asset throughout the project, laboring with me in every aspect from the beginning to completion/final product. She was the first person with whom I shared the idea. Her commitment to the efforts of the Peabody Class of 1968 did not begin with this project. She has been associated with us for many years as she is the wife of one

of our classmates. Jean has had an extensive career of discovering, reporting, writing, and editing news and features stories focusing on African American history, culture, and lifestyle for *The Dallas Morning News*. She brought that expertise to this publication. Thank you, Jean Nash Johnson! You rock!

These individuals and others contributed to the development and completion of this work, allowing the contributors to share experiences in the context of the town and the times in which we lived and how we got over.

Helen Benjamin

Dallas, Texas

October 2021

P R E F A C E

“There is that great proverb — that ‘until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.’”

— CHINUA ACHEBE,

1994 interview, *The Paris Review*

WHEN ASKED TO participate in the writing of this book, we each agreed without hesitation. What is the probability in the middle of the 2020 global pandemic, coming up on 53 years after our 1968 high school graduation, that two dozen of us — Baby Boomers, all classmates from the same central Louisiana all Black high school, most of us now living in other cities and states—would rise to write about growing up in midcentury Jim Crow America?

We received the “Call for Participation” in December 2020 from Helen, inviting us to tell our stories of early childhood, family, school, work, and spiritual life. In a year fraught with not only the deadly COVID-19 virus, but also the police killing of George Floyd and a contentious U.S. Presidential election, how could we not respond affirmatively? We were ready to tell our stories. If truths are not chronicled by those living to tell, history is rewritten or tragically goes away. Consensus and commitment were verbally solidified in our first meeting in January 2021.

Writing our stories was hard work. Between group Zoom meetings and one-on-one telephone edits, Helen and Jean turned us into documenters, carefully recalling and substantiating events, and, in some cases, researching historical background information for accuracy, crafting our best words, and producing drafts for them. *How We Got Over* is a collection of stories about our daily lives. We were children born black, gifted, and without access to what this country routinely afforded white Americans in the 1950s and 1960s. We share genuine feats and honest daring anecdotes of what it was like to live the first 18 years of our lives in the segregated Deep South under the strictest of this country's laws. Our stories are unfiltered, recounting the racial, social, and economic strife we faced before the Civil Rights Movement took hold in our hometown and the impact of those experiences on our lives as adults.

Our narratives reveal raw details of personal and family experiences, unfair employment tactics, discriminatory healthcare practices, and one-sided homebuyer strategies, as well as other discriminatory practices prevalent during segregation. We go deep and share accounts of distress and despair amid survival and success. We praise our supportive all Black community for providing the dependable security that kept us blanketed from some of the coldhearted barriers and challenges that dominated our way of life. We share the realities of living in a town in which we depended on the whims of the white people who presided over our community and who were committed to the segregationist system they created. We give you glimpses into the contradictions in our lives with the sense of security and vulnerability in having a teacher, grocer, preacher, and doctor who looked like us, alongside a police sector, city government, and state leaders who did not. Further, we reveal facts of our adult lives in the military, college, our homes, and the workplace.

We now consider ourselves memoirists and remain hopeful as we reflect on our lives in our early 70s. We view our accounts as universal and, as a package, a reflection of the human experience. We hope that amid the instances of troubling encounters of bigotry, you, our reader, discover endurance and appreciate—even connect with—everyday joy and courage in Black life. Amid humorous and heartwarming childhood experiences, our stories clearly illustrate how much all peoples and cultures have in common.

As members of the Peabody High School class of 1968 (PCOSE), we consider this act of writing the continuation of our commitment to paying it forward begun in 2016 with our establishment of an annual scholarship to graduating seniors at our alma mater. Our establishment and funding of this scholarship was a testament to our appreciation for what Peabody did for all of us and our pledge to paying it forward. Some of the proceeds from the sale of this book will fund our scholarship.

We hope you find our stories compelling, significant, inspiring, and worthy of being preserved and shared—that the names (past and present), images, places and treasured things within this volume narrate forward the story of our people, and that their names will not be, as John Keats lamented, “writ on water.”

The Contributors

October 2021

I N T R O D U C T I O N

IN MANY WAYS, the year 1968 was a watershed in American history. For example, the ongoing Vietnam war caused dissent and chaos in the streets of American cities, as young Americans protested the draft and the immorality of the war itself. Two American icons for social justice were assassinated — Robert F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King’s assassination led to more urban racial violence that had come to characterize the struggle by African Americans for racial justice. Dr. King’s assassination sent a clear message to African Americans that even a nonviolent movement, such as Dr. King’s, would result in a violent reaction from those who opposed it. As conflicts raged in the streets of many of the country’s cities and in its politics, the Republican Party under the leadership of Richard Nixon and others promoted a new “southern strategy.” The “southern strategy” took advantage of white resistance to civil rights for African Americans to literally attract and convert the former Solid Democratic South to the GOP.

Historians have written extensively about the social and political changes in American society that seemed to characterize the United States in 1968. They have written about how America “unraveled” and how racial and identity politics emerged to dominate the nation’s political landscape. They have also written about how the Black Power and Black Arts Movement provoked a new sense of racial pride among the younger generation of the period. They have also shown how, in spite of the new laws against racial discrimination and the Supreme Court cases

that ended the legal foundation of racial segregation, white resistance to desegregation and racial justice continued unabated.¹

With only a few exceptions, historians have not examined how the social and political changes that occurred in 1968 affected the daily lives of the African Americans who experienced and lived through them.² Thus, the current book fills a gap in the historical narrative about the period and provides first person stories about what happened to the class of 1968. Set in Alexandria, Louisiana, the personal stories of these 1968 graduates of Peabody High School go beyond the traditional, macro viewpoints of African American life that we assume was the typical African American experience in the American South. Instead, they provide us a micro lens into the daily lives of African Americans, who in spite of growing up in a segregated and hostile environment, lived lives of love and success.

While the recent explosion in studies about the African American experience has given us a wealth of materials on the history and culture of African Americans from the antebellum period to the present, we still lack the studies that give us a lens into the lives of the everyday, grassroots African American. This book excels in doing just that. From the Peabody High School graduates of 1968, we learn about their experiences with family, work, religion, love and marriage, education, attending historically black colleges, beginning their careers in various occupations, and indeed, “how they got over.” Their personal stories of encountering and confronting a racist and hostile society that was just beginning to accept African Americans as equals are truly unique.

¹ See Alan J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked the World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003); Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *Drama Review* (Summer 1968); and LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (New York: Morrow, 1968).

² See especially Ann Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1968); and Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967). See also “The First,” *The Atlantic*, September 29, 2020, a five-part series about the children who desegregated America’s public schools.

As a 1968 high school graduate myself, I identified with many of the stories in this book, and I am excited that I have had the opportunity to read it.

W. Marvin Dulaney

Associate Professor of History Emeritus

University of Texas, Arlington

PART ONE



**OUR COMMUNITY:
ENSLAVEMENT, THE CIVIL
WAR, AND RECONSTRUCTION**

“We are not makers of history. We are made of history.”

—DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



THE CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS book were born in the middle of the 20th century, their lives shaped by the people, places, events, and laws associated with Alexandria, Louisiana, before and after their birth. To fully understand the experiences shared in their stories, the early history must be illuminated with a view of the city's racial past. From the arrival in the central Louisiana region of the first slaves in the 1790s to 2018, the marker for Alexandria's first elected African American mayor, 20-20 hindsight reveals that the journey from slavery to freedom under law has been jarring.

This early history provides the backdrop for Alexandria, the village and place of origin for the contributors to this volume. Experiences there from the time of their birth influenced them greatly and created the moral, intellectual, and social foundation from which they speak. This overview covers deliberations on the part of the enslaver and effects of legislation designed to ensure subjugation of African Americans. The narratives in this section show the impact of slavery and segregation on the lives of the writers into the 21st century, particularly the lives of women as heads of households, job discrimination, and how they managed to survive it and, at times, thrive.

OUR COMMUNITY: ENSLAVEMENT, THE CIVIL WAR, AND RECONSTRUCTION

Historian Daniel Usner estimates that some 500 African slaves were brought into Louisiana near New Orleans in 1719 by the French during the transatlantic slave trade. For farmers, those slaves were a welcome change as replacements for undesirable European convicts and other less reliable workers. Slave laborers were expected to perform the manual and mechanical work required to settle a colony rich in economic potential. After the initial purchase of slaves, for the farmers, there was no better investment for business than unsalaried Black people living in a land foreign to them with little or no freedom of movement and no rights and privileges. Because of the

difficult journey across the Middle Passage to the Americas, many enslaved people died enroute or after reaching their destination.

Alexandria is in the center of Louisiana on the south bank of the Red River in Rapides Parish.³ Small bayous meander throughout the city and surrounding areas. White inhabitants, first the French, followed by the Spanish, had control of Alexandria until the United States purchased 827,000 square miles of land west of the Mississippi in 1803. Before the French descended on Rapides Parish, it was inhabited by indigenous peoples, including Caddo, Choctaw, The Natchez, and The Natchitoches. Only traces of the indigenous people can be seen today, as they were systematically extracted from the environment by disease, effects of enslavement, and involuntary relocation. Black inhabitants initially were brought to Louisiana as enslaved people from the Caribbean and Africa to provide free labor in the agriculturally rich area in which cotton, sugarcane, and other staples grew in abundance. Ensuing actions in Alexandria's history highlight its racist past and the lasting effects of marginalization on people of color.



Red River

³

Parishes are geographical units known as counties in the other 49 states.



Bayou Robert

ENSLAVEMENT IN ALEXANDRIA

The acquisition of slaves in Rapides Parish began much later than it did in the southernmost parts of the state. Rapides Parish population information from the U.S. Census in the years indicated in the table below reveals the extent to which Blacks swiftly outnumbered whites in the parish, while all the financial and physical resources, as well as power and authority, were in the hands of the white minority. (That remains true today. Based on U.S. Census estimates, the current population of Alexandria is 45,412 with 55.29% being Black or African American and 39.62%, white)

TABLE 1

	1799	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860
Whites	530	996	2,491	3,113	3,243	5,037	9,711
Black Slaves	175	1,081	3,487	5,329	10,511	11,340	15,358
Black Freemen	2	123	85	113	378	184	291
Total	706	2,200	6,063	8,555	14,132	16,561	25,360



The table below reflects the U.S. Census results for 1850 and 1860 with Alexandria's population statistics compared to the parish statistics for 1850 and 1860 only. The table shows that larger numbers of enslaved and free Blacks lived in the rural areas where the more plentiful and challenging work was done, where cotton and sugarcane were grown and harvested. Alexandria was the hub that provided consumer services for the outlying areas. Black slaves who lived in town worked in the "service" industry and as servants to the wealthy.



TABLE 2⁴

	ALEXANDRIA		RAPIDES PARISH	
	1850	1860	1850	1860
Whites	394	980	5,037	9,711
Black Slaves	168	314	11,340	15,358
Black Free men/women	26	131	184	291
Total	588	1425	16,561	25,360

⁴ The information in Tables 1 and 2 was gleaned from data presented in Carl Laurent's *From This Valley: A History of Alexandria, Pineville, and Rapides, Louisiana*.

In her 1944 thesis on slavery legislation in antebellum Louisiana, Ethel Kramer points out that because of its central location, Alexandria in 1826 was one of three depots established in the state for runaway slaves. Slaveholders and prominent citizens placed notices in the daily newspapers to recapture fleeing slaves, to sell a “fresh crop” of slaves, and to sell trustworthy, experienced slaves as shown in the samples below from two issues of the *Louisiana Democrat* in 1859.

NEGROES FOR SALE!
MOSELY & SPAGINS,
FROM NORTH ALABAMA,
WILL be in Alexandria, La., between the 15th
 and 20th inst., with about—
 **75 NEGROES** 
 For sale, consisting of able-bodied FIELD HANDS,
 likely BOYS, GIRLS and WOMEN; also one good
 BRICKLAYER. They invite those wishing to buy
No. 1 Negroes to wait until their arrival, and
 then to call and examine for themselves.
 October 12, 1859—tf

\$50 Reward.
RUNAWAY from the undersigned, residing on
 Bayou Beuf, on Monday night, May 30th, two
 negro boys, to wit:
 **Hillery**
 AND
 **Harry.**
 Hillery, aged about 25 years, weighs 165 or 70
 lbs., about 6 feet high, black complexion, has very
 bad teeth, and rather down countenance when
 spoken to.
 Harry is very near the same size, and is very
 black; aged about 20 years.
 They will aim for Texas or New Orleans. I will
 give Fifty Dollars Reward for their delivery to me
 on Bayou Beuf, or lodged in Jail at Alexandria,
 Rapides Parish, so that I can get them.
 June 1, 1859—tf J. W. McKINNEY.

VALUABLE SERVANT WOMAN TO DIS-
 POSE OF.—Wm. H. Carnal, before re-
 moving to Missouri last fall, sold off most
 of his Slaves at their own request—they not wish-
 ing to leave Louisiana.
TEMPY, his Cook, after reaching Missouri be-
 came dissatisfied and wished to return to Rapides,
 and accordingly her master has sent her to me for
 sale.
 She is fully acclimated, having spent nearly her
 whole life in this parish, is 32 or 33 years old, an
 excellent family Cook, washes well, and irons beau-
 tifully, what is most rare, is perfectly trust-worthy.
 Upon leaving home her mistress used to always
 leave the house keys in Tempy's possession, and
 never was the trust abused. To a person desiring
 such a servant, her cash value is not less than
 \$1500. Short paper with good endorsers, or city
 acceptance, will be taken.
MERCER CANFIELD.
 Alex., May 25th, 1859—tf

Slaves were a valued monetary commodity. According to Carl Laurent, one slave could be purchased in Alexandria in the 1850s for \$1,800, enough to buy a sugar mill. The *Code Noire* (Black Code) was enacted in 1724. The codes were designed to maintain control of Blacks by limiting their education, movement, and ability to think freely and assemble in groups. A French invention, the Code became more critical to whites as the slave population grew, a challenge of their own making in their desire for economic gain through free labor.

Laurent gives a glimpse into the social lives of slaves in his description of “Negro balls” hosted by a white socialite in Alexandria in her attempt to provide an entertainment outlet for slaves. The balls, frequently attended by white men in search of Black women, often resulted in altercations reported in the local papers. The low regard in which slaves were held and the extent to which they were included in the community also were reflected in local newspapers. In the May 13, 1848, issue of the *Red River Republican*, the following racist statement appeared regarding Black attendance at an upcoming circus: “every man, woman, child and nigger (for it is fashionable for all) in and about town, will be delighted to learn that there will soon be a circus here.”

Throughout slavery, similar references on the treatment of slaves who lived in Alexandria are found in newspapers. Regarding freedom of movement of Blacks, the Alexandria Board of Trustees released the following statement in the January 6, 1849, edition of the *Red River Republican*:

“Be it ordained, that it shall be the duty of the town constable, after the ringing of the nine o’clock bell, to strike every slave found off of his or her master’s premises without a pass or something to indicate that he or she is on his or her master’s business, 25 lashes.”

As population numbers for slaves grew and exceeded those of whites, Blacks became more of a threat to whites, especially after whites learned about revolts in other places. While no major rebellions are recorded in Alexandria, one did occur in

nearby Cheneyville, as portrayed in the 2016 film *12 Years a Slave*, based on abolitionist Solomon Northrup's 19th century book/memoir.

There is substantial documentation of at least 25 plantations in and around Alexandria before the Civil War. Slaves played a significant role in the development and profitability of plantations. "The greatest incidence of slaveholding occurred among the attorneys, physicians, merchants, and lodging keepers. ...the census recorded a number of single or widowed women slaveholders," according to Terry Seip in his research on slaves and free Blacks. He notes further that the number of slaveholders nearly doubled between 1850 and 1860, showing slavery at its height in Alexandria prior to the Civil War. Neighborhoods and plantation sites bear the names today: Annandale, Hard Times, Inglewood, Kent House, Mooreland, and Willow Glen.



Blacks picking cotton on the Inglewood Plantation on the outskirts of Alexandria, date unknown

“Fellow Citizens, we cannot escape history.”

— ABRAHAM LINCOLN

A month after the November 6, 1860, election of President Abraham Lincoln, South Carolina seceded. The following April, Confederates fired on federal troops at Fort Sumter, off the coast of Charleston, and started the Civil War. Lincoln’s antislavery backing had worried Southerners. If slaveholding became illegal, slaveowners would lose economic advantage. With South Carolina first up, a bevy of southern states seceded from the Union. Louisiana seceded January 26, 1861. Most men went off to war in other states, leaving white women to fend for themselves with slaves as their aides. By 1863, Alexandria was occupied by the Union forces, and the Union forces set fire to the town May 13, 1864, burning most of its buildings. In 1868, three years after the war, Louisiana was restored to the Union under a rewritten state Constitution that abolished slavery and granted citizenship to former slaves. The 1870 census data show the impact of the Civil War on the population with the dramatic shift in the numbers of Blacks in Rapides Parish.

	1860	1870
Whites	9,711	7,742
Black Slaves	15,358	0
Black Free men/women	291	10,267
Total	25,360	18,015

Although Black people in Rapides Parish moved from enslavement to freedom, little changed for them. They began their lives as “free” people with no advantages. If they chose to remain in the South, they likely would remain beholden to whites. Those in rural areas moved from chattel status to sharecropping, another form of

oppression. Blacks in Alexandria benefitted very little from Reconstruction, 1865-1877, during which attempts were made to redress the inequities of slavery. However, at the state level and in some Louisiana towns and cities, Blacks were elected to public office in this period. Of note, is P.B.S. Pinchback, who served as lieutenant governor and governor of Louisiana briefly from 1872-73. According to the historical marker honoring Pinchback in downtown Alexandria, he lived for a brief period in Alexandria and influenced the inclusion of the creation of Southern University in the 1879 Louisiana state constitution. No evidence could be found that such progressive action as electing Blacks to public office was taken in Alexandria.

Freed slaves in Rapides Parish were likely hungry for postwar progress, though events occurring in the region during Reconstruction may have created fear and hesitancy. No doubt, Black Alexandrians had heard about the April 1873 Colfax Massacre, a horrific Easter Sunday attack, a few miles from Alexandria. Black militia men there had surrendered and were murdered, attempting to exercise their equal rights as included in the rewritten Louisiana State Constitution after the Civil War. Throughout the state during Reconstruction, Blacks were systematically discouraged from embracing mandated freedoms. Stripped of political, economic, and social autonomy, Black Alexandrians were powerless but managed to move forward.

NARRATIVE ONE



A STORY, A STORY. LET IT COME, AND LET IT GO

“Where there is love, there is no darkness.”

BURUNDIAN PROVERB

Rosa Ashby Metoyer



I AM ROSA MARIE Ashby Metoyer, daughter of Thomas Joseph Ashby Sr. and Rosa Taffaro Ashby. I feel that I am not a good historian, not because I'm a senior citizen, but because I've had problems recalling childhood events even as a young adult. However, I do have memories of my childhood that come in bits and pieces, like little skits often without dialogue. I have memories from different ages in my life but not every age. These glimpses, taken as a whole with my classmates, can provide a window into growing up in the segregated South.

This place that fueled my passion for acting had been a source of degradation and despair for my parents.

So, the narrative I have prepared depicts small vignettes in my life that my brain has opened. Some memories are easily recalled and put to paper, yet others were sparked by hearing stories, and some came after reaching out to childhood friends and doing a little research.

My story is a plain and simple one. My childhood was good. I had a mother and a father who loved me and took care of me, and I had family and friends in a community that nurtured me. I always had food and clothes, and life was carefree. As a teenager, I realized that few things were as simple as they seemed, and the carefree life I'd always lived was anything but carefree for my parents and our Black community. As children, we were often protected from the darkness of the real world.

GROWING UP: FAMILY LIFE

In the 1950s and 1960s, segregation was the law, and Jim Crow was alive and well in Alexandria, LA. Segregation affected us all whether we knew it or not. Our perspective on events and the circumstances of our daily lives, however, is what makes our stories different.

I was born December 10, 1950, in Huey P. Long Charity Hospital in Pineville, LA., "Charity Hospital" as it was called by many people. My first residence was with my mom, dad, and sister on Solomon Street, off Lower Third Street. Alice Faye, 11 years my senior, took her role as big sister seriously, as she loved me as if I were her

doll baby. With our age difference, she assumed she could discipline me. When I was 7 or 8 maybe, story has it, that she spanked me, and I let her know through words that she would never whip me again “or else,” and according to our parents, that was her



*My parents at Jones Street Junior
High event in 1960s*

last time. Because of this narrative, I did more research into my family history, and I learned that we lived on Lot 4 of William Ashby addition to the City of Alexandria. It was called Ashby Alley, then Ashby Street early in its existence, and years later, it was changed to Solomon Street as it exists today. Solomon Ashby was my grandfather. My great grandfather, William Ashby, migrated to America from Barbados on a ship that docked in Baltimore, Maryland in 1867. He became a naturalized citizen in 1869. William moved to Rapides Parish near Lecompte where he met and married Josephine Washington. They later moved to Alexandria and acquired this land. Apparently, the land was divided among William and Josephine’s seven children. We lived next door to my grandmother. The next two houses were her brothers’ families. Across the street was Pilgrim Baptist Church where my grandmother attended. That church is still operating today. I owned property on Solomon Street until 1993. The majority of what was once Ashby land is now owned by the Pilgrim church community.

My uncle, William Ashby, and his family lived on Leonard St, one street north of Solomon. My cousin, “Buddy” Ashby, and his family lived two streets south of Solomon on John Thomas Street. My uncle, Solomon, or Toby, as we all called him,

and his wife, Aunt Dot (Dorothy), lived on John Thomas as well. Our family and extended neighborhood felt safe, and we all looked out for one another.

In 1955, we moved a little farther down Third Street to Woodard Street. My brother, Thomas Jr. was born July 2, 1957. I was 6 years old, somewhat spoiled, and not willing to share my parents and sister with this little boy. Let's just say his early years were a little rocky with me. I loved my baby brother, but I would be mean to him sometimes. As we grew, so did our bond, and eventually I did stop being the mean sister. Sadly, my brother died on March 26, 1983, from a gunshot wound. He was 26.

After we moved to Woodard Street, we were not side by side with family, but we were still within walking distance. For a while after we moved, I spent part of the week at my grandmother's house because I attended Augustana Lutheran School on Third Street, a short walk from the house. When I stayed with my grandmother and the nights would be cold, I remember she would heat an iron and wrap it in a towel then tuck it in at the foot of my bed to keep me warm. I never forgot that. I loved my grandmother dearly. Josephine Ashby Ellis died August 18, 1965. She was 85 years old.

Augustana Lutheran Church was established in 1915. It was pastored by Rev. E.R. Berger at its beginning. The church ran a successful lower elementary school from 1932 through the 1970s. Mrs. S.B. Berger was the lead teacher at the school in the early days. From approximately 1944 through 1971, hundreds of Black kids in the Lower Third area were educated at Augustana before moving to upper elementary school. Augustana became a licensed daycare center in 1972 and was in operation until at least 1976.

Augustana Lutheran Church was my first church. My daddy was baptized there when he was a baby. I was a member until the early 1980s when I converted to Catholicism to worship with my husband. My mother and sister were Baptist and my brother, and I were Lutheran. As kids, we visited each other's churches. Augustana school was my first school. I went there through second grade and then to Silver City Elementary.

At the beginning of Woodard Street was a large cotton gin that fronted Third Street and extended about two or three blocks down Woodard on the left side. I

remember it being a loud bustling entity in the neighborhood. In the air there was a sweet smell of cottonseed. We lived on the last block of Woodard at 719. The end cross street was Ninth Street. Across Ninth was the canal.

Our house had a living room, dining room, kitchen, three bedrooms and one bath. My father and his brothers and other family built that house. Several Ashby men were carpenters. Uncle Solomon taught carpentry at the Alexandria Vocational Technical School. We had a big backyard that my parents took advantage of to raise chickens from time to time. I remember my mother wringing the necks of chickens, and she was an expert! She would grab a chicken and wring its neck, then whip it up into the air and snap it down toward the ground. The neck would still be in her hand, while the headless bird would be flopping all over the yard until it was dead.

I specifically remember two painful accidents that happened to me while living in our house. First, in the kitchen, we had a wringer washing machine. The washer had a round body that held gallons of water and on top were two rollers that closed together to wring the water from the clothes. Articles of clothing had to be fed between the rollers carefully to prevent one's fingers from being caught in the rollers. One day, I took what I remember to be doll clothes out of the washer and carefully placed them one at a time between the rollers. All was well until a piece of clothing got bunched up in the wringer. I decided to pull it out — bad idea. My hand got caught and was slowly pulled into the wringer. I was screaming and naturally trying to pull my hand out, but that only made the pain worse. My hand was pulled in as far as my wrist and the wrist bone kept it from moving farther inside, but the wringer kept turning, causing a second-degree burn across the top of my left hand. My mother released me from the washing machine disaster and took me to the doctor where I was treated. The burn healed but the scar, although faded, remains. I learned a powerful lesson that day about being careful around household machinery.

The second incident happened when I was in the fifth grade. I apparently forgot how dangerous household machinery could be, and one of the most dangerous of all was the gas space heater. One morning, I was fooling around taking too much time getting ready for school. I was wearing a long nightgown and a long robe. It was cold

outside, and the heater was on in my room. We had space heaters that were freestanding on four legs with a ceramic top and grates where flames came from. My mother had told me to get ready several times, but I was cold and didn't want to go to school. I was warming myself with my back to the heater. It felt good, until the heat got more intense, and I looked back to realize that my gown and robe were on fire! Instead of stopping, dropping, and rolling, I did the opposite by panicking, screaming, and running. My mother caught me in the hall and snuffed the fire and took me straight to the doctor. I remember being in Dr Robinson's office and being treated again for second-degree burns. This time I did learn my lesson, a few lessons in fact. I learned not to stand too close to the heater, and in case your clothes catch fire, you stop, drop, and roll. At the time, I attended Silver City Elementary, and my mother would send me to school with a special pillow to sit on for a couple of days, as my burns continued to heal.

MY HARDWORKING PARENTS

I remember my parents were hard workers, but racism certainly took a toll on them. My parents worked for and around white people, but as a small child, I only got glimpses of that world. I remember going to their respective workplaces from time to time. My father, a grown man being the head of his own household, was different around these people than he was at home. I never saw him treated badly, but I never saw him treated like the white employees. There was definitely a color line. My daddy was a responsible, trusted employee but not a valued employee. He was expected to be happy, obedient, and available when he was needed and that's what he did to succeed. He was a drinker, as were most of our family and their friends, and his drinking increased over his lifespan, yet all the while he was able to keep the same job for 36 years.

My father worked at R.J. Jones and Sons Building Company. He was a smart man and very good in math. He could tell you exactly how much building material it took to build a house, down to the last nail regardless of size. I remember him

having a stool and a tall desk on the loading dock. I also remember people asking him where to find things in the store and about how much material they needed for their projects.

My daddy also worked as the Jones' chauffeur, and he was a bartender at their social events. He worked for the Joneses for 36 years until the day that he had a stroke and fell off his stool on the loading dock. He was taken to Rapides General Hospital where he had surgery and never recovered. His doctor, Dr Chicola, said it looked like he had been kicked in the head by a horse. Dr Chicola was white, and he treated many Black people in Alexandria/Pineville. Thomas Joseph Ashby Sr. died February 1, 1985. He was 62 years old.

My mother worked in private homes. Before I was born, she cooked in a café and, at some point, she worked in a medical clinic. Throughout my life, especially when I expressed an interest in nursing, Madear would say she could have been a nurse if she had really applied herself. I believe she could have been a great nurse. I didn't spend much time with my mother on any of her jobs. I would go with my dad to pick her up sometimes. I remember some of the employers, but I never had a relationship with any of them. My mother worked hard, but she was not one to take a lot of crap. If she felt disrespected on the job, she would say what she felt on her way out. Remember this was the '60s, so she knew how far to go. "My mama didn't raise no fool," she would say as she recounted her experience. She would also say, "you can't let these white people treat you any type of way." As you can see, my mama had a bit of an attitude.

Daddy was drinking daily by the time I was a teen. Madear drank mostly on the weekends. They had friends who came over that drank as well. While there were good times with family and friends, my parents ran the gambit of little fusses to huge alcohol-fueled arguments. My bedroom and books were my retreat.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD: IN BLACK AND WHITE

In the late 1950s, Lower Third was bustling, and there was a store or business on every block. In the vicinity around Solomon Street there were churches, a fish market and

a cleaner. There also were bars, several mom-and-pop stores, and, of course, the three large, white-owned grocery stores. The grocery stores were where I would see white people regularly in the '50s and early '60s.

At the corner of Third and Solomon was a "Cree-Mee" hamburger place, which was the Dairy Queen of our time. They had the best soft serve ice cream cones. Needless to say, there were "white" and "colored" windows for service. According to my sister, during the time, people complained about the signs, and there was even some talk of a boycott. Eventually the signs were removed, and there was no violence associated.

We frequented the "Mom and Pop" stores, as well as the bigger ones. You could buy cigarettes out of the pack, two or three for a nickel. There were packs of tobacco with rolling papers, so you could roll your own cigarettes. Kids could buy cigarettes during those days. Our parents would send us to the store for odds and ends, and we could get some penny candy or a bottle of Coke. My sister loved to put peanuts in her Coke bottle. Anyone else ever tried that? I loved it too back in the day.

I don't remember there being a problem with race in the white-owned stores in the neighborhood. The Food Mart, F & F, and K & S groceries were all family businesses. Owners had their children running around behind the counters or in the store. I never played with these white children, but they grew up in the neighborhood during the day and interacted with neighborhood kids. Also, my parents were able to cash their checks at these stores, and for the most part, they had good relationships with the owners until they closed in my adult years.

I saw white people on Woodard Street regularly. The Union National life insurance man would come to our house weekly to collect, and the mercantile man, who sold a variety of household items, like Chenille bedspreads and curtains, also would come with his wares. Today, when I think about our interaction with white people in my youth, I would say it was limited. Our neighborhoods, our schools, our churches, our parks, our swimming pools, movie theaters, and so much more were all Black. We had two Black doctors in Alexandria, Dr. Hines, and Dr. Robinson. There was a pharmacy on Third and Bogan run by a white man, Mr. Redmond, who filled

prescriptions and prepared medicine. There were six Black-owned funeral homes that I was aware of in Alexandria.

MY EDUCATION: IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL

After Silver City Elementary, I went on across the street to Jones Street Junior High. I loved music, so I joined the band. My daddy was a musician. He played tenor saxophone in a band, and he also wrote and arranged music. So, playing music came naturally for me. My parents bought me a B flat clarinet from a music store in town, I can't recall the name, and they paid it off over time. I still have that instrument today, and it is in fair condition. I have played that clarinet from time to time over the last 50 plus years. It has been years since the last time I picked it up, but I feel like I can still play a tune.

Later at Peabody, I was in the marching and the concert bands. Our band director, Mr. Andrews, encouraged us to learn more than one instrument. My major instrument was the clarinet, and I also played oboe and baritone horn. I thought about majoring in music in college. Because of Mr. Andrews' instruction and encouragement, just after graduating from Peabody, I was able to play with the Rapides Symphony Orchestra for a short time. The white orchestra members were not friendly, and I remember hearing a remark about my lips being too big to play oboe, so I showed them how a big-lipped Black girl could play. I practiced with them for three to four months before I left.

By this time in my life, as a teenager, I had been exposed to the real world. I had been "to town," so to speak. I knew that when we rode the city bus, we sat at the back, and when we went to the Paramount or the Don Theater, we had to sit in the balcony. I knew that we could order food at Kress's lunch counter, but we couldn't sit there to eat. Although I had lived in the real world, I had not experienced overt racism.

After two years at Jones Street, the home of the "Rattlers", we were one summer break away from entering Peabody High School, the third point in the triangle of schools on Jones Street. In that summer of 1964, there was a get-together every

weekend at someone's house on my end of Woodard and Ninth Streets. I was not an introvert or shy, just more of a homebody. I had friends, animals, and books. I typically stayed home reading, and I was content. My mother and sister encouraged me to go to some of the get-togethers that summer. These were at friends' houses and their parents were home. There was food, dancing, and fun.

On one summer evening, I went to a get-together at Ennis Miles' house, and my whole life changed. I met Joseph Metoyer that night. He was a good-looking boy, with piercing eyes that stole my heart for all eternity. We were 14 years old when we met. We talked and danced, and he walked me home, which was just a few doors up the street. My sister says they couldn't wipe the smile off my face that night. I liked him a lot, and I could hardly wait until the next get-together. Alice still tells that story, and she exaggerates it more every time she tells it. What's not exaggerated is the fact that the Summer of 1964 was transformative for me. Joe came from a big family, four sisters and three brothers. They attended St. James Catholic Church and School. That summer I met his friends and family, and he met mine. And somehow, in spite of that, we kept seeing each other.

Our courtship was not perfect. He broke up with me in high school for nearly a year because of his family's concern that we were seeing too much of each other. He was also being advised by a priest who was close to his family that because I had planned to go away to college, and he had planned to join the U.S. Air Force that we should cut ties. So, he broke up with me. I was miserable. We lived one street apart, so we saw each other at games, downtown, or in passing in the neighborhood. Mutual friends told me that he was miserable too. When he decided in his heart and mind what he wanted, he came back. We built a relationship that expanded to 42 years and one month of marriage, four children, six grandchildren and one on the way in 2021. Our life together was not perfect, but it was beautiful. Our children were born in the 1970s and 1980s. The racial climate had improved for them, but there were still hills that they had to climb. We did our best as parents to keep them safe and secure and always aware of who they are and whose they are. My sweet precious husband died October 3, 2013. He was 62 years old. I miss him every day.

I loved high school! Joe went to St. James, the Catholic school for Blacks, and I went to Peabody. My years at Peabody were some of the happiest of my life. My friends and I were no longer “Rattlers” from Jones Street, we were “Warhorses”, the Mighty Warhorses, if you will. Along with us were students from Lincoln Road Junior High, the home of the “Bulldogs”. We had been fierce competitors for the past two years in all sports and school activities. I’m sure we brought some of that competitive spirit with us as we crossed the threshold and walked down the hallowed halls of Peabody. We got to know each other in classes and as we participated in sports and other activities together. The teachers lived in or near our neighborhoods and Mr. Iles, our principal, convinced all of us that he knew our families personally. Also, the teachers were available to help with any problems we felt comfortable sharing with them.

For me, the Peabody experience gave me a sense of community like the one I had growing up with family on Ashby Street. Our books and equipment were second-hand, mostly coming from Bolton, the seemingly rich public white high school across town. Our teachers, however, were dedicated to giving us the best education with the equipment at hand, and they pushed us to be more than we thought we could be. They were supportive but firm, and they taught us that we couldn’t be as good as white students; we had to be better. They expected us to do well, and most of us did. That being said, we weren’t all sitting around singing happy songs and watching the real world go by. I did not slide through high school. I don’t think any of us did. Some days were tough, and there were times when I doubted my own ability, but my teachers walked me through difficult studies and situations.

We walked through the doors of Peabody as “Rattlers” and “Bulldogs”. We bonded in high school, old friends and new, and four years later, we walked across the stage and received diplomas as a part of the strong, proud, unified Peabody Class of 1968, P-COSE. This book of narratives is a testament to our bond.

Throughout high school, I was asked to speak, narrate, or serve as mistress of ceremony for school and community events. I was in the band, drama club, Future Nurses of America, and other clubs at different times. My involvement in school activities afforded me the opportunity to be involved in Alexandria community events.

I was chosen along with a group of students to usher at the Rapides Parish Coliseum when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at the opening of the Louisiana Education Association convention in 1966. I remember that being a very exciting night, and I was thrilled to be a part of it. Hearing Dr. King speak in person was easily one of the most important experiences in my life.

After graduation, I was determined to make my family and Peabody proud. I decided to stay home instead of going away for college, so I enrolled at LSU-A, majoring in nursing. I did not like LSU-A at all, but it was affordable. I could stay home and monitor things, and I could see Joe every day. It was like a huge high school with mostly white people. There were no Black instructors, and I sensed that the white ones were prejudiced as were most of the students. Before I got a car, I rode a bus to school. LSU-A had a bus stop in the mall parking lot where students were picked up and dropped off. I met Black students from different places and other schools. I met students who were willing to share rides, and when I got my car, I did the same.

In 1970, I was part of a group of Black students that organized the first Black student organization on campus. We applied to the committee on student organizations at LSU-A and were approved by the committee and the Dean. Uhuru na Umoja (Freedom and Unity) was born. I was the treasurer of the group. Our purpose was to strive to attain equality throughout the campus and the community, to merit a voice on campus affairs and to aid the Black communities through tutorship sessions, improvement plans, and by enlightening others of the true heritage of people of Afro-American descent. I found out while researching for this narrative that Uhuru na Umoja was only active that one year.

During my stay at LSU-A, I participated in school activities to make my presence known. I was in a couple of plays, I danced in student programs, and I participated in homecoming activities. Willie D. Weaver and I entered the Miss LSU-A pageant in 1970, to add a little color, and although we did not win, we had a good time in the process. I'm not sure, but I think we were the first Black students to enter that pageant. While I did not like LSU-A, the nursing program was known to be hard, and it was highly rated in the state. The percentage of graduates who passed the State

Board Exam on their first try was always near 100 percent. Through hard work and determination, I earned an Associate Degree in Nursing. I'm proud to say that I passed the State Board exam on my first attempt and became a registered nurse.

Years later, I returned to school and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Health Arts from the College of St. Francis in Joliet, Illinois. I wanted to participate in the commencement ceremony. Joe and the kids, nor my mom was able to go, so my sister flew from Texas to Chicago to be with me. I was thrilled that she was there. We had a great time. Alice and I have had many special times together as adults. Our bond has never been stronger. She is 81 years old, and she still thinks she's the boss of me.

CURTAIN CALL IN SECOND ACT

I love nursing, and it has served me well for nearly 50 years. I've been a school nurse, I've worked ICU and general medicine, a plasma donor center, and nearly 30 years in psychiatric/mental health nursing. Mental health nursing felt like my calling. I remember that people who had mental health problems, people who were different or didn't fit in most places, were welcome in our home. Those were the people drawn to my mother, and they sought her counsel. Rosa Ashby Sr was a mental health nurse/counselor before I knew what that was. My mother taught me to treat others the way I wanted to be treated. She WAS the nurse she always said she could be. In my work, I approached each patient respectfully with the attitude that "this is somebody's child, but for the Grace of God, this could be me or one of mine." My staff and students know that respect for our patients is my Number 1 rule. Since retiring from state service in 2012, I have enjoyed teaching prospective clinical medical assistants at a local career college.

I am proud to say that I never strayed too far from my creative side.

I have established myself as a professional storyteller and an actress on stage and screen. I was active in theater at Peabody and LSU-A, and I never lost that love for the stage. After working for years and raising a family, I auditioned for a play with City Park Players, which is Alexandria's oldest community theater. The local theaters

were and still are predominantly white with few Blacks involved in productions or audiences.

I did not get a part in the first play I auditioned for, but the next time there was a performance, I got a small part. After that I kept coming, I worked behind the scenes and on stage frequently. I pushed for more Black plays to get more Black actors involved, but there was always pushback. I was given the opportunity to direct plays, particularly the yearly Black play that they were comfortable putting on. I was fortunate enough to have starring roles in some of City Park Players' most successful productions. While theater is not as noble a calling as nursing, I give God the Glory for affording me this talent. If my performance helps one person who is burdened leave the theater feeling better, I've done a good job.

My mother would come to see me perform, and we would talk about the plays afterwards. One day she told me this story: When I was a little girl, my daddy's employer Robert Jones of R.J. Jones and Sons Building Company gave Daddy two tickets to see a play at City Park Players. This was probably late '50s, early '60s, the height of segregation in the Deep South. Who knows why Mr. Jones would give my dad those tickets, but I know why my dad would take them and go to a play at a segregated theater. He went because his boss expected him to go. My mother did not remember the



Rosa as Sarah Delaney in Having Our Say

play or much about their treatment inside the theater, but she had a clear memory of them coming out of the theater to a slashed tire. That's all I got because that's all she remembered. That story left me stunned. This place that fueled my passion for acting had been a source of degradation and despair for my parents. I thought about cutting ties with the theater, but I decided to stick around to try to make things better.

I was asked to sit on the Board of Directors of City Park Players in 2000. A few years later, I became the first Black president of that board. I sat on the design committee for the Coughlin-Saunders Performing Arts Center, and along with other board members, I had the honor of laying one of the first bricks as the building was being constructed. Later, I played the role of Sadie Delany in the play *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*. Along with Sylvia Davis as Bessie Delany, we represented City Park Players in the American Association of Community Theaters festivals, and we had the good fortune of winning state and regional competitions for the production of the play. Our performance at nationals led to an invitation to the international festival in Strasburg, Germany. The theater held fundraisers, and we got lots of donations. Our goal was reached, and it was off to Germany. We were accompanied by five City Park Players supporters who worked as our crew. Joe was able to come with me, so it made for a perfect trip.

I had success and good times with City Park Players. I can't blame people in the present for sins of people in the past. Yet, every time I presided at a board meeting or performed with City Park Players, I recalled the story that my mother told me, and I thought, "This is for you, Mom and Dad. This is for the racism and the disrespect showered on you. Your baby girl has the keys to their building and Black folks are encouraged to come in."

I didn't change much at City Park Players. Times changed, and I received the respect my mother and father deserved when they went to a play there when I was a child. My mother died June 2, 2010.

This is my story. Plain and simple. My life has had ups and downs, but my perspective has always been that life is good. God has been good to us even in the bad

times, and I am grateful. Madear always said, "Thank God for what it is." It is my hope that the simple accomplishments that I have made in my life have been a source of pride to my parents and to my school.

I am thankful for this opportunity to tell my story as a member of the Peabody Class of 1968.

NARRATIVE TWO



ONE MORE THING

*“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High
shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”*

PSALM 91:1

Dr. Helen Benjamin



I AM NOT UNIQUE among the masses of African Americans whose ancestors were brought to America as enslaved people. I see myself as a survivor of the legacy of horror that symbolized that terrible time. As such, I have endeavored to honor the memories of those who lost their lives in the Middle Passage and those who survived and enabled my birth. I have not always considered myself a survivor. I grew into this awareness as I learned more about and reflected on my heritage. Doing so allowed me to call up the strength and determination instilled by my forebears so that I could participate fully in a society determined to denigrate and exclude me.

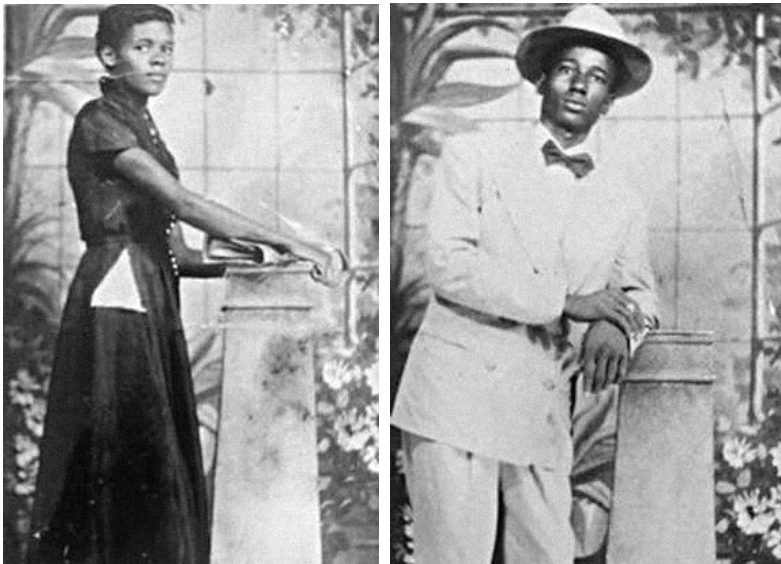
Whether conscious of it or not, I think now that I was always living with a sense of urgency, always involved in something meaningful and engaged in multiple activities toward a greater purpose.

A BIT OF FAMILY HISTORY

We have a huge family. I have close to 70 first cousins. Family members on both sides have spent considerable time exploring our lineage, which has been traced to five and six generations because of records in family Bibles, stories passed down by family members, and genealogical research. There are many stories worthy of noting, but I shall mention only one. My mother's maternal ancestry goes back to Africa to Celestine Adams Baptiste (Scilisteen) who was born in either 1815 or 1823. The story has been passed down through six generations. When Scilisteen was around 6 years old, she and her mother, along with others, were lured onto a slave ship, presumably off the West African coast, to shop for bolts of colorful bright fabric. After taking some time to select the fabric for purchase, they discovered that the ship had deliberately sailed so far out to sea, it was impossible for them to get off and get back to their African village. They were forever tormented by thoughts of leaving their families behind and never knowing what happened to them. They belonged to their captors and became slaves, first in Texas, then in Louisiana. We have a photo of her.

My parents, Justus Benjamin and Dorothy Givens Benjamin, were born and reared in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana. Specifically, both sides of my father's family settled in the Flora/Cypress area soon after the Civil War. Both sides of my mother's family

settled in the Lena (Rapides Parish)/Marco/Chopin areas long before the Civil War. My father's parents, George Benjamin and Virena Talton Benjamin, began their lives together as sharecroppers in 1925 and became parents to 12 children. My father was their oldest child. My mother's parents, Willie Givens and Sarah Murphy Givens, were also sharecroppers who married in 1930, both for the second time. They had six children together and a total of 14 children including those from prior marriages. My grandparents settled in Marco, my grandmother having lived in Chopin prior to the marriage. My mother, Dorothy, was their oldest child together.



My parents in early 1950s

My father served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and returned to the Cloutierville/Derry area after the war ended. Church attendance brought our parents together. Our mother was in a quartet with three of her friends. They sang at a service Dad attended. In a video in which Dad reflects on his life, he says our mother was “the prettiest girl I had ever seen”. My mother remembers seeing him for the first time walking toward her and a group of friends on their way from church. They married on February 26, 1949, on the front porch of her parents’ house facing Cane River.

My mother and grandmother had made a special trip to Alexandria and bought her wedding dress at Schwartzberg's. My parents moved to Alexandria in 1953, after what Dad humorously described as his miserable failure at sharecropping. Alexandria, he determined, would offer more employment opportunities. With just me (I was the only child until 1954), they moved first to Woodside, then to the Sonia Quarters on Poplar Street where we lived until I was 12. My three siblings were added in 1954 (Justus Jr), 1955 (Patricia), and 1960 (Michael). Our parents were married for over 68 years, until Dad's passing in 2017.

MY FIRST NEIGHBORHOOD

The house we lived in was on one of four tree-named (Poplar, Locust, Cypress, Cedar) streets, hemmed between two railroad tracks and the businesses that employed Black men and women in the surrounding community: an oak flooring plant, a sawmill, and a chicken processing plant. The latter emitted the worst stench imaginable *every single day*. I never got used to the smell and have never forgotten it. The placement of these homes was and remains typical of neighborhoods designed in cities and towns throughout the country for Black people. Interestingly, the homes on those streets were owned by Blacks. We rented our house from Mr. Henry who had converted one room of the house we lived in into a store. It was a small store typical of its time. Folks were in and out all day for cookies, "lunch" meat, candy, pickles, slices of cheese. Entrepreneurial and a tough businessman, Mr. Henry represents for me those in the Black community with a desire, and in some cases, a gift for business, but lacked the opportunity and resources to capitalize on those skills. Within those four streets were two churches; my siblings and I attended St. Lawrence. I loved that church. I was a regular at Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. The pastor, Rev. D.D. Smith, was a proponent of Christian education and recruited all the children in the neighborhood for participation in church activities. Just about everything I know about the Bible, I learned in the church's excellent programs. Ask me the major and minor prophets, I can tell you. I am ever grateful for that exposure to the Bible.

Ours was a lively, close-knit neighborhood with plenty of children, elders, and young couples. We were one of the few families with a television. I remember it well. It was a “floor model” with a blonde finish and doors that made it appear to be a cabinet when closed. Children would gather at our house to watch “TV”. One of my friends called my mother recently and brought that memory back to her. Westerns were popular in the 1950s and 1960s and reflected in the one activity boys loved: riding stick horses. They would get long sticks, attach “reins” and commence to ride. I wish I’d had a video camera to capture the kids riding their horses up and down Poplar Street. The boys also used to roll tires. That was also a sight to see. Girls made all manner of things from mud and played with paper dolls made from pages of the Sears catalog in the absence of the “store bought” ones. What we could do with popsicle sticks showed the depth of our creativity. We used what we had to entertain ourselves.

MY GRANDMOTHER’S HOUSE

Although we lived in Alexandria, my three siblings and I had much to look forward to, as we spent our summers on Cane River, primarily in Marco. My maternal grandparents lived close to the point where Cane River began. In those years, the Red River ran alongside Colfax and served as the dividing line between Grant and Natchitoches Parishes. The two rivers formed a “T”, with Red River forming the top of the “T” and Cane River, the vertical line,” rambling its way through Natchitoches Parish from that point. There were no plantations on the Marco end of Cane River, but white landowners constructed houses for themselves and the sharecroppers who worked the land hoeing and picking cotton in summer and fall, picking pecans during winter, and fishing in Cane River year-round. My grandparents merely crossed the road and walked down the hill to the banks of Cane River. It holds a distinct place in the lives of those who grew up in its presence. It was the source for many meals with its variety of fish, including buffalo, cat, gar, and gasper goo. Many of our family members on both sides, including our parents, my baby brother, and I, were baptized in it. Some

family members and friends of the family lost their lives in it. With the houses facing the river, cottonfields on both sides and behind the houses for rows and rows, and scores of pecan trees behind the cottonfields, my grandparents and others who lived “on the river” were surrounded by their livelihood. They all lived off the land, some, of course, better than others. My paternal grandparents (Big Momma and Big Poppa) lived further up the river in Cloutierville/Derry until 1956 when they shed their sharecropping existence for the more lucrative highway construction work in other parts of Louisiana and Mississippi.



We were on Cane River every first and fourth Sunday of the month attending my mother’s (St. Mary) and father’s (Bright Morning Star) home churches, respectively, both established during the early 1900s. Muh, what we call our mother, and Daddy maintained their membership in those home churches for many years after leaving for town, as Alexandria was called by them. The church as well as the services were different from those in town. The services were still steeped in the traditions from slavery. There was no piano. Every song was a capella and beautifully accompanied by patting feet and clapping hands. People told their determinations, prayed strong, unforgettable prayers in the tradition of the ancestors, and shouted from being filled with the spirit. Rev. A.J Jenkins, a man with a calm demeanor and strong commitment to

the Word, pastored both churches and was the grandfather of my classmate, Larry Jenkins. People adored Rev. Jenkins who was atypical for his time. More than 60 years later, I can still see and hear them all in my mind's eye. Mr. Jim (Cleveland), as we called him, prayed soul stirring prayers and sang from the depths of his soul. The equally powerful women, my grandmother and Miss Jo (Mr. Jim's wife) among them, enhanced the services with their prayers, songs, and testimonies. Church gave them power and hope in a world that offered little. It was a place all their own. They had power and control in church that they did not experience in their daily lives.



My parents (1971) at Marco. St. Mary B. C. in the background

My maternal grandfather died in 1953. Mama, my grandmother, never remarried. I know now that she was the strongest and bravest woman I have known personally. I saw her in action run that farm and support her family against the odds. Nobody messed with her. There are wonderful stories about her toughness. Until I was 13, I spent most summers at her house. I loved being in the “country” as we called it. Those experiences in the sharecropping environment are integral to the person I am today; I was immersed in the culture and traditions that I love. I did all kinds of things from feeding chickens to collecting the eggs they laid in the chicken house which often had snakes that “collected” the eggs as well. However, I never learned to milk the cow whom we called Blossom. I tortured her. Getting the right tilt on the rope to get a full bucket of water from the cistern was a challenge as well. My aunts would tell me it was a good thing I was a good student because I would never make it on a farm. Nevertheless, I enjoyed my time there.



*Sarah Murphy Givens, Mama,
my maternal grandmother*

My grandmother’s house, built in 1950 by the landowner, appeared to be on stilts. We used to play under that house. Peach trees lined one side, and a flower garden with a chinaberry tree was set in the corner of the yard. The opposite side had a cistern with water flowing into it from the gutters surrounding the edges of the tin roof of the house. A crib for storing the cotton once picked and a scale for weighing it were across from the cistern. A chicken coop and a large garden were in the back of the house. The house had front and back porches that all of us enjoyed. Neither the house nor the crib was painted. Row upon row of cotton on both sides of the house and behind it were hoed and picked by the Givens family for many years. Of course, there was an outdoor toilet. A gate led to the front porch, and a very wide gate on

the other side allowed vehicles or wagons to enter the yard for access to the crib and the fields. The house and setting were emblematic of the agricultural life lived by Black people in Louisiana at that time. Even as there were reminders of poverty and separation, being there was a source of comfort and pleasure because family and community were there. My mother shares stories of the entire family listening to Joe Louis fights and Los Angeles Dodgers games on the radio with Jackie Robinson as a member of that team. They cheered for Jackie Robinson as though he was a member of the family. Every family member, especially my grandmother, loved the Dodgers because they hired Jackie Robinson. One of their own had become the first to make the big leagues and made them proud. *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines were a staple in the household. They provided connections to an aspirational Black world.

In 1958 when I was in third grade, I had the opportunity to live with my grandmother for a few months and attend Springhill, the school in Chopin. Although their school, like my South Alexandria Elementary, was segregated, there were glaring differences in the investment made in these schools and what were considered grossly underfunded schools in town. We seemed to fare better by far. (Everything is relative!) Children attending these schools were from Black sharecropping families and seemed to have fewer resources. Their physical environment had moved directly from slavery to “freedom”. In 1958, they were in the same setting in which their ancestors had been enslaved with little change, a generation removed from slavery but still suffering its indignities to what appeared to be at a greater degree than Black schoolchildren in Alexandria! They rode several miles on a bus to get to school. Several grades were taught in one classroom. They often missed school because of the need to help the family bring in the crop. Despite the inequities, the teachers were committed to the community and the students, and they were able to provide excellent instruction and extracurricular activities for the children to the extent possible under the circumstances. I had a memorable experience. On reflection, those times in the country made me appreciate the character-building qualities of work, family, worship, and community that as an adult allowed for a more confident transition for me into the outside world.

My paternal grandmother, Virena Talton Benjamin (Big Mama), passed away in 1960 when I was 10. Two weeks before she passed, I had spent part of my summer with her in Amite, LA. Her passing broke my heart. She gave birth to 12 children and was ahead of her time in so many ways. Her legacy lives on in her numerous grandchildren.



Big Mama (right) with her sister, Essaphine, in 1954 in Los Angeles.

THE BENJAMIN HOUSEHOLD, SCHOOL, AND WORK

Wherever we were, our parents worked as a team and maintained strict rules. The emphases in our household were on doing things for others, spending our time productively, and always putting God first. In Alexandria, Dad worked at the sawmill for a few years and then at a gravel pit. He attended the local technical school and became a certified welder. Mom was a private housekeeper off and on during our childhood.

Dad had us memorize full chapters of the Bible; we had to stand before him and recite. That Psalm 91 is a long one to memorize, but it sustains me to this day.

I am grateful for it now. Our mother comes from a long line of great cooks. In our house, everything was made from scratch. She made the best cakes, pies, gumbo, fried chicken. I could go on. Eating from a fast food restaurant was not allowed. When we returned home for visits as adults, we never went out to eat. She cooked our favorite foods. Great food along with her wise counsel continue to be her greatest gifts to us.

As strict as they were, Dad insisted that each of us get a driver license when we turned 15. Being able to drive was part of another of my parents' character-building strategies. My driving was restricted to family errands, including chauffeuring elderly family members to doctor appointments and church services. Of course, I often ended up in places I was not sent, and I was punished for it if discovered! They often sent my brother with me on errands. He could not hold water. If I veered from the straight and narrow, he would "tell it" before he got both feet in the house. Considering Dad's old-school ways, I was surprised that when I turned 16, he allowed me to "receive" company. It was all very formal and, I suppose, a carryover from his and my mother's courting experience. Guys would come to visit me, typically on Sundays. We sat awkwardly on the sofa and conversed uncomfortably, knowing that we weren't completely alone. If the guy overstayed what seemed to be sufficient time for a visit, Dad walked through the house winding the clock. That hint that it was time to leave could not have been more obvious.

As was the case with most Black parents at the time, our parents focused on the importance of education and their desire for my siblings and me to escape the backbreaking work for those who did not seek higher education. To this end, going to school was as important as anything else we did. I never attended preschool or kindergarten. My mother taught me the alphabet and my numbers. I was ready for school. From the moment I stepped into Mrs. Castain's first grade classroom at South Alexandria Elementary School, I loved school. I loved everything it offered, especially a glimpse into a world foreign to my daily existence and the wonderful possibilities life held for me. School was my respite, my escape, my saving grace in a segregated system designed to subjugate me. I also wanted more from the life I had. School brought me both joy and hope. In elementary school, I loved geography and still

remember being fascinated by Greenland and Iceland and wondering how anyone could live in such a cold climate.

We moved from the Sonia Quarters across one set of the tracks and near the Garden of Memories Cemetery when I completed elementary school. I enrolled in one of the two junior high schools, Lincoln Road, with all the kids I had attended elementary school, but I stayed there for only one semester because we moved into a neighborhood requiring my attendance at the opposing junior high, Jones Street. I was heartbroken because I did not want to leave my friends. However, I had no choice. The only good thing about the move was that my elementary school principal, Mr. Spottsville, had been promoted to principal of Jones Street, and he knew me. That gave me some comfort. I distinctly remember the assistant principal saying to me on the day I enrolled at Lincoln Road that I had made all A's at Lincoln Road but that would not happen at Jones Street because Jones Street was much more challenging. Who says something like that to a seventh grader? I have never forgotten his comment and have endeavored in my career as an educator to never say such a thing to any student. A distinct Jones Street memory for me is participating in Louisiana Interscholastic Athletic and Literary Organization (LIALO) oratory competition in eighth grade. Ms. Tabor, my English teacher, selected Poe's "The Raven" for me to recite. I competed against a young man who performed a dramatic recitation of Judas' remorse after the betrayal. I was certain he had won, but he did not. I took home the prize.

Despite my disappointment over changing schools, attending both schools gave me a huge advantage when we all ended up together in 10th grade at Peabody, the only public high school for Black students. I knew just about everyone in our class, having spent time at both feeder schools. As a matter of fact, I was voted "most popular girl" and "best all-around girl" in our senior class and president of the student council in my senior year. The longer I was in school, the better things became for me. Although I was busy with jobs, church, and responsibilities of being the oldest child in the household, I was active in high school. I participated in numerous activities and was given leadership opportunities, providing the impetus and experience

for thinking about what I would do in the future. One of the ways I took advantage of high school activities and programs for broadening my educational experience was to participate in Bayou Girls State in Baton Rouge in the summer of 1967. Doing so was the highlight of my high school years. Separate but equal activities were still the norm in the country then, and Bayou Girls State was the Black version of a statewide program. Both were designed to acquaint students with how government works. It was a transformative experience for me. I spent a week with other Black girls from all over Louisiana, learned a great deal about Southern University where the program took place, lived in a dormitory, and participated in a process that provided discipline and knowledge about government that I would otherwise have never obtained. Being involved in this program broadened my horizons and my understanding of leadership.

Because of my experiences in the first 18 years of my life in Alexandria, I faced my future with confidence. I realize now that I moved along as a child on a mission under the pressure of the constant refrain from our parents: “I do not know what you are going to do when you are 18, but you got to get out of here.” I knew they meant it. They forced independence. They instilled us with Christian values and a serious sense of right and wrong, and they expected us to make good choices for the rest of our lives.

Whether conscious of it or not, I think now that I was always living with a sense of urgency, always involved in something meaningful and engaged in multiple activities toward a greater purpose. That involved working, another of the values strongly held by my family. I started my first job the summer I turned 14, as a babysitter for a toddler, a white girl named Kelly whose mother worked outside the home. I don’t recall much about that job except that the house was in disarray. All the mother wanted me to do was take care of Kelly all day, and that was all I did that entire summer. I started my first bank account with that job. It also was the first summer I did not spend all or part of with my grandmother in Marco. In high school, I got a job for another white family in town. One of my mother’s cousins worked for them during the day. They had five stairstep children. I worked there on Tuesday and Thursday evenings and on Sunday mornings when they went to church. I was the evening and weekend “help”

with responsibility for the two youngest children who were probably 18 months or so apart. They lived a privileged life that was truly foreign to me. I never “connected” with them, as would be expected in a situation where enforced racial and social segregation held sway. The job was a means to an end. I did what I was paid to do, and that was to add money to my bank account toward the end of that type of servitude.

While working for the physician’s family, I became part of the federally funded Economic Opportunity Act’s Neighborhood Youth Corp (NYC), approved in 1964 as part of LBJ’s War on Poverty. There were 11 programs in the legislation, and I participated in two of them, NYC in high school and Work Study in college. NYC provided work and training for young men and women between the ages of 16 and 21 from impoverished families and neighborhoods. I certainly qualified when it came to poverty in financial resources, though I would like to think I was rich in other ways. NYC provided three important job training experiences: an aide at Pincrest State School for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities; an aide at Huey P. Long Charity Hospital; and with my best friend, Jackie Mayeaux, a recruiter for the Head Start program.



*Sandra Williams, Kathlyn Giles,
and me in our uniforms at Pincrest
State School, Summer 1967*

MY AWAKENING

There were whites in the work environment in the first two jobs, but they now are a blur to me. However, I clearly remember the patients I encountered. At Pinecrest, I experienced children with disabilities of all kinds, including sweeping cases of babies with hydrocephalus and young patients in the hospital with terminal illnesses who were there on a Saturday I worked, and deceased by the next Saturday. It was more than I could take, but I survived. I was not the one suffering, and the least I could do was offer aid. I knew then that such work settings were not ones in which I could build a career. My empathy would override my ability to do the job. Those images and experiences have stayed with me my whole life and instilled in me an understanding I would not have had otherwise. The Head Start experience involved walking across the Pineville bridge from the NYC office and going door-to-door in Smithville and Pineville to sign up participants. That job involved lots of walking and interacting with people. We even worked in the program at Mary Hill once it started. That work was more appealing to me. My NYC work provided a variety of work experiences and a peek into the real world of work, and it provided steady income. Between the domestic work and NYC, I was able to take care of many of my needs, especially when it came to graduation expenses.

My experiences as worker with NYC and my jobs as a domestic represent my closest and longest sustained encounters with white people in my 18 years in Alexandria. Of course, I saw white people when I went downtown or rode the bus, but sustained contact did not exist. In those two situations, I spoke only if it was required. I had nothing to say and little was asked of me that required a verbal response. I did not have sustained contact with whites until 1971 when I fulfilled my student teaching requirement. These minimal interactions were a result of the racial hierarchy of the time.

I experienced the strange and unnatural feeling of avoiding communicating with another human being when I exercised my right to sit at the front of the city bus one day. Neither my parents nor I was part of any organized opposition to segregation. Little was said in our home about what was happening in Alexandria. However, we

were aware of the national scene. Chet Huntley and David Brinkley brought the news of civil rights into our home every weekday evening. I knew what was happening or had happened in Birmingham, Little Rock, and other cities throughout the South. I knew federal legislation had passed allowing me to sit anywhere I wanted on the bus or eat at any restaurant I wanted to. I became bold enough to step outside the vacuum of my home environment.

On that Big Day, at age 14 and scared to death, I dropped my coins in the fare box opening, steeled myself, and sat behind the bus driver. Nothing happened. I rode through the Sonia Quarters and downtown to my stop. The driver looked at me through the rearview mirror but uttered not a word. I sat in the front of the bus from then on. My bus riding days, however, were drawing to a close because I got my license to drive the next year. I also remember vividly the day Jackie (Mayeaux), my best friend, and I finally got the courage to sit at the lunch counter at the W.T. Grant store. Jackie remembers our teachers encouraging us to do so. I remember the vivid newspaper and television images of other young Black teenagers risking their lives to give us the right to do so. We used to walk through Grant all the time and talk about “doing it.” When we finally sat at that lunch counter one day and ordered hamburgers, we received no resistance.

We were inching toward integration, but I could not wait for a future escape from the segregated conditions that existed for too long in my hometown. I wanted to know more about a broader world. The segregated environment in which I was born was shaped internally by those who lived and led within it. We were with people who knew and understood us and knew what we needed to survive and even thrive and not be stifled and completely limited in our expectations for ourselves. They cared about us, saw the potential in us, encouraged us, and sometimes forced us to see beyond our circumstances what we could and would become. They knew that our hope was in becoming educated and in having experiences that exposed us to the broader world and not the racially oppressive one designed to keep us in subjugation to white people and their ways. They also knew that persisting toward that education required a toughness, a willingness to take risks, and endure discomfort. This

discomfort extended even into the educational arena where, one would think, a more enlightened attitude toward equality, fairness, and a greater comfort level would exist. That, however, was often not the case.

COLLEGE

At the end of my senior year, I had a scholarship to Southern University in Baton Rouge and was planning to be on campus in the fall of 1968. I had some trepidation about being a college student, but Southern was familiar to me as I had spent a week there as a citizen of Bayou Girls State the prior summer. As chance would have it, the Bishop College financial aid director (Mr. O'Bannon) who was from Oakdale, a nearby town, contacted one of the counselors at Peabody on a Saturday morning in June, indicating that he had full rides with a combination of financial aid and scholarships for six students. The counselor called six of us to his office where we were offered the packages, and all six of us accepted. What a turn of fate for us all. Jackie and I left for Dallas a couple of weeks later for participation in a summer program. The trajectory of our lives changed that day.

What a change to my life! Affiliated with the Baptist church, Bishop was a historically Black college founded in Marshall, Texas in 1880, and in 1961 moved its campus to Dallas. It was a beautiful, intimate campus in the southern-most part of the city with a student body of about 2,000 Black students from across the United States and a few students from African countries. The professors were a diverse group: African Americans, Black and white Cubans, American whites, and Europeans. This kind of exposure to others was a first for me. They all appeared to have a common interest in the success of Black students. For the first time, I met Black students from all over the country.

Prior to going to college, I had only been to cities in Louisiana and Mississippi to visit my paternal grandparents who would move to and from areas where highway work took them. I also had been to Houston to spend a summer or two with my mother's sisters. Meeting students from California, Chicago, cities in Texas, the East

Coast, other southern states, and the Continent opened a world for me I had not imagined. There was even a student from Pocatello, Idaho. How diverse we were! This new environment required adjustments for us all. The college was a safe place for me to continue my growth and development and to enter an even broader world a little at a time. Dallas offered the large city experience but was just as segregated as Alexandria.

I was as busy in college as I had been in high school. I participated in student government, joined a sorority, worked in the library at the time they changed the cataloguing system from Dewey Decimal to Library of Congress (LC). I remember that so well because my job was to replace the Dewey Decimal numbers with the new LC ones and to make sure the cards in the card catalogue matched the numbers I “burned” on to the spines of hundreds of books with a hot pen. I also babysat for professors and worked at the first Target in Dallas as a night head cashier while maintaining a decent grade point average. I still had that sense of urgency I felt in high school as I reflect on it. As a student leader, I represented the college at a national United Negro College Fund event in Detroit. What an experience for me! I had my first airplane flight and took a day trip to Windsor, Canada, my first international travel experience. I loved college as much as high school.

MOVING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Racial oppression has long-lasting effects. Although I began my teaching career at age 21 in an integrated environment of Blacks, whites, and Latinos, it was not until I was 25 and in my very first graduate course at Texas Woman’s University that I sat as a student in a classroom with others who were not Black like me. I admit that I felt some discomfort and questioned my academic abilities and seriously wondered if I could compete. I had similar questions and misgivings about myself, when, in September 1971, I was thrust into a student teaching situation in a predominantly white school with a white teacher who had apparently not experienced the likes of me in such a capacity. It was a first for both of us. I realize now that I had bought into

the “inferiority” or “lesser than” hype that results from growing up in an environment designed to subjugate my people and me. I had been complicit in my own subjugation without my conscious knowledge. I doubted myself and my abilities because I had spent the first 18 years of my life in an environment designed by white people to lower my self-esteem. Every single day, their words (or lack of words) and actions supported that. Fortunately, family members, my one-race school classmates, and my church community showed me that I was valued.

Those years were lessons in contradictions to young minds taught patriotic songs that we sang with great fervor. The contradictions came with the realization that the words of those songs and others did not reflect my experience. My classmates and I never received new textbooks, only used ones with the names of white students we would never meet. In school we were taught principles of democracy, but we lived our daily lives in a “separate and apart” unequal world with its own set of rules designed for Blacks and whites. These practices, if one took the time to pay attention and let their effects register, were enough to drive one into madness. Thankfully, those around us would not allow us to take that path. They encouraged and urged us to live above the circumstances of our birth. I did not know of W.E.B. Dubois’ notion of “double consciousness” as an elementary school student, but I certainly experienced the dilemma described by it. That was indeed my life.

As I was growing up, adults who cared about me wanted me to do better than they had done. Teachers were the only professional role models I saw daily, so I decided to become one of them. I spent my professional career in various educational settings. I advanced from being a teacher in a public high school in Texas to increasingly responsible administrative positions in higher education, ending as an administrator in a large community college system in California. Professionally, the move to California was fortuitous. In the fall of 1989, I participated in a national leadership program sponsored by the League for Innovation in Community Colleges with 16 other people of color from across the United States. The program gave me hope and exposed me to a world of possibilities. By the time it ended in June of 1990, I had a job in the San Francisco Bay Area. I had given my all in Dallas in service to the

community and in my workplaces, but there was little opportunity there for advancement. I went West and encountered colleagues and a system different from the one I had experienced in the South, one more favorable in furthering my career goals but not necessarily favorable for my children who had to adjust to a life radically different from the one they had left. We persevered, however, to a better outcome for us all.

While moving between segregated and integrated worlds presented major challenges for me after I left Alexandria, my movement between two worlds was successful because I never lost my sense of self and the core values that shaped me. My life could have turned out differently, but I decided against internalizing the anger and hatred exhibited toward me on numerous occasions, for it would make me lose my center — my essence — and render me useless in a world that needed me whole to make a difference. I refuse to carry that anger and hatred within me. Witnessing how my grandparents and others in rural areas and Blacks in Alexandria were treated and how they responded to the injustices and indignities placed on them has stayed with me. I have endeavored not to have racism become a distraction in my life. Toni Morrison's words reverberate:

The function of racism ... is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. ... None of that is necessary. There will always be one more thing.

Thankfully, I learned this early and moved on with my life. I have devoted my life to education as a teacher and administrator, always paying it forward because of the help and support I received in my educational experience. As a result of my career choice, I have been in school since I was six years old and have loved it. I am reminded of the words with which Mr. Jim and many others closed their prayers back in the day. They express what I wish for myself at this point in my life: "May my last days be my best."