

Fresh Advices

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Oral History and Williamsburg's Black Community: Interviews with Mrs. Fannie Epps

From July to December 1986, Kathleen Bragdon of the department of historical research conducted oral history research with Mrs. Fannie Epps, a life tenant in the Historic Area, who was born in Williamsburg in 1895. As a member of Williamsburg's black community and a descendant of a long-established York County family, Mrs. Epps's memories tell us a great deal about little known aspects of local black history and about the changes that have occurred in Williamsburg in the twentieth century.

In the past several decades as historians have turned increasingly to studies of "hidden" segments of past societies to supplement and correct our vision of America's past, oral history has been recognized as a significant tool for uncovering little known or unrecorded facts about everyday life. Although its methods are different from those traditionally employed by historians, oral history supplements, complements, and sometimes corrects information derived from documentary research.

The subjects researched by oral historians include anything within the memories of their informants, who are often chosen because their individual experiences, occupations, or longevity makes them repositories of forgotten information. Sometimes their knowledge is about ordinary subjects: how hogs were slaughtered, what people ate for Saturday night supper, what a country church service was like. Often these informants were present at important events or were members of significant organizations, and their memories are the only records of what took place. Oral history is the history of the taken-for-granted and the history of those who left few or no written records. It is also the history of the recent past.

The interview is the primary source for the oral historian. In most cases the interview is

set in the informant's home, and the oral historian has a prepared set of questions to ask. All interviews should be tape-recorded. The new interviewer has many lessons to learn about method. In general, it is best to interview informants one at a time; interviews done simultaneously with more than one informant become confusing, argumentative, or contradictory. The interviewer must learn to allow the informant time to formulate an answer and must not interrupt or contradict. Another difficult lesson to learn is when to pursue a new avenue of inquiry brought out by the interview and when to return to the original line of questioning.

After the interview is completed, the tape-recording must be transcribed, an arduous task. The first transcription is often a shock to both the interviewer and informant; most people don't realize how repetitive and rambling their conversation can be. Some interview transcriptions are edited to remove the interviewer's inanities, repetitious remarks, and interjections, but others are left in their original state. The advantage of the first method is the increased clarity of the transcription, while the advantage of the latter is its preservation of the original flavor of the conversation and a lower probability of accidental loss of information due to overediting.

Some successful oral histories have been collected from a single individual, while others are based on the memories of several people. Numerous case studies have demonstrated the surprising accuracy with which many people remember events, names, and even dates for periods spanning several decades. Some oral histories have been known to describe accurately events dating back a century or more, when those stories have been passed down between generations.

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The oral history technique, used successfully by folklorists and anthropologists investigating non-literate aboriginal American and African cultures, has in recent decades been shown to be equally effective in studying everyday life in our own society as well.

Particularly significant have been those oral histories of African-Americans, beginning with Lynwood Montell's groundbreaking *Saga of Coe Ridge*, written in 1973. In this study Montell was able to re-create the lives of the inhabitants of Coe Ridge in Cumberland County, Kentucky, using information from interviews taken thirty years after that Appalachian community was abandoned. Most recently the value of oral history research has been reaffirmed in Charles Joyner's *Down by the Riverside*, an ethnohistory of South Carolina's nineteenth-century rice plantation slaves. This study and others have provided much information about the history of African-Americans in various parts of the South.

Another group of African-Americans has been perhaps less well studied. These are the Africans and African descendants who during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were granted their freedom and settled in free black communities that had become common in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina by the outbreak of the Civil War. With the exception of Timothy Breen's recent *"Myne owne ground": Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore*, these communities have not been as intensely analyzed, in part because there is very little documentary evidence available concerning them. Several such communities existed in Virginia in the early nineteenth century, and the lives of their members and descendants can be partially illuminated through oral history research. Information about these communities can in turn shed light on the later history of African-Americans in the Tidewater.

Mrs. Fannie Epps, a life tenant in the George Reid House in Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area, is a descendant of members of a free black community in York County. Her great-grandparents, William and Betsey Thornton, lived in the vicinity of Black Swamp, on lands now occupied by the Naval Weapons Station. Mrs. Epps was born in Williamsburg on November 23, 1895, and remembers as a small child being taken to visit her great-grandparents who lived in a log cabin near Grove. The Thorntons lived behind the "big house" owned by Mrs. Epps's

grandparents, Fannie and George Howard. The following is an excerpt from an interview with Mrs. Epps concerning her great-grandparents' cabin.

KB: Can you describe for us again your great-grandparents' cabin, which was out in York County?

FE: Well, it was a log cabin . . . log house, I guess you could call it a cabin . . . 'cause it had one big room with a big fireplace. And the walls were of clay . . . because they used to paper them—not with wallpaper but with newspaper. And when I was a child—the reason I remember it was newspaper was I had just learned how to read . . . And I'd go around and read the newspapers. And she [Mrs. Epps's great-grandmother, Betsey Thornton] thought that was just grand.

KB: Did they ever change that paper or was it up there permanently?

FE: It stayed up there . . . and as far as I knew, they put it up there with a paste made of flour and water . . . and cooked it or something and spread it on there and put it up on the walls. And they didn't put it in the water. They just put it up on the walls.

KB: So it had a big fireplace and one large room downstairs.

FE: Yes. One thing that I remember, too, about it was that it had a bed . . . and they didn't have mattresses like we have now. It was a quilted mattress. And so we had a little stool and the bed was up high like this. And I being a little child, I had to step up on the stool. And then I'd fall over on the bed. And the bed was made of feathers.

KB: Now was this bedroom the main room?

FE: The fireplace was in the center. The bed was over there and the chest was over on this other side of the fireplace. And I used to like to get up on that stool and fall over in that bed . . . because it was all soft and everything. And you used to have to make it up with a broomstick—you know, a broom handle. And take it and beat it up and smooth it out.

KB: Now, was there a loft above the main floor?

FE: Yes, but I never went—I don't remember ever going up in the loft . . . I don't remember anything up in there at all. And I didn't go in the kitchen too much . . . because the spring was down the hill . . . from this log cabin. And we used to go

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down to the spring . . . to carry the butter—put in the spring in this tin bucket.

KB: Now what did the outside of the cabin look like?

FE: Just the logs. Just the logs and the clay . . . in between it. And it had a door. A big door.

The Thorntons' cabin was probably similar to some that were photographed near Richmond and in Newport News in the late nineteenth century. These photographs depict interiors of one-room cabins papered with newspaper advertisements, and an assortment of furniture centered around a large fireplace. These photographs are now part of the Cook Collection, some of which is located at the Valentine Museum in Richmond and some at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library. A number of these have also been published in Lawrence Kocher and Howard Dearstyne's *Shadows in Silver* and John Vlach's *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*.

Mrs. Thornton was born in the early 1800s, according to Mrs. Epps, but had never been a slave. She had worked before her marriage for a family by the name of Henley, also residents of York County. Her daughter, Fannie Thornton Howard, who was born before 1860, was a midwife. Fannie's husband, George Howard, was employed as a plasterer. They lived in a framed house near the Thorntons' cabin, which, based on Mrs. Epps's descriptions, was probably the standard folk "I" house, the two-story, "two-over-two" structure with a central hall built throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in this region. Like their white and black neighbors, the Howards kept a kitchen garden and raised chickens, guinea hens, cows, and hogs.

Her family attended nearby St. John's Baptist Church. Some supplies were purchased at a local store, but many were brought out to the rural families by their relatives living in town. Mrs. Epps recalls that when she was a little girl living in Williamsburg, she was taken by horse and wagon down to York County, carrying tea and coffee, cloth, and other such staples and bringing back in return country products like vegetables, fruits, eggs, and milk.

In the late 1870s Mrs. Epps's mother, Sarah Howard, came to Williamsburg to act as nurse to the children of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Harris. She soon became an "adopted" daughter of

that family and remained with them until her marriage to Henry Pierce. She and Henry then settled on Francis Street, and their children were regarded as part of the Harris family as well. Mrs. Epps lived with the Harrises most of her young life and moved permanently to Francis Street only when her mother became ill in 1912 or 1913.

Mrs. Epps remembers life at the Harris house with great fondness. Sam Harris, the owner of a profitable general store, was regarded as a leader and benefactor of the local black community. His home, located above the store at the site of the Davidson Shop, was a gathering place for friends and family, and Mrs. Epps describes many a happy time at Christmas and Easter, when the Harrises' daughter Elizabeth played the piano and "sings" were held. Young Fannie Pierce had the run of the store and was allowed to sneak peanuts and other goodies from the bins that ranged along one wall.

She remembers too being sent on errands up Duke of Gloucester Street, sometimes to Miss Mullins's Store located in what is now Merchants Square. She was told, she recalls, to stay away from the "rowdy corner" at Colonial and Duke of Gloucester streets, where patrons of one of the saloons would gather.

Fannie visited her parents' home on Francis Street daily and helped her mother and brothers with many daily chores. Her mother worked as a laundress, and her father worked at Eastern State Hospital. Among the tasks Fannie's mother performed daily was drawing water from a backyard well to fill two enormous tubs, which were kept on the boil, both summer and winter, for washing. Fannie cleaned the oil lamps, brought in wood, and watched the younger children.

Mrs. Epps's recollections of Williamsburg between the World Wars remind us that there were in reality two separate communities then, the black and the white. This excerpt describes the "eating houses" or restaurants owned and patronized by Williamsburg's black residents in the 1920s and '30s.

FE: We had eating houses. I wouldn't call them restaurants because they—beef stew, and beans, and . . .

KB: You called them eating houses?

FE: [laughter] Yeah.

KB: Where were they?

FE: Well, there was one right down here somewhere that had a restaurant—Mr.

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Crutchfield had a restaurant.

KB: Was he a black man?

FE: Uh-huh. Tall.

KB: And he had a restaurant?

FE: He had a restaurant.

KB: Do you remember what it was called?

FE: And the Crumps had a restaurant.

Right across the street here.

KB: Did the restaurants have names?

FE: We just called it Crump's Restaurant.

KB: Did you call the other one Crutchfield's Restaurant?

FE: Yeah. Down at Confusion Corner.

KB: What kind of food did they serve?

FE: Beef stew, and beans, and chitlings, and [laughter].

KB: But why did you say it wasn't really like a restaurant? It sounds like it was.

FE: It was—it was a restaurant. It was really a restaurant, but some of them didn't have a room as big as this. And they had tables in there, but you know—

KB: Did they have a waiter or waitresses or something?

FE: Yeah. They'd have some waitresses.

Another example of the distinctiveness of the black community was the existence of organizations whose primary function was to provide aid in times of sickness. One of these, known as the Household of Ruth, met at the old Oddfellows' building on Nicholson Street. Members paid dues and also provided food and care for other members and their families. These societies, as well as church organizations, provided the bulk of what poor relief and public aid was available for blacks in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Fannie Pierce married Frederick Epps on October 15, 1917. She had completed seven years of schooling and taken some courses toward a teaching degree. She gave up teaching when her children were born: Frederick, Jr., in 1918; Henry in 1919; Warren in 1921; and Roland in 1927. She, her husband, and their surviving sons have worked for Colonial Williamsburg. Henry Epps died in 1938 and Frederick, Sr., in 1961. Fred, Jr. retired in 1983, and Warren in 1982. Roland Epps is currently special functions manager at the Cascades.

Today, at age 91, Mrs. Epps works as a foster grandmother for the Norge school system and remains an active member of the First Baptist Church. Her own life and her memories of stories told to her by her

forebears span a period of nearly two hundred years, all spent in and near Williamsburg. "I laugh," she says, "when I read about someone saying they've lived here twenty-five, thirty-five years and saying they know what Williamsburg was like—I've lived here ninety-one years."

Mrs. Epps's memories of stories told to her by her great-grandparents and grandparents tell us things about the life of free blacks in the nineteenth century which are nowhere recorded, and her own experiences tell us a great deal about how the lives of African-Americans in eastern Virginia have changed during the past century. She is the kind of informant oral historians dream about but seldom find.

Recommended Reading

Barbara Allen and Lynwood Montell. *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research*. Nashville, 1981.

Willa K. Baum. *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. Nashville, 1971.

David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum. *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. Nashville, 1983.

A. Lawrence Kocher and Howard Dearstyne. *Shadows in Silver: A Record of Virginia, 1850-1900 . . .* New York, 1954.

Charles Joyner. *Down by the Riverside*. Urbana, Ill., 1986.

Lynwood Montell. *The Saga of Coe Ridge*. Knoxville, 1970.

John M. Vlach. *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*. Cleveland, 1978.

In celebration of James City County's Tercentennial, a number of oral histories were recorded and are now being transcribed. These will eventually be published. In the meantime, audio cassettes of oral history interviews with Mrs. Epps and other long-time residents are available at the Williamsburg Regional Library.

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