

Mapping the Civil Rights Movement in Northeastern North Carolina

Currituck, Camden, Pasquotank, Perquimans, Chowan, Bertie,
Northampton, Halifax, Edgecombe, Martin, Washington, Tyrrell, and
Dare Counties, North Carolina



New South Associates, Inc.

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I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

Under contract with the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (HPO), New South Associates, Inc. (NSA) prepared this summary report of the results from the first phase of a multiphase effort to document extant Civil Rights–related sites in northeastern North Carolina. The objective of this study was to capture memories of the Civil Rights Movement by conducting oral history interviews of key figures in the movement and compiling a list of buildings and sites to be considered for architectural survey in a forthcoming phase. Funding for this phase was provided by a National Park Service (NPS) African American Civil Rights Grant administered through the HPO. The project seeks to document local expressions of the national Civil Rights Movement in the small cities and towns of northeastern North Carolina, where Black Americans formed a majority segment of the population. Northeastern North Carolina emerged as a center of the Civil Rights Movement through the efforts of local activists such as Golden Frinks, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) field secretary appointed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Raised in Tabor City and residing in Edenton, Frinks rose to prominence in the movement along with other SCLC leaders from northeastern North Carolina, including Fred LaGarde. Protests, demonstrations, and commercial boycotts to counter racism in Edenton gained national attention as the Edenton Movement and inspired similar movements and action in nearby Williamston (Martin County) and Plymouth (Washington County) between 1963 and 1966. Meanwhile, voting rights movements gained traction in the small towns of Northampton and Halifax counties, inspiring protests and organization in the inland counties.

For the purposes of this project, the HPO defined northeastern North Carolina as the 13-county region bounded by Virginia to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the east, U.S. Highway 64 to the south, and Interstate 95 to the west. The project focuses on events that occurred between 1941 and 1976, spanning three periods defined by the NPS as the “Birth of the Civil Rights Movement, the “Modern Civil Rights Movement,” and the “Second Revolution.” NSA compiled a list of sites referred to in eight oral history interviews and primary source research to map locations of sites of organization, action, and confrontation. Sites were field checked using Google Streetview and in-person visits, and a prioritized resources list for future survey was developed based on the resource’s historic significance, vulnerability, potential eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), and/or local interest in preservation.

In an effort to identify relevant sites and interview candidates, NSA reviewed the statewide architectural survey records of the HPO using HPOWeb, their online GIS service, and in September 2021, New South Historian Brittany Hyder visited the HPO File Room to scan relevant

files. New South Historians Velma Fann and Brittany Hyder reviewed the history of the Civil Rights Movement in northeastern North Carolina by consulting primary and secondary sources on file at the Raleigh Government and Heritage Library, North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, and online local and statewide newspaper archives, including *The Carolina Tribune of Raleigh*, later known as *The Carolinian*, a statewide newspaper that compiled local, state, and national news for African Americans.

NSA, in conjunction with HPO staff, engaged local history contacts, including elected officials, local history leaders, and prominent Black churches and organizations to develop a list of potential oral history candidates. The team issued a press release in February 2022 and created a Facebook page named “Mapping the Civil Rights Movement in Northeastern North Carolina” to circulate project information and attempt to reach candidates.

In consultation with the HPO, NSA’s Oral Historian Velma Fann drafted a list of potential interview candidates and questions. Between March and September 2022, Fann conducted eight oral history interviews (transcripts in Appendix A). Interviews were conducted via telephone, and each interviewee completed a consent form provided by the State Archives of North Carolina. Recordings were archived as uncompressed WAV audio files with 48 kHz sample rate and 24-bit audio depth.

Following completion of the interviews, NSA mapped the location of Civil Rights activities identified by interviewees and in primary source material in a GIS database provided to the HPO as part of this undertaking. Properties were placed in one of three categories:

- 1) Places of Organization: Homes or churches where organizers gathered to hold meetings and plan demonstrations.
- 2) Places of Action: Sites of demonstrations such as picketing, walk-outs, sit-in, or marches.
- 3) Places of Confrontation: Locations where confrontational protest, police interactions, or acts of intimidation occurred.

On September 20 and 21, 2021, NSA Historians Sherry Teal and Brittany Hyder field-checked and photographed each site to assess its condition, vulnerability, and potential for listing in the NRHP. These findings informed the prioritized list of sites for future architectural work presented in Section II of this report.

II. PRIORITIZATION FOR SURVEY

The following sites are presented in two lists. Sites in Table 1 have not been previously recorded in architectural surveys. While some have been commemorated with historic plaques or markers, these sites do not appear in the HPO’s database and should receive first priority for documentation. Sites in Table 1 are ranked numerically and organized into three levels – low, medium, and high priority – based on the preliminary onsite field assessment of each site’s condition, vulnerability, and potential for listing in the NRHP.

Table 1. Newly Identified Sites


1: Chapel of Cofield Funeral Home	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Organization; site of strategy meetings for demonstrations held in Enfield during the summer of 1963 and 1964 and organization of the Halifax County Voter’s Movement.</p>
	<p>Location: 211 Pope Street, Enfield, Halifax County</p>
	<p>Source: Interview with Willa Cofield</p>
	<p>Priority Level: High; vulnerable due to deterioration and lack of use.</p>
2: Mount Zion Baptist Church	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Organization; site of strategy meetings for demonstrations and the voter’s rights movement in Northampton County and Seaboard. Site of NAACP meetings.</p>
	<p>Location: 36.53024, -77.379547 in Northampton County</p>
	<p>Source: Interview with Sandra Reddish</p>
	<p>Priority Level: High; original location is vulnerable due to deterioration and lack of use.</p>

Table 1. Newly Identified Sites

3: Broadnax Diner	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Organization; meeting place for voting rights activists in Seaboard.</p>
	<p>Location: 306 Park Street, Seaboard, Northampton County</p>
	<p>Source: Interview with Sandra Reddish</p>
	<p>Priority Level: High; good condition, potential for NRHP eligibility.</p>
4: Home of Willa Cofield	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Confrontation; site of intimidation and a cross burning during Willa Cofield's husband's campaign for Enfield's Board of Commissions.</p>
	<p>Location: 410 Whitaker Street, Enfield, Halifax County</p>
	<p>Source: Interview with Willa Cofield</p>
	<p>Priority Level: High; retains historic feel and integrity.</p>
5: Cornerstone Missionary Baptist Church	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Action; site of voter-registration campaigns and beginning of the "Back our Brothers" movement.</p>
	<p>Location: 713 Warren Street, Williamston, Martin County</p>
	<p>Source: Wells and Sanders 2009:69</p>
	<p>Priority Level: High; additions have impacted the historic feel and integrity.</p>

Table 1. Newly Identified Sites




6: Green Memorial Church of Christ	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Organization; site of SCLC meetings and beginning point of 250-person march.</p>
	<p>Location: 503 East Main Street, Williamston, Martin County</p>
	<p>Source: Wells and Sanders 2009:73</p>
	<p>Priority Level: High; retains historic feel.</p>
7: Plantation Grill	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Action; site of protests, in the mid-1960s management locked doors when Black patrons attempted to enter. Central to a ruling that private restaurants were required to serve Black patrons.</p>
	<p>Location: 210 North McDaniel Street, Enfield, Halifax County</p>
	<p>Source: Interview with Willa Cofield</p>
	<p>Priority Level: High; retains moderate historic feel and use.</p>
8: Southwestern High School	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Confrontation; Golden Frinks was arrested at this location with 23 Black students for disrupting classes.</p>
	<p>Location: 819 Governors Road, Windsor, Bertie County</p>
	<p>Source: <i>New York Times</i> 1966</p>
	<p>Priority Level: High; retains historic feel and integrity.</p>

Table 1. Newly Identified Sites

9: New Ahoskie Baptist Church	
	Site Type/Description: Organization; site of strategy meetings that led to expanded civil rights.
	Location: 401 Hayes Street East, Ahoskie, Hertford County
	Source: <i>Roanoke-Chowan News-Herald</i> 2021
	Priority Level: Medium; marker in place as of August 2021. Retains historic feel and integrity.
10: Rich Square Factory	
	Site Type/Description: Confrontation; site of segregated factory and confrontation after passage of the Civil Rights Act.
	Location: 416 North Main Street, Rich Square, Northampton County
	Source: Interview with Sandra Reddish
	Priority Level: Medium; retains historic feel.
11: Glorious Hope Church	
	Site Type/Description: Confrontation; site of firebombing.
	Location: 569 New Hope Church Road, Battleboro, Edgecombe County
	Source: <i>Rocky Mount Telegram</i> 1970
	Priority Level: Medium; vulnerable due to deterioration and lack of use.

Table 1. Newly Identified Sites




12: New Hope Church	
	Site Type/Description: Confrontation; site of firebombing.
	Location: 1263 New Hope Church Road, Battleboro, Edgecombe County
	Source: <i>Rocky Mount Telegram</i> 1970
	Priority: Medium; updated after the intimidation event.
13: Gumberry High School	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of protests and student organization.
	Location: 36.464719, -77.519934, Garysburg, Northampton County
	Source: Interview with Sandra Reddish
	Priority: Medium; vulnerable due to change in use and alterations.
14: Griffins Quick Lunch	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of 400-person sit-in on July 7, 1964.
	Location: 200 Washington Street, Williamston, Martin County
	Source: <i>Chapel Hill News</i> 1964
	Priority: Low; significantly altered.

Table 1. Newly Identified Sites

15: Shamrock Restaurant	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of a sit-in and staff walkout in July 1963.
	Location: 101 West Boulevard, Williamston, Martin County
	Source: Smith 1983:97
	Priority: Medium; significantly altered.
15: Nebo Baptist Church	
	Site Type/Description: Organization; meeting place, led by Pastor Charles Melvin Creecy. Founded 1890, burned 1890, rebuilt 1967, burned November 8, 1967, rebuilt 1968.
	Location: 10555 US-258, Murfreesboro, Hertford County
	Source: Interview with Michele Felton
	Priority: Low; Retains elements of the historic core with significant additions.
16: National Guard Armory – Windsor	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of rallies and voter-registration drives.
	Location: 103 County Farm Road, Windsor, Bertie County
	Source: Interview with Michele Felton
	Priority: Low; significantly modified circa 2005.

Table 2 lists sites that have been previously documented by the HPO. Although some sites have been documented for reasons other than their association with the Civil Rights Movement, sites are listed by level of documentation. Documentation levels are, from lowest to highest, sites denoted “Survey Only,” previously surveyed sites in an NRHP-listed district, sites placed on the NC Study List or determined eligible for listing in the NRHP, and sites individually listed in the NRHP. Within each documentation level, sites are ranked numerically based on level of vulnerability due to deterioration, lack of use, or surrounding development.

Table 2: Previously Recorded Sites



1 (Survey Only): White Lily Elks Lodge #326 (HF0129)	
	Site Type/Description: Organization; site of strategy meetings in Ahoskie and Hertford County.
	Location: 401 Maple Street North, Ahoskie, Hertford County
	Source: Interview with Michele Felton
	Priority: High; Survey only.
2 (Survey Only): Enfield Colored Grade School/Inborden School (HX1161)	
	Site Type/Description: Organization; site of strategy meetings for demonstrations held in Enfield during the summer of 1963 and 1964.
	Location: 432 Hannon Street, Enfield, Northampton County
	Source: Interview with Willa Cofield
	Priority Level: High; Survey only, vulnerable due to deterioration and lack of use.

Table 2: Previously Recorded Sites




3 (Survey Only): T.L. Faison's Funeral Home (NP1089)	
	Site Type/Description: Organization; meeting place for voting rights activists and the NAACP in Seaboard.
	Location: 301 Park Street, Seaboard, Northampton County
	Source: Interview with Sandra Reddish
	Priority Level: High; Survey only, good condition, potential for NRHP eligibility.
4 (Survey Only): Indian Woods Baptist Church (BR0858)	
	Site Type/Description: Organization; Site of the 1965 Black Belt Civil Rights and Anti-Poverty Conference.
	Location: 2330 Indian Woods Road, Windsor, Bertie County
	Priority Level: Medium; survey-only site, conveys historic feel.
5 (Survey Only in NRHP-Listed District): J.P. Stevens – Rosemary Plant (HX1050)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of the 1974 Textile Workers of America Union's victory. The vote reflected the impact of Black workers, who represented 30–40% of the work force.
	Location: Bounded by Jackson, West Tenth, West Thirteenth, Roanoke Rapids, Halifax County
	Source: Glass and Williams 2006
	Priority Level: High; vulnerable due to deterioration.

Table 2: Previously Recorded Sites




6 (Survey Only in NRHP-Listed District): Taylor Theater (CO0045)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of picketing on February 17, 1962.
	Location: 206–210 Broad Street, Edenton, Chowan County
	Source: Interview with Goldie Wells
	Priority Level: High; retains historic feel.
7 (Survey Only in NRHP-Listed District): Mitchener’s Pharmacy (CO0355)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of 300-person demonstration in February 1962.
	Location: 301 South Broad Street, Edenton, Chowan County
	Source: Interview with Goldie Wells
	Priority Level: High; retains historic feel.
8 (Survey Only in NRHP-listed District): National Guard Armory – Edenton (CO0727)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s visit on December 21, 1962
	Location: 702 North Broad Street, Edenton, Chowan County
	Source: Williams 1962
	Priority Level: Medium; retains historic feel.

Table 2: Previously Recorded Sites




9 (Survey Only in NRHP-Listed District): Providence Baptist Church (CO0085)	
	Site Type/Description: Organization; site of freedom rallies led by Reverend Fred LaGarde.
	Location: 214 West Church Street, Edenton, Chowan County
	Source: Interview with Goldie Wells
	Priority Level: Medium; retains historic feel.
10 (Survey Only in NRHP-Listed District): Pleasant Grove AME Zion Church (CO0447)	
	Site Type/Description: Organization; 300 demonstrators including Golden Frinks and Reverend Fred LeGarde met here prior to a demonstration at Mitchener's Drug Store.
	Location: 123 East Carteret Street, Edenton, Chowan County
	Source: <i>Herald-Sun</i> (Durham, North Carolina) 1962
	Priority Level: Medium; Retains historic feel.
11 (Survey Only in NRHP-Listed District): Enfield Public Library (HX1151)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; Willa Cofield's students attempted to access the library and were denied.
	Location: 103 SE Railroad Street, Enfield, Halifax County
	Source: Interview with Willa Cofield
	Priority Level: Medium; retains historic feel and use.

Table 2: Previously Recorded Sites

12 (Survey Only in NRHP-Listed District): Levon Theater (HX2033)	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Action; site of demonstrations, picketing, and commercial boycotts.</p>
	<p>Location: 200 Whitfield Street, Enfield, Halifax County</p>
	<p>Source: Interview with Willa Cofield</p>
	<p>Priority: Medium; retains historic feel on the exterior, change in use.</p>
13 (Survey Only in NRHP-Listed District): Downtown Enfield Fire and Police Station (HX001)	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Confrontation; site of confrontation in August 1963 after protestors refused to leave the streets after 9:00 pm.</p>
	<p>Location: 115 SE Railroad Street, Enfield, Halifax County</p>
	<p>Source: Interview with Willa Cofield</p>
	<p>Priority: Medium; retains historic feel with some alterations including closure of the original garage bays.</p>
14 (Survey Only in NRHP-Listed District): Leggett’s Soda Shop (MT0971)	
	<p>Site Type/Description: Action; Golden Frinks and six students were served at this location.</p>
	<p>Location: 110 West Main Street, Williamston, Martin County</p>
	<p>Source: <i>Charlotte Observer</i> 1963</p>
	<p>Priority: Medium; retains historic feel.</p>

Table 2: Previously Recorded Sites




15 (Survey Only in NRHP-Listed District): Williamston City Hall and Fire Station (MT0960)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; 75 demonstrators ended a march at this location on June 30, 1963.
	Location: 106 East Main Street, Williamston, Martin County
	Source: Carter 1999:13
	Priority: Low; altered between 1956 and 1977 and again in the mid-2000s.
16 (Placed on the NC Study List or DOE for the NRHP): China American Tobacco Company (NS1332)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of first pro-union vote and precursor to local civil rights movement.
	Location: 436 North Pearl Street, Rocky Mount, Nash County
	Source: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources 2010
	Priority: High; vulnerable due to deterioration and lack of use.
17 (Placed on the NC Study List or DOE for the NRHP): National Guard Armory – Woodland (NP0884)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of voter-registration drives.
	Location: 307 Cherry Street, Woodland, Northampton County
	Source: Interview with Michele Felton
	Priority: Medium; vulnerable due to deterioration and lack of use.

Table 2: Previously Recorded Sites




18 (Placed on the NC Study List or DOE for the NRHP): National Guard Armory – Northampton High School East (NP1028)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; sit out following the principal’s refusal to acknowledge the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
	Location: 750 NCHS East Road, Conway, Northampton County
	Source: Interview with Sandra Reddish
	Priority: Medium; vulnerable due to lack of use.
19 (Placed on the NC Study List or DOE for the NRHP): Booker T. Washington High School (ED0614) and Booker T. Washington High School Gymnasium (ED0625)	
	Site Type: Action; location of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Rocky Mount speech.
	Location: 727 Pennsylvania Avenue, Rocky Mount, Edgecombe County
	Source: Armstrong 1962
	Priority: Low; appears well preserved.
20 (Placed on the NC Study List or DOE for the NRHP): Tillery Resettlement District (HX0541)	
	Site Type/Action: Organization; site of voter-registration movement led by the Tillery Improvement Association and movements of the North Carolina Rural Health Coalition and the Black Farmers’ Agricultural Association.
	Location: 321 Community Center Road and 45 NC-481, Tillery, Halifax County
	Source: Interview with Gary Grant
	Priority: Low; appears well-preserved.

Table 2: Previously Recorded Sites





21 (Placed on the NC Study List or DOE for the NRHP): Benbury-Frinks House (CO0680)	
	Site Type/Description: Organization; home of Golden Frinks from 1958 until his death. Known as “Freedom House,” the site of SCLC strategy meetings for demonstrations throughout northeast North Carolina.
	Location: 122 West Peterson Street
	Source: Interview with Goldie Wells
	Priority: Low; recipient of recent NPS African American Civil Rights Grant.
22 (NRHP-Listed): Old Gaston High School (NP1128)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of student boycott called by the Progressive Civic Union.
	Location: 200 School Street, Gaston, Northampton County
	Source: <i>Herald-Sun</i> (Durham, North Carolina) 1960
	Priority: High; vulnerable due to deterioration and lack of use.
23 (NRHP-Listed): E.J. Hayes School (MT0998)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; site of a 400–500-person demonstration on August 30, 1963 and a school boycott in February 1964.
	Location: 705 Washington Street, Williamston, Martin County
	Source: Associated Press 1969; <i>Charlotte Observer</i> 1964
	Priority: Medium; retains historic feel.

Table 2: Previously Recorded Sites

24 (NRHP-Listed): Northampton County Courthouse (NP0092)	
	Site Type/Description: Action; associated with the case of Louise Lassiter vs. Northampton County Board of Elections.
	Location: 104 West Jefferson Street, Jackson, Northampton County
	Source: Interview with Sandra Reddish
	Priority: Low; retains historic feel, well-preserved.
25 (NRHP-Listed): Washington County Courthouse (WH0006)	
	Site Type/Description: Action/Confrontation; 200 people marched with the SCLC in Plymouth and picketed at this location; Golden Frinks held a prayer vigil at the Plymouth Registrar's Office that ended with conflict the KKK.
	Location: 120 Adams Street, Plymouth, Washington County
	Source: Wells and Sanders 2009:103
	Priority: Low; site retains historic feel and appears well-preserved.

DEMONSTRATION ROUTES

Four march or demonstration routes were identified and mapped as part of this study. Each approximate route was revisited during field checks and mapped based on information shared during oral history interviews, a review of primary and secondary sources, and brief conversations with the public during field checks. Despite continued development, each route retains the general character and feel of the era in which the marches took place. Preliminary march routes were georeferenced, and representative streetscapes were photographed during the field checks.

WILLIAMSTON MARCH ROUTES

While several demonstrations occurred in the summer of 1963 during the Williamston Freedom Movement, two significant marches were noted in this study. The first march occurred on June 30, 1963, when 75 people traveled from Reverend David Carter's "tent church," known as Bible Way Church, to Williamston City Hall on Main Street. Some accounts place Carter's church in the 400 block of Washington Street; however, the route described in two secondary sources aligns with the church's current location at 301 Center Street in Williamston. The route is described as traveling south on Sycamore Street (present-day North MLK Jr. Drive) and turning left onto Main Street toward Williamston City Hall (Figure 1; Carter 1999:12; Smith 1983:97; United Press International 1963).

Williamston resident Nellie Wiggins describes a second demonstration, which began at Green Memorial Church, north of downtown on East Main Street, moved south through downtown, turned on Washington Street, and ended near Shamrock Restaurant, at the intersection of West Boulevard and Washington Street (Figures 2 and 3; Nellie Wiggins, personal communication, September 21, 2022).

PLYMOUTH MARCH ROUTE

The SCLC aided in organizing a Civil Rights Movement and voter-registration campaign in Plymouth, Washington County. As part of this effort, at least two demonstrations, both associated with Golden Frinks, were held in Plymouth. In August 1965, a group of Black citizens marched along Madison Street, where they were confronted by members of the Ku Klux Klan. The confrontation surged at the intersection of Madison and Third streets (American Experience 2022).

In March 1966, approximately 200 people marched with Golden Frinks and the SCLC, ending at the Washington County Courthouse. There, they held a prayer vigil at the registrar's office. According to Frink's account, Ku Klux Klan members intimidated demonstrators at the site of the vigil (Figure 4 and 5; Wells and Sanders 2009:103).

MARCH FOR FREEDOM: ELIZABETH CITY

In August 1963, six students from Elizabeth City State Teachers College organized a march for freedom. The march began at Moore Hall on the Elizabeth City State Teachers College campus and continued north along Southern Avenue, turning west on Colonial Avenue and continuing to City Hall. Five students, presumed to be the planners of the march, were jailed, and 450 students participated (Figures 6 and 7; Padilla 2014).

Figure 1.
Map of the Approximate Route of the June 30, 1963 Demonstration
in Williamston, Martin County



Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)

Figure 2.
Map of the Approximate Route, Williamston Demonstration, Beginning at
Green Memorial Church, Williamston, Martin County



Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)

Figure 3.
View North on Washington Street, Approximate Green Memorial
Church Route, Williamston, Martin County



Figure 4.
Map of the Approximate Route, March 1965 Demonstration in
Plymouth, Washington County



Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)

Figure 5.
View East along Third Street, Approximate Site of the August 1965 Confrontation in
Plymouth, Washington County



Figure 6.
Approximate Route, State Teacher's College March for Freedom, August
1963, Elizabeth City, Pasquotank County



Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)

Figure 7.
Moore Hall, Beginning of the Elizabeth City State Teacher's College March for Freedom,
August 1963, Elizabeth City, Pasquotank County



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III. RECOMMENDATIONS

ADDITIONAL INTERVIEW POTENTIAL

Encounters during field checks revealed potential for additional oral history interviews or public involvement campaigns geared toward individuals involved in Civil Rights demonstrations in Williamston and Northampton County. Contacts made at small businesses in Williamston and Seaboard revealed strong community interest in contributing additional first-person accounts of major demonstrations in Williamston and the voting rights movement in Northampton County, primarily among the children of those involved in demonstrations.

POST-1976 SITES AND DEMONSTRATIONS

Field checks and preliminary archival research revealed potential for further documentation of events outside the established timeframe, particularly in Rocky Mount, Nash, and Edgecombe counties. In July 1978, Alexander Evans, a Black city-sanitation employee, was arrested and suspended after collecting a men's suit left along his predominantly white route. In response, sanitation workers launched a strike that extended from July 10 to August 30 of 1978, prompting marches and organization within the Black community, which rose in support of Mr. Evans. The strike also inspired a voter-registration campaign to address the lack of Black representation in the city government and the formation of the Black Workers for Justice in 1981. In 2018, the strike and movement were recognized by the Rocky Mount City Council with a historic marker at the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Spruce Street (West 2022). The following sites are associated with the movement and have not been surveyed by the HPO:

1. Weeks Armstrong Neighborhood, Victory Avenue and Shirley Leake Avenue, bounded by Pinehurst Drive in Rocky Mount
2. North End Baptist Church, 500 East Grand Avenue, Rocky Mount
3. City Lake Park, southwest corner of Sunset Avenue and Lake Drive in Rocky Mount
4. Mount Pisgah Presbyterian Church, 614 Goldleaf Street, Rocky Mount
5. Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, 702 West Raleigh Boulevard, Rocky Mount

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APPENDIX A: ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTS

Interview with Willa Cofield

New South Associates in conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office welcomes you to *Untold Stories of the Struggle for Civil Rights in the Places of Northeastern North Carolina: A Research Study*. This project is supported through an African American civil rights grant from the National Park Service, the United States Department of the Interior, to the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office to identify places of significance in the Civil Rights Movement, 1941 to 1976. I am Velma Fann, historian, with New South Associates. Today is April 12th, 2022, and I am speaking with Mrs. Willa Johnson Cofield. Welcome, Ms. Cofield.

Willa Cofield:

Thank you.

Velma Fann:

Thank you. Please state and spell your name for us.

Willa Cofield:

My name is Willa Cofield. It's spelled W-I-L-L-A C-O-F-I-E-L-D.

Velma Fann:

Ms. Cofield, in what county were you born and living during the civil rights era?

Willa Cofield:

I was born and I was living in Halifax County, North Carolina.

Velma Fann:

And would you like to tell us your age?

Willa Cofield:

Yes, I am 93 years old.

Velma Fann:

Wow, that's amazing. God bless you.

Willa Cofield:

Yes. Thank you.

Velma Fann:

Ms. Cofield. Can you give us a sense of your home life? What life was like growing up in your community at that time?

Willa Cofield:

Yes. Well, I grew up in the thirties and forties, and as a young girl, I had a very secure and happy childhood. I lived in a black neighborhood that was more or less anchored by a grocery store and a business complex, I could call it, that my father owned. And there was a big yard behind the house we lived in that served the store, the barber shop and the funeral home, and that was my play area. I was more or less confined to that yard as I didn't play out in the street or do a lot of visiting. But I had friends who would join me and we did lots of fun things in that backyard. And I could talk about some of those, but I guess that gives you a notion of what my life was like.

Willa Cofield:

Perhaps I should add that I went to the elementary school that was really not that far from where we lived. It seemed as if it was far in those days, but it actually was about, I'd say two good blocks from where we lived, and I walked back and forth to school. I started school when I was five and I loved school. I just found it a wonderful place and hated to stay home. Most of the years, I would win a certificate for having gone every day. I remember as a little kid, I had chickenpox, but I wouldn't tell my mother or anyone. The teachers found out that I had it, and by that time, I guess I had infected much of the school, but they sent me home. But I always remember that as testimony of how much I loved school that I went even when I was sick.

Velma Fann:

I can see you really did love school. That's beautiful.

Willa Cofield:

Yes.

Velma Fann:

Ms. Cofield, when did you realize that blacks and whites live differently and were treated differently, that there were rights afforded to whites that were denied to the blacks in the community?

Willa Cofield:

You know, I can't pin a certain date. I think it was just general knowledge. You just knew that because you knew that the neighborhoods that you lived in looked very different from the white neighborhoods, that even at one time, we lived in a part of town that was called Black Bottom. We would walk from Black Bottom downtown, and when you got to the section where white people lived, their houses all looked different from ours, well-kept lawns, not that many people in the streets. There was kind of a mystery about those neighborhoods, in a sense.

Willa Cofield:

And then when you would go into a little town, you were always aware of the different way that you were treated, how your parents were treated in the stores. You knew that you couldn't use the bathroom downtown. You knew that there were certain places you couldn't sit, that if you went in a doctor's office, you went in a different waiting room from the white people. If you went in on the train, in the train station, you knew you were in a separate area. So it was just something that you were introduced to at a very early age, didn't come as a shock. It was just that part of the environment.

Velma Fann:

When you look back at your experience with the civil rights movement, tell us how you were involved.

Willa Cofield:

I was involved as a teacher. I taught high school English, and I always tried to keep my students to relate the lessons that I taught in class to what was happening in the contemporary world. And so students and I followed the bus rides into the South, the sit-ins at the various cafeterias and lunch counters. And it happened that one of my students came to class on a Monday morning and told us that he and a couple of other friends... We didn't anticipate this (telephone ringing) [inaudible 00:08:17]

Velma Fann:

Ms. Cofield, how did you become involved in the civil rights struggle?

Willa Cofield:

I became involved, first of all, my husband ran for the board of commissions in our town, and that was quite unprecedented. I never remember any Black person running for any political office before that. People said that he was the first Black person to run for political office in our town. Of course, we found out 20 years later that that was not correct. That there had actually been a Black Congressman who had lived in Enfield in the late part of the 19th century, but no one remembered that or even knew about it when we ran for office.

Willa Cofield:

His campaign stimulated a lot of negative reactions from the white community. They began calling our home, telling him to get out of the race, and that if he didn't that, they were going to burn our house down. Then one night we were awakened to find a cross burning on the back side of our house. These acts certainly were not unnoticed by the Black community, and people responded by becoming more interested in registering to vote. There were very, very few people registered, and Reed knew that he would not be able to win a seat on the board, but one of his goals was to get people more interested in registering.

Willa Cofield:

So, one of the outcomes of his campaign was to motivate students in the high school that I taught in. They became involved in trying to help him. They also began thinking and talking about doing things themselves, and one afternoon at the end of school, these students came to me and told me that they were going to go downtown and attempt to use the public library, which at that time did not serve Blacks. They made that effort, they were denied use of the library, but it really stimulated them to become more assertive.

Willa Cofield:

We took a group of them to hear Floyd McKissick speak at Quankey Baptist church, somewhere up near Roanoke Rapids, and that was on a Friday night, and on the Saturday night, we had a little party to thank them for helping my husband in his campaign, but they were not interested in the party, they wanted to go downtown to see if they could use the theater. So, after a lot of discussion, two of them, one of the adults took two of these young students down to the Levon theater and the students asked the manager

if he would change his policy of having Black people sit in the balcony at the theater and let them use the theater like other patrons.

Willa Cofield:

I didn't know, they had tried to use the theater before, I wasn't aware of that, but I was aware that they made that effort on that Saturday night. The owner of the theater was totally against making any changes, and told them if they didn't like the way he managed the theater, basically just stay home, that he wasn't making any money, he just provided it as a community service, and if they didn't like the policies that he'd follow, they could just not come to the theater.

Willa Cofield:

So, when they came back to our home and made this report, no one knew what we should do to follow up, and someone suggested, "Well, why don't we call Floyd McKissick?" We had heard him speak the night before, and so that's what Art actually called, Mr. McKissick, and he said, "Put up a picket line." He said, "Stop going to the theater, get other people to stop going, put up a picket line and keep it there until he changes his policies." So, the next day was the Baccalaureate Sunday, and many of students were supposed to be graduating that spring, and they were really scheduled to be at the school. But, instead of going to the school for the baccalaureate sermon, earlier in the day, they gathered at the Levon theater and put up a picket line, and this was the first time to anybody's knowledge that I know that there was a picket line in our town, and that went on for about four weeks, and at the end of June, the theater closed.

Willa Cofield:

During that period, I was helping the students get to the theater and back, and the adults would stand around and watch these kids to make certain that no one bothers them, and then later on in the summer, their picketing extended from the theater to the stores in downtown Enfield, and the city of course, was very concerned about it. They finally passed an ordinance saying that no one could picket who was not 21 years old, and that meant none of our students were 21. So, that meant the end of the picketing, they thought. But, instead, we adults took up to picketing, and so I became actively involved in that.

Willa Cofield:

Those activities went on throughout the summer, and a couple of days after the March on Washington, there was a big effort made by our group to challenge the city's ordinance against young people picketing, and it ended with big confrontation on the streets of Enfield, because all of the people, or most of the people in the movement, were in jail, and people from the countryside heard about what was happening in Enfield, and the newspaper said there were a thousand people on the streets. I had no idea the numbers of people, but I know the streets were crowded and the jails were filled.

Willa Cofield:

At that time, the towns had a whistle that it blew on Saturday nights at nine o'clock, and it was a signal to all of the people downtown, and they were almost all Black, to leave. So, on this particular day, with the streets full of people, singing and clapping and chanting, and the town authorities called in the highway patrol, they deputized some of the white men who were not police officers, and there was quite a confrontation. So, they blew the whistle to get people to go home, but nobody left and they blew the whistle a second time, nobody left. So, then they brought out the fire truck and with the fire

hose and they just washed the streets, washed the people off the streets, and injured people, sent people to the hospital.

Willa Cofield:

Following that, our group, I didn't mention that we had been meeting constantly during the month of June, for example, while the activities were going on down at the theater. We were meeting nightly at my father's funeral home. The churches were not open to us, and of course we couldn't use the school, and there was no other place to assemble. So, we met every night during the month of June and frequently thereafter. But, after the confrontation with the police in downtown Enfield, our group initiated a boycott of the stores in downtown Enfield and of the fireman's there, and the boycott was highly successful.

Willa Cofield:

The streets were just emptied because many of the people who shopped in Enfield were Black, and when they learned about how we had been treated on the streets, they stopped coming. We put up picket lines to enforce the boycott. So, that I was involved in the meetings that helping recruit people, and I was doing whatever I could to keep the movement going, and it came to the attention of the people I worked for the school authorities, and in September after the confrontation in downtown Enfield with the police and the firemen, the superintendent came to my school.

Willa Cofield:

I overheard him say to the principal that he didn't want the schools involved, and after that visit, my principal became very antagonistic toward me. Whereas I had been able to do school projects, things I wanted to do, I had been able to do them, and he would support me almost all the time. But, after that visit, he began monitoring me and his whole attitude changed, and so that year I had a very hectic year because I couldn't do anything right.

Willa Cofield:

At the end of the year, when I went to pick up my contract, because at that time the state had a 12 month contract, you didn't teach for... Your contract was not continuous, it was good for only one school year. When I went to pick up my contract, he told me that when he got the contracts for the teachers at that school, he saw that there was no contract for me, and so I asked him, "What? Why?" And he said, "Well, they said that you were insubordinate." And I said, "To whom?" And he said, "To me." So, that brings us a whole year. That was the spring of 1964. That was the end of May. So, I guess I'll stop these for a little while.

Velma Fann:

So, that was 1964. That was a busy, busy year.

Willa Cofield:

Yes. It was, unlike any other year I've ever, ever had. Things were happening all over. So, it wasn't that we were isolated and not apart, we felt that we were in the vanguard, we were a part of the movement that was sweeping across the south.

Velma Fann:

I'm just thinking about everything that you have said and everything that took place, the young people were involved, the adults were involved.

Willa Cofield:

Yes.

Velma Fann:

How proud were you of your community at that time?

Willa Cofield:

Well, I was very proud of it. I was amazed. For me, it was very educational because I felt that I was demonstrating in the streets what I had been teaching in the classroom. We had been talking about justice and we had always talked about racism and how it affected us, and when we got a chance to stand up and assert ourselves and to say, to defy what bad treatment that we had received, it was very liberating, and you felt a sense of pride in what you were doing.

Willa Cofield:

Also, I felt, in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement, when I read about what was happening in Durham and Raleigh and other places, I thought, I hope those people will eventually get to our community because we have a lot of problems here, and maybe just to say are challenging things in Durham or Raleigh, they should challenge things here at Enfield, and it had not occurred to me at that point that we were the ones who were going to have to challenge what was happening in our community.

Willa Cofield:

The other revelation that I had was, we got lots of help, early on in the movement, as I said, McKissick offered his advice once we requested, we asked him what we should do. But, then he sent a student down, someone who was involved in the movement in Durham. He came down and he met with us, and then during the summer of '63, the NAACP sent, they had they called them youth commandos, and they sent two youth commandos, Robert Blow and Marie Davis, and they lived in the community with us.

Willa Cofield:

They were the ones who helped organize the buses that went to Washington, for the March on Washington. They were the ones who led the demonstration down at the Plantation Grill that locked its doors when Black people tried to enter, and people started coming to our community from other communities to help. So, the lesson I got from that was that if you assert yourself, if you try to do something, other people will help you, they will, but you have to show some initiative yourself, you can't just sit and wait for people to come over from some other city to help you. But, if you start, if you put yourself out there and say, "This is wrong and I'm protesting it." Then you get help.

Velma Fann:

What was the degree of fear in the community at this time?

Willa Cofield:

Well, there was a good deal of fear. The cross, the burning of the cross was a very frightful thing. I had heard of a cross being burned in Enfield, back in the late '20s or early '30s, and it had been, at that time, we had a Black hospital. It was a very small hospital, but I was born there, and it had promise for becoming an institution of real significance in the town. But, white people did not like the Black hospital, and we always heard that they told the Black doctor to leave, and when he didn't, they burned a cross in front of the hospital and he left.

Willa Cofield:

Someone talked to his daughter, oh, many, many years after the '60s, I think it was probably in the early '90s, and his daughter remembered their leaving. She said she was sitting in the back seat of the car and she remembers her father driving over this cross. So, there was that story. Then there were other stories of people who had been lynched, and so there was this history of racial violence in our community. So, when the cross was burned, it really was frightening, but it was, I think, it also made people angry, and I think it motivated people to register.

Willa Cofield:

But, there was fear. Our house was guarded at night. I remember men from the neighborhood came down with their shotguns and they guarded our house, and I remember a time when most of the men were armed because no one knew what might happen, but people knew that bad things could happen because they had happened in the history of the town, and so there was a good deal of fear, and when I speak of we and what we did, we were not the total community. There was one other teacher who was very much out front, but we were the only teachers who were participating, and much of the community did not participate. People, friends who used to come to my house, stopped coming. It was quite a scary time for us.

Willa Cofield:

After the boycott, a man whose name was John Salter, who was from Mississippi. He actually was from Tucson, Arizona, but he had taught at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, in Jackson, and he left Jackson after the death of Medgar Evers, and he worked for the Southern Conference Educational Fund, it was called SCEF for short. He came into Enfield in the winter of '64, and that's when we started a countywide organization called the Halifax County Voters Movement, and John at that time was racially identified as white. Later on, he declared his race or his, I guess, race to be Native American, but he looked like a white man and everybody thought he was a white man, and he was really very courageous to come into our community because he was very much disliked by the local white people.

Willa Cofield:

But, John carried a gun, he had a permit, and he would travel the country roads at night, and he let it be known that he was prepared to protect himself. So, nothing ever happened to him, but it was quite, quite brave on his part to come into our community and to do the things that he did.

Velma Fann:

Ms. Cofield, where were some of the meetings held, the planning sessions, the gatherings?

Willa Cofield:

Well, as I said, we met in the chapel of the Cofield Funeral Home at the beginning. The very first meetings were at my home. My husband's name was Reed Johnson, and the planning meetings, the meetings with the young people were at our home. But then later, there were too many people involved to meet in our home. So, we met in the chapel of the funeral home, and that went on throughout '63 and '64, and when the Halifax County Voters Movement was organized, we met in the same place every week, once a week, there were people in that organization from Weldon and they would come over every week, and we had this meeting.

Willa Cofield:

The other place that we used was, there was a small house in the sort of behind the funeral home to the side, but also behind, it was used as a flower shop. For a while, my husband and I operated a flower shop there, and that was going on during that time. So, that was kind of the headquarters, that's where the records would be kept and was too small to have large meetings there. But, it was used as a storage space because people from throughout the country started sending us used clothing and we would give it away on Saturdays, and so we kept the clothing in that house.

Willa Cofield:

I was trying to think, what else? Oh, I know. I took some of the students, about 15 of them, to Dorchester, Georgia during the summer of '64, and we attended Martin Luther King's literacy program, and we were taught to come back and to come back to our homes, our neighborhoods, and teach literacy classes that were focused on preparing people to register. So, I taught one of those literacy classes in what was the flower shop. There was a big room there that could be used, and we had a table and blackboard and whatever. So, those were the spots in which we met.

Willa Cofield:

You ask about places that demonstrations were held. The corner of, what do you say the street? Whitaker and... Hmm. I can't, I can't remember the... Dennis, that's it. Dennis Street in downtown Enfield. That's where I think the town office is there now because they closed the theater, and it's never been used as a theater again. So, that was where the first picketing took place. I mentioned the funeral home, is a meeting place. My house is a meeting place. The in boarding school is no longer in service, it's just falling down, and it's a former Rosenwald School, and it wasn't generally known that it was, because it's an old school, it's been there for a long, long time, and no one living, I guess, maybe except a very, very few people, knew that it was once a Rosenwald School, but it was.

Willa Cofield:

That's where the students were in school. So, that would be a place of interest. The Plantation Grill that was on highway 301, and that's at the corner of highway 301 in Bryant Street, and that's where a lot of the picketing took place, and there was a court case that emanated at the Plantation Grill, the owner had the protestors arrested, and they charged the owner with harassment and said that he didn't have the right to order them off the property, which he said he did because it was private property. But, that particular case went all the way to the Supreme Court, and the picketers, our side won, at that level. So, that's another site that is of interest. Those are the major. The firemen, the place of the fireman's there, there was picketing there too.

Velma Fann:

When we look back at your career as a teacher, I understand your contract was not renewed, were you ever reinstated?

Willa Cofield:

Oh, yes. I just mentioned that I sued 14 people in Enfield, it included the district committee, which was based in Enfield, the Halifax County Board of Education, the attorney for the Board of Education, and the attorney for the city of the town of Enfield, and the case was heard first in the federal district court in New Bern, as that was the federal court, and at that level I lost, they ruled against me, and Judge Larkins was the judge. He had been the judge in an earlier case that was brought out of our community.

Willa Cofield:

During the vote, we had a big voter registration campaign during the spring of '64, and when hundreds of people appeared at the polls, the registrars began taking as much time as possible with each prospective registrar, and so we went into court and challenged them, said they were deliberately doing that to slow down the registration. There was a case that was called Austin, versus... Can't remember the last part of it, the other, the defendant. But, at any rate, Judge Larkins had been the judge in that case, and he had ordered them to change, to stop their practice of slowing things down, and he was the same judge who ruled in my suit against the officials, and he ruled in their favor instead of mine.

Willa Cofield:

So, we were able, with the help of the National Education Association, we were able to go into the Circuit court, the Fourth Circuit court, and at that level, those judge turned the decision around and said that the people who fired me, always said that they were not firing me because of any Civil Rights activity, they were firing me because I had been insubordinate to the principal, and so at that level, at the circuit level, the judges said that everybody knew who my husband was, and everybody knew, including those people, that I was suing, that I taught at that school, and so they turned the decision around and said that I should be rehired.

Willa Cofield:

But, what really happened was, and I had sued for \$250,000, which was a big pile of money in those days, and what happened is the county offered me \$20,000, and I had to sign a statement saying that I would not seek to work in that school district ever, which I did, and my lawyers took half the money. So, I got \$10,000. I don't think you were asking all about that, I mean, asking for that information, but I hope I answered your question.

Velma Fann:

Yes, ma'am. This is your story. One other question or interest that I have, the film that you created and directed that is titled The Nine O'clock Whistle. Could you give us a synopsis of that and why you thought it was important to create this film?

Willa Cofield:

Well, the authorities in Enfield, the white authorities had the practice of blowing a whistle at nine o'clock on Saturday nights to warn Black people to leave the streets of downtown Enfield. But, three days after the March on Washington, Black people refused to heed the blowing of the whistle, and that particular act led to a change in the social and civic relations in the town and initiated a campaign that ultimately resulted in political empowerment of that whole region. That's my synopsis.

Willa Cofield:

I made the video. I have always, ever since the '60s, I have been concerned that those activities, that that protest, would be lost to history, that there would be no record of the bravery, the courage, that those students, my husband, the leaders of the movement, had shown there. It would be lost to history as so much Black history has been lost. So, I have thought that it would be wonderful if I could write a book about it, but it just happened that I worked for an organization called SEED, the National SEED Project, and I worked for them part-time in the summers for about 20 years, and finally, at the end of that 20 years, when it was no longer a good thing for me to go to California in the summer and work, they gave me a small grant, I shouldn't say a small grant, they gave me a grant to do a documentary about some aspect of my life.

Willa Cofield:

So, I chose to highlight the years between 1963 and 1965, because that would give me the opportunity to document what happened in Enfield during those years, and so I take great satisfaction in having that opportunity because now I know that people, years and years in the future, will know about Enfield, and they'll know about the courage that the people of Enfield showed in the Civil Rights Movement, that we were a significant part of the Civil Rights Movement in North Carolina, and that had not been recognized even by Black historians who had documented the Civil Rights Movement in North Carolina, they had not included our story.

Willa Cofield:

So, that's what The Nine O'clock Whistle does. It was named The Nine O'clock Whistle by one of the former students who was a part of the movement. She said, "We've got to call it The Nine O'clock Whistle." And anyone who knows of Enfield's history during the '40s and '50s immediately recognized what it's about, because everybody remembered The Nine O'clock Whistle, because it was a very demeaning thing. It was a very loud to be heard in every corner of the town, and you couldn't yell back at it and it seemed as if you couldn't change it. So, it was just something that was very present in our lives that reminded us of all the indignities, the slurs, and the put downs, and the surly looks and all that we had experienced growing up and living in Enfield.

Velma Fann:

Thank you very much, Ms. Cofield, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Willa Cofield:

I can't think of anything. I appreciate the opportunity and I hope that I've done the story justice, but I've certainly tried because I'm the only person who was among their adult leadership. There are students now who are retired people themselves now, but among those who were in leadership, I'm the only one, I think, who is able to tell this story. There are people alive, I think, who participated in the Halifax County Voters Movement at the leadership level, the adult leadership level, because the students have leaders too, but unfortunately they are passing away too. So, this story was... It's just very fortunate that I've had a long life and that I have been able to pull together the resources and people have been generous in supporting me to make it possible for me to tell this story.

Velma Fann:

We thank you very much.

Willa Cofield:

Well, you are very welcome.

Velma Fann:

You have a wonderful day and thank you again.

Willa Cofield:

You're so welcome. Take care. I'm so glad you called. I scribbled something on the calendar, I couldn't read it a little, so I'm glad to solve that mystery.

Velma Fann:

Yes, ma'am. Thank you, and you have a wonderful day.

Willa Cofield:

You too.

Velma Fann:

All right. Bye. Bye.

Willa Cofield:

Bye.

Interview with Phennis Michele Felton

New South Associates in conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office welcomes you to *Untold Stories of the Struggle for Civil Rights in the Places of Northeastern North Carolina: A Research Study*. This project is supported through an African American civil rights grant from the National Park Service, the United States Department of the Interior, to the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office to identify places of significance in the Civil Rights Movement, 1941 to 1976. I am Velma Fann, historian with New South Associates. Today is April the 20th, 2022. And I am speaking with Michele Felton. Welcome.

Michele Felton:

Thank you, thank you for having me.

Velma Fann:

Ms. Felton, please state and spell your full name.

Michele Felton:

My name is Phennis Michele Felton. That's P-H-E-N-N-I-S, Michele is M-I-C-H-E-L-E. And my last name is Felton, F like Frank, E-L-T-O-N.

Velma Fann:

Thank you, and Ms. Felton, in what county were you living during the civil rights era?

Michele Felton:

I lived in Hertford County, North Carolina.

Velma Fann:

And can you give us a sense of your home life, life in the Black community at that time?

Michele Felton:

We lived in a professional working class, Black neighborhood. There were six of us. My parents had six children. And it was a tight knit community. We shared meals together, breakfast and dinner. And of course when we weren't in school, we shared snacks at around lunchtime together. And my parents encouraged us to learn as much as we could. It was a culture-filled environment. We attended church and Sunday school on Sunday. My siblings took band lessons. I had a younger sister Camilla, who took violin lessons and I took piano lessons. So, it was a very cultural enriched environment in which I was raised. And my parents consistently encouraged us to learn as much as we could.

Velma Fann:

Would I be correct in assuming or believing that you lived in a segregated community?

Michele Felton:

Yes. The community was segregated. There were teachers, and other professionals who lived within the community. And we of course attended school. The school was a segregated school. It was a couple miles from my home. It was CS Brown, historic CS Brown high school that we attended. And the church was on the corner there, First Baptist Church of Winton. So, that was the community.

Velma Fann:

What were the strengths of a segregated community?

Michele Felton:

Can you repeat that question?

Velma Fann:

What were the strengths of a segregated community?

Michele Felton:

I think the nurturing portion of a segregated community was really important, because we were nurtured by everyone that we came in contact with. It was a situation where not as today, but where students and children can be corrected by a neighbor, or spoken to by a neighbor. So I think the strength really was in the nurturing of us, and that felt really good to be cared for by others, and for others to care for us. Plus there was a center, in which the focus was on learning and gaining and education. And most of the teachers and people that we were around within the segregated environment helped us to learn as much as we could.

Velma Fann:

Mrs. Felton, when did you realize that Blacks and whites lived and were treated differently? And that there were rights afforded to whites that were denied to Blacks?

Michele Felton:

Yeah, that's an interesting question. Because growing up, I never heard anything about race within my home. And it wasn't until I looked at my skin one day that I noticed that I was even a different color than someone else. And what's interesting about our community, or I would say Hertford County, I have to add this, because this may have caused some of the... Not confusion, but understanding of different races of people. Because within our county, there are Blacks or colored people who are, in skin color and eye tone, eye color, are almost white. They look white. But they are accepted, or they were... And lived within the segregated community.

Michele Felton:

So, I guess I learned more early on about the races of just being a different race of people, because every night we would watch, every evening we would have dinner and we would gather around the table, and we would watch of course the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite. And we would hear and see during those times, where there was mention of some upheaval or problems within the segregated community. That's where I learned a lot. I learned of course, a lot from my parents, but I followed as a child, I used to see the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and see what was going on with the NAACP. And I used to see Dr. King and others on television.

Michele Felton:

And also when I attended fourth grade at a predominantly white school, it was a part of North Carolina's experiment, I guess we could say, with integration where you had to receive permission from the board to transfer to another school. And my father and his work as a civil rights leader within the community there, of course they were working very hard towards equal opportunities in terms of education. And thought that this could be reached by Black children being able to attend and get the same resources as white students. Because we used to get the white students' used books. So, my parents signed off or applied so that a couple of my siblings and my myself could attend the segregated white school.

Michele Felton:

And when we got on the bus, on the school bus, of course whites had left the rear, the back of the bus for us to sit. They all sat up front, and they all set together. And my parents had told us nothing really different that morning, other than, "Treat everybody fairly, you're going to a new school, do the right thing, be nice to everyone." And so when we got on the bus, as I said, the back of the bus was totally clear, there were rows for us to be able to sit. So at that point, that was a real smack in the face, of racism is real and it truly exists. So that's, I guess, when I really realized the troubles and problems of racism.

Michele Felton:

And I recall that at one point on the bus, the bus became very crowded. And if you got on and could not have a seat, because there was normally three children or students in a seat, and once all of those seats were filled, anyone getting on later would have to stand. Even though there were seats available within the white, or what they had designated as the white seating area. And this is just how it was. One day a young lady, actually an African American, she actually refused to stand. And sat over, pushed over to sit on available seating within the white area. And those white students immediately got up and went and sat with other white students. So, this was a true introduction for me as a child, to racism.

Velma Fann:

You spoke about your father, you spoke of your father. Could you give us your father's name, your parents' names?

Michele Felton:

Yes. My dad's name was Reverend James A. Felton, James Andrew Felton. And my mother's name was Annie [Vaughan 00:11:38] Felton. And they were extremely active and giving to the community. My mother and father were both educators, or started out as educators. They both taught adult education. And my dad in the late sixties, came out of the school system to devote his life to the Civil Rights Movement, and working for fairness, and equality and justice.

Velma Fann:

What were some of the key civil rights concerns in the community?

Michele Felton:

I would say the key concerns were voting rights, housing, jobs, jobs and jobs, and of course education.

Velma Fann:

Where were some of these civil rights meetings planned or held in your community?

Michele Felton:

I know that they were not held at my home. And I think those reasons were, I can't speak for others, but I doubt that any were held at anyone's home, where they met in mass or as a group. Just for safety concerns, and not to put the home as being a target. But some of the places may have been within local churches, Dr. Charles Melvin Creecy was another individual heavily involved within the Civil Rights Movement. And I would imagine that some of the meetings may have occurred at his churches. And then Dr. John Scott, who was the pastor of New Ahoskie Baptist Church. Also the Elks home, I would think that occasionally they would have met there as a group.

Michele Felton:

And then there was an organization which my father co-founded, which was called People's Program on Poverty, PPOP. And PPOP worked really hard in terms of housing, voting rights, education and registration, and to help to train African Americans so that they could receive job training and on the job training in some cases, and be employed to be able to take care of their families. And Reverend Creecy, in fact, he was the pastor at Nebo Baptist Church, and that church was burned. It was, I do believe, being constructed a new construction site. And that church was burned to the ground, simply because of Dr. Creecy's involvement in the movement. And a white police officer allegedly was arrested for the destruction of Nebo Baptist Church. And it was stated that he had been involved also with the Klan. Now, he never went on trial because he committed suicide.

Velma Fann:

You mentioned the Klan, how active was the Klan in your area?

Michele Felton:

In Hertford County, they would occasionally burn crosses. at the site of Black people's homes. They were more active, I would say, over in Jackson. And also Jackson... North Carolina, which was in Northampton County. And also they were very active in Gates County.

Velma Fann:

What degree of fear was there in the community at that time?

Michele Felton:

There was extreme fear. Blacks didn't feel comfortable registering to vote. I would say many did not even know the power of the vote. And because many families were sharecroppers, even obtaining education was difficult. Because frequently they would withhold their children from school in order to help to get the crop in. At that time, and someone else can probably speak to this better than I can, but the schools would start later. They normally start with August or September. There would be a delayed starting of school, so that families could get in the crops and the children could help with the crops. So, there was a great deal of fear because when you don't have your own home, when you're living off of anything that you can get, and typically it's provided by whites. You truly don't step outside of the line. And this was true of many families. There was more concern on surviving rather than obtaining rights, I would say. And that's an opinion, I have to say.

Velma Fann:

In light of what you just shared, what moment was one where the community just came together and excelled, and showed the most resilience, despite any setbacks or obstacles or fear?

Michele Felton:

I guess this would've been around 1968 or '69 is about the time that I think that the community joined together and were not as fearful as before. Although there was of course, a great fear because in 1968, Dr. King was assassinated. But I think that was a turning point, where people really felt as though they needed to stand their ground, and speak up, and speak up for themselves. And of course, the church played a major role. The leaders that I had mentioned before, are Dr. Creecy and Dr. Scott, they encouraged their members to unite, and to attend various rallies. There were meetings, or rallies I would call them, voter registration drives at several of the armories within the area. The armory in Bertie County, which was in Windsor, and the armory in Northampton County. I recall attending. And that would've been in Woodland, North Carolina.

Michele Felton:

But at these rallies, it was to mobilize the people. And also at that time, African American or Black students came into the area from the North, to help with voter registration and voter education. So to help to get people registered to vote. And then my dad made several door to door, and some of these students did too, but on a regular basis he would go door to door and have conversations with families. And talk to them about why attending these rallies were important, why getting involved... He was extremely strong in talking about citizenship and the responsibility of every individual to be a good citizen. And that sometimes meant for Blacks during that time, exercising their rights and not being fearful. Because it would mean so much for themselves, and also for future generations.

Michele Felton:

In fact, they raised money at these rallies. They would sell dinners in order to raise money, to help with the voter registration drives. And then like I said, the adult education classes that were held also at that point, where they could talk about citizenship and what it meant to be a citizen, and also your rights as a citizen. So they used every avenue, every opening in order to speak and talk about this, and to share with others.

Velma Fann:

When the community gathered, what was the response of law enforcement, or just members in the white community?

Michele Felton:

As I recall it, it was more of a standoffish response. There were no problems at any of these rallies that as I recall them to be. A car may have been parked within the vicinity, but there was no response to break it up or to dissolve the rallies. We were free to have these. Now, I don't know what was happening in the background, but as I recall it in attending, they were very peaceful. They were very vocal, they were very spiritual, they were absolutely wonderful. And when you left a rally, you felt as though you could just about do any, and accomplish anything. That's how motivating they were. And then speaking about the armories, in fact the armory in Edenton, which is Edenton, North Carolina, which is Chowan County, at that armory, it hosted Dr. King. And that was the first time that I attended a function. And the only time at which Dr. King visited, and spoke to the crowd that was there.

Velma Fann:

And describe that experience. You were a young girl at the time, is that correct?

Michele Felton:

Yes. It was galvanizing. It was again, a typical rally where people would sing songs, and you were motivated. And it was, oh, it was extremely crowded and hot within the armory, because it was packed. And so, I can't even recall what age I was at the time that Dr. King attended the armory there in Edenton. But it was very spiritual, and energized, and very powerful.

Velma Fann:

I know your father was very active in the Civil Rights Movement. Did he talk about this in the home? Were you sheltered, or did he explain and tell you what was going on?

Michele Felton:

I would say that I was more or less sheltered. Now, I heard plenty of discussions, but it was as if my mother and father tried to protect us from the events going on outside of the home. Now, I heard tons of discussions about what was happening, but never directly. And my dad used to attend meetings all the time, strategy meetings, planning meetings. And my mom would just say, "Well, he's at a meeting." She would never explain, and he did not either.

Michele Felton:

They let us, I think, see what was going on. And if we dared to ask a question, then they would respond to it. But I would say sheltered, but there was an openness of my parents discussing what was happening and what meetings they were planning for. And there were pamphlets all within the home, of course, that we saw. One said, "Speak out." I'll never forget over in Murfreesboro, there was a demonstration of some dilapidated homes because housing was, it was so poor in our area. And the water system was not sufficient. And I recall in one protest, the group used to say, "Red row must go." And this was a row of houses in a block in Murfreesboro which were extremely dilapidated. So, that was a rallying cry. And they had demonstrations at various, and within various areas. But I recall that very well, "Red row must go."

Velma Fann:

Was your family ever in any danger? Was your father ever physically abused, or threatened or anything like that when you were growing up?

Michele Felton:

I don't recall any of that. Although my dad did get for the family, a dog. And it was a German shepherd, his name was Rex. And he never said that he retrieved the dog for the family to protect us, but later on in life, as I reflect on the times and what was going on, he definitely wanted to have something physically there that could alert us if someone drove into the yard. And Rex was an excellent guard dog, he was known in the area to be quite vicious, that no one would dare come up there and try to do anything. But as I matured, as I grew up and as I reflected on this, I thought that's exactly why he got Rex. It was to protect us. Because as I stated, he was at meetings with other ministers and other individuals in planning where they were going to go, what the strategy was going to be, what they

wanted to achieve, how to achieve it, how to get the people to buy into it. And he wanted something there to be able to protect us.

Velma Fann:

In an earlier conversation, you spoke of when your father traveled to a different state and your mother was fearful for his life. Do I recall that correctly?

Michele Felton:

Yes, thank you. This is when my dad went down to Jackson, Mississippi for an NAACP national convention. And my mother just, you could see terror within her face, and worry when he left. Because he took a bus, a Trailway bus down to Jackson, and she did not rest until he returned. I remember that vividly. And as I mentioned, the NAACP, Mr. George Hall was heavily involved. And he was the president of the NAACP, of the local chapter. And he was involved in some of these meetings, and strategy meetings. We also, myself and two other siblings traveled with my dad to Raleigh, to Shaw University, where there were meetings and discussions about where and how to organize individuals, and to get people involved in obtaining their civil rights. And I remember that, being a young girl, attending those meetings with him there in the student union building.

Velma Fann:

What changes came about because of all of the civil rights activities, and plannings, and struggles and demonstrations?

Michele Felton:

Well, there was... There was a gradual, I should say, turnaround within our community in terms of elected officials. Because prior to this, there were no African American or Black elected officials. And the community was almost 50, 50, but Blacks held no public office. So this began to change, that we had an elected Black official of the Board of Education, elected Black county commissioners. Then we had an elected representative to the general assembly, the house general assembly for district number five. And that's the district, I think that our area is located in. So in terms of having representation, it definitely achieved that.

Michele Felton:

And even now you can see the results of it, because our county commissioners now are at least 90% Black. And I'm not saying that all Black, or all one race of individuals is correct. I'm not advocating for that. I think people need to be of course, qualified to be able to represent their citizens and get them what they need. But in terms of counting heads and in terms of having representation, yes, Blacks were able to achieve that representation because of the efforts by my dad and several other individuals.

Michele Felton:

There were not many, because they were scared. Grownups were fearful because of maybe jobs that they had, teachers did not dare get involved. There were a small portion of teachers that would become involved in the movement. One I recall is Dr. Dimple Newsome. She was involved, and she was a teacher. Like I said, my dad came out of education so that he could devote his life to the Civil Rights Movement. But many kept their heads down really low. And many of the professionals did not even attend the rallies. And I just assumed this was just out of fear of being associated with individuals who were demanding rights and justice for all people.

Velma Fann:

Mrs. Fenton, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Michele Felton:

Well, I would say that my parents were extremely brave people. They loved humanity, and every day they worked hard to see that people were treated fairly. Also, they devoted a lot of time to the community. This is time that could have been spent leisurely or doing other things, but they were totally committed to making a better way and a better life for everyone. My dad, I guess some of his bravery came from he was a Montford Point Marine. These were the first African American Marines in the United States Marine Corps. And he joined the Marine Corps in 1943, and became a drill instructor under Sergeant Major Huff.

Michele Felton:

So, I think a lot of this is within his DNA, but definitely he involved himself in areas where you would need to extend and demonstrate bravery. Also, he wrote a book, *Fruits of Enduring Faith*, and it's a story about a Black and a white Marine Corps member and how they overcame racism. And they were very good friends, and the stories about how they were good friends within the Marine Corps, but his family wasn't warming up to this relationship. And it talks about that struggle and how they overcame it. So, I'm very proud of what they did, of their life, their contributions to the community and beyond. They were truly good citizens, and demonstrated that, and were role models for not only us, but for other people and for their children.

Michele Felton:

Like I said, housing was extremely poor. My dad attended a conference in Washington on poverty. And he took my brother, my eldest brother, elder brother rather, along one day and took him out to do a small, not video, but filming of the housing conditions. And this was a part of PPOP too. And he presented and spoke to the congressional hearing on poverty. And out of that, funds were received. I think it came through the farm home loans, I believe that's correct, but I could be wrong. But this is so that individuals who were in the farming business could apply for a loan. And this is how many individuals within our area were able to move from sharecropper homes into home ownership. So, that was a tremendous achievement because it provided for a quality life within your own home. And I would like to say, did I mention Golden Frinks?

Velma Fann:

No, you didn't.

Michele Felton:

There were a few... So Golden Frinks worked for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and he was out of Edenton. And he would attend rallies from time to time. Howard Fuller also, who was out of Durham, he attended the rally in Woodland, North Carolina. So, these were some of the individuals who were very outspoken and would just speak truth to power. Also Julius Chambers, who was an attorney, and then also the President at North Carolina Central University. Some members of the community contacted him to look into the hospital, the local hospital. Because at that time, patients were being segregated according to their race. And some of them were being kept in hallways, because there were not any other places in order to place them for treatment. And so, also they were trying to break that color barrier in terms of jobs there at the hospital. So, a lot of activity was happening during this period

of time. And as a result, our country has grown to be fairer than it was, but we still have a long ways to go.

Velma Fann:

Well, I thank you so very much for sharing your story with us.

Michele Felton:

And I thank you for having me this morning, Velma.

Velma Fann:

Thank you. We appreciate you, have a wonderful day.

Michele Felton:

Thank you.

Velma Fann:

Bye bye.

Michele Felton:

Bye bye.

Interview with Gary Grant

New South Associates in conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and the State Historic Preservation Office, welcomes you to untold stories of the struggle for Civil Rights in the places of Northeastern, North Carolina, a research study. This project is supported through an African American Civil Rights grant from the National Park Service, the United States Department of Interior, to the North Carolina Preservation Office to identify places of significance in the Civil Rights Movement. 1941 to 1976. I am Velma Fann, Historian with New South Associates. Today is August 22nd, 2022. And I am speaking with Mr. Gary Grant. Welcome Mr. Grant.

Gary Grant:

Thank you.

Velma Fann:

Mr. Grant. Would you please state and spell your name for us?

Gary Grant:

The name is Gary, G-A-R-Y. My middle initial is R and my last name is Grant, G-R-A-N-T.

Velma Fann:

Thank you. Mr. Grant, we are looking at the Civil Rights era, 1941 to 76. What County were you living in during that time?

Gary Grant:

Halifax County, North Carolina.

Velma Fann:

Okay. And would you like to tell us your age?

Gary Grant:

I just celebrated 79 years, this past Friday. The 19th of August.

Velma Fann:

Happy birthday.

Gary Grant:

Thank you very much.

Velma Fann:

Very good. Now, what is, and where is Tillery? And what is your role with that Community?

Gary Grant:

Tillery is in the Northeast Sector of North Carolina, right up at the Virginia border. Most people will have heard of Roanoke Rapids because of them building a theater for Dolly Parton's brother that never took off. And they're still trying to pay for it.

Velma Fann:

Oh, my goodness.

Gary Grant:

No, don't it's. Don't waste your breath on that. They didn't do it right to start out with.

Velma Fann:

And what is your role with Tillery?

Gary Grant:

I am the... I'm a former classroom teacher here in Tillery, and I am the Executive Director of a group called the Concerned Citizens of Tillery.

Velma Fann:

And Mr. Grant, can you give us a brief introduction and background history? I know Tillery has had a marvelous history... Other having ups and there have downs, but it seems to be a very steadfast community. And I know it's hard to truncate all of this wonderful information, but if you could just give our listeners an idea of the history of Tillery.

Gary Grant:

Okay, let me just say this. We were talking about an incident before, and I want you to know that the local power structure, the white man who was the political guru here in Tillery... After my mother registered, he went up to the registrar's office and told them... You may as well register them cause they're not going to stop. So. That's the kind of reputation that Tillery had. It was a very... It's rural. And I don't know whether you saw where there was 10... The government bought 10,000 acres of former plantation land and broke up into 40 to about 60 acre tracks. And they sold that to Black people. And each farm had a house, a smokehouse, a chicken coop, a barn, pastor land, and an outdoor privy. So everything that a family needed, there was an orchard and a garden spot. Everything that a family needed was pretty much right there, so they could sustain themselves. And that was one of the reasons that the people were so independent, was because they didn't have to depend on the local whites and their stores, in order to feed their families.

Velma Fann:

And this was called the Tillery Resettlement Farms, if I'm correct?

Gary Grant:

That's right. The Tillery Resettlement Farms. And we have people here from every state along the Eastern Seaboard from Florida to Virginia. And that... I haven't found any place else where people actually move... People in Mississippi, even though there was a Resettlement in Mississippi, but they came to North Carolina, to Tillery. Maybe... Go ahead. I'm sorry.

Velma Fann:

I'm sorry. And when was this established? When was Tillery Resettlement established?

Gary Grant:

1935. It was following the Great Depression, and we thought at one time that this was really glorious and it is... But we later on discovered that it was just the way for the government to give white people land back and to give them that power.

Velma Fann:

Share with us a little bit about that story? I understand that there was a separate white community and an African American community? And some people were moved to the High Lands and other people were left in the flood plain area.

Gary Grant:

The government was going to have an experiment. They were putting Black people on one side and white people on the other side and the side they were putting white people on, was next to the Roanoke River, which, when heavy rains came, flooded. And in 1940, it flooded the whole 10,000 acres. But anyway, people... The white people wrote to the administration, the New Deal Administration and complained about the varmints and the mosquitoes and all of that... That the government bought another 8,000 acres, and moved all the white people to that section and sold the bottom land to Black people. So those of us whose parents bought land along the Roanoke River at that time... So they bought flood Plain land, and today it's Riverfront property. It is very, very valuable.

Velma Fann:

Okay.

Gary Grant:

Of course the white Resettlement got all the perks and all, when they moved them out of Tillery, they also took the tobacco allotments and they took a room off the houses that they were building for Black people, so that they could build the tobacco barns up in the section where the white people were being moved to. So the whites ended up with tobacco allotments and real cash crop. And they told the Black people in Tillery that their cash crops were peanuts. And they went to grow good crops of peanuts and put them on stacks, but the hurricanes and rains would be come and damage them. They didn't forewarn the farmers of that. So it's never been an equal opportunity.

Gary Grant:

And even though people that come in, that was the other thing. People who moved here, they called us the new people up until about the 1980s. They called us the new people, the Black... There was a Black community that were descendants of the slaves of the four major plantations. And then there was the white community of the few white descendants of the plantation owners who were still here. So they brought us into a community and plopped us down, and then of course the whites didn't want us because that meant we outnumbered them. And then the Blacks... The whites taught the Blacks against us.

Gary Grant:

One lady who lived to be 104, as she was telling us first, she said... And they thought they was so much too, because they had electric lights and us was still trying to read by lamplight. So they used the positives that the Black community had to keep them separated from the Black sharecropping community. They were afraid that there would be too much influence and that the sharecroppers wouldn't work for them anymore. Even though the government had tried to sell the sharecroppers the land before. But they were not educated and just didn't see how they were going to make it. And they could go back to the sharecropper and he let them have money and they end up back working for him.

Velma Fann:

Can you give us a sense of the Black life and the community in Tillery? When you were growing up?

Gary Grant:

Well, the Black life in the Tillery farms area was a good life, nice life. We could go to school where the sharecropper children had to stay home, whenever the white man said. And there's another lady who lived to be 103 at least, and she was raising her grandchildren, and four of them were boys and one was a girl. And one day Tillery, John Tillery came up to her house and said... Her name was Ms. Hat... Hey Hat, where're your boys? She said... Where're yours? He said... Mine in school. She said... So are mine. So they couldn't handle that kind of stuff. That's... And then the Tillery Improvement Association came about. So the people in the Resettlement Community had to organize themselves to get to know one another, because we were not like next door to each other.

Gary Grant:

And the Tillery Improvement Association was the avenue through which they did that. And there was a Tillery Chapel School that was next door to the Tillery Chapel Baptist Church, the Black Baptist Church. And the school had May Days and school closing programs and other things. And the church had Vacation Bible School and there was a junior choir. And we had a lady Ed teacher who had what? Third, fourth, and fifth grade in one classroom. And she tried to teach all of us how to play the piano. One piano. And that were probably 150, 200 students.

Gary Grant:

And so we were able to go to school and participate in things that the children who were still living on the sharecroppers' farms didn't get a chance to. And then the Tillery Improvement Association organized a Teenage Club, which gave us another... And it... I mean, it was open to all of the children, but it was primarily the Resettlement children who were there because the Sharecropper children were either too tired or knew they had to get up early the next morning. But the Teenage Club, they had hay rides for us. We could have socials at the Community Center. In other words, it made a life an enjoyable life for us, by the standards of that time.

Velma Fann:

I can see, it sounds like there were two Communities? One of Black land owners and one of Black Sharecroppers. Is that correct?

Gary Grant:

Right. That's correct.

Velma Fann:

And how did that come about?

Gary Grant:

Well, the landowners came from different places. The people who were... Would buy land. The Sharecroppers were descendants of the slave plantations that were here before. And so they didn't have the get-up-and-go. The government tried to sell the farms to the Sharecroppers initially, but they didn't take to it too well. As I said, they didn't see how they were going to do it, when they didn't think they could feed their families. And they ended up going back, borrowing money from the landlords and thus ended up back as Sharecroppers, rather than landowners.

Velma Fann:

Thank you. I understand. There are a couple of... Maybe major, Civil Rights events that took place in Tillery. Although you all were very active from several generations. One was voting rights? And there's a story of a woman named Florenza Grant. Are you related to her?

Gary Grant:

Florenza Moore Grant. And that's my mother.

Velma Fann:

And I understand that she became one of the first Black women in Tillery to register to vote? Can you tell us that story?

Gary Grant:

Well, the Tillery Improvement Association had... At that time, people had to read a portion of the Constitution and then the registrar would read it back to them and they had to write it. So of course, if you hadn't been to school, there was no way that you were going to do that. My mother was the Salutatorian of her high school graduating class. And my dad says he was one of those that said... Thank God I've graduated. So my parents were high school graduates. And there were... What? Was one, maybe there were two or three other families where the parents were high school graduates.

Gary Grant:

Anyway, the Tillery Improvement Association decided that they needed to get these people registered so they could vote. And every time they go to register, they chose two people because they wanted a witness to what happened. And the other lady's name was Thelma Manley. Thelma Boone Manley. And she would go with my mother there. And the reason that... Not only that... Well, they sent one person with my mother because my mother was also the first woman in the community to get a driver's license. And they didn't want her out on the road by herself. So they would go and they'd get to the point where the man would read the Constitution. And they had been told, no matter what don't you read it, because if you... If one ever read it, that meant that everybody else would had to read it.

Gary Grant:

And one day when she went... A little... She must have been 21. Because at that time you had to be 21 to register. white, young white woman came in and she spoke to the registrar and he said... You just go over there. So anyway, my mother said... You didn't make her read this. He said... No, she's under the grandfather clause. And her grandfather was white. And my mother said... Give me that paper. My

granddaddy was white too. And he was. And the man gave her the paper. She read it to him and the story that she would tell, and when he was reading it back to her for her to have to write it. She would tell him, you mispronounced that word. I don't know what words, but let's say declaration. He did. She'd say, you didn't say that right. The word is Declaration, not Declaration. So she got registered that day and the lady who was with her got registered. And that's how they broke the barrier of Blacks having to be able to read and write.

Velma Fann:

It sounds like Ms. Florenza Grant was quite feisty?

Gary Grant:

Oh, you needed to know Ms. Florenza. Can I tell you one more story?

Velma Fann:

Oh sure.

Gary Grant:

The rural electric was part of the New Deal as well. And somehow or another my daddy... If he sent the bill, it hadn't got there. And this little young 18-year-old came over and told my mother... "Matthew ain't paid his bill,". I mean, they were just so nasty and disrespectful. And my mother said... "Well, I'm sure that he... If he didn't put it in the mail, he'll be there in the morning with it." He said... "I've been ordered to cut your lights off." My mother said... "Man, don't cut my lights out. I've got a freezer full of food that I got to feed my family with this one."

Gary Grant:

"I can't help that, they told me to cut your lights out and I'm going to cut them out." So during that time, they'd have to put on cleats on the shoes and the belts around their waist to climb the pole. So she said... "Young man, I'm telling you. Do not go up that pole." And he looked back at her and he said... "I'm telling you, they told me to cut these lights out!" So he proceeds to climb the pole. And the next thing he heard was a click and he looked back and she had the shotgun and she said... "You might go up there, but I'm going to tell you how you coming down!"

Velma Fann:

Oh, my goodness.

Gary Grant:

The lights were not cut out either, by the way.

Velma Fann:

I can see why. Okay, Miss Florenza.

Gary Grant:

And just... Revenge is so good. My dad ended up becoming one of the first Black members of that Board of Directors and the first Black Chair of a Rural Electric Co-op, in the Nation.

Velma Fann:
Isn't that something?

Gary Grant:
Yep.

Velma Fann:
That's really great.

Gary Grant:
So these folk did not play. They meant business. And all I've ever known is that.

Velma Fann:
We talk about how dedicated and determined the community was. I understand at one point they wanted to close the school at Tillery? And the community said... No. Do you remember that story?

Gary Grant:
Yes. I was still teaching at the school when the rumor came out. The principal didn't even know that the Board had voted to close the school. And that was in 1978. And I'll have you know, we kept it open until 1982. And the only reason that it got closed then was because they took... Well we will keep it open, but you're going to have three classes in a room. Well, nobody wanted to go back to that day. So. That's how they got it closed. But the Community rallied together to say... No, don't close the school.

Gary Grant:
They held hearings at the school. People showed up for the meetings and they kept telling us low enrollment... And one man kept telling them... We probably do have low enrollment, because y'all done fed everybody them birth control pills. I mean, so they didn't go blindly. They went with facts, and all. And then they were going to have... They have to move the meetings from the school to the Central Office, which is 10 miles from the community. I guess they thought we couldn't get there. But the folk filled the room every time they got ready to have a meeting. So. That's how we were able to keep it open.

Velma Fann:
Congratulations on that. You mentioned that they had a meeting at the Central Office? Was that the School Board? The County Board?

Gary Grant:
That's the County School Board.

Velma Fann:
What other... Where were some of the other meeting places for them?

Gary Grant:
At the school in Tillery.

Velma Fann:

What about the church?

Gary Grant:

Didn't need... Didn't have to go to the church, because we had the school. It was a segregated school, all Black. And the principal was Black, so he didn't want to lose his job. So we were able to get in.

Velma Fann:

I understand that there is a building now that serves as the Community Museum?

Gary Grant:

Yes there's... We have a Tillery Museum of the Resettlement Era... Told by... Stories told by 80... And 70, 80 and 90 year olds. And we have one of the original houses that... And this is an interesting tidbit. We never... Our parents never talked about a Resettlement. All we knew we were here, we owned the land or at least we were working to own it, and everything was going fine. And it was a young white student from Duke who came. And that's another story with a group called the North Carolina Rural Health Coalition. A group of activists, white students, who would go into Black communities or, and white communities, but primarily black communities and help them to discover their strength. And we invited them to come here and they did.

Gary Grant:

And this young lady, as she was learning about things... She did her senior honor Thesis on "Tillery, North Carolina. 100 Years of Struggle." And it was only when we read that we began... That we knew, began to know about the New Deal and the Tillery Resettlement. And of course our parents would go... Oh, we could have told you that. Well, why didn't you? And from that we established a History Committee and we began to dig and to understand. Then a student from UNC who was in a PhD program at UNC doing her... I believe it was her master's thesis on oral history. And she came and actually stayed in the community for three years. And we gathered old photographs. We gathered photographs that people would let us... We took pictures of their pictures so that they didn't have to get rid of theirs. And we continued to dig more. And we got a small grant from the Humanities Council, I believe it was. So we were able to send her and you couldn't go... We didn't... At that time white kids... I want to help.

Gary Grant:

No, you don't need to help us, because y'all have helped us enough. So we taught them that you bring your skills and put them with our skills and then we can do something. And that's basically what we did. But don't be using the word help. So they would go to Atlanta and to Washington, DC to look at the archives and come back, and we'd have a community session. And people began to learn about Tillery and why they were... Children didn't even know how they got here. All they knew is they were here. And we did a photo display in the house of Ms. William and Madeline Taylor. And Mr. Taylor was the first President of the Concerned Citizens of Tillery. And his young daughter is now my left and right arm. She's right there with me. So, that's how we got there. And from the creation of the History House, I was approached by a professor, ad-hoc professor, at Duke who was at the Duke Center for what's it called? You know what it is, the Duke Center?

Velma Fann:

We'll come back to that. We'll look it up.

Gary Grant:

Okay. And he said... Have you ever thought about this story being told on film, now? No, not thought about it. And so he agreed that would find a videographer and that they would come and do the story for us, and had to have a couple of sessions with them first to get them straight that... Now let's get this clear. We are the ones in charge of this documentary. Not you... Because the first thing he said was... Ooh, there'll be some good singing. And my sister said... That's all you White folk think about is that Black folk can sing? We can talk too. We know some other stuff other than just singing. So got him and photographer, the videographer, to understand that this was not just some ordinary community you are coming to. And that the title of the documentary is, We Shall Not Be Moved.

Gary Grant:

And they did interviews of people who had come here from various places. And as I said, they were 70, 80, 90 going on a hundred years old. And there was one Black woman who was so... Had been raised. So fearful of White people, they interviewed her for an over an hour and she didn't look at them the whole time. She looked down at the ground the whole time. That's what white America has done to Black folk.

Velma Fann:

When we speak of that time, was there any retaliation?

Gary Grant:

No, they knew better than to come over into the Resettlement Community. The word was... Because the landowners would break into the sharecropper's house. And there was one story where the man raped... Another man raped the Black man's wife in front of him and dared him to tell it. And this same lady that I was telling you the story about... That she told him her children were in school too... When yours stay home, mine will stay home.

Velma Fann:

Some of the places that you're mentioning? The school? The church? Are they still standing?

Gary Grant:

The school is not the... We had Rose... There were seven Rosenwald Schools in a five mile area of the town of Tillery. That's how many Black people were here. And throughout migration and all... The Rosenwald school that was called Tillery Capital Elementary school. When... The day before my oldest brother had, had a confrontation with the teacher. All of the teachers had more than one class in their room. And he told her... Don't you worry, I'll fix this. I'm going to burn this place down. And fortunately, our parents kept us home. The next day we were shaking peanuts. And they had these Pot Belly stoves in the center of the room. So wood and coal, and evidently some sparks went up the chimney, and the school burned down that day.

Gary Grant:

And then as our parents would tell us that the Board came down... Members of the Board of Education rather... And they rode them around and rode them around and showed them barns and houses that were too small and all of that. And there was an old WPA building that had served as the school for the

few white children who were here that had running water, heated... Radiated heat, bathrooms, but they never took them to that. And one day my dad said... What's wrong with that building there? And anyway, they went on and at some point they got them to take them in there. And that's where we ended up being placed in that old WPA building, the school that the white children had, had.

Velma Fann:

Is that building still standing?

Gary Grant:

No, actually I think somebody bought the property and we see the building's been torn down now. That's... I graduated eighth grade from that building and I came back and I taught for 10 years in that building. So, fighting to save it because I knew what it meant to the community and all.

Velma Fann:

We talk about the History House now? Was that a Sharecropper's dwelling?

Gary Grant:

No, we have one of the actual resettlement houses-

Velma Fann:

Okay.

Gary Grant:

... that the story is told in. And again, that's started to divide the communities all over again, because some members from old Tillery wanted to know... Well, what's wrong with old Tillery? And my sister said... Well, what has old Tillery got other than a plantation and a plantation house? How many communities do you know where Black folk own 10,000 acres of land? Or had the opportunity to? And by the way, today, we still own five to 6,000 acres. And students come from across the country to study us, and tell our stories. We've got doctors, PhDs, who've done their studies on Tillery and from UNC, Duke, University of Minnesota... I mean just all across the country.

Velma Fann:

So when people speak of old Tillery?

Gary Grant:

When they speak of old Tillery, we are talking about Sharecroppers and the descendants from the plantations.

Velma Fann:

Okay.

Gary Grant:

But I'll tell you the kind of meaning it has. This past Saturday, we have one of the ladies who grew up with us. She moved to Philadelphia after graduating high school, because the only jobs here were

working on the farm. And she's now 80, 85-years-old and dementia is setting in. And another friend of hers, a best friend of hers, who's also from Tillery. She would tell her, I want to go home one more time. I want to go home. I want to go home. So the friend called and asked us could something be done at the Community Center? And of course, because that's what we do. And so this past Saturday, they brought her down. Her birthday was August the 15th. And we gave her a little surprise birthday party.

Gary Grant:

And one of her distant cousins was there and we brought her over and the cousin told her who she was and all. But she had on a... She had an Afro and dark glasses and the mask. So she really didn't recognize her. But when we sat down that cousin sat at a table behind her and she said something to somebody. And the lady said... That's that be Desi Tillery. I know that voice anywhere. So she didn't recognize her with all the garb on, but she did recognize her voice. And we had about 20 people that showed up for her. So. That's the kind of stuff that we do in Tillery. And that's the kind of stuff that has been going on since the new people moved in.

Velma Fann:

So Tillery still was very active in the '80s and the '90s. And I'm reading something about the Black Farmers Agriculture Association. Can you share something with us about that?

Gary Grant:

Correct. As far as we know, Tillery farmers were the first to raise the issue of Black farmers here in North Carolina, because what we had... Industrial Hog Corporations wanting to come in and build these industrial hog sites. And while they were doing that, the United States Department of Agriculture was foreclosing on Black farmers. Well, we all had raised pigs, so we knew what the stench and what could happen. But I guess one of the things that was in our favor was... We had been cited for 13, but the first one was built one half mile from the last living descendant of the Tillery plantation, who still lives here in Tillery. And he came to me one day and he asked me... Did I know what was getting ready to happen? And I told him no. So he told me that hog farms. So I told him... Why are you so worried about that?

Gary Grant:

All of us have raised hogs. He said, get in my truck. So I got in his truck and he took me down to the site where they had all this earth moving equipment, and everything. And then as we studied, they were digging what they call lagoons, cesspools, 30 feet deep in our... The aquifer that served most of our, of us, our well water, was only 15 feet, which meant that they were going to be digging through the aquifer. And that put us on notice about what was going to happen. And especially we were worried because all Black farmers were being foreclosed on.

Gary Grant:

So in desperation, people will grab for anything that they think is a lifesaver. But we were able to educate them. Had to hold the first meetings, first two or three meetings with four or five of us in the lobby of our little Post Office, because couldn't get them to come down to the Community Center. And so that's where we started meeting. And eventually, we moved down to the Community Center and the meetings grew and people began to understand. And then I met a... That's not... I'm supposed to be talking about the Black farmers.

Velma Fann:

The Black farmers. We'll get to it-

Gary Grant:

Right.

Velma Fann:

... take your time.

Gary Grant:

And let's back up to before the invasion of the hogs. Black farmers were being foreclosed on and the government foreclosed on my parents. And my brother who was a farmer and a Vietnam Veteran, went up to assume the debt. And the man told him you're going to lose everything you got. And within 10 days they had foreclosed on him. So we organized a group that was called the Land Loss Fund to raise money, to help farmers. And we held a Ms. Black Earth pageant where the ladies would not model bathing suits, they would model evening wear and church wear, and casual where. And they had to do a two minute speech on why Black land was important. Their ownership of Black land was important.

Gary Grant:

And we held, I think we held four of them. And we were able to help four local farmers. Well, we helped more than that, but we helped them from those funds. We were able to help farmers buy their fertilizer, because they couldn't get credit, buy groceries, help to pay their light bills. And during that time, as a result of that group of students from the Rural Health Coalition, coming to Tillery, we could get volunteers who would come and do what they called internships. And one of the students who had been here, his home was in California. He called me and asked me, did you hear about Black farmers going to meet in Washington? And I said... No. So he sent me a link and I saw it, and started talking. And the men folks said they couldn't go because the crops... They needed to be cultivating the crops. So I had 10 women who got with me on a van and we went to Washington DC.

Gary Grant:

And we were the only ones who showed up with protest signs. And as we were going into the park, I can't think of the name of it. The one where Trump went in to have his picture taken. Anyway, we went into the park and they were holding the signs up and the security guard came over and told us that our permit did not allow us to be holding signs up. And so the women took them down and put them around their waist.

Velma Fann:

Oh, my. Okay Tillery!

Gary Grant:

I tell you that's... We will find a way to get around it. No doubt about it. And that was when I met an attorney named James Myatt, I met John Boyd and that's where the... That night is where the movement really began. And we were saying we would not leave until we met with the President. And we had been there since about 12 o'clock and it was drizzly and cold that whole day. Ooh. And finally, someone from the White House came out and said... The President can't meet with you, but he's going to send the Secretary of Agriculture over to meet with you. And then the Secretary of Agriculture didn't

come. He sent somebody and said he would meet with 15 people. And there were about 60 or 75 of us out protesting.

Gary Grant:

So now the question gets to be what 15 people are going to go? The lawyer said... Don't let that bother you, because all he's trying to do is to put a wedge between us. So. Got everybody calm that 15 people could go in and we would tell everybody's story and not just our personal stories. So I guess it was about 6:30 that he finally sent for the 15. And we went in and we were talking and telling the Secretary Vilsack what was happening and all that. No, it wasn't Vilsack at that time... That was... Can't remember his name now, but it wasn't Vilsack.

Gary Grant:

And the President didn't come, but the Vice President showed up. Anyway, we got our message over to him there. And we left and said... We will be back. And we did go back on the... That must have been somewhere around the 6th or 7th of December. And we were back there on the... Is it the 16th of the 19th? I'm getting old. And these dates began to blur together. What the Secretary heard that night. He understood that it didn't need to get to the press. So they were going to do everything they could to keep the stories from being told to the press. And they did a fairly good job, but some of them did get out.

Gary Grant:

And on August the 17th of '97, I believe it was... We organized the Black Farmers and Agriculturalist Association. And the group elected me as their President and a man from Georgia named Eddie Slaughter as their Vice President. And the one thing that we did was we actually organized some farmers to come to DC. And therefore we were always able to keep a contingency there. And we were... Everybody was pretty happy to understand that somebody else had been treated like they were treated, and that there was some other folk out fighting, just like they were.

Gary Grant:

And that led to the filing of Pigford v. Glickman... That's who he was. Glickman was the Secretary of Agriculture. Pigford v. Glickman. That was filed on the 19th, I believe it was, of August. And it yielded... Pigford v. Glickman... And it was settled out of court for \$2.4 billion. They were going to give all of the farmers 50,000. Write off their debt. Does this sound familiar?

Velma Fann:

Yes. It does.

Gary Grant:

Write off their debt and everything would be okay from there on. And the folk who got the 50,000 were people who had already lost their farms had been put out of farming. Those who were still farming didn't get the money or the debt relief that was promised. So we are back now with President Biden's, Build Back Better. And hoping that we're going to get it straight this time.

Velma Fann:

And all of this has come from Tillery?

Gary Grant:

All of this has come from Tillery, North Carolina.

Velma Fann:

Amazing. Right.

Gary Grant:

And back to the hog fight, there were some small white communities further East that were fighting the hog industry as well. And we were able to all get together and 60 Minutes came and did a program. We were actually shown on 60 Minutes, two times in one year. Mike, what's his name? He's deceased now. Can't think of?

Velma Fann:

Was it Wallace?

Gary Grant:

Wallace, yeah. Mike Wallace came to Tillery. I want you to know that Mike Wallace came to Tillery.

Velma Fann:

Okay.

Gary Grant:

And the Secretary of Agriculture came to Tillery, on the Bush. Sure did.

Velma Fann:

That's excellent.

Gary Grant:

Told you. We don't play here Tillery. Don't you be editing this story too much because they'll come get you.

Velma Fann:

Okay. And I believe they will do that too! Is there anything else you would like to add?

Gary Grant:

I just want to add that our last struggle was joining with a group called Apple to stop this pipeline that was going to run from West Virginia all the way through Virginia and North Carolina. That was our last major struggle. And which... And that's what they can't understand is... How people, or rather why they don't want people to come together, because when people come together, they can do things. And so we were able to stop that pipeline that was going straight through every Black community, along the route. Or a poor white community... But major Black communities, where there were not necessarily Fire Stations. And if there were Fire Stations, there were no Emergency Management Group, but ultimately it did get stopped.

Velma Fann:

Mr. Grant, I'd like to thank you for sharing your story.

Gary Grant:

You're more than welcome.

Velma Fann:

And you have a wonderful day.

Gary Grant:

Thank you. And you do likewise. Sorry. We had the confusion at the beginning. And if you need to call back for clarity or to do a little more investigating into anything, just let me know. We'll be happy to talk with you.

Velma Fann:

Alrighty. Thank you. Bye-bye.

Gary Grant:

You're welcome. Thank you. Bye-bye. And you have a good week now.

Interview with William Earl Newsome

New South Associates in conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and the State Historic Preservation Office welcomes you to untold stories of the struggle for civil rights in the places of Northeastern North Carolina, a research study. This project is supported through an African American Civil Rights grant from the National Park Service, United States Department of Interior, to the North Carolina Preservation Office to identify places of significance in the Civil Rights Movement, 1941 through 1976.

Velma Fann:

I am Velma Fann, historian with New South Associates. Today is August 16, 2022, and I am speaking with Mr. Earl Newsome.

Velma Fann:

Welcome, Mr. Newsome.

William Earl Newsome:

Thank you for having me.

Velma Fann:

Thank you. Would you state and spell your name for us please?

William Earl Newsome:

William, W-I-L-L-I-A-M. Middle name, Earl, E-A-R-L. Last name Newsome, N-E-W-S-O-M-E.

Velma Fann:

Thank you. And in what county were you living during the Civil Rights era? Let's say from '41 through '76?

William Earl Newsome:

Martin County, eastern part of the state.

Velma Fann:

Would you like to tell us your age?

William Earl Newsome:

88. Will be 89 in November. November the 9th.

Velma Fann:

Okay. Well early happy birthday to you.

William Earl Newsome:

Thank you.

Velma Fann:

Mr. Newsome, would you give us a sense of your home life and life in the Black community when you were growing up?

William Earl Newsome:

Born in Eastern North Carolina, namely Williamston in 1933. My dad and grandfather were farmers and farm owners. We were sort of a rare breed, but we were all happy.

William Earl Newsome:

I lived next door to my granddad who was also fatherly to me. I had a wonderful upbringing. Mom and dad had four children. I was the last of the four. Assil Lee, my brother, Thad the third, who was killed in World War II in Japan in 1946, Muriel and then Earl. Muriel's some seven years older than me so I was left home a long time to be my father's tenant and my mother's maid but nothing but love was in the household. They didn't shield me, but it was all good. They worked me hard and gave me all the value that was necessary to grow with.

William Earl Newsome:

As I said, I started school in 1939. I went to grade school to 1949. And let me say this. This is braggadocious, but it's true. My mother and dad were so inspired with the children that between the sixth and the 12th grade, I did not miss a day out of school. I know now, I probably didn't know then how many sacrifices that they made to do what they did for me. They would go out of their way to make sure that I got what belonged... Well that the children got what they needed to have gotten, especially me. I can say especially me because it was seven years between my sister and I. But it was all good, nothing but love in the household.

William Earl Newsome:

We were farmers. Sometimes people call us dirt farmers, but we were farmers and I might not have experienced some of the bitter that my family members and classmates and others did because mom and dad made sure that I got what I needed in the midst of not having a penny, but no doubt we had enough. We were land owners on a small farm and we were blessed because my daddy's two sisters... He had four sisters. Two, which the husband were land owners, dirt farmers as we were, denied as we were. But they too saw fit that the children were educated and was exposed to as much that was available.

William Earl Newsome:

And I can say now it was all good. Nothing but love in the household, nothing but love in the family. And I now cherish it even more so now than then, because then I didn't know. But now I know because I can make comparison between us and other folks. Now this isn't to say that we had it all. We did not have but a little bit, but what we had was shared with love.

William Earl Newsome:

Went on to high school. Came out of high school, May 28th, 1952. Valedictorian of my class. Went away to college at Virginia State and was there for a year and a half.

William Earl Newsome:

Then my daddy died. After my daddy died, I came out of school for a year and worked. I went back to school for another year after having worked to save the money. Then I came out because there was no work and no money.

William Earl Newsome:

So in 1960, I married the love of my life in June, July, excuse me, of 1961. And this marriage produced a wonderful son, William Newsome the second, who was born in September the 30th, 1962. Who enjoyed everything that I enjoyed plus more. They used to say that he was my shadow because I don't know whether I wanted to take him everywhere I went or whether he wanted to go or whatever. We were together and love bonded us along with my wife, of course.

William Earl Newsome:

The Lord took him from us in 1990 at the age 27. He had gone to University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and was doing very well and died in his sleep of an enlarged heart that we didn't know about. And here I am today, some 32 years later doing what I can for, of course, the Lord and my family and the community and E.J. Hayes School.

William Earl Newsome:

I've been blessed to be the chairman of the board of election for a number of years. I've been affiliated with the board of election since 1973. Well, I've been a part of the system since 1973. I've been directly affiliated since 1989 and I had a meeting yesterday that went very well preparing for the election of November the 8th, I believe.

William Earl Newsome:

And been involved as my wife would say, a little bit too much involved, but I don't know how to say no. The Lord gave me those abilities and gave me those strengths. There are very few things in the community that I volunteer for. The things that were part of me was, I don't say put on me, but a phone call was answered and I was asked to do thus and so or the mailman delivered a letter and say, "Would you do thus and so and that's what it's all about.

William Earl Newsome:

Now, back in the 60s when things were not so good, of course, I was very active as most people of interest were active. I did the things that personally I thought I need to do. And some things that I didn't want to do, but again, they were thrust on me and I accepted them with challenges. And here we are today, we were very successful with a lot of projects, but that has been very good.

Velma Fann:

Okay. Excuse me for cutting you off. You have a beautiful life. I wanted to ask you a little bit. When you were growing up, when did you realize that Blacks and whites lived differently and were treated differently? I think you started to tell a story earlier about riding a bicycle.

William Earl Newsome:

Yes. In the seventh grade, of course, my parents had bought me a bicycle a couple years before and all the kids in the community had either moved away or had finished the seventh grade and I had to walk to school by myself. So I was riding the bicycle to school and the bus would... Of course the white bus

would come by on the dirt road, of course. And I would hear it come. So I would get off the bike and drag the bike through the woods behind the creek. And they would literally get off the bus and look for me. But nowhere in the world that they could find Thad Newsome's son, as alert as I was and with the agility that I have. So I would hide behind trees, brushes, ditches, or whatever. This didn't happen every day, but it happened all too often.

William Earl Newsome:

I think it was then that, I guess I must have been 13 years old, 12, 13 years old, whatever age it was, that I realized that how bad it was. I hadn't been necessarily shielded, but as I said, dad and granddad had farms side by side. I had mostly worked at home and didn't have to work in the world, so to speak. I didn't see the problems that my sister and my one brother and mother and father had seen out there in the world. But those instances, that particular instance let me know how bad it was. Because needless to say, they had envy in their heart. Heaven knows what would've happened to me if they had found me, but they couldn't have found me because I had too much rabbit in me. Too much [inaudible 00:11:59] Yeah, I knew how to be evasive and the run and hide and all for my dad and mom. They taught me that. And my one brother and two sisters, what they knew, I knew. They passed it on.

Velma Fann:

Very good.

William Earl Newsome:

So it was all good.

Velma Fann:

Yes.

William Earl Newsome:

It was all good.

William Earl Newsome:

Then on to high school. I did well in the band, played football. Too short to play basketball, but I was the scorekeeper and the trainer and dad didn't have a car [inaudible 00:12:31] at the time. People favored me, including the teachers and the principals. Not the principals, the teachers, and those folk would bring me home. Dad always told me to, "Keep money in your pocket, boy because you might have to catch the bus home when everything else fails."

William Earl Newsome:

So everything fell in place for me in spite of things not being the way that they were supposed to have been or should have been, whatever's right to say. But I just made it, as I said, the fifth or maybe the sixth through the 12th grade, I did not miss a day out of school.

Velma Fann:

That's beautiful.

William Earl Newsome:

Miss a single day.

Velma Fann:

We want to talk about the Civil Rights Movements. What did you experience in the fifties and the sixties? And tell us a little bit, if you would about E.J. Hayes School.

William Earl Newsome:

E.J. Hayes School was of course the Black school named after its principal, Edgar Joseph... Edgar John Hayes. It had a wonderful history in Eastern North Carolina. I don't tell a history of out of vanity because there was other communities who had schools. I guess I was more than prejudice. It sort of stood out because of this principal. He was stern, strict, and everybody was afraid of him with the exception of me. I loved him too much to be afraid of him because I came from that type of culture that I respected discipline and that was all good.

William Earl Newsome:

Hayes was a school that has produced... I wish I had time. I should have jotted these things down. The doctors, lawyers, and Indian Chiefs from my time until consolidation in 1977 to one.

William Earl Newsome:

It was a good school. It fulfilled all the things that we needed and the school could afford. You got to understand that we got hand me down books. So you got a book, you saw a name you never knew because they came from white school. After they finished with it, we took the book and whether that curriculum was over or not, we didn't know. We didn't have anything compared with. We had the best teachers in the world. Mrs. Gathom, Mrs. Slate, Mr. Broadneck and others who did the excellent job with what they had. And they were loved. They taught those teachers that I just mentioned to taught all my brother and my two sisters. Two of which went to college. My brother would have, but Uncle Sam, right out of the high school, he went in the military and came home on furlough twice before going to Japan. And didn't never come back home until he came back in a draped casket, a flag draped casket.

William Earl Newsome:

One sister finished college. Another got two years in college, but went on to have a wonderful career in making false teeth, pharmaceutical industry. Other sister did an excellent job with the community action program, which retired at... Was good stuff and all because of my parents. First all because of the Lord and my parents and that good high school we came from. Good school. We were good at academics. I shouldn't say that. Academics first of course. Very, very good in athletics. We won state championship in football several years and a national championship in football for two years. It was good.

William Earl Newsome:

Some of the old remnants are still here that were. Most are dead, of course, but the idea still there. And that's why I'm so endeared to the E.J.H. alumni association because I knew what it did for me. I knew what it did for my two sisters and my brother and my other cousins and relatives and friends and church folk.

William Earl Newsome:

So it just laid the kinds of foundation that I don't want to compare with for other communities because I don't know about other communities. But I knew that we were compatible. Even more so compatible plus with the other communities in Eastern North Carolina. In much larger towns and counties, they knew about Hayes. When I went away to school, I went away to school that was not in the state, Virginia State in Petersburg, but even some of the people there knew about E.J. Hayes. Why, I don't know, but good things travel. Bad things travel faster, but some good things would get there too.

William Earl Newsome:

Now back to the Civil Rights in the sixties. It was a rough time in Williamston, a very rough time in Eastern North Carolina, in the United States. But I think Williamston had its share. Golden Frinks, you might remember the name or heard of the name. I should have his book in front of me now, but I didn't think of it. I told you I forgot this stuff. But he made Williamston his stay place along with Sarah Small, who was the daughter of some good citizens. And the movement of Eastern North Carolina was sort of centered in Williamston. Nothing but marches.

William Earl Newsome:

I'll tell you a funny thing that was very dangerous for us. In the summer of 1967, the State Department under, I think of the name in the moment, gave a grant for community development and this grant hired Howard Lee. I think he was from Cleveland. He had gone to a school in Cleveland anyway. They came in the county to organize the county and here come the Klan here from all the other desirables that they were sure would throw ugly stuff. Well, that's what that did, but we withstood it and from that, we had people to... That was the summer of '67.

William Earl Newsome:

From that summer of '67, Sarah Small ran for Congress the next year. I ran for the board of education and some other five of us ran for various spots from the board of education, the clerk of courts, and county commissioners because of the enthusiasm that was generated the summer of 1967. All of us lost. I don't think down heartedly that we expected to win, but we showed them how unified were and how non-violent we could be, but yet competent. And it was all good.

William Earl Newsome:

From that also a credit union was grown. It defunct in 1984, but at least we had the enthusiasm to go further. We had lots of people that would go to college and do other things in life. I believe that they would not have done had it not been for our experience in 1960. Not necessarily 1967, but the sixties. We did well, the enthusiasm was great. And we withstood.

William Earl Newsome:

Now the Green Memorial Church. You didn't ask this, but let me say was the stay place for meetings during the Civil Rights area. And yes, they took their lumps big lumps. So much so that a couple of three, four years ago a monument was placed in front of the church with all the necessary readings on it that any community or any church or any entity would welcome. Would welcome.

Velma Fann:

Yes.

William Earl Newsome:

As I look back at it, it was all good. During those times, Earl and Louis didn't know how bad it was because we were too stupid to know. That summer we had college kids from A&T, North Carolina Central, and Fayetteville State to come in to help organize the county.

William Earl Newsome:

And little do we know that Sunday afternoon after church when we got home, car drove in the yard and here come a little white girl who was a senior at Duke. We had no idea that first of all, the whites would be in the mix number one. Secondly, that she had no place to stay. They knew that we didn't. Thirdly, that she ended up in our house. Well, we volunteered to keep her over. Whether it was put on us or we don't know.

William Earl Newsome:

That summer was kind of rough for us, but I got the best wife in the world and we combined our love and our forces and made it comfortable for her and for the group. It wasn't easy as I look back at it now how bad it could have been if we had not been in arms of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who I know that directed our faith and kept us steadfast and guided us.

William Earl Newsome:

And that summer, we did it. I had to take the girl to the county for votes, and folks thought I was crazy. I guess I was, but we got the job done. And it was great.

Velma Fann:

Mr. Newsome?

William Earl Newsome:

Huh?

Velma Fann:

What I'd like to ask you in my reading, I understand that in 1963, students boycotted E.J. Hayes School. They did not go to school. Are you familiar with the boycotts of the schools in 63?

William Earl Newsome:

Yes. I don't know what spurred it for. I knew it was unrest, but I don't know exactly what it was and my wife isn't here. Oh yes, I'm familiar with it. But it was for due cause. Nothing happened that not was not of due cause. Yes, it was boycotted because of things that should have... And I should have done my homework and I wish you had asked me that before. I know I could have found out. My cousin was on the staff. Yes, I'm familiar with it, but I don't know the reason for it, but I know whatever, it was successful.

Velma Fann:

Good. Were you ever part personally, of any demonstrations? Did you march or demonstrate?

William Earl Newsome:

Undercover. See, I didn't because of our job. We had to eat the next day. That's a joke.

William Earl Newsome:

Well, what we did was my wife was working in county government. I was working in industry, the only one of my kind in that department and the only one that well, whatever. And it wasn't that I couldn't have afforded to be jailed. It didn't bother me for what I was doing because I was on top of things. I was the first at work and the last to leave if I had to. Had to be the last to leave. And I was always on top of things and management and Earl got along fine.

William Earl Newsome:

So I elected not to demonstrate publicly, but I possibly stood more bonds of people that went to jail than anybody else in the county. And I attended all the meetings and my name was in the paper for whatever, nothing that they could put a finger on.

William Earl Newsome:

But no, we did not get out there physically. We were there on the sideline. we were there to bring them home and feed them. We were there to house ministers and administrators that came from Massachusetts, namely Boston part of the time. If the mass meetings were at Green Memorial Church, other kinds of personal meetings, not all, for many of which were in our house at 114... You don't need to know the address on 64.

William Earl Newsome:

But we did, this sounds like a brag, but it is not. We did more than our share in that arena than anyone that I know of. If someone surpassed that, that's fine. But I just don't know about it. But people were here. We were deprived of food, sleep, and everything else because of [inaudible 00:26:54] and guests that came in, but it was all good. We know the results made a difference.

Velma Fann:

And that's important. We need people everywhere. I mean, those demonstrating, those feeding, those posting the bonds and the bail, and just making sure that people were fed and housed. So thank you.

William Earl Newsome:

Let me ask this. At that time, my son was born in 1962. In 1967, he was just five years old, hadn't started school. It meant a lot to his growth and development. He didn't quite understand it at the time, but it gave him some background knowledge that we talked about and engaged with as he grew up. And when he went to Carolina, he was more than well, even in... But let's not mention high school but because everybody else knew. He was so far in front of his time when it came to that kind of stuff that you kind of mentioned. He was very well versed in all those aspects because he saw it, his mom and his dad and his grandparents on my wife's side. My dad died in 1954 before he was born and my mother was in decline in health and died in '64. So he didn't see that much from them. Nothing from his granddad, very little from my mother, but it had been a part of him. What was in us, we planted in him and all was good.

Velma Fann:

That's great. Mr. Newsome?

William Earl Newsome:

Yes.

Velma Fann:

Did the Klan retaliate or did others retaliate in terms of your demonstrations and what the Black community was trying to do at that time?

William Earl Newsome:

Yes, but we stayed fearful and I was stupid. I know because they rallied less than well, exactly two miles from my house on Saturday night, every Saturday night. But on Saturday night and we used to see signs of stuff, but we never did get any retaliation from the Klan. We knew they were there and then they knew where we lived and the county commissioners gave my wife, I thought, gave my wife a hard time, but I found out later it could have been worse. I was even called in by the chairman of the county commissioner and I had my gun cocked and almost blew it. I went in prepared to shoot him out of the chair, literally. And I sit there and listen. And what our requests were, were met. By me keeping quiet and waiting to see what he was going to do rather than expounding on the little speech that my niece, my wife, and I wrote. It was choreographed well.

William Earl Newsome:

Yes, the Klan was bad, but I tell you what, in other counties around us, it was worse. We were shield. At least some of us were shield. I never did get in the direct... I got maybe gun shot down the road in the air. I got some funny looks when I was in the public, maybe the grocery store or wherever I went. At work, I got some bad looking eyes, but nothing never direct. But we knew it was there and we knew it was there to the point that it kept some of us in check. We knew how far to go. We weren't totally stupid. Sometimes I think I was, and I was not radical. I often used this for how I was. I don't know how I was. I know I stayed free to the point that I was continued to do what the Lord had prepared me to do.

Velma Fann:

Mr. Newsome, as we talked about Green Memorial Church, were there other churches or other institutions or places where people gathered?

William Earl Newsome:

That was the primary place. I know it was, but that was the place. Right now I don't know of any, but I know it had to have been. If it were not large meetings, it had to been some small meetings of some kind in some of these other churches. Not my church, because we were out in the woods. Nobody want to... That's a joke, but Green Memorial was the place.

Velma Fann:

Okay. What was some of the key issues? Was it voting rights? Was it desegregation, economic rights? What were some of the key issues?

William Earl Newsome:

Economic rights were the main thing. Hiring, voting rights, and economic rights were the main stay. They were the main stay. I think I might have mentioned after 1967, after the group left in '67, at least five of us ran for public office because we thought we had... I knew I couldn't win against Axon Ward who was a

polished merchant downtown, but I got 1,267 votes. I don't know how many he got. Maybe more than that. Maybe double that. I don't know, but I exercised my rights. I exercised my rights against my peers at work who looked at me funny and it was never in a conversation. I knew they had a conversation about me in my absence, but that didn't bother me. There was no direct retaliation. And I didn't give them a reason because I was never late and always there and always on top of things with leadership. So, you know.

Velma Fann:

That's good. I wanted to ask you, your wife's name. Did you mention your wife's name?

William Earl Newsome:

Louise. Louise [inaudible 00:34:04] Newsome. She graduated two years in 1954 as I graduated in 1952.

Velma Fann:

Very good. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

William Earl Newsome:

I talk myself to death. Ask whatever you think there needs to be said. I might have mentioned this a little bit, but my wife's uncle, Haywood Harris who died last year, graduated from high school two years before I did. He was executive director of the poverty program and he had positioned himself. He was not a genius by any means, but his resources from his work helped the whole community in their plight. And he was smart enough to maneuver those resources, not necessarily money, but his staff folk to fuel it into the movement to the point that we would not have gained on what we gained had he not been a daily director. He was a master at that.

William Earl Newsome:

And some years later he got the credit union started because of his enthusiasm and because of what his staff did for us. His staff probably did more for us or as much. I can't say as I did, because I was stupid enough to be out in front. I wondered why, but I was.

William Earl Newsome:

He was very instrumental in our fight. We had some principals, schools that would've been more cooperative if the backbone had been strong enough. The mind was in place, but they just didn't... You know how that is? You want them to be one way and they need to have been one way. And personally they wanted to be that way, but they weren't strong enough. And I can understand that because the superintendent at that time was a dick head. Pardon my slang. I know they were afraid of that job because I was stupid enough not to be afraid of mine. But there was a difference. But it still worked out all right. No one was fired. No one was harassed publicly.

William Earl Newsome:

We feel very strongly that we gained a lot with what had happened. In fact, I know I did, and so much so that it's a point of conversation with the right people now when we power up. Because those people who was really geared to the thing now, most of them have gone on to glory, but there's some good remnants.

William Earl Newsome:

I was at my sister's house who's ailing, who lives next door a few weeks... No, I'm there every day. Well I'm there, well her sister, her daughter and I were and others were talking. Doesn't matter. She said, "You told me something today that I hadn't heard before. We need to get back together." And bear in mind now this back in the, I guess she was out of the high school then. No she wasn't. Well, whatever. She's 68 years old now. There's still some good stories to be told. There's still some good experiences to be passed over. I don't want to walk out in the street and voluntary stuff, but in conversation if asked, I sort of juggle them. I sort of get my thoughts going and tell what I think needs to be told. But it was all good. I tell you what, it made me a better man.

Velma Fann:

That's good.

William Earl Newsome:

That it did.

Velma Fann:

That's beautiful. I thank you so much for your time and for your work and for being such an inspiration. And I appreciate that you shared your stories with us.

Velma Fann:

Yes, sir. Thank you so much. I'm going to let you catch your phone. Okay?

William Earl Newsome:

Oh, thank you. Mm-hmm.

Velma Fann:

All right. Bye-bye.

William Earl Newsome:

Bye.

Interview with Sandra Reddish

New South Associates in conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office welcomes you to *Untold Stories of the Struggle for Civil Rights in the Places of Northeastern North Carolina: A Research Study*. This project is supported through an African American civil rights grant from the National Park Service, the United States Department of the Interior to the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office to identify places of significance in the Civil Rights Movement, 1941 to 1976. I am Velma Fann, historian with New South Associates. Today is April the 28th, 2022. And I am speaking with Ms. Sandra Reddish, greetings Ms. Reddish, how are you?

Sandra Reddish:

I'm doing fine. How are you?

Velma Fann:

Great. Please state and spell your name for us.

Sandra Reddish:

My name is Sandra Deloatch Reddish that Sandra S-A-N-D-R-A Deloatch D as in David, E-L-O-A-T-C-H Reddish, R as in red dish, R-E-D-D-I-S-H.

Velma Fann:

Thank you. Ms. Reddish, in what county were you living during that civil rights' era that we are studying?

Sandra Reddish:

Well, actually I lived in two counties, Southampton county, Virginia, and Northampton county, North Carolina, they border each other.

Velma Fann:

Okay. And can you give us a sense of your home life in the Black community?

Sandra Reddish:

At that particular time?

Velma Fann:

Yes.

Sandra Reddish:

We were a very close knit community in that extended family members were constantly in and out of our homes. We visit each other often. We had Sunday dinners together when I say extend... extended family members. I'm speaking of my uncles and his children, my first cousins and my aunts, her children who were my first cousins. And we also spent a lot of time with neighbors, neighbors would come. So it was a really close knit community, I would say so. It was the type of community where if we cook dinner, then two or three families would come to our house to eat. And we would also go and eat with them as

well on some Sundays. But weekdays basically consisted of school. We get home do our chores. We had homework, we watched a little TV. Our parents did not allow us to watch a lot of TV. And then we got ready for our bath time And then we went to bed.

Velma Fann:

It sounds like it was a very nurturing community. Am I correct?

Sandra Reddish:

Yes. A very, very nurturing community. We all felt that we need to help look out for each other. And there were elderly people in the neighborhood who could not, they weren't able to cook for themselves. So my mom would cook enough food for them and we'd pack it in the trunk of the car and take it to them as well. And she would tell us, take miss Alice this dinner, take cousin Annie and cousin Mason, this food, but it was a type of situation where we looked out for each other, not just the people who lived with us, but also others in the community.

Velma Fann:

So you had a very nurturing community, but at what point did you realize that Blacks and whites lived differently and were treated differently, that there were certain rights given to whites that were denied to Black people?

Sandra Reddish:

I realized this probably at the age of five or six years old, when at the age of seven my family moved from Southampton county, Virginia to... And I just want to mention Southampton county, Virginia is the same county where Nat Turner led his revolt years ago, the same county, a lot of Turners still live there. As a matter of fact, my aunt who just passed last year, she was a 101 years old. They want to do a documentary on Nat Turner. So they had interviewed her at some point, but I was around seven years of age when I realized that things were different, because my parents would go shopping and it was a restaurant and we couldn't go in the front of the restaurant. My dad would always have to drive around the back and he'd have to go through the back to order food and to get food. And I remember once I had to use the bathroom and my mom took me aside and I saw colored on the doors. It was like they had it for white and for colors, those were the bathrooms. So I realized that around the age of maybe seven years old.

Velma Fann:

When we had talked earlier, you spoke about an incident at your high school and how that can be added to the places of struggle and protest for civil rights. Would you tell us that story please?

Sandra Reddish:

Absolutely. But before I get into that, can I tell you another story real briefly? I don't know if I mentioned it to you.

Velma Fann:

Certainly go right ahead.

Sandra Reddish:

Okay. Around the same time when I was between 5, 6, 7 years old, I realized that something was wrong, but I couldn't put my hand on it because I had a cousin who was, his mom was white and his dad was my uncle, Black. Okay. They weren't married. So the baby was born out of wedlock and we were outside playing. My parents owned a general store and we were outside playing and people came up, the authorities came up in a vehicle and they just snatched him and put him in the car and took him away. And I didn't see him again until I was about 20 something years old or a little older, but they took him away because the white lady had a baby by Black man. So they took him and put him in an orphanage in Richmond, Virginia. I found out later where he was, we asked my mom, because it was very devastating. Because we thought he had just disappeared. We're outside playing all of a sudden he's gone. But anyway, that's not related to the story I was telling you about. That's one of the really devastating stories that made me realize that racism is very real because he was only taken away because he was biracial. But anyway, what was your question again?

Velma Fann:

About the school, the demonstrations that you were part of?

Sandra Reddish:

Oh yes, it was during the time when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated and it was not a lot of Black students there. It was maybe about 75 to a 100 of us or less maybe about 70 of us, maybe less. Anyway, we had gone to the principal. We were all devastated and crying and sad because to us Martin Luther King, Jr., was our savior. He's going to end all of the hatred and all of the mean and hateful slurs that we had to endure on a daily basis. So when we heard that he had been assassinated, he was shot. We went to the principal and we asked him if he could fly the flag half mast, just to honor Martin Luther King, Jr., his death and the principal refused to do it. So we asked him a second time. And when he refused to even acknowledge that Martin Luther King, Jr., had gotten shot or assassinated the students, it was two different groups of students at Northampton County High Schools, at that time.

Sandra Reddish:

Later on it ended up being an east or west. But at that time it was just Northampton County High School. So the principal refused to fly the flag half mast. He refused to even acknowledge the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. So we decided with the direction of the juniors and seniors, because I was like a freshman and sophomore. We decided to sit out, we did a sit out, we refused to go to class. We all just peacefully went out and sat out in front of the school to just sort of honor Martin Luther King, Jr.,. But prior to that, I was afraid to go out. I was in the library and my older brother, because my brother was two years ahead of me. He came to the library and he asked me, why was I in the library?

Sandra Reddish:

He said, "You're supposed to be outside. We're sitting out because the principal refused to acknowledge Martin Luther King, Jr's., death". And I told him I was afraid to go out because I didn't even want to get put on punishment when I got home. But anyway, he said, don't worry about it. Let's go. You got to be out here with everybody else. We have to be in unity. And so he was my older brother. So of course I followed him and I felt pretty secure doing that. So after we sat out at the end of the school day, we went to our buses, our prospective buses to go home. And of course it was a lot of mean things said to us and we were being just treated really mean. And the teachers had no compassion at all.

Sandra Reddish:

They acted like Martin Luther King, Jr., didn't exist as well. So we really didn't have any support. All we had was the support of each other. So when we got home, of course we let our parents know what we did and whatever, but we ended up getting suspended for three days. The principal suspended all of the Black students for three days, maybe just a handful of Blacks were afraid to go outside, to go out and participate. But to sit out and those who did, we were all suspended for three days. Our parents went to the principal to ask for a meeting. The principal refused to see them. Then they went to the superintendent's office. Superintendent refused to have anything to do with our parents. So we served three days, which we felt like it was worth it. But we were out of school for three days only because we acknowledged Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, death.

Velma Fann:

Were your parents surprised? Were they supportive? Did they know that you all were going to sit out?

Sandra Reddish:

Well, we didn't have cell phones at that time. So when we got home, we told our mom what happened. And they said you did right. They confirmed that we had gone to the principal and we were even talking to the teachers about it. Nobody wanted to do anything about it. It was like Martin Luther King, Jr., didn't even exist. It's like, who cares he's a nobody. And so it was just devastating to us. And so our parents, they were on outside. They say, you guys did the right thing. I can't see anything else that you could have done. You were peaceful about it. You were nice about it. You didn't stir up any conflict in the school, they basically sided with us.

Sandra Reddish:

So that's why they went to ask the principal. If we could come back to school to explain the reason why we did it, they were basically trying to help the principal understand what we were going through. It was a serious loss for us. And so the principal didn't want to have anything to do with them. And then they went to the superintendent. And then numerous phone calls were made. I'll never forget. My mom kept calling and calling, just begging and asking for a meeting if they would just meet with the Black parents and they just refused to do it. So we ended up serving three days and that was at Northampton County High School East. And even now, when we all see each other, we talk about how it's amazing how Martin Luther King, Jr., actually have a day of celebration. There's a holiday. And we got suspended just because we wanted to acknowledge him at that point, But it was a devastating experience, but we didn't regret. We did not regret what we did.

Velma Fann:

What in general was the relationship between Blacks and whites at that time and where you were growing up?

Sandra Reddish:

In general the relationship was really, it was intense, it was... I'm trying think of a word to describe it. It was just so horrible that my grades were awful, because when I went there, okay. My senior year, I ended up transferring to another high school, which was not integrated. I was an all Black high school and I made straight A's and I ended up being the... Not the salutatorian, but the... Was it valedictorian, salutatorian? It's three people that did speeches. And I was one of those people because I had straight A's. But at that school it was so emotionally, it was just a traumatic experience to the point where it

affected our grades, because you would sit in class and we would have answers to questions and you raise your hand and they would act like, they didn't see you. They would not acknowledge us. Many of my classes. I was maybe only two Blacks in the class. And the teachers were just so mean and hateful. They acted like we weren't even in the room and I would raise my hand and I wanted to participate in discussions, but they would just pretend we weren't in the room and that we was just emotionally, it was just an emotionally draining experience.

Velma Fann:

When you all protested, when you walked out of school, was there any media coverage? Did it appear in the newspapers or on radio or TV?

Sandra Reddish:

I don't recall it being on radio or TV, but what I do recall is all of the churches, the pastors were talking about it. The parents were talking about it. The other school that was... It was really, we called a Black high school. Because there was no whites in the high school. It wasn't even any white teachers there at the time. Okay. Even the other schools were talking about it. Everybody in the area was talking about it. But I cannot recall because I came from a very rural area, Northampton County at that time. And that area of Conway, the county seat is Jackson, North Carolina. They didn't even have a newspaper in my county. The only newspaper came out of Roanoke Rapids, the Herald Sun, I think it was something like the Daily Herald, something like that, came out of Roanoke Rapids on North Carolina. So that was 25, almost 30 miles from us. So there were no newspapers in our neighborhood, let alone television coverage.

Velma Fann:

Did your parents experience any retaliatory action? Were there any phone calls or any trouble because of what you all did?

Sandra Reddish:

They did not experience any retaliatory action, but my mom, like when she had to go to the store. We had like the little grocery store, little stores, you call them little general stores. We had two little general stores, comments would be made. And my mother had to speak up on our behalf. But the thing that I loved about my mom was my mother was a very outspoken person. You either liked her or you hated her. You loved her or you hated her. And she had no reservation when it came to advocating for her children and our needs. So there were times when she had to explain things like people say, "Oh, I heard the kids got suspended from school". And then she would explain what happened, things like that.

Velma Fann:

And give us your mother's name.

Sandra Reddish:

My mother's name is Rosa, but she passed away now. But her name was Rosa Drew Deloatch, Rosa Mae Drew. She was a Drew. Her maiden name was Drew, Rosa Drew Deloatch.

Sandra Reddish:

And my dad was Walter Deloatch and my mom was a housewife. She never worked. She just stayed at home, which there were times when we'd get home from school, I would say, "Boy, I wish she would go somewhere." Because a lot of kids at had moms who worked, but my mom was a stay at home mom. She was a house wife, my dad was an entrepreneur. He was a builder. So he provided for our family which I thought was wonderful. He's a World War II veteran. He's still living. He's at the North Carolina State Veterans Home in Fayetteville. He'll be 99 years old in June.

Velma Fann:

Wow.

Sandra Reddish:

Yeah. So he was a very hard worker. He was determined to take care of his family. So my mother was a good homemaker. And so they were both there and they were married for almost 60 years, still married until my mother passed away. And they got married when my mom was 19 and he was 23 years old.

Velma Fann:

Sounds like a beautiful family.

Sandra Reddish:

Yes. I came from a very good family and I appreciate all they did because there were times when I used to wonder why my friends wanted to come home with me so much. And I said, wow, I thought that they really cared about me, but I finished high school and off to college. And some of my friends who didn't go away, they were still going to visit my mom and my dad. Yeah.

Velma Fann:

Were there other activities in Northampton or the community—civil rights—activities that you are aware of or heard about growing up?

Sandra Reddish:

Okay. It was a type of town where I can't remember what percent. Mainly when I was growing up, it was maybe about 60% Black and 40% white. But the meetings, any community type meetings were like the NAACP. That was one thing in our family, once you turned 18. Well, once you got old enough, there's three things we had to do. You had to go get a driver's license, as soon as you got old enough; you had to join the NAACP; and we had to register to vote and they used to have NAACP meetings and some of the masons used to meet at the funeral home. So whenever there were meetings that they couldn't have any place at all, it would be at the funeral home at Faison's funeral home in Seaboard upstairs. And then they would also have meetings at church, at Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church, the church where I was a member of.

Velma Fann:

So the meeting places were at Faison Funeral Home and Mount Zion Missionary Baptist.

Sandra Reddish:

Yes. Those are the two places that I know of. Except when I was younger, my parents, they did have a general store and there was an upstairs. So I know that they used to meet up there for different community meetings and the Elks used to meet up there. And also, I don't know if you've ever heard. Have you ever heard of the house of Ruth?

Velma Fann:

Yes, I have.

Sandra Reddish:

Something like that. Okay. They used to meet there, because my mother was a member of that. My dad was a Mason. But they would usually meet at a place of business that was Black owned.

Velma Fann:

How were the turnouts when there were community meetings or issues to be discussed?

Sandra Reddish:

Oh, the turnout was really, I mean they had a pretty high turnout because then from such a rural area, the main thing we did was school, church and visiting family and friends. And of course a part of our upbringing was again, our parents were mad at us that we had to get involved in things. We had to be change makers. We had to try to be a part of making positive changes. They made us very aware of what was going on in terms of race. And we could see it. We lived it, we felt it. So they constantly groomed us, reminding us that we had to better ourselves. We had to be something, do something with our lives. And I came from a family of 10 and out of 10 children, seven of us or at least passed, not high school, all us graduated from high school, but at least seven of us are four-year college graduates and attorneys in my family, PhDs, Masters, lawyers and things like that.

Sandra Reddish:

So my parents really reminded us of how important education was. As a matter of fact, four of my siblings were at Carolina at one time, UNC Chapel Hill. In Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I had two brothers and two sisters there at the same time.

Velma Fann:

That's admirable. That's very good And So...

Sandra Reddish:

And then right in the midst of that, then one of my sisters, she was at Howard University. And then of course I went to North Carolina, A&T state university. And then my oldest brother, he went to UDC. They used to call a UDC, but now it's... It was called the University of the District of Columbia. But at that time it was called Federal City College. He went there. That was my oldest brother.

Velma Fann:

At some places. And there was a lot of negative activity, Klan activity, cross burnings in some people's homes. Did you all ever experience anything like that personally or in the community?

Sandra Reddish:

We never experienced cross burnings, but what we did experience was a lot of name calling, the N word. Then we didn't want to be out late at night on the roads, because it was a rural area and our parents will always tell us, try to get home before it gets dark. Even when we were driving, they would still want us to come home before dark. So we did experience, mostly name calling and mean things like people trying to trip you in the classroom when you're walking and we had to sit in the back. We would sit in the back of the school bus, we sat in the back. Whew, oh boy! It brings back some memories.

Sandra Reddish:

But even today, Northampton County has not changed that much. When Donald Trump was in office, three houses got burned down. Three Black people houses were burned, when Donald Trump didn't win the second term when Trump was on his way out and Biden had been elected to be president. They burned a 91 year old lady's house. They tried to burn her up in the house and someone came by and they saw it burning and they got her out another house, they burned up. This lady's about 88 years old. They burned her house down to the ground. There was another house that they burned. So racism is still real in Northampton County. It's very real. I live in Durham, but we also bought property next door to my dad. It's maybe on 12 acres and it's like a mobile home there and some other people wanted it and they didn't get it. We bought it. And so someone went in, we weren't there, they broke in and just cut all the wires off all of the electronic devices, and it wasn't a thief cause a thief would've taken everything, but it's just a lot of little mean things that's still going on. And the same stuff was happening around at that time as well. Similar incidents, I'd say.

Velma Fann:

Well because of the action that you all took as students and because of the work that others in the community did, what changes came about?

Sandra Reddish:

I ended up transferring to another school, not by choice, but remember it was a busing situation at the time. So by my senior year, I ended up getting transferred to another school. But the changes that I could see, and I'm not sure, if it was as a result of that particular incident, but some of the changes I did see was that some of the people were more open. Some of the whites were more open to having Blacks on the basketball team. Cause my brother was one of the first on the football team and he used to get threatened and they would deface his locker and try to trip him in the shower room. And he just went through so much, my God. But the changes that I saw afterwards, well, the whole dynamic changed because a lot of the white students end up going to a private school. So that same school today is predominantly Black. And we could see those changes coming about because when it was noticeable that we were going to go to any schools, we wanted to go to, that we could go to that we were, then they just started moving out and going to private schools.

Velma Fann:

I know you said you did not regret your actions.

Sandra Reddish:

No, not at all.

Velma Fann:

Have you told this story to your children or your grandchildren or younger people in your families? Are they aware of the stand that you took?

Sandra Reddish:

Absolutely. And my daughter, who's 36, I told her the story and she said, "Wow, it's amazing how y'all had to go through so much". I said, "Yeah." I said, "We were actually trailblazers. We made and paved the way for you guys to be able to be attorneys nowadays." My daughter's an attorney. My son-in-law's an attorney. I said. 'If we hadn't made those sacrifices, just like, I'm not comparing myself to Rosa Parks. But if we hadn't had the Rosa Parks and the Martin Luther King, Jr's., where would we be today. So even with us, I told him sometimes you have to take a stand of what's right. Even if you do get put on punishment, like I did, well, no, I didn't get put on punishment for that particular reason.

Sandra Reddish:

But even if you have to take a stand of what is right, even if you know, there's going to be some repercussions, as long as you know, in your heart that it will make some long term positive changes. But when I tell her the story and I tell my brothers' story and they... One of my brothers, okay. He went to North Carolina, Central University. I don't know if you ever heard of North Carolina Central, NCCU that's in Durham, North Carolina. And then he went to law school at University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Okay. So he didn't experience what I did because he didn't go to the same high school I went to, he went to the predominantly Black high school. So when some things come up and he hear what I have to say about it, he said, "Sandra, you are just a hardcore racist. I said, no, I'm not a hardcore racist".

Sandra Reddish:

I said, "But I'm a realist. And I'm just telling you what I went through. And based on some of the trauma that you experienced in your past, it affects the way you respond to situations, even nowadays you". And that's why I was trying to explain to him. I told him, I said, "You too trusting us on people". I said, "People don't care about you". But he said, "You're just a hardcore racist". No, I'm not. I'm just a realist. But again, it depends on your past experiences definitely has a bearing on how you see things, even today.

Velma Fann:

If you were to give a walking tour of your community, of your town, your city to show people different places where people gathered, where there were demonstrations, where there were talks, where there were people were organizing, what buildings, what places would you point to?

Sandra Reddish:

Okay, I'm going to answer that for you. But before I answer that, I will also let them know. I'll show them stores that we went into and the people didn't want to touch the money. They would tell us to put it on the counter, or when they give you the change, they throw it on the counter. Because they didn't want to touch your hand or anything like that. But the buildings that I would show if I did a walking tour would definitely be Northampton county high school east. Okay. That's in Conway, North Carolina, that front part of it. And I've actually shown it to my daughter where we did the sit out to honor Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sandra Reddish:

I would also show them Broadnax Diner, Broadnax Diner just closed up. That's the diner where that was one of the first Black restaurants that was opening in Northampton County that I know about. And that was a place where we went to and we felt a sense of worth. Okay. And the owner, the last owner of that restaurant, his mom was the same one that had to go to the Supreme court just to be able to vote because they were trying to block Blacks from voting in Northampton County. They were saying that he had to pass a literacy test in order to vote. But anyway, I would show them Broadnax Diner.

Sandra Reddish:

I would show them the high school that I ended up at Gumberry High School. That's the high school I graduated from. That's a school where a lot of prominent people, we fought hard there. The principal was wonderful. Mr. L.H. Mosley, I'll never forget him. His motto was, 'You have to get all you can get. And then some more, if you want to be able to compete in this world. You have to get all you can get. And then some more. So I would show them that school. Those are the three main places I would show them.

Velma Fann:

And Broadnax Diner, do you remember what street or road that was on?

Sandra Reddish:

Broadnax Diner is in Seaboard and it's on... I can look it up for you.

Velma Fann:

Okay.

Sandra Reddish:

[inaudible 00:32:51] But you Google it. You'll see it. Because they're on the computer if you Google it Broadnax Diner, Seaboard, North Carolina.

Velma Fann:

Okay. That sounds great. Is there anything that you would like to add?

Sandra Reddish:

I would like to add that I have seen some really, really, I have been involved in some really racist type of situations that even today, when I think back and how far we've come, I would stand strong and say that systemic racism is very real. It's very strong. And in some rural areas, we have not made much progress. We have not made as much progress as we should have made in terms of racism because some of the same people, they have the very same mindset. And I'm not saying they are the same people that's living, they're dead, but I'm talking about their children and their grandchildren now, they have a very same mindset that they had when I was a child.

Sandra Reddish:

So I think the only thing that can make serious changes in our society is... Well, first of all, it's prayer we have to. And that's the one thing that helped to sustain us as kids growing up, we used to have prayer in school. In elementary school, we had to do a Bible verse and I have to mention Coates Elementary

school, too, Coates Elementary school that I went to. The principal there was very, very adamant about us excelling in life. And we would have assemblies, we call assembly and he would always have the assemblies where he would invite people in to talk to us. And, oh my goodness. And I'll never forget when John F. Kennedy died. He brought us all in the auditorium and we were crying and he just made sure that we felt okay when we left he reminded us until we got on that bus to go home.

Sandra Reddish:

But I mean, I could just go on and on, but I just feel like we, as a country, we need to continue to work on systemic racism and we need to be at a place where we need to realize that a lot of foreigners are coming in here buying up our country because it's still such a racist place. And it's a huge divide between Blacks and whites, still to the point where people are coming in from all over the world. And they're just buying up the country. And I always ask myself, what would this country look like if after the slavery, after the slaves were freed, if the white man had just said, "Okay, slavery is no longer legal. I'm sorry that you guys are slaves, but let's work together. Let's work together to make this the best country in the world". Where would we be today? We would have such a... Oh, our country would be so much stronger, so much better, but they didn't do that. They continue to try to hold—keep their feet on our necks. And if I'm trying to hold you down, there's no way I can move. So that's why this country is really not even owned by, its being bought up by people from all over the world.

Velma Fann:

Ms. Reddish, we thank you for your interview. We thank you for your stories.

Sandra Reddish:

You are so welcome.

Velma Fann:

And have a...

Sandra Reddish:

Thank you for interviewing me.

Velma Fann:

Yes, ma'am and have a wonderful day. Thank you again.

Sandra Reddish:

You too. Thank you. Bye-bye.

Velma Fann:

Bye-bye.

Sandra Reddish:

Bye-bye.

Interview with Gail Rountree

New South Associates in conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office welcomes you to *Untold Stories of the Struggle for Civil Rights in the Places of Northeastern North Carolina: A Research Study*. This project is supported through an African American civil rights grant from the National Park Service, the United States Department of the Interior, to the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office to identify places of significance in the Civil Rights Movement, 1941 to 1976. I am Velma Fann, historian with New South Associates. Today is May 17th, 2022, and I am speaking with Ms. Gail Rountree. Welcome Ms. Rountree, how are you?

Gail Rountree:

I'm well, and yourself?

Velma Fann:

Great, thank you. Please state and spell your name for us.

Gail Rountree:

Gail J. Rountree. Gail, G-A-I-L. Middle initial, J. And Rountree, R-O-U-N-T-R-E-E.

Velma Fann:

Ms. Rountree, what county were you living in during the civil rights era?

Gail Rountree:

I was living in Chowan County.

Velma Fann:

Would you like to share your age?

Gail Rountree:

I don't have a problem with that. I was born October 5th, 1951. So in October I'll be 71.

Velma Fann:

Thank you, Ms. Rountree. Would you give us a sense of your home life, what life was like in the Black community?

Gail Rountree:

It was a small town. I like to call it an industrial town, Edenton. But I was born in Virginia Beach. My dad was in the Navy and my mom was working at a restaurant, and my dad was gone a lot. My mom didn't know many people in Norfolk, Virginia, where we were living. When my dad went overseas, one time, my mom convinced my dad to move us back to her hometown, which was Edenton, North Carolina. In the military, you don't notice discrimination as much as you do in the outside world. Blacks and whites kind of co-mingled or lived around and with one another. But when I got to Edenton, that was not the case. I didn't notice that early because I was young. When we moved, I had just been promoted to the

third grade and we moved in with my grandma and her son, which was my great uncle, and his daughter until we got our place. The Blacks lived in one section of town and the whites lived in the other.

Velma Fann:

When did you realize that Blacks and whites lived differently and were treated differently?

Gail Rountree:

As I got older and started playing with friends, we wanted to go to the movies and the movie theater was downtown. When we were on our way, one of my friends said, "Don't forget, we got to go around the back." "Go around the back, for what?" I didn't know anything about that, but he said, "You'll see." We got to the theater and I noticed the whites were going in the front door but we had to go in between two buildings around the side. And then he said, "You know we got to go upstairs." I said, "Go upstairs?" He said, "Yeah, we got to sit in the balcony." I'm like, "Okay." We went in and then I saw the whites go in and sit down, but we had to go upstairs. We went upstairs and I said, "Why are we sitting up here?" "Because the whites don't want us to sit down there with them." In retaliation, when we went upstairs, as mischievous children are, we threw things down on them. That's when I kind of felt different, felt less than.

Velma Fann:

Ms. Rountree, when we talk about the Civil Rights Movement, what were some of the key concerns in your community? Would it be voting rights or desegregation of public places?

Gail Rountree:

It was a kind of a little of several things. For instance, to me, there were no Blacks in any of the predominant higher positions of employment and they didn't get the money. I always heard them complain about, "Well, they're not paying me the same thing they're paying so-and-so," and that person was white. I didn't understand too much of it at that time, but as I got older I could talk to them what they were talking about. The Blacks had the menial jobs, picking up trash, working in factories, and sweating all day and night doing that heavy labor. I would go into these offices or the banks and all the little white kids or adults with these good paying jobs and looking all professional. That kind of stung me a little bit.

Velma Fann:

Yes. I can see that. I can see how that would. When the community came together and decided to demonstrate, or protest, or speak out, where were some of these planning meetings held?

Gail Rountree:

The majority of them were held at the different churches that we had in Edenton. Some people let us have them in their home. I didn't get to go to very many because my mom worked at night and I was the older child and I was home with my sisters and brothers. Most of the time they met in the evenings or after-school hours and I was home, but I did go to the ones that were at the church.

Velma Fann:

Do you recall the name of some of the churches?

Gail Rountree:

The one that I can remember most is the one that I was a member of, which was Providence Baptist Church. It is now probably the Missionary Baptist Church.

Velma Fann:

Were people apprehensive at the time?

Gail Rountree:

I beg your pardon?

Velma Fann:

Were people apprehensive at the time, getting involved, going to the meetings? What was the feeling, the tenor in the community?

Gail Rountree:

A lot of them were afraid because... The activists approached a lot of the adults and the adults that they approached, of course, they worked for a lot of the whites or worked along, beside some of the whites, and they didn't want to jeopardize their jobs or their standing with the whites and everything. So, yes, I would say that they were apprehensive, and to the point where they might have been afraid.

Velma Fann:

What were some of the key issues? Was there a particular incident that the community just rallied around at one point? Maybe said, "Okay, enough is enough."

Gail Rountree:

I would say, let me see. A lot of them got arrested because they were marching for the general rights that everybody, that the whites had and the Blacks did not have. A lot of them got arrested for that. I got arrested myself, because there was a drug store that we could go around the back and we could buy food and drinks, like the whites, but we could not sit down in the drug store and eat our purchases. I just decided one day, I had just had enough. I went in and sat down and started to make my order, and the owner comes running out, "Go on. Get out of here. We don't serve the N-word people in here." And I said, "Well, that's fine because I don't eat the N-word people. I want a sandwich."

Gail Rountree:

Of course, he thought I was being a smartbutt, which I was, and he called the police and I got arrested too. I was afraid at first, because I'd never been arrested. Once I got to the police station and saw there was some other people already in there that I had marched with, the fear and apprehension kind of subsided a little. We got to singing freedom songs and all that. My mom, because I was a minor, my mom came down, "Well, you want to get out, baby? I can get you." I was like, no, everybody else was in here, so I was having fun with them. I never knew what happened, but somehow or another, we all got out. I don't know who bonded us out or they dropped the charges or what, but I was out of there.

Velma Fann:

What did your parents think? Did they say, "Good job," or "Don't do this again?" What did your parents think of your activity?

Gail Rountree:

My father was gone a lot, but my mom would write him and tell him about the grades I was making, and my brothers and sisters. I think my mom was very proud of me because my mom was all about education herself. She graduated salutatorian from her class, and she always stressed education and getting good grades and striving for the best thing. I think she was proud of me because when they asked me to go [to the desegregated school], she didn't hesitate at all. She just said, "Well, Gail, do you want to go?" She didn't say, "You don't have to go, baby, if you don't want to," or anything like that. She just said, "Whatever you want to do." And because I had heard so many times before, "Well, whites are smarter than Blacks," I wanted to get rid of that myth. That that wasn't true, because I felt like my brains were just as good as anybody else, and that I knew just as much as most of them, which I did. I didn't know that at the time, but I learned.

Velma Fann:

This is when you decided to go, or were chosen to go to, was it Swain Elementary School?

Gail Rountree:

Yes. Ernest A. Swain Elementary. Some of the activists came and talked to my mom. A lot of the ones that came were from our church. Reverend F. H. LaGarde, he was the pastor at our church. The deacon, the chairman of the deacons, chairman of the trustee board, and Golden Frinks, who was a staunch activist, a civil rights activist. They came and asked my mom. They wanted somebody whose grades were already up there, so in case this action had a traumatic or negative or some sort of psychological effect on the student, if the grades dropped, they wouldn't be so low that the child couldn't go on. You didn't want to jeopardize their educational standing. When they asked me, did I want to go? I said, "Yeah," and I went.

Velma Fann:

What was your first day, or first days like at the new school?

Gail Rountree:

There were police standing by at the school and some of the activists were there. One of the activists, I'm trying to remember which one, walked part of the way with me. The school was gated, it had a fence around it, and the custodian who was there, Mr. Winston Bonner, he was at the gate and he opened the gate for me and said, "Come on in, child." I came here... There were no other Blacks at that school, except for the custodian and the people who worked in dietary. There were no other Blacks there. When I saw his face, I was happy. I thought, "Well, okay, there's one of my kind there," but it was... The other kids were standing around looking, and just glaring at me. I could hear them mumbling as I came up, but I didn't say anything. I just went up. There was some teachers out there and I just asked them where my classroom was. They asked who I had been assigned to and I told them, and they showed me where my classroom was.

Velma Fann:

Did anyone prepare you for Swain? Did they talk to you? Did any of the officials come to your house? Did they give you an idea of what it might be like to integrate this school?

Gail Rountree:

They did tell me, "Now, Gail you'll probably get some name calling and if they do anything physical to you, let us know and we'll intervene on your behalf, and of course, if they threaten you or threaten your family, let me know that too," and all of that. They didn't do any of that. They just called me names and they would bump into me in the hallways and try to make it appear that it was an accident. But, of course, you knew it was intentional, and everything.

Gail Rountree:

One instance that I will never forget. We were in the cafeteria and every... they all had their little groups, all the kids have little groups when they're young like that. Whenever I would sit at a table where any of them were, they would get up and move. For some reason or another, this particular day, the dining room was crowded. When I sat down at the end of the table, there were some guys there and they couldn't move anywhere and not be around me. They sat down, and I think they had french fries, something that required ketchup. I can't remember what it was. They said, "Hey, N-word, pass me the ketchup." I kind of tried to ignore him. "Hey, N-word, you heard me. Pass me the ketchup." I know my mama didn't name me the N-word so I just [inaudible 00:16:08]. Then he says, "Hey, N., if your mammy was here, she'd pass it to me." Now, I don't care what color you are, you know you don't talk about nobody's mama. I stood up in the chair, picked up the ketchup, and passed it to him right beside his head.

Velma Fann:

My goodness.

Gail Rountree:

I did. I don't care what color you are, Miss Thing, you can't talk about people's mama. Anyway, so they reported us to the office. I don't know why I didn't get expelled or reprimanded or anything. They just told me, try to maintain my temper and to... I don't know what they said to the little white boy, but they did call my mama. All my mama said, "Is she hurt?" They said, "No." When I got home, my mama said, "Did he hit you?" I said, "No." She said, "Did you hit him?" I said, "Yeah, with the ketchup bottle beside the head." She said, "He didn't hit you back?" I said, "Nope." So she said, "Okay."

Velma Fann:

About how old were you at this time?

Gail Rountree:

How old are you when you're in sixth grade? About 12, 13? Yeah, about that age.

Velma Fann:

About 11 or 12, yes.

Gail Rountree:

Something like that.

Velma Fann:

You also wrote about a particular teacher. Maybe, we may or may not want to give her name, and this was during-

Gail Rountree:

Well, she's-

Velma Fann:

... Black History Month.

Gail Rountree:

... Yes. She's deceased. It doesn't matter to me if they mention her name, but I'm sure her ancestors [children] might not want her name mentioned. I'll keep it on the DL. She was very prejudiced, you could tell. I don't think she even wanted me in her classroom, because when we would have classes, she would ask a question and nobody else knew, and I would have my hand up the whole time, she would never call on me unless nobody else knew the answer or nobody else wanted to answer. Eventually, she would call on me. Sometimes she wouldn't even stand there and wait for me to answer. She'd just walk away while I was talking, like, "Oh, whatever."

Gail Rountree:

One day, when I was in the sixth grade, during Halloween, I knew where she lived. She didn't live far from the Black section of town. Some friends and I went to her house and we knocked on the door and said, "Trick or treat." She came to the door, all smiling. Boy, when she saw those Black faces, "Go on, go on to people of your color." Bam. And slammed the door in our faces. Boy, I should have expected that.

Velma Fann:

You know, Ms. Rountree, sometimes when children have traumatic experiences like that, it affects them as they grow up, one way or the other. How did all of this affect you?

Gail Rountree:

I learned that you can't let the way other people feel about you make you feel that way about yourself. You have to be strong and persevere, because my mom always said, "You're just as good as anybody else, if not better, so carry yourself like that." I always try to do that.

Velma Fann:

Now, did you say you were the oldest of the children in your family?

Gail Rountree:

Yes.

Velma Fann:

How did your brothers and sisters react, respond to their big sister and her activism?

Gail Rountree:

I don't think they really paid that much attention because I am, they were born in '60, I'm about 10 years older than them. I don't think they knew that much. They were interested in growing up and playing and all that. They knew that I was having some traumatic experiences because sometimes I

would come home and I'd be a little depressed, because at that age, those are your formative years where you bond with your friends and whatever, and I had none in school. Not where I was going.

Gail Rountree:

I didn't have any friends there except for the cafeteria staff and the custodian. When I was there, I was by myself. When we had recreational play time and you had to have teams, we would play kickball or volleyball or something, they would go ahead and pick all the team members. I was always the last one. And half the time they wouldn't even say my name, "Oh, I'll take her," like that, like, "Well, whatever, if I got to have her, I'll just take her." It didn't bother me because I didn't really want to be around them anyway, not during recreational time.

Velma Fann:

Just knowing a little bit about your personal history, it seems as though you excelled. Tell us what happened after that in your personal life and your career and what happened, all that you achieved.

Gail Rountree:

I graduated from John A. Holmes. John A. Holmes is the high school that they had. Ernest A. Swain, for the white, had grades 1-6 and then they would leave there and go to John A. Holmes, which was 7-12. When I got over there, there were other Blacks over there. That made it a little better. I graduated from there. I went to Elizabeth City State University, but I did not graduate from there. I had a child while I was there. I went back to school after having the child and then I went to... No, I had the child while I was at John A. Holmes, and then I went to Elizabeth City State, excuse me, let me get it right. While I was at Elizabeth City State, I had another child. I left there. I went to New York and then I came back home and went to work for Edenton-Chowan Rescue Squad.

Gail Rountree:

I was a secretary and dispatcher. Then, I went on to nursing school and got my LPN. I worked on the rescue squad for about 11 years. Then, I became a nurse, a travel nurse and a geriatric nurse. I worked at several of the nursing homes in Edenton, where they had two. I worked at those two and I worked a little while at Chowan Hospital in Edenton as well. I became a nurse, a traveling nurse, where you go to different places and whatever. As I traveled, I got married and I moved to Raleigh. I went back to college and got a degree in human service and substance abuse counseling. Graduated president of my class, top of my class, and got inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, and got an award from the president at Wake Tech. I forgot what the award was for, you probably can Google it, it's in there. So far, I think I've been doing pretty good.

Velma Fann:

It sounds like you have been doing very well. Ms. Rountree. If you were to take us back to your hometown to point out some places of importance, maybe do a walking tour, what would you show us?

Gail Rountree:

I would show you, first of all, Edenton is surrounded by water, so it's lovely down... I would take you downtown to the waterfront where they have the three little cannons down there. And then, I would take you to the church. I think it's two Baptist churches where we would meet, and walk you downtown Main Street, where we did the marching. I would take you over there where Ernest A. Swain used to be. They have converted that into one of those homes where the indigent people live now. Mr. Swain has

passed on, he's transitioned. But John A. Holmes is still there. The elementary school that I went to, when I first came to Edenton from Virginia, was called D. F. Walker Elementary, and they have converted that into sort of like some sort of center. I could show you that as well. I could show you, there's still the separation from Blacks and whites. It's still there. You'd be able to see it. It would be very obvious. I could show you that.

Velma Fann:

I see. Is there anything else you'd like to add or like to tell us about your experience, and just your hometown and the Civil Rights Movement?

Gail Rountree:

I just want people to know, nobody can make you feel less than who you are, if you know who you are. Don't let them put you in a place that you don't want to be. Be where you want to be and do what you want to do because with God's help, all things are possible if you only believe.

Velma Fann:

Thank you very much, Ms. Rountree. Have a wonderful day.

Gail Rountree:

Thank you, darling. And you have a blessed day.

Interview with James Swimpson

New South Associates in conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and the State Historic Preservation Office welcomes you to Untold Stories of the Struggle for Civil Rights in the Places of Northeastern North Carolina, a Research Study. This project is supported through an African-American civil rights grant from the National Park Service, the United States Department of Interior to the North Carolina Preservation Office to identify places of significance in the Civil Rights Movement, 1941 to 1976. I am Velma Fann, Historian with New South Associates. Today is September the sixth, 2022. And I am speaking with Mr. James Swimpson. Welcome Mr. Swimpson.

James Swimpson:

Thank you.

Velma Fann:

Would you please state and spell your name for us?

James Swimpson:

My name is James Swimpson, J-A-M-E-S S-W-I-M-P-S-O-N.

Velma Fann:

Thank you. And in what county were you living during the Civil Rights era? Let's say from the mid-'40s to the mid-'70s.

James Swimpson:

I was living in Martin County, North Carolina, the town of Williamston.

Velma Fann:

Now I know Williamston was very active in the Civil Rights Movement.

James Swimpson:

Yes, it was.

Velma Fann:

But before we speak to that, would you mind telling us your age?

James Swimpson:

I'm 81.

Velma Fann:

Well, great. All right. So Mr. Swimpson, tell us a little bit about your home life growing up in Martin County.

James Swimpson:

Well, growing up in Martin County, I was in what I call a lower-income household. We were poor. My parents, my mother worked at one of the local laundries and my dad worked at a cannery. We pretty much were what I would consider average, poor Black families. We did not know that we were poor apparently because the whole community was poor, but we had what I would consider average living, average bringing up. Nothing outstanding.

Velma Fann:

Was this a rural area at the time?

James Swimpson:

Yes. Yes, it was a rural area.

Velma Fann:

And Mr. Swimpson, when did you realize that Blacks and whites lived differently or were treated differently?

James Swimpson:

Early on. Very early on. In fact, it didn't really dawn on me that we were being treated differently, but I noticed it. I accepted it. I thought it was the way of life, but I noticed that early on. When I say early on, before I started school I noticed that. Down at the corner store where most folk would gather, we were treated differently.

Velma Fann:

And how did that shape your outlook on life?

James Swimpson:

I don't know that it had an immediate impact because I think the impact in terms of my ability to get involved in trying to make changes came about during the time I was in college and the A&T sit-ins started, that really sort of rung my bell.

Velma Fann:

And what college were you attending at that time?

James Swimpson:

I was attending Elizabeth City State Teachers College at the time of the A&T sit-ins, when the A&T sit-ins started.

Velma Fann:

So, you were in college at the time. Give us an idea of what the students were thinking and what they did. Any protests at the time?

James Swimpson:

No. Actually we did not have any protest going on in Elizabeth City at that time. I'm not really sure why, but I think I know why. We didn't want to disturb the status quo. We didn't want to get in trouble, and

that was pretty much why we did not immediately start protesting. In fact, I think the reason we got involved in a protest was the... Well, the reason I got involved, the President of the Student Government Association at Elizabeth City State was also one of the campus barbers. And he was cutting my hair one night and mentioned to me that he had gotten a letter from the President of the Student Government Association at North Carolina A&T questioning whether or not he thought he could put together or organize a sit-in demonstration in Elizabeth City.

James Swimpson:

The thought pattern was that if sit-in demonstrations were organized and carried out and all of the cities where historically Black colleges and universities were located, that would add much impetus to sit-in at North Carolina A&T, which I think it did. And he did not want to organize a sit-in under the auspices of the Student Government Association or Elizabeth City State because he didn't want either of those organizations to be targeted for rebellion or to be targeted for any retribution from the sit-in. So, he was sort of searching around for individuals who might be interested or capable of pulling off the sit-ins without the college causing a ruckus for either the school or the SCA. So, that's how I got involved in the sit-ins.

James Swimpson:

He invited me. He wanted to know first of all, if I would be willing to participate. Of course, I was. I was very eager to participate. And I think the other five guys, well the other four guys. There were five of us who initially lunched to sit-in at the W. T. Grant counter. All five of us came from different directions on campus, we were not friends, friends at the outset. We were just students going our own separate ways. But once we got involved in the sit-ins, of course we became closer comrades then, but we never really had a bond, what I would consider a bond then, because we were doing what we felt that we needed to do as individuals, not as a coalition of any kind, but as individuals. That was definitely my thought. And that's how I got involved in the sit-in at Elizabeth City State.

Velma Fann:

How many students would you say participated in that demonstration?

James Swimpson:

Initially, there were five of us. There were five of us and as I said, we were sort of different kinds of animals. There was not a leader first of all, which was strange. I remember the oldest guy in the group was a veteran, an army veteran from Suffolk, Virginia. His name was Sevellios Wason. We sort of looked up to him because he was a veteran, but the other guys, the other three guys who were athletes, William Hager from Belmont, North Carolina, played basketball. Calvin Williams from Wilson, North Carolina, played both basketball and baseball and William Long from Camden, New Jersey played football. And by the way, Wason earlier in his college career before being drafted in the army, played football at Elizabeth City State. But I did not play anything. Just the books.

Velma Fann:

So, describe the demonstration to us. Tell us what you did.

James Swimpson:

My memory of the demonstrations was walking in the Grant store sitting at the counter. The clerks behind the counter tried their best to ignore us, but they could not ignore us because they were

shocked. They wanted us to leave of course. They did not ask us to leave. They did not call the police. They simply ignored us, did not take our orders or anything, but it was really a state of shock for them as it was for us, but we didn't know what to expect. But that first day at the end of... We got there around 2:00 in the afternoon, I believe, and we sat there until around 5:00. And just as we were getting ready to leave to get back to campus for dinner, Calvin Williams suggested to us that we form a circle and in unison say the Lord's Prayer, which we did. That sort of shocked the clerks and by then the few bystanders it had attracted, but that was the end of the first day. I remember it.

Velma Fann:

So a little bit about the history of W. T. Grant. Now were African Americans welcome there? Was it segregated seating or were we not welcome there at all?

James Swimpson:

We could not sit at the counter. We could not sit at the counter at all. Of course, after our sit-in demonstrations went on for a while, of course that rule was changed because of our demonstrations. But prior to our demonstrations, no. There was no sitting area for Black people. You would come in, get your order and leave and walk out with your order, but you could not sit at the counter.

Velma Fann:

Did you anticipate any violence? Did anyone call the police?

James Swimpson:

We didn't know what to anticipate, to be honest with you. In fact, had we gone to jail, we might still be in jail because I don't know that we had any money. I didn't have money to get myself out of jail and my family didn't have any money to get me out of jail. So, I might have been there a while, but there was no plan to my knowledge in terms of our being arrested, but there was no police presence the first day that we did the demonstrations. The police was not called or showing up.

Velma Fann:

So, did you go back? You mentioned the first day. Was this an ongoing demonstration for a while?

James Swimpson:

Yes. It was an ongoing demonstration for a while. And of course, after it started, it started getting larger in terms of numbers. And eventually it really got to be a powerful message for a small town like Elizabeth City. And then of course it was really a history for everybody, for white folk and Black folk.

Velma Fann:

You mentioned your parents. What did your parents think of your participation?

James Swimpson:

I didn't write home to tell them. I told my mom, my parents about it when I went home for the Easter break, which was a few months after we got started because this was in February when we started the demonstrations.

Velma Fann:

When you told your parents, what did they say? How did they respond?

James Swimpson:

My mom was upset because she didn't want me to get hurt. And that was pretty much the attitude of the family. They were concerned about my safety, not as concerned about the fact that I was doing it, but they were concerned about the potential outcome, potential negative outcome.

Velma Fann:

So the other students, did they join? They joined in pretty rapidly or did you have to coax them or did they look at you all as heroes and say, "Wow, if they can do it, we can do this?"

James Swimpson:

I think the latter was the attitude, "We can do it. If they can do it, we can help them do it."

Velma Fann:

And what was the outcome? What were some of the changes that came about due to the protests?

James Swimpson:

The immediate changes, I would find it hard to assess as I remember them. I don't remember any immediate changes because the seating situation did not change immediately. They did not allow us to sit and eat at the lunch counter immediately. That was a change that came from corporate office later on, but it was not before the end of that school year.

Velma Fann:

And what year did the sit-ins take place?

James Swimpson:

What?

Velma Fann:

In what year did the sit-in take place?

James Swimpson:

Oh, this was '63, I believe. 1963 as I remember it. No, it was 1960.

Velma Fann:

Okay.

James Swimpson:

No, this is 1960. I said 1963. I graduated in 1962. So, it was 1960.

Velma Fann:

Right. Okay. So looking back on it, did you surprise yourself as being part of that?

James Swimpson:

Not really. I was a determined person. I was quiet, I'm assuming, but I was determined. I was a determined person. So, I wouldn't say that I surprised myself.

Velma Fann:

Have you shared your story with maybe your children or any grandchildren that you may have?

James Swimpson:

Not in detail. In fact, they'll be hearing this. They have it in the unveiling of the street marker next month in October. In fact, they'll be doing the homecoming activities that Elizabeth City State this year, they will be unveiling the street marker, acknowledging the sit-in activities of the location for the sit-in activities. Of course, I plan to have as much of my family there as I can pull together for that. But no, I never sat them down and told them the whole story. I guess I've been too busy.

Velma Fann:

Well, I'm sure they will be very proud of you. And when they attend the unveiling just to see that, that's very wonderful. Will this marker be on campus? Is this correct?

James Swimpson:

No. I think the marker is going to be at the site of the old W. T. Grant building, which is right downtown across from the old post office. And I think there, because the W. T. Grant outlet is no longer in Elizabeth City. The building was converted to an office space now. So, it's no longer the old department store that it used to be, but the building is still there.

James Swimpson:

So, it's my understanding that the marker will be posted there.

Velma Fann:

Very good. Is there anything on campus, a plaque or a marker of anything?

James Swimpson:

I don't know, but the marker, one of the persons in the History Department at Elizabeth City now was instrumental in getting the marker approved and getting it there. He was very interested. He's sort of a living history guy and he was responsible for following the story and getting the marker approved and funded.

Velma Fann:

Excellent. Very good. Were there any arrests of any the students during any of the protests?

James Swimpson:

Yes, but not during the time that I was there. Yeah. After we left, the protests got bigger and bigger and bigger and changed directions. I was not there. So, I cannot really vouch for anything that went on after I left. But after we left, things got a little wild and student behavior started to change.

Velma Fann:

Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

James Swimpson:

Not that I can think of that relates to that situation. I was involved, I was hired back at Elizabeth City State 10 years after I graduated. And during that time, well, after I came back to Elizabeth City, I got quite involved in community activities and ended up being one of the plaintiffs on a suit against the city, which changed the voting rights ward system there, but that was another ball game.

Velma Fann:

So, that was in the early '70s you would think?

James Swimpson:

No, that was in the '80s. As I remember, I think it was in '83 when the suit was called.

Velma Fann:

So, you've been active for a while, as they would say?

James Swimpson:

Yeah.

Velma Fann:

Very good. Well Mr. Swimpson, we thank you for sharing your story.

James Swimpson:

You're quite welcome.

Velma Fann:

And thank you again and congratulations, and I'm sure it will be a wonderful unveiling of the marker.

James Swimpson:

Thank you so much for hearing my story.

Velma Fann:

Thank you. Have a good day, bye-bye.

James Swimpson:

Bye now.

Interview with Goldie Frinks Wells

New South Associates in conjunction with the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office welcomes you to *Untold Stories of the Struggle for Civil Rights in the Places of Northeastern North Carolina: A Research Study*. This project is supported through an African American civil rights grant from the National Park Service, the United States Department of the Interior, to the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office to identify places of significance in the Civil Rights Movement, 1941 to 1976. I am Velma Fann, historian with New South Associates. Today is May the third 2022. And I am speaking with Ms. Goldie Wells. Welcome, Ms. Wells.

Goldie Wells:

Well, good morning. Thank you.

Velma Fann:

Please state and spell your name for us.

Goldie Wells:

My name is Goldie Frinks Wells, G-O-L-D-I-E F-R-I-N-K-S W-E-L-L-S.

Velma Fann:

And Ms. Wells, and what county were you living in during the time span that we're looking at?

Goldie Wells:

During that time span, I lived in Chowan County then Wake County and Guilford County all in the state of North Carolina.

Velma Fann:

And would you give us a sense of your home life and the Black community?

Goldie Wells:

Well, growing up in Chowan County in a small town Edenton, North Carolina, that's in Northeast, North Carolina. It was a typical Southern town, whites and Blacks did not live side by side. It was separate communities and the lifestyle there was just very, very, calm. I did not have a large sensible small place. My life there until I was 16, went off to college, 16 or 17. It was just, I lived on one street.

The church was on the next, the school was about four or five blocks over. So in downtown was just a few blocks away. So it was a small environment and peaceful.

Goldie Wells:

I attended an all Black school from elementary to the 12th grade, but it was a consolidated school. So when they asked where did you go to elementary school? I'd say Edenton High School. And that kind of raises eyebrows, but it was a consolidated school. So we all went to Edenton High School. I lived in what's called, I don't know whether it's called a blended family or old traditional family for African

Velma Fann:

Now, growing up, I know you said the communities Black and white were separate. So when did you realize that Blacks and whites lived and were treated differently, that there were rights afforded to whites that were denied to the Black community?

Goldie Wells:

Well, I realized it pretty early because my grandmother worked for a white family. So I realized by seeing where they lived and how they lived, there was a difference. And my grandmother cared for a white girl who was the same age. I think Jenny may have been a few months older than me, but she had different privileges and she could go and sit at the lunch counter down at Mitchener's Drug Store. And she could sit on the lower level at Taylor's Theater. We didn't have that privilege. We could not sit at the lunch counter. We could not sit downstairs at the theater. We always had to go up in the balcony after walking through an alley to get to the door, to go upstairs.

Goldie Wells:

So the things like that, realizing that, we didn't go to school together and there was an unwritten law, it seemed, you could be close to a white child like Jenny and I were like playmates a bit. But then when you get to about the sixth or seventh grade, seems like there was an unwritten law that this can't go on anymore. So I realized all of that.

Velma Fann:

What made it-

Goldie Wells:

I also realized when I went to take my exam, the SAT, the students in Edenton always went to Raleigh, to Shaw, to take the exam. When I looked at the list of sites, Windsor, North Carolina, which is 21 miles away from me was on the list. So I signed up to go to Windsor to take the test. When I got there that Saturday morning, of course there were a lot of kids, white kids from Edenton that I knew from seeing, I was the only Black there, and the principal took me in a room alone to take my test. Now that I know a lot about testing, I know my test couldn't have been valid because I wasn't tested under the same conditions as the rest of people.

Velma Fann:

I see. When we look at that particular era and your community, what may have sparked a civil rights movement? What incident or incidents may have sparked the movement?

Goldie Wells:

The movement was sparked by the youth of the NAACP. My daddy was very much involved in NAACP. And these young people came to the meeting and asked what they could do about the conditions, the sitting at the counter, going to the theater, and the older NAACP leaders were quite reluctant. And so they didn't want to deal with it. And my daddy, who had come back from service and had a lot of ideas and wanted things to happen, told the people to come over to his house and that they could talk about it. And really that's what started the movement.

Velma Fann:

And tell us your father's name and a little bit about him please?

Goldie Wells:

My father's name is Golden Asro Frinks, and he grew up in Tabor City, North Carolina came to Edenton when he was about 17 or 18. And he was on his way to Norfolk to join the Navy. But he stopped in Edenton because the daughter of Mrs. Fannie Lewis, the woman that his mother worked for in Tabor City, her husband had become the editor of the newspaper in Edenton. So he stopped to visit them and he never did really leave Edenton again as his home place. The people that he stopped to see had a friend who had a son who had, is what we call now, special needs. They thought that my daddy, "Golden would be great for George." And, of cause, the Prudens were rich. So they hired him to go with them to Nags Head, to look after George, to be a friend to him and help him.

Goldie Wells:

So that's how he came to Edenton and stayed there, but he went away to the army eventually. And he had met my mother and they got married and I was born. And that's how I got the name Goldie, because he was in the service and I wasn't a boy. So they couldn't name me, Golden. They named me Goldie. And when he came back, after he had served as a staff Sergeant, he realized the conditions that persisted here in the country, after serving in the army, you're still relegated to the Black, white Jim Crow system, and that disturbed him. He did join the American Legion. And he was the first African American to be a delegate to the North Carolina, all-white American Legion convention.

Goldie Wells:

So it was something in him, he wanted to see things better. So those kids, when they wanted to start the movement, it just got him involved. And the rest is kind of history. He ended up being arrested 87 times for civil rights. And he became the first field secretary that Dr. Martin Luther king hired. So he was known as the great agitator, led many marches and protests in Northeast, North Carolina.

Velma Fann:

Did you participate in any of these demonstrations?

Goldie Wells:

No, I didn't. I left home just before things started, I went to college. So I was away for four years and they kept a lot of things that were going on away from me because he was being arrested. Once they had a rabbit with a note tied to it on our front porch, a dead rabbit. The note said, "Golden you are going to be just like this rabbit if you don't stop all these marches." So they kept those things away from me while I was in college because they wanted me to get a degree. They didn't want me to be disturbed. We had a carpool, because there were four of us at Hampton from Edenton. So they would send drivers to pick us up. And as we were coming home this driver said, "Well, they got Golden Frinks this time, they got him locked up in prison." I knew nothing about it and it hit me really hard.

Goldie Wells:

And while I was home, I went to the prison to see him. And that really got to me because you couldn't sit on the same side of the table. It was kind of devastating to me. Now, I did March in Hampton.

We had a little thing there after the sit-in at A&T in '60. The colleges around the country, some of the HBCUs participated in little marches and I did there.

Velma Fann:

So I know you were away from home, but as the movement progressed, where did the civil rights meetings, where were they held? Were they held at churches or schools or homes or can you share a little bit about that?

Goldie Wells:

Yeah, well they did a lot of strategizing right there at the house, but the Providence Baptist Church had a new pastor who had come from New Jersey. His name was Reverend Frederick LaGarde, and he and my daddy worked together. So, I guess they'd call them freedom rallies that they had, where they'd sing and get their marching orders and all were held at Providence Baptist Church.

Velma Fann:

To what degree did the community support the civil rights activities?

Goldie Wells:

I would say to a great degree. The older people were not doing the marching but they were supporting, they were supplying food. They were supplying money. They were providing the bond, the bail to get the students out. And they participated when they had the rallies. And I wonder if it's more like entertainment because that became a thing, at nights they would go to the rallies. So I would say the community, the Black community was quite supportive. I think everybody was ready to see some changes. And so they supported.

Velma Fann:

And what was the reaction of the white community or the law enforcement?

Goldie Wells:

Well, you can imagine the white folks, did not like it at all. They were losing control. The police exercised every bit of authority that they had and arrested as many people as they could. So there was resistance from the white community.

Velma Fann:

Were any students hurt at any of these rallies?

Goldie Wells:

No. I never heard of anyone being hurt. No, I didn't.

Velma Fann:

As you look back-

Goldie Wells:

They used nonviolent tactics, so the students were nonviolent, but I didn't hear of anyone really being hurt.

Velma Fann:

As you look back on some of the key issues and some of the demonstrations, what was a difficult moment for the community? What was a moment when your community showed the most resilience, despite any setbacks or against any odds?

Goldie Wells:

When did they show the most persistence? I think it was when so many of the students were put in jail or arrested because that was the point that they sent for SCLC to come to help them. Reverend LaGarde called for Dr. King to see if they could get some help. And I think that when things just got really tight, I think that was the point where they said we've got to just move out and do more, get more help.

Velma Fann:

Did Dr. King visit Edenton?

Goldie Wells:

Yes, he did. Dr. King came and he came to our house and they started calling the house Freedom House. And he came when I was a sophomore in college and he came again when I was second-year teacher. So I remember him being there twice. And that is one of the things that has made a difference now that they're doing the research. The house has been purchased by the state and the house is going to become a museum, that is because of the fact that Dr. King visited the house twice. Now, when he came the first time, he was not as well known, but the second time he came, everybody knew who he was. He came, it was a Sunday night. All the churches closed. The house where I was born, is two doors down the street where my grand parents lived. Well, my grandmother came over to the house when Dr. King was there and the police wouldn't even let her in. I mean, that's just the tight security that they had when he came the second time.

Velma Fann:

Was your mother active? Or what was her role? What was she experiencing during this time?

Goldie Wells:

Well, she experienced a lot. She never did hinder my daddy in what he was doing. She felt like that was his God-given assignment. We are a religious group. All the women, are Pentecostal holiness. So she accepted that as his call to do that kind of work. She was a school teacher. She would come home in the evenings. If the house was full of folks, just put her apron, start cooking and feeding. She used a lot of her funds also to help with the movement. She had a temperament that was calm. So she didn't let things disturb her too much. And the thing that got to her the most, when I talked about him being in prison, when they would say, he's going to be released on a certain day, then that day they'd say, oh, the judge had to go fishing and they'd put it off.

Goldie Wells:

And that was the only time that I saw her down about how it was a roller coaster thing. You couldn't pinpoint what was going to happen to him. At one point, the things had gotten so bad that he had a

rifle, and he had a rifle up in the bedroom. And she said, "No, we not going to do this because you may jump up and shoot the wrong person. Don't know who you are shooting." But she was very instrumental in keeping things going. She was also a leader in her own, right. She was the president of the Negro Women's Group. And she led them in building a building for their meetings. And in our church, she was also a leader. So when they started this research, it was the Golden Frinks House.

Goldie Wells:

Now they say the Golden and Ruth Frinks House. And I'm glad that they're honoring her because she deserves it. She started something in our church called the Pink Tea. And, it was a fun-raiser, but people have picked that Pink Tea up all over the country, she said, she just came to just call it a Pink Tea. The church was trying to build a temple for the state. And she did that to help with the building fund. But that little Pink Tea has been used all over the country.

Velma Fann:

Congratulations on that. And to your mom, you mentioned some leaders, who were some of the key leaders in or outside of the area who supported the community's demonstrations?

Goldie Wells:

Well, I had a list of people who helped in different movements across the state. Do you want me to list those people?

Velma Fann:

Let's name a few.

Goldie Wells:

A few. All right. In Edenton, of course, was Reverend Fred LaGarde, who was like co-leader with my dad. Then there was Mr. Norman Brinkley in Edenton. He was the financial backing. He was an older man, but he would make sure that the fines were paid and he stayed in the background, but he was quite instrumental in that movement, those are the key people I have. Of course, there are some others that I did not have. I went through some things that my dad had said and recorded. And so I just picked up a few nights there.

Goldie Wells:

But after he left Edenton, then there was the Williamston movement and the Greenville movement and the mountain to the valley march, in the Hyde County Movement, there were quite a few move movements that were started after the Edenton Movement, because they saw the effects. My daddy had a real gift of leading people. I used to call him the Pied Piper of Hamelin. He'd get up and start talking and folks would just listening. Then they'd just go right on with him. I don't know if you've seen that movie about the Oxford called *Blood Done Sign My Name*, is the name of the book. And they made it into a movie. And he just arrived and started talking and the people just lined up and went right on with him. So he had a gift to doing that.

Velma Fann:

You mentioned some of the retaliatory acts that your family was subjected to. Was there a degree of fear, were other homes or other people treated badly or threatened by the authorities?

Goldie Wells:

Well, there was always a little bit of fear because you never knew what someone could do, but the fear didn't stop anybody. No, they were never stopped by the fear. Fear didn't just overtake them, I told you about the rabbit and I think there was a cross burning, but nothing stopped them, they kept on going.

Velma Fann:

And what changes were brought about due to the student's activities and others activities?

Goldie Wells:

What changes?

Velma Fann:

Yes. What changes were brought about?

Goldie Wells:

Yes, well the lunch counter, the situation was changed. So was the theater. And then in the fall, there were two students who enrolled in the high school, the white high school. Daddy talked to the parents and asked them, would they let those kids go? And they did. Gerald Perry was the male, and Lois Jordan was the female. Lois has passed away, but Gerald is still there in Edenton.

Velma Fann:

If you were to take someone on a walking tour of Edenton, what places would you point out and what were their significance?

Goldie Wells:

All right. I'd point out the house at our house. I would point out Providence Baptist church. I would point out the fact that Edenton had the oldest courthouse in the state of North Carolina. And they say the first tea party was there. But the prayers on the steps of the church was symbolic. And then they would have their rallies in the church. I also would point out the high school where we had the first African Americans to enroll. And then I'd take them to show them that route, what we did when daddy died, they had the mules to go to the grave kind of symbolic. So I would point that out also.

Velma Fann:

And then you mentioned a theater?

Goldie Wells:

I would showed them the theater and I'd show them the Mitchener's Drug Store is still there.

Velma Fann:

Is the theater still standing?

Goldie Wells:

Yes. It's there.

Velma Fann:

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Goldie Wells:

Well, I'm grateful that the contribution that my parents made, my dad, what he did, having so much and having the tenacity to push through, and the things that he did to help change the lives of other people. Some of the things that we are able to enjoy now in the state of North Carolina, there was the first environmental injustice case was filed in Warren County when they were putting PCB along the highway, near people's houses. And I talked to the Michael S. Regan, Administrator, United States Environmental Protection Agency, he was here a couple of weeks ago with the President Biden. I think he said that that was the very first case that they had ever had filed against environmental hazards. And then when I started working here in my community in Greensboro, they wanted to open a landfill and I led that fight to keep the landfill closed.

Goldie Wells:

So the things that he did helped a lot of people, and I realized that a lot of his ability, as far as leading to make some changes in the communities where you live, that's been a part of me also. So I've realized that the genes and chromosomes do make a difference in your life and you don't realize it. I didn't take part when that was going on. Never thought that I would have to lead some groups to make some changes. They wanted to demolish the oldest Black High School in Greensboro. And so I was leader to save Dudley. To close the landfill, I started a group called Citizens for Economic and Environmental Justice. And when they closed our grocery store which created a food desert in '98, I started a group called the Concerned Citizens of Northeast Greensboro.

Goldie Wells:

So, as I look back and now I'm serving on the city council, so as I look back and think about what is in me, that motivates me is what my mom and my dad put in me. So I'm grateful for that. I'm grateful that now the work that he did is going to be recognized. I'm sorry. But some of the younger people will be able to read and it would inspire them to not accept things just as they are, that you could do something about bringing about change.

Velma Fann:

Very good. Thank you, Mrs. Wells. Thank you for sharing your stories with us.

Goldie Wells:

All right. How are you all going to use your stories?

Velma Fann:

Yes, Ms. Wells, you were asking how the oral history will be used. This will be part of the Untold Stories of the Struggle for Civil Rights in the Places of Northeastern North Carolina: A Research Study. So this will become part of that study. Copies will also be available at the North Carolina State Archives. Again, thank you for your time. Have a wonderful day.

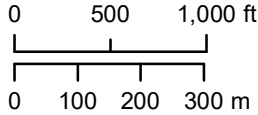
APPENDIX B: MAPS



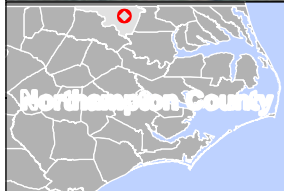
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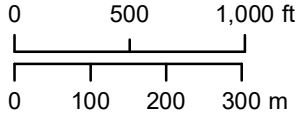
 Site of Confrontation



Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)




Ac Site of Action

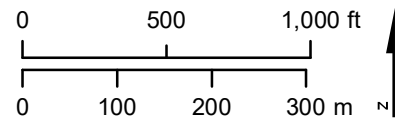


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Bert e County

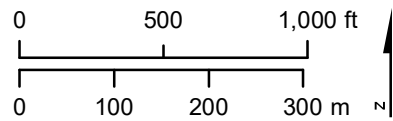
 SHPO Resource of Organization



Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)



 Site of Confrontation

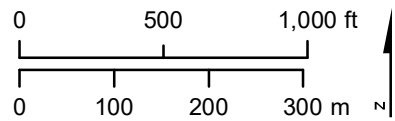


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Bertie County

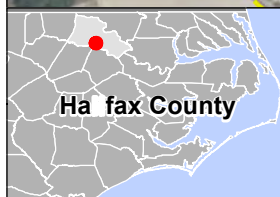
Ac Site of Action



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Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)

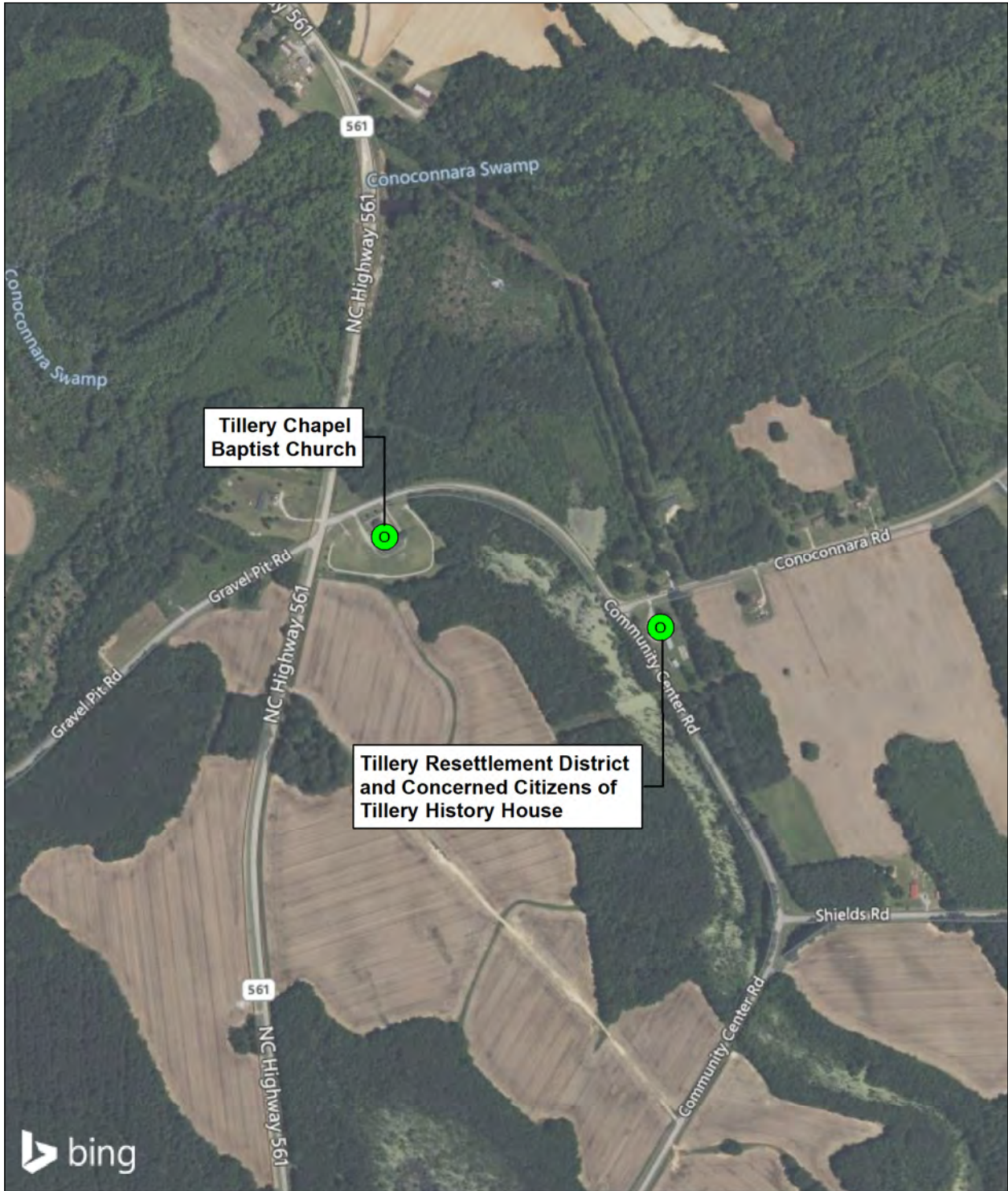


- ▶ Enfield March
- Ac Site of Action
- Ac SHPO Resource of Action
- 🏠 Site of Confrontation
- SHPO Resource of Confrontation
- Site of Organization
- Site of Organization (Demolished)
- Place of Action

Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)

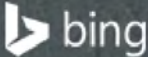


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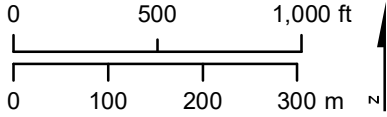
Tillery Chapel Baptist Church

Tillery Resettlement District and Concerned Citizens of Tillery History House

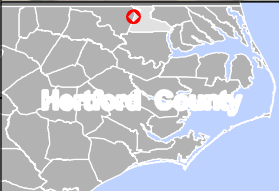



Halifax County

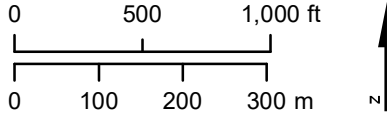
 SHPO Resource of Organization



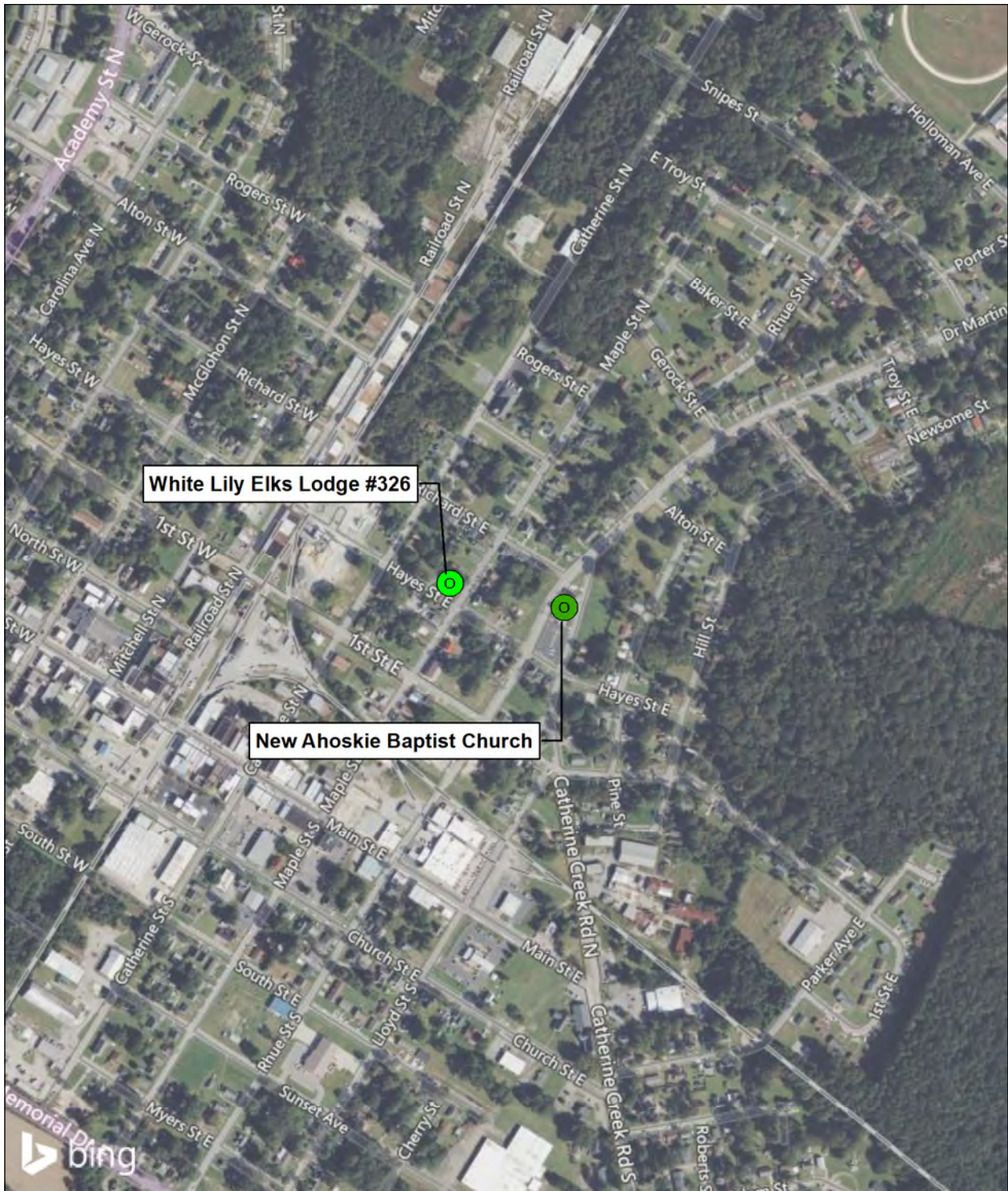
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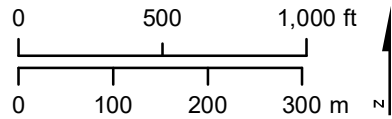
 Site of Organization



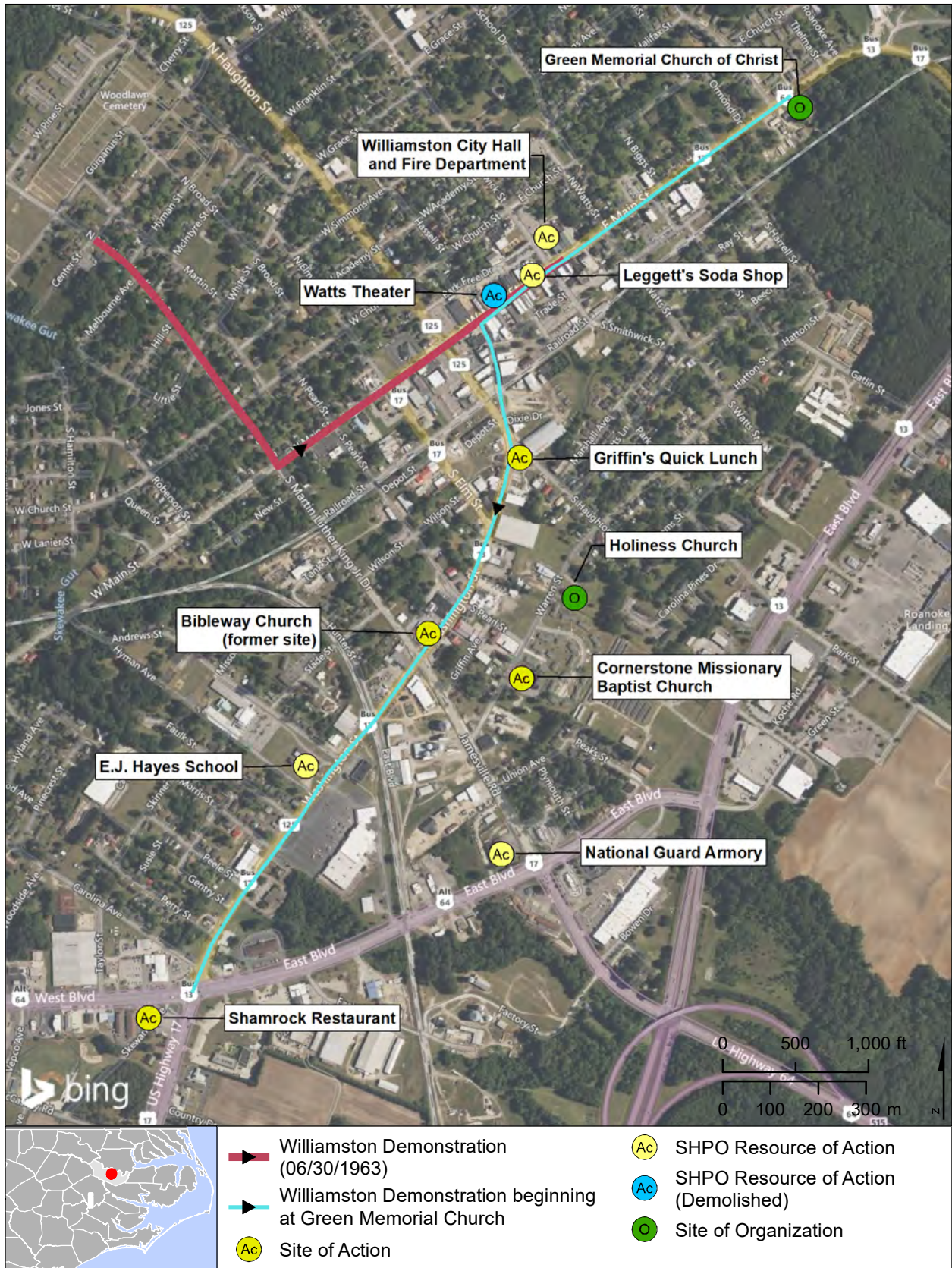
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- SHPO Resource of Organization
- Site of Organization

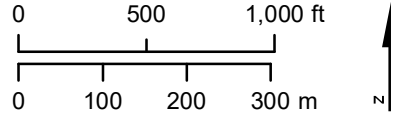


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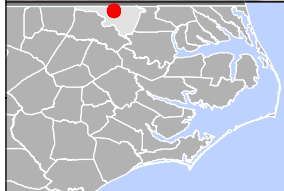




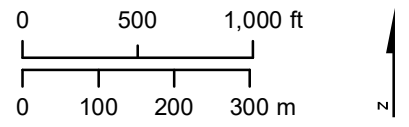
-  Site of Action
-  Place of Action



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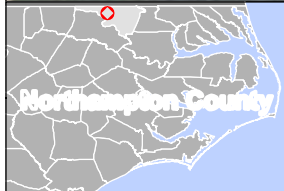
- Ⓐ Site of Action (Demolished)
- ⊙ SHPO Resource of Organization
- Site of Organization
- ⋯ Place of Action



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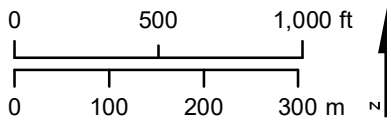


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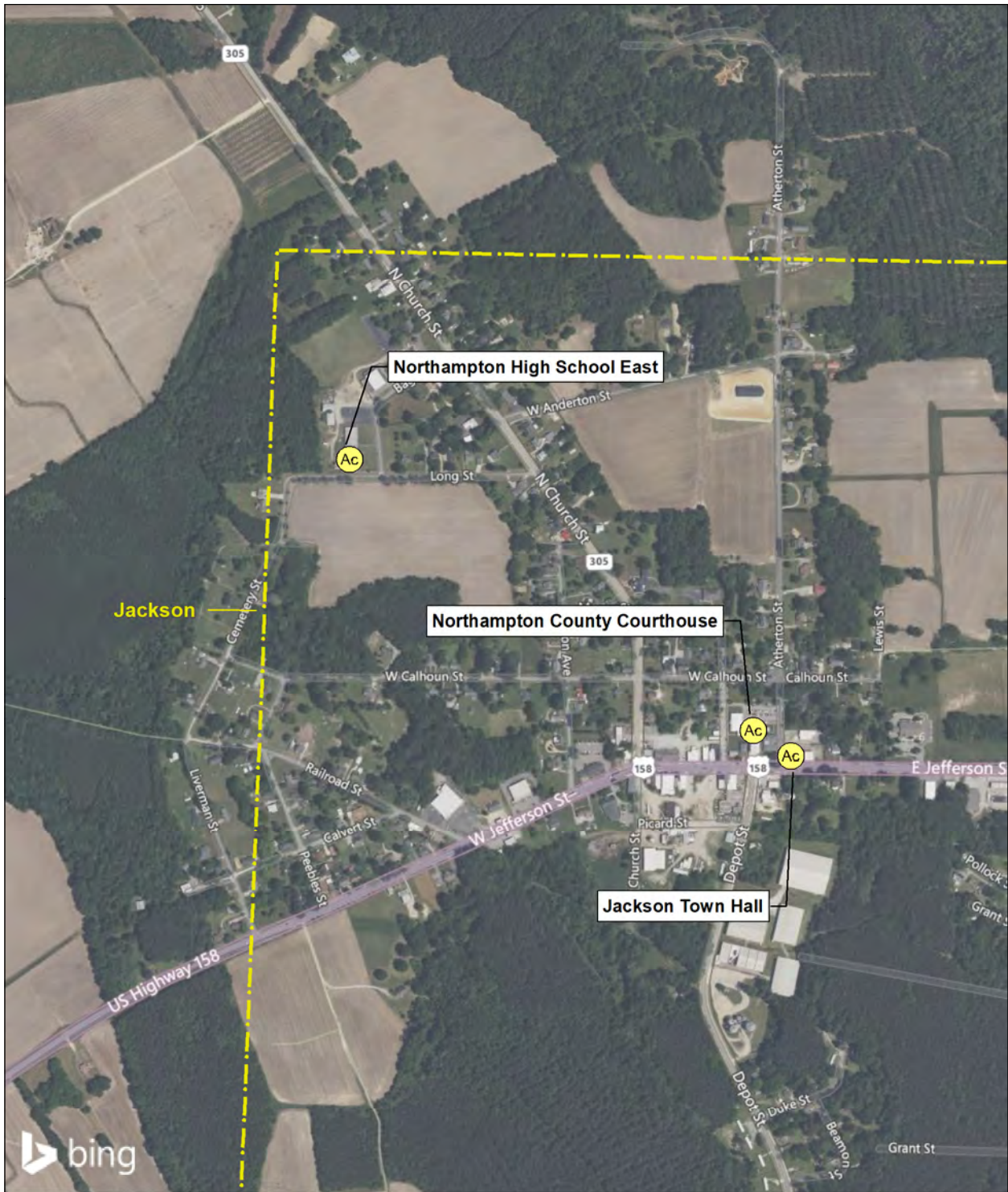


Northampton County

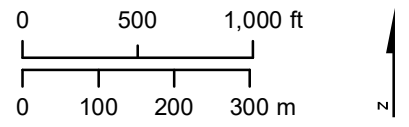
Ac Site of Action



Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)



- SHPO Resource of Action
- Place of Action

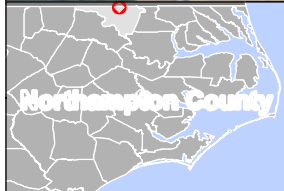
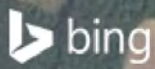


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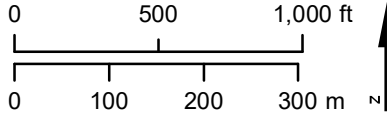


Mount Zion Baptist Church
(built 1988)

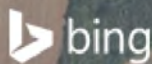
Mount Zion Baptist Church
(former site)



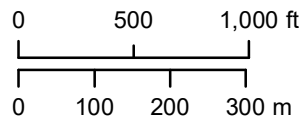
● Site of Organization



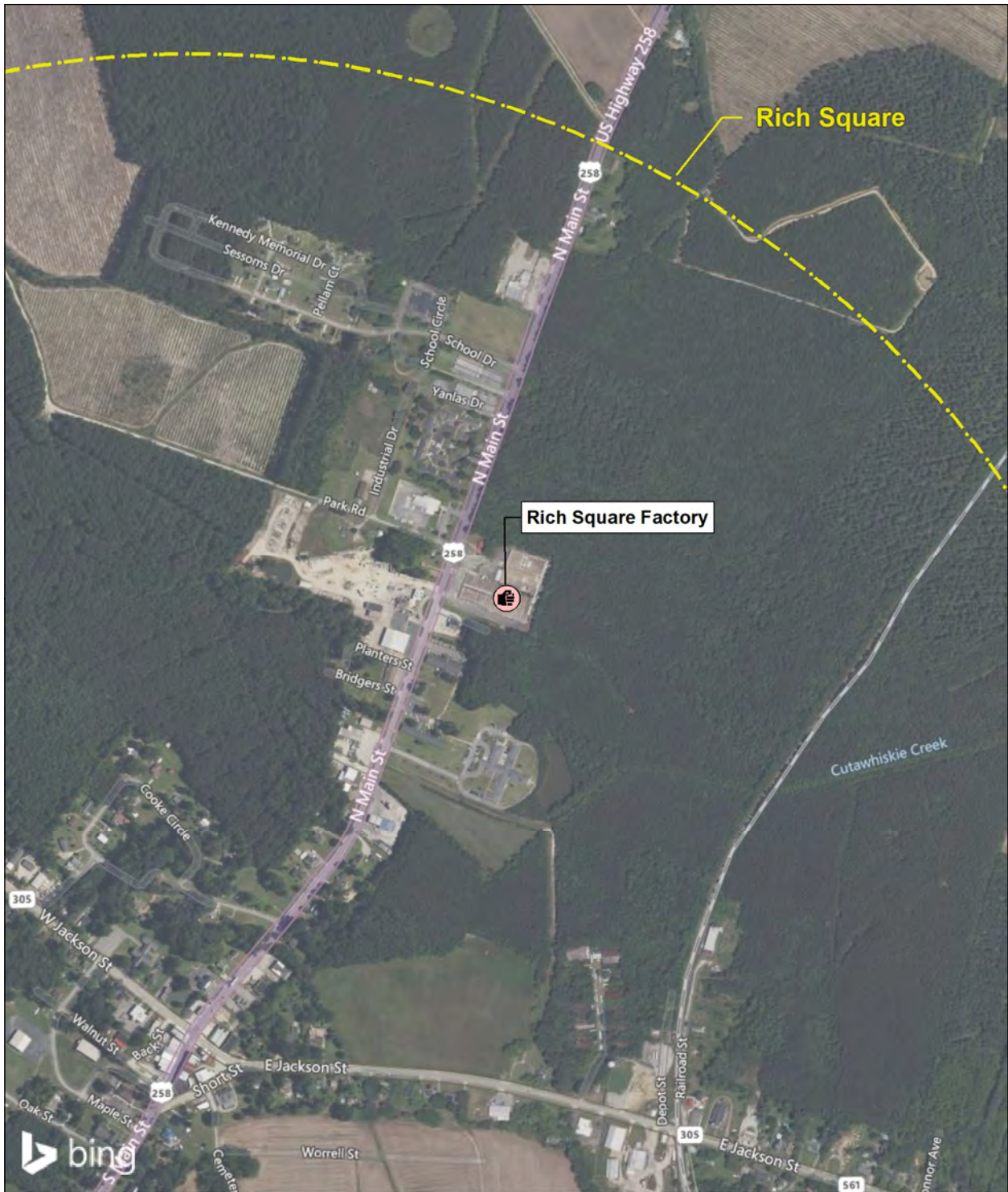
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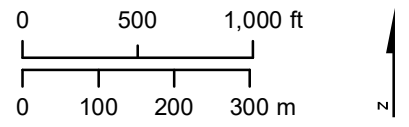
- Ac SHPO Resource of Action
- Place of Action



Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)



-  Site of Confrontation
-  Place of Action



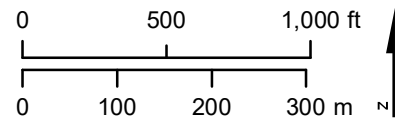
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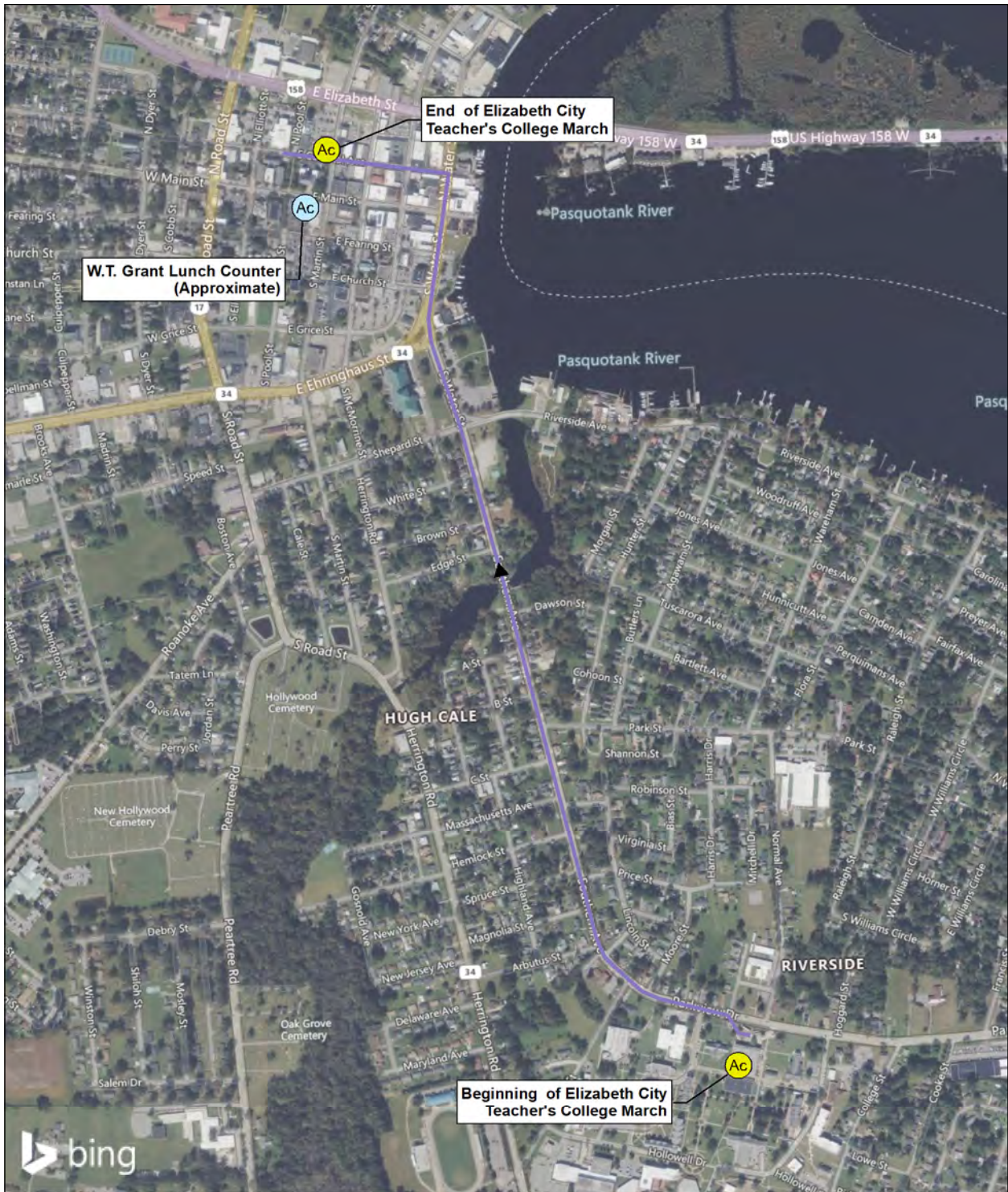
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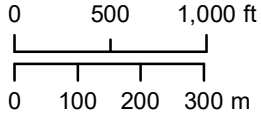
- Ac SHPO Resource of Action
- Place of Action



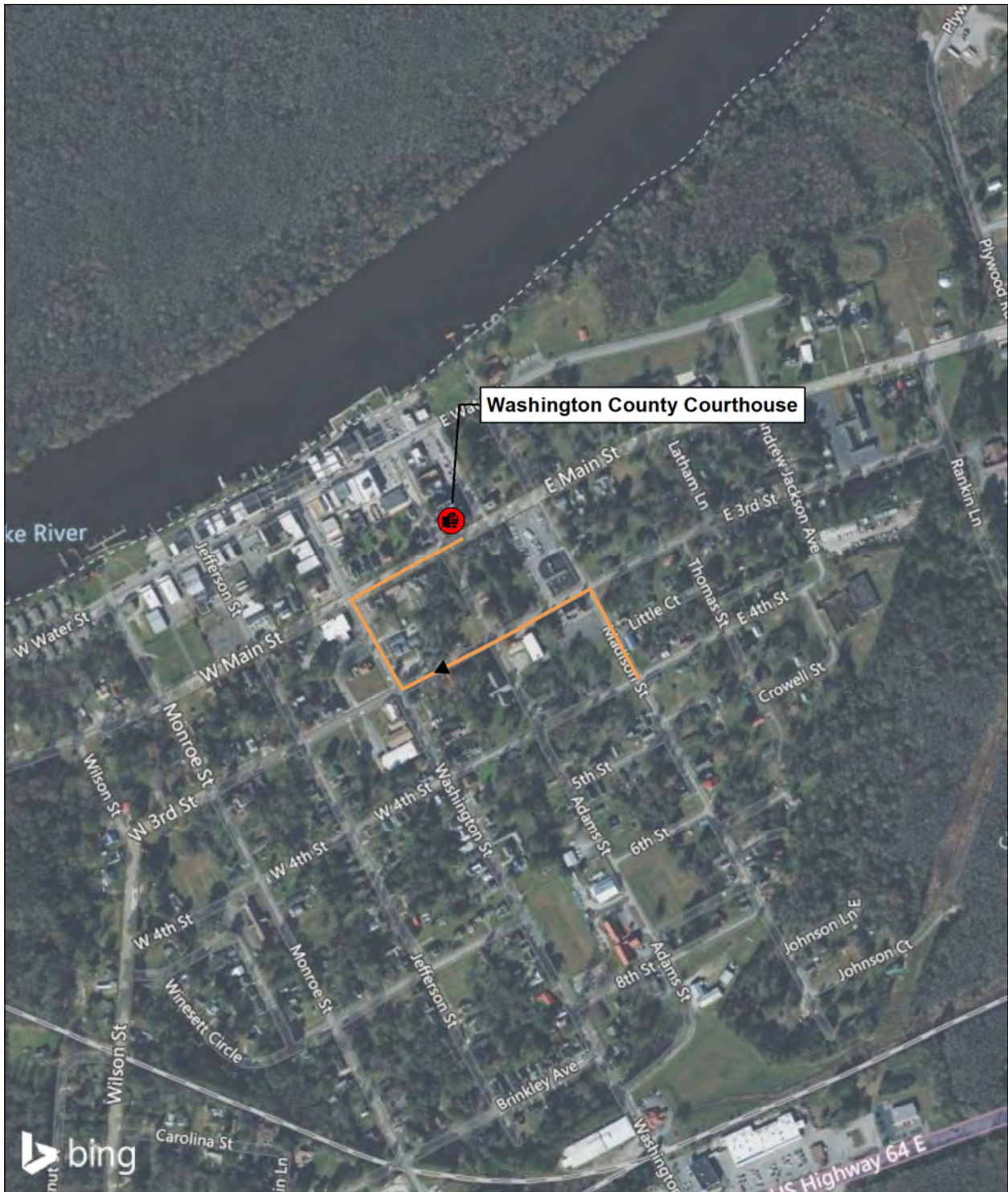
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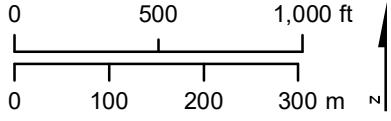
-  Elizabeth City State University
Teacher's College March
(08/1963)
-  Site of Action
-  Site of Action (Demolished)



Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)



-  Demonstration and Conflict - Plymouth (03/1965)
-  SHPO Resource of Confrontation



Basemap: Bing Maps Hybrid (2022)