

ORAL HISTORY RELEASE FORM

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Signature of Interviewee:

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 ORAL HISTORY DATA SHEET (to be turned in with tapes & transcript)

INTERVIEWEE William Powell + Henry Powell

ADDRESS:

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 3/22/00

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Rev. Powell Residence

INTERVIEWER/S: Heather Wentzel and Dorian Watson

TOPICS COVERED: Vernon Johns, Barbara Johns Powell, schools back then and today
attitudes toward the closings

NUMBER OF TAPES: 2

Tape 1: Interview with Rev. William Powell and Henry Powell
Side 1

Talking about teachers before the actual interview begins...

W: I get angry because they circumvent, you know, the real problem. And a lot of it, too, has to do with say, welfare...and that is, that uh, when you have thirteen-year-old girls having babies, what do they have to pass on? And, uh, they were supported by welfare, and uh, so it is just...we have created...I used to do training for the welfare workers and I pointed out to them at that time we were, uh, we were raising the future welfare recipients because there were no demands on them in school, and uh, they have made the teachers powerless. You can't, you can't even put your hands on a child...

H: You don't touch a child...don't touch a child...You never did...

W: Some of them need you to put them right across your knee...you know...(laughs)

H: Not even a pat on the back, good job...Don't do it, don't touch him! Isn't that ridiculous?

W: Gone on.

H: In other words, what I'm saying is you can put an Einstein in each classroom in the country and the results would be absolutely the same as they are now because that is not the problem. It's not the teachers. It's the home and the parents and the attitudes the children bring to school with them and nobody wants to address that. Just pretend it doesn't happen and blame teachers, we're weak ...just submit...a door mat of society. I hate it. I really do.

W: (laughs)...the way go back into the classroom it'd be with a bullwhip and a shotgun (laughs) No, but not all situations are bad.

H: No, I hope you have a good one.

Q: I hope I do too...

W: Not all of them are bad, but uh...

H: So many of them are.

W: Yes, that's the sad part about it.

Q: All right...

W: We've gotten that off our chest now. (laughs)

Q: That's ok. All right. I guess we should say that in addition to Rev. Powell we have his brother Henry Powell. Clarify that. Ok. I guess we wanted to start out with is just a brief history of yourself. Like that kind of thing, and stuff. Get all that out there so we can..."How does this relate to that or anything like that." And you can add anything you want. (to Henry) So, just a brief history of yourself as far as your career as a minister and how you got involved in the whole...situation...All that good stuff.

W: Yah, well actually my father was a minister, a pastor at Shiloh Baptist church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for a number of years. And um, I went into the ministry, uh, was licensed and ordained by the same church, in uh, I think '47 or '49...something like that. And then I pastored, uh..., at Community Baptist Church in Williamstown, New Jersey for seventeen years and I left there and went to Lansdowne Mr. Sinai Baptist Church for thirteen years. And I, pardon me, met my wife, Barbara, uh, here in Farmville. My father had a camp and we used to...every couple of months in August. And uh, that's how I got in this area... made the mistake of marrying my wife. (laughs)

H: Best thing that ever happened to you.

W: (laughs) Shut up!

H: No, she was a lovely person. I have to say I liked her very much.

W: So that uh, that...that's...Well, I lost her in '91 to cancer. And uh, in fact, she's buried right here in uh..., Baptist Church up at the end of the road here and um that's where she, you know, had made her wishes that she would be, you know, buried there. So that, actually, we were married after the fiasco here in Farmville. She was in Spelling College in...and I was back in Philadelphia in school and that's the reason why I think my brother's important to me...fill in what was really occurring here because I wasn't in the area and I... I do know that my sister adopted one of the children that...and carried her to Philadelphia...uh, who was...in that...in the closing of the schools. So she was, finished her education in Philadelphia and went into nursing. What was that child's name?

H: Alice Watkins.

W: Alice, Alice Watkins. Yes.

Q: How many siblings do you have?

W: I have uh, right now I have uh, three. Three daughters.

H: No, no, no. She's...brother and sisters.

W: Oh, brothers and sisters! (laughs) Siblings...you know. Uh, one brother and four sisters. And uh, what are they doing now? Nothing. (laughs) Yeh, we had...there were six of us. Mother and father, of course and we had a fairly stable home. My father

during that time was between Lynchburg, VA and Philadelphia. He was pastor, as I said, at the...Baptist Church but he also was president of Virginia Theological Seminary in a college in Lynchburg, VA, but that time he was called what we would call a part-time president because he was back and forth between his church and the school being a situation that couldn't afford to pay anybody. (laughs).

Q: Can you tell us a little bit more about the camp that you were involved in and the name of it?

W: It was Holreba, H-O-L-R-E-B-A. Did it have a Halloween children's camp?

H: Yeh, yeh.

W: Yeh, children's camp.

H: That's a strange name. It's a contraction of my father's aunt and uncle's names, Hollin and Rebecca. So they put the names together and made Holreba out of it.

W: When uh, Aunt Rebecca passed, she left my father some money in the will which he used for the establishment of the camp. So, that's how that came about. And what happened they'd... for two weeks they would have children and some members of the congregation and a Bible study. They had Dr. McCrary and Dr. Banks and Nonnie Ford and Ms. Daniel Croston. And each one would take a class and they had to study just like school, you know, they were able say from 9 to 10 have one class, 10 to 11, then maybe to lunch and then have...pick up again at 1 o'clock until 3. Something like that, isn't it?

H: Something like that, that's close enough.

W: One of the, one the problems, my father made the mistake by not really...they were invited...but there was no attempt, say, to draw people of the area in and he relied heavily on the congregation in Philadelphia to be supportive. I think if more of an effort had been made in the surrounding area, that the camp would have been, you know, larger. But it, it functioned until his death in, what was it, eighty...seventy-five, seventy-five...

H: Seventy-six. I know...Yes, seventy six. Yeh.

W: And uh, it survived a couple of years after that and then it just went to pot. So that's just about it about the camp. (laughs)

Q: What was Prince Edward County like when you moved here?

W: Well, it was racially divided. And uh, so you couldn't go into the restaurants or anything like that, like you can today. And of course the school system was separate. And Dr. Johns, my wife's uncle, used to say, "That separate but equal was the damnedest lie ever spawned this side of Hell." And that was his comment, you know, well which is true. There was no equality in the schools set up, whatsoever, and they came as a shock

to the entire community when the kids had the merit to walk out on strike. And of course there was a lot of fear among blacks in the area because they were fearful of retaliation, you know, by whites. And uh, you know more about that than I do.

H: Yeh, I lived here. As a matter of fact I taught schools until they closed in this county and all that he says is true. And the power in Farmville seemed to lie or seemed to rest largely in the hands of a few people who were in position to hire lots of people. And they seemed to set the direction for the county. I just finished writing a piece. If I had known this was going to happen, I would have been glad to have brought it to you. I call it *Prince Edward Adventures*. I talk about my nine years in the county. And I have a subtitle that I don't think I'm going to use, but the subtitle was *Life Among the Bumpkins*. (laughs) I don't think I better use it cause it might offend some people and there are some nice, very fine people out here, but some of them are true bumpkins too...so all that he said was true. There was a division in so many ways you are very conscious in the difference in the races. You know, having known Prince Edward County from 1950 on through until the present...it's hard for you to imagine the changes that I see that have taken place here. Things are so different today from what it used to be. I'm sure most of the differences are on the plus side, but there may be some other side that I don't know about. It's such a difference place. I tell you, it's almost unimaginable that the place could change as much as this place has changed since I moved. However, I have a friend who teaches at...at Longwood. And she told me she has never seen such prejudice in her life that she encountered in the town of Farmville and also among her, you know, the people that she worked with. So apparently, things aren't quite...you know, there may be a little bit hidden in there. It's still...she is.

Q: What school did you teach at when the schools closed?

H: I taught, I taught, when the schools closed I was teaching at *First Rock Elementary School*, which is on 460?...I taught in Cumberland County. Right after that I taught at...what school did I teach at?...That's about it, really.

Q: And from what years did you teach?

H: I started teaching in, I guess about '53, I think. I'm not sure of the date. And I stayed here until they closed the schools in '59. That was a trauma that...close the schools. Unfortunately, I think a lot of kids got lost in the shuffle in the sense that somebody who was eight years old in the third grade when the schools closed, when they re-opened five years later, they were now thirteen years old going in fourth grade now going back to school, you know? And I think we lost an awful lot of kids that way. Although I must say, they initiated some very innovative programs in order to rescue as many of those kids...which once the schools re-opened, they allowed some children to move at their own pace so that they could cover two grades in one year. They would encourage them to do so. That way, some of them were able to, you know, make up for some of the terrible loss they had suffered. On the other hand, I need to say, I want to make this very plain. I don't think that the decision to close the schools expressed the will of most people in Prince Edward County. I think, I think the people out here saw the...the government dictation mandates as a threat to their own personal power and so for that

reason, resented it. But I think that many people who, who were affected by the closing of the schools were...would have gone along with the government's decree even though they might have some personal misgivings and uncertainties I think they would have gone along with it. Particularly when their only choice they had to keep their kids in school was to send those kids to the private school. Which was an expensive proposition. Did you know that many people lost their homes and their farms because they were not able to...to...you know, they borrowed money from the banks...the ones that suffered too in the closings of the schools. That's a side of the problem that I don't think has been addressed very much. Now remember why people lost their homes...unable to make their mortgage payments and so forth. It was a terrible time in Prince Edward County.

W: ...educate their children in the private schools that was set up. And course private schools cost money, and as a result, they borrowed money and then weren't able to repay it. Not only did blacks suffer, whites suffered also, you know. And uh, it's unfortunately, unfortunate that that part of the story is not better known. I don't know whether people are embarrassed, you know, but reality is reality, you know. In the...in a scheme of things, I don't think that there is anything to be embarrassed about except, if you maintain an evil nature, you know. If you aren't able to change, because I...I...no matter how far back you go, you'll find racism. And unfortunately, it's going to last until every man is wiped off the face of the earth. It's sad, and I where I...I try to get people to understand is that you have potential, you rise up to your own advantages, you know, and don't allow what people say, what people think, affect you. But, if you have...then...I don't go too much about relying on the past I think something like Einstein said, was reported to have said it...he said, "Why clutter up the mind with a bunch of historical facts when you can go to the library and pick out anything that you want to know about. You know, so in other words, study your history as a race. (laughs) I don't know whether people would agree with me, but...Maybe to know a little bit about the back...about the past is ok, but just to get all caught up in it, you know, so that this the sole thing, is futile. And that's a sad commentary on, I think, our upbringing was the separate but equal idea. When Dr. Johns was in Louisiana, I believe, he said that when he was on a bus and when he drove up to the station, that they had this beautiful facility for whites, and that they had a shack attached to the end of it for colored. And so he walked in to the main bus station and he asked the...he said, "I saw this white man reading the newspaper who looked intelligent. And I walked up to him and I said, 'Pardon me sir, I'd like to ask you a question.' He said the man put down his paper and took his eye glasses off and said, 'Yes, what is it?' And he asked him that question, he said, 'Isn't the separate but equal the greatest lie spawned this side of Hell?' He said the man turned red and got up and moved away. And he walked up to the counter and asked the manager the same question. And the manager became very defensive. He said, "I'm not responsible for it. You ought to talk to the politicians, and what not, you." But they served him, right there at that counter, Which shows that the man...there, there has always been those that in spite of what the general attitude was, who reached out to blacks. And you cannot condemn all white people for what happened because there were those who bent over backward and suffered insults because of their wanting to work with blacks. Working with them, so that...to hate an entire people is wrong, definitely wrong. You hate those individuals, individuals, in spite of their intelligence, knowledge, and

what not, if they continue their evil ways. You hate that. And that's something that's very hard for people to change. They are mighty afraid to change. They hate it. And yet change is, in many instances, is a wonderful thing. Certainly, I know you all enjoyed riding in out here that automobile over against a horse buggy! (laughs) Over the holiday, I flew to a, flew from Florida back to Philadelphia and the plane was held in Richmond for a length of time, so that when the pilot took off, he took off at such a rate, we were in Philadelphia in forty-five minutes. It so spoiled me, that when I was driving back down, I almost parked the car and called the police to come back because I had to take six hours to drive from Philadelphia, you know. So this change is not all bad, there is a lot of in change and yet people will resist it, you know. Because they feel threatened, I guess, you know. I often have wondered, of course this is...I'm laughing today, where the whites didn't want to associate with blacks because they maybe thought the black would rub off on them (laughs)

H: Well, it won't.

W: No, I, it has been one of my lighter moments, thinking that.

H: What other questions do you have there?

Q: How did Rev. Johns affect you, and I guess you too also, Mr. Powell.

W: There is something he has written about Dr. Johns.

Q: Oh, ok.

H: I would, if I had known that, that's what your interested in, I would have sent you a copy of the thing that I wrote that Hampden Sydney reprinted in a small book. As a matter of fact, I'll still send it you in the mail, if you'd like.

Q: Ms. Bagby gave it to me.

H: Oh, she did? All right, then you have some idea where I'm coming from.

W: But what Dr. Johns was a brilliant heart. In fact, I think he was perhaps two or three generations beyond his time and that made it difficult for him to find associates and uh, because people, even white, didn't really understand where he was coming from. And um, he had an ability with language to subdue anyone and he was intolerant of the separate but equal situation. I don't know whether...What do you think about his influence?

H: It's hard to measure his influence because first of all, I think you have to understand that Vernon Johns had a sort of a wanderlust. He was all over the country all of the time. He didn't stay anywhere long. And I've heard people say, "Well, I was in Boston when I heard him speak." I've heard people say New York state. He been all over and everywhere he went he left a tremendous impression. He's a very, very brilliant man,

number one. I don't think I have run into his like in my lifetime. And um, a spellbinder of an orator. And he had a tremendous influence wherever he went. He made people sit up and listen and think. He had a much more of an influence on Martin Luther King than is generally known and Mrs. Corretta King has determined it shall stay that way. Don't want people to know what an influence he had on Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King worshiped the ground Vernon Johns walked on and even adapted some of his sermons to his own use. I don't call it plagerism only because Vernon Johns didn't care. You know, if he wanted to use it, then use it. He was a man of tremendous gifts is all I can say. He had a photographic memory for one thing. People said he could quote the entire Bible from memory. I don't think that's true but I know that he did know several, he had learned verbatim several books of the Bible. He loved poetry. He could spout poetry for hours on end. As a matter of fact, he used that as a yard stick to tell how far he traveled when driving how many poems he could, in a certain, in a hundred miles we'll say. I was riding with one day when he told, I think it some piece of a poetry. He said, "You know when I learned this?" I said no. He said, "I was in second grade at school." HE had tremendous memory, a photographic memory, total recall. He never used a Bible or manuscript when he spoke, yet he could quote scripture verbatim for as long as need be, you know. Like I said, he didn't use a manuscript. He spoke from...here.

W: As far as his influence would go, I think he had to cope with fear. And uh, kept people from really getting close to him. They were afraid of him. In other words, he would, because of his language and what not, he would be called a, a rebel. Put it that way. So naturally people were very afraid to, you know, follow and accept his influence.

H: Let me interject this. His daughter told me recently that she thought her father was terribly wounded that he was not invited to be a part of the march on Washington. And uh, after thinking about that, it occurs to me that there a good reason why they wouldn't include him in the march in Washington. First of all, he would not turn the other cheek on the opponent. His was, fight back. And fight he did, he did. He knew that there would be violence. In the 70's you know that these two guys tried to rob him, he knocked both of them out. Did you know that? Down in Petersburg. You sense this about the divine, somewhere, somewhere just under the surface. And he's just going to speak his mind, he's going to be Vernon Johns in all and every situation. He would not, it would not have been wise for them to involve him in the march on Washington because you couldn't control him. He was going to say what he wanted to say regardless of what your program was and so forth. And he was perceived, probably, as a threat to other people who organized the march. And for that reason was...

W: ...on the troublemaker and so that cowered the number of blacks because the white man says he's a troublemaker you know you better stay away too. So...

H: I think he was actually fearless, I don't think he feared...

End side one

Side Two

H: He wasn't a complete fool. Whenever you saw him in that, that white Mercury he used to drive, he wasn't too far from a double barrel shotgun, loaded...and I have no hesitation in that stating I believe that he would use that...he would use that shotgun, if need be. Um, he did not believe in nonviolence, he did not believe in turning the other cheek. His thing was fight back. How could a man who said, "If you see a good fight, get in it." That was his philosophy. (laughs) And you know, the beautiful thing about this guy is his wonderful, human side of him. He loved humor, he loved laughter, he loved a good story and he could tell you some stories that'd make your hair curl. Oh, he was just a fascinating person and I learned to love him almost like I did my own father. I was telling his son the other day...I said, "You know John," I said, "That's great about your father. I admired him and respected him and I loved him, but thank God I didn't live with him." (laughs)

H: Look, here's why: His daughters were away in college. They come home for Christmas holiday and they're...related to be home, of course, and they're envisioning a nice, leisurely breakfast...and so forth. They're going to have a great time being home for the holiday. About six o'clock in morning he comes to the bedroom and says, "Uh, by eight o'clock, I want you to give me six reasons...uh, six methods by which the Civil War might have had a different conclusion." And this was what they faced with over the Christmas holidays. They had to get up and go, and write out six reasons... (laughs) I couldn't have lived with him, no way in hell I could live with him as much as I loved him. He was crazy.

W: Yeh, I've heard my wife talk about some of the demands. He would call them in and expect them to recite, verbatim, a certain piece and it was always with fear and trembling that they approached that moment and she said that she would be so happy when she was successful...(laughs) I, I don't know whether his...it would take a certain kind of person for him to have influence with, I'll put it that way. And that was, that was his problem, was that people of his own age bracket didn't understand him. And um, consequently, as I said, they would shy away from him so his influence would be upon a younger generation that had college exposure. You know, they would be able to understand where he was coming from and the ideas and the poetry and this, that, and the other thing...

H: I just thought about something. Again, I didn't know that I was going to get involved in this but I would have brought you some tape recordings of a, at least one of his speeches. And I think he's at, Atlanta U when he gave this particular speech. And from the tape I think you could begin to get a picture of the kind of man that he was. But again, I didn't know, but I'd be glad to send you one if you'd like that.

Q: Yes, thank you.

H: I didn't mean to be taking you away from your...

Q: This is just a guideline...Yeh, we want you to...

H: You know, in spite of all the negative about Prince Edward County, I could give you a long list of them, there's something about the place that grows on you. I was just talking to a guy this morning. I was telling him, I said, "You know, I live in Lynchburg, but if I had my drothers, I'd rather be in the country, in Prince Edward County. I can never get quite used to the quiet here. You know, that just blows my mind how quiet it is. I remember when I first came here, I had an awful hard time, it was a culture shock, you can imagine, from Philadelphia. But the thing that killed me you could hear a car from a great distance and it's almost enough to make you stop what you doing just to look at a car going by. You know, it was so quiet, it was a welcome diversion, just a car passing on the highway. So, but it has its attractions and it grows on you and I didn't realize how much it had grown on me until I left Prince Edward County, went back to the city and couldn't stand it...I don't blame you.

Q: I don't want to go back to the city.

W: I know, no, well, you better off especially teaching. I think you have more control here than you ever would in Philadelphia. I would not go into a classroom without a shotgun, I really wouldn't do it. And I mean, you see parents have abdicated their position and their responsibilities. That's what they've done. And they are to blame. There's no way in the world, you mean to tell me that my son be could be in my garage making bombs, and I wouldn't know anything about it? This is ridiculous. What kind of society is this...I'm talking about that bombing, in that school...in Columbine High. This is utterly ridiculous, this kind of thing. Are we so insensitive that our own children, we aren't involved in them, with them, you know. And this what the politicians and what not, are passing off as, oh nothing, uh the teacher must be perfect. The teacher has to be God according to them. And uh, if a child does not...how in the world can a child finish high school and can't read? Huh?

(Sister-in-law passing through the kitchen)

It is cold.

Q: You talked about Vernon Johns personality. Did you see any of him in Barbara? Did you see similarities between the two?

W: No, you know, that is a strange situation. He, would say, was stand-offish. He was very proud of her, but as far as...and this was something that she was never able to see, this piece concerning her, that she did mention that toward the end she was spiritually led in what she did. And of course the article in the newspaper, the story was out it was a fabrication. That did happen. Barbara did not rely on anybody. She got the idea from this teacher who told her, she was complaining about the school situation and the teacher

said why don't you do something about it. She took off from there. And a teacher was saying she came back and they passed notes. No, nothing like that ever happened. Uh, and uh, she, over and over again said that this was something she was just born to do, that's all. And uh, they never, while she was in, she never had the idea that it was going to have the impact that it had. But uh, she just thought that what they would do, they would create a better situation. You know, it still would be separate, but it would be equal. And uh, she didn't have any idea it would grow to the extent that it had grown. And I think if, to be fair, to look at the high school that now exists down there in Farmville, uh, it certainly is an improvement over what they had, both white and black. And that...when the separate but equal was alive. (laughs) But I don't, uh, she was asking the question do I see some of Dr. Johns in Barbara, I said know she was really her own woman. (laughs) And you see, too, once she got married and starting having children, they became her focus, you know. And uh, she finished her education and got her masters in library science and so other words, she grew, you know, into a different...different phase and what was behind her was behind her, you know. And of course, having four children, or five children, wasn't it? My son and four little girls, that took up her time so that she...she was interested in...in the house. (laughs)

Q: How did she react when the press and the media approached her about what happened, when they struck...when they went on strike.

W: She accepted them. I think that interview that she did would give you an idea that she you know, welcomed the press. And uh, but as I said, she still had no idea the far-reaching the events were going to be. She had no idea concerning that at all. But she just knew and felt that it was something that had to be done and she did it. And of course, I understand, I don't...I'm not in a position to verify, but they claim that the Klu Klux Klan burned a cross on her aunt's place. That's the reason why they sent her to Montgomery, to be with her uncle. But anything worthwhile is a, somebody has to suffer somewhere, you know. You...you can't have advancement without somebody paying a price. That is, if it is going to be worthwhile.

Q: Why do you think this happened in Farmville?

W: Why do you think...Well because I think the hierarchy were entrenched in their ideas. And that was we were, well, to show you the anger and dogmaticism, we will close the schools rather than change. You see that commercial, "We'd rather fight than switch?" That was the attitude of the hierarchy here, was that we are going to maintain this situation regardless. And they actually resented the federal government's encroachment.

H: I think you're absolutely right. I think that they saw it as a threat to their power.

W: Power, yeh.

H: Yeh, a chokehold on the community. Undoubtedly there were other communities in the South where even worse school situations prevailed. I've seen some photographs of some schools that were...you wouldn't want, you know...they looked like outhouses, it

was terrible situations. But the difference was, you had Barbara Johns in Farmville. That's where the difference lie.

W: And of course what they...well they already called her uncle a trouble-maker. And they swear up and down that she got it from him, but uh, he had no influence on her. I think he was in Montgomery when, when this took place. So, he had no influence on her and she tried to get the reporters to understand, she said that this was something that was spiritual. That she was led to do what she did. And knowing her, she, she, she was of her own mind, you know, even as far as I was concerned. If Barbara got in her mind that she was going to do a certain thing, she did it. Well, give you an idea. I tried to get a child care center set up in the church and so the church was rebelling because they said they didn't want the traffic in here. The truth of the matter was that they did not want to be displaced. They saw themselves as having power, but they knew once the childcare center was set up, that parents would be wining to the church, so they would be losing their positions and want not, so they fought like animals against it. And, without my knowledge, my wife called the church body together and cussed them out. (laughs) I use the word cuss...She told me she had never in her life been in a situation that was as horrible as she attended. And she was calling them to a realization that they were supposed to be representing a higher standard than what they displayed and what not. So, that gives you an idea of what kind of person she was, and that was if she saw a wrong, she was going to fight against it, period. You know, even if was me, she would fight against me because if she felt it was wrong. But one thing I could see was that she supported me entirely in the ministry and that's what I liked about her. Because there had been several ministers have lost a church because of the wife's involvement. She's got too involved in the congregation's business and what not. But not so with her. And as I said that one incidence when she saw and felt that was wrong she called them together and laid them out about it. I'm doing good.

H: Well, you know, I don't think...her uncle, you said had no direct influence on her decisions to do what she did and yet, and yet, his influence was a part of her life from the very beginning and the way he thought, that was bound to have some impact on the way she thought, the way she saw things. And uh, so I would say indirectly he probably had something to do with it. But it was not a direct thing, that he said, "You listen to this and that so forth." I know it didn't work that way.

W: Yeh, because she was, she was a rebellious nature too, you know. If you told her to do it she wouldn't have done it. (laughs)

Q: You were saying how Farmville kind of grows on you.

H: Well, yeh, I think about the peace and the quiet here and I contrast it when I go to New York City and you scared the whole time you're there. The noise, the filth, the crime. Man, I was in Boston a couple of years ago. I don't know when I been so glad to get back on that train and come back to Virginia. Lynchburg look better all the time to me and Farmville look even better. I just like the cities anymore, the confusion...

W: I moved here, moved here permanently in July and I went back, back to Philadelphia and just driving around there made me so happy I was out of Philadelphia...(laughs)

H: I can certainly relate to that.

Q: Have you noticed anything today that, um, still shows the results of what happened several years ago?

H: No, but I know it's here because as I said there were a number of people who, who lost their opportunity to go to school, so we have to assume that these people are still living and how they've been affected by not being able to finish school...As I said a kid in fourth grade will be eight years...the third grade, will be eight years of age and is now thirteen going on to fourth grade is not likely to return to school so that ended his education for all intensive purposes when they closed the schools. And without a doubt, these people still suffer from result of not being properly educated. And that's unfortunate.

Q: And it could carry on through the generations?

H: Of course it could.

W: But I see blacks holding jobs now that would not have held at that time. In some of the offices that, that are downtown you'll see...in the tax office is an example. And then the, what was that other office, they keep the deeds and things like that...

H: Yeh, I know what you talking about, recording the deeds...

W: Recording...deeds, in that office, you know, so that you see now that there are blacks in positions that were not held by blacks at that time. So that has been an improvement...And like he said that uh, some whites had suffered and think that maybe in their suffering their eyes have been opened to how foolish the stance was at that time. You, know, to deprive not only the black, but to deprive whites of an education. This is ridiculous. That's the problem with our country. Is that uh...I am shocked. Up in Connecticut they have a high percentage of people that can't read or write and I was amazed at the statistic, I was driving up there, the statistic came out over the radio and I wish I had jotted it down, but I was amazed. So, that ignorance has a definite hold on this country everywhere. And um, you take the number of white families, that first generation college, you know, and uh, you take my own family. My mother and father were college graduates, I'm a college graduate, my daughter's a college graduate and this is third or, third generation of college graduates which automatically lists you above a whole mass of people who some have not even finished high school, so. You have a different outlook, and it's not that you're any better than anyone, but you have been, you have beneficiary of the legs of those who went ahead of you, you know. And you try to do all you can where you are, you know. And hopefully I think that uh that maybe I have done some goodness maybe is what I did. In other words, we're obligated to get them to pass it on to somebody else.

Q: Have you...Did Barbara ever talk about her ties here? Did she feel the same way about city versus country?

H: Well, I can speak to that in a sense that I know that she always wanted to come back, she wanted to get out of the city. She didn't ever quite realize it when I was here, I heard her speak of it many times, you know.

W: Well, the, the house down the road is her last effort. She was instrumental in having her family rebuild the house that was burned. And uh, it's...you know where that...I don't know where you know there's a road that comes down, and this house is about, is about the next house on the left-hand side going back that way. And...

H: They wouldn't know that. (laughs)

W: No, they wouldn't know, I know.

Q: We've been down so many roads...

W: Yeh, they called. You know where they were? They were in Hampden Sydney. They weren't in Darlington Heights. (laughs)

Q: We weren't too far.

W: No, you weren't too far. (laughs)

Q: We were on this road...Just not quite far...

W: Just not quite far enough. (laughs) Yes, but as I say, you know, then see, she got involved in the education of her children and what not and lot of, lot of times your life dictates you how you going to live, you know. You can't always do what you really want to do. And the...have been very fortunate in that their education was of the highest quality...School, two daughters went there and graduated with honors. My daughter who lives in Toms River, New Jersey is a nurse. She's married to a doctor and she's finished, finished not only her college work, got...has her masters in nursing and also a degree beyond that. A wound specialist. So that...and all that is Barbara's influence. I think I would have been kind of like, "It doesn't matter..." I was always so involved in the church, I just let her have a free reign, you know. And she was the one who stayed behind the girls and saw to it that they got their education. So I have to give her credit for that. That's what she passed on to them. And in fact, I told my daughter, "I hate to tell you this, but I think you are mighty blessed your mother had passed when you had your first baby because," I said, "I could just imagine that Barbara would've been in the hospital with you and once the baby was born she would tell you, 'All right Terry, go back home and rest. I'll take the baby.'" (laughs) Yeh, and so, Terry, Terry says, "Daddy, I hate to admit it to, but I think you are right." You know, and that's just what she would've done because she was, she was fussing with them, talking about, "Y'all are

married now and I don't have any grandchildren yet." And unfortunately, all her grandchildren were born, you know, after she passed.

H: It's hard to believe...It was '91 when she passed?

W: Yeh, it was '91.

H: It's hard to believe. I can see her, just so plainly, you know, I remember so well.

W: Yes, you see, after she got married, she ceased to be a civil rights threat. (laughs)

Q: Ok, we have not many more questions. Are you good? What was your relationship like with Rev. Griffith?

W: Well, I didn't really have any relationship with him. I had uh...I know that he did spend some time with Dr. Johns in Montgomery. And Henry, you know...

H: Yeh, he uh, I didn't have a relationship with him, but I had a...I knew him and we always got along well. It's casual conversation and so forth. He was a disciple to Vernon Johns. He loved the ground that Vernon Johns walked on. And uh, he, he was tremendously influenced by his contact with Johns. And I think that covered his stance on the civil rights matters here in Farmville. Now he suffered a great deal because of his involvement in Civil Rights activities here. He received threatening phone calls, his...got his car repossessed, and he was doing very, very badly at one point. Someone, I read someone had been to his home...his family was coughing, it was a very cold house and the children were sick. He had no money. He suffered a great deal because of his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. But I did not have a relationship except for casual and friendly.

Q: Were you here when he was going through all of that?

H: Oh yeh, I was here until '59 when they closed the schools. I had other responsibilities and debts and so forth. I did not teach school...

Q: Did you, obviously you said you only knew him casually, did you notice how his congregation, neighbors, reacted?

H: No, I don't think that uh, I think it would be fair to say that his, his ah, congregation was by no means unanimous in the support of his stance. With the proposition of some of the membership...

W: Blacks were intimidated.

H: Exactly, exactly. In a way, a preacher is uniquely situated in the black community to lead the Civil Rights Movement. They do not want to have to go to white people for support.

W: The trouble too, is, will the congregation provide the support? Now, if they had been as attentive as they should have been, there is no reason in the world they should've been in a cold house and shouldn't have been without funds, no way. And I, I'll be the first to acknowledge that a minister robs the church when he has to work, but yet at the same time I thank God that I worked while I held both pastorates. And I only retired when we, we added seven classrooms and upgraded the bathrooms at the church. And that's when I retired, so that I could be sure the construction was done correctly. But uh...

H: Retired from your day job, you mean

W: Yeh, from the day job, yeh. And um...

End tape 1

Rev. William Powell and his brother Henry Powell
Tape 2

Rev Powell: I had forgotten what I was saying. Oh yes, I retired from my day job. But ah, because people have, I don't know they, humanity is a strange, is a strange group. Really. [Chuckles] And especially I think, their strangeness is highlighted in the church because you have one group in the church that dislikes this group and yet all of them are going to heaven. And this I could never understand. And I tell them I say you know I must be reading the wrong Bible. [Laughs] Something is wrong because I can't understand how you can entertain uh, this taste here and this taste there and still feel as though you're going to have God's approval. I don't understand it. And uh when it comes to a missionary, and God in Heaven knows that anybody can sit down and look at TV and see the poverties in this world. All you have to do is go to ahh, I think Cancun, Mexico, ahh you see this mother living in a cave and cooking in front of the cave. It is ridiculous that poverty should live this close to the United States. And um ah yet as I said we are all going to Heaven but we are insensitive to the human problem. And that ought not never to be. You know so that ahh the minister is better better off, especially among small congregations if uh he is employed elsewhere, has has other income because they, the congregation would like to take advantage of you, you know and you will do what they want you to do. But you can stand there and say this is it, period. And uh, so that uh with Griffin uh, I think that what he experienced was a product of a people not caring enough or not uh not a supportive of his stance. And I think all of that was a result of fear. You know because they were intimidated.

HW: What do you think about hmmm... were you here when they had the meeting in the auditorium at Longwood? When the white community had the meeting at Longwood?

HP: Back in November or something of this year? Oh, oh no no. No I don't know anything about that.

Rev Powell: What was that meeting in, ah pertaining to?

HW: It was in Jarman Auditorium pertaining to the uh the closing of the schools and money appropriations and saying that they wouldn't appropriate the money for public schools and establishing a private school and I was just wondering if you knew anything about that.

HP: No I didn't. No I was not involved in that. Although I probably do but at the time but it's just been so long that...

HW: There's also been mention of intimidation factors with the higher ups in the white community with everybody else intimidating... used intimidation a lot

RP: Yes because see this was before loans and uh um support. In other words, you're a heretic if you were going along with what was being done and uh in fact the meeting they had not too long ago uh they say the daughter of the uh editor of uh the Farmville Herald

stood up and uh apologized for her father and his stance and said the poor thing cried like something terrible, you know. So that uh you know change is a slow process with a number of people. And sometimes for uh change to be rapid uh people have to undergo a traumatic experience say with illness or with an accident or something and then all of a sudden they'll see a different side. But um, uh well it shows that uh but I think that the attitude in the community has changed, somewhat. Because they're human it needs to change more [chuckles] but how far will our humanity allow us to you know change? And there's always that fear that uh we will withhold certain goods and certain jobs and whatnot from you if you have this kind of attitude you know. But I, I guess maybe Wal-Mart has something to do with it but uh in other places like country store downtown I, I find the treatment and acceptance you know uh okay. You know and uh so I know that their attitudes uh you know have changed somewhat.

HW: What do you think of Moton High School apparently they are going to put some tar paper shacks outside.

RP: They are?

HW: That's the word. How do you think the community is going to react to that?

HP: Can you repeat what did you say?

HW: Yeah. At the, the Moton High School, they're going to put a tar paper shack up

HP: I hadn't heard that before. I would like to see the place uh become a living reality it would be a great [landmark] in this area for tourists and so forth and so on. I think there is a good bit of friction and misunderstanding and so forth. It appears that we are too bent on vying for control down there.

RP: They're going to kill it before it gets off the ground. That's what happens you know and I want to be the big shot and you know that kind of thing and I'm not going to allow you to be. I don't know whether I think that in that building that they have there they can um I wonder if they have any pictures of the tar paper shacks you know I'm thinking from the standpoint that uh people might feel those shacks are put up uh you're rubbing it in. I don't know, I I don't know how the community say would take that. And I think with that building as it is that you can certainly have uh pictures and what not in there if it is going to be a museum of what it was

Dog and Cat Interlude

RP: No that's my opinion about the shacks. Use what is there and in a meaningful way and I think that would be enough.

HP: Well they have their work cut out for them. I don't remember what the cost of the building is but it was.

RP: Did they say \$200,000 I believe they had raised a thousand, I mean a hundred thousand.

HW: I think they're close

DW: I saw the little goal thing and it was almost

HP: Are they close to it? Well that's wonderful but you know they to need to spend that much to make it useful terrible shape it's in

HW: Our class is going there

DW: Why do you think the community is so opposed to outsiders knowing about what happened here? I know I didn't know anything about the schools being closed until I came to college and I know many people are not aware of what happened here in Prince Edward County. Why do you think that...

RP: They are embarrassed. And uh you see this is the only the only county that that occurred in. the schools were closed rather than to integrate and uh I think the majority opinion is that they are embarrassed and and the least that's know about it the better they feel. I think that's the... don't you feel that's

HP: Yeah you've got a good point a good strong point there. Yeah I don't think anyone now is proud of what happened.

RP: No and I you know I'm not only speaking from the standpoint of the blacks that were affected. I'm speaking form the standpoint of the white because being a gather and a parent and uh to lose you know to be be forced into losing my property and not being able to provide for my family and perhaps having to rely on welfare. This has to do something even to the white person you know. So that uh our sympathies are with both and

HW: Some of the people who have come and spoken to our class have mentioned that they are tired. They are ^{tired} of telling their story

RP: Yeah, I can see that

HW: They want to forget

RP: Yeah they want to put it you know anything that hurts us we want to put it in the background. Push it you know in the back of our minds. Bad experiences and what not. We don't like to think about them and uh anything that hurts us, you know we try to get rid of them and uh in other words [chuckles] I may be a jackass but you don't have to keep reminding me of it [laughs]

HP: Are you you're saying that other people who have come to speak to your classes have said that they're tired of it? Is that what I understood you say?

HW: Yeah. They're tired of telling their story over and over.

HP: Oh yeah. Well they have to expect it. That's just if they uh What happened in Prince Edward County was so unique and so different uh that even though they may get tired of telling it, it has to be told and they have to continue doing it.

RP: Well it's the same way you take with the Holocaust. Uh ah people are denying that any such tragedy like that occurred when they have every kind of example that it did. And uh they don't want to be reminded of man's inhumanity to man. And uh that was so horrible no I'm with the Jews. Don't let anybody forget it. So that it uh may act as a preventative because that same kind of thing can happen right here in this country. And uh um so that you know even though they are tired of it uh people need to know. And we don't like to look at our ugly side you know and uh you ate us what's so wrong with our uh justice system [is it] here you have an individual that is accused of 45 murders a mass murderer. And we spend 9 years studying him. Maybe his grandmother treated him badly or maybe his uncle treated him something must have done this; this is just an evil character! Because I have seen kids that were uncontrollable have been kicked out of the Catholic school and put in the public school because of their behavior an nobody can control them. Now these are just children 7 to 8 and 9 years old. And I have seen this so that there are individuals who are just born bad and will do anything you know and we don't like to ah acknowledge that this is a possibility. That man in a number of instances is lower than the animal. And uh we don't want to look at that. We want to believe that we are going to evolve into a Holy Nation one of these days and such an idea is so ridiculous that it's not even funny just like this watch has a thousand parts in it and there is no way in the world this watch just came together by itself and there is no way in the world this world and the theory of evolution is simply uh to free us from having to stand before a righteous God. That's all. That's the only, only reason why people are holding on to it. They have no more proof for it and uh anybody that tries to live halfway right can verify the existence of God because of the things that have happened in his life. And uh um but as I say we don't want to you see we want to get rid of that control and we don't want to acknowledge that we are as bad as we are. But you take girls sent to school by their parents and that it wasn't Gracey. I forget this guy's name that murdered 3 or 4 girls in uh Florida. In Florida um they had these uh life on the TV the other day. Um but we don't want to. We have to study them to find because he is so different. Is he really? You know? Fortunately, we have gotten to a state where we can control our emotions somewhat you know. But this individual ah doesn't care about anything or anybody and so he is able to do what he does but that is a very, a great motivating factor is the fact that we don't want to look at what we really are and what we have done. Wee and it's and it's foolish because we all make mistakes. You know and uh what they need to do they need to separate a deliberate mistake from a you know just a mistake that I didn't mean. But this, this was a deliberate mistake an so uh if it if it hurts them to repeat, so what? Repeat it. That's my attitude. Alright, how many more questions do you have?

DW: Do you have any additional comments?

HW: I mean, that was, that was pretty good what you said. I don't know if you wanted to add anything else.

RP: What are you all attempting to get with this?

DW: Pretty much to get your history and your viewpoint so that other people can know what happened in Prince Edward County and yeah so they can learn from it. And I think our purpose was to see if you had any insight into Barbara's perspective on the whole thing and how she felt about some of the things.

HW: And Vernon Johns.

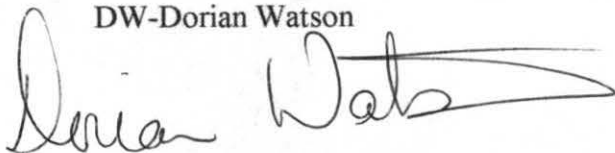
RP: Yeah well the main thing was the fact that she uh felt as though that was wrong. But as I say once it was over with, as far as she was concerned, uh her took on a different aspect you know. Getting married and what not uh and that opened up a whole new can of worms for her so that uh she wasn't uh you know involved in uh. They have tried to say that her uncle you know uh aside from the fact that he cast a shadow over here when uh they were growing up. He was not a direct influence on what she did you know as far as the school was concerned. And um her she was happy after it all you know happened um the way that it did. Because it meant that somebody else would experience a better time. And have a uh a better chance at learning than they had you know... so uh it's a tragedy. It really is a tragedy. You know uh that's the reason why I don't, I don't go in for hostage takers you know like these people get on an aeroplane and they have a gripe against uh say the FBI because we are holding uh somebody of theirs in prison so we are going to jeopardize the lives of thousands of innocent people because uh of uh their gripe, which is which is wrong

Dog interlude

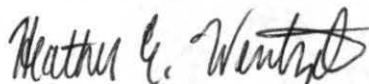
DW: We appreciate your time Reverend Powell

RP: I hope we have been some help

Key: RP-Reverend Powell
HP-Henry Powell
HW-Heather Wentzel
DW-Dorian Watson



May 4, 2000



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