

Interview with Beatrice Elizabeth Coleman '25

Narrator: Beatrice Elizabeth Coleman

Interviewer: Jane Lancaster

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Jane Lancaster: ...2006. This is Jane Lancaster and I'm interviewing Beatrice Coleman, Pembroke class of 1925, at the Tockwotton Home in Providence, Rhode Island. And today's date is May the 24th, 2006. My name is Jane Lancaster, and I work at Brown.

Beatrice Elizabeth Coleman: What?

Lancaster: I said, my name is Jane Lancaster,

Coleman: Oh, Lancaster.

Lancaster: And I work at Brown.

Coleman: Yes.

Lancaster: And, do you know Roxanne Johnson?

Coleman: Who?

Lancaster: Roxanne Johnson Nance? No?

Coleman: I don't think so. Is she a colored lady?

Lancaster: Yes.

Coleman: Roxanne Johnson?

Lancaster: Yup.

Coleman: Hmm.

Lancaster: Never mind. I've come to talk to you about your time at Pembroke.

Coleman: My goodness that was a long time ago.

Lancaster: It was, wasn't it?

Coleman: Yes. Well what do you want to know about it?

Lancaster: Well, I've got a form here. So I'll just ask you some of these questions. Do you remember what you studied at Pembroke? What was your major?

Coleman: Oh I think Latin, I'm not sure. It was a long time ago.

Lancaster: It was a long time ago. You were the class of...?

Coleman: What?

Lancaster: You graduated in?

Coleman: Graduated?

Lancaster: What year did you graduate?

Coleman: From Brown?

Lancaster: Yes.

Coleman: '25.

Lancaster: 1925. When were you born?

Coleman: Oh, in 1904.

Lancaster: 1904? That's a while ago.

Coleman: I know.

Lancaster: What's your actual birthday?

Coleman: April the 20th.

Lancaster: Oh. Where were you born?

Coleman: Oh I guess in Providence.

Lancaster: Do you belong to a church?

Coleman: To a church?

Lancaster: Yeah.

Coleman: Well I used to go to the Cathedral of St. John. It was many years ago, I went to the old St. Stephen's Church. That was a long, long time ago. That was way, way back when I was...

Lancaster: Ok, were you ever married?

Coleman: Oh my god, no.

Lancaster: Why not?

Coleman: No, I like to have my way do what I want and do it when I want to do it. I guess I was spoiled. [3:00]

Lancaster: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Coleman: Not that I know of.

Lancaster: So you were an only child?

Coleman: I think so, yeah.

Lancaster: What was your mother's name?

Coleman: Elizabeth Coleman. 'Cause my grandparents brought me up and I took the name Coleman.

Lancaster: Okay, why did your grandparents bring you up?

Coleman: Oh gosh, I don't know. Because they just wanted to, I guess.

Lancaster: Your mother was still alive?

Coleman: Oh yes. But she worked every day.

Lancaster: What did she do?

Coleman: Oh, uh, she was an errand girl for a -- she worked for a dressmaker.

Lancaster: In Providence?

Coleman: In Providence, yeah. Abby Child.

Lancaster: What did she do for them?

Coleman: Shopping. She did all the shopping for them.

Lancaster: And your father?

Coleman: Oh I never knew too much about him. [4:00]

Lancaster: Have you always lived in Providence?

Coleman: Except when I went to work, 'cause they didn't have any colored teachers here so I went away from September until June.

Lancaster: Where did you go?

Coleman: Elizabeth City, North Carolina. And Saint Mary's School for Girls in Germantown, Pennsylvania. It's run by two colored nuns.

Lancaster: These were schools for colored children?

Coleman: Well, St. Mary's School for Girls was, Elizabeth City in North Carolina had to be for colored, in the south.

Lancaster: Right, what did you teach?

Coleman: Well, I taught Latin and English. 'Cause, you see, one time the colleges required Latin, but I taught some, a little English I guess.

Lancaster: Right. How long were you down there?

Coleman: Where?

Lancaster: Well, in the south.

Coleman: Well, in Elizabeth City about a year, because they saw the change there. They went from a normal school to a college. They affiliated with the

North Carolina College. So I was only there for about a year, maybe a year and a half.

Lancaster: So were you teaching at a normal school, not a high school?

Coleman: Oh no, in the school, in the normal school. Oh yes.

Lancaster: And the second one, the other school you taught at, the church school?

Coleman: What do you mean?

Lancaster: St. Mary's?

Coleman: St. Mary's School that was run by two colored nuns. I think they were independent. I'm not sure. As far as I know they were independent.

Lancaster: How long did you stay there?

Coleman: Oh, a few years.

Lancaster: And then you came back to Providence?

Coleman: Yes.

Lancaster: And you taught...? [inaudible for 30 seconds]

Coleman: I can't remember.

Lancaster: Okay. But you did teach in Providence for a long time?

Coleman: Well, I retired from Providence. But of course at one time they didn't have colored teachers here, but then the four lawyers got together and they found out all the money that the colored people paid in taxation, property, and if they didn't put a colored teacher here, let them go to the normal school, they were gonna take them to the supreme court. And lawyer Heathman meant what he said.

Lancaster: That was lawyer Heathman?

Coleman: Heathman. He didn't take any foolishness off white people. I knew that much about him. He was very friendly with an uncle of mine.

Lancaster: So, roughly when was this? When did you start working in the Providence schools?

Coleman: Oh gosh, I don't know.

Lancaster: So it would be in the 1930s?

Coleman: Sometime in the 30's.

Lancaster: And did you teach at classical?

Coleman: Classical? Not at Classical High.

Lancaster: Where did you teach?

Coleman: When?

Lancaster: Where?

Coleman: I guess it was at the old Hope Street High School, the old Hope, not the new Hope. Oh gosh, where did I...? Montague...

Lancaster: Where was that?

Coleman: Well it's a housing project now, but it was at the corner of Montague and Hope. Cause I went there for Primary school. And I guess I finished at the old Hope Street High School, which that's now a housing project.

Lancaster: So, why did you go to Pembroke?

Coleman: To the women's college, yes.

Lancaster: Where there any other colored girls there?

Coleman: Oh yes, there was another colored girl there from Providence, there was a colored girl from Washington, Thelma Garlin [?] came from Boston, Charlotte West came from Washington, and uh, oh Frances Wearing [?] came from Baltimore but she passed away while we were in school. There weren't too many of us there but there were colored, a few colored girls.

Lancaster: How was it, was it difficult being a colored girl there?

Coleman: Oh no, because, see, I was brought up in a white neighborhood, in a Jewish neighborhood. And I was used to white people.

Lancaster: And the other girls?

Coleman: Well, Marguerite, she came from the West Elmwood section, and colored people lived all over Providence then as far as I know. Cause there weren't too many of them there, and we had a few colored doctors. Colored lawyers. Undertakers. And of course ministers in the colored churches. But there were no colored teachers here because there was a group of colored people, they... I think it was lawyer Heathman and lawyer Stark, they were, but all that money that the colored people paid in taxation, and they didn't put a colored girl in the normal school -- they didn't let them go to the normal school. They were going to take them to the Supreme Court in Washington. And lawyer Heathman meant what he said. He didn't take any foolishness off white folks.

Lancaster: So Brown was different from the normal school?

Coleman: Oh Brown was a college, of course! A liberal arts college. Normal School? [spits] We consider that second rate of course. Brown was a Univer-si-tay.

Lancaster: Right.

Coleman: I wanted to go to Howard but my folks couldn't afford to send me way down there to Washington. Well see Dr. Gilbert went to Howard, Dr. Gross went to Howard, and Dr. Jackson went to Howard, Lawyer Stockard went to Howard, all our professional men went to Howard, and I wanted to go, my mother says: "You're crazy."

Lancaster: Was there a women's college at Howard?

Coleman: Oh, I don't know if there's a women's college but let's see, who went there? Oh, I don't know. What's a colored woman that went to Howard? I can't think of her name now, you've got me all confused.

Lancaster: I'm sorry. So, you went to Brown, did you live in the dormitory?

Coleman: Oh no, I lived home. I only, I lived on Olney Street, and I could walk up to Pembroke Hall in about 10 or 15 minutes, maybe the John Hay Library in 20, because I had to cross Waterman St. and Angell St. But, no they weren't prejudiced as far as I know they weren't prejudiced. They couldn't be because they were in the north, and lawyer Heathman you know they found out about colored people owned so much property here. Of course Brown was always a private college, you know. It wasn't a public college. Like that Rhode Island... normal school, it wasn't like that. It was superior to the normal school.

Lancaster: Did they let colored teachers work in the private schools?

Coleman: Oh here? Oh gosh I don't know. Because I went to Elizabeth City North Carolina, from there to St. Mary's School for Girls in Germantown, then the Bradley Hospital School Department.

Lancaster: Oh you worked up at Bradley?

Coleman: The Bradley Hosp-- in the school department.

Lancaster: Yeah, so these were children who were not well?

Coleman: Yeah, well they were, a little mental problem but they weren't dangerous or anything. What do they call -- schizophrenics.

Lancaster: That must've been difficult sometimes.

Coleman: Well a little, course they liked to have their own way, do what they wanted to do when they wanted to do it, you know.

Lancaster: Right. So when you were at Pembroke, do you remember any of the professors, or the Deans at Pembroke?

Coleman: Oh gosh, I don't know. That was a long, long time ago.

Lancaster: So did you join in any of the clubs?

Coleman: Not there, I belonged to a sorority, a colored sorority, but I didn't belong to any of the clubs. In fact, I guess they didn't want, wouldn't take us you know. And because, even the northern white people they were almost as prejudiced as the south.

Lancaster: I think so. So, you belonged to the sorority then?

Coleman: I'm trying to think... maybe. 'Cause they wouldn't take you unless you were a junior. To be sure that you stayed in college. 'Cause some would go and then leave college so they could get in the sorority, then they made a ruling that you had to be in the college, you know. No, but I was made in Providence.

Lancaster: What's the name of the sorority?

Coleman: Alpha Kappa Alpha.

Lancaster: Alpha Kappa Alpha.

Coleman: In fact it was started by one of the first colored women to graduate from Brown, but she couldn't start it because she was a teacher, you know, but

she put the idea in some of the student's head. Her name was Ethel Robinson. She was one of -- I think she was the first colored girl to graduate from Brown.

Lancaster: Did you know her?

Coleman: Oh yes, I met Ethel Robinson. Oh yes, she was very nice. I guess I met her one summer, or somewhere.

Lancaster: I'll look her up, see when she graduated.

Coleman: When she did? Oh she graduated way back in 1909, somewhere back there. She was the first colored girl to graduate from Brown. And that was, I think around 1909. [15:00] 'Cause my aunt knew her mother. Mother said her mother was very airy. She was surprised that Ethel and I were so friendly. 'Cause she said her mother was so airy.

Lancaster: Now what does she mean by airy?

Coleman: Well, some colored people, they, they're fussy about whom they associate with.

Lancaster: I see. Did you do physical education? Did you do the gym?

Coleman: Oh, we had to. It was necessary.

Lancaster: What did you do?

Coleman: Oh, we did the really regular exercise. I played a little basketball. I liked that. And I was, I think I was on a class basketball team.

Lancaster: Even though you were very little. You're small.

Coleman: Well, most of the girls were small, you know. They weren't sad or anything like that. They weren't too tall. Let's see, Marguerite was a center, she was tall. Let's see, I think Thelma was what they call a girl on the side, a god [?]. Because we had class teams you know. Then there was an intercollegiate team. It was so long ago I forget. Getting old and dotey.

Lancaster: Do you remember how it was, well Pembroke Hall, in Pembroke Hall did you use the library up on the top floor?

Coleman: Oh yes, we could use the library if we want. We could even use the John Hay Library. They didn't object to us using either library. What we couldn't get at the Women's College library we got over at the John Hay. They weren't prejudiced at all.

Lancaster: So you could see, when you went to the John Hay, you could meet the young men of Brown?

Coleman: Oh no, we weren't there -- it wasn't a social thing. You went there to study. And sometimes when we went there - well, there weren't all those colored students at Brown anyway. But we didn't go there for social purposes. You went there to study, and you had to study. Even the white people had to study. They didn't go there for sociability.

Lancaster: Were there some young men of color there at that time?

Coleman: At Brown? Oh yes. There was Joe Coddle that played on the football team. Let's see, oh gosh... Larry, I can't think of Larry's last name. Yes cause there was a colored fellow from Baltimore, one from Washington, and one from Atlantic City -- not Atlantic City, but another city in New Jersey's kind of famous.

Lancaster: Newark?

Coleman: No, no. Another. Another colored fellow went, he married a Providence girl. Pollard, Fritz Pollard went there. Went to Brown.

Lancaster: Oh yeah, he was famous wasn't he? He became famous?

Coleman: Huh?

Lancaster: Wasn't he very famous?

Coleman: Yeah, well that said. He went to Brown. I think the girl he married was a Providence woman, 'cause my mother knew her very well. I had a channel, sometimes at Commencement, coming back, I would meet them and sometimes I wouldn't.

Lancaster: Are you planning to go to Commencement this year?

Coleman: Not necessarily, no. Lucky to be alive.

Lancaster: Are you the oldest graduate, do you think?

Coleman: I don't know. I couldn't say.

Lancaster: Probably nearly?

Coleman: I imagine. I don't know. There may be somebody else living.

Lancaster: Yeah. So did you keep in touch with your class at Brown?

Coleman: Oh, not necessarily. Maybe one or two. Maybe Marguerite.

Lancaster: Who was Marguerite, what was her second name?

Coleman: Marguerite Lingham. She was in my class. She was the other colored girl in that class, and Violet Warfield. There were three in our class, and I think there were three in the '24 class. And there weren't ever too many, but there was always a few colored girls at Brown.

Lancaster: Did they live in the dormitory, any of these girls?

Coleman: Oh, of course not. They stayed with private families.

Lancaster: 'Cause they wouldn't let them stay in the dorms?

Coleman: I don't think at the time, they wouldn't let them stay in the dormitories. There weren't too many but I don't know. They didn't... I think we were the last class to graduate under President Faunce. I think so.

Lancaster: Could be, could be.

Coleman: Hmm?

Lancaster: You might be right. I could look it up. So, there was some prejudice then?

Coleman: Oh yes, there was quite a lot of prejudice. Even a lot of the white people, they were brought up here in the North, they were still very prejudiced. They weren't too keen about inter-marriage. Oh, the colored people weren't too keen about it either.

Lancaster: So, you graduated from Hope High?

Coleman: Hope Street High School, yeah. The old Hope. It's a housing project now. The old Hope, the old Doyle Lambda grammar school, and I don't think it's there now, it used to be a rooming house, I don't think it's there any more. 'Cause I was up that way and I didn't see it. The old Doyle school, and of course the Women's College. Pembroke Hall is still there though isn't it?

Lancaster: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. [Coleman laughs] [21:00] So from your class at the old Hope High, how many people went to Brown from your class?

Coleman: From my class?

Lancaster: From Hope High.

Coleman: Oh gosh, I don't remember.

Lancaster: A lot, a few? Five?

Coleman: Oh I -- oh no, it was more than five. There were a few. I don't know, remember too many.

Lancaster: Right, but not many colored girls?

Coleman: Oh no cause I think... not that many colored girls, no. I was the only colored girl, yes. Cause when I was at Brown there weren't too many colored girls there then anyway. There were no more than oh, five or six maybe more.

Lancaster: To get back to what you studied, you studied Latin.

Coleman: I took Latin, and a little English. Some English.

Lancaster: And you were taught by male professors?

Coleman: Oh yes.

Lancaster: Not by women.

Coleman: No I didn't have any woman... there may have been, but I didn't have any. I had all male professors.

Lancaster: But they came over to Pembroke Hall?

Coleman: Oh, most of them there, they came to Pembroke. Once in a while we'd take a course on the hill. Maybe a science course where we had to do experiments and all... the laboratories were on the hill so we had to go over there.

Lancaster: But were those single sex classes, just the women?

Coleman: What?

Lancaster: Did you have any classes with men?

Coleman: Oh no, no, all women. There may have -- I doubt it, unless they were people studying for their masters degrees, I don't know.

Lancaster: Okay.

Coleman: I doubt it.

Lancaster: What do you think you got from your education at Brown?

Coleman: Huh?

Lancaster: What did you get from your education at Brown?

Coleman: What do you mean, I had a chance to learn a living. That was the most important thing, I didn't want to cook, wash, shine and wait on white folks.

Lancaster: Quite right. That was the alternative?

Coleman: Yeah, you had cook, wash, wait, uh, wash. Cook, wash, wait on white folks.

Lancaster: So most of the girls you grew up with, most of the colored girls you grew up with ended up working for white folks?

Coleman: Well some of them did. I think, um, I didn't go out because at that time we weren't allowed to run all over the city like they do now to associate with people. Once in a while, you'd probably go with your parents to somebody's house, but we weren't allowed to go all over at that time. There weren't too many people that owned automobiles then.

Lancaster: Right. Did your family have a car?

Coleman: We did. We had a Ford I think it was.

Lancaster: You said you lived with your grandparents?

Coleman: Yeah.

Lancaster: What did they do for a living?

Coleman: Well my grandfather was a watchman, my grandmother had been a practical nurse and a midwife. She died when she was 88, and my grandfather when he died at 95. These are my maternal grandparents, I never knew my paternal grandparents, these are my maternals. And I had a cousin, my mother's first cousin lived to be 100 years old. Cousin Lucy, oh she has a daughter now, May lives at Laurelmead, and May is 95.

Lancaster: May who?

Coleman: May Walter, she's at...

Lancaster: Laurelmead. There's another elderly woman of color at Laurelmead, what's her name? Her husband was an artist.

Coleman: Was a what?

Lancaster: An artist. Painted, an artist.

Coleman: Oh gosh, I don't know.

Lancaster: Uh, what's she called? I've forgotten. So...

Coleman: Wouldn't be Howard?

Lancaster: No.

Coleman: Mary Howard?

Lancaster: Mary something.

Coleman: I can't remember now.

Lancaster: I'm a bit younger than you and I can't remember either [both laugh].

Coleman: Were you born in Providence?

Lancaster: No, I was born in England.

Coleman: No, but there was a colored artist. I'm trying to think what his name was...

Lancaster: It'll come.

Coleman: It may come to me later, I'm old and dotey.

Lancaster: So how long have you lived here?

Coleman: Hmm, not too long. [26:00] Well, maybe a year, I don't know. They'll tell you I'm old and dotey, they can tell you better than I.

Lancaster: because, about 10 years ago I came to talk to you,

Coleman: Where was I?

Lancaster: In that high-rise building.

Coleman: Not here.

Lancaster: No, not here. Near the Beneficent Church.

Coleman: Near where?

Lancaster: Beneficent Church. You know there's that tall,

Coleman: Oh, it's up on um, oh gosh, um... Well it wouldn't be, um, oh gosh.

Lancaster: Anyway I think I was talking to you that time about Elizabeth Prophet.

Coleman: Elizabeth Prophet? Was she the first colored girl to graduate from Brown?

Lancaster: RISD.

Coleman: Hmm?

Lancaster: RISD. She went to RISD.

Coleman: Oh.

Lancaster: She was a sculptor.

Coleman: Well, who was the first colored girl to graduate from Brown?

Lancaster: Maybe somebody Robinson?

Coleman: Oh, Ethel Robinson. I get it now. Yeah, because my -- I had an aunt who knew her mother I guess it was.

Lancaster: Okay. So, what else? I think I may have asked you enough questions.

Coleman: Oh no, that was alright.

Lancaster: Okay.

Coleman: I know 'cause there were four colored doctors when I was around.

Lancaster: Who were they?

Coleman: There was Dr. Gross, Dr. Higgins, and Dr. Gilbert who was our doctor. Dr. Gross lived down Olney Street. Oh, Dr. Robinson.

Lancaster: And there were black lawyers as well?

Coleman: Lawyer Heathman.

Lancaster: What was his first name?

Coleman: William. William H. Heathman, cause he and one of my uncles were very friendly. And...

Lancaster: What was the name of your uncle?

Coleman: Oh gosh, my uncle Andy I guess, Andy Jackson.

Lancaster: Andy Jackson.

Coleman: Andrew Jackson, yeah.

Lancaster: And Heath... lawyer Heathcote --

Coleman: Heathman.

Lancaster: Heathman, sorry. Was involved in the Urban League?

Coleman: Gosh I wouldn't know, I couldn't say that.

Lancaster: Or the NAACP?

Coleman: More in the NAACP than the Urban League, 'cause he was always for colored rights and for colored people having rights. He and my grandfather were friendly because they were both high masons.

Lancaster: Ah. Which masonic order were they?

Coleman: Huh? The colored mason! They never, they weren't going to have them in the white.

Lancaster: The Prince Hall Masons?

Coleman: Prince Hall, yeah. Prince Hall Grand Lodge.

Lancaster: Okay. Is there a female equivalent of those masons?

Coleman: I... I think so... I think so, because you see they never had colored teachers here and after I finished Brown I went away and, um, and in the summer, I didn't have any time. I usually went and lived, or I went with my sorority, we had an annual meeting of something or other. I'd usually go to that.

Lancaster: Did you work in the summer, when you were home? No?

Coleman: No, not necessarily.

Lancaster: Did you work while you were at Brown?

Coleman: Well, I'd maybe do some babysitting.

Lancaster: But nothing... ?

Coleman: Nothing else, oh no, I -- some babysitting.

Lancaster: Did the other colored girls work to help pay for their fees?

Coleman: Well, 'cause my, maybe Marguerite did. But Violet Warfield's father was a doctor. He was head of the Freedmen Hospital in Washington.

Lancaster: And the other girl you mentioned? [30:00]

Coleman: Marguerite Lingham?

Lancaster: Yeah.

Coleman: I don't know what. Well, she maybe did a little, oh, take care of children like I did. Stay with them at night while their parents worked.

Lancaster: And you said that the colored girls lived in private houses, not in the dormitories, right?

Coleman: Oh no they didn't stay in the dormitories, they lived in private homes.

Lancaster: And these were homes of colored people?

Coleman: Of course, yeah. Yeah because Thelma lived at, oh... one of them lived with, at uh Lawyer Heathman's home.

Lancaster: Where did he live?

Coleman: He lived um, was it Howell Street? Either Howell or Lippitt, one of those streets. And Dr. Higgins, they lived on the west side. It wasn't, hmm, it wasn't part of Randall, but over on that other side of town.

Lancaster: The Lippitt Hill area was a black community, was it not?

Coleman: Oh quite a few colored people lived in that area, There was Lippitt Street, and Carrington Avenue. Lippitt, Carrington Ave, well, not too many colored people lived on Doyle Avenue, but there were a few on Lippitt Street, Carrington Avenue, 'cause the next was Olney Street. Then of course, there was the reservoir there then.

Lancaster: Yeah. Where Hope High's grounds are now?

Coleman: Yeah, that was the reservoir.

Lancaster: And Hope High was the other side of Hope St?

Coleman: The other end of Hope Street. The old Hope, it's a housing project now.

Lancaster: So, Camp Street, did the colored people live over on Camp St?

Coleman: On what street?

Lancaster: Camp. C-A-M-P, Camp.

Coleman: Caplin St.?

Lancaster: Camp. Camp.

Coleman: Cabot! Oh, C-A-B-O-T?

Lancaster: No, I'll write it down. [Sounds of writing]

Coleman: On Camp Street?

Lancaster: Yeah.

Coleman: Oh, um, there was the True Reformers Hall there, and Lucy Simms lived on Camp Street. And Adeline Brennan's folks lived on Camp St. And, um, I don't think there were too many other colored people that lived up above Doyle Avenue.

Lancaster: But you lived on Olney Street?

Coleman: On Olney Street, in the plaza just below the reservoir, in the block between Prospect and Brown.

Lancaster: Okay.

Coleman: As a colored – well, we lived there for many years but there were people who bought the house and we had to move.

Lancaster: So you were roughly opposite that church?

Coleman: Olney Street Church, yeah. The big church was down almost facing Pratt Street, but now it's moved up over to the corner. Well, it was a big church then but now it's a smaller church, but I guess it has as many people.

Lancaster: Right. Did you used to go to that church?

Coleman: Well I'd go there to Sunday school in the summertime, 'cause I was brought up at St. Stephen's and they didn't have any summer school. And of course the people aren't like they are now. If I didn't go to church on Sunday school I couldn't go anywhere else on Sunday, so I usually went down to the Olney Street church. The old Olney, which was on Olney St.

Lancaster: How about in St. Stephen's, was there prejudice against black people there?

Coleman: Oh gosh, I was a little girl then. I wouldn't know.

Lancaster: 'Cause it was a very posh church, wasn't it?

Coleman: Oh yes, very well-to-do. It was the only Episcopal Church at the time. Once there was a little Episcopal mission, and then that went into the -- St. John's, that was a father Moore-Brown, we knew the Moore-Brown's very well, Enid and I were quite friendly.

Lancaster: And they were black, or white?

Coleman: Oh no, the Moore-Brown's? Oh no, they were colored people.

Lancaster: Okay, and they were ministers, he was a minister in the Episcopal Church?

Coleman: Well at that time there was a colored Episcopal Church. I think there was a little mission over on Broad Street. And then they went into the church on

Benefit Street. That old, old church, I think it's a cemetery, Transit Street, down that way.

Lancaster: Right, I know. You said [35:00] worked for a dressmaker?

Coleman: A dressmaker. Abby Child.

Lancaster: And what sort of dressmaker was Abby Child? What did Abby Child make?

Coleman: Oh gosh, I don't know, because at that time they didn't have so much ready-to-wear as they have now, and people had to have...

Lancaster: Was Abby Child white or black?

Coleman: Oh, Abby Child was white.

Lancaster: And she was making clothes for, rich people?

Coleman: Oh well-to-do people, oh yes.

Lancaster: So your mother was a kind of...?

Coleman: Oh she was the errand girl, not a dressmaker, but she did all the errands and shopping for her. They even sent her to New York to get things that you couldn't get here in Providence.

Lancaster: Oh. Did she go down on the boat, or the train? How did she get to New York, do you know? The boat, or the train?

Coleman: Oh no, she went by train. My goodness.

Lancaster: 'Cause people did go on the boat.

Coleman: Oh no, they didn't go too much. She would go by train 'cause she would have to go to shop and come back again, you know, when Miss Child herself couldn't go.

Lancaster: Right. So she went on working after you born? Your mother was working after you were born?

Coleman: I guess so.

Lancaster: And so that's when your grandparents took over?

Coleman: Yeah.

Lancaster: Were they very strict?

Coleman: What do you mean strange?

Lancaster: Strict?

Coleman: Oh, kind of. I don't know. You know how grandparents are.

Lancaster: They're older.

Coleman: Well that's no... I wasn't allowed in everybody's home. No, no. There's only one or two homes I could go into, and one home was around the corner, they had a little girl and I could go there to play, and I could go on Olney Street, I could go into Miss, well Miss Ginsburg was quality, and I could go in Miss Ginsburg's house cause she was quality.

Lancaster: Was she Jewish?

Coleman: Oh no. Oh yes, she was Jewish, but my grandmother considered her quality. She didn't like poor white folks. [both laugh]. Although she came from Virginia, she did not like poor white folks.

Lancaster: So your grandparents came up from Virginia after the Civil War?

Coleman: I don't know when they came. My maternal grandmother came from Virginia, but my maternal grandfather came from North Carolina. I never knew my other grandparents. But grandpa came from North Carolina. Where, I don't know. When we were little we didn't ask big children, you know, we weren't allowed to ask the questions that the kids ask today you know.

Lancaster: Did you know Sissieretta Jones? [38:00]

Coleman: Oh, Black Patti. Yeah we call her, yeah, well she went to my grandfather's church, the Congdon Street church, oh yeah.

Lancaster: Did you ever go to her house?

Coleman: I don't think so. No, no. But I know of her, she went to Congdon Street church. That was my grandfather's church. In fact, my uncle went there, too.

Lancaster: So they were Baptist? It's a Baptist church?

Coleman: Oh Baptist, yes indeed.

Lancaster: But you were Episcopalian?

Coleman: Yes, I don't know how my mother strayed off, but I don't know, I was christened and confirmed in the, uh, well the old St. Stephen's. It's there now isn't it?

Lancaster: Uh-huh. Yup. That's interesting.

Coleman: What was the name of that colored church, on it, was it Benefit and Transit?

Lancaster: Don't know.

Coleman: It was an old, old church. I don't think it, I don't know whether it's there or not, I haven't been in that neighborhood in a long time.

Lancaster: It's a theater now.

Coleman: Theater, yeah, that's what I thought.

Lancaster: I don't know the name of it as a church.

Coleman: No but I remember going there to church, I think that's where Father Moore-Brown was for a while, yeah.

Lancaster: So you got this, a number of professional people, in the black community?

Coleman: There were what?

Lancaster: Some professional people?

Coleman: There was lawyer Heathman, and lawyer Account [?] and lawyer Stark, and then there was Dr. Gilbert, and Dr. Robinson, and Dr. Higgins, and Dr. Gross, and let's see... lawyer Account [?], Lawyer Heathman... oh there were a couple of undertakers.

Lancaster: Bell. One of them was called Bell?

Coleman: Undertaker Bell. But no I think there was one before Bell. I can't think of his name.

Lancaster: And there were black women, worked as nurses?

Coleman: Gosh, I don't know. They must've worked in private homes. But I wouldn't know cause I'd be a little girl, and when we were little we weren't allowed to meddle in old folks business.

Lancaster: Quite right. So when you were little, before you went to college, did you sometimes work as a babysitter or a waitress or anything like that?

Coleman: No, no, no.

Lancaster: You were busy at school?

Coleman: Oh yes, I never did any work or anything like that.

Lancaster: Why do you think you managed to live so long?

Coleman: All depends on the man, in the hands of the man above, I've nothing to do about that. As I said, um, cousin Lucy lived to be a hundred years old. And uh, oh grandma Coleman was 88 and I think grandpa Coleman was 95 when he passed.

Lancaster: Wow.

Coleman: Cousin Lucy was a hundred-and-something. Her daughter's living now, May, at um,

Lancaster: At Laurelmead?

Coleman: Where is it, the place on the Boulevard.

Lancaster: Laurelmead.

Coleman: Laurelmead, yeah.

Lancaster: Good. So. When you -- I have one more question, I think. When you were working, or even after you retired, were you involved in any organizations?

Coleman: What do you mean?

Lancaster: Clubs, activities, boards...?

Coleman: Well the only club was I belong to my sorority.

Lancaster: That's the only one, no others?

Coleman: I don't think I belong to any club. Sorority then. And of course I was away from September until June anyway. And then once in awhile I'd go travelling in the summer.

Lancaster: Where would you go?

Coleman: Holy Land.

Lancaster: Really? When did you go there?

Coleman: Well, I think '85, with one of the ministers from Congdon Street church, a former minister from Congdon Street church, we went to the Holy Land. And then I've been to a few states in the United States. Wherever my sorority held a convention, if I could afford to I'd go [laughs].

Lancaster: So what does, what activities does your sorority do?

Coleman: What do you mean?

Lancaster: You belong to the sorority, you go to meetings?

Coleman: Oh, they had no particular activities as we had, oh, professional women, and mostly schoolteachers, and I guess we had a few nurses. Well, see, at that time everybody had to have a degree. Oh you had to have a degree to get in, or you couldn't get in. The idea started with a colored lady who graduated from Brown. Ethel Robinson. I had the good fortune to meet her.

Lancaster: And is this now a national sorority?

Coleman: Oh yes. AKA is national. Unless it just gave up [laughs] yesterday.

Lancaster: I don't think so.

Coleman: It's national.

Lancaster: That's terrific. That's really interesting. Right. I think I'll switch this thing off now... it says in the yearbook that you were, I've lost you again, you played basketball,

Coleman: Basketball, yes.

Lancaster: Bowling.

Coleman: Oh yes, oh we had to, as part of our gym work.

Lancaster: And Fistball?

Coleman: What's that?

Lancaster: Fistball.

Coleman: What's that?

Lancaster: I don't know. With your fist?

Coleman: Oh I don't remember that. I know the other, I had. But Fistball, I don't remember that.

Lancaster: Okay. You don't remember at all. But I'll find out and let you know if those other two are still alive. I doubt it, but we can find out.

[End of Interview]