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Cunningham, James and Cunningham, Margaret

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Tape 1, Side A

Mark Naison (MN): The Bronx African-American History Project. We are here with Dr. James Cunningham and Margaret Cunningham at their home in Schenectady, New York on January 9th, 2006, and we're very happy to have this opportunity. Dr. Cunningham, could you tell us a little bit about your family background on both sides?

James Cunningham (JC): Yes. My father was born of a German lady who was working in a nursery of a family in Long Island, and she married a Black man who was employed there as well, and from that union came at least five to six children. My mother, on the other hand, was born of a lady who is supposed to be a full-blooded Shinnocock Indian. However, we do not have sufficient documents to -- documentation to make that statement positively. Her father, on the other hand -- Let's see -- My mother's father was born in Charlotte, North Carolina and we have absolutely no information about his parents, so that all that we can say is that he was a severe disciplinarian, and that -- to my mother had raised for herself the four children that followed. Her mother passed away when she was about fifteen or sixteen, and so she raised the others. How my mother managed to get an education and subsequent certification as a schoolteacher, I will never know in terms of all the time and effort involved in raising her siblings, but she did, and at the time of her marriage had taught in one or two schools. I was born while my dad was overseas during the First World War, and didn't get to know him, of course, until he came back from France. From what I know, he entered employment in Washington, D.C. as an elevator operator, although he had been described in his army papers as a conductor, a streetcar conductor. From there, from Washington, D.C. he was transferred

to New York City to work as a customs inspector, and my suspicion is that he passed as White and was able to negotiate the personnel practices of the Treasury Department with considerable ease. He was well-liked and all the people on the job referred to him as Jimmy. I often, as a student, as a kid, would visit him at work and was overwhelmed by the size of the ocean liners that the customs inspectors worked on. You see, every time a ship like Italian-American line or the North German Lloyd Line came in town with a full load of passengers, it was the job of my father and his colleagues to inspect the baggage and perhaps levy certain taxes for the importation of things, and as he would say, sometimes people would try to hide watches or diamonds or whatever in order to evade paying the taxes. Anyway, dad was a -- How you might say -- A very conscientious and hardworking person because he oftentimes would take the subway down to 14th street, 18th street, 9th or 10th Avenue where the piers were, and that's where the ships came in. We as a family lived in the Bronx. While -- Shortly after the war, my mother and I -- prior to the -- my mother and I lived, I think, with his mother and his brothers and sisters -- He had four brothers and sisters, and then when he came back from Washington, we apparently moved to 167th Street, and in succession came my four brothers and sisters. I attended P.S. 23 and was, as far as I know, the only colored boy in the school, and experienced no pain or embarrassment at being colored. As a matter of fact, I don't think the issue ever came up in those days. Our neighborhood -- I never thought about it, but we were one family that got along with everybody. There was a drug store on the corner, and the son of the drug store owner and myself were great friends, and I would visit him on -- I think it was Friday nights. Many of the Jewish people would ask me to turn off the stove, and they would give me a penny or two, and that was a pleasant job with little

income, and I was treated quite nicely. When I got strong enough, the grocery store owner asked me to work in the store, and I remember learning how to chop butter into quarter pounds or pounds or whatnot --

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): Sorry to interrupt. I was just wondering what year was this. You know -- What years do you think you were doing -- you were attending P.S. 23 and doing all these odd jobs in the neighborhood?

JC: I started P.S. 23 at the usual age that you go to kindergarten, and from there went to 1st Grade and whatnot, and somewhere along the line I skipped twice, which meant that I was going along quite nicely. Now, I think the employment in the grocery store must have come when I was about ten or twelve years old. I don't think it could have come much earlier than that, and it was --

MC: The years --

JC: Huh?

MC: We want the years.

JC: Let's see, well I was born in 1918, so we would add 12 years to that which would come to 1920, is that right?

MN and NL: (in unison) 1930 --

JC: 1930, now that's curious because I graduated Morris in '39. Anyway, you know the experience of working in a grocery store was there.

MN: This interesting issue of racial identification -- Before we started talking, you said your father was in the military as colored, and then worked as White. Was this something that was discussed in the family?

JC: No. I've thought about that quite a bit. I don't recall any -- How you might say -- categorization of people. It's just -- somehow or other passed over us. My dad knew nothing about poets, Black poets or Black playwrights or painters. He had no inkling of Black history or culture, and my mother likewise was, how you might say, I guess colorblind or color ignorant. It didn't matter. She just focused more on family, education. I think she -- How you might say it -- insisted that all of us do our best because -- You know, I became a physician. My number two sister became a school teacher and a school principal. My number three -- the number three child, a girl, became a practical nurse. Number four, a boy, became an engineer for -- He went to Stuyvesant and City College and became an engineer, and number five, a boy, finished college and went to medical school, became a physician, so that, in a sense, education was a kind of redeeming obsession, if you want to say that.

NL: And you were the eldest of five?

JC: Yes.

NL: Okay.

MN: Now, one interesting -- When you visited your father at work, where your father was identified as White, did anybody ever comment on you being colored? Did that ever come up at his job?

JC: If it did, Dad didn't comment on it. I don't remember him commenting on me blowing his cover, so to speak.

MN: [Laughs]

NL: Right, right.

JC: To use a common phrase --

MN: Right --

JC: I --

Brian Purnell (BP): Is there a photograph of his father here?

JC: Yes, we have one picture of dad.

BP: Maybe we can hold it up, if that's alright?

MN: Yes, if you could hold it up? If you could hold this up and point him out?

JC: Here's my father. He was the shortest of the five children, and his sister, and his three brothers. I have another picture of him in his customs uniform, and -- Anyway, if I blew his cover, it may have been that he was so well ensconced in service, and had earned a kind of respect or loyalty amongst his fellow employees that perhaps may not have mattered. I'm not sure.

MN: What about in school? In P.S. 23 and what junior high school did you attend?

JC: P.S. 51.

MN: And what street was that located on?

JC: That was -- I think 158th Street and Paulding Avenue. It was quite a walk from 167th Street, but -- And in junior high school I -- How you might say -- breezed through without any sense of racial hostility or even more than that, any sense of racial identification. See, one thing is that perhaps not having an inbred home identification and home, so to speak, attitude toward teachers and everybody else; I just went along with whatever happened. I'm at a loss to say -- and it may also have been that my complexion wasn't so obvious that people were forced to -- How you might say -- Make judgments based on other experiences. We had, at P.S. 51, no athletic program, and when I went to Morris, I became a part of the track team, and enjoyed whatever pleasures came to track.

I do remember one time at Morris, there was a notice about a dancing class, and I applied to learn how to dance, and much to my surprise was told that all colored people were born dancers, so that I didn't have to take any lessons, and therefore, I couldn't be in the class. That kind of threw me, but it wasn't the, so to speak, a big deal. Learning to dance was not --

[Laughter]

NL: Would you say that that moment was one of the first times that you were being racially identified in your educational history by teachers and other, you know, school employees?

JC: I kind of think so. It was the first time that -- Well, you know, there are two factors here. One was being refused the opportunity, and the second was the logic behind

NL: Right --

JC: -- the refusal, but I think my mother would have said that's foolishness anyway, you don't need to learn to dance, but in terms of my broad array of experiences, that was a relatively -- I mean, I was working in the store, or rather, I had worked in the store. I had been doing a lot of things, and nothing had, so to speak, happened up until that time.

MN: Was there much political discussion in your household about events in the world, you know, politics, war and peace, the Depression, things like that?

JC: No. My dad was not, how you might say, politically or socially informed, and I remember during FDR's first campaign, I had some very strong opinions as to voting for FDR as against Wilkie, I think, who was running against him, and I continually suggested to mama that she would want to vote for FDR. I never said anything to my father. Maybe I assumed that he was -- Oh, his theory was that he was Republican and was going to stay

Republican because Lincoln had freed the slaves, and that was good enough reason for me, but here I was preaching a kind of sedition by asking Mama on behalf of what I thought, for that time, unemployed people and whatnot. So we grew up, how you might say, insulated from the general economy because dad, in working for the government, always had a reliable income, and the people I saw selling apples on the corner, the breadlines and all the other things were fixtures but not relevant to our particular thing.

MN: So you saw indications of the suffering during the Depression in your neighborhood?

JC: Yes, yes.

MN: What were -- you know, where were the breadlines? Were those downtown or in the Bronx?

JC: Well, there was a thing called home relief, and apparently they had outlets in various neighborhoods, and you could go to these outlets and get bottles of milk and I suspect loaves of bread and whatnot, and that would be, I think what was keeping some people going?

MN: Now were you ever aware of what people called the Bronx Slave Market. The sort of -- These corners where black women would line up for domestic work, is this some thing you ever saw or heard about in those years?

JC: To be honest, I think I saw, but it didn't -- I know at the subway station, there were some people kind of lining up or looking for employment.

NL: Men and women?

JC: Yes.

NL: And this is the subway station at Prospect?

JC: Prospect, yes, but it didn't, how you might say, register. It wasn't until I got to City College that I became much more socially aware about the history.

MN: Right, so until you went to City College, there wasn't political discussion in your home and it didn't seem to affect your family?

JC: That's right.

MN: What was the street life on Prospect Avenue and 167th Street when you were growing up?

JC: Oh, it was very exciting. By that I mean to say there were cobblestone streets, so you would hear the milkman coming along with his crates and whatnot, and there was coal being delivered by, you know, the coal truck and they'd bring their extensions and funnel the coal down, and the peddlers coming along with their horse and wagons with potatoes and apples and, you know, he would yell out and people would come down and they would buy whatever they could, but after school, there was no end of stickball games, even though -- Well, the cobblestones added a dimension to it in that, wherever the ball hit, that would mean it would bounce in a predictable or unpredictable manner, and in those days, there were relatively few cars, so that a game might go along for three or four innings, and then a car would come and we'd have to draw to one side. Horse and wagons, I don't know, and we played Ring-A-Levio and -- Let me see -- fox in the -- we had another game called Fox in the Den or something. We would foot race up and down the street and whatnot so that there was a lot of various kinds of activity. Of course, I had discovered the library had endless books, and so that sometimes the guys would say, "What are you going to do with all those books?" I'd bring home five --

MN: Which library was this?

JC: Morrisania branch. 161st street, I think it was.

BP: And McKinley Square, that one?

JC: No, 161st, somewhere around -- Maybe Trinity Avenue. I'm not sure.

MN: Okay.

JC: Yes, and so that -- and -- My mother would say, "Lights out." And you know, as soon as she left the room, my flashlight would come out. I'd be able to read for maybe, I don't know, an hour or two so, but -- and street life -- you would hear -- If you were upstairs, you could hear the beginnings of the guys coming out.

MN: What floor did you live on?

JC: We lived on the third floor front.

MN: So facing out to the street?

JC: The street, yes.

MN: Now, was there a fire escape to your building?

JC: Oh yes, that fire escape was the -- In Biology, Botany, we were taught to raise bean sprouts and boy, I had a box full of beans that were germinating, and we would eat beans, yes, and the fire escape was a kind of -- you could sometimes go from the third floor down to the second floor, but you couldn't get to the street by the fire escape. I guess the bottom thing was sealed off in some kind of way. You couldn't get down the street, and of course, using the fire escape depended on, you know, whether the neighbors below you had kids or the ones upstairs had kids. You know, otherwise there would be no reason to -- They had dumbwaiters too, and Halloween -- I think it was Halloween, we would go down into the cellar and race and knock on the dumbwaiter, which would open into the kitchen, and we'd something like surprise or some kind of stupid [Laughs].

MN: Now, did your family go places during the summer? Did they ever go to the beach? Did they ever go to resorts?

JC: Well, in those days we had no car. Nobody had cars in those days, so everybody would -- If they were going, they would take the bus to the subway station, so we would go to, like, Crotona Park, which was just a bus ride up Prospect Avenue, or we would go to Central Park for various things. I think my mother liked to explore the city because I remember we went down to Williamsburg Bridge and walked around. I was amazed by the size of the bridge. One time, I discovered that the circus was coming to town, so I guess at around 4 o'clock I got up and went down to Mott Haven somewhere, and watched the circus unload, and the elephants were busy being -- pulling stuff off the -- You know, they use them as horses, I guess, and the whole procession went down to, I think it was Madison Square Garden.

MN: All the way from the Bronx.

JC: Bronx, yes. It's like a parade.

MN: A circus parade.

JC: Yes.

MN: Now, in terms of religion, did your family go to church regularly, or was it only your mother?

JC: That's a good question. My dad had no -- He had once said that the only time he'd be in church was when they had his services.

[Laughter]

MN: And now you meant funeral services.

JC: Yes.

NL: Right.

JC: So -- but my mother -- okay, my mother had an uncle who was a Baptist minister -- Had a church in Manhattan, and for some reason or other, she sent us or took us to Woodstock Presbyterian Church. In asking my sister about that, Ruthie said that was the only church in the Bronx that was within the walking distance, so naturally, she said, Mama would take us there, so that we became involved in the Sunday school activities there, and eventually, the minister, in response to the growing Black population, asked my mother whether she would be willing to come to separate services which she was setting up for the new neighbors, and my mother said, "Absolutely not." That was her, and so --

MN: When did you start noticing that significant numbers of Black families were moving into the neighborhood?

JC: You know? That's an interesting question. It was so gradual; I think that it just kind of happened. It wasn't something that we would discuss, you know, at the family table. I don't think that any, but -- It's like a cloud, we just discovered that there were all of a sudden, large numbers of us around, but it didn't --

MN: Did you think of it as "us?"

JC: [Laughs] Well, it wasn't a -- yeah, I guess it was "us." You know -- It was at stickball, okay, one day they took up all the cobblestones and resurfaced the street. Well, one day you noticed that everybody around you was Black, and that was that.

NL: And this was before you had finished high school?

JC: Yes.

MN: So it was happening in the 1930s –

JC: Yes --

MN: -- that Black families began to move in your immediate area.

JC: Yes.

MN: And was it a rapid transition, would you say, or very gradual?

JC: Well, not having, how you might say, been aware, it was kind of, I guess, rapid because all of a sudden you notice that something has changed, yes.

NL: And did you find yourself befriending some of your new neighbors from school or, you know, stickball games or other activities?

JC: Yes, we got along just fine. We began to make distinctions between guys. I mean, there were some guys who couldn't care less about school, couldn't care less about books or one thing or another, but those who did were more like me I socialized with.

MN: Now you had mentioned to me when we were talking on the phone this one incident at Woodstock Presbyterian Church where you were going on an outing, and somebody noticed your arm. Could you --

JC: Yes. Every year, Woodstock would have an annual picnic, and the whole family would go on this picnic. I think it was Kingsland Point Park, somewhere up in Westchester County. So they would charter three buses, four buses, and the families would get on, and on one of the trips back into the city -- I forget the name of the Sunday school teacher, yelled out, "Whose black arm is that sticking out of the bus window?" And [Laughs] I knew it was mine because mine was sticking out of the window. Well, I pulled it back in, and --

NL: Wow --

JC: There was no more said, but I was, how you might say, I guess I was somewhat amused, I don't know.

NL: How old were you when that happened?

JC: I must have been about 10 or 11.

NL: And you think, you know, maybe you were playing outside that made your arm considerably darker that day or something, you know, I'm wondering it might have been --

JC: Yes, well --

NL: --The fact that the sun might have given you away?

JC: Well, that's an interesting question. I don't know, you know, whether it was -- See, now the minister of the church was, you know, was asking my mother would she come to the separate service, so I suspect that there had been, I mean, you know, this is 20, 40 years later. I suspect that there must have been some discussion within the church about Blacks and whatnot, and so this was part of a kind of changing attitude in response to some of the --

MN: Yes, now I'd like Margaret -- was your experience growing up in Brooklyn at all comparable to this, or was your family very different?

MC: It was different in the respect that we were more conscious of race and there were -- Most of our friends and neighbors were Black.

NL: And what neighborhood in Brooklyn did you live?

MC: Bedford-Stuyvesant, famous --

NL: Right.

[Laughter]

MC: Bed-Stuyvesant, and I lived there on Decatur Street, and, at one time we were up near Stuyvesant, and then we moved, and rented out a place, and moved back and we -- The -- Our experiences -- There wasn't a whole lot of prejudice that we were conscious of, probably because we were all mostly Black, and when I think back, I think -- I can't remember any White friends at the time, when I was growing up.

MN: And what high school did you go to?

MC: Girls High --

MN: Were there many Black students at Girls High?

MC: Yes. There was -- Most of us went to school together, you know.

MN: So you had a cohort of Black students who bonded together at Girls High.

MC: That's right.

MN: Which you didn't have at Morris.

JC: That's right.

MN: So when was your first experience of identifying as a Black person with other Black people having a common identification? Was that at City College, your first experience with that?

JC: Yes, that was the first time that I was ever able to, how you might say, find and be a part of a group of young fellows who were intellectually and socially and what not -- sharing the values that I had, somehow or other, developed. I must say, though, when we had track meets and whatnot, I became aware of, you know, large numbers of us Black fellows on the track teams and whatnot, and the various high schools had larger contingents of Black athletes than we did. For instance, DeWitt Clinton always had four and five Black guys on the team. Stuyvesant would have three and four, and you know,

poor Morris would have me, and I don't think there was any other guy on the team, and but -- and my best friend at the time, who went to 51 with me, Black fellow, lived in 166th Street, so he was sent to Monroe High School, and I think, I don't know, I think Monroe may have had a larger enrollment of Black students than Morris because -- I don't know how, you know, at that time, I guess wherever your house was was where you went to high school.

MN: Right.

NL: Yes, you were zoned.

JC: Yes.

MN: Now, at City College, did you become more politically conscious?

JC: Yes.

MN: You mentioned reading -- being aware of Paul Robeson and so forth.

JC: Yes, yes.

NL: Did you seek out Black history courses?

JC: They began -- The faculty began to somehow or other make available to us. We had a Frederick Douglass Society, and somehow or other, this was the beginning of my, of the unfolding of Black experience.

MN: Now, did you -- What year at City College did you join the Frederick Douglass Society?

JC: The first year I was there. Let's see, I started, I think, in '35. I graduated Morris High in '35, and I went to City.

MN: Okay, so -- and what year did you graduate from City College.

JC: 1940.

MN: Okay, so you graduate from Morris in '35, City at 1940.

JC: Right.

MN: So City College must have been a pretty lively place in the late '30s.

JC: Indeed. It was very lively because during that time, there was a Spanish Civil War, and large numbers of, well, they had an Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, and during that time, a number of Italian students who were brought over to somehow or other lecture, and these were seen as Mussolini's assistants, and we City College students had a demonstration. At about the same time, I think, the Italian -- Italy was invading Ethiopia, and I think -- was it was Marshall Graziano was making a big name for himself. There was a lot of activity.

MN: Now, did you go to any demonstrations when you were at City College?

JC: I did. I did.

MN: Did you ever carry a picket sign?

JC: No, I never carried a picket sign.

NL: Wow, and so during the whole time you were at City, you lived in the Bronx?

JC: Oh, yes.

NL: And what was it like commuting for you between, you know, being in the Bronx and being in that neighborhood and going in the city? How did you kind of --

JC: Well, it was interesting because, at the time I was doing -- We began living as a family, I was at 167th Street when I began City College, and I think in my sophomore year we moved up to Garfield Street, and this was a predominately Italian enclave, and so that here I would be all day and half the evening between classroom and track team,

coming to renewed isolation of Garfield Street, and a family that was not particularly interested. Nobody was saying, well what'd you learn about Paul Robeson, or --

MN: Right.

JC: You know, none of that.

MN: Now, when did you first become aware of Harlem as a center for black culture and politics?

JC: That's an interesting question because, in a sense, I was always aware of it as a Black community. I mean, Dad had me go down for haircuts, and then I used to visit my mother's mother and Reverend Booker, and we went to church every now and again, maybe twice a year, really, to his church in Manhattan, in Harlem.

MN: So that's very interesting that your father brought you to a barber shop in Harlem to cut your hair.

JC: Yes, yes, and our family physician for many years was in Harlem too. Subsequently, oh -- I think in our earliest years when we were quite small, we had a local physician who had me circumcised. I mean, [Chuckles] not had ME circumcised, but he sold my mother on the virtues of circumcision, so -- done in the Bronx, so --

[Laughter]

JC: But --

MN: Was there music in your house, and if so, what kind of music?

JC: I'm sorry you asked that.

[Laughter]

JC: One of the records -- CDs we got [is] *Mama Don't Allow No Music in the House*.

MC: [Laughs]

JC: I pondered a number of things. Wherever we lived, there was a piano. At first it was a player piano, but to this day, nobody has any recollection of my mother sitting down and enjoying the piano, so -- but she did insist that we all get musical lessons. I was in about a month or two months of music lessons, and thinking to myself, "What a nice-smelling piano teacher I have."

MN: [Laughs]

JC: We sat on the same stool, and she would reach around me, and I would --

[Laughter]

JC: But when I heard on somebody's Victrola, it might have been Louis Armstrong, I said," Mama, I want a trumpet." And she said, "It's the piano or nothing." I said, "It's nothing." So that ended my piano lessons, so -- and it also ended -- My mother thought that music, somehow or other, may have been related to the devil for quite some time. She was a WCTU-er --

MN: Really? Women's Christian Temperance Union --

JC: Yes, yes -- There was no alcohol in the house, or when my dad would bring it home, she would kind of pad his overcoat pocket to see if he had brought home a little something to sip on.

MN: Yes.

[End of Side A of Tape] [Beginning of Side B of Tape]

JC: To this day, Margaret would want to play this or something, and I would say, I don't know -- I -- you know. So, to make a long story short, my younger sister wanted to be a, I guess, a nightclub singer. I don't know. Again, she got a vehement no, so that ended that career.

MN: When did you become aware of all the great jazz coming out of Harlem -- the Duke Ellingtons, the Louis Armstrongs, the --

JC: Yes. Well, I must have learned about them somewhere around 14, 15 or so because, although I think I'm of age of some of these guys, but anyway, this friend of mine, Mac and I used to sit in his house and listen to The Make-Believe Ballroom.

MN: Okay.

JC: It would come on at 5 o'clock perhaps or maybe 3 o'clock. It would go on until 6:30 or something. Anyway, he and I would sit there when there was nothing else to do but eat Ritz crackers and listen to a lot of -- so we became what you might say, well-entrenched in the jazz scene. At Rikers Island, they would have these Sunday concerts every, I guess, once or twice a summer or spring or something, and I would go down, and one time, I was up on stage because I wanted to take some pictures, and I think Stuff Smith -- So a policeman came over to me and started, and I said, "What?" And he said, "You're not supposed to be onstage." You know, high school Goldberg, and I forget who wrote the French, but anyway, I said I was one of those Frenchmen, and he laughed. [Laughs]

MC: [Laughs]

JC: So I was able to stay on stage and I was able to take a few pictures. I don't know what happened to them, but anyway -- So I knew the jazz scene, and when Goodman first came to New York, Mac and I got down to the Paramount around eight that morning, and we didn't leave the Paramount until about seven o'clock that night.

MN: This is for Benny Goodman.

JC: Yes and the movie was Fred Astaire – no, no, no -- *Maid of Salem*, that was the movie, and with Mr. Goodbar candies, we were able to go through the whole, I think, five, six, seven shows.

MN: Now Margaret, was Black culture more a part of your home than James?

MC: It was, I think. My father was very much interested in poetry, and he just got us well acquainted with Paul Laurence Dunbar. There was "The Party" by Paul Laurence Dunbar, which is a long poem, several pages long, and he memorized the whole thing, and we kids used to ask him to recite it for us. It was one of our favorites, and we went to -- The church that we attended was a Black church.

MN: And what church was that?

MC: That was Saint Philip's Episcopal Church.

MN: You went to Harlem to attend?

MC: No, this was in Brooklyn, yes.

MN: Okay, and what street was that on?

MC: On Mac Donough Street and the parish house was on Decatur.

MN: Yes.

MC: So that -- and then my father used to like to sing, so whenever we kids were doing the dishes, he would come out and have us sing and he would harmonize with us, so I got a lot of my interest in music or Black culture from my father.

MN: Was there a phonograph in your house?

MC: Yes, oh yes.

MN: And were jazz artists or people like Marion Anderson played on the phonograph?

MN: People like Marion Anderson, yes, but jazz, no. My father was not interested in jazz, and because he was from the West Indies, from Barbados, and we began to get interested in calypso music, and he said no. He didn't want us to sing calypso around the house.

That was --

MN: He was high culture?

MC: Yes.

[Laughter]

MN: Was there classical music in your house?

MC: Yes, there was this program, *Music to Read By*. And I remember my father would have that on. This was after my first job, and he was -- Every night, he would sit and listen to *Music to Read By* when he read. He was very well-read. So he was the basis of the culture -- Black culture, just culture in general.

MN: Now James, did ever you see Langston Hughes or Paul Robeson in person in the late '30s?

JC: No, I would say. We were -- not denied -- but this was omitted from our experience, from our thinking. I may have known of him. I think *Showboat* had been a part of the American culture, and one or two other things, but it was a distant intellectual experience. It wasn't something that was talked about. Nobody -- It just wasn't there.

MN: What about 1939 when Paul Robeson returned to the United States. Was he somebody that was important in your cultural political awareness when he was back in the United States?

JC: Yes. Even when they had the rally in Peekskill in 19 -- I guess it was --

MN: '49 or something --

JC: '49, yes. That didn't raise any eyebrows in my family. It was a perfectly despicable display of violence in the north. It was uncalled for. It just went beyond – It wasn't on our radar screen.

MN: So your family was very apolitical.

JC: That's right.

NL: And you said that you felt that even your brothers and sisters were coming up in later years. Were they ever touched by race consciousness a little more than you were because as they were coming of age?

JC: You know, it's interesting --When -- was it Truman who called MacArthur back from Korea, my middle brother was very much against MacArthur coming back, so he and I had quite an exhausting argument about it, but my younger brother, the youngest brother, was very much for MacArthur getting sacked, you know? My sisters -- I suspect my second sister may have had some feelings politically, but she and I didn't get to talk about that very much.

MN: Yes. Now when you were at City College, did you know you wanted to be a doctor? Was this something which was like a lifelong dream and something you approached with a lot of direction?

JC: No, it wasn't a lifelong dream actually. It was kind of a distant thing. I remember that at that time, a lot of the Jewish fellows were talking about going to Switzerland or other places to get their degrees, and I knew that was not -- and Canada, that was the other place. So I had lowered my expectations to do a career in Biology. So when -- oh, and when I asked one of my faculty teachers, he said, "Oh forget about it. You don't have any speaking knowledge of German, and that's essential." My family physician laughed and

he said he doesn't know what he's talking about, so I knew that it was possible. One of two things happened that I think solidified -- My brother came down with pneumonia, and my family doctor said in seven days he'll have either have a crisis or he'll die or something.

MN: Wow.

JC: And my mother's relief was so obvious that it made me feel like that was a possibility. You know, it's an intellectual thing. Then my family physician asked my mother whether I could baby-sit his office while he made house calls, and that began to -- that neared the profession as a possibility.

MN: Was he a Black man?

JC: Yes, he was a Black man.

MN: And where was his practice located?

JC: He was on Prospect Avenue.

MN: Really? What was his name?

JC: Wormley. Doctor Wormley and he was between 167th and I think Home Street?

MN: Really, and so he was your neighborhood family practitioner?

JC: Yes.

MN: Doctor Wormley.

JC: At one stage, yes, and so when he asked me to baby-sit his office, why I took the liberty of, how you might say, devouring the content of his various books. I was very impressed. Then one time, the New York Academy of Medicine had a lecture on the new sulphonamides, and I went down there and heard a lecture, so I, you know, I was beginning this, how you might say, climb toward medicine.

MN: Right.

NL: And you -- what major were you at City College?

JC: Biology --

MC: Biology was your major.

JC: Well, Biology and History.

NL: Ahh, okay.

JC: And then one of my friends, his mother worked in the emergency room at Lincoln Hospital, so Stanley and I would spend the evenings in the emergency room sight-seeing, so to speak --

MN: Stanley was who?

JC: Stanley was another friend of mine, Stanley Herbert, and so we would -- So I got a first-hand experience, you know, and I always liked the -- I guess I was drawn to the behavior or the mien or the whatever of physicians, but at City College I was not, how you might say, focused on a career in medicine. Then when I got to Washington and was working in the Census Bureau, I used to hang out with the guys who were in medical school, and they said, "How come you're not applying?" So I said, "I am applying."

MN: Now, how did you end up getting to Washington after City College? Well, Margaret, how did you end up in Washington?

MC: Well, I was working in the YWCA after business school, and -- not Arnold Hearseman -- was the head of the black Y, and I met her when I was at the Harlem Business School, and she told me she got a job for me when I graduated, so from there, they had a competition for various arts, and I won the art competition and got a scholarship to Hampton Institute.

NL: Wow.

MC: And fortunately I loved it and I was very active in drama and art. I was an art major. And when I -- Unfortunately I didn't stay there very long because after Pearl Harbor, I got a letter regarding this civil rights job that I had applied for back --

JC: Civil service --

MC: -- I mean civil service.

MN: [Laughs]

MC: [Laughs] Civil service job, and so they wanted me to come to Washington, which was a tough decision, but I thought I could make more money and help my family, being the oldest child I, you know.

MN: I want to go back to City College where you were a History as well as Biology major. Was there any History course which made a big impression on you?

JC: Well, I was interested in American History, and I'd begun to develop an interest in the Civil War and the Reconstruction, and I saw that as part of the area of interest and something I'd want to be involved in.

MN: Right. Now did you, when you were in college, ever read papers like *The Amsterdam News or New York Age*?

JC: Yes. My dad -- Well, there's a little inconsistency. *The New York Age* came to our house either by mail or by him stopping off. He was also a member of the Masons, and somehow or other he had Black contacts and Black this and that, but you see, none of his brothers or sisters had much political or racial history.

MN: Right, so here's your father who is working apparently as White. He goes to a barbershop in Harlem. He is a member of the Masons, a Black Masonic group, was it the Prince Hall Masons?

JC: Yes, Prince Hall...

MN: These are Prince Hall Masons.

JC: Number 23 --

MN: And where was that lodge located?

JC: Oh, [Laughs] I don't know.

MN: Was it in Harlem?

JC: Yes.

MN: And he gets *The New York Age*. Were there any columnists in the New York Age that he would mention or that you --?

JC: No, and I don't think I read the *Age* very much. Somehow or other -- Well, it may have been that I was more interested in what I was doing, but I --

MN: So by the time you graduated from City College, were there any Black leaders who really grabbed your attention or, you know, at that particular point, either cultural or political or even religious?

JC: Well, you know, I can't say off hand. I don't really know, but I was not -- I was reading at that time *The Compass*. I think that was a new newspaper in New York that was much more -- Compass -- What was the other --

MC: *P.M.* --

JC: Huh -- *P.M* --

MN: *P.M.*--

JC: Which came first --

MN: Right --

JC: *P.M.* ,which came first, but Ingersoll was the editor, and I think by the time I was, I don't know about I.F. Stone, but anyways, I didn't have a firm sense of anything.

MN: So what was it like moving from New York to Washington, which I assume was a fairly segregated city at that time?

MC: Oh yes.

MN: Margaret, was it a little culture shock?

MC: It was [Laughs]. It was -- Those were the days when Blacks had to ride the back of the bus.

MN: Wow.

MC: And we had a -- I remember one instance where we had a young man working for us. I was in the office that had only five or six of us, and one Jewish fellow and a White, young fellow, just graduated from high school, and had never run into -- had never -- grown up with blacks. He was -- had no prejudices because he had no experiences with Blacks and so as far as he was concerned, the Whites and the Blacks in the office were his friends because we were all Black, and one day, he saw us, got on the bus and saw us in the back of the bus, and so he immediately came and sat with us, and the -- Our boss, a woman from Virginia, got word of this and she called him into her office and blessed him out and told him if he ever did that again, that he would lose his job.

MN: Were people segregated on the job as well as in the buses? Were Black workers given certain defined jobs in certain sections of the office, or it wasn't that clear cut?

MC: I don't think so. I think that Blacks had -- There were certain positions that were not available to them. In this same office, the woman who was the head of the office depended on one of the Black women. Anytime she was out, this woman would take her place, and anytime she had problems, she would get this woman to help her, but this woman never got promoted --

MN: Right, now what about the cafeteria or eating places? Were those segregated?

MC: Oh yes. Of the first day I was in the War Department pool, lunchtime came, and I knew I couldn't eat around there. I saw a bus stop cab driver, and I asked him could he take me someplace where I could eat, and he said, "No, I wouldn't have time." Because he would have to take me all the way across town, you know, and so I -- In this office where I was working, I -- we -- all of us -- the two fellows and the four Black women, including myself -- We would get sandwiches every day together and sit outside together.

MN: Right, you got the sandwiches in advance?

MC: We went to a store and bought the sandwiches, but we couldn't eat in the restaurant.

MN: Right.

MC: We had to bring the sandwiches --

MN: Now what about you, Dr. Cunningham, when you went down. Was it a similar experience?

JC: Indeed. I first -- My first job was as a Census tabulator -- no, a census clerk, in which -- and in the so-called work room, I was seated in the front row, and the teacher told me that I couldn't -- the instructor -- he was going to instruct us in the methods, said that I couldn't sit in the front row, that I would have to sit in the back, and in response to my questions -- Why was I supposed to sit in the back. He said it's the law down here in

Washington that whites sit in the front rows and Blacks in the back. So with that, not only I got up, but four or five of the fellows who had gone through the City and who were working, like myself, for the Census Bureau, got up and moved to the back with me, and the teacher said, no, no. That that was not acceptable and they said we're friends, and if this happens to him, it happens to us.

MN: So these were White guys?

JC: These were White guys.

MN: Who went back with you?

JC: Yes.

MN: Wow.

JC: And so the teacher said, "Well, I can't stop you from sitting back there, but the law is that you should sit in front, and they said well, we're going to -- and when it came lunch time, again they said you go to the colored thing, and the fellows said, let's go out and try to find something to eat, but we faced the same thing in the small restaurant that was close by, so that eventually, you know, that was the way it was. Everybody adjusted to it. I mean, the fellows sat in the back with me, and moving on -- Subsequently, I became what they called a section chief, and here it was much stricter. The people in my section and my co-chief, we're all Black, and they had five Black sections and maybe five White sections, and the -- there was relatively little contact between --

MN: Right --

JC: -- the two sections.

MN: Now, when you came home, did you discuss these experiences with your brothers and sisters, with your mother and father, this segregated environment, was it something that, you know, you brought to their attention?

JC: That's a good question. I don't think I did. I don't know whether I even mentioned it. I took it as the way things were in Washington.

MN: Wow.

JC: Now I didn't -- Well, I couldn't ask my father because I think he was passing all the time, so -- but I didn't discuss. It was in medical school, though, that my father began his campaign to have me transfer to a White school, saying that he didn't think I would get a good medical education -- as good a medical education as I could in NYU or Columbia.

NL: Wow.

JC: And I told him that, well, I was here and this is where I was going to stay.

MN: Wow.

JC: So --

MN: You said a campaign. He wanted to persuade you or persuade them to admit you?

JC: Well, I think he -- His opinion was that all I had to do was request a transfer, and that I would go into be accepted, and I didn't, you know, I wasn't going to pursue that.

MN: Did you ever, when you were in Washington, run into people who said -- not just personally protested the way your friends did, but politically said, segregation is wrong, and we need to lead a movement against this. Did you run into anything that, like, would kind of prefigure what would happen fifteen years later in the civil rights movement?

JC: Well, you know, that's very interesting because I think somewhere along the line, FDR appointed Ickes as Secretary of the Interior.

MN: Right.

JC: I'm not sure, but I think Ickes, in some way, eased a lot of the Jim Crow things that were going on.

MN: Right.

JC: And perhaps that was that, I'm not sure, but no, there -- I don't remember any concerted effort to, in some way, reduce the Black and White thing.

MN: Okay, I'm just going to shut -- [Brief Pause] let's start the second part of our interview with Creighton Berry, who is an old friend of yours. How did you meet Creighton?

JC: I don't know how I met him, but we crossed paths a number of times. Certainly at Saint Augustine, but I guess in just passing, coming along in the street, we knew a lot of people in common. At times, I circulated with the athletes, and at times I circulated with the, how you might say, the braniac crowd.

BP: The intellectuals --

[Laughter]

JC: It depended, and then some were attracted to my sisters, or they had sisters to whom I was attracted, so it was kind of difficult to know for sure.

MN: Right, now do you have -- did you have any contact with Edler Hawkins when he was at Saint Augustine's?

JC: Very much so. Edler Hawkins became a friend, so to speak, of the family. My mother and I think his mother, and his sister or -- had a very cordial relationship, and I was, how you might say, part of the welcoming committee, and I was, how you might say, some help in the transition and what not.

MN: Now tell us a little something about this welcoming committee and how it was created.

JC: I'm not sure I know how it was created, but somehow or other I got to be, how you might say, part of it, and --

MN: How old were you when you were involved with this? Were you at City College at the time or still in high school?

JC: I suspect I was still in high school towards the end of my career in high school. Maybe first year in college, but as I say, we moved from 167th Street during my first year in college, so it would have been --

MN: Did your family still retain a connection with the church after you moved to Garfield Place?

JC: I don't think my mother did. As far as my sisters, it's very difficult to say because Susie was becoming increasingly independent and I was, so to speak, much more involved in my own things and not really an integral part of the family then.

MN: What were your recollections of Edler Hawkins as a person, you know?

JC: Well, I liked the common sense approach that he brought to religion. It was not nearly as ethereal as spiritual, I think, and is relevant to our society as Reverend Hawkins. I think he had a better grasp of the complexities and the need to be participant in the community. He saw the need for doing things, being involved, whereas the other chap delivered a spiritual message that lead you to want to get to heaven as soon as possible. [Laughter]

NL: And so what kinds of things do you remember kind of getting involved with under or other people that you knew that were, you know, part of the Saint Augustine community?

JC: Well, I think a part of the Reverend Hawkins appeal was the gradual awakening of the social spirit on my part, the community spirit, as well as the sense of, I think, excitement of the Roosevelt administration. I mean, he was a man who began to think in terms or PWA and WPA and helping the country to get back on its feet, so to speak. Up until that time, Herbert Hoover and some of the other people were -- It'll all work out somehow. Here was a man who was far more practical in, how you might say, involving people.

NL: And you would say that Hawkins was in that same kind of tradition of picking up the pieces.

JC: Yes, and about that same time, I think LaGuardia had been -- had either been mayor was coming into his own as mayor, and I think following LaGuardia, I'm not sure, but Mark Antonio --

MN: Yes.

JC: There was a kind of, and there was some other mayor too who was, how you might say, more dynamic, more -- Lindsay, I think came along too.

MN: Would it be too strong a statement to say that you are in the late '30s, you had a sense of social justice as an issue that was awakened both in college and in contact with Reverend Hawkins?

JC: That's correct. I began to be a little less self-contained, a little less, you know, inner directed. I could see the larger society as in need of people being involved.

NL: What other lessons that you think you might have learned in the Bronx that you carried with you throughout all of your different travels to D.C., Alaska, and other place -- well, and ending up in upstate New York?

JC: That's a good question. Well, I think that the experience of going to City College and I guess my growing of age led me to see much further than I had been seeing up until that time. I guess a growing maturity.

MN: Now, Natasha, you wanted to raise some questions about --

NL: I had -- I was interested in how, you know, the two of you met and kind of decided to form a life together, you know, we're looking at 62 years later. How did that all start, you know, just more of a personal side thing [Laughs].

MC: Well, we were both at -- well, we met as a -- I said when we were at the War Department pool, and after they divided the pool into two sections because it was getting too crowded, all of our crowd, so to speak, they were put into the morning session except for Jim and Jim's friend, another Jim, and myself, and so, they would come by my house every morning and pick me up, and we would go sightseeing. We did all the museums, and I was impressed with a man that liked museums [Laughs].

NL: Being an artist yourself --

MC: Yes --

NL: I see.

BP: He always tells me that. Before I got engaged --

NL: [Laughs]

BP: -- he would encourage me to take women on dates to museums.

MC: Uh-huh.

JC: Indeed!

[Laughter]

NL: And you're living proof that it works, right?

JC: Right.

[Laughter]

NL: So the museum thing impressed you.

MC: That impressed me, and so we went to -- The other fellow kind of dropped out of the picture, and so it was just Jim and me and we did all of D.C. together.

NL: Wow.

MC: And we didn't have -- neither of us had any money. We were [Laughs], and so we found lots of cheap ways of entertaining ourselves like riding the bus to the end of the line and back. [Laughs] Going to the concerts where the -- places where we could hear some good Goodwin music --

NL: Right.

MC: And that kind of thing.

NL: [Laughs]

MC: And so after the ASTP put Jim in the army, that was all we needed. It meant that we would get a, what do you call it? You know, the government would pay him for having a wife, and when we had Nikki, the government paid extra.

NL: A family wage --

MC: Yes.

NL: So to speak.

MC: So, you know, there were lots of advantages, and by that time, we knew we wanted to get married, so we did.

NL: Wow.

MC: We came back to Brooklyn.

NL: Oh, you got married in Brooklyn.

MC: And got married --

NL: In Saint Philip's?

MC: No because my father --It was Saint Philip's next to us, but my father was sick at the time. He had been an invalid for some years, and so we were married at home --

NL: Ohh --

MC: --So that he could attend --

NL: --attend, that's wonderful.

MC: And when the, I forgot what I was going to say [Laughs].

NL: I have a question, speaking of Brooklyn, just wondering off the top of my head because I know this in my experience growing up as a Bronx native that, you know, that Brooklyn to me seemed like the other side of the world. You went there rarely.

[Laughter]

NL: We probably went there every -- You know, we had family in Crown Heights. We'd go to see them, you know, once, maybe once or twice a year was a lot, you know?

MC: Yes.

NL: So I was just wondering in your own recollection of growing up as a Brooklynite, did you have any kind of sense of what was going on in the Bronx? Did you know anybody? Did you have any kind of, you didn't know what was the -- you know --

MC: I just heard about the Bronx --

NL: And what of the reputation?

MC: Heard about Harlem and when I went to business school at the Harlem Y, I got off of the subway that morning and looked around and I said, "So this is Harlem."

NL: Right.

MC: I had heard --

NL: You had heard about it for so long, but --

MC: But I had never been there, so with the Bronx, I had never been there.

NL: You had never been -- Did it have any kind of reputation at the time that you can think of that the Bronx was associated with anything in particular.

MC: I don't think -- until I met Jim, I haven't felt one way or the other about --

NL: Oh, okay, so it was even more [Laughs] divided than even when I was growing up.

MN: Now, Margaret, did you have a similar kind of political consciousness? Did the two of you talk about politics at all when you were traveling around Washington?

MC: I think we did? What do you remember?

JC: Well, I think the one thing we've always said is that you saw me carrying *The Compass* or *The P.M.* --

MC: -- or *The P.M.* --

JC: -- and you thought at that time you seldom saw anybody who seemed to carry their political flag around --

MC: [Laughs]

JC: -- all the time, I don't know.

MC: Yes, well I had this idea that anyone who read *PM* had to be a good -- In those days, the word "liberal" was a good word.

NL: Right.

MC: [Laughs]

MN: Right.

MC: Meant all kind of political progressives.

MN: Yes, and so when I saw him, I was interested because he had a *P.M.* under his arm.

NL: Right.

MC: I thought, you know --

MN: A *P.M.* and a museum --

[Laughter]

MN: Unbeatable combination --

NL: Right, right. Oh, look at that.

MC: [Laughter]

NL: Well, if there's any other final comments. I don't have any --

MN: Yes --

NL: -- too many more questions, but --

MN: -- If either of you would like, in summation, to say something to the people of the Bronx that might be hearing this? Any final remarks?

JC: Well, I think during my years in college, I had gotten to know a young lady in Brooklyn, and the subway system was not very helpful in getting me back home, because I walked in the house at 3 o'clock in the morning, and I was unable to explain satisfactorily to my mother why it took so long to [Laughs] get from Brooklyn back to the Bronx.

[Laughter]

JC: So, that was the one thing that soured me on Brooklyn.

[Laughter]

NL: Right, you kept it local.

MC: He said that it was a good thing that we met in --

MN: Washington --

MC: -- in Washington --

NL: -- in D.C., right!

MN: [Laughs]

MC: Because he would never come all the way to Brooklyn for any girl.

[Laughter]

MN: Okay, on that note, thank you.

[End of Tape]