

TMP-012

Interviewee: William Lawrence

Interviewer: Jessica Taylor

Date: June 19, 2013

T: I am Jessica Taylor, and I am interviewing, oh my God, Bill Lawrence at-what time is it?

L: It is 5:15.

T: 5:15 on June 19, 2013. We're actually at the Lawrence residence.

L: New Cottage.

T: New Cottage. Okay. Is that the name of it?

L: We just call it New Cottage because the old house-river house-my daughter is in.

T: Oh, okay. Please state your full name.

L: William Lindsey Lawrence.

T: Okay. What is your date of birth?

L: March 29, 1947.

T: Where were you born?

L: Norfolk, Virginia.

T: What are your parents' names?

L: My mother's name is Louise- Mary Louise Lindsey, she goes by Louise. Her father was born at Belroi, and her mother was born on the Island, at the old homeplace. My dad's name is Louis Lorenzo Lawrence, Sr. He was born in Richmond.

T: What did they do?

L: Dad was a civil engineer with the government for thirty-odd years. Mom was a homemaker.

T: Do you have any siblings?

L: Yes, I have three brothers and a sister.

T: What do they do?

L: Well, they're all on the island. Larry was a banker and retired a year ago. My sister is a homemaker. My brother Lou was an N.C. State graduate like I was in engineering but he ended up teaching drafting, math and physics at Gloucester High School. Our youngest brother is the administrator of a nursing home. I have two brothers that are retired.

T: Wonderful. As for you, I know you've had many lives, but what is your occupation or was your occupation?

L: I was trained to be a nuclear engineer. I worked at Surry for two years during the initial start up. I had intents to buy land on the island, and that was maybe a deal I couldn't refuse. But it's eighty-five miles to Surry, so I had to find another profession. They were building the community college, so I went back to grad school at William and Mary and got a master's and I taught math and computers at the local community college for thirty-two years.

T: Wow. Okay. I know this is kind of an obvious question, but when did you come to Gloucester County?

L: I was raised in Hampton and we would come over when I was a little kid and we'd stay at two places: my grandmother's at old homeplace, that her brother George Smith and her sister Irene lived in. We'd spend weekends here or we would spend weekends at my grandmother's sister's house at the Courthouse. It's the building between the Masonic Lodge and the First Presbyterian Church, now Harry Morris' law office. I spent many a weekend at that house. My aunt's

husband was B.B. Roane, who was the clerk of court for fifty-four years or so. I have fond memories of being up there at the Courthouse.

T: Now you have to tell me about them.

L: Uncle Bernard was a character. Everybody knows stories about B.B. Roane. He was a unique individual. He had no children. His life was that clerk's office. He worked Saturdays; he worked Sundays. Many time, Sunday afternoon, Aunt Grace would say, go up to the courthouse to the clerk's office, get your uncle, tell him dinner's going to be ready in fifteen minutes. You'd just walk across the street and the court circle. Uncle Bernard, he was a character. Fond memories. In the back of the house, which is now the parking lot for the church, my aunt had chickens. She had about a, I'm guessing, six to eight foot fence, number of chicken coops. Lots of times, we'd get up at six o'clock in the morning, she'd say, hey, I want some fresh eggs, so we'd go with her in the backyard and put our hands in the chicken coop. They never pecked her, but when you're a kid, it seemed they always peck your hands. We let her get the eggs most of the time. That felt very lucky.

T: Were you around when the Daffodil Festival and the fair came around at all?

L: We were living here at the time. We'd go occasionally. We don't go every year. That's been going on for twenty-some years I think now. We built the big house in [19]74.

T: Just so the listener would know, where is the big house?

L: About a hundred feet away. [Laughter]

T: Where in Gloucester is it? [Laughter]

L: On L's Island in Zanoni on the Ware River.

T: What else about Main Street do you remember, if you could kind of visualize it and walk down from the court green?

L: If you came out Uncle Bernard and Aunt Grace's house, what is now the road that goes to the newest courthouse, that was just an empty field. It dropped off pretty- I mean, it was a big ravine. There was a house on the corner across from the Masonic lodge. That is no longer there. That is just an empty space. Tucker's store was there. Next to the Masonic lodge were two buildings. I think Mrs. Stubbs' house was one and the old shoe shop was the other one. The church manse was between B.B. Roane's house and the present church. The minister lived there and would visit my aunt quite often. That building was moved sometime in the [19]70s. Back and- well, it's behind where the old chicken coop used to be. They ended up buying the lot when my aunt died. The church ended up buying land behind that property. They moved the manse to that lot. Used to be church chimes every Sunday morning that would wake you up.

T: From which church?

L: First Presbyterian Church. That one you could really hear because it was right next door. Newington Church, I think was a little further down the street so it was a little- not quite as loud. I remember going to Leigh's Market to pick up- my aunt would call and get the order. We'd go down, they'd bag them up, and we'd bring them back. Where Southern States is and in that shopping center that they're rebuilding right now, I can remember when that was a big field. They built an A&P, that became Wallace and Gurleys then they had the fire that burned that

down. That's what they're sort renovating now, making some doctor's offices, I think. Professional offices of some sort. The Texaco station was there. There was a building that was used as a restrooms that used to be facing the garage-service station to the right. Friend of mine, Joe Brown, who's about ninety now, or ninety-one, remembers when it used to be on the left and it was a hot dog and hamburger stand. He said that building was moved from Five Gables, which was also Chesapeake Academy. Jessica, when you came in past the Zanoni store and you made that hard left, if you had gone straight for another three-quarters of a mile, that road ends at Five Gables. That building which was square shape, pyramid type roof, was moved from Five Gables to the left side of the gas station. It was a hot dog-hamburger stand. Then it was to the right as restrooms. Then I think again in the [19]70s, it was sawed in half with a chain saw and put on a Low Boy truck and taken up to the Ark area to put back together in the back of a home, used as a workshop for the family.

T: Wow. Do you have any idea how old it was originally?

L: No. Chesapeake Academy was probably around 1925. I was able to find a picture of it.

T: Really? I'd love to see it.

[BREAK IN INTERVIEW]

L: They moved it to Ark.

T: It was a big thing, wasn't it? People taking pictures of it and then do that one there. That is just something else. Thank you. So as a child what do you remember about the gas station?

L: Not a whole lot. I don't think my dad ever stopped there for gas. If he did, I don't remember it. I remember passing by it to go to my aunt's house up at the Courthouse. It was white, always in pretty good shape, kept nice and clean. The road wasn't nearly as close to the pumps as it is now. Not a whole lot. I don't remember ever stopping there.

T: No?

L I do remember the square shaped, what became the restrooms, off to the right-hand side.

T: Do you remember anything about Howard Brown or Captain Jack Brown at all?

L: The only thing I knew about Captain or J.C. Brown is right across on the other side of the river, he ran a fuel storage facility, with the storage tanks that were horizontal and up on frames. They had a gas pump at the end of the pier, so if we wanted boat gas we could just take our boats over. We'd call them ahead of time, they'd turn the pumps on, pump it, then walk down the pier to the building and pay for the gas. After we had moved here, they still delivered the gasoline and oil here by barge. Then we had one of the big storms and it did damage to the pier and I think they cut it out. It was a big deal, seeing the barge come up to fuel tanks and whatnot and they'd pump it into the storage tanks.

T: Yeah. What sort of everyday things like that would you have seen around Main Street that aren't there anymore?

L: Tucker building is gone. The manse is torn down. The two buildings next to Masonic lodge have been demolished. There was a hodge podge shop-

T: What is a hodge podge shop?

L: It was like an odds and ends-type small little cabin. You know where the debtor's prison is? Between the debtor's prison and the engineering office or the older courthouse, it was right in there. It wasn't on the corner, but back toward the engineering building. That was there and that was moved in the early [19]80s I would think, to the end of Carriage Street, to kind of use as a storage facility and then it wasn't maintained. The roof started giving way, it became rotten, they just demolished it four, five years ago. My aunt had chickens in the back. It was very rural. That lot of theirs went back a mile. There was a road like an old logging road. Lot of times, Sunday afternoon, my dad would take us and we'd just walk down there, it became Fox Mill Run.

T: We've talked a lot about how Main Street has physically changed over time. How has the way that people used Main Street changed over time?

L: Hugh Dischinger, who's ninety-one now- I hope you interviewed Hugh- grew up there. He did make the comment, this is the only time in my life that I cannot walk to either a grocery store on Main Street or a service station. I guess with the big box stores you tend to lose that. We've lost gas stations and we've lost local grocery stores. Where people in Gloucester Village could be self-sustaining, and you could walk everywhere, you can't do that anymore.

T: Is that something you would maybe want to see changed in the future?

L: Well, it'd be nice for people in the Courthouse.

T: Yeah, definitely. For the rest of Gloucester, do you feel like the Courthouse has a place?

L: Absolutely. It's pretty unique. I'm a docent at the museum, and people come from all over. That court circle is very unique. I don't know of any other in the country right now. I'm sure there might be some, but if there are, I'm not familiar with them, the way the road goes around.

T: That's nice. You've been a voice for preservation for a long time. To someone that doesn't know the value of the court green, what would you say to justify recreating a self-sustaining community?

L: I would think- and I wouldn't mind living in the Courthouse- that you want to maintain that small village atmosphere. To do that, part of it is walking. My uncle Bernard had an automobile, but the last ten years of his life, he didn't. They were self-sustaining. As they got older, they'd call Leigh's Market, and Leigh's Market would bring the groceries to the house. We're only talking about a block. Now we put people in nursing homes. In those days, they stayed in the house. I think Uncle Bernard died in the house. My aunt may have been in a nursing home the last week or two. People tended to stay put.

T: And that's just justification for creating a community that is self-sustaining.

L: Yeah, a lot of my friends, one I play bridge with, is building a new house in the Courthouse right now.

T: Wow.

L: It's a good area that you can walk. A number of our friends have moved there. You can walk to a lot of facilities.

T: Absolutely. Part of that is really interesting because you're maybe the third or fourth person I've heard say that if the facilities aren't there, then it's not self-

sustaining. It's more of an image. I'm wondering what role can preservationists play in keeping it practical, keeping it so that it actually serves the community that's immediately around it.

L: To me, you need to hit a happy balance. That is, you can't preserve everything, though that'd be nice. Some things need to be modernized. We have a unique look in Gloucester. When I was a kid, around where the fire station is, there were a number of homes there that have been demolished. You need the fire department. Every time you demolish something, you don't build it back with the same look. It has a unique timeframe. As we lose one at a time, you lose that and what goes back is something newer, and sometimes better, but different. You tend to lose that look.

T: Okay. Going back to being a kid and kind of living in the time period of that aesthetic, kind of walk me through what you'd do in a general store or in the hardware store when you go there as a kid.

L: I only remember going to Tucker store once, and boy, that was something. The stuff on the shelf were toys probably from the thirties. [Laughter] It wasn't a lot, but stuff left over from the thirties. It was like going into an antique store. Doswell Dutton had the hardware store. You could buy anything you could think of: hammer, nail, saws, he had it. That was further down towards the service station. He was a good friend of my uncle's.

T: Oh, okay.

L: Fact is, when my uncle died- he was a mason. His masonic book was given to him by Doswell Dutton, so that's one thing I did was return the book back to Doswell Dutton.

T: Wow. Small world.

L: Small world.

T: When you walk in, the one time you went to Tucker's, you walk in, how were you greeted, what's the relationship like?

L: It was old in the lifetime of the store. It didn't last much longer after visiting there. I was probably a teenager, may even have been in my twenties when I visited. It was on its last leg. I think there was one person behind the counter, but there was another customer and they were talking, so I just meandered around the store. When the customer left, we chatted for a little bit. That's about it. It was dark, I remember. It didn't have a whole lot of modern lighting. It's not like going into a modern store, where it's lit up like a Christmas tree.

T: Did that make you uncomfortable?

L: No, just different.

T: Different than you were used to. You had gone away for college and been to Raleigh. What's it like coming back?

L: Wasn't a whole lot different. One thing: when my wife and I moved back here in [19]74, one Friday evening we wanted to go out and get a snack of some sort, went to Main Street and it was locked up tighter than a drum. There was not a single thing open. We finally found a Dairy Queen up at Ark open. From

Gloucester Point to Gloucester Courthouse, there was nothing. Nothing was open.

T: Wow. Wow.

L: No fast food.

T: Yeah. Do you think that's a good or a bad thing?

L: Now, that's nice to have.

T: Yeah?

L: Yeah.

T: What do you attribute that to?

L: More people.

T: More people?

L: Yeah.

T: Okay. I've heard people- there's a really divided opinion between, I really like having new people, and, I really hate having new people around.

L: You get a change. You get good points and bad points. Coming up when I was a kid, I remember coming over on the ferry ever. Once you got past Gloucester Point, it was very rural, much like going 17 north of the Courthouse. Very rural. We lost that until you get past the hospital now. It's pretty much just a suburban corridor now from Gloucester Point to the Courthouse. I miss that, the open fields. There was a lot of open fields. But, if you want to go get a Frosty at Wendy's now on an evening at nine o'clock at night, we get in the car and we're there in seven or eight minutes to get a Frosty. You lose one and you gain another. To me, it'd probably be nice to have a balance between the two. I grew

up in Hampton, and Mercury Boulevard had no buildings on it when I was a kid.

It was a bunch of dairy farms.

T: Wow. Now it's different. [Laughter]

L: It's different; I don't like it at all.

T: I can understand that. Now that there is this huge population boom, the Courthouse is rather unable planning-wise to expand the actual village itself. How would you like to see it beyond bringing grocery stores and hardware stores, maybe serve the needs of the community?

L: It'd be nice if they could keep Main Street from stoplight to stoplight as close to what they have now without any big box coming in that would...The intersection is going change some but if you could maintain that small store atmosphere, then when you go from north of the court circle, you get the residential area. The county owns some of those; the county could have a big impact. I think they're buying the lot where Tucker Store was. They own the old Corr-Hutchinson house, the old big two-story house across from the Presbyterian Church. One time they talked about making it a parking lot. That would just be terrible. You've got the nice old big trees and whatnot. One of those things you just chip away. The old Gloucester High School, which was adjacent to Botetourt Elementary School that housed the superintendent's office, they tore that down about five or six years or so ago. My grandfather remembers the guy that made the cinderblocks that built that building.

T: Wow.

- L: In the early 1900s. It's something that lasts a hundred years and it's gone. It gets replaced with something that's not quite as nice looking. You lose that atmosphere; you lose that look. That can be a challenge, especially as those houses get older. If I lived on Main Street, I would definitely try to be a voice to try to maintain it. It seems to chip away. A house goes and it's torn down and something else, one here, one there. If they want to maintain it, a concerted effort needs to be made.
- T: I have to agree with you. The way that you experienced Gloucester was fundamentally rural.
- L: Yeah, very much so. There were chickens in somebody's backyard.
- T: My neighbor has them, makes me feel rural. [Laughter] We use the land differently now that it isn't rural, it's suburban. I talked to the lady that runs Parks and Rec here and she was saying that the way they use the parks is now fundamentally different, like cultural art centers than places for kids to play baseball and things like that. How has recreation and leisure activity and tourism changed since you came here in the [19]50s?
- L: Well, we talked about it. When we use to go and visit my aunt, my dad would take myself and my two brothers that were alive at that time, and we'd go over to the old Botetourt Elementary School. They had a ball diamond in the back and we'd play ball. I remember a lot of dirt, no grass. In the summertime, you'd go to home plate and the dirt and the dust was about two inches thick. There were pickup games. You don't see much baseball pickup games anymore with the kids. We didn't have soccer in those days. If we played ball with a ball, it was

kickball with baseball rules. No soccer. That didn't exist. Beaverdam Park didn't exist. Course down here we'd go fishing off the old pier, crabbing off the old pier, all salt water, no fresh water. Golf course was there when I was a kid. My mother said that even when she was young, growing up in Richmond, she would come down and spend many summers here that they would have dances, at the country club. She said it was a lot of activity. She said it was probably as much to do as a teenager then as there is now. They had a bowling alley, they had a theater...She said there was a lot to do.

T: Where was the country club?

L: Where **Gloucester** golf course is, at the club house, where they keep the golf carts now. It was an open area. [Laughter] They used to have dances in there.

T: That's interesting. She came in the summers and noted that there was more to do in the summers. What about you? Did you find that there was consistent stuff to do in the summers?

L: We would only stay three or four days or so, a weekend. It was like paradise coming down here. If you came from the Courthouse, there was almost no houses other than the Zanoni store, coming down. You thought you were coming to the end of the world. Then coming down the old lane and across the marsh, no houses at all. It was very, very rural, grass growing up in the middle of the lane, only the tire tracks. The marsh road was level with the marsh, oyster shell road. Literally we could come over only at low tide. If we came over at high tide or up a little bit, one of us rolled up our pants legs and took off our shoes and socks, walk around, get the boat, come around and get the rest of the family. We

have it raised up now, so it comes over a couple times a year, you wait a couple hours and it goes back down.

T: That's the stoicism I would expect from a waterman. [Laughter] Did you notice that a lot of other people were coming for three or four days or for the summer?

L: We didn't know anybody else. There were no other kids around. My cousins, my mother's brother's kids, would come down sometimes. No, there was two houses on the next point, no kids. There were just no other houses around here.

T: Just your family.

L: Yeah. That was it. We didn't know any of the other families up at the Courthouse.

T: When did you get to know them? Clearly you know them now.

L: Many of them. Once we moved here in [19]74, houses go up here and there, you just introduce yourself, you run into them. The old Zanoni Store, after we moved here was probably in business for another eight or ten years. You could still get groceries, gasoline, and meat.

T: This was in the [19]70s?

L: Yes. You'd run into some of the neighbors. Everybody knew- you'd say, are you Mr. Smith's nephew? You pretty much knew that. The old people knew the young people much more than vice versa.

T: Yeah. The country store was also a good way to meet people.

L: Yes.

T: The people that went to this country store, they walked.

L: We would bike. A lot of old people would be in automobiles. Some would walk.

T: Okay. I think that's all of my questions. Do you have anything you want to put on the record for the entire population of the University of Florida?

L: [Laughter] I have a friend of mine, I played golf with him today, he said, go Gators.

T: Yes.

L: He's a big Florida fan.

T: That's an amazing note to end on.

Transcribed by: Sally Taylor

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