

Transcript of a Recorded Interview with John Thomas Ballew, 3 Jul 1990

AD: Permission and release agreements are recorded at the end of the interview.

AD: . . . Mr. Ballew this morning. Would you give me your name, please?

JB: J.T. Ballew.

AD: Senior?

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: Would you tell us what the J.T. stands for?

JB: John Thomas.

AD: Alright. And how long have you been a resident of Richmond, Kentucky?

JB: All my life. I was born here in Richmond.

AD: You were born in Richmond?

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: I m going to move this closer to you so we can make sure we get your voice and not mine. Okay. When were you born here, do you mind me asking?

JB: 1909.

AD: Oh. When s your birthday? What month? Date?

JB: January, the 6th.

AD: 1909?

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: Were you one of the first black store owners in Richmond?

JB: No, no, no.

AD: When did you get the store started?

JB: In 1937.

AD: 1937. Has it always been a tailor shop?

JB: Yeah. It started right here.

AD: Okay. Were you born in Richmond or Madison County?

JB: I was born in Richmond.

AD: In Richmond?

JB: Yeah, on Irvine Street.

AD: On Irvine Street?

JB: Right.

AD: What was Richmond like for black people? Tell me some of the things you did? Education? Schools? Did you have a school then for black people only?

JB: Have we?

AD: A school.

JB: Yeah, yeah.

AD: What was the name of it?

JB: Richmond High.

AD: That was Richmond High. Okay. And then when integration came in the 50s, everybody went to the same one?

JB: No, we moved, changed, went to Madison High.

AD: Oh. Richmond High was the black high school. Okay.

JB: Madison High was the white one.

AD: Oh, okay. Can you tell me, do you remember the name of the elementary school? The elementary school?

JB: Richmond High taught from 1st grade up to 12th.

AD: Like a consolidated school?

JB: Mmm-hmm. First through 12th.

AD: Oh. Okay. Where, in 1909, when you were born, where was the black community located?

JB: Well, we was scattered around all over Richmond. Richmond was a small place then.

AD: Okay.

JB: Yeah, I guess three or four thousand people all together.

AD: Three or four thousand all together?

JB: Yeah.

AD: How many of those were black? The first time you can remember.

JB: I don t know. There were quite a few blacks.

AD: Were there?

JB: Yes.

AD: Okay. You weren t the first black businessman?

JB: No.

AD: Was the black business area where you are now, on this part of 3rd street or have you moved since you first started?

JB: No, I ve been here ever since 1937.

AD: In this location?

JB: Several of the black business _____(unintelligible) remember that was back before I started.

AD: That was back before you started? Uh, Mr. Ballew, let me check something right quick if you don t mind.

(PAUSE)

AD: Alright, let s start again. Do you remember the names of any of those black businesses?

JB: Uh, Vulcan Irving had a tailor shop here on Main Street.

AD: I m not getting the name.

JB: Vulcan Irving.

AD: Vulcan Irving? Okay.

JB: Yeah, had a tailor shop on Main Street, and Johnny Cobb had one on First Street, and Lucille Preston s place.

AD: Are you getting quiet on me?

JB: Huh?

AD: Are you getting quiet on me? (Laughter).

JB: No. (Laughter).

AD: It seems like to me, I m getting uh. . . , your voice seems to get lighter and lighter on me. I m going to put this over by you. (Laughter). Okay, how about there were black funeral parlors I know? Funeral homes?

JB: Yes.

AD: Do you remember the names of them?

JB: Well, there s Boyd s Funeral Home, Collins Funeral Home, Rankin s Funeral Home. (Background voices)

JB: Rankins. . .

[A voice in the background asks JB an unintelligible question]

JB: [Reply to unknown voice] Those would ve been with Collins.

AD: Can I ask you some personal questions?

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: When were you married?

JB: I was married in 1928.

AD: Twenty-eight? Who did you marry?

JB: Thorton Brooks.

AD: Thorton Brooks?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Okay. I do know you have one son that is a junior. He is a minister.

JB: Yes.

AD: Do you have any other children?

JB: Yeah. Four girls.

AD: Four girls and a boy?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Okay. I didn't realize the reverend was the baby. Is he?

JB: Yes. Well, he's a twin.

AD: Oh, is he?

JB: No, he's not the baby. There's one younger than him.

AD: Oh, okay. So, you . . . after you got married and you raised your family here? You've always lived in Richmond?

JB: Yeah.

AD: I won't even ask you if you like it.

JB: Hmm.

AD: I won't even ask you if you like living here. You just have. You just stayed.

JB: Yeah, I like it alright.

AD: When you were growing up, was there a lot of racial conflict between blacks and whites in this town?

JB: I don't know. Not too much. We got, got along very well. Worked together, played together.

AD: Did play together?

JB: Sure.

AD: Uh-huh. What social organizations did you belong to when you were, um, in your adult life?

JB: I belong to the N.A.A.C.P. and . . .

AD: Do you belong to, like, a social men s club or something? Where there any of those?

JB: No. I didn t belong to any lodge or men s club.

AD: Yeah, lodges and things like that.

JB: No, no, no, no.

AD: Okay. Did you ever serve Richmond as, say, like a volunteer fireman or anything like that?

JB: No.

AD: What s your church? What church do you attend?

JB: I m Predestinarian

AD: Oh, okay. There is a church, a Predestinarian church here.

JB: Yeah. I don t attend it very often. I don t attend it very often.

AD: But that s your church home. Would you say that?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Okay. How long have you been attending that church?

JB: Well, since I was about 13 years old.

AD: Really?

JB: Not regularly.

AD: Right. I understand what you re saying. Okay. Let s see what else. About Richmond? About black people in Richmond? Was the community tight knit?

JB: Tight?

AD: Yeah, you know, like tight knit in the sense that everybody knew everybody and usual friction, but nothing to divide the community up.

JB: Yeah. Most everybody knew everybody. That s why there s only a few of us here (laughter).

AD: (Laughter) Everybody did know everybody? Okay. Are there certain families that have always lived in Richmond that everybody s kin to? You know, like the Ballew family, different families. If you, if you looked at all the black people in Richmond, could you count out maybe five or six families that have been here since the beginning?

JB: Well, . . . the Broaduses.

AD: The Broaduses?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Okay.

JB: Walkers.

AD: Walker.

JB: Walkers.

AD: Okay.

JB: Whites. There were some Whites.

AD: Okay.

JB: Collinses.

AD: Yeah.

JB: Boyds.

AD: Boyds?

JB: Boyds. B-O-Y-D-S. Boyds.

AD: Okay.

JB: Yateses. Yates.

AD: Okay. Mr. Ballew, what is your father s name?

JB: James Ballew.

AD: James Ballew?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Was he in Richmond from Richmond?

JB: Yeah. He was born and raised in Richmond.

AD: Born in Richmond?

JB: In Madison County.

AD: Oh, okay. Madison County?

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: Do you remember your mother's maiden name?

JB: Lena Chenault.

AD: C-H-E-N?

JB: A-U-L-T.

AD: A-U-L-T?

JB: Mmm-hmm. Yeah.

AD: Okay. Madison County, too?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Okay. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JB: Seven of us.

AD: Okay. Seven. Are they still living? Are you the only one alive?

JB: No. There's three of us living. Three of us are living.

AD: Okay. In this area? In Richmond?

JB: Yeah. Well, one lives in Versailles. A sister in Versailles.

AD: Okay.

JB: I got a sister here in a nursing home.

AD: Okay.

JB: What did I say, three of us living?

AD: Yeah, three of you. How do you feel about . . . Are there still just three, two sisters and you?

JB: Yeah, yeah, two sisters and myself. Three of us.

AD: Okay. What do you, what do you think about Richmond today and black people?

JB: Well, I . . .

AD: I know . . . Well, there are sometimes, you know, I can read things in the paper and talk to people. What do you think black people in Richmond? What do you think about the situation?

JB: I don't think that black people manage well off as they was back then.

AD: Why do you say that?

JB: Well, most of the black people had good little homes .

AD: Okay.

JB: It wasn't much but they had their little home and a little farm, most all of them. But now, there's just a very few blacks that have a home and maybe one or two farmers. When they got rid of the mule and they got the tractors, the negroes . . . the black people had to leave . . . leave Madison County because there wasn't anything here for them to do.

AD: Okay.

Voice background: Most blacks had trades like they do now.

JB: Yeah, they had trades but after they got rid of the mule and got a tractor, there wasn't anything much for us to do.

AD: So, as a community, you think that they were better off then, in terms of what they owned and the kinds of work they did, and all that?

JB: Yeah.

AD: How come you never left?

JB: Well, I've always worked and always had a job.

AD: Okay.

JB: I had a family to take care of.

AD: Okay. Did you learn how to do this in school?

JB: No, I went to . . . Well, I worked for a tailor for six years, and then, I went out for myself after the six years or so. He taught me quite a bit about sewing.

AD: Okay. So, it s been a nice life for you?

JB: Yeah, I ve enjoyed it very well. I made a living out of it.

AD: Boy, that s the most important thing.

JB: Yeah.

AD: Okay. How about the political situation in Richmond? Do you . . . Since you ve been here, has there been a black, say, city councilman or anything like that?

JB: No.

AD: Has there been a black on the school board?

JB: One black on the school board.

AD: Do you remember their name?

JB: Carla Black.

AD: Carla Black?

JB: Yeah, Carla Black.

AD: On the school board?

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: About how long ago was that? Oh, that s now.

JB: Yeah.

AD: Was she the first? Black on the school board?

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: But there d been no blacks on, like, city council or anything like that?

JB: No.

AD: Okay. How about the board of commissioners? No blacks on the county commissioners or anything like that?

JB: No.

AD: Do you vote?

JB: Well, they had a Deputy Conner here once. Deputy Conner. Spry Collins. And that s about all, I guess, about politics.

AD: Are you a voting person?

JB: Yeah, I always voted.

AD: What party?

JB: Republican.

AD: Have you? (Laughter) Okay. You first voted in . . if you were born in 1909, you first voted in what . . you had to be 21, then, didn t you?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Uh, 1930. Around 1930.

JB: 1920, wasn t it? No. 1930, yeah. Yeah, yeah. 1930 I guess.

AD: Uh-huh, and you became a Republican then?

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: Do you remember why?

JB: My mother and father were Republicans. I just went along with them.

AD: What . . . my folks used to call it the party of Lincoln, and they voted Republican. Until I got in there in the last 25 years and started making waves, but then I got them to change but not before that. Of course, I don t know what they did went they went into the voting booth (laughter) Okay, that s interesting. Are your children Democrats, do I imagine?

JB: Yeah, I think . . they all are Democrats.

AD: Yeah. Do they ever give you a hard time about it?

JB: No. They never did bother me about that, politics or the church either.

AD: You didn't.

JB: No.

AD: Do you . . . you don't go often . . . you go occasionally. Do you tithe?

JB: No.

AD: Or you just go when the mood strikes you?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Who's your minister? What's his name?

JB: Well, to tell you the truth, I really don't have a minister at my church. Well, my church closed up long . . .

AD: The church assembly?

JB: Yeah. The old church . . . the government take the church and members went to other churches.

AD: Oh. Well, was it an all-black church?

JB: Yeah.

AD: What was the name of it?

JB: Grove Hill.

AD: Grove Hill?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Did it say Grove Hill Predestinarian?

JB: Grove Hill Predestinarian.

AD: Predestinarian?

JB: Baptist.

AD: Baptist. Okay. Do you remember when the state took the land or whatever?

JB: In 1940.

AD: Oh, okay. What did they put on it?

JB: The government take it over. What was the name of that? Blue Grass Ordnance. They stored ammunition there.

AD: Yeah, uh-huh. Okay.

JB: About 14,000 acres I think it was.

AD: Did you ever serve in the armed forces?

JB: No.

AD: Reserves?

JB: No, no.

AD: Okay. Let s see, what else. What other nosy questions can I ask you? Um, let me think about it for a minute or two.
(PAUSE)

AD: Alright, Mr. Ballew, you were married for the first time in what year?

JB: 1928.

AD: Twenty-eight. And you married a Chenault?

JB: No, no, I married a Brooks, Thorton Brooks.

AD: Thorton Brooks was your wife, was who you married then. Are you still married to Thorton Brooks?

JB: No, she died in 1949.

AD: Alright, you remarried, sir?

JB: Yeah, I married again in 1955.

AD: And who did you marry in 1955?

JB: Narcissus Hill.

AD: Narcissus Hill?

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: Alright, is she still alive?

JB: Yeah. She s . . .

AD: Is you with you? Are the two of you together?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Okay. Your children are by Narcissus?

JB: No, they re by Thorton, my first wife.

AD: Okay. Alright.
(PAUSE)

AD: Mr. Ballew, what are your children s names? Let s do that. I know that you have a son, Reverend J.T. Ballew, Jr. What are your other children?

JB: Ometris Walker. That s her married name.

AD: Ometris?

JB: Mmm-hmm. Walker.

AD: Does she live in Richmond?

JB: No, she lives in Cincinnati.

AD: In Cincinnati, Ohio?

JB: Yeah.

AD: May I ask how old she is?

JB: She s 59, I think.

AD: Okay.

Voice in background: About 61. Because I m two years older than my sister and they were around the same age.

JB: She was born in 29.

AD: Okay. And the other . . . ?

JB: The other is Lena Mae Dillingham.

AD: Lena Mae Dillingham?

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: Where does she live?

JB: She lives in Dayton, Ohio.

AD: About how old is she?

JB: She was born in 1930.

AD: Alright. And the third daughter?

JB: Marla. Marla Farris.

AD: Marla Farris?

JB: Yeah.

AD: Where does she live?

JB: She lives here in Richmond.

AD: Okay. About what age is she?

JB: She s born in 34, I think.

AD: Okay.

Voice in background: Maybe 64, maybe 54.

JB: No, Marla wasn t born in no 54. She was born in 1934. Marla was. Yeah. Marla and her brother, they were twins. He was born in the same year.

AD: Marla and J.T. Junior are twins.

JB: Yeah.

AD: How many grandchildren do you have? I won t ask you to name them. About how many do you have?

JB: Grandchildren. I have 16 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren.

AD: Do you? Sixteen grand and 16 great-grand. Okay. Oh. Do you have a family reunion once a year, where you get to see everybody and everybody gets to see you?

JB: Well, we haven't been doing it. We've had . . . all the children and grandchildren have a birthday party for me, January, the 6th, every 10 years.

AD: Every ten years?

JB: We've had about four or five of those.

AD: Okay. But you don't have, like, a family reunion in the summer or something?

JB: Well, yeah. We have a family reunion, but I very seldom go to it . . . which I seldom go. Nothing much for going myself.

AD: While we've got this tape on, may I have your name?

Voice in background: Dan Walker. Dan Walker, Jr.

AD: Dan Walker, Jr. Are you from Richmond?

DW: All my life.

AD: What year were you born and what day?

DW: Nineteen nineteen. January, the 7th.

AD: Oh, okay. You were both born in the same month. Nineteen nineteen January the 7th. What was your mother's maiden name?

DW: Patty Palmer.

AD: Patty Palmer. From Richmond or Madison County?

DW: Madison County.

AD: Okay. I've just identified the voice you've heard on the tape periodically while we've been discussing the black community in Richmond, Kentucky. Are you . . . Have you always been a tailor?

DW: Yes.

AD: When did you come into the tailor business?

DW: Well, I've been working clothes ever since around about '37, but I started sewing in the late '40s.

AD: Okay, and you came to work . . .

DW: I worked while he was in the service.

AD: You came to work under him when he came out of the service?

DW: Yeah. I worked for him before he went in.

AD: Oh, did you?

DW: Yeah.

AD: Okay. And you're working for him ever since?

DW: Yeah.

AD: Alright. What kind of taskmaster is he? See, we've got it all on tape.

DW: I tell you what, I've been with him since 1936, that answers your question, don't it.

AD: Not necessarily.

DW: And I'm pretty highly needed.

AD: Are you pretty highly needed?

DW: Yeah.

AD: Oh, okay. Of course, it does. It does answer the question. Oh, okay. Alright. Oh, let's see, any other hints you can give me about things I forgot to ask?

JB: No, I don't know.

AD: Mr. Ballew, one question?

DW: Well, you could say, we played with whites . . .

AD: When you were in school?

DW: Of course, we didn't go to the restroom with the whites.

AD: Right.

DW: We didn't go to school with the whites. . .

AD: Right.

DW: At that time. And I don't say they integrated.

AD: You don't say they did it?

DW: I don't call that integrating?

AD: What do you call it?

DW: Force. You don't have a choice.

AD: No, you don't.

DW: You don't have a choice.

AD: Right.

DW: They close the school and, of course, you have to do it.

AD: Force you to have to go to Madison High.

DW: Or else?

AD: Yeah. That's true. Or else, not go at all?

DW: Yeah.

AD: Okay. That's forced integration.

DW: Yeah, that's forced. That forced down your throat just like forced segregation.. It's the same thing.

AD: Yeah, we didn't have a choice there either.

DW: No, we don't have a choice.

AD: Right, I hear what you're saying.

DW: That's the way I feel about it, I don't know.

AD: Let me ask you both a question. What I'm doing is for the Oral History Commission out of Frankfort, Kentucky. I have ample tape. I have all kinds of time and I want to do this thing

right. So, what I m asking for is your permission to come back again.

JB: Yeah, you can come back again.

AD: And talk to you again and record you again.

JB: Mmm-hmm.

AD: Alright, and you, sir?

DW: It s alright with me.

AD: Okay, alright. What I ll do is I ll take it back and . . .

DW: Bring me . . Bring me a tape so I can keep it.

AD: A copy of the tape?

DW: Yeah. That s if its alright with you?

AD: Yeah. That s fine with me. Mmm-hmm.

DW: I know its opposite.

AD: Yeah, I ll be happy to.

DW: I d enjoy it.

AD: Okay. I ll come back again and we can, you know, get some things ironed out that I ve overlooked, you know, but this is just our first contact and I want us to make some more contact before I m through with this whole project.

DW: Do you know a lady by the name of Beverly Henderson, who lives in Lexington?

AD: I taught Beverly, didn t I?

DW: Where?

AD: At U.K.

DW: You go there?

AD: Beverly Henderson?

DW: Who are you?

AD: I m A.G. Dunston.

DW: You might have taught . .

AD: A fro- American History.

DW: Yeah, I bet you did.

AD: Unless there s more than one.

DW: I don t think the world could stand more than one (laughter). Now, she s my niece. Beverly Henderson. She s a lighter complexion than I am.

AD: Yes? And she works now for a . . uh. . .?

DW: Something like Women ____.

AD: Yes. Yeah, I taught her.

DW: Yeah.

AD: Yeah, I did.

DW: Dunst?

AD: Dunston. D-U-N-S-T-O-N.

DW: Did you go down to Richmond one time?

AD: Mmm-hmm.

DW: I didn t meet you.

AD: Okay. Let s take . . . get rid of . . .
(PAUSE)

AD: I m asking these gentleman if it s all right for me to have the tapes transcribed, that means if somebody would take the words off, you know, with the little machine, and put them on paper and so forth and so on. Okay. Is that okay?

DW: It s okay.

AD: Is it okay for me to use what I m taping in my research?

JB: Sure.

DW: Yeah.

AD: And, I don't know. This was recorded but I have promised you a copy of the cassette. Do you want a copy of the cassettes, too, Mr. Ballew? Okay, that'll be fine. Thank you very much. Interviewer name is A.G. Dunston. It is the morning of the 3rd of July, 1990.