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The students were galvanized when they realized this neighborhood had a history that, on paper, did not exist. They began to unearth significant documents and fill in missing gaps. Lou Arrindell, a junior researching civil rights and local politics for our class, wrote:

Up until this point, the library was simply a quiet place to do homework or check out a book. A few weeks ago, the idea of doing research in newspapers and microfilm was more than an unnerving task; it was absolutely terrifying. The idea of scrolling through a year’s worth of microfiche seemed impossible. I thought the needle-in-a-haystack type research we were doing was reserved for junior papers and senior theses.

After all the research we’ve done in this class, I have not only gained confidence, but also learned how to research topics efficiently. Despite the fact that the actual process became tedious at times, whenever I found a gem of information, I was overcome with a feeling of satisfaction that sustained me for quite a while. The greatest moment research-wise for me was when I found a copy of the *Black Word*.<sup>47</sup> Several of the founding members of the newspaper had expressed regret over not having any of the old issues, and did not know where any existing copies were. When I found a copy of the *Black Word* in the public library, I thought it typified the research of the class, as we were not only finding tangible objects with a real connection in history, but also emotional connections with people.

The students found great motivation when they realized that their scholarship might help enlighten others and deepen their perspective on African American experience. Jenny Hildebrand, then a sophomore, wrote:

I am amazed at the interesting and shocking events that have occurred in Princeton. Finding historical information has not been easy, but along the way, I have learned a lot. Sitting in Mudd Library the other day, I spent about three hours sifting through ancient documents. I found myself reading articles that didn't pertain to my topic just because they were interesting. At the end of the three hours, I stood up and there were little pieces of browned paper all over my lap. It was then I realized how fragile those old documents were and that future generations would not be able to handle them. In the same light, people's stories would be dying along with them, burying valuable history.

I felt exhilarated as I watched my students discover for themselves the humanity I'd been experiencing from my black friends and mentors since the 1960s and '70s. I loved seeing the students tearing off the blinders, and moment by moment being given unexpected insight into the false notions of race and racial superiority. I loved seeing the Witherspoon old-timers decimate stereotypes of blacks as less intelligent, less diligent, less ethical, less capable, and more dangerous and volatile than whites.

Many of the students *saw and felt* racism in whole new ways. I heard amazement in their voices when they talked about how many of the residents *looked* white but were classified as black. The variety of skin shades made illogic the myth of "race" and highlighted the inconsistencies of how we define it.

All of the students were captivated by the keen sensibilities of the people they interviewed. They were also startled by some of the elders' abrupt observations about them. Kappy (Kathleen Montgomery Edwards) chided a black student for her privileged background and challenged her to become more active in social and political justice issues. Another, one-hundred-year-old Johnnie Dennis, kept interrupting her own story to tell the white student interviewing her, "Get your hat and go home."

Again and again, students said they were “blown away” by hearing about living life on a daily basis under oppressive white assumptions and the daily terrorism of Jim Crow racism. At the same time, they felt humbled and inspired by the genuine openness of people who had transcended the tremendous wrongs done against them to live with such humor, imagination, and intellect. Student Celia Riechel wrote:

With Mr. Phox and Ms. Twyman, I forgot almost immediately what information I was looking for. I just wanted to sit and listen, and follow their thoughts. I wanted to sit at their feet in wonder and awe. So this is real. This is raw. . . . Nothing could adequately convey how I feel. . . . Were I to sum up my experience this semester, I should like to have the luxury of time, to serve as an intermediary. Will it weave itself into some spiraling arabesque throughout the rest of my life? I do not know. I am in the midst of this, still waking each morning with something new because of it. Still glowing/flushed/tingling from the listening. . . .

To really know (and I will never really know, but maybe that is what is so wonderful about it), I need the focalization that time can only give—not time as defined by seconds, minutes, years, but time defined by distance traveled, things done and not done, happiness and pain felt and shared. . . . I do not know how my time will go, but ask me in a year or ask me in fifty, and maybe then I’ll know.

The more interviews we did, the more it became clear how much more we had to do. We couldn’t possibly complete all the interviews or research in the few weeks that remained in the semester.

When the course had ended, we couldn’t let it go. Lauren Miller, a sophomore, suggested we call the oral history “a work in progress.” Our core group was committed, and more volunteers joined us. With funding from Princeton University’s president, the Program in African American Studies, Community-Based Learning Initiative, and vice president for Campus Life, we were able to subsidize students’ work and pay for professional transcriptions of the taped interviews. With this backing, our endeavor turned into a much larger project. We began to gather one evening a week to share stories,

check facts, eat pizza, read the narratives aloud, and make notes about following up on various interviews to fill in missing details.

We held events at the Princeton Public Library, Princeton University, and the Clay Street Learning Center, and students read dynamic excerpts from the interviews that moved and sometimes shocked our audiences. Many Witherspoon residents attended these sessions and afterward often confirmed, elaborated upon, or corrected information they heard. The most significant intervention was one night at the library when a student read from his interview with a former Tuskegee Airman, who had described in phenomenal detail his experiences in World War II as one of the first African American military pilots.

After our presentation, three women from the neighborhood took me aside to say this man's story was absolutely untrue. He never was a Tuskegee Airman. He claimed to have been with the 302nd Fighter Squadron in Italy in 1944, but at the time, he was still in high school. They showed me a photograph of him and themselves at their graduation under a "Class of 1944" banner. He was not in the records of Tuskegee Airmen. Memory may be unreliable, but this was fiction, so we deleted that story from this collection.

In May 2001, we celebrated our progress at the Henry F. Pannell Learning Center, formerly known as the Clay Street Learning Center. By then we had been working for more than two years. We had thirty-four taped interviews, with written transcripts of most of them—some as long as thirty pages. From the transcripts, we'd shaped short biographies, as well as first-person narratives of varying lengths that related stories of important or pivotal moments of the residents' lives.

The oral history was under way. Neighborhood retirees and university students—black, white, Asian, Caribbean, Native American, and Middle Eastern—had been mobilized by this extraordinary community. People who normally didn't cross paths had worked together, often in a state of elation, over the rich first-person histories we were collecting. To witness the strength of individuals who saw so clearly beyond the corrosive effects of racial prejudice was awe-inspiring. Coming together to preserve these irreplaceable stories gave all of us the gift of seeing and being seen.

At our celebration in May 2001, we ate soul food prepared by George Cumberbatch, owner and chef of the Downtown Deluxe on John Street. The large

room was filled with the loud noise of people talking and laughing together. A hush fell, however, when Buster Thomas spoke and students began to read excerpts from their interviews with the residents. As we listened, a feeling of reverence seemed to settle over the room. At one point, Saloni Doshi, a junior then, read from her interview with Romus Broadway about a time he went to explore the slave records of his ancestors and ran into a cousin of his who was white. Broadway sat rapt as he heard his own words spoken back to him. Later, he said, “When I was listening, it was all I could do to stop the tears. I felt I was walking in the footsteps of all of my forefathers.”

Now, nearly two decades after it began, with *really* the last interview completed, we are seeing Hank Pannell’s dream, now our collective dream, come true. Altogether, we now have gathered more than fifty-five oral histories. These incorporate interviews with Sophie Hinds, Burnett Griggs, Emma Epps, Estelle Johnson, and Eva Redding, which we unearthed at the Historical Society of Princeton. We’ve regretted that some people died before we had a chance to record their stories. But it wasn’t too late for these.



This book’s organization was inspired by presentations we gave based on the interviews. Each chapter presents a particular focus, followed by speakers talking about their own experiences. The residents’ birth dates are given after their names, before they are quoted, to allow readers a sense of time and perspective from the late 1800s up to 2000. In chapter 10, residents discuss more modern times and look to the future of the neighborhood. In the back of the book, short biographies of each speaker are listed in alphabetical order by surnames.

Given the history of Jim Crow and all the barriers erected against black success, the Witherspoon residents have always been well aware that their value as individuals is not equated with the status of their jobs. Whether people wash pots and pans, open doors, or shine shoes for pay does not measure their intellect, dignity, courage, or generous spirit. Residents show loyalty and respect for one another based on character, unrelated to spurious measurements. As Emma Epps told her mother’s employer, “Miss Wright, the fact that my mother was a laundress in your house was not the fact that she didn’t have a brain but that she didn’t have a chance.”

A large number of the speakers in this book did service work and jobs below their aspirations. For many, their life experience has been their schooling. Holding a job for twenty or thirty years and moving to the top of it may show a steadiness of purpose and a pragmatism that has supported their families, but looked at more closely, it can also be an index of their intellect and their character. For instance, Jay Craig, superintendent of maintenance for the Jewish Center of Princeton for thirty years, used to go to the Carousel, a breakfast spot, to drink coffee and solve the problems of the world with former Princeton president Harold Shapiro. A voracious reader, Craig, who lives on-site at the Jewish Center, traveled around the world on the funds he saved on rent. I imagine that if, as a young man, he'd had a chance at college, he would have been, at the least, a US senator by now. Similarly, Hank Pannell did such outstanding work as a maintenance mechanic for the Housing Authority that he ended up as chief of maintenance for the Housing Authority of the Borough of Princeton for thirty years. Yet he would have much preferred to follow his dreams at Princeton's Jet Propulsion Lab, where he worked as a young man—the first and only African American at that time.

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Our intention for this book was to bring the historic Witherspoon neighborhood into view and to share the sweep of its rich history. An unplanned result of the process is that the wealth of individuals' life stories has provided a fresh lens for illuminating the persistence of racism's harsh realities and the legacies of slavery as they have been and still are experienced in our country today—particularly in law enforcement's disproportionate focus on young black men and women. This stereotypical focus has created a discriminatory cycle of arrests, prosecutions, prison sentences, and an industry of mass incarceration and felony disenfranchisement that has taken the vote away from millions of black men and women and split up families in ways reminiscent of slavery.

Close up, this book has allowed us to witness the personal ways in which discrimination and institutional inequalities work in our society and the lengths to which entrenched power will go to suppress black advancement, black leadership, and independence. It also has allowed us to see how African Americans have fought for self-determination in the face of continuing

prejudice. In these pages, we hear how a tight-knit community faced these adversities and formed strategies to protect their children from them. As individuals, neighbors, children, and parents, they have gone through all life's passages—growing up, working, forming friendships and partnerships, marrying, divorcing, raising children, celebrating, burying loved ones—with an awe-inspiring ability to challenge yet put aside, step over, leave behind, and transcend the demeaning, destructive stereotypes others keep imposing on them.

In the pages that follow, you'll meet black Princetonians who have risen to challenges every day and have worked to live just lives despite the injustices. Although the speakers certainly have cause for bitterness, they rarely dwell on it. This was true for Emanuel Rhodes, a World War II veteran awarded the Bronze Star Medal for valor and heroic service in a combat zone. Rhodes returned after the war to a segregated Princeton and a nation where black soldiers were being shot, and lynched by white mobs that were never held accountable. He shook his head. "I still don't have hate in my heart," he said. "I'm seventy-eight years old and I don't hate nobody."

The words from this little-known neighborhood, in this well-known town can teach us lessons for living, for finding freedom by standing up against wrongs and working together for justice. We hope that this book will inspire readers to create a world of caring where every one of our children can thrive.

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## *Author's Note*

We are donating documents and photographs used in preparation of this book to the Historical Society of Princeton and to the Paul Robeson Collection for African-American Family History at the Princeton Public Library. At the public library, these archival materials will be housed in the Robeson Collection in the Special Collections Room, along with the library's excellent genealogical materials for those interested in researching their African American roots.

The Historical Society of Princeton, which donated a great deal of time to preparing photographs for this book, will also have copies of research materials gathered by students and community available to the public.

Half of the profits from royalties for this book will be donated to the Jean Riley Scholarship Fund for the Princeton Nursery School, 78 Leigh Avenue, Princeton, NJ 08540. Jean Riley grew up in the Witherspoon neighborhood and put her heart into the nursery school for fifty years, beginning in 1955. She was head teacher until 1973 and served as director from 1974 until her retirement in 2005.