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Introduction

“THE NORTH’S MOST SOUTHERN TOWN”

I

The time is the twentieth century and the place is the center of the borough of Princeton, New Jersey, where white church spires and flowering, tree-lined streets reflect the aura of the world-renowned Princeton University, well known for a steady stream of Nobel Prizes and accolades for its illustrious professors, graduates, and alumni. Every year, thousands of visitors from around the world walk the hallowed grounds where famous predecessors have tread, not only at Princeton University but also at the nearby Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Westminster Choir College.

Unknown to most of those visitors, as well as to most university students and local white residents, is the existence of an active, yet historic African American community in the very heart of Princeton, only a few minutes' walk from the university. This book, *I Hear My People Singing: Voices of African American Princeton*, gives testimony to the firsthand experiences of individuals who built a close-knit and vibrant community within a segregated Northern Jim Crow town, where “the doctrine of white supremacy was held almost as tenaciously above the Mason-Dixon Line as below it.”¹

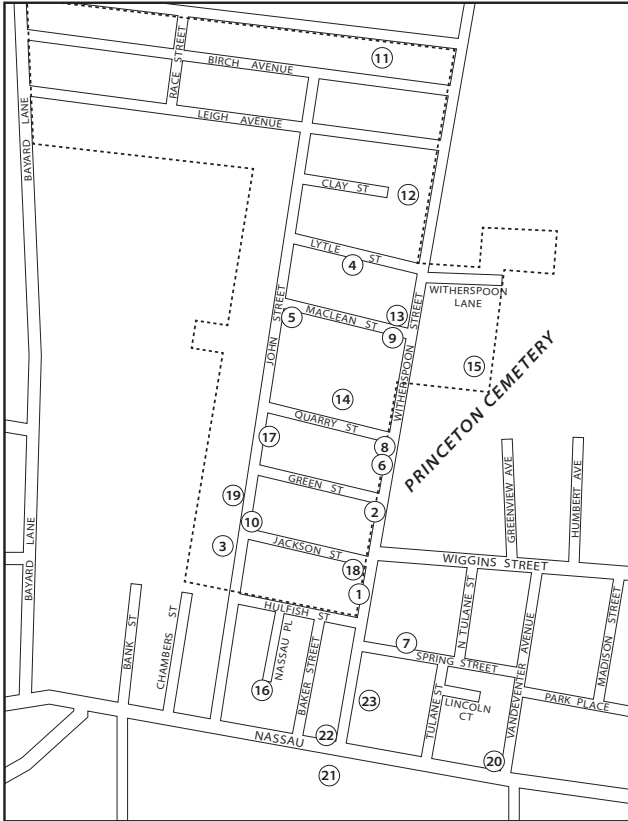
This neighborhood took shape in the 1700s across the road from what would become Nassau Street and Princeton University's Nassau Hall. Originally established by the Presbyterian Church as the “College of New Jersey” in 1746 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and permanently situated in Princeton in

1756, the school, like the town, prospered from slavery—so much so that local black residents dubbed Princeton “The North’s Most Southern Town,” as well as “The South’s Most Northern Town.”

Only one dirt road, formerly an Indian trail, led from Nassau Street into the neighborhood. That thoroughfare, then named Hill Street, was referred to by generations of white Princetonians as “African Lane” or “African Alley.” Today that thoroughfare, called Witherspoon Street, still takes us from Nassau Street into the African American neighborhood. In the 1800s and 1900s, the vicinity covered eighteen blocks, which included what is now Palmer Square. The neighborhood had active black businesses mixed in with a stables and a fire station. Today, it’s an eleven-block area, still proximate to the university and yet still a world apart. Its narrow streets, shaded by overhanging trees, continue their turn-of-the-century appeal. From Paul Robeson Place (formerly Jackson Street) to Birch Avenue, Witherspoon to John Streets, you will find neat two- to three-story single houses, as well as wooden and brick row houses with front porches and small, well-tended yards planted with flowers, bushes, and trees.

The area is also home to four long-standing churches: the First Baptist Church of Princeton on John Street, founded as Bright Hope Baptist Church of Princeton in 1885; Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church, founded in 1838; Mount Pisgah African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), founded in 1832 on Witherspoon Street, and Morning Star Church of God in Christ, founded in 1941 on Birch Avenue. Members of social clubs and fraternal organizations meet in the American Legion building, the Elks Lodge, and the Masonic Temple. A large multi-unit residential building called The Waxwood sits at the former site of the Witherspoon School for Colored Children and, central to the neighborhood, is a community learning center and businesses that include an urban planning center, a beauty parlor, a convenience store, and restaurants.

The presence of African Americans in this predominately white town may not be well known, but their existence here is older than the town itself, which became known as “Prince Town” in the early 1700s. The first black people in the Princeton area are thought to have been free blacks dating back to the 1680s.² Seven enslaved Africans arrived in 1696 with white colonialist Richard Stockton, who had bought and brought them,



The Borough of Princeton in 1917, based on a map created by William L. Ulyat.

- | | | |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Griggs' Imperial Restaurant | 9. Mt. Pisgah A.M.E. Church | 16. Palmer Square (after 1937); previous site of Baker's Alley |
| 2. The Colored YW/YMCA | 10. First Baptist Church of Princeton | 17. Ball's Confectionary |
| 3. Dorothea House | 11. Morning Star Church of God in Christ | 18. Thomas Sullivan's grocery store |
| 4. Charles Robinson American Legion Post 218 | 12. Barclay's Ice, Coal, and Wood Plant | 19. Princeton Rug Washing and Carpet Cleaning Works |
| 5. Masonic Temple, Aaron Lodge #9, Inc. | 13. Witherspoon Street School for Colored Children | 20. Public Library (later the Historical Society) |
| 6. Paul Robeson's birthplace | 14. Witherspoon ("Quarry Street") School | 21. Nassau Hall and FitzRandolph Gate |
| 7. "Sport" Moore's family property | 15. Negro Cemetery (inset for Princeton Cemetery) | 22. Cesar Trent's property (1795) |
| 8. Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church | | 23. Office of the <i>Citizen</i> |

In April 2016 the area inside the dashed line was designated a historic district on the recommendation from the Historic Preservation Committee of Princeton.

along with his wife, Susanna, and their children, to a 400-acre tract he purchased that year—land that includes what is now the campus of Princeton University and the grounds of the Theological Seminary. In 1701, Stockton purchased from William Penn an additional 6,000 acres that are approximately the center of the present town of Princeton, for the sum of 900 pounds.³ The enslaved Stocktons not only worked the land but also cleared and built the Stocktons' stately home, as well as their own slave quarters in the back. The Stocktons' mansion, "Morven," later became the official residence of New Jersey's governors.⁴ Today it is known as the Morven Museum and Garden.

It's most likely that Richard Stockton, and perhaps his father before him, was among the beneficiaries of land in exchange for the purchase of slaves. When the English seized New Netherland from the Dutch in 1664 and New Jersey became a royal colony, the Crown, which profited from the slave trade, encouraged slavery by offering white settlers 150 acres each "for every full-grown, able-bodied male slave he owned and 75 acres each for those not fully grown."⁵ Elsewhere in New Jersey, Africans arrived with settlers from England, Sweden, and Holland, possibly as early as the 1630s.⁶ By 1726, there were some 2,600 enslaved Africans living within the state—roughly 8 percent of the colony's population.⁷ Their origins varied, but ships brought them directly from West Africa and the Caribbean to New Jersey's ports in Perth Amboy and Camden, where they were advertised and sold to slave traders and the highest bidders from New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. New Jersey imported Africans in larger numbers than any other Northern colony.⁸

Throughout the 1700s and into the early 1800s, slavery was woven into the financial and social fabric of Princeton, as it was into the college towns of Cambridge, New Haven, Providence, New Brunswick, and elsewhere in the North. The sale and purchase of African men, women, and children was business as usual. Across generations, "For Sale" advertisements were printed on flyers or run in local newspapers, not just for newly arrived Africans, but also for those previously owned. After the fifth president of the College of New Jersey died in 1766, for instance, a sale was held on campus right in front of the president's house, now known as the Maclean House. On July 31, 1766, the *Pennsylvania Journal* ran this notice:

TO BE SOLD,

At public venue, on the 19th of August next, at the presidents house in Princeton, all the personal estate of the late Revd. Dr. SAMUEL FINLEY, consisting of:

Two Negro women, a negro man, and three Negro children, household furniture, horses, and neat cattle, a light wagon, a new chaise, a sleigh, some hay and grain, together with a variety of farming utensils. Also a choice collection of books, religious, moral and historical, containing the complete library of the deceased. The Negroes will be disposed of at private sale previous to the day appointed for the venue, should a suitable price be offered for them. The Negro woman understands all kinds of house work, and the Negro man is well suited for the business of farming in all its branches. The conditions of the venue will be made known on the day of sale. All those that are indebted to the said estate by bond, note, or book debts, are desired to make immediate payment to the subscribers, and such as have any demands against the estate are desired to lend in their accounts properly attested to.

JONATHAN SEARGEANT, jun,
in Princeton, or
SAMUEL BREESE, Executor,
in New York.⁹

As the town of Princeton grew, so did the number of Africans sold to local residents, businessmen, and estate owners for work in private homes, brickyards, quarries, farms, stables, and lavish properties.¹⁰ According to Robert Ketchum, in his book *The Winter Soldier*, “Lush agricultural land around Princeton resembled the plantations of Virginia, both in its gentleman farmers and the number of Negro slaves who toiled in their fields.”¹¹

Just as most white families in Princeton had a team of horses, they also had slaves. “Most white families in Princeton owned at least one black human being,” writes historian and professor of American History at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Craig Steven Wilder author of *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities*. By

the 1780s, one of every six residents of Princeton was an enslaved person. Similarly at that time, enslaved people were one fifth of the population of New Brunswick, where Rutgers University had been chartered as Queens College in 1766.¹²

It's clear that colonial institutions of learning greatly relied on the use of slave labor and profits from the slave trade to build and maintain their facilities. Princeton was no exception. Its seven founders, named as trustees who in the king's name established the College of New Jersey in 1746, each owned African people who were bound to them for life. In addition, the first nine presidents of the College, at the school's helm from 1746 to 1854, are all known to have been slave owners.¹³ As Wilder recounts, "The first five colleges in the British American colonies—Harvard (est. 1636), William & Mary (1693), Yale (1701), Codrington (1745) in Barbados, and [Princeton in] New Jersey (1746)—were instruments of Christian expansionism, weapons for the conquest of indigenous peoples, and major beneficiaries of the American slave trade and slavery."¹⁴ Among these college towns, however, Princeton created a unique niche for itself as the most welcoming intellectual environment for children of the Southern elite. Its sixth president (1768–94), Rev. John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister, who began buying slaves shortly after his arrival in America from Scotland, actively recruited students from slaveholding families in the South and the West Indies, so as to acquire funding for his initiatives to restructure the college and enhance the curriculum. By doing this, Witherspoon reached beyond the intense competition for students from New England and the Mid-Atlantic states to welcome the sons of Southern families hostile to Harvard's and Yale's abolitionist sentiments.¹⁵

In important ways, Witherspoon—whose name came to identify the African American neighborhood—embodied Princeton's relationship with slavery. The contradictions in white behavior were always apparent to the Witherspoon residents. They understood Witherspoon's slave-owning and proslavery status yet appreciated his preaching that blacks and Indians should be educated—something forbidden in many other slaveholding states. Witherspoon also privately acted upon this belief by tutoring two free black students from Rhode Island, a free black man from North Carolina and several Delaware Indians, in the hope they would preach the Gospel.¹⁶

Later in his life, President Witherspoon spoke in favor of abolishing slavery, but an inventory at his death still included “two slaves . . . valued at a hundred dollars each.”¹⁷

And so it was that Princeton’s African American neighborhood was born within the framework of slavery—an institution that stripped people of their own names, languages, families, homes, and tribes, and also, by law, denied them all rights and liberties. As the DC Slave Code of 1860 mandated, “A slave is a human being who is by law deprived of his or her liberty, for life, and is the property of another. A slave has no political rights and generally has no civil rights.”¹⁸ Despite this legacy, Princeton’s African American residents found personal freedom through their steadfast faith and deep understanding of the essential equality of all people.

When the College of New Jersey’s Nassau Hall hosted the first New Jersey state legislative body in 1776 and housed sessions of the Continental Congress in 1783—when, for several months, the town of Princeton was the capital of the United States—Princeton’s free and enslaved African Americans did the heavy lifting. They stoked fires, cooked meals, served, cleaned, washed dishes, laundered clothes, shaved white men’s cheeks, powdered them, polished shoes, floors and silver, emptied chamber pots, built lecture platforms, readied furniture, and did other service jobs. When one of the first public readings of the Declaration of Independence took place on the lawn in front of Nassau Hall in early July 1776,¹⁹ several signers of the Declaration—John Witherspoon, Richard Stockton II, and Benjamin Rush, class of 1760, all slave owners—were part of the crowd gathered for the occasion in defense of American freedom. As Craig Steven Wilder observes, “[Witherspoon] and his contemporaries had established their own intellectual freedom upon human bondage. They had also bound the nation’s intellectual culture to the future of American slavery and the slave trade.”²⁰ We don’t know how many of Princeton’s free or enslaved black residents were standing on the outskirts of the crowds in front of Nassau Hall, but it is certain that the Declaration’s message of “freedom, equality, and liberty for all” reached their ears and stirred their aspirations.

When it came to the American Revolution, African Americans were eager to fight for freedom—a concept they wholeheartedly embraced. Both free and enslaved black men seized the opportunity to prove themselves.

Some slave owners throughout the colonies promised freedom to enslaved black men willing to fight in their places, and their places were quickly filled. Two Princeton men were known to have served for their owners during this time. And when the British realized their manpower shortage and offered freedom to slaves in exchange for their service to the Crown, thousands of black men enlisted in the British army and navy.

Thousands of black men signed up to fight for the army of the colonies as well. Eventually, the Continental army, pressed for manpower, also offered to liberate enslaved men at the end of the war.²¹ Some two dozen black men from Princeton—enslaved and free—joined nearby state militias and fought against the Crown. Several others signed on as seamen and marine pilots. At the end of the war, most of the formerly enslaved men who had fought for the Crown—approximately 14,000—departed on British ships. Some settled in Nova Scotia while others were taken to Canada as freemen, making many Americans, particularly slaveholding Americans, furious at the British for confiscating their “property.”²²

Formerly enslaved men who had fought for the colonies also earned their freedom, which was sometimes accompanied by a reward of land.²³ Another victory was the fact that the nature of a war waged in the name of “liberty” inspired more Americans to reflect upon the wrongness of slavery. “During the war, anti-slavery sentiment became a moving force, highlighted by the law of March 1780 gradually abolishing slavery in Pennsylvania.”²⁴

In 1804, the New Jersey legislature passed a Gradual Abolition Act mandating that “all slave children born in New Jersey” after July 4, 1804, be set free upon a woman’s twenty-first birthday and a man’s twenty-fifth birthday. This arrangement actually extended slavery until 1825 and gave slave owners two decades more of free labor. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, many free blacks began settling in Princeton because of the South’s pressure on them to leave: “In the South the free Negro was unwanted, branded both a nuisance and a menace. . . . He was viewed as a threat to the institution of slavery, not only by arousing the slaves’ dissatisfaction by his very presence, but by actively encouraging them to steal, to escape, and to plot against their masters. All whites agreed that the Free Negro must be kept in check.”²⁵

New Jersey, like other Northern states, replaced outright slavery with strict controls of free blacks. An 1807 law disenfranchised free Negroes and women from the voting rights they'd been granted by the state constitution in 1776. In Princeton, as elsewhere in New Jersey, free blacks were required to carry "free papers," which included a certificate of freedom that stated his or her name, a physical description, and the manner in which freedom had been obtained. Throughout the state, free Negroes could not walk on the streets after dark, travel between towns without a pass, vote, purchase property, enlist to fight in a militia, serve on a jury, testify against a white man, or enter public or private white establishments.²⁶ By 1850, when the town's total population was just over three thousand, the Witherspoon neighborhood had become home to between five and six hundred free blacks.²⁷

During the Civil War—one-sixth of Princeton's black male population volunteered to fight for Union forces. Since the black regimental army units known as United States Colored Troops (USCT) were still not permitted to form in New Jersey, Princeton's black men enlisted mainly in Pennsylvania and New York. Some eighty black Princeton men volunteered and fought in the Union army, many serving in the Sixth or Eighth Pennsylvania Regiment, USCT.²⁸ At least twenty-two joined the US Navy.²⁹ Princeton's men joined some 200,000 other black soldiers to help turn the tide of victory for the Union forces.

African American men from Princeton also served in large numbers in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and, more recently, the Gulf War. Three of the men interviewed in this book won Purple Hearts and higher honors for their bravery during World War II, but their presence abroad earned them no special gratitude from their government in America, which still treated them as second-class citizens. "When we got out of the service, [and we went to a restaurant,] they stopped all of us black guys and said, 'You can't eat here,'" recalls Floyd Campbell, who earned a Bronze Star in the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II. "We said, 'But, we're soldiers.' They said, 'We don't serve colored.' So they brought food out to us—plain white bread with mayonnaise and onions. That was the first incident of hurt. You mean to tell me I went to war for my country, and I can't eat with fellow soldiers? It brought tears to my eyes."

Witherspoon residents resisted the injustices in large ways and small. In the neighborhood, the churches served as hubs of mutual support and community action. In the 1800s, they formed their own independent congregations, apart from the white churches where they had to sit in balconies or “colored” pews. These churches were not only sanctuaries for worship, but they also served as social centers, meeting places, and avenues for mutual aid and social justice; they provided hiding places for escaped slaves and schools for uplifting and empowering black people, as well as sites for Bible study and activities for young people. Churches in Princeton also worked cooperatively with churches of their denominations in nearby Trenton, Camden, and Newark. A preacher from the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in Trenton, Samson Peters, helped establish the first black church in Princeton, Mount Pisgah AME Church, in 1832.³⁰

Witherspoon residents also traveled to colored church conventions, which began in 1830 at Bethel Church in Philadelphia and were designed to galvanize Negro leaders.³¹ Princeton’s congregants joined other delegates from New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania at annual meetings that addressed public issues affecting Negroes. Church pastors played key roles in the lives of their congregations, not only by preaching against the laws and public policies of slavery and segregation but also in providing needed counsel, food, goods, jobs, and housing in times of hardship for families and individuals.

Princeton’s black community, particularly members of the Mount Pisgah AME Church, became active participants in the Underground Railroad, work that connected them to a large network of both black and white abolitionists. Beginning in the late 1830s, Princeton was “one of the switching points in a circuit for runaways that stretched from Morristown to New Brunswick.”³² This system of transporting their black brethren out of slavery depended on secrecy. It was dangerous work. But the Witherspoon neighbors and their white cohorts were passionately committed to the holy imperatives: “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them,” and “Do unto others as ye would they should do unto you.”³³

To combat discrimination in housing and employment and strive for racial betterment, residents established mutual aid and self-help groups, along with secret fraternal organizations such as the Witherspoon Elks Lodge, founded in 1913, and a chapter of Prince Hall Freemasonry, Aaron Lodge No. 9F & AM, which was descended from the country's first African Masonic Lodge chartered in Boston in 1787. In 1922, World War I veterans organized the Charles W. Robinson Post 218, American Legion. Witherspoon residents established an active and influential chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (NAACP), in Princeton in 1917. The author and intellectual giant W.E.B. Du Bois, who founded the NAACP, often visited the Princeton chapter, which actively advocated for integration, housing, civil rights, and an end to police abuse.

Neighborhood men organized, staffed, and maintained numerous social and civic organizations, including the community's YMCA, which became a local branch of the National YMCA in 1917. Neighborhood women were equally active in forming the YWCA, which met in private homes before joining the YMCA in their central location at the corner of Witherspoon and Jackson Streets in 1938. The YM-YWCA was a lively center of activity that hosted national speakers, as well as sports, recreation programs, field trips, father-son banquets, mother-daughter teas, and social activities for boys, girls, adults, and families. It was the vital heart of the community up until the 1950s, when both black and white branches of the YM-YWCA in Princeton were racially integrated and established in a new building on Avalon Place. In 1932, Witherspoon women formed a "Friendship Club" to advance the cause of racial justice, provide local students with college scholarships, and offer support to families in need. They sponsored concerts and fund-raisers and made contributions to the NAACP and the New Jersey State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Families also actively worked through their churches to create a caring environment.

In the years that followed, Witherspoon neighbors founded the Elizabeth Taylor Byrd Scholarship Fund, in honor of Elizabeth Byrd's lifetime effort to develop leadership among the African American youth through education

and cultural exposure. They organized events and invited guests, including Daisy Bates, the president of the NAACP in Little Rock, Arkansas, to talk about her efforts to integrate the school system there. Bates commented that in her visit to Princeton, she did not find even one Negro working as a salesperson or in any capacity on Nassau Street—the retail center of Princeton then and now. She told the crowd, “I’ll take care of Little Rock. See to it that you take care of Princeton.”³⁴ In 1963, Witherspoon residents created the Princeton Association for Human Rights. Including residents of the greater Princeton area, together with faculty and students at educational institutions, it worked with the Interfaith Council to organize civil rights work in Princeton. Two hundred and fifty people from Princeton traveled together to the March on Washington in 1963.

A good number of the speakers in this book were among the six million African Americans who fled the violence of the South and came north during what is now called the Great Migration, which occurred from 1910 to 1970. Many Witherspoon residents recall their surprise upon finding Princeton as segregated as the Southern Jim Crow towns they had left behind. Racial divisions in Princeton, they discovered, were vigorously enforced in the schools, in housing, and on other fronts. Despite the vagaries of “race” and multiracial mixtures, persons were defined as “Negro” if their appearance conveyed any suggestion that their rainbow of ethnicities contained a drop of Negro blood. Internationally renowned actor, singer, and human rights advocate Paul Robeson, born in Princeton in 1898, later wrote, “Rich Princeton was white: the Negroes were there to do the work. An aristocracy must have its retainers, and so the people of our small Negro community were, for the most part, a servant class. . . . Princeton was for all the world like any small town in the deep south. Less than 50 miles from New York, and even closer to Philadelphia, Princeton was spiritually located in Dixie.”³⁵

Most of the contributions of Princeton’s African Americans have not been recorded or accounted for in white newspapers or history books, yet their labor fueled the growth, maintenance, and economic success of the town and the

university. As did blacks in similarly segregated communities all over this country, generations of Witherspoon residents, no matter how bright or how educated, worked to exhaustion for paltry wages. Within the neighborhood, adults traded goods and services to sustain life for themselves and their children. Together in communion, they created an island of ingenuity in an ocean of pervasive, invasive, and persistent racial discrimination.

This is the world, neighborhood, and community in which the elders of this book lived from 1900 to 2000. They were an exceedingly motivated group of individuals committed to education and intellectual advancement for their children. Upon arriving, some may have been inspired by the institutions of higher learning they found around them, but they soon understood they were not welcome or considered worthy of the privileges and the opportunities reserved for whites. A potent symbol of the racial division between the all-white, all-male university and its black neighbors was the tall iron FitzRandolph Gate in front of Princeton University. This gate, locked year-round, opened only on graduation day and then was closed and locked again. Ironically, the gate opens onto Nassau Street in front of Nassau Hall, at its intersection with Witherspoon Street.

“Probably one of the most ominous things I can remember about growing up in the shadow of the university is the gate,” recalls educator Leonard Rivers. “You go [up] Witherspoon Street [to the] University, and that gate was always locked shut. . . . We had the John Witherspoon area that was our community. We knew that when you crossed Nassau Street and you went to the university, that was not us.”

II

I Hear My People Singing: Voices of African American Princeton took root one summer day in 1999 when I met with two men from the Witherspoon neighborhood for advice about a writing seminar I was planning for students at Princeton University, where I was a lecturer. The course required my students to volunteer weekly in soup kitchens, crisis centers, rescue missions, homeless shelters, after-school sessions, or other programs, and to write about what they learned. Both Henry (Hank) Pannell and Clyde (Buster) Thomas were actively engaged in mentoring children and teenagers, driving

older folks to church and to doctors' appointments, and working to keep housing affordable for black residents. They suggested several programs they knew of in the area that could use volunteers.

We had been talking a while when Hank sat forward. "Your poverty course sounds just wonderful." His voice grew louder. "But what *we really want* is an oral history of our community. *Before it's too late.*"

I was startled. "Are you saying there's never been an oral history of this community?"

"It's never been done. And people are dying. If it doesn't happen now, if we don't get their stories now, it's going to be too late."

Sitting there, I felt a jolt of lightning pass through me. During the summer of 1964, crossing through Mississippi on my way to Florida as a young bride, blinders had been ripped off my eyes. It was the "Whites," capital W, and the "coloreds," small c, signs over water fountains, plus the headline, "Mixers Missing" about the disappearance, and ultimately the deaths, of three civil rights workers, that first shocked me. Like most white people, I'd grown up in a sea of whiteness, oblivious to the depth of racist assaults against black people in America. When I got to Florida, I joined the NAACP, and began tutoring teenagers from the segregated black high school even before I got my first job as a newspaper reporter. At that time, it was *illegal* for my students and their taxpaying parents to cross the train tracks that segregated them after 9:00 p.m. It was *illegal* for them to use public beaches or swim in the ocean. The police arrested the father of one of my students for driving across the tracks at 9:30 p.m. to pick up his daughter. They beat him up and threw him in jail. What I learned in those tense, volatile years changed me forever.

Later on, I went as a Peace Corps volunteer to Malaysia, where I lived in a Chinese neighborhood and taught English as a second language in a teachers' training college. I came back in 1969 to Philadelphia, where I lived in the inner city, worked as a daily newspaper reporter, and became even more deeply cognizant of the viciousness of institutionalized racism—particularly as it pertained to police abuses and the courts. I taught a writing workshop at Holmesburg Prison, which led me to investigate Pennsylvania's state prison system and interview hundreds of prisoners, as well as guards and administrators. My first book looks at prisons and the criminal justice system

from the perspectives of women prisoners, who know it from first-hand experience. In a later book, I examine a leader in America's white supremacist hate movement, a Grand Dragon of Nebraska's Klu Klux Klan, who was transformed by the love of a Jewish cantor and his family, whose synagogue he had planned to bomb. I'd been drawn to this true story because it epitomizes Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s message: "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. . . . We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force."³⁶

Of course, on that spring day in 1999, Hank Pannell didn't know my history, my love of stories, or the wild symphony stirring inside me at the very idea, even the impossible idea, of my managing to conduct this oral history. But Hank is a fisherman, and I've come to know his patience, his powers of observation, and his joy in making a catch. That day he had light in his eyes, and in that light I felt the intensity of his love for the remarkable community that I would later learn had sheltered and nurtured him after his mother's and grandmother's deaths, when he was a young teenager in charge of his younger sister and two brothers.

Hank sat there quietly for a while. Then he leaned back and let out his lure. "We have one member of the community, Mr. Albert Hinds, who is ninety-eight years old right now. That man has a wealth of stories."

"I don't know. I don't think there's any possible way I could do this."

Hank began to smile. "But you're gonna try, aren't you? You're going to try."

Two weeks later, on a Sunday afternoon, I walked by the bank at the corner of Witherspoon and Nassau Streets, which I would later learn had been the first property in Princeton owned by a black man, Cesar Trent, who bought it in 1795, during a lull in enforcement of laws prohibiting such a purchase. I continued down Witherspoon Street. I passed what in the early 1900s had been the office of a black-owned newspaper called the *Citizen*, and past the Princeton Arts Council, former home of the black YM-YWCA, where many hundreds of black kids in segregated Princeton had played, performed, and

been coached in a variety of programs that had grounded them in their young lives with a powerful sense of inclusion and belonging.

At the corner of Witherspoon and Clay, I walked into the air-conditioned Clay Street Learning Center, a community gathering place with a big after-school program, and yoga, exercise, business, and computer classes.³⁷ Hank called me up to a large, airy room on the second floor, where I was surprised to see him setting up video equipment. Buster (Clyde Thomas) and I arranged two chairs and a small table in front of Hank's curtain-draped backdrop. I wasn't used to being filmed while I interviewed someone, and I silently was worrying about whether this setting, the camera, and my tape recorder would inhibit Mr. Hinds. About then, I heard someone slowly climbing the stairs. His hat appeared first, then his brown suit jacket, and then all of him—Mr. Albert Hinds, a small, trim man with the stature of a former athlete.

“My knees make it slow,” he said as he took off his hat. “Concrete and steel wear out over time, so I guess knees do, too. But I'm not getting them replaced.” He smiled. “I'm going out with everything I came in with, except my teeth.”

That day, nearly two decades ago, I treasured hearing Albert Hinds talk about his life. He'd watered horses, walked horses, driven a hack, and shined shoes as a young kid, and at ninety-eight, he was still living in his own home, driving his own car, teaching yoga to seniors three times a week, and playing bridge every afternoon. His deep, bright eyes filled at different times with laughter and sadness as he spoke about his childhood and years as an athlete-scholar at Princeton High School, which gave blacks certificates instead of diplomas. Stories flowed about his work, dreams, and life experiences, most of which, except for a few years in Louisiana, he'd lived within a three-block radius of his house on John Street, where he was born in 1902. He told of his first wife's dying during childbirth in the 1940s, when she was not admitted to Princeton's hospital because she was black.

He spoke freely, with no trace of self-consciousness—not a bit bothered by the video camera, lights, or tape recorder. At the end of three hours, he said he was happy to have recalled so much, but it made him regret he'd never interviewed his own relatives. “My grandfather [a former slave] never

talked about slavery much. My family wasn't a very talkative family. Now I realize how important it is to talk to your children."

After meeting Albert Hinds, I had a brainstorm. That fall, I was teaching a writing seminar titled "Finding Voice: Perspectives on Race and Class" at Princeton. I realized I could change one of my assignments: instead of interviewing a grandparent, each student could interview an elder resident. This could be a great learning opportunity for the students—and at the same time, it could provide at least a dozen more interviews.

Hank, Buster, and I started meeting in Hank's workshop on John Street or over sausage sandwiches at Conte's Restaurant, across from Community Park Elementary School, to figure out how to accomplish our task. Soon, Penelope S. Edwards-Carter joined us. Penney had also grown up in the neighborhood, where everybody knew everybody. The three of them began compiling a list of people sixty years old or older—the oldest first—who had lived or grown up in the Witherspoon neighborhood. We sent out close to one hundred letters, and Hank, Buster, and Penney made calls to talk about the project and ask for suggestions of anyone who might have been forgotten or overlooked. We wanted everyone included. The only criterion was that they currently or formerly had lived in the neighborhood. Every person had stories to tell, and we wanted to hear them all.

These efforts led to an afternoon in late September 1999 when I walked with fourteen Princeton undergraduates from campus into this neighborhood so intimately linked to their university but unknown to them. At the Clay Street Learning Center, we sat in a circle with about twenty older neighborhood residents, whose parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, great-grandparents, and even great-great-grandparents had served Princeton University, its faculty, its students, and its grounds and facilities for more than two hundred years.

Buster, who was a retired labor negotiator, began the conversation. My students looked uncomfortable. In our class, they were reading Frederick Douglass, examining white privilege and patterns of discrimination, but the majority of them had very little experience in conversing about race or unconscious assumptions they might carry. Certainly, most of the students had never been in the same room with this many black people or old people. Seeing everyone sitting a little too stiffly, avoiding one another's eyes, eating too

few cookies, reminded me of how racially segregated we still are in America. Traditionally, one group had advantages associated not only with whiteness but also with an elite university, and the other group, given secondhand books since they were small, and denied freedoms, opportunities, prospects, and power, had known far more humble circumstances.

One lifelong resident, Lois Craig, cut through the reticence and began to tell stories about the way it used to be in the neighborhood. “When we were kids, we were poor, but we never knew it. We always had enough food on our table from the leftovers Dad brought home from his work on Prospect Avenue [at the Cap and Gown eating club].”

“The university don’t let them take food home anymore,” said another woman. “It’s really too bad for the families.”

That meeting, for all its discomfort, was a beginning. We were together. Some of the residents said they were willing to be interviewed. Others weren’t. Several expressed skepticism about the university’s involvement. They said that for years they’d been approached as “subjects” by Princeton students doing research for politics or sociology classes. For them to believe that this project would celebrate their lives—rather than just use them—required a leap of faith that was aided by the fact that Hank, Buster, and Penney, beloved and respected community activists, had initiated this project with me.

One woman in her late seventies said that she wouldn’t be comfortable telling her personal stories to a white student; she would participate only if the student were black. This posed a challenge, but we agreed with her wishes. We wanted to hear her story.

Hank, Penney, and Buster handled the logistics of scheduling, and at least one of the three accompanied each student to the initial interviews, which the students tape-recorded and Hank videotaped. By the end of the semester, we had fourteen completed interviews that my students transcribed and shaped into first-person narratives. The students said they felt their eyes had been opened to a whole new world.

With our semester complete, it became clear that we needed a larger and more focused effort to put together a collection of interviews, which now seemed a logical goal. In September 2000, I launched a seminar, AAS 204,

“Life Stories: Writing Oral History”—the first academic course at Princeton University focused entirely on Princeton’s African American community—under the aegis of what was then the African American Studies Program and the Princeton Writing Program. The students in this class embarked on a journey with me that took on a life of its own. They started learning about the Witherspoon neighborhood and black history through literature, film, guest speakers, scattered newspaper accounts, and research from the First Exhibition on the African-American Community in Princeton, by the Historical Society of Princeton in 1996.

The students said their *real education* began, however, when they walked out of “the Princeton bubble,” down Witherspoon Street, and past the swanky shopping area across Nassau Street that is Palmer Square, which bore little resemblance to the black neighborhood that occupied it in previous centuries. When the students crossed Paul Robeson Place, the complexion of people they passed took on a darker hue, and the atmosphere changed. People greeted them warmly as they passed, and students said they felt a welcoming friendliness they previously had not experienced in Princeton. Lauren Miller, a junior at the time, wrote, “It’s a wonder how much of a difference it makes to step several blocks off campus and to interview the amazing people of the community and learn the rich history of the area. . . . Every day when I step into that neighborhood, I feel my spirit has been uplifted.”

Walking in the neighborhood, the students saw the house where Paul Robeson, the neighborhood’s great champion of human rights, had been born. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the internationally known singer, actor, athlete, scholar, and orator Paul Robeson was “arguably the most popular and influential black public figure in the United States and the world.”³⁸ Students saw the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church with its tall spire, where Paul’s extraordinary father, the Reverend William Robeson, himself, an escaped slave who earned a bachelor’s and two doctoral degrees from Lincoln University, had preached the Gospel in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They also saw the stained-glass window Rev. Robeson had installed in honor of his mother, Sabra, who had been born into slavery in 1825 in North Carolina. On Quarry Street, they saw the former Witherspoon School for Colored Children, which had been formally established in 1858 at 184 Witherspoon Street. As the population grew, the school, still called the Witherspoon

School for Colored Children, was relocated in 1908 to Thirty-Five Quarry Street, where it was reconstructed in 1939 to include more classrooms, a gymnasium, and an auditorium.³⁹ Now it is used as apartments.

The students soon learned that they were treading the same streets where the world's most famous scientist, Albert Einstein, had regularly walked. As a Jew who had "felt a definite coldness" when he first arrived in Princeton in 1933, Einstein had been acutely aware of racism, which he called "America's worst disease."⁴⁰ Throughout his life in Princeton, Einstein attended NAACP meetings and sat on neighborhood porches, conversing with his Witherspoon friends and kindred spirits.

Several students visited the neighborhood churches that residents had attended for worship and Bible studies, community dinners, social events, plays, political discussions, and spiritual solace since they were children. Students also visited organizations established by neighborhood residents, such as the Elks, Masons, and Veterans Association, and saw the site of the former Charcoal Inn and Tavern. They learned about black businesses in the neighborhood and the entrepreneurial spirit that created them.

Two or three of the students visited James ("Jimmy") Mack's barbershop on John Street, a go-to place for black men to get haircuts. Up until the 1970s, black men were turned away from barbershops on Nassau Street. Students learned that for many years, the one black physician in Princeton had a general practice and also made house calls. However, the Princeton Medical Center and Hospital refused to give him hospital privileges, so he could not admit any of his patients there. If black people needed hospitalization, they had to go to a hospital in Trenton or elsewhere for treatment.

During our weekly three-hour seminar, students responded to readings, discussed racism, practiced interviewing skills, and researched different aspects of the community. As they began their interviews, they started to learn more specific details about the discrimination African Americans had experienced in Princeton. At Lahiere's Restaurant on Witherspoon Street, for instance, blacks who appeared to be African in full African garb were served, but American blacks dressed in suits and ties were refused service there well into the late 1960s. Many Witherspoon residents continued to boycott Lahiere's until the day it closed in 2010. Similarly, even though black Princetonians broke through the hiring barrier in the 1950s to cook and wait

tables at the Nassau Tavern (now the Nassau Inn) and the Nassau Club, they themselves were not allowed entry or served there until well into the 1970s.

To see a movie at the Playhouse theater, located on Hulfish Street and demolished during the urban renewal of the 1980s, blacks had to sit on the back right side of the theater. “I used to wonder why we always sat in the back on the right-hand side,” resident Shirley Satterfield recalls. “I thought it was just where we always sat, but actually that’s where we *had* to sit.” The only black person who sat in the front of the theater was Donald Moore’s Aunt Kissey (1899–1972), who played the piano there during silent films in the early 1920s. At the Garden Theatre on Nassau Street, blacks had to climb the staircase to the balcony—the only place they were allowed to sit. Albert Hinds recalled how it hurt him as a young man when his father could no longer climb those stairs. The last time they went, he carried his father up to his seat. After that, they stopped going to the movies.

Until the 1970s, African Americans could not sit at the counter in Woolworth’s (located on Nassau Street until it closed in the late 1990s), or shop in the fancy stores that sold everything from jewelry to dishes, let alone be hired as clerks in those stores. Certain clothing stores along Nassau Street “permitted” black women to purchase clothes, but they were not allowed to try on any clothing in the store. If they were black, once they had purchased the clothing, they could not return or exchange the item for any reason.

Alice Satterfield remembers going with her mother into a store, where they had once felt welcomed. The ownership had changed, however, and the clerk, saying nothing, closely followed them around the room until they left. “We didn’t need to go there anyway,” Satterfield said. “We could get what we needed in our own neighborhood.”

At Princeton restaurants, such as “the Balt” (the Baltimore Daily Lunch) on Nassau Street, black people could not sit down, be served food, or pay for takeout food well into the 1960s. One of the greatest authors of the twentieth century, novelist and essayist James Baldwin, worked at a defense plant near Princeton in the 1940s. In *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin writes about waiting to be served at Renwick’s, a restaurant on Nassau Street.

I knew about jim-crow but I had never experienced it. I went to the same self-service restaurant three times and stood with all the

Princeton boys before the counter, waiting for a hamburger and coffee; it was always an extraordinarily long time before anything was set before me; but it was not until the fourth visit that I learned that, in fact, nothing had ever been set before me: I had simply picked something up. Negroes were not served there, I was told, and they had been waiting for me to realize that I was always the only Negro present. Once I was told this, I determined to go there all the time. But now they were ready for me and, though some dreadful scenes were subsequently enacted in that restaurant, I never ate there again.

It was the same story all over New Jersey, in bars, bowling alleys, diners, places to live. I was always being forced to leave, silently, or with mutual imprecations.⁴¹

No local hotels welcomed black Americans—no matter how famous they were. The Nassau Inn and other local inns were reserved for whites only.⁴² In 1902, when Woodrow Wilson, Princeton class of 1878, was about to be inaugurated as Princeton's thirteenth president, Booker T. Washington was invited to attend as an honored guest. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute and one of the most prominent black educators, orators, and authors of the late nineteenth century, joined the procession of dignitaries walking behind Woodrow Wilson, and also attended the luncheon that followed, where President Wilson gave a speech. Washington was the only black person and the only black visiting dignitary present. He was also the only celebrity who was not housed with a Princeton faculty member's family during the inaugural events. Instead, Washington stayed at a black boardinghouse in the Witherspoon neighborhood. He was further snubbed by the Wilsons, who did not invite him to either of the dinners they gave during the inaugural festivities.⁴³

In 1937, when opera contralto Marian Anderson, one of the most celebrated singers of the twentieth century, gave a concert to a standing-room only audience at Princeton's McCarter Theatre, Princeton's Nassau Inn refused her a room. When Albert Einstein heard about the insult, he invited Anderson to stay with his daughter and him in their house on Mercer Street. Anderson accepted the invitation, and she and Einstein formed a friendship that lasted for the rest of his life.⁴⁴

Throughout the neighborhood's history, black boardinghouses were, for the most part, bedrooms hired out by neighborhood residents to black folks who were not welcome "uptown." When Carmen McRae and other musicians, including Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Lionel Hampton, Ella Fitzgerald, and Duke Ellington, came to perform at the McCarter Theatre or at university events, they found lodging in various neighborhood homes. A number of the people we interviewed recalled how as youngsters they helped their parents clean bedrooms and change sheets, move chairs, and set up tables on their family's front porch or in the living-dining room, to transform those spaces into guest rooms or dining rooms for paying customers. The visiting musicians often put on mini-concerts for the community—sometimes at the old Charcoal Inn on John Street, the YMCA, the Masonic Temple, or in a boardinghouse where they were staying. Often, neighborhood musicians, including jazz stride pianist Donald "the Lamb" Lambert (1904–62), well known in Harlem nightclubs in the 1920s and '30s, joined in with them. When Harriett Calloway, born in Princeton in 1906, recalled the life of her musician father, she said, "He didn't have a band like Count Basie or any of those, but he entertained a lot, and did a lot of work around Princeton. He had a little jazz band, and he went to Florida every year to play—that was [starting] back in 1910."

Music—from gospel to jazz, classical music to opera, bop to rhythm and blues—filled the Witherspoon neighborhood. The Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and the flourishing of African American voices being heard throughout the world—poets, writers, artists, musicians, intellectuals, and performers—lifted spirits and reminded Witherspoon residents of the joy of being alive and connecting to others in this long walk toward freedom.

While we were learning from residents about national events that had sparked unity in the community and what local initiatives they'd created to right the wrongs against them in employment, housing, urban development, and police-community relations, my students were scouring old issues of newspapers and magazines and looking for relevant files at the Historical Society of Princeton, the Archives of Seeley G. Mudd Library at Princeton University, and the Princeton Public Library. In the process, they discovered

firsthand how ignored and underrepresented African Americans were in the written history of this town, state, and nation by a white press that rarely covered black life on any level. No full copies of the black-owned paper the *Citizen*, “A Weekly Newspaper Dedicated to the Moral, Intellectual, and Industrial Improvement of the Negro Race,” are known to exist.⁴⁵ Only one front page of the *Citizen* (“Volume 1, no. 16, March 12, 1909. Price Five Cents”) has survived. “This document alone provides ample testimony to the struggles and successes of Princeton’s African Americans in forging their own ideals, institutions, and community,” says Professor and writer Kevin Gaines. At a time the mainstream press expressed indifference to black aspirations, the black press articulated them and promoted black advancement and combatted antiblack prejudice.”⁴⁶

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*.⁴⁷ 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.

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.