

**Oral History Project**  
**Washington Booker, III**  
**January 5, 1995**

**Code: Huntley[H] Booker[B]**

H: Welcome, Mr. Washington Booker. Wash, what we are doing, we are attempting to really write the history of Birmingham through the eyes of people who have lived and grown up here. And, of course, you have been instrumental in the development of Birmingham and I just wanted to ask you a few questions. Let me just ask you, first of all, though, where were your parents from? What part of the state?

B: Marengo County.

H: Both were from Marengo County.

B: My mother and my father both were from Marengo County. The parents on my father's side, my grandfather's father, came from Hale County. It appears that they came there after slavery. He had seven sons. My grandfather was the seventh. He came to Marengo County and he met my grandmother on my father's side. She was originally from Bessemer.

H: She was originally from Bessemer and then moved to Marengo County?

B: Right. Her mother was having difficulties, respiratory difficulties, obviously from the industrial pollution and the doctor told my great-grandfather, my grandmother's father, that if he wanted her to get rid of her problems and, possibly, live longer, that they should move from the city. He bought some land in Marengo County and eventually gave his daughters and sons a piece of land. My grandmother and my grandfather met, not on my father's side, were married there. And my father met my mother there. My mother's people appear to go back in Marengo County, as best as we have been able to tell at this point. The oldest, the great-great patriarch, is Lincoln Bell, whose children had children that had children. My mother is third generation from Lincoln Bell because her mother was his grand. Anyway they come from Marengo County.

H: Were you born in Marengo County?

B: Yes, I was born in Marengo County.

H: How old were you when you came to Birmingham?

B: I came to Birmingham when I was four.

H: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

B: I have one sister. She's older.

H: You don't want to say how much older?

B: Yes, she's two years older than me, and I was born in 1949. I was a post-war baby.

H: Tell me about your parents' education.

B: My father finished high school and joined the Navy. He is a well-read man. He loves books and he loves to read and listens to tapes and anything that can give him information. He has a high school diploma, but he is fairly well read which makes him educated beyond those years. My mother went to Alabama State on a choir scholarship and was there for two years.

H: What were their occupations?

B: My father worked in the plant and retired from the plant.

H: What plant?

B: In Demopolis. They pressed plywood. It was a plywood factory. At an earlier age I think he worked about ten years delivering for a store in downtown Demopolis. It was the top of the line store in Demopolis. It was called Flosins or Frozens, or something like that. I think they were Jewish, but they ran "the" store. He delivered packages for them.<sup>1</sup>

H: What about your mother?

B: My mother was an orthodontist assistant. She worked for Dr. Farmer on the southside starting in the late 50's. Before then she worked over the mountain. She caught the bus and went to the White folks' house. Eventually, she got on doing that kind of work and she liked it. She left there in the mid-sixties, walked out, I think. It appears it was around the time, not too long after, maybe about 1964, 1965 when they asked her to do the windows.

H: She didn't do windows?

B: No, she left and had a quarter (\$0.25), and I think the bus cost fifteen cents (\$0.15), but she walked out. But she had such a reputation for doing good work that she was hired by Dr.

Westbrook, who was in the City Federal Building for fifty years, and she worked for him for twenty-five years.

H: Did your mother ever take you to work with her when you were younger? Can you remember any of those times?

B: Eventually, when you work with people for twenty years, you become a unit. I won't say family, but it's similar to family in that you develop certain casual relationships. They would visit us. We would go visit them at Christmas time. We would go to Central Park. One of her co-workers lived in Central Park, which was all White then, and I remember one lady that lived out in, not Crestline—out like you're going out [Highway] 280, and you go under the bridge out there, back out towards the water works, but not quite that far. And, we would go visit. I'd go to the office. They knew me. They kept up with how I was doing, where I was going to school, when I was in the service. We kept up with their kids. It was one of those kind of places. He obviously did a good job, now that I think about it, of creating a good work atmosphere, because they all seemed more like family there. Of course, she was the only colored there.

H: Tell me more about your education?

B: I got a G.E.D. [General Equivalency Diploma].

H: But you attended Ullman High School?

B: Yes, yes.

H: Can you tell us a little bit about Ullman High School?

B: Ullman was located on the Southside. It is now part of UAB's urban renewal or some other term. There was a community there. It was a Black community on the Southside. The school had been there a long time and they just came in and just took it, no discussion, no nothing. 'We're gonna' close it down. Y'all got to go.' Ullman was a good school. A lot of our students went on and went on to college. They were well prepared. It was a good institution. People came out from the Southside. People came out of Titusville and went to Ullman. We had the best football time, the best basketball team in the city. We used to beat Wenonah [High School] on a consistent basis. It was a good school.

H: And you didn't graduate from Ullman?

B: No, I was asked to leave.

H: Why were you asked to leave?

B: I was just so far above the rest of the students they felt like I shouldn't finish. They felt I was so grown, that I should just go on out in the world.

H: What did you do after you left?

B: I did the all-American thing. I joined the Marine Corps. It was 1967. September 7th I went into the Marine Corps and went to Vietnam.

H: What were you in the military? Were you in the supply squadron?

B: Nope. I was in an infantry unit, First Battalion, Third Marines Bravo Company. I'd like to say that we ran the welcome center between North and South Vietnam. Our area of operation was along the border between North and South Vietnam. We patrolled that area that became famous as Asho Valley, up and down the Ho Chi Min Trail, Kantian, along the ridge-line that runs right inside of South Vietnam. Mother's Ridge all the way out to the South China Sea and Kuaviet River, the sand dunes. All of that was our area of responsibility. We ran patrols, search and destroy patrols. We looked for enemy units moving in and through the area and closed in and destroyed.

H: So you are a combat veteran?

B: I'm a combat veteran.

H: Well prior to that, Wash, you were at Ullman during the demonstrations of 1963.

B: Yeah.

H: Were you one of those that decided that you were going to stay in classes and you were not going to participate?

B: No. We had-- My friends and I had gone down to observe what was going on downtown and

had thrown rocks and ran. I remember the first day that I went to it, the march was starting from, I think it was, St. Joseph [Church]. It was all the way down on Sixth Avenue. The power company has that property now. But there was a church down there that the demonstrations left out of. At this time that's where they were going on.

H: Was that Sixth Avenue Baptist Church?

B: Yes, it was Sixth Avenue North. The church was St. Joseph on Sixth Avenue North, where the power company has the property now. It's where the railroad track goes across. I don't know what street it is. I think it's about Tenth Street, maybe Tenth or Eleventh Street, but that's where the church was. And we were standing across the street facing north and the steps came out of the church and the church faced south and the people were coming out of the church and the police was meeting them in the streets. So, some people behind us threw some bottles and some bricks. They saw where it came from and they rushed into the crowd. And when they rushed into the crowd, I just fell. I fell in front of one of the police officers and he fell over me, and the brother got up. He ran and got away. And so, when I went home that day, I felt like I had really, really done something—that I had aided and abetted a fellow revolutionary. But, that was the first day. After that, we kind of kept up with it, but, to us, it was hard to come to grips with...we didn't go to jail when the call out to fill the jails up with the children. We did not go at first because we had run-ins with the police on a daily basis. We knew them to be torturers, murderers, masochists, and the idea of voluntarily submitting yourself to be taken away with them was just to us— We couldn't— It took us a while to get used to it, even though we finally decided we would go, and we went and we all got arrested and that kind of thing and went to jail.

H: Let me ask you Wash, I sort of jumped the gun. What community were you living in?

B: I grew up in Loveman's Village. When we first came to Birmingham I lived on Seventh Avenue North, two doors up from Pooles Funeral Home. Pooles was on one corner. Bradford was on the other corner. Mary Strong's house was right across from us. We stayed in a two-story tenement house. We had one room and my mother and my sister slept in the big bed and I slept in the roll-a-way bed and there was a common kitchen and the people had rooms in the two-story house. We stayed there until 1959. In 1959 we moved to Loveman's Village where we had hot and cold running water, a bathtub and a thermostat. We moved up in the world. We moved to Loveman's Village and from '59 on until I eventually went into the Marine Corps, I lived in Loveman's Village.

H: How would you describe your community? Can you describe both communities—the community that you moved away from and then describe Loveman's Village?

B: [House number] 1511 Seventh Avenue North. It was downtown for the most part. It was a short walk. If you walked up to the corner to where Bradford Funeral Home was, took a right, walked down a block, you would be standing on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Sixteenth Street and facing across the park. And everybody who came out of Smithfield or came up Seventh Avenue came up Eighth Avenue would come down and go across the park.

H: Kelly Ingram Park?

B: Kelly Ingram Park. The park. Like there's only one. Across from Kelly Ingram Park, and so I was about a block and a half from Kelly Ingram Park. The street had— There was Poole's starting on the corner of Fifteenth Street. On the corner of Fifteenth Street and Seventh Avenue there was Poole's Funeral Home. John and Earnest Poole. Their father was starting to get old at that time and they were grown men and they were running the funeral home. People like Audrey Bushelon, who now runs Bushelon Funeral Home, was working for the Poole family. As a matter of fact, if you go down another block, down to the corner of Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue, there were houses on the south side of the street, all the way down, and we knew people who lived in those houses. And on the right side of the street, the church was on the corner right where it is now, except it was a different building, a different church. If you go farther down on Seventh Avenue, farther west on Seventh Avenue, there was the Ballot house that was owned by Ma Perkins, who also owned the Zanzibar Hotel which was right next to my house which is where the Birmingham Black Barons lived when they were in Birmingham.

H: So you were in the heart of a lot of activity.

B: Right. Mr. Parker's building was up on the other corner. There were Black businesses on both corners on the south side of Seventh Avenue, but on the north side of Seventh Avenue, Vincent's Grocery Store was on one corner, which was an Italian business, and Fagin's Grocery Store was on the other corner, which was another Italian business. And right across Sixteenth Street, on the Northeast corner, there was a coal yard. But, Ragland Drugs, after the Ballot House, going back down from Fifteenth Street, back west on Seventh Avenue, Ma Perkins' Ballard House and there were some other houses. Then there was Ragland's Drugs which was owned, I believe, by two brothers. But, if you were really, really, good at church on

Sunday, and momma had some extra money and after you took your church clothes off and if everything was just right, we would walk down to Ragland's sometime and get a scoop of ice cream, hand-packed ice cream. And that was the high point of my life. I'll always remember that. But, anyway, coming back up to the corner of Fifteenth Street, there was Poole's Funeral Home, and Mr. and Mrs. King's home. They had a couple of girls and a son. As a matter of fact, their son still lives in Birmingham, Dan King. He's an accountant or something and I think he still lives in Smithfield. He's older now, but his mother and father lived in the next house. Our house was the next house. Our house was a tenement house. My two cousins— One of my cousins, Lucy, she ran a stand in the yard, a small stand that sold drinks and sodas and stockings and pork and beans and stuff like that. My cousin, Annie, we called her Nannie, she was the landlady of the tenement house and they had the front room and we all— People had rooms in the house. Next to that was the Zanzibar Hotel, which was owned by Ma Perkins who also owned the Ballot House and I think she also owned the Zanzibar Café, which was on Fourth Avenue. But anyway, the Barons, the Birmingham Black Barons, lived there and I would go to the store for them. I'd go over to Vincent's for them, or go over to Fagin's for them, get sodas and stuff like that for them and they would give me balls, old bats, little bitty bats and that kind of thing. Sometimes, they would put me on the bus and take me out to Rickwood Field and I'd sit in the dugout. I didn't know then that I was with a part of history, the old Negro League, short stops and all of that.

H: What kind of recreation did you have as a child in that area?

B: On Seventh Avenue we had a wagon. Joyce Smith had a bicycle. Joyce Smith's house was next to Bradford's and I think she was some kin to the Bradfords. But those two houses are the only two houses left on Seventh Avenue now in that block. But she had a bicycle. We had a wagon. We got skates at Christmas—Union Hardware iron skates—and we could skate up and down the street. When that wore out, we would take an old broom and turn it upside down and that would be our horse. And, we would get a coat hanger and make a cowboy gun. I know you know how to make one. But, anyway, we would play and we would go in the back yard. And the back yard ran all the way back to the alley. Those were big lots. There was a couple of fruit trees in the backyard and then another fence. We would play back there, play cowboys and Indians and climb trees.

H: How did your life change when you left that area and moved to Loveman's Village?

B: It changed. It was a subtle change. My perception of the change was subtle and it went back

and forth. It appeared to be...Initially, when we moved to Loveman's Village, one of the biggest arguments my sister and I ever had was over who was going to be the first one that took a bath in the bathtub, alright. Because we had a Number Ten tub that we boiled water, poured into the tub and then put cold water in the tub and that's what we took a bath in, because there was no such thing as hot water in the house. The bathroom was a room a little bigger than a closet. It had a commode that sat right in the middle of the floor and there was no light in. There was just the commode in the middle of the floor, nothing else in there. There was one sink in the house and it was, of course, on the other side of the wall from the bathroom, all the way to the back of the house. So, plus, there was a coal stove in the house. My mom would get up in the morning and make the fire in the stove and get back in the bed until the room got warm. Moving to Loveman's Village, there was a bathtub. It had hot and cold running water. There was a heater, a gas heater, with a thermostat that came on whenever it got cold. There was no light that would come in. If you closed all the doors and turned off all the lights, you couldn't see light coming in from the outside around the windows and through the closets. You could go in the closets in the old house on Seventh Avenue and close your door and you could see light coming in from the outside, because it wasn't insulated. And Loveman's Village was brick, and it was warm and it was well lit. We had moved up in the world. Of course, now, once we went to school... I think we moved in maybe July, August or something like that, and school hadn't started, so we were on vacation. And so we were all wonderful until we went to school and the other kids informed us that we lived in the projects.

H: So then you then realized that, although you were better off, you still had not made it? You still were not middle class?

B: Right, we had gone and you get flashes as a child, of what the other world is like. Because for a child, you know the world is the block that you live on or the space that you are limited to. You know that there is something around the corner, but only your imagination tells you what it is around there. But, before we moved to Loveman's Village, there would be times when we would go riding with somebody we knew that had a car that would take us for a ride during the Christmas season. And maybe, we would ride over through Titusville or maybe we would ride over to Mountain Brook and look at the lights and that kind of thing, and so we knew that there was something better than the house that we lived in.

H: As a child growing up, Wash, what was your community's relationship to the Birmingham police department?

B: Birmingham Police Department was the occupying force in our community. It was the source of the ultimate terror. People would threaten their children by telling them, 'The police gonna get you.'

H: What do you mean by an 'occupying force'?

B: Vietnam, we were like the policemen trying to run the bogeymen out the country. The Viet Cong were painted as the bogeymen and we were the good guys from the west, come in to save the poor ignorant savages from the bogeymen. Of course, the savages really didn't want to be saved. They looked at me like we were barbarians coming in from the west. But in our relationship with the police, the police were much the same way. There was no communication other than, 'Come here nigger,' or a lick up side the head or to shoot. There was no human communications. There was no talking, none of that. They terrorized the community. It was a rare weekend passed that one or two folk, maybe, didn't get killed by the police. They'd call you. This is what they'd do to you: They'd call you and make you stick your head in the window, right, and then they would roll the window up and get your neck like this, all the while calling you 'boy' and 'Nigger, where you going, nigger?' And, then, they'd hit you on your head. You were lucky if that was all you got away with. You know, they'd beat people to death.

H: People were afraid of the police?

B: They were terrified. People were terrified of the police.

H: We're going to get back to that when we start a little bit more about the Movement, but let me just ask you, in your community, were there community organizations?

B: Yes.

H: What were some of those organizations?

B: There were clubs, the Y [YMCA or Young Men's Christian Association]. There was the Boy Scouts. Every church—and almost everybody went to church, almost everybody went to church—like it was unheard of— Somebody would go [say] if you don't go to church, 'The devil going to get him. He going to hell.' What you would call the 'baddest' kids at the school, they went to church. It was really, really an exception to find a family in the Black community

that didn't go to church. But anyway, the church had ushers, matrons, youth programs, that kind of thing. There was the Boy Scouts. We had a Boy Scout Troop in Loveman's Village. We had the Y. I was lucky enough a few years ago to go to a Y camp, because they had slots for poor kids and so I could get in one of those slots and I'd get a chance to go out to Camp Fletcher and played with the kids whose parents had paid to send them out there. But, anyway, it was a good experience, and I'm thankful for it. There was all kind of organizations. There were singing groups. There used to be a thing in the Black community, in the [19]50s that— When I was a kid, as a matter of fact, my mother sang with the Gospel Harmonettes, which was a gospel group. Churches would be packed on Sunday night because one of those groups would be coming to town, or one of the small auditoriums or the Masonic Temple and other places where they would have concerts. Then there were social and savings clubs. Later on, after Honeybowl was built and Starbowl was built, it was really two Black bowling alleys. For a while everybody bowled. That was the thing in Birmingham. If you were anybody in Birmingham, you went to the bowling alley and people formed bowling clubs and a lot of Black folks still bowl today. But, other organizations, oh, in the schools, the clubs like the ushers.

H: Which one were you involved with?

B: We had a club. Our club was called the Coachmen. We would, all of us would just kind of get together. Figured everybody else had a club, so we had a club of our own.

H: What did you do in the club?

B: We had parties and we went to other people's parties, and we all wore the same T-shirts or something.

H: Today, wouldn't that be called a gang?

B: No, no. We didn't sell dope and do drive-bys. We weren't really that tough in that, you know. You always had a few people who are going to fight or else, and they were gangs. They weren't called gangs, but there was always a group of fellows that hung together that carried pocket knives and were always looking to jump on somebody. They would go to another side of town or go to a party for the express purpose of getting into a fight and cutting somebody. Yeah, there were folk out there like that. They were in the minority.

H: These were social clubs?

B: These were social clubs, Gamma Phi.

H: Met on Sunday evenings at somebody's home.

B: Yeah, it was just something to do and we... Like I said, we would sponsor bus trips to Atlanta to go over to the big park and spend the day over there and go to the dance hall.

H: Let me ask you now about the Civil Rights Movement. I know you were involved. How did you get involved?

B: I knew that what was going on downtown, the demonstrations, the sit ins, I felt good about it. I felt like Black folk was standing up. You know I grew up with Step-n-Fetch It. I grew up with Tarzan movies. I grew up with Amos 'n Andy, where the only Black folk who were really on TV then were buffoons or lackeys or cowards.

H: So you saw a relationship to the Movement?

B: It was courage. It was courage. It was Black people standing up saying that, you know, 'I'm a human being, I have a right to go and to be treated like a human being,' even more so than the jobs. As a child, not understanding the demands for— Or to be a clerk at Newberry's and that kind of thing— I understood access to public facilities, because I went down to Newberry's and I would have to walk by and look at the White people sitting at the counter eating a banana split and, I swear to God, I was going to get me one. More than anything else I wanted a banana split behind that counter, because they looked so good. But you couldn't go back there. You had to go over to the other side, go down into the basement and stand up at this...this almost white counter that was just as basic as it could possibly be. You could get a hot dog, maybe a hamburger. I don't know. You couldn't get all the things you could get upstairs at the lunch counter. And so, I felt we wanted to go there. As a child, I wanted to go there, because I saw the White kids go there. But, even more than that, it was the thought that Black people was standing up, that they were showing courage. I felt strongly— I felt as though I had never seen a Black man talk or speak with defiance or self assurance to a White man. Not in real life. If a White man walked up, he could be twenty years old, and there could be Black folks sitting around who were sixty years old and you couldn't miss the skinning and a-grinning, because that's what they had to do to survive.

H: And you saw the Movement was changing the whole thing?

B: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!

H: Did you attend any of the mass meetings?

B: Yeah, I went to the churches and sat inside. They would ask you put your pocketknife in there<sup>2</sup>... and they made speeches and that kind of thing. For the most part, we would go in and we would be kind of circulating around seeing who we could see...see folks from the other side of town talking. We knew what we were going to do, and we just— To be honest, we just really weren't into the speeches. You know, we all wanted to see Martin Luther King. Once we saw him that was cool. Now, who else you see? Do you see anybody over there that looked good? Where they from? They outside? You know, it was that kind of thing. Not to say we were not serious. We were very serious about what we had to do, but we were just prepared to do it when it came time and we really did not need to be pumped. We were ready to go.

H: So in [19]63, Wash, you were probably fourteen [years old]?

B: Fourteen, yeah.

H: So, you and your partners were ready? How would you then describe a typical mass meeting that you remember?

B: Praying and singing. They would be calling it to order. Most of the time, when we got there, when we would get there, it would already be started up. Because we would kind of be walking and talking and moseying along and somebody may not have been able to get out. So, you know, when you'd get there, they would do the devotion, I guess. But, mostly I remember, the day I went to jail. If you ask me who spoke, who were the speakers on that particular day, I could not tell you. My mind was already outside in the streets. I think everybody else was thinking about what we were about to do. But the programs were mostly for the adults.

H: What were the circumstances when you went to jail?

B: We came out of the church. First we went in. Okay, got down there that day. We knew it was going to be a good day, because when we started off, we left Ullman [High School] and

we came on— It was a Monday. We left Ullman and we came on downtown. And the group, I guess it was about fifty or sixty of us, it may have been more than that, because it was kind of strung out and we came down the railroad track and after we got off the railroad track, we came up and came down First Avenue and turned left onto Sixteenth Street, which means we turned north and as we came up the little hill right there where Etheridge Brothers is now and the service station, as we got up to the top of that little rise, we could see all the way up Sixteenth Street, down to about 8th Avenue and we could see just a whole bunch of folk coming. We figured that they were coming from north Birmingham or coming from Carver [High School] or something like that. So we started running. Something just went through the crowd, because we coming for business. We coming to face the police, to face the dogs, to do whatever we had to do.

H: You know, Wash, prior to that time, I can remember that if you'd go downtown, you would see people from other parts of town. In many cases, you were talking about some kind of trouble.

B: Right, right. Those were magic times, because there was none of that. We were all in jail together and we didn't fight. I mean we were packed on top of each, but we didn't fight.

H: Tell me, how did you get arrested?

B: Okay, we came over the hill. We saw the kids coming from Carver. Then, as we got down to Sixth Avenue, we all just kind of got on both sides and went down on Sixth Avenue to the church and I think when we crossed Fifth Avenue, everything was blocked off from there. And we kind of made our way down and the police was rolling their eyes, looking at us, because people were coming. And as we got there and these kids got there, we looked down Sixth Avenue and there were kids coming in a big group like ours. It may have been maybe twenty-five [people], it may have been twenty. You know, when you're fourteen years old, twenty people could be a hundred people.

H: So, now, had you left school that day?

B: Yeah, we left school. We snuck out of school.

H: Let's back up then. How did that come about? How did you know to leave school?

B: Everybody else was going. We didn't go the first day. We may have went the fourth day or the

fifth day. But there had already been people who had gone who were already in jail. We had been kind of checking things out. We had been down to the mass meeting, checked that out. We had been to the demonstrations where, you know, the people had made it against the law to march. The strategy came about that we were going to fill up the jail. I think this was after they put Martin and Dr. Abernathy in jail. The strategy was, let's just fill the jails up. They couldn't do it with the adults because they could lose their jobs. I heard different people take credit for the idea of using the children. I heard people say that the leadership didn't want to use the children and that it was some of the field workers said it, but as soon as the idea got around among the kids, it was over. We liked it and we moved on it. So, other folk had already gone to jail and we knew what to expect. We knew how it went. We knew what was going on, alright. But this was the day that we were going. It was a Monday. My mother dropped me off. I went in the school, through the school, and out to the courtyard. Other folk were already out in the courtyard. And, you know, it was already that we were going today. We're going. You're going, we going too.

So as we started leaving the school, other folk got with us and you know, people caught up with us. We saw folk on their way to school. They turned around and we walked downtown talking, and we didn't start singing until we got up near the church. We sang outside in the streets before we went in the church so we can come back out and be arrested. We just sang and taunted the police. Our favorite thing was, 'I ain't gonna' let nobody turn me around.' And our favorite verse was, 'ain't gonna' let Bull Conner.' It gave us a good feeling to be able to stand there and tell Mr. Eugene 'Bull' Conner, 'We ain't gonna' let you...'. It made us feel powerful. But, anyway, then we go inside. They make the speeches. They pass the basket and ask everybody to put their pocketknife in the basket and if you got any weapons. They told us what to do, how to protect ourselves if you were pushed or shoved. They went through all that. We had heard all of these before, because we had seen other folks go. We had seen some of the first group of folks, when it was small, when the adults were going and we had seen other kids go. So we knew the spiel. We knew the routine. Like I said, we already knew, and though we were sitting there and they were making the speeches, we may have been talking among ourselves, halfway listening and halfway talking because we had already decided the plan.

The plan was laid. We knew what we were going to do. They were in charge. We knew they had to make their speeches and go through their changes, but... So, we moved out. We came out of the church, we turned left and we started up Sixth Avenue. We started east on Sixth Avenue and the people at the front were met by the policemen who said, 'Y'all got to go. If you don't, we're gonna' arrest you.' And, then, they started herding us, and the people came in

from both sides. They started herding us towards the buses and loading us on the buses because they had the buses parked there. It had become an assembly line. After that point, we had filled up not quite, but the city jail was full. Juvenile Court was full to capacity. People were sleeping in the halls. I went to the county. And when I got to the county, the county eventually became full and then they started bringing them to the Fair Park, and Fair Park got full. They filled up Bessemer and Fairfield jails, too, and some others.

H: So where did you go?

B: I went to the county [jail]. They took us there. But when they first loaded us up they took us over to the city. But at the city jail it was just like a mad house. You couldn't see the police for the kids and the demonstrators. I remember this one police officer was in the back of the building, because we were outside. They just put us all out in the big courtyard. All the cells were already full and it must have been a processing center at that point. We were just outside and rumors were spreading about where we would eventually go after they figured out what the heck to do with all these little nappy headed children.

H: How long were you there?

B: At that place, we were there for about four or five hours. We talked to the police face to face because the guards didn't have guns. And they were just completely surrounded. It was like folk on all sides and they seemed a little troubled about it. I guess they had never seen anything like this. Anyway, they kept us there for about four or five hours and then they loaded us back on the buses and they took us to juvenile court. At juvenile court they split us, the boys and the girls and I remember it was starting to get late in the evening and we had been going all day and we were kind of settling down, and this sister got up and started singing the Lord's Prayer and we sung out there for a while. We sang Movement songs. We sang church songs. The people in the building came to the windows, opened the windows, and was looking out, and it was just really, really an emotional thing that happened. We left there that night about eight [o'clock].

H: They released you?

B: No, no. They loaded all the boys. They loaded most of us because now they started breaking us down into groups and they took us to Jefferson County Jail, which was just about full. And when they put us in the cells up on the eighth floor, I believe, we were just in the hallway in the cellblock. The front of the cellblock is a big door, a big iron door, that's an electric door. You

go through that way. It could be either to the right or to the left, but what you immediately come into is the day room where there are two or three, maybe, long tables, alright, where the guys sit during the day and play cards. I don't think they had TV's at that time. But that's where you ate your meals and played cards and generally sat around and did things during the day. If you go on back from there, then there are cells, and I think in this block they had four-man cells, which means they had two bunks up here and two bunks up there and a commode in the middle. And there may have been three, four, maybe five cells on back [of] this whole area. Normally, what happened was, you would put the prisoners inside the cells and close the doors to the individual cells....

[END OF SIDE ONE]

B: .....on the floors, in the cells on the floors, in the halls, on the tables and on the floors in the day room. They were just packed in there. We had literally filled up all the jails in the county. One thing I remember when my mother finally came and got me after five or six days, they were coming in with new boilers, new pots and new pans and stuff like that. It must have been a logistical nightmare to have to feed all of these people and take care of them. You have to remember, at this point, all the news media from all over the world was in here and everything they were doing was being closely scrutinized. Needless to say, it hassled them to no end. We were credited with breaking the back of Birmingham because at that point I believe, they— It [the Movement] was fizzling. As a matter of fact, I think it was fizzling at the point when King and Abernathy went to jail and then the adults were afraid because they were losing their jobs and they couldn't get out of jail and all kind of stuff was going on. They got everybody out of jail, but what I'm saying is, if you went to jail, they got your name. Wherever you worked, if you had a job, then you were through. So the grownups were too frightened to go.

H: It was just the numbers weren't there.

B: Right, the numbers weren't there to keep it going. And it's said that the Movement would have died at that point had it not been for us [children]. And, God, it's just a blessing to have been there. I think that we changed the course of human history at some point.

H: Were there other members of your family involved?

B: No, my sister wouldn't go to jail for no-o-o-o-o body. She wouldn't go to jail if Martin Luther King came by the house and asked her to.

H: Did she ever go to any of the meetings?

B: No, she watched it on TV. My sister was very non-confrontational.

H: What was your mother's and sister's reaction to your participation?

B: You know what my sister would say? [She'd say] 'See, I knew he would go down there, cause he just so bad.' My mother was afraid and proud because she knew that they would kill me. When we was little they used to say, 'I'd rather kill you myself than let the White folks kill you,' and that was a real thing. And, so, she was proud, but she was also afraid. She had told me not to go down there.

H: Were you all members of any particular church?

B: We went to Zion Hill. Zion Hill was on Sixth Avenue. It was right down from Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in the next block.

H: So even after you moved to Loveman's Village you still came back?

B: Yeah.

H: Was your church involved?

B: No, as a church we didn't have any mass meetings.

H: What about your pastor?

B: Not to my knowledge. I really don't know.

H: What benefits did you and your family and community realize as a result of the Movement?

B: The beginning of consciousness. The beginning of the awareness of self. I know the obvious things you would think would be the integration and access to public facilities, and all those

things were obvious benefits. But I think the most important benefit was the self-esteem that it gave Black people. The feeling that we can do something. I think that we have never been that powerless since that day.

H: After the Movement, Wash, you then volunteered and went into the Marine Corps?

B: I was still very patriotic.

H: When you came out of the Marine Corps, what did you do?

B: I came home.

H: How was home?

B: I was different. Home was different, but I was different, too. I was a combat veteran. I had been in combat. I had fought for this country and I made the same mistakes that Black men had made since the Civil War. You are very familiar with the fact that there were riots after World War Two, because the Black troops went to France and they set with the mademoiselles and they thought they were free and when they came back here there were riots in eastern cities and cities in the Midwest. And partly, it was the attitude that they came back with—expecting that they could now be real Americans and they could enjoy all of the privileges that other American enjoyed. Of course, that wasn't the case. After World War Two it was the same way. And Korea. I don't think it was as bad after Korea for some reason. I guess it bears examining, but it just didn't have the same kind of effect. After Vietnam, because of the Civil Rights Movement, the peace Movement, and the nationalist Movement that was afoot in the Black community, we got education in 'Nam [Vietnam]. We started to interact with people from up north and up east who knew about folks like Malcolm X, because you have to realize in Alabama there was a cotton curtain. News didn't come in and news didn't get out. We were shocked to find out some of the things that had gone on in some of the other parts of the country that we never heard about.

H: Like what, for instance?

B: Like what was happening with the Nation of Islam. We knew there was a small group of Black Muslims here. And we had heard tales about what they were doing in places like Chicago and what they were doing in places like New York, but to get news in the newspaper or to be able

to look at the news on television, which is what we did, or looking at the front page of the newspaper, it wasn't there. It's just those kinds of things just weren't reported down here. So we were behind in terms of that Movement. We led the charge in the Civil Rights Movement but the 'Black and proud' Movement, the Black revolution, the Black identity, Black Independence Movement if you will, we came late to that. And, most of us, got those kind of ideas from our interactions with our cousins from up north and some of these other places. So we came back quite militant. Plus the riots happened while I was in 'Nam and we didn't find out about them. A lot of things were going on in this country too. I was in 'Nam in [19]68 and '69. There were things happening here that we didn't find about until much later.

H: You got back here in '69 or '70?

B: I came home from 'Nam in '69—in May of '69 and I got out of the Marine Corps in '70. What I found in Birmingham when I got back, though, with my new attitude and my new knowledge of James Brown had made Black and Proud. Plus, we thought things had changed too while we were in 'Nam. We made two mistakes. Two things we thought had changed hadn't changed. One, we thought that America had become a fair and a more just place and that Black people now shared equally in the American dream. Two, we became conscious and close while we were in 'Nam. We developed a camaraderie, a sense of brotherhood that we thought was even stronger back here.

H: Now you came to Birmingham. Your buddies probably went to New York or Chicago or Los Angeles. What was your reaction when you returned?

B: Police brutality was rampant here. I think it was the same kind of thing. There were people coming from the service. The old line, the old racist segregationists who were on the police department was saying, 'Well, you're back here now, I don't care where you been, who you think you is. You're back in Birmingham...' And, so, that kind of thing was going on. The community was a little bit more militant. There was militancy in the community, and we returning Vietnam veterans brought back militancy to the community. And, at the same time, the police were becoming more repressive and oppressive. That's what we ran into. I hooked up with some fellows when I got back here.

H: These other fellows, were they Vietnam veterans as well?

B: Three of them were Vietnam veterans. Mombozi was a middle class college student that

hooked up with us. Doc Brad—you know Doc. Doc had come from Carolina and had been fooling around with the Movement for years and we started an affiliation of the Panther Party. It was called the Alabama Black Liberation Front. We adhered to the principles and ideology and teachings of the Party and we sold the Black Panther newspaper and we were an affiliation of the Party. Among other things, we fought police brutality by doing everything from investigating and documenting cases of police brutality when we went out into the community right on their heels. We had two offices. We had one in Roosevelt City and we had another over in Titusville in a place they called Newmongo, a little Korea. People would call. Let's say the police was going to somebody's house in Cottageville, kicked the door in and roughed their momma up and their sister and just kind of beat up everybody, which they would do, which was done commonly and we would get a call. We would shoot over there. We'd talk to everybody who was a witness. We'd get their story. We'd get it all down. And there was a young man, a young council member, who had decided that he was going to fight things. So we hooked up with him and we decided that we would go up there and meet with him. Doc would take him the information, and he would get up in the council meeting and boom, boom, boom, and he would blast them. He had the acceptability and the credibility in the community that we had been denied. They ran a campaign, a media campaign, against us. They told the community that we were a threat to the community, that we were militants, and that we were dangerous, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But the information we gave him, he was able to use to bring attention to the situation.

H: Who was this individual?

B: Richard Arrington. He was Councilman Arrington then. He had his office in the City Federal Building—not the City Federal Building, but the 2121 Building. We started a breakfast-for-kids programs. We went to the merchants in the neighborhood and said, 'You make your money off of these people, but their kids go to school hungry in the morning.' Of course, we got this from the [Black Panther] Party, and we said, "You're going to donate and give us grits and eggs and food.' And they said we were extorting. 'Hell,' we said. 'No, we're just putting something back.' We were making sure they were putting something back. So we started running breakfast-for-kids programs and we held political education classes and we would teach the kids songs. They said we were indoctrinating the kids with our ideology, which is why the federal government eventually co-opted the program nationally and the federal government now provides breakfast for children at school who can't afford it. But the concept came from the Panther Party.

H: Around the country there were Black Panther Party organizations from Oakland to New Haven, Connecticut and there were many difficulties, physical encounters with the police. Did that happen?

B: All the time. One of the first ones I can remember is when we followed the example of the Party and got copies of the City Codes and we— When they came into our community, we would get in the car and get right behind them. And if they would stop anybody, we'd get out and observe. We would say, 'The man has rights. You have to read him his rights. You have to' do this, you have to do that. Of course, they would get angry. In the beginning they didn't know how to deal with it. I think a lot of it had to do with just that they were really stunned because here was some Black men in Birmingham, Alabama walking up to the police saying, 'Look, you can't do this to this man. This man has a constitutional right to defend himself against you if you violate his rights, and he has rights.' Of course, they didn't want to hear none of that. We had one confrontation up on Sixth Avenue where a brother was selling the papers and they called the police on him. He called it in and we called some other folk and it ended up that we were all up there on Sixth Avenue armed with the police. It was diffused. It all just fizzled out. We left. They left. Nobody was arrested. There was a shoot out that was out in Tarrant City. A woman was going to be evicted and she had no place to go. We were idealists. We could not understand how you could just take a Black person— The lady was in her sixties. She had been living there and she was renting from one of these slumlords and he was going to put her out. Somebody called us and said, 'Look, they're going to put this lady out in the street and she's got nowhere to go. She's got no family.' So we went out to the house. I was not in the house when the Sheriff finally came, but the Sheriff came and a gunfight broke out and obviously they brought enough folk. They had fifty or sixty deputies.

H: Was anyone hurt?

B: Ronny was shot in the neck, I think. Was Doc shot? Doc might have been shot too. Ronny was shot and Jamael was shot. Mombozi didn't get shot, but I think maybe two or three of the fellows got shot.<sup>3</sup> Then one of the brothers named Robert Jakes from North Birmingham, they broke him and he testified against everybody else and said it was a conspiracy. I think Doc ended up with five years, Ronny ended up with five years. Ronny never served his. He left and went to Oregon. The Governor of Oregon refused to extradite him back to Alabama because he said that the judicial system was unfair to Blacks and that [Ronny] couldn't get a fair trial and he didn't feel like it was good. He lived there until he died four or five years ago. Doc, of course, went and did three years, I think. There was— Oh God, I remember one night. When

I think about this it sends chills. One night we were going to ambush the police simply because some idiot came to headquarters and started saying, 'Y'all always talk about what y'all gonna' do, but y'all ain't gonna' do nothing. Y'all scared of the White folks. Y'all ain't gonna' do nothing.' Doc wasn't there. Ronny was there and it kind of worked us all into a frenzy. We loaded up our arms and set up an ambush, and it just so happens we made this guy go with us and he broke before we could spring the ambush. It would have been a terrible thing, just a senseless act of murder with no real political purpose. It would have been hard to defend in hindsight. Hindsight is twenty twenty. It would have been hard to defend.

H: But it didn't happen?

B: Right, it didn't happen because, he... We were set in, in the ambush, right? Everybody was. We was just waiting for the cop and he [the man who instigated things] jumped up and threw his rifle down and took off and said, 'Y'all crazy' and ran. So, when he ran, we all got up and said, 'We ain't gonna' do this.' But, you know, that's the closest— I look back at that and I think that's the closest— And it was stupid. The other confrontations were when we were exercising our rights. The brother had the right to sell the newspaper but, thinking that Black people didn't know their rights, that they could just buffalo this brother, you know, these officers, they approach him and tell him, 'Get on. You can't stand out here and sell that.' Of course, he could. He called us. They called reinforcements. And we all ended up on Sixth Avenue. There were cases where they stopped and we stopped and there were words back and forth. I just think that they were not ready for armed Black men. They had never had to deal with this kind of situation before and it kind of threw them off. Of course, today, they have tactics and deal with it lickety split.

H: Well, Wash, I think we can probably conclude. Is there anything else that you would like to add just to highlight or maybe encapsulate what Birmingham has meant to you in the years that you've spent here?

B: I see Birmingham now in hindsight as a place where, you know, a center for change. Birmingham has produced a lot of leaders, great thinkers. People have left here, I think, and have gone to other parts of the country that the Movement produced and that we have played a part. This has been a Movement town and it is a Movement town. And I think the reason it became a Movement town is because at one point, it was 'the most racist place on the face of the earth,' is what one person said. Tough times make tough people. Growing up in a tough town like Birmingham was what made the people, the Black folk who came out of here, tough

people. And I think that toughness has pushed this city forward when they were allowed to participate and their toughness has caused this city to continue to try to grow and build and move in spite of what anybody may say or what may happen, and I think it's because of the toughness of the town and that it's still around and it is still, to my way of thinking, one of the world's great cities today and it has a bright future. Strangely enough, because of those tough times, we made tough people that are now able to build. We are not inside, not by a long shot. We ain't where we ought to be, but we ain't where we was, either. Hopefully, we will get 'there', wherever that is. But the controversial thing... 'There' is...is a place we haven't identified yet as a people. I think that self-determination, the right to decide your own destiny as a people, is something, is a right, that belongs to every group of people, race and ethnic group on the earth. I think, we, as Black folk have to realize that it is right and just for us to want to determine our own destiny. To want, to whatever extent we can, to the greatest extent we can, to determine our own destiny.

H: I appreciate you spending this time with us. You have done a tremendous job.

B: I really feel like we left so much out.

H: Yes, but we'll have to do it again. There's always so much left out, but you can't do it all in a day.

B: I think the best part of it was the part that they threw out, but that wasn't our fault. That was their fault. That was the director's fault.

H: But that was very perceptive. A tough town makes for tough people. Thank you, Wash.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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<sup>1</sup> This was probably Frohsin's Department Store, based in Alexander City, Alabama and run by a Jewish merchant, Henry Frohsin.

<sup>2</sup> At mass meetings, baskets were passed around in which pocket knives and other possible weapons were collected to insure that demonstrations remained non-violent and in attempt to prevent demonstrators from being accused of carrying weapons.

<sup>3</sup> According to historian Robert Widell, Ronald "Ronny" Williams and Wayland

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"Doc" Bryant were both arrested in the case and held in jail for a year before being convicted of assaulting a law enforcement officer, after which time Williams fled to Oregon and Bryant served time. Widell's research indicates that three other members of the ABLF were present at the incident: Robert Jakes, Harold Robinson, and Brenda Joyce Griffin. From email correspondence with Robert Widell, Emory University, May 23, 2003.