

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.

**Copyright, 2009, University of South Florida.
All rights, reserved.**

This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.

For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.

Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: A31-00027
Interviewee: Howard H. Harris (HH)
Interviewer: Otis Anthony (OA)
Interview date: August 21, 1978
Interview location: Unknown
Transcribed by: Unknown
Transcription date: Unknown
Interview changes by: Kimberly Nordon
Changes date: December 19, 2008
Final Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson
Final Edit date: February 4, 2009

Howard H. Harris, Senior: — was born here in this street. Right here. Where that mango tree is, that's where I found our family owned that home.

I went to school here at Meacham [Elementary] School from [grades] one to six. Then I went to Booker Washington [Junior High School] 7th through 9th. I went to Middleton [High School]. I finished high school at Middleton, 1941. Then I went in the service. When I came back I went in (inaudible). Before I went in the service, I went to work in Washington at the War Department in Washington, D.C. And then I went in the service.

When I came back I went back to Washington and worked at the War Department as an IBM computer programmer. And then I went to college at Howard University and got my bachelor's degree. Then I went to Columbia and got my master's degree. And I've been working here now in the school system thirty—almost thirty years, 29.6 years. And I've been here principal of this—I've been principal for eighteen years. I've been principal here now the last three years.

And this home. What I wanted to say was about this section of town down in here, the majority of the properties down in here were owned by black people, in the downtown part of Tampa here. For instance, on this street here, there were just two little sections of property that were owned by outsiders that was rental property. They had a little row of red houses on this side of the street, three—the end of this first part of this building, not the end of the school, between here and the middle of this block, say where that mango tree is. And on the other side of our house was where that mango—there was a few rental houses in there—about six rental houses, probably—on this street was owned by black people. For instance, right here, right on these two corners here, you had these—you mentioned Miss Marion Anderson that Sunday on the program; her father owned that corner and that corner. From that corner to the corner of Fifth [Avenue] on Scott Street, the Larkins owned that corner. On the opposite side over there, Dr. Norton owned that

corner back to about halfway—that block, Dr. Norton owned. Okay, the Andersons owned on this corner, on this side—

Otis Anthony: Why don't you name the streets so that we can (inaudible)?

HH: Oh, Governor Street. On this side of Governor Street, Dr.—I say, the Andersons owned that corner, and then the next house is the Simmons house. Fredrica Simmons is a musicians; that's where their home was. And then the next house to theirs was owned by a private owner, but I don't remember the name of the people. And the next building there was a—next to the doctor's property, there was some property owned by a businessman; he owned a poolroom on the corner of Central [Avenue] and Shorty (inaudible), I think. He owned the next property, his home and a couple of houses next to it.

Across the street here, John Luke—from the Andersons' property on, and there might have been another home in there, another piece of property, but they were two-story buildings on that side. But it was owned by the people who lived there, black people. And John Luke had a big place in there. And he had a barbecue place and all—he had a big area in there. And a wood yard and things in there. Then next to John Luke, right directly in front of this store here, the Johnsons owned that, their house there. And before the Johnsons was the Benders, between John Luke and the Johnsons. The Benders owned their house there, the Bender family. And next to the Johnsons was a couple of pieces of rental property. And then the house next to ours was owned by some people—I don't remember their name, but they were black people. Then our house. Then a couple pieces of rental property.

And the other houses from the—another six rental houses on down to the corner were owned by black people. Don't remember exactly all of 'em's name. But on this beside those rental houses, there was the Stephens family, there was this church—the Morning Star Church was next to the school. And then the Stephens family owned that house. And Ms. Susie (inaudible), then was the Fosters. We call her Miss Marylou. Marylou Foster, she owned the next big house.

pause in recording

The next house was Ms. Susie (inaudible) house, a big two-story house. Then next house was Ms. Moore's house. On the corner, the Singletarys, they owned that corner. There was a store on that corner, and they owned that whole—it was a curved corner. On that corner across there, Mr. Moore owned a big two story—it was a two-story building, but he had a grocery store downstairs. This grocery store, Mr. Moore's store. Behind our house was a two-story house owned by the Johnsons. And in that house—they lived upstairs and that house was a store, downstairs, owned by Mr. Jenkins, a West Indies fellow. Back to this corner over here across the street, in front of the church, probably on the front of Scott Street, the front of the church, was owned by the Williams family, R.L. Williams family. They were all stores.

OA: Was this Dr. R.R. [Reche Reden] Williams?

HH: No, he owned all that down here. He owned a lot of property down here then. No, this is the R.L. Williams family.

OA: Okay.

HH: There was a store on the corner. This was a store an this corner too, but R.L. Williams had a dry goods store and a tailor shop and all that down an this side. On this corner—the Larkins had owned this corner here. And the house and the house next to it. There were a couple of stores there. They had the grocery store and another store next door. And next to that was a house that they owned. But then, in addition to that property, they owned property down on Estelle [Street] and Governor. The Larkins owned that corner. There's a store building there now. They owned that store, the houses which were next to it down to the alley. Their house was an this side of the store, a big story house is not there.

Then the Boxers owned the next house comin' back this way from the Larkins' house. And, well, this Ms. Hillman owned the next big two-story house in there. And then on the corner of Bay Street, the Larrys owned that corner. They're still there on that corner, Bay and Governor. And then they had a store behind the house on Governor Street on Third Avenue. Their store was right from K Street—from behind their house to Third Avenue. And across the street, I don't know them. Most of the people on that side (inaudible). And on that side of Governor Street between (inaudible) and Estelle, all those houses in there were owned by individual black families. No rental properties.

You get to rental property on Third Avenue. There was a man we called Mr. Dupree. Well, on this street, I think it was a lady; she owned quite a bit of houses on Third Avenue between Governor. But, now, before you got to her houses there were three or four houses there that were owned by families, individual families. Then rental property up Mitchell Street. And on the other side of Mitchell Street, going up on the same side of Fifth Avenue to Nebraska [Avenue] behind the stores—On the corner of K and Nebraska, that building there, that red brick building. The first black person who owned a drugstore in Tampa, Bert Williams, who worked for Brown and then worked at Brown's store—work for Perry Harvey now—he owned that store there on the corner—drugstore, there on the corner. He wasn't a registered pharmacist—he dispensed medicine on the side—but he owned that drug store. In fact, Brown worked for Bert, stole all of Bert's money and (inaudible) drugstore out there. But Bert owned that drugstore on the corner. But that was the first black man to own a drugstore.

OA: Tell me a—

HH: Bert Williams. He works for—

OA: Bert Williams.

HH: He works for (inaudible) Brown's Pharmacy—or College Hill Pharmacy. He owned

that drugstore. What happened, the white man owned it, named Dr. Monroe. When Bert started he was a little boy like that. Well, when Dr. Monroe died he left the drugstore—he gave it to Bert, the whole business, the whole works, because Bert had worked for him through all of his life. So he owned that drugstore.

But when Bert started hiring these pharmacy—these boys who came out of school—A boy named Robinson worked for him. Brown was one of 'em but they're all— By him not being a pharmacist, they picked him clean and the drug—He had to give it up. But that was the first black owned—Now the other drug—We have a drugstore down on the corner of Central and Scott, Fallas Brothers, but blacks always worked in there. But the pharmacist was a white man. He owned another drugstore, Jim's Drugstore, down blocks down here. As you know, on the corner of Scott and Central—actually old Charlie Moon owned it last. But, you know Mr. Garland, Robbie Garland? Do you know Robbie Garland?

OA: (inaudible) Garland.

HH: Well, their daddy owned that corner—

OA: (inaudible)

HH: (inaudible) they owned part of that corner. And, of course, they were—They owned part of the hotel too, the Pyramid Hotel. But blacks owned all of the property along Central on the east side. All the businesses except the Greek Stand was on the corner of Central and Scott. A Greek owned that, but all the other places—Kid Mason had a third of the block. And the Whiteway Barber Shop, that was owned by Dr. White. He was a doctor, he had his office up over the Greek Stand on the corner of Central and Scott. He owned the Whiteway Barber Shop. And the poolrooms were owned by Lee Davis and this guy that I was tellin' you owned the property, he—I couldn't think of his name. Justin. Yeah, Justin. He owned two others on that corner down there. And Chick from Ameriville owned the bar on the corner of Nick's (inaudible) bar and thing down there. And then there was the Kid who was owned by—it was always owned by whites.

OA: Okay. Was there a messenger service down there?

HH: A messenger service? Miller. Harris Miller, but this was late in his years after he was a—He had business there all his life. He had a business right there on—See, the drugstore was on the corner and the insurance company, Atlanta Life Insurance, and then Miller and the barbershop and then Miller's place was there for 100 years. He was always in some kind of business there, but in the later part of the years, you know how it is, it was all runnin' down to the point where it was—it became a messenger service, Miller's Messenger Service.

pause in recording

HH: She's been here. She's been—And all these—Do you remember all—In that block

where she lived, in her house, I know down here—that beer garden, that was always a beer garden, but the houses in between her house and the beer garden were owned by individuals. A Spaniard owned one, Williams owned one, all those houses that were in between, they were owned by black people; and then the beer garden. And then the school and the churches and whatnot. But all this property around here was owned by blacks. And along Nebraska, on that side of Nebraska, was rental property. On this side, all those houses—Mr. Johns, the first house by him, the first house an Scott, there on the corner; he's been there a long time too. Bill, the watchman, he's been there a long time. All those houses along there belong to individuals. Owned by black people. Negroes didn't have—weren't earnin' that much in those days.

OA: Mr. Harris, how did the city get these properties from the individuals? Did they sell out, or were they forced out, or what?

HH: You mean down here?

OA: Right.

HH: I think most of 'em just sold out. Because we didn't—You know, we sold our house. You know they came through and declared—you know, it was an urban renewal area. But they paid everybody for their property. They wasn't, you know, forcin' them out. Everybody got paid for their property. (inaudible)

OA: But were there any apartments built to accommodate, say, blacks who were in the inner-city area? So they was (inaudible) finish buildin' the buildings—anything to accommodate—?

HH: Well, this one was the last one. Well, (inaudible) homes had been there a long time. It was built in the forties [1940's]. But they built buildings. Built the one in Belmont Heights. So they came over here, so I guess they assumed that—they would say that that was built—there was a place provided for them out there, housing (inaudible).

OA: When you was comin' up, in this area, what was the general condition of the blacks in this area?

HH: The general condition was—well, they weren't makin' much money, you know, during the Depression days. And after the Depression they still weren't makin' too much money. I imagine a man was makin' about seven or eight dollars a week. Of course, you know, the thing that people—most of those people that I say owned their houses, it had come down from previous generations, so we made—they just worked hard and saved (inaudible) the ends and bought the property. But the general—

Before they put streets in—you know, I was here before they put streets in. People were poor but they weren't—I mean, they weren't like they are now. And to a certain extent, but—Because things were cheaper, you know. That was during the day when you could go to the store with a dollar and get dinner; get meat, rice, sugar and all that out of a

dollar. Or go get a quarter's worth of meat, a dime's worth of rice a nickel's worth of sugar. Days like that. (inaudible) But the people lived pretty good, you know, on this particular street. Most of 'em (inaudible). Those people that I'm talkin' about worked, you know.

OA: What were the general occupations, let's say, of blacks in the—?

HH: Laborers.

OA: Laborers?

HH: Now, my people worked the railroads. My folks were railroad porters. My grandfather, who built the house, worked the cigar factories. Because, you know, the cigarmakers—Back in those days the blacks worked for the cigar factories too, some of 'em. But he was in the cigar business. And—but for the most part, just laborers and things. They worked hard and saved their money

OA: Were there any professionals in this area?

HH: I don't know. Dr. Norton, he lives back there. Gettin' on down further, Dr. Williams owned, oh, several blocks (inaudible). A whole block on—block and a half, two blocks—he just owned a lot—I mean, a lot of houses gathered beside one street. A big row of houses. All of the other houses scattered independently were owned by the people who lived in them.

OA: So what you're sayin' is that during the early days, say in the forties [1940's] and the early fifties [1950's] blacks had their own businesses and controlled their own (inaudible)?

HH: Yeah. Umm hmm. There was black businesses all the way down Central, all up Scott Street. And Nebraska and on the corner of Nebraska there was always a little sundries store there, a barber shop and all that along there. On the any corner was a drugstore, like with sundries. And there was a pool room and a beauty shop and a barber shop and maybe somethin' else there. There was always a business there. It was a black business, owned by black people. And the black people owned the building.

Now, that corner down there was owned by Larkins too, but not these Larkins. They were related, but there was another set of Larkins owned the buildings on the corner of Nebraska and Scott, let's say four buildings down. And there was four buildings along there. And on the other side of the street, on that corner, Scott and Nebraska, there was a two story building there, and that was owned by blacks. It was always a restaurant up there of some kind.

OA: You mean there was cigarmakers who was—

HH: My grandfather was a cigarmaker.

OA: Did he tell you anything about the cigar factories?

HH: No, I was too young when he died. He died when I was about two.

OA: During this time, can you think of the political foundation of blacks during that period? How were they motivated during that politically?

HH: (inaudible)

OA: What is the political motivation? Was that during the time when—

HH: (inaudible) you know, during the '40s when this started. A little bit of politics around then as far as blacks were concerned. There was more or less one person who'd go around and this would be "big man," you know, "big cheese."

OA: (inaudible) usually the influential black?

HH: There wasn't any influential black who was involved in politics here? Like Bill Richardson, for instance. Bill Richardson was (inaudible) for votin' for years and years and years. He was the most noted politician, so to speak, although he's not a really big time politician that was on a money level. He never ran for an office, but he motivated a lot of people gettin' into politics. He never ran for political office himself. But he was instrumental in getting people who he thought were the right people for black people and instrumental in motivating blacks to register to vote.

But, other than him, I can't remember anybody that really, you know—You've got the story about the Urban League. In this area, for some reason, it was always the vital agency. Very vital, the Urban League has been, in securing jobs and lookin' out for people who had emergencies, situations and things like that. It was always a vital agency, startin' back during the time when [Benjamin] Mays was here¹, you know. It had some very good executive secretaries. And some very good liberal white people was behind us, you know.

OA: Okay, Mr. Harris (inaudible) education (inaudible).

HH: Wait a minute. One more thing I really ought to mention, because I know they would like for it to be known, and that is the longshoreman had the first black-owned supermarket. The first black supermarket in Tampa, right there on Scott Street. They used to have a big supermarket there, the longshoremen.

OA: Okay, now what year was this; can you think of about what year it was?

HH: What year it was? It was in the forties [1940's] or early fifties [1950's]. No, it must have been in the forties [1940's], because I came back here in the fifties [1950's].

¹ During the 1920s.

OA: Was it a major shopping center or a—?

HH: No, it was just a big supermarket, grocery store. Other than that we just had the little neighborhood—you know, the little small grocery stores, like if there was a grocery store on that corner. The grocery store over here was pretty good size. But, I mean, it was a massive big store, you know. It was a supermarket, really. It was the forerunner of the major supermarkets. It was a big store. And it was pretty sound and ran for quite awhile. A lot of these things, I don't remember the demise of 'em, and how they went out because I wasn't here. I left after forty-one [1941]—it was the forties [1940's], the first part of the forties [1940's], I left. And then I came back in the fifties [1950's]. I was away for ten years.

OA: As you returned to Tampa in the fifties [1950's] and entering education, what were the conditions of the black teachers during the fifties [1950's]?

HH: Well, the conditions had changed in the latter forties [1940's], somewhat—well, especially economic wise, because they had won the suit for equal pay. You've heard the story about that. forty-seven [1947], forty-eight [1948], forty-nine [1949] was when things began to get a little bit better so for as—really got better when the pay was on an equal status. And things got better when they organized. The beginning of the FSTA, the Florida State Teachers Association, the teachers began to organize, things got a little bit better then. But that was the start of it, in forty-seven [1947]. Ben Griffin, Harry Manus and Davis from over at Central Life, they were leaders for equal pay in the state and here in Tampa. And we won the suit in Tampa, one of the first ones that ever sued the state of Florida, so from there others started following suit. Thurgood Marshall was the attorney then, for that suit. And he won the suit, down here in Tampa, for equal pay for teachers.

OA: Okay. (inaudible) the present disruptive student, as opposed to the student which you have taught. Is there a basic difference, or are the black teachers more adept at dealing with particular problems than, say, the whites?

HH: I couldn't say that they aren't—they could be and could not be. You had some very, very good, strong black teachers. You had a few good white teachers. But, to me, it isn't all in the teaching. I mean, it isn't all in the school. The biggest part of the trouble is the children with the negative attitude that they have towards the school—attitude the children come to the school with. You see, regardless of who it is it makes it more difficult to deal with them, white or black. Those white teachers who have good intentions, it's harder—just as hard for them to deal with— it's just as hard for a black teacher who have good intentions to deal with 'em if they're white. Because it's just overall in an attitude.

It's changing a little bit. I'd say within the last year. But the first few years of integration it was terrible. The change is coming about but it all comes down, too, from the higher educational institutions. Institutions of higher education. Just like when we had the strike here, the teachers' strike. The first week, naturally, the high school children, they raised

hell. But we got along all right with the elementary school children. But by the next week after that weekend, they found out what their big sisters and brothers was doing, the next week they was doin' it in the elementary school. Because, you know, we had these different people in the room every day, different persons, keepin' the room—not teachers, people comin' out of the fields, comin' to work in the classroom. They were payin' 'em twenty-five dollars a day to break the strike, just to keep the children. It was just a matter of keepin' the children. But it all started at a high level and worked down.

And now we have the college people are going back to what college as it used be like. The violence and all that has gotten out of the system and it's workin' down to the high schools slowly. And I can't say too much on how it used to be. I used to call myself—speakin' on the situation which—and I found that I was wrong because I wasn't there. And unless you're there, you really don't know what the situation really is. And I've found that out. I'm not connected with any high schools, never have been, and don't want to be, especially now. But with the high school situation, unless you've been into the situation you can't say how good it is or how much worse it was. I know how bad it was, but I don't know how much better it's become. But I do know there is some improvement. But it's still bad. But, now, the elementary schools there's a lot of improvement.

OA: All right, the elementary schools, have the conditions changed that much?

HH: Oh, much, much. If you saw the superintendent this morning on that program—did you hear his message? I mean, they showed the test score situation. The test score situation in Hillsborough County—The test scores in Hillsborough County are at or above the norm in every area, first grade on through twelfth. They're a little bit lower at the tenth grade level and they're a little bit lower at the fifth grade level, lower than the others—and the sixth grade level—but in the first, third in the last two years, there's been a tremendous jump. And this is test scores overall. You know what I'm talking about, averaging out. But our children in Hillsborough County are reaching the norm. In other words, the bell curve is moved up. The line being here, the bell curve being up in here. And there's been a tremendous improvement.

There were two things that caused it, especially in the elementary schools, was the Impact Program that we have. But we have additional people in the first three grades. You know, they try to put as many teachers or teacher aides as they can in the elementary schools now in grades one through three. In other words, each elementary school that has one through three schooling are allocated a certain amount of money based on the projected enrollment, and the principal can take that money and use it either to hire additional teachers or additional aides. And they have money for additional materials. For this kind of thing—see to a large extent, teacher needs additional help in the room. And if the teacher gets some help, then she can work with those who need it the most while the aide is working with the others. So this has been a tremendous help. And some teachers may have two aides. If the situation warrants it, then the principal, he has the ability to shift—the flexibility to shift this thing around where the need is.

And now when they get to the third grade, they've picked 'em up because of the

programs. They're able to pick 'em up. But the special math programs and reading teachers, or the special reading and math teachers pick up this group that is dragging behind and give them a push on a one-to-one basis. Also these special math and reading teachers, along with the classroom teachers, plus they have they have an aide. So there's more personnel to handle these—to work with these children. And at the sixth grade level we have a sixth grade reading teacher and she has an aide. So in addition to the regular classroom there are two other people to work with this kid who's in trouble. So if the kid is any way capable, between the first and sixth grade he should be able to make it.

But then, of course, now you have people who are less capable who just can't cut it, you know, and so you do have some kids who remain way down. And it's not only for black kids, but the majority of the kids are black, unfortunately, that are on the lowest level. It's not because the school is lower, it's because it just happened that way. And because there are more—well, there're more black children on the lower economic level than there are white, to a certain extent in some areas. But the system itself has improved tremendously and we've gotten a—that's the reason we really hate to see Mr. Green go because, man, every dollar that you could squeeze out of the government, he got it and put in this county. We happened to have had contacts with people in Atlanta and Washington—that's where the money comes from—and he has friends in high places and they'd let him know when something's coming off the wire. And before it could be finished he's got a proposal up there in Washington gettin' some of that money. And we've got it here. Every program that comes out is—that can help—

end of interview