

## Museum on Main Street, Smithsonian Institution

### The Black Labor Experience in Kent County, Maryland

As told by WKHS Radio Station Students

Kent County, Maryland

Story Narrative:

Students at the Kent County High School radio station WKHS interview local residents about their work experiences that vary from what it's like to be a female police officer to a World War II veteran who was in the Normandy Invasion.

**Nina Johnson-Wright:** And I am the Executive Director of Sumner Hall. Sumner Hall is one of two African American Civil War veterans posts that is still standing in the US today. Sumner Hall has partnered with Washington College to showcase the Smithsonian exhibit on the Way We Worked along with our companion exhibit titled The Black Labor Experience In Kent County. Through our collaboration with Kent County High School's broadcasting class, we are presenting oral histories on a few local African American community members sharing their experience working in Kent County and beyond.

**Stephen Neukam (00:45):** Hi, I'm Stephen Neukam.

**Xavier Jones (00:48):** And I'm Xavier Jones.

**Stephen Neukam (00:48):** And we are seniors at Kent County High School. And we are also involved with the high school's radio station, 90.5 WKHS. We both had the opportunity to sit down and interview members of our community. Some of which will be shown in the video.

**Xavier Jones (01:00):** The members of the community that we interviewed answered questions about what it was like to work in an environment that tested them, but not only physically, but emotionally and mentally. Through these interviews, I hope that we can showcase the way that they work.

**Stephen Neukam (01:11):** We really hope you enjoy.

**Stephen Neukam (01:13):** As a part of the companion exhibit at Sumner hall, The Black Labor Experience in Kent County, Maryland, this project features oral histories of local community members interviewed by broadcasting students at Kent County High School. This covers the 1930s up to the present. We asked people to share their stories of their dream jobs, the first job they held, what limitations and challenges they faced in their careers, work ethic, and some life experiences worth noting.

**Xavier Jones (01:38):** These oral interviews have allowed us to learn more about our community, and how they work. It also allowed people to learn things about our

community that may have not even been known, before the African American work experience.

**Allen Johnson** (01:52): Well, when I first grew up, as I recall, my mother wanted me to be a minister. She preached the Gospel, and we always had a lot of books that I could read, study religion. As I grew older and started elementary school, I changed my viewpoints a little bit, and I like drawing and painting and wanted to move towards being an artist.

**Wesley Jackson** (02:25): Our doctor came from Chesapeake. And Dr. Richmond, who was a black doctor, and I thought he was the greatest man that every lived.

**Stephen Neukam** (02:39): That's great.

**Wesley Jackson** (02:39): And I wanted to be just like him.

**Marcellene Beck** (02:42): It was either going to Africa, being a missionary, or a police officer. That's been a major part of my aspirations growing up. And modeling.

**Lauretta Freeman** (02:56): And coming from a family of educators, naturally, it's expected that I would also become an educator.

**Stephen Neukam** (03:07): Okay.

**Lauretta Freeman** (03:07): First, I wanted to become a nurse. And this is interesting. The reason why I changed my mind, I was afraid of the diseases. I was afraid of dead people. So I knew I would not make it as a nurse. So then my interest went into teaching, and I wanted to be a teacher back to my aunts were.

**Stephen Neukam** (03:32): When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?

**Ruby Johnson** (03:34): I think maybe a teacher.

**Xavier Jones** (03:44): So what was your first job actually, speaking of?

**James Saunders** (03:47): My first job actually speaking in county, I was at age of 16. And I worked a summer job at [inaudible 00:03:58].

**Xavier Jones** (03:57): Okay.

**James Saunders** (03:57): But-

**Xavier Jones** (03:57): Did you like it?

**James Saunders** (04:02): I didn't have no other choice. That was the only thing that was open at that time for kids around here. But I didn't care for it. Because I worked so long, but didn't make the money.

**Xavier Jones** (04:15): Yeah.

**James Saunders** (04:15): After I graduated from school in 1963, I went, we used to call it back in them days, going up the line. Going up the line was going to Wilmington, Delaware to work. And I got there. I went to Wilmington, Delaware, and joined the Local, the Local 199. That was a labor Local 199 in '63. You had join it in order to work these jobs.

**Stephen Neukam** (04:44): What was your first job?

**Betty Smith** (04:44): My very first job was at [inaudible 00:04:48] during this summer? They started hiring 16-year-old kids. So that was my very first job that I can think of.

**Mrs. Gloristeen Powell-Pinkett** (04:56): The first job I had was working at a hotel.

**Stephen Neukam** (05:00): Okay.

**Mrs. Gloristeen Powell-Pinkett** (05:01):

And I did that when I went to college because I had to work. I had to go to work during the summer, make enough money. And see, education wasn't as expensive as it is today. And make enough money to get into college. And the funny thing is, it only taken me to the middle of the first semester, then my aunt, this is where my aunt came in, and I loved her dearly. My aunt came in, and she would finance me for the second semester. And then I would come back, and do the same thing all over again. Work during the summer, finance the first semester, my aunt would take care of the second semester. Come back and do the same thing all over again.

**Wesley Jackson** (05:43): I didn't have the means and the privileges that those other kids had to pursue my dream.

**Thomas Grace** (05:58): Yeah. The jobs were very limited.

**Stephen Neukam** (05:58): Yeah.

**Thomas Grace** (06:02): If it hadn't been for the factory job, I'm not sure what I would have done. There were very few jobs around at that particular time for teenagers.

**Stephen Neukam** (06:13): And were there are a lot of people working in the factory? Was that a popular job?

**Thomas Grace** (06:18): That was a popular job. Many of the women in the county, and some men, worked at that factory for years. And probably what happened was the waste product, there was so much brines, so much salty water, that the town's system could not handle the wastewater.

**Stephen Neukam** (06:43): Wow.

**Thomas Grace** (06:44): And they finally closed it.

**Marcellene Beck** (06:44): I dealt with all kinds of people, all colors. And for the most part, I've realized that ignorance was just a state of mind. And sometimes you could

penetrate that. Sometimes you couldn't. And that's with any color. But being a black police officer, I think I had dealt with some things that ordinarily, or normally, I wouldn't have dealt with in responding to calls. I was the only police officer, female, when I came onboard. So it was always a white male that I dealt with, especially in the later, well, not necessarily the later years. A Lieutenant Rudolph Brown was a black police officer when I came to Chestertown.

**Stephen Neukam (07:45):** Wow. You're a World War II veteran?

**Wesley Jackson (07:48):** Sorry?

**Stephen Neukam (07:49):** You fought in the War?

**Wesley Jackson (07:52):** Invasion.

**Stephen Neukam (07:55):** D-Day?

**Wesley Jackson (07:56):** Normandy Beach.

**Stephen Neukam (07:57):** Oh my. Wow.

**Wesley Jackson (07:58):** What happened? They were supposed to go before the sixth. And we went out on the fourth. It was cloudy.

**Stephen Neukam (08:08):** Oh, wow.

**Wesley Jackson (08:08):** English Channel. They couldn't get ships down there. So they had the infantry and Marines go to Omaha Beach in 1946. And they saw from the pill boxes. We went to Normandy Beach. We was right up the road, six yards or something from Omaha Beach. And the beach. They say beach. It's not like Betterton or Rock Hall. We went in on the LST boat. And the hill, it was just like this wall in here. We had to get up there.

**Stephen Neukam (09:09):** Just straight up.

**Wesley Jackson (09:11):** Straight up.

**Stephen Neukam (09:12):** Oh, wow.

**Wesley Jackson (09:13):** They had pill boxes where the machine were sitting. And they were clear. And the boys said they saw dead people on soldiers on the beach. I didn't see a man. I was trying to look out for me. I didn't see it. But we went over on troop ships. We had warships to escort us. And the first people that went were doctors and nurses, hospital ships and supply ships. Supplies consisted of food and ammunition.

**Stephen Neukam (09:58):** That's amazing.

**Wesley Jackson (10:02):** So I'm blessed to be back. Come back. And I wasn't discharged November the 22nd, 1945.

**Stephen Neukam (10:09):** Wow.

**Wesley Jackson** (10:10): At Fort Maine.

**Stephen Neukam** (10:11): Thank you so much for your service.

**Wesley Jackson** (10:14): Yeah.

**Stephen Neukam** (10:16): It means a lot. How'd you get started in bus driving?

**Mrs. Anna Mae Dorsey** (10:18): My husband worked as a mechanic and funds were not enough for us when we first got married.

**Stephen Neukam** (10:26): So one day you're just like, "I'm going to start driving buses," and then you fell in love with it?

**Mrs. Anna Mae Dorsey** (10:29): I started driving.

**Stephen Neukam** (10:33): So what got you through all the years? Did the kids? What made you get up every morning and drive buses?

**Mrs. Anna Mae Dorsey** (10:41): It was my job. I had to do it.

**Airlee Johnson** (10:44): The jobs that I enjoyed. The one in New York City. I enjoyed that tremendously. I enjoyed living in New York, and it's just a learning experience being off the Eastern Shore.

**Stephen Neukam** (11:04): And going from Kent County to New York City. That was a big life change from-

**Airlee Johnson** (11:08): It was a very big-

**Stephen Neukam** (11:08): ... a small, quiet town-

**Airlee Johnson** (11:09): ... a small, quiet Eastern Shore.

**Stephen Neukam** (11:12): ... to a huge, booming city.

**Airlee Johnson** (11:14): And I handled it well. I fit right in. And that was a great learning experience. And then from there to Atlanta, trying to be a merchandise manager. I was an assistant merchandise manager. There was another learning experience. Because you leave from the North going down to the South. And it was. Yeah. I had a couple of instances where I had to stand my ground because the one big promotion that I wanted, I knew why I didn't get it. Because of wrong racial reasons. And I had to have to forward. I have to assert myself.

**Allen Johnson** (11:56): Back there in 1963. I remember this is just like it was yesterday. And I'm talking about that was the time when schools in this county and different places was not integrated. Garnett High School had won a championship for that year. And we were the black school. Chestertown High had won the championship for their school. They were the white school of the county. So what happened. We had to play the tournament in Washington College-

**Xavier Jones** (12:36): Oh, okay.

**Allen Johnson** (12:37): ... gym before we could go to University of Maryland. That's where they integrated all the players. Before we could go to Washington College, they had a bus come pick us up. And go on and take us to Chestertown High and play a scrimmage against Chestertown High. When they took that bus up to Chestertown High from Garnett, we went into the gym. We went into the auditorium. They locked the doors behind. Was only two teams, Garnett and Chestertown High was the only two teams in here, and the coaches. The next week, they brought us back. Chestertown High bused down to Garnett. We did the same thing. They locked the door, and didn't let nobody in. Because Garnett had never played a white school, and Chestertown High had never played black school.

**Xavier Jones** (13:29): So you were part of history, huh?

**Allen Johnson** (13:31): Yeah. Chestertown High was supposed to play Maces Lane, and we was supposed to play the Colonel Richardson. So when we went to Washington College, we guys from Garnett, and the guys from Chestertown High had became friends because of the basketball players.

**Xavier Jones** (13:47): Right.

**Allen Johnson** (13:48): So it didn't make no difference whether you were black or white. When we went up there, Chestertown High had to play one game to go to University of Maryland. Garnett had to play four at Washington College. Chestertown High got knocked out by Maces Lane the first night. We played four different games, and we won.

**Xavier Jones** (14:06): Wow!

**Allen Johnson** (14:06): All four of them.

**Xavier Jones** (14:09): So Garnett won.

**Allen Johnson** (14:12): So we went to University of Maryland. And the first team we played was Hancock.

**Xavier Jones** (14:20): Okay.

**Allen Johnson** (14:21): It was an all-white school.

**Xavier Jones** (14:23): Where were they from?

**Allen Johnson** (14:24): They was from the Western Shore.

**Xavier Jones** (14:25): The Western Shore.

**Allen Johnson** (14:26): And we played them. And our principal, Mr. Hawkins. We was losing back here. We was losing the first half. Mr. Hawkins came into our locker room and said, "Don't embarrass me over here." We come back, and we beat them. Beat Hancock 98 to 50.

**Allen Johnson** (14:47): Poolesville was integrated.

**Xavier Jones** (14:50): Okay. They had both black and white.

**Allen Johnson** (14:52): And we weren't.

**Xavier Jones** (14:53): Okay.

**Allen Johnson** (14:54): So we weren't adjusted to that. So we played Poolesville. First half, Poolesville run us out of the gym. But the second half we came back.

**Xavier Jones** (15:05): You bounced back.

**Allen Johnson** (15:06): And they beat us by, what, six points. But we did get the runner up for that.

**Xavier Jones** (15:13): Right. But you gave it a close game.

**Allen Johnson** (15:16): Yes.

**Xavier Jones** (15:16): You made it that far.

**Allen Johnson** (15:17): Yes, we did. And we was the only one that did make it in the years that was left.

**Nina Johnson-Wright** (15:27): Being able to raise a family, take care of your family. And even my grandparents. That was instilled from generation to generation, and we can appreciate that. Because we often sit around and talk and say, "We don't know what it's like not to work. We've always worked." Even before I got the job at the Cedar Program with being a recreation aid, we still had responsibility.

**Allen Johnson** (15:54): Right.

**Nina Johnson-Wright** (15:55): I maybe help babysit or do something else. I didn't get paid a whole lot, but even with my brother. But once we started working and earning a paycheck, we don't know what it's like not to work. Because we've been taught to work hard, work smart, have a good work ethic. Meaning you go to work on time.

**Allen Johnson** (16:17): Right.

**Nina Johnson-Wright** (16:17): You do your job. You be professional, and you be respectful, courteous. And it pays you back when you do that. And to learn how to get along with people.

**Stephen Neukam** (16:37): Thank you for watching the WKHS video on The Black Labor Experience in Kent County, Maryland.

**Speaker 15** (16:42): To hear the full interviews conducted by the broadcasting students, you can visit Sumner Hall's listening station. This has been a 90.5 WKHS production.

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