

BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2016

IN LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH PROMINENT MEMBERS OF THE
AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY, SPONSORED BY THE
HISTORIC LEXINGTON FOUNDATION



EMILY JANE BORGUS ADAMSON

*Conducted by Anne McClung in February 2012 while driving through the
Diamond Hill neighborhood of Lexington*

AM: Were you born in Lexington?

EA: Yes, over on Randolph Street, in my parents' home.

AM: In what year were you born?

EA: 1924.

AM: Were all of your brothers and sisters born in your parents' home?

EA: I was the first of the girls. There were four of us: two boys and two girls. I was the first one born in the house.

AM: What were your brothers' and sisters' names?

EA: Brown Colbert Borgus; Napoleon Henry Borgus; Emily, me; Laura Anne Borgus.

AM: What were your parents' names?

EA: My mother was Laura Holloway and my father was Brown Colbert Borgus.

AM: Were your parents born here?

EA: My mom was born here and my dad was born in Point Pleasant, West Virginia. His father was a minister.

AM: How did your mom and dad meet?

EA: They met here in Lexington. After his father died, he and his brother and sister moved back to Rockbridge County, to our great-grandparents' farm, my grandmother's father [*at the intersection of Beatty Hollow and Enfield Turnpike Roads*]. My father came in town and lived with Dr. Pleasants and went to school. This was the older Dr. Pleasants, because the younger one, now deceased, was born while my father was living with them. As a matter of fact the first word that the young Dr. Pleasants said as a baby was "Brown," my father's name.

I get invited to Monticello because I am supposed to be related to some people from over there. There is something at the Smithsonian where they have a display of African American heritage. I am invited to that.

[Emily shows where her great-grandparents' farm was]

AM: What did he do with this land?

EA: He farmed some of it. But I imagine it was too hilly to do much. There was an old house on top of the hill but I don't see it any more. And there was a spring down closer to the road, near where the land ends.

AM: Where did you go to school?

EA: After I finished tenth grade at Lylburn Downing I went to Henderson, North Carolina, to finish my last two years of high school at a boarding school. Then I went to Bennett, a Methodist college, all women, in Greensboro, North Carolina. That's where I got my BA degree. And after — then I went to the University of Virginia and got my master's. I can't remember when I got it but it was before I started working at Lexington High School, which was in the mid- to late-sixties, I guess.

AM: After you got your master's, then you started teaching at Lexington High School?

EA: No. I was teaching at Lylburn Downing, then after they integrated — then that's when I went to Lexington High School.

AM: When and whom did you marry?



Emily Jane Borgus Adamson

EA: I was married in January of 1949, to Ernest Adamson. He was in the Army and served in World War II and then in the Reserves during the Vietnam conflict. We were friends from the first grade all the way up. We never had any children.

AM: What did your father do?

EA: My father was something like the maître d', headwaiter, down at VMI. He hired and fired and had his own office. That was the time the waiters were all black and they wore black-like tuxedo pants with that stripe down the leg and waiter jackets and black bow ties and white shirts. They waited on the Keydets.

AM: I didn't know that Keydets ever got waited on.

EA: Yes, they did. So that's what he did. There is a plaque there in Crozet Hall on the wall with his picture in it. There was a big ceremony and the whole family was invited.

AM: And what did you mom do? Raise all you children?

EA: She didn't work until after my sister started to school. And then she worked at the SAE fraternity house [*Sigma Alpha Epsilon at Washington and Lee*]. She was sort of like the assistant to the housemother.

AM: Since you were born at home, did you have a midwife, or what did you have?

EA: Dr. Siebert, a white doctor, came to help birth us. And then there was a lady that worked with him who was a midwife, I guess. She was always with him and never by herself. She was a Clark, Ms. Lillian Clark.

AM: I wasn't around here during the integration of schools. I was off at boarding school. What was it like?

EA: Well, the kids that left Lylburn Downing, they didn't have a problem at all. The whites and the Downing kids didn't have any problems. There were very congenial to one another. The first year they went to Lexington High School they took the eighth grade and put it over at Downing. So I taught still at Downing with Mr. Potter. After that first year, they took the eighth grade back to the high school and then I went back to the high school.

AM: When the school were integrated whatever changes occurred in Lexington?

EA: Not that I can recall.

AM: Did you ever feel like you were restricted in doing things in town?

EA: No, all the stores were open to us. Some places you couldn't go into stores to try on things, but that didn't exist around here. You could go in any place. Of course you know we didn't go to the restaurants because we knew we weren't going to be accepted there. But the theaters, there used to be two, and we were in the balcony but you would go in the front door and go up the steps. At the

Plaque honoring Ms. Adamson's father
in VMI's Crozet Hall

State down here when you would go and if it was the day the Keydets could come to the theater — well, if you were sitting down in the extra section and they needed more seats, they would ask you to move back up further. They would do that. We could actually see the movie better than the whites up in the balcony. What else? Like I say, we had our own black restaurants.

AM: Do you remember the names of the black restaurants?

EA: Washington's Restaurant, it was down in that area where McClung has his law office [*18 North Main Street*]. My grandfather had a pool hall right there in that building where the Red Hen is now [*11 East Washington*]. He came over from Amherst after slavery and he opened the pool hall. This wasn't a black area back then. Down on Nelson Street there was a black man named Roland and he had a restaurant. From Dold's [*1 North Main*] all the way down Main was black business and stuff. There was a barber shop down in the section where McClung's is. Teddy Delaney wrote about the black businesses down that part of town. It was his grandfather who had the barber shop. There was another restaurant across the street and that was Doc's restaurant and a pool hall. Nanny Wood who owned the Blandome home owned what was the Willson-Walker House and is now Macado's. It was her father's butcher shop.

[We were driving around at this point and stopped at her parents' home where she and her siblings were born. This is on Randolph Street. Her surviving brother Napoleon currently lives in the house next door. He is 91.]

AM: When you were a child, what did you all do for fun?

EA: I would stand on my porch and watch the Keydets play tennis because the tennis courts were right down here where Cameron Hall is now. We would watch the Keydets practice. And then up at Downing is where kids played softball in the summer. We would congregate down on this corner



[*Diamond and Randolph*], the kids from Mudtown, Green Hill and Diamond Hill. We had skates and bicycles and we would talk and play around. One boy had a motorcycle and he would take us around. We used to sleigh ride from Downing all the way down the hill and up the other side and come out on Main Street. Someone would stand there in case a car came along. There weren't that many cars, though.

Where we would sleigh ride, the dumps were there. So they would make fires out of old tires and stuff, and Keydets would come and bring wooden chairs from the dining hall and they would bring them and turn them on their backs and sleigh ride or use them like skis to go down the hill. Yes, we did those types of things. Then my mom and some other ladies organized some camps in the summer. The boys used to go out to Rockbridge Baths for two weeks during the summer. Then, when the boys would come in, they would take us girls out there.

AM: Where were the camps in Rockbridge Baths?

EA: In Rockbridge Baths, you would go across the swinging bridge, and it was called Shoulders Bottom. So we would camp down there. We went to Zollmans too to have picnics. We weren't home too much during the summer though because Mom and Dad started going to Virginia Beach when I was eleven or twelve. They went to work down there and rented a house while they did. When we came back it was about time for school to start again.

AM: You were a very young girl when the Depression came along. Do you remember how that affected you?

EA: No, it didn't affect us as I can remember. I have pictures from a little girl on up and we always had food and clothes and everything and I remember Mom and the ladies on the hill here would have "pound parties" and everybody would come and bring a pound of food to take to other families that were really having a hard time.

AM: Emily, did you have indoor plumbing?

EA: Ever since I can remember. Maybe I was too little to realize it when they put it in though.

I didn't have far to walk to school. And we would sleigh ride down these other hills too. This house and Napoleon's house are the only two houses blocking VMI from expanding. They are begging for the properties. The dump was all through here [*meaning along Diamond Street*]. All of this is built on the old dump. When I was in the first grade the dump would be burning and you would have to have the windows up because of the heat. It is a wonder all of us don't have something crazy wrong with us. The fumes of the dump would come right in the window along with flies, and it was something else. Then I look at all of these houses

AM: Do you like the changes you have witnessed?

EA: Oh, yeah, but I just think what we went through with and what it is like now. Kids have it easier now, and I was telling someone they had a picture of Downing [*namesake of Rev. Lylburn L. Downing*]

with something else in the paper and they didn't mention the fact that he was Afro-American and people thought he was white, so the kids and parents think Downing was named after a white person I imagine, but he was black.

AM: Who was the principal of Downing when you went there?

EA: I believe it was Rev. Allen. Leander Shaw was the principal when I was teaching there.

AM: Your uncle who came back to town after the Civil War, what was his story?

EA: The Yankees came and took him during the war. They took a lot of blacks during that time. They took him because he was really white. That was my grandmother's brother. He went to California and he would come back here and stay at the Robert E. Lee Hotel and he bought this property here on Diamond Hill and he bought a big grave-site out at the cemetery. He had a big house, so when his mother died, it was large enough to divide into two houses for his two sisters to have a home place. He would send truckloads of clothing because my grandmother had two older daughters. He would send the clothes for them to start school every year.

You see, the white folks thought he was white, and that's why he could stay at the R. E. Lee. He would tell his black friends and family not to speak to him in public so he could continue staying at the hotel.

AM: What do you remember about Lexington when World War II was going on?

EA: Well, there was an officers training school at W&L and VMI, and many young men were sent from all around to go through the school. There were ration books for whiskey and gas. I remember getting my first ration book when I was twenty-one. I remember when I was at college during the war there weren't many boys to date. And I remember that's when margarine came out and it had a red button on the top that you had to push to make the margarine turn yellow.

AM: Can you think of anything else that people would be interested in knowing about how things used to be around here?

EA: Just like I told you about Main Street with a lot of black businesses and we had our own neighborhoods, Diamond Hill, Green Hill, and Mudtown. When I was young and living on Diamond Hill, most everyone

Randolph Street United Methodist Church,
where Ms. Adamson worshipped



in the three neighborhoods was black and most everyone owned their own homes. And they were well-kept homes, too. Now there are many whites living there and a whole lot of rentals.

AM: And the population of the blacks was much greater than it is now, right?

EA: Oh, yes indeed. Like I say, Anne, Lexington will be an all-white town because the youngsters — like my nieces, Paula and Diane, take them for example — there was nothing for them to do to stay here and make a living. Also, a lot of whites leave too. The young ones.

[We were driving down Randolph Street, near Maury Street, and Emily pointed out Sheridan's field, likely associated with Sheridan's Livery.]

EA: We used to sleigh ride in that field too. There were no houses there.

AM: What church did you go to?

EA: Methodist.

AM: Is that the one on Main Street?

EA: No, that's our sister church, Trinity. There's history behind that too. My church belonged to Trinity during slavery. The slaves used to come to it and they could sit up in the balcony and listen to the sermons and all. So after they built Trinity, they gave the church to the blacks. They had buried some people in back of the church and moved them up to the cemetery. They used the church before they gave it to us as a recreation place and then they gave it to the blacks — United Methodist.

AM: How is it that the girls in you family went to college and the boys didn't?

EA: My oldest brother went to Christiansburg Industrial Institute. That was a boarding school. He went there his two years. And my youngest brother, Poley, when he finished eighth grade, he went on in the service at the time of World War II. So both of them were in the service.

AM: Of the black girls who grew up in Lexington, was it unusual for them to go to college?

EA: I was unusual because very few of them went. After they finished high school, they did the domestic work around here. You remember, Anne — like Connie took care of you and your brothers and sister when you were little. The help would congregate with the kids in front of Lee Chapel. Bring the kids down and let them play and they would talk with one another. Very few of them went to college. I think there were only two of us then who went to college.

AM: Do you remember a man named Marshall Fishwick?

EA: I remember the name.

AM: He used to live behind the Episcopal Church and a black woman named Lucy Doc raised his children and took care of his family. Marshall Fishwick always said that if it weren't for the black people,

all of the white families would be a mess. He told me they kept the white families together. They were the glue that held these families together.

EA: The domestics and the whites were close.

AM: Did you all walk and ride bikes everywhere you went?

EA: Yeah, I had a bicycle and I had skates, too. When I got my bicycle, my brother Poley took my skates and nailed them to a board. So he had a skateboard, just like they do now! We used to skate from Downing to Main Street and jumped the side walks and all that. And the Swinks lived at the top of the hill and sometimes we made so much noise they would call the police and they would tell us we had to stop making so much noise.

AM: Do you remember the Rhythm Makers?

EA: Oh yes, I remember them all. Lewis Watts had no arms and Emily taught him in school in the fourth grade.

AM: We used to love the Rhythm Makers. They played at all of our dances. Who all was in the Rhythm Makers?

The Rhythm Makers in another incarnation; from left, Lewis Watts, Bill Hoffman, Junior Broadneaux, Frank Woodley, Vaden Thompson and Teddy Borgus



EA: Lewis Watts — Dayton Thompson — Billy Hoffman — Teddy Borgus, Napoleon's son.

In that book about Lexington there is a picture of the band. They also have a picture of Napoleon and my other brother Brown. They didn't know who they were when they put it in there.

AM: Did any blacks have house maids?

EA: No, no. I don't think any blacks had any, not even the Woods and they would have been the ones who would have had. Oh, yes, they did too. They had a lady who lived there and helped in the house. That s the only one I know of.

AM: How about the house you live in now?

EA: My husband built this house. I helped a little. He was a contractor and built this house and the one on Fuller Street.

This was a wonderful place to grow up. I didn't have any complex about being black. I knew we weren't going in white restaurants and that type of thing. Like I said, we could go in any of the stores and buy what we wanted. The theater wasn't upsetting that we had to sit in the balcony. That was just something you accepted. So we didn't really have any problems. I never did feel inferior because I was black.

I was a Girl Scout leader for many years. I was on the library board, United Way, Lime Kiln Arts, and volunteered at the hospital for almost fifty years, and just quit. I had an after-school program at my church for the kids for a number of years. We had art classes, classes in Japanese and karate. I ran a food bank though the Methodist church.

I had a motorcycle and so did my husband. We rode around here a lot. I went to James Madison and got certified to ride my motorcycle. I went there to be certified by the state to be a guidance counselor, too. I've been to all of the local colleges to take extra classes. I taught drivers education and had to be certified for that.

AM: Thank you so much for sharing these memories with me, Emily! ■

Illustrations

Portrait of Emily Adamson: Bruce Macdonald

Plaque: Ryan Titzer, VMI '16

Rhythm Makers: Lylburn Downing Alumni 1928–65 Facebook page

About this series

Quietly nestled in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley in the Blue Ridge Mountains is a small town called Lexington, Virginia. It is a relatively quiet place, a village in its nature, a college town that attracts a wide range of interesting people. History is the culture of Lexington; two of its well-known sons are Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. There are others: its sons and daughters, artists, musicians, professors, coeds, cadets, many such as George C. Marshall, who have gone to take their place as citizens of the larger world. Equal parts of pride are recognized in its heroes and those who are not so well known, Many of those deserve our recognition and admiration, for they guide us with their stories from the past. They are our caretakers of memories that reveal what many of us never knew, yet too valuable to remain unrecorded. The Historic Lexington Foundation, under the guidance of its Executive Director, Don Hasfurthur, with this project makes some of those memories available.

These oral histories comprise the substance of the book *The House on Fuller Street* by Beverly Tucker with illustrations by Bruce Macdonald (Mariner Press, 2013; available on Amazon.com)

