

# 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



## EDLOW MORRISON

Interview conducted on December 2, 2011, by Don Hasfurther, Executive Director, and  
Dr. Beverly Tucker, Executive Board, Historic Lexington Foundation

*Location of interview: Mr. Morrison's home, Lexington, Virginia*

DH: Could you tell us the place and date of your birth? Then we will talk about your family.

EM: I was born in Murat, Virginia, in 1918. The house I was born in was behind the school. . . . I'm sorry I can't remember the name of it, my mind is not what it once was — oh, just above Collierstown High school, which closed. The house has burned down since. My father was farming the Elhart farm . Old Dr. Coleman delivered all seven of us children. I was the sixth of seven. In 1927, the black school closed and we had to move. My father was farming but we moved in to Lexington so that we children could go to school. I was one of the first to go to Lylburn Downing, an all-black school in the Diamond Hill area of Lexington, which was mostly black also. I had finished the second grade in my other school but the people here had it in their head that we were not so good so coming in from the county, so I had to repeat the second grade.

DH: So you moved from Murat. Could you tell us a little about your father and mother?

EM: My mother was born and lived in a black orphanage somewhere near Fairfield. Some Caucasian people in Rockbridge County took her into their home and raised her as one of their family. She was ten years old and lived with them until she was nineteen when she met my father and they married. My mother never had an education. She never went to school a day in her life, but there wasn't nothing she was not capable of doing. She sewed for people, black and white. She could sew anything. She could make a pattern for anything people wanted. She sewed for me too. She made blouses, rompers — in fact

everyone called me “little boy blue” because she made everything out of blue material. My mother died when I was twelve years old and we moved to town. I remember her so much. She was such a great lady.

DH: And you moved to Diamond Hill?

EM: We moved to 106 Tucker Street. My father remarried. He started cleaning houses, then he worked at the Stonewall Jackson Hospital. One of the doctors liked him and hired him. He died when he was seventy-eight years old but he was still working at the hospital. What street was that on?

DH: Washington Street

EM: Yes, Washington Street.

DH: Let me take you back to Murat. Did you go to Cedar Hill Church?

EM: Oh yes, Sunday mornings, my Daddy would hook up the horses to the wagon. Those that could not fit in the wagon would ride on the backs of those horses. Church was a must. My brother and sister were baptized in a creek that ran through Collierstown.

BT: Were you baptized there?

EM: I was baptized in the church that I'm in now.

DH: First Baptist of Lexington? On Main Street?



Cedar Hill Baptist  
Church; n.d.

EM: Yes. I was twelve years old. I've been a member there over eighty years. My father was a deacon in the Cedar Hill Church. We closed up that church when all the black people moved to town so their children could go to school. We transferred to First Baptist. Mother didn't since we were going backwards and forwards to Cedar Hill.

BT: Did you meet your wife in Lexington?

EM: Yes, I met her in Lexington. We married in 1941. I was twenty-three years old. My wife was a year and a half older than me.

DH: My mother and father were married in 1941, December of 1941, two weeks after Pearl Harbor. So you know where my dad ended up. Did you do military service?

EM: Yes I was in the Army Air Force. I went to Mississippi for training, then to San Antonio, Texas. I had a daughter in 1941. I was scheduled to go but my wife was six months pregnant so they delayed me until my daughter was born. I was an airplane mechanic for a B-25 airplane. It was our job to keep our one plane going and that was all we worked on. My whole career was spent at that field in San Antonio.

DH: I have to ask you a question in that regard. The Deep South was still very segregated at that time, and you being an African American from Virginia, how did you find the situation in the military?

EM: I never thought about it. Well, I do remember an incident. I was in San Antonio, me and two friends went shopping. We rode a military bus to work and we could sit anywhere we wanted to. If we got on the city bus, the normal thing was to go to the back of the bus. Once my friend said, "I'm going to sit up at the front of the bus!" I said, "No, we didn't come down here to make trouble. Forget about it and come on back here with me." He thought I was crazy. He was scratching his head. I never had any trouble. I worked with Caucasians, Mexicans. I knew a lot of them. I never thought about it. They were — what do you call them?

DH: Migrant workers?

EM: No civil service. We'd eat together, I never thought about it. Back in Murat, we were just people. There were some white Morrisons who owned a store and there was black Morrisons. We would get the wagon out and come to town and sell watermelon. That's how my dad made a living. He also made brooms. He raised broom corn and he had a machine to make the brooms. He had a wonderful garden. I was the sixth of seven children.

BT: When you came back from Texas, what did you do?

EM: Well, I went to work for a white lady. There was an old man and woman . . . he was a haberdasher in downtown Lexington. They invited me to live with them and do whatever they needed to have done. I lived there eight years. I was hired to cook, clean, garden, drive, pay her tax, and for all of that I earned \$7.50 a week. That's \$30 a month. I learned all those things while I was working for them. Then I got married and realized I needed to make more money. I went to work at Washington and Lee University

earning \$10 a week but my wife had had a child and I said that was still not enough. They raised me to \$11 a week. Still hard to make it on that. I went to Newport News to help build a railroad to Yorktown. I fought with those flies and mosquitos as long as I could and then went to Richmond to work at a quartermaster depot. My wife let me know that they were hiring people to work in textiles at Glasgow, so I came back and worked there for forty years. Then later, when I had a truck of my own, I helped a black man deliver medicine for a drugstore. Then later the man died and I kept on with the deliveries.

DH: I'd like to come back to your growing up in Lexington. What a lot of people who have moved to this area don't realize is that Main street was a vibrant street of black entrepreneurs. Do you remember those?

EM: Yeah, yeah, black people owned a lot of big businesses. There were many. One was a pool hall, a barber shop, there was a black doctor, and the Walker family ran a butcher shop in the Wilson-Walker House. I remember as a young person we danced upstairs on that porch. I got three years of high school. Many have died. I forget what that house was called, it's all brick, but I'd remember when we had our high school dances there. One daughter sent me a Christmas card this year.

BT: What are some of the most obvious changes that you have seen in Lexington?

EM: Well that's sorta a very hard question for me to answer. I just took it day to day and never thought about change or something new.

DH: One of the changes that people tell me about is this neighborhood of Diamond Hill. There was a closeness then.

EM: Yeah, There was a white man, most people buy them houses. I counted eighteen cars on this street mostly students. My children left. They both went to Virginia State College. My youngest went to Washington. Many of the young people left and went to Washington, D.C. Dr. Pleasants lived in that big house. I bought this house I still live in.

BT: How long have you been in this house?

EM: I bought this house in 1946 and I've lived here ever since. My wife bought a little bungalow which she rented then sold my nephew, no, she sold it to our grandson for \$1.

BD: You've seen many changes on the street.

EM: Well people moving, my daughter built that brick house over there.

DH: I had the opportunity recently of taking a tour of Diamond Hill with Professor Ted Delaney. He showed me where his grandparents lived on Tucker Street. He spoke of the Franklin Colored Tourist Home, where black people were allowed to stay safely. There were Cadillacs parked there with their black drivers. You obviously remember that,



Edllow Alexander Morrison

EM: Yeah, you know it's an odd thing. You're bringing up things . . . its odd about people . . . things happen . . . I can't remember a lot of things. My sister's husband had a barber shop on Main Street. They built that house over there. That large house is where we used to go to shoot marbles. But I can't remember a lot of things.

DH: You are doing pretty well.

BT: You have an extraordinary attitude about life. You don't have a larger reaction to things that have happened to you or other African Americans.

EM: Why should I?

BT: Well, I want to know how that happened?

EM: There was a white family that took my mother in to their home and family when she was ten years old . . . they raised her like she was one of their own. She was taught by that family. Her name was Della Brown Morrison. She was very close to that family. She was taught! The Rader family raised her! They never lost their closeness. She was the last to go to church. She had to sit up in the balcony. Then my father married her and she came to Cedar Hill Baptist. My brother was as Methodist.

DH: So it was the Rader family. Cedar Hill, where your family spent many years in church, is on the National Register of Historic Places. It has log construction underneath.

EM: Yeah, we had services there this year. I had three nieces that come down and had charge of the services.

BT: Do you have children here in Lexington?

EM: I told you, my son lives in that house over there. They all take care of me. He has a garden with greens that he gives away. He has greens this tall. He's got a tiller. He bought me a tiller too. His son is moving in that house down there. He got married and moved to Glasgow. His son is in college.

BT: Did your family have any special traditions that you remember?

EM: We just had holidays like everybody else. They will be here for Christmas. We will cook dinner. My daughter had two daughters nine months apart. She's been married twice. They come down. Now, where was I?

BT: What words of advice would you give to your children?

EM: Keep your hand in the hand of the Lord. I have always said that. That has been my way. I have been a deacon for over fifty years. That's my spirit. Every morning I thank the Lord for what he's done for me and mine. We've made two women deacons since I've been at the First Baptist Church. We are celebrating 143 years. The black Baptist church came out of the white Baptist church. We wanted our own church. When we celebrated our anniversary the other day we had thirty-two pastors that had served in that church. Before the church was built the black Baptist community worshiped at the white Baptist church. We have been a part of this community for a long time.

DH: Mrs. Tucker paints portraits and it occurs to me that she might paint you.

BT: I would love to paint your portrait, would you let me?

EM: Paint me? Makes me no difference! My wife painted — there are some of her paintings. My wife was Dr. Leyburn's housekeeper for 20 years. She took a course in nursing and a course in painting at VMI. My daughters all did painting. That's my wife's painting up there. There is something missing in it. Can you tell it? I always ask people if they can see it. Look that tree that leans on the bank has no shadow in the water. I always teased her about that.

BT: You do have a wonderful face. You should be painted. Where are you going?

EM: You know when I retired, the people I worked for made a big poster with my picture on it. Here is another picture.

BT: May I take it? I'll return it.

EM: You may take it. When I retired everybody in town said goodbye . worked for Norman Bowles. I told him I was going to retire. They told me to come at 2 p.m., and when I got there a whole bunch of people were there. There was a man with a \$12,000 camera and he wanted to take my picture..

DH: Let me ask about 205 Fuller Street. Historic Lexington Foundation owns it. They own it because two years ago the city was going to order a demolition on it. The city was going to destroy it but it was historically significant. It was built after the civil war , late 1870s -'80s. The Holmes family, a black family from Amherst County, moved here built it and several generations lived in it . . . for over a hundred years. Do you recall that family?

EM: I remember the house. Next door to that house, I had a brother who married. Last owner was a black girl who moved to Roanoke.

BT: You worked so much of the time, what did you do for entertainment?

EM: Well, I had plenty time. I worked three shifts. I workd at Wadell School for nineteen years when I was in Glasgow. That was my evening job.

BT: Do you sing?

EM: I sing second tenor, hymns. I had my own quartet in the church. I sang in the choir down there for seventy years. My tenor voice changed after I got old. My voice is OK for a few seconds but fore you know it, it's gone. I sang second tenor. I have a piano in there. I did the jitterbug, but . . . I never went with wild women, or drank or smoked, but I enjoy living. My father was the most decentest person you ever seen. He loved us children. He would play with us. He was one of the sweetest people. He didn't play favorites, but . . . Edlow came first. When I came out of the service, my father came to meet me and he broke up. I have been honest and I have been loved and I have loved. I love my people. Of seven children, I am actually the last one alive. My younger brother, the last, died before me. It is odd but they all died in the order they were born. My baby brother took my place, as I am still living. My brother and sister would now be 100 years old. My wife had seven brothers.

BT: You are a fine man. You must be like your Dad.

EM: My Dad hugged me and broke up when I went off to the service. I carry him in my heart. You know the whole family kinda looks to me. And when I come home in the glorious time I will remember I had a wife, and two children, no, three children, a daughter, son, and daughter. My wife came out of a family with seven brothers. She was the onlyest daughter. She was ninety-three when she died last year. She was beautiful. And I come out of a family the died just like they were born, oldest, next, next, next, next, The baby took my place, I'm supposed to be gone. They were born in 1910, 1911, 1912, 1915, the year of the Titanic, 1918, 1924, and they died in that order except for me, and I'm still here, my baby brother took my place.

DH: You have been incredibly generous with your time. Beverly is there anything you want to add?

BT" Is there anything you would like to say to those who might read this? We are trying to put history in a place for others to know.

EM: What's the use? I lived through those things. No need to worry; that's just the way it was. I know what you are talking about but it always pops in my mind . . . just like these that are hollering about the flag. I think that just a bunch of hooey. Why should they be worrying about the past? I carry no chip on my shoulder. I carry no hate in my heart against anyone. The people I have known, have died, black, white, pink, and yellow are beautiful! Have you been to Alexander's Orchard? The Alexander family . . . that's my name too . . . Alexander, well, they still have that big ol' house in Fairfield and they had a daughter, Anna Liza, she was born blind, never married. And though she can't see, all she has to do is hear my voice and she will say, "Ed!" She always knows its me. I went to see her some time back and she said, "I have this apple from the orchard and I have been saving it for someone special . . . it's the last

apple in the orchard." I took it and later when I bit into it, it was rotten! Isn't that quaint? That apple was waiting on someone to come by and when I come, it had done gone.

BT: You are amazing!

EM: I'm not amazing. But I am alive. The Lord has been so good to me. People in this town have been so good to me. People are just so nice.

DH : We will say goodbye and thank you for letting us come to your home and for this interview. ■

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### *Illustration credits*

Cedar Hill Baptist Church photo: The church's Facebook page

Portrait of Edlow Morrison: Bruce MacDonald

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### *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)

