

# 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



## ALICE VIRGINIA SLOAN

*Conducted at Mrs. Sloan's home, Lexington, Virginia, on July 13, 2012, by Beverly Tucker,  
board member, Historic Lexington Foundation. Jane Brooke sat in on the interview.*

BT: Tell us your name and when you were born.

AS: Alice Virginia Sloan, April 21, 1922. I am 92 years old.

BT: Tell me about your parents.

AS: My parents were Andrew Watson and Rosa Watson. My father was from Brownsburg.

BT: Do you remember your grandparents?

AS: No.

BT : Why is that?

AS: I just don't remember them.

BT: Tell me about your brothers and sisters, if you have any.

AS: I have three sisters and five brothers. Two are still living.

BT: What was it like living in a family of nine children?

AS: It was nice. We had our ups and downs and fights, but we got along real well.

BT: Where did you live then?

AS: . . . We went to school at Lylburn Downing. You couldn't go any further than the seventh grade, so I went away to North Carolina so that I could go to school. I stayed in North Carolina for the next fourteen years. And that's where I met my husband.

BT: Did all your brothers and sisters go away to school?

AS: No, no — I was the only one.

BT: Were you the oldest?

AS: No, I was number four.

BT: So you met your husband in North Carolina. How did you get him to come up to Lexington?

AS: Well, he was a great football and basketball player. I was living in a dorm, and every Friday the matron would take us girls downtown. That's where we would meet, then we would come back to the dorm. Then on Saturday, we could have visitors. Then on Friday we could go to the game. We could watch them play football. My husband was the captain of the basketball and football teams. I would say, "Oh, you played a real good game," and and we just started from there.

Then I finished there and he came to Lexington. He asked my Daddy, could he marry me? My Daddy said, "O.K., do you love her? If you take her away and don't treat her right, you bring her right back here." My mother liked him too.

BT: What was his name?

AS: Thomas. He called me Alice.

JB: Alice was "chummy" with Napoleon Borgus at one time.

AS: Oh yes, Napoleon and I went together for a long time. When I went to North Carolina, "Poley" would write to me every day. But then he had another girlfriend, so when I came back home I didn't bother him. He married the girl. But I talk to Napoleon every day now. He is not well, he has no appetite. I call and ask if he is eating. One day he called me and said he'd like to have some chicken hash. I said O.K. So I made him some chicken hash. A cup full will last him about three days. He eats so little. He is very small.

*[Son Thomas enters and goes to the chair behind his mother and pulls her back up in the chair, as she has slipped down. It is a loving act that is obviously done often.]*

BT: Hello, Thomas.

JB: Did you know that Thomas has taken over for Napoleon and is the resident bartender now?

*[Thomas nods and leaves]*

BT: Alice, describe for me how it was growing up with that large family. For example did you all wear hand-me-down clothing?

AS: Well, yes. My mother's best friend lived across the street from us. Her name was Alice. When Mama was pregnant with me her friend said, "If you have a little girl, you must name her Alice." So Mama named me Alice after her. So then they called me Little Alice. She wanted me to come live with her, so I did, and I went to Lylburn Downing. I didn't have much connection with my siblings. I lived there a long time. She took me. She had an older daughter. She dressed me. I could go see my sisters and brothers and play anytime I wanted to.

BT: Was it hard to leave here?

AS: No, because there were four other girls. Two of the girls are deceased and one is still living.

BT: Do you get out of the house very much?

AS: No, just to church, but I am in a wheel chair and that makes it hard.

BT: Which church do you attend?

AS: First Baptist. In fact I am the Mother of the Church.

BT: Really? Tell me about that.

AS: Well I went to the church meeting and they voted me to be the Mother of the Church. I am the oldest one.

BT: What an honor!

JB: Alice used to do a lot at the church.

BT: So isn't Edlow Morrison the Father of the Church?

AS: I guess so. Edlow is my good friend. He is retired now and yet he still brings me my medicines. He goes to church every Sunday. He has been a deacon for a long time. His wife was an only child and she told me one time that if she could have a sister, she would want it to be me.

BT: Tell me about your mother and dad. What were they like?

AS: My mother was real tall and my father was real short. They were real sweet. She didn't work because she had nine children. After we started growing up she worked. My daddy worked at VMI over forty years. He was a waiter at VMI. He would go early in the morning about 5 a.m. and get breakfast there, then he would come home and take a nap, then go back to do lunch — then come home about 3 p.m. and go back at 5 p.m. Poley's daddy worked there too. Most of the black people worked at VMI or W&L.

BT: Who would you say had the most influence on you?

AS: My Daddy.

BT: Did the lady you lived with have a special impact on your life?

AS: We had three Alices in the neighborhood. They called me Little Alice.

BT: Where did you get married?

AS: In North Carolina. We didn't have a wedding, we just went to a preacher. I stayed there in North Carolina for fourteen years.

BT: What did your husband do?

AS: He drove a taxi. He was in the Army. We got married and the next day he left for the service. I lived with his mother while he was gone. She said she was so glad he got married and she hoped he had a whole lot of children. He said, "I don't think so."

BT: So tell me about your children.

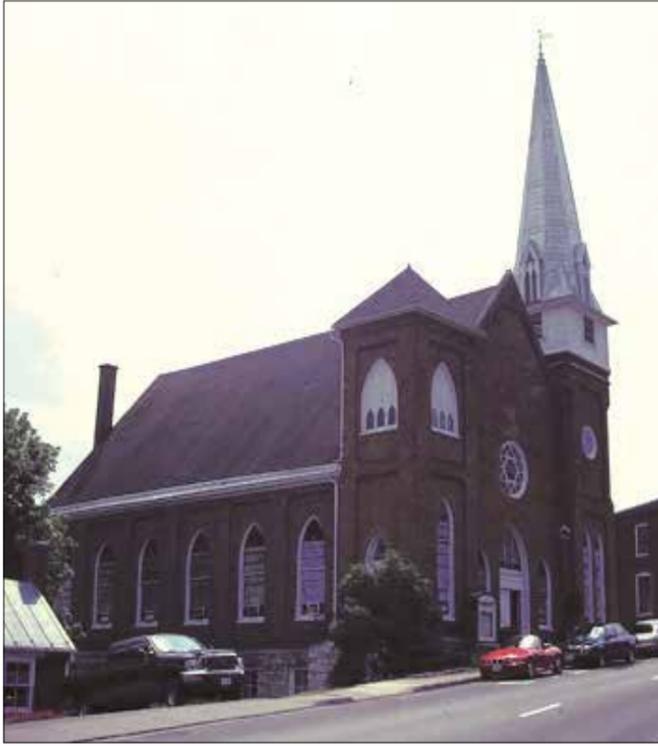
AS: Well, my daughter is married and lives over on Massie Street. Thomas is married and he has two sons and a stepson and a grandson. I have three great-grandchildren. My great-granddaughter, Elsie, is seven going on twenty-one. She will dial me up and tell her mother, "I'm talking to Granny." Their father is from Africa. They are very tall like their Daddy. I had a birthday and had two birthday cakes. She said for me to cut four pieces and save them for her. She got into trouble on the school bus and the driver said if she didn't stop misbehaving she couldn't ride the school bus anymore. She is something else!

BT: When you came back to Lexington did you see any significant changes?

AS: Not too much. When I came home to stay, I started working for the Brookes and I worked for them for forty years. We never had a cross word. I also worked for Mrs. Feddeman. I remember one time when Mrs. Brooke was having a dinner party, and she said she wanted three recipes of the chicken casserole. I told her I didn't think we needed that much, but she said, "Make it anyway." So I did but I'll bet there's some still in the freezer right now.



Alice Virginia Watson Sloan



First Baptist Church in Lexington, where Ms. Sloan was Mother of the Church

JB: Alice, you may remember that when our daughter Catherine was in college, she brought some friends home with her and after introducing them to her grandparents, Frances and George, she said now come and meet my other grandmother — and that was you. The children always made a beeline for Alice.

AS: I am quiet. My sister is here with me. I go to church when I can, but I see a difference in our church. We don't have any young people anymore. The people used to stay and talk and now they just leave. My daughter sees to it that I get to church but because there are so many elderly people, there is no one to help.

BT: Would you explain a little about the ladies in the church, the ones that wear white.

AS: They are ushers. I am an usher. In the summertime we wear white and in the winter we wear black. I was in the kitchen at the church for years. I would come in early and receive the food, put the food on the table and help with the family. I had somebody to help me. There is a big funeral this Sunday. Irene Thompson and Rosa Harris [*the friend who passed away*] would come to see me and have prayer. Rosa was here about a month ago. She was sick then. We are expecting about 300 people at our church this Sunday. I'm going to go early. She had a beautiful voice and I wanted her to sing at my funeral — and now she's gone. She sang for me that day she was here. She sang my favorite, *We Shall Be Whole*. I used to sing in the junior choir. Edlow sings. He sings tenor. At church Edlow always comes over to say, "Alice, how are you?"

Rosa's husband was pastor here for a long time. We have a piano and a pipe organ.

BT: Do you have air conditioning?

AS: Oh, no — and it is so hot. That is another reason that more people don't come. The ceilings are so high. There used to be a man in the church that took care of the steeple.

BT: It needs paint now.

AS: I'm sure it does. Nobody bothers with it anymore.

BT: Would you say that the next generation is prepared to step in?

AS: Oh, no. I used to take my grandchildren to church every Sunday. Then it got to where they were too sleepy or just didn't want to go. When I was growing up there was a lady in the neighborhood that would gather up all the children and take us to Sunday School. Now there may be five or six there. My husband's mother loved church. We don't have many men there anymore.

BT: How many would you have in church service on a regular Sunday?

AS: No more than fifty, if that many. They just don't go anymore.

BT: How long has it been since you lost your husband?

AS: Sixteen years. After he died . . . well, he started getting sick and I took him to Bethesda, Maryland. I was working for the Brookes then. I took off. He then went to the Veterans Hospital, but his heart just played out on him and he died. My grandsons stayed with me two nights then they went home and I stayed by myself.

BT: After you weren't working did you have any hobbies or clubs?

AS: Oh, yes, I was in a club, a hearts club. We played cards. We would play for three hours or more. All the ladies are dead now but me.

BT: Do you remember the Depression?

AS: Yes, I remember. There was a liquor store and you had to have coupons to buy liquor. I had coupons and I would sell mine because I didn't drink.

BT: Did you feel poor?

AS: No, but if I saw a pair of shoes that cost \$15 I would say no to myself. I have a great grandson and he will pay as much as \$35 for a pair of shoes. I say, "Boy, ain't never had that much money to pay for a pair of shoes." He loves clothes and he's real neat.

BT: What is the biggest change?

AS: One of the grandsons said, "Granny, can I come live with you?" I said he could but he would have to be in by 10 p.m. That broke the deal. He didn't come. They live with Thomas. They don't stay out late.

BT: Do you remember listening to the radio?

AS: Oh, yes. One time when I was working for Dr. Feddeman, he said, "Alice, do you want this radio?" I still have it. I listen to stories and music. I do remember the "Inner Sanctum" program with the squeaking door.

David Feddeman is the baby. He comes up every month. When the storm happened he called and wanted to come. He said he would come bring his truck and cut limbs. I said "David, don't come, gas is

too high and you don't need to come." He said, "Alice, I love you and I want to come." I talked him out of it. When he comes he goes to the grocery store and buys groceries for me. He's the one that keeps up.

BT: Given our world right now, what would you see as our biggest problem?

AS: Well, I guess it would be people out of work. My grandson has a good job but a lot of people do not.

JB: I met Alice when Chip and I were courting. We all felt that Alice was family.

AS: I also worked for the Washburns. I didn't drive, so everyone was good to take me. I never did drive. My husband was going to teach me but he would say, "Do this, do that, do this," and I would end up in tears. And I said, "No, sir, you are not going to yell at me. *Show me* what to do." My daughter doesn't drive either.

BT: How does she get here?

AS: She walks.

JB: Her daughter is so good. She comes and tidies up the house and yard.

AS: She is deaf. She was born deaf. She went to Staunton, to the School for the Deaf. She started talking and we then sent her to Baltimore to my niece. The she came back home. She has a hearing aid and she reads lips. She has a beautiful family.

BT: What advice would you give to the younger generation?

AS: Behave yourself and keep out of trouble!

See those cups and saucers? I know where I want them to go. I am going to give my sewing machine and the rocking chair to my niece. I used to make my daughters dresses. I never say no. I am still an usher. I still make rolls and cakes and biscuits.

JB: Will you teach me to make tomato aspic?

AS: Sure I will. I taught myself how to cook. First time I made biscuits, they ate them.

BT: I will go now, but may I take your picture?

AS: No.

*[And that was that.]* ■

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### *Illustrations*

Portrait of Alice Sloan: Bruce Macdonald

First Baptist Church: Virginia Department of Historic Resources

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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)

