

Return to Fuller Street, an anthology of 10 interviews with prominent black citizens in Rockbridge County, will be published next month by Historic Lexington Foundation. The actual interviews — bookended by a prologue and afterword by a composite narrator — were conducted and edited by Beverly Tucker, a psychologist who is president of the foundation. This article excerpts Dr. Tucker’s interview with one couple.

Wendell Holloway Baker Jr. and Priscilla Nowlin Baker

Wendell worked more than fifty years as a barber, and Priscilla was a registered nurse. They represent all that is good and right in this world. Praise be that I had the good fortune to know them. [*— The fictional narrator of “Return to Fuller Street”*]

Wendell

I was born in 1937 in Lexington at the Stonewall Jackson Hospital. As with other African American babies, my mother was confined to give birth in the basement rather than upstairs with the white mothers. . . .

After a happy and rather ordinary early childhood, I was enrolled in school at [all-black] Lylburn Downing. It was there that I played football and got really interested in music.

A highlight of my life was to be a part of a band called The Rhythm Makers in Lexington. I played the saxophone and we traveled all over the place. We were popular with the white community as well as the African American, so we never lacked for a place to play.

One of the most exciting things was the opportunity to hear the professional bands. Count Basie and Duke Ellington were just two of the greats who would come to Lexington to play for special events at Washington and Lee and Virginia Military Institute. One time when Duke Ellington came to town, after the program was over, he came over to the home of Priscilla’s aunt. She had a piano, not a very good one at all, but he sat down and played that piano, and it never sounded so great.

I went to barber school in Washington, D.C., and then came back to Lexington to work for Dave Moore as a barber in the lobby of the Robert E. Lee Hotel, where I stayed for the next 10 years.

Then I opened my own shop on Jefferson Street, and there I stayed for almost 50 years. On my days off, I went over to VMI to cut the hair of the cadets. I also had many

friends at Washington and Lee, and often alums would return for a visit and come get their hair cut. Once a W&L graduate came into the shop and he said, "Is Wendell here?"

I said, "I'm Wendell."

He said, "No I mean the one that cuts hair."

I said, "That's me."

He said, "You're still here?" He couldn't believe it.

I was sometimes a counselor. I would never repeat those things that were told to me. One day a man came in and he let me know that he was a friend of Mother Theresa. I said to myself, "That's about as close as I'll ever get to sainthood!"

Priscilla

I was born in Lexington, one of 10 children: eight boys and two girls. Like so many of the African American babies born at that time, I and six of my siblings were delivered by a midwife.

Growing up with that many brothers and a sister, there was never a lack of someone to play with, and that provided for a very happy childhood. We played marbles, rode bicycles, skated, sledged when it snowed, and just had a wonderful time growing up together. There weren't any cars, so we walked everywhere.

Our neighborhoods were full of caring parents. I remember that the parents in my neighborhood were all very concerned with the safety and well-being of all the children. They watched out for each other's children and even went so far as to correct misbehavior of children other than their own. "We took care of each other": That is a phrase that's often heard when remembering those days and even now.

With that many children, my mom stayed at home, and, believe me, there was plenty of work to do. She packed all our lunches. Remember — that would be ten lunches. My mom was a wonderful cook. She was also an excellent seamstress, so she did do some sewing for others.

We ironed all our clothes because my mother insisted, and I still iron to this day. My children and others tease me because I still iron. Sometimes they examine me for wrinkles just so they can give me a hard time about ironing.

I graduated from Lylburn Downing School, which is still very much a part of me. After graduation, I went to work in a restaurant, and there was Wendell. We ended up

getting married in 1959. We've been married 60 years, and I think you could say it worked out very well. We have three children. The two girls attended Virginia Commonwealth University and Wendell Jr. attended Hampton Institute. Education is very important to our family. Of this I am very proud!

We have always attended church, and we belong to First Baptist. That place has been a very important part of our family life, and we still support it. We also hold a reverence for the little old Cedar Hill church [deep in Rockbridge County], which many of our older relatives attended. There is a Cedar Hill reunion every year, and people come from all over to renew memories and family and friendship ties. Everyone brings something, and we pray, sing a little, and sit outside that tiny church, just being thankful to be together.

The church has no electricity, so any service we have has to be in the daytime. It has a very old piano and memory books in the pulpit. The pews are hard and uncomfortable— but we don't mind.

As our children were growing up, I decided to go back to school. It was not easy because I still had all the responsibilities of the home and raising three busy children. I went through training at Stonewall Jackson Hospital to become a Licensed Practical Nurse and then I worked in extended care. I decided to go back to school again to become a Registered Nurse. For that RN, I attended Blue Ridge College. For the next thirty-five years, I worked in surgery at the hospital. I also worked with geriatric patients at the close of my nursing career.

We love our home and have made it comfortable for friends and family to visit. They will all come for Thanksgiving and Christmas. We always have a live tree that we put up next to the mantel. Our daughter comes over to decorate it, and we always say it's the prettiest one ever. We have wonderful grandchildren who never leave us without saying, "I love you." I am so grateful that they are the kind of people that are willing to say that out loud to their grandparents. We are very blessed and thankful for what we have and who we are.

[Wendell Baker died on November 15, 2019, at 82. Priscilla Baker lives in the family home in Lexington.]