

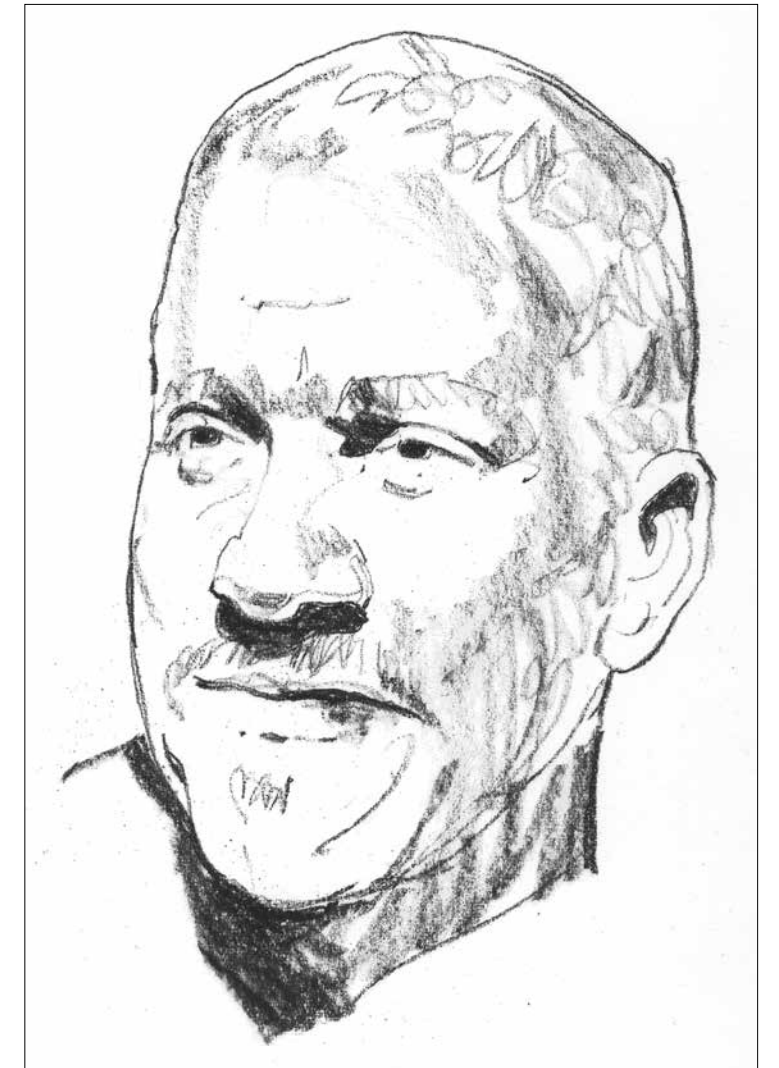
BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2016

IN LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

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



Leslie Cauthern Jr.



LESLIE CAUTHERN

*Interviewed at his home in Lexington, Virginia, on July 13, 2012,
by Beverly Tucker, board member, Historic Lexington Foundation*

BT: Please state your name.

LC: Leslie Cauthern.

BT: Tell me a little about your family.

LC: I was the son of Mr. And Mrs. Leslie Cauthern Sr. I had three older sisters and we all went to Lylburn Downing. We all graduated and went on to college. My oldest sister became a school teacher, my second oldest worked in nursing and my other sister worked for the federal government — as I did. After forty years of being a teacher and principal in Maryland, she retired.

BT: All of you were obviously successful in your own way.

LC: Yes. Our parents stressed strong education. There were no rewarding opportunities in Lexington. We got support from our father, mother, teachers and relatives — in fact, the whole community. In the fifties and sixties, Lexington was a very close-knit town among the African Americans. There were many Downing graduates who went on to college and are successful in their various endeavors.

BT: Are there many still here?

LC: Very few have remained in Lexington. They moved up the Atlantic coast. We see each other when there is a scheduled Lylburn Downing reunion. All the classes come back and honor the now surviving teachers. We have a banquet and round out the activities with a picnic in Richardson Park.

BT: Do you attend church here?

LC: My wife and I attend the Randolph Street Methodist Church. We attended Hughes Memorial Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. We have one son. He graduated from high school and went on to Delaware State University — my alma mater too. He received a business and marketing degree. He now works as a classroom instructor with the Police Academy.

BT: Tell me about your parents.

LC: My father was born in 1910 and my mother was born in 1912. They met in 1934. They married and had four children. We had a normal life. Went to school, church on Sunday. They were very fair and disciplined parents who supported us in every way. My father was a custodial engineer and my mother was a homemaker. She cared for the family. My sisters were much older than me. My parents sort of had two families. I was so much younger than my sisters. After we were adults we would get together on holidays and that was very rewarding. There are five grandchildren.

BT: Do you remember your grandparents?

LC: Yes. My grandparents lived down on Main and Diamond — Nathan and Pauline Morrison. They died in 1992. My father passed away in January of 1982. He has been gone thirty years. My mother resided at the home place. We all supported her.

BT: Did your grandparents speak of their own lives?

LC: My grandfather worked on the railroad in 1902. My grandmother took in washing and ironing for the VMI cadets. My grandfather also worked at VMI mess hall. Many African Americans worked at W&L fraternities.

BT: Do you remember the places that were acceptable for blacks to go at that time?

LC: Very few places were acceptable but we had our own restaurants. There were black businesses, barbershops, etc.

BT: Did you feel discriminated against?

LC: No, I didn't, because our parents acted as a buffer against discrimination. They stressed education, so that we could have a better life. My parents were true guardians. We had strong black females that provided support.

BT: Did they talk about their parents?

LC: They just basically said there were limited opportunities for African Americans in the town. They stressed education. You should carry this on to your children and grandchildren.

BT: I know you are married. Tell me about your wife and how you met.

LC: My wife and I met at the Randolph Street Methodist Church in a Christmas play, fifty-two years ago. We dated in school, we each went away to school, married in 1970. We are very proud of our son. We have told him there would be ups and downs but you have to stick to it. We always tried to set an example for him. You have to remain strong and firm in your beliefs. The legacy that we have left with him, we expect him to remember — to have “stick-to-it-iveness” and drive. We tried to model that for him.

BT: Who had the most influence on you?

LC: My father. He was basically a strong, smart black man. He was ahead of his time. A friend of mine said, “Your father stressed education to young black men.” His drive came from missing out on going to college. He felt education was the key.

BT: Do you think that is true of young black males now?

LC: Maybe some.

BT: Where is the breakdown for the young black males?

LC: I think it is that they don't have the strong family structures. On the other hand, there are those who are working hard to raise their children properly. We have an African American president who was raised by his mother and grandmother. There are single mothers who raised very good successful children. I think President Obama is trying hard to do a tremendous job, given all the pitfalls he inherited. He is trying to dig us out of this hole. We were on the cliff. There is a lot of obstruction in the Congress. I'm not saying that the Republicans are not honest and sincere, but there is an element of people who don't want to see him succeed. We have to get back to the middle class because we see a lot of money in the politics. I am concerned because I don't want to see it destroy our democracy.

BT: Were you in any way affected by the Depression? Even though you didn't live at that time? Say, through the attitudes of your parents and your grandparents?

LC: Indirectly, I suppose. I used to go down and watch my grandfather cut grass. My grandmother would can fruit and vegetables. I wondered why she had all those canned goods in the basement. My

mother said she learned that in the Depression. They never forgot that time.

BT: Tell me about your wife's family.

LC: They were the Poindexter family. A very large family in Lexington. They supported us in many ways. Her father worked at Modine for thirty years until he retired. Payne Poindexter Sr. was Karen's father. Her mother, Marjorie Poindexter. She worked at W&L until her death from an aneurism at the age of fifty. Payne Poindexter was the first African American fire chief here. He was well respected. Both our fathers were. My father was a stalwart in the Masons. He was a Mason for fifty years.

BT: Was it an all-black Mason lodge?

LC: It was — all black.

BT: Is that still the case?

LC: Yes. There is not one here, but there is one in Glasgow. Many here have passed away. They used to give scholarships to Downing students. The Lylburn Downing Alumni Association carried on to give those scholarships.

BT: Do you remember segregation and integration?

LC: I do. I remember having to sit upstairs at the State Theater. We later learned that these were actually the best seats in the house. When I was about ten, I used to visit my sister in Washington. The bus would stop in certain places. I remember “white” and “colored” water fountains. My class was next to the last class of the all-black Downing High School. My wife said it went well but she did not allow it to affect her. She went on to Central State in Ohio. She finished Bowie State University in 1980. She got a good job in personnel.

BT: And what were you doing?

LC: I graduated in 1969 and went to work for the federal government in accounting and financial management. I retired in July of 2001. We relocated here in 2003. We were caring for my mother. I worked for a financial institution here and then got my retirement.

BT: Do you remember getting a television?

LC: We always had a television. Most of the people in Diamond Hill have had televisions for a long time.

BT: What are some of the changes you have observed in your lifetime?



Mr. Cauthern's patriotism was a defining trait

LC: We are proud of our son. A fine young man. He is the most important thing in our life. We had success but what was most important was our son.

BT: How do you think the world has changed?

LC: It has changed but sometime remained the same. My father and Karen's parents taught us that you have to earn it. Nobody's going to give you a handout!

BT: How do you feel that the African American community sees itself?

LC: It is less that it used to be. I'm not sure they have the same drive. Some try to continue to keep the stong ties. Now you have social media and the family structure can get sidetracked.

There has been a breakdown in the church. People just don't go as they once did. Not many youth are in church. The churches used to be packed. School, church, education were stressed. There are other interests now. The older ones are passing, the younger ones are leaving. Many whites also leave Lexington for jobs.

Bt: How does it feel to be back?

LC: I feel O.K. We've come full circle. We went away and now we are back. We like the small town atmosphere.

BT: Are here you are across the street from Lylburn Downing You have truly come full circle.

LC: We were raised properly and we have tried to raise our son properly. Mygreat niece graduated from North Carolina State. We are keeping this progress going. We wanted to be good representatives for our family.

My father always said, "Every white person is not your enemy. Every black person is not your friend." These are words worth remembering for all of us. ■

Illustration

Portrait of Leslie Cauthern: Bruce Macdonald

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)

