## Oral History 4425 Adairsville Project Clent Coker Interview Conducted by Brent Parmelee, Mihran Tascioglu, and Jennifer Dickey Location: The Barnsley Museum, Adairsville, Georgia October 8, 2018 Transcribed by Mihran Tascioglu and Brent Parmelee

Tascioglu:	Hello, my name is Mihran Tascioglu. I am a student at Kennesaw State University.
Parmelee:	I'm Brent Parmelee. We are here at Barnsley Gardens inside the museum. For the record, would you please state your name?
Coker:	My name is Phillip Clent Coker.
Parmelee:	And do you consent to being recorded for this interview?
Coker:	Well I do, yes.
Parmelee:	Thank you.
Dickey:	And the date is October 8, 2018.
Parmelee:	Where did you grow up?
Coker:	Can I say this, can I speak now? I gave you my full name nobody knows me as Phillip so please call me Clent.
Parmelee:	Okay. So, where did you grow up?
Coker:	I actually grew up right here in this area. Of course, my father traveled quite a lot through the years and lived in various places. But this was home, right here in Barnsley for the last four generations of my family.
Parmelee:	You mentioned your father, what were your parents' names?
Coker:	My father was Sherman Henry Coker, and my mother was Sybil Sutton Coker.
Parmelee:	Can you tell us about them?

Coker:	Well, they married in the mid 1930s. My mother, Sybil Sutton before she married, was the great-granddaughter of Payton Morrow, who helped build Barnsley Gardens. My father's family was from Union County; there is a lot of history in their family too.
	So, they married [in refence to his mother and father] and I was the first child born; they moved away. I was actually born down in Covington, Georgia, down in Newton County, but then we moved back to Adairsville. I started school here in Adairsville. I actually finished high school in Lake Orion, Michigan since we moved up there for a few years.
Parmelee:	I understand you are a bit of a local historian. What is it like being a local historian in a small town like Adairsville?
Coker:	Well, I have been enjoying it. I spent a lot of my life putting the history back together. Of course, mainly the Barnsley history and my own family's history, but also the history of Adairsville and Bartow Country—Bartow County has always been rich in history and I fell in love with it as a child. So through the years it has been rewarding because I have had a lot of folks come to me wanting to know the history of their families and about Barnsley. We have had a lot of good guests through the years that have enjoyed it.

Parmelee: Do you do a lot of family research and history for other people?

Coker: Not for other people, I do it for my family and for the Barnsleys. I fell in love with the Barnsleys as a child. One of my great grandmothers was born right here in the historic area. She is the one that got me involved in all this when I was a little boy—her and some of my great aunt and grandmother. They would tell me stories while we sat by the fireside on cold winter nights. I would listen to stories. That used to be a favorite pastime in this house. It was great entertainment for me. And I just loved it. I would stay right by her, and I was all ears listening to everything they could tell me.

As time progressed, I become more and more obsessed with it. I really wanted to put this story back together. I started researching at a young age. My family was so close to this family [the Barnsleys] for four generations. Later on, when the last of the Barnsley blood passed away, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_\_ held an auction and sold this place [in reference to the Barnsley]—including all of these heirlooms and artifacts. My family purchased quite a lot of said artifacts. As I began growing up and getting deeper into this project, they had these things to

	give me to get started. I would later spend years collecting things from other people who attended the auction here in the 1940s.
Parmelee:	You spoke about a family connection to the Barnsleys. Was that based upon location or did your family know the Barnsleys well?
Coker:	I suppose it was location. Actually, one of my great-great-grandfathers had worked with Barnsley in his shipping empire in Savannah.
	My family came up and got involved in the Cherokee Land Lottery in North Georgia. Barnsley later followed several friends who came up here and got involved in this lottery such as Mr. Henry William Stiles, who later established Stilesboro nearby. Charles Wallace Howard at Kingston. My great-great- grandfather, Payton Morrow and several other people. The area started to grow.
	Godfrey Barnsley later came and invested in the land lots. Some people were willing to sell the land lots. Actually, what happened was our government made a deal with the Cherokee Indians for their land north of Atlanta. They [the U.S. government] took their lands and divided them up into land lots, held a big land lottery here with 54 land lots of 160 acres each.
	Our families came in, people came from all over like the Carolinas and especially people from the lowlands, where it was so hot, and they wanted to get out of the lowlands and wanted to come up to the cooler mountains. But some of them were willing to sell; it was a tough trip up here, about three weeks from Savannah. Some were willing to sell later since it is pretty rugged up here. So Barnsley came and bought land lots from those who were willing to sell. He would, finally, at one point his land would engulf 8,000 acres.
Parmelee:	That's a lot. So, we are here at the Barnsley Gardens, what role do you have here at the resort and the Barnsley Gardens in general?
Coker:	Well, I am the Barnsley author and historian. I am also the museum director. I actually established the museum here with artifacts I collected through the years that went through the auction—not only from my family but through other families who purchased the artifacts at the auction. I tell people I am the author, historian, museum director, ditch digger, and bottle washer. We've had to do it all to restore every little bit of this place.
Parmelee:	Within that role, what is a daily routine like here at the museum?

Coker: The museum opens at nine in the morning and closes at five in the evening. We have a lot of guests coming through who want to see a little bit of the story here and a little bit of the story there and to visit the museum and grounds.

We do have some of the original gardens left. We have a very old garden right out in front of the museum here. The boxwood partier has been standing here since before the Civil War. (10:09) We are happy we have been able to save that one. People come to visit the estate and to visit the resort we have established here.

- Parmelee: How has the estate contributed to Adairsville, overall?
- Coker: I think it has benefited the city of Adairsville and the entire county because of... since we have the resort going, a lot of guests come in, we do a lot of cooperate business, we had over 60 weddings last year. We have several amenities such as horseback riding and clay shooting; we've been growing for the past fifteen to twenty years. And it has been good revenue for the area and for the county. It's actually brought a lot of tourists to the area.
- Parmelee: It is very clear that your expertise is in Godfrey Barnsley and the Barnsley Estate. Can you tell us a little about that?
- Coker: Yes. It is such a complex story. I could get wound up and we would be here all day. I've always said it's a thousand stories within a story surrounding four generations of the family. It's one of the greatest love stories in the Old South. The adventures of building a family empire in the heart of an Indian wilderness, strong women in every generation, especially during the Civil War, and prize fighting and bootleg whiskey the Great American Depressions, and even one murder. All the stories are here, and yet the saga is true.

And [pause]... but it has the origin of the story is from young Godfrey Barnsley, born in England in 1805. He grew up and became interested in the cotton and shipping business; Great Britain had the largest cotton mills in the world, but they did not have the cotton, and they had to depend on us for the cotton, but it was a slow process in shipping. So, young Barnsley had a dream of establishing a better shipping operation. When he was eighteen years old, he worked his way across the sea to Savannah, Georgia—big shipping port, cotton capital of the South. He went to work as a clerk for a large shipping broker. Within a few years, they made him a partner in the business; within about fifteen years, Godfrey Barnsley was considered the wealthiest sea merchant in the South. He shipped cotton abroad and brought European goods back to this country. He didn't grow cotton, he didn't have a cotton plantation, but he shipped it and he could do it much faster than others. He amassed a fortune and became highly recognized for his honesty and integrity. The President of the United States appointed him vice-consulate to three foreign nations. Although he never became an American citizen, he started so much trade between us and those countries.

In Savannah, he married into the well-known Scarborough family. Scarborough Castle is still standing in Savanah—today, it is known as the Ships of the Sea Museum.

He always wanted to build his wife Julia this estate [Barnsley Estate] that he planned for her. There is a real story behind this estate. It is a certain type of estate that was rare at the time; I have chapters in my book [*Barnsley Gardens at Woodlands*] on that.

Then they finally came up and got involved in the [Land] Lottery in North Georgia, our families that is. Barnsley came later, bought land lots and started building this estate. He would later bring trees, plants and shrubs from the four corners of the world and set them out here. He built an Italian-villa style house that was completely different. The house had modern plumbing even before the Civil War. So, he had a real vision here. Even though we have only saved a small portion of the estate today, it still echoes with his vison.

- Parmelee: So, the estate has changed hands many times and has gone through difficult situations. Can you tell us about some of the difficulties that have happened here with the estate?
- Coker: Yes. Four generations of Barnsley lived here, but the last of the Barnsley blood passed in 1942. That was the granddaughter of Barnsley—[insert name here]. Her and her mother had been through times of struggle trying to build the estate back up after the Civil War because 29,000 troops camped on the land. It was ransacked. Most of the buildings were not burned, but it was left with a hundred starving people, and it was the women that saved them. That's quite a story.

After that happened different owners had the property. Because Miss Addie died, they auctioned the place off and sold it. All its heirlooms and everything that was left. My family purchased quite a lot of that, and I knew other people that did. And so, I went to work at a pretty young age to try and collect these things back that were owned by the Barnsleys. I ended up with quite a collection hoping that someday we could restore it back.

But after the auctions was held, two different owners had the property down through the years until 1988. The last owner, a poultry farmer here, tried to keep it all going. It was a huge task. There was a lot of gardens, a lot of land and he became plagued with vandals and other things. He later decided to just padlock the gates, lock it all off and operate his farming business. From that time on, all the way up until 1988, it became quite grown up here—there were a lot of buildings covered with vines and other things. But he finally decided to sell the property in 1988. He put it on the open market and advertised it.

Prince Hubertus Fugger of German, from the well-known Fugger family of German, purchased the last 13,000 acres and what was left of the estate. I met with Prince Fugger's attorneys and then with him. I pleaded with him to save the estate. Poured my hear out to him about this beautiful story and why I wanted to save it. Prince Fugger began to see it, but also he had always been interested in out American history; he had read books from the Civil War and had an interest. He and his attorneys decided later we should try to clean up the estate and restore what we could.

And so, we went to work in 1988. It took several years to clean out the buildings and clean up the grounds. We brought in a wonderful horticulturalist in 1990, Steve Wheaton from Pennsylvania, who turned out to be a blessing for us. He taught me a lot about how we had to save these historic gardens. We have a few... we have the boxwood partier out from that is very old—original. We have the bog garden right below, the conifer hill, different areas so we have saved at least a small portion of what Barnsley had. At least now, we have extended the Barnsley dream into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Parmelee: So how did you feel about this place being turned into a resort?

Coker: Well, I like it. We realized and Prince Fugger began to realize to make it profitable there needed to be other amenities here to make it work financially, especially with the cost of things today.

We were getting a lot of investors and things were coming up good. [?] decided to build a resort. We talked about it. Of course, I had said, if we do it in good taste, it will work well. But I recommended that we always bend the project around the history and the historical theme, the real charm of the place—and we did that. The historic area is still sitting here with the ruins and the gardens and so forth for people to see. But we also have the resort, the golf course, a village over there, cottages—tying it back to the same plans that Barnsley was following in the 1800s when he was building this estate.

Now, we just build the New Georgian Hall and the new inn. We do a lot of corporate business here. Companies come in, hold their meetings, enjoy visiting the estate, taking part in the amenities. We have two restaurants on the property, and we're still growing. Now we have the Spring Bank Estate right below us where we have shooting clays, hunting and so forth.

In 2005, Prince Fugger sold the estate to the present owner Mr. Julian Saul. He has added more amenities and purchased additional land just south of the property. Now, we are up to about 3,000 acres.

- Parmelee: If you were able to follow your lifelong vision for this place, in terms of conservation, for this place, what would that look like?
- Coker: Let me see if I understand that completely, please say that again.
- Parmelee: If you were able to do your personal conservationist dream here, what would that look like?
- Coker: Well, I would like to continue with... we do have a few buildings I would like to see restored. We have the log barn in the lower gardens, and now we have horseback riding there. We have a farm zoo and things like that. We have restored most of the old buildings, but I would like to be sure we continue to preserve the history here. It is such a colorful estate and story and it is truly a historic treasure of antebellum America.
- Parmelee: Changing subject a little bit here, earlier you talked about a key factor here being strong Barnsley women. Can you tell us a little bit about the Barnsley women and their story?
- Coker: Alright, yes. In every generation it seemed to be the case. First of all, first Julia, Godfrey's wife. They had married in 1828. Julia had eight children by the time she was thirty-two. Big family quick. So, she was a strong woman, seven children were born in Savannah the last one up here in the wilderness. She died within a few months. Two children died in infancy. One son disappeared in China, so five children grew into adulthood. So, she was very strong and she loved the estate, but she had a lung ailment before Godfrey brought her here. It wasn't easy living

down in the extreme heat of the lowlands. Yellow fever mosquitos and whatever, and so that is one reason Godfrey wanted to get her out.

But it is such a touching love story. I do have the last letter she wrote to him in 1844. He was out in New Orleans setting up a new office. He had to travel a lot since his business was growing. She was pleading with him to return to the wilderness, that is what they called it here [at the Barnsley Estate]—and it truly was a wilderness.

During that time, she had become lonely, although there were a lot of workers here, and there was a lot going on. She complained that she felt fully cheated that year, for it had been eight months since she had the pleasure of seeing him. He wrote back and told her to give him a little longer. He would have the new office setup in New Orleans, and they could enjoy setting up their castle together. But before he got back she was taken back to Savannah to be under the care of her original doctor. Godfrey sailed back as fast as he could, and she had just passed.

It's a very touching love story. He wasn't going to complete the estate later since Julia was gone. He had strong dreams of Julia, and she was pleading with him to finish the estate in the dreams. He informed our families, and my family was involved and Mr. Conley, who was here, to have more bricks burned immediately, and they were made right here on the property.

Julia and I are going to complete the estate just as we planned—[the way Mr. Coker said this was as if he was quoting Godfrey].

He would spend the rest of his life trying to do that. He never remarried, and it's such a love story.

Then, it is the daughter Julia, who took over at that time, just prior to the Civil War. She becomes the real kingpin or the "Strong Scarlett" during the war later when the estate is raided by Union troops, and although the army was ordered by General James B. McPherson ordered the place spared because Barnsley was not an American citizen. The place was so beautiful and outstanding. He ordered the estate spared and that the army could take food supplies, but that was it.

As McPherson moved on the next morning, a few hours later, about a thousand troops and some stragglers joined in—we had a lot of stragglers following the armies—that was a very turbulent time—the railroads had been destroyed by General Sherman's Army of the Cumberland.

The strong women are trying to keep things going. She is expecting a child who later becomes little Addie, whom I spoke of earlier. Even in that condition, she steps up to the plate with the mentality of, "we are going to survive, and we are going to do it together." She led the women and children into the woods and the hills and taught them survival—how to dig roots from the woods and whatever.

So, her daughter Addie grows up like her mother. Addie is a strong woman. She goes through a lot in her life because she grew up during the southern Reconstruction era when the South is still struggling to build back. She married a chemist from Pennsylvania in 1897 and quite the story of how he worked his way in here. But he was a brilliant man. He was the one who started out bauxite mining here in this county—bauxite ore to make aluminum. He married Addie, and they had three children, Preston, Harry and Julia—and that is another story and quite a story.

So, they were the last one to live here with their mother. There was a tragedy in the family, some land baron stepped in between the brothers and caused a lot of... there was a lot of outside interference pulling the brothers apart. Finally, Preston, who was in charge, became known as K.O. Dugan a prize fighter, shot and killed his brother Harry here—mostly caused by greedy people who got involved.

- Parmelee: The Barnsley Estate has had some tragic occurrences with natural disasters, can you tell me a little bit about the natural disasters and the impact they had on the estate?
- Coker: Well, yes. The first real one was in 1906 when a tornado came through when Addie Saylor and her family were living in the manor. The roof was blown from the house. Several attempts were made to put it back but the family was still struggling financially and economically from the war. Something always seemed to happen, so they never restored it. Through the years, it just fell into ruin. Finally, it grew up into a forest inside the house so when we started restoration in 1988, we had to cut the trees out before we could start securing the walls or whatever.

Other disasters, of course.... I always say that wars, storms, and depressions took their toll. There was a lot of happiness here, a lot of good things. It is a place of bountiful joy, a great love story but also some tragedy and... through the four generations.

- Parmelee: If there was one favorite story you had concerning Barnsley, the Barnsley family, or the estate, what would that favorite story be?
- Coker: That is hard to say, there are so many beautiful stories.

I, of course, think the story of Godfrey coming into the wilderness and bringing all these things and establishing all the gardens. I still have stacks of letters, nothing but listings of plants he brought in from all over the world—some of the trees he brought in were hundreds of years old when he brought them in. Cedars of Lebanon, like you read about in the Bible, Redwoods, Lentons, Cunning from Scandinavia (sp). And the list goes on and on. That was a very colorful story of him coming in, in fact most people in those days had no earthly idea of what that man was up to. He really had a vision, a dream. That's a favorite story.

But also, I enjoy the great love story of Godfrey and Julia. The story of General McPherson camping on the grounds and offering to spare the estate.

The...I guess the strongest story is the daughter (Julia, daughter of Godfrey), after the invasion of the Union army, her life here and all the things she went through trying to save the estate and right on through her daughter Addie.

- Parmelee: What impact did Barnsley have on a young Adairsville? What impact was there?
- Coker: Well, when he came in Adairsville—and my family too from the lottery— Adairsville was a small settlement at the country line of Bartow in Gordon Country. It was established by a half Scottish half Cherokee family. The main town at that time was Kingston down below us—later that became a big railroad hub in 1845. They gradually worked the railroad up through 1847-48 up to where Adairsville is now and up to Chattanooga in 1850. But they saw the need of moving Adairsville, actually to the railroad.

It really had an effect because Barnsley brought in things from all over the world, and there was always a lot work here. He raised fine show horses and had large orchards and vineyards. He was involved in a lot of things, so people could find work up here. My grandfather, as a young man, worked with Barnsley here, as did my great-great-grandfather on both sides of my family. It brought revenue to the area in those days. Later, Barnsley would be involved in making a lot of peach brandy here. So, a lot of things happened here that was good for the economy of ol' Cass County that later became Bartow in 1861.

- Parmelee: I think the story of Adairsville is really the story of how this small town had been consistently part of or close to the main transportation hubs to the region. How has that sort of thought process impacted the Barnsley Gardens and the Barnsley Estates?
- Coker: That's exactly right. You see, we brought the railroad up to Kingston in 1845 and gradually worked its way up, as I mentioned earlier. Adairsville became quite a hub too. For example, Adairsville had the first flour roller mill. Adairsville, established by Mr. James Madison Veach and the Veach Home that is still standing there.

As the years passed, being on the railroad, it became a big peach center. Godfrey Barnsley brought all the peaches in the old days. But then, more and more people got involved in it. You know, Adairsville was penned as the Peach center of the world for a time. I can remember, even when I was a boy, peaches were shipped out from the warehouses in Adairsville on the railroad. You couldn't drive down any road in the country here without seeing peach orchards. Today it is hard to see a peach tree. As the years passed, the weather changed, the weather pattern, fruit flies, different things happen—a lot of my family was involved in peaches.

But then also, the chenille —the chenille bedspread business. That became quite a lucrative business here through the years. That would eventually, basically, turn into the carpet industry. They made the little cotton rugs and finally Dalton, they started turning into carpet and so forth.

A lot of things happened in Adairsville in those days. It was really...\_\_\_\_\_ really contributed to the growth of Adairsville.

- Dickey: Mr. Coker, could you tell us a little bit about the building we are in right now? Specifically, the history of this building and the last time anyone lived in this particular building.
- Coker: Okay. This house was built in 1842; it was built before the big manor. He built the houses around it, and this is the kitchen wing [the room in which the interview took place]. They needed that. They had workers and a lot going on before they built the manor. The big left-wing used to be on the other side, the cottage was torn down in the 1970s. This house became the kitchen house, you can notice here the huge stove—a very rare piece, one of a kind. Godfrey Barnsley designed it and had it brought over from Liverpool, England. It has the cooking capacity for 100 people or more—something that was very unique for the day and age.

Down through the years, the family was here in this house and on down to the Saylor family. Four generations lived in this house. Right on through to the Saylor brothers (Harry and Preston).

Ms. Addie died in the 1940s, the granddaughter here, she had lived in this house. In the meantime, a storm had taken the roof of the manor and they moved into the kitchen wing. So this became the Saylor home after that. Ms. Addie lived here until her death. After it was sold in auction, two different owners lived in this house up until 1988. Mr. Arrow Mcchesky, the poultry farmer, lived here until he sold the property in 1988.

Parmelee: I think the other thing that puts Adairsville on the historical map is the Great Locomotive chase. Have you ever studied anything about—

- Coker: Well yes, I have. Of course, I know about it. I know Mr. Joe Head who wrote a book on it and did a good job. That is a real outstanding story and I was happy to see when they finally restored the old *General*. I was in Adairsville when they first came through with it on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The governor was...[?] so that started the great locomotive chase festival, and now it has been here fifty years. But that is the very colorful story being stolen back and forth all the way up to Chattanooga.
- Parmelee: Why do you think the Great Locomotive Chase has become such a local phenomenon?
- Coker: Well, because it was so different. The Union soldiers that stole the train down in Kennesaw and brought it through and the Confederates was just not gonna have it, so they stole it back. That happened several times up and down the track—even chasing it on a hand operated car. All of those things add up to a very colorful story. We are not talking about two or three miles, we are talking about sixty or seventy miles of this back and forth. It's a very colorful story. That is why Walt Disney filmed a portion of it years ago.
- Parmelee: Well, Mr. Coker, I would like to thank you very much for your time. I suppose my last question is if there was one thing you would like recorded for posterity, what would that be?

Coker: Concerning the Barnsleys or...

- Parmelee: Concerning the Barnsleys, concerning yourself. What is the one thing you would want to be sure was recorded for historical sake?
- Coker: To make sure the beautiful history of rural Georgia, North Georgia, but especially Bartow County is preserved through the years. I am happy now that has happened. Many years ago, I was hoping to see a historical society established, maybe a museum. Now we have the Bartow History Center, and they are doing a wonderful job. We have so much here in this county, and I would like to see that preserved... and the Barnsley story. That is why I have worked so hard on it throughout the years. Of course, through my writings and books and so forth, the Barnsley story will be preserved, to a point. I would like[pause] to see it preserved for future generations.

[Tascioglu, Parmelee and Dickey thank Coker.]

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